Making Novices: Education and Ethics in a Thai Monastic School

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Declaration

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

Abstract

This is an ethnographic study of Wat Don Khet Buddhist Scriptural School, a monastic secondary school educating novice monks in northern Thailand. Drawing on twelve months of fieldwork (carried out 2020-2021) involving participant observation and in-depth interviews with staff and students, the study deals with questions on projects of religious and secular education, and how these projects relate to the development of ethical subjectivities. This thesis sets out to chart the journeys boys make as they take ordination to complete their education in robes, contextualising the specific experiences of those enrolled at the field site institution in relation to the historical place of Thai novitiate ordination. By engaging with theoretical perspectives on the relationship between Buddhism and education in Thailand, the thesis examines the conflicts and confluences generated by the diverse forms of discourse governing approaches to education at Wat Don Khet School. Building on an analysis of the monastic school as an institution, the thesis sets out to describe how novice monks cultivated diverse modes of ethical subjectivity, that could both conform to and defy the expectations attached to their religious position. This account speaks to critical debates in the anthropology of ethics, presenting a novel picture of the ways individuals may exercise their free capacities for self-cultivation via a relational negotiation with codes of moral discipline. As discourses on educational ideals become increasingly difficult to accommodate within the novitiate ordination tradition, institutions like Wat Don Khet School are called upon to transform while retaining their essential function of providing an education based in Buddhist ideals. This study captures a portrait of individuals, and an institution, undergoing difficult processes of metamorphosis. In doing so, it produces an account of how individuals cultivate ethical subjectivities that must reconcile an array of competing ideals.

Impact Statement

The research presented here has clear implications, both for academic debates in social anthropology, and for the organisation of education systems. In terms of its impact on scholarship, this study presents a series of innovative theoretical interventions that may have widespread application in future ethnographic studies. In particular, it deals with the development of ethical and religious ideals in a group of adolescents, setting their beliefs, desires, and concerns on the same level as the study's adult interlocuters in pursuit of richer and more incisive findings on the life of an institution, and the forms of ethical subjectivity cultivated therein. This approach could hold importance for future studies aiming to investigate the realities of adolescent life across cultural contexts, since it rejects prior tendencies to characterise the ethical subjectivities of young people as incomplete, when compared to adults. This approach may be of relevance in the anthropological study of Buddhism, which has seen a number of studies examining the life of committed monastics but has rarely seen explorations of the more ambiguous and equivocal relationships to Buddhist belief and practice presented here. In addition, the study grapples with several key areas of theoretical debate. It addresses questions on the relationship between modernity and tradition, breaking down these categories in examining how locally described 'traditional' and 'modern' educational practices interact and influence one another. Important interventions are also made into anthropological theory concerning ethics. The study draws on significant work in this area in order to formulate a novel approach to theorising people's ethical subjectivities and the way these are relationally developed through nuanced processes of negotiation.

Through a detailed investigation of the organisational structure of the monastic school, the study presents a series of issues encountered in the administration of educational institutions and systems. Taking a broad view of the historical and political factors shaping monastic schooling, the findings presented here offer insight into the local and national factors affecting the transforming model of education delivered at monastic schools. These insights, touching on the difficulties of reconciling a traditional form of Buddhist religious education with the demands that come with preparing students for a modern industrialised economy, have implications beyond the specific case described in this study. Global education discourses demand that schools and other educational institutions continually remake themselves in the image of new theory, new priorities, and new forms of pedagogic practice. Benefits of the insights presented here, include the potential for formulating strategies for teachers and school administrators to utilise in dealing with rapidly evolving education discourses.

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Introduction: Ethnographer and Novice

The novice monks stood in a neat row. All of their expressions were identical. Their porcelain smiles beamed up at me from the shelf as I moved to pick one up for a closer look. The figurine was rendered cartoonishly, the chubby face locked in a serene and impossibly broad grin, with the classic saffron robe wrapped around the body. It was the ideal image of the young Buddhist monk – a picture of happy comportment. I was surrounded by similarly idealised imagery, evoking all of the key figures of Thai Buddhism. The Buddha, and a host of venerated senior monks, all depicted in wood, porcelain, plastic, and ink, filled the souvenir stand. At Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok, it is easy to find this type of merchandise, presenting an essential and instantly recognisable image of the Buddhist faith. The happy little novices played a key part in the arrangement. Their presentation was distinctive when compared with the serious men depicted in large ornate frames just one shelf above them – the famous senior monks wore decidedly dour expressions that jarred with the novices' exaggerated delight. The monks' stern faces seemed to recall their commitment to an acetic life, while the porcelain novices evoked the enthusiastic, and perhaps uncomprehending, first steps into monasticism. They had only just embarked on their quests to follow in the footsteps of these giants of spiritual attainment, just beginning to receive the *dhamma*[1] and the Buddhist ideals intended to shape them into good monastics. For now, there was still something boyish and mischievous about them. They were still learning, and perhaps even still clinging to the childish concerns that occupied them before they put their robes on for the first time. They were not serious monastics just yet, that is why they could be represented in such a cute and kitschy fashion.

[1] In Buddhism, '*dhamma*' or '*dharma*' (*thamm* [ธรรม] in Thai) is commonly used to describe the Buddha's teachings. More broadly, it refers to the true order of reality according to Buddhist cosmology.

The representation was amusing, not least because I had seen similar depictions of novice monks standing next to their real-life counterparts. At one *wat*[2] I visited frequently, the entrance to the *sala*[3] was flanked by a pair of life-sized plastic statues of novices, with the same chubby features, wearing similar docile grins, and with the added touch of a pair of glasses to give them a studious bearing. Evoking the same wholesome image of Buddhist monasticism as the souvenirs, these statues had an added function, with coin slots in the tops of their heads to collect donations. Their hands, clasped in front of their chests in a *wai*[4] gesture, exuded beneficence to those who would support their 'going forth' into ordination and monastic education. The real adolescents who wandered in and out of the sala often looked quite different. They could be found hiding in shady corners playing with their phones, labouring at chores, or even engaging in physical labour with their outer robe removed, stripped down to the waist. At school, while they could often be found in classrooms, they did not always mimic the scholarly enthusiasm of their plastic effigies. They did not always live up to the ideal image of the novice monk, even if they possessed a thorough understanding of the qualities embodied in this ideal. The features of the souvenirs and the donation boxes were familiar even prior to their ordination, they learned what it meant to embody these features as they became acclimated to the novitiate life. At times, when called upon, they were able to skilfully produce these features in their own practice and their own bearings. But they were also engaged in the continual process of cultivating their own ideals,

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[2] A *wat* (วัด) is a Thai Buddhist temple. Wats serve as sites of religious activity and public worship and house monks, novice monks, and Buddhist nuns (*mae chee*).

[3] The *sala* is the primary gathering place for monks and novice monks on a temple's grounds. It is usually used as an informal meeting hall, in contrast to the formal space where most ceremonial activity takes place, the *ubosot*.

[4] The *wai* (ไหว้) is the standard gesture of respect in Thailand. It involves clasping the hands, as if in prayer, in front of the chest and is used universally in greeting. Etiquette governing the wai dictates that those of lower status perform the gesture first when greeting those of higher status. Greeting monks, or other people of exceptionally high status, involves clasping the hands high up against the forehead, demonstrating the highest degree of deference to their social position.

settling upon the features they found desirable, not all of which fit into the neat image of the model novice monk.

This is a study of how novice monks are made, with the processes feeding into their development considered from the multitude of perspectives present within the institution of a monastic school[5]. The research centres around a twelve-month period of ethnographic fieldwork, conducted at Wat Don Khet Scriptural School[6], located in a rural province of northern Thailand. In this introduction, I will lay out the basic facts of the field site, and the theoretical and methodological approaches employed in designing and undertaking the project. First, I aim to provide some vital contextualising information on the novice monks, who made up the majority of my interlocutors. In order to understand Wat Don Khet specifically, and the institution of monastic schooling broadly, it is necessary to establish exactly what function the novice monk serves within the institution and within Thai society at large. My analysis of how the novice is defined also introduces the theoretical approaches underpinning the argument of this thesis, giving a brief preview into the discussions to come in the following chapters. Next, I will delve into contextualising information about the field site institution, and the historical significance of monastic schooling more generally, before setting out my research questions, and defining the key terminology I employ in asking and answering these questions. I will then describe the methodological design of the project, reflecting on the approaches I employed and the challenges I encountered. Finally, I give a summary of the thesis structure, outlining the subject matter and argument of each chapter.

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[5] In Thai, monastic schools are officially termed '*rongrian phra pariyathithamm*' (โรงเรียนพระปริยัติธรรม) which can be literally translated as 'scriptural school'. I use the more general term 'monastic school' as it serves as a more accurate descriptor of the field site institution's form and function. While novice monks do occasionally still study scripture, I found this to be relatively uncommon, and is certainly no longer the primary component of their education.

[6] The names of all institutions, places, and individuals in this thesis are pseudonymous.

What is a Novice?

Novitiate ordination is practised across Buddhist traditions, and while it is subject to variation according to cultural context, there are a few overarching common features. In general, boys have the opportunity to take ordination during childhood or early adolescence. Temporary ordination practices are commonly associated with rites of passage. Men in a range of Buddhist contexts are expected to ordain to signify the beginning of their adult lives, or to mark the death of a parent. The length of these periods of ordination may vary widely. While traditionally men may have ordained for the three months of the rainy season (*phansa*[7]), Thai men now often ordain for as short a time as a few days, or even just a few hours. Novitiate ordination, as I discuss it here, differs slightly from these practices, in that while temporary, it is intended to last for the duration of a boy's education. Once they have completed their education and are ready to enter the workforce, most will disrobe and return to lay life. A very small number of novices may remain in the *sangha*[8], taking full ordination once they turn twenty years old, and becoming monks, possibly for the rest of their lives. This system has remained in place for generations in Thai wats, with boys ordaining to serve in the role of novice monk, while receiving some education. Previously, this involved rudimentary tutelage in reading and writing largely in the service of sitting ecclesiastical exams. Now, with the

[7] *Phansa* (พรรษา) refers to the three-month rainy season that occurs in Thailand from July until October. This period is religiously significant for Thai Buddhists because it denotes the time during which monastics are expected to remain in one place to practice meditation or engage in scriptural studies. Men undergoing temporary ordination, and novice monks, would take ecclesiastical exams at the end of this period.

[8] The *sangha* is the collective body of Buddhist monastics. The Thai sangha is governed by the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand, which is made up of the highest-ranking monks in the country. The organisation is responsible for regulating all Buddhist institutions and administrating all Buddhist ecclesiastical matters in Thailand.

implementation of a national curriculum, novices are expected to receive the full education delivered at secular schools.

The role of the novice monk in Thailand is multifaceted, and the meaning of the practice has been subject to major changes over time. The Thai word for novice – *samanen* (สามเณร), often shortened to *nehn* (เณร) – is derived from the Pali – *sāmaṇera*. A direct translation of the term would render it simply as a 'young monastic or young ascetic practitioner'. Throughout this thesis, I prefer to use the translation – 'novice monk' – because it evokes the fundamental activity of novice life, that of obtaining an education. In Thailand, the novice monk is invariably associated with education, historically in the sense of being ideally engaged in the scholarly pursuit of reading scripture. This sense of being a novitiate is further reinforced by the nature of their apprenticeship to senior monks charged with guiding them through their education. Samanen are therefore never seen simply as diminutive counterparts to the adult monastics with whom they live; they are in a state of perpetual development and subject to continuing projects of cultivation. In the Thai idiom, before ordination they are 'raw' (*dip*), once they are educated through their time in robes they become 'ripe' (*suk*)[9]. To be a novice places one at the bottom of a hierarchical order, in which one is expected to defer to the orders and expectations of adepts and masters. This term more accurately reflects the place of the novice monks I worked with, who were tasked with pursuing their education within the confines of this hierarchy.

As Michael Chladek (2018) has noted, in the Thai context, novice monks are expected to undergo a transformational process effected through their training as monastics. In the most literal sense, this transformation is afforded by having

[9] See Borchert (2017) for an instance of the same idiom used in the context of Dai Lue novitiate ordination.

novices live with a set of ten precepts (in contrast to the full two hundred and twenty-seven precepts taken by fully ordained monks). The novices' precepts are:

1. To refrain from killing or harming living beings.
2. To refrain from stealing.
3. To refrain from sexual activity.
4. To refrain from lying.
5. To refrain from taking intoxicants.
6. To refrain from eating at inappropriate times (after noon).
7. To refrain from singing, dancing, or playing music.
8. To refrain from wearing perfume or beautifying oneself.
9. To refrain from sleeping on high or luxurious beds or seats.
10. To refrain from using money.

Novice monks vow to uphold these precepts when they first take ordination, and, for my interlocutors, these norms were symbolic of the code of morality defining the role of the novice monk. When I surveyed novice monks, asking them the question 'what is a novice?' at Wat Don Khet, the most common answer read something like 'someone who follows ten precepts and is under twenty years old'[10]. As we shall see in later chapters, the implementation of these precepts is the subject of negotiation and debate, but for the purposes of defining the novice here, it is clear that the intention is for them to limit their behaviour and instil discipline. In addition to this formal set of norms, novices are expected to develop a sense of monastic comportment. This involves carrying oneself in a controlled way, learning to speak, walk, and act calmly and mindfully. This demeanour should be adopted in carrying out the duties of the novice monk, which are both religious and practical. In practical terms, they are assigned many chores associated with the maintenance of their wat, while

[10] See appendix I for a sample of responses from this survey.

their religious duties include their participation in funerary rites, festivals, and holy days, and usually involve chanting and receiving donations.

In Chladek's (2018) study, he maps the path of socialisation followed by novice monks in Thailand as they participate in temple summer camps. His account concentrates upon how the processes of inculcating them with the moral code of their precepts, and the disciplinary cultivation of their comportment, operate as they must quickly conform to their temporary way of life. In this sense, he follows McDaniel (2008), whose research into monastic schooling in Thailand and Laos combines textual and ethnographic methods to build a picture of how Buddhist religious education operates. My project is similarly concerned with how processes of socialisation and religious education work in the context of novitiate ordination, but I bring insights gained in this area to bear against a heavier focus on the experiences and modes of cultivation engaged in by novices that fall outside the traditional remit governed by the monastic school. This study therefore also draws on ethnographic approaches to Buddhist novitiate ordination (and similar practices) that have been implemented outside the Thai context. These studies have illuminated areas of the practice of novitiate ordination left untouched by research with a more explicit interest in describing the tradition in terms of its significance for Buddhist belief and practice. For example, Elijah Ary's (2012) study considers the implications of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of recognising *Tulkus* — reincarnations of high-status Tibetan monks. Tulkus are typically young boys, who have enormous expectations placed upon them because of the importance of their religious role. The present study looks at the analogous expectations placed upon Thai novice monks, examining how such heady presuppositions about one's role in a religious order shape one's developing sense of identity.

Thomas Borchert's (2012, 2017) account of novitiate ordination in Sipsongpanna province, China, ties the practice to the maintenance of ethnic identity among his Dai Lue interlocutors, as they remain partially insulated from the homogenisation of cultural identity in the region. He considers how monks in Sipsongpanna constitute modern subjects, alongside their projects communicating essential aspects of Dai Lue culture, such as the ability to read and write in the Dai Lue language, to the novice monks they are tasked with educating. As a tradition associated with Dai Lue ethnicity, the motivations for maintaining the system of monastic schooling in Sipsongpanna differ quite drastically from the motivations I found to be relevant in my field site. In Thailand, unlike China, novitiate ordination is still a widely understood and accepted practice, even if the popularity of ordaining to study at a monastic school has declined as access to secular schooling increases. What Wat Don Khet shares with the institutions Borchert describes, is the self-conscious attempt to present themselves as consonant with modernity. In both settings, monastic institutions have historically been intimately associated with education, and there is an enduring desire to preserve the efficacy of this association. Such a desire has given rise to complexes of issues as monastic institutions strive to maintain the legacy of their integral role within communities, while simultaneously perpetuating a notion that they are capable of maintaining relevance in a transformed educational landscape. Questions on the relations between modernity and tradition are similarly at issue in Michael Lempert's (2012) study of Geluk Buddhists at a Tibetan monastery in India. Part of his research includes a description of the ways lectures involving histrionic displays of anger are employed by monks in their attempts at educating and reprimanding novices and laypeople. This mode of lecturing is based upon a distinct pedagogic tradition aimed at transforming men into monks. Similar forms of traditional pedagogic practice are at issue in my study, and like Lempert, I am mainly interested in analysing them in terms of how they are

intended to shape their recipients, rather than providing an in-depth account of the religious impetus behind such practices.

The selection of studies into the lives of novice monks cited here demonstrate the diversity of perspectives it is possible to take on novitiate ordination as a practice. The present project aims to strike a balance between theoretical perspectives, while also highlighting the contextual specificities of how the practice operates in northern Thailand. It is important to note that, in general, Thai novitiate ordination undertaken for the entirety of one's secondary education is diminishing. Temporary ordination for men remains a significant rite of passage, but as referenced above, the practice has transformed, and is now regularly only a matter of taking up robes for a few weeks or even just a single day. As recently as the twentieth century, novitiate ordination was closely associated with education in line with the wat's wider role of guiding a community in domains of life beyond the exclusively religious. Wats served as centres of learning for lay people as much as monastics, with scholar-monks at certain wats educating those who would come to consult with them on anything from mathematics to astronomy (Watson, 1973). Before the advent of mass secular education, beginning towards the end of the nineteenth century, wats were the only place to obtain any kind of formal education (Dhammasami, 2018). As noted above, in its most systematised form, this involved leading novice monks through their ecclesiastical examinations. Often, preparations for these examinations would be the only regular form of education novices received. Indeed, this was the only tutelage received by several of the senior monks at Wat Don Khet when they were novices themselves. Earning qualifications in secular subjects, even after education reforms established nationally recognised qualifications alongside a national curriculum, has only recently become possible for novice monks. Historically, the limitations on novice education were unimportant when compared to the benefits such an

education could offer. Crucially, learning to pass one's monastic exams meant learning to read and write, and these skills afforded a host of opportunities inaccessible to most people within a population in which farming was the default occupation, and most were illiterate (Tambiah, 1976; Wyatt, 1966).

Those who became literate at the monastic school might be able to run businesses or obtain coveted clerical positions in government. Novitiate ordination, with its attendant educational opportunities, was therefore regarded with a level of prestige. This status has continued to hold currency with the older generation, but its importance has been reduced by developments in the education system. In terms of its practical role as a tool for social mobility the practice has declined. As secular education became more widely available over the course of the twentieth century, the peculiarly Buddhist form of education offered by the monastic school came to look increasingly irrelevant. In attempts to increase the spread of secular schooling, many monastic schools were converted, ultimately becoming accessible to all lay students regardless of sex. By some accounts the monastic schools, and the bodies governing them, were unable to adapt (Dhammasami, 2018). Conservative attitudes regarding what counted as appropriate subjects for novice monks to learn, quickly made their form of education limited and parochial. A curriculum that could not prepare students for the rapidly changing demands of Thailand's developing economy was bound to find itself marginalised. To spend time in a monastic school today, it seems like this religious conservatism has given way. Novice monks at Wat Don Khet learn all of the subjects required by the core national curriculum, including Thai, English, science, maths, and social studies. However, there seems to be a general belief, at least among the monastic educators I worked with, that the damage is already done. As Thailand continues to develop, and free secular education becomes even more widely available, the status of monastic

schooling falls into question. For this study then, concerned with the specificities of monastic education as a distinct project, the questions posed must be asked in the light of a waning practice. The consequences of the decline in conservative forms of monastic tutelage form part of the concerns addressed in the first half of the thesis. To further contextualise the project, I shall now move from the role of the novice monk generally, to the specificities of the temporary ordination tradition, and the transformations effected by the demands of a modern education system, as I found them at Wat Don Khet.

The Field Site in Context

Wat Don Khet is situated in the valley of the Nan River, within the community of Ban Don Khet, a small farming village of around seven hundred and fifty people, split across three hundred households[11]. Don Khet is a typical village within Nan province, where most large population centres are clustered along the river from which the province takes its name. The temple complex of Wat Don Khet, which includes both the local temple and the monastic school, sits at the centre of the community, flanked by the large open village square on one side, where events and community meetings are held, and crop fields on the other, which extend to the banks of the river. The households of Ban Don Khet are considered to be relatively affluent as compared with the rest of the province. This affluence is facilitated by a number of factors, including the economic advantages afforded by its proximity to larger population centres, with the nearest town just a ten-minute drive away, and the journey into the provincial capital of Nan City (Nan Nakhon) taking just under an hour. More significantly though, Ban Don Khet's ageing population, some of whom had little to no independent income, received financial support from their adult children and younger relatives, who had moved to urban centres to benefit

[11] These figures accurate as of October 2022 according to local government sources.

from increased education and employment opportunities. For the purposes of this study, the affluence of the village was particularly notable because of its contrast with the backgrounds of many of the novices studying at Wat Don Khet School, who generally came from the less developed border regions of the province. These regions, located up in the hill country above the river valley, were far more reliant on farming as a primary source of income, and had far less access to secondary education[12].

At the time of fieldwork, no local boys from Ban Don Khet were ordained at the monastic school. When I asked one senior monk about this, he explained that it was the result of the favourable status of the economy. Families with school-aged children in Ban Don Khet could generally afford to send them to the large fee-paying school in the nearest town, and this was the preferred option since this school was seen as delivering the best quality education in the region. The nearest free secular school providing secondary education was located just across the river from Ban Don Khet, but it was considered by many to be an inferior option compared to Wat Don Khet School. This was not just because of the fewer educational opportunities afforded by the limited resources available at the free school, but also because of a perception that students there were more likely to be tempted into patterns of bad behaviour. The fear was that even good children could be corrupted and transformed into errant adolescents, who might disregard their education in favour of illicit pleasures such as drinking alcohol, smoking, and sexual activity. For many families then, apart from any religious considerations, the monastic school figured within calculations as to how they could obtain an education for all of their children, while also protecting them from dangerous temptations. For example, in some of the families of novices I spent time with, all adolescent boys were expected to

[12] See appendix II for occupation data on novices' parents/guardians from 2016-2021. The data shows that most parents/guardians relied on farming and itinerant labour for their income.

ordain for their schooling. This meant that resources could be concentrated on the girls in the family, who could be sent to a fee-paying school with the money saved after being relieved of the boys' upkeep.

If practical and economic factors were often as important as religious ones in families' decisions to have their boys ordain for their education, then this was equally true for the wats that housed them. The story of how Wat Don Khet School was first established is emblematic of this. The institution began recruiting novices and providing a broad secular curriculum in the 1990s and grew until it reached its capacity of around one hundred enrolled novices at the time of fieldwork in 2020/2021. Phra Ajhan Kasem, the director of the school, explained the reasons for the school's establishment to me. At the time of the institution's founding, he was working under the abbot of Wat Don Khet, who initiated the project primarily as a reaction to the dearth of novice monks in residence at wats in the local region. Phra Ajhan Kasem framed this problem in practical terms. Novices were essential in helping to perform much of the labour necessary in maintaining wats, helping to free up senior monks so that they were able to fully perform their religious duties for the community in which they were based. Wats without novices were in danger of becoming impossible to sustain and could even end up without resident monastics at all. The establishment of Wat Don Khet School sought to solve this problem by concentrating a relatively high number of novices in the region, attracting them from the far reaches of the province to come and receive their education, in exchange for filling a necessary role in ensuring local wats could continue to serve their religious functions.

In order to attract boys to come and take ordination, it was necessary for Wat Don Khet to become an institution capable of delivering an education comparable to that taught across Thailand in secular schools. As noted above, in

the past, schooling at Wat Don Khet, and other wats nearby, could involve very little education outside the preparation for ecclesiastical exams. The curriculum would therefore be limited to the study of the dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha), the *vinaya* (the code of monastic discipline), and the Pali language. Phra Ajhan Kasem, along with his fellow senior monks acting as teachers at Wat Don Khet, had received this form of tutelage. By their account, the organisation of their schooling under this model was extremely loose. As novices, they had no scheduled classes or set times during which they were expected to study. Instead, a senior monk would occasionally (and quite spontaneously) summon the novices to listen to a lesson. The lessons themselves would then usually consist of the monk reading or lecturing on a particular aspect of Buddhist doctrine or practice. Their descriptions were therefore consistent with historical accounts of monastic education I have referenced (Dhammasami, 2018; Watson, 1973; Wyatt, 1966). Phra Ajhan Kasem was one of the first teachers at the newly established monastic school; now having passed his own ecclesiastical exams he prepared new novices to undertake theirs. At the same time, lay teachers from local secondary schools would sometimes volunteer their time to begin teaching subjects such as maths, English, science, and social studies. These classes would take place after the normal school day had finished, and Phra Ajhan Kasem would take part in them as a student, right after finishing his own day of teaching.

With an increase in funding, Wat Don Khet was eventually able to afford to hire permanent lay teachers (in 2020/2021 the school employed nine lay teachers in addition to five monks who worked as teachers) and novices could begin studying in preparation for the national standardised examinations, that would earn them qualifications to verify their receipt of a secondary education. Funding was derived partially from donations offered by the local community, but the most significant contributing factor to Wat Don Khet's transformation

into a school with a fully operational secular staff was the patronage of Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. The Princess began funding monastic schools in the north of Thailand as part of a royal initiative to increase educational opportunities for those living in regions of the country that had seen little development, and still lacked adequate access to secondary schooling. The initiative combined traditional narratives about the opportunities afforded by monastic schooling and its religious significance, with discourses concerning the modernisation of state mechanisms, especially the education system. The royal initiative has maintained an involvement in the operation of Wat Don Khet School, providing funding and incorporating it into a network of other monastic schools under its wing. With the school firmly established within the local community, it now serves its original intended function of providing local wats with a steady stream of new ordinands. Of the one hundred novices enrolled at the school in 2021, a small number lived on site at the temple complex housing the monastic school, but most lived at other wats in the region. Before their ordination, the school administration would make arrangements to find a home for each novice, drawing on a network of local wats, with the abbots and senior monks at these wats serving as the primary guardians of their novice charges. Novices were then bussed in to attend school five days a week, arriving by 8am and returning to their home wats at 4pm. Their education served as their main occupation, but novice monks did also have a host of other duties which would occasionally take precedence over their studies. For instance, their attendance was required at funerals, where they participated in rites, chanting, and received donations.

In line with the organisation of schooling nationally, Wat Don Khet's school year began in late April or early May, with novices graduating to the next level of their secondary education at this time. In Thailand, schooling is split into levels, the *Prathom* level, which corresponds to primary education and begins at

around the age of six, and the secondary *Matthayom* level, which is itself split into lower-secondary and higher-secondary levels. Education at Wat Don Khet begins at the lower Mattayom level. Grades are denoted by the first letter of their level, and the number of the grade within that level, for example Wat Don Khet School starts at M.1. Boys are required to have passed P.6 before ordaining to start their education at the monastic school. The final class of lower-secondary education is M.3, after which many novices end up leaving the school, usually remaining in education but attending secular institutions. Upper-secondary schooling then continues up until M.6, after which it is possible to apply for a university place and go on into higher education. During M.1, novices are usually eleven or twelve years old, meaning they are seventeen or eighteen by the time they leave the school after M.6. However, ages of novices in each grade were subject to some variation. Occasionally this was because novices were held back a year, after failing to achieve high enough marks on the yearly exams and assessments measuring their performance. More often though, novices who were old for their grade had begun their education later, with this often being a consequence of coming from a region with meagre access to schooling. With the practical facts of novitiate life at the field site institution established, I will now move to explain the impetus behind the present project, laying out my research questions and clarifying some theoretical terminology relevant to them.

Research Questions and Terminology

The seed of this project was planted in 2017, when I met a monk on a train journey from Bangkok to Nong Kai. At the time, I spoke little Thai, and the monk in question, Wut, did not speak English. Nevertheless, he made efforts to explain some of the details of his life to me. He was young, in his early twenties, and lived at a wat in central Bangkok. Most of his time was dedicated to his

studies – he was enrolled at a university where he was training to qualify as a social worker. Unfamiliar with any concept of temporary ordination, I didn't understand. Was it possible for a monk to take on a secondary occupation like this? Would he perform his job as a social worker while also fulfilling his religious role? Perhaps seeing my confusion, Wut tried to explain further. Tugging at his robes just below his neck, he spoke in words simple enough for me to understand. "When my studies are done, I'm finished[13]." Upon graduation, he was going to disrobe, beginning his career in social work as a layman. Despite Wut's explanation, some of my confusion still lingered. I grasped his meaning but couldn't fathom how his experience of the monastic life fit into the broader picture of his future plans. Wut was a Buddhist monk, which presumably meant a commitment to a set of precepts and an ascetic life. At the same time, he was a student, embroiled in the material world of laypeople not just through his studies but also via his conception of his own future life and occupation. How could one remain dedicated to a project of religious commitment predicated on a separation from the world of material concerns, while simultaneously pursuing projects that would entangle oneself further in that same world? I could imagine how Wut might balance his commitments to lay and monastic life practically speaking, but conceptually, in terms of the ethical and religious meaning of these two projects, there were surely some points of incompatibility and conflict.

Later, when I had the chance to spend time in monastic schools and to meet novice monks, I saw another version of this same tangle of questions. The adolescent boys who had taken ordination were practically all going to leave their robes behind at some point. Yet considerable time was spent, both by the novices themselves, and by the teachers and monks guiding them, in the cultivation of distinctively monastic ideals and practices. In the modern version

[13] All quotations from individuals in this thesis are translated from Thai unless otherwise stated.

of this temporary ordination tradition, I saw a paradox[14]. The novice monks seemed to be being cultivated under the assumption that they would remain in robes indefinitely, while everyone with a stake in this project of cultivation knew that their time as monastics would come to an end. It was the confusion brought on by Wut's position, in addition to the novice monks I met afterwards, that led me to develop what has become the central research question of this study: How do novice monks cultivate ethical subjectivities that reconcile their role as monastics with their future as laymen? I will give an outline of how I will address this question throughout the thesis shortly. First though, it is necessary to give an explanation of some of the key pieces of theoretical and conceptual terminology I employ.

First, the term at the centre of the primary research question: 'ethical subjectivities' should be defined as I use it here. The notion of 'the subject' has been an enduring theoretical focus across the social sciences. Understanding how people define themselves, how they are defined by others, and the mechanisms of power used to legitimise these definitions, have naturally been a central concern in addressing questions on how institutional and societal structures shape, and are shaped by, the subjects that constitute them. This is the angle of approach many anthropologists have begun with in delving into questions of subjectivity, attempting to account for cultural variation in the emotional styles adopted by people in different contexts. Defining subjectivity in anthropological terms has been important across a wide range of sub-fields, including feminist anthropology — famously Ortner's (1996) work — strands of affect theory aiming towards a dialogue with physiological models of subjectivity discussed by psychologists (Gross & John, 2003; Lutz, 1988), and

[14] I liken this paradox to Laidlaw's (1995) starting point in working with Jain laypeople in Jaipur, India. His interlocuters were engaged in an apparently paradoxical pursuit to evoke the ideals of a religion that demanded an ascetic life, which contrasted starkly with the trappings of their middle-class realities.

other theoretical approaches concerning the anthropology of the emotions (Luhrmann, 2006). Holland and Leander (2004) offer an effective definition, describing subjectivity as, 'actors' thoughts, sentiments and embodied sensibilities, and, especially, their sense of self and self-world relations' (2004, p. 127). For the purposes of the present study this is broadly how I will discuss subjectivities, with particular emphasis on the notion of subjectivity as a relational construct which inherently encapsulates an individual's way of relating to their social environment. To add to this definition then, it is necessary to determine what is distinctive about 'ethical' subjectivities.

With the development of theoretical approaches following the 'ethical turn' in anthropology, the issue of the subject takes on yet another layer of significance. Discussions of subjectivity specifically have been of particular importance in work included within the branch of the anthropology of ethics taking inspiration from the later writings of Foucault (2000). Foucault's work in general has been pivotal in setting forth 'the subject' as a nexus point of rumination in the social sciences. While many of the subfields of anthropology I have already mentioned in relation to questions of subjectivity have drawn on his early conceptions of a distinctively political subject, meticulously shaped and controlled by mechanisms of power (Foucault, 1977), writers in the anthropology of ethics have turned to Foucault's (1985, 1986, 1988) notion of 'technologies of the self' to emphasise the ways individuals may produce their own forms of subjectivity that may conform to, or resist, the influences of power. A host of ethnographic studies have drawn on these notions to describe instances in which people engage in projects of self-cultivation, projects which may be intimately attached to existing power structures or involve practices that radically defy them (Cook, 2010b; Hirschkind, 2006; Laidlaw & Mair, 2019; Mittermaier, 2012; Schielke, 2010). At this point it will also be useful to account for the precise meaning of 'ethics' as the term is understood in this context.

Defining the domain of ethics has proved an area of contention among theorists working in the anthropology of ethics. This debate will be of central concern in the latter part of this thesis. For my purposes here, I defer to the strand of thought distinguishing ethics from morals – with the former concerning people's basic capacity to deliberate and evaluate the situations, circumstances, and practices with which they come into contact. Under this definition, ethics encapsulates morals – which are limited to describing codes of practice – but itself extends to include the assessment of choice writ large (Laidlaw, 2002). Taken together then, a study of ethical subjectivities concerns the forms of choice-making and evaluation that people engage in, as well as how they reflexively measure these deliberative actions against the enduring experience of their lives. Laidlaw's (2013) concept of reflective freedom will be crucial here in examining the deliberative capacities of stakeholders in the process of making novices. In the context of the present study, this conception is valuable for its far-reaching capacity to include a broad range of the influences and experiences encountered by my interlocutors. The novice monks at the heart of the project are profoundly shaped by the moral strictures and complex ideologies governing the operation of their institution, even as they themselves evaluate these same processes, altering the functioning of the monastic school in turn as they exercise their free capacities for self-making.

Directly pertaining to the definitions of ethics I have described are two terms commonly employed in mapping people's moral frameworks and analysing their acts of deliberation and choice-making. The first term I will address here is 'value', the second is 'ideal'. The description of diverse modes of valuation has been important in quarters of anthropological thought concerned with accessing plural notions of 'the good'. Joel Robbins' (2004) significant body of work on value among Pentecostal Christians in Papua New Guinea has been

especially influential here. In Robbins' framework, cultural values underpin people's everyday thinking about the ethical circumstances of their lives and the choices they are required to make[15]. Robbins defines cultural values as, 'cultural conceptions of the good or desirable…. those cultural conceptions that arrange other cultural elements (such as cultural ideas about persons, kinds of actions, things, etc.) into hierarchies of better and worse or more and less desirable' (2012, p. 120). In general, I concur with Robbins' perspective as far as the definition of values goes, but I would add the concept of 'the ideal' to compare against values in building up a fuller picture of people's ethical lives. While values may be employed in the moment, internally present with individuals and revealed via action, ideals present as explicitly goal and future oriented. They take shape external to individual action in the present. Ideals reflect notions of exemplarity explored by Humphrey (1996). The emulation of the ideal (or exemplar) is prefigured as a potentiality, rather than as something we are ever likely to encounter in the present. The practice of novitiate ordination, with its attendant rites of passage and demands upon ordinands implies a whole host of values held by stakeholders in the project. Devotion to one's family, and an earnest desire to obtain an education may serve as examples of such values underpinning ordination as a practice. But at the same time, overarching ideals define the ultimate goal of that practice, and the discourses utilised in discussing it. Throughout this thesis I explore multiple expressions of such ideals – those aimed at shaping novices into masters of monastic comportment, and those aimed at making them into a particular kind of educated subject. In discussing these different ideological threads, which

[15] Graeber (2001) presents an interesting attempt to unpick the slippage between notions of economic and moral value, or following Bourdieu, between economic and symbolic capital. While aspects of this type of theorising on the nature of values touches on how we might conceive of moral valuation, it is not within the scope of this thesis to delve into an interrogation of such a multivalent concept. For the purposes of this study, I limit discussions of value, primarily speaking to questions on the 'moral good' in line with Robbins (2012).

coexist and compete within the monastic school, I employ one more key term, 'discourse'.

Foucault's (1981) conception of discourse has formed the basis of how the notion is discussed in the social sciences. The term 'discourse' refers to the ongoing modes of communication, and their contents, engaged in by a community. In Foucault's terms, control over discourse is an essential component of political power, he defines it, writing that, 'discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but…. the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized' (1981, pp. 52-53). This thesis does not offer an extensive engagement with classic forms of discourse analysis relating to this definition, instead I employ this notion of discourse as a useful heuristic in assessing how diverse modes of education, employed within the context of the monastic school, were differentially valued. In examining the forms of discourse holding currency at Wat Don Khet, it is especially critical to emphasise the point that discourses should be understood in relation to one another. For example, a large part of Chapter 2 concerns an examination of discourses built around both the traditional, religious functions of the novice monk and the monastic school, as well as notions of modernity that are particularly influential in shaping thought about education systems. Rather than striving to draw clear boundaries around these different forms of discourse, I am interested in explaining how they interact with one another, eliciting confluences and contradictions at the blurred edges where they meet. Having clarified some of the terminology essential to my argument here, I now turn to an explanation of how I designed and developed the research methodology of the project.

Methodology: Ethnographer as Novice

Conducting ethnography requires one to be a novice. At the beginning of fieldwork, one is apprenticed to one's interlocutors, respecting them as experts in the workings of the field site, and the social hierarchies operating within it. In my initial attempts to carry out ethnographic fieldwork at Wat Don Khet, and the communities surrounding it, perhaps nothing was as helpful as my acceptance of this position of relative ignorance. This became clear when, after spending a few months becoming acquainted with the school, I had the opportunity to see a new cohort of boys arrive to take ordination. The new M.1 class became the group of novices I spent the most time with. Since we were both new to the novitiate life, we shared in certain experiences as novel concepts were introduced to us. As I document in Chapter 1, I first met some of these boys in their home villages, before watching them prepare for their ordination, undertake this rite of passage, and spend their first months coming to grips with their studies and their new monastic duties. We learned together what it was like to be a novice monk, me from the removed position of the novice ethnographer, them from the direct phenomenological experience of this new form of life.

The learning processes involved in accepting my own position, as a novice ethnographer and a novitiate coming to understand the structure of monastic life at Wat Don Khet, were critical in making my doubts about my fieldwork methodology productive. As Cook (2010a) points out, doubt and anxiety are near universal experiences when it comes to carrying out ethnographic fieldwork. Questions as they are framed in anthropological theory can seem a long way away when immersed in the action of an ordination ritual or a Pali lesson. In these contexts, the clear-sighted analysis of exemplary ethnographic work might seem an impossible feat, as doubtful questions needle the mind of

the researcher. “Do I really understand what is going on here?”; “are my insights and observations anything more than surface deep?”; “am I asking the right questions, seeing the right things, spending time in the most productive ways?” Anxieties precipitated by these questions led me to constantly doubt whether I was approaching my methodology effectively and consider whether I was falling short. However, such doubts can prove instrumental in determining one’s position relative to a field site and to a group of interlocutors. Fieldwork experience may be incomplete, and its structure may be difficult to define, but this is ultimately part of what makes it valuable. As Cook writes, ‘the application of local interpretive models to the anthropologist’s own interiority may provide the anthropologist with a crucial source for learning culture that is not limited to previously internalised directives or pre-defined modes of understanding’ (2010a, p. 239). Through an acceptance of doubt, I felt more able to engage with the overlapping aspects of experience I shared with novices, monks, and teachers at Wat Don Khet, as well as gaining a refined ability to perceive where our experiences diverged.

Many of my doubts during fieldwork revolved around the primary challenge of the fieldwork – gaining an insight into the cultivation of novice monks’ ethical subjectivities that went beyond observations of the performance of their role as students and as monastics. My initial plan for the project split the research methodology roughly in two. First, I was interested in making an assessment of the monastic school as an institution. I conducted in-depth interviews with members of staff to understand the history of Wat Don Khet, and the details of its contemporary day to day operation. I spent many hours observing classes, building up an extensive account of the contents of curricula, and the pedagogic methods being employed. I studied novices’ reactions to the structure of their education, attempting to assess their interests and aptitudes, in addition to their lapses into boredom and disinterest. Second, I sought to understand how

novices incorporated the ideals and discourses underpinning the institution into their own ethical subjectivities. I wanted to find avenues for exploring where they might have questions or doubts about their religious position, where their interests might diverge significantly from the interests of the monastic school, and how they perceived their potential future lives, given their seemingly paradoxical quandary of refining themselves as good monastics, even as they experienced an increasingly pressing need to prepare for the realities of lay life.

The first aspect of the project went smoothly enough, not least because of the significant help I received from staff at Wat Don Khet. Each day, I gradually built upon my basic knowledge of the institution, with monks and teachers guiding me through its workings by inviting me to their classes and providing patient explanations along the way. With their assistance, I was able to construct a working mental model of the institution and could understand and communicate its place within the wider frameworks of monastic education at provincial and state levels. This aspect of the methodology felt successful. The second aspect proved more difficult. To some extent I had anticipated this. As I designed my methodology, I was conscious of the fact that a large proportion of my interlocutors would be adolescents, and that this would necessarily shape the way I approached participant observation and interviews owing to the methodological and ethical exigencies of conducting research with young people. I knew that I must maintain a persistent awareness of the power relations between myself, a white, adult male researcher from a prestigious European university, and all of my interlocutors, but this was especially true when interacting with the younger novice monks. I felt it was essential that, as far as possible, I should avoid situations in which these power relations could be leveraged (inadvertently or not) to derive ethnographic material from novices that may have been coloured by the nature of our relative positions in a

social hierarchy. This problem is most easily demonstrated by my continual attempts to have novices call me anything other than '*ajhan*' or 'teacher'. These attempts proved to be totally in vain – as an adult seen to be working at the school every day, this was the way I was naturally perceived by novices within the context of the institution. I worried that my being perceived in this way could be problematic, that it would shape novices' responses when I put questions to them and would shape their behaviour around me. What I learned from my attempts to alleviate this issue was that it was not for me to try to cultivate a particular image of myself in the field. Instead, I needed to apprehend the position I was ascribed by members of the field site community and find ways of working within the confines of the identity associated with this position.

In line with favoured techniques in the social sciences for conducting research with children and young people (Clark, 2005, 2017; Hecht, 1998; Mayall, 1999; O'Kane, 1999), I began with an assortment of methods aiming to avoid the pitfalls inherent in utilising classic mainstays of the ethnographic method in interactions with younger novice monks. The open-ended interviews, so central to many ethnographic studies, would not be suitable in this situation. While respecting, and indeed investigating, the capacities of young people for constructing complex social worlds, it would have been a mistake to assume that I could gain access to these worlds via modes of questioning so clearly warped by a hierarchically defined power relation between myself and the young novice. Instead, I turned to methods commonly employed in education studies, as well as sociological and psychological research conducted with children, which favour task-based interviews centred around activities that divert attention away from the direct relation between researcher and interlocutor. Such approaches may be further facilitated by having interlocutors engage with activities as a group, engendering discussion between them that

would not necessarily arise if solely in dialogue with a researcher, thus avoiding some of the problems produced by imbalanced power relations. To a limited extent, I used methods like this where I was interested in eliciting novices' opinions on a subject that did not come up naturally in the course of casual conversation within the day-to-day routine of the school. Activities, such as asking novices to discuss and individually write down responses to basic questions, such as 'what is a novice monk?' resulted in simple insights that provided the foundation for my extended thought and exploration into particular quarters of my research question. The example cited, for instance, helped to identify essential features novices associated with their own religious role.

These methods for acquiring foundational insights were hardly comprehensive in painting a picture of novices' complex ethical subjectivities though. Obtaining more than a basic sense of their projects of self-cultivation, projects that might fall outside the remit of their religious position or educational endeavours, continued to prove difficult, and was only mitigated by my increasing identification with the doubts and anxieties endemic to my own novitiate status. As I spent time in classrooms with the new M.1 cohort, I had the opportunity to feel our collective understanding of monastic duty deepen. But perhaps more importantly, quite apart from any formal discussions or lessons on the monastic life, I witnessed their socialisation into the wider school peer group. Observing this process highlighted aspects of novice ethical subjectivities that had previously been obscured to me. As expected, the new monks learned how to tie their robes, chant adequately, and prostrate before senior monastics, but many of them learned other aspects of novitiate life. How to cheat on exams, how to mock the older monks, and how to get away with doing as little studying as possible, were all examples of skills outside the remit of institutional or religious expectations. Exploring how subjectivities could

coagulate around each one of these activities has formed key aspects of the argument of this thesis, in providing a more involved and nuanced picture of novices' lives than a simplistic rendering of the norms governing monastic duty and comportment could do.

Another way I hoped to gain access to novice ethical subjectivities beyond the limits of their superficial image was by spending time with them outside of the regimented setting of the monastic school. At weekends and in the evenings, I would travel to novice's home temples to spend time with them as they completed chores and enjoyed their down time. In this setting, engaging with the younger novices did not prove particularly fruitful. Any unsupervised time was spent in play, either absorbed in the glow of a phone screen or running around the grounds of their wat. Yet this is where my relationships with the older novices developed, as I accompanied them in completing chores to collect food donations and shared in their leisure time, spent idling in the shady corners of the wats where they were easier to engage in conversation. These novices, at about seventeen or eighteen years old, were on the cusp of leaving the school and potentially the monastic life altogether. Their advanced position within the institution seemed to motivate them to share the nuances of the time they had spent in robes. As the young novices introduced me to the practical task of becoming socialised into the school community, these older novices provided words of reflection. Often, they would share thoughts on the inconsistencies and disorienting characteristics of receiving one's education as a novice monk. Again, my own position as a novitiate proved helpful, as I took on the role of curious student to these older novices, cultivating deep and ongoing relationships with them. These experiences, of submitting myself to the status conferred upon me at Wat Don Khet, and of listening to the insights of the novices with whom I built relationships, made the anxieties and doubts I held about the fieldwork process fruitful. They became part of the process of

reconfiguring my own assumptions, to open myself up to forms of ethical subjectivity that I would not have been able to imagine before the time I spent at Wat Don Khet. In the final part of this introduction, I will now give a brief summary of the chapters making up this thesis, noting how each contributes to its overarching argument.

