

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Everyday Scandals: Regulating the Buddhist Monastic Body in Thai Media

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(Received 9 August 2020; revised 12 February 2021; accepted 16 May 2021)

Abstract

Although allegations of monastic financial embezzlement and sexual misconduct are the most frequent and outrageous monastic scandals reported in Thailand's media outlets, this article discusses a separate category of scandal I label 'everyday scandals.' This type of scandal describes the phenomenon of monks committing bodily transgressions, including inappropriate behaviours outside the temple and unacceptable presentations of the body. For Thai Buddhist laity, photos of monks taking trips to the mall and working out at a gym can be indicators that their religion is in decline. A proper male monastic body enacting acceptable behaviour signals the difference of the monastic life from the lay life, ensuring the efficacy of merit and ritual performance. The regulation of everyday monastic life is a fertile topic in Thai media. Because the Buddhist monastic institution is interconnected with the Thai nation-state, the male monastic body is a site of evaluation and critique. At stake is national Thai heritage and pride in Thailand's majority religion: Buddhism. Besides the strength of contemporary Thai Buddhism, everyday scandals also reveal continuity in the discourse of decline and anxiety over monastic behaviour, which began with the earliest Buddhist communities. The threat of Buddhism's decline is part of a continuum of debates within monastic texts and Buddhist history regarding proper monastic behaviours in public.

Keywords: Buddhism; Thailand; Southeast Asia; Buddhist monks; media; body; religion

In contemporary Thailand, political coups, stalled elections and military governments seem to dominate the news, but another significant national topic of debate is monastic behaviour.¹ For example, in 2013, most Thai people knew the name of monk Luangpu Nen Kham, or Phra Wirapol Sukphol, who international media quickly dubbed the "jet-set monk." It began with photos of Luangpu Nen Kham lying with a woman. Then a YouTube clip showed the now-infamous monk riding in a private jet, holding a Louis Vuitton bag, wearing designer sunglasses and carrying a briefcase brimming with cash.² In the late 1990s and again in 2017, Phra Dhammajayo, abbot of the controversial temple Wat Dhammakaya, filled the news with allegations of financial scandals and unorthodox teachings.³ One of the most recent large-scale monastic news stories took place in May 2018, when four senior monks were arrested for alleged temple fund embezzlement in excess of hundreds of millions of baht in four

¹For examples of major scandals in this article's introduction, I use the English-language Thai news website *The Bangkok Post*. Thai language news websites also covered these scandals. However, because *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and-National Studies of Southeast Asia* is an English-medium journal, I chose the *Bangkok Post* for this opening section. In the sections below, which build my argument on everyday scandals in Thai media, I will draw more from Thai-language media.

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9An9ydGM4g>. One Thai woman accused Luangpu Nen Kham of sexual abuse and rape (King-Oua Laohong 2013). Luangpu Nen Kham's penchant for cash has also been reported (Frederickson 2013). In 2018, this 'jet-set monk' was disrobed and sentenced to 114 years in jail. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1518678/ex-monk-nen-kham-sentenced-to-114-years-in-jail>.

³There are many media articles focused on the scandals of Wat Dhammakaya. One example can be found on the *Bangkok Post* website (Thitinan 2017).

Bangkok temples.⁴ These recent examples of corruption, allegations of sexual misconduct, and suspicions of financial embezzlement are not isolated instances. Indeed, there have been several cases of male monks implicated in criminal activity, which appear to be increasing in recent decades.⁵ This has provided critics with evidence that Thai Buddhism is in a state of decline and crisis.⁶

Although these large-scale financial and sexual scandals make the most impact on Thai media, there is another type of scandal that, although not connected to criminal activity, is equally important to understand. This category, which I have labelled ‘everyday scandals’, describes the phenomenon of debate and tension surrounding monastic performance of the body. Everyday scandals do not infiltrate the wider economic and political systems that major scandals do. Instead, they reveal the ways that Thai Buddhist lay society evaluates and regulates the appearances and actions of monks when they travel outside of their temples. This smaller-scale regulation of monastic behaviour is a fertile topic in Thai media because, with the prominence of social media and smart devices, not only journalists but also regular Thai citizens can catch Buddhist monks at inopportune moments.

Because the Buddhist monastic institution is so interconnected with the Thai nation-state, the male monastic body has become a site of evaluation and critique. At stake is the national Thai heritage and pride in Thailand’s majority religion: Buddhism. Moreover, a proper male monastic, who behaves appropriately, would ensure the efficacy of merit for lay Thai Buddhists—that is, they would be confident that their good deeds to support the monastic life will be rewarded.⁷ Ideally, asceticism and renunciation signal the difference between the monastic life from the lay life. When this breaks down—when monastics follow lifestyles closer to the laypeople—some Thai Buddhist laity begin to question their donations of time and money to temples and monks.

As such, many of these everyday scandals focus on inappropriate displays of the monastic body involving actions more typical of a layperson, such as driving a car or motorcycle, or monastic presence in inappropriate places, like a shopping mall. The appearance of the body is also important; the public is concerned when monastics demonstrate vanity by paying an excessive amount of attention to their bodies. This is apparent from the frequent circulation of news stories about monks taking selfies while enjoying the consumerist lifestyle at a mall or showing off a muscular physique. At the same time, observers take furtive pictures of monks slouching with their phones in a coffee shop, amusing themselves on a day trip and other seemingly inappropriate bodily presentations and actions.

After Thai Buddhists see pictures and read articles about these inappropriate monastic bodies, social media comments often discuss the declining state of Thai Buddhism. A monk with neatly tied robes inside the temple who practices proper deportment outside the temple lessens the threat of decline; however, increasing visual evidence of transgressive bodies raises concern regarding the state of Thai Buddhism today. The threat of Buddhism’s decline is part of a continuum of debates within monastic texts and Buddhist history regarding proper monastic behaviours in public. Everyday scandals in Thai monasticism reveal continuity in the discourse of decline and anxiety over monastic behaviour, which began with the earliest Buddhist communities.

⁴One example of an article covering this May 2018 embezzlement scandal is Wassayos (2018). One temple, Wat Saket, was accused of embezzling money from two Buddhism related projects totaling 69 million baht.

⁵Sara E. Michaels and Justin McDaniel (2019) report that from 2015–2018, there were over 300 male monks reprimanded by Sangha leadership, with some being disrobed for breaking their precepts. I use the term ‘male monks’ to distinguish from female monks, or *bhikkhunis*, of which there are over two hundred currently residing throughout Thailand, with larger communities under Dhammananda Bhikkhuni at Wat Songdhammakalyani outside of Bangkok and under Bhikkhuni Nanthayani at Nirotharam and Suttajit Bhikkhuni Aram, which are both outside of Chiang Mai city.

