Localising the Universal: Women, Motherhood and the Appeal of Early Theravāda Buddhism

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This essay suggests that one reason for the success of Theravāda Buddhism in early Southeast Asia was its appeal to women. The maternal metaphor, a prominent theme in Buddhist texts, was both familiar and relevant to the lives of all females, regardless of their social standing. Translated into a local environment, the interaction between motherhood and merit-making provided new opportunities for lay women to display their piety and strengthened their links with the monkhood.

Introduction

When the doyen of Southeast Asian studies, George Cœdès (1886–1969), published his *Histoire ancienne des états hindouisés d’Extrême-Orient* more than fifty years ago, he identified the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as a period marked by ‘great changes in the spiritual realm’. Among the most significant of these changes, Cœdès maintained, was the penetration of ‘Singhalese’ (i.e. Theravāda) Buddhism among ‘the general population...the most humble classes’ of what is now Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar.1 Although this perspective has been endorsed by all subsequent scholarship, one overview has rightly noted that the manner in which Theravāda Buddhism expanded and the precise reasons for its regional appeal are still unclear.2 At a general level Richard Gombrich has referred to the ‘power and beauty’ of Theravāda Buddhist thought, which he believes offered both a ‘coherent, universalistic ethic and a way to

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salvation from suffering’ and filled ‘an intellectual and religious gap’ in societies that had ‘no soteriology and no literate culture of their own.’ Scholars of Southeast Asia, however, have tended to place greater emphasis on the influential role of rulers, who were obviously attracted by Theravāda conceptions of the cakkavatti (the universal monarch) and the support this offered their own position. Royal patronage not only elevated the status of Theravāda, but sustained the Sangha (the monkhood) and promoted its influence among ordinary people.

To some degree, of course, this historiographical preoccupation with the relationship between kingship and Buddhism reflects the nature of the available sources. Historians of early Southeast Asia have also become accustomed to thinking in terms of cultural orders that enlarge the actions of rulers and thus give them ‘a disproportionate historical effect.’ Nonetheless, while this emphasis on royal policies and statecraft has produced a corpus of extremely important research, it has also led to the conclusion that religious involvement was largely an elite affair prior to the nineteenth century. As the late O.W Wolters once remarked, the emergence of ‘the royal patron’ rather than ‘the humble disciple’ as the main agent in the expansion of Theravāda Buddhism ‘is what one would expect in the history of religion in Southeast Asia.’

A recent article by David Wyatt approaches the ruler–ruled relationship in the Theravāda environment of early Southeast Asia from a somewhat different standpoint. Wyatt argues that from the eleventh century increased communication between Tai kingdoms and Sri Lanka helped disseminate ideas of a revised world order and a moral vision that could be shared by the entire community. In proposing that ‘thirteenth-century Buddhism may have acted as powerfully on followers as it did upon their leaders,’ Wyatt stresses that most ‘ordinary men’ were participants in the monastic experience and were increasingly exposed to the teachings of Buddhist texts. By inference, however, this unprecedented ‘religious convergence’ would also have been gender-inclusive, for ‘medieval Buddhism simultaneously boosted the individual’s responsibility for his or her own salvation (through merit-making and religious self-awakening) and validated and strengthened the bonds that held society together.’

Wyatt’s engaging hypothesis, while providing new openings for ‘the most humble classes’ to be incorporated into studies of early Buddhist societies, should also give pause to those interested in the history of gender (the practices and symbols by which societies

