Alms, Money and Reciprocity: Buddhist Nuns as Mediators of Generalised Exchange in Thailand

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I examine the part that women, in the ambiguous role of Buddhist nun (mae chee), now take in the emblematic Buddhist practice of alms donations. The monastic office of ‘mae chee’ is complicated. It is conveyed through the ritual adoption of religious vows and is usually undertaken for life. However, mae chee ordination is only partial and its status is far below that of monks. In Thai law mae chee are regarded as pious laywomen (upasikas) and the Department of Religious Affairs does not mention them in its annual report. Even so, because they are said to have renounced the world they do not have the right to vote. Owing to this ambiguity mae chee are able to employ both the ascetic practices of renouncers (such as accepting alms) and those of laywomen (such as offering alms). Mae chee, while debarred from the alms round, both receive alms from the laity and donate alms to monks. Furthermore, mae chee receive monetary alms from the laity on behalf of the monastic community as a whole. I argue that by handling money given to the monastic community mae chee mediate in a relationship of generalised reciprocity between the monastic community and the lay society. By donating alms to monks, mae chee appear to be reaffirming their status of partial ordination, yet in order for them to be able to receive alms donations from the laity they must see themselves, and be recognised by the laity, as an integral part of the monastic community. A nuanced understanding of these economic, religious and gendered roles is crucial to our understanding of the incorporation of women into the monastic community and the ways in which gift practices are related to interpersonal and group dynamics in the context of modern Thai monasticism.

KEYWORDS: Thailand, Buddhism, alms donations, free gift, monasticism, mae chee

Gift Giving and Thai Buddhist Monasticism

The monastery in Thailand on which this research is based has a stable monastic community and the largest mae chee population in the region. Whereas some monasteries have few or no mae chee in residence, this monastery has approximately 69 mae chee and 70 monks at any one time. The monastery is focused on the propagation of vipassanā meditation to the laity; during the year approximately 4000 laypeople attend the monastery to do a retreat. In this respect, the monastery is part of the widespread adoption of meditation by the laity since the 1950s, identified by some scholars as the greatest single change to have come over Theravada Buddhist countries since the Second World War (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988: 237). Today this is a widely popular
and influential movement, meditation being taught in monasteries throughout Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma and, latterly, Nepal (cf. Gellner & LeVine 2005; Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988; Houtman 1990). Even though, or indeed partly because, the status of mae chee is ambiguous, they are playing a decisive role in transformations in Thai Buddhism. The involvement of mae chee in teaching and practising meditation is leading to the incorporation of women into religious and monastic roles. While monks are controlled by 227 monastic precepts, the relative lack of formal rules for mae chee means that their performance of monastic identity and ascetic practice is crucial in their self-placement between the sangha and the laity. As I shall show below, the performance of monastic identity is also crucial to our understanding of both monks and mae chee receiving alms.

Tambiah (1984) reports that in the 1970s mae chee were considered as a ‘peripheral’ category of the monastic community. In Bunnag’s (1973) study of Thai Buddhist monasteries she also found that mae chee had little contact with the monks and novices in monasteries, and were ‘outside the system properly speaking’ (Bunnag 1973: 99). It appears significant that, in Bunnag’s study, the one monastery with a large number of mae chee (35) integrated into the community, Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon, was oriented towards meditation and the abbot was a renowned meditation teacher (Bunnag 1973: 87). Whereas reports of mae chee dating from as recently as ten years ago report on a group of women living as ‘temple-servants’ (Sanitsuda 2001), living lives of ‘hardship and poverty’ (Barnes 1996: 268), more recent research has revealed that, while the status of mae chee is influenced by age, social background, educational level, aspirations and motives (cf. Lindberg Falk 2007), the propagation of meditation to the laity has been crucial in the development of monastic identity for mae chee (Cook Forthcoming). One mae chee told me that as a group mae chee are ‘half-lay’, like laywomen who want to follow the Buddha’s lifestyle: ‘It is because the rules for monks were given by the Buddha, but the rules for us weren’t. The way to improve the situation of mae chee is to work and practice to improve yourself’. Another mae chee told me that they are second class citizens in the monastery … sometimes’. Nonetheless, all mae chee in this monastery feel that partial ordination as mae chee is sufficient for them to lead religiously defined monastic lives. In the monastery mae chee sit in-between laypeople and monks during rituals, separating the two and drawing a white line between them. In this half place they are both ordained and lay. I was continually told that the way to improve the status of mae chee in general was to meditate and guard one’s precepts very well. This is evidenced through the performance of physical control and mindful comportment. Those mae chee who adopt the principles of vipassana meditation in communities of practice are able to understand their bodily practices and performances as congruent with Buddhist understandings of merit, mindfulness and morality. Through correct ascetic practice mae chee are making claims to religious authority and status by actively incorporating ‘true Buddhism’ in their lives. Without challenging either the hierarchy or the doctrine of Thai Buddhism, the embodiment of the principles of meditation in monastic practice is changing people’s understandings of individual and group identity and thereby inserting mae chee into a strong position in relation to the laity and the sangha.

