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The Religious Standing of Burmese Buddhist Nuns (*thilá-shin*): The Ten Precepts and Religious Respect Words

by *Hiroko Kawanami*

This paper¹ seeks to illuminate the socio-religious place occupied by contemporary Buddhist nuns² (known as *thilá-shin*) in Burmese society and within the Buddhist community at large.

According to the textual Buddhist tradition, frequently cited by monks and laity alike, contemporary Buddhist nuns are not *bhikkhunī*, and therefore not invested with any formal religious significance; they are considered merely as pious lay women. However, these “religious women” who have their heads shaven and live by receiving alms, play a much more important role in the Buddhist community than might be expected from “official” explanations. Their true status is ambiguous; however, it is this very “ambiguity” that allows them to play an indispensable role in the maintenance of present-day Burmese Buddhism.

The major focus of this paper is on two areas: the taking of the ten precepts and the usage of religious honorifics in Burma to address monks, novices and nuns. An investigation of these, I believe, will help to illuminate the religious standing of *thilá-shin* in Burma.

I. The Status of “Religious Women” in Buddhism

The “official version” of Buddhist texts in the Theravāda tradition may serve as the starting point for understanding the religious status of contemporary Buddhist nuns. While doing my fieldwork, I found that stories of *bhikkhunīs* and “religious

women” in the Buddhist texts were frequently referred to by monks and laity in an attempt to explain the present position of *thilá-shin* in Burma. The formation of the *Bhikkhunī* Saṅgha³ and the textual account of *bhikkhunīs* who once existed were important components of the story. Tradition also tells us that the lineage of *bhikkhunī* ordination has become extinct and there exists no *bhikkhunī* who can confer ordination on contemporary Buddhist nuns. Therefore, present-day *thilá-shin* are not *bhikkhunīs*. The pseudo-ordination ceremony that initiates laywomen into the Order is considered a ritual that provides them with a religious status no more than that of pious lay women who abide by additional sabbatical vows. Ironically, the assumption that their predecessors once held a legitimate religious status seems to stress all the more the “illegitimate” religious status of present-day Buddhist nuns. These explanations are repeatedly referred to by monks and scholars to remind the general public of where a contemporary Buddhist nun “should stand,” in order to perpetuate the ideology that “she is not a *bhikkhunī* and that she can never become one.”

According to traditional Buddhist classification, the Buddhist assembly comprised four kinds of people: *bhikkhu* (almsmen), *bhikkhunī* (almswomen), *upāsaka* (devout laymen) and *upāsikā* (devout laywomen). Both male *upāsaka* and female *upāsikā* were pious layfolk who followed the Buddhist morality of five precepts (eight on sabbatical days). These people were above all householders and material benefactors of the Saṅgha, called *dāyaka* (donor) or *dāyikā* (female donor), and responsible for the upkeep of both the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* communities. The number of precepts taken is usually a major index of the religious status of an individual, and from this viewpoint, a *thilá-shin* is categorized as an *upāsikā* (laywoman) who takes eight precepts. However, strictly speaking, a *thilá-shin* does not fit into the category of *upāsikā*, because she is not a productive householder but an almswoman who is dependent on the laity.

Historically and socio-culturally, it seems that women have always been discouraged from spiritual renunciation. In the Hindu tradition, from which Buddhism arose, married status was the only acceptable way for women to pursue their religious goal.⁴ The institutionalized body of male renouncers

was and still is dependent on lay householders for material support as well as for recruitment of celibate monks. Women were expected to look after the family and children, and be responsible for the perpetuation of the Buddhist faith to the future generation. As N. Falk observes,⁵ stories concerning pious laywomen were far more numerous and elaborated in the texts than those relating to Buddhist nuns. This implies that the role of female lay householders was far more acknowledged and encouraged than that of female renouncers in the Buddhist tradition.

Present-day Buddhist nuns in Burma are called *thilá-shin*. The Burmese term *thila* derives from the Pali word *sīla*,⁶ which designates that virtuous behaviour, ethical conduct and moral practice which Buddhist texts list as the initial point of departure towards higher spirituality. The precepts Buddhists observe are also called *thila*. The Burmese word *shin* means the "holder" or "one who possesses." Therefore, *thilá-shin* means a person who observes the Buddhist code of morality, one who is virtuous and moral in every way this word would apply.

The legal position of a *thilá-shin* in Burmese Buddhist law makes it clear that she is still a member of the secular world: she is not deprived of social rights to inherit estate and property,⁷ whereas monks and novices are governed by monastic rules that oblige them to renounce all secular rights. Nevertheless, in most cases a woman, should she become a *thilá-shin*, voluntarily hands over her property to her family or donates her wealth to the nunnery, considering it incompatible with the pursuit of a religious life; alternatively, she may use her inheritance to build her own accommodation inside the nunnery premises; after her death, it becomes communal property of the institution.

With regard to civil status, a *thilá-shin* is put in the same category as a monk. The Constitution of Burma (No. 180, 1974) stipulates that "any religious persons" or "any member of the religious Orders," whether Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, etc., whether male or female, may not vote in elections. "Religious persons" are denied certain civil rights so that they do not engage in political activities. This reflects fear on the part of political authorities in Burma that "religious persons" may exert their power in secular forms. The assumption is that "religious" persons should be confined to the religious realm,

and in this respect, both monks and nuns are considered to belong to the *lokuttara*.

In order to understand the present standing of the *thilá-shin* in Burma, we have to understand the distinction between *lokiya*, worldly and mundane, and *lokuttara*, transcendental and spiritual (*làw-ki* and *làw-kouk-tara* in Burmese pronunciation).⁸ In Burma, this distinction is frequently referred to and understood as that between the secular and the religious. Members of the Buddhist community who have committed themselves to the "higher ideal" are referred to as those who belong to the *lokuttara*, contrasted to those who belong to the *lokiya*. The *lokuttara* person is unproductive, and thus completely dependent on the productive members of the *lokiya* for material support. The Buddhist community provides a field of religious merit for secular people. Accordingly, "giving" is encouraged as the most meritorious and ethically valued activity for those in the *lokiya*, while "receiving" is the norm of life for those in the *lokuttara*. The difference in ways of life is well recognized and the boundary between the two worlds is firmly maintained. They are dependent on one another, and this complementarity provides the basis for Burmese Buddhism.

