

The Thai *bhikkhuni* movement and women's empowerment

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This paper discusses the recent emergence of a movement in Thailand that aims to critique and transform patriarchal values supported by the Theravada Buddhist tradition by introducing female ordination (bhikkhuni ordination). The paper argues that there is a relationship between the low status of women in Thai Buddhism and the inferior status of women in Thai society. The introduction of female leadership roles in Thai Buddhism could play a role in balancing the gender hierarchies within the tradition as well as in society more broadly.

Introduction

In the field of gender and development, an understanding of the influence that religious and cultural traditions have upon women's social status or economic opportunity is slowly being recognised as an important factor in the pursuit of female empowerment in developing countries. While institutional religion can legitimise values and rules that disempower women, the importance of religion in the lives of millions of poor women across the globe means that secular feminism is often perceived not only as Western but also as lacking cultural relevance (Peach 2000).

In response, rather than rejecting religion for its inherent patriarchy, styles of 'religious feminism' have emerged. These argue for re-interpretations of religious systems that are consistent with the 'core' values of the tradition as well as various types of feminist thinking. Such a strategy is attractive to women who wish to employ a religious narrative to guide their politics of empowerment, rather than relying on the secular rhetoric of mainstream (Western) feminist discourses. While we should be sceptical about research which depicts poor, non-Western women as essentially religious, or which reduces gender oppression to religious or cultural causes, an increased sensitivity to the role of religious and cultural factors in shaping gender relations is a welcome shift in development theory and practice.

A key challenge, however, faces 'religious feminists', since women rarely occupy the positions of status and authority in religious traditions that would enable them to challenge misogynistic tendencies. The aim of this paper is to discuss the recent emergence of a movement in Thailand that aims to critique and transform patriarchal

values supported by the Theravada Buddhist¹ tradition through introducing the ordination of women into religious orders, or the *bhikkhuni* ordination². A strong theme within this movement is the argument that gender hierarchies in Thai Buddhism have a broader cultural impact on social attitudes that disempower women. Many advocates of the *bhikkhuni* ordination consider that there is a very direct relationship between the low status of women in Thai Buddhism and the inferior status of women in Thai society, which places them at risk of abuses such as domestic violence and sex trafficking, as well as an increased vulnerability to HIV. For instance, as the activist and writer Khuankaew suggests:

One of the core causes of violence against women has not yet been touched upon – the beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and values that come out of a patriarchal society influenced by Buddhism itself... in the discussions at the local, national and international meetings of women organizations the root causes of prostitution have always been poverty, western models of development and modernization... Hardly mentioned as a cause of prostitution is the lack of leadership roles for women in Buddhism (2002, 16).

In this paper I will first discuss the position of women in Thai Buddhism and the significance of the *bhikkhuni* ordination. The introduction of the *bhikkhuni* ordination into Thailand is considered to be significant not only for religious reasons, benefiting women who choose to embark on this religious life and the renouncement of many material comforts that accompanies it, but also for its potential to be empowering to women more broadly. I will then move on to discuss some of the academic literature that examines the relationship between Thai Buddhism and women's oppression in Thailand, particularly with respect to the issues of sex trafficking and HIV (Thitsa 1980; Peach 2000, 2005; Klunklin and Greenwood 2005). Finally, I will examine the recent emergence of the Thai *bhikkhuni* movement as a 'local strategy' to address gender inequalities within the social system.

The history and significance of the bhikkhuni ordination movement in Thailand

While the Buddhist texts tell us that the Buddha established a male religious order (*bhikkhu sangha*)³ as well as a female religious order (*bhikkhuni sangha*), there is no historical evidence that the *bhikkhuni* tradition was actually established in Thailand (Kabilsingh 1991; Owen 1998). Sri Lanka, India and Burma are the only countries where Theravada *bhikkhunis* ever existed, and by the eleventh century CE they had disappeared completely from Theravada Buddhism. By contrast, in the Mahayana tradition the *bhikkhuni* order exists to this day. In Thailand the only formal religious option available to women is life as a white robed *mae chi*. The *mae chi* institution is not mentioned in the texts, in fact its exact origins are unclear (Lindberg-Falk 2000, 45), and many view it as a poor substitute for the *bhikkhuni* ideal. The living conditions of a *mae chi* are often inadequate, they have little opportunity for study of the *dhamma* (Buddhist teachings), and the majority live in temples, where they cook and clean for