All Thai Buddhist monks and mae chee are celibate renouncers. They observe fast for eighteen hours a day, receiving and eating food only between the hours of 6 am and 12 noon. The strict observance of fast is intended to reduce attachment to desire. The food eaten is enough to maintain the body for meditation rather than for pleasure or fun. Laypeople donate all the food eaten in the monastery. The laity either offer small amounts of food to monks when they go for alms or donate larger amounts (such as sacks of rice or crates
of vegetables) to the main office in the monastic compound. While monastics usually have a limited number of personal possessions, monasteries are often very wealthy as a result of lay support. This is reflected in the grand, gilded temple buildings found in most Thai monasteries. Furthermore, the food in monasteries is often of a very high standard and large amounts of food are donated to the monastery on a daily basis.

In the monastery where I conducted research, the monk’s community performs two alms rounds every morning. The first is in the surrounding area outside the monastic compound. Monks leave for their alms rounds as the sun rises, walking slowly with bare feet for distances of up to four miles. The second is conducted within the monastery. It was explained to me that this is because those laypeople staying in the monastery to do meditation should also have the opportunity to donate alms. Monks walk the alms route slowly, with their eyes downcast and alms bowl covered. The control of the monastic body and use of slow, low-range movements in this instance provide the waiting laity with an example of Buddhist wisdom and morality. As Collins (1997: 203) argues:

the composed, pure and autonomous body of the monk or nun presented in social life instantiates for lay supporters the immediate existence of that sacred, immaterial and underlying Truth which their own bodily concerns make impossibly distant for them, and with which they can thus be connected by their material support of its human embodiments.

During the alms round the monk does not ask for food. As he is walking, laypeople who wish to offer alms will come and kneel at the side of the street holding the donation up to their forehead. Without smiling or looking at the layperson the monk stops and moves the lid of his alms bowl to one side so that the layperson can place the food inside. Without any sign of gratitude for the donation the monk replaces the lid of his bowl, chants a short blessing for the layperson and moves on (cf. Carrithers 1983: 57).

Making and Sharing Merit through Alms Donations

Making merit is one of the primary motivations for donating alms to the monastic community (cf. Spiro 1970: 105) and the daily alms round is just one means by which this is achieved. The monastic economy is based entirely on alms donations. Alms donations of food, money and objects, such as electric fans or water heaters, are made to the main office, staffed by mae chee, on a daily basis. The name of the donor and the amount donated, which is in turn received by the mae chee, are recorded and read aloud each week on the eve of Wan Phra (Buddha Day). On this occasion novices, mae chee and the laity also publicly renew their commitment to the monastery and receive a dhamma teaching (tet). Any unusual expenditure by the monastery as a whole, for example for computer parts and so on, is also made explicit. These finances are then posted on a notice board outside the main office for the rest of the week. The donation and public recognition of alms are both highly meritorious acts. Some people donate relatively small amounts, and lack of economic resources is not an obstacle to being recognised in this way. Nonetheless, the public recognition of alms amounts implies that there are those that give, and those that give more: the announcement necessitates an audience other than those who are named as well as those who are donated to. By reading out the amounts donated by individuals the merit of their acts may be measured by others, and is given public recognition by the monastic community as a whole. However, it is crucial that reading the amounts of alms donations is itself a meritorious act that is shared by the whole community.

In Thai Buddhism each person may acquire merit of his or her own volition, for example,
through participating in a religious ceremony or offering alms. This merit may then be passed on to others, living or dead, through its stated dedication. Intending to transfer merit to another is itself meritorious and both persons thereby acquire merit. Sharing merit with another augments the original amount of merit; the more people share in a meritorious act, the more merit is created. Indeed, merit sharing is an important motivation in many Thai rituals. For example, Thai men and women enter the monastery for a limited period in order to transfer merit to their deceased relatives; the abidhamma is chanted at wakes in order to pass merit on to the deceased; and lustral water and string are used as specific tools for the physical transference of merit in most rituals (cf. Klima 2002; 2004).

