

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>

## Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand

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# Review of *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand*

Vanessa R. Sasson\*

*Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand.* By Monica Lindberg Falk. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007, 238 pages, ISBN 0-2959-8726-X, US \$30.00.

*Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* by Monica Lindberg Falk is a fascinating study of the Thai *mae chiis* and will undoubtedly become required reading for anyone interested in Thai Buddhism or female Buddhist asceticism. Falk begins her study by outlining the context in which her ethnography was conducted. In addition to numerous short trips to Thailand over a period of a few years, Falk spent one year living among *mae chiis* in a *samnak chii*, learning the language, following their routine (including performing daily alms rounds) and adopting their rules with few exceptions (she did not, for example, shave her head). The result is a powerful ethnographic study that expresses the complex humanity of the *mae chii* experience. Perhaps the most significant testimony to her successful research

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consists of references made to the many friendships she fostered over the course of her field work. Anyone who has undertaken field work knows that it consists not only of interviewing subjects, but eventually of developing friendships. These friendships and mutual interactions are often what lead researchers to greater understanding and sympathy. The friendships behind Falk's study appear to have had a significant impact on her work and it is surely the better for it.

Falk manages to balance her academic study with a gentle touch of humanity, as she regularly alternates between first-hand descriptions of the events she witnessed and theoretical analysis of these. The integrity of her material is thereby enhanced, as the reader is always made aware of when she is describing events she was personally privy to, and when she is pulling back from these to seek theoretical conclusions. The irony of her research project, moreover, does not escape her: she recognizes that she is paying attention to a group of women who are largely ignored by the country they inhabit—a situation many find themselves in with similar studies concerning female asceticism.

After setting the stage in her first chapter, Falk provides a brief overview of gender theory as it pertains to her field in the next chapter. Although she raises a number of fascinating questions, she unfortunately does not always follow them through to the end. For example, she briefly recounts interactions with ascetic lesbians but does not allow herself to fully explore the gender ramifications of how these women are treated in the community. She refers to the fact that, while both monks and *mae chiis* are barred from similar sexual offences, there are many cases of monks being expelled whereas there are no recorded cases for *mae chiis*. Situations such as these beg theoretical examination, but Falk pulls back too quickly. Nevertheless, the fact that she points to so many intriguing issues in such a short chapter demonstrates the depth of her awareness

of gendered asceticism and one is left hoping to hear more from her about these in future publications.

One of the most interesting themes touched upon in this book has to do with debunking certain general assumptions often made about female Buddhist ascetics and their reasons for renunciation. Falk demonstrates that, contrary to popular opinion, women do not necessarily renounce because of misfortune or suffering; spiritual and philosophical considerations emerge in her discussions with many *mae chiis*, thereby demonstrating that women are not always running away when they shave their heads. Moreover, she refutes the idea that poverty is a leading factor behind women's renunciation, as she clearly demonstrates that, not only do most women who take the robes in Thailand come from financially secure homes, but that they in fact jeopardize their family's finances (if their families agree to support them) to become *mae chiis*. For these reasons and many others, it becomes clear that women face tremendous obstacles in the pursuit of renunciation and that their motives are profound and layered. Although motivation has been examined in similar studies about female renunciation, rarely has a scholar provided as much material on this question.

Falk also provides fascinating material concerning female pollution in Thailand. She explores the fear associated with menstruation and describes various local customs that have developed to protect men from its dangerous toxicity, such as hanging women's garments on low clotheslines to protect men from accidentally walking into their polluted presence or forbidding women from entering the inner sanctum of Buddhist temples in Northern Thailand (despite the "un-Buddhist" character of such regulations). *Mae chiis* living independently from monks in *samnak chiis* (as opposed to those living in temples under the monks' direction) do not have to deal with questions

of their supposed pollution because there are no men to protect. This is a significant advantage for the *samnak chii* residents that she aptly notes. A question I am left with is whether protocol for menstruating *mae chiis* exists when they leave the walls of their *samnak chiis*. Do they ascribe to local norms in these cases or do they consider themselves free of the issue entirely?

Falk's discussion of education is also particularly strong and worthy of mention here, and her detailed account of how the first Thai *mae chii* college came into existence is surely an important record for the history of female ascetics in Thailand. She navigates elegantly between various positions concerning women's education, identifying a multiplicity of views and the politics behind them, most of which have been seen time and again in Buddhist countries around the world. The material she presents contributes to a greater perspective on women in Thailand, but also confirms an ongoing problem for ascetic women in many Buddhist countries. An inter-monastic dialogue about women's education—such as those conducted through Sakyadhita—is essential. Falk's analysis renders the issue all the more urgent.

The scant material concerning *bhikkhunī* ordination is the only potential shortcoming of Falk's otherwise excellent book. Although this scarcity makes sense in the Thai context to a certain degree—the majority of *mae chiis* are apparently not interested in higher ordination and seek to gain formal recognition as *mae chiis* instead—the obvious question one is left with is, why? With *bhikkhunī* ordination coming to the forefront in a number of Buddhist countries—most notably Sri Lanka and Tibet—one must ask what specifically has discouraged the female ascetics in Thailand from pursuing the matter. In addressing this issue Falk argues that the laicization of Thailand has given the *mae chiis'* ambiguous status a marked advantage. Moreover, with scandals of

corruption emerging regularly from the monastic community, the *mae chiis* might have little to gain by joining the institution.

Falk also suggests that many *mae chiis* fear that *bhikkhunī* ordination would render them socially and financially isolated. She seems optimistic that their quest for legal recognition as *mae chiis* will prove successful, with many (if not most) monastic institutions supporting them. But again, why have they chosen to fight for *mae chii* recognition rather than ordination? Voicing concerns about social and financial consequences rather than spiritual ones (needing to wait for Metteyya to reinstate the *bhikkhunī* lineage for example) suggests that, if external support were available to them, they just might be willing to give ordination serious consideration. The fact that it is to their social and financial advantage to remain institutionally marginalized leads to the conclusion that the institution has successfully managed to convince women to stay out of it. The *mae chiis* are surely calculating their position well, perhaps hoping that partial entrance through the back door is the best they can achieve for now, or perhaps they are disenchanted by the institution and thus not even interested in joining their ranks as a result of political, social or spiritual concerns. All of these issues emerged in my own research with the *silmātās* of Sri Lanka, and no obvious resolution presents itself at the moment. The only shortcoming in Falk's research is that she could have explored these questions and the impact of the answers she might have encountered more fully. A book on female asceticism in Thailand surely requires more attention be paid to the logistics of ordination and the politics surrounding it.

Overall, this study of the *mae chiis* in Thailand is an excellent contribution to Buddhist Studies, Gender Studies, and specifically scholarship on female asceticism. I eagerly look forward to reading more of Falk's work.