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4 The literature on Southeast Asian Buddhism and kingship is extensive. For a general discussion, see Donald K. Sweeder, The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), ch. 2.
7 O.W. Wolters, ‘The Khmer King at Basan (1371 – 3) and the Restoration of the Cambodian Chronology During the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries’, Asia Major, 2, 1 (1966): 87.
construct the roles assigned to men and women). Since we cannot assume that the aspirations and motivations attached to men necessarily apply to women, how should we gloss 'being female' in a context where religious changes are helping to reshape the cultural order? This issue is especially pertinent in regard to Theravada, which is considered relatively conservative in its textual assertion of male spiritual superiority, and yet was highly successful in attracting female support. Any effort to explain this apparent contradiction must recognise the risk in posing questions about human motivation, particularly in a region where the sources for early history are so limited and almost always the work of elite men. Methodologically, it would certainly be more prudent to simply refrain from raising issues that have little possibility of resolution. But one could also contend that in some cases a degree of boldness can serve a purpose by presenting alternative if debatable lines of inquiry. Since the appropriation of outside ideas is so often reflected in gender constructions, conjectures about representations of femaleness and women's responses to change may also be useful to the field because they mesh with a multiplicity of different issues. To cite O. W. Wolters once more, 'A gender-oriented study should do more than put women into history. It should also throw light on the history – male as well as female – into which women are put.'

Offered in the spirit of considered speculation rather than assertion, this essay suggests that in early Southeast Asia beliefs about female spiritual inferiority were countered by the public space Theravada ritual permitted women as lay devotees (upasika) and by the affirmation of their nurturing and maternal role. At once transcultural and yet intensely local, the experience of mothering and of being mothered is envisaged here as a mode by which new soteriological ideas were refracted through profoundly familiar imageries. In the process Buddhism became a dynamic element in the cultural production of attitudes both among and towards women across much of mainland Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the increased social solidarity that Wyatt has associated with the spread of Theravada may also contain a gendered dimension. Although historical sources point to the mothers of kings as the foremost exponents of female piety and generosity, women of all classes could identify with the mothering role these 'royal patrons' exemplified. While the ability of different societies to recognise the familiar within the universal helps explain the acceptance of new systems of thought, it may also supply another reason for Theravada's appeal to women and thus its success in pre-modern Southeast Asia.

The position of women in Southeast Asian Buddhism

For over a century scholars working in Buddhist studies have debated the implications of pronouncements on women found in early texts, with more recent research drawing particular attention to the differing attitudes of individual nikāya. However, the focus of these exchanges is on India and Sri Lanka, where the Buddhist experience stretched back well over a millennium before Theravāda teachings began to spread in Southeast Asia. The lack of attention to the Southeast Asian milieu may also be attributed to the fact that feminist scholars have tended to concentrate on Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism, generally considered more sympathetic to women’s religious aspirations.

In the context of comparative Buddhism, the appeal of the Theravāda nikāya in early Southeast Asia represents something of a puzzle. Although the doctrinal foundation may be non-discriminating, there is a general consensus that Theravāda commentaries are particularly outspoken in denouncing female attachment to this world and endorsing the view that to be born a woman rather than a man was evidence of ‘an inadequate store of merit’.

However, as demonstrated in the sometimes heated debates among contemporary Buddhist women, the textual messages are often ambiguous, and in Southeast Asia historical evidence testifies to the ways in which religious practice adapted to the gender dynamics of local environments. In a region allegedly characterised by ‘relatively high female autonomy’, women are commonly acknowledged to be Theravāda’s principal supporters.

12 Nikāya originally connoted particular groups or collections of canonical texts or sutta. Though ‘school’ or ‘sect’ are commonly given as English equivalents, the term refers more broadly to a group of monks who have subscribed to a specific interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings. Larger nikāya like Mahāyāna and Theravāda could themselves incorporate different nikāya. For example, in the eleventh century Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka comprised three often rival nikāya associated with each of the largest monasteries, the Abhayagirivihāra, the Jetavanavihāra and the Mahāvihāra, the latter being the most important.


