

The Social Roles of Thai Bhikkhunis in the Local Community of Present-Day Thai Society

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Abstract

In this paper, the social roles of Thai Bhikkhunis (Buddhist female priests) are analyzed by using the concept of roles. The concept of roles, developed by Bloom and Selznick (1973), Turner (1998), Good (1973), and Raven and Rubin (1976), is also grouped. As a result, the social roles of Thai Bhikkhunis can be divided into three categories: a prescribed role, a perceived role, and a performed role. The prescribed role or a publisher of Buddhist doctrine is the role that Thai Bhikkhunis have shown as good Bhikkhunis. They publicize Buddhist teachings and religious education. This role has probably existed since Buddha's time in the view of the author. However, the forms of this role have evolved over time. The content of the Buddhist teachings has been changed in response to the new generation as well. The perceived role is an unclear role of female priests in Thai society. With the fact that the Sangha Supreme Council has not yet approved the ordination of Bhikkhunis in Thailand, the status of Thai Bhikkhunis is still unclear. The performed role is defined as the role of a social worker for Thai Bhikkhunis. This role of Thai Bhikkhunis can be easily noticed in Thai society. It has provided various benefits to the public. Nevertheless, the main goal of this paper is to give a better understanding toward Thai Bhikkhunis. It does not intend to spark the debate on whether the ordination of Bhikkhunis should be allowed in Thai society. It is expected to draw more attention to the benefits that Thai Bhikkhunis have contributed to their community.

Keywords: Roles, Social roles, Bhikkhunis, Thai Bhikkhunis

Introduction

In Thailand, Bhikkhunis (Buddhist female priests) emerged for the first time in a story during the King Rama VII period. The story was recorded as follows. There was a father whose name was Narin Pasit. He had two daughters, namely, Sara and Jongdee at the age of 18 and 13 years, respectively. At that time, this father of the two daughters had a very challenging idea toward Buddhism in Thailand. His idea was that the country should establish the four Buddhist Communities following the provisions of Buddhism. The four Buddhist Communities included

monks, Bhikkhunis, Upāsaka (masculine), and Upāsikā (feminine). With such ideas in his mind, Narin Pasit had his two daughters ordained as a Bhikkhuni and a novice. However, when Somdej Phra Maha Kromluang Chinnawora Siriwat, the 11th Supreme Patriarch of Thailand, had found out about the ordination of these two girls, he issued an order that forbade the ordination of Bhikkhunis, female novices, and Sikkhamānā (a female novice undergoing a probationary course for two years prior to higher ordination). The justification was that Bhikkhunis had been lost and torn off from Buddhist practices for a long time, and the story ended with these two girls arrested and their priesthoods terminated.

In 2014, there were eight female novices ordained to become Bhikkhunis at Dhipaya Satan Dhamma Bhikkhuni Aram located in Koh Yor Subdistrict in Songkhla Province (Buaban, 2017). Also, their ordination followed the Disciplines by the attendance of both male and female Buddhist preceptors. Not surprisingly, the Supreme Sangha announced that such ordinations of Bhikkhunis were not correct even if it was not illegal. Bhikkhunis do not have priest status like male monks. While male monks are granted with privileges, Bhikkhunis only have their title as “Mrs. or Miss.” Moreover, they still have ID cards as if they were ordinary people. Nevertheless, a group of Bhikkhunis had not surrendered to such treatments. They went to Sri Lanka where the ordination of Bhikkhunis was allowed. This situation can be viewed as a negotiation between the Bhikkhunis and the Supreme Sangha. Their negotiation has raised awareness and created a better understanding toward the existence of Bhikkhunis in Thai society. In Cambodia, Bhikkhunis are more accepted and the issues of Bhikkhuni ordination are not debated or solicited. In fact, the Dhammyuttika Sangha can exercise the power of the Maha Patriarch of Dhammyuttika as the head of the sect to certify the Bhikkhuni status. Therefore, some Bhikkhunis in Cambodia are honored as monks (Chhun, 2020).