Thilá-shin stand in between the *lokiya* and the *lokuttara*. Their position may be perceived as both *lokiya* and *lokuttara*, or part of either, depending on the situation and context, and according to the standing of the speaker in relationship to a *thilá-shin*. Almost all my Burmese lay informants asserted that *thilá-shin* did not belong to the *lokiya*. Having said that, some consider *thilá-shin* as indispensable members of the *lokuttara*, vital to the maintenance of the Buddhist community, while some disregard them as mere burden on the productive population. Monks, who officially adhere to the doctrine that contemporary nuns are "laywoman," tend to discount their importance in everyday life. The *thilá-shin* themselves strongly identify with the Buddhist community as far as their lifestyle and affiliation are concerned, yet their religious activities tend to centre around merit-making, entailing the act of "giving" that is the focus of members of the *lokiya*.

A *thilá-shin* seeks to clarify her standing by distinguishing her status from that of the permanent or semi-permanent *yàw-gi* (*yogin* in Pali) woman. Most Burmese laity, young and old,

male and female, married and single, spend a certain time in meditation centres as *yàw-gi*. They are usually clad in brown, following eight precepts and meditate in religious premises. Most permanent or semi-permanent *yàw-gi* are old women relieved of their domestic chores and responsibilities. When asked why they had not become *thilá-shin*, many of them said that they were too old to pursue a professional life. Furthermore, in contrast to a *thilá-shin*, whose commitment to a religious cause is demonstrated by her shorn head, the retained hair of the *yàw-gi* was frequently derided as evidence of the lack of spiritual worth that made it difficult for them to detach themselves from the *lokiya* world.

Even though *yàw-gi* observe the same number of precepts and lead a stoic lifestyle in religious premises, they are regarded as basically outside the *lokuttara*. Still, *thilá-shin* envy *yàw-gi* because they have more time for meditation and personal religious pursuits since, unlike nuns, *yàw-gi* are not expected to provide menial services for the monks or the Buddhist community. Also, *yàw-gi* cannot, nor do they wish to, live on “receiving” alms like the *thilá-shin*. Therefore, in order to lead a religious life as *yàw-gi*, they have to be materially self-sufficient and fairly well off, which suggests that they have not given up their role as “donors” who are responsible for “giving” to the Buddhist community.

At one level, the *thilá-shin* claim that they have renounced the lay world to take up a life of stoic discipline and hardship. They say they have symbolically become “daughters of the Buddha” (*Hpayà-thamí*) and entered the Order of sisterhood for the pursuit of spiritual advancement. The keeping of Buddhist morality obliges them to abstain from sex, alcohol, eating after midday and from such worldly pleasures as singing and dancing and cosmetics and garlands, which may hinder their effort to purify the body and soul. *Thilá-shin* say that their life is cool (*ei-thi*) and clean (*thán-sin-thi*) compared to the hot (*pu-thi*) and filthy (*nyik-pak-thi*) life of the secular world. This gives them a reason to feel spiritually superior to the laity, both men and women.

As mentioned before, the daily life of *thilá-shin* is centered around merit-making activities that involve menial services to the religious community of the monks. Perseverance and

hardship are endured as "giving," and sacrifices are believed to lead to the acquisition of merit. Many *thilá-shin* said that they were enabled to acquire more merit than those living in the secular world, since they could devote themselves wholeheartedly to a lifestyle with a religious cause, another reason for their spiritual superiority to the general laity.

However, there is a contradiction between the spiritual worthiness felt by *thilá-shin* themselves and the mundane degradation to which they are subject. In order to cope with the embedded tension, they distinguish their relationship with the secular world on two levels: that of spiritual supremacy and that of economic dependence.

On an economic level, *thilá-shin* seem to be reminded of their worldliness. They feel down-graded, inferior and "bad" (*à-na-thi*), being obliged to be economically dependent on their lay benefactors despite their "illegitimate" religious status. *Thilá-shin* are aware that theoretically they are not full members of the Buddhist Order. Therefore, they feel that they are not fully entitled "to receive" like the monks and novices whose legitimate religious status, backed by the Saṅgha, gives them full rights to receive from the laity. The alms received by monks and *thilá-shin* appear to be fundamentally different. *Thilá-shin* are given raw rice and money, which indicates that they can cook and look after themselves, in contrast to the monks, who are given only cooked food. The degree of autonomy maintained by the *thilá-shin* shows that they retain a closer link to the secular than monks, who are completely dependent on the laity.

In most big monasteries, there usually are lay helpers to offer the monks menial services such as cooking and washing, so it is not necessary for the *thilá-shin* to perform these duties. Nonetheless, *thilá-shin* are eager to take part in merit-making activities by offering food to the monks. They like to "be in need of the monks" and this becomes almost a religious objective for some of them. However, it must be added that not all *thilá-shin* spend their time cooking for and serving the monks; those who are students and teachers of Buddhist scriptures and philosophy devote most of their time to the work of education. Therefore, there is a division of labour among the nuns, and the basic economic unit within a Burmese nunnery is usually

comprised of a partnership between a nun who teaches and a nun who is in charge of the household.⁹ It is wrong to assume that most nuns are servants for the monks, and to my surprise, I met many educated *thilá-shin* who were not even able to boil water!

In a Buddhist culture, “giving” (*dāna*) is encouraged, but receiving gifts may become problematic. Although it is theoretically unnecessary for *thilá-shin* to reciprocate a material gift with a material countergift, they feel comfortable in “giving,” but “receiving” makes them feel “indebted.” While monks and novices enjoy the privilege of receiving to the full on the supposition that they are providing the laity with a chance to acquire religious merit, the role of recipient for *thilá-shin* constantly reminds them of their ambiguous religious standing, such that they are not fully exempted from the social rules of reciprocity.

