

# Mindfulness, monasticism, and women in Thai Buddhism

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Katherine Scahill (fourth from right) and other newly ordained female monks return from alms rounds in the neighborhood near the monastery. Credit: Katherine Scahill

Katherine Scahill, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Music, has always been interested in the overlap of music and mindfulness. She

grew up playing the violin, and, as an undergraduate at Wesleyan University, first began exploring that intersection in compositions she created while studying with experimental composer Alvin Lucier. Meanwhile, another Wesleyan mentor, Jan Willis, a professor of religion, introduced her to the female monastic movement in Thai Buddhism.

"One of the things I kept coming back to was how music can put you in a certain state of flow and get you out of a narrow sense of self. Through this broader interest in music and mindfulness, I started to become curious about how Buddhist practitioners use sound as an aspect of mindfulness," Scahill says.

It was during her master's program in religion from the Yale Divinity School and Institute of Sacred Music when her current project took flight, centering the importance of chant to female monastic training.

Scahill's dissertation, "The gendered politics of religious authority in Thai Buddhism: Voice, embodiment, and sonic efficacy in the movement for female monastic ordination," is based on ethnographic fieldwork with three communities of female Buddhist monks (bhikkhunīs) in Thailand.

Drawing on the fields of religious studies and music studies, her dissertation investigates the sonic practices bhikkhunīs employ to establish alternate channels of recognition, given that women's ordination is not accepted at a national level.

Scahill's Penn advisor Jim Sykes characterizes her work as pioneering. "I believe Katherine's dissertation will radically transform the disciplines of sound studies, voice studies, and Theravada Buddhist studies," Sykes says.

"Through fieldwork conducted at monasteries in Thailand, Katherine's dissertation challenges conventional Western understandings of the voice, agency, and subjectivity, as well as the idea that Theravada Buddhist is a 'silent' religion. Instead, Katherine centers the importance of chant to monastic training, particularly with regards to bodily discipline."

Scahill's research looks at the chanting and teaching traditions of bhikkhunīs, the order of female monks that was started by the Buddha. The Buddha ordained women as monastics in his time, but some of the lineages over the 2,500 years since have died out.

In the Theravada Buddhist school—mainly practiced in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia—the order of bhikkhunīs died out and was never revived. There's a narrative that once the lineage becomes extinct, it cannot be revived, that, in the absence of bhikkhunīs, only the Buddha himself could ordain new orders Scahill says. "This is one of the arguments used against ordaining female monks," she says.

Scahill says that in Sri Lanka, some bhikkhu (male monks) supported the ordination of women, and in 1998 20 women from Sri Lanka were ordained. This opened the way for women in other countries to start contemplating whether the lineage could be revived in their country, and, if it couldn't, then they could travel to Sri Lanka to make it happen.

That's how the first bhikkhunī in Thailand, Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, was ordained as a samaneri (novice) in 2001 and as a bhikkhunī in 2003.

"She traveled to Sri Lanka to be ordained and made news when she came back to Thailand; she wasn't welcomed with open arms in all sectors," Scahill says. Contrary to what her opponents say, Venerable Dhammananda's position is that she's reviving and strengthening

Buddhism in Thai society.

Following Venerable Dhammananda's ordination, other Thai women, such as Venerable Nandayani Bhikkhuni, also ordained in Sri Lanka and have since established bhikkhunī monasteries throughout Thailand.

Scahill first met Venerable Dhammananda during a Skype interview while working on her master's degree. "She was happy to do an interview," Scahill says. "I was interested in hearing how their chanting traditions both reflect and produce this revival, while at the same time creating new traditions."

Since then, Scahill has traveled to Thailand and stayed at Venerable Dhammananda's monastery, Wat Songdhammakalyani, in 2018 and 2019. During longer-term fieldwork in 2022–23, she returned to this monastery as well as Nirodharam Bhikkhuni Aram in Chiang Mai and Thippayasathantham Bhikkhuni Aram in Songkhla.

"By staying in residence at three monasteries, I observed how morning and evening chanting sessions were a vital piece of monastic education and practice. The chanting is in a combination of Thai and Pali, the scriptural language used in Theravada Buddhism that is related to Sanskrit," she says.

One thing she notes is that in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, one of the ethical precepts that monks undertake is not to sing or play musical instruments. "That's why I tend to talk about sound and voice rather than music in terms of chanting. They wouldn't call it music, and it might give the wrong impression."

What she found is that the sound can be used as a technique of bringing the mind back to the present because the melodies and prayers that they use are repeated regularly in community practice.

She says, "While you are there, you're not listening to Spotify. In keeping with the precepts, in general, you're not consuming a lot of media. What I found on a personal level was that throughout the day, phrases from the chanting in Pali or in Thai would start to pop up in my mind, both the sound and the meaning."

There are about 300,000 male monks in Thailand, and they have a revered status in Thai society, Scahill says. "Chanting styles differ regionally and by monastic school. On a national level, however, the sound of these bhikkhu chanting has become closely associated with the way that Thai Buddhism sounds."

She says Thai bhikkhunīs draw on these traditions, but, because they were ordained in Sri Lanka, they are influenced by Sri Lankan chanting styles and repertoire. Bhikkhunī in Thailand have also reused material from the past to formulate their tradition in the present.

"For instance, Venerable Dhammananda took Pali verses about 13 enlightened bhikkhunīs praised by the Buddha for their remarkable qualities and created a chant, which she recorded," Scahill says.

"This was about 20 years ago when she first ordained. Now it's part of the repertoire that they do every week. Thippayasathantham Bhikkhuni Aram in southern Thailand, which traces their lineage through Venerable Dhammananda, has also incorporated this chant. So, they are taking scripture that was old and making it new for their purposes."

While living in Thailand from 2022 to 2023, Scahill took part in an opportunity to be temporarily ordained as a novice monk at Wat Songdhammakalyani to better inform her research. "That was a very intense experience," she says.

She and 20 other women underwent training and preparation for months

prior to the nine days of temporary ordination.

"As part of the ordination, you shave your head, and you have to learn how to wear the robes," she says, noting the particular way the outer robe must be folded and wrapped around the body.

As a temporarily ordained novice, she went out to represent the temple in the local neighborhood, participating in chants as part of alms rounds. She then had the chance to offer a blessing. "Going through that process helped me realize, 'Wow, this is a lot to take on.'"

Scahill says that she wants the discourse around bhikkhunīs to not just stop at the idea of whether these women should be allowed to become monks or not because she says it misses all the nuance of why they are doing the work.

"A lot has been written about that at this point. Now, they're doing their thing, and so let's look at how they are doing it. What are the mechanisms by which they're creating community? What are the mechanisms by which they're sustaining that practice and that movement over the last 20 years and into the third decade of their revival in Thailand?"

Scahill says there's a lot of misrepresentation of the female monks in mainstream media coverage, portraying them as feminists fighting for equality of women, as rebels fighting the power. When you go to the temples and stay there, she says, while you find that some of the outcomes of more liberal feminist projects may overlap with pieces of what the bhikkhunīs are doing, the motivation is quite different.

Their motivation "is not to fight for women's equality," Scahill says, "but to have a road to practice what the Buddha taught. We need to take what they are doing on their terms."

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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