

Monastic Discipline and Communal Rules for Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar and Thailand¹

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Abstract

This study explores the contemporary social reality of Buddhist precept nuns in Myanmar and Thailand through the lens of the monastic regulations and communal rules they adhere to, and how/if such rules inform their monastic discipline and communal cohesion. The concept of cohesion, in turn, may have much to tell us about nuns' ritual practices and religious activities in relation to those of monks, as well as about their engagement with the outside world. The article also discusses nuns' legal status in relation to the state, the traditional norms for Buddhist women in various socio-religious contexts, and the workings of hierarchy, authority and punishment in nunneries. In recent decades, some Buddhist nuns in both countries have expanded the size of their communities and enhanced their levels of education in part by upholding discipline and following Buddhist rules and norms. However, the dynamics differ between Myanmar and Thailand. While *thilashin* in Myanmar have worked closely with monks by offering ritual services (and are now fully integrated into the wider Buddhist community there), *mae chi* in Thailand have enhanced their education and spiritual development by making the most of their independent status outside the control of the sangha.

Keywords

bhikkhunī, precept nuns, *thilashin*, *mae chi*, monastic discipline, communal rules, education

Introduction

Today, there are large numbers of female renunciants in Theravāda Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia, who are called *thilashin* in Myanmar and *mae chi* in Thailand in their local vernacular. In this article, we refer to them as “Buddhist nuns” in general or more specifically as “precept nuns,” because they are mostly Eight-precept observers, along with a few Ten-precept female adherents.² These nuns are not ordained *bhikkhunī*. The *bhikkhunī* sangha became extinct in Myanmar and Sri

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² The few Ten Precept nuns are highly respected for their moral purity. They do not handle money and refrain from any secular occupation, and for that reason, have a unique position of religious autonomy.

Lanka around the twelfth century, and it was never fully established in Thailand.³ Hence the precept nuns cannot undergo the ordination procedure prescribed in the Vinaya in their own countries today, but several Myanmar and Thai women have travelled to Sri Lanka where they can receive *bhikkhunī* ordination.⁴ However, these attempts by Buddhist women have so far not been recognized by the sangha or the government in these countries. Meanwhile, an increasing number of young women are opting to become Buddhist nuns and ordained as “precept nuns” according to the formal procedures accepted as legitimate in their local monastic communities.

From a civil-law viewpoint, a woman is largely unaffected by becoming a Buddhist nun, in contrast to a man whose legal status changes dramatically when he becomes a Buddhist monk.⁵ In other words, a *thilashin* or *mae chi* continues to be endowed with civil rights and social obligations towards her immediate and extended family in the same manner as a laywoman;⁶ whereas a man, once ordained, comes directly under the jurisdiction of monastic rules called the Vinaya, which oblige him to renounce all civil, property and inheritance rights. Although we notice today that Myanmar monks possess many items that are not mentioned in the Vinaya such as smart phones, iPads and briefcases. If an item is donated personally to a monk, he is normally allowed to keep it as long as it is nothing extravagant. On the other hand, there is a general perception that every item a monk uses or carries belongs to the sangha and accumulating personal possessions is usually discouraged in the monastic community. Following traditional norms, a Buddhist nun, once ordained, may give up her property rights and donate her possessions to the nunnery with which she becomes affiliated. However, she is not forced to do so. In practice, many ordained nuns retain their property rights and some even continue to draw their pensions. This unique half-way position of Buddhist nuns – in between the laity and the sangha, both worldly and other-worldly – has allowed them to navigate between the religious and secular worlds, tactically asserting whichever identity best helps them to achieve their goals.

The precept nuns’ relationships with the state, the sangha, and other authorities are also an important factor in defining their religious identity. *Thilashin* in Myanmar, for instance, are official members of the national monastic organization since the sangha reorganization in the early 1980s, and although they are not ordained *bhikkhunī*, *thilashin* especially those with state-accredited *dhamma* qualifications, are summoned to participate in public ceremonies to complement ritual roles conducted

³ It has never been possible for women to receive *bhikkhunī* ordination from the Thai sangha, since the *bhikkhunī* order never took root in Thailand. See Nancy Auer Falk, “The case of the vanishing nuns: The fruits of ambivalence in ancient Indian Buddhism,” in *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*, eds. Nancy Falk and Rita Gross (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 207–223; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1991).

⁴ Hiroko Kawanami, “The *Bhikkhunī* Ordination Debate: Global Aspirations, Local Concerns, with Special Emphasis on the Views of the Monastic Community in Burma,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 24, no. 2 (2007): 226–244.

⁵ Passports of Buddhist nuns show that they are still registered in their lay names in Thailand and Sri Lanka, and even in Mahāyāna countries such as Taiwan and China. The situation is different in Myanmar, where the government officially acknowledges a nun’s Buddhist title and identifies her with it in her travel documents.

⁶ Mya Sein, *Myanma Bokdābatha Taya Ubadei* (Mandalay: Thīwāyebun, 1962), 319.

by the monks.⁷ *Mae chi* in Thailand, on the other hand, have carved out autonomous spaces for their religious activities outside the control of the Thai sangha. Those who have established independent nunneries have improved their religious position and fostered education under the leadership of the Thai Nuns' Institute (*Sathaaban Mae Chi Thai*). In Myanmar, the state adopted the communal rules and norms traditionally observed by *thilashin* in one local monastic community as the reference point, which were then endorsed by the Supreme Sangha Council and became known as the code of conduct for all *thilashin* in Myanmar. In both countries, these nuns have renounced their secular identity to become members of their respective monastic communities. They adhere to legal frameworks they have developed for themselves to protect their monastic identity, and as a result, observe a large number of communal rules that structure their lives and activities. In fact, the rules they follow as precept nuns even outnumber the rules prescribed for *bhikkhunī* in the Pātimokkha. Many of these rules are intended to train them in moral discipline and give them a clear religious identity as well as a routinized structure in their monastic lives.

Part 1. Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar

Buddhism is accorded a special position in Myanmar's constitution, and plays a pivotal role in society as the faith professed and practised by the majority of the population, providing them with a specific worldview, moral foundation, and vision for the future.⁸ The country's Buddhist monastic community currently comprises half a million monks and novices, and more than 60,000 precept nuns,⁹ one of the largest populations of Buddhist nuns in any single country.¹⁰ The overall number of young nuns have seen a steady increase over the past three decades.

