

Gender and Sexual Discrimination in Popular Thai Buddhism

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Abstract

Many in Thai society believe that Buddhism is a source of gender and sexual discrimination, with enlightenment only possible for heterosexual men as everyone else has bad karma. However, according to my study based on the Tripitaka, the Thai Buddhist text, physiological sex is no obstacle to achieving enlightenment because in meditative practice, one's body is only a "form". Further, regarding karma and rebirth, to be born male or female depends on the individual's powerful karma, whether good or bad. If one has no such powerful karma, sex will depend on the cultivated and accumulated sexual characteristics of the individual. Therefore, although the mind has no sex, it is possible for the mind to accumulate certain sexual characteristics or "genders" which are based on social and cultural contexts. What is not clear is what causes humans to have different sexual orientations.

In Thailand, it is widely believed that Buddhism on the whole sanctions gender and sexual discrimination. Influential temples and Buddhist scholars teach that women and homosexual people are inferior, so protocols within popular Buddhist practice derive from this inherent belief. Women are therefore procedurally barred from being ordained as monks in Thailand and they are also forbidden in sacred places such as certain pagodas. It is common in northern Thailand to see a sign in front of a pagoda explicitly stating "Women not allowed." Similarly, homosexuals are discriminated against: homosexuality is seen as the result of bad karma accumulated in past lives, so homosexuals would not be considered for ordination as well.

I investigated if discrimination of women and homosexual people was embodied in the Buddhist texts themselves or if they form instead from Thai societal interpretations that reflected current values and balances of power. I will describe here what is specifically mentioned in the texts, then describe how popular Thai Buddhism has manifested its own interpretations, without reliance on or verification from the texts. I will show how this kind of discrimination benefits the powerful Thai Sangha and will also talk about the effects of discrimination on women and homosexual people who are seeking a religious life. Finally, I will suggest possible avenues for social change.

Gender Discrimination

Thailand has a critical relationship to Buddhism since it has the highest percentage of Buddhists in the world at 96%. Ever since 1200 A.D., Buddhism has played a significant role in Thailand politically, socially and culturally, and its values are seamlessly infused into society. Therefore, the way Buddhism treats gender has important ramifications for society as a whole.

The concept of gender equality in Buddhism is first mentioned in the *Tripitaka Vinaya*, where the Buddha, when pressed for an answer from Ananda, proclaimed that it is possible for women to leave their household life by becoming *bhikkhuni* (female monk). He also stated that it is possible for women to achieve different levels of enlightenment. Therefore, he allowed women to be ordained. Many of women in the Buddha's time attained enlightenment at different levels, according to the *Theri Gatha Sutra* in *Tripitaka*.

In the *Tripitaka* is also the Buddhist concept that there should be four Buddhist groups: *bhikkhu* or male monk, *bhikkuni* or female monk, *upasaka* or layman, and *upasika* or laywoman. The Buddha said that in order for Buddhism to be firmly established, it required the formation of these four groups and that these four groups must study, practice and be able to defend the *dhamma*. The structure of these four groups reflects the equal responsibility and gender equality of both sexes to practice and support Buddhism.

Mention of inability to practice Buddhism or to attain enlightenment due to physiological sex does not appear anywhere in Buddhist texts. Instead, the core of *vipassana* or Buddhist insight meditation is explained as mindfulness in the four foundations: body, feeling, mind or thought, and *dhamma* or object of mind. Enlightenment is considered a process of the mind and the body is considered only a foundation, called *rupa* or form in meditative practice. Due to lack of explicit mention of the limits of physiological sex and the limits placed on spirituality practice thereof, it would seemingly follow that physiological and biological differences between men and women would have no effect on their ability to achieve enlightenment.

However, Thai Buddhism as it is currently practiced believes that physiological sex does make a difference in terms of enlightenment. For instance, some Thai monks, especially of the influential Dhammakaya Temple in a suburb of Bangkok, teach that to be born as a woman is a result of bad

karma accumulated in past lives. Women therefore cannot attain enlightenment. If she wants to become enlightened, she must first make lots of merit by offering donations to the temple, then pray to be born as a man in the next life, as only men can be enlightened. Although this idea is not mentioned anywhere in the *Tripitaka*, it first appears in commentary written by senior monks five centuries later.