The position of female ascetics is emblematic of the discrepancy between text and practice frequently resulting from the accommodation that typifies Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asian societies. In broad terms, the disappearance of valid ordination for nuns in the Theravādin tradition would seem to support the view that its advent in Southeast Asia entailed a retraction of religious opportunities for women. It is worth noting, for instance, that the Sarvāstivādin nikāya, said to be more liberal in its attitude to women, evidently accepted both girls and boys as novices. Although popular among the Pyu of ancient Burma, this school was eventually eclipsed by that of the Theravādins.16 Early Chinese visitors to Java, Cambodia and Vietnam also refer to Mahāyāna Buddhist nuns, usually high-ranking women who operated in ways reminiscent of China, Japan and Korea rather than of India, where nuns were more subordinated to monks.17 Until the early eleventh century nuns were also found in Theravāda, but around that time higher female ordination disappeared in the monasteries of Sri Lanka.18 In late thirteenth-century Angkor, where Theravāda was well established, a Chinese envoy categorically stated that he saw no nuns.19 The order of ordained women (bhikkuni) was apparently never established in Thailand, and the Buddhist 'nuns' mentioned by seventeenth-century French visitors to the Thai capital of Ayutthaya were in fact 'lay women in white' or mae chit, usually old women whose main function was serving the monks.20 Bhikkuni are certainly mentioned in early Burma, and


18 Nuns in Sri Lanka had previously enjoyed royal patronage, and a number of nunnaries had been established. In the Mahāvihāra monastery they were in charge of rituals connected with nourishing the bō tree, which symbolised the Buddha in Buddhist ritual. The decline of patronage may have been due to opposition to female ordination among monks. R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, 'Subtle Silk of Ferrous Firmness: Buddhist Nuns in Ancient and Medieval Sri Lanka and their Role in the Propagation of Buddhism', The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities, 14, 1 – 2 (1988): 32 – 8, and Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka (Tucson: University of Arizona Press for the Association of Asian Studies, 1979), pp. 37 – 9.


20 Simon de la Loubère, The Kingdom of Siam, ed. David K. Wyatt (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University
even in the fifteenth century well-born women still entered the Sangha and were accorded honours similar to those of monks. At some period thereafter, however, full ordination of women disappeared. During a visit to Burma in 1795, the British envoy Michael Symes was told that Burmese nuns had once worn the yellow robes of the bhikkuni, but that the order had been abolished in order to encourage population growth.

Nonetheless, though the higher ordination of women eventually died away in the Theravada societies of mainland Southeast Asia as it had in Sri Lanka, pious lay nuns who taught, meditated and performed ritual services continued to operate as fields of merit. Their numbers often included older women of high rank, especially widows, who are mentioned in chronicles from Ayutthaya as heads of religious foundations. Even in the eighteenth century ‘the monastery of the white-robed nuns’ was sufficiently prestigious to provide temporary accommodation for King Borommakot (1733 – 58) while on a royal tour. A Sri Lankan monk who visited Burma in the late nineteenth century was struck by the knowledge of lay nuns and the esteem with which they were regarded. As a recent study has shown, similar attitudes towards female ascetics are found in regional traditions in Thailand, and until the introduction of stricter controls in the early twentieth century some provincial abbots were quite prepared to accept women for full ordination.

From the eleventh century, as Theravada gathered strength, these kinds of ambiguities in the religious position of women emerge as a consistent theme. Inscriptions left by wealthy and highborn Southeast Asia Buddhist women who were born into lives of privilege thus record the formulaic acceptance of a lower position in a religiously based gender hierarchy. Since ‘the status of wife is inferior’, a Burmese queen in eleventh-century Pagan longs for the time when she will become ‘a man and a spirit [nat]’, while a pious queen mother in the Thai state of Sukhothai, founding a monastery in 1399, hopes that she has acquired sufficient merit ‘to be reborn as a male’.