When they receive, *thilá-shin* recite and give out religious blessings in return. They may chant for the donor the “powerful” Buddhist protection-formulas called *paritta* (*payeik-kyi* in Burmese). These are believed to ward off evil spirits and confer upon the recipient prosperity, safety, luck and happiness. *Thilá-shin* also show their utmost hospitality and kindness, and offer whatever humble food they have whenever a lay guest visits their nunnery. But these acts are not sufficient to convince them that they have paid back their debts in terms of the religious merit acquired by their lay benefactors. The feeling of having to receive all the time becomes a psychological burden, and seems to make them feel inferior. At times, they expressed this as a wish not to descend to the status of a mere beggar who receives alms with no religious significance.

Officially, “Buddhist nuns” observe eight precepts. Novices observe ten precepts and monks abide by the 227 rules of the Vinaya. Five precepts are considered as fundamental to Buddhist morality, so devout lay Buddhists abide by at least five. On *uposatha* days, during the *Vassa*¹⁰ and on other special days, such as the day of the week when they were born, Burmese people make special efforts to observe an additional three precepts and interrupt their ordinary lay life by taking religious disciplines. “Celibacy” and “no solid food after midday” are important and difficult additional abstinences on these occasions.

There are *thilá-shin* who attempt to abide by ten precepts, the same number taken by novices. These precepts may be the same in content, but different in context and significance. This derives from the precept-takers' difference in status. A novice is "on the way to becoming a fully ordained member of the Saṅgha," whereas further religious status for a *thilá-shin* is closed. This difference becomes clearer when we examine the manner in which the basic Buddhist precepts are taken.

Novices and *thilá-shin* recite and take the first six precepts in the same manner. For novices, the seventh and the eighth precepts are separated and recited as two precepts: 7) abstinence from dancing, singing, music and shows, and 8) abstinence from garlands, perfumes, cosmetics and adornment. *Thilá-shin* and laity take these precepts as two precepts merged into one, which makes one long precept, counted as the seventh. The ninth precept—abstinence from sleeping on luxurious beds, is ninth for novices only; the same precept slides into the place of the eighth for *thilá-shin* and laity. Therefore, it is recited as the ninth for the novice and the eighth for *thilá-shin* and laity. Technically speaking, this means that there is no ninth precept for *thilá-shin* and laity, and the artificial gap created between the eighth and the tenth precept marks the boundary between their religious status and that of a novice. If a *thilá-shin* wishes to abide by the ten precepts, the present custom is to fill in the gap of the ninth position by reciting the phrase which sends loving kindness (*metta* or *myit-ta*) to all sentient beings, especially to the spirits. This allows her to carry on to the taking of the tenth precept. However, this so-called "ninth precept" is not a precept of abstinence, but rather a code of behaviour set up for instrumental reasons.

It seems that the gap¹¹ stands as a reminder that the religious status of *thilá-shin* is that of *upāsikā*, and the manner in which the precepts are taken seems to confine them to the same level as the laity, or *lokiya*. In the meanwhile, a novice confronts no gap which hinders him from following further precepts and he is led to a higher religious status in the *lokuttara*.

The tenth precept prohibits the taker from handling gold and silver, which means, in effect, money. This precept has a considerable religious significance for contemporary Buddhist nuns, while it is taken for granted by monks and novices. Most

thilá-shin in Burma receive and handle money, and are rarely in a position to abstain from it. They live under the constant pressure of low income, since their daily life has to be maintained on humble donations of 1 to 5 kyats, while monks receive 50 to 100 kyats for attending a religious function. Threatened by the insecurity of their financial base, *thilá-shin* cannot abstain from fussing over money, haggling at markets and living as thriftily as possible—this seems to result in a general image of nuns as greedy.

On the other hand, *thilá-shin* are often indispensable to the administration of monasteries on behalf of the monks, who are not allowed to handle money. Still, they do not consider this role of treasurer as an important base of power from which to demand further influence. The negative value attributed to their capacity “to be able” to handle money, makes them feel worldly and degraded, and it is regarded more or less as a shackle that keeps them away from spiritual advancement. Abstinence from handling money comes to be regarded as a special privilege for *thilá-shin*. Not having to deal with it is aspired to as a “cool” state of detachment from “hot” matters, an unobtainable state of bliss. As one *thilá-shin* expressed it, if only she were relieved from worries about money and maintenance, she would be able to concentrate fully on Buddhist studies and meditation. Such a state was considered to give her the physical and spiritual freedom to concentrate wholeheartedly on her basic spiritual pursuit.

Only a few *thilá-shin* in Burma are able to follow all ten precepts.¹² To become a ten-precept *thilá-shin*, a woman has to have either a wealthy family background or a highly successful academic career, or both, so as to be able to attract numerous donors and benefactors who can give her a solid financial standing. It may sound paradoxical, but to be in a position of detachment, she must have sufficient resources and backing to be able to afford it. She also must have a reliable layperson or a nun serve as a *kat-pí-yá*, to attend to her needs. A *kat-pí-yá* will act as secretary and treasurer and attend to the daily needs of the ten precept *thilá-shin*. If money is donated to the *thilá-shin*, her *kat-pí-yá* will receive and deal with it on her behalf. The actual difficulty lies in the fact that *thilá-shin* are rarely in a position to be looked after like monks, since they usually cannot

attract sufficient respect or attention from the laity to require being attended on a full-time basis. On the contrary, *thilá-shin* themselves often act as *kat-pí-yá* to monks, looking after their financial interests and, as we have seen, acting as manager and treasurer for the running of monasteries.