The Dhammakaya Temple in particular has a following of millions of Thai Buddhists and is well organized in its outreach efforts. Not only does the temple produce many publications and own satellite networks, but it also networks with many universities to reach young people to join its movement, in order to increase its influence in Thai Buddhism. Because of the teachings promulgated by this and other temples, the better part of Thai Buddhists believe that gender and sexually discriminatory practices are justified and even encouraged by Buddhism.

The above interpretation of Buddhism reflects the patriarchal ideology of popular Thai Buddhism in general. This ideology also perpetuates a double standard among Thai Buddhists in their attitudes towards ordination of men and women. When a man wants to ordain, the public agrees with and encourages him. But when a woman wants to ordain, the public questions and discourages her. Women's ordination is considered to be an escape from life's problems, whereas men's ordination is considered to be a wish for purity and liberation.

The basic belief that women are inferior to men and are impure leads to discriminatory religious practices against women. For instance, in the Buddhist temples of northern Thailand, the sign "Women not allowed" is placed outside a fence surrounding *prathat* or *pagoda* containing the Buddha's relics. In July 2004, Senator Rabiabrat Pongpanich, a female senator, raised the issue that this practice is against the religious freedom guaranteed in the 1997 constitution of Thailand. Surprisingly, there was much public protest against her, including rallies, death threats and ritual cursing, uncharacteristically from northern Thai people who are known for their friendliness. When this issue reached the Bureau National Buddhism, they sidestepped it and asked for clarification from a prominent local Buddhist temple in Chiang Mai, Wat Prathat Doi Suthep.

Wat Prathat Doi Suthep responded to the Bureau National Buddhism in a letter they intended to be made public. The temple justified this custom of excluding women from *stupas* by giving the following three reasons, preceded by an explanatory category:

- Belief: *Lanna* people (northern Thais) believe that objects contained in the pagoda, especially Buddha's relics, are sacred because they were religiously blessed with a *yanta* (mantra) to prevent them from being stolen. This *yanta* could be harmed if women or any polluted items of women, such as *phaa-tuungs* (traditional Thai skirt worn only by women) or underwear, come close to it. Women are also forbidden to stand astride sacred objects.
- Tradition: Because *Lanna* ancestors have these beliefs, they have passed these beliefs on from generation to generation, so now it has become a tradition.
- Respect: *Lanna* people have good traditional customs and culture that have existed for a long time. Like other regions of Thailand, if you enter into the *Lanna* region, then you are expected to follow and respect the beliefs of that region (Aarpawatchrute, 2004, p. 16).

Some experts in *Lanna* studies also believed that this custom is intended to protect the women themselves from “*khued*” or harm caused by the supernatural powers of these sacred objects. This custom is particularly applied to women because men are generally assumed by Thai Buddhists to be stronger and more able to withstand these powers.

In short, this custom is to protect sacred objects such as the Buddha's relics from the supposed impurity of women; in particular, exposure to menstruating women is believed to destroy the sacredness of objects. Therefore, many northern Thais feel this custom should be preserved, as it is a “beautiful tradition.” However, many central Thais disagree with this practice and assert that this custom not only oppresses women, but is also against the Thai constitution that emphasizes gender equality as a main principle. This issue, therefore, has become hotly debated and presents a historic conflict between northern Thais and central Thais in the context of Buddhism.

However, some Buddhist scholars have pointed out that this custom is not even primarily Buddhist in origin. According to a study done by Bhikkhu Metta Nandho, this practice of excluding women came from Brahmanism, which has subtly influenced Buddhism throughout history. Brahmanism believes that there are ten polluted fluids of women, such as saliva, tears and especially menstruation (Mettanando, 2002, p. 74-81). According to the study of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, formerly Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, monks believe that women's presence above sacred relics would desecralize them; she then points out that if women's fluids can actually destroy the holiness of the

Buddha's relic, then this implies that women are more powerful than the Buddha, which is unlikely (Kabilsingh, 1998, p. 35). It appears that Thai Buddhism has absorbed beliefs and practices of Brahmanism without question and has assumed them as Buddhist practice.