Development of Bhikkhuni ordination in Thailand

The developments of Bhikkhuni ordination in Thailand can be divided into four periods under the author’s view.

1. The first period began with the ordination of Bhikkhunis in the story of a father having his two daughters ordained as a Bhikkhuni and a novice in the reign of King Rama VII. At that time, there was a claim that the country should have the four Buddhist Communities to complete the provisions of Buddhism as well as giving more opportunities to women to take precedence in serious actions. Meanwhile, the issues of Bhikkhuni ordination had been debated whether it was a correct Buddhist practice based on the disciplines of Buddhism. Although the ordination of Sara and Jongdee had been made known, no one revealed their acceptance toward the ordination. Consequently, it became a subject of much criticism. With such criticism in Thai society, the 11th Supreme Patriarch decided to issue an order that forbade the ordination of Bhikkhunis, female novices, and Sikkhamānā. The reason was that “*Bhikkhunis have long lost their lineage*” (BBCNEWS, 2017).

2. The emergence of the first Mahayana Bhikkhuni in Thailand marked the second period of Bhikkhuni ordination, which occurred in 1956. During this period, the ordination of Bhikkhunis happened again when Mrs. Woramai Kobilasingha or “*Luang Ya*”, the mother of

Luang Mae Dhammanantha, went to Taiwan for her Mahayana Bhikkhuni ordination. When returning to Thailand, she built the first Buddhist Mahayana temple. The temple was named “*Vat Songdhammakalyani*”, which was intended for her daughter's ordination as a Bhikkhuni in the future. Nevertheless, Vat Songdhammakalyani was not considered a Buddhist temple. It was not legalized yet, and the Supreme Sangha did not accept the ordination of a Woramai Khobilasingha Bhikkhuni, who was ordained by Mahayana Buddhism at this time.

3. The appearance of a Theravada Bhikkhuni was considered the third period of Thailand's Bhikkhuni development. Mrs. Chatsumal Kabinasingh, a former lecturer at Thammasat University, had made her decision to be ordained and become the first Theravada Bhikkhuni in Thailand. The former lecturer was also known as Bhikkhuni Dhammananda or “*Luang Mae*,” abbot of Vat Songdhammakalyani in Nakhon Pathom Province. In 2001, she was initially ordained as a novice by the group of monks and nuns of Siamwong Sangha at Wat Tapotan Ramaya in Sri Lanka. Mrs. Chatsumal Kabinasingh was nicknamed “*Dhammananda*.” Subsequently, she became a Bhikkhuni after the higher ordination in February 2003 (Thai Bhikkhunis, 2019). Mrs. Chatsumal Kabinasingh was the first female priest who had been fully ordained as a Theravada Bhikkhuni in Thailand. Still, she has met a community of exceptional women who are not recognized by the government and most Thai monks along with a portion of laypeople (Raymond, 2019).