The Myanmar term for nuns, *thilashin*, means “keepers of the Buddhist precepts,” and as the term connotes, they are known for their *thila* (or *sīla* in Pali language). The majority of them observe the Eight Precepts, which implies they are celibate, take no food in the afternoon, and abstain from worldly pleasures such as singing, dancing, and adorning themselves with flowers and cosmetics. These observances are fundamental not only to their religious commitment as “precept keepers,” but to the moral discipline that, according to my nun informants, forms the inner core of their monastic identity. Thus, the daily practice of *thila*, comprising self-control, restraint and mindfulness, is regarded as essential for building nuns' moral character and laying the foundation for their observance

⁷ It does not mean that *thilashin* are willing participants in their integration into the national sangha structure, but they have been co-opted as an apolitical and pious component of the Buddhist community who could bridge the sangha and laity.

⁸ See Article 361, *The 2008 Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar* (Yangon: Ministry of Information, 2008).

⁹ In 2017, there were 64,519 Buddhist nuns officially registered in Myanmar and 4,398 independent nunneries operating nationwide. Large concentrations of nuns were found in the administrative divisions of Yangon, Sagaing, and Mandalay. Statistics were obtained from the Department of Religious Affairs, Kaba Aye, Yangon.

¹⁰ There were more than thirty ordained *bhikkhunī* and 20,000 *mae chi* (Eight Precept observing nuns) in Thailand, but since there is no registration system for Thai female renunciants as there is for monks, this is a rough estimate given by the Sathaaban Mae Chi Thai (Thai Nuns' Institute) in August 2013.

of the many customary norms of their monastic communities.¹¹ Some of the precepts, such as fasting in the afternoon, are normally incorporated into the daily routine of a monastic institution, but the actual observance of these vows is ultimately left to the resolve of the individual practitioner. As such, the daily reciting of collective rules and norms can be seen as complementing the voluntary discipline of the individual. The *thilashin* adhere to both to guarantee the cohesion and sense of unity in their monastic community.

Although senior members encourage a balanced pursuit of both the theory and practice of Buddhism, Myanmar nuns can be roughly divided into three groups, according to whether their primary religious pursuit is *pariyatti* (scriptural learning and teaching), *patipatti* (meditation), or *parahita* (social work).¹² Each nunnery has a different profile in terms of the type of work its nuns undertake in their daily lives, and the different emphasis it places on their religious preoccupations, which in turn helps determine the tone of its moral discipline. For example, nunneries that function primarily as seminaries where Buddhist scriptures and Pali language are taught, are called *sathin-daik* and reputable ones attract much attention as well as material support from lay donors. These nunneries normally have large concentrations of young resident student-nuns, and tend to apply their communal jurisdiction more stringently than small nunneries inhabited by old and retired members. This section of the paper focuses mainly on such *sathin-daik*, which focus on monastic education and learning the scriptures. In particular, it examines the role of everyday training as the nuns live, work, study, and practise together, with the goal of achieving a clearer understanding of the communal environment in which Myanmar nuns are trained.

1.1 Legal status in relation to the state

In the official discourse of Myanmar, Buddhist nuns are classified as *thathana wundàn-myà*, or “persons serving the *sāsana*”, which can be further translated as “vocational religious persons”. This implies that Buddhist nuns and monks, along with clerics of other religions, are effectively placed in a single category that casts them as inside religion, but outside politics. The country’s founding 1947 Constitution limited civil and voting rights for persons in this category, and this position remains unchanged under the current, 2008 Constitution.¹³ In practice, this means that Buddhist monks and nuns cannot partake in political activities or public demonstrations. Hence, in theory, Myanmar’s monastics are legally prohibited from voicing their political opinions in public. However, in many recent social protests and public events, monks have been increasingly vocal on matters outside their official remit, and are actively taking part in public discussions, especially about the state of Myanmar

¹¹ Buddhist precepts are recited many times daily by nuns, as such recitation is believed to imbue them with an awareness of their abstinence vows and render them vigilant regarding their whims and desires.

¹² In recent years, especially since the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis in 2008, social work or *parahita* has received greater public attention. Traditionally, social work was regarded as a side occupation for monastic members, seen as “secular” and therefore the responsibility of civil authorities.

¹³ Article 392(a), *The 2008 Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar*.

Buddhism. In contrast, Buddhist nuns, have been largely apolitical in the public domain, although they are supportive of the sangha in their informal capacity.

Taken as a whole, the legal provisions for Buddhist nuns in Myanmar manifest a profound ambiguity. On the one hand, nuns – along with monks – are registered with the Department of Religious Affairs of the Religious Ministry, and those over the age of eighteen carry a state-issued monastic passport.¹⁴ This document grants them special privileges to move around the country without any of the usual travel restrictions that apply to non-monastic civilians, and to transport donated rice and other foodstuffs back to their registered places of monastic residence. In addition, Myanmar nuns' passports as well as other official travel documents display their Buddhist titles and names (rather than their lay names), which indicates a higher degree of integration into the national monastic organization compared to nuns in other Buddhist countries whose legal status continues to be defined by their lay status.

1.2 Communal rules for precept nuns in Myanmar

Despite the absence of a scripturally stipulated framework, such as the code of discipline for *bhikkhunī*, Myanmar nuns resolve day to day problems by following their own communal rules that govern every aspect of their monastic lives.¹⁵ The customary practices and normative rules traditionally observed by Buddhist nuns in Sagaing were compiled and written down by a senior nun and published in 1914 as a code of practice for the Sagaing community of *thilashin*. Nuns in other parts of the country subsequently adopted this code as a reference point to regulate the monastic conduct of junior nuns. Based on these customary rules, in 1994, Thilashin Kyinwut, the “code of practice for Myanmar *thilashin*,” was endorsed by the Supreme Sangha Council and distributed by the Department of Religious Affairs of the Myanmar government to *thilashin* in other parts of the country. It contains eighty-four instructions, specifying the duties and the regulations that *thilashin* must follow in the context of their monastic settings.¹⁶ These cover fundamental concerns such as theft, sexual misconduct, social and economic transactions, as well as matters of personal and collective decorum. The Kyinwut also describes the procedures for becoming ordained as a Buddhist nun, both temporarily and vocationally, and lists nine areas that require supervision by senior members. These are: religious practice, study, alms collecting and receiving food, attending functions, collecting wood, shopping, proper terms of address corresponding to seniority, correct behaviour in relation to monks, taking leave, and a miscellaneous category. As part of her general aspiration to lead a simple and frugal lifestyle, a Buddhist nun is expected to eat little, sleep little, talk little, possess few items, and serve

¹⁴ The monastic passport is called *hmatpontin* or *Thathana Nwewin Hmattān* in full and its issuance is authorized by the Sangha Supreme Council in Myanmar.

¹⁵ Hiroko Kawanami, *Renunciation and Empowerment of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar-Burma: Building A Community of Female Faithful* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 122–123.