Map of the Thesis

As my experience of the field site institution deepened, I began to identify the various stakeholders in the project of cultivating novices' ethical subjectivities. It became clear that, in order to produce an adequate account of how these multiple contributors added to the process of making novices, I would need to explore individual perspectives, and consider how such perspectives interacted in influencing the way ethical subjectivities in general were conceived of and produced. To organise these perspectives, I split the thesis into two sections. The first section, encompassing the first three chapters, is titled 'The Techniques of the Institution' and primarily concerns the ways monks, teachers, and school administrators approached their roles in introducing boys to the novitiate life, developing Wat Don Khet as an institution, and addressing their own multifarious roles in helping to shape novices' subjectivities. I begin in Chapter 1 with an elucidation of the various perspectives of the ideal novice life course, in which ordination is mapped on to a rough model of the phases of a life, attributing each phase with particular forms of significance. This process was primarily managed by the teachers and monks of Wat Don Khet, in coordination with novices' families. I look at the novice life course, as it was conceived of by these various stakeholders in novices' development, through an account of the journey from boyhood to monkhood facilitated by the ordination ceremony. The chapter centres around an ethnographic account of this

ceremony and the events leading up to it, using it as a focal point in which narratives around ideal life courses coalesce and interact.

Building upon the multifarious perspectives on the nature of novice's lives, in Chapter 2 I directly address the discourses surrounding the project of education undertaken by Wat Don Khet's administrators, teachers and monks (whom I refer to collectively as 'institutional elders'). I demonstrate the ways that discourses derived from traditional notions of monastic schooling interact with self-consciously modern education discourses, underpinned by appeals to education theory and the practical recommendations of academic experts. My aim is to show that the project of monastic education is the product of both confluences and conflicts between various discourses, a point I go on to examine further in Chapter 3, in relation to the systems of academic assessment employed at Wat Don Khet. Here, I look at the interaction of discourses through ethnographic accounts of two sets of examinations I witnessed take place at the monastic school. In doing so, I argue that ecclesiastical exams intimately tied to a conservative picture of the monastic tradition, and the standardised tests applied to assess students' and schools' capacities by the Thai state, both rely on examinees approaching their tests as performances of ritual action. In the latter part of the thesis, I go on to explore how novices develop capacities that both resonate, and create dissonance with, the normative expectations attached to their role. This is why the second part of the thesis is titled 'To be a Novice is to Follow Precepts', a statement employed by novices in describing the essence of the religious position they simultaneously constructed and defied. This phrase became central to my thinking as I attempted to understand how novices managed to conform to the normative codes of discipline encapsulated in Buddhist precepts and school rules, while also pursuing projects that undermined the logic of those codes.

In Chapter 4, I begin addressing questions of how novices themselves went about formulating and implementing projects of self-cultivation, looking specifically at the forms of discipline and moralisation they navigated at Wat Don Khet. My argument considers the moralising projects of teachers, marking ways in which moral lessons helped to create a persistent sense of moral dissonance, as novices paid lip service to the efficacy of moral lessons while deriding them when out of teachers' earshot. The analysis engages with important theoretical work in the anthropology of ethics, notably Joel Robbins (2007) use of the concept of moral value spheres, and Jarrett Zigon's (2007, 2009) notion of moral breakdown, to account for the balance between the self-directed motivations of novices with their dedication to expressions of monastic comportment and duty. The exploration of this balancing act continues into Chapter 5, where I begin by relating an illuminating case of a particularly religious and committed novice monk who suddenly left Wat Don Khet in pursuit of experiences unavailable to him in his monastic role. I use this case to explore what I consider to be a critical aspect of the mechanics of novice subject formation, their capacity for free deliberation and choice. Drawing on Laidlaw's (2013) concept of reflective freedom, I look at how novices' evaluative capacities led them to develop subjectivities that simultaneously conformed to, and subverted, institutional expectations. I do this by looking at two areas where novices' apprehension of the divergent strands of their developing subjectivities were highlighted, in their experiences of boredom and their experiences of masculinity. In these two dimensions of novitiate life, we find a complex negotiation of competing ideals. I chart novices' attempts to navigate these areas of contradiction and attempt to explain the conclusions they came to in their evaluations of their own life courses.

The analysis of novices' ability to negotiate their adherence to monastic comportment and duty, alongside their own collaboratively imagined projects

of subject-making, is explored from an alternate perspective in Chapter 6. In this chapter, I put novices' own projects of self-cultivation centre stage, by looking at the ways they develop play-practices through games. This perspective is useful as it allows for an analysis of their capacities for reflective freedom as they engage with the processes inherent to their own subject formation. I incorporate this view of reflection into a model of relational ethics, drawing on Zigon's (2021) work on the question of 'how is it between us?' to unravel novices' capacities for 'playing' with the structures of the monastic school institution. Taking inspiration from Ortner's (1996, 1999, 2006) notion of 'serious games', I assess the ways stakeholders in monastic education collaborate in the process of novice subject formation in attempts to make particular types of monks and particular types of men. Finally, in the conclusion I bring my insights on the institutional and personal cultivation of novices' ethical subjectivities together, crystallising my arguments by bringing them to bear against the experiences of one particular novice, Eric, who features prominently throughout the thesis. I demonstrate how my arguments apply in the case of his specific experiences of ethical subject-formation, going on to examine how the findings presented here intervene into bodies of anthropological theory concerning Buddhism and ethics to challenge existing assumptions.

Part I – The Techniques of an Institution

Chapter 1 - From Boy to Novice

After a long day at school, we piled into the pickup truck. Manit, the school finance officer, was driving, with Art, a seventeen-year-old novice, in the passenger seat. I sat in the bed of the truck with two teachers, Fah and Daw, enjoying the breeze as Manit pulled out onto the highway. We stopped to pick up some snacks and beers for the journey. The whole party was in a jovial mood, despite the long road ahead. Fah, the more senior teacher leaned around the side of the truck, offering Art a sip of beer before we set off again. He surreptitiously took a gulp, smiling as he quickly handed the can back to her. I might have been shocked by this obvious breach of Art's precepts, but by this time I had witnessed many such minor infractions. Art was a good novice, who got along well with his teachers. That afforded certain privileges, and anyway, he was in his final year of school, the monastic rule that forbade him from drinking alcohol wouldn't apply much longer. We chatted and dozed as our route eventually took us off the highway, and up on to the winding roads of the hill country. The sun began to set as we approached our destination. After a steep descent we turned a corner to find a busy village climbing a steep hill. Manit drove us up to the front of a small general store. We all climbed down from the truck, stretching our stiff limbs and yawning as Fah ducked into the shop to speak with its owner. She returned to the roadside with him, looking up and down the road, surveying the bustle of idling pedestrians and weaving scooters. Finally, the shop owner pointed further up the slope, where a group of young boys in school uniform were making their way towards us.

We set off to greet them, Fah leading us. Among this group of boys, we were looking for two individuals, Noi and Yok. Both boys' families had contacted Fah at Wat Don Khet, expressing their interest in having their boys ordain as novice monks, and enrol at the monastic school. Fah addressed the group of schoolboys. All of them looked between eight and thirteen years old and quickly ceased their noisy conversation as Fah engaged them. She asked for Noi and Yok and the boys awkwardly shuffled around until two came forward, both identifying themselves with mumbles as they looked to the ground. Noi was very short and appeared the youngest out of the entire group. Yok was taller and spoke with more confidence. Both seemed to have been expecting us, but neither seemed particularly enthused by our visit. Fah asked for both of their addresses. Yok lived further up the hill, Noi's house was just around the corner, so Fah resolved to call on his home first. Noi led the way, Yok tagging along with us. We entered the wooden house through a sliding door and made our way through to the back of a long empty room, where Noi's mother was sitting at a table. She greeted us as awkwardly as her son had. Fah did all of the talking. She explained that we were here today to take her son's information before he would be required to journey down the valley for his ordination. She spoke very softly, drawing out the particle '*na kaaa*'[16] at the end of each sentence to reinforce her gentle tone.

Daw, the younger teacher, fetched a printer from the back of the truck. She came back into the house and plugged it in so that we could take copies of the mother's and the boy's ID cards. Art, straight-backed and smiling, played his role as the representation of the ideal novice, chatting with the boys while Fah and Daw helped the mother with the forms. Art teased the boys playfully,

[16] In Thai, particles are used at the end of sentences to connote tone and shape emphasis. The use of the particle, '*na*' (นะ) softens the sentence preceding it.

eliciting nervous laughter and appearing totally at ease in his robes. Fah explained all of the arrangements to Noi's mother. Accommodation had already been found for her son at a temple near to the school, although he was free to ordain at any wat. If his family preferred, he could ordain at his local temple before moving down the valley to take his place at Wat Don Khet. Otherwise, he would join the group of boys ordaining together at the school. Noi's mother indicated that his ceremony could take place at Wat Don Khet. Fah nodded and told her that when it came time for him to make the move, the school could provide money to cover his travel costs, or they could even send someone to collect him. Finally, with the arrangements made and the forms signed, we stood in a regimented line for Manit to take everyone's picture. As he framed the photo, Daw and Fah handed a basket full of toiletries to Noi's mother as a gift.

We left Noi and his mother behind and headed back to the truck with Yok. He directed us up a perilously steep dirt track to reach his house. His mother and father were both standing by the front entrance, obviously having heard news of our arrival, with the mother clutching a naked toddler as she welcomed us and led us inside. In the living room Fah began her procedure once again. The couple were less shy than Noi's mother had been, more talkative and keener to ask questions about their son's future living arrangements. Their questions all contained a hint of apprehension, as if they had not quite made their minds up about whether or not they wanted him to ordain. Fah patiently answered all of their questions, and perhaps sensing their reservations, made a point of listing all of the opportunities their son could enjoy as a novice. He could earn scholarships, perhaps even have the chance to go to university. Her description evoked a hopeful picture of future academic attainment and moral cultivation. The parents both seemed reassured by her responses. Daw spoke with the toddler as Fah led the boy through his portion of the form. "Are you going to

miss your brother?" Daw asked. The boy put his arm around the confused little girl, cuddling her as he signed his name. We took pictures again before we left, and again Fah bestowed the basket of gifts on the family. It was dark when we stepped back outside. We waved goodbye to Yok, telling him we would see him again very soon. Then we returned to the truck and began the long drive back down into the valley.

In the weeks and months that followed, I would watch these two boys, along with the rest of their cohort, become novice monks. I spent time with them when they came to join classes for the last week of the school year, still in their laypersons' clothes, struggling to fit in among their robed peers. I attended the lengthy practice session, led by a young monk tasked with preparing them for the chanting and the prostrations required during their ordination ceremony. I sat through the ceremony itself, watching as they put their practice to work in front of emotional relatives. I saw them put their robes on for the first time, and then I watched as they settled into the novitiate life. In this chapter, I want to chart the journey boys like Noi and Yok take as they become novices, considering the significance of this watershed moment in their life courses. I aim to show that this significance can be construed in various ways. The institution, and its representatives in the form of monks, teachers, and novices, present a particular image of the monastic school and what it means to ordain, generated by engagements with both traditional religious ideals, and the ideals underpinning modern education policy. The picture generated by the institution is, in turn, consumed and interpreted by prospective novices and their families. I will compare these plural perspectives, considering the implications they hold for the socialisation process to which boys are subject, as they are made (and make themselves) into novice monks. I begin by looking at each stage of Noi and Yok's journey into their ordination. My aim here is not to unravel specific effects evoked by elements of the ritual process (the subject of

Chapter 3), but rather to understand the ordination rite as a watershed moment upon the boys' life courses, and the life courses of their families. I follow Eberhardt (2006) in utilising a notion of the life course, showing how plural and nested life trajectories interact within the space of the ordination ceremony and its preparatory stages. I go on to build upon notions of the life course, by describing the connections between perceptions of critical life stages, and the powerful somatic experiences elicited by rites of passage marking these stages.

Defining the Life Course

The life course has served as a subject of discussion in strands of anthropological theory in dialogue with developmental psychology. For instance, anthropologists within the school of ethnopsychology have sought to present 'folk' conceptions of development alongside, and overlapping with, debates on emotion, self, and the mind (Hallowell, 1955; White & Kirkpatrick, 1985). Meanwhile, Plath (1980) and Eberhardt (2006) have aimed to expand anthropological contributions to the field of human development by arguing for a perspective that takes the whole trajectory of life into account, rather than placing undue emphasis on early developmental stages. This contribution has allowed for the life course to be seen as a malleable concept, providing a useful entry point into examinations of how people delineate phases of life, and of the criteria they employ in making such delineations. Eberhardt's (2006) exemplary study of a Shan community in northern Thailand, demonstrates how this form of analysis can work, by presenting the significant stages of the Shan life course according to local delineations. As Johnson-Hanks (2002) points out, local conceptions of life courses do not necessarily trace consistent patterns built up of clearly identifiable discrete stages. In some contexts, life courses may be subject to persistent fluctuations or chaotic reconfigurations, in which we can only attempt to piece together tangible events with particular significance in

people's lives (Feldman, 2017)[17]. For my purposes here, I consider novitiate ordination as an event, ushering in a particular life phase, however I acknowledge that this phase may be subject to transformation and reinterpretation depending upon the individual perceptions of each of the stakeholders in the ordination as a rite of passage.

The inevitability of fluctuations within an individual's conception of their own life course, makes it impossible to describe a single life course model that could apply universally, even within a bounded institutional context. There is no singular model of the novitiate life, and so my project here is not to attempt to describe universal features of significance applied to the ordination ceremony. Instead, I aim to present an alternative conception of how life courses may be constructed. Rather than focusing exclusively on the social hierarchies and structures that might be seen to force actors to conform to certain life trajectories, I see the production of local ideas about the life course as a collaborative and relational process. This process may be informed by an array of factors more or less relevant to the ceremonies' various stakeholders. The impetus to acquire a modern education, the adherence to a traditional rite of passage, and the economic advantages of ordination, may all have a role in shaping individual perceptions of the ordination ceremony as a significant event upon the life course. Crucially, this consideration of various perceptions of a single life course event involves an acknowledgment of how such perceptions may diverge. Ordination may have represented an entry into the opportunities afforded by modern education, a chance to make merit[18] for one's

[17] Feldman's (2017) example from Palestine illustrates how life courses may be disrupted, with their entire pattern altered by experiences such as displacement. Refugees' experiences of 'dying everyday' are projected forward and back to undermine whatever delineated notion of a life course might have existed before the displacement.

[18] In Thai Buddhism, merit, or '*bun*' (บุญ) is the accumulated force of good deeds that enables one's development towards enlightenment (and in the nearer future, to a good next life). It may be acquired through various forms of ritual donation made to monastics and can be acquired on behalf of others. The act of ordaining is itself an action that accumulates merit, which in the case

family, or it may even be totally stripped of personal significance, rendering it a quasi-event (Povinelli, 2011). I argue that all these variations may feed into one another, with the perceptions of monastic school staff, families, and novices all commingling in a relational process that continues to shape the perspectives of the various stakeholders.

In Thailand, novitiate ordination has a long and storied history as a significant juncture upon the life course. However, the ordination as rite of passage has taken many forms and taken on new meanings over time. In subsequent chapters, I will give particular attention to the way encroaching discourses on education as a modernising project have affected the life courses of novice monks. In this chapter, my focus will be on the way these discourses affected perceptions of the ordination ceremony as a watershed moment pregnant with potential meaning for all the actors implicated in its operation. As Eberhardt (2006, p. 90) notes, self-conscious apprehension of one's life course may become particularly pertinent as young people begin to understand their position within a social hierarchy in their transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Ordination may serve as one seminal point along the trajectory of novice life courses, determining the perception of their social role from the perspective of their community. The practical realities of this process as it took place at Wat Don Khet involved the reification of a changing social position via an initiation ritual, followed by a period in which the new novices must perform the task of orienting themselves within the institutional hierarchy. In the following section I aim to situate the experience of the boys I spent time with, charting their perceptions of their own life courses, and paying attention to the changes they had to undergo in preparing for, and undertaking, their ordination. I begin this account by developing a picture of the way Wat Don

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of novice monks is conferred on to their parents — or the sponsors of the ordination in some cases (Eberhardt 2009).

Khet was presented in the initial stages of Noi and Yok's journey into monastic life.

A Picture of the Institution

In making the journey into the hills to meet Noi, Yok, and their families, the representatives from Wat Don Khet aimed to evoke a particular form of desirable maturity. In this first major point of contact between the families and the monastic school, the image of a well-formed novice was presented as emblematic of the institution. Art was one of a few novices handpicked by senior teachers to accompany these trips, as he was seen as a studious and respectable monastic. He was good at playing his part. In front of the nervous boys and their families, he projected an air of serene calm and quiet confidence. As he chatted to the boys about their schooling, standing upright, back straight with his hands clasped loosely over his robes, perhaps they had a sense that this picture of monastic comportment represented a possibility for their future life courses. In the Shan context, Eberhardt (2006, p. 85) notes that the acquisition of maturity is marked by an ability to mask one's desires. Children must be led through a process of moral education, assisted by cajoling and teasing, to learn how to keep their desires under control. Novice monks were expected to exemplify a similar sense of control, particularly when they were in public. Art's controlled bearing marked him out as a good monk, and also served to indicate his place upon the life course as he stood on the cusp of adulthood, with his imminent return to lay life within reach. His status was even in evidence before we arrived to greet the boys. The fact that Art was permitted a sip of beer and a snack (despite this breaking two of his precepts) was indicative of his status, Fah did not just see him as a monk, she also respected his status as an incipient young adult. I witnessed many other instances of novices being allowed privileges that technically broke their precepts, but these

privileges were only afforded to novices who were well respected and in control of their impulses. Those novices who would deliberately break their precepts, independently seeking out alcohol for instance, would never have their illicit behaviour sanctioned by adults like Fah[19].

For Noi, Yok, and their families, Art's comportment, and Fah's assurances created a picture of an ideal adolescent life course, combining embedded beliefs about the significance and morality of the monastic role alongside a promise of opportunity. Talk of the future was crucial in Fah's attempts to calm the families' anxieties. Promises of the opportunities for scholarships and higher education were presented as within reach for the boys, if they could emulate Art and forge themselves into good monastics. The institution itself was implicitly referenced as the site where such possibilities could be realised. Wat Don Khet, depicted by its quietly commanding representatives, embodied a mode of potential development not just for individual boys, but for their families and communities as well. Everything from the talk of scholarships to the offer of gifts and financial assistance spoke of the possibility for the boys to be cultivated into good monastics and good men. The picture of the school incorporated discourses on education, drawing from both entrenched traditions governing Buddhist schooling and ordination practices, and from a range of discourses presenting education as a conduit for modernity.

Teresa Kuan's (2015) study of how *suzhi jiaoyu* (quality education) reforms in China have influenced child rearing practices provides an interesting point of comparison here. Policy changes in this area have sparked a transformation in the popular perception of how educational institutions should operate,

[19] As I discuss in Chapter 4, not all precepts were routinely upheld. Prohibitions against eating in the afternoon, and handling money, were universally ignored by novices and senior monks. The precept against consuming intoxicants was almost always strictly observed though, and novices caught breaking it would be immediately punished under normal circumstances.

emphasising creativity and initiative over the perceived over-adherence to fact-based learning that held sway until recent years. In turn, the reforms have altered perceptions of good child-rearing practice, with an increasing emphasis on seeing the child at an autonomous individual, with a need to allow them to express their individuality and protect their wellbeing. In Thailand, as in China, an increasing sense of the child's ability for self-determination has settled into the milieu of discourse on opportunity and development. The change in discourse transforms the image of the ideal educated subject. Previously, this subject was seen as one who acquires expertise and knowledge via rigid discipline. Now priorities have shifted, they are defined as one capable of expressing themselves, confident in their ability to apprehend and critically assess their social position. To be 'educated', to act as the harbinger of development, has had its meaning altered by a new logic, underpinned by the dominant discourse defining modern education. This type of logic was frequently employed by staff at Wat Don Khet whenever it was necessary to reinforce the idea that the monastic school could be an entirely modern (and modernising) institution.

Beyond the similarities in terms of developing perceptions of good education and good child rearing in families, Thailand has also been subject to a pattern of education policy reforms analogous to the case in China. Successive reformulations of the ideals that should underpin education have entered the arena of state policy directives and interacted with existing assumptions on educational ideals. Each successive reform movement devalues the currency of previous education discourses, with ideals that were previously considered endemic to innovation quickly being rendered old-fashioned and redundant. The picture of the monastic school presented on the visit to the village, drew on notions of opportunity consonant to the education discourses currently holding influence at Wat Don Khet, and in line with dominant state narratives and their

influence on local conceptions of education. This is a subject I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter. For the present argument, it is merely important to acknowledge the influence such education discourses hold in forging perspectives of the novice life course. These perspectives were never limited to an antiquated vision of moral and religious development through ordination. Actors on both sides of the relation, those presenting the school, and those forming perspectives on it, were continually incorporating the ideals of modernising education discourses into their impressions.

Early points of contact, such as the visit I have described, formed the basis for the expectations boys like Noi and Yok, and their families, came to have of Wat Don Khet as an institution. Fah introduced them to a milieu of ideals and attendant discourses as she spoke with parents about the step they were making in having their boys ordain. Ideas about the opportunity for higher education may have drawn from modern education discourses, but these notions also tapped into long held ideals relating to the value of novitiate ordination. The appeal of a monastic education was derived from multiple commingling sources. The historical role of the monastic school, with its capacity for providing routes for social mobility predating access to secular education (Wyatt, 1966), was augmented and renewed by modern education narratives implied to be unproblematically compatible with the traditional role of the novice monk. These augmentations meant that novel possibilities, such as access to higher education, which were likely inaccessible even to relatively young parents of novices, could be presented as within reach to Noi and Yok. Wat Don Khet only became a fully functioning school, able to lead its students through examinations in the secular subjects included as part of the national curriculum, in the 1990s. For the families of the boys then, the stakes of their sons' transition into the adulthood, and the possibilities afforded them by the promises of education, contributed to maintaining the monastic school as a

viable option when compared to other educational pathways. As Kuan (2015, p. 40) notes, changing economic circumstances demand an adaptation to novel educational ideals on the part of families and institutions. In China, the introduction of the socialist market economy helped to propel *suzhi jiaoyu* imaginaries beyond the domain of policymakers. Such imaginaries have encouraged parents to engage in novel forms of consumption in order to cultivate their children and safeguard their wellbeing.

For an institution couched in religious tradition, like the monastic school, economic changes present significant challenges to their continued relevance. Staff at Wat Don Khet were required to develop an ability to describe the school both in traditional terms, emphasising its ability to serve its historical role, while simultaneously presenting it as having the capacity to compete with secular schools in engaging with modern education discourses, and providing the same forms of economic opportunity to its students. This challenge became particularly complicated where contradictions and conflicts could arise between education discourses. In Kuan's case, this occurred as the state attempted to effect control over *suzhi jiaoyu* reforms, in such a way that could engage with their popularity while also making them compatible with overarching aspects of state ideology. In policy documents, *suzhi jiaoyu* reforms were described as standing in direct opposition to aspects of the consumer economy in line with socialist values. Yet these same aspects of consumption were implicitly demanded by an adherence to *suzhi jiaoyu* reforms[20]. At Wat Don Khet, the same type of problem could arise. Education discourses could grate against one another, even as staff were at pains to reconcile them. I want to consider these contradictions as they played out as part of wider divergences in perspectives on the novice life course. To do this I will provide an account of the

[20] The rise of *suzhi jiaoyu* as the inspiration behind policy reforms could not have taken place without the mass consumption of popular literature on the topic (Woronov 2009).

preparations and procedure of the ordination ceremony Noi and Yok undertook. Through this account I attempt to show how the picture of the monastic school presented by staff could help to influence perceptions of novice life courses for families, even as it failed to represent the reality of life as it was experienced by novices themselves.

The Ordination Ceremony

At Wat Don Khet, the plural perceptions of the novice life course coalesced in the ordination ceremony and its preparatory stages. Staff mixed notions of a modern educational ideal alongside a 'traditional' Buddhist ideal of the morality of monasticism. In the actual preparation and carrying out of the ordination ceremony, this presentation of values was tested in the first-hand experience of both the boys becoming novices, and the institutional staff guiding them. In this section I aim to highlight how this preparation stage sometimes defied my expectations of what it meant to prepare for a momentous life transition. Diverse possibilities afforded by ordination have frequently been the source of both a confluence and conflict between variant perspectives of its role within a life course. Houtman (1984) describes a case in rural Burma, in which a boy's ordination was a site of contention between his father and grandfather. The former wanted him to ordain to become a monk in the traditional sense, while the latter was a proponent of the new popular meditation movement that was gaining traction at the time, and therefore wanted the boy to ordain specifically to cultivate his meditation practice. The ceremonies involved for each form of ordination would vary slightly, with the father's preference following the older, more lavish model, and the grandfather's involving a more stripped down and truncated ritual. The conflict demonstrates how apparently subtle differences in the form and purpose of ordination can result from the plurality of ideals being staked upon it. In my

case, at Wat Don Khet such obvious conflicts did not emerge into open discussion. Instead, areas of contradiction sparked different reactions for different stakeholders in the rite of passage. For Noi and Yok, the contradictions quickly surfaced, and determined their attitude towards the tasks expected of them in the carrying out of their initiation rite. Meanwhile, the same contradictions could be glossed over by institutional staff, as they prepared to convey a consistent set of ideals to the attendees of the ceremony.

The morning before the ceremony, the boys turned up at the school accompanied by parents or other family members. I turned up early, expecting to spend the day witnessing a gruelling preparation process, as the boys were trained in every aspect of the ordination ritual. I had already attended one ordination ceremony earlier the same month, which took place at a temple a few miles from Wat Don Khet. That ceremony had been for young men, already finished with their education, who were mostly ordaining for a single rainy season (*phansa*) as part of the traditional rite of passage Thai men undertake[21]. I had witnessed the endurance and discipline shown by the men, as they engaged in endless chanting and prostrations while the festive atmosphere generated by the audience of lay supporters buzzed around them. The scene I found at Wat Don Khet did not remotely reflect the seriousness of the activity at that previous event. The time was mostly split between a welcome assembly and a series of relaxed games and activities. For the first hour, as most of the families remained at the school with their boys, the monks and staff echoed the sentiments I had seen presented on the visit to see Noi and Yok. The boys and their remaining relatives gathered in the hall. The ordinands sat cross-legged on

[21] If they have not ordained as novice monks, men in Thailand often undertake ordination as a rite of passage to mark their transition from childhood to adulthood. While the length of this period of temporary ordination is subject to a high degree of variance, a traditional practice is to enter the monkhood for the rains retreat (phansa). During this time, monks do not travel, and are meant to spend their time in study or meditation. Men then end their time in robes after taking the first set of *Nak Thamm* ecclesiastical exams which take place at the end of phansa.

the floor, their families on chairs at the side of the room, observing as their boys were introduced to the school director, Phra Ajhan Kasem.

The assembly began with the usual round of chanting led by the monks in attendance, the boys staying quiet and holding their bodies awkwardly now they were on their knees. When called upon to prostrate before Phra Ajhan Kasem they all bowed clumsily, out of sync with one another. The senior monk sat in an ornate chair facing them and began to speak. But while his eyes never left the anxious group of boys, the content of his speech seemed directed more towards the families than at his new students. He spoke at length about the role of the novice, extolling its vital importance in the functioning of a religious community, of the ordinands' capacity to confer merit upon their relatives. Then he moved on to the common theme that I had first heard Fah raise with Noi's mother, the opportunity that was being afforded the boys here. "Before I ordained, I was scared. I didn't know if I wanted to do it because I thought I wasn't capable. But you know we all have this opportunity as humans to ordain and to practise. Our ability doesn't matter." Phra Ajhan Kasem appealed to the religious necessity of ordination. The Buddhist ideal of the life course necessitated that boys should take this step. The factors common to his ordination, and the imminent 'going forth' undertaken by the boys assembled in front of him, were skilfully interwoven with a modern education discourse that emphasised the maximisation of individual wellbeing and academic potential. As ever, his tone was calm and measured. His speech seemed designed to put everyone at ease, pooling values of economic opportunity and merit-making to alleviate the anxieties of his audience.

The families gradually left over the course of the morning, leaving the boys behind. Noi, Yok, and the rest of the cohort were given the opportunity to settle into their new surroundings before the real work of the day began. Somsak (the

deputy head) and Baifern (the science teacher) led the group in a series of games and activities, interspersed with minor lessons about the history of the school, and on points of etiquette such as the correct way to address a monk. For a few hours before lunch the activity seemed more about acclimatising the boys to life in the institution generally. I was confused, and kept checking the time as the morning progressed, wondering just when the serious business of preparing for the momentous rite of passage, taking place just twenty-four hours from now, would begin. In contrast to the way this life transition had just been presented in Phra Ajhan Kasem's speech, the activity now took on an air of easy relaxation. The heavy atmosphere generated by standing at the cusp of a watershed moment on the life course, had suddenly dissipated. The presentation of the novice life course seemed to fluctuate upon contact with different audiences. Thinking about this fluctuation in terms of Povinelli's (2011) descriptions of eventfulness, to the staff and boys the ordination ceremony almost appeared relegated to the status of a quasi-event. While in dialogue with families, Phra Ajhan Kasem described the ceremony in terms of its extreme significance for the broader pattern of the boys' lives, yet with the absence of this audience the ceremony seemed to have become a rote procedure, to be mechanically performed without any implications for personal perceptions of change in the boys' whose life courses it was apparently designed to transform.

To understand the fluctuation in perspectives of the novice life course across the various stakeholders in the ordination, I consider another momentous life-course event: one's death, and the ritual action taken to mark that occasion. In Chua's (2011) account of Bornean funerary rites, she describes the high energy festivities (including eating, drinking, and gambling) that take place immediately before the participants are called to attend final prayers, and the coffin is closed and buried. During this phase of the funeral, the festive

atmosphere immediately dissipates, as the family of the deceased experience jarring somatic expressions of grief. Chua describes the occurrence of such somatic experiences as public expressions of religious belief. The bodies of the grieving interact with the soul of the deceased and the gathered funeral attendees. Dramatic fluctuations altered the forms of engagement acceptable in marking the deceased's final rite of passage. The focus on the momentousness of this final rite upon the course of their life was suddenly sharpened, producing tangible somatic effects.

For the boys, and the teachers and monks leading them into their life course transition, the process of entering into the rite of passage evoked an analogous response. The monks and institutional staff shared an understanding with the ordinands, that the supposed point of significance along their life courses marked by their ordination, would ultimately constitute a more prosaic occurrence in their subjective experience. Yet at certain points it was necessary to participate in alternate perceptions of the novice life course, that lay totally outside their own subjective experience, and their own perceptions of their life courses. These alternate perceptions were grounded in beliefs about the religious significance of novitiate ordination, beliefs that were affirmed through the boys' performance of the ordination ceremony, and through outward expressions of deference paid to novices by their relatives once they were ordained[22]. Chua emphasises the importance of bodily sensations in communicating belief. For her, these sensations are 'not private, interior experiences but highly palpable, public entities that are perceptible and accessible to others' (Chua, 2011, p. 13). It is this public expression of belief, of a

[22] Thai Buddhist notions of religious belief differ significantly from those ordinarily applied in English-speaking contexts, and often derived from Christian ideas of 'belief in'. The Thai word *naptuu* (นับถือ) is often translated as 'to believe in' but is more accurately rendered as 'pay respect to'. For the present purposes a detailed account on the nuances of belief (as provided by Chua in relation to her case) is not necessary. Instead, my use of 'belief' here is limited to connoting significance with regard to the life course, rather than the broader landscape of ideals and doctrine implied by 'religious belief'.

commitment to religious and ethical ideals attached to particular models of the life course, that shaped the approach to the rite of passage the boys were undertaking. Within the confines of the ceremony, as I shall describe it shortly, the responsibility for performing in such a way as to evoke belief in novitiate ordination fell upon boys like Noi and Yok. To adequately describe how perceptions of the novice life course could differ and fluctuate though, I first want to describe a prototypical instance of a relative's performance of belief, directed towards a novice who was already ordained. My hope is that this description illustrates the contrast between the expectations attached to each performance, delineating factors of significance in assessing the ordination ceremony as a life course event.

Eric was one of the few novices who had family living close to Wat Don Khet. His mother, sister, and brother lived together in a village just a couple of miles from the school. His great aunt (Baa Da) and great uncle (Loong Boon) lived next door to them. I often visited Eric at Wat Jai Fan, his home temple, located in the village of Ban Jai Fan where his family lived. I would walk with him as he made his alms rounds returning containers from community members who had offered food donations in the morning. Sometimes these walks led us past his families' homes, and we would stop in to talk with them for a while. All of Eric's family told me they were proud of his skilled monastic comportment, and his good academic performance, but none more so that Baa Da. She lavished praise on him when speaking to me, and her bearing towards him was characterised by a carefully practiced deference. This was encapsulated particularly well one evening, when Baa Da had food to give Eric to take back to the wat. They both got up from the table outside, where we had been sitting chatting with Loong Boon. She led him into the kitchen, just through the front door of the house. Inside, she picked up two plastic bags of pumpkin curry, she turned to Eric and carefully handed him the food waiing him as she did so,

clasping her hands together against her forehead and bowing her head deeply. The whole performance stood in stark contrast to the easy conversation in which we had just been engaged. Baa Da took on an air of intense formality as she performed the act of donation, savouring every moment of its significance. As she and Eric returned outside, she was beaming with joy and clutching her heart, the somatic expression of her belief in the meaningfulness of Eric's status seemed to bring her a deep sense of serenity.

For relatives, such a heartfelt performance of belief was indicative of their perspective on the novice life course. Baa Da clearly perceived Eric's status, marked out by ritual actions such as donating food to him, through the types of palpable and public bodily sensations Chua describes. On the day of the ordination ceremony, for the most part, relatives did not have the same opportunity to actively perform their belief in the significance of their boys' transformations. On this occasion, they took on the role of observers as the responsibility for performing the rite of passage fell on Nok, Yoi, and their cohort, a performance which was carried out with a very different bearing to the earnestness of Baa Da's ritual act of donation. This became clear as they began their preparations for the performance. When it was finally time to begin the serious business of practicing for the ceremony the boys all lined up facing the front of the hall. They began by practising their prostrations. Phra Ajhan Kasem was accompanied by Phra Nit, a young monk from the temple next door. The senior monk called out the name of each pose adopted in performing a single prostration while Phra Nit observed the boys from the side, assessing the smoothness of their movements and calling for adjustments in their posture. After around fifteen minutes of this Phra Ajhan Kasem called for them to move on to chanting practice.

Phra Nit handed out sheets with the words of each chant printed for the ordinands to read. The monks led the chanting, Phra Nit occasionally pausing to correct one of the boys' pronunciations. The practice session continued in this way, switching between the various stages of the ceremony, from the prostrations to the chanting, to Phra Ajhan Kasem dressing each of the boys in their underrobe. The actions were approached as if the boys were experiencing each for the first time, even though in the course of growing up, each one of them would have paid many trips to the wat, been required to prostrate many times, and would have heard many hours of chanting. The emphasis here seemed to be not so much on learning the mechanism of a proper prostration, or the words of each particular chant, but to elicit each of these performances as renewed somatic experiences. On the surface it might appear as though they were being trained to appreciate these experiences in the same way as Baa Da appreciated her ritual acts. However, the repetition of the practices also served to render them prosaic, aimed more at an initiation into the work and the bodily comportment of monasticism, rather than as a round of preparations specifically aimed at serving the boys when they would have to perform the next day. While bodily comportment and somatic experience were a part of an expression of belief on the part of both relatives and ordinands, the underlying character of these expressions could be very different. This difference was observable via the varying levels of significance attributed to the ordination ceremony as a rite of passage, and as a notable event upon the life course. The somatic experience of Baa Da spoke of the significance of Eric's ordination *for her*, while the experiences of Noi and Yok on the practice day were about learning the work of bodily comportment required of a monastic, with the actual ceremony comprising only a relatively minor part of this overall project.

On the day of the preparations, I was interested to know how Noi and Yok themselves felt about the momentousness of the ceremony. The work of the

afternoon was long and dull, but finally, at around 6pm the boys were allowed a break to have dinner. As they lay around on the carpets in the hall, I spoke with them about their expectations for the next day. “Are you nervous about it?” I asked. “Do you feel like you are prepared?” Yok spoke up first. “No, I’m not nervous. We know all the chants now; we know what to do”. I looked from him to his peers, who were nodding casually in agreement, trying to detect any hint of bravado in them, trying to see if any of them were concealing their nerves. They seemed genuinely at ease, lying back down and returning to their light-hearted conversation. Later, the boys continued practising as rain and wind hammered against the shutters separating the hall from the dark grounds outside. Phra Nit leaned back in his chair, obviously exhausted as the chanting continued. He himself mostly remained quiet at this stage, letting one of the boys lead while he occasionally chimed in with a minor correction. I sat at the back with Got, an M.2 novice from the temple who had been helping with minor errands throughout the day. We spoke about his experience of going through the process of preparing for, and undertaking, the ordination ceremony last year. “Did you find it difficult when you first came here and had to prepare like this?” I asked him. He replied just as the boys earlier had. “No, it wasn’t really difficult. It just takes a long time. It’s long and boring”.

Thinking about the day as I walked home later, I reflected on why the stakes seemed to be so low for the prospective novices, and why Got looked back on his own ordination without any sense of its significance for its place upon his life course. Listening to the teachers and monks, and watching the reactions of the boys’ families, had given me the impression that this was to be a momentous event in the boys’ lives. From talking to the boys themselves though, the ceremony appeared to be no more than a quasi-event. It was like many aspects of education that I will go on to describe in the next two chapters, like an exam, it was something that required long and tedious preparation, an

event that came and went and was largely forgotten. On the visit to the village that I recounted at the beginning of this chapter, it seemed that Noi and Yok had perhaps been intimidated by the path to ordination that lay ahead of them. At that point, the only real impressions they had about what their transformation into novices might mean were gained via contact with the school staff, with Art serving as the example of monastic comportment. It was only once they arrived at the school, with the rhetoric of the ordination ceremony dispelled somewhat by the mechanistic realities of their preparations, that their 'going forth' into the novitiate life became stripped of its significance as their perception of the life course ahead of them fluctuated. The somatic experience of a transformation in life course would predominantly occur for their relatives observing the ceremony. As I demonstrated through the appeal to Baa Da's somatic experience of the meaningfulness of novitiate ordination, the event was cast as significant because of *their* belief. The efficacy of the ordination ceremony was therefore directed more at the assembled relatives observing the ordinands, than at the ordinands themselves.

When morning came, the boys were shuffled around the school and temple as the area was prepared for the families and community members who would come to observe the ceremony. Teachers manned a booth taking donations, while the ordinands were called to have their picture taken with Phra Ajhan Kasem and their families against a decorative display. The day's events began with the boys sitting in a line against the back wall of the temple complex. Here, Phra Ajhan Kasem began cutting one boys' hair, chanting as the congregation of lay people looked on. Soon, the boys' families were allowed to join them, each member cutting away a small lock of hair, sprinkling it upon the lotus leaf placed in each ordinands' lap. Next, the heads were soaped up ready to be shaved, with the atmosphere becoming ever more joyful. The boys each sat with scrunched up faces as relatives swarmed around them, some performing the

shaving itself, some taking pictures of them, some wiping water from their eyes. Finally, the monks took over and the lay people moved back to watch as each boy's eyebrows were gently cut away. Observing this initial stage of the rite of passage, I felt there was a neat encapsulation of the divergent attitudes to the novice life course that I had already witnessed. As Noi's large congregation of relatives moved around him, they exercised the same type of care and assiduousness that Baa Da had shown when performing her ritual donation. When they took up the scissors, they each gently held up the smallest lock of hair they could grasp, taking care not to pull on it as they made the cut. The whole ceremony at this point was full of chatter and laughter, the gathered relatives apparently deriving significant enjoyment from the ritual acts. When the monks took over, they were far more business-like. They worked quickly, shaving the ordinands' heads with practised hands.

There was far more at stake for the relatives observing the rite of passage here, than for the senior monks or even the prospective novices. The latter two groups served merely as ritual actors, in their own way each serving as conduits to enable the gathered families to experience the significance of the rite. Each stage of the ceremony reinforced the notion that this alteration in life stage was on display for those around the ordinands, with their experience sublimated to the way their experience was to be perceived by their audience. They were dressed and fawned over like manikins, donning white ordination robes before being endlessly posed and photographed with various combinations of monks, teachers, relatives, and peers. They sat still as their teachers and relatives tied lengths of string around their wrists, the adults chanting blessings as the boys kept their eyes closed or unfocused. When the main portion of the ceremony began, a visiting monk, Phra Wirod, spoke to the assembled audience, the local lay people sitting on chairs behind the boys, who sat on the floor surrounded by their family members. As dramatic music played over the speakers, Phra Wirod

talked them through their emotions. “Look at your hands. They work hard and they care. They are used to hold the child when he is born. They are used to sow the fields.” He told the families to take the boys’ hands, and to hold their bodies. He talked about how the ordination would help to accumulate *bun* (merit) for the boys’ relatives. “One can survive for seven days without food. For three days without water. For three minutes without air. But if you live for one hundred years without doing any good, your life will have no value.” As his speech drew to a close, he instructed the ordinands to repeat after him, them now sitting with their hands clasped. “I will promise to do good… I will listen to my parents… I ask forgiveness from my parents for all the sins I have committed…” The focus of Phra Wirod’s speech remained firmly with the parents and relatives listening, speaking as much to the meaningfulness of familial connections as to initiation into the monkhood.

I now want to offer a possible explanation as to why the rite is so consistently directed towards the older generation, through a comparison with Eberhardt’s (2009) account of Shan ordination practices. In the Shan context, ordination preparations are usually sponsored by wealthy middle-aged members of the community, who will take on the costs of leading a boy from a poorer family into the monastic life. They do this as part of a drive to accumulate merit for themselves, a motivation that Eberhardt notes becomes more critical as individuals move along the path of their own life courses towards old age. This drive to accumulate merit falls in line with an increasing general sense of religiosity and responsibility towards the community that Shan adults acquire as they enter the later stages of their life courses. Ordination ceremonies therefore elicit two momentous life course transitions. As the boys transition into their role as novices, the lay supporters sponsoring them enter into a new phase of their own life courses, as community leaders now dedicated to the moral imperative of making merit. As I noted at Wat Don Khet, the transition

experienced by the boys was often sublimated by the even more vital transformation their families were undergoing. Eberhardt describes the experience of ordinands, writing that, 'during the initial dressing at the temple, the sleepy boys are often treated like dolls, fussed over, photographed, and made into objects of beauty' (Eberhardt, 2006, p. 129). As this process progresses throughout the ceremony, the boys' agency is apparently stripped from them as the sponsors take over. At Wat Don Khet, the boys' ordinations were mainly managed and funded by family members, the tradition of sponsorship from those outside the immediate family having recently declined. Nevertheless, the relation between the two interacting life courses: those of the ordinand and their sponsor, remained the same as in the Shan case. The boys I had met were required to undergo a life course transition that was, in terms of its significance in relation to belief in particular ethical and religious ideals associated with ordination, primarily perceptible within the subjective experiences of the families sponsoring them.

When the boys finally assembled in the formation they had taken the day before during their lengthy practice session, I was surprised by how much assistance they still required in navigating each step of the process. As the monks began chanting, the ordinands barely joined in, apparently too shy or unsure of themselves now they had an audience observing them. Once the chanting finished, Phra Ajhan Kasem took the lead in talking the group through their prostrations, apparently still not able to trust them to remain elegant and synchronised without his intervention. At the start of the practice session yesterday, I had assumed that the prospective novices were being trained to demonstrate competence in monastic skills for the audience coming to observe their transformation. But everyone seemed thoroughly at ease with the boys' less than skilful attempt at emulating a monk's comportment at this stage. The crowd looked on placidly, those with sons, or grandsons, or nephews in the

collection of ordinands appearing emotional and shedding the occasional tear. At the time, I was left with another question: what exactly was at stake for the various participants in the ordination ceremony? I had assumed that the performance of the ordinands would be a critical step in representing the multitude of life course transitions initiated by this rite of passage. Yet, to everyone involved, the quality of performance seemed immaterial. In answering this question, I turn to a feature of the rite as an example of ritual action. While my full account of the operation of ritual action at Wat Don Khet will be presented in Chapter 3, it is important here to make note of the role of the rite of passage as it relates to the work of self-cultivation inherent to stakeholders' projects in shaping their own life courses.

While the boys were expected to go through the ritual motions associated with the ordination ceremony as rite of passage, they were not required to exhibit a transformation of comportment. Laidlaw's (1995) account of Jain ritual practices in India provides an illuminating point of comparison here. For the adult Jains with whom Laidlaw worked, ritual action was an important site of self-cultivation. After describing the precision exercised in the flow of bodily movements demanded by the *Pratikraman* ritual, he writes that, 'none of this is in the least symbolic - nothing is being represented or communicated. Instead, it is work - work on the self - requiring for accomplished performance the mastery of skills which include bodily control, memorization, and accurate recitation' (Laidlaw, 1995, p. 208). In contrast, the ritual performance of the novices was precisely *not* about working upon themselves. The intended target of their ritual words and movements was not their own subjective perceptions of their life courses, but those of their relatives in the audience. The mere fact of their undertaking, their transition into the novitiate life elicited by this ritual, was enough to evoke the appropriate sense of momentousness for the life course transition their families were experiencing. The efficacy of the ritual was

achieved through the ordinands' mere presence, and their acquiescence to the transformation being worked upon them.

This idea is reinforced if we think back to the account of the ordination ceremony provided by Eberhardt (2009), in which the ordinands were treated almost as if they were ritual objects, their own intentionality rendered absent. In the final phases of the ceremony at Wat Don Khet, this notion once again rang true. With the chanting finished the boys recited their precepts, then each shuffled to the front to be dressed in their underrobe as they knelt in front of the presiding monk. They were then sent away into the corridor around the corner, where they were dressed in their novice robes for the first time. This happened frantically, with a flurry of monks and laypeople swarming each boy to quickly get him neatly turned out. The boys themselves once again took on the role of manikins. They seemed mere observers, as their limbs were grabbed and contorted, and the robes wrapped around them. Once the collected adults approved of the neatness of each ordinands' dress, they were sent back to their formation in the hall. Filing back in, their new attire looked stiff and unnatural as they shrugged and adjusted themselves awkwardly. After a final round of chanting, the head monk announced that they were now novices. Again, they had become inert objects in their own rite of passage, still not able to hold the responsibility to dress themselves even as the ritual culminated in their putatively complete transformation.