Discrimination in Monasticism

The belief in the inferiority and impurity of women also underlies the idea that women should not be ordained as *bhikkhunis* or female monks. *Bhikkhunis* were allowed by the Buddha, as mentioned in *Tripitaka*, and the *bhikkhuni* order has spread throughout many countries in Asia, such as Sri Lanka, China and Taiwan. However, the lineage was broken before it reached Thailand. Thus Thailand does not have an established order of *bhikkhuni* like other Asian countries.

There were many attempts to establish a *bhikkhuni* order in Thailand. One example is that in 1927, Narin Pasit, a progressive politician, encouraged his two daughters, along with other Thai women, to be ordained as *samaneris* or female novices. He did this to fulfill the Buddhist concept found in the *Tripitaka* that there should be four Buddhist groups. Generally, Thailand has only three Buddhist groups instead of four because it is missing the *bhikkhuni* group.

But because Narin Pasit was a progressive politician who regularly took action against the wishes of the Supreme Sangha, many in the Sangha blocked this action as they did his others. By order of the Supreme Sangha, these two women were physically disrobed and put into jail. In 1928, the Supreme Sangha Council passed the Sangha Act, which prohibited male monks from ordaining women as *samaneri* (female novice), *sikkhamana* (the would-be *bhikkhuni*), and *bhikkhuni*. This Act effectively blocked women from becoming ordained as monks in Thailand, as women's ordination must be sanctioned by male monks (whereas ordination of men does not require the sanction of female monks). This Act remains in effect to this day and is against the religious freedom guaranteed in the 1997 Thai Constitution.

The teachings of influential temples have therefore resulted in lack of religious access and equal support for Thai Buddhist women, either through outright barring of women in public religious spaces or through withholding ordination. According to Sharlardchai Ramitanondh, a Thai feminist anthropologist, when women are barred from entering a space, they are equally barred from acquiring knowledge that is part of that space. Moreover, the Sangha Act of 1928 prohibiting Thai monks from ordaining women presents a formidable obstacle to the spiritual development of Thai

Buddhist women by withholding legal and therefore financial support from the state. Limiting women's access to knowledge in these two critical ways limits their power and influence in the religious realm.

Lack of a *bhikkhuni* order is made up by the *mae chii* (traditional Thai Buddhist nun) order. However, the status of *mae chiis* has always been problematic and ambiguous. Since the Thai government has never legally recognized *mae chiis*, their status fluctuates with different interpretations of various government sectors. For instance, the Ministry of Transport and Communication considers *mae chiis* to be laywomen because they observe only eight or ten precepts. Therefore, they are not able to receive educational and financial support from government sources as monks do. However, the Ministry of Interior considers *mae chiis* to be ordained women because they shave their head, wear a white robe (which signifies religious stature) and live in the temple. Therefore, they do not have right to vote. The lack of clear legal status for *mae chiis* has resulted in this double standard.

Since the status of *mae chii* is problematic, many young Buddhist women who are interested in religious life tend to reject becoming a *mae chii*. The other option is to become a *bhikkhuni* through more difficult means. Because the Sangha Act makes it almost impossible for women to access ordination within the country, they have to go abroad to seek ordination in other Buddhist countries. However, ordination abroad requires adequate financial means, which many do not have. Another way they can obtain ordination is from foreign Theravada monks and nuns visiting Thailand. In both situations, an obstacle they face is that they also need language proficiency in order to communicate to foreign monks and nuns, if an interpreter is not readily provided. Language proficiency is important because ordination from other countries requires a certain period of religious training from the ordaining institution; for example, the Golden Temple of Dambulla in Sri Lanka requires that foreign women who want to ordain undergo at least three months' training at their temple.

In addition, ordination by foreign monks and nuns has never been recognized by the Thai Sangha. In March 2006, international Buddhist monks and nuns ordained three Thai women in an abandoned temple in the Ayutthaya province. This ordination is now questioned by Thai society from both state and civil sectors as it was performed by foreign monks and nuns. Moreover, because it was held privately without public recognition, it is hard for the Buddhist institution and civil

society to investigate whether or not this ordination was held correctly and properly.