Transferring merit to others is done through specific verses and acts, while sharing in the merit of another may be as simple as bearing witness to the act. Spiro’s excellent ethnography reveals that the alms offered to monastics in the Burmese context are understood to be meritorious in proportion to the spiritual quality of the recipient, and it is for this reason that the laity emphasise the importance of the piety of monastics (Spiro 1970: 107). Regrettably, he does not examine the implicit sharing of merit between monastics and the laity in this context: that the monastic must already have a high degree of merit in order to behave in such a way as to constitute a fertile ‘field of merit’ for the laity. I suggest that the significance of the spiritual level of monastics for lay merit making reveals that in the Burmese context, as in Thailand, merit making is not a question of individual intent alone.

Monks and mae chee share the common duty to behave ‘mindfully’. However, the lack of ritual duty coupled with the ambiguity surrounding mae chee ordination status means that their scope for action is confined more than monks to the capacities of their bodies. Furthermore, those bodies are more subjected to the judgmental eye of others. I was told, and it was evidenced in behaviour, that the lack of formal rules for mae chee means that their behaviour becomes the site in which their morality is shown, in a way that differs from monks. Owing to their ambiguous status mae chee do not receive alms on the alms round. Nonetheless, they are involved in the ritual process through the monastic duty to bear witness to the donations of others. Mae chee are often invited to attend ceremonies, such as ordinations, because their embodiment of the principles of mindfulness is understood as demonstrable evidence of morality and personal merit. By having such a person witness the ceremony the amount of merit generated by the ceremony is increased for all parties. Klima (2004: 450) writes about Thai ritual that, ‘the enhancement of one’s spiritual condition is afforded, oftentimes, not only through one’s individual concentration and effort, but through the communal presence of others sharing in the power of the rituals themselves as well as the degree to which the recipient already embodies a refined and meritorious character’. Thus, merit making is shared and generated by lay donors as well as those who facilitate that merit making through their embodiment of the principles of monasticism. Mae chee are invited to attend ceremonies so that they might share in the merit of the sponsor and thereby produce more merit. It is a question of individual merit that they have the opportunity to attend such ceremonies and their attending them thereby produces more merit for them and others.

Monastics have a duty to behave well for the benefit of others. Ideally, the physical control of the monastic comes as a happy consequence of ascetic practice. Yet, by refining behavioural characteristics and holding them up as indicative of a virtuous state of mind, one’s behaviour becomes not only a question of individual morality but also a social responsibility. As such, the correct behaviour of monastics does not always result from an attitude of detachment. As one monk told me, ‘Sometimes in ourselves
we know that we are not doing good but we want to keep it to ourselves so that it is only our own demerit and no one else has to share it’. If the monastic appearance communicates how the monastic community is to be treated by the laity, then it also communicates how the monastic community is to behave for the laity. The appearance of the monastic both physically and performatively acts as a buffer zone between the social world and the bounded self. It is the space in which lay impressions of renunciates are realised, and where renunciates communicate themselves to others in the light of the religious ideal. The body may speak to others about one’s personhood but by ordaining one’s body becomes part of the public domain—one has a moral duty to behave in an appropriate way, something that is understood as the ultimate gift of the monastic community. Thus, by behaving in a physically controlled way, mae chee enable the merit making of the laity, but this behaviour is itself understood as indicative of monastic identity. I was told that the ‘gift’ of the monastic community is the example of appropriate behaviour that induces faith in the laity, and monastics are able to cut attachment to a sense of self through giving the gift of an outward state of physical and emotional equanimity, even if this is in conflict with one’s inner state. One’s morality presents a paradox as a process of self-aware reflection on the one hand and absence of self in the performance of one’s moral duty to the laity as an act of giving by a religious specialist on the other hand. Thus, the morality of the gift may not be separated from the morality of the monastic community.

Mae chee do not go for alms but instead donate alms to monks (Figure 1). In donating alms mae chee are performing the religious role of the laity. However, on different occasions mae chee also have the duty to receive alms from the laity on behalf of the monastery and as individual monastics, thereby giving lay devotees the opportunity to make merit. The ambiguity of the position of mae chee means that their performance of monastic identity, understood as an act of giving, is central to their relationship with the laity. Their involvement in the ritual process is dependant on mae chee’s embodiment of the principles of mindful awareness. This is not commensurable with the involvement of monks, who hold formal ordination status and central roles in ritual. However, it is precisely this ambiguity that enables mae chee to handle monetary alms donations, something that is spiritually problematic for monks as they have monastic precepts expressly forbidding it. Before going on to consider in more detail the different ways in which mae chee give and receive alms, I will examine the meaning of the gift in this context.