4. The fourth period of Bhikkhuni development started with attempts to revive the ordination of Theravada Bhikkhunis in Thailand. Currently, it is believed that there are Theravada Bhikkhunis and the Bhikkhunis of the Mahayana route Vajrayana living in Thailand. The Bhikkhunis of the Mahayana route Vajrayana are descended from Theravada Bhikkhunis. At present, Theravada Bhikkhunis are being considered if they have originated from Mahayana Bhikkhunis. Mahayana Bhikkhunis were the female priests from Sri Lanka who went to China for their ordination. Thailand has many Theravada Bhikkhunis who have been ordained by a group of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka. An example of such Bhikkhunis includes “*Dhammananda*” who is an independent Bhikkhuni of Vat Songdhammakalyani. She was ordained as a novice in 2001, which was considered a correct Buddhist practice of the ordination of Theravada Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka. In 2003, the first Theravada Bhikkhuni emerged in Thailand, ordained in Sri Lanka. It is estimated that there are more than 280 Thai Bhikkhunis living in 30 provinces across the country. The Bhikkhunis who live at the Sangha follow Buddhist teachings or the Dharma Practice Office. In addition, there are Buddhist practice centers where Bhikkhunis can join in for their Buddhist practices. Those Buddhist practice centers are established in different regions of Thailand. For the central region, Buddhist practice centers can be found in the provinces of Nakhon Pathom, Lopburi, Uthai Thani, and Samut Sakhon. There are two Buddhist practice centers in the eastern region which include Chonburi Province and Rayong Province. Kanchanaburi is the only province in the western region that hosts a Buddhist practice center for the Bhikkhunis. For the northeastern region, there are Buddhist practice centers in eight provinces including Nakhon Ratchasima, Sakon Nakhon, Yasothon, Khon Kaen, Nong Khai, Surin, Buri Ram, and Udon Thani. In the northern region, Buddhist practice centers are found in the provinces of Phayao, Chiang Mai,

and Tak. In the southern region, there are two provinces that have Buddhist practice centers including Songkhla and Nakhon Si Thammarat.

An understanding toward Bhikkhunis in Thailand is still not clear even if it is a term that describes a female priest in Buddhism. Also, it is one of the four Buddhist Communities. The word “*Bhikkhuni*” refers to female priests who are ordained in Buddhism (Phra Kru Kalyasitthirat, 2003). Bhikkhunis are different from nuns. In the Buddhist perspective, nuns are only Upāsikā or female Buddhists holding the eight precepts. In other words, they are strict female Buddhists. The Theravada Sangha regards the ordination of nuns who shave their heads in the white-clad and in the white cloak as a relief for women with the faith to be ordained. In Thai society, there are two points of discussion in regard to the ordination of Bhikkhunis.

1. The first point of discussion about the ordination of Bhikkhunis is that, “*The Bhikkhunis have long been lost and lacked lineage.*” In 2014, forty-seven Bhikkhunis were ordained at Dhipaya Satan Dhamma Bhikkhuni Aram, a monastery in Koh Yor Subdistrict, Songkhla Province, Thailand. As a result, the meeting of the Sangha Supreme Council was held to discuss and resolve the problems of the Sangha clergy throughout the country following the announcement by Somdej Phra Maha Kromluang Chinnawora Siriwat. In 1928, monks were not allowed to ordain women to become female monks, including the prohibition of all monks and novices of all sects to ordain women as Bhikkhunis, novices, and Sikkhamānā. Therefore, Bhikkhunis had been long lost and lacked lineage. Because Theravada monks had not been allowed to ordain women, Mahayana monks and Bhikkhunis from Korea and Taiwan were brought in to perform the ordination of Theravada Bhikkhunis in India. However, such ordination was not in compliance with the disciplines. In addition, the Bureau of Buddhism in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that monks who were ordained outside of the country were required to organize their ordination ceremonies. In Thailand, the ordinations must be reported to the Sangha Supreme Council (TCIJ, 2014).

2. The second point of discussion is that, “*The Bhikkhunis are one of the four Buddhist Communities*”. It is like a car with four wheels. If the car has only three wheels, it cannot run. Nonetheless, there are only three Buddhist Communities out of the four Buddhist Communities in Thailand. Those three Buddhist Communities include monks, Upāsaka, and Upāsikā. Monks and novices have been forbidden to ordain women as Bhikkhunis, which is written in the statement: “*The Bhikkhunis have long been lost and have been torn off*”. In Thailand, women who wish to be ordained can only do so by a Bhikkhuni, whose status is unclear in Thai society. Moreover, the Ministry of the Interior interprets Bhikkhunis as priests who have been deprived of their rights to vote. The National Bureau of Buddhism also interprets that Bhikkhunis are not priests; as a result, they do not receive the benefits and assistance that priests are given. In the past, several parties had called for the amendment of the Sangha Act 1962, and more amendments were added to provide Bhikkhunis with legal status.