¹⁶ *Thilashin Kyinwut hnin Nyunkya-hlwa Ahmat 84* was accepted and endorsed by the State Sangha Supreme Council on March 22, 1994, and published by the Department for Promotion and Propagation of the Sāsana later the same year.

and look after the Buddhist community. Thilashin Kyinwut also assumes a nun's life to be sedentary, and thus presumes her to have a permanent monastic address and a nun preceptor who guides her throughout her religious life.

In large nunneries such as *sathin-daik* run by nuns, considerable influence is exerted by those in positions of authority—such as dhamma teachers, mentors and senior nuns—since they are responsible for maintaining order and fostering discipline among young students and junior nuns.¹⁷ The students are expected to be obedient and respectful towards senior members and are trained extensively in correct conduct to maintain the reputation of the nunnery as well as its scholarly standards. The monastic rules they adhere to stipulate every detail of their daily lives, including clothing and deportment, manner of food intake, bathing and washing clothing, as well as acceptable behaviour towards others both within and outside the monastic community. Many of these rules and norms have become embedded aspects of their moral culture. For example, students are reprimanded if their conduct diverts from the communal standards and are monitored closely so that they address senior members using appropriate honorifics. Nun students memorize and recite the Thilashin Kyinwut regularly as part of their curriculum in many *sathin-daik*. Their ethical code of practice emphasizes the crucial importance of discipline and morality to their status as respectable monastic members who can sustain the support of lay society.

There are also rules instilled in nuns' daily conduct that are not written, but passed down as oral traditions. These rules are aimed at fostering self-discipline and keeping selfish tendencies at bay, especially in communal living environments. However, some have arisen due to environmental conditions such as the scarcity of particular resources in the surrounding area. For example, in the arid region around Sagaing Hill, where many hundreds of monasteries and nunneries depend on water from the Ayeyarwady River, communal rules dictate that residents should not waste water or electricity. Thus, these rules inform students at an early stage about the environment in which they live and at the same time reinforce the important monastic ideal of frugality.

1.3 Traditional feminine values and religious norms

Some of the communal rules for Buddhist nuns in Myanmar, which subject them to strict standards of moral behaviour and daily scrutiny, may appear harsh in comparison to modern secular standards of conduct for women. These include injunctions against laughing too heartily, talking loudly, raising their voices, arguing, gossiping, yawning or sneezing loudly, whistling, running, and even taking long strides. Every feature of a *thilashin*'s religious attire replicates an ideal of traditional womanhood in

¹⁷ The structures of authority for *thilashin* do not parallel those of male monastic fraternities since they do not have a *bhikkhuni* sangha to provide them with a unitary monastic structure or organization. Thus, a nunnery is a private holding legally owned by the abbess, which is administered by her nun assistants who are sometimes related to her. Seniority is decided by the length of time (the number of rain retreats) spent as an ordained member in the monastic community, but *thilashin* also move through the ranks based on their academic achievements and teaching qualifications granted by the Myanmar government.

Myanmar, which appear aimed at preserving feminine virtues and the notion of honour surrounding them. A *thilashin* is expected to wear her robes neatly and in a particular manner, and is reprimanded if she is not dressed correctly. A tight-fitting bodice is worn under her blouse, and the lower garment has to cover her down to the ankles. Long sleeves are worn throughout the year despite the hot tropical climate, hiding any exposed skin (except for her shaved head). She also normally wears a large wrap over her robes, both to hide her feminine curves from the public gaze and symbolically protect her internal sense of moral purity. In short, she is expected to preserve and embody the traditional Myanmar values of how a good woman presents herself in public, represented in the notion of *meinma dou eindrei*; the vernacular term to imply “feminine virtues.”

Many other conventional rules for nuns also reflect traditional socio-cultural beliefs regarding femininity that are prevalent in Asian societies. This resonates strongly with Mrozik’s view that morality and the body—especially the female body—are closely related, to the point that external features may serve as indications of inner virtue or even “sin.”¹⁸ It can be difficult to understand how these values, aimed at preserving feminine virtues by restricting women’s mobility and individual liberty in a manner so alien to modern Western sensibilities, are accepted without resistance by so many of Myanmar’s young women. Indeed, the daily rules that Buddhist nuns are subjected to seem as restrictive as the norms of *purdah* enforced on women in some Muslim contexts, which confine them to limited domestic (or institutional) surroundings where they are constantly supervised by their female elders. The reasons for imposing these communal norms are similar for the protection not only of unmarried women’s physical virginity, but of upholding their honourable reputation in terms of the public perception. Nonetheless, this may be only until marriage in the case of *purdah*, rather than for life in the case of nuns who are celibate renouncers. These communal norms governing how they cover their bodies, make women less appealing as a way to address real dangers and exploitation in society that threaten unmarried women (including celibate nuns). Having said that, the pressure for nuns to conform with and live up to the moral standards expected of them is heavy, and even more so for those who live in reputable *sathin-daik*. In daily training, these feminine virtues are interpreted as fundamental to the cultivation of nuns’ self-restraint and morality, and when these become integrated into communal rules imbued with deep religious significance, they become part of the moral foundation of the Buddhist faith itself.

1.4 Authority, seniority and collective responsibility

The notion of seniority is paramount in Buddhist monastic communities, but positions of authority are determined not only by an individual’s length of service to the community, but by the depth of her scriptural knowledge and her ability to make sound decisions. The nuns’ *Kyinwut* stipulates the duties

¹⁸ Susanne Mrozik, “Materializations of Virtue: Buddhist Discourses on Bodies,” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, eds. Ellen T. Amour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 22.

and obligations of those in positions of authority in detail, as well as measures for mediation and punishments to help nuns make decisions when violations take place. The powers of enforcement rest on senior members in the monastic hierarchy, and admonishing is regarded as a particularly important part of a teacher's duty. The monitoring of discipline by teachers and those in other senior positions is viewed as fundamental in maintaining communal harmony, and the institutional structure is sustained by the personal relationship each student has with her teacher/mentor. So if any offence comes to light, collective responsibility first obliges the offender's supervisor to be punished on the grounds of neglect of duty; and ultimately, the responsibility falls on the institutional head; the *kyaung saya*, who is the principal nun. However, if a student does not acknowledge the importance of her teacher's role, the teacher can abandon her mentoring duties, which is detrimental for the student who has to look for another mentor and start all over again from the bottom of the pecking order.¹⁹

