


Doctrinal and Lived Suffering

Thai Women Experiencing and Coping with *Dukkha*

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This article examines the experiences of Thai women living in Finland, addressing a significant gap in research regarding their perspectives on the challenges they face in a new environment, particularly through the lens of Buddhism. In contrast to existing literature, that has often portrayed Thai women in Western countries through a problematic and negative lens, the current research, making use of fieldwork in Thai temples and life-story interviews with thirteen women, explores themes of suffering and coping mechanisms, and the role of lived religion in navigating personal meaning and community. Central to this exploration is the Buddhist concept of *dukkha* (suffering), which informs the subjects' understanding of life's challenges and their efforts to alleviate suffering through religious practices. By acknowledging the intersections of gender, religion and ethnicity, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the multi-faceted realities of Thai women's lives in Finland.

Introduction

My family was not wealthy, but I studied at university and worked in various jobs. After that, I got married and had a son. Unfortunately, my husband eventually found another woman and brought her home, which led to our separation. A friend of mine was married to a Finnish man and introduced my ex-spouse to me. I moved to Finland, and my son joined me a year

later. I made it clear that I wouldn't stay in Finland if I couldn't bring my son with me, as I missed him greatly.

When I came to Finland, my husband began to drink and just talked non-stop. I worked hard and handled everything, while he just sat on the couch watching TV. When he asked me about certain things and I replied that I didn't know, he called me stupid. After our divorce, I had a boyfriend with whom I lived for a few years. However, the same issues arose with him; there were other women, drinking, and he took advantage of me. Eventually, I became seriously ill.

I know many cases like mine. Sometimes, women just want to come to a foreign country and think it's easy here, there's money, and so on. [But] you must be really strong here. There is no family to go to. You might be kicked out of your home, and don't know where to go. My second partner told me to get out of our house. They know there is no place we can go to.

– *Churai, a Thai woman living in Finland*

What Churai shared during our interview on a cold winter afternoon some two years ago was striking yet not surprising. Over hours of listening to Thai women's life stories, I learned about their childhood hardships and poverty, and the betrayal by their first spouses in Thailand. They had married Finnish men and relocated, but their lives were often marred by health issues, longing for family, spousal alcoholism and instances of violence. It took time to bring their children from Thailand, and adjusting to life in Finland was challenging. Despite many being educated, finding a job was difficult, and many had faced workplace bullying.

Today, Thailand is one of the most popular travel destinations in the world, particularly appealing to people from the Nordic countries.¹ As a result, Thai women have become popular partners for transnational marriages, including many Finnish men who find spouses from Thailand. Consequently, because of the high number of marriages between Finnish men and Thai women, nearly 83 per cent of the over 12,000 Thais living in Finland are women (Official Statistics Finland 2023a, 2023b). The situation is similar across all the Nordic countries and many other European nations (Fernbrant et al. 2014; Straiton et al. 2019; Fresnoza-Flot 2017).²

1 Statistics indicate that approximately 150,000 Finns travel to Thailand each year (Statista; Finland in Thailand).

2 The number of Thai female migrants aligns with the ongoing debate about the "feminization of migration" and especially the notion of women as active agents in the migration processes (e.g. Donato & Cabaccia 2015; IOM 2021).

I have criticized elsewhere (Härkönen 2023; 2024) how Thai women living in Western countries have been represented in research publications and the media mainly in negative and problem-oriented ways, concentrating on the stereotypes of Thai women as sex workers or as submissive victims of human trafficking or their abusive Western husbands (e.g. Fernbrant et al. 2014; Pongthipatt et al. 2018). While these observations hold some truth, they only tell part of the story. Thus, it would be both incorrect and dismissive to suggest that Thai women's lives are solely filled with difficulties and struggles without acknowledging the joy and happiness they also experience, as well as their agency in shaping the course of their lives. Thai women do not simply escape hardships in their birth country, only to encounter new challenges in their destination country. After emphasizing this fact, it is nevertheless important to recognize that their life stories often include experiences marked by mental, physical and "existential" suffering as women, ethnic Thais and migrants.

This article highlights the gap in research regarding Thai women's perspectives on the challenges they face, particularly within the framework of Buddhism. While there has been research on Thai women's adversities, little has been done to understand the role Buddhism plays in how they interpret and cope with their hardships and difficult emotions. The Buddhist concept of *dukkha*, or suffering, is central to Thai Buddhism, with teachings addressing the reality of suffering and its alleviation. Thus, given that Buddhism plays a crucial role in the worldview and identity of many Thais also outside Thailand, this lack of focus is surprising.