**Understanding the Gift**

As we have seen, the behaviour of both donors and receivers of alms is highly prescribed. I will argue that this behaviour enables merit making precisely because it de-emphasises social reciprocity. Selfless giving, or *dana*, is rewarded with merit, but only if it is unreciprocated. Were the receiver of alms to reciprocate with gratitude or recognition of the gift, it would not be selfless and as such it would not be meritorious. In order to understand the gift as ‘free’, that is, free from all reciprocity or
socially binding activity, it is necessary to reject understandings of gift exchange as the opposite of commodity exchange (cf. Gregory 1982). In such a formulation commodity exchange is assumed to stand squarely in the economic realm, influenced by disinterested rationality and commercial gain, typified by alienability and non-reciprocal relationships. Gift exchange, by contrast, is assumed to carry with it moral obligation and the social concerns of the non-economic realm; as such, it is essentialised as reciprocal and socially binding. In such a formulation the gift, including the gift of alms, could never be ‘free’ because it always entails the obligation to be reciprocated in some way.

Examining Buddhist alms giving, Carrithers (1984) suggests that relationships between the sangha (monastic community) and alms givers are created through a process of positive reciprocity, because failing to meet the exacting standards of the ideology of selfless giving for the alms giver is ‘as natural as falling off a high wire’ (1984: 322). Alms giving is understood by Carrithers as ‘gift exchange’, reciprocal exchange between the laity and the sangha, because in daily life there is almost always recognition of a personal relationship between sangha and laity. However, it is difficult to see how this relationship can be understood as personal, given that ‘laity’ and ‘sangha’ are defined as generalised entities (cf. Laidlaw 2000: 625–6). As we have seen, the personal relationships that may exist between individuals are purposefully de-emphasised by the rules for comportment during alms donations as well as a verbal emphasis on categories of persons (‘laity’ and ‘sangha’) during ritual donations. Contra Carrithers, Strenski (1983: 472) states that the bhikkhu (monk) is an ideological paradigm of non-reciprocity. As he points out, it is impossible for the sangha to ‘give’ merit in return for alms donations because to have gained merit is ‘simply to have acted in a karmically good way’ (1983: ff4). The sangha provides the occasion for people to act in a karmically good way but cannot give merit for dāna ‘any more than it can give someone virtue for having been virtuous’ (ibid). Strenski suggests that dāna is precisely a rejection of the idea of reciprocity between particular laity and particular monastics. Instead, the ritual services provided by monastics and the dāna given by laity constitute a system of generalised exchange, which has naturally evolved into the ‘domestication’ of the sangha, as ‘regular patterns of social relationships grow along with regular patterns of giving’ (Strenski 1983: 470). Generalised exchange ‘seeks an unbalanced condition between exchange partners, which requires repayment at some unspecified time, typically by another group or person than the original receiver of the first gift’ (ibid: 471). In Strenski’s evocative terms, this is ‘a model of society moving in spiralling circles of generosity and sympathetic joy’ (1983: 476). The laity performs dāna, and the sangha performs rituals and teaching, but neither of them is in direct reciprocation of the other. Alms donations may therefore be understood ideologically as ‘free’ gifts; that is, voluntary donations made without expectation of this worldly return (cf. Parry 1989: 66).

Parry (1986) suggests that it is a distortion of Mauss’s (1966) seminal work on the gift to assume that self-interest is the necessary opposite of altruism, or that Mauss was concerned to reveal the self-interest inherent in all gift exchange. The assumption in such readings is that the gift for which an equivalent return is expected is a ‘non-ideological verity that nobody does anything for nothing’ in contrast to the notion of a ‘pure gift’ as ‘mere ideological obfuscation’ (Parry 1986: 455). Parry argues that the ideology of the ‘pure’ gift emerges parallel to the ideology of self-interested pursuit of utility; the total social fact of Mauss’s gift exchange is fractured. This is Mauss’s comment on modern society: that individual pursuit becomes the guiding principle of modern economic life, and it is this that Mauss wistfully contrasts with a
primitive past in which interest and disinterest are combined (Parry 1986: 458). Parry argues, therefore, that while Mauss is often read as revealing why the gift can never be free, he is in fact revealing how a theory that this should be the case has developed. Interested exchange and disinterested gift appear as two sides of the same coin: ‘Given a profound dislike of the first, mistrust of the second is only logical’ (Parry 1986: 458).