the monks (Mueke 2004). Whereas lay Buddhists give generously to the monks, since they represent authentic 'fields of merit'⁴, donations to a *mae chi* generate less merit and therefore people give less generously. Like *bhikkhunis*, women who become *mae chis* shave their heads and eyebrows, give up their possessions and practise celibacy. However, they only follow eight, or sometimes ten, precepts rather than the 311 rules of the *bhikkhuni patimokkha*⁵. This would seem to place them closer to lay Buddhists, who observe five precepts. The low status of the *mae chi* is further compounded by the ambiguous way in which they are dealt with by different government ministries in Thailand: there is no consensus about whether they are actually religious or lay persons. While the Ministry of the Interior defines the *mae chi* as a 'skilled ordinand' (candidate for ordination) who has renounced worldly concerns and, like monks, not eligible to vote, both the Department of Religion and the Ministry of Communications treat them as lay women. Thus, the Department of Religion underwrites education for monks and novices but not for *mae chis*, and the Ministry of Communications grants travel subsidies to monks but not to *mae chis* (Lindberg-Falk 2000, 42; Mueke 2004, 225).

It has proved difficult to revive the *bhikkhuni* ordination in Theravada Buddhism, since the conventional ordination procedure necessitates the presence of at least five male and five female ordinands (the 'dual ordination'). One possible approach to this apparent deadlock has been the recognition that, although the Buddhist literature tells us that the dual ordination is the ideal, it does not declare other forms of ordination invalid (Bhadra 2002). For instance, the first Buddhist nun, Mahapajapati, was ordained by receiving eight special rules, *garudhammas*, from the Buddha, and in Sri Lanka, before the arrival of *bhikkhunis* from India in the third century BCE, it is recorded that male *bhikkhus* alone were permitted to ordain women (Li 2000, 183). This departure from the conventional ordination procedure has not, however, been the strategy employed to revive the ordination, firstly in the USA (1988), then in India (1996), and Sri Lanka (1998). Instead, the dual ordination has been retained, but the required number of *bhikkhunis* has been achieved through the presence of nuns from the Chinese Dharmaguptaka tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. While many reject this for not being an authentic Theravada ordination, others argue that it is legitimate since it was a group of *bhikkhunis* from Sri Lanka who introduced the *bhikkhuni* ordination into China in 433 CE. The Sri Lankan and Chinese *bhikkhunis*, therefore, share the same lineage (Kabilsingh 1991, 31; Wijayasundara 2000, 82).

The revival of the *bhikkhuni* tradition in Sri Lanka in 1998 was a major milestone, since 70 per cent⁶ of Sri Lankans are Buddhist, whereas Buddhism accounts for only 0.8 per cent⁷ of the population of India and much less in the USA. Although in Sri Lanka there are opponents of the *bhikkhuni* ordination, and it has not been officially recognised by the 'Maha Sangha'⁸ (Lee and Bhadra 2002, 33), a number of high profile monks have given their support and the response of the lay community has been generally positive. It is estimated that there are around four hundred *bhikkhunis* in Sri Lanka. The situation is somewhat different in Thailand, where to date only five Thai

women live as Theravada *bhikkhunis*, and where monks are specifically banned from ordaining women under the 1928 Sangha Act⁹. Neither the public nor the monastic community, or *sangha*, have been particularly welcoming towards the introduction of the *bhikkhuni* tradition in Thailand. There is a fairly broad consensus in Thailand that women's status and options within Buddhism need to undergo reform, but many argue that it is more appropriate to work towards transforming the *mae chi* institution rather than to introduce the *bhikkhuni* ordination. Lindberg-Falk suggests that the *mae chi* institution is already undergoing a process of reform, particularly through the emergence of 'independent nunneries' where women have the opportunity for education and religious practice (2000). Moreover, the 'Mae Chi Institute' (established in 1969) is behind a campaign for legal change that would recognise *mae chis* as authentic religious persons and grant them the same rights as *bhikkhus*¹⁰. In fact, Lindberg-Falk tells us that the majority of nuns she has interviewed would not want to become *bhikkhunis*. Many of them see it as part of the Mahayana tradition or would be daunted by having to follow all the 311 *bhikkhuni* precepts. Furthermore, the benefits of remaining 'independent' and apart from the male *sangha*, could avoid 'institutionalized subordination to the monks' (Lindberg-Falk 2000, 55).