The article explores the experiences of Thai women living in Finland, focusing on their suffering and efforts to cope with it. Exploring their life stories and lived religion, it offers insights into the women's understanding and interpretation of the doctrinal concept of *dukkha* and their bodily and moral religious practices used to alleviate suffering. Through fieldwork in Thai temples and life-story interviews with thirteen women, the article highlights their experiences of suffering both before and after moving to Finland, emphasizing the need to consider intersections of their gender, religion and ethnicity in local contexts. The findings indicate that the women experienced physical suffering and mental anguish, and to cope with these challenges, they confronted existential questions. Buddhism's teachings on emptiness and impermanence were crucial for easing their suffering, as they emphasize that clinging leads to pain. By understanding this, women could let go, accept their circumstances and cultivate gratitude, enhancing their appreciation of the present. Thus, Buddhism provided them with practical insights for managing suffering.

In what follows, I will first examine the concept of lived religion, focusing particularly on its application within a Buddhist (research) context. Following this, I will introduce the doctrine of *dukkha* and outline the research context, along with the materials and data used. Finally, I will discuss and analyse the data across two sections—on suffering and coping—and draw some conclusions.

Lived Buddhism

Research on lived religion has evolved significantly in the sociology of religion over

the past few decades, transitioning from a focus on formal doctrines and institutional practices to a broader understanding of how individuals experience, interpret and practice their beliefs in their everyday lives. The perspective emphasizes personal and fluid interpretations of religion, highlighting how beliefs integrate into daily life, identities and cultural traditions (e.g. Knibbe & Kupari 2020; 159; Ammerman 2014, 190; 2015, 1–2).

While this shift emerged in response to the sociological research of religion of that period, which primarily focused on religious institutions, specialists and doctrines, it can be argued that anthropological research investigated people's religious beliefs and practices from an "insider" perspective within various ethnographic contexts relatively early on. Although the term "lived religion" was not commonly used then, ethnographically oriented researchers studying Buddhism, for instance, had long been interested in how both religious specialists and non-specialists integrate their religious beliefs into their everyday lives.

For example, Melford Spiro (1970), an anthropologist studying Buddhism in Burma, identified different dimensions of Buddhist practice. He distinguished between "nibbanic Buddhism", which emphasizes attaining *nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvāna*) through meditation, ethical conduct and wisdom, and "kammatic Buddhism", which focuses on *kamma* (Skt. *karma*) and the importance of actions affecting future rebirths. Practitioners of the latter especially engage in rituals and good deeds to accumulate merit. Additionally, Spiro described "apotropaic Buddhism", which centres on protective rituals and practices aimed at warding off misfortune and promoting

well-being—illustrating the intersection of Buddhism with local cultural beliefs and traditions and serving both spiritual and practical needs (Spiro 1970; Cassaniti 2015, 23). Later, Geoffrey Samuel (1993) identified three similar orientations of Buddhism in the Tibetan context.³ The analysis by both Spiro and Samuel thus highlighted the complexity of Buddhist practice in Burma and Tibet, demonstrating that Buddhism is not a monolithic tradition but rather a tapestry of experiences and interpretations that reflect the (everyday) needs, choices and beliefs of its practitioners.⁴

In Thailand, where about 95 per cent of the population practises *Theravāda* Buddhism, the religious landscape is diverse—a fact that has led scholars to debate how to categorize various beliefs and practices shaped by the country’s complex religious, political and social histories. While *Theravāda* is predominant, non-*Theravāda* influences, such as *Mahāyāna* and *Brahmanic* traditions, also significantly contribute to contemporary religion.

- 3 First, the “bodhi orientation” focuses on achieving enlightenment and inner transformation through meditation, mindfulness, and wisdom. Second, the “karma orientation” emphasizes ethical conduct, the impact of intentions and actions on present and future experiences, promoting positive deeds, and interconnectedness. Lastly, the “practical orientation” is about applying Buddhist teachings in everyday life, encompassing practices like exorcism, healing, and worshiping deities. (Samuel 1993.)
- 4 The diversity of beliefs and practices within Buddhism, of course, extends also to other Buddhist societies. Additionally, Buddhism is not a static religion. For example, Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) illustrated this in Sri Lanka, where there has been an interaction between more “rational” and “modern” interpretations of Buddhism and devotional practices.