While it has been argued that this may be taken to mean that Mauss’ use of the term ‘gift’ does not imply altruism (cf. Kelty 2002: 34), I suggest that the ideological significance of self-interest is no less present in our theorising of the gift than is the notion of the ‘pure gift’ as ideology. For Mauss, the implication of the possibility of both self-interest and altruism as mutually constitutive is the reason why the gift may be understood as ‘total social fact’. Laidlaw argues that in fact the idea of the ‘free’ gift is central to Mauss’s argument. He writes that,

Mauss can only really make the argument because the idea of what a real free gift would be is left unexamined. The reader’s understanding of it is tacitly invoked. Because the invocation is implicit, and because the idea of the gift is, as Derrida has shown us, anyway unstable and paradoxical, it can be made to work in two quite contrary ways at once (2000: 627).

Laidlaw makes the astute point that what gives the gift its capacity to create the moral basis of society in Mauss’s theory is the everyday understanding of what a pure gift would be. In Laidlaw’s words (2000: 628), ‘Gifts evoke obligations and create reciprocity, but they can do this because they might not: what creates the obligation is the gesture or moment which alienates the given thing and asks for no reciprocation’.

Laidlaw argues that alms giving to Shvetambar Jain renouncers is an institutionalised elaboration of the idea of the free gift (dāna). Jain alms giving may—in terms set out by Derrida (1992)—be understood as a free gift because renouncers are forbidden to express gratitude or reciprocate for food given in any way; the gift is not recognised because the small gifts of many are merged and thereby depersonalised; the beneficiary of the gift is not recognised as such (though the donor is understood to have given); and finally, in language and in action the idea that something is given is undermined. That the donor is recognised as having given something is important in both the Jain and the Buddhist context because in each it is believed that giving alms is beneficial. It would appear that in Derrida’s four-part definition it is only in this area that the gift fails to be free.

The recipient is spared the obligations that arise from receiving, but the givers have still given. Making a dāna is meritorious, an act of punya or good karma. As such, it is expected, by an entirely impersonal process over which no one has any influence, to bring its own reward, although one cannot know when or in what manner the resulting good fortune will come (Laidlaw 2000: 624).

In Jainism, as in Theravada Buddhism, what is given should be an expression of a positive sentiment and should create no social relation between donor and recipient. Thai monks and mae chee, when not performing dāna, do have personal relationships with each other, with history, feeling and emotion. It would not be possible for people to live in such a community and not interface in terms of social interaction at some point. It is interesting, therefore, that when there is a disagreement between a monk and a mae chee it is often settled by one party asking for the alms donation. Though this asking reaffirms that individuals are involved, the act of the alms donation returns the relationship to one of generalised exchange rather than the relatively lower level of social interaction which made a dispute possible. The practice of alms donation de-emphasises the personal relationship and creates a new reality wherein they may face each other as if they were strangers not caught in relationships characterised by reciprocity.
Thai Buddhist alms donations are meritoriously accumulative and often earning religious merit is the motivation for giving, but this is understood as leading to spiritual attainment and insight. The merit attained through selfless giving is both generated by and leads to understandings of the Buddhist tenets of impermanence, suffering and non-self (*anicca, dukkha, anatta*). The more attached to something one is, the more merit there is in renouncing it. It is not that each giver must take a speculative risk, but rather that understanding of the nature of the world is reached as a result of selfless giving, which simultaneously leads to the creation of religious merit. The *sangha* facilitate the merit making of laity and *mae chee* but this cannot be understood in terms of the commodity logic. If the ‘free’ gift of alms donation becomes the price of salvation, culminating in the calculation of merit accrued by acts of donation (cf. Spiro 1970), this is the case because the correlation of the ideology of merit with donation is consistent with the soteriological ideology of purely disinterested action.

Parry (1986: 468) argues that in ethicised salvation religions, such as Theravada Buddhism, the gift is completely alienated from the giver and the ideal goals of social action are oriented towards a future existence. For this reason gifts made to Buddhist monastics are never reciprocated: they become a denial of the profane self and a means to salvation.

The more radical the opposition between this world and a world free from suffering to come, the more inevitable is the development of a *contemptus mundi*, which culminates in the institution of renunciation, but of which the charitable gift—as a kind of lay exercise in asceticism—is also often an expression (Parry 1986: 468).

Thus, in the Thai context, we see that not only is the gift necessarily alienable and non-reciprocated but also that the ideology of the free gift as embedded in the alms donation may be understood as the same process of ascetic renunciation which is seen in the meritorious performance of monastic identity by monks and *mae chee*. It is precisely because alms gifts do not create obligations that they are socially important, and it is through the embodiment of detachment and cultivation of non-self through giving and receiving alms that the social position of *mae chee* is changing. Were the giving and receiving of alms to entail the social binding and personal reciprocity that once made the gift the logical opposite of commodity exchange (cf. Gregory 1982), then this would not be the case.