With the ceremony over, the new novices were allowed to speak with their relatives briefly before they were left to their new lives. The activity of the day seemed to give way, with the weighty expectations attached to the momentousness of the event now dissipating. The teachers and I cleaned up around the congregation of novices, who had now been called to sit down on the floor once again as Somsak addressed them. They sat in loose groups, Noi

and Yok lay on the floor splayed out next to one another, no longer adhering to the tight formation they had held during the ceremony. They appeared to have come full circle, apart from their new robes, and cropped heads, the novices looked exactly as they had done when they had been allowed to relax the previous day. They were now free to dispense with the air of fatefulness attributed to the ceremony while their relatives had been present, and the teachers and monks seemed happy to acknowledge that. After an hour or so, with the hall now mostly cleaned up, Somsak had the novices pair up, and set them a task. "Take off your outer robe. Then split up into your pairs and help each other to tie it again. Remember it has to look proper." He gave them fifteen minutes to complete this. The novices rushed off excitedly, spreading out in the large space of the hall and pulling at the knots that held their robes in place. They raced to see which pair could complete the task quickest. All of them struggled, at first giggling and shouting at their partners as they made abortive attempts to guess how the robe should be folded, how it should be wrapped around the body.

Eventually, with all of them beyond the fifteen-minute time limit originally allocated, they began to get frustrated. Not a single pair had managed to re-tie their robes. At this point a couple of novices and young monks who had been relaxing off to the side, enjoying the spectacle of their inept new peers, came to intervene. They stood over each pair of fresh novices, giving them orders and instructions, showing them where they were going wrong, occasionally tugging at a poorly tied knot or tucking in a loose corner of fabric. After another ten or fifteen minutes, with much assistance, all of the new novices stood dressed in their full monastic garb once again. Their haplessness at completing this basic necessity of the monastic life was treated with total levity. Somsak and I had wandered around, joking and laughing with a couple of the monks who had come to observe. Among those established within the institution it was

understood that the ceremony would only constitute a quasi-event for the novices. Whatever mode of comportment monastics might be expected to exemplify – such as the mode adopted by Art – it was understood that the fresh novices would have little grasp of this yet. The process of making boys into novices couldn't take place over forty-eight hours, it was a task that they were expected to collaboratively engage in, with the institution, over the course of their adolescence. Phra Ajhan Ban, a monk who taught at the school, came to remind them of this. They all sat down on the floor, and he led them in the evening's session of chanting and meditation. Once they had finished, he spoke with them gently, offering them a reminder, "you know, you are not boys anymore." They may have completed the rite of passage to shed their boyhood, but their hapless attempts to don the monastic dress perhaps indicated that their journey into being novices was only just beginning.

The ebb and flow of significance attributed to the ordination ceremony demonstrates how perceptions of the novice life course change, subject to perspective. Standing outside the institution proper, the lay visitors interpreted the rite of passage through the lens of their own life courses. For teachers, monks, and novices, the perception of the ceremony was different. It was approached as a prosaic rite. The first necessary, but often tedious duty that novices were to undertake in their new monastic lives. Questions remain then, as to how the rest of novices' time in robes is perceived and interpreted. How do novices come to conform to the normative expectations of the monastic institution? How might they subvert institutional norms as they reinterpret their subjectivities in relation to the monastic identity attributed to them? Enquiries concerning the tangible experience of the novice life course, as it was felt by novices themselves, will be addressed throughout the second part of the thesis. Before assessing such questions though, I first want to consider the ways in which the monastic school institution, through its administrative, teaching,

and monastic staff, conceived of itself in relation to the novice life courses it was in the business of shaping. In the next chapter, I do this via a reflection on the multiplicity of discourses affecting the ways education was conceived of at Wat Don Khet, and how pedagogical techniques were implemented and practised. In Chapter 3, I conclude this section by more thoroughly interrogating how ritual action came to affect the various discourses holding sway at Wat Don Khet, comparing the ordination ceremony as I have described it in this chapter to the implementation of examinations within the monastic school.

Chapter 2 – Modern Education and Monastic Tradition

It was the first period of the day and Baifern arrived to teach chemistry to the M.5 class. As usual, it took a while to get started. Novices were still settling down after registration, some sitting on the floor, a couple helping one another retie their robes. A group in the corner had seized upon the brief absence of any authority figure before Baifern had arrived to initiate a multiplayer video game tournament. Their excited whoops and yelps as they tapped furiously at their phone screens pulled the entire volume of the room up, so that even novices sitting at their desks were engaging in shouted conversations with their neighbours. Baifern was unperturbed by the noise. She stood at the front, logging into the classroom's computer and pulling up her teaching materials for the day. She was in her early twenties and had graduated from university with her degree in education a couple of years prior. This was only her second teaching job, but despite her relative lack of experience she always appeared relaxed and well organised in the classroom. She worked hard on her lesson plans, sticking closely to the national curriculum approved material in the textbooks she referred to, but always incorporating a range of activities in an attempt to keep her students interested.

With her materials all ready, she called out to the M.5 class to attract their attention. "*Samaneeeen.* Everybody. Sit down please!" She spoke just loudly enough to be heard over the din of the classroom, managing to sound calm and collected despite the need to strain her voice. After a few more general requests for quiet, interspersed with her directly addressing a few of the particularly boisterous novices, she finally had their attention. We were almost twenty minutes into the lesson. Baifern began quickly, introducing the first slide of her

presentation, a picture of the periodic table. She began moving up and down the rows of desks, handing each novice a strip of card depicting one column of the table. She explained as she moved, "look at it closely and remember it. You have to try to remember it!" Back up at the front, Baifern began a lecture on oxidation numbers, writing key information on the white board. Most novices made notes, copying information from the board word for word as she looked on, waiting until they had all finished. The exercises for the day required the novices to calculate oxidation numbers, with Baifern leading the class through example questions. She stopped frequently to check her students' understanding. A couple of them seemed unsure. "*Ajhan*[23], I don't understand how you got the last number!" She went through the method once again, having the confused novice recite each step for her. Eventually she diagnosed the issue, they had forgotten the rudiments of adding and subtracting negative integers. She quickly refreshed them on how to perform this part of the calculation as she handed out worksheets featuring more oxidation number problems. Once each novice had completed their worksheet, Baifern had them come up to the front to hand them to her, where she quizzed them on the periodic table columns she had introduced at the beginning of the lesson.

Once the science class was over a very different lesson began. Phra Ajhan Ban arrived to teach dhamma studies[24]. The room was noisy again, but like Baifern, Phra Ajhan Ban made no immediate attempt to quieten the excited novices. He busied himself setting up a microphone and had one particularly tall novice

[23] '*Ajhan*' (อาจารย์) is the Thai word for teacher. It is often used interchangeably with *kroo* (ครู), although at Wat Don Khet senior teachers explained that they preferred novices to use 'ajhan' because it conferred a greater degree of respect. While 'ajhan' can be applied to lay-teachers, it carries religious prestige since it is also an honorific used to address senior Buddhist monks.
[24] At Wat Don Khet, dhamma studies was the class in which novices were taught about all aspects of Buddhist cosmology and practice. Lessons might focus on anything from scripture to temple architecture. Along with Pali studies, it was one of the only classes taught by monks, and one of the few areas in which the monastic curriculum deviated from the secular Thai syllabus, which requires more general 'religious studies' classes.

turn on the overhead projector. He was a senior monk, having been ordained since his own days as a novice. Now he was in his sixties, and he held a prominent position among the school staff. Apart from his duties teaching dhamma studies, he also frequently led blessings and chanting when donors visited the school, and trained novices to read and recite Buddhist scripture. Like Baifern, he had a relatively set pattern in his approach to lesson structure, although his pattern differed drastically from hers. Phra Ajhan Ban pulled up an article on the projector screen, and with the novices all seated, began to read it aloud, speaking into a microphone. The subject of the article was the cycle of *samsara*, and the various levels of heaven and hell detailed in Buddhist cosmology[25]. The novices chatted back and forth continuously as Phra Ajhan Ban continued reading, occasionally commenting on the article to one another, but for the most part ignoring the lecture. The senior monk paid no attention to them, forging his path forward through the article's contents. Very occasionally, Phra Ajahn Ban would bark out a question. I was surprised to find that novices were almost always able to answer him, despite appearing to pay no attention to the lesson contents. After finishing the article, Phra Ajhan Ban continued to talk into the microphone, seemingly reflecting off the top of his head on the details of Buddhist cosmology. This continued until the bell rang for lunch. The senior monk seemed taken aback at the sound of it, and quickly wrapped up what he had been saying before bustling out of the classroom.

I present this account of two lessons delivered at Wat Don Khet School to give an impression of the different forms of education at work there. Baifern's chemistry class was exemplary of the type of lesson most lay-teachers were trained to deliver. In the pursuit of preparing the novices for their

[25] '*Samsara*' refers to the cycle of birth and death – a central belief in Buddhism. The concept is used to describe the endless process whereby one is reborn upon death into one of the realms of heaven, hell, or earth until one can break free from the cycle by attaining enlightenment (*Nirvana).*

examinations, these lessons adhered to the material and format approved by the national curriculum. Most lay-teachers had obtained their teaching qualifications at university, where they had learned the craft of designing and delivering a lesson in line with the rudiments and ideals of modern education theory. Baifern's teaching style and format would likely be familiar in educational contexts worldwide, subject to the globalising influence of the academic consensus on how secondary education should be organised, how pedagogical techniques and strategies should be employed, and how teachers should relate to their students. Phra Ajhan Ban's pedagogical craft was quite different. He was following in the tradition of an education he himself had received. When he, and the other senior monks at Wat Don Khet had been novices, they had been taught lessons exclusively focusing on preparation for their Nak Thamm ecclesiastical exams. These classes were informally organised, following the same relatively unstructured approach Phra Ajhan Ban employed, in which the teacher chooses a topic, reads a passage on it, and then waxes on the contents of what he has just read as his novice students listen and take notes[26].

The question generated by considering these accounts of very different lessons, and very different pedagogical crafts, is how they could exist side by side within a single institution. As we saw in the previous chapter, Wat Don Khet School is frequently presented as capable of delivering a modern education, providing opportunities to succeed in Thailand's developing economic landscape. How then, could teachers such as Phra Ajhan Ban justify their use of teaching methods predating their own time at school, even as they enthusiastically supported novel pedagogical techniques and innovations? I will attempt to answer this question, not by examining each form of education

[26] The form of pedagogical practice I witnessed here closely resembles McDaniel's (2008) description of how dhamma studies has historically been taught to novice monks in Thailand.

— the 'traditional' and the 'modern' — as discrete entities, but rather by focusing on the ways they interacted even in the minds of individual lay-teachers and monks. I begin by attempting to deconstruct any simplistic categorisations of the forms of education operating at Wat Don Khet as 'traditional' or 'modern'. To do this requires an understanding of how so-called 'traditional' forms of monastic education have historically been subject to modernising and colonial influences. I give a historical account which is brought to bear upon the state of Wat Don Khet School as I found it and focuses on what the effects of language-use — considered through the lens of crypto-colonialism (Herzfeld, 2002) — reveal about the surface-level compatibility, and underlying conflict, generated by plural education discourses. The discussion of language-use concerns three instances where monastic and modern education discourses met and commingled. The first, a teacher training event, the second, an inter-school competition, and the third, a school project presentation for visiting academics. Each of these events illuminates the knotty and difficult relationships sometimes generated by interacting education discourses, even as the institutional community insists upon their essential compatibility.

Beyond Modernity and Tradition

In the previous chapter, I introduced Kuan's (2015) description of the developing landscape of China's education reforms, noting the similarity of their progression to the Thai case. In both instances, discourses derived from Euro-American sources have influenced notions of what 'good education' looks like. Indeed, Thailand's adoption of education policy reforms has historically been influenced by thought derived from colonial states, however, in discussing 'modern' education discourses I should emphasise that the modernity in question is not being treated as an objectively defined epoch or event (Appadurai, 1996; Latour, 1993). I do not intend to consign Phra Ajhan Ban's

pedagogic practice to a past era, while describing Baifern and her fellow lay-teachers as having passed some theoretical threshold into modern educational practice. After all, the two forms of practice were contemporaneous and in perpetual engagement with one another at Wat Don Khet. Nevertheless, it is important to define some local notion of modernity since the concept held significant sway in shaping Wat Don Khet as an institution. As Asad notes, 'what is distinctive about modernity *as a historical epoch* includes modernity as a political-economic project' (2003, p. 14) and such a project was clearly a central concern for the institutional staff of Wat Don Khet, as they strove to represent the school in light of a set of discourses and ideals that they self-consciously described as 'modern'. Therefore, in describing the discourses concerning modernity at the monastic school I am treating modernity itself as an ethnographic object, considered in terms of its local particularities, while appreciating the global reach that self-described 'modern' discourses on education possess. This approach avoids attributing discourses on modernity exclusively to 'the West', since they are inevitably too multivalent to tie to one particular time or place (Inda, 2005). By describing modern education in the terms used locally at Wat Don Khet I hope to sharpen the specificity of the type of discourse I am referring to, replacing generalised imaginaries of modernity with the ideals that held real weight in leading teachers and monks to make decisions about their approaches to pedagogic practice.

The two modes of education I have described speak to the manifold representations the school produced of itself. For the most part, teachers and administrative staff sought to present the school as a thoroughly modern institution, capable of providing an education that adhered to the same ideals and standards as those taught in state schools for lay students. This image was exemplified by teachers like Baifern, who were steeped in the structures and methods sanctioned by academy and state as a result of their own university

educations. It was perpetuated through an engagement with state policy objectives, and the narratives surrounding modernisation and development. Through special presentations and events, novices were well acquainted with concepts such as 'Thailand 4.0'[27], a concept coined by policy-makers to describe a new economic model brimming with state of the art innovation. Teachers like Baifern were persistently engaged in programmes aimed at professional development and the introduction of new, cutting-edge ideas in pedagogic technique. This all took place in tandem with the production of the traditional image of the school as a place of monastic discipline. At the same time as a presentation on economic policy goals was taking place in one classroom, the one next door could be filled with novices sitting cross-legged on the floor, dogmatically reciting Pali vocabulary, learning by catechism in identical fashion to the elder monks who had come before them.

As should be consonant with my position on what counts as 'modern education', I want to avoid casting the divergent forms of education at Wat Don Khet as split between modernity and tradition. This dichotomy has of course been extensively critiqued, not least because of the unclear boundaries between what we categorise as modern or traditional (Galland & Yannick, 2008). My aim is not to essentialise forms of education, describing a 'traditional' Buddhist form in contrast to the modern form produced by an engagement with global academic ideology. Instead, I want to explore how features of a 'traditional' Buddhist monastic education have affected the way institutional staff engage with 'modern' educational practice, and vice versa. Khurshid (2015) explores the problems with the modernity vs tradition binary when applied to ethnographic work. Writing about women's education in Pakistan, she draws

[27] 'Thailand 4.0' was typical of the types of projects presented to novices as exemplary of Thailand's status as a modern nation. Novices attended several online presentations in which a host of government officials gave complex explanations on how the blockchain would revolutionize agricultural industries and how new educational models could turn the country into a hub for digital start-ups.

attention to the tendency to associate an increase in formal education for women with 'modern' progressive and secular ideals. In reality, in the context in which Khurshid conducted her ethnography, nineteenth century Islamic revivalist projects were significant movements in shaping attitudes to women's education. As she describes it, 'these two modernization projects — the colonial and Islamic — simultaneously constructed gender, class, and women's education in such a manner that the performance of middle-class dispositions came to reflect modern Muslim educated status' (Khurshid, 2015, p. 102). Local notions of one's responsibility as a Muslim for becoming an educated person (*parhap likhay*) were as influential here as any 'modern', 'Western', notions in support of women's education. In Thailand, a similar combination of influences, transcending essentialising notions of tradition and modernity, have contributed to the structure and contents of monastic school education.

I will now trace the historical trajectory of this process, taking stock of the ways such influences have produced the modern monastic school. Thailand's education system was transformed, as the network of monastic schools was partially dismantled to accommodate broader access to primary and secondary education. The first secular schools were opened in the reign of King Mongkut (1851-1868). Their number expanded until it became necessary to divert control over their organisation from Buddhist institutions, into the hands of the newly formed Ministry of Education in 1892. The aim was to provide universal access to schooling nationwide, with existing monastic schools transformed to accommodate lay students, rather than exclusively catering to ordained novices (Watson, 1981). At the same time, there was a concerted effort to train increasing numbers of lay teachers to take on the newly structured secular curriculum, with its division of subjects and modes of assessment following European and American models of education (Lao, 2015). The systems of teacher training established at this time also emulated Euro-American higher education norms,

creating the lineage in which Baifern and the other young teachers at Wat Don Khet received their training.

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, monastic schooling has historically been associated with the promise of social mobility, owing to its exclusive role in providing a free education (Wyatt, 1966). In the new era of mass education, the essential utility of monastic schooling, its role in providing a vehicle for social mobility, was co-opted by the new secular schools. The role of monastic schools became uncertain and contested. The sangha, retaining control over the administration of monastic schooling, oscillated between conservative programmes focused on religious education and attempts to reform and modernise monastic schools, to have them compete with secular institutions, and provide a worldly education. Dhammasami (2018) frames this dilemma as a balancing act between idealism and pragmatism, with movements emphasising each side of the divide taking hold at various points over the course of the twentieth century. Couched within an educational setting that has come to favour secular subjects, Phra Ajhan Ban's classes, along with lessons in Pali and special sessions on chanting and reading scripture, represent the vestiges of the more conservative attitude to Buddhist education. In these subjects, the format remained remarkably unchanged from the one described in historical accounts of monastic schooling focused on the ecclesiastical exams (McDaniel, 2008), as well as the accounts I heard from senior monks at Wat Don Khet describing their own schooling.

The survival of conservative approaches to religious teaching is perhaps owing to movements aimed at protecting monastic schools as centres of Buddhist learning. Despite their conservatism though, such movements necessarily reflected the particular views of those at the top of the sangha at the time, who were influenced by increasing calls for rationalism and enlightenment values as

a result of the colonial encounter[28]. As responsibilities for the wider education of the Thai populace moved away from the remit of Buddhist institutions, some within the sangha saw this as an opportunity to embrace a core set of religious ideals in the delivery of Buddhist education. Monastic schools were encouraged to concentrate solely on religiously oriented subjects like dhamma studies and Pali language instruction. Reforms in 1902 cemented the influence of the conservative Thammayut sect at the top of the sangha hierarchy (McCargo, 2012; Swearer, 1981). Influential monks like Wachirayan, the supreme patriarch leading the sangha at the time, overhauled monastic higher education institutions to have them focus on scriptural studies and Pali. Under this narrow conception of monastic education even practices such as meditation were side-lined in favour of scriptural studies, and secular subjects were not studied at all (Choompolpaisal, 2015). As we shall see in the next chapter, the Thammayut educational ideals were communicated through the format of ecclesiastical exams, with the Nak Thamm examinations serving as the main focus of novice education.

It is ironic that the Thammayut movement, finding its origins in the reformist projects of King Mongkut, was itself borne out of modernisation narratives (McDaniel, 2008, 2011). As rationalist discourses came to hold sway over the sangha, the reform of examination systems and the tighter controls over monastic education that the Thammayut sought to achieve became part of an effort that was essentially modernising (Swearer, 1981). As in Khurshid's (2015) case, looking at women's education in Pakistan, notions of modernity were employed in arguing for putatively traditional religious ideals. In her example, to be educated (*parhap likhay*) meant embodying and becoming adept in the performance of middle-class womanhood, and this in turn was intimately associated with notions of what it meant to be a good Muslim. The argument

[28] See Moran (2019) and Asad (1973) for comparable cases.

for a particular modernity here was distinctively Islamic. In Thailand, the Thammayut ideal of monastic education became associated with a perspective on rationalism that was distinctively Buddhist, embodying enlightenment values on the one hand with its appeal to the ultimate authority and precedence of the text, while differentiating itself from them on the other by eschewing the pursuit of subjects that were not explicitly Buddhist.

Subsequent calls for the introduction of a secular curriculum to monastic schools were seen as alternative modernising projects, casting the Thammayut goals as conservative and traditionalist. Yet another layer of irony is revealed in the calls for the reintroduction of secular subjects to actually return monastic schooling to its original place in Thai society. While monastic education was seen to be in need of modernisation, this modernisation effort was aimed at re-establishing Buddhist institutions as a driver of social mobility. Those arguing for this cause, claimed that the reestablishment of the monastic school as a centre of free education, would enable a return to one of the sangha's traditional roles in Thai community life. By the late 1960s a movement calling for pragmatic monastic education was gaining popularity, spurred by renowned monks who believed in the necessity for monastics to engage with their society[29]. Buddhahasa Bhikku and Phra Payutto were both Buddhist monastics and public intellectuals who wrote on a range of social issues expressing their views on how the sangha should relate to laypeople (Ishii, 1986; Seeger, 2009; Tambiah, 1976). Education was a key focus here, with both emphasising a need for a greater engagement with worldly education from the wat. Phra Payutto in particular saw this engagement as a return to Buddhism's classical role in Thai society, with monks deeply embedded in the communities

[29] This formed part of a wider landscape of Buddhist movements at the time calling for 'socially engaged Buddhism' that aimed at encouraging practitioners to help to reduce suffering in the world, rather than focusing exclusively on personal growth towards enlightenment (Henry 2013).

they inhabited in their role as educators as well as spiritual guides. He felt that this role was crucial in tackling what he perceived as a rise in inequality between urban and rural regions of the country. Writing on the customary link between education and the temple for rural people, he contends that 'this custom may be almost invisible to the urbanites and city-dwellers of the current day, but for villages in the distant countryside it is still visible; even though it may not be the center it was in the past, it is still a path or a last refuge.' (Payutto, 1987, p. 8). His claim in making such statements was not to advocate for a return to traditional educational ideals insofar as the technique and contents of instruction, but to emphasise the need for the monastic school to be modernised if it were to retain relevance in a rapidly changing Thai society.

Payutto's argument was spurred by the fact that, still in the 1980s, access to quality education in Thailand was far from universal. In order to bring about greater equality in educational opportunity, it was felt that the monastic schooling tradition should be reinvigorated to provide a worldly education that could enable the same possibilities of social mobility it had afforded in the past. These notions are the driving force behind the project animating Wat Don Khet School and guiding its administration. The school aims to provide novice students with the same curriculum and access to qualifications they would have at a secular school, with religious education and the performance of monastic duty filling complementary roles alongside these aims. As noted in the introduction, Wat Don Khet School is predominantly funded by a project initiated by Princess Sirindhorn of the Thai royal family. The project sponsors monastic schools throughout the northern provinces, aiming to expand access to education to boys from particularly remote areas. In a 2011 policy brief, the project states that its ultimate goal is to ensure that:

'Novices have good nutrition, are in good health, eager to learn, are honest, economical and perseverant, are good religious heirs, have the knowledge and

occupational skills as the basis of their living, love and care about natural resources, are proud of local culture and being Thai, and can participate in community and national development.' (*General Buddhist Scripture Schools and Youth Development as Initiated by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chari Sirindhorn*, 2011, p. 12)

Modern discourses on development are here in evidence alongside putatively traditional Thai Buddhist values. The compatibility of these discourses is assumed: the role of the religious heir compatible with that of the layman, entering the workplace with a healthy body, and a healthy set of occupational skills. The statement encapsulates what modern education should be at Wat Don Khet, bypassing concerns about the incompatibility of monastic discipline with secular education to insist on the essential complementarity of ideals. This complementarity was embedded in the discourse of teachers and administrators at the school, manifesting in discussions on social mobility and monastic authority and prestige. As has been evidenced by the preceding historical account, incipient educational ideals have been cultivated through distinctively Thai imaginings of modernity. The question that remains is how, in certain cases, the complementarity of ideals expressed at the school breaks down. Novice attitudes to the institutional image of modern education at Wat Don Khet, and occasional scepticism expressed by teachers, could become sources of conflict and debate. I will now explore circumstances in which these conflicts played out, focusing on a series of events. The first documents a training day attended by all staff at Wat Don Khet, aimed at educating them in a series of new attitudes and techniques to undertake in their teaching practice.

Training, Transliteration, and Translation

The teacher training day was held at a hotel conference room in the provincial capital, about an hour's drive from Ban Don Khet. The long room was divided, with chairs set out facing the stage at the front, and an aisle running down the

middle. After we arrived, the monks moved to occupy the seats on one side of the room, greeting their friends and colleagues from other schools animatedly. Meanwhile the lay-teachers, yawning and gripping cups of coffee, occupied the other side of the room. The main presenter for the day, a charismatic woman introduced as an expert from a local university, prostrated before the senior monks sitting in the front row before she began the proceedings. She invited Phra Ajhan Kasem, the director of Wat Don Khet School, to address the room before the first training session began. He enthusiastically endorsed the value of the 'Professional Learning Community'[30] training system they were all taking part in (the community comprising ten monastic schools from around the province) and encouraged teachers and monastics to be open to the methods presented to them.

The day consisted of several training sessions which introduced the assembled monastic school staff to a host of methods for managing and improving their teaching practice. The methodologies and concepts introduced were firmly couched in the language of secular schooling, but the event was framed by paying the necessary respect to the monastics in attendance. After making his speech endorsing the virtues of the training session, Phra Ajhan Kasem lit incense in front of a Buddha image in the corner, and the monks led the room in chanting. This process was repeated at the end of the day, after each of the directors from the ten monastic schools were invited to give their thoughts on what they had learned. All of them extolled the virtues of the concepts and techniques they had become acquainted with. My impression watching all this, was of the effortless synchrony that seemed to have been achieved between the traditional role of the monastic, and the ceremonial rites over which they had

[30] The 'Professional Learning Community' is a term coined by Peter Senge (1990) that aims to have teaching organisations collaborate in developing their members' professional skills and practice. It has become popular as a framework for organising educational training for teachers by having schools come together to discuss and develop their pedagogic practice.

authority, with the secular authority possessed by the academics who planned and led the training day. The latter form of authority, derived from notions of modernity and development associated with academia, appeared to sit comfortably alongside the monks' religious authority.

The administrators leading this project employed the notion of a 'Professional Learning Community' to have monastic schools within the province come together to develop teaching practice. The idioms of modern education on display were familiar to all parties. Teachers, administrators and monastics were all familiar with a shared language of modern education, and all implicitly shared the belief that monastic schooling must prepare novices for the world waiting for them once they graduated. In line with the statement on institutional policy I quoted above, the schools all operated under a — as Dhammasami (2018) terms it —pragmatic stance towards monastic education, following in the lineage of ideas spurred by monks like Phra Payutto and Buddhahasa Bhikku. In the context of the training day, modern education discourses were set alongside entrenched religious practices endemic to Buddhist monastic life, with acknowledgment paid to both sets of ideals. Prostration before monks, the lighting of candles in front of Buddha images, and chanting before the beginning of the day's activities were all seamlessly incorporated into the event. On the surface at least, one might have the impression of a harmonious melding of traditional and modern educational ideals here. However, as I have already demonstrated through the historical analysis of Thai Buddhist monasticism's evolving relationship to mass education, there can be no simple incorporation of discrete ideals possible here. This became evident as institutional staff at Wat Don Khet attempted to consistently uphold all of the discourses they held a stake in at the same time.

An interesting analogy may be drawn here, between the language of modern education theory as it was incorporated into the training day, and the 'digestibility' of Euro-American social science terminology in relation to Thai academia. Thanes Wongyannava (2010) traces the adoption of Foucault's notion of 'discourse' into the Thai social science milieu. He argues that theory in this domain can behave as a commodity, with specific concepts originating from the Euro-American academy holding more or less currency in Thailand based on their compatibility with Thai academic sensibilities. Foucault's 'discourse' (now most often translated as *wathakam*) has become so widely adopted as a concept that it is now even used outside strictly academic contexts, without reference to its origins in French social theory. Wonyannava explains this success, writing that:

> Thai scholars like to compare understanding academic texts to eating, often describing books as either being "digestible" (*yoi dai*) or alternatively as "indigestible" (*yoi mai dai*) and causing (intellectual) indigestion (*mai yoi*). Once a foreign text is edible and digestible it is accepted into the Thai intellectual world. (Wongyannava, 2010, p. 154)

The concepts deployed at the training day, all English terms left untranslated, often appeared to be 'digestible' in the same way. Ideas on 'Active Learning' and 'Lesson Studies' presented pragmatic courses of action amenable to the Thai academic landscape. Young teachers like Baifern found the concepts particularly easy to digest, perhaps because of their familiarity with the world of Thai academia. As we shall see, for monks such as Phra Ajhan Ban and older lay teachers, the ideas were more likely to cause some indigestion. While they might eagerly consume the theories presented by the enthusiastic presenters at the training event, these ideas wouldn't easily stay down, and this had knock-on effects for Wat Don Khet as an institution.

Implementing the new strategies taught at the training event became more complicated once we were back at school. One of the main objectives of the training day was to communicate a system for 'Lesson Studies' in which teachers would work in teams to analyse and critique one another's lesson plans and teaching methods. A video introduced by the presenter showed children noisily engaging with a classroom activity while a group of adults observed, clipboards in hand. Afterwards the presenter encouraged teachers to think about their practice in three steps: PLAN (research material for the lesson and decide how to best communicate the material), DO (teach the lesson, implementing the activities laid out in planning), SEE (reflect on what happened in the lesson, thinking about what worked and what could be improved). The school staff were required to draw up plans to schedule specific lessons to be observed by their peers, as well as follow up meetings where the lesson observations could be discussed. Baifern, along with a couple of the younger lay teachers, quickly jumped into action. They seemed instantly familiar with the tenor of the suggested program of work, which they told me later, closely resembled the format of their assessments when they had been university students training to be teachers. Phra Ajhan Ban on the other hand, looked disengaged. While the rest of the staff busily drew up their plans he sat back, half watching them work. Back in Ban Don Khet, the schedule proved hard to implement. Older teachers and monks would often claim to be too busy to observe a class for more than a few minutes and played down the importance of the process for their own teaching practice. I had already received a general preview of the attitude some of the older lay-teachers had towards the concepts introduced to them at the training day, as I travelled back from the city with two of them the same evening.

Somchai was driving, navigating the looping roads through the hills that followed the river up from the city and into the valley. Widura was sitting next

to him up front, with me in the back, leaning over the seats to talk with them. The teachers chatted back and forth about the day's events. "...I don't think it's applicable to high school students." Widura said. "Sure, maybe for primary school kids. Children. But our novices… they just need more discipline." He was talking about the 'Active Learning' strategies presented during one of the training sessions. Somchai looked thoughtful as he steered the truck around another bend. "Right. More discipline and I think they would focus on studying more." They continued to deconstruct the theories and techniques presented in the various sessions we had taken part in. As they weighed up the merits of each strategy and technique a common theme emerged: these novel ideas sounded nice, and might be applicable in some situations, but they're not applicable to us. Despite this, the underlying educational discourses motivating the training exercises appealed to them. The necessity to emulate the ideals of modern education presented to them throughout the day rang true, even as they dismissed the methods these ideals seemed to imply. Teachers and administrative staff at the school were all eager to pay lip service to modern educational ideals, even if they struggled to embody them in their practice. These discourses just weren't as digestible as they had appeared at first glance.

It will be helpful at this point to consider the relationship between the ambivalent attitudes Somchai, Widura and Phra Ajhan Ban held towards modern education discourses, and the historical development of the Thai language that directly engages with the discourses of colonial powers. We have already traced the lineage of Thai monastic schooling that led to Wat Don Khet School's image of itself as a modern institution, but the desire to trade in education discourses seen as modern can be related back to the adoption of particular calques, as they were influenced by forms of transliteration and translation. Just as in Wongyannava's (2010) example of the creation of a new Thai language portmanteau to translate the Foucauldian concept of discourse,

many other terms have been translated, reimagined, and reformulated. This reflects the way local notions of modernity have undergone the same process. Of course, the relation between such transformations of language and the generation of modernity discourses is not only metaphorical, the former was actively employed in service of the latter. I now want to show how the use of English language terminology at the training event was significant in what it says about the digestibility of the concepts concerned. I do this through another brief historical account of the ways Thai elites have grappled with colonial encounters.

King Mongkut's reign may have seen the beginning of Thailand's relationship with European modern ideals, but the monarch most associated with bringing elements of these ideologies to the forefront of the Thai popular consciousness was his successor. King Chulalongkorn (reign: 1868-1910) oversaw the continuing threat and potential of the encounter with colonial powers. This encounter necessitated the ruling Siamese elite to develop an adaptive stance to dealing with encroaching European ideals. Far from a passive deferral to colonial influence, this position frequently employed spectacle and celebration to associate Siamese nationalism with notions of modernity (Peleggi, 2002). King Chulalongkorn's 1897 tour of Europe was typical of this approach. At home in Siam, the trip was reported as a momentous watershed, announcing the nation's entry on to the world stage. The Siamese monarch stood alongside his European peers as an equal. The view of King Chulalongkorn leading Siam to its own unique modernity, distinct from the modernisation narratives of colonial powers, continues to persist in the Thai popular imagination. Peleggi notes that, 'Thailand's master historical narrative remains locked in a royalist-nationalist discourse that posits the country's experience as a unique case of indigenous modernization and nation-building in the context of colonial Southeast Asia' (2002, pp. 6-7). The reflexivity of Thai modernity discourse is

considered as a product of local religious and cultural tradition *alongside* colonial influence, rather than subject to it.

The prevalence of the language of modernisation narratives can be seen both in the reign of King Chulalongkorn and in the present. Winichakul (2000) describes the evolution of the transliterated term '*siwilai*', derived from the English word 'civilised', as the political elite came to use it in late-nineteenth century Siam. Siwilai was associated with a nebulous set of social values, their common feature being their shared association with power, wealth, and the modern European state. It was particularly utilised during King Chulalongkorn's reign to signify the perceived changes, in both national policy and individual comportment, necessary to transform the agrarian provinces outside Bangkok. This consolidation of the outer-most provinces (those that had previously operated with the greatest autonomy) was seen as a vital step in the integration of the new, siwilai Siamese state. While the term was directly lifted from the English as a product of colonial influence, along with many other 'cultural borrowings' (Lao, 2015) from colonial sources, the concept was self-consciously altered to fit the particular needs of Siam. First used in the discourse on the transformation of the un-siwilai internal other, the term was adapted continually even into the twentieth century.

The transliteration and transformation of terms like siwilai mirrors the way terms from English-speaking academia were employed in education discourse at the training event. In the latter context, terms were employed in their original renderings (not transliterated or translated) and seemingly integrated into a self-conscious view of modern Thai education as part of an international academic community. English verbs were projected in bold capitals, accompanied by explanations on the use of conceptual language derived from American and European academic contexts. Phrases such as, 'Active Learning',

'Professional Learning Community' and 'Lesson Studies' were deployed along with lengthy Thai language rubrics on their meaning. The presenter had everyone in the room chant these English phrases at length after explaining each one, embedding them in memory. The requirement to internalise academic concepts in the language in which they were originally rendered appeared to be part of the global education discourse holding such concepts as universally applicable. Simply translating them into local vernacular could potentially dilute their efficacy, resulting in misapprehensions of their contents and meaning. However, such hopes for a global education discourse were not entirely borne out in reality. The scepticism with which Somchai and Widura discussed the concepts in the car was underlined by a sense of their conspicuously alien quality. Despite all the practice, each time Somachai or Widura uttered one of the English language phrases, it seemed to stick on their tongue for a second, as they appeared to still be in search of its essential meaning. To fully grasp each of the terms a simple portmanteau would not suffice. The lengthy paragraphs used to explain each one perhaps spoke to the impossibility of embedding them in Thai discourse to the point where their origins became unimportant. The ambivalent attitude towards the concepts may be further explained by appealing to an account of how Thailand perceives itself in relation to colonial states, along with an account of how this national perception may affect institutional and individual attitudes.

Herzfeld (2002) cites details of language use in his argument that Thailand constitutes a crypto-colony. Comparing Thailand to Greece, he claims that they (and potentially a number of other states) share certain traits relating to their legacy of never having been colonised. Summarising his account of what traits contribute to a country's status as a crypto-colony Herzfeld writes that:

perhaps one feature that all these countries share is the aggressive promotion of their claims to civilizational superiority or antiquity, claims that almost always

appear disproportionate to their political influence. One begins to suspect that they have been placed, or place themselves, on high cultural pedestals that effectively isolate them from other, more brutally material forms of power, and that this ironic predicament is the defining feature of crypto-colonialism. (Herzfeld, 2002, p. 902)

In Thailand's case, this superiority is supposedly grounded in the efforts associated with establishing a core siwilai Thai populace that can be contrasted with those who have not been civilized, namely the northern hill tribe groups (*chao paa*[31]). Herzfeld persuasively sets out a series of what might be termed 'crypto-colonial techniques' leveraged by states in order to weather the existential threats presented to them by the colonial encounter, however I do see problems with the blanket description of the Thai state as a wholly crypto-colonial entity. The most pressing concern for my account of education discourses at Wat Don Khet, is how crypto-coloniality actually affects institutions and the perspectives of the individuals working in them. I will return to this issue shortly, but first I want to deal with a broader concern raised by Herzfeld's direct engagement with Thai Buddhist monasticism.

Herzfeld claims that, as in the Greek case, monastic traditions in Thailand have contributed to a rejection of the 'materialist models and morals' (Herzfeld, 2002, p. 907) associated with colonial states. This statement gets to the heart of what is problematic about an overly simplistic rendering of the crypto-colony. Interestingly, Herzfeld cites two Thai Buddhist reform movements,

[31] These hill tribe groups are made up of ethnic minorities who have long been associated with a lack of civilization connected to the lack of central government control applied to them. Their 'un-siwilai' practices, dress, and religious beliefs were depicted as backwards by the central Thai elite, using their example to typify the essentially siwilai nature of central Thais (Winichakul, 2000). Also see Scott (2009).

Dhammakaya[32] and Santi Asoke[33], the first as an example of the embeddedness of materialist models in Thai society, the second as an example of organised resistance to those embedded models. Yet broadly speaking, both movements simultaneously draw on both conservative discourses around the traditional place of Buddhism within Thai society, and upon appeals for Buddhism to become a modern religion, capable of retaining relevance in the lives of people increasingly in touch with the materialist models and morals of colonial states (Mackenzie, 2007b; McCargo, 2012). There are clear parallels here with the historical tug of war over the place of monastic schooling in the sangha and Thai society at large. Parsing the modern from the traditional, or the colonial from the Thai in these cases is a lost cause. Whatever domains of discourse we might define will inevitably overlap, borrow from one another, and spark conflicts. Therefore, any general description of an entire state as 'crypto-colonial' fails to describe anything beyond what we already knew – the obvious point that the colonial encounter continues to radically shape states such as Thailand.

What might be more helpful in describing the forms of education at work in Wat Don Khet, is a consideration of the techniques we might consider crypto-colonial. One issue with crypto-colonialism writ large is its lack of applicability to the lives of individuals, and the reality of their practice as they interact with institutions. However, the techniques Herzfeld describes as crypto-colonial, the

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[32] The Dhammakaya movement has become massively popular since its inception in the 1970s. Despite several high-profile scandals and controversies mostly relating to the financial conduct of its original leader, Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo, the movement has attracted millions of followers both in and outside Thailand. The movement has become known for its ability to raise vast sums from its followers, encouraging them to make donations to make merit (Laohavanich, 2012, MacKenzie, 2007).

[33] The Santi Asoke sect was founded by Phra Bodhirak as a reform movement. Its founding was largely a response to Phra Bodhirak's perception of the establishment Thai sangha as overly lax, lacking in the proper degree of monastic asceticism. This led him to dramatically split from the sangha in 1975 to establish his own order, requiring a high degree of ascetic discipline from his followers (Mackenzie, 2007; McCargo, 2012).

strategies through which states may supposedly reinvent themselves to weather the colonial encounter, are in evidence in the day to day operation of institutions. Wat Don Khet, and the 'Professional Learning Community' of schools present at the training day, were comfortable in leveraging education discourses to produce a sense of the monastic school in general, as an institution in touch with the demands of modernity, as exemplified by colonial states. Just as a skilful acquisition of colonial concepts became essential to King Chulalongkorn and his court in order to cement the notion of the Thai state in the global imagination, it has become essential for the administrators of the monastic school to apprehend and 'digest' modern education discourses in order to secure their relevance in a developing education landscape. In both cases, crypto-colonial techniques are at work, with a deference to the modernising conceptual notions not sufficient for preserving a self-image worthy of Thai society. The education discourses in effect at the teacher training day needed to be consumed and made part of a contiguous field of understanding containing both the craft of the teacher, and the role of novitiate ordination.

As evidenced by some of the teachers' private reactions to the education discourses they were being asked to participate in, sometimes the process of reconciling novel discourses resulted in conflict. Widura and Somchai acknowledged the efficacy of the 'Active Learning' techniques but located that efficacy outside the domain of their own practice. Even young teachers like Baifern, well acquainted with modern education discourses, and enthusiastic about applying new pedagogical techniques in the development of her craft, could not always find the time to fully incorporate the ideals championed through those discourses into her everyday routine. Phra Ajhan Ban, while he would always talk enthusiastically about the potential of new 'Lesson Study' schemes and 'Active Learning' techniques if asked directly about them, never

seemed to alter the tradition-bound format of his classes. All of these issues speak to the practical realities of the monastic school and its circumstances as a parochial and rural institution. So far, I have explained how historical lineages lead certain discourses to be seen as simultaneously attractive, yet indigestible. Now, I want to focus on more tangible factors affecting the practicalities of adopting modern education discourses. Attitudinal resistance to modern education discourses was at least partially generated by a lack of resources, and this in turn made it exceedingly difficult to align teaching practices with a modern educational ideal. I will explore these issues through an examination of two more events, beginning with an inter-school competition reminiscent of the competitions in Indonesia that Long (2013) examines in his work on achievement psychology.

Projects and Competitions as the Language of Modernity

The work of translation, redefining and reimagining notions of modernity, is present in Nicholas Long's (2013) study of achievement psychology in a newly formed province of Indonesia. His work focuses on the local concept of success known as *prestasi*. The term has gained currency through a direct engagement with psychological theory concerning the drive for success, or nAch as it is termed by McClelland (1961) following Murray (1938). Appeals to this body of theory became popular among Indonesian political circles and were eventually widely discussed at the level of provincial politics, finding particular footing in public competitions and in schooling. In Long's descriptions of his interlocutors' pursuits for *prestasi*, he highlights points at which this distinctively modern ideal was questioned and contested. As for Somchai and Widura, the categories they encountered through self-consciously modernising projects could at times become grating, at which point their superficial compatibility with pre-existing discourses was called into question. In Long's

examples, participants broke under the pressures of having to live up to national standards of attainment or came to view the seemingly endless parade of competitions held in their province as a frivolous waste of local resources. In many instances I witnessed during fieldwork, a similar culture of competitions with their attendant notions of achievement was in evidence. I will now explore a case in which the drive to exemplify modern ideals was undercut by anxieties and misapprehensions about what it meant to engage with discourses of modernity.

We set out early one morning. I joined a group of novices in the back of a pickup truck, along with an assortment of produce, signs and displays. We were going to an inter-school competition in the city, taking place over two days, and serving as a chance for monastic schools from across the province to demonstrate the successes of their projects and the aptitudes of their students. Staff and novices had been preparing for weeks. Competitions involved arts and crafts activities such as making wooden longboats and clay stupas, completing written assignments, and performing speeches and sermons. The most skilled novices were carefully selected for each contest and set to work preparing their craft materials and practicing their performances. Along with the contests, each school was also tasked with demonstrating the success of the various projects they had instituted, by filling a dedicated booth with produce, pictures, and written explanations. All of this took place at a large monastic school in the centre of the provincial capital. This school was far larger than Wat Don Khet, with extensive grounds to host the parties from each of the sixteen monastic schools participating.

Over the two-day period, I registered a palpable sense of anxiety in both the staff and students from Wat Don Khet. This anxiety was continually generated by comparisons with the novices from other schools. On the first day, I waited

with Max, an M.5 novice, as he watched his competitors perform in one of the many speaking contests. These competitions were held in a long, covered courtyard surrounded by the tall school buildings. At one end a stage had been set up, empty except for a Buddha image in one corner. A teacher stood in front of the stage, explaining how the point scoring system for the speaking competition would work. A scattered crowd of interested novices and teachers sat in the neatly arranged rows of plastic chairs, with a separate table set up at the front where four judges, also teachers from the various schools, sat ready to hear the performances. Max was visibly nervous, unable to sit down, he walked in a tight circle around the aisle, muttering his speech back to himself over and over again. As the first competitor took to the stage, waiing the Buddha image before taking his place in front of the microphone, Max finally sat down. He appeared to calm down, until the second performance began. This second novice looked older than Max and was from the host school. He spoke with impressive eloquence, looking towards the judges, and giving off an air of easy confidence. Max looked pained. "Ah, he's speaking very well!" he muttered as he looked on. It didn't ease his nerves much as the bell rang, interrupting the end of the talented novice's speech as it marked the end of his allotted time.

Max seemed so anxious that even I began to worry for him as his name was called, and he got up shakily to climb the steps onto the stage. He performed admirably, tripping over his words a couple of times, but managing to get through the speech in a clear and authoritative tone before the bell rang. Max had been lucky. The next day we looked on as a couple of novices taking part in another speech competition completely froze on stage after just a few sentences, their eyes darting around the wide courtyard as if desperately searching for the lines they had forgotten. Long describes a similar scenario to these overwhelming instances of anxiety in the face of performance, in which competitors in an English speaking competition buckled under the pressure of

expectation, feeling their efforts were not up to a 'national standard' (Long, 2013, p. 89). He describes this scenario as evidence of his interlocutors' anxieties surrounding the perceived inferiority of their remote, and newly formed, home province. Performing in line with ideals thought to exemplify a fluency in modern discourse and practice put extreme pressure on these individuals because they were competing at a national level, where the highest levels of *prestasi* would be expected. The stakes might not have been quite so high for Max and the other novices, but they undoubtedly felt a degree of inferiority as they compared themselves to competitors from other schools, noting that their relatively small and rural institution simply couldn't match up to the time and resources available to bigger, more urban schools such as the one hosting the competition.

Walking around the booths belonging to each monastic school with Eric, another of the novices competing in speaking competitions, we noted the impressive displays, making the one we had prepared seem meagre in comparison. Eric's comparisons were coloured by his knowledge of the performativity that went into creating the display for Wat Don Khet, which apparently had included sourcing a number of large and impressive gourds, brought over from another wat in a neighbouring village, but presented as if they were the result of a school agriculture project. When it came to the crafts competitions, Wat Don Khet also appeared to be a step behind according to both the competing novices and their teachers. Several contests had novices collaboratively create an artwork in teams within an allotted time period, using resources they had brought with them. I spent one afternoon watching these competitions, as novices from Wat Don Khet struggled alongside their better prepared opponents. One team of novices, tasked with creating a miniature garden, complained about the lack of materials they had to work with, as they looked around at the lavish displays being put together by other teams. Ajhan

Widura, watching one of these contests himself, kept muttering under his breath as we watched the Wat Don Khet team struggle. “We just didn’t have enough time to prepare,” he said to himself.