Additionally, local spirits, known as *phi*, are believed to inhabit trees, buildings and the landscape, further impacting religious practices throughout the country. Thus, while *nibbāna* is viewed as the highest bliss, many find it difficult to achieve, leading them to strive for good deeds and accumulating merit through making offerings to monks and the monastery (*wat*) to ensure positive outcomes in this life and the next (Cassaniti 2015, 9–11, 14–15; McCargo 2007, 156; Kusalasaya 1983, 32–38). Cassaniti, who conducted extensive fieldwork in northern Thailand to find out how Buddhist ideas are integrated into everyday experiences, found that Thai people possess a rich and relevant understanding of Buddhism woven into their daily lives. Her findings indicate that while the laity did not frequently discuss metaphysical concepts of Buddhism, they were deeply embedded in personal stories and experiences, highlighting how real life often diverged from formal Buddhist teachings (Cassaniti 2015, 15, 31, 183).

Dukkha in Buddhism

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates⁵ subject to clinging are suffering (Samyutta Nikaya 56, 11, 1844; in Gäb 2015, 346).

- 5 According to Buddhism, human beings are ultimately reducible to their constituent parts, namely, the five *skandhas* or aggregates.

Most religious traditions provide an answer to how to understand and interpret suffering. For example, in Christianity, suffering is often regarded as a test of faith or a means of spiritual growth, while Buddhism views suffering as an inherent part of life that can be transcended through enlightenment (e.g. Fitzpatrick et al. 2016). The Buddha's teachings focus on understanding the origin of suffering and methods to eliminate it, emphasizing that overcoming suffering is the ultimate goal in Buddhist practice (Inthisan 2015, 13; Peacock 2008, 209; Botha 2022, 22).

The teachings on suffering are expressed in the Four Noble Truths. The first truth asserts that suffering is an inherent part of existence because of its changing nature. The second truth identifies craving as the main cause of suffering, stemming from selfish desires, attachments and misconceptions about the self. Suffering arises from our mental responses to external factors rather than the factors themselves. The third truth states that overcoming suffering is possible by letting go of cravings and false beliefs.

The fourth truth outlines the Noble Eightfold Path as the means to end suffering. This path includes the right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration. Following this path leads to *nirvāna*, the extinction of greed, anger and delusion, resulting in dispassion towards self and compassion for others. Buddhism teaches that by understanding suffering and its causes and following the Eightfold Path, one can achieve enlightenment and liberation from the cycle of rebirth and suffering.

In Buddhism, *dukkha* represents various forms of dissatisfaction and is classified

into three types: 1) *dukkha-dukkha*, which is explicit suffering from physical experiences like illness, ageing and death; 2) *viparināma-dukkha*, the suffering of change, which includes the pain of losing what is pleasurable and gaining what is not; and 3) *samskara-dukkha*, conditioned or all-pervasive suffering, stemming from the inherent unsatisfactoriness of existence. The Pali term *dukkha* thus extends beyond the typical notion of suffering: it encompasses not only physical and mental pain but also a fundamental, existential dissatisfaction that is seen to affect our lives (Gäb 2015; Peacock 2008; Harris 2014).

Suffering is a central concept in Buddhism, and even its brief presentation indicates that, while it is a doctrine that is extensively discussed in Buddhist philosophy, it also serves as an experiential teaching relevant to all "sentient beings". Yet, how individual Buddhists understand, interpret and address the problem of suffering in their everyday lives is much less known. A study with twenty elderly Thai immigrants in the USA explored their coping mechanisms for depression. The participants emphasized Buddhist practices like visiting temples, speaking with monks and meditating, as well as the importance of studying Buddhist teachings (Soonthornchaiya & Dancy 2006). Another study discovered that Thai hospital nurses used meditation and relaxation techniques to manage occupational stress, particularly when caring for dying patients and their families (Tyson & Pongruengphant 2007). Similarly, Thai individuals with advanced cancer sought ways to cope with their suffering by embracing religious principles, maintaining hope and surrounding themselves with love and support from family (Nilmanat et al. 2010).

Previous research on Buddhists dealing with suffering mainly focuses on psychological coping strategies, particularly in relation to the feeling of stress. As a result, there is a significant amount of literature demonstrating that meditation can effectively reduce stress (Phillips et al. 2012). The research further indicates that individuals with high levels of mindfulness experience better well-being, effective coping strategies and fewer mental and physical health issues. Nevertheless, it is important to exercise caution when applying Western psychological concepts to cultural phenomena that may be understood in different ways. “Stress” in Buddhism is associated with *dukkha*, and the idea of “coping” in this context relates to cognitive and behavioural methods used to alleviate this suffering or to address the gap between reality and our perceptions of it (Phillips et al. 2012; Tyson & Pongruengphant 2007, 355).

Data, methods and ethics

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork at Thai Buddhist temples in Finland and interviews with Thai women living in the country. Between 2019 and 2023, I regularly visited three Thai temples. During the fieldwork, I attended several Buddhist calendar festivals, bringing hundreds of Thai women and sometimes their families to these temple venues. In addition, I visited the temples on ordinary days to observe temple life on both weekdays and weekends. The level of my participation varied from observing from a distance to taking part in everything I could.