Senior nuns emphasize the importance of instilling moral discipline in young nuns and students in the early part of their monastic training, thus reputable nunneries do not usually accept new entrants after their mid twenties. Once initiated into their community, a junior nun is not allowed to go out on her own, instead being always accompanied by another nun, normally one senior to her. Moreover, a nun's moral conduct when in public is subject to even more scrutiny than usual. Thus, senior nuns admonish junior nuns for chatting or loitering in market places, for sitting in coffee shops, talking with men in public, swearing, walking in a suggestive manner or showing crude gestures. Young nuns can be as vulnerable to abuse and sexual harassment as any unmarried women, and thus they are told not to act in a provocative manner in public. Nevertheless, the nuns' practice of celibacy can itself be seen as a controversial stance of defiance in the eyes of some people, since it sits uncomfortably with the normative perception of sexual womanhood in Myanmar society.²⁰

Protecting their good reputation is of paramount importance to the nuns' community, since it guarantees not only their enhanced status and security, but also the ongoing material support of their lay donors. Conversely, any misconduct by female monastics brings serious repercussions, as social sanctions against women in Myanmar always tend to be heavier than those against men.²¹ Therefore, strong sanctions are imposed on nuns for interacting with men, even monks. If a nun and a monk are

¹⁹ The mentoring role normally falls on the "preceptor" (*upyitze saya* or *upajjhāya* in Pali), but the same nun may perform both roles as a teacher and a preceptor.

²⁰ Being a monastic practitioner means that a nun is free from general social expectations on her womanhood and remains virtuous in her own right, but the level of self-control and discipline implied in her celibate lifestyle seems to be incompatible with the cultural myth of an uncontrolled female libido. See Hiroko Kawanami, "Can Women be Celibate? Sexual Abstinence in Theravāda Buddhism," in *Celibacy, Culture, and Society: The Anthropology of Sexual Abstinence*, eds. Elisa J. Sobo and Sandra Bell (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 153; Melford E. Spiro, *Kinship and Marriage in Burma: A Cultural and Psychodynamic Analysis* (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 240–243.

²¹ When an amorous liaison takes place between a monk and a laywoman, it is usually the woman who is blamed for corrupting and leading him astray. During her fieldwork in the mid 1980s, Kawanami came across two cases of an affair between a monk and a nun. In both cases, the monk was allowed to stay on as a monastic, but the nun was forced to disrobe.

seen to transgress the acceptable distance between them, it is often the nun who is punished, in some cases by expulsion from the community.

1.5 Maintaining order and punishment

Punishments following violations of communal rules are specified in the Thilashin Kyinwut, but the role of enforcing them is reserved for the principal nun or her deputy. Offences deemed minor, such as petty quarrels and squabbles, theft, and not repaying debts, are commonly dealt with and resolved within the immediate circle of the perpetrators' supervisors and a few other senior nuns. More serious offences are discussed by a formal committee of senior nuns called *nayaka*, but are rarely taken beyond the confines of a nunnery institution. If the offence involves sexual transgression, unwritten norms in the nuns' community dictate that the nun is asked to move out immediately. Serious cases, such as land disputes or succession issues, may be referred to the Township Thilashin Council (*Myo-ne Thilashin Ahpwe-asi*),²² where a nun representative – usually the township secretary – negotiates between the parties involved to find a quick solution. But if they do not reach an agreement within sixty days, the case is handed over to the Township Monks' Council (*Myo-ne Thanga Maha Nayaka Ahpwe*), which becomes an *ad hoc* sangha court to resolve the matter. Monastics' offences are rarely reported to the local police unless they involve murder or possibly child abuse, at which point, the accused loses her monastic status even before she is convicted and is transferred to the jurisdiction of local civil authorities.²³ Yet, a nunnery ultimately does not have the executive power to defrock one of its members from within and the most it can do is to blacklist the offender and make her a communal outcast or move her to a nunnery outside the local jurisdiction.

In addition, it is traditional for Myanmar nuns to have one or more senior monks who act as *ovādacariya* or counsel for their nunnery who are thus obligated to oversee its protection and general well-being. An *ovādacariya* is also expected to give the nuns regular admonitions, as well as to intervene to resolve internal disputes. The nuns appoint these monks themselves, although they sometimes inherit a relationship with a particular *ovādacariya* or with his monastery from their nun predecessors. The arrangement to have an *ovādacariya* and many other practices they follow suggest that the precept nuns in Myanmar live a monastic life very similar to that of fully ordained bhikkhūnī. Though informal, such arrangements with monks form the crux of the regional monastic infrastructure, allowing the nuns to be recognized by the sangha authority and become fully integrated into the local monastic community. Such practical measures minimize any threats to the nuns' monastic reputation that they are the true adherents of moral discipline.

In short, both monks and nuns in Myanmar follow traditional practices for conflict resolution, and

²² More than four *sathin-daik* (independent nunneries dedicated to scriptural studies) have to be in operation for the nuns to form a Thilashin Township Council, and only principal nuns representing an independent nunnery are eligible to be nominated as members to the Council.

²³ Even if she is later found to be innocent of the crime, it will be difficult to regain her monastic status.

maintain a united front and a degree of autonomy in conducting their local affairs away from the control of local and national secular authorities. Meanwhile, the nuns' communal code, stipulated in the Kyinwut, strictly proscribes acceptable modes of conduct for their relationship with monks, and provides numerous examples of situations that may arise and the appropriate conduct for them. This level of detail reflects senior nuns' apprehensiveness about the vulnerability inherent in their ambiguous religious position in society, where female renunciants, are often still viewed as women who have diverted from the socially accepted norm of womanhood. For the same reason, senior nuns take extraordinary care to curb unnecessary disputes amongst the nuns themselves and with the surrounding lay community, since both of which could undermine their moral and religious credentials.

Part 2. Buddhist Nuns in Thailand

Theravāda Buddhist nuns have a long history in Thailand, and diverse groups of nuns – including pious laywomen as well as *bhikkhunī* – have formed their respective communities outside the official *bhikkhu* sangha's control.²⁴ Amongst them, precept observing nuns called *mae chi* form the largest group and are the main focus of this section. The findings described here are based mainly on anthropological fieldwork carried out during 2014 and 2015, but also on ethnographic material drawn from earlier fieldwork. This section looks at communal guidelines, rules and regulations set up by *mae chi* themselves for their monastic community following Buddhist principles. It also examines how *mae chi* (*mae*, means mother, often used as an honorific for hierarchical as well as familial relationships, and *chi* an honorific derived from Khmer, used for any person who occupies a position of respect) maintain autonomy in relation to the Thai sangha.²⁵

The majority of Thai women who aspire to lead a monastic life receive *mae chi* ordination. Some have been ordained as *sikkhamat* (lit. mothers who study) in the Santi Asoke tradition since the 1970s, but increasingly Thai women are receiving the *bhikkhunī* ordination from monks living abroad. The exact number of Buddhist nuns in Thailand is unknown, but it is estimated that there are 20,000 *mae chi*. According to a survey done in 2017 there are at least 173 *bhikkhunī*, 50 *samaneri*, and 23, *sikkhamana* (women who are observing Buddhist practices at the temple to prepare themselves for ordination) in 60 *bhikkhunī* centers across Thailand.²⁶ In modern Thai history, individual nuns have been recognized for their high level of Buddhist attainment in meditation and moral discipline, but in recent decades they, as well as groups of nuns, have gained public attention for their meditation skills and work in social development.²⁷ The roughly 25 female practitioners in the Asoke community are a

²⁴ See Benjamin Schonthal, "Formations of Buddhist Constitutionalism in South and Southeast Asia," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 15, (Oct. 2017): 705–733.