Concerns over available time and resources were pertinent beyond the domain of the competition. As the science teacher, Baifern often expressed her anxieties about the lack of resources available at the school in order to provide a comprehensive science education to her students. The school science lab, which had been built recently along with several other new school buildings, was underutilised. Over the twelve months I spent at the school, it was only used three or four times. When I asked about the science lab Baifern seemed embarrassed. “It’s not equipped properly,” she told me. “We don’t have a way of disposing of toxic chemicals safely if we use them for experiments, so I do fewer practical activities with the students now.” As a recently qualified teacher, well-versed in what it took for a school to be a truly modern institution, Baifern appeared to feel a level of guilt at not being able to provide a practical science education to her students. Similar anxieties and concerns over whether local resources were sufficient to enable achievement lie at the centre of Long’s study. In his examples from Kepri, anxieties were persistently generated by a negative perception of the ‘human resources’ available to effectively administer the newly created province. This is precisely what local theories on ‘the social life of achievement’ were aimed at addressing – enabling the people of Kepri to accumulate *prestasi* in order to build up an image of themselves as successful and capable human resources. In both my case and Long’s, anxieties over the available ‘resources’ continued to cause problems, even as individuals pursued activities aimed at increasing their levels of achievement.

At the end of the inter-school competition, I stood with Eric as he looked over the results of the full range of contests that had taken place, pinned up on a

board in the middle of the busy courtyard. He maintained his cynical view of the school's performance, even though he had done well in the speaking competitions in which he had participated. The teachers were in better spirits. Despite the failings in contests requiring a high degree of preparation, Wat Don Khet had placed reasonably well in the more academic events. They were happy to return to the school, satisfied in the knowledge that they were part of a fruitful project aimed at cultivating human resources. From their perspective, the competition results demonstrated a favourable account of their work. Competitions like the one I have described here, and that Long discusses, might be defined as examples of crypto-colonial techniques at work. They allowed administrators to point to the tangible results of their work, demonstrating their competence as part of a definitively modern institution. Satisfaction with these displays wasn't always universal though, with actors such as Baifern and Eric, feeling as if they were able to see through the superficiality of the crypto-colonial techniques being employed, to critique the substance of what they were actually achieving. These doubts occasionally manifested themselves more conspicuously at Wat Don Khet, evidenced during another episode, in which three visiting 'school coaches' – academics charged with assisting schools develop their educational programs and teaching practice – came to see the results of a series of school projects.

It had been a long day for the novices. They had spent all morning setting up the main hall of Wat Don Khet with project displays while teachers and monks sternly critiqued their work, assessing whether their presentations would stand any chance of impressing the visiting academics. Finally, they waited in nervous silence for the teachers to finish their meeting with the advisers prior to the project presentations. I wandered up the line of displays at the edge of the hall, each exhibiting a project. A young novice at the first stand turned his eyes to the ceiling, reciting his presentation script and shaking his hands in front of

him. Two more novices, flanked by hand crafted lanterns, mumbled to one another and shuffled back and forth. The older novices (Eric and Max once again) were up at the end of the line, as far away as possible from the meeting taking place at the other end of the long hall. I stopped to whisper to Max. "Nervous?" He nodded, his eyes remaining fixed on the conference table where the teachers were being lectured by their guests. The three visitors were introduced as 'coaches', all of them academic staff from different universities and here to offer their expertise to assess the teaching and administration of the school. They were led by Nan, a tall woman with steely eyes, who engaged the teachers in a forceful discussion on the aims of the school projects lined up on display. Just as at the inter-school competition, the institution's perception of itself was at stake. Kuan's (2015) descriptions of perceptions of education policy in China are once again relevant here. In her case, the need to adequately demonstrate modern, technocratically informed policy implementation was a persistent source of anxiety. Such anxieties often became focused on rural schools, where a lack of resources often meant institutions lagged behind with regard to the latest recommendations on educational structure and ideals. As in Long's example, internal critique was very common in projects to establish 'education for quality' reforms in China, and this type of critique could be seen at a much smaller scale as the novices presented their projects to experts, who perceived them in terms of their pre-existing notions of what modern Thai education should look like.

The meeting between the experts and teachers finished abruptly, and the three coaches approached the project displays. Kiet, the novice who had been attempting to memorise his presentation lines, performed a deep intake of breath as they engaged him. The teachers followed, hanging back a little and looking on anxiously as Kiet greeted the guests. He spoke well, explaining how each swatch of cloth on his display board was coloured using a different

naturally derived dye. When he finished, the three coaches stood silently for a second before Nan spoke up. “I don’t understand. What is the reasoning behind the project?” Kiet looked instantly crestfallen, struggling to find his voice as the teachers shared worried glances behind the coaches’ backs. He tried to answer, but he kept stumbling over his words. Nan started in again, questioning further aspects of the project in harsh tones. “Why did you use these types of dye? Why is the colour brighter on this one than on that one?” With each question Kiet clutched his hands to his heart, audibly gasping as if he had been struck.

The coaches quickly lost patience and moved down the line of displays, leaving Kiet still tripping over his words trying to answer the barrage of questions. The other novices didn’t fare much better. Nan picked up one of the homemade lanterns next. It was made from a wire frame covered with brightly coloured fabric. “This is far too heavy,” she said. “The wire is too thick, why didn’t you use thinner wire?” The novices failed to provide any satisfactory answers to her questions, unfamiliar with this style of assessment. Nan looked especially unhappy when each novice failed to answer one question in particular: “why did you choose this project? What about it interests you?” The teachers looked increasingly sheepish, occasionally whispering to each other or suppressing nervous laughter. Baifern, who had been helping novices with a number of the projects now being eviscerated, looked more seriously aggrieved. She chimed in to defend them, attempting to give a more comprehensive explanation of their reasoning than the novices presenting them had managed. Nan sternly considered her points, giving only a nod in response before moving to the final display. Her mood was only slightly improved when she reached the last project display, presented by Eric and Max. They explained their process of making fertiliser in eloquent terms and, having witnessed their peers fail to offer substantial answers, they were prepared for the coaches’ questions.

With the presentations finished the novices were all excused and the coaches and teachers headed back to the conference table to debrief. Nan held court once again. She spoke firmly, praising the last presentation but criticising the others for missing the point of the exercise. The projects were supposed to encourage novices to consider inventive and potentially profitable ways of utilising local craft practices and resources. She felt the projects lacked an exhibition of the novices' critical reasoning skills, emphasising the need for teachers to make sure this is a 'thinking school', using yet another English phrase. Despite a persistent dialogue about the need for a modern and ever-evolving approach to teaching and learning at Wat Don Khet, a disconnect between the educational discourses espoused by officials like the coaches, and the practice of the teachers, seemed impossible to bridge. While all parties appeared to sustain a reflexive approach to the practice of teaching, the conclusions this reflexivity led to appeared quite different.

Long's (2013) analysis provides some explanation. In relation to the competitors in national competitions in Kepri, he notes that even successful participants 'achievement identities' may be held in bad faith. This means that, even in instances where they are successful, they nevertheless feel limited in their possibilities for achievement because of the essence of their parochial origins. This attitude seemed somewhat reflected in the behaviour of the teachers, coaches, and novices during the project presentations. After speaking with the teachers, one of the coaches, Paibun, came over to speak with me. She was middle-aged, with a gentler bearing than Nan. We spoke a little about my experiences at the school, and she explained emphatically that there was a lot of work to be done. "This school… it isn't A-grade yet. Right now it's C-grade." She seemed anxious for me to understand this, perhaps concerned about my judgments on the quality of education available at Wat Don Khet, seeing me as a representative of English academia. Her comment seemed to suggest an

understanding of an education discourse that she assumed we must have in common, assuring me that she understood the steps needed to improve quality at Wat Don Khet, while also making the claim that the institution was not representative of the achievements possible within the monastic school system she oversaw.

Paibun, Nan, and the other academics helping to guide monastic schooling in this corner of Thailand might be described as employing crypto-colonial techniques in the ways they attempted to shape perceptions of the institution. As we saw in the account of the training day, specific uses of language became crucial in disseminating a digestible set of concepts to teachers and monks. Different transformations of language are employed to associate local practice with modern, global education discourses, and to make claims about the prestige of the education being disseminated within Thai institutions. As a final example of this here, Paibun's use of the terms 'A-grade' and 'C-grade', themselves from North American school systems, performed this act. She demonstrated a fluency in modern education discourse, even while critiquing Wat Don Khet's capabilities as an institution. In essence, this mode of engaging with plural forms of discourse is at the heart of how the Thai state has presented itself to colonial powers. The crypto-colonial techniques deployed at that level have trickled down, to the level of monastic schooling as a national institution, as seen through the historical account related here of how it has transformed itself over the course of the last century, and even to the level of individual institutions, teachers and monks. The perspective missing here, is that of the novice monks who were in receipt of the milieu of discourses I have described. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to the novices themselves. My concern is how the different education discourses described here tangibly affected their experience of the monastic school as an institution. I do this, through an investigation of two sets of examinations. The first, associated with

traditional discourses on monastic education, are the Nak Thamm ecclesiastical exams; the second, finding their origins in education discourses concerned with modernity, are the O-Net national exams, administered to determine the qualifications students leave school with.

Chapter 3: The Examination as Ritual Action

My aims in the previous two chapters were to unpack local perspectives of the novice life course, and to explore the various discourses brought to bear upon that life course and upon the project of monastic schooling. I did this by assessing the projects of the stakeholders connected with the monastic school institution. I now want to turn my attention to how such discourses are actually experienced by novices, as they chart their journey through the years of their temporary ordination. To do this, I will assess the role of the examination in novitiate life. Examinations are of particular interest here because of their multivalent capacities for connecting 'traditional' and 'modern' discourses, while also serving as potentially critical junctures upon novice life courses. Like the ordination ceremony I described in Chapter 1, examinations serve as rites of passage. By leveraging a series of ritualising techniques, the exam can reinforce ideals associated with a discourse, creating an event that initiates participants into a particular way of understanding the exam, both as a site of ritual action and as an instrument for measuring their capacities. At Wat Don Khet, two sets of exams held special significance: the Nak Thamm ecclesiastical exams, and the O-Nets (Ordinary National Educational Tests[34]) used as part of modes of assessment to determine students' final qualifications upon completing their education.

I will describe these sets of exams, arguing that both involve forms of ritual action, and serve as rites of passage for the novices who take them. By doing this, I further demonstrate how education discourses can feed into one another, as the logic of the antiquated religious examinations is applied to the

[34] As seen in the previous chapter in the case of English-language terms used in presenting educational theory, the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS) typically uses English terminology in naming national examinations.

assessments meant to embody the culmination of a modern education system, and vice versa. I analyse the examinations as ritual action drawing on two major lineages of ritual theory. The first is derived predominantly from the classic account of *rites de passage* laid out by Arnold van Gennep (1977 [1909]), and built upon by Victor Turner (1969). I consider this account to be the most obvious route to justifying an argument for the examination as a form of ritual, but I challenge the definitional project of Turner and Van Gennep, appealing to Humphrey and Laidlaw's (1994) theory of ritual action. Rather than focusing on a project to define examinations as rites of passage, I follow Humphrey and Laidlaw by identifying the features of the exam that constitute ritual action. I give special emphasis to the role of intentionality in exam-taking to see how the intentions of the examinee may be the determinant factor in whether their activity is sublimated to the level of ritual action. Questions of intentionality are raised in comparing the O-Net and Nak Thamm exams I witnessed take place at Wat Don Khet, with Howlett's (2021) account of the *Gao Kao* university entrance exams in China serving as a useful comparative case. The account of ritual action I apply here is important in revealing a particular dynamic of interaction between education discourses, a form of interaction which contributes to perspectives on desirable modes of subject formation. A full accounting of these perspectives will be explored in the second part of the thesis. My first task here is to establish the significance of the examination within the context of monastic schooling, and to explain how exams may pertain to the various discourses I discussed in the previous chapter.

Defining the Exam

Before I begin describing the specific examinations undertaken at Wat Don Khet, I want to lay out two framings that define what an examination is and the types of work it can do. First, the exam within the context of the modern

education system operates as an instrument of measurement. It is used to assess the capacities of students, and the performance of institutions, curricula, and teaching staff, in delivering a suitably modern education (Goodman, 2013; Howlett, 2021). Second, the exam serves as a rite of passage, ushering its participants into a new social position marked by the demonstration of their knowledge and capabilities. Justifying how each of the exams analysed here may act as a rite of passage will serve as a central project for this chapter, but it is important to note that the two framings I outline here are emblematic of the interaction of discourses I explored in the previous chapter. The temptation may be to map 'traditional' and 'modern' models of examination on to the two examples at issue. But neither examination can be characterised by an appeal to a single strand of discourse. The Nak Thamm, as an ecclesiastical exam, is no more or less of a rite of passage, or indeed an instrument of measurement, than the O-Net. Both exams are informed by a plurality of discourses that, as we have already seen, irresistibly commingle in ways that determine the operation and perception of the examination as it is generally conceived. I focus particularly on the exam as a rite of passage because the features of ritual action common across examinations are indicative of the novices' fluctuating modes of intentionality. These fluctuations have broader implications for the way the institution goes about making novices.

Novices understand their examinations through both framings. The exam as instrument and the exam as ritual are always projected on to one another. Regardless of the format and subject matter of the exam, its instrumental and ritualistic aspects blend together to homogenise the experience of test-taking. In the two examples that follow, the stakes of each examination are radically different. The diverse training and preparations for each result in equally distinct experiences for examinees. Yet, despite this divergence, the attitudes to the examination as a general concept remain remarkably uniform across both

instances. Novices' attitudes in approaching the exam are forged out of the double projection, one on to the other, of the secular and ecclesiastical to form a single combined image. As novices approach their O-Nets, they adopt a ritual stance that imitates the stance demanded of them in completing the Nak Thamm; the discourse governing the mode of intentionality necessary for undertaking ecclesiastical exams is projected on to the modern form of assessment. In the opposite direction, the logic of institutional assessment via an appraisal of examination results, derived from modern education policy, is applied to the Nak Thamm. This was demonstrated for me when Wat Don Khet staff initiated a 'training camp' for novices taking the Nak Thamm in order to ensure their preparations were more intensive after a number of years of substandard results. I will now analyse the operation of each exam, including the preparations necessary for both. This will demonstrate the commingling of discourses in greater detail. I begin with the O-Nets, and an explanation of their place within the Thai education system at the time of fieldwork, before going on to justify my view of them as an example of ritual action.

The O-Nets

Towards the end of the school year everything at Wat Don Khet seemed to slow down. I wandered the classrooms, each full of inactive novices. The term was almost over and the syllabus for each subject had been completed. For the teachers, this meant endless marking. They spent the larger part of their days shut in their dark shared office, leafing through piles of assessments for each student, assigning them the portion of their grades determined by class work. Many of them stopped turning up to lead scheduled classes, and if they did venture into the classrooms, it was usually just to assign the novices with some light revision work, while they sat at the front desk hidden by a pile of marking. The novices themselves oscillated between boredom and satisfaction with this

arrangement. Many of them spent these long hot days asleep under their desks or curled up with friends playing video games or watching Youtube videos on their phones. I spent my time idly chatting with the reclining novices, occasionally joining in with their games. It would have been difficult to guess that this period of inactivity was actually the run up to the end of year exams, including the critical O-Nets. Without direct input from teachers, novices virtually never committed themselves to any independent study, with the exception of the oldest class, M.6.

While all the novices had exams to take in the following weeks, the stakes for the M.6 class were particularly high. Not only were they to take their final lot of school administered exams, they also had to take their final O-Nets. The O-Nets were taken more seriously because they were nationally administered and would be influential in determining whether the final year novices could obtain a university place. Having made it to the final year of secondary education, the few students left in M.6 (this cohort was made up of only four novices), were generally hoping to achieve good enough grades to go on to higher education. I entered the M.6 classroom one day during the slow period running up to the exams, where Baifern was standing over a single desk with three novices huddled around it. The novices were focused on an ipad screen, displaying a video in which a teacher was going over O-Net science questions, explaining the reasoning behind each answer. They paid rapt attention, all of them making notes, while Baifern looked off into the mid-distance as she listened to the teachers' lecture. Once it finished, we began talking. The three novices told me about their plans for the future. One expressed his desire to study engineering, while the other two intended to become teachers. They put another lecture on and Baifern wandered outside with me to get some fresh air. "It's good for them to study like this," she said. "It prepares them for how it will be at university. They need to be independent." Yet there was a hint of weariness in her voice. In

the past she had complained to me about how the increasing influence of the O-Nets shaped the way she approached her teaching practice in ways she found overly constraining. “We have to teach to the test” she would say, deriding the lack of opportunity to devise more practical and engaging lessons for her students. Baifern’s attitude was perhaps indicative of a general perception of the O-Net’s place within the modern Thai education system. On the one hand, they were a critical instrument of modern education practices, feeding into the forms of discourse championed by state bodies overseeing the national curriculum. On the other hand, they flew in the face of the ideals increasingly implied by developing forms of discourse and modern education, that were growing increasingly popular with policymakers as they elicited an attunement to global academic trends.

The equivocal attitude expressed by Baifern could increasingly be seen more widely in Thai public life by the time of our conversation at Wat Don Khet. In line with comparable national examination systems, the O-Nets had provided a benchmark for determining the quality of the education delivered at Thai schools. Every year, figures on the O-Net scores of individual schools would be the subject of media speculation and analysis, serving as a barometer for the performance of the countries’ education system (Maxwell & Kamnuansilpa, 2017; Suthiprapha, 2018; *“Ministry of Education”*, 2016). The implicit metric of judgement applied in these assessments, was how truly ‘modern’ Thai education was, when compared with other states. As such the O-Nets, along with many other aspects of education policy, have been subject to critique, as their status is regularly reassessed, and questions are raised as to whether they are fit for purpose. As the most significant qualification and mode of assessment applied to students at critical points in their education, debate has continually been raised as to whether the nature of the examinations has shaped the Thai education landscape in adverse ways. Indeed, since the period of fieldwork in

2021, O-Nets have been made optional for final year (M.6) students, with individually administered university entrance exams coming into favour. Observing the preparations for, and the undertaking of, the O-Nets at Wat Don Khet was illuminating in that it demonstrated how elements of a discourse, that were previously integral to its claims and ideals, might be quickly undermined and discarded as novel ideals come to hold sway.

To understand how such an apparently vital component of the modern Thai education landscape could fall into disfavour, it is necessary to briefly outline the history of the O-Nets' implementation. First introduced in 2005, the O-Nets for each grade included exams in the four main school subjects, Thai language, mathematics, science, and a foreign language (practically always English). Exams are also taken in social studies, health and physical education, and art and vocational Skills (later changed to occupation and technology studies). The format of these exams is predominantly multiple choice, with students referring to question sheets and filling out answer cards. Each exam may also include short answer questions requiring written responses, but longform writing is not required at all. At their inception, the exams were merely the latest iteration of the kind of standardised tests first implemented in Thai schools in the 1960s. Since then, their usefulness as nation-building tools has meant that they receive a high level of government attention. Goodman (2013) points out that standardised testing in Thailand has been seen as contributing to the production of an 'imagined community' as students all take the same test simultaneously across the country. The exam questions similarly reflect the project to have the tests communicate ideals seen as desirable by the government of the day. For example, questions often project a sense of national unity, with Bangkok depicted as the locus point of Thai civilization. For the most part, criticism of the O-Nets in the media has focused on the specifics of confusing or nonsensical questions, however more substantive criticism has

sprung from developments in modern education discourse that cast the prescriptive format and contents as stifling of students' creative and critical capacities. It is this latter point that teachers like Baifern seemed to be appealing to when they criticised the exams.

While I was conducting my research at Wat Don Khet, O-Nets were taken at several stages by students across Thailand. First, during P.6 (grade 6), the final year of primary education, then again at M.3 (grade 9) and M.6 (grade 12). At each stage they were used to help determine future academic pathways for students. Students receive a combined score at the end of each of these key years consisting of their O-Net results and the results of institutionally administered assessments. This combined score determined whether they would pass the year and move on to the next grade. For novices, the M.3 round of exams were often used to assess the likelihood of whether they would continue studying with the aim of going on to university, or finish school to pursue vocational training. The final round of exams at M.6 were one component of the admissions process Thai universities utilised when enrolling new students, giving M.6 novices a more tangible motivation for performing well in them. For the M.3 novices at Wat Don Khet, the O-Nets were routinely met with ambivalence, with teachers frequently complaining of the impossibility of getting the M.3 class to take them seriously. Novices' unwillingness to study was generally put down to a lack of maturity. Widura and Somchai's habitual refrain on this topic was simply to sigh, "they're still just kids. They do what they want." To a certain extent, this was certainly true, but judging from my conversations with novices it did not seem to capture the full picture. There were two other factors undercutting the supposed significance of the O-Nets. The first was the increasing sense of the exams as outmoded and old fashioned, a notion that novices seemed as aware of as their teachers. The second, was that novices' general approach to exams was

cultivated in relation to their ecclesiastical examinations, in short, testing was rendered as ritual action. I will consider the first point, on the exposure novices had to changing education discourses, before setting out my argument for how the O-Nets' intended purpose was undercut by the ritual approach novices brought to them.

The novices' disinterest in the O-Nets was perhaps unsurprising given the lack of prestige afforded to the exams. The deemphasising of their significance came about following criticism of the O-Nets as a viable means of assessing academic performance. This criticism had been increasing since 2015. The national average scores in each subject were published each year and were generally met with derision in the media. In 2019 the average score on the M.6 exams in the four main subjects was well below 50% (Sritrakarn, 2021). The consistently poor national average scores were referred to as evidence that the O-Nets were not fit for purpose, with preparations for them failing to improve students' knowledge and skills. These criticisms were compounded by data showing extreme discrepancies between the performance of urban and rural students, and claims that the exams were failing to assess students' capacities for evaluation and critical reasoning (Goodman, 2013). At Wat Don Khet, preparations for the O-Nets dominated the class time for M.3 and M.6 novices. Maths, science, Thai, and English lessons were all taken up with practice testing throughout the year. Class time became dense with test questions and practice paper reviews. The perceived necessity to have the entirety of M.3 and M.6 dedicated to exam preparations seemed, from the novices' perspective, only to reinforce their irrelevancy, as it became clear that good performance relied upon rote memorisation.

The problem this posed for Wat Don Khet as an institution can be compared to the difficulties encountered in interactions between plural modes of discourse,

as explored in the previous chapter. When I observed Baifern's M.6 preparation class, she cited the ideal of 'independence' as a requirement of university level study because of its association with the development of creative and critical capacities. Yet the activity the novices were actually engaged in could nevertheless be seen as an exercise in memorisation. They watched the teacher on the iPad screen present a question and noted it down alongside the correct answer. This was exactly the type of activity that was looked down upon in public discourses championing the importance of critical thinking and initiative as the goals of education. The ideal of modern education appealed to by school administrators seeking to increase performance on the O-Nets, seemed incompatible with evolving education discourses. These discourses, present in public discussions of standardised examination explicitly deriding the O-Nets, undermined the exams' overall status in the minds of teachers and students. This was not the only effect of the O-Nets' perceived reliance upon rote memorisation. For the most part, their format meant they were easily compatible with an existing stance, deployed when engaging with forms of assessment, a stance adopted in the replication of information in a mode I describe as a form of ritual action. I now move to look at how this ritual action was constituted as a technique for approaching the O-Nets, by describing the practical details of how the tests were carried out. This description serves to detail the ways the exam operated as a rite of passage and as an instrument of measurement.

The Day of the Exam

The sound of chanting amplified the tension in the courtyard. Novices wandered listlessly in front of the school or huddled in small groups. Occasionally one would glance over at the high school students from the town. A mix of boys and girls, all around fifteen or sixteen, chatting confidentially at

one of the concrete tables next to the entrance. An event at the temple was threatening to spill out into the wide space between the school and the *Ubosot*[35], with chanting emanating from the gold shuttered windows. At the foot of the stairs into the ordination hall a young novice, not taking part in the examinations, photographed a group of old ladies in traditional skirts and headwraps. The novices and high school students paid no attention to the noisy activity, focusing on their nerves as they waited for the exam to begin. A sign pinned to a notice board forbade anyone from entering the school until they had been given permission. The rest of the board was covered in schedules, candidate numbers, the rules and regulations of the O-Net exams. Upstairs, in the meticulously arranged classrooms, the teachers waited with the proctors. They made idle conversation while Baifern, leaning out of the doorway and glancing towards the temple, anxiously wondered aloud, "will they be finished soon?" The chief proctor, a middle-aged man with an upright posture and his head shaved in military fashion, made his way downstairs. Standing at the top of the steps to the school entrance he called for the examinees to line up.

The chief proctor talked at length in a loud clear voice to compete with the chanting, addressing the lines of students and novices waiting to enter the building. He explained the examination procedure step by step: enter the test centre, climb the stairs, leave bags by the classroom door, locate the desk with your candidate number. The lines of examinees remained rigid, the novices and students staring straight ahead like an army regiment waiting for inspection. The proctor finished his speech and allowed them to enter the building in single file. The classroom upstairs was silent as everyone hurriedly took their seats. The teachers gathered in the doorway, peering anxiously in at their students. Every sound seemed exaggerated now that the persistent drone of chanting had

[35] An *Ubosot* is an ordination hall. It is usually the biggest and most ornate building at a wat and is used to hold formal ceremonies and rituals.

finally ceased. The examinees sat staring down at their desks or fiddling with their pencil cases as the proctors moved calmly around them distributing papers, noting the occupant of each seat. The proctors gathered at the front of the room, behind the teacher's desk. One of them gave the word, and the question papers were all turned over in unison.

Each stage of the event was prescribed. Even details, such as when the novices could enter the building, how desks should be arranged, and how they should line up as they waited to enter were carefully controlled. The meticulous and preordained form of the exam day gave it the weighty atmosphere of a rite of passage. Like the ordination ceremony I described in Chapter 1, in a classical conception of the initiation rite, the event serves as a way to separate subjects from their previous social status in order to remake them, now appropriately socialised for their new social position. In the case of the ordination ceremony, this meant transforming from boy into novice monk. In terms of the O-Net exam, the transition moved the student from one phase of their education to the next, with the final set of exams leading participants from their interstitial and plastic position as students, conferring upon them the status of modern educated subjects. My project here is not to set out an account of how the exam might conform to any particular definition of ritual, indeed I will make a point of assessing the ways the examination defies categorisation as a rite of passage according to many classical conceptions. Instead, I aim to show how certain features of the exam as an event become defined by the ritual stances examinees bring to it. It is the nuances of this learned ritual stance that are relevant for the present discussion, in which the plural discourses shaping perspectives on education interact and influence one another. Nevertheless, in many ways, my description of the exam hews to well-established anthropological theory on how rites of passage may be employed to transform and reinforce social ties (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). Van Gennep's (1977 [1909]) theory on the delineated

stages of the rite of passage, and Victor Turner's (1969) further explication of the phases of such rites are particularly notable here, and I will consider the features of their definitions that shape my perspective on the exam, before exploring alternatives to such definitional theories of the rite.

In Van Gennep's terms, the examinee must be separated from their previous social position, endure a marginal state of liminality, and then finally emerge to reaggregate with society at large in possession of their new social position. Wat Don Khet, on the day of the O-Nets, seemed to be set up to facilitate such a process. The presence of the exam proctors, who arrive as ritual specialists to guide novices through the examination process; the transformation of the school building itself — emptied of its usual activity, reconfigured and made strange as the students were required to undergo an unusually restrictive set of actions before being allowed to enter — these features seemed designed to evoke a sense of fatefulness. Beginning the exam itself, they entered a state of liminality, cut off from the normality of everyday life by further restrictions on their movement. They were required to stay in place, to remain silent, to focus their attention on the task in front of them. They could finally exit this liminal phase when the examination was complete, ready to move into a new social position conferred upon them by their new qualifications.

This tentative description of the exam as a rite of passage enables us to see it as a necessary component of the discourses I discussed in the previous chapter. It acts to engage the monastic students in the systematised initiations of 'modern' society, by demanding their participation in a rite to acquire the qualifications that will putatively serve as the hallmark of their status as educated subjects. As I shall explore later in this chapter, it also serves, through its echoing of familiar Buddhist rites of passage, to integrate 'traditional' and 'modern' discourses, and to make claims about their inherent compatibility. However, before

considering the relationship between religious and secular examinations as rites of passage, it is necessary to discuss some objections to the idea that examinations could constitute a form of ritual at all. My objective here is to clarify exactly what type of ritual action we can ascribe to the examination, retaining an awareness of the limitations and possibilities afforded by this particular avenue of analysis. In doing so, I also hope to uncover a deeper level of analysis than that afforded by Van Gennep's top-down conception of ritual phases, focusing on the forms of intentionality novices bring to the exam, and how transformations in intentionality may ritualise aspects of it.

Anthropological theories of ritual setting out strict parameters on what type of activity counts as ritual will naturally preclude many forms of practice. Such definitional theories may cast ritual as being characteristically devoid of any instrumental purposes beyond the realm of the symbolic, or inject notions of sacrality and formality as the defining elements of ritual action (Rappaport, 1979). The O-Nets, as a secular examination, would clearly fail to adhere to the parameters set out in such theories, undermining any analysis that made attempts to draw conclusions based on their ritualised features. For one, they clearly do serve an instrumental purpose beyond the functioning of the ritual. As I laid out in my framings of the examination at the beginning of this chapter, they serve as an instrument of measurement, to assess both the capabilities of the individual students taking them, and as a barometer of the education system as a whole. Their operation appears to be set entirely against the world of religious ritual action, even within the domain of the monastic school, representative of the pursuit of rational measurements of achievement necessary for administering a modern education system. Attempts to theorise secular forms of ritual, dispensing with definitional requirements for rites to speak to the sacred, or appeal to 'mystical beings or powers' (Turner, 1967, p. 19) may attempt to emphasise formalised aspects of performance in order to

identify secular rituals (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). However, the problem in adopting such theories is that they run the risk of spreading to include virtually any form of action. Under these circumstances, the project of classifying forms of ritual collapses, as 'ritual' itself becomes useless as an analytic category.

To avoid these pitfalls, I appeal to Humphrey and Laidlaw's (1994) theory of ritual action. They take up a critique of many past theories and definitions of ritual that I have mentioned already. Their main contention is that attempts to define ritual as a particular type of event inevitably end up excluding many forms of activity that we think of as having been ritualised. In the same vein, attempts to render all types of social action as somehow imbued with ritualistic tendencies fail because they render the concept of ritual essentially inert in terms of its capabilities to play a meaningful role in an analysis of a given practice (cf. Leach, 1968)[36]. Instead, they argue that we should focus on 'ritual action' as an attribute applicable to certain activities and not others. As they describe it, 'ritualization begins with a particular modification of the normal intentionality of human action' (Humphrey & Laidlaw, 1994, p. 71) and this modification transforms 'everyday' action into 'ritualised action'. For my purposes here then, it does not matter whether or not the O-Net exam conforms with any particular definition of ritual, as such a definition may apply to a discrete event. In identifying what might be interesting about the exams as they pertain to a discussion of interacting discourses at the monastic school, what is important is an assessment of the features of ritual action at play. In line with Humphrey and Laidlaw's conception of ritual action, I interpret the examination as it relates to individual experience, as well as its place within social interactions. As I see it, the formation and interaction of discourses

[36] Leach's theory of ritual applies it to all action as a characteristic that can be present to a higher or lesser degree. As Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994, p.73) point out, this perspective fails to account for the stark differences we intuitively perceive between ritual and non-ritual forms of action.

becomes apprehensible where the relation between individual novices' experience of the exam as a task to undertake, and the external perception of what it is like to undertake such a task, meet, commingle, and conflict.

What is perhaps most interesting about the operation of the O-Net exam as an example of ritual action, is the fact that, in line with the discourses on modern education I have outlined so far, it should ideally not be ritualised at all. The modern education reforms espoused at the training day, or during the project presentations I recounted in the last chapter, emphasise the importance of cultivating individual intention in the way schoolwork and assessments are carried out. This form of intention is meant to underpin the developing capacities of students, as they become increasingly adept at critically navigating problems, and creatively producing quality solutions. If novices were trained to approach the O-Nets as an exercise in the deliberate application of critical intention, their undertaking could not be seen as a form of ritual action even in the terms that Humphrey and Laidlaw outline. In their conception, what distinguishes everyday action from ritual action, is that ritual action is non-intentional. They explain this, writing that:

> The form taken by ritualized actions is not only divorced from individuals' intentions and purposes but is also separate from everyday functional action in time; the more ritualized a sequence of action, the greater the possibilities of changes in order, abbreviation, lengthening and reversals. Such manipulations are justified not by practical necessity but by reference to previous ritual enactments, hallowed precedents which establish the 'archetypal' nature of the present act. (Humphrey & Laidlaw, 1994, p. 12)

A student who sits down to their exam, ready to bring the full weight of their own critical capacities to bear upon each question, is not undertaking a ritualised action because they are acting with full intention in the service of a functional purpose. This is precisely *not* how most of the novices at Wat Don Khet approached their examinations. For the most part, the multiple choice

questions of the O-Net were answered using recourse to rote memorisation. An examination approached in this way entirely conforms with the view of ritual action we have been working with so far, drawing on a body of existing answers to respond to the ritual prompts of each question. Their answers are not, from the perspective of the examinee, generated via an exercise of their own intentions. As Humphrey and Laidlaw put it, 'the person performing ritual 'aims' at the realization of a pre-existing ritual act. Celebrants' acts appear, even to themselves, as 'external', as not of their own making.' (Humphrey & Laidlaw, 1994, p. 89) To fully explore how the performance of the examination may constitute a realisation of external capacities, I now turn to a comparison with another form of examination that may operate similarly as an example of ritual action: the college entrance exams taken by Chinese students at the end of their secondary education. Through this comparison I also aim to demonstrate how the very fact that the O-Nets operated as a form of ritual action has come to be associated with their failure to perform their role as a mode of assessment suitable for a modern education system.

The Gaokao

The *Gaokao* is taken at the end of Chinese students' high school years, with the results determining whether they will be able to pursue higher education, and the prestige of the university at which they will be able to obtain a place. In his study of how teachers, students, and institutions prepare for the Gaokao as the most critical event on academic calendar, Howlett (2021, p. 10) describes it as a 'fateful rite of passage', designed to allow its participants to demonstrate their abilities and virtues in order to acquire social credit and recognition. The stakes of the exam are enormous, and students' scores are seen as shaping the entirety of their future life courses. A good result could mean a place at a prestigious university and a chance to move to a more central location with significantly

more lucrative employment opportunities. A poor result could consign the student to remain in a parochial area, with little chance of improving the economic situation into which they were born. This is why it is considered 'fateful'. The fatefulness of the exam is determined by its capacity to radically alter a life course, and this makes it subject to a range of religious practices aimed at improving chances of success. This fatefulness is held in a complex dialogue with the state-approved discourses on the Gaokao. In line with modern education discourses, the exam should ideally represent a truly meritocratic contest capable of fostering social mobility.

The interplay between the meritocratic and the fateful illuminates some of the contradictions inherent to the way the O-Net exams were approached at Wat Don Khet. While the stakes were nowhere near as high as those set for the Gaokao, the discourses surrounding the O-Nets still emphasised their capacity to act as a meritocratic conduit for social mobility. In both cases, the efficacy of the exams to perform their intended instrumental function was determined by the perception of them as truly meritocratic. While some forms of fatefulness could be reconciled with the discourses upholding the exams as meritocratic contests, others could undermine this impression. In China, students were expected to undergo intense preparations ahead of the Gaokao, precisely because of its significance as a fateful event. Yet the logic of fatefulness also led families of prospective examinees to take up illicit religious practices. Howlett (2021, p. 198) describes one instance, in which a ritual to confer luck upon examinees was performed at a school under the cover of a routine disinfection to battle a flu outbreak. The logic of fatefulness here led to activities that were certainly not in line with the education discourses used to justify the place of the Gaokao in a modern education system. The results of this could directly undermine the status of the exam as a truly meritocratic contest in the minds of those performing luck-enhancing rituals. As Howlett explains it:

> in attributing both random events and the facts of personhood to luck and fate, people credit transcendental forces with contingencies that are, in part, humanly (that is, socially) produced. In so doing, they make social inequality appear as the natural and inevitable product of fate. (Howlett, 2021, p. 189)

If the exam is approached with a ritual stance devoid of intentionality, then the results will be similarly cast as fate. This seemed to be what had happened when the M.3 novices sat their O-Nets. In this case, their learned ritual stance was perhaps as much tied to a discourse on monastic comportment (an area I will explore in detail when analysing novices' approach to their ecclesiastical exams) as it was to the meritocratic ideals of a modern education discourse. For the time being, what is important to note in the comparison between the Gaokao and the O-Nets is the common tendency for the intentionality of the examinee to be externalised. This externalisation was enacted, not just by the requirement for answers to be mechanistically reproduced, but by the discourses engaged in by media, teachers, institutions, and students' families, concerning the role of examination. Such discourses may highlight intangible factors of performance, such as fatefulness or comportment, over the ideals espoused in modern education discourses calling for the exam to represent a meritocratic test of knowledge and aptitude.

The clash of discourse, in China and Thailand, has undermined the respective models of standardised testing implemented in each country. The Gaokao format is notably similar to that of the O-Nets, and has been subject to many of the same criticisms. In line with the developing discourses on modern education I briefly looked at in the previous chapter, an emphasis on students' wellbeing, creativity, and capacities for critical reasoning have all led upper-middle class Chinese families to increasingly eschew the Gaokao. Howlett (2021, p. 62) notes that the logic driving the intense preparations for the Gaokao and its designation as a highly fateful event, now drives students to look at

educational opportunities abroad. With education for quality reforms, the desire for mobility, to establish oneself in central locations, has led to the conclusion that, since North American and European countries represent the centres of quality, they must be the most desirable places to obtain a university degree. With education for quality reforms defining modern education discourses, the Gaokao begins to look outmoded, just as the O-Net has been rendered almost completely redundant in Thailand. The knowledge that the O-Net was not an accurate measure of academic merit seemed widespread among novices at Wat Don Khet. Despite this, the day of the O-Nets was still administered with a serious air of fatefulness, with the meticulous adherence to a set of novel rules, the drawing of new boundaries within the institution of the school to transform it into the site of the examination, and the presence of the external proctors, all serving to affirm its procedure as an example of ritual action. Outside the bounds of the event itself though, its efficacy had been lost.

In the weeks leading up to the exams I often questioned novices about their nervousness or anticipation for the tests. My enquiries were usually met with amusement, derision, or disinterest. Over the two days of the M.3 O-Nets I came to watch as the novices went through the motions of ritual action. Finally, at the end of the second day, they lingered outside the school once again, waiting for lifts to return to their home temples. They were quiet and unemotional while Phra Ajhan Kasem circulated with a beaming smile on his face. He tried to engage a few of them but none seemed particularly relieved that the tests were now over. I asked one usually talkative novice how he thought he had performed. He replied, “I’m not sure, quite badly I think. Fifty-fifty?” and released some nervous laughter. Another novice, often found avoiding classes, simply shook his head at me when I asked him the same question. Both young novices seemed faintly surprised that I would even bother to ask such a question. Their nonchalance reflected the attitude to examination

determined by its performance as a rite of passage. In effect, it was not the results, the tangible product of achievement, that was the relevant factor of their performance. The relevant details concerned their successful engagement with the rite as an exhibition of ritual action – a performance that seemed to have been entirely externalised. Whatever anxiety existed before the O-Nets had begun two days earlier was perhaps the result of the transformative elements of the rite that defined it as fateful. But these anxieties were confined to the event. This attitude completely undermined the idea of the O-Nets as instruments for measuring students' aptitude for retaining knowledge, with this aim substituted for the performance of the exam as something akin to an exercise in comportment. In the next section, I look at the novices' ecclesiastical exams as an explicit test of this type, requiring a ritual stance of comportment above any tangible exhibition of the types of aptitude valued in modern education discourses.

The Nak Thamm

On a morning several months later, a younger and rowdier group of novices milled about the courtyard. Eventually they were wrangled by teachers and monks, who herded them into the decorated hall. An audience of visiting monks sat waiting. If the O-Nets had required a transformation of the school to suit the needs of the exam as rite of passage, then the logic of such an alteration in physical space was taken to an even further extreme here. The room was full of animated chatter, the monks sat to one side enthusiastically greeting one another. Between the playing novices and the laughing monks, the atmosphere was distinctly festive. We waited for the opening ceremony to begin, marking the formal start of the Nak Thamm ecclesiastical examinations. The novices were coaxed in and ordered to sit in their usual neat rows on the floor of the hall, joined by two young adult monks. These men had taken temporary

ordination for a single phansa (rainy season), and this set of tests would serve as the terminus of their time in robes. The group fell quiet, self-conscious now that they were on display to guests, they assumed a uniform posture. The opening ceremony went on for some time. Monks from the school gave formal introductions and encouraged discipline and concentration. The group of examinees on the floor were instructed to prostrate for the abbot of the temple next door, and for the crowd of monks now patiently watching them. Then it was time to begin. The examinees were led upstairs as the monks continued chatting jovially. The group entered the same classroom that had hosted the O-Nets months before. Teachers and monks bustled about the room distractedly, getting novices into their seats, setting up the projector, fumbling with answer sheets. The room was full of energy as the novices exchanged smiles and whispers.

The novices shuffled in their seats and swung their legs as they looked up at the blank projector screen, waiting for the Nak Thamm essay questions to be displayed. The teachers frantically contended with the computer at the front desk as the novices swivelled around to make faces at one another. The monks all leant against the wall at the back of the room in a line, talking idly, their calm demeanour serving to relax the atmosphere. As the projector finally lit up, the essay questions appeared on the screen. Teachers and monks drifted about the room, gently chiding the novices and encouraging them to begin writing. The novices fell quiet, but the buzz of conversation in the classroom continued. Monks leaned over shoulders, peering down at the examinee's scripts, offering points of correction. "Not like that" one whispered. "Start it again". The performance of the Nak Thamms, like the O-Nets, was characterised by the ritual action novices were expected to participate in. In the case of the ecclesiastical exams, the ritual elements of the tests were even more central. Concerns about the exams serving as a meritocratic assessment of knowledge

were virtually absent. Monks and teachers felt free to intervene in novices' performances, adjusting their comportment where needed. The cohort sitting the Nak Thamm had only recently ordained, and the ritual preparations and performances on display here echoed the carrying out of their ordination ceremony, which I described in Chapter 1. The discourses governing the operation of the Nak Thamm as an event were dominated by the need to have novices exhibit a particular form of monastic comportment, with this primary aim sublimating the exam as an instrument for measuring knowledge. I will consider the implications of this approach to examination shortly, after a brief explanation of the Nak Thamm's historical context and format.

The Nak Thamm ecclesiastical examinations are nominally intended to test monastics' knowledge of Buddhist principles and the Pali language. First instituted by King Mongkut, the exams were widely adopted by 1905. King Mongkut (as a high-ranking monk in the years before the start of his reign) intended to reform monastic education by refocusing the examination curriculum on the Pali canon and away from commentaries on key texts (Dhammasami, 2018). The reformed examination system was also an extension of the continued desire to hold monastics to an academic standard and deter those who would flee military conscription via ordination. Within the Nak Thamm system novices and monks advance through three levels of examination to demonstrate their knowledge of the dhamma, completing the first level at the end of the first rainy season they spend in robes. The novices at Wat Don Khet take the Nak Thamm exams over their first three years of study. They are required to pass at least the first two levels in order to successfully graduate. The exams take place over multiple days, with four sections covering the life of the Buddha, dhamma studies, Pali proverbs and the monastic code of discipline. The format of examination combines essays with long-form written answer questions. Novices often fail the exams, requiring them to retake the

next year. Phra Ajhan Kasem loved to talk about the many times he failed his exams, as we saw in Chapter 1, in which he used an anecdote about his failure to reinforce a point about the universal opportunity afforded by ordination. In contrast to this relaxed attitude, during the time I spent a Wat Don Khet the exams were a locus of anxiety for monks and teachers at the school, who felt responsible for ensuring all novices pass the first two levels. Usually, preparations for the Nak Thamm were confined to scheduled dhamma studies classes, however in 2021 Phra Ajhan Kasem directed teachers to instead run lengthy 'training camps' with all first-year novices taking part.

The first level of the exam is held earliest in the year, in October. The M.1 novices preparing for the initial stage of the Nak Thamm began their training camp in the school holidays preceding the exam date. The whole year group came into school every day for over a week, completing practice papers in the hall under the direction of teachers and monks. Activity during the training camp consisted mainly of copying down pre-prepared essays projected on to a display at the front of the hall. Novices were expected to carefully replicate the precise modes of formatting demanded by the Nak Thamm essay style. Only during the last couple of days of the camp were the novices instructed to write essays from scratch, first with textbooks for reference, and lastly under true exam conditions. The ultimate aim was for them to be able to write their answers from memory. The young novices bore the long days of essay writing with stoicism, echoing their diligent preparations for ordination just a few months earlier. While a number of novices were only interested in doing the bare minimum, a couple threw themselves into the task with steely determination. Yok, a popular class leader, dedicated himself to completing as many practice essays as possible each day. As he completed each one, he would proudly proclaim, "finished!" as he reached across the table to grab the next sheet of questions.

With this round of exams acting as the first true test of the novices' monastic credentials, boys like Yok were anxious to prove themselves capable. Novices who had completed some or all levels of the Nak Thamm were more ambivalent towards them. "It doesn't matter what you write," Eric, who had already completed his exams, told me. "They have so many to mark, they just look at the handwriting and give it a pass or a fail"[37]. Eric's assessment emphasised the reliance on the Nak Thamm as an exercise in comportment, with novices expected to produce a beautiful page of writing that conformed to the given format, rather than as a project drawing on novices' capacities to meaningfully engage with a set of questions. Considering the Nak Thamm as a rite of passage then, as with the O-Nets, we can once again see how examinees sublimate their intentionality in order to achieve the correct ritual stance. As Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994, p. 2) note in relation to their case study of the Jain Puja, the meaning of a given rite is subject to the interpretation of its individual participants. This goes so far as to include the potential for participants to describe a rite as meaningless, even as they dedicate themselves to its performance. Between Eric and Yok, we can see the variance in the ways they might interpret the Nak Thamm as a rite. For Eric, despite having completed his rite successfully, he was happy to cast it as devoid of meaning. For Yok, the rite had the potential to prove his status as a developing monastic.