Others, however, are dismissive of this reasoning and instead stress that the introduction of the *bhikkhuni* ordination is congruent with the 'true intentions' of the Buddha to establish the 'four-fold *sangha*' consisting of *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunis*, lay men (*upasaka*) and lay women (*upasika*) (Wijayasundara 2000)¹¹. In addition to this religious reason, many also draw attention to the social dimension of women's exclusion from full ordination in Thailand. They argue that the revival of the *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand is an important step in improving women's social status and opportunities more broadly (Ekachai 2001; Kabilsingh 1991; Satha-Anand 1999). In the next section I will explore the theory behind the link between the *bhikkhuni* ordination and women's empowerment.

The theory behind the link between the *bhikkhuni* ordination and women's empowerment

The link between the *bhikkhuni* ordination and women's empowerment has been discussed in academic literature (e.g. Puntarigvivat 2001; Satha-Anand 1999), as well as by people I have interviewed in Thailand (both lay and ordained). There is concern that many gender-related issues facing women in Thailand, including domestic violence, sex trafficking and HIV transmission, have a religious and cultural dimension that is frequently overlooked by secular development agencies, as well as by the Buddhist establishment. Two main themes have emerged in my discussions with ordained and lay Buddhist women in Thailand concerning the social benefits of the *bhikkhuni* ordination. The first theme draws attention to the practical role of

Buddhism in providing various services to the community. While many young boys spend time living in temples as temporary monks, where they receive a free religious and general education, this opportunity is denied to girls. This, it is argued, exacerbates the likelihood of the sex trafficking of young girls. The boys who become 'temporary monks' come from socially deprived backgrounds, and girls from similar backgrounds are those who are most likely to end up trafficked into the sex trade. The opportunity to become 'temporary nuns' would, it is argued, help prevent this from happening. The creation of a respected and recognised community of female ordinands in Thai Buddhism would enable the institutionalisation of education in the temples for girls as well as boys. Moreover, it is envisioned that female ordinands would be able to offer an informal counselling service to women who have suffered abuse or problems with their marriages, or have contracted HIV. The *bhikkhus* are typically consulted by lay Buddhists for advice and support, but cultural constraints make it difficult for women to seek spiritual and practical advice from male religious persons, particularly regarding issues of a sexual nature.

The second theme raised by those I interviewed concerns the perception that the subordinate status of women in Thai Buddhism has a negative influence on social attitudes about gender roles more broadly (Rattanavali and Earth 2003). This is also reflected in academic literature concerned with gender and Buddhism. As Van Esterik writes, Buddhism is a 'key component of Thai identity' providing 'a way of viewing the world, a sense of reality, moral standards, and a shared language and metaphors for analyzing their existing life situation' (2000, 65–66; Peach 2005, 124). Buddhism reinforces the understanding that women are a lower rebirth than men because of *kamma* acquired in previous lives (Owen 1998) and 'women are socialised to be relational, socially embedded and family oriented rather than independent, autonomous, self-determining individuals' (Peach 2005, 124). This intrinsic inferiority of women is reinforced within the structure of everyday public Buddhist practice and custom:

Men perform all the public roles of Buddhism, ordained as monks or as lay officiants, leading the chanting, conducting rituals, and participating as members of the wat (temple) committee. In addition, the organisation of space in the meeting hall clearly denotes the differential status distinctions between monks and lay persons, elders and younger people, and women and men. Monks sit upon a raised platform, denoting higher status. Elderly men sit closest to the monks, followed by younger men. Women sit around the perimeter. The elderly men make merit by placing food in the monks' bowls first, followed by the younger men. Not until the youngest boy has made his offering will the most elderly woman lead the other women to make their offerings (Klunklin and Greenwood 2005, 48).

