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Trading Sex for Karma in Thailand: An Analysis of the Reciprocal Relationship Between Buddhist Monastics and Thai Prostitutes

Amy Proskow

Western Michigan University, star7228@gmail.com

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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL EXAMINATION

Amy Proskow, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in Winter 1999 successfully presented the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 23, 2002.

The title of the paper is:

"Trading Sex for Karma in Thailand: An Analysis of the Reciprocal Relationship Between Buddhist Monastics and Thai Prostitutes"

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Gregory Howard", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Gregory Howard, Sociology Department

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Susanne Mrozik", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Susanne Mrozik, Comparative Religion Department

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Vyacheslav Karpov", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Vyacheslav Karpov, Sociology Department

Trading Sex for Karma in Thailand:
An Analysis of the Reciprocal Relationship Between Buddhist Monastics and Thai Prostitutes

Amy Proskow
Lee Honors College Thesis
April 12, 2002

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Greg Howard, Chairperson, Department of Sociology
Dr. Suzanne Mrozik, Department of Comparative Religion
Dr. Vyacheslav Karpov, Department of Sociology

Introductions

Religions are often the foundations of societies. A person's religion helps guide his/her behaviors, thoughts, goals and priorities. Religious beliefs are often those beliefs that are adhered to most strongly; they hold incredible power over the believer and the non-believer alike. In many societies around the world, religion is used as a form of social control, and it is often the primary force behind governmental policies and social opinions and expressions. Examining social processes within a religious context allows us to analyze certain societies and their patterns of interactions in a very deep and detailed manner. A particular society or culture cannot be truly understood without examining the religious beliefs, duties and practices that guide the functions of that society.

Thailand is no exception to this rule. With an official national religion of Theravada Buddhism, the daily lives of Thai citizens, government officials and religious leaders are continually being passed through a Buddhist filter. When examining certain societal problems in Thailand, then, it is helpful to conduct such analyses through a Theravada Buddhist lens. Prostitution can be examined in such a way. Prostitution in Thailand is often seen as an epidemic that is having horrific effects on the young Thai women who enter the sex industry each year. Before any solutions to this epidemic can be offered, though, a thorough understanding of prostitution, within the Thai cultural context and within the Buddhist context, must be attempted.

Based on a thorough analysis of prostitution in Thailand, within the cultural and religious contexts of the region, two main points can be emphasized in establishing the impacts of Thai culture and Thai Buddhism on prostitution in the country. First, there has recently been a mass migration of women from rural, northern Thailand to large, urban centers like Bangkok in order

to find employment in the thriving sex industry. Second, there exists a sort of reciprocal relationship between Buddhist monks and Thai prostitutes. This relationship is evident in that the monks seem to condone the practice of prostitution, though it is viewed as an “immoral,” demerit-earning behavior, when they accept prostitutes’ gifts with no mind toward encouraging them to choose an alternative profession. These prostitutes, of course, are making such donations to the monks in order to make merit, which will consequently improve their karma.

This examination begins with an assessment of Thailand: the national economy, migration patterns and a history of prostitution in the country. Following is an analysis of the various views of prostitution, including citizens’ views, governmental opinions and a comparison of premodern and modern views of prostitutes. After covering these various positions, the importance of the Buddhist concepts of karma and merit-making are considered. The impacts of these concepts on the daily lives of Thai citizens and how they influence the actions of young prostitutes are assessed. Finally, the lives of Buddhist monks are examined. The primary emphasis of this last section is the reciprocal relationship that seems to exist between Buddhist monks and prostitutes in Thailand.

Thailand: An Introduction

Thailand is commonly referred to as the sex capital of Asia due to the overwhelming number of strip clubs, sex shows, prostitution and various other forms of sexually explicit entertainment found primarily in and near the nation’s capital of Bangkok. Although politicians and scholars in various countries across the globe commonly criticize the sex industry in Thailand, the economic success of Bangkok’s red light district remains untouched. Many scholars believe that the industry’s boom stems largely from the thousands of U.S. soldiers on

R&R leave who visited Bangkok during the Vietnam War. This influx of soldiers into the region brought attention to the city and to its sex industry, promoting future tourism and attracting rural women to the city for work. Others emphasize the status of Thai women in society and certain Thai Buddhist principles as also contributing to the major growth of the country's "sex capital." Regardless of one's beliefs as to how the industry began and as to how it maintains its success, it is crucial to have a thorough understanding of Thailand's sex industry in order to fully understand the nation's diverse culture and society.

Because Thailand has gained worldwide recognition for its sexual services industry, many scholars have attempted to trace the historical development of the nation's sex sector. According to Boonchalaksi and Guest (1998), prostitution has maintained a close relationship with economic development throughout Thailand's long history (p.130). As far back as the fourteenth century, prostitution was not only legal but was also taxed by the Thai government (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.130). For several centuries, "prostitute houses" were primarily located in the Chinese community in the capital of Ayuddhya (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.130). Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Chinese migration into Thailand increased, primarily among Chinese males. Prostitution flourished in Thailand as a result of this male migration into the country and was centrally located around Sampeng, a Chinese district of Bangkok (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.130). As foreigners from various countries began migrating to the country and developing their own communities in later years, prostitution expanded further, tailoring itself to the cultures and preferences of the respective communities/districts: "...as a community of Europeans grew in the Bang-rak area, it attracted prostitutes who often adopted foreign names in order to identify with their clients" (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.130).

While Thailand is known for its prostitution and other sexually explicit entertainment, Bangkok is a major center of the sexual services industry. Bangkok is a bustling city, the business center of Thailand. Phongpaichit and Baker (1998) summarize the state of the city: “Factories ring the outskirts. Commuters clog the roads. High-rise office towers crown the centre. The city has the buzz of Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, Shanghai – the sound of Asia making money” (p.10). Between 1985 and 1995, the population in Bangkok expanded to an incredible nine million people, whereas in 1970 there were only three million people in the city (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1998).

While tourists are often sold on the excitement of Bangkok, in recent years the city’s conditions have worsened. Because of the large number of rural migrants who seek work in Bangkok, the slums in the city have increased as well. By 1990, there were 1,404 slum settlements in the greater Bangkok area, which housed over 1.2 million people (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1998, p.133). As a result, living conditions for many of Bangkok’s residents are quite poor. One migrant commented: “The city is full of mosquitoes, the water reeks of chlorine, and it’s hot” (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1998, p.134). Thus, it seems that although Thailand, and especially Bangkok, experienced an economic boom during the 1980s and early 1990s, that boom quickly ended and life in the city today is not as promising as it was several years ago. It is important to note, however, that the rampant poverty experienced in the city today is not simply the result of the end of Thailand’s economic boom in the 1990s. Rather, the booming economy that began during the 1980s lured villagers to the city who lived in tightly packed spaces and extreme poverty in the slums they occupied. Thus, the poverty conditions that many city-dwellers experience actually began during the 1980s as a result of the success of Thailand’s economy.

Prostitution in Thailand

During the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the most common form of prostitution involved what were referred to as “stationed women” (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.130). These “stationed women” were essentially slaves whose owners could sell them at will. Often times, these women would be sold to prostitution houses, similar to modern Thailand’s brothels, and would provide sexual services to the establishment’s clients. In 1905, slavery was abolished in Thailand, and in 1908, the Contagious Disease Prevention Act was passed which required prostitution houses to register with and pay taxes to the Thai government (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.131). In 1960, the Prostitution Suppression Act, which established prostitution as an illegal activity, came into effect (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.163). In recognition of the weakness of this and other legislation, the Thai government passed the Prostitution Prevention and Suppression Act in 1996 (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.164). Although this act focused primarily on the growing concern over child prostitution in Thailand, it did maintain adult prostitution as an illegal activity, but those who violate the act face only a minimal fine (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.164). Thus, it seems that although prostitution is now illegal, centuries of legalized and socially accepted prostitution combined with the government, in essence, turning a blind eye to such illegal activity has left Thailand with the same booming sex industry it has always maintained, regardless of governmental legislation.