Regardless of personal meaning though, the substance of the Nak Thamm, as novices were prepared for it, was transparently linked with skilled monastic practice rather than an exhibition of knowledge. In this sense, the 'training

[37] Another novice told me a questionable story about one examinee who had supposedly filled his Nak Thamm script with the lyrics from pop songs. Because his handwriting was well presented and he conformed to the strict rules on the layout of his script, he received a passing mark, despite his essay bearing no relation to the question he had been tasked with answering. The veracity of this story is dubious, but it reveals a lot about the attitude of the amused novice relating it. He saw the Nak Thamms as a mechanistic exercise in comportment, requiring no intentional engagement with the critical capacities of the examinee.

camp' looked far more like one of Phra Ajhan Ban's dhamma studies lessons that I described in the previous chapter, than it did a revision session for a test like one of the O-Nets. Novices were often chided by teachers for their illegible handwriting and sloppy layout. The format of the Nak Thamm examination sheet is extremely precise. Essays are written on long lined sheets, headed with the name of the examination curriculum (*Sanam Luang* National Dhamma Studies Examination Curriculum). Titles and section headings must be indented at particular widths and take up a precise number of lines depending upon their relative importance. At the beginning of the training camp, I joined novices in copying down example essays. For the most part, the completed essays came back covered in red arrows denoting where the indents were meant to start, where the text should take up two lines instead of one, as well as picking up spelling and handwriting errors.

My scripts were no different. Phra Ajhan Kittibun, the monk who had marked the first round of practice tests, handed mine back to me, patiently pointing out each of my mistakes. The substance of the answers to each of the essay questions was barely discussed, with novices simply being shown which type of answer they must replicate for each type of question. The expectation was that the answers would be memorised and copied down, rather than for novices to attempt to conceive of their own original answers. During my experience sitting alongside novices, spending days copying down endless exam essays, I reflected upon how similar this activity was to other emblematic performances of monastic comportment that I participated in. Learning to chant, learning to read palm leaf manuscripts aloud, and learning how to prostrate properly all came to mind. Each required a close attention to movement and the replication of precise forms. To do any of these exercises well, including producing a good Nak Thamm script, it was necessary to retain a constant and steady attention to comportment. Intellectual engagement with any of these practices was not

required, and in some instances may have even undermined their successful performance.

The discourse surrounding the Nak Thamm drew upon the traditional status of monastic schooling. In line with its historical aim, to affirm the desired qualities of the Buddhist monk, and to banish interlopers, the exam has retained its focus on comportment. More so than the O-Nets, the ecclesiastical examinations are quite explicitly conceived as a rite of passage, and the performance of the Nak Thamm script closely resembles the description of ritual action provided by Humphrey and Laidlaw that I have been using to characterise each of the exams analysed in this chapter. Just as we saw in the commingling of discourses presented in the previous chapter, here we can discern a lineage of how exam performance is conceived. The dedication to rote memorisation and comportment, that stand quite explicitly at the heart of the Nak Thamm, are carried over and applied in the case of the O-Nets. In the latter case, the assumption of the ritual stance in taking the exams appears to have contributed to the deterioration of belief in them as a reliable instrument for measuring aptitude, the education discourses at play failing to coagulate, and instead producing a difficult contradiction. This effect goes both ways. In the case of the Nak Thamm, mounting anxiety about novices' performance seems to have been driven by an increasing expectation that the ecclesiastical exams should serve as a meritocratic instrument of measurement, and not just as an exercise in comportment. This attitude was most in evidence as the exams themselves were actually carried out. As monks and teachers circulated the exam room, dispensing advice and corrections in such a way as to totally undermine the tests as an objective and meritocratic device, they appeared on edge. They gave advice, but they did so surreptitiously, as if their actions constituted a breach of the rules that could put them at risk of being reprimanded at any moment.

The way the Nak Thamm was practised appeared to be at odds with ideals underpinning the role of the exam within the domain of modern education. Herzfeld's (2002) theorising of the crypto-colonial is once again relevant here. The examination, as it has come to be conceived in line with modern education discourses, might itself be seen as an instrument of crypto-colonial technology. This is especially clear when looking at the O-Nets, which are so explicitly modelled after similar systems of standardised testing employed by colonial states. In tandem with the idea of the examination as a crypto-colonial technology, we might consider the behaviour undermining the ideals of a modern education discourse – such as the behaviour of teachers and monks during the Nak Thamm – to constitute examples of what Herzfeld (2016) terms 'cultural intimacy'. Culturally intimate practices are those that are seen as somehow shameful if exposed to those outside the cultural group. The shamefulness is often elicited by a conflict between the practices of the individual, and popular discourses on national character. In Thailand, as modern education discourses have come to hold sway, the ritualised aspects of the way the examination is approached may constitute culturally intimate practices. Undercutting the meritocratic ideal of the exam may be seen as a self-conscious subversion of modern education discourses, revealing an alternative, outmoded form of discourse, that nevertheless still holds currency within the confines of the institution.

To a certain extent, we might consider all of the exams I have analysed to include culturally intimate practices. The O-Nets, with their overreliance on rote memorisation, have come to look too much like old-fashioned forms of examination. For a state that wants to present itself as in touch with the front line of developing educational theory and practice, the way the O-Net has been approached in many institutions, including Wat Don Khet, is cast as shameful. As we have seen, the Gaokao has been subject to similar criticism. As upper-

middle class parents in China have lost faith in the exams as a meritocratic gateway to higher education, they have sought educational pathways for their children that more closely resemble the ideals exemplified in popular education discourse. The Nak Thamms, having now remained largely unchanged in contents or format for decades, may have largely been shielded from similar judgements because of their central role within the culturally conservative tradition of monastic education.

However, as demonstrated by the way teachers and monks have come to attach greater stakes to the outcome of the Nak Thamm, even this form of examination may be critiqued from the point of view of a modern education discourse that casts a lack of the meritocratic ideal as an automatic failing. As I have argued, all three examples have been subject to contention at least partly because of the way they are approached as rites of passage, that require participants to forgo their intentionality in the assumption of a ritual stance. The analysis of modes of assessment here demonstrates how plural education discourses can produce tensions within an institution. School staff may have been most concerned with dispelling these tensions, but as referenced in this chapter, they did not go unnoticed by novices. In the second section of the thesis, I will examine how novices' developing ethical subjectivities were shaped through negotiation with the institution and the divergent modes of discourse defining it. I begin this project in the next chapter by looking at how novices responded to the aspects of their education that were explicitly moralising.

Part II – "To be a Novice is to Follow Precepts"

Chapter 4 - Moralisation, Dissonance, and the Novitiate Life

How do novice monks learn ethical and religious ideals? At the monastic school, part of the project teachers and monks undertake involves delivering a distinctively moral education to their students. The operation of this project is evident throughout the institution. The way routines and lessons are structured, the presentation of examinations and exercises, and the lectures given in assemblies are all, often implicitly, value laden. Novices are regularly exposed to expressions of moral education aimed at moulding them into adepts of the novitiate life. Of course, teachers and monks are also pursuing the more general project of preparing the novices to take their place back in the moral universe of lay society. They retain a persistent sensitivity to the future life paths of their charges and look to the resources made available to them by state curricula and ideology to provide them with a moral education fit to this purpose. Here I will examine exactly what it means to receive a moral education in the context of the monastic school, both from the perspective of institutional elders, and from the perspective of the novice monks themselves.

To understand the complex interaction of moral agents and educators present in my account of moral education, I split my description into three levels. The first level, concerning the definition of moralisation, looks at the transparent attempts at communicating moral values engaged in by institutional elders. By

considering Robbins (2007) understanding of moral-value spheres, and Zigon's (2009) critique of this model, I aim to problematize the notion that moral education can ever be exclusively reproductive. I reflect on one particular teacher, Ajhan Widura's, strategies for bridging what I describe as 'moral dissonance', between himself and his students. Ajhan Widura's own moral reflexivity frequently played into his choice of technique for sparking moral conversations (Mair, 2014), even as he was communicating the apparently rigid moralising lessons incorporated in state sanctioned curricula. At the second level, I consider the application of disciplinary practices as they are used within the institution. By looking at how boundaries are drawn and how rules are applied, I describe the pragmatic attitude novices emulate, following senior monks in their understanding of their religious and moral positions. At the final level, which will be fully explored in the next chapter, I examine clues that might reveal the perspective of the novice monks themselves. I consider how novices were able to simultaneously maintain forms of ethical subjectivity that resonated with the religious ideals they were taught at school, and initiate dissonance with the same ideals through expressions of contempt and subversion.

Defining Moralisation

My first task is to define what elements of the education delivered at Wat Don Khet School we can take to be distinctively 'moral'. What exactly does it mean for teachers and monks to take up projects of moralisation, what strategies do they use in pursuing those aims, and what happens when they encounter the pitfalls of those strategies? In anthropology, the task of demarcating the boundaries of 'the moral' has been a central question in developing strands of theory concerning morality and ethics at large. Recent movements in theory have sought to overcome the limitations of early anthropological explanations.

The Durkheimian notion of morality as a straightforward capacity for following social norms has been especially derided for its lack of attention to individual moral reasoning (Laidlaw, 2013). The notion that moral education might involve an unconscious reproduction of values, integral to the continuation of a society, has fallen out of favour because it fails to account for conscious projects of moral transformation (Heywood, 2017). However, we can see the idea of morality as reproductive via explicitly moralising projects alive and well in the contents of state sanctioned curricula at Wat Don Khet. This was particularly evident in the lay-teachers' application of the national curriculum, which included an array of material designed to shape students into good citizens embodying a morality wholly reflective of Thai societal norms.

If we take 'morals' to simply be the normative codes by which people are expected to conduct their lives, then 'moralisation' is the process through which they come to understand and embody these codes. The focus of this chapter is that process, the process of moralisation within the confines of the monastic school, and how this project is perceived and taken part in by novices and their educators. However, understanding the process of moralisation requires an exploration of the distinctions between morals and ethics described in various anthropological accounts dealing with ethical life (Fassin, 2012; Faubion, 2011; Laidlaw, 2002, 2013; Zigon, 2007, 2008, 2009). These distinctions may be drawn between the supposedly straightforward moralising driving the reproduction of normative morals, and the ethical capacities exercised by all participants in the project of moral education. By examining this tension, apparent in an array of theoretical formulations put forward by scholars working in the anthropology of ethics, I aim to show that moralisation can never be an exercise in undeliberative reproduction or transmission.

While various formulations distinguish between morals and ethics (a number of which I examine below), these accounts generally favour one side of the divide or the other, with a lack of emphasis on how the two domains interact (Fassin, 2012). Even where the analysis of morals is considered in relation to ethics, as in arguments casting the former as a very narrow and particular form of the latter, there has been a tendency to assume that the operation of normative morality is relatively straightforward (often straightforwardly reproductive) and that the weight of analysis should fall upon the more complex and evanescent world of broader ethics, the domain of choice and freedom outside the restricting bounds of moral precepts. In arguing against a reproductive moralisation process, I aim to demonstrate how moral precepts may be subject to continuous negotiation and haunted by the possibility of breakdown (Zigon, 2007, 2009). I begin with an account of the most opaque instances of moralisation that took place at Wat Don Khet, before moving to look at how these instances became fraught sites of moral tension and dissonance.

Moralising Lessons

Ajhan Widura, the social studies teacher at Wat Don Khet, taught lessons with transparently moralising directives. I observed lessons on how to choose good occupations, how to comport oneself properly as a novice monk, and how to avoid corrupting influences. These topics fell under a bracket of the curriculum notable for its explicit role in presenting and reaffirming state policy objectives, through the communication of moral values. The lesson content was sanctioned to describe an ideal image of the upstanding moral Thai citizen. Ajhan Widura would typically show novices a video depicting a fable or a clear example of altruistic behaviour and then quiz them on its contents. One M.4 class featured an advert for life insurance. In the advert, a kind-hearted man was shown in a dramatically scored sequence performing a series of altruistic deeds: helping an

old woman with her heavy food cart, donating the last of his money to a young homeless girl, giving his lunch to a stray dog. A voiceover queried, "what does he get from this?" Ajhan Widura paused the video and put the question to the class, "why does he do all these things even though they cause him difficulties?" Novices shouted out, "love", "happiness", "pride". Hitting play on the video again, the altruistic man was seen enjoying the company of those he had helped. The voiceover resumed, answering its own question. "*Dai kwamsook"* (he receives happiness). "*Dai kowjai*" (he receives understanding). "*Dai kwamrak*" (he receives love). Ajhan Widura nodded in approval.

In delivering these lessons, Ajhan Widura's task involved presenting examples of moral behaviour and examining his students on their intuitive ability to grasp the logic motivating them. His question for novices, on what one can hope to gain from the types of altruistic acts approved of in society, were attempts at elucidating a basic sense of moral logic. Behaving as one who performs actions deemed morally upstanding by society will yield a sense of integration, with the attendant emotions of love, happiness, and pride endemic to this kind of integration. The strategy for propagating this moral logic, set out in curricula and adhered to by Ajhan Widura, seems to assume an essentially Durkheimian notion of reproduction. By perfectly reproducing social norms, teachers fulfil their role within the moral system, by disseminating social norms to their students. In other words, the mere presentation of such norms is enough to socialize the novices and have them understand and adopt the appropriate social norms. The assumption appears to be that this process is automatic, with the moral logic being apprehended by both teacher and students unconsciously, with little or no requirement for deliberation or negotiation to prove the moral force attached to such social norms.

Upon closer inspection though, these deliberate attempts at moralisation are more nuanced than they might initially seem. On the one hand, teachers like Ajhan Widura faithfully reproduce the established values of society by rote, regurgitating them with the aim of affirming their moral force in the minds of those undergoing a moral education. On the other hand, it seems odd to describe such lessons as 'unconscious' acts of moral reproduction. Ajhan Widura was very deliberately presenting a moral lesson to his students, making deliberate choices about what to show them and what to ask them. To learn morals, in the sense that Widura was encouraging novices to, is to learn a set of edicts that are meant to govern thought and action. The occupations we pursue, the ways we present ourselves to peers or to strangers, and the ways we engage (or choose not to engage) with expectations others have for us given our position in society: all of these are considerations for the development of an ethical identity. Already, the domain of straightforward moral codes seems under threat of giving way to the messy reality of deliberative ethics, as the social norms presented in the lesson came into contact with the existing values and assumptions at work in novices' sense of their own identity, and their relational bonds to peers and institutional elders.

It is important here then, to return to and fully clarify the question of how morals may be distinguished from ethics. This distinction goes back to Aristotle's (1941) parsing of morals from ethics, defining the former as the codes prescribed by ideologies or religions, and the latter as the practical matter of self-making (Laidlaw, 2002; Mahmood, 2012). Two prominent and related versions of this argument have been made by Laidlaw (2002) and Faubion (2011), both drawing on Foucault's (2000) genealogy of ethics to describe a form of ethical subjectivation that is applied to putatively 'traditional' societies and institutions, defying the notion that such moral 'traditions' preclude the possibility of individual ethical deliberation (Fassin, 2012). Following Williams

(1985), Laidlaw (2002, p. 316) describes moral codes as a specific form of response, designed to answer the Socratic question of 'how ought one to live?' Morals, as they appear in schools and other state institutions, are advanced as a normative project, the project of moralisation. In this respect, schools are of course particularly important, as they serve to establish the pedagogical relationships that are essential for inculcating the younger generation into the established moral order of society, as it is lived by the elder generation. Ethics, then, are distinctive because they are about projects of reflective freedom that, while not necessarily in direct opposition to societal moral logics, include their own motivations, aims, and techniques (Laidlaw, 2013). I shall explore notions of reflective freedom more fully in the next chapter. For my present purposes I aim to emphasise further how moral logics were disseminated at the monastic school through moralisation, and how these moral logics were received and understood by those subject to projects of moralisation.

At Wat Don Khet, Ajhan Widura was reproducing a particular sense of morality — inculcating his students into the moral system of Thai society by making its social norms explicit. Within the bounds of this system, the values espoused through the life insurance advert, and disseminated by Ajhan Widura, may go unchallenged. Their moral force appeared self-evident as the novices mechanically affirmed their value by recognising the inherent 'goodness' of the altruistic man's deeds, associating them with positive emotional states. Ajahn Widura seemed to acknowledge their recognition of this 'inherent goodness' as a success. His students were able to perfectly reproduce the moral reasoning presented in the film and the quasi-Durkheimian model of moralisation adhered to by the national curriculum appeared to be functioning smoothly. However, the superficially simplistic equation (altruistic acts produce positive emotional states) belies the nuances of the novices' understanding as to what was going on in the lesson. Over many more classes, retreading the same basic

structure as the one I have described here, I watched them fire off similarly mechanistic responses to a host of moral questions. Often, they delivered these responses while staring out of the window or with the larger share of their attention focused on their phone screens. Their ability to accurately reproduce the logic of the moral normativity they were being educated in did not necessarily mean they were buying it. In the lesson I described above, Ajhan Widura mistook novices' understanding of the societal norms being modeled, for an acceptance of their value.

The mistake was made explicit in another lesson. Ajhan Widura showed M.3 novices another moralising video (this time a student-produced short film that had won a national arts prize) dramatising the lives of two schoolboys. The first boy is shown to be from a poor family, the second is the son of a wealthy businessman. The film cuts from one boy reading a tattered comic book to the other flipping through apps on his ipad. The poor boy struggles with his schoolwork while the rich boy pays a classmate to do his for him. After the rich boy's father is caught trying to bribe soldiers, the poor boy befriends him, even though the rich boy had been an obnoxious bully prior to his father's arrest. Ajhan Widura watched the class eagerly, hoping to hear them reaffirm the anti-corruption and altruistic messages of the film, as the M.4 class had done with the previous film. He was disappointed to hear them laughing at its heavy-handed moralising. Bouncing back quickly, he rolled his eyes at the guffawing novices and snapped at them to pay attention. Once the film had finished Ajhan Widura struggled to engage the students in any kind of serious discussion about its messages. "No way would I have helped him!" one novice said loudly in reference to the rich boy, drawing laughter from his classmates. In this case, novices certainly understood the social norms the film was attempting to communicate but, much to Ajhan Widura's chagrin, they displayed open contempt for them. The model of moralisation, of the reproduction of morals

via the systematised communication of social norms, seemed to have broken down.

One possible explanation for this failure is provided by Weber's (1946) concept of moral-value spheres. In Weber's original conception, societies are made up of a number of different value spheres, each following their own set of normative precepts. Therefore, when conflicts arise (as in Ajhan Widura's classroom) they can be accounted for as the point at which incompatible value-spheres meet. This explains how apparently stable moral systems, in which moralising processes generally result in the straightforward reproduction of social norms, can nevertheless be shaken by conflicts when irreconcilable differences between value-spheres are brought to the surface. Robbins (2007) reformulates the concept of moral-value spheres, mapping their operations on to the distinction between morals and ethics. The aim of this reformulation is to address how experiences of moral harmony and conflict come into being, and what factors may lead one state to give way to the other. In this sense Robbins diverges from Weber, whose model infers that cultural conflict between value-spheres will always be present within societies, and Dumont (Dumont, 1977, 1980, 1986), who sees moral systems as tending towards stable 'value-hierarchies'. Instead, the operation of moral systems is split along the morals/ethics line into the 'morality of reproduction' and the 'morality of freedom'. While operating under the morality of reproduction, agents occupy a particular moral-value sphere in which normative values need not be questioned. When moral-value spheres with incompatible values collide, we enter the domain of the morality of freedom, in which conscious deliberation must take place to resolve the conflict.

Robbins' applies this notion of moral freedom to the encounter between the moral-value sphere of his Urapmin interlocutors in Papua New Guinea and the new, and sometimes incompatible, values of Pentecostal Christianity that they

have adopted since the 1970s. In this example, Robbins reports that the Urapmin experience a continual moral struggle because of the areas where the values implied by their social structure (which predates their conversion to Christianity) are incompatible with the moral framework demanded by their religion. Within the monastic school we might imagine this process playing out in miniature, between the established moral-value sphere of state-sanctioned education, and the values held by the adolescent monks. However, the case here is not nearly so clear as with the Urapmin and their struggle to embody Christian values. It is not at all obvious where we might find the source of the conflict between novices and the institutional elders attempting to moralise to them. Moreover, while the Urapmin were locked in continual moral quandaries as a result of being stuck between the relationalism of their social structure and the individualism of their moral system, for the novices, there was no active attempt made to resolve the conflict with Ajhan Widura and the moral system presented in his lessons. Applying Robbins' model raises some difficult questions then. Are the novices and their institutional elders really locked in a negotiation within a single moral-value sphere, or are their perceptions of the moral lessons in conflict because they are actually approaching them from two different moral-value spheres?

Zigon (2009) critiques Robbins' (2007) interpretation of moral-value spheres on the basis that such questions are difficult to parse in many of the chaotic and erratic circumstances of moral conflict. If moral-value spheres contain uniformly harmonious moral relations, in which conflict apparently need not ever arise, then it appears to negate the possibility for moral reasoning and deliberation within their bounds, as in the case of Durkheimian moral reproduction. If conflict *is* somehow possible within moral-value spheres, how do we determine when conflicts are being worked out internally, in contrast to instances in which multiple moral-value spheres are colliding? Novices may

appear disinterested in the moral values being espoused in lessons, but this does not imply a wholesale rejection of those values. We might imagine that this is simply part of a process of inculcation within a single moral-value sphere, in which members of a society come to feel the full moral force of that societies' values through a process of moral education. Before that education is complete, they may not have the capacities necessary to appreciate the moral force of those values. Looking closer at the novices' reactions though, I do not think this position does justice to their own sophisticated understanding of the moralisation process. Their bored reactions were elicited precisely *because* they were aware they were being moralised to. In Robbins' terms, their awareness of the objectives of the moral lessons triggered an exercise in moral freedom, a type of conscious choice that he wants to claim is evidence of two moral-value spheres coming together with conflicting values.

The binary choice, between the unchanging harmony of moral reproduction, and the clash of incompatible moral-value spheres leading to moral freedom, oversimplifies the processes individuals are embedded in as they cultivate ideals. By the time Ajhan Widura was exposing his students to the moralising messages of the films, they were already conversant in the logic of this societally-approved normative morality. If they were not conversant, the lessons would have been incomprehensible. When Ajhan Widura put his questions to the class, he expected them to already know what moral ideals they should draw out of the fables they had seen. The lessons served as a reaffirmation of ideals held within the moral-value sphere that everyone in the classroom was supposed to be a part of already. Yet, for the most part, the novices found these reaffirmations tedious. "We've heard it all before" was the common refrain when I asked them what they thought of these lessons. Older novices could be particularly dismissive. Commenting in exasperated tones after one of Ajhan Widura's classes on combating corruption, one M.6 novice

said to me, "this year it's corruption. That's what the government is talking about now, so that's what we have to learn about". Their contempt for this form of moralising seemed couched in their own perception of it as reductive.

The novices' critique emulated the points commonly made in rejection of the Durkheimian notion of moral reproduction. The idea that moralisation could take place at an unconscious level, through the simple presentation and reaffirmation of social norms, ignored their capacities for active deliberation, as well as their sophisticated pre-existing knowledge of how the moral system of their society functioned. Is this a true conflict between moral-value spheres then? Novices were not interested in reaffirming the moral force of the social norms communicated to them in moralising lessons, but it seems strange to claim that they stood in direct opposition to them. If they were actively opposing them, we could imagine novices taking this position as part of the formation of their own moral-value sphere. Instead, they took up no such active oppositional stance. Rather than arguing with Ajhan Widura, they simply maintained a steady contempt for his lessons. I think what we have is a form of moral dissonance, rather than outright moral conflict. Just as a piece of music can be largely tonal, atonal elements may be introduced that jar with the overall harmony. We can assume that Ajhan Widura and his monastic pupils shared a significant proportion of their respective understandings of morality. But that did not prevent them from perceiving the body of their shared moral logic quite differently. Describing this relation as a conflict (in Robbins' sense) implies too dramatic a scenario, in which values on each side vie to subsume one another. Viewing this as a form of dissonance is more appropriate because there is little or no attempt for one set of values to dominate the other, and no implication that this situation must eventually reach any equilibrium. Each party simply lives with the dissonance.

Zigon (2007, 2009) offers an alternative to the morality of reproduction and the morality of freedom model, by instead parsing different forms of moral life and then casting them against moments of 'moral breakdown' in which ethical deliberation becomes necessary. His first aspect of morality, the 'morality of institutions', could be seen expressed in Ajhan Widura's moral project, and this characterisation seems particularly pertinent in the case of schooling and moral education. Institutional morals are represented as obviously good and true, and adherence to them often determines one's ability to interact with a particular institution. The values of altruism, and the distaste for corruption, were advanced as unquestionably moral in Ajhan Widura's lessons. These values were presented to the novices by Widura, as his own values, the values of the institution he served, and the values of society at large. His job was therefore to establish the universality of these values across societal institutions. Alongside institutional morality, Zigon (2009) describes the 'morality of public discourse' and the 'morality of embodied dispositions'. The former aspect in particular may offer an explanation of novices' apparent ability to entertain the moral values espoused in lessons, while finding the presentation of them hollow and tedious.

In Zigon's argument, the morality of public discourse includes the everyday values people trade in as part of their social lives. They are supposedly separate from institutional moralities and their rhetoric pertaining to the 'obvious goodness' of ideals but are constantly interacting with them. This is how people who ordinarily adhere to the morality of an institution could be seen to divert from it, while maintaining the essential morality of their position. Rather than appealing to the values of the institution, they appeal to the morality of public discourse. For novices, public discourse would presumably be predominantly constructed in their interactions with one another. Through the establishment of their own ideals, perhaps seen as more authentic than those of the institution,

they incite a kind of subversion of (or dissonance with) institutional morality. For Zigon then, do we suppose that novices are undergoing a moral breakdown? Are they now in a position where they must exercise their ethical capacities in order to resolve the conflict between their public discourse, and the values of their institution?

If this is the case, they do not seem to be in any hurry to solve the apparent conflict. Zigon (2009, p. 269) claims that, in instances of moral breakdown, agents will always attempt to resolve the conflict in values in order to return to a state in which an underlying moral order is implicit and unconscious. In his own ethnographic example, he describes the broad moral breakdown in post-soviet Russia, in which competing institutional and public discourse moralities collided, before looking at a case of moral breakdown through a discussion of lying between two of his interlocutors. While one of the two women he interviewed felt comfortable lying at work because of its pragmatic benefits, the other seemed to struggle more with dishonesty, both because of her religious orthodox background, and her relatively new position within modern Russian business culture. The first woman felt secure, and did not need to question her moral position, while the second was experiencing a moral breakdown. Zigon's claim is that she was in the process of resolving this breakdown, initiating a process of ethical reflection in herself in order to produce a state in which lying at work could be morally acceptable, as it was for her friend. If individuals may occupy a state of moral breakdown such as this for extended periods, perhaps the novices are simply in the same kind of state. The moral dissonance of their position would endure only until the process of moral breakdown had worked itself out. As Ajhan Widura delivered each of his lessons, the novices gradually experienced a state of deliberative ethical reflection in an attempt to reconcile the institutional morality with their own morality of public discourse. My contention here would be that, over the entire duration of their schooling, many

novices seemed perfectly at ease with this state of apparent breakdown. The supposed moral entropy that should have been drawing them into a state of unconscious resolution (or moral harmony) appeared to be largely absent.

Both Robbins (2007) and Zigon (2009) share a notion that people's default state is one of unconscious moral reproduction. The morality of freedom, or the emergence of ethics, only occur when this default state is somehow ruptured through conflict. Heywood (2015) criticises each of their perspectives on this basis, noting that both fail to reconcile the Durkeimian fallacy of rendering ethics and social norms identical, with their recognition of the need for an account of deliberation and self-fashioning. Robbins and Zigon end up giving precedence to the structuring influence of social norms, describing models in which ethical deliberation can only take place as an irregularity. The consequence of this is that neither view of morality and moralisation can account for a situation in which moral conflict appears to be an accepted norm. Ajhan Widura and his students seemed to perpetually exist in this kind of tension, with him attempting to inculcate them into the moral vision of Thai society, and them passively resisting his attempts with mere token affirmations or outright contempt and dismissal. While the objective of such a moral education might necessitate a resolution of the kind Zigon describes, on the novices' side of the conflict, there was no desire to reach such a state. Moral dissonance was a perfectly acceptable state for them to remain in, as they made no attempt to either make themselves understood to Ajhan Widura, or to take his ideas seriously. Rather than searching for the threads of a possible resolution then, it might be more productive to further analyse the exchange occurring between the dissonant moralities at work here. This exchange is enacted through various means, including disciplinary measures and appeals to a common experience that, following Mair (2014), I consider as a form of ethical conversation or negotiation. As we shall see, from the side of the institutional

elders, these conversations are enacted as a pragmatic form of dialogue, one that can convince their novice interlocutors to enter a sustained (albeit bad-tempered and dissonant) cooperative relation.

Discipline and Conversation

The explicit moral lessons I have described so far may have been the most obvious sites of moralisation at the monastic school, but processes of moralisation were implicitly at work everywhere in the institution. Teachers and monks frequently included explicit and implicit moralising in speeches, tellings off, and classes that, on their surface, had nothing to do with morals. In these instances, they often seemed to be attempting to break down the obstacles novices erected in the creation of moral dissonance. They employed a range of techniques for doing this, cajoling, disciplining, and sympathising with their students in order to open up a dialogue that might institute a greater level of moral harmony. In these instances, teachers could be seen as engaging in the types of 'ethical conversations' Jonathan Mair (2014) describes in his work on Fo Guang Shan Buddhism. Mair describes Taiwanese Fo Guang Shan Buddhists as taking part in attempts to enter into a dialogue with members of other cultures and share their particular interpretation of Pure Land Buddhism. They try to bridge the gap between moral universes, breaking down their boundaries to enter into a gratifying relationship for both sides. In the monastic school case, we might see an analogous process. Teachers and monks make efforts to traverse the obstacles of contempt and boredom underlying novices' dissonant moral perspective to appeal to the elements of their moral sensibilities that could resonate with their own.

First thing in the morning, Ajhan Widura would often be the teacher in charge of leading the assembly. Most of the novices, bussed in on the backs of

converted pick-up trucks, would sleepily make their way into the hall. Sitting on the floor in rows they would fiddle with their robes, attempting to snatch conversations with friends as the speaker called for their attention. On slow days without much news, Ajhan Widura would lecture the collected novices on whatever issue had been causing particular problems that week. Smoking, personal hygiene, and managing relationships with one another, were all popular topics for him to reflect on. Ajhan Widura often fell back upon a familiar refrain to soften these lectures. "This life. The life of the novice. It's not an easy life." He would soberly acknowledge the difficulties inherent in the routines and expectations attached to the young monastics, even as he himself encouraged them to work to meet these expectations. Moralising lessons about the nature of novice life went alongside a tempering nod to the difficulty of living up to society's standards. Just as in the classroom, Ajhan Widura's attempts at communicating moral lessons represent an effort on his part to bring novices into a shared moral vision based around a common understanding of state sanctioned morality, and how this vision could be applied to individuals in their own particular societal roles. Here though, his exhortations went a step further than the mere presentation of social norms. By demonstrating an awareness of the novices' struggles and deliberations, Ajahn Widura was entering into a more conversational mode of exchange, in which the process of moralisation might take place through the acknowledgement of each party's moral position within the social hierarchy of the school.

In Mair's terms, Ajhan Widura was searching for 'affinities'. Widura would speak the words, "the life of the novice" with a heavy sense of meaning, pausing before telling the room "I know it is difficult". He seemed to be encouraging the collected novices to recognise the weight of his own experience. He too had spent his adolescence in the novitiate life. Appealing to their shared experience, he would move from this to whatever issue happened

to be troubling him that day, whatever rule novices had not been following as faithfully as he felt they should have. Mair identifies a number of possible strategies one can implement to initiate a conversation across borders and locate affinities. In the situation here we might identify Ajhan Widura's technique as falling somewhere between the 'appeal to a shared meta-ethics' and an 'appeal to a shared enemy'. By referencing his own experience as a novice, he was staking his place within their shared moral universe, with the 'enemy' being the difficulties of living the novitiate life as an adolescent, with the limitations on freedom this life demands. Behind his words, was the acknowledgement of the pragmatic realities of the world that led boys to ordain, alongside the more idealistic religious impetus. He was calling them to recognise their shared meta-ethical position, that although their experience of monasticism may be wearisome at times, they could all agree to its fundamental desirability, as a way to support their families, both economically and through accumulated merit. Whether ordination might be a morally desirable pursuit for its own sake is left unsaid, with Ajhan Widura's appeal perhaps tactically avoiding this more ephemeral point, to focus upon the tangible benefits of novices' positions. To put this in Robbins' (2007) terms, this meta-ethical position is the place where moral-value spheres intersect. Or, to extend the notion of moral dissonance, we could describe these 'affinities' as a sample of the notes taken from each sphere that harmonise. Ajhan Widura was exhorting his students to focus on these harmonising notes, rather than on the elements of their own contempt and disinterest fuelling the dissonance.

In some instances, locating affinities could be more difficult. When novices made serious breaches of school and monastic rules, the conversations became fraught and the threat of real moral breakdown would emerge. These cases hewed closer to Zigon's (2007, 2009) model, demanding an ultimate resolution arrived at through deliberation, in order for the status quo of steady moral

dissonance to return. If novices were caught taking part in any prohibited activity, they would be sent to Ajhan Widura's desk in the downstairs office. He would lecture them at length, employing a range of conversational strategies. Sometimes he would shout at them from behind his desk while they stood with their heads hung, sometimes he would speak in a low and steady voice, sitting cross legged with them on the floor as he quietly demanded they think about their choices. Two M.2 novices who were caught with a few cans of beer were harangued for some time, Ajhan Widura picking up and shaking one of the empty cans at them to emphasise his point, "you thought this was ok at school!?" The quieter, more solemn talks would be reserved for older novices, who had perhaps made a minor lapse of judgment, or occasionally for repeat offenders, who were beyond being affected by their teachers' anger. Novices who repeatedly broke serious rules were offered ultimatums by Ajhan Widura. "Do you want to leave?" he would ask them, his tone blunt and unemotional. The knotty and fraught conversations here yield to a point of necessary resolution and breakdown. A choice was required. One scenario was particularly exemplary of this conversational process leading to breakdown, in which a series of infractions led one usually popular novice to come to the brink of expulsion from Wat Don Khet.

I left a classroom one morning to be faced with one novice (a particularly strong and formidable M.5) pushing another violently against a wall. His victim took the abuse without resistance. "What did you say huh?" the big M.5 shouted at him. "What did you tell them?" I rushed to break up the fighting and the M.5 quickly stalked off, scowling. I got the story behind the fight a little later from a friend of the victim. It seemed that Noot, the big M.5, had been off truanting the previous day. He and his friends had hatched a plan to come to school as normal, be seen to have arrived at assembly, then sneak off and walk up the road to a quiet temple in the next village, where they could discreetly drink and

smoke for the day. The victim, Arm, was rumoured to have reported this escapade to the teachers. A little later, Noot and Arm were called to Ajhan Widura's office where they were both severely reprimanded for fighting. However, as Arm was allowed to leave first, it became clear that Ajhan Widura had indeed learned of Noot's truanting.

Noot was told that if his bad behaviour continued, he would not be permitted to continue studying at the school. As his lecture progressed, Ajhan Widura's tone slowly transformed, from scathing and furious, to weary, disappointed and resigned. He seemed to find delivering this lecture particularly difficult, perhaps because, while Noot was never exactly studious in his lessons, he and Widura usually got along very well, chatting about football when it became clear that Noot had no intention of finishing his exercises for the day. Noot was similarly transformed by the interaction. When he was first called in (and especially while Arm was still in the room) he fiercely argued his case, denying all charges of wrongdoing, with Ajhan Widura repeatedly curtailing his desperate attempts to defend himself. Once Arm was gone, and Noot's crimes were laid out in front of him, he became dejected, staring down at the floor, and eventually weeping helplessly as Ajhan Widura offered him his final ultimatum. In defeated tones, he capitulated, muttering that he would work on his behaviour, that he would stop smoking and stop drinking and commit himself to his studies. Via a high stakes mode of negotiation, Ajhan Widura seemed to have brought Noot to realise his predicament and initiate a moral breakdown.

The extent of Noot's previous contempt for the moral precepts imposed on him was no longer a viable position to retain as his transgression of the rules had produced a true conflict. He was therefore forced to make a choice, to double down on his rejection of the social norms applied to him as a novice monk, and

as a student at the monastic school, or to reform his attitude and take the institutional moral code more seriously. Of course, there were limitations to this attitudinal change. In the weeks following Noot's telling off, while he did always attend class, and did generally behave somewhat more cooperatively with his teachers, I still caught sight of him surreptitiously smoking by the bathrooms with his friends. The negotiation with Widura and subsequent breakdown had not radically altered his generally contemptuous attitude towards the restrictions placed upon him, and for the most part, his relationship with the institutional morality remained dissonant. The conversation across borders brought about in Ajhan Widura's lecture had managed to bring him into greater harmony with the social norms of the institution, as he made greater effort to conceal his smoking and at least refrained from drinking during school hours, but these harmonic elements were a compromise, the result of a difficult negotiation.

The compromise arrived at by Noot and Widura is reminiscent of Heywood's description of '*doppia morale'*, a term taken from his ethnography of the LGBTQ activist community in Bologna (2015). Heywood focuses on sexual infidelity in particular, looking at how individuals navigate the moral problem of infidelity by maintaining an outward image of propriety, despite behaving in ways that would contravene the morality implied by this image. This is doppia morale, 'a manner of relating to moral codes in which one allows for the possibility of their transgression under certain circumstances' (Heywood, 2015, p. 206). Heywood argues that by allowing for the possibility of transgression, 'doppia morale' constitutes a 'mode of subjectivation', in Foucault's (2000) terms, a way of orienting oneself to the moral codes to which one subscribes. In Heywood's examples, 'doppia morale' cannot be maintained when one party is too careless in concealing their infidelity. In relationships in which one party has been cheating on the other, a conflict does not arise until the infidelity is

inadequately hidden. In Noot's case, his manifold infractions were tolerated by institutional elders until he stumbled into a situation where they were publicly observable, signalled most conspicuously by the physical fight he openly initiated in a setting where anyone could observe his actions. By tacitly agreeing for Noot's behaviour to move back below the surface of public apprehension, Widura relied upon a pragmatic 'mode of subjectivation', made possible via a conversation across the border between them, to speak to Noot's disdain for institutional codes of morality.

Conversations and compromises like this one were generally the first response Widura and other institutional elders appealed to when exacting discipline, but the threat of expulsion was not empty. The breakdown elicited by extreme breaches of the institutional moral code really did threaten novices with the prospect of being disallowed from returning to the school. It was not uncommon for at least a couple of novices to be expelled from the school each year. Repeatedly being caught smoking, drinking or fighting, as Noot was, could serve as grounds to be asked to leave. Any incident involving drug use resulted in instant expulsion. The other infractions were considered insurmountable only when they became ingrained habits. Applying a pragmatic lens (similar to applications of 'doppia morale'), lapses into these behaviours could be forgivable even if they became public. Public knowledge of novices using drugs was too disgraceful a prospect though, and so no pragmatic considerations could be applied to these infractions. In essence, it seemed to be taken that the novice who used drugs had already worked through their own moral breakdown, utterly rejecting the premises of the novitiate life; they made their final choice in the act of the infraction itself. Interestingly, the same logic seemed to be applied in cases that, on the surface, did not present such serious rule breaking. One M.2 novice named Wut lost his place at the school, and was forced to return to his home village on the border

of the province, after he was caught wearing laypeople's clothing a few times too often by the abbot of the temple that had been hosting him.

Other compounding factors may have contributed to his expulsion, since he was well known for misbehaving at school, yet it seems notable that everyone who discussed the incident made reference to the rejection of his monastic garb as the final straw. By refusing to present himself as a novice, it seemed he had already committed himself to a total rejection of the moral codes governing his role within the monastic institution. On the surface, such rapid recourse to expulsion as a disciplinary practice might appear harsh, but in general Wat Don Khet's institutional elders maintained an air of extreme leniency in dealing with their novice students. Outside the domain in which total rejection of the moral logic of monastic life was deemed evident, conversation and negotiation were always favoured as the pragmatic tools aimed at shaping novices' conduct. This leniency was evident in teachers' relationships with Ice, a novice who rejected the educational trappings of the monastic school, while maintaining a steady adherence to the monastic moral code that appeared to be the real determinant of whether one could sustain their status as a novice monk.

Ajhan Widura pointed Ice out to me. He spent the majority of his school days around the grounds of the temple. He was occasionally joined by a loose group of three or four other novices, all of whom shared a disinterest in the lessons taking place upstairs in their classrooms. However, Ice was the novice most dedicated to avoiding any kind of study. The majority of his days were spent assisting Ajhan Somchai, the work and occupation studies teacher, in tending to the various crops and plants grown around the school. He would also clean and load up the truck that took away the rubbish each week, and generally perform any other manual labour task that either Ajhan Somchai directed him towards, or that he could find for himself. When I asked Ajhan Somchai about Ice's lack

of attendance when it came to regularly scheduled classes, he did not seem overly concerned. He shrugged and simply said "he doesn't like studying. We can't get him to study." Ajhan Widura, half listening to the conversation from his desk, nodded in agreement, equally unconcerned. For the most part then, Ice was left alone to choose for himself how he would spend his time. His refusal to take part in the education offered at Wat Don Khet may not have been ideal, but the tacit conversation worked out between himself and his institutional elders had resulted in a pragmatic compromise.

Scheilke (2009) describes a similarly pragmatic approach to retaining a relatively stable moral order despite the prevalence of moral dissonance. In his ethnography looking at Ramadan practices in Egypt, he recounts the popularity of supposedly forbidden games of football during the Ramadan period among young men. In Scheilke's analysis, he considers these games to be judged as relatively permissible practices that can divert young men away from more serious moral infractions, like smoking, drinking and sexual activity. In Nan, one of the most commonly referenced advantages to monastic schooling, cited by my neighbours in Ban Don Khet, as well as teachers and monks, was that it protected boys from the dangers that could result from temptations to act immorally. Fears of drug and alcohol addiction, violence, and teenage pregnancy were mitigated by the relative safety of the monastic school when compared with the local free high school. At the institutional level then, it was perhaps expedient to take a stance tolerant of a certain level of moral dissonance. Novices' disregard for aspects of the moral code governing Wat Don Khet was permissible as long as their contempt did not become publicly observable. The loose covenant was produced and continually renewed through the disciplinary practices of the institution, practices that primarily involved a tacit or explicit conversation across borders. Ice was allowed to skip classes and disregard the value of education, because he complied with the greater part of

the institutional moral code, comporting himself in an acceptable fashion as a novice monk. Noot and Wut on the other hand, were more readily subject to active disciplinary tactics. They either needed to be engaged in the conversational methods aimed at bringing them back into the moral fold, or, as in Wut's case, made to realise the implications of their total rejection of the institution's values.

The analysis of institutional policies governing discipline may give an explanation as to how Wat Don Khet was structured to cope with the persistence of moral dissonance, but it fails to address how this dissonance was handled interpersonally between teachers and their monastic students. Awareness of the nuances underpinning the institutional social hierarchy shaped how these relationships were navigated. One novice, Eric, spoke to me boastfully about the relatively relaxed attitude to general discipline he experienced at the monastic school, as compared with friends of his who attended secular schools. The teachers at these schools enacted harsher punishments upon their pupils with far greater regularity, with corporal punishment being common, and a lack of attentiveness to studying something that could draw teachers' ire. In contrast, he explained, teachers at the monastic school were bound by the respect they were required to pay to monastics, even to young novice monks. While lectures like the ones dispensed by Ajhan Widura were an acceptable way to punish an errant novice, a lay-teacher was not permitted to use physical violence as a disciplinary technique. Teachers were well aware of their delicate relationship with the novice students, and the trappings of respect they were required to show them.

The fine line lay-teachers walked was demonstrated by occasional slips of speech. For instance, when attempting to attract the attention of a group of novices' they might call out '*nakrien!'* (the term for lay students), catching

themselves halfway through the utterance and quickly correcting themselves to the proper term of address for novice monks: *samanen*. This type of error was also common in the use of the collective pronoun used for addressing monastics. Teachers would refer to '*took kon*' (everyone — used for laypeople) and then correct themselves to the proper term: '*took roob*' (everyone — used for monastics). To properly conduct themselves in their relationships with the junior monastics, lay-teachers were required to exercise a persistent awareness of the delicate, difficult to navigate points of the social hierarchy. The need to persistently maintain recognition of this hierarchy seemed to itself be generative of novices' contempt for the strictures of the normative morality guiding the teachers' actions, hence Eric's boastful attitude with regard to the leniency he enjoyed.

The monastic members of school staff did not have the same problem. As the novices' seniors in terms of both age and religious status, they were not required to exercise the same delicate touch when it came to discipline. However, while monks were occasionally able to dispense harsher punishments, their need to attend to their own monastic comportment restricted them from displaying high arousal emotions. An M.5 novice explained this to me, referencing a monk who had previously worked at the school as an exception who proved the rule. Laughing, he told me "he would get really angry and shout at us. Sometimes he would hit the ones who behaved really badly". While this monk's disciplinary practices were not scandalous, it was clear from the novices' recounting that they could be deemed unseemly for one of his status. The novice found the disciplinarian monk's inability to keep his cool amusing, precisely because it was outside the ordinary remit of expected monastic comportment. In the novice's words, they were not '*riap roi*', not 'proper' or 'orderly. His story recalls Cook's (2010b) explanation of how Thai mae chee (nuns) and monks are expected to be riap roi in all of their

conduct. As she notes, riap roi is used to express completeness as well as orderliness, and is used to announce the successful completion of tasks. At Wat Don Khet, novices would often shout "riap roi" upon completing a worksheet or exercise. The hot-headed monk's quick temper was a sign that he was not yet 'complete', in the sense that he could not yet exude the correct air of monastic comportment required to perform his religious role. Monks were able to enact corporal punishment, so long as they conducted it in a 'seemly' way. One monastic teacher practically always carried a cane while he conducted Pali classes. As the novices sat on the floor reciting vocabulary, he would wander amongst them, giving any novices who weren't giving the task their full attention a firm whack. He did this while maintaining a serene air of indifference, barely breaking step and retaining an easy smile.