Thus, in the course of my research, it has become clear that an important dimension of the *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand is its potential to rebalance this institutionalised hierarchy, which is very much part of Buddhism but also of Thai society more broadly.

While not all *bhikkhunis* or aspiring ordinands are explicitly motivated by such a 'feminist' agenda, it is anticipated that the introduction of the *bhikkhuni* ordination may have the effect of transforming attitudes, which would benefit women more broadly. As Puntarigivat argues 'the replacement of *mae chi* by a *bhikkhuni* institution would greatly raise women's status at the core of Thai culture and would begin to address many of women's problems in Thailand – including poverty, child abuse and prostitution' (2001, 225). Before I go on to discuss the emergent *bhikkhuni* movement in Thailand, I will first review some of the recent literature that discusses the relationship between Thai Buddhism, gender, and women's oppression. These studies particularly focus on links between Buddhism, sex trafficking and women's vulnerability to HIV, and they reflect the concerns of many of the lay and ordained women that I have interviewed in Thailand. The following discussion will provide some important examples of the suggested effects of traditional Buddhist patriarchal views which the *bhikkhuni* movement is attempting to address.

Thai Buddhism and gender: HIV and sex trafficking

The problem of HIV and AIDS is one of the most pressing issues facing developing countries. While the pandemic is most acute in sub-Saharan Africa, south-east Asia, including Thailand, has also been hit hard. In all these regions it is often women who have been worse affected, due to both their physiology and the cultural and social norms that make it difficult for them to ensure safe sexual activity. Klunklin and Greenwood's study of the relationship between Buddhism and the spread of HIV in Thailand argues that 'Thai culture, particularly Buddhism, folklore, and ancient superstitions, affects gender roles and . . . the incidence and rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in Thai women' (2005, 46). The superior status of men in the Buddhist tradition and the belief in women's 'kammic deficit' finds further reinforcement, they argue, in notions of the ideal Thai woman (*kunlasatri*) as 'proficient and sophisticated in household duties; graceful and pleasant yet unassuming in appearance and social manners; and conservative in her sexuality' (2005, 49). Central to an understanding of the ideal *kunlasatr* is the notion of *krengjai*, social rules and protocols learnt from childhood that ensure familial and social harmony. However, these are hierarchical and gendered, stressing the subservience of women to their male partners, such that the *kunlasatri* is 'expected to trust and believe in her partner's honesty and fidelity even when she has evidence to the contrary' (Klunklin and Greenwood 2005, 52). Thus, to insist on condom use in a marital relationship can be perceived as not trusting one's husband or as evidence of one's own infidelity.

While the *kunlasatri* ideal is arguably one factor in increasing women's vulnerability to HIV, this is exacerbated by the high proportion of men who have sex with prostitutes after marriage. Buddhism does not condone prostitution, but the *sangha* in Thailand has been criticised for not taking a clear stance on the issue.

Some suggest that this would harm the interests of the *sangha*, since the monks receive substantial monetary donations from commercial sex workers (Mueke 1992; Peach 2000, 2005). Others, by contrast, point out that prostitution 'is not considered to be a sin in Buddhism as it is in Christianity, Islam, or other religions, and prostitutes are not always viewed negatively in Buddhist teachings' (Peach 2000, 70–71). Therefore, the *sangha* is less compelled to take a stance on commercial sex work as an ethical issue. However, many are calling on the *sangha* to apply Buddhist ethical teachings to the issue of sex trafficking, invoking the precepts of non-harm (*ahimsa*) and avoidance of sexual misconduct¹², or stressing that prostitution leads to the accumulation of 'negative karma by reinforcing craving and attachment to the sensual world of desire (which perpetuates bondage to *samsara*' (Peach 2000, 70)¹³.