The growth of the sex sector in Thailand has been heavily influenced by international factors. During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States invested large sums of money into Thailand’s economy. A large portion of these investments was in relation to the creation of U.S. military bases in Thailand, which included transferring many U.S. soldiers into the country. The subsequent influx of foreign military personnel in the country greatly contributed to the growing

success of the sex industry in Thailand. Some of these men were serving on military bases, but many of them were on “rest and recreation” during the Vietnam War. Pattaya, one of the most famous centers for prostitution in Thailand, was established as an R&R center for American soldiers during the war, and it continues to survive on tourism and especially on the presence of U.S. Naval soldiers when American warships dock there for crew shore leaves (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.133-134).

Tourism and the National Economy

Thailand is still known around the world as the sex capital of the Eastern Hemisphere, and it is often sold as such to prospective tourists. There are many travel packages that can be found on the internet and through various travel agencies that sell Thailand as an exotic locale where a man can have his every sexual desire fulfilled. It seems that it will be nearly impossible to escape this image of Thailand when the nation’s economy is so dependent upon prostitution and other sex trades. Paul Williams (1988) states this point well: “Without it [the sex industry], [Thailand’s] tourist industry would contract catastrophically” (p.4). Boonchalaksi & Guest (1998) further illustrate the problem by showing that the sex industry contributes more money to rural areas (because the sex workers send much of their money home) than to the government programs that are designed to eliminate the suffering experienced by these rural people: “...[There is] an annual transfer from urban to rural areas of 7.2 billion baht – an amount that dwarfs the budgets of many development programmes funded by the government” (p.162). It seems that there are several factors contributing to the increased growth and success of Thailand’s sex industry, factors that make it increasingly difficult to cut down on such activity.

Many people point to the incredible amount of money generated by Thailand’s sex industry to explain why it is often overlooked and/or completely ignored by Thai government

officials. Phongpaichit and Baker (1998), citing a recent study, claim that the major illegal businesses add nearly 300 to 450 million baht each year to the national economy and that this “dirty money” constitutes between eight and thirteen percent of the legitimate economy (p.298). Of course, many scholars who study and criticize Thailand’s sex industry note that the plethora of brothels, a-gogo bars and massage parlors are also sites for gambling and other illegal business (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1998; Bishop & Robinson, 1999). Thus, one may naturally assume that a great portion of the quoted 300 to 450 million baht is the direct result of prostitution and other sexual entertainment businesses.

Rural to Urban Migration: A National Trend Among Women

There are several factors that have contributed and continue to contribute to the booming sex industry in Thailand, but many researchers (Bishop & Robinson, 1999; “Protecting,” 1989; Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998; Skrobanek, et. al., 1997) agree that the mass migration of women from rural Thailand into urban centers like Bangkok is a major cause of this phenomenon. Of course, this migration also has its own individual causes, including the incredible poverty afflicting many areas of rural Thailand, traditional Thai values and beliefs, many of which are based on Thai Buddhist philosophy, the mass immigration of Chinese males into the country in the nineteenth century and the general position and status of Thai women in society.

The migration of women from rural villages to urban centers like Bangkok increased dramatically during Thailand’s economic boom in the 1980s and 1990s. While many men also migrated to the city for work, estimates show that over half of all migrants were women (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1998, p.132). Most of these migrants come from the North and Northeast regions of Thailand. As Phongpaichit and Baker (1998) state, “[b]etween 1980 and 1990, 1.1 million people from the 15-30 age range disappeared from the northeast, mostly

headed for Bangkok” (p.133). This mass migration is at least partly due to the increased job opportunities found in urban centers like Bangkok, but there are other contributing factors as well. In fact, a primary factor in this mass migration is the decline in agricultural opportunities in Thailand, which primarily affects the rural, northern regions of the country, which has pushed people out of the villages and into the cities to avoid absolute poverty (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1998; Mensendiek, 1997). As Mensendiek (1997) states, “[d]eclined self-sufficiency, medical bills, consumerism and investment in modernized agriculture have increased the farmers’ debts. The debts can only be paid off by sending family members to the cities (p.167). Because women can sell their sexual appeal, they are often sent to the cities to engage in prostitution.

The migration of great numbers of rural Thai women into bustling city centers like Bangkok has been perhaps the greatest single contributor to the booming sex industry in Thailand. As was stated previously, this migration has been caused by many factors, but the most important contributor seems to be the overwhelming poverty experienced by many rural Thai families, especially those living in the north and northeast regions of the country. These poor areas are dependent upon subsistence farming, and, according to Bishop and Robinson (1999), “...in the past three decades, it has become nearly impossible [for people in these poor regions] to subsist on subsistence farming” (p.36).

Because families cannot support themselves on this farming, their children often migrate to the larger, urban centers to find work, for there is plenty of employment to be found in the city for young, unskilled people. Thus, these young people often find themselves in new, unfamiliar, capitalistic environments working at jobs that leave much to be desired. Bishop and Robinson (1999) illustrate this point well: “The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers that were the most popular U.S. Christmas toy a few years ago were manufactured by Thai women workers whose

daily salary could not purchase even one Morphin” (p.36). While these unskilled, low-paying jobs surely allow young people to help support their families, they barely do so; thus, the availability of these gruesome jobs do not offer an explanation as to why young women flock to the sex industry in order to make money to send home to their families.

Compounding the concern over the mass migration of rural women to urban areas to engage in prostitution is the increased presence of foreign military personnel, especially U.S. soldiers over the past several decades. During and after the Vietnam War, many U.S. soldiers were stationed and remained in Thailand. During R&R leaves, these men would often seek out prostitutes in brothels, hotels and bars. Because there was such a high demand for sex workers, these areas often attracted large numbers of young girls. Pattaya, a town that is regularly visited by the U.S. Navy, is a major center for prostitution, and many contend that it was the presence of U.S. soldiers that originally attracted the girls (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998; Williams, 1988). Thus, it seems that the economic needs of many rural Thai families has provided the supply of prostitutes, and the presence of foreign military personnel has helped create the demand. In addition to an understanding of supply and demand, however, is a closer examination of traditional Thai culture, values and beliefs. Such an analysis is necessary in order to understand what is pulling these young girls into the world of the red light district.

One of the most important values of traditional Thai culture is a young person’s duty to contribute to the support of his/her family. Many researchers further emphasize the cultural expectation that Thai daughters, in particular, help support their parents (Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998, p.133). When this cultural duty is combined with the shame and embarrassment that poor, rural families experience as a result of their living conditions, prostitution and other sex industry professions seem quite appealing to young, rural women and their families as a means-to-an-end.

As one young Thai prostitute stated, “I have to put up with everything because of the money. I’ll take home a lot, so that no one can look down on us” (Skrobanek, et. al., 1997, p.69). Another young sex worker comments similarly: “In the past, we didn’t even have a house of our own. We lived with relatives who didn’t really want us because we were so poor. Now it’s different. Nobody discriminates against us any more. Everyone is pleased to see us” (Skrobanek, et. al., 1997, p.74).

Women who work in the sex industry can provide their families with a standard of living never previously imagined. This opportunity combined with the capitalistic values of urban Thailand create a desire in families not only to survive, but to survive “better” than their neighbors, an all-too-common characteristic in capitalistic societies. A report by the International Labour Organisation in Geneva illustrates the earning potential of young Thai prostitutes: “A couple of years of work would enable the family to build a house of a size and quality which few people in the countryside could hope to achieve in the earnings of a lifetime” (“Protecting”, 1989, p.30). It is evident that many of these young women who work as prostitutes come from poor, struggling rural families. Because their culturally prescribed duties include supporting their families, and because a woman can make between three and ten times more money than in traditional jobs (Manderson, 1992, p.470), it is no wonder that many women are flocking to the sex industry. As Williams (1988) eloquently states, “[a]s long as the gap between the city and the rural areas continues to widen and real living standards in the country remain low, young women will continue to furnish Thailand’s sex industry with its raw material” (p.5).