Enforced by the respective demands placed upon them by the institution, both teachers and monastics were virtually required to affect a permissive attitude towards many aspects of novice behaviour. This was even evident when it came to the maintenance of the religious precepts novices undertook. Just as comportment, and the presentation of religious identity, determined monks' relationship with novices, so too were novices expected to remain aware of the performance of their precepts. When novices ordain, they agree to uphold ten precepts, however, there were precepts that all monastics seemed happy to ignore or at least approach with an air of flexibility. In particular, the sixth precept, forbidding the consumption of food after midday, and the tenth precept, prohibiting monastics from using money, were virtually never adhered to. The malleable attitude to apparently 'strict' religious proscriptions like the precepts bears a resemblance to Clarke's (2021) examination of the practical application of religious moral codes, specifically casuistry and Islamic law. Both of these traditions have developed pragmatic schools of thought that allow for flexibility in the interpretation of apparently rigid religious rules. In casuistry

for example, the doctrine of 'probablism' allowed for a course of action so long as one could point to a past case in which a reasonably similar ruling had been made. Novices did not need to make such formal appeals to justify their breaking of the precepts. They needed only point to the senior monastics around them, who all exercised a flexible attitude to their precepts, bending or breaking them where it seemed the pragmatic course of action. When I asked novices about the sixth and tenth precepts they laughed at me. "Everyone does it [breaks the rules]!" (everyone here refers to all monastics). "Those rules are thousands of years old. We can't follow them now, the world has changed."

While senior monks would avoid talking openly about their pragmatic approach to the precepts, their judgement seemed at bottom to mirror that of their students. One senior monk, Ajhan Wichai, drove to school everyday in a pick-up truck 'lent' to him by a family in his home village. Monks who have undertaken full ordination are forbidden from driving or owning vehicles, yet this senior monk made no attempt to hide this deviation from the monastic code of practice. When I discreetly asked teachers and novices about this, they all told me the same thing, "If he didn't drive himself, he would have to wait for someone to be available to drive him. That's not practical." And while I never openly asked him about the permissibility of his driving, he did once seem to observe me watching him as he parked up his truck. Getting out, he wished me a good morning, pausing before looking at me pointedly and saying, "you know I used to walk here everyday from my village. An hour both ways in all weather" before smiling and walking off. Both senior and novice monastics' attitudes to their precepts were thus characterised by a high degree of pragmatism. The rules were not there to be followed for their own sake, but to assist in constructing a moral vision, assisting in guiding an individual through the moral quandaries they would encounter through their lives. In relation to the doctrine of probabilism, Clarke notes that

> Casuistry was… part of a practical project, coming to terms with the moral dilemmas that life in the world inevitably puts in our way. In real life, there is rarely one right path; obligations conflict. Casuistry, and probabilism, was a way of coping with the inevitable lack of moral certainty. In such circumstances, the concern was to relieve what might otherwise seem an impossible burden. (Clarke, 2021, p. 218)

The interpretation of precepts at the monastic school seems to have functioned in an analogous way, and the pragmatic attitude to cultivating moral life in the institution was carried through to all other areas of discipline. The moral vision produced by this pragmatist interpretation of religious rules and religious positions shaped the institution, and determined the forms of moralisation that could be workable there.

The pragmatist moral vision implied by attitudes to precepts is equally reflected in the attitude to the monastic school and novitiate ordination as an institution. On the surface, the temple and the school may appear to be sites designed for the refined moralisation of trainee monastics. In other settings that utilise pedagogic technique in the service of the perfection of the monastic or religious self, this might be true, but in Ban Don Khet, the monastic school is a pragmatic organisation aimed less at moralising ideal novice monks and more at protecting its charges from the perceived dangers of the secular world. Eric was from a village neighbouring Ban Don Khet and so he and I would often discuss the range of educational pathways open to young boys in the local area. Most of them would enrol at the large paid high school in town. If their families could not afford this, they had two options: the monastic school or the free co-educational high school just across the river. Eric explained that, while the general perception of the monastic school and the free school were the same when it came to educational attainment, many families worried about the risks associated with adolescent boys left to do as they wanted without restrictions.

The monastic school offered an environment where the worst excesses of illicit adolescent behaviour could be curtailed. In this respect, the potentialities of obtaining an education were less important than the tangible protection novices received from moral dangers. The conduct of Ice, the novice who refused to study, was emblematic of this.

Ice was not particularly interested in talking about the choice he had made to avoid the classroom. When I asked him about his lack of studying, he would generally ignore the question or shrug at me. Or, just as Ajhan Somchai had told me, he would simply respond "I don't like studying. It's boring". He seemed to understand that his situation was precarious. If any of the teachers decided to crack down on attendance, he would be compelled to return to class. As long as he kept busy and remained under the radar, nobody would force him to change his daily routine. He need not have worried. During the time I spent at the school, I saw novices disciplined frequently, but their infractions rarely concerned a lack of attendance or commitment to their studies. Ice's situation is demonstrative of the sense of independence novices cultivated over the years of their ordination. Away from the watchful eyes of relatives and neighbours in their home villages, they became responsible for their own conduct and their own time. At the temples that became their homes upon ordination, the abbots and senior monks who served as the heads of each institutional community were theoretically responsible for their new charges, and while they were generally careful to ensure novices learned to perform their new duties as monastics, many paid little attention to the novices beyond this. Many novices were happy to admit that their duties were not particularly strenuous, and were well aware of just how much free time was afforded them. When Ajhan Widura talked about the novitiate life being difficult, he was not talking about the demands made on their time (of which there were few). He was talking about the restrictions placed upon them by their precepts, and the

expectation that they limit themselves to acting within the bounds of acceptability for a novice monk.

The monks and teachers at Wat Don Khet exhibited a relaxed attitude towards shaping novice behaviour when it came to their studies. If novices were uninterested in studying, little effort would be made to try to persuade them otherwise. So long as they did not cause trouble they were left to their own devices. I asked a clever M.5 novice about this as we sat upstairs looking down on to a group of wayward novices casually avoiding class by chatting outside the toilets. "Why doesn't someone tell them to go back to class. Aren't they supposed to be learning?" He replied quickly with a shrug of his shoulders. "It's up to you". I pressed him, asking what he meant and he explained. The responsibility for each novice's education was, at bottom, their own. If they did not want to pursue the education laid out for them at the monastic school, that was up to them. This attitude reflects the same level of independence and freedom exhibited in novice's responses (or lack of appropriate responses) to Ajhan Widura's moralising. The joking and the lack of engagement with moral lessons is one form of the capacity for freedom they exercise, with Ice's near total rejection of the formal education offered at the school an example of this capacity taken to its extreme. Each of these instances speaks to the general condition of moral dissonance that prevailed at Wat Don Khet, in which ideals that could not align, would at least remain in stable tension with one another. This stability was perhaps best reflected at times when novices did exercise their freedom in order to reflect the Buddhist moral ideals they had been taught. Such occasions took place when novices were called upon to enact the more serious and mechanistic aspects of their duty: at funerals or on special occasions when particularly high standards of comportment were requested of them.

At the start of the rainy season, just before phansa commenced, the teachers and I spent a Saturday visiting almost all of the wats housing the novice monks enrolled at Wat Don Khet. Some of these wats, especially the ones in the villages closest to Ban Don Khet, I already knew well, visiting them frequently at weekends and after school to speak with the novices there. Others I was visiting for the first time. It was strange seeing many of the novices in this alternate environment, away from the strictures of the classroom. They seemed relaxed and at ease, especially those who were perhaps the most resistant to behaving well at school. As we pulled up to one temple, situated on top of a hill, up a steep and winding road that came straight off the highway, we were greeted laconically by a group of novices sitting around in the shade, wearing only their under robes. They all instantly knew what to do. Together, we made our way to the large ubosot at the other end of the temple grounds. Some of the novices darted off to fetch absent peers, or to fetch their top robes. We entered the large open hall, prostrating before the Buddha image at one end, before sitting and talking with the abbot who greeted us there. The novices filed in behind us, many of them diligently tucking and folding their robes to ensure they were presentable. They sat cross-legged on a raised platform lining one edge of the hall, muttering to one another in serious tones as they adjusted their posture and clasped their hands. The abbot led them in chanting, as the staff and I rested on our knees, our heads down and our own hands clasped in front of our faces.

Over the course of the day, we repeated this process many times, and each time I was surprised to see novices who could usually be relied upon to act contemptuously, or boisterously, behaving as docile pictures of monastic comportment. The general state of moral dissonance at Wat Don Khet did not mean that novices were not capable of exercising their capacities in the furtherance of Buddhist moral ideals. The time just had to be right. Perhaps it

was the sense of occasion, perhaps the threat of disciplinary action from their abbots held greater threat than anything they were subject to at the school, whatever the reason it was clear that virtually no novice could remain in robes while acting out a total rejection of the monastic institution in both mind and body. Asking a couple of them why they seemed so well behaved, I got the usual collection of circumspect answers. A couple of particularly loud and uncouth M.3s looked genuinely surprised when I asked them this question. "It's part of our job!" They were as capable of engaging with the moralising lessons of the monastic school as they were of rejecting them, but their engagement still took place on their terms. Just as when they rejected attempts at moralising, they evaluated their place within the social hierarchy of their monastic order, and acted pragmatically in ways they deemed most appropriate to the situation.

In this chapter I have attempted to describe the complicated and difficult relationship novices maintain with the institutional morality of the monastic school. Through an investigation into the moralising and disciplinary practices employed at Wat Don Khet, I have demonstrated how institutional elders enter into relationships of moral dissonance with their students. These relations are held in place by a series of negotiations and conversations, that help to emphasise the harmonic points where the novice and the institution can reach some agreement. In instances where these negotiations fail, breakdowns can emerge, in which novices must genuinely adjust their behaviour within the confines of the school, or risk being expelled from it. Here I have favoured the ways the institution and its staff must navigate instances of breakdown, in the following chapter I intend to look further at examples where the cracks in the morally dissonant status quo appear for novices. These incidents required more pained and nuanced exercising of their evaluative capacities, as they attempted to navigate their way between the plural ethical subjectivities they had cultivated for themselves.

Chapter 5 - Freedom, Boredom, and Masculinity

Jack was a model novice. Every day his robe was neatly folded, he walked with steady and deliberate steps, his back upright. During *pujas*[38] and assemblies, he led the rest of the novice monks in chanting, holding a microphone between his clasped hands, retaining his sturdy posture on his knees. Even though he was quiet in conversation, he never mumbled during chanting, and always remembered the words correctly. When called upon to meditate, he sat for the duration of the allotted period with his eyes closed, even as his friends whispered around him. When I met him, he was fifteen years old, having come to ordain from a remote edge of the province after turning eleven. Teachers and senior monks went out of their way to praise him. From my first days at the school, I was told repeatedly, "you must speak with Jack, he is such a good boy. He studies very hard; you should help him with his English". When I did speak with Jack, at first he was very shy, but always polite. He spoke softly and carefully and was happy to answer any questions I had, but he never seemed entirely at ease, as if he needed to monitor his own conduct constantly to ensure he was retaining the monastic demeanour demanded by his position. Even as we came to know each other better, as he told me about his aspirations to become a doctor and would ask me to translate rap lyrics for him or buy him noodles from the shop outside the school, he was careful not to reveal too much of himself. I put his reticence down to shyness and hoped that he might become more familiar with me over time. Then, one day I heard he had left. Quite suddenly he had disrobed and moved out of the temple.

[38] A *puja* is a session of worship. For the novices enrolled at Wat Don Khet, pujas took place at their home temples everyday first thing in the morning, and in the evening. They typically involve a period of chanting and prostration before a wat's central Buddha image.

Jack's departure was confirmed for me when I saw a picture he had posted on Facebook. In the image, he was sitting in a cafe, dressed in shorts and a polo shirt, no longer wrapped in his neat robe. I sent him a message, asking how he was and why he had decided to leave, trying to come across as non-judgmental, and to conceal my surprise that he would leave midway through the school year. He was taciturn as ever, telling me in vague terms that the move had been necessitated by his family, and that he was now living with them in an outer suburb of Bangkok. Over the week that followed I heard a different story. A group of M.6 novices filled me in on the details. It was true that Jack had moved to Bangkok, but apparently, he was not with his family. He had gone to live with his girlfriend, whom he had met online and had been speaking to for many months prior to his departure. According to the M.6s she was quite a few years his senior and had evidently persuaded him to leave his robes behind in order to go and live with her. I was surprised by the story, hardly able to believe that the novice who had so readily listened to the lectures of senior monks, and served as head boy, could have made such a rash decision. The M.6s telling the story, meanwhile, were completely unfazed. "This kind of thing is common" they told me. For them the narrative followed an established pattern. A desire to pursue sexual and romantic relationships was often discussed as a common reason teenage novices sought to leave their robes behind. As long-serving monastics themselves, the M.6s derided the decision as foolish, an impulsive action that would probably end badly. Better to stay the course and finish school in robes, then there would be time for things like romantic relationships once they re-entered the world of laypeople.

The wider reaction to Jack's departure reflected the M.6s' view. Most of the teachers and senior monks seemed disappointed but unsurprised. Phra Ajhan Kasem, who had been particularly effusive in his praise of Jack, was stoic about the episode. Reflecting on the modern attitudes of novice monks generally, he

put Jack's choice down to the novel obsession with individual identity cultivated by young monastics, a product of their exposure to the types of socialisation now possible online via social media. "Novices these days only think about themselves," he said. "They see all the possibilities of what they can do on the internet and it tempts them." Only a couple of younger novices, who had lived at the temple adjoining the school along with Jack, seemed genuinely surprised and upset by his departure. Still new to the monastic life, his decision was incomprehensible to them. They only knew Jack as the model novice, one to look up to and admire, a model their teachers had encouraged them to emulate. I was in the same position as these young monks. I had taken the identity Jack had presented at the school at face value, assuming that his air of discipline and his adherence to the Buddhist moral codes governing his life spoke to a comprehensive acceptance of the monastic life. Clearly there was something else going on. Jack had balanced his well-honed exhibition of monastic ideals alongside a quite different identity, in which his motivations, and the choices he made because of them, ran contrary to the moral code of the institution.

As we saw in the previous chapter, apparently strict moral codes can be subject to continual negotiation, and the application of pragmatic logics that mitigate their rigidity. Within the boundaries of his ordination, what from the outside might appear as a tightly controlled domain of possibility, Jack was nevertheless able to exercise considerable freedom in shaping a multifaceted ethical identity. Through this ethical identity, he was capable of simultaneously incorporating and rejecting the moral logics governing the day-to-day activity of his life. His ability to ultimately come to the decision to leave the temple may resemble a moral breakdown in Zigon's (2007, 2009) sense, in which the demands of Jack's incompatible ideals brought him to the decision to abandon the moral logic of the monastic school. A moral logic that he had represented to

many of his peers and elders. However, I think this misses important considerations as to exactly how Jack arrived at such a decision. In this chapter, I want to further explore the complex interplay between the ability to exercise freedom in the cultivation of ethical subjectivities, and the demands and expectations of an institutional morality. Beyond the consideration of Jack's case as an example of a moral breakdown, we are left with the question as to why Jack was motivated to exercise his freedom in this particular way. If he was able to cultivate ideals and a sense of ethical subjectivity that ran contrary to monastic institutional ideals, then how was this novel subjectivity able to coexist for so long with Wat Don Khet's moral code? How was Jack able to maintain a distinct notion of his alternate identity alongside his authentic devotion to his role as a novice monk?

I will address these questions by drawing on anthropological accounts of freedom to show how fundamental evaluative capacities can lead subjects to instantiate superficially incompatible ideals, resulting in instances of what I will refer to as 'volitional angst'. Novices were frequently subject to volitional angst because of the competing systems of value to which they tended to adhere. As I explained in the last chapter, the fact that novices did not always buy into the moral framework of Wat Don Khet, resulting in moral dissonance, did not always cause them trouble. They frequently found themselves able to pragmatically negotiate with institutional elders in order to acceptably operate within the bounds of the monastic school. Here, I will consider cases in which that process of conversation and negotiation was not so successful, as in the case of Jack, and his sudden abandonment of the monkhood. I consider two broad areas of experience in which novices were faced with volitional angst: their experiences of boredom and their experiences of their own developing masculinities. These are particular areas of interest because they forced novices to weigh monastic duty, and their valuation of the monastic life, against their

desires to embody and express themselves in ways not acceptable while they were in robes. First though, it is necessary to explore the contributions anthropological theory has made towards notions of freedom, in order to define what I mean by volitional angst.

Freedom and Angst

Accounts of freedom have become important to anthropologists because of the need to account for subjects' capacity for volition outside the deterministic bounds of earlier sociological models of society. Going back to Durkheim (1979 [1920], 1995 [1912]) , structure has had the effect of sublimating notions of individual freedom to the ongoing processual and reproductive aspects of society. This is what led Bauman to describe social theory as 'the science of unfreedom' (1988, p. 5), since theoretical formulations inevitably favoured the analysis of social norms and codes of conduct over the capacities those within such structures might have to act freely, or indeed to transform societal structure. Attempts to describe forms of freedom have needed to balance any explanation of how freedom might operate within, and alter, patterns of structure, with the clear influence such structures will have on motivations and proclivities. This balancing act is especially conspicuous in practice theory, where discussions of agency are set against the ways society may reproduce itself through the inculcation of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Despite the development of notions of agency as part of practice theoretical approaches, there has still been a tendency for accounts of freedom in this vein to collapse back into structural explanations. Agency in these accounts, is defined too heavily by a tendency to focus on its transformative capacities, with ethnographic studies employing the concept favouring uses of agency that

resist structuring influences (Laidlaw, 2013)[39]. More recent formulations of agency and freedom instead draw on Foucault's (2000) genealogy of ethics to describe how deliberative ethics are leveraged in the formation of subjectivities. These studies aim to present alternative versions of agency that more fully describe subjects' creative capacities for self-cultivation.

Notable ethnographic work describing alternative forms of agency and subject formation has arisen from the study of Islamic reform movements. Hirschkind (2006), Mahmood (2005) and Mittermaier (2012), for example have all examined how previous accounts of agency might be extended by considering the plurality of ways people may submit themselves to social norms, religious edicts, and moral logics, rather than retaining a persistent focus on how these pre-existing elements might be undermined through the application of agency. Hirschkind's example invokes Foucault's 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988) to explain how Egyptian Muslims use sermons recorded on cassette tapes to pursue a religious ideal. Mahmood's (2005) work argues that practices of veiling may be seen as acts of freedom, emphasising that accounts of agency cannot be limited by 'liberal progressive' definitions of what counts as human flourishing. Mittermaier's (2012) work examines the discourse around divine dreams in Egypt, and aims to overcome the 'tropes' of Foucauldian accounts of self-cultivation by arguing that various forms of agency are at work as subjects simultaneously express and sublimate themselves. Each of these studies contributes to the development of more complex accounts of freedom that explain how people can interact with normative structures of society and religion, rather than simply resisting them or being dominated by them. However, the need to reconcile pre-existing ideas of agency hampers all of them.

[39] I explore practice theoretical notions of agency, particularly in regard to Ortner's (1996, 1999, 2006) 'serious games' concept, in greater detail in the next chapter.

James Laidlaw (2002, 2013) provides an alternative point of departure, dispensing with notions of agency altogether, and instead introducing the concept of 'reflective freedom' to account for people's capacity to shape themselves as subjects. Here freedom is defined in Foucauldian terms but avoids the pitfall of having to explain how the exercise of this freedom must, by definition, work towards transforming social norms. Laidlaw notes that:

> the freedom of the ethical subject, for Foucault, consists in the possibility of choosing the kind of self one wishes to be. Actively answering the ethical question of how or as what one ought to live is to exercise this self-constituting freedom. (2002, p. 324)

Freedom, then, is a fundamental fact of people's ethical lives, it is what allows there to be ethics at all, and for questions and discussions of ethical norms and ideals to be meaningful. It is the implications for people's ethical lives through their capacities to be evaluative that leads Laidlaw to term this specific form of freedom 'reflective'. It is important to note here a common objection to making freedom such a central component of an anthropological engagement with ethics, or indeed to making freedom a central concern in anthropology at all. This objection identifies notions of freedom as they have been discussed in social theory, with peculiarly 'Western' ideas of liberal freedom (Mahmood, 2001). Therefore, the concern runs, applications of this concept in 'non-Western' contexts may result in ethnocentric interpretations of ethics. Laidlaw (2013, p. 50) counters this idea in two main ways. Firstly, he argues that, while discussions of freedom are particularly central in European and North American political philosophy, there is no single coherent concept of 'Western' liberal freedom as applied to individuals that *could* be applied ethnocentrically. Secondly, he makes the point that reflective freedom is an especially malleable concept, since it refers only to the base fact of people's capacity for evaluation. Exactly how evaluative capacities are theorised, applied, or talked about in local

contexts is subject to variance, and this variance is of course of interest to the anthropologist.

The potential for a malleable reflective freedom, that may be expressed in plural forms even within a single social context, is further reinforced by Foucault's idea that moral codes may be engaged with through different 'modes of subjectivation' (Foucault, 2000, p. 264). People may employ a range of modes of subjectivation as they engage with the moral norms governing their relationships, institutions, and society at large. This was in evidence in the previous chapter, where I described novices' plural modes of engaging with institutional elders, and the edicts of the monastic school, sometimes rejecting and sometimes negotiating with institutional moral norms as part of their processes of subject formation. An intriguing comparison may be drawn here between discussions of reflective freedom, and earlier calls for an anthropology of the will (Murphy & Throop, 2010). While the latter debates have unfortunately neglected Foucault's insights into freedom in favour of engaging with practice theory and psychological perspectives, they do raise interesting points on the operation of volition, and the genealogy of social theory concerning the will, that bear some relevance for the examination of novice ethical life in terms of reflective freedom I am advancing here. Murphy and Throop identify one particular lineage of theory, tracing its roots back to Schopenhauer (1958) and Freud (1958), that effectively encapsulates what I mean by 'volitional angst'.

In his attempt to reconcile and explain the relationship between the will and the determining influences of social structure, Freud posits that the individual remains in perpetual conflict with the society. The necessity of existing within society places a burden of suffering (or angst) upon the individual, who experiences inner turmoil as their own desires conflict with their internalised

representations of social norms. This description seems apt in explaining the plural influences to which Jack was subject, as he simultaneously performed his role as a novice monk and sought to subvert the moral code governing that position. Relying solely on a Freudian conception of Jack's relationship to the monastic school, we might arrive back at a mechanistic model in which there is no room to consider his capacities for reflection. However, I want to argue that it was his capacity for reflective freedom that brought Jack to his difficult position — between desire and institutional morality — in the first place. His quandary was brought about because of the way he made his choices and exercised his freedom. He employed this freedom both in the undertaking to be a model monastic *and* in pursuit of desires outside the realm of possibilities for the novice monk. His angst was generated precisely because of the way he used his volition. This perspective can provide an explanation of religious self-cultivation that incorporates the ambivalence practitioners may have towards their religion, even as they remain deeply invested in its ideals. I should clarify that the 'volitional angst' I describe here is not identical with, nor does it imply, some perpetual state of 'affective' angst. Jack's emotional state as he grappled with the problem of his competing desires remains unknown. What is clear, is that the quandary he found himself in was a product of the ways he had used his reflective freedom to choose to pursue divergent forms of ethical subjectivity. It is this basic fact of his interminable ethical position that leads me to label it as 'volitional angst'.

As has been noted elsewhere (Keane, 2008; Maqsood, 2021; Schielke, 2009), accounts of religious self-cultivation that explore how individuals exercise their free capacities for the cultivation of their subjectivities, have frequently focused on a quest for ideological purity. This tendency has been prevalent among the studies of Islamic revival movements I referenced above (Hirschkind, 2006; Mahmood, 2005; Mittermaier, 2012), leading Samuli Schielke to claim 'there is

too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam' (Schielke, 2010, p. 1). The point being that a bounded concern with only the most pious aspects of religious practice and belief fails to account for their place within a wider moral universe, in which conflicting registers of morality (or modes of subjectivation) may hold currency. Anthropological work on Buddhism has shown similar proclivities in accounting for Buddhist moralities, the predominance of work on monasticism frequently foregrounds pious and devotional tendencies, with less attention paid to ambivalent and contingent forms of religiosity[40].

This is natural, given that studies of monasticism generally concern adults, who have chosen to pursue a Buddhist monastic life because of an explicit desire to embark upon projects of religious self-cultivation. Their attachments to the monastic institution are not as entangled in pragmatic concerns as they were for the novices I work with, and so they are not as prone to the dissonant ethical positions that give rise to volitional angst. Novice monks have generally not joined the monastery out of a desire to cultivate religious ideals, and so their projects in developing ethical subjectivities are more difficult to parse, less obviously dominated by singular religious concerns, and perhaps more flexible and unstructured. As Keane writes, 'the category of religion must be capable of including not just the ardently faithful but the bored schoolboy who has memorized a credo which he recites by rote' (2008, p. 116). I would add to this, that the category of religion must incorporate individuals like Jack, who experience intense devotion to religious ideals, while also experiencing a desire to be rid of the implications of these ideals.

[40] See Cassaniti (2015) and Eberhardt (2009) for studies that include detailed accounts of Buddhist practice in everyday lay life, following classic studies in this area such as Bunnag (1973) and Tambiah (1970) that consider the relationship between monastic and lay Buddhist practice.

What does it mean then, to exercise freedom within the bounds of a code of religious moral practice? Jack was obviously influenced by the moralising projects of the monastic school. He adhered to them better than most, presenting the image of comportment held up as the ideal for Buddhist monastics (Cook, 2010b). Yet he was also able to construct ideals that seem entirely contrary to the moral logic implied by the codes of practice he followed. I think it is important here not to frame Jack's actions as a conflict between the influences of external discipline and internal agency. In his decision to leave, I do not see an expression of agentic capacities defying the strictures of the institution that had previously governed his behaviour. Instead, I interpret both of the identities Jack cultivated as distinct exercises in reflective freedom. He chose to align himself with the ideal of monastic comportment, just as he ultimately chose to leave it behind. Many novices occupied the institution while choosing to make virtually no attempt to emulate the ideals Jack did. The pragmatic attitude governing the application of religious and ethical norms meant that novices were not limited to a single monolithic form of ethical subjectivity, determined by the codes of the institution. Jack could have wandered the grounds with the errant novices uninterested in academic subjects. He could have talked when he was supposed to be chanting, played on his phone when he should have been meditating, and fallen asleep while senior monks gave lectures, but he chose not to do any of these things. Therefore, any analysis of the ways Jack used his freedom must reconcile the different forms of ethical subjectivity implied by his actions, without reducing any to essentially un-free rule following. After all, Jack chose to engage in Buddhist practice wholeheartedly, with a devotion that perhaps directly caused him so much volitional angst as he began to exercise his reflective freedom in ways that contravened the dictates guiding his practice.

Laidlaw (1995) aptly describes the apparent paradox of pursuing putatively incompatible projects of self-cultivation. Rather than foregrounding the ascetic discipline usually associated with discussions of morality, he looks at how individuals choose to act in relation to such systems of discipline. Implementing this perspective in a discussion of his Jain interlocutors in India, Laidlaw proposes that while Jains do adhere to a strict disciplinary regime, their adoption of its rules only makes sense if we consider it a part of a broader ethical project. This is where we return to the distinction between morality and ethics. While in the previous chapter I discussed how the monastic school as an institution constructs a moralising regime, here we must recognise how novices' ethical projects shape their interactions with that regime, or to once again frame the situation in Foucauldian terms, how they develop particular modes of subjectivation. Rather than casting confluences and conflicts of morality between novices and their institutional elders as temporally linear occurrences, with the flow of moral identity determined by breakdowns or particular moments of reflection, we must be able to account for parallel modes of subjectivation that may be taken up by a single person and maintained simultaneously. As the middle-class Jains Laidlaw spent time with were able to simultaneously occupy an identity in line with their economic position and their religious ideals, so too were novices like Jack capable of maintaining parallel identities that both adhered to and violated the normative morality of Buddhist monasticism.

The Jain laypeople Laidlaw worked with balanced the practical realities of their economic and social obligations with the ideals of their religion, while the novices I work with were performing an analogous but very different balancing act. The basic facts of the two moral situations are very similar. As Laidlaw notes, 'where ideals are unrealizable, and where incommensurable values are in conflict — and I take it that this at least is always to some degree the case —

then living in the light of an ideal must always be something more subtle and complex than merely conforming to it.' (1995, p. 7). To fulfil their obligations, novices must adhere to the normative moral framework of the monastic institution, even as many of them constantly try to stretch the boundaries of this framework. For the most part, they intended to remain in robes, but they were constantly testing the limits of their freedom within the bounds of the institution's moral logic. This is where the two cases diverge. While the Jains in Laidlaw's ethnography sought to pursue their projects of self-cultivation to closer align themselves with unrealisable religious ideals, the novices looked to see where they could bend and stretch the ideals they lived by to their furthest limits. However, rather than casting novices' relation to the normative morality of the institution as a simple form of resistance to it, I prefer to think of their tests of its boundaries as a form of exploration, the kind of subtle and complex mode of relating to a normative moral code that Laidlaw describes. Skipping classes, experimenting with alcohol, and taking up smoking were all ways for them to explore exactly what they could get away with while remaining in robes.

This freedom to explore within a domain of normative institutional morality becomes particularly conspicuous in religious traditions allowing for temporary ordination. An ordinand's knowledge that they will eventually return to lay life gives them an ability to experiment both with intense ethical projects aimed at conforming to institutionally approved religious ideals, as well as to contravene them. The layperson one will become is always waiting in the future, with the boundaries imposed by institutional discipline lifted. The freedom to explore in this context is seen in Laidlaw and Mair's (2019) ethnography of a short-term Fo Guang Shan monastic retreat in Taiwan. Participants in the retreat pursue intense projects of self-cultivation. They ordain and then participate in exercises aimed at developing their capacities for mindfulness. Failure and defeat are

integral parts of the retreat experience. Even as participants begin by making vows of purity, their failure is predetermined. Just a few days after promising to remain in their monastic robes they leave the retreat. Laidlaw and Mair describe this apparently contradictory process as a way of embodying values. By inhabiting intense monastic values and adhering to the practices associated with them (even if for just a few days) they are engaging in a broader project of self-cultivation that touches their lives as laypeople, even after they have left their robes behind. To add to this, I would characterise the actions taken by participants in the Fo Guang Shan retreat, and my own interlocutors at the monastic school, as exploratory practices within the domains of their ordination. Such exploratory practices could involve subversions of monastic codes of practice, as it frequently did for the novices, but Laidlaw and Mair demonstrate that such practices can equally involve restricting oneself via ascetic discipline. Both are valid technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988), employed to achieve various effects in shaping subjectivities. Understanding this is crucial to understanding Jack's case, and the production of volitional angst.

There are obvious differences between the two instances of temporary ordination I consider here. For one, Fo Guang Shan Buddhists commit themselves to short periods of monasticism as a deliberate attempt to cultivate their religious practice, shaping themselves into subjects imbued with monastic ideals, while the novice monks at Wat Don Khet were ordained for a plurality of reasons that rarely included a similar religious drive. Nevertheless, both examples point to a consistent model of ethical subject formation predicated on a free capacity for reflection. I think it is important to recognise that the diverse forms of self-cultivation this free capacity can give rise to lead to significant differences in how ethical subjectivities are formulated, modes of subjectivation expressed, and subsequent states, such as volitional angst, are produced. Even

within the limited context of the monastic school, methods for constructing parallel ethical identities were diverse. This was evidenced through novices' use of social media. Facebook was the platform they primarily engaged with, but their representation of their identities on the site followed a distinctive pattern. For the most part, novices did not have images of themselves on their profiles. Instead, they would represent themselves with pictures of anime or video game characters. Similarly, few of them opted to use their real names. They adopted aliases that played on the names of actors, musicians, or fictional characters. Identifying the real-life identity associated with one of these profiles was virtually impossible, and in most cases their status as a novice monk was carefully concealed. Long before the episode with Jack, I heard of novices that had online girlfriends. These relationships were apparently played out entirely via Facebook and multiplayer video games. When I asked whether the girls entering into these online relationships would be aware that their mysterious partner was actually a novice monk, most novices told me no, this aspect of their identity would be kept secret. The precise progression of the relationship Jack pursued, that ultimately led him to leave his robes behind, is not clear. What we can determine is that he was an active participant in the kind of identity construction widely practiced by novices on social media.

The use of social media in pursuing illicit romantic relationships is a contemporary expression of a well-worn trope associated with Buddhist monastics. Stories of monks being seduced by laywomen were common[41]. Such stories even concerned adults in the community known to the novices. Open secrets about one specific man, still intimately engaged with the temple community, who had left the monkhood to get married, were discussed by

[41] Several recent national scandals concerning popular monks who were found to have engaged in sexual conduct are just the most recent instances of this phenomenon. The prevalence of social media does however mean that awareness of such stories has perhaps become even more widespread (Schedneck and Epstein 2022).

novices in hushed tones. While these stories carried an air of scandal, the couple concerned were still well-respected members of the community. Their relationship, as well as the online relationships cultivated by novices, resembled versions of the 'understandings' Maqsood (2021) discusses in her work among middle-class young women in Pakistan. These 'understandings' involve women entering into illicit romantic relationships with men, which they go on to legitimise, securing the approval of family elders to engineer a marriage proposal. Maqsood interprets their actions as a form of self-making that neither wholly conflicts with normative family structures nor entirely adheres to them, instead they explore the limits of their opportunities within these structures. In the case of the adult man who had left the monkhood to marry, he apparently had cultivated an illicit romantic relationship that was subsequently legitimised by the temple community. While everyone knew the true origins of the relationship, they seemed happy to turn a blind eye, just as the family elders in Maqsood's case were often content to accept the marriages of their daughters despite knowing that the relationships had begun 'improperly'.

While novices' online relationships cannot be wholly conceived of as 'understandings' in Maqsood's sense, the exercise of freedom within the normative structures of the monastic institution mirrors the exploration of opportunities practiced by young Pakistani women. While the precept prohibiting sexual contact makes physical relationships forbidden for novices, in the ephemeral online spaces they spent their time, the morality or immorality of their behaviour was more ambiguous. The lack of explicit normative rules relating to their online behaviour allowed novices to reach out into areas where their precepts, and the institutional elders who might enforce them, were not able to access. Some air of immorality hung over the possibility for novices to have girlfriends. If I explicitly asked novices about girlfriends, they would sometimes respond in shocked tones — "No of course not! We're ordained, we

cannot" — as if the mere fact of their ordination rendered the entire notion of them entering into romantic relationships impossible. This attitude stands in contrast to the pragmatic approaches towards adherence to precepts I discussed in the previous chapter. There, the rules were reinterpreted in line with the prevailing moral logic implicitly subscribed to by the institutional community and the laypeople who were invested in the community. Here, the pursuit of romantic relationships represented a complete subversion of a precept, with no justification available within the institution's moral logic. Novices exploring romantic possibilities therefore needed to cultivate a form of ethical subjectivity that necessarily fell outside of the remit of their role as monastics. For those who were relatively uninvested in this role from the start, this action might have been a relatively easy step, producing the type of moral dissonance that necessitated no breakdown or state of volitional angst. For Jack it wasn't so easy. He was deeply invested in a form of ethical subjectivity he had cultivated as a monastic, and so it caused him more volitional angst[42] to so starkly subvert that identity.

Both Maqsood's case, and my own, highlight the need for a conceptual framework that can account for ethical positions that are perpetually ambivalent, tenuous, and charged with volitional angst. Exercising freedom, often as part of choosing a lifepath, can be a fraught process that defies explanation via an elucidation of any straightforward moral logic. As we have seen in Jack's case, plural carefully cultivated ethical subjectivities can exist in parallel even as they grate and stick against one another. These same ethical identities can burst forth from normative structures, threatening to make a previously cohabiting identity suddenly meaningless. Jack was able to sustain

[42] Once again, I am not necessarily claiming that Jack felt a greater sense of 'affective' angst as a result of his difficult position. I derive the conclusion that the volitional angst applied to him was greater than that of other novices because of the very fact that it put him in an untenable position, one that could only be resolved by leaving his robes.

apparently contradictory ethical subjectivities until his reflective capacities presumably led him towards an ultimatum, in which he had to prioritise one over the other. Jack's case reverses the type of progression through self-cultivation we saw in Laidlaw's (1995) study of lay Jains, or in Laidaw and Mair's (2019) assessment of the self-cultivation augmented by systematic ethical pedagogy seen among Fo-Guang Shan Buddhists. In these cases, individuals worked to cultivate themselves in line with religious ideals, reconciling this journey with the pragmatic realities of their lives as laypeople. Jack's progression appeared to reverse this journey. For him, his practical reality consisted of a similarly voluntary adherence to religious ideology, however the ethical project he was pursuing concerned the alternate form of subjectivity he had created and cultivated for himself online.

The subversion of the typically unidirectional projects of self-cultivation seen in religious contexts was not the only part of this account that makes it distinct from the other examples I have explored. Maqsood (2021) notes that the young women she worked with were pursuing self-making projects that were both in line with, and subversive of, normative moral structures. I see Jack's behaviour as a similar form of self-cultivation, albeit a form less shaped by strategic assessments, and plagued with a greater sense of volitional angst. If Jack's acts of subject making were a mere reversal of the type of project Laidlaw and Mair (2019) describe, then it seems perfectly plausible for him to retain this apparently paradoxical ethical position indefinitely. But he could not. The experience of volitional angst brought on by his incommensurate subjectivities led him to abandon his wholehearted adoption of Buddhist monastic ideals. So far, I have considered Jack's case in isolation, because I think it is emblematic of the volitional angst prevalent among the novice monks with whom I worked. To explore the notion of volitional angst further I now want to look beyond Jack's particular experience to events and ideas in which this form of angst

seemed to surface more generally. Two particular modes of experience seemed to intersect most commonly with expressions of volitional angst: experiences of boredom and experiences connected to developing forms of masculinity.

Boredom

The whole school gathered in the hall after lunch. Teachers and monks rushed around, calling on the novices to take their customary positions in long lines facing the front of the room. Before they were permitted to sit, their robes were closely inspected to ensure they were tied neatly. Those novices found lacking were chastised and told to quickly adjust their dress. Once all of them looked sufficiently presentable they were allowed to sit, but even then, their comportment was closely scrutinised. Phra Ajhan Kasem watched benignly from the front, as staff made a second round through the regiments. Novices were told to move closer together or further apart, to ensure the spacing between them was even. They were told to sit up straight, fold their legs rather than let them splay out, and to keep their spines straight and their heads upright. While the novices were being arranged, Ajhan Widura was frantically trying to set up a projector screen and a camera to capture the room of model novices. Eventually, as the congregation sat impatiently, he successfully pulled up a live video stream. It displayed a room very similar to the one we occupied, filled with young novice monks sat in neat rows. A teacher rushed around in the foreground, apparently Ajahn Widura's counterpart, alternately waving to the camera, engaging in serious hushed conversations with staff out of shot, and snapping at errant novices. We waited. To the side of the main video, a number of other video streams had joined the conference, all showing school halls, all full of upright novices. We waited for the princess to arrive, bored and confused about what was supposed to happen next.

Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn was due to arrive at the school displayed in the first video stream for a ceremonial visit, but it looked like she was running late. Ajhan Widura conferred with his counterpart over the video call. He turned around to address the room. “We have to wait for a bit. You can relax for now”. The novices acquiesced immediately, breaking from their tight bodily postures, uncrossing their legs, and stretching out their limbs. Some slumped over on the floor, lying on their backs and staring up at the ceiling. We spent the whole afternoon this way. Every so often a false alarm would sound, as one of the teachers on the video call announced that the princess’s arrival was imminent. The teachers would scramble to get the novices back into position, lining them up and ensuring they were sitting neatly as they had done before. But each time it turned out the warning had been premature. The novices would sit rigidly for a few minutes before Ajhan Widura would once again give them permission to stand down. I sat at the side, occasionally chatting with the novices or their teachers, growing increasingly impatient but conscious of the respect the occasion demanded, I refrained from complaining or asking too many questions about when the event would finally begin. When Ajhan Widura finally called out that it really was time, I sat up eagerly. I watched the projector screen, picking out the small square filled by the image of Wat Don Khet’s hall, almost indistinguishable among the row of nearly identical video feeds. On the main screen a flurry of activity died down as the princess entered the frame. She was talking amiably with an older monk, who took his place alongside her. She waied him, clasping her hands in front of her face, waied the Buddha image next to him, and lit a stick of incense to place below the statue. Then she sat, as the senior monk led his congregation of novices in a short round of chanting, before she stood up again and walked out of shot. The whole event could not have lasted more than ten minutes.

I spoke with Angpao, a cynical M.6 novice, as everyone stretched their aching limbs and wandered out of the hall. “That was a long wait,” I said reservedly. He gave me a characteristically weary look, “Yeah, we’re used to things like this. We’re used to waiting and being bored. We’re good at it.” Angpao’s voice was neutral, he too was perhaps being careful not to show disrespect for the afternoon’s proceedings, particularly as we were within earshot of his teachers. His implication seemed to be that boredom was a natural element of monastic duty. His attitude, and the attitude of the novices generally, mirrored the steadfast performance of comportment and duty I described at the end of the previous chapter. Boredom was not just a by-product of activities required of the novice, it was itself a requirement, an experience to be borne out and overcome. In this sense, boredom (and dealing well with boredom) was codified as part of the normative morality of the institution. To my mind, Angpao was right, the novices were exemplary practitioners of boredom and waiting. At the end of the episode I describe here, I felt that I was experiencing far more frustration than the novices around me. They were well habituated to the experience, but of course this does not mean that they always bore it with unrelenting steadfastness. Experiences of boredom did produce prolonged states of volitional angst, such as the one Jack seemingly experienced leading to his exit from the institution. There is something distinctive here in the way boredom is produced and understood within the monastic school, that makes novices particularly susceptible to these experiences, a susceptibility that contrasts interestingly with my own experiences as an ethnographer in their midst.

Boredom, brought on by inactivity, waiting, or incomprehension is a notably common experience for the ethnographer, though it has not generally been considered worthy of analysis (Bandak & Janeja, 2020). All three characteristics were generative of my boredom as I waited with everyone else at Wat Don Khet

for the event honouring the princess to begin. Simon Coleman (2020) describes his own experiences of boredom, both as a child during Jewish ritual and education and as an ethnographer studying Pentecostal Christianity, sitting through long and repetitive sermons. By way of explaining his own feelings, he references Raposa's (1999) description of boredom as a '"semiotic" problem, arising from a difficulty on the part of the bored person in "reading the signs" or interpreting the information in any given situation *as* meaningful or interesting' (Raposa, 1999, p. 77). This is one element of what Coleman (2020) and I experienced: episodes in which we were unable to render the events we were embroiled in legible. We could not read the significance of the situation, this is what produced a persistent air of incomprehension and, ultimately, boredom. Coleman describes a renewed ability to overcome this boredom, generated by an activation of the ethnographic sensibility, the desire to find a way to read the illegible situation by attending closely to the elements of the event, a process I found myself taking part in during Buddhist rituals, where certain hints and hooks provided nascent clues as to how I might read the proceedings.

By contrast, for the novices, their relationship with the circumstances eliciting their boredom were not characterised by an inability to read the semiotics of any given situation. If anything, the legibility of these instances was overdetermined for them, so immediate as to provoke no interest and require no reaction. Toohey (2011, p. 13) terms this form of boredom, 'boredom of surfeit', as it is brought about by the incredible overabundance of a particular object, performance, or situation. The novices' exposure to an endless succession of boring scenarios, waiting for lessons to begin, half-heartedly miming their way through chanting, and enduring restless sessions of meditation, seemed, in their minds, to become the defining experience of their day-to-day existence. This feeling was described by the novices themselves as "*bua chiwit*", meaning 'bored of life'. It would arrive as a response, if a teacher, a

monk, or I asked a particularly sulky looking novice what was wrong, but could also be used as a simple exclamation of dissatisfaction. Bua chiwit captured the sense that the particular form of boredom novices experienced was a total fact of their lives within the institution, brought about by the moral requirements it placed upon them to perform their duties and comport themselves correctly. In Toohey's (2011, p. 15) terms they were subject to '*taedium vitae*', a sustained state of discomfort, or even disgust, likened to the experiences of the protagonist in John Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1965 [1938]). The bouts of bored sickness in the novel are brought on by the perception of all stimuli as overdetermined, constituting an unbearable surfeit of sensation, the kind of overflowing that might lead to a frustrated exclamation like "Bua chiwit*!*" Enduring the tedium of the monastic school seemed to be a powerful motivator for pursuing alternate forms of ethical subjectivity to the ones sanctioned by it. Even the simple acknowledgement of the boredom inherent to their situation could constitute an example of volitional angst, as by choosing to remain in robes, they were also choosing to continue experiencing the disgust that comes with intense and prolonged boredom. It is unclear whether boredom characterised a key factor in Jack's decision to leave the institution, but it certainly was integral in other cases.

On the last day of term, I left the school grounds at lunch time, and crossed the road to the noodle shop opposite. Three boys I recognised sat around a table inside, but it took me a moment to remember exactly who they were. It was my first time seeing boys I had come to know as novices no longer dressed in saffron robes, now wearing t-shirts and jeans, their hair beginning to grow longer than it had ever been allowed to while they were ordained. The three of them had all disrobed a few weeks earlier after finishing their end of year exams. Chai had just finished M.3, Suriya and Nat had completed M.5. They invited me to join them while we all waited for our food to arrive. I asked them

about their lives since disrobing, and about their plans for the future. All of them politely told me about their intentions to finish their education at the free school in the village across the river at the start of the next academic year. Their talk about how they had been spending their free time now they had left Wat Don Khet was more reserved. "We've been able to spend a lot of time with our families" Suriya said diplomatically as Chai and Nat smirked and attempted to hold back laughter. "So why did you decide to leave the school here?" I asked. Chai answered first before either of the older boys could stop him. "Ahh it's so boring there! I was just so bored I had to leave. I…." Suriya cut him off before he could go any further, looking at him pointedly as he spoke. "He means we wanted to have some new experiences, you know? To meet new people and experience somewhere else." Our bowls of noodles were brought over just then, and all three former novices looked pleased to have an excuse to turn the conversation towards the food. For these three former novices, the intense experience of taedium vitae had become too much. He may have been covering for his friend, but I do not disbelieve Suriya's reinterpretation of their reasons for departure. Their need to seek out alternate forms of ethical subjectivity had become too much to bear, as they attempted to balance these desires against their commitment to their ordination. I now turn to look at the specific forms such ethical subjectivities consisted of, by reflecting on novices' plural understandings of their own masculinity.