Thilá-shin who have attained the ten precept status are regarded as those who have attained a higher stage of detachment, endowed with spiritual peace. They do not necessarily have to commit themselves to a lifestyle of collecting alms and receiving donations, which reverses the power relationship between the *thilá-shin* and her lay donors. In general, ten-precept *thilá-shin* still maintain close relationships with their lay donors, but give a general impression that they are not desperately in need. Having a secure backing gives them a feeling of assurance so that they do not feel servile or inferior in any way to their lay benefactors. The inner tension felt between their spiritual worth and economic dependency gradually resolves as the former gains strength. Ten-precept *thilá-shin* are well respected, regarded as higher on the spiritual ladder than ordinary eight-precept *thilá-shin* and perceived to have a special quality called *gon*.¹³ Moreover, their status of "not having to receive" gives them more importance, hence reasons for the laity to give; thus, they become the centre of worship among Buddhist nuns. However, the formal religious status of ten-precept *thilá-shin* is still considered to be that of *upāsikā*, since they have not been through an "official" ordination ceremony. The only implication may be that they have succeeded in renouncing their role of service to the monks and novices, and achieved a certain state of religious autonomy within the Buddhist community.

As a current movement in Sri Lanka shows,¹⁴ nuns clad in yellow who are ten-precept observers aspire to a higher religious status than ordinary eight-precept nuns. They are attempting to secure a proper religious status between that of lay *upāsikā* and *bhikkhunī*. The aim of this movement is to raise their religious status into a different category through strict morality, meditation and recitation of the *dhamma*, so that they can approximate the ideal of "sainthood" (*arahantship*).¹⁵ Similarly, in Burma, *thilá-shin* are eager to enhance their spirituality in spite of many obstacles. The taking of ten precepts is a valid

religious statement which signifies that a *thilá-shin* has overcome the “uncomfortable” position of being materially dependent on the laity. Some *thilá-shin* take the ten precepts in the evening, even though it has no practical effect, since they go to markets and attend religious functions in the mornings. Some *thilá-shin* keep the ten precepts on *uposatha* days, on the day of week on which they were born, or during the *Vassa*. A nun may save up her whole donation income for the rest of the year to be able to abide by the ten precepts during the three months of *Vassa*.

The abstinence enjoined on the ten-precept abider is often combined with one or two austere Buddhist practices called *dhutāṅga*¹⁶ (*dú-tin* in Burmese), which also enhance one’s spiritual stature. Among the most common of the thirteen kinds of *dhutāṅga* are the taking of one meal a day (*ekāsānikāṅga*) and the mixing up of all the food and taking it directly from the bowl (*pattapiṇḍikāṅga*), with no second helpings. To these basic *dhutāṅga*, *thilá-shin* may add vegetarianism, eating only beans, no sleep, and so on. The observation of these trials is by no means forced upon them, but a matter strictly of individual choice and decision. If a *thilá-shin* is healthy and committed enough to take upon herself this kind of hardship, her efforts and sacrifice are met with respect by the laity. The *thilá-shin* herself also believes that she is on the path to a higher spiritual level.

Officially, *thilá-shin* are not obliged to abide by as many rules and regulations as monks. However, in practice, their daily life is governed by far more rules and minor details than that of monks and novices. These are either imposed as a norm¹⁷ of life or observed as written nunnery rules¹⁸ or a communal code for *thilá-shin*. Moreover, it is often the case that *thilá-shin* explicitly display their seriousness towards their religious profession and give the impression that their commitment is stronger than that of the monks. *Thilá-shin* seem to know that their religious position depends on their outward image—on how they are perceived in the society—so they try all means to keep up their religious stance in good manners, clean clothes and pious behaviour, etc. It can be argued that the insecurity of their religious position drives them to make far more efforts in observing the rules and regulations. The

only way of keeping their religious position intact is by constantly working on it and displaying their “super-devoutness,” so that their pious image becomes widely acknowledged by the laity. It is this recognition and the general approval of society that give *thilá-shin* a secure place in the *lokuttara*.

II. Religious Honorifics

Religious honorifics¹⁹ are special pronouns and verbs, which are generally applied in situations of interaction between members of the Buddhist community and the laity in Burma. Burmese people employ religious honorifics towards monks, novices and nuns to differentiate them from the laity, and to confirm where they stand in relationship to members of the Buddhist community. The usage of religious honorifics also clarifies the standing of monks, novices and nuns in the Buddhist community, marking their internal hierarchy. They are especially useful as an index for understanding the ambiguous position held by contemporary Buddhist nuns, who stand in between the religious and the secular worlds.

A. Paying respect

Along with the use of religious honorifics, respectful etiquette and deportment are displayed when a lay person is dealing with members of the Buddhist community. Children learn to clasp their palms in front of their faces as an act of respect called *u-daw*. They also learn the proper way of worship (*shikkho*) in the form of “five touchings”: clasp of palms, elbows and knees touching the floor, palms touching the floor to make a triangular shape with both thumbs and index fingers, and the forehead touching this triangular shape on the floor. On ceremonial occasions or in monasteries, lay people prostrate themselves three times, putting their foreheads to the floor. This is a show of respect and worship towards those who are considered to be higher in religious status and spirituality. It might be assumed that lay people worship all those who don the yellow robe of the Saṅgha, but in practice, they do not prostrate themselves to every monk they come across on the street.

Their worship and show of respect depends on various criteria, such as the monk's position in the Buddhist community, age, academic achievement, textual knowledge, preaching ability, good reputation, and other charismatic qualities. Laywomen tend to prostrate themselves more frequently and eagerly than laymen. *Thilá-shin*, however, are the most eager to prostrate themselves to almost every monk. This is an inward as well as an outward gesture which demonstrates that they are the most pious followers of monks and the Saṅgha.

It is not compulsory for Burmese people to prostrate themselves to *thilá-shin*. However, lay children are taught to worship both monks and nuns. Lay women, in general, prostrate themselves to a *thilá-shin*, especially if she is senior, elderly and important in the religious community. Lay men tend to refrain from prostrating themselves to a *thilá-shin* unless they are very devout, though young men these days often ignore both monks and nuns and show little respect towards the Saṅgha. Whether lay persons prostrate themselves also depends on their specific relationship to the monk or nun. If they are a *dāyaka* with a supportive relationship, they will obviously prostrate to the religious member whom they are supporting, in part as a display of their religious sponsorship.