Violence Against Women

One of the unintended consequences of restrictions on ordination of women is that women have been vulnerable to violence. Violence against Thai women in the religious realm has manifested in both physical and sexual ways.

Without proper legal recognition and financial support from the state as ordained women, *mae chii* are not provided with a temple of their own and must live in-residence with male monks. Their explicit role is to serve male monks in order to make merit. Some monks have been taking advantage of this structural inequality of roles. In general, monks are not allowed to be alone with an individual woman. However, some have ordered *mae chiis* to come to their room at night on the pretense of learning the *dhamma* or doing extra domestic work, then have raped them. Because *mae chiis* are expected to respect monks as their masters, they are not in a position to refuse seemingly innocuous orders. Also, because monks are respected members of society, it is difficult to report such abuses and to have them adequately addressed.

There have been the few brave private testimonials from sexually abused *mae chiis*. But in general, *mae chiis* tend to keep silent about abuses for a variety of reasons: potentially loss of their *mae chii* status, loss of a place to live, and social condemnation and stigmatization. The victim, possible witnesses and employees, and temple supporters tend to not report abuses, out of respect for the institution or even the responsible monk, and fear of bad publicity or loss of employment. Therefore, sexual violence in Thai Buddhist structures is overlooked and thereby perpetuated.

Sexual violence from monks is not only directed toward *mae chiis*. As monks traditionally act as counselors to the community, they for the most part come in contact with laywomen, who come to seek help for personal problems and who also make up the majority of followers. According to statistics collected by the Foundation of Women, from 1997-1999, there were at least sixteen monks/novices who committed sexual abuse and rape, as reported in five Thai newspapers (Archavanichkul, 2003, p. 9). Nowadays, there are even higher rates of reports from newspapers- almost monthly- of sexual misconduct from monks, including rape.

In addition, laywomen dealing with domestic violence or sexual assault outside the temple are not

able to go to male monks for counseling because of the embarrassing and personal aspect of the issue. The prohibition against monks being alone with an individual woman makes discussion of highly personal and sensitive issues difficult. Therefore, without female monks, women have no options within the religious realm to find support and help for abuses.

Gender Bias: Internalized and Structural

Gender bias can be found in even Thai Buddhist women themselves, especially in *mae chiis*. Many *mae chiis* believe that women are inferior to men because they are born from accumulated negative karma. Thus, *mae chiis* feel they should make more merit by serving monks in order to obtain better rebirths, i.e. as a man. They therefore tend to be submissive to the injustice perpetuated against them. In this regard, *mae chiis* have been perpetuating patriarchy by internalizing gender bias. This may explain why Thai mae chii never organized into a movement to work against unjust gender relations in Thai Buddhism and remain unrecognized and marginalized in Thai Buddhism.

This bias against women is found less often among Thai Buddhist laywomen, especially among educated and middle-class women. However, due to the gender biased preaching of Thai Buddhist institutions, Thai women in general of all classes feel themselves impure and thus conform to expectations of women in the temple and in public, such as maintaining physical distance from monks and abstaining from religious studies. The irony lies in the fact that women comprise the vast majority of temple supporters and participants in its rituals and activities, yet they are treated as second-class citizens.

Temples in Thai society are not only places of worship, but also an opportunity for the poor to gain an education and advancement in society. In rural areas especially, if parents cannot support their boy's education, they are sent to live at the temple, where they can be ordained as novice or monk and can have their study supported by the temple through the university level. Many boys and men take advantage of this privilege. However, this privilege is not available to poor rural girls; they do not have the option of obtaining an education as *mae chiis*. *Mae chiis* do not receive an education because they are not recognized as ordained. According to Tavivat Puntarigivat, professor at Mahidol University in Bangkok, there is a linkage between the state of Buddhist women and prostitution in Thailand. Because temple education had been functioning as a social ladder for poor people, girls who do not have access to this opportunity are forced into

labor market, including the sex industry (Kabilsingh, 1991, p. 67-86).

