EMPOWERMENT, ITS CRITIQUE FROM A FEMINIST AND BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE AND BHIKKHUNI ORDINATION

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Abstract

The article discusses the conceptual understanding of the term empowerment as contributing to transforming unequal gender relations focusing on the context of the struggle for full ordination as bhikkhuni for religious women in the Thai Theravada Buddhist tradition. As bhikkhunis, religious women move to a higher moral realm and is considered as “fields-of-merit”, a status previously available only to men who have access to full ordination. However, the relevance of the term empowerment is also critiqued firstly, from a feminist perspective that it is derived from a patriarchal discourse fixated with power. Secondly, the notion of empowerment is analyzed from a Buddhist perspective of non-attachment or letting go. In the process of discussing the relevance of the term empowerment the social position of mae chii (religious women who observe eight precepts, shave their heads and wear white robes) are highlighted. Broadly, the struggle for the ordination as bhikkhuni for religious women is situated in the debate on whether Buddhism supports gender equality.

Keywords: empowerment, gender in/equality, women, religion, Buddhism.

Introduction

Focusing on the key term empowerment, the paper traces its development and definition that address the imbalance in gender relations. Specifically, an analysis for understanding full ordination as bhikkhuni (holder of 311 precepts) as empowerment is provided in the context of Theravada Buddhist in Thailand. The circumstances and struggles of religious women that include both bhikkhuni and mae chii (holder of eight precepts) are drawn to provide a background for understanding the differential access in power in the religious domain between men and women. In addition, examples from the Sakyaditha’s (Daughters of The Buddha) experiences of organizing for the recognition of bhikkhuni ordination are drawn upon to illustrate the concept of empowerment. The paper also critiques the concept of empowerment from both a feminist and a Buddhist perspective with its responses highlighted. As a paper concerning the issue of empowerment and gender equality for women in terms of the

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