26 Quoted in Aung Thwin, Pagan, pp. 34, 41.
27 A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, ‘The Añokarma inscription of 1399 A.D: Epigraphic and
Cambodia another queen mother prays that the benefit she receives from her meritorious acts 'may achieve for her in a future life the greatest of all boons; to be born as a great man at the time the Buddha will return'. The spiritual inequality of men and women was also emphasised in religious commentaries. Although images of grotesque women's bodies are a continuing theme in post-Aśokan Pali literature, B.J. Terwiel has argued that the misogynist element in two important Theravāda texts in Southeast Asia is actually stronger than the Indian or Sri Lankan versions on which they drew. The Lokapaññatti, a Pali treatise on the nature of the world composed or compiled in Burma around the eleventh century or later, and the better-known Traibhūmikāthā by the Sukhothai ruler Lu'Tai (c. 1347 – 74), both see women as 'corrupted beings' born into an inferior state because they were consumed by material and sensual desires in their past lives.

In explaining the appeal of Theravāda in early times, historians have not felt it necessary to address the apparent contradiction between the touted 'high status' of Southeast Asian women and their acceptance of a belief system that apparently condones religious inequality. Anthropologists, however, have long been preoccupied with the contrast between gender constructions in Theravāda commentaries and actual practices in contemporary societies. While differing on some issues, most scholars agree that ceremonies associated with Theravāda accord mothers a special place, and that positive images of motherhood are fostered by images projected in village 'texts' – sermons, folk operas, courting songs, agricultural rituals and myths. It is not just that the maternal experience is valorised by popular religiosity; more to the point, it is a role that is expected of and reached by the overwhelming majority of women. The mother-child bond, most clearly manifested in a woman's relationship with her son, also forms a direct link with the Buddhist establishment. When a boy enters the monastery as a novice, the

30 Frank Reynolds and Mani Reynolds, Three Worlds According to King Ruang (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1982), p. 132. This work is attributed to the King Lu'Tai and is commonly dated to 1345, although Michael Vickery argues that it was compiled later, during the Ayutthaya period; see his 'Note on the Date of the Traibhūmikāthā', JSS, 52, 3 (1974): 275 – 84 and 'On Traibhūmikāthā', JSS, 79, 2 (1991): 24 – 36. The Lokapaññatti (mentioned in the Traibhūmikāthā) is believed to have been written by Saddhamaghosa of Thaton, possibly based on a Sanskrit original; John Strong dates the text to the eleventh or twelfth century, Steven Collins to the fourteenth. See Strong, The Legend and Cult of Upagupta, p. 12; Steven Collins, Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 321; and Reynolds, 'A Nineteenth-Century Thai Buddhist Defense', p. 930.
31 A summary of the extensive literature is in Swearer, The Buddhist World, pp. 152 – 4.
merit accrues to his mother, and this rite of passage thus stands as a public acknowledgement of the lifelong obligation he has incurred. Before his ordination, chants proclaim the debt a Thai youth owes his mother, extolling her selflessness in enduring the pain of childbirth and nurturing him thereafter and presenting his entry into the monkhood (Sangha) as kha nom, the price of milk. In Burma a boy’s shin-byu receives considerably more attention than his later ordination as a monk. Informants told Melford Spiro that ‘among all types of da-na [gift-giving, generosity] ... the shin-byu is the noblest’, conferring the greatest amount of merit. Even so, a novice’s debt to his mother remains so great that the shin-byu can repay her for the milk he drank from only one of her breasts. In reminding the community that the Sangha’s gain means a mother’s deprivation, such practices render the maternal relationship and the debts it encodes integral to the practice of Theravāda. The converse side, of course, is the knowledge that even parental loss is temporary, since the Sangha in Southeast Asia has long countenanced short-term ordination. Whereas in Sri Lanka a man who has left the order is usually the target of criticism, in Southeast Asian societies even a former novice is respected for his religious experience. This movement of men between the family and the Sangha remains immensely significant in maintaining ongoing links between monks and laity.