In addition, I conducted a life-story interview with thirteen Thai women aged between 33 and 65 years who had been residing in Finland for 7 to 32 years. The

life-story method aims to capture the “subjective essence” of a person’s life by having interviewees narrate their experiences in chronological order, from childhood to the present. In this collaborative process, the interviewee acts as the narrator while the interviewer guides the conversation. Personal narratives are not objective accounts and should not be judged on reliability or validity; they offer mediated interpretations rather than direct reflections of experience. Although they are narrative in nature, life stories offer valuable insights into an individual’s social reality, their interpretation of events and their position within the social order (Atkinson 1998, 3, 13–15).

I recruited most research participants from the temples or used snowball sampling. The interviews, conducted in Finnish, English or both, primarily took place in the women’s homes, with two done on Zoom at their request. The in-depth interviews covered their life stories and the influence of Buddhism and the temples. Many women came to Finland through marriage, while a few arrived for work or study. At the time of the interviews, six were in long-term relationships with Finnish men; the others were divorced or widowed. Most participants came from agricultural backgrounds and described their childhoods as poor. Despite eight holding degrees from Thailand or Finland, they faced challenges in finding jobs mainly because of language barriers.

The women shared their life stories openly, with some interviews lasting for hours. While I felt privileged to hear these narratives, I also recognize the ethical questions that arise from their openness and the use of ethnographic methods. Therefore,

it has been essential to respect the dignity and integrity of the research subjects in all circumstances, including during the interviews and ethnographic inquiry. My top priority has been to treat these individuals with the utmost respect. It is critical to ensure that no harm occurs to them—whether physical, mental, social or economic—during data collection or storage, or when findings are reported in research publications (The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2019).

The temple is a public space where everyone is welcome to spend time. However, when observing the activities and people at the temples, I have taken care to write about them in a way that prevents individual identification. Participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent. I provided participants with information about the research topic, its objectives, duration and methods, and how the collected material will be used and stored. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw at any time before the research was published without facing any consequences. To protect women's privacy, I use pseudonyms and do not disclose their age, origin in Thailand, current residence in Finland, or the exact duration of their stay here.

Lived suffering

Typically, the structure of the life-story interviews emphasizes experiences and situations that evoke strong emotions. Consequently, it was common for the women interviewed to recount various adversities that have caused them to struggle throughout their lives. This section focuses on these challenges. Despite facing significant hardships, sadness and loss, these women have naturally also expe-

rienced various moments of happiness in their lives.

Most women I interviewed were from rural Thailand and from farming families. Many grew up with grandparents while their parents worked in cities and faced early losses of a parent, with one woman becoming an orphan. While some recalled happy childhoods, many also spoke of the poverty and hardships they endured during their formative years.

Some were able to pursue an education, which served as a pathway out of poverty. However, some of the women had only attended school for a few years or not at all because their families could not afford it. Additionally, some had to start working as teenagers or before. Chatmanee, in her fifties, began working at eleven, while Dao, ten years younger, started to work at the age of thirteen. Phloi, a woman under forty, also reflected on how her childhood and youth were cut short since she had to move to Bangkok early to support her family. Some of the women faced poverty and deprivation until they married a Finnish spouse and relocated to Finland.

Five of the women had previously been married to a Thai man before marrying a Finn. Samorn, a woman in her sixties, shared that her family was poor, which prevented her from attending school. Instead, she worked and married her first husband at under twenty years old. This marriage was arranged by her parents, a common practice at that time, especially in rural areas. Like Samorn, some women had children from their first marriages in Thailand, but also those marriages were typically short-lived. Most ended when it became clear that the man was drinking, cheating or had found another woman. Samorn related:

We got two kids. When the kids were still small, my husband went to work in another city. Then he did not return for two years, and I went to look for him. I found him living with another woman, who was pregnant.

Many women's lives were completely turned upside down after meeting their Finnish spouses. Most of them met their future husbands in Thailand. Moving to Finland was a shock for some, while others quickly adapted. Many marriages with Finnish men started off well until jealousy, alcohol and other problems arose. Samorn stated:

In the beginning, everything was fine. I got the children to Finland, and my husband adopted them. Then jealousy came into play. We finally divorced. I later married another man who, however, became seriously ill and aggressive.