While the overwhelming poverty affecting rural Thailand is a major factor in the explanation for the mass migration of young women into urban areas, there are other contributors

as well. Many scholars believe that the large-scale immigration of Chinese men into Thailand during the nineteenth century helped to establish and maintain the prostitution industry in these urban areas. Still others focus on features of traditional Thai life as indicators of why the sex industry is so successful. Polygamy and concubinage have been a feature of Thai aristocratic life for years, and it is widely accepted for married men of the new urban classes to take a “minor wife,” *mia noy*, as long as such a relationship is kept discreet (Williams, 1988, p.4). It is important to note that such infidelity is certainly not socially acceptable on the part of Thai women, who are taught to accept such behavior from their husbands.

In addition to the voluntary migration of many women from rural to urban areas, there is also much concern over forced prostitution and the illegal trafficking of women for sexual purposes. A quite common method of trafficking occurs when young women are initially promised well-paying jobs in the cities only to leave their families and find themselves forced into prostitution under the control of a violent manager or pimp (Skrobanek, et al., 1997; Talleyrand, 2000). Young girls, who constitute a good portion of Thailand’s prostitutes, are especially vulnerable to such promises because they are naïve and often very trusting (Skrobanek, et al., 1997). In addition, many women and young girls are simply kidnapped and transported into the cities to serve as sexual slaves for paying customers (Bertone, 2000; Skrobanek, et al., 1997; Talleyrand, 2000). To further complicate the issue, Skrobanek, et al. (1997) emphasize the problem with the visibility of illegal trafficking: “The extent of trafficking of women has been obscured by the general flow of migration. The documentation of women moving independently of men and families has been inadequate” (p. 16). Thus, in addition to the problems of rural poverty and voluntary migration to the red light districts of Thailand, there is

also the frightening, and often underestimated, market of human trafficking in which women and young girls are forced into a demeaning and possibly violent life of prostitution.

Based upon examinations of Thailand's national economy, the economic differences between rural and urban areas and the visibly inferior status of women to men, it is evident that the sex industry in Thailand is an integral aspect of life in this Asian sex capital. Without the booming sex industry, the nation would certainly be suffering from a lack of revenue and tourism, which would severely damage the nation's economy. In a country with centuries-old traditions and values, women enter the work force as prostitutes believing that they are taking advantage of the only decent opportunity available to them in order to fulfill their cultural and religious obligations to their families. It seems, then, that the situation in Thailand is one that represents a vicious cycle of deep-rooted cultural values, capitalistic desires and the degradation of women; Thailand is a nation that is crushing its people and their culture under the guise of material success.

Views of Prostitution According to Thai Buddhism

Buddhist views towards prostitution have changed over time. There are several centuries old Buddhist narratives that depict prostitutes, or courtesans, as strong, courageous, powerful women. During premodern times, then, prostitutes seemed to be viewed more positively than they are today, and some even seemed to have been highly revered. Of course, in modern times, prostitutes are not held in such high regard. Rather, they are viewed as one of the lowest groups on the social ladder. They are not offered much respect, and they certainly are not celebrated in Buddhist philosophy and ideology, as they sometimes were during premodern times.

Premodern Times: The Strong, Powerful Courtesan

There are several Buddhist narratives depicting courtesans as beautiful, admired women, many of whom were patrons of the Buddha. For example, the courtesan Ambapali donated a mango grove to the Buddha, on which the first Buddhist monastery for women was later built in Vaisali, India (“Buddhist Places,” 1998, Vaisali section, para. 2). In Vaisali there was also a law forbidding a “perfect woman” from marrying; this law demanded that such a woman be made available for the pleasures of the people (Andrews, para. 5). There are many stories focusing on courtesans in the *Saddharmaratnavaliya*, a compilation of thirteenth century stories. The *Saddharmaratnavaliya* is considered very important in the Sinhala tradition, which is Sri Lanka’s form of Theravada Buddhism. Thailand’s official religion is also Theravada Buddhism, and the Buddhist traditions and philosophies in both countries are quite similar.

One popular story in the *Saddharmaratnavaliya* is the story of the woman Uttara. This story demonstrates the non-negative view of courtesans that most people possessed during premodern times. Uttara was married into a non-Buddhist family, so she could never perform acts of merit, a very important and treasured tradition of the Buddhist faith. She sent letters home to her family sharing her concerns over not being able to perform her duties as a devout Buddhist. Uttara’s father sent her fifteen thousand pieces of gold and told her to arrange for the courtesan Sirima to perform the duties of a wife for Uttara’s husband for fifteen days. During these fifteen days, Uttara could entertain the Buddha during Alms feasts held at her house and earn merit for her acts. This is indeed what Uttara did and she was very pleased and thankful for Sirima’s great deeds. Uttara did not look down upon Sirima for being a courtesan; rather, Sirima was greatly respected for having provided Uttara with the necessary time to make offerings to the Buddha and earn merit for her actions. It is evident that courtesans, or prostitutes, were not

only viewed as good, generous people, but were also an important, even integral aspect of the Buddhist faith during premodern times.

A second story in the *Saddharmaratnavaliya* is the story of Sirima. This story depicts Sirima, a young courtesan of the city of Rajagaha, as a beautiful, compelling woman who was incredibly generous in her donations to the Buddhist monks. Each day, Sirima offered plentiful offerings to eight monks, and each day eight monks would visit her at her home to receive the offerings. One monk who had received one of her offerings commented on her extreme generosity: “What she offers to one monk is usually enough for several” (Obeyesekere, 2001, p.151). Thus, it seems that not only were courtesans viewed as beautiful, admirable women during premodern times, but also that they were valued as donors to the monastic order, as they often made great contributions to monks and temples.

In addition to being valued as great women and as great donors, however, courtesans were also viewed as dangerous creatures who threatened the spiritual strength of Buddhist monks. Sirima was so beautiful that she diverted the attention of one particular monk away from his meditative practices. Her beauty was so great that the young monk became sexually attracted to her in violation of his vows of celibacy. When Sirima died, the Buddha displayed her body for all to come visit, and he demanded that apart from children and those taking care of households, anyone who did not come to visit Sirima’s body would have to pay a fine of eight gold coins (Obeyesekere, 2001, p.152). The Buddha required this so that the monk would be forced to observe Sirima’s rotting corpse. The Buddha’s belief was that the monk would be able to overcome his lust for Sirima by viewing the corpse. Thus, it seems that the story of Sirima emphasizes the often ambiguous representation of courtesans during premodern times. Courtesans were valued because they donated great amounts of money and food to monks and

temples, but they were also viewed as dangerous creatures because they had the power to incite lust in monks.

Modern Times: The Low Status of Women

Modern Thai Buddhism takes a different stance towards prostitution than premodern Buddhism did. It is important to note, however, that the nation's lengthy history of generally supporting commercial sex has certainly lessened the stigma attached to prostitution. There is also quite a difference in the social stigma experienced between prostitutes living in rural, northern Thailand and those living in urban Thailand. The northern and northeastern regions of the country are poverty-stricken, rural areas where most families expect or plan for their daughters to migrate to the city to engage in commercial sex work in order to help support their struggling families.

These rural families often realize that young women can participate in this underground economy, even just for a short period of time, and bring home more money than the family could ever hope to see in years. In addition, because these young women are expected to earn money this way, the social stigma they experience would seem to be diminished a bit. In the bustling, urban centers of Thailand, there are other choices available for women, and their families may not be as poor as the rural families in northern regions of Thailand. For these urban women, however, there are still benefits of participating in the sex trade, such as, again, bringing money home to one's family and finding a wealthy man who desires to marry or at least to support one of these young sex workers.

Marriage Possibilities: A Measure of Worthiness for Thai Prostitutes

Several researchers have examined the "marriageability" of young prostitutes as a measure of the social stigma that is attached to participating in the commercial sex industry.

Peracca, Knodel and Saengtienchai (1998) conducted in-depth studies of general Thai attitudes towards prostitution, a prostitute's ability to marry and how this marriageability affects the social status of and/or stigma experienced by Thai prostitutes. The researchers evaluated previous data from focus group studies and conducted their own focus group studies to obtain their information. They interviewed both males and females, and each group was interviewed separately by either a male or a female moderator, respectively. The focus group members came from various areas in Thailand, including Bangkok, two provincial towns in the Central region of Thailand and several small villages. The researchers made sure that people from all social classes were interviewed, including people from various middle-class occupations, factory workers, slum dwellers, farmers and other varied positions. All participants were between the ages of twenty-five and forty, and all had been married.