⁶Michaels and McDaniel argue against these critics of Thai Buddhism by stating that the belief that “...Buddhism is declining in Thailand has been a constant refrain in local history. This makes perfect sense: religious leaders usually state that religion is in crisis in order to justify more donations, building projects, new schools, and encourage people to be better followers. This is common rhetoric in all religions” (2019: 254). Michaels and McDaniel continue to claim that these reports of decline are overstated because there are many members of the Thai Buddhist sangha who are focused on engaged Buddhist projects. Instead of taking a stance on whether Thai Buddhism is in crisis or not, in this article, I use media analysis to observe and investigate the emic perspectives of Thai lay Buddhists who participate in online discussions.

⁷Through their renunciant lifestyles, monks accumulate and give merit to laypeople. Buddhist laypersons engage in merit-making practices to gain merit that will have a positive effect on their current situation, as well as the next life, and negate the effects of past evil deeds.

Ideal Monastic Performance in Theravāda Buddhism

Thai Buddhist anxiety over the monastic body has been part of lay–monastic relations and the rules of monks since the earliest Buddhist communities. Below, I discuss the ways in which news media and social media have enhanced this anxiety recently. The extent to which Thai lay Buddhists know the history or details of monastic texts differs. Despite this range of knowledge, when Thai lay Buddhists consider whether an action is appropriate or not, their questioning is in line with the history of Theravāda Buddhists' concern with monastic discipline. They have been exposed to an ideal of monastic asceticism through historical examples of great monks, the activities of well-respected contemporary monks and the ways more regular monks act in formal ritual settings. Consequently, Thai Buddhists are aware of model monastic behaviour, which is often in contrast to social media commentary on everyday scandals. New technologies and societal developments have made monastic discipline more obvious, but there has been tension and judgment of the monastic body for a large part of Theravāda Buddhist history.

The bodily presentation and comportment of monks is extremely important: it offers a picture of their inner state, internalization of monastic rules and level of attainment on the Buddhist path towards enlightenment. Visible signs of this are inscribed not just on how the body looks but also how it moves in space. The authoritative manual of meditation and teachings, the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification), composed by fifth-century scholar-monk Bhadantāchariya Buddhaghosa, offers an ideal description of the comportment of a Buddhist monk:

[A monk] is respectful, deferential, possessed of conscience and shame, [he] wears his inner robe properly, wears his upper robe properly, his manner inspires confidence whether in moving forwards or backwards, looking ahead or aside, bending or stretching: his eyes are downcast, he has (good) deportment, he guards the doors of his sense faculties, knows the right measure in eating, is devoted to wakefulness, possesses mindfulness and full awareness, wants little, is contented, is strenuous, is a careful observer of good behavior, and treats the teachers with great respect. This is called (proper) conduct... having entered a house, having gone into a street, he goes with downcast eyes, seeing the length of a plough yoke, restrained, not looking at an elephant, not looking at a horse, a carriage, a pedestrian, a woman, a man, not looking up, not looking down, not staring this way and that. (translation of Bhikkhu Nanamoli cited in Collins 2020: 113–114)

Even slight bodily movements are crucial in differentiating the renunciant from the layperson. Another illuminating description of the monastic body comes from Michael Carrithers' ethnographic research, written in the early 1980s, titled *Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Historiographical and Anthropological Study*:

This image of the graceful, restrained monk is ancient and powerful in Sinhalese Buddhist society. According to Buddhaghosa's Introduction to his commentary on the Vinaya [the monastic rules], the Indian Emperor Asoka was first attracted to Buddhism by the sight of such a monk walking past the palace. Today, Buddhist laymen have a clear image of this style of deportment: on more than one occasion laymen imitated it for me. It is characterized by, in Ray Birdwhistell's terminology, small range—movements tend to be restricted rather than broad; and low intensity—they are slow rather than abrupt. Perhaps our nearest equivalent is the deportment of a well-brought up lady: the voice is gentle, the knees kept together, the arms held close to the body.

(Carrithers cited in Collins 2020: 114)

For Buddhist monks, the realization of Buddhist teachings is mirrored by their outer performance. The monk is “acting out his inner state, showing what is inside to those who are outside” (Collins 2020: 115).

To achieve this ideal monastic performance, texts within the Pāli Canon describe how *not* to behave. The *Pāṭimokkha* (Buddhist Monastic Code) outlines some of this unacceptable conduct in the section of *Pācittiya* offenses, or offenses that should be confessed (Thanissaro 2013: 546–551). A selection from these 92 rules warns that monks should not imbibe alcohol (Pc51), engage in violent behaviours (Pc74) or make threatening gestures (Pc75); actions like tickling other male monks or unordained

persons for fun (Pc52) are also considered offensive. Another example is water play: monks should not jump up and down, splash or swim for pleasure even in water as deep as one's ankle (Pc53). Rules against behaviours such as these point to the non-violent, unattached lifestyle of the monastic ideal but also indicate a seriousness of purpose that should lack frivolity, like tickling or playing in water.

The 75 *Sekhiya*, or training rules, also concern the body, specifically etiquette in dressing and behaving; accepting and eating almsfood; teaching Dhamma; and urinating, defecating and spitting (Thanissaro 2013: 661). These rules are in place partly because a monk's behaviour is believed to be able to inspire someone to become interested in the Dhamma. Thanissaro Bhikkhu relates this story from a section of the Pāli Vinaya, the *Mahāvagga*:

Then Ven. Assaji, dressing early in the morning, taking his bowl and (outer) robe, entered Rājagaha for alms: gracious in the way he approached and departed, looked forward and behind, drew in and stretched out (his arm); his eyes downcast, his every movement consummate. Sāriputta the wanderer saw Ven. Assaji going for alms in Rājagaha: gracious his eyes downcast, his every movement consummate. On seeing him, the thought occurred to him: Surely, of those bhikkhus in this world who are arahants or have entered the path to arahantship, this is one.

(Thanissaro 2013: 662; Mv.I.23.1–3)

From this story, it is apparent that even minor movements, such as downcast eyes, could spark another person's faith and curiosity about Buddhism. The context and commentary on the *Pāṭimokkha*, called the *Vibhaṅga*, describes how monks should act in public places. Their restrained nature can be indicated by not playing with their hands or feet, nor dancing or cracking their knuckles, nor wiggling their fingers and toes. Monks should not laugh loudly, swing their arms, put their hands on their hips, clasp their knees, tiptoe or walk on their heels (Thanissaro 2013: 664).

