

Spiritual Journeys within the Patriarchy of Modern Thai Buddhism by Women Buddhist Practitioners

MARTIN SEEGER. 2018. *Gender and the Path to Awakening: Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism.* Silkworm Books.

Keywords: Thai Buddhism, biography hagiography, female Buddhist practitioner, female sainthood

Gender and the Path to Awakening by Martin Seeger is important for its interdisciplinary contributions to anthropology, sociology, gender and religious studies. It is a textual and ethnographic study of seven female practitioners of modern Thai Buddhism, and sets out to challenge the generalized and oversimplified description of female practice, gender relations and hierarchies in the mainstream discourse about gender and Thai Buddhism. Seeger analyses how the women Buddhist practitioners perceive themselves and their spiritual practices by focusing on their descriptions and reflections of their spiritual aspirations, paths, achievements and obstacles (4). He uses hagiographical and biographical accounts of these women and their authored texts as a focal point to unravel and examine Thai beliefs in relations to female sainthood and female Buddhist practice in modern Thai Buddhism (8-9).

Seeger has made an important scholarly contribution in this book by demonstrating how Thai women practitioners navigate their way through the patriarchy of Thai Buddhist institutions. From the outset, the *bhikkhuni* order is not officially recognised in Buddhism. Therefore, the religious contributions of women Buddhist practitioners are often left understudied. With seven Thai women Buddhist practitioners as case studies, Seeger has demonstrated how they often appear to accept, support and employ the patriarchal hierarchy of Thai Buddhism. These women were and are renowned Thai women practitioners at local, national and international levels across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who have successfully navigated the patriarchal hierarchy of Thai Buddhist institutions. While they abide by the hierarchical

structure, accepting their secondary positions to the monks, they have gained recognition and teachings directly from the senior monks, earning them respect that has lasted for decades even after death. Therefore, Seeger has debunked the generalized and oversimplified conventional descriptions of female practice, gender relations and hierarchy.

Furthermore, Seeger has highlighted the agency of women renunciants in ensuring the religious influence of Thai renunciants. As Seeger concluded, women are not deterred by their gendered roles, rather they are active and creative agents who were committed to their spiritual practice since a young age (248). They accepted, adopted, supported and employed the patriarchal religious hierarchy, that there is no institution for the *bhikkhuni* order and had no desire to be reborn as men. Instead they made use of the Mae Chi institution, focusing on overcoming mental defilement (*kilesa*), which has been successful as reflected from the support by the (often high ranking) monks.

Another significance of Seeger's work is his innovative use of data from biography, hagiography, photographs, paintings, architectures, videos and visual materials available online (10). His demonstration of collecting and using the data is a useful reminder of the need for innovation in choosing and using different research methods based on changing technologies in mass media. For instance, while Seeger set out to collect the biographies and hagiographies of Thai female practitioners, he also found that Thai Buddhists are more interested in listening to oral accounts, watching films and visiting sites of veneration. Besides printed and visual materials, Seeger also collected memories and oral accounts of the monastics and laypeople. Furthermore, the collection of a variety of data demonstrates the innovation of Seeger's research methods in overcoming a lack of textual resources for a more comprehensive understanding of female renunciation and practices from a historical perspective.

With the combination of biography and hagiography, Seeger has illuminated the various religious experiences of women practitioners and their modes of religious expression not only through the perceptions of the women practitioners themselves but also through their followers. The originality of this study is the source of data which are derived from the texts that are circulated within Thai society for centuries, yet are often scattered and ephemeral. Seeger has demonstrated how these texts are often resourceful in informing the history, biography, cultural and religious data pertaining to the woman renunciants. The following are highlights for each of the chapter of the book:

In Chapter 1, Seeger outlines the major themes for his analysis in the book. The themes pave the way for him to explain the ambiguities and changes to the roles of women in modern Thai Buddhism. The chapter also provides the context for the case studies of six Thai women practitioners in the study. In Chapter 2, Seeger traces the evolution of biographies and autobiographies of Buddhist monks and female practitioners in Thailand. He presents the detailed biographies of six Thai women practitioners across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to demonstrate the evolution of their religious influence in Thai Buddhism. In Chapter 3, Seeger explores the notion of sainthood and how female practitioners employ the flexibilities of sainthood in Thai Buddhism, that is, by juxtaposing Pali literature and social constructions. The flexibilities contribute to ambiguities of the journeys by women practitioners in attaining supernatural powers, supramundane states of mind and high levels of awakening. The ambiguities are ways that women practitioners assert their sainthood while challenging the dichotomy of being fully or properly ordained. In Chapter 4, Seeger analyses how female sainthood is reinforced and reified not only by the hagiographical literature but also by the *stupas*, amulets and relics, the remains of the body that is not decayed or emits a fragrant odour. Seeger contends that these objects were more effective in demonstrating accomplished practices of the female practitioners while they were still adhering to hierarchy relations with the monks (Seeger 2018, 164). In Chapter 5, Seeger analyses the importance of orality and memorisation as media for Thai female practitioners to acquire Buddhist knowledge and practice. With evidence of another seven case studies of women who had received teaching from Buddhist monks, Seeger demonstrates that sexual identity is not as much a concern as the spiritual potential of these women to understand the *dharmma* (208) and their literacy was not a determinant for limiting their access to Buddhist teachings. In Chapter 6, Seeger discusses the complexity and diversity of religious hierarchies in Thai Buddhism that intersect with gender. These hierarchies are interrelated, dynamic and often affect one another (219). The chapter also demonstrates how female practitioners experience gendered obstacles in various ways based on their social and educational backgrounds and contextualizes their experiences.

My interest in this book is its contribution to the growing literature about informal or micro-political movements or activities by subaltern groups. For example, Cross (1998) has demonstrated that “marginal” political actors such as street vendors can employ co-operative political strategies as subtle forms of evasion and manipulation to gain access to self-empowerment. The study has made an important contribution by intersecting the informal and subtle political movements of the subalterns with gender. An immediate and more relevant

example to this study is a renowned work by Asef Bayat's (2013) *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* which demonstrates how Middle Eastern women have negotiated their ways through the labyrinth of patriarchal Islamic institutions. Seeger, in this study, also demonstrates how women Buddhist practitioners have negotiated for spaces for spiritual practices and religious attainment successfully, which are evident from their hagiographical and biographical texts over the century, and above all, acknowledgements from the senior high-ranking monks.

Works Cited

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