After interviewing several Thai citizens from various regions of the country, Peracca, Knodel and Saengtienchai (1998) found that, for most people, the prospect of a prostitute being "worthy" enough to marry later on in her life was generally accepted. Perhaps the most significant finding in the authors' study was that prostitutes are often chosen to be "minor wives," *mia noy*, instead of gaining full status as married women (p.260). This is certainly not considered a terrible option, as most minor wives enjoy the status of concubine, an accepted and even encouraged status in Thai society, where they are very well taken care of and provided for, most often by wealthy men. As one Bangkok woman states, "[t]hey don't have to work and are well-provided for even though they didn't have wedding ceremonies" (Peracca, Knodel & Saengtienchai, 1998, p. 260).

Young prostitutes often initially meet their future husbands as customers. Most of the Thai citizens interviewed by Peracca, Knodel and Saengtienchai (1998) felt that this was an

acceptable route to marriage, as it seemed to demonstrate that the man was concerned for the woman's welfare and wished for her to find better work. As one group of people commented, "[t]hey sympathize with the girl when she tells her story. They feel sorry for her. Then the man accepts to take care of her" (Peracca, Knodel and Saengtienchai, 1998, p. 260). It is interesting to note that although these interviewees consider it a "good deed" for the man to give the prostitute an alternative to such work, they do not seem bothered by the fact that he is a customer of the prostitute and, therefore, is contributing to and encouraging her line of work. An important finding by Peracca, Knodel & Saengtienchai (1998) shows that these men do not simply want to help these women find better, more meaningful work, but rather that there is an expectation in Thai society that prostitutes leave their work immediately upon finding a husband or a man to take care of her as a mistress. The researchers emphasize this discrepancy: "[such an expectation] likely reflects the double standard in Thai society which, while to some extent condoning male marital infidelity, unambiguously condemns female infidelity" (Peracca, Knodel & Saengtienchai, 1998, p. 260). Thus, while it is socially acceptable for men to frequent prostitution establishments, it is unacceptable for women to work there.

Although the study conducted by Peracca, Knodel and Saengtienchai (1998) includes people from various regions of Thailand and economic backgrounds, it is important to note that the study is limited in its scope of representativeness due to its focused research question and the lack of further reproductions of the study. However, the study still proves to be quite useful in evaluating the attitudes of Thai citizens towards prostitutes, and it provides the public with a research question that offers a unique perspective on the position of prostitutes in Thai society. Thus, based on the researchers' study, it seems that many Thai people feel that women who enter the commercial sex industry are "salvageable" if they can find a suitable husband/caretaker.

There does not seem to be a permanent stigma attached to prostitution, especially in the northern regions, where women commonly leave for about a year to work in the sex sector, bring the money back home to their parents, and then marry a young man from their village. In such poverty-stricken areas, sending a daughter to work in the lucrative sex market in Bangkok and other urban centers is often a family's only chance to achieve status and to live fairly comfortably (Mensendiek, 1997, p.166).

Social Contributions to One's Family

In addition to contributing financially to one's family, it is important in Buddhist Thailand for children to contribute to their families' social statuses and to make merit for their families, but Thai daughters are often left with few options: "Sons still have the option of making merit for their parents through being ordained as monks, but daughters do not have that choice" (Mensendiek, 1997, p.166). While girls can become nuns in some areas, Buddhist nuns do not enjoy the same prestige as Buddhist monks do, both for themselves and for their families. In urban regions, where daughters are not as commonly sent to work as prostitutes, those young women who willingly enter such work are especially looked down upon (Peracca, Knodel, & Saengtienchai, 1998, p.262). In most cases, however, women do not wish to become prostitutes; rather, they see it as their only chance to make a decent living and to support their children and families, so it is often widely accepted as being a fact of life, especially in rural, Northern Thailand. And as long as women do not flaunt their former work as a prostitute, they should not encounter many problems in Thai society.

Governmental Views of Prostitution

The Thai government also has an official position on prostitution, although most would argue that there are actually two, very contradictory, governmental opinions on prostitution. The

official government position is that prostitution is illegal, and many government officials go so far as to pretend that they are not aware of the large-scale nature of such illegal activity. One Thai official, when asked embarrassing questions about the booming sex industry in Bangkok, replied, "It is quite illegal... Where did you say this is happening?" ("Protecting," 1989, p.30). Such statements are so obviously false to the Thai public and to the international community that most people have conceded to the fact that the government is not likely to put a stop to the sex industry and its exploitation of women.

Most people are aware of the fact that while Thailand's government verbally condemns prostitution and declares it illegal, in practice, it does virtually nothing to crack down on the sale of women for sexual purposes. Thailand's economy is dependent upon tourism, as the tourism industry contributes millions of dollars each year to the national economy. As is commonly known, the tourism industry in Thailand is based in large part on the sex industry in urban centers like Bangkok. People desiring an escape to a sexually saturated region where strip clubs, massage parlors, sex shows and prostitution abound usually know to visit Thailand. Thailand's government is also aware of this fact, so it declares prostitution illegal in hopes of appealing to Thai citizens and the international community, while simultaneously avoiding any true "crack down" on "illegal" sex industry businesses in order to keep the country's economy overflowing with tourists' money.

While the government does not truly attempt to cut down on the amount of prostitution in Thailand, the government has responded to public concern by implementing certain laws. The laws that are in place, however, are geared at punishing the prostitutes, not their customers. This, of course, is reflective of a society that does not place much value on women and sees them as the source of the problem. Just as women are punished for infidelity and men and encouraged

to engage in it, women are the ones punished for providing the sex workers while the men who supply the demand for these prostitutes are let off the hook. As Marjorie Muecke (1992) summarizes, “prostitution is legal when it is not advertized as prostitution, but prostitutes are not; and only female prostitutes are penalized by police, not male prostitutes or male transvestites” (p.896).

Thailand’s government has been heavily pressured by the international community to crack down on the expanding sex industry in Thailand. Further fueling this demand for government intervention in the sex industry is the recent epidemic of AIDS in Thailand. This exploding problem is easily illustrated in the number of AIDS cases recently experienced in the country: In 1988, there were only 186 known cases of HIV infection, but by 1990, there were 27,030 known cases of HIV infection (Muecke, 1992, p.897). While greater reporting could have impacted these numbers, instances of reporting are unlikely to increase so drastically in only two years. HIV/AIDS is an epidemic that is being rapidly spread throughout the country by the prominent, successful sex industry. As a result, the Thai government has been forced to examine the AIDS issue and to develop new policies aimed at cutting down on the transmission of HIV. As is not too surprising, the policies created by Thai government officials are, again, focused on penalizing the prostitute, not her customers (Muecke, 1992, p.897).

The Position of Women in Thai Society

As is evident from public views on and governmental policies related to prostitution, Thailand is a society in which women are often forced to take the burden for many of the nation’s problems. Interestingly, Thai family structure is commonly described as being matrilineal and matrilocal (Mensendiek, 1997, p.163). This refers to the fact that although the authority rests with the men of the family, particularly the senior male, such authority is

transmitted through the female line (Mensendiek, 1997, p.163-164). Women take on most, if not all, of the family responsibilities, including managing the family finances, taking care of family elders and taking care of children. Mensendiek (1997) also points out that Thailand's indigenous culture was, in fact, matriarchal, but that through the mass immigration of Indian and Chinese cultures, which brought with them patriarchal culture, Thailand shifted to a patriarchal society (p.165).

Historically, Thai women were not allowed to enter into royal service, which excluded them from enjoying the benefits of such work, including prestige, status and title (Vichit-Vadakan, 1994, p.519). Women have also been excluded from powerful positions in politics and administration, forcing them to rely on men to make decisions (Vichit-Vadakan, 1994, p.521). Thailand's predominant religion is Buddhism, and Thai Buddhism, like most of the world's religions, possesses a very male-centered tradition. Women have not always been allowed to become ordained as Buddhist nuns, and, even today, nuns typically do not enjoy the same reverence as monks do. Many fundamental Buddhists believe that those who are born as women begin their lives with lower karma than those who are born as men, a belief that uses religion to justify the poor treatment of, low social position of and lack of empathy for women.