Sexual Discrimination in Thai Society

Thailand is perceived as one of the most tolerant societies on the issue of homosexuality and has been known as a “gay paradise.” However, sexual discrimination can be found in both secular and religious realms in Thai society. To better understand sexual discrimination in Thai Buddhism, I will first describe discrimination in Thai society for context.

In Thai language, the most common term for homosexuality is “*rak-ruam-phet*.” Although this term is meant to connote “same-sex love,” it can also literally mean “loves to have sexual intercourse.” This term carries a bad connotation as it defines homosexuals as people whose main activity is having lots of sexual intercourse. Therefore, gay and lesbian activists have been trying to change this term to be “*rak-phet-diew-kan*,” which clearly means same-sex love. However, the new term is mainly used by gay and lesbian activists, whereas the general public is still not aware of the harmful connotations of the former term.

Prof. Nithi Aeusrivongse, a well-known Thai scholar, posits that “society’s disapproval of gay arrangements means that it is quite difficult for gay relationships to develop beyond the superficial and sexual.” He observed that within Thai gay jargon itself, there is a lack of terms of emotional intimacy and instead, most of the terms relate to sexual activity. I believe that gay language has this characteristic also because heterosexual people, especially in the media, created negative terms to call gays. Terms created by heterosexuals mostly have negative meanings, such as “*aud-thua-dam*,” which came from the nickname of a man who committed a crime by having sex with and prostituting boys in 1935. Since then, the term has been used to describe anal sex between men. A new term is “*tui*,” which is the nickname of a gay man who had committed a crime by having sex with a young boy in 1998, but as newspapers continued to use his name to refer to gay sex in general, this term has become slang for gay sex. Having these terms for gay sex that derive from names of criminals has contributed to fear and suspicion of gay people and has reinforced the negative stereotypical image of homosexual people.

Aeusrivongse also noted negative gay stereotypes in popular Thai fiction and soap operas, where the sexual behavior of gay people is often shown to be the “problem” of the situation or gays are often portrayed as the culprit (Aewsriwongs, 2004, p. 4-6). Gays in movies are typically portrayed

in a mocking or grotesque fashion. Movies such as “*พรองชมพู*” (*Saving Private Tootsie*) were created as an alternative to the onslaught of negative gay (and transgendered) images and represents them as equal to other human beings. (Parivudhiphongs, 2002, online data)

Sexual discrimination is also embodied in the policies of institutions. In 1996, the Rajabhat Teachers Institute barred homosexual students from enrolling in courses leading to degrees in kindergarten and primary school teaching. A majority of Thais believe that teachers play a significant and influential role in students’ lives; therefore having a gay teacher can make a student become gay. This myth of the contagion of homosexuality leads to discrimination of gays in various professions, especially as teachers or doctors. As the result, the careers of Thai gays are primarily confined to the entertainment business, as actors, performers or dancers, or the beauty business, as make-up artists and hairdressers. Even in these limited professions, gays and transgendered/transsexual people experience discrimination. A high-end salon in Chiang Mai in 2006 displayed the sign, “Job Opening for Hairdresser: Only biologically-born women need apply.”

Since the period of King Rama IV, Thailand has attempted steps toward modernity by adopting Western ideas such as democracy and human rights. However, the Thai state has overlooked sexuality issues and this lack of attention paid to the issue has perpetuated sexual discrimination. This could be because Thai people usually feel awkward when talking about sexuality in public. In 2001, there was an attempt by Mr. Purachai Piamsomboon, a progressive Minister of Interior, to bring the issue into the policy realm and advocated legalizing same-sex marriage, but Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said the idea was too modern for the Thai society. So the Thai state has preferred to disregard the issue of homosexuality and pretend that gays do not exist. Since Thai gay and lesbian couples do not receive legal status, they are barred from many rights, including partner inheritance rights and having their partner named as a beneficiary in their life insurance.

Sexual Discrimination in Buddhism

Similar to gender bias towards women in Thai Buddhism, it is a common belief that a person is born homosexual because of the bad karma accumulated in past lives. To reverse this bad karma, homosexuals need to make merit and pray to be born “normal” in their next life. Therefore, underlying Thai people’s outward display of tolerance towards homosexual people is pity for abnormality born of bad karma.