Ultimately, physical decorum is a significant part of the public presentation of monastic life. The monastic body becomes a way for Buddhist laity to access Buddhist teachings, wisdom and morality (Collins 1997: 203). Laypeople who might not have the time, interest or ability to engage with Buddhist teachings and practices directly can be in touch with them through materially supporting those whose bodies perform and enact the teachings on a daily basis. Joanna Cook (2010) has found that in a meditation monastery in northern Thailand, monastics feel a responsibility to others in their discipline, which inspires faith among the laity. In this way, monastic behaviour and use of the body is also a social responsibility. Cook writes, "The body may speak to others about one's personhood but by being ordained one's body becomes part of the public domain—one has a moral duty to behave in an appropriate way, something which is understood as the ultimate gift of the monastic" (2010: 131). Restraint, composure, control, calmness and slow movements are all positive words associated with the monastic body. On the other hand, a lack of discipline, education and mindfulness in the monastic life would be expressed by someone who spoke loudly, was emotionally sensitive or moved quickly or loudly (Cook 2010: 119).

Beyond inspiring the laity, monastic performance is also necessary to indicate the strength of Buddhism. Decline has been a problem within Theravāda Buddhist history because the Buddha himself predicted the eventual decline and disappearance of his teachings. When monks are unable to maintain Buddhist precepts or textual knowledge, this is an indication of decline, as found in the decline narrative of the *Manoratha pūranī*, a commentary on the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* attributed to Buddhaghosa (Turner 2014: 27). Decline has been a major motivating force for Buddhists, notable especially in periods of intense change, such as colonialism. The colonial period in Burma, especially from 1890–1920, is an example of one of these flashpoints of concern about decline and correct forms of monastic performance. For example, Erik Braun (2013) discusses the ways one leading monastic figure during this period, Ledi Sayadaw, sought to delay decline by encouraging study and self-cultivation. Similarly, Alicia Turner (2014: 24–25) argues that Burmese Buddhists sought to impede decline and purify monks in the nineteenth century through efforts such as debates over monastic dress and practice, the creation of reformist monastic sects and the historic meeting of the Fifth Buddhist Council. The Shwegyin monastic reform sect in Burma, founded in 1860, understood themselves as sons of the Buddha through their emphasis on disciplinary purity and intellectual rigor (Carbine 2011: 22). Siam's reform sect, the Thammayut,

which was established in 1830 under the leadership of the future King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868), also emphasized proper monastic ordination rituals and robe-wearing, along with study of the Vinaya and Pāli language (Cook 2010: 28). All of these reforms, in monastic ritual, study and practice, demonstrate the significant debates and rearticulations of Buddhist performance during periods of perceived decline.

Anne Blackburn (2001) and Anne Hansen (2007) both demonstrate the importance of perceived monastic discipline, especially as it relates to the cycle of decline and revival within eighteenth-century Sri Lanka and the French colonial period in Cambodia, respectively. Both authors reveal that, even in different times and places, monastic discipline and textual study were necessary to purify the sangha during times of perceived moral decline. These decline narratives have been significant in debates over monastic reform in the history of Theravāda Buddhism. Cycles of degeneration and purity continue to hold significance, as can be seen in modern Thai media reports on monastic behaviours. Contemporary Thai Buddhist society is currently focused on pointing out lapses in behaviour observed on the monastic body. The omnipresence of social media and news outlets exacerbates the number of cases where monks can be portrayed as not following the ideal performance of monasticism, triggering the threat of decline.

Narratives of Decline in Contemporary Thai Buddhism

Scholarship on Buddhism and media has focused on the ways Buddhists have spread their religion, from historical media to print capitalism to digital technology (Schober 2019; Veidlinger 2018). I analyse instead the ways in which digital news media in Thailand is part of a broader system that regulates Buddhism by reporting transgressions beyond the monastic boundaries. No journalist has been more prolific in recording monastic scandals and editorializing on their meaning than *Bangkok Post* columnist Sanitsuda Ekachai. Her opinion pieces on this topic were brought together in an anthologized book titled *Keeping the Faith: Thai Buddhism at the Crossroads* (2001). A variety of scandals are catalogued here, including the major monastic allegations and convictions of sexual, financial, and drug- and alcohol-related abuse in the 1990s. Sanitsuda sees some reason for hope among the reformist and development monks who are working to better people's lives, including monks who ordain trees and female monks who she sees as pursuing a purer form of Thai Buddhism. In addition to stories disparaging individual monks brought down by sexual and financial scandals or praising socially engaged monks, narratives of decline often comment on widely acknowledged structural problems within the monastic institution.

Thai media covering contemporary Buddhism, often citing the perspectives of Thai monks and public intellectuals, reveal three issues at the heart of the structures of monastic life that contribute to the perception that Thai Buddhism is in decline. These issues include: 1) a lack of authority by senior leadership, 2) the commodification of Buddhist symbols and sacred objects, along with the increasing secularization of Thai society, and 3) the increased influence of other religions.⁸ These issues are important here not as much for their veracity as for their semiotic value in articulating nationalistic anxieties within the Thai Buddhist monastic and lay sangha.

Although there are national and regional monastic hierarchies in place, led by the *Sangharaja*, or the Supreme Patriarch, and his Sangha Supreme Council, they are often considered inadequate in managing decline.⁹ Well-known historian Nithi Aeusriwongse (1993) believes that structural reform is necessary for the monastic sangha, which would include more participation and power in the hands of the local people and communities. Nithi, along with other public intellectuals such as Sulak Sivaraksa and Phra Paisal Visalo, has criticized the Sangha Supreme Council's lack of authority over the majority of monks in Thailand (Katewadee 2019a: 2). Consequently, the sangha authorities have little recourse when the Buddhist public sphere scrutinizes monks for increasing cases of misconduct and inappropriate monastic appearance.

⁸Pattana Kitiarsa writes about the commodification of Thai Buddhism, in part by focusing on the controversial Wat Dhammakaya, which has been accused of selling religious rewards (2008: 225). Peter Jackson (1999a, 1999b) also includes in this category blessed amulets, religious relics and superstar monks who have large followings and religious products associated with them.

⁹In addition to the *Sangharaja*, the Office of National Buddhism (ONB) is an arm of the state government responsible for supporting Buddhist events and projects across the country. Established in 2002, this office distributes monastic and temple allowances within the Thai sangha administration. The Kings of Thailand also have historical roles as supporters, protectors and reformers of the sangha (Fleming 2014: 38–39).