A long-standing tradition in Thai culture is to treat beauty as a woman's greatest asset (Vichit-Vadakan, 1994, p.520). This places women into a position of being the sexual object, a position that many women around the world experience regularly. The support for and encouragement of concubinage and the taking of "minor wives" further ensures the Thai woman's status as object and trophy for men, and it allows married men to frequent prostitutes without suffering social stigmatization for infidelity. The "beauty culture" of Thailand merely encourages prostitution because men grow up in a society that portrays women as existing for the

pleasure of men, so men can visit prostitutes feeling as though they are simply exercising their rights as men. As it is with many cultures, the problem of prostitution in Thailand is not one that can be easily solved. It stems from centuries of social labels and mores, from religious ideologies and from governmental ambiguity and neglect. Eliminating prostitution in Thailand would require a complete overhaul of Thai society's traditional views toward women and the relationships between men and women. As most scholars would note, this is certainly a necessary change, but one which will most likely take decades, if not centuries to accomplish.

Karma and Merit-making: The Cornerstone of Thai Buddhism

Perhaps the aspect of Buddhism best known throughout the world is that of karma. Karma basically refers to the consequences of one's moral choices, and it can be either good or bad. As is evident, making good moral choices will earn an individual good karma, and making poor moral choices will earn a person bad karma. Karma influences a person's future lives, and it is believed that an individual's current life status is influenced by his/her past lives. Buddhists believe that performing good, moral deeds will earn them good karma, which, in turn, will help them achieve a good rebirth as either a god or a human. Being reborn as a human is the highest form of rebirth, as only humans can attain liberation, or *nirvana*.

Perhaps the most common form of earning good karma is through merit-making. This involves a person performing a good deed and earning merit, or good karma, as a consequence of that action. Damien Keown (1996) refers to merit as a type of "spiritual capital – like money in a bank account – whereby credit is built up as the deposit on a heavenly rebirth" (p.40). One of the best ways for lay people to earn merit is through the support of the monastic order (Bowie, 1998; Mensendiek, 1997; Muecke, 1992; Mulder, 1969; Peracca, Knodel & Saengtienchai,

1998). Common citizens can make donations of food, clothing, money and other supplies to monasteries in order to earn merit and improve their karma. Many Buddhists view the performance of acts of merit as essential to their spiritual life and future. Recall the story of Uttara, the young woman who was married into a family of non-Buddhists and who was very distressed over her inability to perform acts of merit. In a letter to her father, who reluctantly arranged for the marriage, Uttara wrote, "...why have you put me in this prison?...it were better if you had branded me and sold me...By coming into this family of unbelievers I am unable to perform a single Act of Merit" (Obeyesekere, 2001, p.195). Uttara obviously felt it was crucial that she be able to perform these meritorious acts, and she even hired a courtesan for her husband so that she would be able to perform her Buddhist, rather than her wifely, duties.

The Influence of Merit-making on Thai Daily Life

To better understand prostitution in Thailand, an examination of the concepts of karma and merit-making in Theravada Buddhism is especially important. These concepts hold great influence over the Thai people, and young Thai prostitutes are no exception. Martha Mensendiek (1997), citing Muecke's (1992) work, does an excellent job of showing her readers how these two important concepts might shape the behaviors and actions of young women in Thailand:

A person can change her/his karma by purposefully making merit. The most common ways to make merit are to give gifts to monks and temples, and to sponsor an ordination of a monk.... Degree of economic wealth is popularly taken as a direct indicator of karmic status, with the royal family and Buddhist monks being those with the greatest store of merit. Popular belief holds that men are karmically superior to women. According to this schema, prostitutes rank low on merit because they are women and [typically] come from poor families (p.165).

According to Muecke's (1992) and Mensendiek's (1997) work, it should not be surprising that young women in Thailand choose to engage in prostitution. In a nation whose official religion is Theravada Buddhism, the concepts of karma and merit-making hold great influence over people.

The young women who typically become commercial sex workers (poor, young women who come from rural, northern Thailand) most likely feel very pressured to help increase the economic status of their poor families in an effort not only to make their lives and their families' lives more comfortable, but also to help earn them merit and increase their good karma. Further, it is no surprise that these young sex workers try to make merit regularly. According to their national religion, these women are in need of earning merit and improving their karma because they are women and because they are engaging in prostitution.

Although it is believed by most people in Thai society that prostitutes lose merit, or gain demerit, by engaging in such work (Mensendiek, 1997; Muecke, 1992; Peracca, Knodel & Saengtienchai, 1998, p.263), it is hard to quantitatively determine exactly how much demerit, and subsequent negative karma, a woman may accrue for prostituting herself. Lowered karma is believed to lead to greater suffering in life, and one's suffering is often viewed as the result of accumulated negative karma from previous lives. In light of these beliefs, however, Peracca, Knodel and Saengtienchai (1998) found that a woman's life as a prostitute was not necessarily viewed by the Thai citizens they interviewed as solely being the consequence of bad karma from previous lives (p.264). On the same note, Marjorie Muecke (1992) emphasizes that some prostitutes make merit in hopes that they will not be reincarnated as a prostitute in the future (p.894). In addition, merit-making allows prostitutes to temporarily escape some of the shame they might experience: "Merit-making is perceived by [the prostitute and society] as an independent activity in which [the prostitute] is being a good Buddhist" (Muecke, 1992, p.894). Thus, it seems that merit-making not only allows prostitutes to earn merit and hopefully counteract the demerit they earn through their work, but also it allows them to "save face," even just temporarily. It seems that although people may not view prostitution as the direct result of a

woman's bad karma from a previous life, prostitutes do live with the fear that if they do not do something to counteract the demerit earned for engaging in commercial sex, they may be forced to live another life of suffering, possibly again as a prostitute, in the future.

By supporting concepts like karma and by encouraging actions like merit-making, Buddhism is a faith that focuses upon an individual's personal responsibility for fostering his/her spiritual growth. Perhaps this aspect of Buddhism contributes to the sometimes ambiguous reactions from the Thai public that are experienced by prostitutes as a result of their type of work. As Peracca, Knodel and Saengtienchai (1998) state, "both the commercial sex worker and the client are seen to be responsible for their own fate...[reflecting] the broader value system as influenced by Buddhist beliefs" (p.264). This emphasis on personal responsibility in Buddhist Thailand would seemingly lead Thai citizens to the belief that even prostitutes can change their bad karma. In a society and religion that places so much weight upon one's meritorious acts, it seems certainly plausible that prostitutes would be able to improve their chances of achieving a higher status in a future life, just as other Thai citizens can do.

Methods of Merit-making

Because they are women, prostitutes are left with fewer methods of making merit than their male counterparts. Many Buddhists believe that women are born with a lower karma than men are born with. Perhaps the best way to earn merit is to become an ordained monk; however, this option is only available to men. Women may, in certain areas, become nuns, but Buddhist nuns are still not as respected or as valued as Buddhist monks are.

Many Thai women perform such acts of merit as providing food for monks on a daily basis, visiting the Buddhist temples on holy days and making and donating robes and other garments for monks (Muecke, 1992, p.894). While many prostitutes surely engage in these same

meritorious acts, many sex workers cannot perform such acts, especially if they work for a massage parlor or other bar, leaving them with little control over their working hours. According to Muecke (1992), many of these “contracted” prostitutes make merit by “inviting friends and clients to participate in a *thoot phaa paa* ritual, an excursion (usually overnight) to a village temple for the purpose of giving money and gifts as a group to the temple” (p.894).