Anthropological research provides a useful departure point for the historical exploration of gender in Southeast Asian Buddhism, since the heavy emotional weight invested in the mother–son relationship obviously draws on a deep cultural underlay. In a lecture given in London more than forty years ago, Paul Lévy speculated that the public lamentations of a Lao ordinand’s mother on the eve of his departure for the monastery were ‘the remains of a very ancient ritual’ that had been incorporated into Buddhist practice. More recently, François Bizot has described certain Cambodian practices that conceptualise a neophyte’s entry into the monastery as a return to the womb of the August Mother, Mahāmâyā (the mother of the historical Buddha), which will enable him to be symbolically reborn in a purified state. Manuscripts still housed in a number of Khmer vat (temple-monastery), presumably reflecting much older beliefs, equate the monk’s waist belt with the umbilical cord, the cloak with the caul and the robe itself with the placenta. An appreciation of these cultural underpinnings may provide a key to understanding why Theravāda Buddhism was so readily accepted by Southeast Asian women.


**Women and Dāna in early Theravāda Buddhism**

From the late eleventh century the pace of Theravāda’s expansion in mainland Southeast Asia quickened because of stronger shipping links between Sri Lanka and major centres in modern Myanmar and Thailand. Consequently, religious exchanges also began to expand.\(^38\) As a number of scholars have shown, the depth and nature of these connections have important implications in any discussion of Southeast Asian responses to Theravāda Buddhist teachings. One significant effect of improved communications was the opportunity for an increasing number of Southeast Asian monks to study in Sri Lankan monasteries. Here they were exposed to a more rigorous religious training which required a knowledge of Sanskrit and more particularly Pali so that canonical texts could be read in what was believed to be the original language.\(^39\) The rapid movement of imported ideas into Southeast Asian societies has been seen by some as a regional hallmark, and Wyatt’s recent study details the striking advance of Pali among Tai states, where it was evidently being used in religious contexts by the first half of the twelfth century.\(^40\) In the mid-fourteenth century Lu’ Tai’s *Traibhūmiṇikāthā*, composed in Thai, includes an impressive list of over thirty texts in both Pali and Sanskrit that provided the basis for its explanation of Buddhist cosmology.

While it is hard to overestimate the importance of Pali in providing access to internationalised Theravādin scholarship, the linguistic environment of Sri Lankan monasteries at this time was highly eclectic. Among scholars, fluency in six languages was considered a highly desirable accomplishment,\(^41\) perhaps reflecting a new monastic emphasis on the use of the vernacular as a means of conveying supralocal religious and cosmological concepts. Though in keeping with wider trends in South and Southeast Asia, this had particular relevance in Sri Lanka.\(^42\) Sinhalese certainly had a long literary history, but the association between religion, language and identity was sharpened at the end of the twelfth century as Buddhism was rebuilt after a long period of occupation by the South Indian Cola dynasty. Reaching out to the laity was evidently part of a rebuilding process that ultimately led to a much stronger sense of Sinhala identity, encompassing ordinary people as well as rulers.\(^43\) As Charles Hallisey has shown, from about 1000 CE a number of didactic works in Sinhalese were produced by Sri Lankan monks for the guidance of lay people so that they could be more effectively integrated into the Buddhist community. A specific message concerned the value of *dāna* (generosity), foremost among Buddhism’s Ten Virtues, and the benefits resulting from


\(^42\) Sheldon Pollock has postulated that during this period older ‘empires’ in South and Southeast Asia were devolving into ‘vernacular polities’ that tended to coincide with language or culture areas (‘The Cosmopolitan Vernacular’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57, 1 [February 1998]: 31).

offering gifts such as food, drink, robes and flowers to the monastic order. This new emphasis on dāna as an inseparable aspect of religious devotion (pūjā) and as a principal means of making merit was important because it enabled ordinary people who had no expertise in spiritual matters and were ignorant of text-based knowledge to become participants in religious rituals. While any donation to the Sangha was a demonstration of religious piety, the benefits of dāna were incremental, for the constant giving of even humble gifts meant an accumulation of merit that could eventually lead to enlightenment (nibbāna).