Monks usually learn the monastic lifestyle and proper behaviour as part of their training as novices or for a short period before their ordination ceremonies. It is up to the individual temples and abbots to make sure that each ordained male knows how to follow his training rules. However, with over 33,000 active temples and between 250,000 to 300,000 monks in the country, monastic instruction is uneven, contributing to the perception that Thai Buddhism is rife with both large-scale and everyday scandals.¹⁰ Senior monks have been criticized for a lack of engagement with local communities, including the training of novices and temporary male monks (Fleming 2014: 44).¹¹ The temple is traditionally considered a place to tame young men, transforming them through the discipline of meditation and emphasis on proper decorum (Crosby 2014: 202). However, because the structures of Thai Buddhism are perceived as weak, it is difficult to manage the fluid system of boys and men continually entering and leaving the monastic life. There is no stigma attached to disrobing from the monastic life, while ordaining for even a short period is considered highly meritorious. This has created a system where men ordain for three to seven days to make offerings dedicated to a deceased relative, fulfil a vow of thanks for a wish come true or please one's future in-laws; as such, they have little chance to learn the teachings in depth (Crosby 2014: 203). During this short window, it is difficult for the layman to immediately transition to embodying the ideal discipline and conventions of the monastic life.

In December 2017, the Sangha Supreme Council created a course for temporary ordination to help young men study the foundations of the Buddhist dhamma. The assistant abbot of Wat Rajathiwat, Phra Dhammakittimethi, stated that his temple would follow this rule. Specifically, they would require a minimum ordination period of fifteen days and would cancel any shorter-term ordinations (MThai News 2017b). However, the extent to which this curriculum and time limit will be effective across other temples in Thailand remains to be seen, especially when there is no mechanism in place to enforce this proclamation. Additionally, in many Theravāda Buddhist countries, there is anxiety about the diminishing number of long-term monks due to decreasing birth rates and increasing secular, public and private opportunities for education and social mobility (Crosby 2014: 199).

These perspectives, articulated against the mismanagement of the monastic sangha and towards centring Buddhist teachings, are perpetuated and elaborated in Thai media, with Thai journalists often interviewing nationally recognized scholar and activist monks. For example, Phra Paisal Visalo is often asked to comment on the state of Thai Buddhism. He is most concerned with structural problems within the sangha system, beginning with monastic education and its lack of meditation teaching, linking these issues to major monastic scandals. Phra Paisal believes that those individual monks who commit immoral acts are not true representations of the Buddha's disciples (Patcharawalai 2018). Another well-known monk, Phra Phayom Kalyano, abbot of Wat Suan Kaew, also believes that sexual, financial and drug-related scandals involving monks are not the root of the problem. Like Phra Paisal, he identifies a lack of Buddhist education as a significant issue. He argues that to combat the problem of individual monks who lack discipline, all Buddhists should build their knowledge of Buddhism (Thai PBS News 2013). On the other hand, Phra Ajan Ariyawangso (2016), abbot of Wat Phutthaphot Haripunchai, acknowledges that there are some monks who make the whole Buddhist institution look bad and take advantage of the monastic system by ordaining just to have food provided for them. However, he believes that despite what seems like a crisis of faith, Buddhists should maintain their faith in Buddhist teachings and not be critical of Buddhism as a whole because of individual monks (Phra Ajan Ariyawangso 2016).

Another internal threat to Thai Buddhism is the rise of shopping mall culture as a focal point in Thai society (Katewadee 2019b: 3). Phra Paisal is convinced that, in addition to sangha structural issues, one of the most important issues in the decline of Thai Buddhism is consumerism, which has confused Thai society, making many turn their backs on simple living and meditation (Patcharawalai 2018). Thai social critic and activist Sulak Sivaraksa believes that traditional Buddhism did very well in rural, agrarian

¹⁰The Thai website Dhammathai lists the total number of active temples in Thailand at 33,902 in 2004. <http://www.dhamma-thai.org/watthai/watstat.php>. The Ministry of Education in Thailand counts the number of monks in 2016 as 289,580. <http://www.en.moe.go.th/enMoe2017/index.php/educational-statistics/educational-statistics-2016>.

¹¹Phra Paisal Visalo (2012), one of the primary critics of modern Thai Buddhism, notes many problems and suggests various solutions to fix this 'crisis'. PA Payutto (1987), another well-known Thai Buddhist monk interested in reform, finds that mature monks are either not experienced enough to teach or lack the energy to do so. This is compounded by the youth's general lack of interest in the monastic life as the country continues to develop.

societies. However, “Buddhism does not know what to do” with the complexities of modern life and urbanized societies like Bangkok (Sulak Sivaraksa 1996: 73). As such, monks continue to study and conduct almsround rituals in the traditional way even as the world changes around them. Consequently, instead of Buddhism, Sulak (2000) claims that the main religion of Thailand has become consumerism.

Nithi Aeusriwongse (2020) asserts that the crisis of faith in the monastic institution has not resulted in Thai Buddhists losing respect for The Triple Gem (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) but in being unable or unwilling to incorporate the teachings into their lives. He agrees that Thai Buddhism has not been able to adapt to capitalism and modernity. This has resulted in religious rituals lacking in morality and the possibility of worshipping new sacred figures outside the temple.¹² As such, Nithi (2020) finds that it is difficult to perceive monks as valuing the moral teachings of Buddhism. Other observers contend that a consequence of this lack of grounding in Buddhist teachings is that the religion becomes linked with the commodification of Buddhist objects themselves. As Pattana Kitiarsa writes, “Under the ongoing secularization process of Thai social life, Buddhism is transformed into a commodity by the complex forces of capitalist economy and modern lifestyle” (2008: 120). Luang Pho Khun (1923–2015), a monk highly regarded for his supernatural powers and amulet production, is a significant example of the commercialization of Buddhism. His amulets were marketed by entrepreneurs using a business approach targeted to make a profit. Pattana (2012: 96) remarks that although there were claims that these profits are used for charity, there is no way for the public to verify these claims. Such arguments from Thai monks and public intellectuals are part of the dominant narrative of Buddhism in decline presented in Thai media.

Alongside these internal threats, some Thai Buddhists feel that their religion is under threat from external sources. Thai media often covers monks who exhibit forms of Buddhist nationalism, especially directed against the perceived threat of Islam, a behaviour that has become rampant in modern Thai Buddhist society (Katewadee 2019a: 2). Sanitsuda Ekachai (2020) is critical of Buddhists who claim to be devout but support state violence against outsiders, including southern Muslims, because they are considered “national security threats”. Phra Paisal Visalo agrees that some Thai Buddhists look outside their religion to place blame for the problems of Thai Buddhism (Patcharawalai 2018). For these two commentators, Thai Buddhism’s weakness is seen in the impulse to blame others, not in the external threats themselves.