As stated earlier, the most common methods of making merit are making donations of food and clothing to monks and giving gifts and money to Buddhist temples. However, Thai Buddhists also believe that an individual can earn merit through sending remittances home to his/her family (Mensendiek, 1997, p.165). This concept certainly applies to young prostitutes, and one can see that if a young woman feels that she already has fairly low karma, and if she comes from a poor, struggling family, entering the sex industry would likely seem to be a wise choice. A woman in such a position would be able to help her family financially and would be able to earn merit for herself and her family at the same time. Thus, the financial and religious obligations to family that are placed on Thai women certainly contribute to the mass migration of these women to urban centers like Bangkok to find employment as commercial sex workers.

Counteracting the Demerit of Prostitution

It is certainly easy to understand a young woman’s desire to increase her and her family’s status and karma, but many researchers have questioned whether a prostitute’s merit-making activities can truly “counterbalance” the demerits earned as a result of prostituting oneself. Martha Mensendiek (1997) seems to think that many Thai people believe that merit-making can, in fact, counteract the negative karma earned as a result of prostitution: “A common attitude towards prostitutes is that helping her family or making merit counterbalances the demerit of prostituting herself” (p.165). Mensendiek (1997) refers to the perception of the “proper

daughter” as being a young woman who takes care of her parents and siblings, donates to temples, sponsors her brothers’ ordinations as monks and brings gifts home to her family (p.165). In essence, claims Mensendiek (1997), such proper daughters who are also prostitutes are “considered justified” (p.165). Thus, it seems that many people may overlook a prostitute’s actions, as long as she performs her familial and Buddhist duties of caretaking and merit-making.

While many civilians may consider the occupation of prostitutes “justified” as long as the prostitute performs acts of merit, the opinions of the Buddhist monastic order is perhaps even more important than social views and public opinions. Marjorie Muecke (1992) inquired into the opinions of Buddhist monks on such matters and found that the monks she interviewed were not as tolerant of prostitution as civilians tended to be. In conducting her study, Muecke (1992) interviewed senior monks and unordained nuns, *mae chii*, at the three main meditation monasteries in Chiang Mai, which is located in the northern region of Thailand.

An important finding by Muecke (1992) was that the monks believed that “the karmic outcome depended upon the prostitute’s ‘intention’ in prostituting herself” (p.894). Thus, it seems that a prostitute’s simple performance of acts of merit is not enough to counteract her negative karma. Rather, she must only be working as a prostitute because of her good intentions, such as helping to support her poor and struggling family. This seems to be a very common reason as to why many young Thai women migrate to the cities to find employment in the commercial sex industry, and it seems that the monks interviewed by Muecke (1992) would approve of these women’s actions because of their good intentions. It is important to note, however, that although these monks did feel that the sex workers’ intentions were the most important factor in determining her chances of counterbalancing her negative karma, they did not

find it likely that the merit earned by the woman would be enough to account for the demerit earned as a result of her prostitution (Muecke, 1992, p.894).

It is clear that measuring and determining how much demerit or merit a person earns is a difficult, if not impossible, task. Many people in Thailand, especially young sex workers, are very concerned about making merit in order to compensate for the demerit they earn regularly. Prostitutes are in an especially difficult position. They are often driven to such work with the intentions of helping their families, and often these “intentions” stem from the duties they feel they must accomplish in order to fit the role of a good daughter according to Buddhist tradition. While these women may not suffer extreme stigma in Thai society for engaging in prostitution, it seems that the monastic order is not convinced that any amount of merit-making will be able to help these young women. It is interesting to note that while many young women engage in prostitution as a means of fulfilling their familial duties according to Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist monastics do not often seem very sympathetic to the plight of these women.

Thai Buddhist Monks: Pillars of Society

A Buddhist monk, or *bhikkhu*, is perhaps the most important symbol of moral greatness found in Buddhist societies throughout the world. Lay people can only hope to be privileged enough to make offerings to Buddhist monks and their temples. These monks offer the only closeness to the Buddha and his teachings that the laity can ever glimpse. Because of their importance in Buddhist societies, understanding the relationship between prostitutes and monks is necessary in order to fully evaluate the position of prostitutes in Thai society.

Buddhist monks are, of course, much more highly regarded than Buddhist nuns are. As discussed previously, Thai Buddhism asserts that a man becoming an ordained monk will earn

great merit for himself and for his family. For a young man who wants to become a monk there are a few paths that can be taken to accomplish this. Many young Thai men are interested in becoming monks for only a short period of time, while others desire to become monks and remain so for their entire lives (Brown, 2001, p.24). For young men who come from poor families that cannot afford higher education for their sons, there is the option of being ordained as *samanen* (Brown, 2001, p.24-25). These young boys live with and are educated by the monks in the temple, and in exchange they cook, clean and perform other duties related to maintaining the temple (Brown, 2001, p.24-25). While these young boys do not become fully ordained monks, they certainly enjoy a better lifestyle and more prosperity than they would have if they had remained in the care of their poor families. Sid Brown (2001) emphasizes the benefits of entering the monkhood as a young man in Thailand: “Becoming a monk is a way to get ahead in Thai society” (p.26).

The Life of a Buddhist Monk

The moral commitment of *samanen* usually includes the taking of ten precepts (Brown, 2001, p.25). Precepts, or moral principles, are at the heart of Buddhism, and both lay people and monastics are required to “take,” or commit themselves to, certain precepts. Lay people usually take five to ten precepts (Brown, 2001, p.25), and these precepts are similar to various ethics codes found in different regions of the world, including Christian societies. There are five main precepts that are at the center of becoming a Buddhist, and these five precepts represent the basic moral duties required of all individuals claiming to be Buddhist (Keown, 1996, p.99). The five precepts forbid killing, stealing, sexual immorality, lying and taking intoxicants (Keown, 1996, p.98). Becoming a Buddhist monk requires incredible devotion and commitment, much past that of the layperson, and most monks take several hundred vows during their monkhood (Brown,

2001, p.25). The Monastic Disciplinary Code, or *patimokkha*, which is contained in the Monastic Rule, or *vinaya*, explicitly describes over two hundred rules that are to be followed by the monks (Keown, 1996, p.98). Thus, a monk's lifestyle must include constant awareness of his actions so as to avoid violating any of the several hundred rules he must abide by on a daily basis.

Monks serve several functions in their daily lives. Perhaps most significant to the laity, Buddhist monks represent an opportunity to make merit. As Muecke (1992) states, “[m]onks represent themselves as a field of merit for laypersons” (p.894). Studies in various regions of Thailand show that when listing the most meritorious acts in order of importance, those related to Buddhist monks and temples were consistently listed first (Mulder, 1969, p.116). In the Central Plain region of Thailand, according to Kaufman (1960) the ten most meritorious acts were listed as follows:

1. becoming a monk;
2. contributing enough money for the construction of a *wat* [Buddhist temple];
3. having a son ordained as a monk;
4. making excursions to the Buddhist shrines throughout Thailand;
5. making contributions toward the repair of a *wat*;
6. giving food, daily, to the monks and giving food on holy days;
7. becoming a novice;
8. attending the *wat* on all holy days and obeying the eight laws on these days;
9. obeying the five precepts at all times;
10. giving money and clothing to the monks at the *Kathin* festival (Mulder, 1969, p.116).

In a study conducted by Tambiah (1968), listings of meritorious acts in the Northeast regions of Thailand were similar to Kaufman's (1960) findings (Mulder, 1969, p.116). Nearly all of the most meritorious acts were connected, in some way, to the monastic order, or *sangha*. In addition to Mulder's (1969) findings, several other researchers have found that becoming a monk and/or donating food and money to monks and temples are the most effective ways to earn merit (Bowie, 1998; Mensendiek, 1997; Muecke, 1992; Mulder, 1969; Peracca, Knodel & Saengtienchai, 1998). Based on the common finding that merit-making is closely related in

several ways to Buddhist monks, it seems plausible to conclude that these monks are very influential, if not the most influential force, in the lives of Thai Buddhists. Due to this influence, then, it certainly seems that Buddhist monks would have the ability not only to influence Thai prostitutes in their meritorious actions (e.g. donating some of their earnings to temples), but also to influence the ways in which Thai society perceives young prostitutes and their profession.