Although heterosexuality was the norm in the Buddha's time, there is no obvious condemnation regarding homosexuality in the *Tripitaka*. No particular punishment was set for being a homosexual in both the secular and monastic disciplines. This is because people's reproductive purpose was not emphasized in Buddhism. The Buddha once said, "You yourself are actually not-self, how can you have your own child? (Therefore,) wise people should not want son or daughter; they should not want wealth or property (Thai Tripitaka Vol.25, 1996, p. 18)". By not explicitly promoting reproduction, which can only be accomplished through heterosexuality (and which is commonly emphasized in other religions such as Christianity), and by not explicitly prohibiting homosexual behavior, Buddhism seems to imply that homosexuality is not an issue.

Currently, homosexual people in Thailand are often discriminated against when seeking ordination. They face the threat of being labeled a *ban dho*. According to the *Tripitaka*, *ban dhos* are persons who have an ambiguous sexual organ. Thus it is difficult to identify whether they are male or female. They can either have both sexual organs or none. In Buddhism, *ban dhos* are considered 'abnormal' and are not allowed to ordain. However, the *Tripitaka* commentaries have elaborated on the features of *ban dhos* into five types: 1) oral sex, 2) voyeurism, 3) genital mutilation, 4) correlating one's sexual desires to the moon, and 5) lack of genitals. Although the last type is mentioned as well in the actual *Tripitaka*, the first two and the fourth are considered sexual behavior rather than physical sexual abnormalities. The third type is obviously a cultural and human-made issue. So in general, these characteristics are not specific to homosexuals; in fact, heterosexuals may also practice the first four characteristics. Nevertheless, homosexuals, especially men, in current Thai society are the ones who are often labeled *ban dhos* and therefore are often not allowed to be ordained as a monk.

Because the *Tripitaka* does not allow ordination of *ban dhos*, and gay men are all generalized as *ban dhos* by the Thai Buddhist institution, gays encounter difficulties if they want to ordain. Ordination in Thai Buddhism is not only considered an ideal path for liberation, but is also a traditional method of paying one's gratitude and debt to parents. Many gay men, especially those whose parents expect them to be ordained, fall into a dilemma: no matter how much they may want to be ordained for the sake of their parents, they are often prohibited from doing so by the Thai Buddhist institution because of their sexual preference.

Currently, there are many ordained monks in Thailand who are gay. The existence of gay monks¹

¹ Ideally speaking, those ordained as monks (and nuns) should relinquish sexual preference altogether, whether they

has been a recent much-debated issue in Thai Buddhism. A Thai newspaper in 2005 published a picture of young gay monks in robes adjusted in a more feminine style, walking and giggling in a feminine way on the street in Chiang Mai. As a consequence of these ongoing debates regarding whether gay monks should be allowed, Phra Pisarn Thammapatee, an influential Thai monk, stated that all gay monks should be banished from the temples (Author unknown, 2003, online data). He and a columnist from the Asoke Info network, a well-known Buddhist website, were of the opinion that gay monks could influence and sexually abuse other “good” (i.e. straight) monks who are living in the temple (Hacker, 2003, online data). This incident represents another example of the myth of contagion of homosexuality. In fact, the columnist compared a gay monk to the lowly serpent in the Buddha’s time that disguised himself as a human in order to get ordination. When he was found to be a serpent, he was disrobed.^{a2}

There is a stereotype that gay monks are not able to be serious monks due to their sexuality. There is always the threat of intimacy with other monks and they are seen as disturbing other monks’ concentration; they have the potential to ruin the social order of the temple and thereby its image. In reality, there are gay monks who follow the discipline and work to benefit society, but they tend to be overlooked because of these stereotypes. As well, homosexual women are doubly oppressed because of their status both as women and as a homosexual. Since Thai Buddhist institutions as well as Buddhist texts have never made any clear statements on the issue of gays, ordination of gays (and transgendered) people has been problematic throughout history.