An intriguing aspect of this religious reformation in Sri Lanka was the identification of women as a potential target, possibly reflecting a desire to promote the Upāsikā, the devout laywoman, in preference to nuns, the last reference to whom comes in the tenth century. One Sinhala text notes that among the beneficiaries of stories which clarify Buddhist teachings and which are ‘written in one’s own language’ are well-born women who can now ‘read as they wish among themselves.’ It is tempting to suggest that one woman who may have been exposed to this new literature was the Sinhalese princess Vatānsikā, who came to Pagan as a principal queen of Narapatisithu (1174 – 1211). But the monks who arrived with her would certainly have acted as a vehicle for Sri Lankan influence, and in Pagan this period saw the development of a separate nikāya, the Sihalasanga, which was strongly oriented towards Sri Lanka. The promotion of such links also involved high-ranking Southeast Asian women. The queen mother in fourteenth-century Martaban, for example, endowed a monastery in Sri Lanka, where her teacher received his religious training; a queen of Keng Tung in the Shan highlands similarly acted as patron to a monastery whose abbot had been ordained in a reformed Sri Lanka nikāya. In light of the continuing Sri Lankan ties, an apparent reference to the story of the compassionate monk Phra Malai in a 1201 CE inscription from Pagan merits attention. Not only is the sutta of Phra Malai, which became one of Southeast Asia’s core Buddhist texts, considered to have Sinhalese origins; in depicting dāna as the principal means of merit-making, it emphasises the great rewards awaiting those who faithfully perform their devotional obligations.

The importance attached to dāna has particular relevance for explaining the attraction which Buddhism held for women, for through the presentation of offerings they could accrue merit which would not only make possible a higher rebirth, but even improve their lot in this life. In Lu-Taits cosmology, the Traibhāmikathā, the idealised

48 Bonnie Pacala Brereton, Thai Tellings of Phra Malai: Texts and Rituals Concerning a Popular Buddhist Saint (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 25 – 45, especially pp. 38 – 9. Phra Malai visits hell, where the denizens of hell, hoping to be reborn in heaven, plead for their relatives to make merit on their behalf. In Tavatimsa heaven, whence he also travels, Phra Malai sees that heavenly beings are often ordinary people who have made merit through dāna.
49 C.E. Godakumbura presents a twelfth-century text of stories of good men and women who had performed meritorious deeds that would enable them to gain riches in this world, as well as higher rebirth; see his Śāducaritodaya: An Unnoticed Pali Poem, Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Centenary Volume 1845 – 1945, new series, 1 (1950): 95 – 103.
women of Uttarakuru (the northern continent of the Human World), have acquired such merit that they 'never suffer any labour pains' when giving birth.\(^{50}\) The supplications of well-born women attest their belief in the benefits that will come to those who conscientiously undertake meritorious acts. In donating lands and gardens to a temple, a thirteenth-century Pagan queen thus prays that in future existences she might have 'happiness, luxury and wealth, better than the average person'. Should she be reborn as a\(^{51}\) nat, 'I wish to have long life, to be free from illness, have a good appearance, melodic of voice, good figure ... whenever I am born, I wish to be fully equipped with \(\text{dāna}\), precepts, faith, wisdom, nobility ... and not know a bit of misery.'\(^{52}\) In 1399 a queen mother of Sukhothai similarly offers up her\(^{52}\) pūja, expressing the hope that by plunging 'into the cool ocean of \(\text{dāna}\)' she has ensured 'no other will be my equal ... in beauty, renown, longevity or riches' in any existence.\(^{53}\) And while the wealth of queens and princesses meant they could become particularly generous donors, the examples of meritorious acts cited in a Pali text from Burma – sweeping a religious compound, cleaning the area around a\(^{54}\) cetiya (Buddhist reliquary monument), offering flowers, giving cloth to cover a\(^{55}\) cetiya – could be incorporated comfortably into the daily round of the poorest village woman.\(^{55}\) Although dating from the eighteenth century, a Thai version of the Phra Malai story encapsulates the expectations and hopes behind the continuing cycle of female merit-making. It explains that the beautifully robed and bejewelled women accompanying the Metteyya, the Future Buddha, were reborn into this celestial state because they had accumulated great stores of merit through their piety and through making daily offerings of cloth, mats, food, fragrances, and flowers to the Buddha, the \(\text{Dhamma}\) [Buddha’s teachings] and the \(\text{Sangha}\).\(^{54}\)