B. First-person pronouns

In general, when a Burmese speaker²⁰ is talking to someone in the Buddhist community and therefore superior in religious status—whether it be a lay person talking to a nun, novice and monk, or a nun or novice talking to a monk, or nuns, novices and monks talking among themselves to someone senior in age and position—the speaker uses the “first-person pronoun” *tabyí-daw*.²¹ This is a special pronoun signifying “your disciple or pupil,” which has the effect of humbling the speaker in front of the listener. A *thilá-shin* refers to herself as *tabyí-daw* not only when talking to monks but also when talking to fellow *thilá-shin*. When she is talking to a novice, she may use *tabyí-daw* or *hsaya-lei*, depending on the context and relative criteria, such as his age or the age difference between herself and the novice. However, this pronoun is never used when talking to a lay person.

The honorific first-person pronoun is employed in the following context of relationships:

lay person	nun, novice, monk
nun	nun, novice, monk
novice	novice, monk
junior monk	senior monk
(disciple)	(teacher)

Those who are lower in religious status usually do not verbally object, and acknowledge whatever has been uttered by those who are superior. Therefore, *tabyí-daw* is used in the same context as the affirmative expression, “*tin-ba hpayà*”²² (yes, you are right, the venerable one), literally meaning “place your feet on my head, my lord,”²³ thus manifesting the utmost humility of the speaker. In Thailand, lay people are reported to address monks using the first-person pronouns *phom* for female, or *dichan* for male.²⁴ But in Burma, the term *tabyí-daw* is used by both sexes and allows the lay speaker, male or female, to become gender-free in self-address.

The first-person pronoun employed is *kyamá* (originally *kyun-má*) by a laywoman and *kyun-daw* by a layman.²⁵ These pronouns are employed when talking to lay people but never to members of the Buddhist community. When a *thilá-shin* is talking to someone inferior in religious status, that is to say a lay person, she refers to herself as *hsaya-lei*, which signifies “small teacher.” It may be relevant to add that female lay teachers are addressed as *hsaya-má* (female teachers), with the female-suffix *ma* added to *hsaya* (teacher), but *thilá-shin* have remained exempt from the application of the gender-suffix. Novices address themselves to *thilá-shin* and lay people as *kohin*, meaning “novice,” but they use *tabyí-daw* when talking to monks. Monks in general draw a line between themselves and the rest, and therefore represent the textual view that they are the only eligible members of the *lokuttara*. They most often refer to themselves as *hpòn-gyi* or *u bazìn*, meaning “monk.” If the monk is much senior in age and position, he may refer to himself as *dó*, often used by elderly people. If talking to someone much junior in age and position, he may refer to himself as *ngá* and address the listener using *min*, an intimate term of reference, showing

the closeness of the relationship with young novices or nuns or lay children whom he knows well.

C. Third-person pronouns

From the point of view of monks and nuns, the laity in the secular world are generally dealt with in one category, "those who give material support." All lay people are addressed as "donors" or "patrons" (*dāyaka*) by monks, novices and nuns. The Burmese term used is *taga* for a male donor and *tagamá* for a female donor. Even if this person is a relative or friend, he/she will still be known respectively as *taga* or *tagamá* in relation to a particular monk or nun.

In general, monks address a *thilá-shin* as *tagamá* (female donor), just as they would any other laywoman. Occasionally, monks are heard to call her *hsaya-lei* (little teacher), which sounds more affectionate, or use her formal *thilá-shin* title according to the relationship between them (for example, if she is his disciple).

However, the mother of a monk or a nun is put into a special category of "motherhood," which may serve to support the view of some scholars²⁶ that the dominant image of women in popular Buddhist texts is that of "mother nurturer," thus emphasizing the important position of the mother in Buddhism.²⁷ As the Burmese word *mi-ba* (parents) signifies, a mother (*mei*) is placed in front of a father (*pa*), and given more respect. "She risks her life for childbirth and gives her blood as milk"; therefore, the gratitude towards a mother is highly acknowledged. *Amei* is the word for an ordinary mother, but the term *me-daw* (venerable mother) or *me-daw-gyi* (venerable big mother) is used for the mother of a monk or nun. *Me-daw* is used not only for the biological mother, but also for *bazin me-daw*, a monk's symbolic mother, who helps him upon his entrance into the Buddhist Order. *Thilá-shin* often take up the *me-daw* role in relation to a novice and commit themselves to the task of looking after him throughout his career as monk. A specific *thilá-shin* will be generally identified as the "*me-daw* of such-and-such a monk,"²⁸ and if the monk establishes himself or becomes famous in the Buddhist community, the respect towards the monk will be shared by and added to the credit of his "symbolic mother." The *thilá-shin*'s maternal role is confined

not just to specific relationships with a novice or a monk; her attitude toward and role in the Buddhist community as a whole often are understood as analogous to that of a mother.

In general, the Burmese laity address the monks as *ashin hpayà* (the venerable one), *hpòn-gyì hpayà* (the venerable monk), *u bazìn* (monk) or *hsaya-daw hpayà* (the venerable teacher). Nevertheless, the affectionate diminutive *hpòn-hpòn* (for *hpòn-guì*; monk) seems to be the term most popular and frequently used. When Burmese people refer to a monk objectively, they cite the name of the monastery he belongs to and call him *hsaya-daw* (honourable teacher or abbot) of such-and-such monastery. At times, it is the name of the place he comes from or where the monastery is located, instead of the name of the monastery. Burmese people never address a monk with his formal religious title except at formal ceremonies and functions.