Chatmanee's marriage also came to an end after some years of cohabitation. She recounted:

He was a good father but a lousy husband. He would leave on Friday evenings with his friends and wouldn't return home until Sunday evening. This pattern continued to intensify, and I couldn't tolerate it any more. He drank heavily at the weekends. After our divorce, I was left to pay for everything; he refused to contribute any money for the kids. When I once asked him for twenty euros so our child could go out with a friend, he told me that if I wanted money from

him, I would have to sue him. After that, I stopped asking for anything. I just took on extra hours at work to cover our kids' expenses.

Not all marriages, of course, ended in divorce; some women reported being happily married. For this reason, the deaths of their husbands were particularly painful for Boribun and Pailin, whose spouses had been loving and supportive. Both were still young when they became widows, and Pailin was left alone with her young child. The age difference between Thai women and their Finnish husbands is often significant, resulting in many cases where the husband passes away before the wife. Consequently, the wife is often left not only as a widow but also as a single parent.

Some women had children from previous relationships, in addition to those with a Finnish spouse. Typically, the Thai child did not accompany their mother immediately but joined her later. In some cases, the child remained in care with relatives and did not move to Finland at all. The separation from their children was particularly difficult for the women. Churai, a woman in her fifties, said: "I made it clear that I wouldn't stay in Finland if I couldn't bring my son with me, as I missed him greatly."

I have observed several instances where Finnish men are willing to accept their wives' children from previous relationships, with some even choosing to adopt them, as was the case with Samorn's first Finnish spouse. However, not all Finnish men are open to this situation. For example, Malee, a woman now in her fifties, encountered significant challenges because her husband refused to welcome her son to Finland. She shared her experiences:

I have one child. He wanted to come here, but my husband refused. That's why I finally had to end the marriage. The child thought that I didn't care about him when I left him. It was a tough time. I cared about him, but there was nothing I could do; I tried my best to bring him here. But my husband wouldn't let him.

Dao successfully brought her child to Finland but encountered various problems with him:

He came to Finland when he was 12 years old. When he was younger, I could only be with him for two years because I had to work, and he stayed with my relatives during that time. He was happy to come to Finland and finally be with me. However, he has struggled with looking after himself. Once in Finland, he excelled in school and learned the Finnish language within two months. However, difficulties arose during his teenage years. He began to play video games excessively. Although he is a kind person, he finds it challenging to follow the rules.

Samorn was faced with a challenging situation when his child was taken into custody and placed outside the home following various issues and misunderstandings. This was an extremely difficult time for her, as she struggled to understand the decision made by the Finnish authorities to separate her from her child. In some cases, such as Phloi's, the child stayed with the father after a divorce.

In addition to facing challenges related to marriage and family, some of the women

I studied had also experienced serious health issues, either physical, psychological or both. When Samorn's children finally settled in Finland, she discovered that she was seriously ill. Similarly, Churai struggled with severe somatic illness, which led to several years of depression. The combination of her health issues and single parenthood pushed her into financial hardship, ultimately resulting in foreclosure. She expressed her feelings by saying, "I thought my life was a failure". Malee also fell into deep depression following her divorce, stating, "I became terribly depressed when life went that way".

Research has shown that the lack of autonomy, discrimination, social isolation resulting from poor language skills, the lack of contact with others and intimate partner violence can make Thai women especially vulnerable. Research has further indicated that prejudices and stereotypes about Thai women can severely hinder their adaptation and quality of life in Western countries (Fernbrant et al. 2017; Fernbrant et al. 2014; Pongthipatt et al. 2018; Straiton et al. 2019.) Interestingly, many of the women reported being unaware of these stereotypes before moving to Finland. Kamlai, who is in her forties, said:

I've had bad experiences. When I first came here, I didn't know that Finns have a certain attitude towards Thai women. People insult Thai women for doing massage work. I think the media has travelled mainly to tourist areas in Thailand. This is why Finns think that Thais come from poor circumstances, are not educated, and try to come to European countries through marriage.

She stated that she experienced serious sexual harassment at her workplace. “After that, I understood what it meant to be Thai in Finland”, she remarked. Kaew, who is in her fifties and has lived in Finland for twenty years, also mentioned that she has witnessed and heard about workplace bullying, discrimination and racism. Malee’s experiences with bullying at work were so severe that they led her into a deep depression.

When examining women’s experiences through the lens of *dukkha*, it becomes evident that various forms of suffering have been present.⁶ Women have experienced physical suffering during serious illnesses and discomfort while working hard to support their childhood families. They have suffered mental anguish when not receiving what they desired, when separated from loved ones, and when forced into unwanted situations such as divorce or harassment. Much of their suffering is tangible. However, various challenges have led some to experience depression and question the meaning of their lives in light of all-pervasive suffering. I will next examine how these women coped with their suffering.