Girls and women enter prostitution in Thailand for complex reasons, and researchers are likely to point to the lack of educational and economic opportunities for poor females, as well as the demands of a profitable sex-tourism industry. However, a number of studies have suggested that cultural factors also play a part in sustaining the sex industry in Thailand. The tendency of Buddhist teachings not to view sex work as immoral or degrading removes much of the stigma associated with similar work in many other cultures (Peach 2005, 125): In Thai culture prostitutes are not viewed with universal negativity and in the Buddhist texts we find stories about prostitutes, often as friends of the Buddha. Moreover, as Peach tells us, one popular attitude towards prostitution in Thailand is that it enables women to earn money that they can give as donations to monks. This provides them with an opportunity to earn merit in order to improve their *kamma* for a better rebirth in the next life (i.e. as a man) (2005, 125). Thus, 'traditional Thai Buddhist culture functions to legitimate the trafficking industry, and thereby deny the human rights of women involved in sexual slavery' (Peach 2000, 65; Mueke 1992; Puntarigivat 2001, 227; Kabilsingh 1991, 67; Satha-Anand 1999).

Although this understanding of *kamma* is embedded in Thai society, the Buddhist tradition can also be interpreted to support the view that men and women are equal; it can thus provide 'sources of empowerment and liberation for women' (Peach 2000, 81). This feminist exposition of Buddhism has become the subject of numerous books and articles in different Buddhist traditions. These studies emphasise men and women's equal ability to gain enlightenment (Murcott 1991; Sponberg 1992), positive images of women and the feminine in the texts (Murcott 1991; Peach 2000), as well as the existence of the *bhikkhuni* ordination at the time of the Buddha (Owen 1998). For instance, one popular view is that Buddhist teachings are essentially gender neutral and any patriarchal influences are later corruptions of the tradition. However, are such feminist interpretations of the Buddhist texts relevant in practice? Or do they represent elite perspectives that have emerged within a context of western feminist critique and have little relevance at the grass roots level? For instance, reading the work of some Buddhist feminist authors one gets the impression that they are speaking about a

generic Buddhism that has been responsive to gender issues and concerns as it has translocated to the West, rather than Buddhism as it is actually lived and practised in Asian contexts (see, for instance, Gross 1993). As Peach writes:

Who is doing the reinterpreting, and for what audience? Would the reinterpreted texts be taught in school? If not, how would the reinterpretations be disseminated? Do Thai women – especially mothers and prostitutes – read Buddhist texts? If not, is it reasonable to assume that Buddhist monks will recite reinterpreted scriptures in religious services? What other mechanisms are available within local communities to communicate these new understandings to women? More generally, it may not always be possible to empower women using a ‘local’ cultural strategy such as textual reinterpretation, in part because of explicit religious or cultural restrictions on women’s autonomy to engage in such practices, including women’s basic literacy skills (2000, 80).

If ‘religious feminism’ is to be a facilitator of women’s empowerment at the grassroots level, then it is necessary to find ways of bridging the gap between feminist interpretations of the tradition and the oppressive dimensions of Thai Buddhism in practice. The final section of this paper discusses recent attempts to introduce the *bhikkhuni* ordination into Thai Buddhism. This is seen as a ‘local cultural strategy’, to challenge and transform aspects of the tradition which are gender biased against women and which feed into broader social attitudes that increase women’s vulnerability to risks such as domestic violence, sex trafficking or HIV.

The Thai *bhikkhuni* movement and women’s empowerment

Since 2002 I have been closely following the progress of the Thai *bhikkhuni* movement via email, letters and visits to Thailand. While so far there has been no formal indication that the ‘Supreme Sangha Council’ intends to recognise and support the *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand, or that the 1928 Sangha Act banning monks from ordaining women will be repealed, its renaissance in Sri Lanka has set a precedent, many hope, for its eventual acceptance in Thailand. Others are more conservative (or pessimistic) and doubt that it will ever become an official institution within the Buddhist tradition in Thailand. However, rather than waiting for the go-ahead from the male religious establishment, a small number of Thai women have now been ordained ‘unofficially’ as *bhikkhunis*. In 2003 the first Thai *bhikkhuni* was ordained in Sri Lanka¹⁴ and since then a further twenty or so women have been ordained as *samaneris*, or novices. While most of these women have travelled to Sri Lanka for their *samaneri* ordination, I am aware of one monk who is prepared to go against convention and ordain female novices. In February 2006 one of these *samaneris* was ordained in Thailand as a *bhikkhuni* in an ordination that involved only *bhikkhus*, and in March 2006 a further three novices were ordained in the presence of Mahayana nuns (from Taiwan) and Theravada monks. These ordinations are not recognised by the Thai