Masculinity

The morning was already hot when we piled into the pick-up trucks and set off for the day. On the instructions of Phra Ajhan Kasem, the school director, we were to head for a village across the river, about a twenty-minute drive from the school. On the edge of a broad reservoir, we jumped down from the truck beds and surveyed the project ahead of us. A shabby and overgrown patch of ground

rounded the corner of a rice field, shaded by a dilapidated plastic roof. We were to rejuvenate this unlikely garden, clearing out the weeds, turning over the earth, and preparing it for the villagers to plant herbs and ginger. Phra Ajahan Kasem regularly volunteered a portion of the monastic student body (this time it was the M.5 class) for projects like this, calling upon them to aid the surrounding communities with their work. The garden here would be shared by locals, with the produce available to anyone in the village. Ajhan Somchai led the majority of the work, directing the novices to pick up hoes and shovels and begin the day's labour. I assisted in clearing the creeping vines that had overtaken the plastic roof, revealing the vestiges of an old sprinkler system. Later, I tried my hand at digging alongside the bigger novices, who laughed at my less than skilful technique as we all sweated in the rising heat of the day.

That morning, everyone was in a good mood. I had sat in the back of the pick-up truck with the novices, all of them laughing and joking. The novelty of being allowed outside the confines of the school or their home temples, of being outside with some occupation other than studying and killing time in the boiling classrooms, was an exciting prospect. The appeal of physical labour, to a group of teenage boys generally starved of any physically demanding activity, seems obvious. In the absence of the ability to enjoy sports or physical games, it provided a way of passing the day usually not permitted to them. In addition to its raw novelty, this type of labour allowed novices to behave in ways that more closely emulated the occupations taken up by laypeople in this rural province. Many novices had fathers or brothers working as mechanics, builders, or farmers, who would take part in planting and tilling the rice fields surrounding each of the nearby villages. The novices' labour on the strip of garden at the edge of the community allowed them an opportunity to leverage a specifically masculine energy that they rarely had the opportunity to fully express as monastics. It allowed them to demonstrate skills outside the narrow remit of the

Buddhist monk. One particular group of novices, who were usually despondent and difficult to engage in class, became enthusiastic experts out in the garden. They took particular pride in how quickly and skilfully they were able to till the earth, critiquing each other's efforts – "too slow! Come on, like this, you have to dig in a line" – and arguing over who would get to use the grass strimmer – "put it down, you don't know how to use it. I'll show you!" Each of these critiques appeared to me to be efforts at exuding a masculine bravado and a set of traits quite different to those usually expected of them as Buddhist monastics.

Thai monastic identity has its own implicit sense of masculinity attached to it. The fact that women in Thailand are not able to take full ordination is indicative of an assumption that Buddhist monasticism is, in some sense, inherently masculine. Chladek (2021) identifies this form of masculinity as cast in opposition to Thai notions of the 'effeminate male', rather than necessarily in opposition to characteristically female traits. He describes moral panics in which the presence of '*gay*' or '*kathoei*' (transgender) monks has been seen as a corrupting influence within the sangha, with monks embodying stereotypically gay or katoei traits failing to live up to the ideal of monastic comportment. Although local laypeople in Ban Don Khet discussed these traits – on a number of occasions people jokingly asked me "does the school have any kathoei novices these days?" – the novices themselves were generally untroubled by them. They seemed more invested in actively performing masculinities, than avoiding any particular traits. In his classic study of masculinity in Cyprus, Michael Herzfeld (1985) describes similar acts of performance. In his examples, such acts are imbued with specific poetics, which dramatically project a sense of the actors' manliness. In evoking both monastic and lay masculinities, novices engaged in an analogous form of performance, leveraging the drama produced

by subverting expected stylistic patterns of behaviour to evoke particular images of themselves.

For monks, the poetics of their masculinity were mainly evoked through comportment. Jack's ability to behave deliberately, remaining subdued and quiet, while able to project a sense that he was constantly aware of his surroundings, served as an archetypal example of Buddhist monastic masculinity. His comportment mirrored that of Phra Ajhan Kasem, who similarly seemed to project an especially commanding air of serene composure in any given circumstance. Whether he was speaking to a large crowd, or disciplining a misbehaving novice, his expression generally remained set, with his penetrating eyes glinting knowingly above a persistent easy smile. Monastic masculinity was also expressed through dress. I noted earlier how Jack's robe was always neatly folded. This was a given among senior monks, but Phra Ajhan Kasem took this a step further, sometimes donning wine coloured robes that contrasted with the saffron worn by every other monastic at Wat Don Khet. When I asked one of the M.5 novices why he thought Phra Ajhan Kasem dressed differently he replied with contempt. "He wants to come across as some kind of holy man." Regardless of the real reason for the senior monk's alternate dress, the perception was that he was employing it as a means to express a particular poetic, a dramatic conceit emblematic of monastic masculinity. Meanwhile, the adolescent novices at Wat Don Khet seemed more interested in associating themselves with archetypal ideas of lay masculinity. Monastic masculinity itself was cast against lay-masculine archetypes, often as an inferior form of manhood associated with shirking labour and a lack of access to distinctively male social pursuits and responsibilities.

Thai masculinities and notions of machismo may be associated with a number of archetypes, with the forceful and charismatic '*nak leng*' cutting an imposing

figure among various exemplary modes of manliness. The term 'nak leng' describes a man with strong leadership qualities, who is not afraid to enact violence in the pursuit of his laudable aims (especially in the protection of his community), and who has access to supernatural sources of power to augment his authority (Ockey, 1996, 2000; Reynolds, 2011). This version of masculinity bears an obvious resemblance to the masculine activity of stealing livestock that lies at the heart of the poetics of manhood in Herzfeld's (1985) ethnography. Novices did not invoke the nak leng archetype directly, but the strength and 'rough-around-the-edges' bearing of the archetype was frequently evident in their behaviour. Novices would happily swear and insult each other as part of the virtually constant bantering that dominated spaces where they had little else to do. This banter was also distinctly in evidence as we worked on the herb garden. Accompanying critiques of one another's performance of the labour, were frequent exclamations of "*ee-kwai*" and "*ee-hia*", two of the most common Thai expletives.

While examples like the nak leng may represent a fairly abstract notion of manhood, contained mostly in stories, the novices were exposed to immediate examples of Thai lay masculine practices even on school grounds. Heavy alcohol consumption was rare in Ban Don Khet. Only on particularly significant days (such as the ordination day for novices), usually involving an enormous amount of work to prepare for and then clean up after an event, would the rice whiskey appear. When it did, the laymen (including the male teachers) would gather around a table in the long hall, positioned close to the large screens leading into the kitchen. Monks might sit at a separate table, a distance away from the drinkers. Women in attendance would sometimes also be drinking, but typically they too sat away from the circle of men, preferring beer to the home brew liquor favoured by the drinking circle. While drinking like this would normally be forbidden on temple grounds, the hall of the school was

deemed to be an ambiguous enough space for alcohol to be consumed there. The drinking circle, where rice whiskey is consumed, evokes a particularly masculine sense of poetics in northern Thailand. The man in charge of the bottle fills a single shot glass, and passes it to the man next to him, who takes the shot. The glass is then passed back to the bottle holder, who refills it before it is passed along to the next man in the circle. The whiskey flows continuously alongside increasingly boisterous conversation. Phra Ajhan Kasem would implicitly approve the drinking circle, occasionally coming over to jovially chat to its members, often jokingly reminding them not to mix their drinks. The line between the poetics of manhood for laymen and monastics here was drawn by the participants. All of the men remained respectful to Phra Ajhan Kasem, as the picture of monastic comportment, while he looked on at their own display of manhood with tacit approval. Novices were entirely peripheral to these proceedings. Drifting in and out of the hall as they completed their chores, or just coming to see what activity was taking place, they could only look on from a distance at this particular performance of manhood. When they had the opportunity to emulate any aspect of lay masculinity, they seized upon it, acting it out in dramatic and overblown performances.

On the day we spent working on the community garden the novices' energy spilled over into one such performance. After we had all been working for several hours, we ate lunch in a shaded gazebo at the edge of the reservoir. Once we had all eaten and rested sufficiently Ajhan Somchai and I got up and went back up the hill to continue working. A few novices joined us, but a large group stayed behind, complaining that they wanted to have a drink of water and rest for a few more moments. After exerting themselves all morning, some of the lustre of the physical labour had perhaps already worn off. The dedicated regiment of novices who had laid down their outer robes to dig at the dry, rocky soil earlier in the day, had dissolved into listless groups, who wandered

up and down the hill, from the garden to the gazebo as their energy waxed and waned. At one point, exhausted and dehydrated, I made my way down to the gazebo by myself to recuperate with the furtive group of novices still lounging around there. We chatted back and forth, them exercising a characteristic restraint, unsure of how much of their illicit behaviour they needed to conceal from me. After a while they apparently felt it was sufficiently safe to get out their cigarettes and light up, crouching low on the cool tiled floor out of the sight of their teachers. Some of them had wandered down the slope, into the overgrown embankment skirting the reservoir. One novice held a twig with a piece of pork saved from his lunch tied to the end. His friends leant over the side of the gazebo to watch him attempt to use it to catch one of the small fish flitting in and out of the reeds at the shallow edge of the water. A couple nervously glanced back at the large sign posted just outside the gazebo, alerting visitors of a hefty fine for anyone caught fishing there.

Whoops of victory went up when the skinny novice climbed up the bank with a fish flopping limply in his hand. As he stuffed his prize into a plastic bag to cook later, his achievement was already being eclipsed as the attention of his friend group swivelled to the distant sound of a moped from the road on the far bank of the reservoir. The boys all watched as the driver and her passenger, both teenage girls, rounded the body of water. Erupting again in whoops and wolf whistles, they waved and clapped, vainly attempting to capture the girls' attention before settling down again to smoke and banter. Phra Ajahn Kasem and Ajhan Somchai, up the hill still watching over the novices working in the garden, turned to notice the noise coming from the gazebo. Both of the adult men wordlessly diverted their attention back to the task at hand, apparently content to let the rowdy novices blow off steam. Later, with the work of the day finally finished, the whole class gathered in the long shadows by the bank of the reservoir. We sat chatting, waiting for the pick-up trucks to return and take us

back to the school. As we waited a couple of the rowdy novices from earlier spoke confidentially to one another. Eventually one of them got up the courage to make his way over to Phra Ajhan Kasem. "Ajhan, can we swim in the reservoir?" he asked, a touch arrogantly as he perhaps tried not to look too deferential in front of his friends. The senior monk looked at him for a moment with a faint smile playing across his face. Silently, he nodded, and the novice and his friends whooped yet again, stripping off their outer robes and racing down to the water. Away from the temple, the domain where it was necessary to perform their monastic masculinity, the novices were able to indulge in explorations of other types of performance.

As we have seen, a variety of lay-masculine models were available for novices to witness, supplying inspiration for the dramatics by the reservoir. The uncouth and powerful nak leng, along with other mythic archetypes such as the gentleman soldier (Streicher, 2012), stand in the Thai popular imagination in parallel to the grounded examples of masculine activity the novices had the opportunity to observe. Such heightened figures of archetypal Thai masculinities resemble the exemplary moral characters first described by Caroline Humphrey (1996) in her work on Mongolia. In her example, men drew precedents for their behaviour from figures such as Chinngis Khaan, making explicit reference to these figures in justifying their actions as moral. I do not want to overdraw the comparison here, since novices never explicitly likened their own behaviour to figures like the nak leng, but I think there is a more productive point to be made in considering the negative image cast as a result of the inaccessibility of exemplary depictions of lay masculinity for novices. This inaccessibility was paired with a derision for monastic masculinity, effectively casting monks as inverse exemplars[43]. A capacity for violence and

[43] This is particularly interesting given that the reverence for charismatic monastics in Thailand, such as those examined by Cook (2009), would serve as prototypical instances of exemplary morality at work if considered from the perspective of adult devotees.

rule breaking, as well as the freedom to be loud and boisterous all stand in direct contrast to the ideals of monastic comportment. To lesser or greater extents, novices would often stretch the boundaries of normative religious morality by fighting, drinking, and smoking. The implementation of disciplinary measures explored in the previous chapter were aimed at curtailing these instances in which the desire to stretch moral boundaries was deemed to go too far. Yet we also saw how such boundaries could be flexibly, and pragmatically applied to allow novices to explore in a controlled way. Just as the elements of lay masculinity that found favour among novices were tacitly agreed upon relationally, so too were the modes of subjectivation that led novices and institutional elders to negotiate the boundaries of acceptability in monastic life.

Between the negotiations of proper comportment on the one hand, and the poetics of lay masculinity on the other, we find an acute source of volitional angst for the novice monks. In conjunction with one another, novices were motivated to seek out and explore the traits they found in masculine archetypes. By the reservoir, the group of errant novices goaded and cheered one another, finding joy in staging exuberant and assertive performances of rule breaking, and subversion of the moral strictures supposedly limiting them as monastics. I see this activity as a relational performance of reflective freedom, a claim I will justify further in the next chapter. Here, I want to contrast this performance of reflective freedom with the exercise of that same reflective freedom in performing their role as novice monks. To some extent, every novice was obliged to engage in this balancing act. Just as they took part in peer-to-peer negotiation of the favoured ethical ideals emulated through forms of lay masculinity, so too were they negotiating their role and their duties with the institution, its elders, and the laypeople who were invested in them representing an ideal of moral comportment. Once again, this is not to imply

that novices were obliged to perform their monasticism in line with institutional ideals. Instead, they were active participants in constructing what it meant to perform their role within the monastic school. These two projects, performing lay masculinity and performing monastic comportment, required that novices apply their reflective freedom in ways that sometimes pulled away from one another, causing conflict and volitional angst.

I often saw this difficult process of negotiation and exploration at work when I asked novices directly about their role. Volitional angst bubbled to the surface, as they attempted to reconcile the multiple projects their reflective freedom had led them to engage in. Rather than finding a middle ground, this often meant pulling sharply to one side of the conflict. One afternoon, I asked the M.6 class to take part in a short exercise, hoping to elicit some discussion about their future plans now that they were in the final year of their schooling. I had them write a series of occupations commonly undertaken in the province up on the board. They quickly populated the list with entries such as "civil servant", "teacher", and "mechanic". I then asked the class to rank the occupations from best to worst, using whatever criteria they judged to be important. Before they began I, perhaps inappropriately, added "monk" to the list. The class was instantly distracted by this. "Being a monk isn't really an occupation" a couple of them called out. I defended my addition, telling them I was interested in how they wanted to spend their lives, and so "monk" could be considered an occupation in this sense. But the activity was already off track. Angpao came up to the board, grabbing a pen off the teacher's desk. He wrote a large '10' next to "monk", ranking it dead last. The rest of the class half cheered, half yelled at Angpao's controversial interjection, a couple of them nodding in furious agreement. "Why does 'monk' come last?" I asked. Angpao replied indignantly, "What do they do? They're just lazy. You be a monk just to sit in the temple and sleep all day."

The message was clear. Angpao, and many of his classmates in M.6, looked down on monastic masculinity because they felt it was somehow inauthentic, an excuse used in concealing a desire for inactivity. Lay masculinities were practically always cast in stark opposition to this, as inherently active. To be a man meant skilfully taking part in physical activities. Swimming, fishing, and sometimes breaking the rules or exerting violence were characteristics of the lay masculinities the novices valued. Yet while monastic masculinity cut against these valued ideals and activities, monastic identity itself did still hold value to even the most cynical novices like Angpao. In practical terms, novitiate ordination was the way to obtain an education with as little financial burden placed upon one's family as possible. This practical aspect, as well as the fact that ordination did hold significant religious and ethical value for the families of novices, meant that a total rejection of the monastic school was generally not desirable. Angpao, and novices like him, were subject to difficult cases of volitional angst. Not only did they favour alternate forms of masculinity to the ones typically available to them while they remained in robes, but they actively denigrated the masculinity they were motivated to embody as a result of pragmatic factors. Their reflective freedom was exercised in multiple directions, and it is perhaps because of the burden such angst placed upon the young novices, that sometimes they ended up pursuing sudden diversions like Jack's, away from the monastic life and towards something entirely different.

Through an examination of novices' reflective freedom, I have attempted here to lay out some of the determinants guiding their more dramatic choices and actions. Cases of volitional angst are one product of novices' reflective freedom. Via a multitude of different routes, they can end up in quandaries that fall outside the usual tedium of the morally dissonant position they generally maintain in relation to their institution. When this happens, they may be driven

to express themselves more directly, embodying masculine forms outside the usual remit of monastic comportment, or even pursuing a necessary abandonment of the monastic school to pursue an alternate form of ethical subjectivity. Ultimately, these dramatic instances are set against a backdrop in which novices actively choose the novitiate life, despite its difficulties. Volitional angst is produced by their reflective freedom, precisely because they are choosing plural subjectivities. In the next chapter, I will explore this subject further, focusing in on the more positive and fulfilling side of novices' engagements with one another. I will consider how, outside instances of volitional angst, novices may relationally construct ethical subjectivities they find mutually desirable, and how this relationality connects them to their teachers, their institution, and the religious community at large.

Chapter 6 - A Relational Ethics of Games and Play

Life for the novice monks was often dull. They woke early in the morning to participate in the morning worship session (*puja*), to collect food (*dtak bat*[44]) from local lay supporters, and to perform their chores. They made their way to school, where they sat through rambling assemblies and lessons. Then at 4pm they returned to their home temples, attended to any further tasks their abbot might assign them, and were then left to while away the remaining portion of their days. Extended periods of inactivity were common, and the activity that was required of them was often tedious. So the frustrated novices turned to their own methods for filling up their time. For the most part, this involved some form of play. They played video games and browsed social media on their phones (*len torasap*). Younger novices played more physical games, chasing one another around the temple grounds and play-fighting when they were sufficiently away from public view. In the previous chapter, I touched already on the eruptions of activity that could spill forth during particularly boring periods, resulting in the expression of novices' desires for particular modes of subjectivity, often implying a rejection of monastic identity. What remains to be seen, is how novices expressed their free capacities for ethical self-making in broader and more extended forms of practice. In this chapter, I argue that the novice monks at Wat Don Khet created and expressed forms of identity with one another through play, not only as a way of associating themselves with pre-existing desirable traits, but as a way of 'playing with' the ideals and modes of ethical subjectivity that underpinned the monastic school.

[44] To '*dtak bat*' (ตักบาตร) means to collect alms. In Thailand monastics will walk around their local communities early in the morning to receive offerings of food from laypeople. In the villages around Ban Don Khet, this job was often exclusively carried out by novices. It was also more common for laypeople to hang food containers on their front gates for the passing novices to collect, rather than giving them food offerings directly.

This chapter will explore the plural modes of play engaged in at Wat Don Khet. In the first section, I look at the literal games novices spent so much of their time indulging in. Analysing the role of play within the moral landscape of the monastic school, I consider how various games may be seen as illicit or acceptable depending upon the expectations of the actors involved in playing and observing them. Drawing on other ethnographic studies concerning games (Festa, 2007; Malaby, 2003), I consider how play-practices may subvert social acceptability, and be nominally forbidden, while simultaneously remaining widespread. I do this by invoking a modified form of Herzfeld's (2016) concept of cultural intimacy, to explain how actors may be implicitly allowed to participate in forms of illicit play. In the second section, I move on to consider games in a more metaphorical sense, following Ortner's (1996, 1999, 2006) notion of 'serious games'. Bridging the gap between the literal and the metaphorical, I describe methods that novices' employed in cheating, both during actual gameplay, and in order to 'game' the academic structure of the school. Through this analysis I consider problems of agency and reflection related to Ortner's 'serious games' approach, which I address via a description of game playing as an example of relational ethics at work. Making use of Zigon's (2021) description of a relational ethics turning on perceptions of what lies 'between' actors, I conclude that novices and institutional elders maintain a deliberative tension between their plural ethical values through their participation in 'serious' games.

Beetles and Video Games

It was the start of a new school year, and I was spending most of my time with the newly ordained M.1 class. Somchai was delivering a lesson, discussing crop cultivation as the novices dozed, looked off into the distance, or peered out of the shutters at the rice fields. The lecture and exercises for the day finished

early, and so Somchai left the room to take the novices' workbooks down to his office for marking. With him gone, the room became more lively. The young novices began chatting animatedly and the volume of their voices instantly grew louder. The two novices next to me, Yok and Noi, kept quiet though. They spoke surreptitiously, quiet enough that I could not hear them. They both kept their eyes fixed on Yok's bag as he rummaged around inside it. After a furtive look around, they caught my eye for a second, paused, then apparently decided I was a safe co-conspirator. Pulling his hand carefully out of his shoulder bag, Yok revealed a small plastic tub. Inside, scratching around the perimeter, was a fat rhinoceros beetle, sharing the container with a chunk of sugarcane. The two novices spoke more excitedly, but kept their voices low as Yok held the plastic tub below the level of his desk, and allowed Noi to tap at its surface. I could not contain my curiosity. "What's that you've got there, Yok?" The novice turned to me, appreciating my interest, he spoke with authority, "It's a beetle, mister. He can fight. You can get two and fight them." He brought the beetle up to his eye level, allowing me to take a closer look. "Where did you get it?" I asked. "A guy in my village sells them," Yok replied, looking about as he realised the mistake he had made. The rest of the class could now see his prized pet. The other novices whooped and called out as they saw the beetle and rushed over. Perhaps luckily for Yok, that was the moment that Somchai re-entered the room. He called out for the novices to take their seats again, and they reluctantly trudged back to their places, as Yok cautiously slipped the container back into his bag so that the teacher could not catch him with it.

A few days later, it was obvious that the appearance of Yok's beetle had fomented a craze. In between lessons, other M.1 novices would show off their own rhinoceros beetles they had managed to procure. Finally, one lunch time, a group of them found an opportunity to initiate one of the duels Yok had mentioned to me. He and another novice sat on the floor, I stood with the

crowd of onlookers hunched around them. Yok held a long stick he had found in the temple grounds in one hand, and the competing beetles sat in their respective containers. With one end of the stick resting on the floor, and Yok holding the other end in the air, he and his challenger carefully retrieved their beetles and placed them at opposite ends of the stick. Taking a pencil, Yok rolled it against the surface of the stick, apparently trying to create vibrations that would agitate the insects, and have them move towards one another. He alternated between this motion, and making studied pokes at his beetle's legs, until it was sufficiently irritated to begin moving towards its opponent. Once the two beetles reached each other, they began lazily sparring. Using their large horned heads, they attempted to find purchase under their competitor's rounded thorax, while the novices around me grew increasingly excited. Whoops and cheers went up as each beetle in turn appeared to gain the advantage. Before the contest could resolve itself though, events were brought to a sudden conclusion when Phra Ajhan Ban came in. The novices scrambled to stow their beetles as he looked on impassively. He let this activity take place, calmly watching his students clear the scene, before beginning his lesson.

Duelling beetles (*chon duang*) is a relatively common pastime in Nan province. Although it is seen as an old-fashioned pursuit (largely replaced by video games, according to older novices) it is still popular with young men and boys, with large night-time contests held in towns around the province. Rhinoceros beetles are caught or purchased and raised to compete with others in contests that are often accompanied by gambling. The game is simple. The two beetles are placed at two ends of a branch, or length of sugar cane, that is suspended in the air. The winner is whoever's beetle manages to toss the other from the branch, although sometimes a beetle that refuses to fight is deemed to have forfeited the match. The novices' version of the game that I witnessed was a somewhat watered-down version, with the gambling absent and not too much

attention paid to whose beetle actually came out on top. For Yok, Noi, and their classmates, the attraction of the activity lay more in cultivating a near obsessive level of attention to their beetle's care. When it came time to actually initiate a bout of chon duang they seemed more interested in simply observing the spectacle of the battle, rather than ever determining a winner[45].

Games and contests such as chon duang may appear to constitute nothing other than what Jeffrey (2010, 2017) calls '*timepass*'. In relation to Jeffrey's work with young men in India, 'timepass' refers to the meaningless pursuits used to fill long periods of inactivity, including meandering conversations and light bouts of gambling. Novices were certainly experts at filling up stretches of down time. Even during school hours, it was common for them to be left to their own devices whenever a teacher was late or had some other set of duties to attend to aside from delivering the scheduled lesson. It was in periods such as these that pursuits like chon duang could be explored, alongside other leisure activities. Initially I found these periods frustrating. For one, I was keen to observe the dynamics of lessons at the school, and I was frequently finding myself sitting among the chaos of unsupervised classrooms. Novices splayed on the floor, or pulled their desks over to sit next to their friends as they initiated rounds of video games (played on smartphones) or idly flicked through social media posts. Rallying my ethnographic instincts, I resolved to participate more actively in these 'timepass' pursuits, volunteering to play video games with novices whenever the classroom was left unoccupied. At first, this proved equally frustrating. While many groups of novices were enthusiastic about the novel prospect of having me join in their games, I struggled to pick up on the deceptively complex language and practice associated with them. As a

[45] This point recalls Clifford Geertz's (1973) observation of the way cockfights were treated in Bali. The care and attention shown towards the animal took on an importance that transcended any notion that this cultivation was purely instrumental. The cultivation of the cock as an extension of oneself was as important as its actual performance in competition.

teammate during rounds of online multiplayer battle games, I was hopeless. As an opponent, controlling a rival team on 'pro-evolution soccer' (PES) I was merely fodder, victim to the practiced strategizing and skilful gestures novices had already mastered.

It was not just that I was bad at these games, I could not speak the language of them. Between the virtual activity on the screen and the huddle of novices around me, all embodying their own virtual avatars and exclaiming incomprehensibly every few seconds, I could not get a measure of what this activity even constituted, let alone begin to understand the potential values and evocations associated with it. I struggled to engage with the appeal of these games beyond my surface impressions of them, as instances of 'timepass', the necessary filling of dead time. It was not until Yok introduced me to his rhinoceros beetle that I finally began seeing these activities as something more evocative of novices' developing senses of shared identity. The tactile and brutish spectacle of the beetle fights were of near universal fascination among the novices in the M.1 class, a sense of spectacle that I *could* understand. Through a reflection on the ideals evoked by the spectacle and the competition of this play-practice I began to appreciate the activity I had previously written off. I came to see what I had dismissed as 'timepass' activities, as generative sites of engagement and identity formation. The way novices pursued their interests in such play-practices spoke to their relationship with the structure of the monastic school institution, and helped to shape their perceptions of their place within its social hierarchy.

For the young men Jeffrey worked with, 'timepass' pursuits were a reaction to a seemingly endless economic disenfranchisement. With little hope of employment, such pursuits were bound up with anxieties about one's status and usefulness in society. Novices didn't necessarily experience such dilemmas.

With a predetermined and stable social role, they were able to look ahead to a future in which they could hope to be successful adults, once they had finished their education and left the institution. Attitudes toward their diverse forms of play are perhaps the best indicators that, to the novices themselves, games were about more than simply enduring a tortuously liminal state. Whenever I spoke to Yok in the weeks following the introduction of the rhinoceros beetles to the classroom, the subject of beetle fighting was the only topic he could talk about. Sat next to him in class, I noticed as he peeked into his bag to check on his pet. I saw him watching YouTube videos on his phone featuring beetle fights or, more commonly, experts giving tips on how best to care for one's beetle or control its movements with studied pokes in the heat of battle. It seems clear then, that novices' 'timepass' activities could graduate from meaningless ways to while away their days, into genuine passions, pursued for their efficacy in evoking desirable ideals and traits. Novices could make their play serious and use it in generating their developing subjectivities.

New games, activities, and forms of play could quickly become the objects of obsession among novices. Yok's class's rapid uptake of beetle fighting was just one instance of this type of obsession. Video games were by far the most prevalent such activity, with sessions of play eliciting a feverish excitement, with the vast majority of novices in each class participating in online multiplayer games that allowed them to play alongside one another. The preoccupation with these games was a frequent source of conflict between the novices and their teachers. As Ajhan Baifern, the science teacher, explained to me with a sigh, "lots of the novices get smartphones when they ordain so that they can keep in touch with their families. They haven't had access to them before, so they get addicted to playing with them." Trying to wrangle novices' attention away from their phones during class time was a frequent problem. During one of her computer classes, Daw made an attempt to have the M.1

novices recognise the issue for themselves. She handed out a survey, in which students had to respond to a series of statements, judging how far each could be applied to their own habits. Statements included lines such as "since I have started playing video games, I have become less interested in pursuing other activities," and "playing video games has caused me to be less successful in my studies." A point score at the end of the survey determined whether novices were addicted to gaming (*dtid game*) or not. Most of the class found the survey amusing, laughing as they filled it out, and clearly not particularly troubled by the possibility of addiction. Instances such as this reveal the ways play and games can be perceived as illicit, or associated with unwholesome states of being. The relationship between the activity and its social acceptability, or perception within a particular institution, can be constitutive of the ideals and modes of subjectivity the activity can evoke.

As Festa (2007) demonstrates in his account of high-stakes Mahjong games in Taiwan, games can reveal the edges of socially acceptable practice. They can evoke ideals by skirting social acceptability, or by subverting it, drawing on the illicitness of the activity to further characterize the ideals they typify. For Festa's interlocutors, their play was evocative of the ideal male social being. The men he played Mahjong with were buying into an image of masculinity exemplified by the styles they employed in playing the game, and by the circumstances surrounding their play. Yok and his friends were engaged in a similar process. Forms of play, such as chon duang, provided a space for them to exude characteristics they found mutually desirable. Notions of masculinity, leadership, and daring, were all caught up in their game playing. As one of the instigators of the new craze for chon duang, Yok appeared to cement his role as a class leader. He was consulted by his peers, as the expert on staging the duels, and was the first to capitalise on any opportunity to play the game. The capacity for games like chon duang to play with the bounds of social acceptability has

been documented in a variety of contexts (Lears, 2003; Malaby, 2003; Oxfeld, 1993). Connections to the possibility of prohibited gambling practices made chon duang somewhat risky for the young monastics. As an activity that commonly involves gambling, chon duang could easily be perceived as outside the remit of acceptable behaviour for novice monks. It was therefore necessary to conceal it from senior monks and teachers, even as this concealment seemed to itself be part of the game. As evidenced by Phra Ajhan Ban's indifferent reaction to catching them engaging in supposedly illicit play, the novices were essentially free to explore the possibilities for expression afforded by their games, so long as they remained within the domain of 'play' and did not spill over into something truly illicit, such as actual gambling. How then, do we account for the novices' hurried reaction to conceal their play? If it was tolerated, what impetus could they have for hiding it?

Along with Festa (2007), Malaby (2003) draws on the notion of 'cultural intimacy', as described by Michael Herzfeld (2016), to explain the place illicit gambling practices hold in people's moral imaginations. The cultural intimacy of any group may be described as the set of emic practices which members of the group consider inside knowledge. These practices may be seen as embarrassing or simply unseemly, and therefore kept hidden from outsiders. This notion is generally applied to the ways in which seemingly minute and specific practices speak to people's self-conscious sense of 'national character'. Herzfeld summarises the concept as, 'the contrasts that the visitor to many a nation-state encounters between the presentation of the national culture — what nationalist discourses personalize as "national character" — and the presentation of individual selves within the intimacy of the national space' (2016, p. 2). Malaby (2003) applies the concept directly to the arena of games, specifically those played in Greek gambling dens. These play-practices are carefully concealed, despite the practices' ubiquity within people's social lives.

The popularity of gambling is matched only by its supposed shamefulness, creating the need to performatively hide it from anyone outside the cultural group practicing it.

I never came across novices explicitly participating in games played for money or goods, but they did engage in many practices that resembled gambling. It was not uncommon for novices idling in their wats in the evening to 'bet' on chores — "if I beat you in this round of PES you have to take my toilet cleaning duties tomorrow." But, as with rounds of chon duang, these 'bets' were observed and ignored by monks, who seemed to find them generally harmless. Instances of genuine illicit gambling among monastics were a popular subject of moralising concern in the Thai media. Early one morning I showed Angpao a news article I had been reading. The article described a scandal, in which every single monk and novice at one temple had been caught engaging in a veritable gambling party by lay supporters in their village. Each monastic had been disrobed, with the fallout resulting in the temple being left without any monks to manage it. Angpao found this story very amusing. "Yeah, this kind of thing is always happening," he said laughing. His implication was that, while many monastics engaged in such games, they were generally careful enough not to reveal these activities publicly. Pursuits adjacent to gambling were genuinely risky since engaging in the real thing resulted in serious consequences, as the offending monastics at the wat in the news article no doubt discovered.

The proximity of the games I have described to genuinely illicit practices makes them an example of the culturally intimate, although in a slightly modified form compared to how Herzfeld (2016) and Malaby (2003) understand it. In their shared conception, the outsiders who must be kept in the dark as to intimate practices are visitors, whose idea of the 'national culture' of the in-group could be affected by their exposure to such intimate practices. Visitors

entirely outside the social world of the novices were not a common sight in Nan. So why should novices bother to hide their beetles from their teachers? And why should monastics generally seek to conceal common practices that were, nevertheless, universally recognised as illicit? The form of cultural intimacy here was at work between monastics and their lay supporters. Despite the common community and context they shared, owing to their social role, monastics recognised the need to conceal certain practices from lay supporters, maintaining their expectations of the ideal monastic identity. Novices quickly became familiar with this notion, understanding that they were required to conceal certain games from laypeople, and performing this concealment even in the presence of monks who quite clearly did not find their play objectionable. When Phra Ajhan Ban entered the classroom, he elicited the need for the novices to demonstrate their understanding that their games needed concealment, the performance (and his lack of reaction) perhaps even reaffirming their shared sense of cultural intimacy. Ironically, the forms of play novices pursued that might have genuinely crossed the line into illicit gambling remained invisible to monks and teachers even as novices engaged in them. Online gambling was not uncommon, either through online versions of traditional betting games, or via 'loot boxes'[46] common in many of the video games popular among novices. If a teacher or monk entered the classroom when a novice was playing one of these games, the novice would often barely acknowledge their presence, continuing to play until they were directly told not to. This form of illicit play was blatant, yet novices were still able to meet the requirements demanded by the institution's shared sense of cultural intimacy. The illicit practices remained invisible, and so nothing untoward was going on.

[46] 'Loot boxes' are a common mechanic in video games. They are usually purchased or received as an award and may be opened to reveal a randomised virtual item (known as 'loot') that may be used in the game. The mechanic has become controversial because of its similarity to gambling practices usually prohibited for children.

Permissiveness towards certain play-practices that might nominally be illicit, sometimes acts as a way of curbing the potential for individuals to slide into genuinely unacceptable behaviour. By taking a relatively permissive stance towards putatively prohibited forms of play, institutional elders were attempting to craft the moral landscape novices could operate within. As referenced in the previous chapter, in his study of Egyptian Muslims, Schielke (2009) observes that young men will often engage in endless games of football as a prohibited form of recreation within the heightened moral expectations demanded by Ramadan. Like the young novices, Muslim men must forgo many of the 'immoral' recreational pursuits they might otherwise engage in for a transient period of time. The resultant boredom elicited by their situation drives them to find pursuits that can compensate for the lack of their usual recreation, in the case of the young Muslims, football, for novices, chon duang and video games. Schielke notes how one of his interlocutors accounted for the Ramadan football phenomenon, reporting that the matches 'are for the youths a way to compensate for not being able to go after girls, smoke marijuana and drink beer. It's a way to fill the emptiness that they otherwise fill with immoral entertainment' (2009, p. 25). Games within the monastic school often seemed to serve the same function, albeit to a more subtle degree. The novice monks were not at risk of 'going after girls' in the same way Schielke describes, but their recreational outlets were seen by teachers as ways to distract them from fighting or seeking out other mischief as a result of extreme boredom. So illicit forms of play were either ignored, as in the case of chon duang, or teachers and monks actively engaged novices in forms of play as a way of communicating with them.

The latter forms of play were encouraged by institutional elders in contexts where they deemed it appropriate. At the start or end of lessons and assemblies, teachers might lead novices in a quick game to get their attention, or encourage

play activities as bonding exercises, such as when a group of new boys came to spend time at the school prior to their ordination. Some of the games initiated by teachers involved activities that seemed to skirt the edges of acceptable monastic comportment. This was particularly true in their interactions with the younger novices who had only recently been ordained. One day shortly after a group of boys had undertaken their ordination, and before the next term had begun, Baifern and a couple of the other teachers spent the morning having the new novices participate in running races and other physical games. During one particularly boisterous running game involving the popping of balloons, amid the noise of the novices shouting and whooping at their teammates, Baifern turned to me, looking a little sheepish and said, "they're still just kids really". Her comment exhibited an awareness that the process of ordination should perhaps mean that the novices had undergone a change that made this type of childish activity unacceptable now, but she nonetheless enthusiastically encouraged them in each game, cheering on the losing teams in the running races, and later on laughing as she led novices in a game that involved them slapping one another with handfuls of talcum powder.

This instance recalls the discussion of permissiveness, and the exercise of discipline in relation to the application of monastic precepts, discussed in Chapter 4. There, I concluded that a studied pragmatism was exercised in order to have the monastic institution work in greater harmony with the demands of the secular world. The question raised here then, is how play could ever be considered pragmatic. If novices are so openly allowed to participate in physical games and boisterous activities, what implicit justifications are their institutional elders drawing on in order to make them allowable? I think the answer is similar to the one Schielke gives in explaining the unchallenged games of football, supposedly prohibited during the period of Ramadan. In short, they were a lesser evil. The attentions of the young men could be focused

upon this relatively harmless prohibited activity, to draw their focus away from the far more egregious ethical misstep of indulging in drugs, sex, and alcohol. Again, especially for younger novices, fears as to the extent of their possible illicit behaviour were not so extreme. Instead, the fears were directed at breaches of comportment, which could prove more or less dramatic depending on how directly they contravened precepts and how visible they were. For the young novices Baifern was entertaining, relatively harmless forms of frivolity might be encouraged to defer potentially more dramatic breaches of comportment. I suspect one further aspect of this pragmatic curtailing of the young monks' energies is particularly pertinent here. The fact that novices knew they were behaving in a way that technically breached the codes of monastic comportment was itself an important part of the game they were playing. Being permitted to run and to shout allowed them to expend more than just physical energy, it also allowed them to obtain a notion that they were not wholly constrained by their role as monastics.

The institutional elders may have been able to draw boundaries around the novices' moral landscape, but they could not limit the depth or the seriousness with which novices pursued their play-practices. I experienced this seriousness first hand whenever I was invited to play video games with novices. I was most commonly asked to join rounds of 'ROV' (Realm of Valour), a multiplayer, online battle arena game. The game involves two teams of players competing to destroy one another's home base, with novices generally joining forces against an anonymous team of online players rather than competing against one another. Each player controls a single character, and is able to contribute to their team's efforts in a variety of ways, including defending their own base, mounting attacks on the enemy, and collecting loot to spend on equipment upgrades and bonuses that affect the entire team. Angpao, from the M.6 class, would often cajole me into joining his team during lunch breaks. We would sit

in the M.6 classroom, clustered around a few desks, all of us staring intently at our phone screens as we controlled our characters. Angpao was always encouraging, but it was clear that my skill level was not nearly high enough to justify my place among them.

While Angpao and his friends engaged in carefully refined play strategies, my character would wander aimlessly, frequently surprised by enemy players who would defeat me and send me back to the home base. The game's controls were easy to learn, but the broader strategies fiendishly difficult to master, and while Angpao was always patient, not all his friends were happy to put up with my incompetence. Eric, one of Angpao's teammates, was especially displeased by my inclusion, even though under most circumstances he did not find my presence objectionable. Among this group of extremely dedicated ROV obsessives, he held a fierce reputation as the most competitive player, holding the highest rank, and therefore often the most vocal and controlling member of the team. "Argh, why do you always have to invite him to play?" he exclaimed one afternoon, still fixated on the game in progress, that our team was inevitably losing. As one faulty cog in Eric and Angpao's finely tuned machine, I was causing the whole system to fail. The knowledge and skill required to play the game well was shared by the team of novices, who had developed an intimate understanding of this play-world through the quantities of time they had poured into it. ROV was therefore imbued with the status afforded to a high stakes contest, just as Festa's (2007) games of mahjong were for his interlocutors. And just as in a game of mahjong, hidden beneath the veneer of play, was a complex dimension of etiquette and ideals, a dimension that was brought into relief by breaches of this etiquette that offended the underlying ideals. To Eric, my ineptitude was impolite. It was not just that I was a poor player of the game, I was offending the normative moral code that had come to

surround the game, and Angpao was complicit in my bad behaviour for inviting me in.

Many novices, Eric and Angpao included, resembled the 'power gamers' Taylor (2006) describes in his study of online game cultures. 'Power gamers' are the players in any online game, who focus on quantifying and exploiting the mechanics of the game in order to progress at the fastest rate possible. Characterised by an obsession with efficiency and a goal-focused mode of play, Taylor notes how such players barely even seem to be participating in online game worlds to have fun. Whereas the conventional idea of game playing as a leisure activity would imply that 'fun' was the aim of the activity, 'power gamers' appeared to be doing something that more closely resembled a form of labour. As part of the team of novices then, there was an implicit requirement that participants should pull their weight. In performing badly, I was not meeting the responsibilities expected of me when I entered their game. In this sense, the novices and I were not really engaging in the same activity, despite the fact that we were all sharing the same virtual space. They were navigating a complex dimension of knowledge and enskillment that was inaccessible to me, as a novice of their game. This dimension was underpinned by a set of ideals, expectations and desires that Eric, Angpao, and their friends had constructed between one another.

The seriousness of novices' engagement with games and play, calls into question how we define the boundaries of this mode of activity. The role of play within everyday life, and indeed, whether it is at all separate from daily life has been a problem grappled with in various contexts in which forms of play appear to overflow their most widely understood definitions (Malaby, 2009). In the cases already examined, in mahjong players, whose games speak to hidden currents of social acceptability and ideals of masculinity (Festa, 2007) and for

Taylor's (2006) 'power gamers', play became about more than any simple escape into leisure. It became not about creating a separation from the 'ordinary' world, of labour and sociality, but about speaking *to* that 'ordinary' experience. Through their deep investment in play activities, in chon duang, and video games, I argue that novices are also engaged in a mode of activity that inherently speaks to their broader experience within the institution of the monastic school. This engagement is generative. It serves a crucial role in how novices come to relationally construct an image of the ideals they must trade in to exist as monastics, and is central to how they come to cultivate their own distinct networks of ideals and desirable features of ethical subjectivity.

It is worth pausing here to consider one major question to this approach to the generation of ethical subjectivities. How can we consider novices to be forging particular ethical identities with one another through activities that are often by definition, goalless, and pursued for their own sakes? In the rounds of ROV I played with the M.6 class there may have been a clear goal, to win each round, to level up our characters, and to acquire better equipment for them. But the question remains as to how these kinds of goals, instrumentally pursued via play, could possibly map on to broader forms of value that might serve to contribute to novices' developing subjectivities. When Yok and his friends played with the rhinoceros beetles there seemed to be even less in the way of clearly defined goals. Each novice wanted their beetle to win, shouting at it, and cajoling it to engage with its competitor, but the actual outcome of these contests seemed relatively unimportant. Often, as in the scenario I described above, duels would end inconclusively, as teachers or monks interrupted the activity, or each beetle simply gave up on the fight before a clear winner emerged. In this case the play seemed more about initiating and observing the spectacle of the duel, rather than pursuing any particular aim associated with the activity. I must therefore address how forms of play can fit into a

framework that justifies apparently aimless activities as part of the realm of ethical development, in which we often imagine that serious and committed application towards a pre-defined ethical ideal delineates what can possibly count as 'self-cultivation'.

Cheating, Agency, and Intentionality

"I like to cheat sometimes," Eric said. "It just makes things easier." His attention was once again fixed on his phone as he spoke with me. We were sitting outside the M.6 classroom on the top floor, enjoying the cool breeze blowing in from across the river valley. There had been an English lesson scheduled to start at 9am, but we had already been waiting for twenty minutes and nobody had turned up to teach it. Wanting some air, away from the stuffy classroom where the bigger novices insisted on keeping all of the shutters closed, we had decided to while away the morning out in the open-air corridor. "It's very boring when it's like this," Eric complained, frustrated that the teacher hadn't appeared. To occupy himself, he had been showing me a new video game he had downloaded on his phone the day before. "I was so excited for it coming out, but… it's not that fun" he said with disappointment. To liven up the experience of playing it, he had found some cheat codes online that allowed him to progress more quickly. "Doesn't that take the fun out of it?" I asked. "Nah!" he replied shortly. The cheating was a way of making the game easier, a strategy in its own right. But the strategy here wasn't necessarily about achieving the most desirable outcome in the most efficient way possible. It was more about finding a way through a generally uninteresting malaise, turning it into something as engaging as possible.

Eric's stance here reflected a general attitude novices held in relation to their role within the school, both as monastics and as students aiming to obtain an

education. Applied to the classroom, cheating could provide shortcuts not only to materially desirable outcomes, but also to refining and easing the everyday experience of the institution. Many novices who did extremely little schoolwork would still cheat when they did eventually sit down and complete a test or an exercise sheet. This would not realistically make any substantial difference in terms of their final attainments, their grades would probably remain poor, but they chose to cheat anyway. I think this came partially out of the literal 'shortening' of strenuous activities affected by cheating (for example cheating on tests simply meant the act of taking the test would be over faster) but also from the sense of identity novices felt the act of cheating imparted upon them. Just as many other forms of play could evoke desirable values, enabling novices to see themselves as embodying masculine archetypes and becoming gatekeepers of knowledge, so too could cheating enable them to have a sense of themselves as somehow overcoming the structure of their institution through intellect and guile. In this sense, cheating was itself a serious form of play-practice capable of generating and perpetuating novices' collaborative generation of ideals.

