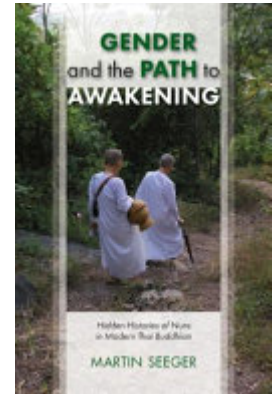


Martin Seeger. *Gender and the Path to Awakening: Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism.* Silkworm Books, 2018. 360 pp. \$40.00, paper, ISBN 978-616215147-7.



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The lives of many accomplished Thai Buddhist female practitioners may always remain hidden. Yet Martin Seeger's brilliant book clearly and persuasively shows us that, contrary to oversimplified depictions of religious hierarchies and gender relations in Thai Buddhism, female Buddhist saints exist in Thailand, and they have been overlooked by both Thai and Western scholarship. In *Gender and the Path to Awakening*, Seeger assembles the hidden histories of female Buddhist practitioners through painstaking research and in-depth descriptions of women's biographies. Resistance to speaking about their own lives, emphasis on oral culture, and obscurity of written materials, some of which have been painstakingly discovered and brought to light by Seeger, mean that it is only in recent times that Thai female saints have attained translocal fame. Seeger sets out to understand these women's religious experiences and modes of expression—how they described and reflected on their spiritual aspirations, paths, and achieve-

ments—and how they are perceived by others. In this long-term textual and ethnographic study, Seeger has done Buddhist studies, Thai studies, and anthropology a huge service.

The book begins with a review of previous scholarship on women in Thai Buddhism as a lead-in to exploring the complex ambiguities of the roles of women in modern Thai Buddhism and some of the recent changes in those roles. Seeger's representation of the scholarship, here and elsewhere, is even-handed and detailed. Seeger observes that the number of known female saints is low relative to their male counterparts, and that there is a relative absence of images and symbols of and books about advanced female practitioners in Thailand. And, importantly for his argument, he notes that the translocal veneration of female saints in Thailand is a recent phenomenon. Increasing numbers of Thai women are widely acknowledged for excelling as dhamma teachers, revered as Buddhist saints, or recognized for their

social engagement. Through the development of print media, digital media, and material culture such as icons and architecture, the fame of such women extends through translocal networks, generating high numbers of devotees. Transformations in communicative and material culture go some way to account for the spread of translocal fame, but later in the book we are treated to Seeger's exploration of orality and memorialization as key components in the earlier absence of popular and scholarly account of female practitioners as "noble ones" (*ariya*; i.e., those who have attained levels of awakening).

Chapter 2 focuses squarely on biography and hagiography through detailed discussions of the biographies of Khunying Damrongthammasan (Yai Wisetsiri), Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem, and Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam, and shorter summaries of the life stories of Mae Chi Nari Karun, Mae Chi Phimpha Wongsu-udom, and Mae Chi Soda Sosut. Seeger provides a comprehensive overview of the character of autobiographical writing and hagiographical literature in Thai Buddhism, noting that biographical literature on female Thai Buddhist practitioners emerged significantly later than that on male monastics and that, while hagiographic texts of male charismatic Thai Buddhists are extremely popular in Thailand, hagiographic texts about female Thai Buddhist practitioners are rare. One thing that comes across most clearly in this chapter is the hard graft that went into researching and assembling the material on which it is based. Hagiographies of female saints are often orally transmitted, and printed materials in the form of cremation volumes or teachings typically have low circulation figures and local distribution within small communities. At one point, Seeger notes that he "regard[s] these texts as treasures," and one can well imagine the treasure hunter's "eureka moment" on discovering a text like Khunying Yai's cremation volume among thousands of dusty books at a monastery in Chon Buri (p. 48). The changing nature of the circulation and reach of hagiographies of female saints is explored in

fascinating detail. Seeger draws on an impressive range of sources—hagiographical accounts, sermon texts and letters, numerous individual and group interviews, participant observation—to establish the issues that biographers, devotees and the women themselves regarded as most meaningful, and this is augmented to an impressive degree through sustained comparison with Pali canonical and postcanonical literature.