sangha and were performed in the open air in the ancient Buddhist ruins at Ayuthaya, around 50 km from Bangkok, rather than at an established Buddhist temple. While the reintroduction of the *bhikkhuni* tradition in Sri Lanka has been crucial to its emergence in Thailand, travel to Sri Lanka is too expensive for poor women who may wish to be ordained. Although the first Thai woman to be ordained as a *bhikkhuni* was a university professor, this is not the typical profile of an aspiring *bhikkhuni* in Thailand. Many have spent years living as *mae chis*; they do not come from economically affluent backgrounds and only some have formal education. Thus, the ordination of women on Thai soil is important if the tradition is to take off.

Despite such developments, a number of the women I have spoken to have told me that once they took on the orange robes (following their ordination as either a *samaneri* or a *bhikkhuni*) they have, at the very least, attracted unwanted attention and, at the very worst, been subjected to harassment and police questioning. The orange-robed monk has a deep symbolic association in Thailand with masculinity. Indeed, in Thai society generally, there is a perception that the practice of women wearing the orange robes is an attempt to make 'women like men' and hence the *bhikkhuni* movement can fall foul of the critique that it is a 'Western feminist imposition'. Nevertheless, the movement considers that the taking on of orange robes by nuns is grounded in an authentic reading of the Buddhist tradition as requiring the 'four-fold *sangha*', even if this breaks with the (patriarchal) customs of Thai Buddhism. Apart from negative social opinion, on a more practical level once a woman decides to become ordained as a novice and to wear the orange robes, then it is likely that she can no longer remain in the temple that has been her home as a *mae chi* (because her ordination is not considered to be authentic to the Theravada tradition). This increases women's vulnerability as they embark on the path to becoming fully ordained. Thus, the conditions for many *mae chis* may be less than desirable, but they are provided with a level of security that many women would be unwilling to forgo.

Although the numbers of *samaneris* and *bhikkhunis* in Thailand are currently very low, there is some indication that negative social attitudes are becoming less pronounced, and the people I spoke to are hopeful that this will encourage more women to embark upon this religious path. Perhaps another obstacle to be overcome, however, is the fact that the emergent '*bhikkhuni* movement' constitutes a loose network of women, rather than a formal organisation with a base and leader. The *samaneris* and *bhikkhunis* have not coalesced around a particular temple/nunnery or teacher: they do not reside together in a religious community, but are dispersed throughout Thailand living off alms and donations. They are, however, linked to broader networks of Buddhist women in both Thailand and abroad. In Thailand there is a network of lay Buddhists, *bhikkhunis* from Mahayana countries, *mae chis* and western female ordinands¹⁵, who provide support (both financial and moral) to the Thai *bhikkhunis*. On an international level, the Thai *bhikkhuni* movement reflects a broader campaign to secure equal ordination rights and status for women across

Buddhist traditions. There are a number of 'international' events that enable information exchange between women from different traditions. The first of these is the annual awards ceremony for 'Outstanding Women in Buddhism' that has been held since 2002 on International Women's Day at the United Nations in Bangkok. The second is the biennial conference of the Buddhist women's organisation Sakyadhita. Both these events involve the participation of Buddhist women and academics from different traditions and countries, to share ideas and to celebrate achievements.

Conclusion

It has not been my intention in this paper to judge the authenticity of the *bhikkhuni* movement either in theory or in practice. Nor have I critically assessed the arguments that link women's oppression in Thailand to features of Buddhist culture. Rather my interest is to highlight the discourses used within the *bhikkhuni* movement as a local religious feminist strategy which aims to challenge and transform the social attitudes that lead to various types of gender-based oppression. I have presented a case study that indicates the potential usefulness of the nurturing of female leadership roles within religious traditions which are socially powerful, on the one hand, and patriarchal on the other. While it is unlikely that the feminist transformation of religious traditions alone is capable of mitigating women's oppression across the globe, in conjunction with other technical, political, or legal strategies it presents a potentially fruitful, yet largely overlooked, dimension of women's empowerment.