Coping with suffering

As shown above, Thai women living in Western countries often face various forms of adversity and distress as women, wives, mothers, ethnic Thais, migrants and employees. Contrary to previous research, which is silent about their religion, my research suggests that many women interpret their suffering through Buddhism,

6 *Dukkha* serves here as an analytical term, and it does not imply that when people discuss *dukkha*, they use that exact word (see Cassaniti 2015).

which is commonly seen as offering teachings and methods to help cope with and transcend the emotions that lead to suffering. Two key aspects emerge from the material when examining how the women understand, confront and seek to alleviate their suffering. The first is the importance of moral actions, such as generosity and good deeds, which are believed to foster not only merit but also happiness and good luck in both metaphysical and mundane terms. The second aspect involves mental and philosophical practices that women engage in to calm their minds and deepen their experiential understanding of Buddhism’s core teachings about emptiness and the impermanence of all phenomena.

Doing good is a core principle in Buddhism, and Thai Buddhists also perform meritorious deeds to accumulate merit (*P. puñña*). Participation in religious rituals, ordination as a monk and supporting monks and temples are common ways to gain merit. In Finland, too, Thai temples are central to religious and community life, where people celebrate birthdays and anniversaries by feeding monks. Donating and sharing food for the living and deceased are viewed as ways to gain good karma and luck. Chailai, a woman in her forties, explained that if a person wishes to have good luck, it is customary to go to a temple and give something—money, food or goods. Boribun agreed when she said that she goes to the temple to give. The act of generosity makes her happy and ensures that she will go to heaven when she dies. Giving extends beyond the temple and monks; it is essential for a Buddhist to practise generosity towards everyone. Kamlai stated:

My parents are good role models for me when it comes to understanding what it means to be a good Buddhist and a good person. They taught me the importance of giving. But when it comes to the deeper meaning of Buddhism, I sometimes teach them. I donate to organizations like Plan, Greenpeace and the Red Cross every month, and sometimes I give extra. Occasionally, my relatives ask to borrow money from me, and I tend to lend it to them right away. When I mentioned this to my father, he expressed concern. He believes that these relatives live comfortably and are just trying to take advantage of my generosity. My father tries to teach me to be wiser and cautions me not to be easily swayed by others. But I told him that I'm simply trying to do good for others. It doesn't bother me to help, even if I'm sending money to relatives who are wealthier than I am. I do this to show my gratitude for the support they have given me throughout my life. For me, it's not about whether they need the money or not; it's about expressing my appreciation.

Dao also pointed out kindness and generosity when she said that the key message of Buddhism is to share love with everyone and to give what one can. According to her, Buddhism emphasizes the value of selflessness; when we are unselfish, the world becomes a more beautiful place.

Women visited the temple for various reasons, resulting in diverse interpretations of Buddhism. However, what was common for all of them was the temple's ability to provide a safe haven free from problems.

In addition to good merit, religious activities performed in the temple were believed to bring peace, happiness and security. Samorn stated:

It's a tradition, an old habit [to visit the temple]. It is good for the heart to go and pray there. To give food to the monks. It feels good. If bad things happen in life, it feels good to go there and pray. I haven't shared much with the monks about my problems. However, I did mention a little, for example, when my child was taken from me. I felt relieved after talking to the monk.

Boribun said she felt comfort, peace and empathy at the temple, which, for her, felt like home. Chatmanee agreed with this when she said that going to the temple felt good. She added that Thai women go to the temple because Buddhism is important to them. According to Dao, too, people feel safe at the temple:

If you are in pain, you need to go somewhere where you feel you are safe. In the same way, I think when people go to the temple, they feel they are safe. When people have problems, they believe that by going to the temple, life changes for the better.

Peace of mind and safety were also sought through mind-training, which helped individuals understand the impermanence and suffering of life and find ways to overcome it. Chailai began visiting the temple more frequently before her divorce, as it provided a "happy place" away from her unhappiness at home. There, she found

support from women going through similar experiences and later developed an interest in mind-training. Phloi explained that when she visits the temple, she learns to let go of burdens and not hold onto them.