²⁵ Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel, "Buddhist 'Nuns' (*Mae Chi*) and the Teaching of Pali in Contemporary Thailand," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 6 (Nov. 2010): 1373–1408.

²⁶ Sanitsuda Ekachai, "The Secret of Thailand's Biggest Female Clergy," *Bangkok Post*, November 23, 2017.

²⁷ John Van Esterik, "Women Meditation Teachers in Thailand," in *Women of Southeast Asia*, ed. Penny Van Esterik (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1996), pp. 33–41; Sid Brown, *The Journey*

unique group in that their status is almost equal to that of monks within their community.²⁸ Laywomen also pursue ascetic lives, becoming *upāsikā* or *chi phram* who stay and practice at temples, nunneries or meditation centers on a temporary basis.

The *mae chi* position outside the official sangha renders her religious status as a person ‘who has gone forth’ somewhat ambiguous, which is manifested in a lack of formal religious authority. She is barred from many benefits that her male colleagues enjoy, such as full access to education and financial support from the government. Meanwhile, the Thai sangha has been criticized for denying women the opportunity to become *bhikkhunī* by arguing that the ordination of *mae chi* is not supported in the Buddhist scriptures.²⁹ At the same time, the exclusion of women from the Thai sangha has, perhaps counterintuitively, brought about an usual degree of autonomy for Thai Buddhist nuns that has made it possible for them to form their own monastic communities and govern their own ordained lives.³⁰

This study confirms that over the past twenty years the *mae chi* have enhanced the respectability of their religious and societal position by refining their religious practices, upgrading their educational levels, and drawing a clearer boundary between themselves and the laity. As part of these processes, some groups of *mae chi* have ceased living in monks’ temples, a practice that had marked them as a marginalized religious group. In recent decades, *mae chi* have also more visibly asserted their heightened religious influence, amid the growth in the number of self-governing nunneries in Thailand and in the number of Thai Buddhist women becoming involved in formal religious activities.

2.1 Legal status in relation to the state

The Thai Sangha’s Supreme Council has forbidden Thai monks to confer the *bhikkhunī* ordination on any women whether Thai or foreign.³¹ This ban was enacted because two sisters, Sara and Chongdee, received *bhikkhunī* novice ordination in 1928 from a Thai monk,³² and then refused to give up their robes when asked to by the police before being arrested by the civil authorities. They were charged

of One Buddhist Nun: Even Against the Wind (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 116–131; Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), pp. 246–254; Joanna Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Martin Seeger, “‘Against the stream’: The Thai Female Buddhist Saint Mae Chi Kaew Singlam (1901–1991)”, *South-East Asia Research* 18, no. 3 (2010), 586–588; Martin Seeger, “Reversal of Female Power, Transcendentality, and Gender in Thai Buddhism: The Thai Buddhist Female Saint Khun Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem (1895–1964):”, *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 5 (2013), 3–4.

²⁸ Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, *Santi Asoke Buddhism and Thai State Response* (Turku: Åbo Akademis Förlag, 1996); Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, “Religious Discrimination and Women in the Asoke Buddhist Group in Thailand,” in *Enabling Gender Equality: Future Generations of the Global World. Research in Political Sociology* vol. 23, eds. Eunice Rodriguez and Barbara Wejnert (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2015), 181–193.

²⁹ Bhikkhunī Dhammananda, “Institutional Authority: A Buddhist Perspective,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 30 (2010a): 152–154.

³⁰ Falk, *Making Fields of Merit*, 254.

³¹ Bhikkhunī Dhammananda, *Women Strengthening Buddhism*, (Bangkok: Thai Tibet Center, 2010b), 7. Announcement was published in *Thalaengkarn Ganason* (Announcement of the Sangha) vol. 16. p. 157

³² Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, 45–48.

with an act of disobedience to the Order of the Sangha.³³ Eighty years later, responding to popular demands, in 2002, the Thai Senate Committee on Women, Youth and the Elderly, set up a sub-committee led by a female senator to investigate the possibility of establishing the *bhikkhunī* order in Thailand. The sub-committee's findings were that the *bhikkhunī* order did not defy the principles of Buddhism, and that the ban issued in 1928 should be revoked as violating the Thai Constitution, which enshrines gender equality and freedom of faith.³⁴ Nevertheless, the ensuing discussions with representatives of the Sangha Supreme Council have so far not led to the establishment of a *bhikkhunī* sangha in Thailand. In February 2004, the country's National Buddhist Bureau argued,³⁵ in response to the senate's findings, that *bhikkhunī* ordination could never be introduced in Thailand due to the irretrievable loss of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* lineage. Despite such arguments, Thai women have since 2001 been receiving novice and full ordination as *bhikkhunī* with the assistance from Buddhist monks and *bhikkhunī* from abroad. Nonetheless, the validity of *bhikkhunī* ordination is still not recognized by the Thai sangha or state, and the new Thai Constitution enacted in 2017 expressly prohibits *bhikkhunī* who are foreign citizens from entering Thailand.³⁶

The majority of *mae chi* who were interviewed as part of the second author's fieldwork were not interested in "going forth" and becoming ordained as *bhikkhunī* or joining the Thai sangha. Instead, their aim was to achieve proper legal recognition in their current status as ordained *mae chi*, i.e., *nak buat*: (one who has left lay life and gone forth) ordained persons who exist outside the sangha. The ambiguous standing of *mae chi* is reinforced in Thai law, which makes no mention of this category of person. In other words, *mae chi* are not mentioned in any legal context, religious or otherwise. Consequently, the government sometimes treats them as ordained (*nak buat*), and sometimes as laypeople. For example, the government denies giving nuns and monks the same educational and medical support on account of nuns' official status as laity. However, the same government denies nuns the right to vote in public elections with reference to their status as nuns and renunciation of worldly matters.

