

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 27, 2020

*Gender and the Path to Awakening:
Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism*

Reviewed by Elizabeth Angowski

Earlham College
angowel@earlham.edu

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:
vforte@albright.edu

A Review of *Gender and the Path to Awakening: Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism*

Elizabeth Angowski¹

Gender and the Path to Awakening: Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism. By Martin Seeger. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2018, xvii + 341 pp., ISBN 978-616-215-147-7 (Paperback), \$40.00.

When Martin Seeger began studying the lives of accomplished Buddhist women in Thailand in 2007, the veneration of female practitioners, or female “saints,” appeared to be quite rare. Roughly a decade ago, one could count the names of such figures on one hand—or so it would seem to the reader of Thai and Western-language sources on the topic. Once Seeger commenced his research, however, he began to see the extent to which scholarship had been neglecting this field (2-3). Except for a small number of texts on a few fairly well-known individuals, highly revered women were conspicuously absent from the conversation.

Gender and the Path to Awakening offers a substantive response to this neglect. Across six chapters, Seeger analyzes a wide range of sources—from ancient Pāli texts to modern cremation volumes, written homilies to

¹ Department of Religion, Earlham College. Email: angowel@earlham.edu.

sermons on MP3, *stūpas* and statues to murals and photographs—in an effort to present readers with new insight into the lives of several accomplished women. Materials related to six in particular, namely Khunying Yai Damrongthammasan (1882–1944), Khun Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem (1895–1964), Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam (1901–1991), Mae Chi Nari Karun (1876/7–1999), Mae Chi Phimpha Wongsu-udom (1912–2010), and Mae Chi Soda Sosut (1920–2009), receive in-depth treatment. Taken together, these women’s lives span nearly 140 years, from the late nineteenth century through the first decade of the twenty-first century. Any one individual’s life would make for a compelling study; and, indeed, Seeger has, in the past, published articles centered on Mae Chi Kaew (“Against the Stream”) and Mae Bunruean (“Reversal of Female Power”), respectively. The strength of *Gender and the Path to Awakening*, then, is in the work of comparison. By revealing how several women’s biographies speak to one another and in chorus, Seeger adds significant nuance to current understandings of what it means to be a highly revered female practitioner in modern Thai Buddhism.

Ultimately, Seeger’s textual-ethnographic analysis succeeds in demonstrating that exemplary women have been not only more numerous but also more influential than commonly assumed. The project deserves praise as a historical study, not least for how it draws on an impressive body of often hard-won evidence. But to classify it sharply as a history would be misleading. At its heart, the book is less interested in questions about past events than it is in matters related to agency, experience, and, especially, self-perception. Over and above “Where are all the female figures in the modern Thai Buddhist devotional pantheon, and what were their lives like, *really*?” Seeger asks, “What did several highly regarded female renunciants think of themselves as they pursued their spiritual ideals?” Answers to this question illuminate how women navigated Thai society and Theravāda monastic hierarchies; how they reconciled their experiences of social and institutional marginalization with the “soteriological inclusiveness” expressed in Buddhist doctrine; and how, in spite of the obstacles they faced, they achieved renown.

To arrive at a better sense of what women thought of themselves, Seeger acknowledges the need to examine what others have thought of them in tandem (4). After all, subjectivity—let alone renown—cannot be achieved in a vacuum, and so, chapter one situates the book’s subjects in the larger socio-religious contexts in which they lived. Here, readers see the extent to which scriptural sources have influenced conceptions of the female as well as women’s roles in religion. Along with summaries and syntheses of these sources, a thorough account of the ongoing debates surrounding women’s full ordination contextualizes several female practitioners’ apparent disinterest in pursuing *bhikkhunī* ordination, a once-esteemed status that has been officially extinct for centuries.