are heterosexual or homosexual. My understanding of the term “gay monk” is a person who is both a monk and gay, meaning that they are either still having sexual relations with same-sex people or still holding on to their sexual preference. When people ordained as monks, especially in Theravada Thai Buddhism, they vow to abstain from any kind of sexual activity. I think this idea should be carried further to include identification with a sexual preference. Under ordination, monks and nuns should be free from labeling themselves with sexual preference so they are neither “straight” nor “gay” monk,” but just “monk.” However, in reality, there are probably gay people who want to seek advice from monks who have experienced what it was like to identify as gay. In this regard, it might be necessary to have a category of monk who “used to be gay,” before they ordained, in order to provide role models and mentors for gay or other people. Like Nathee Thirarojanapong, a gay activist in Thailand who is working for the idea of “KulaGay (Good Gay),” I believe that the category of “used to be gay” monks will encourage other homosexual people to become ordained by providing role models of “used to be gay” monks who follow the discipline.

² According to Buddhist belief, animals are not allowed to be ordained as they cannot gain enlightenment. But they can practice and accumulate good karma, then rebirth as human being and can attain enlightenment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Gender and sexual discrimination are serious issues under Thai Buddhism. Discrimination has obstructed the spiritual development of women and homosexual people and has contributed to unjust conditions and violence against them, as well as lack of educational opportunity and acceptance in society.

Discrimination against female monks benefits many. The powerful Thai Sangha controls vast assets and finances. If women were to become spiritual leaders, they would become competition for the substantial offerings from laypeople and benefits from the state. And as 80 % of lay supporters of temples are women, female monks could potentially affect a great shift in power and loyalty. Therefore, the existence of female monks threatens the current established order of male monks.

In general, most Thai Buddhists do not go directly to Buddhist texts to learn about Buddhism, but rely on and trust monks to interpret Buddhism for them. Monks have been teaching that women are inferior and therefore should not be ordained as a *bhikkhuni* or female monk. The only form of ordination available to women should be ordination as a *mae chii*, which has a much inferior status to monks.

In order to tackle these issues, one must return to the essence of Buddhism to find principles that are against discrimination. There are three main teachings and principles in Buddhism that can be applied to issues of discrimination against women and homosexual people: *Middle Path*, *Tilakkhana* and *Buddha Bhava*.

The teaching of the *Middle Path* advocates transcending duality. This idea first appeared in *Tripitaka* when the Buddha told the *bhikkhu* that all forms are empty and only when one detaches from these forms could one attain eternal happiness. He therefore encouraged his followers to consider concepts such as men, women, masculinity and femininity as empty forms (Thai Tripitaka Vol.30, 1996, 316-317). Division of gender and sexuality into dualities is therefore unfounded.

Secondly, the concept of *Tilakkhana* explains the three characteristics of all elements: impermanence, changeability and not-self. The Buddha said that since sex (male/female) and

gender (femininity/masculinity) are elements, they also fall under these three characteristics. Therefore, one can detach from them in order to attain liberation.

Thirdly, the *Buddha Bhava* describes that all sentient beings have the nature of enlightenment. Therefore, this teaching includes women and homosexual people. However, it is unfortunate in modern day practice that this teaching is mostly emphasized in the Mahayana tradition, not in the Theravada tradition of Thailand. As a result, Thai Buddhists tend to believe in *law of karma* without question rather than in the *Buddha Bhava* of all beings.

These three principles- the middle path, the three characteristics and the inherent nature of enlightenment in all sentient beings- form the vital bases of gender equality in Buddhism. The concept of gender equality enables Buddhism to be more universal and inclusive in its application. Buddhism encourages both men and women to attain *nibbana*, which is the ultimate goal. The Buddhist principle that both men and women have equal potential to attain enlightenment, therefore, should be adhered to.

In the context of conflicts and violence associated with various religions throughout history, such as Christianity and Islam, Buddhism has never had a religious war. However, its forms of violence are more subtle and found in its gender and sexual discrimination. Like other religions, theological disciplines and regulations that oppress women should be reviewed and amended.

As discrimination is a manifestation of oppression, I believe that anyone who is in the circle of oppression cannot be truly liberated if they are involved in that circle, whether they are oppressors or oppressed. This paper is written with the purpose of searching for positive social change. Religion should function as a solace and refuge for humanity regardless of their gender and sexual orientation. Buddhism in essence is inclusive; society should follow its lead in its treatment of women and homosexual people.

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