The Position of Buddhist Monks on Prostitution

As is evident from most of the evidence presented in this paper, prostitution is generally not considered a socially sanctioned behavior. This does not mean that prostitutes themselves are always looked down upon, as they are sometimes “forgiven,” at least in part, for their actions in the sense that society may understand the conditions leading a woman to become a commercial sex worker. Rather, the practice of prostitution is generally viewed as an immoral type of behavior, a seemingly universal belief in much of the world’s communities. Monks, then, are no different in their views of prostitution than are the lay people of Thailand. Monks do not support prostitution, and, according to Muecke (1992), they also believe prostitutes earn demerit as a result of their work in the sex industry (p.894). Rules against sexual misconduct and indulgence are found in the lay precepts and throughout the *patimokkha* and the *vinaya*. Not only are there rules against a monk’s sexual indulgence, which is never allowed, but there is also the third precept, which forbids sexual immorality, and this precept must be taken by all those who wish to become Buddhist. Thus, according to these monks, a Buddhist prostitute is knowingly violating one of the precepts that she committed herself to in becoming a devotee of Buddhism.

It is not difficult to find scriptural and philosophical support for monks’ disdain of prostitution. However, perhaps the more important issue is not the monks’ views towards

prostitution, but rather their reactions to it and how they deal with and possibly help prostitutes. A major barrier to any assistance that monks could try to offer to prostitutes is the rule that they must not have any contact with women (Vichit-Vadakan, 1994, p.522). Thus, young Thai prostitutes are often left without many ways in which they can help improve their unmeritorious situations. As was previously discussed, these young women often donate money and/or robes to monasteries, and they sometimes make special trips to the village temple, *thoot phaa paa*, in order to make offerings to the temple. Many researchers have examined the ways in which these monks react to such offerings in an effort to try to understand the social and religious implications of prostitution and the ways in which religious institutions may, in fact, help promote/encourage prostitution, rather than helping young women seek alternatives to engaging in immoral and unmeritorious behavior.

Monks' Reactions to Prostitution

Many people criticize Buddhist monks for accepting gifts from prostitutes, for accepting such “fruits of the poisonous tree,” and for not responding to prostitution in ways that might help reduce the large numbers of young prostitutes in Thailand. However, some people might emphasize particular Buddhist principles, such as forgiveness, compassion and tolerance, in explaining why many monks might seem indifferent to the problem of prostitution and even encouraging of it in their acceptance of prostitutes’ gifts. Compassion may be the principle for which Buddhism is most well known throughout the world. As Keown (1996) states, “Buddhism is widely respected as one of the world’s most ethical religions. At the heart of Buddhist ethics is the principle of non-harming, which manifests itself in the respect for life for which Buddhism is renowned” (p.9).

Forgiveness is also an important principle in Buddhism, and the belief in karma would seem to maintain the importance of forgiveness and being non-judgmental towards others. According to Buddhism, all humans (and animals) are struggling through life, trying to better themselves and their karma so that they might attain a higher state of being and ultimately reach *nirvana*, where they will not be forced to be continually reborn into a world of suffering. Viewing all humans as suffering individuals, then, would create compassion and forgiveness and would allow for people to acknowledge that others' misgivings are no worse than their own. Thus, it seems plausible that monks may not respond to prostitution overtly, but that they may simply wish to recognize these women's sufferings and their attempts to make their lives, both current and future, more hopeful.

In addition to teaching principles such as forgiveness, tolerance and compassion, Buddhism is a religion that focuses on the individual being. In Buddhism, the individual is believed to have control over his/her physical and spiritual future, and one can make a better future for him/herself by engaging in acts of merit and improving his/her karma. Thus, Buddhist monks may not feel that it is appropriate for them to interfere with the spiritual paths of the laity, which includes prostitutes. Buddhism's emphasis on individual spiritual growth can even be seen in the designations allotted to certain individuals, as the term Buddha is "reserved for a person who discovers the way to enlightenment by him[or her]self rather than [by] hearing it from another" (Keown, 1996, p.26). Monks who accept gifts from lay people are also believed to be "allowing" those people to earn merit. In studying Maha Chettuphon, a young monk in Thailand, Mulder (1973) comments that "[h]is early morning rounds to receive food and gifts offered the pious an occasion to make merit by accepting their donations" (p.3). Thus, it is possible that monks do not overtly respond to prostitution, as many would like them to, because

they feel that they are obliged to let the young women create their own spiritual futures. They may also feel that if they do not accept the gifts of these prostitutes, they will be preventing the women from making merit and improving their lives on their own.

Reciprocity: The Complex Relationship Between Buddhist Monks and Thai Prostitutes

In contradiction to claims of individuality within Buddhism and of monks simply practicing compassion and forgiveness, is the duty of a Buddhist monk to educate on and to spread the Dharma (or Dhamma), the principles and teachings of the Buddha. According to the ecclesiastical authorities in Thailand, the duties of the *sangha* are divided into four departments, one of which is the Department of Spreading the Dhamma (Dhammadharo, 1995, Introduction section, para. 2). The Department of Spreading the Dhamma includes the duties of the monks in educating the general populace on the principles and teachings of the Dhamma, which includes the five precepts to which all Buddhists are expected to commit. The spread of such information, which is the responsibility of the monastic order, is divided into three categories: study, practice and psychic marvels (Dhammadharo, 1995, section 4).

According to these duties, monks are expected to spread the word of the Dhamma to the lay people of Thailand through helping them study the Dhamma and understand its teachings, through practicing the teachings of the Dhamma in their own actions and through psychic marvels such as the Buddha often performed (Dhammadharo, 1995, section 4). Thus, the duties of Thai monks would include teaching the word of the Dhamma to prostitutes who make offerings and donations to them. Even though a monk may not be permitted to be alone with women, he could still teach women about the importance of the Dhamma and adhering to it, which would certainly seem to include discouraging her from participating in the commercial sex industry.

Even though it is generally believed that it is a monk's duty to be a spiritual leader and to teach the general populace how to be moral beings and reduce their future levels of suffering, it seems that many monks do not attempt to guide young women away from the sexual services professions. One abbot from Rim Mon, in expressing his thoughts on the issue, seems to believe that the young girls entering the sex industry are the true cause of its continued success and that he and his fellow monks bear no responsibility in pushing for social change:

We must be reasonable. We must ask ourselves whether the operators of places of entertainment who come to make merit at the temple are recruiting the girls to work with them. What we see is girls applying in droves to do the work. Besides, what is wrong if the employers of the girls make merit at the local temple or visit the village (Skrobanek, et. al., 1997, p.78)?

It seems that this monk, and certainly others like him, believes not only that the young Thai girls are the cause of the state of prostitution in Thailand, but also that those who run the brothels, massage parlors and other sex entertainment businesses should not be held accountable as long as they visit the temple to earn merit. It is astonishing that a person in such a highly revered and influential social position could deny any responsibility when religious texts clearly prescribe that his duties include helping people choose virtuous and meritorious paths, which certainly do not include prostituting oneself. Skrobanek, et al. (1997) believe, as do many others, that the monastic order holds at least some responsibility with regards to the booming business of prostitution in Thailand: "By accepting donations from brothel operators, the temple confers legitimacy on their business" (p.78).

Such neglect on the part of the *sangha* has led many scholars to criticize Buddhist monks and to question their intentions in neglecting this most important duty of the monastic order, the duty of spreading the Buddha's teaching. Pointing out that many temples are built with money donated by women engaging in prostitution, which is quite a lucrative profession, Marjorie Muecke (1992) questions the ethics of monks and their motives in accepting gifts from such

women. Muecke (1992) emphasizes the benefits enjoyed by the monks who accept such donations: “There is one temple in Bangkok...that is named after a woman donor who is widely known to have been a prostitute, Wat Khanikaphol” (p.894). It seems that village monasteries most likely reap great benefits from accepting the donations of prostitutes, who often make quite a lot of money, relatively speaking, and donate large sums of money in order to compensate for the demerits earned as a result of their prostitution.