Malee had faced serious workplace bullying, which, in addition to her difficult relationship with her Finnish ex-husband, had led to major depression. However, she had gained a lot of support from Buddhism, especially from the Buddhist mind-training, and felt much better now. She said:

At my workplace, people treated each other poorly, and they were unfriendly towards me, which hurt my feelings. To cope, I started going to the temple once a week in the evenings to recite prayers, and it helped me feel relaxed. This practice made it easier for me to let go of the negativity. Although people still treat me the same way, their behaviour no longer affects me as it once did. I've noticed a difference since I began meditating more and understanding the teachings of Buddhism. In the past, I would feel hurt for several days, but now I realize that I need to let things go. I've learned to do this more easily. While others suggest that I should respond to negativity, meditation has taught me the importance of release. Buddhist practices have significantly helped me in this regard. My friends have commented that I look happier and more confident now, which reflects the positive changes in my life. The teachings of the Buddha guide me, and I follow five principles. I feel more relaxed when I'm not trying to offend anyone, and I find joy in sharing my happiness

with others. Additionally, I've learned that not all thoughts are true. A particular Buddhist prayer helps calm my mind, reminding me that suffering is a part of everyone's life.

Like Malee, many women participate as "nuns" during temple retreats held on weekends from Friday to Sunday. They follow eight precepts instead of the usual five for laypeople. Dressed in white, the participants meditate and listen to teachings. They view the retreat as a chance to deepen their religious practice and cultivate their minds to overcome ignorance and suffering.

Yet, it is important to note that the essence of Buddhism extends beyond the confines of the temple. Women agreed that Buddhism can be practised outside traditional sacred spaces, and it is possible to identify as a Buddhist without participating in formal practices. Ultimately, what matters most is the state of one's mind. Ratana, a woman in her thirties, was one of those women who sought to incorporate Buddhist practices into her everyday life:

You can also practise outside the temple. The temple is more about Thai culture. The temple can be a good place for some people; for example, if there are family problems, one can go; the temple is a peaceful place. You can be free from problems for a while. But in fact, you can practise any time. Many people don't understand this; they think that when you give a lot of money [to the temple], you get something back, but they don't understand that it's a mental practice.

Dao seemed to agree with this idea when she said that the temple is inside one's mind. One does not need to visit the temple or do "big things" to get good luck; for example, recycling is enough as it makes good things happen, and one feels good. According to Kamlai, true Buddhism is not about ceremonies; it focuses on recognizing the ego within us and learning to overcome it. She said:

The key is understanding the right quality of mind and discerning what is truly right. When I practise, I reflect on whether I am affected by the three mental poisons: *moha* (delusion), *lobha* (attachment) and *dosa* (aversion). Am I feeling greedy or angry? Am I lost or mindful? Do these feelings arise from some deep subconscious layer? Is my instinct in tune with reality? [...] When I began practising in the forest-monk tradition, I engaged in Vipassana meditation, reflecting on the body and its impermanence. The body is temporary, and we should not focus on appearances. What truly matters is what lies within us.

For Kamlai, Buddhism was thus ultimately about how we can control our mind when something surprising happens and how we understand impermanence and know how to react wisely.

Dao was one of the women who had become seriously ill. However, she said she had already understood emptiness before she got sick, and this made it easier to face the situation. She stated:

I was diagnosed with a precursor to cancer. Fortunately, I had come to

realize that I am not the same as my body. I decided to take good care of myself by eating right and meditating. While everyone around me was feeling sad, I reminded them that their sorrow would only make my situation worse. After six months of dedication, I found that I was feeling better. My ultimate goal became achieving freedom of mind. I underwent two surgeries during this time and focused on living in the present moment. I followed Buddhist principles I learned from my father, which have been protective in my life. I truly believe in these teachings. To me, death is not something to fear; it is a natural part of life that should be acknowledged constantly, not just once a day. By embracing this perspective, I aim to avoid wasting time on unnecessary worries.

Boribun, who had lost her husband, practised meditation every day. She had also taught her sick husband to calm his mind and understand that his ill body was not the same as himself. The Buddha's teachings also helped Dao to accept the fact that she is only able to help her son up to a point:

I love him, but I have to free myself from him and let go. Otherwise, it's too painful. He is my child, after all. But I read a lot of the Buddha's teachings. You have to try to help and be happy if you can help; if you fail, you have to let go.

Buddhist teachings have also given women insights into understanding the

people who have hurt them and their motivations. Kamlai stated:

People evaluate situations based on their individual experiences. If life has been difficult for someone, they may view the world as uncertain and find it hard to trust others because of past negative experiences. In contrast, I often encounter interesting people and wonderful opportunities. I choose to trust everyone and focus on solutions rather than obstacles. While we all share the same world, it's important that we learn to appreciate one another and avoid hurting each other with our words. I might not be as skilled as someone else, but I recognize that everyone experiences life uniquely through their own lens. Ultimately, what matters most is finding a way to live happily together.