Thilá-shin are addressed as *hsaya-leì* (small teacher), *hsaya-gyì* (big teacher)²⁹ or just *hpayà*. Formal religious titles (*bwe*) are bestowed upon monks and nuns upon entering the Order, but these formal names are not used casually. In everyday life, nuns address each other in many ways, with a combination of diminutive kin terminology and the respectful religious term *hpayà*. *Daw-gyì*³⁰ *hpayà* or *gyì-gyì hpayà* (venerable big aunt), *Daw-leì*³¹ *hpayà* (venerable small aunt), *má-má hpayà* (venerable big sister), *adaw hpayà* or *daw-daw hpayà* (venerable aunty), *ahpawà hpayà* or *hpawà hpawà hpayà* (venerable granny), and so on, are used according to where the speaker stands in relationship to the addressed. If the *thilá-shin* is not a close acquaintance such as if she were a guest, then she may be called *hsaya-leì hpayà* (venerable little teacher) out of formal politeness.

D. Honorific verbs

Honorific verbs are employed to imbue the activities of members of the Buddhist community with reverence so that their mundane activities gain special religious significance.

For ordinary activities such as sleeping, bathing, coming and going, eating, talking and so on, honorific verbs are employed for monks in order to signify that their activities are still in a religious context. These are *kywá-la-thi* (to come) *kywá-thwá-thi* (to go), *kyein-thi* (to sleep), *yei thon-that-thi* (to bathe), which latter may be expressed as “*yei thon-daw-mu-ba*

hpayà" (please take a bath, the venerable one). The speech of monks is marked by the use of honorific verbs such as *mein-daw-mu-lai-thi* (to instruct) or *amein-shi-lai-thi* (to speak). In contrast, the speaker who is a lay person or inferior in religious rank, uses honorific verbs such as *shauk-thi*, *shauk-tin-thi*, *shau-tá-thi*, which literally means "to ask permission" or "to wait for instruction," in order to represent their humble position in communicating with the monks.

For the activities of lay people and nuns, ordinary verbs such as *yei chò-thi* (to bathe), *eik-thi* (to sleep), *thwà-thi* or *la-thi* (to come or to go), *pyàw-thi* (to speak) are used.

In some areas, a complicated mixture of honorific terms and ordinary verbs is used for *thilá-shin*. For example, in regard to clothing, monks and nuns wear religious robes that are markedly different from the apparel of the laity. The verb *yon-thi* (to put on) is a special verb used to signify the "putting on" of the religious robe, while lay people use the ordinary verb *wut-thi* to "put on" their lay apparel. Monks obviously put on their saffron robe, *thin-gàn*, using the expression "*thin-gàn yon-thi*." This is worn in three different pieces; *e-kathi*, *dú-gouk* and *thin-bain*; it has been suggested³² that if one wants to be precise, the ordinary verb *wut-thi* is used for wearing the lower garment, *thin-bain*. However, monks who are secure in their religious status do not make a fuss over the selection of honorific verbs nor do they make minute distinctions between the upper or lower robe, and deal with the religious apparel (*thin-gàn*) symbolically as a whole.

Thilá-shin, who are eager to promote their religious status by all means, are keen to employ the religious respect verb *yon-thi* for the putting on of their religious apparel. This comprises a long-sleeved blouse (*ein-gyi*), a smock-like garment (*gaik*) and a rectangular-shaped wrapping cloth (*ko-yon*). However, for the lower garment, *hkà-wut* (the term *htamein* is used for a lay woman's sarong), only the ordinary verb *wut-thi* can be used to signify the putting on, because of the negative value attributed it. The lower garment of women, whether a lay-woman or *thilá-shin*, symbolically represents the impure and "inferior" nature of femininity and remains as a reminder of where women actually stand in socio-religious terms. Thus, the visible demarcation in the nuns' clothing presents the divi-

sion of their identity, split between the secular and the religious.

As for religious words and honorific verbs for eating, there is an interesting mixture of religious and lay connotations for the nuns. The ordinary word for the rice crop is *sabà*, *hsan* for husked rice and *htamìn* for cooked rice. Cooked rice as a religious offering is called *hsùn*, and it is the only categorical food that monks are allowed to eat. The word is frequently used for festive meals offered to both monks and nuns; they are given the *hsùn* instead of *htamìn*. Nevertheless, the eating activity of *thilá-shin* is represented by the ordinary verb *sà-thi* (to eat), so that a religious noun (*hsùn*) and an ordinary verb (*sà-thi*) are combined so as to represent their act of eating as *hsùn sà-thi*. Lay people's eating is expressed as *htamìn sà-thi*. Monks' eating is described by a special phrase, *hsùn hpòn pei-thi*,³³ which is equivalent to the verb *sà-thi* for ordinary lay people.

The most important activity for those who belong to the Buddhist community, collecting alms, is expressed by the term *hsùn-hkan-thi*. When *thilá-shin* collect alms, they describe the activity as going for *hsùn-hkan*, which is the same expression used when monks and novices collect alms. It is generally known that the literal meaning of *hsùn* is "cooked" rice in a religious context and *hkan* means "to receive alms," and it is only the monks who receive cooked rice (*hsùn*) while nuns are given uncooked rice (*hsan*). Strictly speaking, since nuns collect "uncooked rice," their act of alms-collecting should be referred to as *hsan-hkan-thi*, and not *hsùn-hkan-thi*. Nowadays, however, all acts of collecting alms, for both monks and nuns, are referred to as *hsùn-hkan-thi*. I assume that the moment uncooked rice (*hsan*) is offered to *thilá-shins*, the religious significance of "offering food" or "receiving religious alms" implied by the honorific verb *hkan-thi* becomes more salient than the distinction between cooked and uncooked. Moreover, there is a similarity in tone between *hsan* and *hsùn*. The point is that the act of collecting alms referred to as *hsùn-hkan-thi* highlights the fact that nuns are fully acknowledged members of the Buddhist community who are also dependent on the mercy of lay donors, and though it is understood that the nuns can cook raw rice (*hsan*) which they have collected, this has to be played down so that their dependent position becomes emphasized in the act of alms-collecting, lest the problems of their claim for independence be raised.