While Muecke and other scholars criticize the monastic order for not attempting to provide assistance to prostitutes in finding other means of employment, they refrain from criticizing the young women who enter the sexual services industry. Rather, these women seem to be the product of a society and a religion that give them few options in life which leads them to choose prostitution as a viable alternative. Mensendiek (1997) states that Thailand’s “religious ideology provides a basis which sanctions the girls’ work as prostitutes” (p.165). Muecke (1992) goes even further with her criticisms of the monastic order and claims that the *sangha* “provides a culturally and morally acceptable means for ‘laundering’ of monies that may have been earned through prostitution or other disreputable means” (p.894). Thus, it seems that there exists a sort of reciprocal relationship between the monastic order and Thai prostitutes in that in exchange for donations to the monasteries, which are likely to be greater than those given by the general population of Thailand, prostitutes receive a sanctioning of their work, even though it is believed to earn them demerit and future negative karma.

Conclusions

At the end of this examination, we are left with the burden of attempting to find a solution to a problem that is the result of centuries of religious and cultural practices and

influences. While this paper focuses on the impact of Buddhist monks on the situation of prostitution in Thailand, it is important to emphasize that Thai Buddhist nuns offer a positive alternative to a life of prostitution for young Thai women. It seems that Buddhist nuns aim not only to help teach young prostitutes the Dhamma, but also that they aim to teach them practical skills that they will be able to use in order to better their lives (Brown, 2001). As one nun stated, “[i]f I give them knowledge, they can have a decent living – they can use their knowledge....I thought that they need work to have money, and then they can be good people. You need money and you need work. You can then help society – in [this area] and in Thailand” (Brown, 2001, p.118). As this nun’s comments illustrate, many Buddhist nuns are quite empathetic to the struggles of women, especially given their own struggles to become respected religious leaders, and as a result, they strive to help disadvantaged women find better opportunities for success. They do not look down upon young Thai prostitutes; rather they understand the pressures placed upon them by Thai society, and in doing so they help young prostitutes find more positive direction in their lives.

In addition to teaching basic job skills to young prostitutes in hopes of helping them find better employment, there are also organized sessions where nuns are grouped with prostitutes who have been brought to prisons for prostitutes (Brown, 2001, p.97). According to Brown (2001), this is done in the hopes that the nuns will have a positive impact on the young women (p.97). In one particular situation, forty nuns-in-training were brought to a prison on an island near Bangkok as a part of their training (Brown, 2001, p.97). This group session seemed to be awkward in the beginning, but the commonness that had been shared by both nun and prostitute seemed to form a type of connection between them:

The most successful conversations for all involved drew on the common backgrounds of the maechi [Buddhist nuns] and prostitutes and invited empathy for what had led the women to be incarcerated on the island and how that island prison was debilitating rather than rehabilitating the women there (Brown, 2001, p.98).

Thus, it seems that by possibly sharing common backgrounds and by having the ability to truly empathize with prostitutes, Buddhist nuns can have an incredible impact on their lives. There seems to be a general perception that a nun's duties include being actively involved in helping those who need help, that nuns should take on the role of "social worker." As Sid Brown (2001) states, "maechi are seen as the societal agents to bring about the end of problems such as prostitution" (p.98). Perhaps these maechi do, indeed, provide at least part of a solution to help end the booming prostitution industry and, hopefully, the degradation of women in Thailand.

Before declaring any solutions, however, the primary problems need to be articulated. There seem to be three main areas that contribute to the problem of prostitution in Thailand. First, there are several economic factors, such as struggles within the agricultural economy and the fairly recent emphasis on and embrace of capitalism in Thailand, which place unneeded and unwanted pressures on the young girls who often enter the world of prostitution. Many of these young girls come from poor, rural families that suffer financially as a result of the downturn in the agricultural economy. When this is combined with a national lust and admiration for wealth, these young girls feel pressured to earn money for their parents, and they try to find work that pays well enough for them to provide a comfortable lifestyle for their families. In addition, international sex tourism in Thailand contributes vast amounts of money to the national economy, which leads Thailand's government to ignore the problem of prostitution in hopes of economic gain for the country.

The second area that contributes to the great amount of prostitution in Thailand is the social position of women in the nation. Thai women have little if any, political or other decision-

making power, which places them in a position where they are consistently dependent upon men. Thailand has also embraced a “beauty culture,” in which great emphasis is placed on a woman’s sexual attractiveness and her beauty is seen as her greatest asset. A social arena that encourages the “beauty culture” and ensures women’s dependence upon men is certain to encourage prostitution as well, as such work flaunts a woman’s beauty and allows her to earn money only from the men she is so dependent upon.

The third, and possibly most influential, area that contributes to Thailand’s booming prostitution industry is Buddhism and Buddhist religious life. The Buddhist concepts of karma and merit-making encourage people to perform acts to atone for their objectionable lifestyles. As much evidence has shown, donating to monasteries and/or temples is the considered the best way to earn merit, besides a man actually becoming an ordained monk. These concepts have also been used to explain away the poverty and low social position of certain groups of people: women and people from lower social classes are believed to have lower karma. Thus, according to Buddhist ideology, these are the people who especially need to make merit. Familial obligations are also important in Thai Buddhist life. Children are expected to contribute financially and spiritually, in the form of merit-making, to their families. Thus, Thai Buddhism seems to be a religion which teaches that women, especially poor women, are in need of merit to increase their already-low karma, that they need to make merit also for their families, and that they need to contribute financially to their families. Prostitution allows these young women to accomplish all three of these goals. This type of work provides women with a higher income than many jobs available to them. Thus, although they earn demerit for their participation in the industry, they make enough money to provide well for their families, and they can make great

contributions to the local temples and monasteries, allowing them to make merit for themselves and for their families.

It seems that one of the most promising solutions to all of these problem areas does, indeed, lie with Thailand's Buddhist nuns, or *maechi*, especially if the numbers of *maechi* were to increase throughout Thailand. The first area, which focuses on economic pressures, could benefit from increased numbers of Buddhist nuns throughout the country because these women obviously do not advocate capitalism, and they ignore the lure of material wealth. Buddhist monks do this as well, but as Sid Brown (2001) established, nuns seem to be more active in the communities and, thus, would seem to have more direct impact on people's lives in this respect. *Maechi* could also help the struggling agricultural families of the northern regions of Thailand because, again, they are actively involved in helping to teach people new skills. If young girls from the rural regions of the country were to learn applicable job skills from the local *maechi*, they would not have as strong of a need to enter the prostitution industry in order to earn money. To be sure, the attraction of great wealth would still be there, but with alternative job skills, the girls could find more uplifting and less demeaning work, something that greatly outweighs the pleasure gained from wealth.

The second area that contributes to the problem of prostitution, the social positions of Thai women, could be greatly improved with the presence of more Buddhist nuns throughout the country. Such an increased presence would certainly "level the playing field," at least somewhat, for women. Young girls would have the opportunity of becoming nuns themselves, just as their brothers have the opportunity to become ordained monks. Again, this would increase the opportunities for Thai women and would consequently allow them to have more control over their own lives.

The final area that contributes to the large-scale prostitution industry in Thailand is Thai Buddhism and Buddhist religious life. As stated previously, increasing the opportunities for women to enter Buddhist monastics would be a great achievement that would give young women life opportunities besides prostitution. In this sense, young women would have increased opportunities to make merit for themselves and for their families. While young, rural women may begin life with low karma, entering Buddhist religious life as maechi would certainly earn them merit and improve their karma and that of their families. Perhaps most importantly, the increased presence of Buddhist nuns and the increased opportunities for young women to become nuns provides young Thai women with a method of merit-making that does not involve money. Currently, it seems that a woman's primary option in terms of merit-making is to contribute money to local temples and monasteries. Because the women who typically become prostitutes are from poor, rural regions and often do not have many job skills, they migrate to the cities in order to make money by prostituting themselves. Many of these young women probably believe that such action is their only option if they want to make merit for themselves and for their families. By allowing them to become maechi, these young women would not have to turn to the prostitution industry. Rather, they could choose a lifestyle of altruism, minimalism and peace. By doing this, they could earn their families and themselves great merit, and, most importantly, they could maintain their pride as women of Thailand.

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