Although Pāli canonical and post-canonical depictions of women, both lay and monastic, are multivocal—women are said to be “the stain of the holy life” and yet just as capable as men of attaining *nibbāna*, or full awakening (21)—Seeger relays that hardships for modern women abound. Doctrinal attestations of soteriological equality have not paved the way for equal access to religious opportunities on the ground. Today, Thai women are legally barred from ordaining as *bhikkhunīs*, the female counterpart to *bhikkhus*, or fully ordained monks. Women who wish to renounce lay life may instead ordain abroad or follow a para-monastic path like that of a *mae chi*, but the question remains whether *mae chi* status can ever provide a satisfying alternative to *bhikkhunī* ordination (27–28). In the eyes of Thai law, for example, *mae chis* are technically “ordained persons” (*nak buat*), yet government institutions may not uniformly observe this designation (33). At the popular level, regard for *mae chis* is also subject to variation; but, generally speaking, they do not experience a level of respect akin to that enjoyed by male clerics.

Each of the six women profiled in depth in chapter two, on biography and hagiography, were ordained as *mae chis* for at least some portion of their lives. Each, in turn, endured gender-specific obstacles. Collectively, however, their life stories challenge what Seeger refers to as “the generalized and oversimplified descriptions of female practice and

gender relations and hierarchies that one can often find in discussions on gender in Thai Buddhism” (3). Although readers do not find the oversimplified account summarized outright, one gathers that it goes something like this: Overall, people consider *mae chis* a drain on society’s resources and a burden on male teachers (44); their access to important Buddhist knowledge has been severely limited, in large part because many of them are not literate, and literacy is key to religious education in Thailand (206); and, given that they regard their embeddedness in gendered hierarchies negatively, they often lack the self-esteem that would help them gain prominence as meditators, scholars, and teachers themselves (216).

The more specific and nuanced picture Seeger proposes emerges over the course of the remaining chapters. Chapters three and four discuss the issue of sainthood, particularly how it is defined, whether it can be ascribed to individuals in the modern era, and how it is made manifest and substantiated in the world. While chapter three examines Pāli-text-based theories of advanced spiritual attainment, chapter four examines the role of material culture and popular devotional practices in affirming an individual’s saintly status.

Both chapters attest to a point Seeger makes in a section on the indefiniteness of sainthood, namely that the gap between canonical descriptions and actual, real-life conceptualizations of an accomplished practitioner can be quite wide (120). Canonically, a saint, or “noble person” (*ariya-puggala*), might be a stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*), once-returner (*sakadāgāmi*), non-returner (*anāgāmi*), or fully awakened *arahant*. Popularly, they might be someone assumed to have attained supernatural powers or supramundane states of mind. Whatever the basis for attributing sainthood to an individual, however, it is clear that public veneration actualizes or realizes that status.

In chapter four, which examines how this realization works, Seeger offers compelling evidence to support his argument that things like

relics and amulets (“repositories of sacred power,” literal objectifications of charisma) have done more to instill confidence in and promote women’s spiritual accomplishments than doctrine-based arguments or hagiographical texts—particularly after women’s deaths (139, 180). On this point, the case of Mae Chi Kaew provides a good example. Although she was not widely venerated during her lifetime, Mae Chi Kaew has been increasingly celebrated on a national level based on reports that her remains had crystallized. The dissemination of these remains as relics not only extended her biography in time and across devotional spheres, it also inspired people to compose new hagiographical texts that testify to her postmortem supernatural powers (155–157, 176).

Shifting to women’s self-perceptions, chapter five presents seven case studies in the form of biographical profiles, and it argues two main points. First, orality and memory have long been and still are viable means for the acquisition of Buddhist knowledge. Second, pedagogical relationships between monks and female renunciants or female lay practitioners (*upāsikās*) have been more complex than once thought. Across the cases Seeger examines, reading and writing were not felt to be crucial for spiritual development. Far more important to women than direct access to written texts, it seems, was direct access to teachers (210–211). Teachers, in turn, could be both supportive and laudatory of their pupils. Some even went so far as to declare a female disciple’s awakened status publicly (128). This image of the supportive monastic teacher contrasts with the idea of an exclusionary or merely tolerant monastic sangha.