Chapter 3 asks, "What makes a saint a saint in modern Thai Buddhism?" a question for which there is no straightforward answer. Seeger explores how advanced practitioners come to be recognized as saints by juxtaposing definitions and concepts of sainthood in the Pali literature with social constructions of Buddhist sainthood in modern Thai Buddhism. Fascinatingly, this necessitates an exploration of the particularities of and consequences of the gender of saints. While in the Pali scriptures all crucial qualities of an arahant are nonphysical, in contemporary Thai Buddhism visible manifestations of sainthood are important for the recognition of a saint. For example, the post-mortem quality of the corpse is an important indication of spiritual purity. This includes both the corpse emitting a fragrant odor and the crystallization of bones into relics. Similarly, sainthood is often evidenced by unusual occurrences during death or the funeral of a practitioner, such as rain atypical for the season, sudden rain, unusual phenomena in the sky, animals behaving strangely, et cetera. The supramundane eradication of mental defilements (*kilesa*), while significant, is taken as a given in the presence of such supernatural occurrences. The central paradox of Buddhist sainthood, as flagged here, is that assertions of sainthood are to be explicitly avoided and often implicit language or visual indications (pictures of specific monks depicted with halos, etc.) may be used to signal sainthood, and yet Thai Buddhists routinely and unequivocally ascribe arahantship to specific Buddhist practitioners. Through his analysis of the life accounts and veneration of Mae Bunruean and Mae Chi Kaew, Seeger further prob-

lematizes the categories of lay and ordained, showing that a dichotomy between being “fully” ordained and being lay is challenged through the veneration of saints whose charisma was based on supernatural powers and spiritual insights outside the Thai monastic community (*sangha*).

The two central chapters of the book, chapters 4 and 5, are (to my mind) the most intellectually exciting. In revealing the “hidden histories” of advanced female practitioners, Seeger draws on the significance of material culture (chapter 4) and orality and memory (chapter 5). Taken together, they mount an important, though perhaps more implicit than I might have liked, critique of the biases of academia. In chapter 4, Seeger makes the case that material culture is as much a part of religion as language, thought, or ritual. Through an analysis of the relics, stūpas, and amulets associated with the women in his study, Seeger is able to draw out the powerful effects that objects have during the women’s lives and post mortem. He makes the important point that relics and amulets are “repositories of sacred power,” and it is often through the circulation and fame of these objects that people learn about and cultivate faith in a particular saint (p. 140). In so doing, Seeger provides an in-depth account of the ways Buddhist sainthood is created, circulated, and reproduced, and the ways the charisma of a saint extends beyond death.

He provides a fascinating account of the crystallization of Mae Chi Kaew’s relics and the ways this contributed to her veneration, indexed by the building of stupas, publication of hagiographies, and the production of amulets and statues. It is a powerful illustration of the ways the circulation of charisma and fame are facilitated and mediated by material culture. Seeger shows that the biography of Mae Chi Kaew extends more widely in death than it ever did during her lifetime. He shows how, given the range of themes that are present in a given biography, a limited number of stories become characteristic of a narrative of a

particular renunciant. In a beautiful piece of comparative analysis with Mae Bunruean, Seeger considers the meaning attributed to the material culture associated with each saint. While Mae Chi Kaew’s relics are perceived as a physical representation of the ultimate aim of Buddhist soteriology, the significance of Mae Bunruean’s relics lies in the generation and dissemination of supernatural powers. In both, the power and charisma of the saint are magnified and disseminated after death through material culture, impacting religious practices and beliefs.

Chapter 5 makes an important commentary on women’s access to knowledge in Buddhist learning environments. It shows that Buddhist women historically had access to (sometimes high-ranking) monk teachers. This provides an important contribution to the history of Buddhist education in Thailand. In the context of a committed emphasis on appropriate relations between female Buddhist and monks, Buddhist teaching was regularly transmitted orally through intensive pedagogical relationships. Seeger shows that literacy did not play a decisive role in many of the pedagogical relationships between a Buddhist master and his students, be they male or female. And he makes a strong case for the importance of orality and memorization in Buddhist learning environments.