There have been attempts to endow *mae chi* with a legal status as ordained practitioners, including the Mae Chi Bill that the *mae chi* themselves began drafting in the mid-1990s at the request of the Thai government's Department of Religious Affairs. In 1998, they submitted a draft of the bill that would have given them formal recognition as *nak buat* and granted them access to education, funding, and social benefits on par with those that ordained members of the Buddhist community were already entitled to receive from the Thai government. However, in 2003, the Department of Religious

³³ Kabil Singh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, 47.

³⁴ Falk, *Making Fields of Merit*, 243.

³⁵ Also called National Office of Buddhism, it is an independent department and agency of the Thai government that reports directly to the Prime Minister. The National Office of Buddhism is responsible for state administration of Buddhism, but religious affairs are handled by the Sangha Supreme Council of elderly monks (see e.g. Tomas Larsson, "Buddhist Bureaucracy and Religious Freedom in Thailand," *Journal of Law and Religion*).

³⁶ Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, "Thailand's Constitutional Changes and Buddhism," paper presented at EuroSEAS conference, Oxford University, August 17, 2017.

Affairs rejected the proposed Mae Chi Bill and suggested that the *mae chi* discuss the matter with the sangha authorities instead. After five more years, a replacement bill was drafted that subordinated *mae chi* to the monks. Despite this key change, the second bill did not pass either. If it had, Thai *mae chi* would have lost their independence, and the Thai Nuns' Institute (the main institute for the *mae chi*) would have been forced to close. Since then, the original ambiguity of their legal position has remained unchanged.

2.2 Nunneries

Mae chi reside in either the nuns' quarters at Buddhist temples administered by monks, or in nunneries independently governed by the *mae chi* themselves. Self-governed nunneries have different profiles and focus on, for example: education, meditation, Pali and Abhidhamma studies and different kinds of social work. In 1975, the Thai Nuns' Institute published a *Handbook for Thai Mae Chi (Rabiab patibat không sathaban mae chi thai haeng prathet thai)*, which among other matters offers instruction for righteous moral living. The *Handbook* is widely used by *mae chi* all over the country, much in the same way that the *Patimokkha* is used by monks. Communal rules and guiding principles that *mae chi* have drawn up follow Buddhist monastic principles, and stipulate that *mae chi* should live together in communities and apart from laypeople. An exception to this is made for *mae chi* who have chosen to live in small groups or alone in hermitages, usually for the purpose of intensive meditation. Generally speaking, living alone on a permanent basis is not considered ideal for either monks or nuns in Thailand. The *mae chi* regard it utterly important for nuns to live together in order to fulfil their aim of living an ordained life and for the sake of their moral and spiritual development.

Architecturally, Buddhist nunneries are generally modelled on Buddhist temples, but do not contain the latter's full range of buildings. Buddhist temples in Thailand are categorized according to their designated official status: a *wat* is a temple with an ordination hall and/or a shrine hall, whereas a *thipak* or *sammak song* is an unofficial, unsanctified temple or a monastic center without an ordination hall. *Sammak* or *thipak song* generally consist of a few *kuti* (living quarters for monks or nuns, basically small one-room huts) and a *sala* (multi-purpose hall). A *wat* includes particular buildings that cannot be transformed into lay structures, such as the ordination hall, *ubosot*. The *ubosot* is surrounded with eight sacred boundary markers stones, which is an example of a sacred building that is not found on nunnery premises. The main building in a nunnery compound is the *sala*, where ceremonies and many other activities take place.

A nunnery's status as a monastic site cannot therefore rely on its physical buildings, but depends on the order and discipline maintained on the premises and during the nuns' daily activities. In other words, the nuns' mode of daily life—minimally, following the monastic code of moral living and upholding the monastic schedule—is essential to the transformation of a nunnery into a religious site. Many of the present study's fieldwork informants declared that regular Buddhist chants constitute the backbone of their daily religious practice and communal identity, and if morning and evening chants

are not conducted regularly in a place, *mae chi* do not consider it to be suitable for their monastic community.

The monastic life imposes not only a clear distinction between the laity and the ordained, but also a hierarchical form of unity among the latter. In Thai nunneries today, the main boundary is drawn between those *mae chi* who have “gone forth,” and temporary precept observers called *chi phram*. The hierarchical differences in their statuses within the community are displayed and maintained throughout their daily practices. The two main criteria for defining a *mae chi*’s place in the hierarchy are the number of years she has spent as an ordained member (*phansa*) and the level of her monastic education. These status differences find expression in seating arrangements during ceremonies and when eating in the dining hall. They also find expression in the types of chores they engage in, where they live on nunnery premises and other things. Because these hierarchical concerns permeate their daily lives, the nuns are continuously reminded of their place in the community. To the extent that these roles are normally accepted without conflict, this regime contributes to communal cohesion.

Temples and nunneries in Thailand are in constant need of both material support and legitimation from the wider society. The boundary between nuns and the laity is confirmed daily by the interactions that take place during the alms round. Giving to monastic members is considered a field of merit for the Thai laity, and the reciprocal relationship that this engenders is confirmed by those who sustain the Buddhist monastic community by giving alms. In return, monks and nuns provide Buddhist teachings, counselling, and meditation instruction to laypeople, as well as refuge in temples and nunneries during or in the aftermath of natural disasters. At independent nunneries, *mae chi* strive to embody the monastic code, explained in the *Handbook* and in the *Bhikkhunī vinaya*, and state that their daily alms round is of great importance to their practice and to their ordained identity. However, many *mae chi* live in temples administered by monks, and in such settings it is only the monks who go out collecting alms, so the nuns are deprived of one of their most important practices. Nuns who live at nuns’ departments at temples must follow the rules at that temple.

The Thai Nuns’ Institute has played an important role in uniting the *mae chi* and forming a national community of nuns in Thailand. It is the activities and spatial organization of *mae chi* who live in independent nunneries that are key to allowing them to distance themselves from lay life and build their own religious communities. These nunneries and their regulated practices provide the *mae chi* with monastic education, spiritual development and strong sense of community. Laypeople increasingly recognize the religious scriptural, ritual and meditative knowledge, hard work, and strict moral discipline of the *mae chi*.