Seeger’s sixth and final chapter focuses on how women experienced their own gender’s implications, both in terms of their relationships with others and their spiritual practices. Here, given a paucity of textual sources authored by all six of the women central to his study, Seeger limits his analysis to works by three figures: Khunying Yai, Mae Bunnuean, and Mae Chi Phimpha. For these women, female embodiment

might have been a conventional, societal problem but never a source of soteriological distress. That is, in their writings, all three women affirm that gender and social status can function as worldly barriers to spiritual practice. However, each viewed gender-related difficulties as external and imposed rather than internal and inherent. Mae Bunruean, for example, notes matter-of-factly in one cited passage that women indeed “have many duties” that may curtail the actual practice of meditation. But, she states, “with the husband gone to work and the children to school, being at home one can try to bring one’s mind to seclusion” (224–225). Rather than dwell on the hardships and obstacles attendant the female gender, Seeger finds, across the board, that these women focused instead the rarity and importance of being born human (228). In the grand, saṃsāric scheme of things, gender appeared to them a minor, if not utterly incidental, concern.

Seeger’s conclusion resounds around this point. It depicts the women he profiled as “active and creative agents who were highly committed to their spiritual practice” and yet largely uninterested in challenging the socio-religious *status quo* (247). Each woman adopted religious hierarchy as part of her path; none aspired to become *bhikkhunīs*; and all would appear to have prioritized attaining *nibbāna* over challenging the mundane systems and attitudes that deemed them inferior to their male counterparts (248). With proximity to monastic environments and the help of supportive teachers, these women felt they had sufficient access to valuable Buddhist knowledge. That knowledge, in turn, offered them self-confidence, perhaps in no small part because it held out *nibbāna* for all, regardless of sex or gender.

Especially after reading the biographical analyses in chapter six, I look forward to future examinations of audience and reception. Throughout the book, Seeger is careful not to suggest that he presents his readers with a representative sample of *mae chis*’ experiences and attitudes. That

would be too tall an order. Still, I am left wondering if these women's universalistic views are aimed at becoming representative. That is, to what degree do these stories not only document but also encourage a focus on soteriological inclusiveness over institutional androcentrism? To put this question more broadly, what futures do stories by and about these women imagine for other practitioners, not least the current and would-be female renunciants navigating Thai Theravāda hierarchies?

Citing Paul Williams in chapter two, Seeger notes that a hagiography "is to be read as an ideological document, *reflecting* the religious interests of the community which put the hagiography together" (61, emphasis added). To this point, I would add that, as ideological documents, hagiographies also project interests. To be sure, in their autobiographical writings, the women at the center of Seeger's study may or may not have discussed gender differently if they had practiced at a further remove from the conservative contexts in which they lived. What effects their stories might aim to have either way is a different question.

Scholars working in Buddhist Studies, monastic studies, and studies of women and gender in religion or anthropology will undoubtedly benefit from reading *Gender and the Path to Awakening*. Less obvious based on the title of the book is that it should also attract scholars of any tradition interested in scripture's interpretation in and through lived experience. Throughout the project, Seeger underscores how Pāli canonical and post-canonical sources functioned as "blueprints" for women (48). In turn, he says, the autobiographies, hagiographies, and devotional practices examined in the book can be understood as "actualization[s] and localization[s] of ideals outlined in the Pāli canon" (250). Inasmuch as the project offers a learned study of gendered experience in Thai Theravāda Buddhist renunciant communities, then, it also proves to be a deft exploration of how authoritative texts bear on religious subject formation.

At the broadest level, *Gender and the Path to Awakening* confirms something that historians of sex, gender, and sexuality recite as a mantra: An absence from the historical record need not indicate an absence in reality. Male figures overwhelmingly dominate the Thai devotional landscape. Seeger's efforts demonstrate, however, that there were, and likely are, more accomplished and admired female practitioners than scholarship to date would have readers assume. No doubt many remarkable women's stories and teachings have eluded the textual record. Nevertheless, some accounts have survived; and, as Seeger shows, especially if one looks beyond the written word, many more—well over a handful—may still be brought to light.

Works Cited

- Seeger, Martin. "‘Against the Stream’: The Thai Female Buddhist Saint Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam (1901–1991)." *South East Asia Research*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2010, pp. 555–595.
- _____. "Reversal of Female Power, Transcendentality, and Gender in Thai Buddhism: The Thai Buddhist Female Saint Khun Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem (1895–1964)." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 5, 2013, pp. 1488–1519.