In analysing both the different game activities explored in the previous section, and how cheating figures into novices' mode of interaction with their institution, it is perhaps helpful to draw on Sherry Ortner's notion of 'serious games' (1996, 1999, 2006). In her original conception, such 'games' need not be contests, or forms of play as they are understood in the usual sense. They are not necessarily bounded activities that involve rules and some form of explicit competition. Instead, 'serious games' are enacted where people exercise their desires and intentions to produce certain effects and evoke their positions within a social hierarchy. In her classic example (Ortner, 1999), Himalayan mountaineering is defined as one such 'serious game', a form of play that

different actors participate in to define themselves, and locate their position within a social hierarchy or network. As Ortner puts it:

> people do not just enact either material necessity or cultural scripts but live life with (often intense) purpose and intention… people are defined and redefined by their social and cultural contexts, which frame not only the resources they start with but also the intentions and purposes they bring to the games of life. (Ortner, 1999, p. 23)

Novices focused their intention upon their games. From the perspective of laypeople, and perhaps even their teachers, their activity may have appeared a way of filling up the formless gaps between the 'real' purposeful activity of their lives, fulfilling their duties as monastics, or applying themselves to their schoolwork. In reality, it seemed that their entire range of activity was constitutive of their developing senses of ethical subjectivity. The normative moral codes communicated within the religiously and politically sanctioned environment of the institution commingled with the novices' 'serious games'. The people and the ideals generated by this commingling were a product of the strategies pursued by the various actors embedded within the institution, as they traded with one another, conversed with one another, and fought one another. This perspective gives us a glimpse of the complex web of relational interactions shaping ethical subjectivities. This (rather literal) reading of Ortner's conception of 'games' — as opposed to the 'projects' or 'goals' alluded to in other anthropological accounts of subjectivity and reflection (Keane, 2008) — gives an insight into how novices' play behaviour spills over, from the deep strategizing and intense interest brought to bear on their literal games, to be utilised in aspects of their interactions with individuals and institutions that fall outside a traditional definition of the game. Cheating is a particularly useful form of practice to consider on these terms, because of its valency both in and outside the realm of literal games. It constitutes one form of strategizing that novices collaboratively construct and engage in, a strategy that can be applied

with equal effect within the confines of a video game, or within the 'serious game' of academic attainment. However, I think there are two major issues with Ortner's 'serious games' concept, which I intend to explore by applying this analysis to instances of cheating. Both issues may be resolved by examining how novices not only played within the strictures of organising structure imposed upon them by the monastic school, but played *with* this structure.

As Laidlaw (2013) points out, Ortner's understanding of 'serious games' is predicated on a view of agency derived from practice-theoretical perspectives. Laidlaw, alongside Keane (2003), criticises this view of agency on the basis of its tendency to foreground a specific notion of human flourishing that finds its origins in the mind of the anthropologist, rather than with their interlocutors. As we saw in the previous chapter, accounts of agency in this mould privilege acts of resistance that supposedly show how an agent may overcome the bounds of societal structure, defying their normative limitations to overcome mere social reproduction and acquire a shaping influence as an active and creative force within their society. This emphasis obscures the full complexity and variety of the relations between an agent and their social environment. Prominent arguments against a strong practice-theoretical version of agency demonstrate how people may sublimate themselves to political or religious structures (Laidlaw, 2002; Mahmood, 2001). The choices they make in pursuing these paths are no less 'agentic' than the paths of resistance that so often exclusively justify courses of action as forms of agency. My analysis of how novices interact with their institution, in navigating its rules and disciplinary structures, in adopting or rejecting its values, or in seeking out their own forms of valued activity through play, runs the risk of falling into the same trap. Over the course of the last two chapters, and entering into the account of novices' play and games here, I have described a series of ways in which novices appear to defy, subvert, and resist the structuring ideals governing the monastic

institution. Here, I think it is important to clarify my view, that novices are locked in a relationship with their institution that affords multiple modes of interaction, and these various modalities are underpinned by a relational ethics. Before describing the operation of relational ethics within the monastic school, I must first touch upon a second issue, closely related to the problem of agency, inherent to Ortner's (2006) description of serious games.

If the particular notion of agency attached to the 'serious games' concept is its first major issue, the second is its implied stance towards reflection and deliberation. The problem of reflection lies at the heart of the question as to whether game playing, either broadly conceived of in the sense of 'serious games' or narrowly interpreted as the playing of literal games, might be seen as a form of generative practice in which ethical subjectivities are cultivated. Considering cheating specifically, I think it is clear that the ways novices cheated (on their schoolwork and on tests) did raise questions as to their ethical relations with their teachers and the institution. Yet it would seem strange to attribute their actions to a desire to move closer to some deliberatively conceived, objective higher goal or motivating ethical ideal. To borrow the language of Ortner's discussion of intentionality, their cheating was routinized, such that it became the natural mode in which novices approached much of their schoolwork. Ortner distinguishes between 'soft' intentionality, exemplified by Giddens' (1979) approach, and 'hard' intentionality, which she advocates following Sewell (1980). She makes this move, claiming that, 'it is the strong role of active (though not necessarily fully "conscious") intentionality in agency that, in my view, differentiates agency from routine practices' (Ortner, 2006, p. 136). This argument quickly becomes muddled in the context of Ortner's (1996, p. 12) previous definition of 'serious games'. On the one hand Ortner wants to claim that routinized actions are not expressions of agency, yet on the other, she advocates for the conception of social life as 'games' over

another, closely related and popularly employed term, 'projects', precisely because 'project' carries the implication of too much intentionality in her view. Her position is born out of the problems surrounding the origins of her commitment to a practice-theoretical view of agency, in which the structuring influences of social formations must always be allowed the space to sublimate at least some portion of an agent's capacities for intention, in Ortner's case transforming elements of intentionality into mere 'routinized' practices. Taking Ortner's view wholesale, there would be a risk that the same problems plaguing her account of intentionality would colour an analysis of reflection and deliberation.

The two issues raised by Ortner's 'serious games' perspective, especially the latter in terms of how to properly account for reflection or deliberation, recall debates over the location of the ethical. This has been a point of contention in the anthropology of ethics, with various theorists offering perspectives on where anthropologists should look to assess the ethical life of their interlocutors (Das, 2010, 2015; Lambek, 2010). I bring up this debate in relation to reflection, because the crux of it generally revolves around a disagreement over whether ethics are located in the subconscious, routinized, and everyday, or in deliberative and, often especially in religious contexts, transcendent, acts of ethical reflection. At this level, it is essentially a question as to the role of reflection in ethical life. Is reflection a central component, or does it stand apart as an exceptional mode of ethical thought quite separate from the 'everyday' ethical practice most people undertake? The question this implies for my exploration of novices' play-practices, and their propensity for cheating, is therefore whether reflection is a necessary condition for a practice that may be said to contribute to the formation of the ethical subject.

Jarrett Zigon (2021) offers an intriguing analysis of the question of the location of the ethical, or as he terms it, 'the transcendence debate'. His position, based on a phenomenological perspective inspired in large part by Emmanuel Lévinas (2011), is that to focus on 'location' in descriptions of ethical life is simply to ask the wrong question. Therefore, both the work on ordinary ethics, notably by Das (2010, 2015) and Lambek (2010), with their claim against locating ethics exclusively within the transcendent and the deliberative, and the counter position taken by Robbins (2007) that transcendence has a place within the ordinary, are all missing the point. Zigon critiques attempts to claim a separation of transcendent and deliberative ethical practices and experiences from the 'ordinary', noting the tendency of the ordinary ethicists to conceptualise normative ethical ideals (or transcendentals) as existing somehow 'above' everyday life, and therefore imposing their own normative ontology to delimit the very possibilities of ethical life. In his words, 'the ontological transcendentals of ordinary ethics - that is, the assumed ontological foundation of ordinary ethics - is an individual human subject who comes into any world whatsoever with an a priori procedural capacity for acting rightly' (Zigon, 2021, p. 387). By making deliberation exceptional, ordinary ethics offers a flattened picture of ethical life in which individuals' practice is generally routinized and unconscious, with the ideals governing it remaining in the background, out of view of the individual themselves.

Applying this perspective to the monastic school, I think Zigon's critique is borne out. When novices conceived of their strategies, devising shortcuts and workarounds in order to game the systems of examinations and exercises, they were constantly navigating an ethical landscape that required perpetual active engagement. One afternoon after school, Eric was telling me about a test he had just taken in his social studies class. The test was relatively serious, a mock exam for the end of term papers that would play a large part in determining the

novices' grades for that semester. "How did it go?" I asked. "Was it difficult?" "Nah" he replied, chuckling. "You know we always cheat on these things." I was sceptical, having looked in on the class while they were completing the exam paper, I had observed the novices all sat in neat rows, silently filling out their multiple-choice answer sheets as Widura, the teacher, sat at the front desk observing them. "Really? How are you managing to cheat? And if you get caught, won't you be in big trouble?" Eric looked pleased at the opportunity to explain his methods to me. "If there is a question we don't know the answer to, we mouth it to the others when the teacher isn't looking. Then someone who does know the answer mouths the right letter." He went on to explain how he and his friends would discuss the seating arrangement beforehand, ensuring that whoever was most likely to know the greatest proportion of the answers was positioned in the middle of the group, allowing enough cover not to be seen by the teacher, but visible to all other members of the group. I thought for a second. "Pretty clever. But I still don't see how Ajhan Widura wouldn't see what's going on." Eric nodded, conceding the point immediately. "Oh yeah, I think he knows what we are doing for sure. He just doesn't really care."

The whole scenario resembled a game. The novices constructed their elaborate cheating strategy, carrying it out with mock caution, as Widura feigned total ignorance of their illicit activity. When I asked Eric what the point of concealing their cheating was, if their teachers were indifferent to it anyway, he had no satisfying answer for me. He just shrugged, "it's what we do". The claim that this game was simply habitual practice gives a sense that it was routinized, a game played within the bounds of the everyday, 'ordinary' ethics of the monastic school. Imagined this way, the ideals underpinning the entire purpose of taking the test in the first place, the teacher's motivations in setting it, and the novices' approach to taking it, were all in contention in the background. This argument seems strange though, when we consider that, while the 'game' of the

test may have been routine, the players seemed nevertheless locked in a deliberative tension. Aware of the multiple perspectives of the players with their various roles, novices deliberately constructed strategies to approach the game in a particular way. Through this deliberation, the novices showed an awareness of the conflict in ideals inherent to the game, the complex relations between themselves, their teacher, and the institution at large. The assertion here is similar to Morgan Clarke's (2014) point, made via his ethnography of Sufi magical practices in Lebanon. His argument is that, by habitually materialising extraordinary feats, such as apparently impossible predictions of the future, the Sufis he worked with incorporated these feats into their 'ordinary' (or routinized) worlds. Cases like Clarke's raise the question as to where it might be possible to draw the boundaries of 'ordinary' ethical practice, given that the transcendent can so readily be observed as a part of ordinary life. The novices were not engaging in any transcendent ethical practice, appealing to any higher ethical ideal, however I do think that the tension generated by their navigation of the complex ethical relations implied in the cheating-game constitute a clear example of deliberation. Their capacities for reflective freedom were in full effect.

To return to Zigon (2021), his alternative picture of a relational ethics appears to offer a resolution to the issues of agency and reflection raised here. Rather than focusing on locating ethics, and in turn defining to what extent the formation of the ethical subject need be a product of agency and intentionality, he sees ethics as an inherent element in people's attempts to address the question: 'how is it between us?' The 'between' here is defined as the ongoing 'conversation' (both literal and metaphorical) that requires an attunement between the self and the Other. Zigon makes a point of contrasting this perspective with the notion of relationality he sees as inherent to the ordinary ethics approach. Discussing Das's (2012, 2015) view in particular, he sees her description of how ethics may

be relational as the projection or translation of the Self on to the Other, subsuming the criteria or life forms of the Other in order to make them identical to their own. Advancing his own perspective against this, Zigon writes that:

> In conversation the Other is revealed as *not* the Same, which means that she cannot be thematized through a projection of an a priori set of criteria or grammar, of the claim of a 'shared experience'. Rather, to be in conversation is to let the Other be and attune. (2021, p. 391)

This attunement functions to allow individuals to answer Zigon's central question: 'how is it between us?' and reach some kind of understanding as to what lies between themselves and the Other.

In my conversation with Eric, he revealed his own understandings as to how things were 'between' himself, his peers, his teachers, and the institution they all inhabited. Following Zigon's relational notion of ethics, the problems of agency and reflection substantially fall away. To ask whether novices engaged in reflection to produce certain effects — to become certain kinds of ethical subject — as a result of their cheating, and their broader participation in the various 'serious games' entailed in the monastic school, is to ask the wrong question. Appeals to ethical ideals were apparent in the working out, in the practice and the play that novices engaged in as they participated in these games. To add to this though, I think it is important to make one final point to diverge from Zigon's account. While I concur with his idea that relational ethics are often worked out in the attunement of individuals to one another's ethical criteria, I would not be so quick to dismiss less harmonious forms of relational engagement from the domain of 'the ethical'. Zigon dismisses Das's (2015) account of relationality on the basis that it involves a translation of ethical criteria, to make the Other the Same. His basis for this judgment is that, following Levinas, he sees this kind of translational projection as a form of violence. While I do not necessarily disagree with Zigon that translation *may*

constitute an act of violence, I do not see this as reason enough to wholesale dismiss it from the domain of 'ethics'. To truly consider the possibility for ethics to constitute a relational project or 'serious game', I think that a full range of practices must be considered as contributory to the ultimate ethical relation.

In my view, Zigon's position runs the risk of applying moralising judgements to his subjects (cf. Holbraad, 2018). Those writing within the ethical turn have frequently been at pains to establish that an anthropological approach to morality need not itself be moralising. To echo Fassin's (2012) comparison, the anthropology of ethics need not be any more prescriptive of moral norms than political anthropology is in recommending specific policies or forms of governance. Whether looking at morality or politics, the realities found at a given field site are examined as ethnographic objects. Zigon (2014) himself has offered a version of this argument. Zigon's (2021) model attempts to provide a baseline for assessing ethical phenomena that would avoid the supposedly moralising frameworks of other theorists such as those based on freedom (Laidlaw, 2002, 2013), or based on virtue ethics (Mattingly, 2014). While Zigon insists his framework is ontological there is no reason to suppose notions of 'attunement' to be any less based in ethics than, for example, 'reflective freedom'. I see this point reflected in Zigon's characterisation of certain relational interactions as 'violent' and therefore impossible to include within the domain of ethics.

As we have seen, at the monastic school, novices, teachers, senior monks, and lay practitioners employ plural modes of engagement in figuring out what it is that lies between them. Sometimes they attune to one another, attempting to assess and understand the Other in order to hold the tension in complex instances of game-playing. The 'game' of cheating is one instance of this, in which each of the participants in the game was necessarily attuned to the

motivations of the other players. Eric understood that he must carefully plan his cheating strategies, in order not to make them too blatant. But, at the same time, he understood that Ajhan Widura was aware of what he was doing, it seemed that he was simply willing to let the cheating go so long as it was not made too obvious. Each player was required to maintain a deliberative stance towards their own action, alongside a watchful awareness of each other's positions. The scenario I describe here is very similar to the guarding of cultural intimacy I described in the first section of this chapter. The awareness of culturally intimate practices was retained by all players, so that these practices could, in reality, be engaged in without consequence, while everyone behaved as though they were genuinely illicit and worthy of punishment in their careful concealment of them.

At other times though, the relational imposition of one group's values could be imposed on another, precisely as the kind of projection of ideals that Zigon rejects. We have seen this in previous chapters. Where instances of real serious illicit behaviour have taken place (the instances of smoking, drinking, or wearing laypeople's clothes described in Chapter 4) the values of the institution were brought to bear upon the errant novices. In cases requiring real disciplinary action, the will and the criteria embodied in the institutional values would be projected on to the novice. When Ajhan Widura was lecturing novices caught drinking, he was not engaging in a process of attunement with them, he was speaking *as if* the criteria of value he bought into, that novices should behave with monastic comportment, were shared by the novices themselves. By the same token, novices were not engaging in processes of attunement when they rejected forms of monastic masculinity embodied for them in the senior monks serving as their guardians and teachers. In Chapter 5, instances where this rejection occurred supplied evidence for the notion that novices exhibited a capacity to independently determine a set of desirable ideals they sought to

embody, and that these were often chosen in direct opposition to the monastic values taught to them by their institutional elders. In these instances, novices rejected any idea of attunement, instead projecting their own values back on to senior monks, and finding them lacking on the basis of their inferior form of masculinity.

In this chapter I have aimed to answer the question as to whether play and games (both literal and metaphorical) could be conceived of as genuine instances of ethical subject formation. As 'serious games', I conclude that the practices I have described are constitutive of novices as ethical subjects, evoking subjectively desirable ideals and features of identity. 'Serious games' such as the play required to retain the tensions of cultural intimacy, constitute the functioning of a relational ethics. The relational framework I have attempted to describe here focuses on the 'between' to describe the complex webs of ethical life held in tension to afford possibilities for the creative cultivation of ethical subjectivities. This view locates ethics neither exclusively in the 'ordinary', or in the transcendent and the deliberative. Instead, I view the various players in the 'serious games' I have analysed, as deliberate actors, seeking to resolve the 'between' separating them from other players via plural methods of both projection and attunement. Novice monks, senior monks, teachers, and laypeople all took part in these 'serious games', assessing the 'between' contested at the centre of their relations, and drawing upon one another to cultivate their own ethical subjectivities.

Conclusion

Eric led the way up the road. We were both a little ahead of the other novices from Wat Jai Fan. On the other side of the narrow street, a couple of girls rounded the corner towards us. Eric glanced over at them but then quickly fixed his gaze on the houses up ahead. The two girls looked about the same age as Eric – sixteen or seventeen – and both snuck furtive glances over at him and the group of young monks behind us. They huddled together, lowering the volume of the conversation they had been having as they came closer and passed us. The entire non-interaction was over in seconds, and I thought nothing of it at the time. We finished our rounds, dropping food containers back at the houses where they had been left for collection that morning. Back at Wat Jai Fan, Eric and I climbed the steep steps up to the small tower housing a drum used on festival days. It was a little away from the other temple buildings, overlooking a rice field on one side, and the rest of the temple buildings on the other. We sat down on the concrete floor, Eric seeming contemplative. "Did you see that girl we passed on the road back there?" he asked me. I had to think for a second before recalling the shy pair. I nodded to him. "One of them, we were friends in primary school you know." I was faintly surprised, given the lack of recognition each party had shown as we had passed them. "From the time I ordained, we don't really speak any more." I asked him why not. He plucked at his robe. "Because of this. You know after I became a novice, people like this started acting differently towards me. They're shy and they can't talk to me. I don't know why…. We're all just human right?" There was a hint of frustration in his voice. The episode appeared to have upset him more than he initially let on.

Eric often used this phrase with me, "we're all human". It seemed part of his efforts to dispel any idea I might have of novice monks as some special category

of person, a distinct and cultivated form of subjectivity. From what I could gather, he was simultaneously trying to educate me, and to reproach me. Why even write about novices in the first place? What should be so interesting about us? Don't you know there is nothing remarkable or distinctive about the novice monk? They are just human beings, like everyone else (robes and shaved heads aside). These were the questions that accompanied his favoured phrase, carrying with them an emphatic message. That day, sat in the tower, Eric spoke at length about the way he was perceived by others, bemoaning his status. His discomfort didn't just spring from the way his former friends had treated him. The gifts and donations made to him at funerals and on holy days made him feel conflicted – "I haven't really done anything for it". In contrast to the occasional displays of reverence shown towards him, he felt his position was more or less worthless. He was unpersuaded by the tenets of the Buddhist faith attributing his role with religious significance. Yet despite his scepticism regarding his value as a novice monk, Eric worked hard to maintain respect as a dedicated and dutiful member of the monastic community, at school and at his home temple here at Wat Jai Fan. Even as he derided his position, he performed it with apparent skill and commitment. He was known at school for his impressive academic record and his positive attitude to his studies. He would often volunteer himself to assist teachers and monks with the irregular jobs at Wat Don Khet such as preparing for projects and events. At Wat Fai Jan he led many of the younger novices in organising the daily chore routine, such as the trip to return food containers we had set out on that day.

But there were times when Eric could not bear the difficulties presented by his position. The angst (volitional and affective) that was generated by the expectation that he constantly maintain his comportment, even when this meant contravening his privately felt doubts and resolutions, became too much. When the logic of his commitment to the monastic life appeared to break down,

when the implications made by the codes of the institution became too obtuse, Eric rebelled against the norms applied to him. A couple of incidents that he recounted to me highlighted this. The first incident occurred before I arrived to begin my fieldwork. Eric told me about it by way of a story detailing how he lost the 'head boy' position he had previously been elected to by the rest of the student body at Wat Don Khet. It was a role he felt he had been well suited to because it involved him applying his aptitudes as a novice in overlooking the conduct of his peers, while also being able to voice his doubts and concerns to school staff. He was removed from the post only a couple of months after obtaining it. One morning, during a particularly long and tedious assembly he had reached his limit. Phra Ajhan Kasem had been speaking at the front, giving what, according to Eric, was an exceptionally boring and rambling lecture. Eric's ire had been aroused as the senior monk's speech had begun to encroach into class time. Not able to stand it any longer, Eric rose from his position sat on the floor, and interrupted Phra Ajhan Kasem, asking him directly whether it was not about time for them to begin their studies for the day. This act of rebellion was met with calm by Phra Ajhan Kasem himself, but Eric reported that he had received a telling off afterwards from Phra Ajhan Ban and that the other teaching staff became conspicuously cold in their interactions with him for weeks afterwards. The act of disrespect led to him being stripped of his position as head boy, since he was deemed too insubordinate to carry out such an important role.

The second incident happened during a school council meeting Eric had attended. While he might not have been head boy anymore, he was still permitted to act as his class representative. School council meetings were called by school staff to discuss current problems at Wat Don Khet and brainstorm possible solutions to them. Unsurprisingly, Ajhan Widura, who led the meeting, was often keen to address the issue of novices' smoking habits.

According to Eric, he proposed carrying out bag searches as novices arrived at school each morning to find packs of cigarettes and confiscate them. Eric was appalled by this idea. He argued that searching everyone constituted a grievous violation of their privacy. His real frustration though seemed not to spring from the disagreement itself, but rather from Ajhan Widura and the other teachers' inability to grasp his argument. "They kept looking at me like I was crazy" he said repeatedly. It was a classic case, according to him, of the 'old headedness' (*hua gao*) constraining the teachers and monks at Wat Don Khet from managing the place better. As in the previous incident, Eric's angst appeared to burst forth where he felt his modes of thought were incompatible with those of the institution, with this incompatibility going beyond conflict on equal terms. Instead, he felt teachers and monks were erasing the logic of his position through their inability to compute the reasoning behind his frustrations.

This brief series of stories and insights provides a glimpse into just one novice's ethical subjectivity. The pains and grievances, the slights and bouts of dissonance, are attributable to these specific instances and to Eric's particular subjectivity. But what I hope I have described throughout this thesis is how such instances of volitional angst and dissonance may form integral parts of the broader project of making novices at the monastic school. Precise modes of expression and specific concerns held by the novice monks I worked with were subject to as much variation as they would be in any other institutional setting. Yet the formulation of Wat Don Khet, as a monastic school and a specific type of institution, led to overarching patterns in the way that its members engaged with its codes of practice, and rubbed up against those same codes. By way of a set of concluding remarks then, I want to apply Eric's stories to the aspects of my research question as I have aimed to dissect them throughout this thesis. In doing this, I hope to demonstrate clearly how my argument, that novices relationally construct ethical subjectivities between their institution and one

another, can explain how the novice monk was made at Wat Don Khet. At the end of this conclusion, I demonstrate how the arguments related here make interventions into key debates concerning anthropological theory on Buddhism and ethics.

The Problem of the Institution

Why did Eric react so strongly to the lack of recognition shown by his former friend? His own explanation to me, about how mystified he was at the perception of him by those outside the monastic order, provides some clues. According to his account, it seemed that Eric's own perception of his religious role and its significance drastically differed from those around him. In Chapter 1, I argued that such divergences in perspective began before novices were even ordained, with the variation in character and significance attributed to the novice life course and the rite of passage leading into it. To novices, a great number of the duties they were required to perform were, by their very nature, invested with religious importance by the laypeople who bore witness to them. For the novices themselves, these performances were mechanistic and perfunctory. They performed them so regularly that they fell back into the general texture of their lives. The ordination ceremony was no doubt emblematic of this procedure, in which Wat Don Khet as an institution was complicit in balancing the perceptions of religious significance on one side, with the prosaic nature of monastic duty on the other. But perhaps the clearest example of this was demonstrated in the story I recounted in Chapter 1, in which Eric himself was at the receiving end of the formality and religious significance invested in the modes of interaction his family exhibited towards him.

Eric's great aunt, Baa Daa, appeared to have fully invested Eric with the weight of his religious role as she made a food donation to him, demonstrating how this investment had radically shaped her way of engaging with him. In this instance, Eric made no mention of any discomfort elicited by her idealisation of him. Perhaps in this scenario, with family, in which acts of ritual giving are expected and appropriate, he was able to accept the divergence between others' perceptions of his role and his life course, and his own perceptions. In the encounter with his former friend, his expectations were apparently not so clear. He baulked at her capacity to so totally transform her affect towards him. The encounter begins to speak to the difficulty and the dissonance of Eric's position and the potential position of novices more generally. To be a novice monk was to perform duties in which one became invested with a religiously significant role and must therefore be treated with a particular form of affect respecting that role. The resulting understanding of novices' subjectivities, alongside their life courses, could not possibly match up to the realities of their day-to-day experience. Eric, for example, remained dubious about many aspects of the Buddhist faith he was meant to represent, but his role as a novice did not allow for him to be perceived in the full complexity of his discordant subjectivity. The angst he experienced because of this (again, both affective and volitional) caused him perpetual discomfort as he considered his relationships to those outside the monastic institution, and with the institution itself.

In Chapter 2 I examined the historical and discursive processes shaping the project of novice education undertaken by the staff at Wat Don Khet. Here, my assessment of divergent perspectives shifted from the novice life course to the forms of education thought to be most appropriately employed within the monastic school. The discourses of modernity and tradition, feeding into one another and altering one another, created points of conflict where claims as to their mutual compatibility broke down. I described instances where this

happened, after teacher training days, during project presentations, and inter-school competitions in which the desire for Wat Don Khet to be seen as a modern educational institution was difficult to reconcile with well-established forms of pedagogic practice, and expectations as to what monastic education should look like. While teachers and monks had the unenviable job of attempting to reconcile conflicting discourses, their task was perhaps made all the more difficult by the fact that novices exhibited a high level of sensitivity in identifying these conflicts. This is not to say that novices were apt to point out instances of ideological difference underpinning discourses, but their expressions of discomfort and mockery targeting such instances spoke to a latent understanding that some institutional operation was straying into a realm of incompatibility that could appear frustrating or even ridiculous and laughable. The attempts at leveraging crypto-colonial (Herzfeld, 2002) techniques and the utilisation of concepts and language from imaginaries of modernity sometimes collapsed in ways that could be painfully obvious to novices, even as their seniors tried in vain to make them work.

Eric's story about the school council meeting was indicative of this. The entire enterprise of the meeting was a product of the development of modern education discourses championing the autonomy of students. The logic of the discourse advanced notions that contributing to their institution and its management (rather than merely being subject to it) can be an important aspect of education (cf. Kuan, 2015). Eric understood this, which made it even more frustrating when, as he saw it, Ajhan Widura subverted the ideals underpinning the meeting by attempting to force through what was, from Eric's perspective, an authoritarian and old-headed measure. Eric's disbelief as he kept repeating the phrase — "they were looking at me like I was crazy" — was revealing of his inability to grasp the paradox of the situation, his frustration springing from the idea that his teachers were not even able to perceive the

incompatibility of discourses that they were themselves sparking. How could Widura on the one hand call a meeting based upon a notion of equality between students and staff, yet then instantaneously invalidate that same sense of equality by insisting upon measures that novices did not agree to? Occasions such as this, in which modern education discourses conflicted with the realities of Wat Don Khet's operation, seemed to be more apparent to novices than to staff. Perhaps because novices like Eric were so conversant in modern education discourses, as they were exposed to them from the start of their adolescence and quite possibly even before then, the conflicts appeared more obvious and egregious. Novices who were especially committed to the development of their academic prowess seemed particularly attuned to this. They demonstrated skill in quickly understanding the ideals of modern education discourses and could quickly leverage this understanding. Eric did this alongside Max, when they presented a project on soil types to the visiting school coaches. Teachers and other novices may have struggled to impress the academics, but these two seemed thoroughly in tune with the qualities expressing critical thinking and initiative that the school coaches were looking for.

The combination of discourses, and the divergent and unexpected results emerging from such combinations, were demonstrated in relation in the way novices undertook exams at Wat Don Khet. In the preparations and carrying out of exams, there were clues as to how elements of novices' ethical subjectivities were maintained, in line with the values of the monastic school. The adoption of the 'ritual stance' as it is described by Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994), was crucial in cultivating the correct type of performance when taking the Nak Thamm ecclesiastical exams. The sublimation of intentionality, giving oneself over to ritual action, was an expectation and an element of monastic comportment. To a novice like Eric, this was not a difficult task. The adoption of the correct ritual stance is one performance novices begin learning even before

their ordination ceremony. For those who committed themselves to this aspect of monastic duty, the ritual stance was a part of their complex relationship to their religious role. The comingling of discourses, of modern notions of the exam as instrument, set against a 'traditional' conception of the exam as rite of passage for example, meant that any simple notion of adherence or resistance to the code of practice implied by the exam was meaningless. This became clear, for the simple reason that no single, easily apprehensible code of practice could be gleaned from an event like the exam, because it remained subject to the push and pull of a complex of discourses that surrounded it. For Eric, the questions he had about the meaning or meaninglessness of his position could not be answered via an appeal to the cacophony of competing discourses he found in interaction with the processes and events inherent to Wat Don Khet's activity. Whether he approached the examination as ritual action, as seemed to be demanded, or subverted the event by cheating, thereby applying an act of reflection, he would not find any definitive answers.

Negotiated Subjectivities

The problem presented by the central paradox of monastic schooling, and the task of developing an ethical subjectivity within that institution, ran throughout novitiate life. In Chapter 4 we saw how novice monks may exist in a state of perpetual moral dissonance, with the codes of morality prescribed by the monastic institution jarring with their own evaluations and impressions. Moralising lessons were often unconvincing, and engaged with merely as chores, as events requiring a particular stance in order to navigate them smoothly, while maintaining one's contempt for them. Novices like Eric may have bought into the codes of morality taught by Ajhan Widura and his colleagues to some extent, but they were nevertheless capable of cultivating divergent moral standpoints at the same time. The resulting moral dissonance

may, ultimately, have been convenient for all parties. Teachers and monks were able to witness and point to the outward behaviour of novices as they conformed to their normative expectations, while novices were free to regard the teachers' norms with barely concealed derision. Yet as we saw in the instances of genuine defiance against norms, in cases where rules were conspicuously disregarded, the uneasy alliance of moral dissonance could break down.

This seemed to be what happened when Eric rebelled against the social hierarchy that usually kept novices from actively criticising older monks. His breach of the moral norms of Wat Don Khet was especially fascinating here, as it conformed neither to the steady balance of moral dissonance nor to the outright breakdown of moral relations seen when novices were caught illicitly contravening their precepts, or anything resembling a moral breakdown in Zigon's (2007, 2009) terms. Eric's action was shocking in how much it ran against the accepted disciplinary codes holding Phra Ajhan Kasem as the ultimate figure of moral authority at the school, but this was not in and of itself punishable beyond the removal of Eric's title as head boy. This may be why, while Eric did receive what appeared to be a relatively minor punishment (compared with the usual threats of expulsion) he was treated differently by members of staff for some time after the incident. If he had been caught drinking or smoking, he could have been reprimanded until he showed genuine contrition and the uneasy status quo of moral dissonance could have returned. But this was not an option, Eric would not show contrition, and so the moral relations between him and the institution were damaged in a way that would take longer to forget but could not result in a total breakdown of relations. The moral dissonance held between novices and the figures governing the monastic school was a result of more than a mere accident of two moral value spheres colliding (Robbins, 2007). It was itself an integral

negotiation, a manageable state of tension that allowed all stakeholders in the project of making novices to live with one another's conflicting ideals. Plainly spoken denials of the value of another's ideals posed the risk of eliminating the possibility of negotiation. This was the threat posed by Eric's act of defiance.

This issue, the potential negation of the terms of negotiation between novices and their institution, could make individuals' place within the monastic school impossible to maintain. The story of Jack's inability to remain at Wat Don Khet, related in Chapter 5, was illustrative of this. Interestingly, unlike Eric, Jack never expressed any frustrations about the code of discipline he was required to follow. His motivation to leave seemed predicated more on the alternative possibilities for self-making he saw outside the confines of his robes, than on a dissatisfaction with the internal moral logic of the institution itself. Jack had never let the image of himself falter from that of the model novice, right up until he suddenly left. He had even held the position of head boy, following his election to the post after Eric was removed from it. When Eric broke with institutional norms, the position was used to punish him, with teachers claiming that the holder must serve as an example to all their peers. By contrast, Jack's tenure as head boy only led to more praise, as the way he conducted himself in the role was held up as a fine demonstration of his leadership in providing a model of comportment. Considering the two monks' experiences of the novitiate life in retrospect, despite their actions speaking to the contrary, they both held on to their role as novices as a core component of their ethical subjectivities. This commitment to their monasticism expressed itself in radically different ways and was contradicted by competing elements of their developing subjectivities in different ways. For Jack, a commitment to the monkhood meant conforming to its norms and standards, exemplifying them through control and comportment. For Eric, it meant a similar dedication to the duties of the novice monk, but this was accompanied by a duty to hold up

certain ideals of the role even if they were deemphasised by the monastic institution at large.

This comparison demonstrates the plurality of ways novices could undergo the experience of volitional angst. For Jack it was about alternate possibilities, for Eric it was about internal contradictions. Both were attempting to reconcile commitments to forms of subjectivity that proved to be ethically incompatible. I do not want to claim that these instances of incompatibility constitute a comprehensive accounting of the forms of ethical subjectivity, and the volitional angst that could be associated with them, that novices experienced at Wat Don Khet. They merely serve as two examples illustrating the paradox novices were faced with, of the need to live in pursuit of one set of ideals while shaping oneself in directions running counter to those same ideals. As a further example of this, Eric's own doubt and affective angst directed at his feelings of guilt, and devaluation of the novice role, recall novices' judgements about the inferior status of monastic masculinities. In both instances, the traits that define novice monkhood – the acceptance of donations, the commitment to a religious position demanding the deference of laypeople – are derided as lacking in value, as inauthentic when compared with the forms of subjectivity novices *did* value. Eric, and the novices longing to embody more 'authentic' forms of masculinity, maintained an awareness that their performances of monastic comportment could be superficial. The question remains though, why did Eric and these novices still continue to cultivate their positions as monastics, engaging with the institution and keeping up their performances of the novice role? Was it a mere practical necessity, afforded by the economic circumstances of their families? A price to be paid in exchange for an education? I do not think the answer is quite so simple.

Jack and Eric, among many other novices, exhibited a genuine commitment to the edicts of monastic duty. If they were just engaging in a superficial performance, there would be no need for them to volunteer their time and labours so readily. It would have been far easier to conform to the behaviour of other novices, who just barely toed the line of acceptability for monastic conduct with their frequent rule breaking. To account for the forms of ethical subjectivity engaged in by novices, it is necessary to acknowledge the real collaborative influence of all the other stakeholders in the project of making novices, including Wat Don Khet itself. Describing the workings of this relational construction of ethical subjectivities was my project in the previous chapter. Novices came to understand their place in the social hierarchy of their community by way of an active negotiation. This negotiation might be described, following Zigon (2021), as a form of questioning, an inquiry into 'what lies between us?' Novice monks appeared to subconsciously pose this question in reference to their relationships with teachers, monks, one another, and the institution as a whole. I attempted to demonstrate this via an exploration of the ways novices engaged in games and play. The examples I gave, involved delicate negotiations between novices, and their use of their capacities to evaluate how their practices would be perceived outside their peer group. While the negotiations I describe often did manage to produce an equilibrium between the various forms of subjectivity active in the serious games of Wat Don Khet, it would be a mistake to conclude that such negotiations universally achieved harmony. Balances between novices' desires to play serious games, skirting the edge of prohibited gambling practices or cheating on their exams, were usually mitigated by the necessity to navigate the uneasy moral dissonance between themselves, and the evaluative capacities exercised by institution staff. And these uneasy alliances could collapse if pressure were applied at the wrong point.

The scenarios between Eric and Ajhan Widura at the school council meeting, or between him and Phra Ajahn Kasem during assembly, provide examples of this. To Eric, both instances implied an assumption as to novices' ethical subjectivities on the part of the adults, an assumption that made novices into the types of subjects who were morally obliged to conform to a code of discipline without complaint. Eric's own perspective, shaped as much in his interactions with his peers through games, as it was by the institution, rejected this imposition. The existence of conflicts like this, in which the ethical viewpoint of one party is projected on to another's, does not imply the collapse of any party's ethical subjectivity per se – contrary to Zigon's belief. From Widura, or Phra Ajhan Kasem's perspectives, the impositions were ethically righteous, indeed it did not appear to occur to either of them that they were making impositions at all. The point to take away from the incompatibility of perspectives here – on the divergent perspectives on novices' ethical subjectivities – is that these conflicts themselves helped to define the relationally negotiated subjectivities novices ended up developing. I think this is a part of what could make the novitiate life difficult.

Whether they wanted to emulate forms of masculinity or play games that were officially off limits to them, novice monks had to understand their practices as part of the relational ethics governing Wat Don Khet's social hierarchy. When teachers or monks encountered impasses, when their attitudes to their occupation conflicted with the project of providing an education, they were often able to overcome the resulting conflicts with novices by imposing the disciplinary mechanisms to which they had access. For novices, it was not so easy. To maintain aspects of their subjectivities developed between one another in contravention of the norms of the monastic school, they had to find ways to incorporate their practices and desires into the unsteady flow of moral dissonance. If they did not, they were subject to untenable positions of

volitional angst. In conversation with Eric in the drum tower, he was perhaps vocally walking himself through a process of mitigation. The guilt he felt about the lack of value he perceived in his monastic role needed to be rationalised and controlled. This was the only way to subdue the volitional angst generated by a subjectivity that pulled in multiple directions.

Buddhist Novice, Buddhist Layman

This study has aimed to contribute to the anthropological study of Buddhism by illustrating the point at which lay and monastic practices meet. Much of the significant anthropological work on monastic Buddhism privileges the position of the adult monastic. As committed adherents to the Buddhist faith, anthropologists have sought a dialogue with monks and nuns to reveal aspects of the quest to cultivate subjectivities in line with Buddhist ideals. Several of these studies have been highly influential in the anthropological study of religion. Classic work by Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1989), Tambiah (1970, 1976), and Spiro (1970) for example, have all contributed to a nuanced understanding of the operation of ascetic practices through deep engagement with Buddhist contexts. Going beyond the domain of religious adepts, studies like Tambiah's (1976) offer extended engagement with the political structure of Buddhist nations, looking at how Buddhist ideals have been instrumental in constructing the self-conscious images of the state prevalent in Thailand. Despite such an abundance of insightful work in this area, lay Buddhism has, in general, received less attention. While some landmark studies such as those by Eberhardt (2006) and Bunnag (1973) have examined the ways Buddhist practice and ideals shape the contours of lay life, ethnographic work has tended to focus on the pious side of Buddhist practice.

Following the example set by several recent projects, this study has aimed to depict the ways committed forms of monasticism intersect with lay life. In temporary ordination traditions this perspective is vitally important, since the moves in and out of monastic life, with their attendant transformations in subjectivity, are of as much anthropological interest as the self-cultivation of life-long monastics. This approach in assessing the religious subjectivities of Buddhists has been effectively implemented in studies looking at the influence of popular meditation movements that have emerged as notions of Buddhist modernism have gained greater purchase. Work by Cook (2010b), Jordt (2007), and Laidlaw and Mair (2019) consider the influence changing lay practice is having on Buddhist monastic life, while also acknowledging the complex subjectivities of monastics themselves, taking careful stock of their formative experiences to highlight the complex interplay between different forms of ethical and religious subjectivity. However, these studies have still taken place primarily with religiously committed adults. This thesis has presented a case in which divergent forms of subjectivity are actively in dialogue with one another. The astute reflections of Buddhist lay life in the studies referenced here generally concern laypeople with an explicit deepfelt commitment to Buddhist ideals. As found in the anthropology of Islam, this focus runs the risk of precluding forms of religious subjectivity that are not predicated on the earnest quest towards an ultimate ideal (Schielke, 2010). They are therefore not able to delve into reflections on what happens in Buddhist contexts in which putative adherents are in conflict with many of the ideals they are expected to emulate.

Through an examination of the monastic school, we have seen the ways religious ideals are apprehended by novice monks. This apprehension can be a nuanced and difficult navigational task, as demonstrated by the forms of volitional angst generated when Buddhist ideal meets the cultivated subjectivity of the adolescent novice. The difficulty is equally visible in the

projects and practices of teachers and monks, as they strive to live up to Buddhist ideals even as they are expected to exhibit fluency in the discourses of modern education. The monastic school as an institution encapsulates this understudied concern in the anthropological engagement with Buddhism. It serves as a site where the devout ascetic ideals of the Buddhist monastic must be reconciled with the more equivocal and ambiguous forms of belief and practice necessitated by the practical realities of lay life, and the opportunities for divergent forms of ethical subjectivity available to the layman. As this study has demonstrated, the tradition of monastic schooling is rapidly transforming, with institutions like Wat Don Khet struggling to maintain relevance. One objective of this thesis has been to capture a brief picture of this form of education, valuable as it is for the anthropology of Buddhism, and the study of Thai Buddhism in general, before it is further transformed by the demands of a modern education system.

Locating Ethics in Education

At the start of this thesis, I defined its central project as an investigation into the ethical subjectivities of novice monks. This project is of particular anthropological interest because of the novel perspective it offers in addressing questions of ethics. In setting out to answer questions on the cultivation of ethical subjectivities theoretical problems immediately present themselves in the context of an educational institution, as competing discourses confuse even the most basic attempts to grasp at a set of norms, or track the projects of self-cultivation pursued by its adherents. These difficulties are reflected in one central issue that has attracted a particularly fevered debate among theorists writing on the anthropology of ethics: the task of locating the domain of ethics, pinning down where in people's lives their ethical subjectivities manifest themselves. In this thesis I have aimed to describe the forms of ethical

subjectivity at play in the lives of novice monks, but was I to suppose that these subjectivities were formed via deliberation and reflection (Robbins, 2016), or by unconscious 'ordinary' experience? (Das, 2010, 2012, 2015; Lambek, 2010) This is how the problem has often been framed. The domain of the ethical is supposed to be located either in the deliberative and evaluative (or transcendent as they are often termed) capacities of subjects or in their ordinary interactions, where reflective capacities are not necessary in describing people's ethical choices and actions (Das, 2012; Robbins, 2016; Zigon, 2021). For the ethnographer interested in ethical subjectivities the debate presents a practical problem. Should I be directly asking my interlocutors about their processes of deliberation and about the ethical choices they make? Or is this to miss the point entirely? Should I instead stand back, observing and participating in ordinary life as the opportunity arises and reading the ordinary ethical dramas people grapple with through my perceptions of this activity?

Through the latter three chapters of this thesis, part of my aim has been to make an intervention into this debate, arguing for an approach that deconstructs the dichotomy of ordinary and deliberative perspectives on ethics in anthropology. Ethnographic evidence presented here suggests that the domain of ethics cannot be exclusively located in one aspect of life and not the other. Ethics are persistently at work in both, existing relationally between subjects, who must maintain and cultivate their subjectivities with reference to one another. This inevitably involves frequent instances in which deliberation and evaluative capacities are in play, which form as much a part of 'ordinary' ethical life as more unconscious forms of interaction do. I advocate for this approach to understanding ethical subjectivities, which has been supported by the analyses of ethical subject formation undertaken as part of this study, and builds on Zigon's (2021) argument that the dichotomy between ordinary and transcendent ethics is false.

For novice monks, as they negotiated their own processes of subject formation, they were only periodically conscious of the choices they were making. These processes were informed by 'ordinary' reactions to the circumstances of their lives, to the constraints placed upon them by their institution and the moralising lessons of their seniors. But the fact that their reactions were instinctive does not preclude their status as evaluations (Clarke, 2014). When novices reacted contemptuously to aspects of the monastic life, they were exercising their reflective freedom (Laidlaw, 2013) to apprehend and evaluate the ideals and values they were being presented with. Evaluation, and the exercise of reflective freedom, were ordinary occurrences at the monastic school. There were of course also moments where more serious deliberation took place. Novice monks' deliberative projects, forming part of the development of their ethical subjectivities, took many forms, and I have only explored a limited number of clear examples here. The deliberative instances of ethical reflection I have focused on have been those in which Buddhist ideals underpinning the monastic school and defining the role of the novice have come up against some other deeply held set of values. The difficult negotiations undertaken by Jack and Eric were emblematic of this, both grappling with their situations of volitional angst to try to reconcile seemingly incompatible ideals.

As I made clear in the previous chapters, by examining the instinctive acts of evaluation, and the more extended situations concerning volitional angst separately, I do not intend to impose yet another binary partition upon ethical life. Rather than trying to break processes of ethical subject formation down into a morality of reproduction and a morality of freedom (Robbins, 2007), or a state of moral stability and a state of moral breakdown (Zigon, 2007, 2009), or indeed an ethics of the ordinary and an ethics of the transcendent (Das, 2012; Robbins, 2016), I have aimed to describe the process of ethical subject formation

as a relational and contiguous whole. This approach presents a clear challenge to critiques of the anthropology of ethics, claiming that attempts to ethnographically engage with people's practices of ethical subject formation are liable to devolve into moralising judgements of one's interlocuters (Holbraad, 2018). I have attempted here to present the experiences of ethical subject formation of those working and living at Wat Don Khet, and the wider network of the monastic school, with equal analytical weight. The aim of my project has been to consider the negotiations of adolescent novice monks, as they relationally construct their own ethical subjectivities with the same level of complexity and commitment demonstrated in the pursuit of religious ideals undertaken by lifelong monastics.

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Appendix I

Sample of translated responses to survey question: 'What is a novice monk?'

- A novice is one who has taken ordination, respects ten precepts, and is not yet twenty years old.
- A novice is the same as a monk, but they are younger and are obliged to follow fewer precepts. Novices have ten precepts while monks have two hundred and twenty-seven.
- Some who is ordained, follows ten precepts and is younger that twenty, or a youth who is celibate and serves the Buddhist religion.
- A person who follows the ten Buddhist precepts.

Appendix II

Self-reported occupations of parents/guardians of **282** novice monks enrolled at Wat Don Khet School from **2016-2021**. Data translated and reproduced here with permission of Wat Don Khet School.

Occupation	**No. of parents/guardians**
Farmer	236
Itinerant employment	230
Merchant	24
Construction	12
Gardener	4
Teacher	3
Government service	3
Police officer	2
Nursing assistant	1
Homemaker	1
Driver	1
Car mechanic	1