However, a significant group sees Thai Buddhism declining because of competition from this other religion. This sentiment is most prevalent in the organization known as the Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand (BPCT) (ศูนย์พิทักษ์พระพุทธศาสนาแห่งประเทศไทย), which was founded in 2001. This group of about 3,000 Buddhists, both laity and monks, devote their time to “defending Buddhism”, primarily through political means and by dispensing information to people about external threats to Buddhism (Katewadee 2013: 122). They are most interested in lobbying for increased representation of Buddhism in the government and officially naming Buddhism the national religion in the constitution (Katewadee 2013: 126). In particular, the BPCT is concerned with what they perceive as increased Muslim influence combined with the relative weakness of Buddhist ideals in Thai society (Katewadee 2013: 172). In 2020, Thai Buddhist author Uthai Manee (2020) wrote that, in order to continue, the BPCT needs to increase its network to more areas of Thailand so that current members will not feel like they are fighting alone. He believes that many Thai Buddhists would like to do this work of defending Buddhism but are not sure how to begin. Thus, organizations like the BPCT signal the vulnerability that Thai Buddhists feel about the place of their religion within the Thai nation-state.

Internal threats of lack of monastic authority, the rise of secular consumerism within Thai society, and the perceived external threat of other religions, are just some of the ways Thai Buddhism is seen to be in crisis, creating an image of organizational disorder, irrelevant or superstitious beliefs and general weakness. These three categories of decline factors represent a broad summary of the structural issues that Thai media highlights through the perspectives of outspoken and authoritative commentators on the state of Thai Buddhism. Fitting into the internal threats to Thai Buddhism is, of course, monks’ widely reported misconduct, including sexual, financial and drug-related scandals. These transgressions,

¹²One of Thailand’s newest and most popular sacred figures emerged in late 2020. English-language coverage of the story of Ai Khai can be found here: <https://coconuts.co/bangkok/news/ai-khai-rising-cult-of-prankster-ghost-boy-explodes-in-pandemic-thailand/>.

compounded by the broad institutional challenges, have generated increased anxiety concerning the strength of Thai Buddhism to serve the needs of the country and individuals. This, in turn, has resulted in the male monastic and his bodily presentation taking on increased symbolic importance.

Everyday Scandals: The Problematic Male Monastic Body

What are the appropriate locations for monastics? Which actions are acceptable? How should monks comport themselves within the temple and public spaces? Through a selection of English- and Thai-language articles from the years 2015–2020, I investigate everyday scandals involving Buddhist monks' bodily performance. Everyday scandals are located in the media and generate discussion, but do not dominate the news cycle as much as financial embezzlement or allegations of sexual assault by high-ranking monks. Although some of these everyday scandals are written by journalists in Thai media outlets, others are reported by ordinary Thai citizens using social media. These Thai citizens who are involved in posting and commenting on such photos are known as 'netizens' (ชาวเน็ต). A significant number of these articles are based on pictures and videos Thai Buddhist netizens have taken of monks in public or selfies taken by monks, which have been shared online for the purpose of critique and shock. Since it would be extremely challenging to get a general view of the opinions of all Thai lay Buddhists, I focus on those who are interested enough to post pictures and comments online. Although these netizens most likely skew younger, this strategy captures a representative sample of Thai Buddhist laity's feelings about the state of Thai Buddhism and its male monks.

To give an example of a typical everyday scandal, a Thai layperson sees a monk going strawberry picking—a popular day-trip activity in the month of February in northern Thailand. The layperson takes a picture and posts it to their Facebook page or a Thai discussion board.¹³ More people share the picture until it ends up on a Thai media website. An article based on this picture will share some of the commentary and debate around this particular issue of monastic behaviour, such as, in this case: Should a monk be strawberry picking? Why is he out on a day trip like a layperson? What kind of activities should a monk be able to do based on monastic rules?

I have identified two broad categories of everyday scandals involving monastic bodily regulation: monastic performance outside the temple and excessive attention to the body.¹⁴ The first category is concerned with monastic actions in public spaces, as seen in the example above, which usually emerges when a Thai Buddhist layperson surreptitiously takes a picture (แอบถ่ายรูป) of a monk spotted outside of the temple or ritual environment. The debates surrounding such pictures reveal opinions regarding acceptable and unacceptable actions for monks. Unacceptable actions are those that demonstrate very little difference between the monastic lifestyle and the lives of the laity. Thai netizens question the asceticism and renunciation of monks who go on day trips or shop at the mall. The second category, vanity towards the body, includes actions like lifting weights and displaying a muscular body. Often, this variety of everyday scandal emerges from monastic selfies intended to show off a muscular physique. Thai Buddhist netizens and commentators argue that monks should not be interested in their appearance or desire to look a certain way.

These everyday scandals are not as disturbing as periodic temple fund embezzlement at the highest monastic ranks, but they represent for Thai Buddhists part of the gradual decline of the state of the Buddhist monastic institution. Because the position of Thailand as a Buddhist nation is seen to be at stake, disciplining and policing monks is a matter of societal concern. Civil society, in these cases, is constantly debating the limits of the monastic body. These concerns indicate that the ideal monastic body, one that would signify a thriving Thai Buddhism, would be neat and proper, but not too muscular, and would only be seen outside of the temple when conducting monastic duties. In contemporary Thailand, many male monastic bodies are widely believed to stray from these ideals.

Monastic Bodily Actions Outside the Temple

Buddhist monks are expected to spend most of their time in the temple environment. There, they function as conduits of merit-making for Thai lay Buddhists, hosts of celebrations for Buddhist holidays and ritual specialists for Buddhist funerals. Outside of the temple space, monks can also act as fields of

¹³A popular discussion board for such topics is <https://pantip.com/>.

¹⁴Effeminate behavior is also a significant issue in male monastic bodily presentation for Thai Buddhist society, as evidenced by media coverage. However, this is such a significant issue that I will be treating it in a separate article.

merit—they are often invited to houses or shops for opening ceremonies and blessings. These are all part of the duties of a monk. Laypeople expect to see them conducting rituals and being available as sources of merit. However, male monastics have increasingly been appearing in unexpected places that are unrelated to the temple or ritual environment. When Thai lay Buddhists view photos of monks in inappropriate locations conducting questionable actions on Thai media websites, they begin to wonder about the state of the monastic institution. The examples below signal the breakdown of the distinction between monks and the laity and the perceived decline of Buddhism in Thailand.