This paper is interested in examining the social roles of Bhikkhunis in Thailand based on the concept of roles. The concept of roles was developed from the symbolic interaction theory by John Dewey, William I. Thomas, and George Herbert Mead. It states that the members of a society show their action through symbols; and, at the same time, the symbols

are used to interpret social truth. Thoughts, experiences, and behaviors play an important role in society. Mead, the most prominent sociologist among the symbolic interaction theorists, suggested that language is the most important symbol. It represents an object, an event, or an action from that object and event. Symbolic interaction means that humans do not have to use their instincts to create behavior to survive (Tillman, 1970). According to Mead, the theory of roles is explained as the relationship between a society and individuals as a network of status and expectations. After the concept of roles had been compiled, its meaning was grouped into three categories. The first category describes roles as behaviors that are expected from other persons in the society. In this regard, it is an expectation from a person holding the role that could lead to the learning of the formal and informal style of roles (Rizzo et al., 1970). Roles are behaviors that are expected to be performed by those in each position (Sarbin & Hardyck, 1955). The second category explains that roles are the positions of men. A person can have different statuses and roles. Linton (1936) assumed that a society was grounded on social practices and responses. The third category is that roles are human interactions with one another. Roles are behaviors related to an individual's status or position in a society (Broom & Selznick, 1973). Table 1 summarizes the meanings of roles from various scholars.

Table 1 Meaning of roles given by different scholars

Role definition by various scholars	Role as the behavior or action of a person	Role as the position of a person	Role as the interaction with other people
Rizzo et al. (1970)	√		
Sarbin and Hardyck (1955)	√		
Broom and Selznick (1973)		√	√
Linton (1936)		√	

Thus, roles refer to the behaviors with regard to the status or position in society in which a person performs the rights and duties of the position they hold. It also combines the expectations of a person and those of others with whom the performer of the role is in a relationship. In this paper, the concept of roles has been adopted to analyze the social roles of Thai Bhikkhunis.

Categories of roles

Based on the concept of roles, a person plays a specific role in different statuses. Status-specific roles are how individuals assess their actions in a particular social role. Some roles are more important than others, depending on how a person defines themselves (self-definition). Hence, the norms and values a person adheres to influence their dominant roles. Dominant roles are created when individuals determine the importance of roles. They choose to play the

most important roles. Consequently, it can be concluded that there are three types of roles as follows.

1. Prescribed/ideal role: Prescribed role or ideal role is the role that people in a society expect or prescribe to a person to do something (Broom & Selznick, 1973). Turner (1998) used the term “*prescribed role*” to refer to prescription roles. It is a role emphasizing that an individual fulfills the expectations according to social world status.

2. Perceived/expectation role: Perceived role is the role that individuals prescribe to themselves to perform or have expectations on how they should behave in a particular position (Raven & Rubin, 1976). Moreover, Good (1973) said that roles are behaviors that a society expects, depending on the position or expression of the individuals according to the expectations of society.

3. Performed/actual role: Performed role is the role that is not relevant to a specific position and responsibility of a person. Bloom used the term “*performed role*” as the role that a person performs based on their beliefs, expectations, pressures, and opportunities to act in each society during their tenure (Good, 1973). In addition, Raven and Rubin (1976) stated that this role is the behavior of individuals that are regularly expressed within the boundaries of the group. It is a behavioral pattern that belongs to an individual. Turner (1998) used the term “*enacted roles*” in which he explained that, ultimately, individual expectations and subjective expectations are assessed. It manifests itself as a behavior. This role is, therefore, the actual behavior that exposes a social world to a network of interrelated behaviors.

Table 2 Categories of roles by four scholars

Categories of roles by four scholars	Prescribed/ideal role	Perceived/expectation role	Performed/actual/enacted role
Bloom and Selznick (1973)	√	√	√
Turner (1998)	√		√
Good (1973)		√	√
Raven and Rubin (1976)		√	√

The three categories of roles written in Table 2 have been applied to examine the social roles of Thai Bhikkhunis in this paper.