Another example is provided by the honorific verbs used in connection with the residence of monks and nuns who live in monasteries or nunneries. These religious premises, which are different from lay people's living quarters, are supposed to be a realm where the lifestyle of stoic discipline and morality is prevalent. In this case, the honorific verb, *thadìn thòn-thi* (to live, to reside, to stay, literally to practise religious life) is used for both monks and nuns, instead of the *nei-thi* or *tè-thi* (to live or to put up) used for lay people. At one point during 17th to mid-19th century Buddhist nuns were also called *thadìn thei*,³⁴ meaning those who live in religious compounds, rather than the present-day name *thilá-shin*.

III. Conclusion

The honorific pronouns and special verbs employed make it clear that the demarcation line is clearly drawn between monks, who enjoy supreme religious status, and the rest, who are considered religiously inferior. The monks are referred to with the highest respect and deference, so that even their daily activities are not allowed to sound mundane and ordinary but represented as holy and spiritual.

The categorization and application of religious honorifics signify that *thilá-shin* in Burma are very much integrated members of the Buddhist community. They may not be part of the *lokuttara* from a textual point of view, which often represents the view of monks and some intellectuals, but in actual daily life, *thilá-shin* are treated very much as part of the religious community.

Senior and important nuns, such as ten-precept *thilá-shin*, are treated with more respect than ordinary nuns, which results in more frequent use of honorific words. Honorific words used to address *thilá-shin* are often used with the same amount of deference as for novices, suggesting that in practice, *thilá-shin* and novices are almost at the same religious level. This evidence suggests that seniority, length of service, influence and actual position in the religious community are much more significant criteria than whether one is categorically "in" or "out" of the *lokuttara*.

The reverence shown towards them in the application of religious honorifics is one criteria of evaluating where the *thilá-shin* stand. I have come to the conclusion that *thilá-shin* are widely associated with the *lokuttara*, in spite of efforts to categorize them as pious laywomen (*upāsikā*).³⁵

The major difficulty in understanding the place of *thilá-shin*, however, lies in the fact that we have to deal with two levels: social perception and actual standing. The religious position of contemporary Buddhist nuns relies much on social perception. The laity is obviously affected by the monks, who, following the textual view, tend to play down the position of nuns, but social perception also is affected by actual lay interaction with the nuns. As the standard of education rises and the importance of their role in the Buddhist community increases, the respect shown toward *thilá-shin* increasingly seems to offset their official religious status. Still, their lack of secure religious status means that their position constantly fluctuates between the limited importance given them in the official view and the actual importance they have achieved in the Buddhist community, so their status finally can be defined only in relational and contextual terms, *vis à vis*—and somewhere in between—the monks and the laity.

NOTES

1. Fieldwork in Burma was conducted from March 1986 to June 1987 and January to March 1988, supported by Central Research Fund, University of London and Toytota Foundation, Japan. I would like to thank Dr. Alfred Gell, Gustaaf Houtman, Sam Landell-Mills and Jonathan Spencer for their useful comments and proof-reading. I am also deeply indebted to my Burmese teacher Mr. John Okell, whose method I used for Burmese transliteration, for correcting my mistakes and for many useful suggestions.

2. The Pali terms, *bhikkhu* for male, *bhikkhunī* for female, literally refer to those who live on alms. There are no equivalent terms in English translation. Horner chooses "monk" as the nearest equivalent for *bhikkhu*, and "nun" for *bhikkhunī* (1938: xl-1), and these terms seem to be the accepted translation. The ancient *bhikkhunīs*, who abided by 311 *Vinaya* rules, may have been equivalent to "female monks," though they are considered extinct today.

In this article, I will refer to these "religious women" as "*thilá-shin*" in the Burmese context or "contemporary Buddhist nuns," in contrast to ancient *bhikkhunīs*. I have also used the term "nuns" for convenience to signify that they

are almswomen with heads shorn and live a religious life following eight to ten precepts, though only when the term was considered not confusing for the discussion.

3. "A good deal of uncertainty surrounds the actual foundation of the Buddhist Order of almswomen that its beginnings are wrapped in mists": Horner, *Women in Primitive Buddhism* (London, 1930), p. 102. Perhaps the story of the formation of the *bhikkhunī* Saṅgha was a myth in itself; its formation during the time of Buddha and its uncertain extinction make the story complete in order to rationalize why present-day Buddhist nuns can never acquire formal religious status.

4. See Khantipalo Bhikkhu, *Banner of the Arahants*, (Kandy, 1979), pp. 131–2, and Catherine Ojha, "Feminine Asceticism in Hinduism: Its Tradition and Present Condition," *Man in India*, 61:3 (1981), pp. 254–85.

5. "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," *Unspoken Worlds*, ed. N. Falk & R. Gross (San Francisco, 1980), p. 220.

6. Strictly speaking, eight to ten precepts should not be called "*sīla*" but "*sikkhāpada*" in Pali. However, the first five *sīla* (*pañca-sīla*) and the first five *sikkhāpada* are the same in content, and called *pañca-dhammā*. These five rules of morality provide preliminary conditions for higher spiritual development. The eightfold precepts recommended for the Buddhist laity are called *aṭṭhanga-samanñagata uposatha* (i.e., *aṭṭhanga* u.). See *Pali Dictionary*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede, (1925), pp. 171–2.

7. Mya Sein, Daw, *Myan-ma Bok-dá-ba-tha Tàya Ú-padei* (Principles of Burmese Buddhist Law), (Mandalay, 1962), p. 319.

8. The term *lokiya* is translated as mundane or worldly, thus "secular," while *lokuttara* is translated as transcendental, supra-mundane or spiritual. See *Pali Dictionary*, ed. by T. W. Rhys David and W. Stede, (Surrey, 1925), p. 46.

9. One chapter of my thesis, "The Position and Role of Women in Burmese Buddhism" is about this partnership. There are many patterns to be found in it, but the combination of scholarly nun and domestic nun was the most common.

10. The Buddhist Lent is a period of retreat during the rainy season when religious observances are strictly observed. It usually extends over three months, from July to October.

11. Ven U. Nyanawara, lecturer at the Mandalay Pali University says that throughout the Buddhist canon, *Tiṭṭhaka*, the seventh and eighth of the ten precepts stand separately for the monks and novices. But they are combined into one (the seventh precept) for lay followers as a part of the eight precepts. He adds that nowhere in the *Tiṭṭhaka* could he find a reason why they are divided for some and fused for others (Private Correspondence, 21 June 1988).