The alms gift is ideally given without desire for merit on the part of the donor. *Dāna balami*, or ‘the power of giving’, is cited as one of the virtues of enlightenment that is to be cultivated through focusing upon one’s state of mind during alms donations. The proscriptive behaviour of donors and receivers of alms de-emphasises social reciprocity and the reason for this lies in Buddhist soteriology: it is impossible to transcend the cycle of rebirth through the act of giving or receiving alms if the very act itself ensnares one further into the morass of social debts and attachments. Thus, giving alms is instrumental as both a means of escape from the wheel of rebirth, through cultivating detachment to a sense of self and acting without desire, as well as a method for securing a better rebirth through acquiring merit; in both instances the gift must be free.

**Mae chee Receiving Alms and Mediating Generalised Exchange**

While monastic identity and ascetic practices have historically been the preserve of monks, requiring full ordination and celibacy, in contemporary Thailand ‘monastic’ and ‘lay’ are not fixed or mutually exclusive categories: temporary ordination for short periods of time has always been available to Thai men; *vipassana* meditation has been propagated to the laity since the 1950s; large numbers of laity now enter monasteries as meditation students.
for short periods of time and accept monastic precepts for the duration of their retreat; and finally, the subsequent monasticisation of social religion is enabling mae chee, though outside the ordained sangha, to define themselves in ways that are critically religious, ascetic and associated with prestige. Buddhism may be understood as a fluid and changing category of beliefs and practices combining varying emphases on doctrinal, animist and meditative aspects at any one moment. Even in a monastery that is heavily involved in the propagation of vipassana meditation to the laity, competing understandings of Buddhist morality and practice exist, and may be employed by individuals in different ways and at different times.

Though mae chee may not walk the alms round, they, like monks, receive alms in the form of money, food, clothes and toiletries from the laity who come to the monastery to donate. This is often done as a result of faith in the ascetic practice of a particular monastic or as a part of rituals such as wakes or funerals. Interestingly, when monetary alms are donated to an individual monk or mae chee the money is always concealed in an envelope. I have found this to be the case throughout Thailand. Money in this instance is not denied or negated but the amount itself is concealed. The emphasis is placed on the act of giving, facilitated by the renouncer’s willingness to receive, as the amount donated is given no significance. By concealing the amount in an envelope the renouncer receives all monetary donations in the same way, and performs the same blessing. Putting money in envelopes distinguishes it from more mundane transactions and adds a temporal dimension to generalised reciprocity. Much of the activity in the monastery and the interaction with the laity takes the form of teaching dhamma and meditation, after which money is often given in envelopes. Money given in this way to ‘a monk’ (rather than ‘a particular monk’), and the blessing received afterwards, maintains an opposition between the world and its renunciation. In contrast, when giving to the monastery, rather than individual monastics, there is no risk of the donation being misinterpreted as a personal exchange because the recipient is in no way individuated and it is therefore not necessary to mask the amount. As such, the amount may be celebrated because it shows the meritorious worth of an individual’s action.

This contrast between masked donations to individual monks and mae chee, and the public recognition of donations to the monastery was highlighted during the celebrations for the Abbot’s birthday in 2002. The Abbot stressed that this year his birthday gifts should take the form of offerings towards the building of a meditation centre, thereby making it possible for more people to practise meditation. The day before his birthday a stage covered in colourful material went up at the back of the large meeting hall (sala) and on it were presented ten beautiful money trees (pa pah) (Figure 2). These are trunks with decorated sticks coming out of them. On each stick is a bank note, with larger ones at the top and smaller amounts at

Figure 2: A money tree (pa pah) before it is offered to the monastery
the bottom. They stand about 6 ft tall and will usually have at least 10,000 bt (approx. £150) (I never saw a tree with less than 10,000 bt on it and I was told that this was because a tree with less money would not look good.) on each tree; some may be as large as 100,000 bt. Displays of monetary donations are commented on in terms of aesthetic display and meritorious worth and donations are celebrated by all. Each tree is conspicuously labelled with the name of the individual or group who donated it. On this occasion a large ceremony was conducted to bless the trees, after which many people wanted to have their photograph taken with the largest.

After all the ceremonies were completed, during which people had donated yet more money, I helped to count the money from the trees with a group of mae chee. A senior monk watched us as we did this and with a wry smile told me a parable of the Buddha:

Buddha and his disciples were going along and as they passed someone digging in the field, Buddha prophesied that a poisonous snake would bite him. Now, the digger unearthed a treasure and as he did so some robbers who were passing by set upon him, killed him and took the treasure. Buddha observed that money would kill you as surely as a bite from a poisonous snake.