Theravāda thus entered Southeast Asia as 'lay-friendly', despite the monastic/lay hierarchy emphasised in its teaching. Soteriological notions attached to the accumulation of merit through gift-giving would have had profound resonances in societies where offerings to supernatural beings had long been part of domestic rounds. The remark that contemporary monasteries in northern Thailand seem 'preoccupied' with food should equally be considered in light of a cultural heritage where communal feasting was a significant component in village life. In its teaching that a monk must accept food cooked by any devotee, Buddhism stood as a dramatic departure from Brahmanistic notions of ritual purity. Since women – often the relatives of the monks themselves – assumed primary responsibility for food preparation, this type of merit-making became a distinctively female activity, and in the seventeenth century European observers specifically commented on the fact that it was women who fed the monks.\(^{55}\)

Because it was primarily through the \(\text{dāna}\) of devout \(\text{upāsikā}\) that monks were provided with food and clothing, women had a special part to play in the lay-\(\text{Sangha}\)

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50 Reynolds and Reynolds, \textit{Three Worlds}, p. 131. The idea that childbirth can serve as a gauge of female piety is also evident in the belief that a woman of inadequate merit is likely to experience a difficult labour (Hanks, \textit{Maternity and Its Rituals}, p. 61).
interaction. We should therefore not be surprised to find that Lady Ming, a well-born widow in fifteenth-century Sukhothai, gives particular emphasis to the donation of food when listing the numerous acts of merit she has performed as a lay benefactor. In her words, 'Because of our zeal we prepared food in great abundance (to place) in front of his lordship and all the monks, and we lifted up the food to present to them.'56 Furthermore, Lady Ming’s generosity could be placed in a continuum of religious ‘heroines’ who provided models of praiseworthy conduct and who were, like the hagiography of medieval Christian Europe, a product of popular beliefs and practices as much as of religious teachings. One such figure was Buddha’s wife, Yasodharā, who cooked the food which, as a Bodhisatta, he offered to the innumerable Buddhas who had gone before him and which made possible his own Buddhahood.57 Another was Sujātā, the daughter of a village chief, who presented the fasting Buddha with a dish of rice and milk, thus ending his period of extreme asceticism; she then became the first female lay disciple.58 Her actions found a highly receptive audience, and it has been said that for Buddhist laywomen generally the distribution of food to monks became ‘a supremely pious act of dāna’ of which Sujātā was a prime exemplar.59 In Southeast Asia the appeal of the Sujātā episode can be gauged in a variety of representations which range from Borobudur reliefs to a fifteenth-century Mon inscription.60 An illustration in a Burmese manuscript (parabaik) quite naturally depicts the offering of Thuzata (Sujātā) as if it occurred in Burma.61 The process of vernacular translation thus extended well beyond the written text, and generations of cultural memory are caught up in a classical Burmese poem in which a woman remarks, ‘I am preparing a broth of rice and milk, and am going to present it to the Buddha.’62

Similar comments could be made about merit-making and the donation of cloth in Southeast Asia. Weaving in this region has been a female enterprise since its beginnings around 2,500 years ago, and the gift of textiles was probably associated with life-cycle rituals from very early times. During Buddhist ceremonies women could offer their dāna in the form of cloth, cushions and pillows that had been produced by their own labour and were in that sense an extension of themselves.63 The occasion could be made even