2.3 Communal rules and precepts for Thai nuns

Good moral conduct, daily Buddhist practice, and knowledge of Buddhism are all considered essential for nuns. The *Handbook* guides *mae chi* in their daily lives and provides details of the precepts they must observe, along with a description of how the Thai Nuns’ Institute is organized. Their ordination

procedure is also described in the *Handbook*, which lays down the qualifications for a *mae chi* candidate. At nunneries, a *mae chi* is commonly ordained in a ceremony led by monks and nuns, but sometimes only *mae chi* lead the ceremony. In addition to the Eight-precept observance, the *Handbook* also lists the seventy-five *sekhiya* training rules that govern every aspect of nuns' daily activities.³⁷ Taken together, the *sekhiya* rules can be regarded as a manual of proper manners, providing support and guidance for the regulation of ordained members' communal lives. The same *sekhiya* rules are also found in the sixth section of the *Patimokkha* and are shared and studied by *bhikkhu*, *bhikkhunī*, and novices.³⁸

2.4 Precepts, guidelines and punishment for mae chi

Mae chi shave off their hair and eyebrows and, on a permanent basis, observe the same Eight Precepts that are followed by laypeople on special religious occasions such as the Buddhist weekly holy day. The sets of Buddhist precepts that monastic members follow are gendered, but laymen and laywomen are expected to follow the same Five Precepts as one another. Four of these constitute the basic moral commitments required of any Buddhist; and the other, regarding refraining from consuming drugs and alcohol, since this causes heedlessness, entails an ascetic rather than an ethical commitment.³⁹ The Eight Precepts add additional ascetic practices to a woman's life beyond those of a normal *upāsikā*. Those who commit themselves to all eight, whether for a day or for a longer period, refrain from all sexual activity rather than from wrong conduct due to sexual desires. The sixth precept entails not eating solid food after noon. The seventh precept requires avoiding, or keeping one's distance from, entertainments, and avoiding make-up, perfume, jewellery and colourful clothes. The eighth precept requires refraining from lying on a high or luxurious sleeping place.

Novice monks observe Ten Precepts, of which the first eight correspond to those observed by *mae chi*, except that the seventh precept about not using beautification or enjoy entertainment is split into two parts,⁴⁰ and there is an additional undertaking to abstain from accepting 'gold and silver', or by extension money of any sort. The Vinaya monastic code that ordained members commit themselves to "trains the mind in dealing with the roots of immoral behavior."⁴¹

It is uncommon for Thai nuns to receive the Ten Precepts observed by novice monks. Those women who do are usually given them more or less secretly by monks, so as not to upset the sangha. There are, however, Buddhist nuns in Thailand who are openly given the Ten Precept: for example, the *sikkhamat* affiliated with the Asoke group mentioned above. The *sikkhamat* differ from *mae chi* in several respects. First, uniquely for Thai women, the *sikkhamat* live in a Buddhist community side by

³⁷ The *sekhiya* rules for *mae chi* are listed in Thai language in *Rabiab patibat không sathaban mae chi thai haeng prathet thai* ("Rules of practice of the Thai Mae Chi Institute"), 1975, 55–62.

³⁸ Chatsumarn Kabil Singh, *A Comparative Study of Bhikkhuni Patimokkha* (Dehli: Chaukhambha Orientalia, 1984), 133.

³⁹ The five precepts are to abstain from: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicants.

⁴⁰ Kawanami, *Renunciation and Empowerment*, 36.

⁴¹ Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 92–94.

side with monks and laypeople. As well as receiving and observing the Ten Precepts, they go walking to receive their daily alms. Their temple's founder and head monk Samana Photirak (also called Bodhirak) has situated himself outside of the state-controlled sangha, which has resulted in legal troubles for the group in the past, and neither the Asoke monks nor the *sikkhamat* are officially recognized by the Thai sangha.⁴² Moreover, the opportunities for women to receive *sikkhamat* ordination are quite limited. For example, a laywoman has to prepare herself for two years in order to qualify, but this alone is not enough, as the number of *sikkhamat* is restricted by the group to one *sikkhamat* per four monks. If all of the Asoke's large following of laywomen were to be ordained, the number of *sikkhamat* would exceed the number of monks, meaning that for an individual to become ordained as a *sikkhamat* often takes longer than the specified minimum two-year period.⁴³

The vocations that are explicitly mentioned as 'improper' for *mae chi* in the *Handbook* are fortune telling, massage, performing miracles, becoming possessed, and games or lotteries. *Mae chi* are also forbidden to perform any task for another person in exchange for payment, to serve or work for laypeople, to engage in any commercial activity, or to collect donations other than for a specific religious purpose. Committing any of the four *Pārājika* offenses (having sexual relations, stealing, killing, or boasting about having supernatural power,) carries the penalty of expulsion from the monastic community. The mildest penalty for breaking the disciplinary code is to be reminded of the rules by the head *mae chi*, and the most severe is to be defrocked and have one's *mae chi*, identity card issued by the Thai Nuns institute, taken away. The *Handbook* states that a joint committee of *mae chi* should decide on a suitable punishment for the perpetrator. The *mae chi* rules for expulsions and penalties follow the *Pārājika*, but cases of a *mae chi* being forced to leave the ordained state are rare. The majority of those who have left it have done so at their own request, and like monks and male novices, it is customary for *mae chi* to formally resign (*suk*) before they return to lay life. The rules that govern *mae chi* lives are in many ways similar to the rules for *bhikkhunī*.

2.5 Ordained identity without a legal position

The position of *mae chi* outside the sangha in Thailand appears to have given them more freedom to govern themselves than is the case with *mae chi* who live in monks' temples, and this has to a certain extent improved their religious position since they can fully perform their religious roles. However, they still find themselves in an ambiguous position in certain circumstances: specifically, the Thai government sometimes considers them to be laypersons, and at other times to be ordained (*nak buat*). As mentioned above the *mae chi* do not receive the same support as the monks with free education, free medical care and free or reduced fares for buses and trains because of their official status as laity however the same government forbids the *mae chi* to vote in public elections on the basis of their

⁴² Heikkilä-Horn, *Santi Asoke Buddhism and Thai State Response*.

⁴³ Heikkilä-Horn, "Religious Discrimination and Women in the Asoke," 185–186.

renunciation of worldly matters. However, it should be noted that the *mae chi* themselves are in no sense uncertain about their ordained identity, and never view themselves as laypeople. The lack of clarity regarding their legal standing is reinforced by Thai law's failure to mention *mae chi* as a group of Buddhist practitioners, and consequently, they do not officially exist as a specific legal category in the way that monks do. Nonetheless, their lack of legal recognition by the state does not mean that the Buddhist practices, abilities, and knowledge of the *mae chi* are any less rigorous than those of monks, and with the support of laypeople, these Thai Buddhist nuns have been able to establish self-governed nunneries, hermitages, and meditation centers. Gaining legal recognition as *nak buat* would give *mae chi* a clearer legal status, and entitle these nuns to the financial support from the Thai government from which they are currently barred. On the other hand, being formally linked to the state and granted a legal status as ordained persons would probably risk the sense of autonomy and monastic self-governance that *mae chi* currently enjoy. It is clear to the present authors that the era of autonomy, that has given the nuns access to education and visibility as monastics has been beneficial to these nuns' spiritual development, and that they will be unlikely to want to give it up, when and if the time comes for formal recognition and subordination.