Two key aspects emerge regarding how women understand and address their suffering. First, moral actions like generosity and good deeds were seen as ways to cultivate merit, happiness and good luck. The temple is mentioned by many as a place whose central aim is to provide chances to gain merit for future rebirths but also offer peace and tranquility that they can carry into their everyday lives. The temple thus serves many women as a safe place where they can confront challenging life situations and emotions and achieve a sense of temporary relief from them. As such, the temple symbolizes the embodiment of the Buddhist soteriology, or the possibility to liberate from suffering. While the temple serves as an ideal place to practise generosity and kindness towards others, these

qualities should also ideally be practised outside the temple in all aspects of life. (Härkönen 2024.)

Second, women practised mental and philosophical techniques to calm their minds and deepen their understanding of Buddhism's teachings on emptiness and impermanence. Various Buddhist traditions employ different meditation techniques to uncover the roots of *dukkha*. One purpose of meditation is to gradually eliminate the biases related to perceiving the world as merely a construct (Phillips et al. 2012, 355). Consequently, the interviews highlighted the significance of personal religious cultivation, which was addressed to grasp the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. Like the Thai people studied by Cassaniti (2015), the women in my research found comfort in the concept of impermanence. This awareness helped them recognize that clinging to things leads to suffering. By fostering calm and "cool-hearted" emotions, individuals can more easily release their emotional attachments, creating positive outcomes. The interplay of personal experiences with impermanence, emptiness, emotion, attachment and karma can thus contribute to overall health and well-being (Cassaniti 2015, 31–32). By understanding that everything is subject to change, one can gradually learn to let go and accept situations as they are. This understanding also fosters feelings of gratitude, allowing individuals to accept both themselves and others and to appreciate life in the present moment. Through this perspective, Buddhism provides women insights into suffering and the tools to manage or cope with it.

Conclusion

If you have, say, a broken heart, if you talk to the Buddha or listen to a teaching, you can learn about emptiness. Buddha doesn't need anything; he only hopes that people have a clear mind.

Churai

I started the article with a personal account of Churai, who shared her challenging experiences before and after moving to Finland. Her story highlighted her struggles with relationships, cultural adjustment and serious illness, but her experiences shed light on the situations faced by many other Thai women living in Finland as well.

The portrayal of Thai women in research and media often emphasizes negative stereotypes, such as depicting them as sex workers or submissive wives. This limited representation fails to capture the complexity of their lives. While many studies highlight the struggles of Thai women, they frequently overlook how these women interpret and cope with their suffering, particularly through the lens of Buddhism, which plays a crucial role in their worldview. This omission is surprising, considering the central place of the doctrine of *dukkha* in Buddhism.

The life stories of the women show how they have endured physical suffering from serious illnesses and the exhaustion that comes from working hard to support their families. They have also experienced mental pain related to unfulfilled desires, separation from loved ones and being placed in undesirable situations such as divorce or harassment. Additionally, while much of

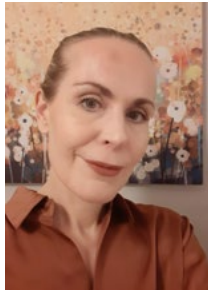
the suffering described is tangible, some women also struggled with depression and existential questions due to the pervasive nature of being and its suffering.

Two key aspects emerge from the material when examining how the women understand, confront and seek to alleviate their suffering. The first is the importance of moral actions, such as generosity and good deeds, which are believed to foster not only merit but also happiness and good luck in both metaphysical and mundane terms. The temple is a significant place for women, offering opportunities for moral and merit-producing activities and providing peace and tranquility that individuals can incorporate into their daily lives. Additionally, it serves as a refuge for women facing difficult life situations and emotions, offering temporary relief and embodying liberation from suffering.

The second aspect involves mental and philosophical practices that women engage in to calm their minds and deepen their understanding of Buddhism's core teachings about emptiness and impermanence. These concepts help individuals recognize that clinging leads to suffering, encouraging them to cultivate calmness and release emotional attachments. By understanding change, they can let go of these attachments, accept their circumstances, and develop feelings of gratitude, which enhance their appreciation of life in the present moment.

Research indicates that religion can provide valuable social support and coping resources that enhance well-being (Wu et al. 2020, 291). Religious coping is linked to positive health and mental health outcomes during critical life events, helping individuals find meaning, emotional comfort, personal control, intimacy, physical health

and spirituality (Pargament et al. 1998, 710–711). The feelings of suffering, stress and other difficult emotions are universal. However, understanding their causes and finding ways to cope with them are often shaped by cultural and religious contexts. Here, Buddhism provides valuable insights and tools that help Thai women understand and manage suffering—not just as an abstract concept but as a lived experience. Furthermore, the women’s agency in addressing suffering through their daily moral actions and mental and philosophical practices should be emphasized. ■



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