An important part of the difference between lay and ordained Buddhists is that monastics reside in a temple and live simply, rather than taking part in ‘luxury’ activities that seem more suitable for householders than monks. In 2017, Amarin News, a Thai media outlet, revealed selfies posted by a monk during a trip to the mall with the title “Social Media Shows ‘The Monk who pays for others’ Eats Luxuriously and Looks Classy” (โซเชียลเปิดวาร์ป ‘หลวงพี่สาขแปะ’ กินอยู่หรู ดูดีมีระดับ). The article’s author, Choey Choey, found pictures of this monk on a Facebook page called Army Worldwide News and spread them further through Amarin News. In this article, the monk is nicknamed Luang Phi Honey Toast, or the Monk who eats Honey Toast, referring to a photo of him eating this snack food at the dessert café chain After You, known for its overpriced sweets. In these pictures documenting one monk’s trip to the mall, Luang Phi Honey Toast is shown taking selfies eating what are considered to be luxurious foods (กินแต่ของหรู) such as shrimp tempura, macarons and honey toast as well as taking selfies in a swanky hotel room. This monk appears to be high-society, or in Thai ‘hi-so’ (ไฮโซ), a phrase meaning rich or enjoying life in a way that is perceived as the opposite of the monastic life. Indeed, Luang Phi Honey Toast walks through the mall using an iPhone and MacBook while looking at various name-brand items.¹⁵ The author comments that this is inappropriate behaviour that is not aligned with the monastic life (พฤติกรรมค่อนข้างไม่เหมาะสม มีความเป็นอยู่ที่ไม่เป็นไปตามกิจลักษณะของสงฆ์) (Amarin News 2017). The author also believes that this monk often travels to other Thai provinces and countries by plane and rides in top name-brand cars like Mercedes Benz and Volkswagen when he travels on land.

In the comments section, Thai netizens criticize the monk for his inappropriate actions. One commenter believes that such conduct is not the monk’s fault because lay Buddhists give money directly to individual monks when they make merit (ยึดใส่มือพระ). Lay Thai Buddhists often offer money to monks in envelopes when they collect alms in the morning or when they are invited to conduct blessing ceremonies at houses or places of business. This commenter continues that because of this monetary exchange, monks now ordain to earn a good income. The threat in this scenario is that Thai Buddhists would be making offerings to monks who are not keeping the precepts of Buddhism, signalling decline because they are not serving as fields of merit. Thai lay Buddhists are also seen as partially culpable by offering money, which has the potential to corrupt and distract monks from their ascetic lifestyles. Another commenter reports that the monks in the temple near his house each have a sedan, and consequently a repair shop has opened right in front of the temple. Consequently, this netizen does not make merit there and feels ashamed [of this temple] (เห็นแล้วทุเรศ). Similarly, one commenter suggests that they would rather make merit at foundations for orphans or the blind than at temples because of monks like this. In these comments, netizens reveal a fear and sensitivity to Buddhism being in decline because of monks leading luxurious lives. The commenters quickly extrapolate to other scenarios of problematic monks and generalize that monks do not follow monastic rules. Others find that it is better to abandon making merit from monks at all and give to charitable organizations instead.

Another monk accused of living a luxurious lifestyle has been covered by Thai news sites Line Today and Kapook Hilight, which shared photos posted by a Facebook page called Charoen Pueng News Agency. The monk in question has been dubbed ‘พระ กุฎีหรูหรา’, which can be translated as ‘the monk whose monastic living space (*kuti*) is luxurious’. This nickname is meant to signal the contradiction inherent in the idea of a fancy *kuti*. The authors of these articles express frustration with the images of this monk living in his own nicely furnished apartment, which seems like a holiday home or resort complete with a luxury car and a table with fancy food. One caption of the monk leaving his apartment to go out on almsround wonders why this monk collects food from people who have fewer resources than

¹⁵While monks often possess smartphones and computers, they are usually budget brands, such as Oppo, Dell or Acer. Apple products, just like honey toast, are considered too luxurious for a monk.

he does (Kapook! Hilight 2017). Line Today highlights the living room of this ‘Phra Celeb’ (short for celebrity), noting his air conditioner, home theatre system and smartphone, all noticeably top brand names. Netizens comment that this signals the degeneration of Buddhism (ทำเสื่อม) and wonder if this monk ordained to live as a monk or to live comfortably, addicted to worldly defilements (มาบวชหรือมาสบายดีดกเลิศ). Netizens post in the comments that they are not surprised because they have seen monks in temples addicted to air conditioning and flat-screen TVs who sleep on beds thicker than the Vinaya allows. Others state that it must be nice to not have to rent a house or buy food. They conclude that people will stop respecting monks because they only meet this kind (คนจะเลิกนับถือพระสงฆ์องค์เจ้าก็เพราะเจอแต่แบบนี้) (Line Today 2019). These commenters lament that Buddhism is not prospering because monks are ordaining to live a relaxed life or to gain money instead of for merit or to study the teachings. Some even surmise that this person is not a monk but a kind of ghost (เปรตประเภทหนึ่ง).¹⁶

Another interesting everyday scandal involves monks on the underground train in Bangkok, called the MRT. It is not necessarily unexpected to find monks on public transportation as they may need to travel to school or another temple. However, one monk’s activity on the underground rail system caused a member of the public to record and post this scandalous behaviour to Facebook, and it was then picked up by Inn News. This monk was found to be live-streaming a young woman standing in the same train car. The article describes this monk holding his phone to take a video of the woman, without even noticing other passengers, while the underground train passes five stations. Netizens comment that this person should not be called a monk (อย่าเรียกพระ), noting that his behaviour is not composed or self-controlled (ไม่สำรวม), and believe that he should be arrested and disrobed (จับสึกไป). Others stated that this monk is really obstructing Buddhism (มารศาสนาจริงๆ) (Inn News 2018). Comments that monks involved in everyday scandals should not be considered part of the monastic institution demonstrate the seriousness of these offences to lay Thai Buddhists.

Another Thai Buddhist saw a monk racing through his neighbourhood on a motorcycle and posted a video and photos on Facebook. He asked his friends on social media to help him research which temple this monk lives in and why he was speeding on a motorcycle at eight o’clock in the morning. The story was picked up by TeeNee News with the title “Villagers Confused: Monk Zooms his Motorcycle on the Road, while Social Media Criticizes!!” (ชาวบ้านงง พระซึ่งมอไซค์บนท้องถนน ทำเอาโซเชียลวิจารณ์สนั่น!!). The original poster explains that although he has heard of monks traveling on horses or being driven in cars by laypeople, there is no such tradition in this neighbourhood, and it seems inappropriate for a monk to use a motorcycle. One commenter wrote in English that in 2018, “Monk [sic] can do everything, if they want. Don’t need to wait on someone else” (TeeNee News 2018). Another clarified that people made monks this way... monks are also people (คนไปทำพระ พระก็คน)—meaning that monks have defilements and can be tempted by desires like ordinary people. As in the case of the previous monk caught live-streaming on the MRT, some netizens stated that this monk is obstructing the religion (มารศาสนาจริงๆ) and that he does not have the controlled manner (สำรวม) of a monk. They believe that this monk, instead of living in the temple, should go sweep the streets, like a poor, low-class person. This monk, another commenter states, needs a slap in the head until it explodes (ตบไปให้หัวระเบิด). The issue of this monk’s speedy motorcycle trip was never resolved, but it is clear that even this seemingly minor transgression can cause ire and confusion among Thai Buddhist laity, who expect that a monk will subject himself to the humble lifestyle required to be a legitimate field of merit and make appropriate use of the money and materials offered.