It is to the strength of the discussion that Seeger evidences the frequency and precision of the ways the women and their biographers refer to, interpret, adopt, and implement Pali canonical teachings and regulations on monastic discipline (*vinaya*). In so doing, he shows that these women had access to and internalized Pali canonical and postcanonical narratives and concepts that shaped, informed, and enriched their spiritual lives. He also combines this with textual research of other sources to show that a number of beliefs and practices in the veneration of Thai saints cannot be found in authoritative Pali texts but are important for understanding the lives of female

saints nonetheless. In so doing, Seeger provides significant insight into women's motivation for learning and the cultural value of knowledge in the context of Buddhist teaching. Committing large amounts of Pali texts to memory was significant both for women's dhamma teaching and for their meditation practice. Women such as Khuny-ing Yai commanded a vast and precise knowledge of Buddhist teaching. But, as Seeger points out, memorization was significant because it enabled an internalization, contemplation, and realization of Buddhist teaching. That is, the motivation for educational effort was coterminous with the spiritual attainment of the saint. Herculean command of Buddhist doctrines was seen as an integral part of both male and female spiritual practice. Despite many of them being illiterate or semiliterate, these women had access to what they deemed to be the most valuable knowledge, as a result of which they were highly revered by laypeople and monastics alike.

The final chapter of the book focuses on the ways Thai female practitioners themselves reflected on issues related to gender. It is striking but not surprising that the women in the study did not challenge existing structures of gendered hierarchy in Thai society. Their teachings rarely reflect on the meaning of gender but rather focus on the importance and rarity of being born as a human being with access to Buddhist teaching, as an extraordinarily precious opportunity to escape from the cycle of rebirth. In the light of the awesome scale of this perspective, gender is rendered insignificant. Seeger highlights the gender-specific obstacles that women faced in their spiritual practice, including the social obstacles to renouncing lay life and pursuing spiritual practice in seclusion, but he shows that the negative consequences of these experiences were motivating factors for women's spiritual journeys, leading to a "weariness of life" and commitment to spiritual development. Seeger concludes the book by reminding us that, within gendered religious and social hierarchies, not only have there been numerous wo-

men who have pursued the path to awakening, but that they have been highly revered as a result.

There is no other work that I know of to match Seeger's book for its methodological rigor. Seeger conducted ethnographic research and numerous interviews with devotees of the women in the study. He compares biographical and devotional elements with pertinent ideas and practices described in the sacred texts of the Pali canon and commentarial texts, revealing an impressive mastery of the canonical literature. He makes use of other textual materials including amulet magazines, Buddhist magazines on the supernatural, and sermon texts by or about the women of the study, as well as comments on Buddhist blogs and amulet websites. But what really sets this work apart is the analysis of biographical and homiletic texts—many of which have never been translated and are extremely rare—with a particular focus on cremation volumes. A kind of literature that is scattered and ephemeral, these books are published and distributed for free on the occasion of funerals in order to generate religious merit. One gets a sense of the urgency of engagement with these texts, many of which were already partially eaten by termites when Seeger discovered them.

Seeger proposes, rightly I think, that data on the lives or even the existence of a high number of locally highly revered female practitioners has irretrievably been lost due to an unwillingness to record their biographies, a lack of interest in their biographies, or reliance on oral tradition rather than writing. But reading this book, one is left with the sense that the preferences of the academy also contribute to their invisibility. One cannot help but conclude that scholarly assumptions about oral/aural culture and the value of the knowledge it generates have left us with a partial picture of Thai Buddhism and rendered invisible women's practice and their relationships to monks. Seeger's account of inspiring religious lives that have been rendered invisible because of

the cultural value of knowledge and the nature of academic priorities is a helpful reminder to scholars that our own assumptions radically inform the ways we make sense of and portray the world. It is through the hard graft of painstaking research that Seeger is able to reveal this alternative picture and these hidden histories.

One wonders just how much merit has been generated through the research and writing of this book. Seeger's account of the generation of hagiography flags the ways in which female saints' lives extend beyond their corporal existence, influencing the world and Thai Buddhism. Surely, writing these lives and afterlives with such exquisite detail is an instantiation and a perpetuation of the charisma that it documents: This is a treasure of a book.

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