Given the quantity of hard currency on the floor in front of us, this highlighted the paradoxical association between the massive meritorious alms donations and the teachings of Buddhism. The grand total was 633,265 bt (approximately £9,500), which is a sizeable snake! However, the monk was in no way suggesting that the money was inappropriately given or that it ought to be given back.

The monetary donations that form the basis of the monastic economy are put in the monastery’s collective bank account and the donor is given a certificate in recognition of his or her good work. The monastery’s accounts are organised through the main office, run by mae chee in conjunction with monks. Money paid into or taken out of the bank is overseen by monks while mae chee organise its collection and distribution. A lay accountant also checks the accounts. Mae chee organise the amounts required for ‘household’ expenses, such as food cooked in the kitchens and so on. Much of the alms food eaten in the monastery is donated in the form of money; because the food is bought using alms money, it is considered to be as morally pure as food donated directly. The monastery’s monetary resources, though entering the monastery as dāna must leave the monastery as commodity when paying bills or shopping at the market. Therefore, there must be a point at which the generalised exchange of alms giving becomes the commodity exchange of consumption (cf. Appadurai 1986: 13). Alms money is donated individually, handled by mae chee and then kept and spent collectively through mae chee on behalf of the monastic community as a whole. Put simply, mae chee mediate much of the economic exchange between the monastery and lay society.

It is important to emphasise that control of money does not necessarily provide an index of authority. Thai women (as women elsewhere in Southeast Asia) play an active role in economic and business responsibilities (cf. Busby 2000; Carsten 1989; Stirrat 1989). Kirsch suggests that in both rural and urban settings it has been shown that women tend to ‘have charge of the family purse strings and petty marketing, while men dominate whatever positions of authority or prestige exist’ (1985: 303). Furthermore, it has been argued (Thitsa 1980: 5) that the sexual division of labour in Thailand lies between women engaged in economic activities and men engaged in bureaucratic activities, with ecclesiastical roles being ascribed a far higher status than money making activities, which are believed to be connected to the material, corporeal side of life. This theory is supported by the fact that monks have precepts forbidding them to
handle money, while mae chee do not. However, all work in the monastery is understood as meritorious to a greater or lesser extent; there is no way in which working with money is particularly sterile (cf. Taussig 1980) for those who do not hold precepts expressly forbidding them to have contact with it.

Weiner’s seminal work locates women’s exchange practices as a component of larger exchange cycles (Weiner 1976, 1988). She argues that exchange must be understood as expressing and producing hierarchy. Examining the gendered and political ramifications of exchange she shows, contra Malinowski (1922), that not only are Trobriand women involved in exchange, but also that women’s exchange in mortuary rituals (sagali) occupies a central role in the ‘total system’ of Trobriand social organisation through which subclans (dala) reproduce themselves. Furthermore, she argues that men’s autonomy is held in check, undermined or supported by women’s economic presence and that power is constituted through rights and access to ‘cosmological authentication’. While it is a concern of this paper to consider the ways in which practices of giving lead to heterogeneity and difference, a distinction between separate but articulating female and male domains (cf. Weiner 1976: 18) is unhelpful for understanding the continuities in male and female involvement in gifting, continuities that, in the monastic context, are central to monastic and lay understanding of religious practice. All action and interaction in the Thai monastic context is more or less meritoriously accumulative: for the monastic community, this includes doing one’s monastic duty, whether that be working in the monastery or providing a living exemplar of Buddhist ethics for the laity. Nevertheless, handling money presents spiritual pitfalls for monks. As such, by selflessly doing work that is spiritually problematic (by handling potentially dangerous gifts) yet remaining uncurred, mae chee are doing good and indeed meritorious work.

Mae chee are making merit by facilitating the merit making of others. This, coupled with alms donations and receiving alms from laity, suggests that the involvement of mae chee in this system of generalised exchange is highly qualified. The generalised reciprocity of alms giving, in which the recipient is occluded, is maintained when alms money is given to mae chee on behalf of the monastery. That it is possible for mae chee to perform this role suggests that they are viewed as monastics by the laity even though they are not officially recognised as part of the sangha. From the point of view of the laity, to view mae chee as separate to the monastic community would devalue the dāna that they give. Nevertheless, for mae chee to be able to handle alms money at all makes an implicit statement about their ordination status. Handling alms money is meritorious work, as is all work in the monastery and, because of the proscription on contact with money for monks, mae chee suggest that their involvement facilitates the smooth running of the monastery. I do not want to suggest that the gifts given or received by mae chee are of a different order to those of monks. Because of the ambiguity inherent in their position, mae chee’s behaviour is central to their monastic identity more than is the case for monks. Nonetheless, the value of alms donations as free gifts is reflected in the performance of monastic identity by all monastics, a performance that is thought to begin with and/or end with the realisation of non-self. As such the gift may be understood as a vehicle for the on-going process of renunciation.