Almsround is another issue where lay Thai Buddhists are concerned about the monastic body’s presence and actions. In an article by M Thai News, a picture showing a monk sitting next to offering baskets (สังฆทาน) containing food and other items is titled “Appropriate or not! Social media clip shows monk sitting and receiving alms from laypeople” (เหมาะสมหรือไม่! โซเชียลแฉคลิปพระสงฆ์เจ้าที่นั่งรับบิณฑบาตญาติโยม). The original post by a Thai Buddhist netizen contained the comment “New era offering alms, the monk just sitting and waiting with a shop providing service” (การใส่บาตรยุคใหม่นั่งรอแถมมีร้านคอยบริการ). The implication here is that today’s monks are not practicing traditional almsrounds in which they walk and receive alms

¹⁶*Preta* (Thai: เปรต) can be considered the opposite of monks. Stanely Tambiah writes that their condition of “perpetual hunger and thirst may possibly signify the extreme punishment for withholding food from monks and for being stingy in merit-making” (1970: 39). The transfer of merit to deceased family members through donations of food to monks is believed to alleviate some of the suffering of these ghostly *preta* figures within the Buddhist cosmology.

from the laity they pass. Instead, the practice has become modern and convenient, with monks sitting and waiting while laypeople buy food from nearby sellers, making offering easy for busy individuals. The person who took this picture also wants to check if this situation is against the Vinaya (MThai News 2017a). Although this behaviour can be seen near markets throughout Thailand, some netizens become upset at what they perceive as the lazy or modern behaviour of monks. Instead of the traditional practice of walking barefoot to collect alms, these monks appear to behave like a regular person. Netizen commenters revealed that they would rather monks exert the effort and discipline required by the monastic rules to fulfil their duty as a field of merit.

From these five examples, it is apparent that everyday scandals occur when monastic bodily actions are considered inappropriate in public spaces. According to netizen commenters, monks do not belong in malls, on motorcycles, or living in their own apartments. Nor should monks be using social media to take selfies while taking part in luxury activities, such as shopping for or displaying their expensive brand-name items. Male monastic bodies are also chastised when they do not exhibit the discipline and traditional values associated with monasticism. Instead of walking barefoot on almsrounds early in the morning, they are sitting and waiting for donations or zooming around on motorcycles. Although these are everyday activities, the point is that they seem too ordinary to fit with the monastic life. They signal the decline of Thai Buddhism because they threaten to further pull apart the ties that bind monks and the laity together through the interdependence of their very different lifestyles. This connection depends on monks living a renunciant lifestyle unlike that of regular laypeople. When monks behave inappropriately in spaces outside of the temple and engage in non-monastic activities, the connection between the laity and monks disintegrates.

Excessive Attention to the Body

A muscular presentation of the monastic body can be seen as evidence of too much attention to one's outer appearance. Monastics are expected to eat only what is given to them for one or two meals a day, before noon. Their approved exercise usually consists of walking in the morning to collect food, sweeping the temple grounds and providing labour for temple building projects. Without the ability to choose an abundance of protein-rich foods or build up cardiovascular stamina, it would be difficult for the monastics to maintain a muscular frame. For these reasons, Thai Buddhist laity express surprise when they see pictures of a muscular monk. Monks who show off an attractive body reveal that instead of studying, meditating, chanting and other monastic duties, they are working to maintain their muscle mass. Although not as large of a perceived problem as financial and sexual scandals, there have been two recent instances of monks posting photos of their muscles and one situation involving monks working out at a gym that have led to online criticism of the monks involved and, in turn, reflections on the state of Buddhism as a whole.

One monk's pictures of his ripped abdomen and V-shaped figure received coverage in both English- and Thai-language media. An English-language media outlet called Queerty poked fun at the idea of a sexy monk breaking Buddhist rules with the title, "This Buddhist monk is in trouble for being too damn sexy." The author writes about Buddhism in a tone that labels it as a foreign and strange religion: "Let it be known: thirst traps are not the Buddhist way."¹⁷ However, the article also includes quotes from Phra Payom Kalyano, an outspoken reformist Thai monk and abbot of Wat Suan Kaew in Nonthaburi. He comments, "Building muscles and putting photos up on social media like this is a monk that forgets his vows of monkhood", and "If you want to exercise and have a muscular body just stay home instead of being ordained (Grant 2018)." A Thai news outlet, written in English, also takes the matter seriously, reporting that the deputy director of the National Office of Buddhism stated that the photo "tarnished the religion's image" and "invites societal criticism and damages Buddhism." Interestingly, the comments on this picture, which was shared over two thousand times, are not as serious. Over one thousand comments stated opinions like "putting whey [protein powder] into your almsbowl" and "wiping up my saliva" to indicate the drooling inspired by this monk's body (Asaree 2018). Thus, the official stance on this monk's appearance is a serious condemnation, while the regular Thai Buddhist lay commenters have some fun with the idea of a toned monk.

¹⁷A thirst trap is a photo, usually a selfie posted on social media, meant to generate a compliment or expression of desire.

In contrast to the critical and silly reactions to the cropped shot of a monk's abdomen, another monk who posted pictures of his muscular physique, along with his face, was praised by Thai-language newspaper Thai Rath in an article titled "Offering Healthy Food, Lay Buddhists Want to See Healthy Monks with no Diseases." The author concluded that if Thai Buddhists give healthy food, they could expect to see more monks looking this way. On the other hand, if the monks are given sweet foods, then they will not be strong or healthy (Thai Rath 2017). Using the nickname "The Monk with Big Muscles" (หลวงพี่กล้ามโต), this article continues to state that the healthy shape and strength of this monk show the results of offering foods with reduced sugar, fat and salt. The comments on this article reveal that Thai Buddhists are not as concerned with the Vinaya in this instance but instead are happy that this monk is so strong. The original poster of these images, Facebook user Biak Rider, stated that the pictures were taken in 2011 by a man who was only ordained briefly before opening his own restaurant (Burns 2017). The commenters wonder if he received whey protein in his almsbowl (หลวงพี่รับบิณฑบาตรเวย์โปรตีนมั๊ยครับ) and joke that this monk would wish whey protein to be abundant (เจริญเวย์โปรตีน). Others who make light of this monk's appearance say he must be a Shaolin monk (นึกว่าพระวัดเส้าหลิน), referring to the famous martial arts temple in China (Tded 2017). There was some debate among Thai netizens over whether monks should be trying to get so buff and if weightlifting is something a monk should be doing, but most were interested in this story just for fun and to support creating healthy lifestyles for monks (Coconuts Bangkok 2017). Indeed, many supported this monk, saying that there is no rule against taking pictures in the Vinaya.