12. Among them are *thilá-shin* whose names are Daw Mala-yi, Daw Hei-ma-yi (Thameik-tàw Gyaùn), Daw Khon-ma-yi (Aye-myò Gyaùn), Daw Nya-ne-ti (Daw Nya-na Sari Kyaùn-Daik).

13. *Gon* (*guna* in Pali) was translated by my informants as "good quality" or "virtue, worth, prestige, honour"; it connotes for Burmese Buddhists a special quality inherited from previous incarnations.

14. L. W. Bloss, "The Female Renunciants of Sri Lanka: The *Dasasilamatawa*," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7:2 (1984), pp. 7–29, E. Nissan, "Recovering Practice: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka" *South Asia Research*, 4:1 (1984), pp. 32–49, R. Gombrich and G. Obeyesekere, in "Buddhism Transformed," (Princeton, 1989).

15. *Arahant* in Pali (*yahàn-da* in Burmese) is one who has attained the final and absolute emancipation.

16. See Khantipalo Bhikkhu, "With Robes and Bowl," (Ceylon, 1965), p. 10.

17. Verbally transmitted rules are primarily about the everyday behaviour of *thilá-shin*. Sneezing, laughing, talking loudly, big gestures, yawning, abusive words, big strides in walking, noisiness, laziness and lack of respect towards elders, etc., are all frowned upon as improper behaviour.

18. Every *thilá-shin* in Sagaing Buddhist community is required to memorize the "Regulations for *Thilá-shin*" written in 1914 by the influential abbot of Maha Ganda-yon monastery. The rules stipulate details from the acceptance of newcomers, and daily routine, duties and obligations, up to minor details of everyday behaviour, such as going out for alms, and behaviour towards monks, senior nuns and towards lay men. Respect, obedience, mindfulness, moderation and good manners are emphasized. It is interesting to note that proper conduct towards a monk is stipulated in every possible situation, which shows the full apprehension of the danger of monks and nuns living side-by-side in a small community. Punishments following the violation of these rules are also specified in detail.

19. Burmese laity learn how to use religious honorifics from their parents or learn the usage while staying in monasteries and nunneries, but there are increasing numbers of lay people who do not know the correct usage. While these people and children shy away or keep silent in front of monks for fear of offending them, *thilá-shin* often take up the role of teaching or correcting religious honorifics for the laity.

20. See J. Bunnag, *Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Layman*, (Cambridge, 1973), p. 35).

21. It was suggested that a laywoman used to refer to herself as *tabyí-daw-ma*, but I did not hear this said even once during my seventeen months in the Buddhist community. Theoretically, it is correct to add the female suffix *ma*, but custom has allowed the pronoun *tabyí-daw* to stay free of gender suffix. Nuns, as well as laywomen, refer to themselves as *tabyí-daw* (your disciple) in front of monks.

22. The term *hpaya* is used for God, Buddha, objects of worship, lord, master, etc. *Judson's Burmese-English Dictionary*, revised by R.C Stevenson (Rangoon, 1893), p. 802

23. This literal translation was suggested by John Okell.

24. J. Bunnag, *ibid.*, p. 35.

25. *Kyun*, literally meaning "slave," signified the lowest and humblest position in the household. The meaning of *kyun-má* was literally "your female slave," which was the humblest of self references for a laywoman. *Kyun*, combined with an honorific *daw* to make *kyun-daw* and *kyamá*, are *khin-bya* (your

master) by a layman and *shin* (your honour) by a laywoman. See *Judson's Burmese-English Dictionary*, p. 260.

26. C. Keyes, "Mother or Mistress But Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender," *American Ethnologist*, 11:2 (1984), pp. 223-41, T. Kirsch, "Text and Context: Buddhist Sex Roles," *American Ethnologist*, 12:2 (1985), pp. 302-20.

27. *Hkamè-daw*, the honorific term employed for the father of a king, monk or nun, was heard, but not as frequently nor with as much emphasis as the honorific term for mother (*me-daw*). This seems to suggest that "fatherhood" is symbolically less important in the Buddhist community.

28. This was so in the case of Daw Dhammasari (1878-1971) who was called the *Tipiṭaka medaw*, since she was the symbolic mother of the eminent monk who had memorized the whole of the *Tipiṭaka*.

29. Notice that female teachers in the lay world are called *hsaya-má* (female teacher), with a female gender suffix *ma* added to *hsaya* (teacher). Lay male teachers are simply addressed as *hsaya*. Nuns, who are part of the asexual *lokuttara*, are exempt from the gender distinction in the secular *lokiya*. Therefore they are never addressed as *hsaya-má*, but as *hsaya-lei* (small teacher) or *hsaya-gyi* (big teacher).

30. *Gyi-daw* or *daw-gyi* is a kinship term used for the elder sister of both maternal and paternal sides, and *gyi-gyi* is the affectionate diminutive for it.

31. *Daw-lei* is used for the younger sister on both maternal and paternal sides.

32. J. Okell points out that the difference between the verbs *yon-thi* and *wut-thi* simply designates the differences in the kind of "putting-on" involved.

33. This term may derive from *hpòn* (glory) in reference to *hpòn-gyi* (monk), but J. Okell considers that it may derive from the Pali word *bhuñjati* (to eat).

34. This term could originally be used for both female and male sabbath-keepers, but it became distinctively used to refer to female sabbath keepers or nuns in the Ava period, according to the accounts of the time. See Ya-wày Tun, *Thilá-shin Thamaing* (The History of Burmese Nuns), (Rangoon, 1965), p. 162.

35. The situation for contemporary Buddhist nuns in Thailand seems to be different; according to J. Bunnag (*ibid.*, 1973), p. 35, nuns or *mae chi* are treated in these same contexts as ordinary lay people, even with regard to linguistic usage between the Buddhist community and Thai laity.