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Notes

- 1 Buddhism is usually divided into three main types: Theravada Buddhism (practised today in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar/Burma, Cambodia, and Laos), Mahayana Buddhism (practised today in Vietnam, China, Japan and Korea) and Vajrayana/Tibetan Buddhism. See Skilton (1994) for a discussion of the history and doctrines of each tradition.
- 2 Since 2002 I have been closely following the developing Thai *bhikkhuni* movement. This research has been funded by a British Academy small grant.
- 3 In the Buddhist tradition the *sangha* is part of the so-called 'triple gem' or 'three refuges' consisting of the Buddha, the *dharma* (the Buddha's teachings) and the *sangha* (the Buddhist monastic community). These are the three things that Buddhists give themselves to or 'take refuge in'.

- 4 Giving food alms and donations both to monks (*bhikkhus*) and to fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhunis*) is believed to confer religious merit on the donors, which increases their positive *kamma* and improves their chances of a favourable rebirth. Most merit is accumulated through giving to monks, and as such they are considered to be authentic 'fields of merit'. *Mae chis*, however, are not considered to be such 'fields of merit'.
- 5 By contrast, Theravada *bhikkhus* (monks) have 227 rules (the *bhikkhu patimokkha*). The fact that nuns are expected to keep more rules than monks has received much attention in the literature. Some suggest that that it is a reflection of the Buddha's initial reluctance to allow women to ordain (it is reported that he was asked three times before he agreed) and that the extra rules for nuns effectively make them subservient to the monks (see Owen 1998, 20–26). Others are less convinced that they are discriminatory (i.e. believe they serve to protect rather than control women) or suggest that they were later additions to the tradition and did not reflect the Buddha's intentions (Kabilsingh 1991, 29–30; Tsomo 2000, 27; Kusuma 2000, 20).
- 6 Data from http://www.adherents.com/largecom/com_buddhist.html (last accessed 25/05/06).
- 7 Data from the 2001 Indian census www.censusindia.net/religiondata/Summary%20-Buddhists.pdf (last accessed 16/04/06).
- 8 The Maha Sangha ('Great Assembly') in Sri Lanka is an elite circle of Buddhist clergy who have influence over important decisions made within the tradition.
- 9 See Kabilsingh (1991, 45ff) for a discussion of the background to this rule. Although the rule still stands and governs practice, it is actually unconstitutional, since the 1997 National Constitution grants equality to men and women.
- 10 This call for legal reform was originally heralded by the feminist lawyer Mae Chi Khunying Kanitha Wichiencharoen, now deceased. She was also a pioneer in the broader reform of the *mae chi* institution, establishing the first and only college for post-high-school education for *mae chis*, Mahapajapati Theri College in Khorat. She was the co-founder of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, which runs a shelter for abused women and children in Bangkok.
- 11 The suggestion that the Buddha's original intention was to establish the 'four-fold *sangha*' seems to be in conflict with his apparent initial reluctance to ordain women (see note 5). However, this is consistent with the broader tendency for religious texts to be open to interpretation from different perspectives and thus supportive of a range of socio-political agendas. For a detailed discussion of the reasons why the Buddha seemed to be reluctant to ordain women, and whether or not this indicates a genuine concern that women are not really capable of leading a renunciate life, see Owen (1998).
- 12 These are two of the five precepts to which all Buddhists aspire to adhere.
- 13 *Samsara* is the Buddhist term for the cycle of phenomenal existences into which individuals are repeatedly born. It is the aim of Buddhist practice to obtain release from *samsara* and no longer be reborn.
- 14 Dhammananda, as she is now known, was previously called Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. She had been married and spent her career as an academic and campaigner for women's ordination. She runs a temple that was established by her mother (who was

ordained as a Taiwanese/Mahayana *bhikkhuni*), the Songdhammakalyani Temple ('the temple of women who uphold *dhamma*'), about 50 km from Bangkok. See the Thaibhikkunis.org website (last accessed 16/04/06).

- 15 My initial introduction to the Thai *bhikkhuni* movement was through meeting an ordained Buddhist woman from the USA, who now lives in Thailand as a Theravada *bhikkhuni*. She is an ardent campaigner for female ordination and has supported a number of Thai women who aspire to become ordained.

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