While Thai Rath assumed that the monk with big muscles acquired his muscular physique through eating healthy offerings and performing monastic-appropriate exercise, monks working out at a gym received much harsher criticism. In the Thai-language Post Today, Phra Maha Pairawanchii Worawano was interviewed about recent monastic behaviours gone viral on the Internet. When asked if the monks shown working out (เล่นกล้าม) and entering the fitness room of a condominium are going against the Vinaya, he confirms that by removing their outer robe and exercising (เล่นฟิตเนส) in public, the monks are committing a *Sekhiya* offense. This category of offenses concerns how monks conduct themselves in public places. For example, they should always wear their outer robe when outside their temple. Instead of breaking these specific monastic rules, lay Buddhist commenters state that monks should look proper (เรียบร้อย) and appropriate (เหมาะสม) when in public spaces. The main criticism in this case concerns the monks' appearance while in full view of non-monastics, as Phra Maha Pairawanchii asserts that there is no specific rule against exercise. However, trying to change the characteristics of one's body to look beautiful or better is not aligned with the spirit of the Vinaya. In terms of the muscular physique, Phra Maha Pairawanchii believes that there is no reason (ไม่มีเหตุผล) for a monk to be muscular and exercise the way regular people (ชาวบ้าน) do. Monks' exercise, such as helping with construction in their temple, should be for the service of the temple, not for its own sake. Occasionally, some temples will have a room with minimal exercise equipment, which would be off-limits to laypeople visiting the temple.¹⁸ In this way, media attention and comments demonstrate that lay-monastic relations depend on monastics maintaining their health but not desiring a fit body.

Concerning this issue, the popular Thai discussion site Pantip posted the question, "Do you think this monk who was working out [in public] has some defilements?" The person who posted this picture explains that when they saw this situation, it made them think that these monks are just like any other person who wants to show off their body shape. However, a monk, as one who has ordained to find peace (หาความสงบ), should be different from householders. This netizen concludes that there are not many respectable monks left because so many appear to be leading a normal, worldly life (ชีวิตเป็นแบบทางโลก) instead of a life worthy of respect (น่านับถือ). The post does not generate much debate: eleven commenters agree that the monk can exercise for health but not to show his shape and pose in front of a mirror, as these so-called "gym monks" seemed to be doing.¹⁹

The overly-muscular monk trope, similar to that of monks in non-monastic spaces, also criticizes the lack of asceticism in the lifestyles of some monks. Thai Buddhist laity seem to wonder, "Why should I support someone who goes to the gym and mall, living a lifestyle similar to my own?" Instead of

¹⁸Personal communication with Buddhist monks in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

¹⁹The comments on these gym monks can be found on the discussion board Pantip: https://pantip.com/topic/36737218?fbclid=IwAR1u98wNdFYBnFVq9mKgg1wPCEo6g8yvyJKN9HSFmR7_Gf3baKe9Sp4Hod0.

excessive attention to the body and showing off name-brand items, Thai Buddhist laity would praise monks exhibiting bodies and behaviours that fit the ideal of asceticism, discipline and renunciation.

Conclusion

Why is the male monastic body so regulated? Why is the shape and comportment of the monastic body so important to Thai lay Buddhists? Why do Thai Buddhists feel outraged when seeing monks working out in a gym or showing off a name-brand item? I argue there are two main reasons for this concern: 1) the continuing and constant rhetoric of the decline of Buddhism in a nation-state where Buddhism is the privileged majority religion, and 2) a proper male monastic body, who conforms to appropriate behaviour while in robes, signals the difference of the monastic life, ensuring the efficacy of merit and ritual performance.

First, the threat of bodies that do not comply with the temple regulations indicates to Thai Buddhists that the religion is in decline, as it has throughout Buddhist history. The monastic body, which remains neat and tidy in the temple space, signals the health and thriving nature of Buddhism in Thailand. Because male monks are displaying excessive attention to their own bodily figures and acting in ways similar to a householder while moving in public spaces, they demonstrate the extent to which Buddhism is failing to tame men, to make them into proper Buddhist subjects. When men cannot follow Buddhist rules of monasticism, the renunciant life seems unattainable. As this occurs continually through everyday scandals, it appears as if there are few monks who can thrive in the monastic lifestyle anymore. This kind of snowball effect can be seen through Thai lay Buddhist netizens' extreme reactions to everyday scandals—decrying the decline of the religion.

Secondly, the monastic is a conduit through which the laity can gain access to merit and good karma. This responsibility is extremely important to the laity, who would like to ensure, as much as possible, that their donations or the ritual they are requesting will bring merit and contribute to fulfilling their health, wealth, safety, protection and happiness. If a monastic does not appear in line with the expectations of monastic rules, the laity would feel some uncertainty as to whether their money is being used effectively to receive the spiritual rewards they hope for. This doubt can be seen by some netizens who would rather give to charities and organizations they know are going to support orphans or the physically disabled. When monks show off their muscles as they work out at the gym or are caught shopping for modern amenities outside of the temple environment, Thai Buddhist laity wonders how different their lifestyles really are. Once monks appear like laypeople, it is difficult to see them as fields of merit because their ability to give merit arises from their renunciant lifestyle and strict rules.

Ultimately, anxiety over the state of Buddhism in Thai society has caused increased regulation of the Thai male monastic body. Anxiety about monastic performance is part of Buddhist history, which has motivated the creation of monastic reform sects in Thailand and Myanmar. Today, in Thailand, there are critiques of internal threats to Buddhist influence like consumerism and lack of monastic regulation. Groups like the BPCT feel threatened by external religions and lobby the government for Buddhist privileges. These represent widespread structural issues concerning the Thai monastic institution. Indicators of these root problems are visible in the appearance and actions of the male monastic body as Thai media continues to report on everyday monastic scandals. The effect of the accumulation of these posts and articles over time causes netizens to believe that a declining number of monks are able to live the renunciant life purely and ordain to study and meditate while working toward liberation. Everyday scandals illustrate that the monastic body is a compelling site to locate debate, anxiety, perceptions of decline, and perhaps, if history is any guide, the roots of future reform within contemporary Thai Buddhism.

Acknowledgements. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in the Religions of Southeast Asia Unit and the Bodies of Buddhism: Somaesthetic Explorations Conference held at Florida Atlantic University in 2020. I thank the organizers and members of the audience for their feedback. I would also like to thank Susan Ryuyin Kerekes for her comments on an earlier manuscript and two anonymous reviewers whose feedback improved the argument and focus of this final version.

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