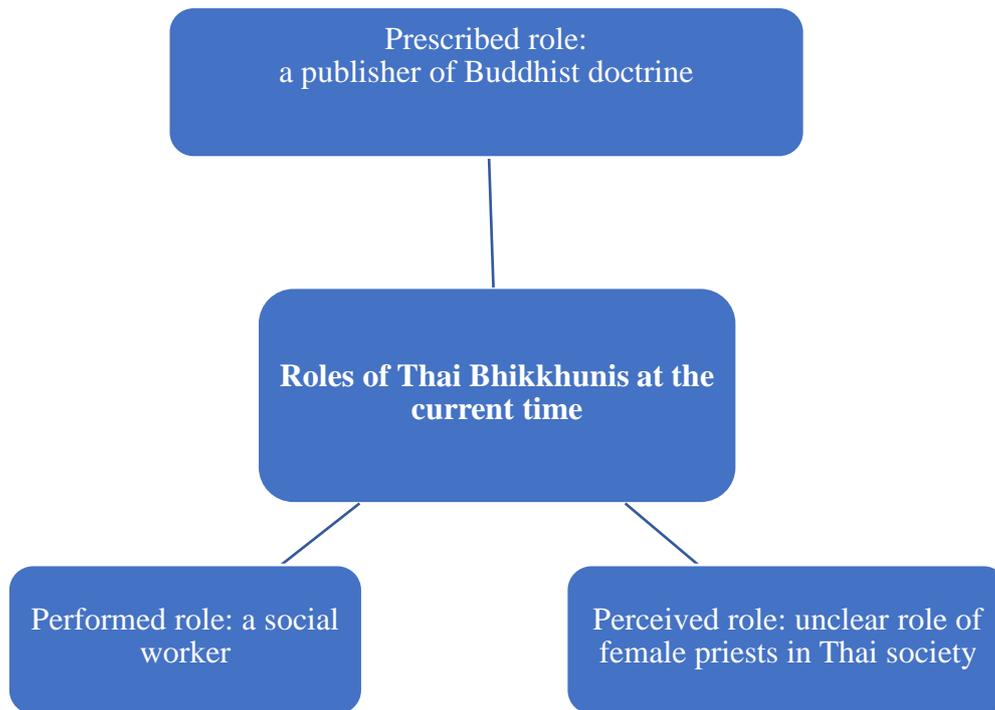


Figure 1 3Ps model of Thai Bhikkhunis' current roles in Thai society

Roles are an important tool that helps humans understand individual behavior, allowing for the coexistence and development of communities and societies. Furthermore, they define individual duties. Roles are concerned with the behaviors in relation to the status or position in a society where an individual exercises their rights and duties of the position they hold. It combines the expectations of a person and those of others with whom the performer of the role is in a relationship. In this paper, the social roles of Thai Bhikkhunis in the community would be analyzed by the framework of these definitions.

1. The first concept of roles that was adopted to analyze the social roles of Thai Bhikkhunis in the community is the prescribed/ideal role. Under this concept, Thai Bhikkhunis would perform their roles by practicing the Dharma and following the discipline, which indicates the role of good Bhikkhunis in Thai society. Every Bhikkhuni, Sikkhamānā, and female novice plays a role in teaching the Dharma and spreading the Dharma altogether, regardless of who has a higher role. To be perceived as good Bhikkhunis, female priests disseminate Buddhist teachings and provide religious education. It is an important role of Bhikkhunis since the time of Buddha. Currently, Thai Bhikkhunis have shown their role in disseminating the teachings of Buddha as well as the knowledge that they have obtained from their education. Under the prescribed/ideal role, Thai Bhikkhunis have illustrated two roles through the acts of spreading Buddhist teachings and religious studies. At present, Buddhist teachings and religious education are disseminated on social media platforms, for example, Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Thai Bhikkhunis have aimed to establish a good network by

