Buddhist Women As Agents of Change: Case Studies from Thailand and Indonesia

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While in Thailand the majority of its population are adherents of the Theravada Buddhist tradition, in Indonesia, Buddhism is a minority religion with the Theravada Buddhist tradition embraced by the majority of Buddhists. However, the development of the Theravada tradition in Indonesia is much influenced by its counterparts in Thailand.

Consisting only of men, the Theravada Buddhist ecclesiastical authorities in both Thailand and Indonesia do not recognize bhikkhunis (a fully ordained female monastics). In this context, the aspiration and determination of Buddhist women to be female monastics in the Theravada Buddhist tradition in the 21st century reflect their role as agents of change to bring renewal to their faith. Their convictions and actions affirm women’s spirituality and gender inclusiveness as envisioned by the Buddha in establishing the female monastic order. They are able to survive and even grow due to their ability to attract their own supporters and followers. Furthermore, those who aspire to be female monastics are able to travel outside of their countries to be ordained due to the transnational dimension of Buddhism. These Buddhist women thus reclaim their identities and roles from only being supporters of Buddhism to that of spiritual leaders, religious innovators and ritual specialists. The Theravada Buddhist tradition is a changing one as the female adherents stake their claim to their rightful heritage as female monastics. Similarly, the identity and roles of Buddhist women are fluid.
Ven. Santhi during a blessings ceremony for land donated to expand a school.

Both bhikkhunis are regarded as spiritual leaders in their respective countries with their own followers and are well known for being socially engaged Buddhist. The female monastic at Songdhammakalyani Temple where Ven. Dhammananda is abbess have worked with female prison inmates since 2011 (Dhammananda 2013, 16-20) and run an environmentally friendly project. Ven. Dhammananda has contributed to training and strengthening the Indian Bhikkhuni Sangha (Roshchitra 2013, 8-11) as well as facilitating the ordination of male monastics from Srimatta, India in Thailand (Thakur 2013, 5-7), and became involved in interfaith dialogue with Muslims in southern Thailand.

Furthermore, Ven. Santini and her followers are known for their work with the disadvantaged that transcends religious lines whether it is donating basic necessities such as rice, oil and sugar or monetary construction in the aftermath of a fire to rebuild homes of the villagers nearby Werna Kuslayani, funding where the local in conveyancing the aid of the victims of the recent Mt Kelud eruption who are predominantly Muslims (Lai 2014, 4-5). The Werna Kuslayani is run in an environmentally sustainable manner with a policy of reduce, reuse and recycle whether it is with regards to water or other household products and a separation of organic and non-organic waste.

Buddhist Women As Agents of Change

The research conducted indicates that these Buddhist women are agents of change as they bring renewal to their faith by ordaining as female monastic in spite of the obstacles encountered. They refer to the Buddhist scripture to re-embrace their heritage as female monastics. As educated persons knowledgeable about Buddhist history and teachings of their tradition, they are able to withstand the opposition encountered and defend their ordination. As female monastics, they become more visible publicly, be it as a spiritual leader, a ritual specialist or a religious innovator. Both Ven. Santini and Ven. Dhammananda are religious innovators as they tap local culture and sentiments by introducing the samanera temporary ordination in their respective countries, an innovation based on the existing samanera temporary ordination.

...And Growing Support

Support for the female monastic is growing as they find a niche in attending to the needs of female Buddhists due to the prohibition of close contact between a monastic and the opposite sex and in meeting the needs of the more disadvantaged sections of society. The socially engaged Buddhist practice that transcends religious lines bodes well for the future and can serve as a stepping stone towards religious harmony. In both the Thai and Indonesian case, networking at the international dimension enables them to be ordained. Furthermore, international networking offers a pathway for female monastic to share their experiences and ideas on a broader stage as well as learning from each other.

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Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia, Young Academic Voice, January 2015

Further enjoy Ven. Dhammananda and the Female Monastic at Songdhammakalyani Monastery.


http://kyotoreview.org/ya/buddhist-women-as-agents-of-change