Mae chi would welcome the same access to formal religious education that Thai monks have. Lack of such access in earlier times meant that few *mae chi* were able to gain as thorough a knowledge of Buddhist scriptures as their highly trained male monastic counterparts. Consequently, many *mae chi* were not able to fulfil their scholastic potential to the fullest extent, or to serve as teachers and guides for others. Thus, education has been identified as one of the key factors for their development as monastics and has, together with Buddhist practice of strict discipline, significantly enhanced their religious authority.

Many prior studies have addressed the importance of Buddhist education for nuns, and access to it has greatly improved for *mae chi* and laypeople in recent decades.⁴⁴ For example, the national Nuns' Institute has played a central role in providing education and has been involved in establishing several nunnery schools as well as Mahāpajapati Therī College, the first Buddhist College for women in Thailand.⁴⁵ Affiliated with the Faculty of Religion and Philosophy at Mahāmakut University, a university for monks, Mahāpajapati Therī opened in 1999. Since then, many *mae chi* students have been able to continue their education in Buddhist studies there.

We will conclude this section with the example of a Buddhist center in the north of Thailand run by nuns. The *mae chi* community in the area, founded in 1995, became a Bhikkhunī center in 2006. The founder of the Nirotharam Meditation Center was a longstanding *mae chi* who was already

⁴⁴ See Falk, *Making Fields of Merit*; Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel, "Buddhist 'Nuns' (*Mae Chi*) and the Teaching of Pali in Contemporary Thailand"; Martin Seeger and Kritsana Raksachom, "Mae chi (Buddhist Nuns): Problems and Opportunities of Access to Higher Education Organized by Thai Sanghka," *The Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies* 8 (2014): 71–113.

⁴⁵ Monica Lindberg Falk and Upamai Srisalab, "Initial Six Years of the First Buddhist College for Nuns and Laywomen in Thailand," in *Buddhist Women in a Global Multicultural Community*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Kuala Lumpur: Sukhi Hotu Dhamma Publications, 2008), 240–245.

renowned for her Buddhist knowledge and skilled practice. In 2008, she received full ordination as a *bhikkhunī* in Sri Lanka, and—now known as Nanthayani Bhikkhunī—she has long been popular through her dhamma talks at group retreats and on local radio. Together with her *samanerī*, *bhikkhunī* and *mae chi* disciples, she has consolidated a monastic community of highly disciplined *bhikkhunī* and *mae chi*, and all of them observe the rule of not using money in keeping with the Ten Precepts followed by ordained novices. At Nirodharam, *mae chi*, *samanerī* and *bhikkhunī*'s main focus is to practice *dhamma* and follow their respective code of discipline. The center recommends that women become *mae chi* before they go forth as *samanerī* and later as *bhikkhunī*, but women who would like to continue to practice as *mae chi* are welcome to do that. In line with the Thai Nuns' Institute—but unlike Dhammananda Bhikkhunī, another well-known *bhikkhunī* in Thailand—the *bhikkhunī* members of Nanthayani Bhikkhunī's community have not confronted senior monks about their sangha membership and do not even seek recognition from the Thai sangha. The center is characterized by a strong sense of communal unity built on strict rules and regulations. The nuns are well respected by the local community, including both laypeople and monks. Many of the *bhikkhunī* at the center are well educated, but uncharacteristically for *mae chi* of the present day, they are not engaged in social work. The daily monastic routines in their community have proved essential to their spiritual development, as well as for the wider progress of independent nunneries in Thailand. In other words, exclusion from the sangha has paradoxically given nuns at nunneries and at this Bhikkhunī center the freedom to administer and educate themselves, build up their monastic communities, and develop as Buddhist practitioners, something that would not have been possible if they had been incorporated into the Thai sangha's communal structure.

Conclusion

Although there is still a lack of clarity regarding the legal status of precept observing nuns in Myanmar and Thailand, they have operated for centuries and been accepted as monastic members within their respective communities. The nuns themselves seem to be clear as to their renunciant status and have strived to make themselves legitimate in the eyes of their lay supporters and monastic community by adhering to strict codes of practice that uphold their sense of inner purity. The communal rules and norms that precept nuns follow have provided them with a collective religious identity that separates them from the laity in the outside world, and given them communal guidelines as to their duties and obligations according to where they stand in the monastic hierarchy.

The Myanmar and Thai governments have taken a somewhat different position towards the Buddhist nuns and have influenced how the nuns negotiate their monastic roles in relation to the monks and society. In Myanmar, the government officially registers the *thilashin* as ordained members and issues them monastic identity cards. Thus *thilashin* have been integrated into the national monastic structure, giving them both protection and channels to maneuver their socio-religious positions. In Thailand, the government has been somewhat ambiguous towards the *mae chi* and in

some circumstances considers them ordained and in another treats them as laypersons. However, some *mae chi* have opted for a more autonomous way of living by staying away from the control of state and sangha.

It is also worth mentioning that both *thilashin* and *mae chi* have instigated practical measures to improve their living conditions and socio-religious status. Both *thilashin* and *mae chi* have developed their internal legal codes for themselves, drawn up out of practical necessities of a large number of renunciant women living together in respective monastic communities. In Myanmar, a senior nun compiled and wrote down a local code of conduct for *thilashin*, which later became the basis for Thilashin Kyinwut: a national code of practice for *thilashin*, adopted by the government to regulate and impose a code of practice on all *thilashin* in the country. In Thailand, the Nuns' Institute compiled and published the *Handbook for Thai Mae Chi*, which became widely used by *mae chi* all over Thailand to encourage moral living, much in the same way that *Patimokkha* is used by the monks. These examples show that the nuns themselves were instrumental in introducing monastic discipline into their community and imposing a clear distinction between the status of the laity and the ordained.

In addition, the Thai Nuns' Institute (*Sathaban Mae Chi Thai*) has played a significant role in providing a national forum for Thai *mae chi* to support each other and especially those who live in independent nunneries. These nunneries have been crucial for providing the nuns with monastic education and contributing to their spiritual development. In Myanmar, the Township Thilashin Council (*Myo-ne Thilashin Ahpwe-asi*) that operate in more than two hundred townships have strengthened the network of nunneries and nuns, providing guidelines and problem-solving to nun residents in local townships. By forming these hubs of activities and core groups of nuns to oversee their communal interests, precept nuns in both countries have fostered a sense of a unified community, comprised of ordained female practitioners in relation to the state and society.

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