utilizing social media platforms with the new generation. They have created religious content and training that can attract positive responses. For example, Nunthanyanee, a member of the Nirodaram Meditation Center, Chiang Mai Province, has a firm faith in Buddhism; and she has studied, practiced, and spread Buddhist teachings for a long time with the aim to help women live on the path of morality, meditation, and wisdom. She wants women to follow Buddha's footsteps by supporting practitioners from private and government agencies, including those interested in general religious studies (Phra Raphin Puttisaro, 2017). Hence, the prescribed/ideal role of a good Bhikkhuni in Thai society is expressed through the role of disseminating Buddhist teachings and religious education, which becomes a significant role of Thai Bhikkhunis in the modern era.

2. Under the concept of the perceived/expectation role, a person's self-expectation depends on what they should be. It is related to an individual's values, attitudes, personality, and experiences. The perceived/expectation role is the role that has assigned rights. Thus, the role of Bhikkhunis expected by Thai society has become a controversial issue. The Sangha Supreme Council has not yet approved the ordination of Bhikkhunis. There are currently more than 280 Thai female priests (Bhikkhunis, Sikkhamānās, and novices). Of these, 200 Bhikkhunis are residing in the country, and most of them were ordained in Sri Lanka. The Bhikkhunis in Thailand have not been granted with the status of priesthood. They still have their titles as Mrs. or Miss. With the concept of the perceived/expectation role, the role that Thai Bhikkhunis should play is still in question in Thai society. However, during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of Thai Bhikkhunis has changed. Thai Buddhist temples across the country have set up alms canteens to give out food to people at their houses. Some groups of monks and Bhikkhunis have prepared meals, patrolling and delivering them to children and bedridden patients (Dailynews, 2020). This role is rarely seen in Thai society. In Thai society, the role of women expected from Buddhism is that they work for the Buddhist temples as an assistant to monks, such as in activities of robe offerings or the Kathin ceremony. This activity is organized by a Buddhist temple, and there would be a group of Bhikkhunis taking part in the activity. Thai Bhikkhunis should be allowed to lead women in the community to work at the temples and in religious works, which include career promotion and vocational training. In the author's view, allowing Thai Bhikkhunis to lead would be of great benefit to Thai society. In general, the roles of Bhikkhunis are perceived as the same as those of nuns who observe the eight precepts. Likewise, people have perceived that those nuns are responsible for making food for monks and helping with some temple issues. The word "nun" has not appeared in the Tripitaka, and the ordination of women is against the Vinaya Pitaka. On the contrary, the ordination of nuns in society is accepted and does not violate the law. Bhikkhunis holding 311 precepts or one element of the four Buddhist Communities are not allowed to be ordained in Thailand (Arayawangso, 2021). Moreover, Srichampa (2010) concluded that the Thai people are more familiar with nuns or "maechi" rather than Bhikkhunis. It will take time for them to change their attitude and accept Bhikkhunis. Srichampa suggested that it was time for Buddhism in Thailand to eliminate sexual discrimination and provide a clear path for women to take their place alongside men as monks.

