

SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM AND GENDER: CASE STUDIES OF BUDDHIST NUNS WHO RUN MONASTIC SCHOOLS IN BURMA/MYANMAR

HNIN WUT YEE 5338797 CHR/D/M

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THESIS ADVISORY COMMITTEE: VARAPORN CHAMSANIT, Ph.D., MIKE HAYES, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Buddhist nuns in Burma have rarely been involved in social activities until recently, except in taking care of orphans. However, nuns have started to be involved in providing monastic school education since 1997 in response to the educational needs of poor children. Having nun-led monastic schools is a recent social trend since monastic school education was traditionally led only by monks. Social engagement of the nuns in this study is underpinned by the situation of the country, specifically related to the problem of access to formal education for many poor children, as well as the nuns' own life experiences and Buddhist world views regarding social engagement.

Nuns face similar challenges to monks who run monastic schools, such as financial constraints, being able to provide quality education for school children, and the risk of being subjected to the state's manipulation, cooptation or control. In addition, the nuns who run monastic schools tend to face other layers of challenges. These layers of challenges are inherent in their gender identity and ambivalent religious position. In spite of gender biased criticisms, they have overcome such challenges with their hard work, dedication, perseverance, and patience. They can capitalize on their selfless motives to help improve the lives of poor children, their educational credentials, and their ascetic practices to earn trust, respect, and support of lay donors

The reputation of the schools and the school head nuns in this study may help improve the public perception of nuns as capable educators and worthy members of the monastic community. However, this recognition does not extend to the possibility of changing the gender stereotypical attitudes towards women due to the inherent traditionally gender biased norms compounded by the country's patriarchal context, coupled with its militarized politics. In spite of the fact that the head nuns in this study have managed to confound criticisms directed at them due to their position as women and nuns, they cannot overcome traditional gender stereotypes. Consequently, gender awareness, a motivating factor to prove their credibility in work, does not necessarily inspire them to seek equality in the religious institutional structure. Instead, within the context of Burma, the issue of gender equality seems irrelevant for nuns who seek to keep a harmonious stance with the fully ordained male monastic members as affiliated members of the *Sasana*

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