**Conclusion: the Gift of Renunciation**

In Thailand alms donations (dāna) are understood as ‘free gifts’: they are non-reciprocal, renouncers are forbidden to express gratitude, and neither the gift nor the beneficiary is recognised as such (though the donor is understood to have given). In this context, to
give is to gain: the flow of material resources is accorded little significance. Alms donations to monastics are understood as instances of generalised exchange.

As a field of merit, monks are accorded ritual deference by mae chee and laypeople. Tambiah (1968: 119) suggests that this is because ‘The Buddhist idiom of selfless giving of gifts, control of passion through asceticism and renunciation of worldly interests is an idealisation and extension of a contrast to the social norm of reciprocity’. This is a situation in which people give to monks as a ‘field of merit’ rather than engaging in personalised relationships of reciprocal gift or commodity exchange. Strenski (1983: 470) suggests that in the context of Buddhism, ritual giving (dāna) defines the relationship between the sangha and lay society, ‘the monks are always receivers, the laity always givers’. Yet, mae chee give alms to monks and receive alms as monastics and on behalf of the monastic community. As such, mae chee facilitate the smooth running of the monastery, and mediate relationships with the outside world.

Mae chee mediate and facilitate the merit making of the laity though alms are also given to mae chee individually. When donating alms themselves mae chee are more closely associated with the laity than the sangha, because, like the laity, they donate alms to the sangha. In contrast, in order to assume the mediating role of receiving alms from the laity individually and on behalf of the monastic community as a whole, mae chee are necessarily associated with the sangha. Handling alms money in the monastery is an area in which clear gender differences are maintained, but the meaning of these differences is only to be understood in the context of local ideas and representations. By donating alms to monks, mae chee appear to be reaffirming their status of partial ordination; yet, in order for them to be able to handle alms donations on behalf of monks, they must see themselves, and be recognised by the laity, as an integral part of the monastic community.

As such, by facilitating the smooth running of the monastery through mediating the generalised exchange of alms donations mae chee earn merit, and the monastery is understood as a community.

How are we to make sense of the different roles mae chee play in alms donations in relation to both the sangha and the laity? I argue that in this context, social positions within the monastic hierarchy are negotiated and maintained through the giving and receiving of alms, but that this is made possible because such exchanges are understood as non-reciprocal; the evidence for this is sought by the laity in the monastic community’s demonstrable ability to remain removed from reciprocal social obligations. Selfless giving on the part of both the laity (through the donation of alms) and the monastic community (through the embodiment of the soteriological message of Buddhist detachment) is both meritoriously accumulative and the result of personal merit. I hope to have shown that through religiously meaningful practices mae chee are understanding themselves and being understood by others as monastic and this is consistent with the soteriological telos of an ideal Buddhist life—release from suffering and cutting attachment to a sense of self. In a community typified by sartorial neatness and physical control, striving for an ideal of non-self, the ultimate act of giving is of oneself and it is through the gift of the embodiment of renunciation that renunciation becomes embodied.

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Notes

1. The Third Basket of the Buddhist Canon; Buddhist philosophy and psychology; metaphysical teachings which deal with the ultimate nature of things.
2. See Copeman (2005) for an interesting discussion of the entanglement of altruism and commodity logic in blood donation practices.

3. Weiner identifies the central concern of exchange as one of ‘keeping-while-giving’, arguing that what motivates exchange is ‘the desire to keep something back from the pressures of give and take’ (Weiner 1992: 43). Central to this ongoing political struggle is the inalienable gift, understood as a set of social processes in which one’s capacity to exchange and withhold is a marker of social strength and identity (Weiner 1992). Strathern has argued contra Weiner that the inalienability of things does not presuppose the inalienability of actors (1988: 283–284). Strathern argues that gifts reveal human value in the attributes of things: it is through gifts that persons and the social relations objectified in persons are continually remade (cf. Strathern 1984: 162–3). At issue for Strathern is an ‘aesthetic’, or ‘the way in which people construe social action and make known the outcomes of their relations with one another’ (Strathern 1988: 341).

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