3. The third concept of roles that was applied to analyze the roles of Thai Bhikkhunis is the performed/actual role. It is a role where a person holding a social position must follow its authority. Under this concept, Thai Bhikkhunis are seen to make contributions to society and communities in various fields for underprivileged children along with professional promotion. For example, Thai Bhikkhunis of the Dhipaya Satan Dhamma Bhikkhuni Aram in Songkhla Province have clearly shown their roles through social work. They take care of terminally ill patients until their death including their funerals. Moreover, they visit the hospice so that the sick or bed-bound can make religious merit in the way that they could at the temples. Another example of the performed/actual role is Vat Songdhammakalyani's global warming campaign. The activities of such campaign include the establishment of the knowledge center that is expected to educate people to become interested in basic waste management and to encourage temple-goers to make merit. These activities serve as the tools for encouraging Buddhists to be interested in separating rubbish and bringing them together to make merit at the Buddhist temples. Natural resources are saved with the use of electricity powered by solar panels. The role in education work is one of the Thai Bhikkhunis' roles. They create both secular and moral educational opportunities. For instance, the Thai Nuns Institute, which provides Buddhist teachings, requested the establishment of the Dhammajarini Wittaya School, a private school in the form of permanent welfare for girls who lack opportunities. This school would educate those girls along with providing the activities that can develop their mental quality in morality, mediation, and wisdom. As a result of their efforts, the Mahapajapati Buddhist College was established (Phra Raphin Puttisaro, 2017). Thai Bhikkhunis also play a role in the conservation of art and culture. It is one of the roles that Thai Bhikkhunis have built in their community. Their role includes the creation of activities concerned with conserving arts and culture. These activities are used to promote the preservation of local cultures in the area in which the Thai Bhikkhunis live. Furthermore, Vat Songdhammakalyani has differentiated itself from male-dominated monasteries in Thailand. Its Thai Bhikkhunis have developed a strong rapport with the communities around them, showing deep understanding and ability to address the needs of the residents. Not only do Thai Bhikkhunis respond to the community's spiritual needs but they also provide physical assistance to the needy and sick. When the floods hit the community many years ago, these Thai Bhikkhunis also helped the residents around them to get through their hard times.

Conclusions

As previously written, there are four periods of the Bhikkhuni development in Thailand. The first period is the revival of Bhikkhuni ordination in the reign of King Rama VII. An emergence of the first Mahayana Bhikkhunis in Thailand in 1956 is the second period of the Bhikkhuni development in Thailand. The third period is the appearance of the first Theravada Bhikkhunis in Thailand in 2003. The fourth period is the restoration of the ordination of Theravada Bhikkhunis, which continues until the present time. However, the third period of the Bhikkhuni development in Thailand has received the most attention due to the words of the

Sangha Supreme Council. Since Bhikkhunis had disappeared in Thai Buddhism for a long time, Theravada Bhikkhunis were not allowed to be ordained, which needs further discussion. In addition, there was a case on the ordination of Bhikkhunis in Koh Yor Subdistrict in Songkhla Province which was voided. Thai Bhikkhunis are not considered priests in Thai society, resulting in the rejection of Thai Bhikkhunis. Hence, Buddhism in Thailand still has only three elements (monks, Upāsaka, and Upāsikā) rather than four elements. This is a serious problem which hinders the completeness of the four Buddhist Communities in the country. It can be concluded that there are two controversies regarding Bhikkhunis: (1) “Bhikkhunis have long been lost and have been lost for a long time,” and (2) “Bhikkhunis are part of the four Buddhist Communities.” The 3Ps model has been adopted to analyze the current roles of Thai Bhikkhunis, which include the prescribed role (a publisher of Buddhist doctrine), the perceived role (unclear role of female priests in Thai society), and the performed role (a social worker).

Recommendations

1. The social roles of Bhikkhunis in other countries, such as Cambodia, are different from those of Thai Bhikkhunis. In Cambodia, Bhikkhunis would be granted with a title, which demonstrates greater respect compared to that shown to Thai Bhikkhunis. Although there are few Theravadas Bhikkhunis in Indonesia, they show a strong missionary role and proactively preach. Currently, the number of Bhikkhunis has started expanding in various countries. Therefore, it is highly recommended that the social roles of Bhikkhunis in other countries be further studied.

2. The ultimate goal of this paper is to provide a better understanding toward Thai Bhikkhunis in Thai society, not raising questions about whether or not Thailand should allow for the ordination of Bhikkhunis. The expectation is that this paper will lead to further and greater emphasize on the benefits of female clergy in Thai society.

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