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61 Patricia M. Herbert, The Life of the Buddha (London: The British Library, 1992), pp. 34 – 5; this manuscript dates from the early nineteenth century.
63 A donation of 400 pillows and robes, for example, is mentioned in one of Lu’Tai’s inscriptions (Griswold and Prasert, ‘The Epigraphy of Mahādharmarājā’, p. 158). On the Korat Plateau in northeastern Thailand women still give pillows they have made themselves to people in a superior position; offerings of pillows are thus made to the spirits and form an important aspect of merit-making
more meritorious when a particularly generous or costly gift was recognised by recording a donor’s name for posterity, like Mrs Kon who presented silk ‘to wrap sacred books’ and Mrs Sen, who gave a canopy.64 Collective female responsibility for textile production would also have been critical in the ‘maze of rituals’ that Wyatt believes were strengthening social bonds in the early Buddhist world. A Sukhothai inscription from the reign of Lu’Tai proudly documents the state welcome given a visiting monk, speaking of ‘veils of all colours’, draperies, and lengths of material that were laid across the road.65 Over six hundred years later such descriptions find echoes in a late nineteenth-century account of an ordination ceremony in Laos, where the women knelt in a row, spreading out their silk sashes on the path the monks would tread.66

Buddhist traditions associated with monks’ robes provide a very specific instance of the way in which cloth production linked lay women with the Sangha and the community. According to the Vinaya, the practice of women donating robes began when Visakhā, the epitome of the upāsikā, learned that the Buddha’s male followers had no spare robes. She requested permission to ‘bestow robes for the rainy season upon the Sangha’. The Buddha granted her request, and in so doing established the period for monks to collect or accept what were known as kathina robes.67 Held at the end of the rainy season, the kathin ceremony with which Visakhā was associated is mentioned in Pagan and Sukhothai inscriptions and in the fourteenth-century Traibhūmikathā.68 Canonical sources endorse this ritual as a merit-making opportunity of great importance to women, for in the words of one Jātaka text ‘chief among women she/Who gives an upper robe in charity/ She that gives pleasant things is sure to win/A home divine and fair to enter in.’69 And indeed, Visakhā was herself rewarded for her generosity by the respect of the community, and the birth of many healthy children and grandchildren.70

ceremonies (Gittinger and Lefferts, Textiles and the Tai Experience, pp. 19, 51, 96, 103 – 4). The same theme could be explored in Southeast Asia in relation to the ordinand’s alms bowl, which according to the Vinaya should be of earthenware. Pottery in Southeast Asia was largely, although not completely, a female domain, and it is possible that a mother or a mother-like relative produced a monk’s personal bowl. At the end of the nineteenth century in Burma one observer noted that the ordinand was asked to identify the accessories of ordination, the robes and bowl, as his own. In so doing he would have implicitly been affirming links with his mother (Lévy, Buddhism: a ‘Mystery Religion’, p. 19).

69 Horner, Women under Primitive Buddhism, p. 347, n 1. The Jātakas tell the stories of the Buddha’s former lives.
Given her place in the popular imagination, it is hardly surprising to find that Visākhā is among the women depicted on the famous murals of Wat Chetuphon in Thailand.71

Because the kathin ceremony came to signal the occasion when monks could return to lay life, it assumed a particular significance in the lives of Buddhist women. In a poem composed by a Burmese court lady, Ma Khwe (1781 – 1836), for instance, the festival of the 'monks taking robes' was one of the most important seasonal rituals.72 Furthermore, those most closely involved in the preparation of these offerings would have been a young man's close female relatives, particularly his mother. According to Burmese legend, Māyā, the mother of the historical Buddha, stayed up all night to weave him a robe on hearing he wished to become a mendicant.73 It is in this environment, indeed, that we can identify female agency in the Southeast Asian localisation of imported beliefs. For example, canonical references to the offering of cloth by the faithful for the Sangha's use, and the need for the robes to be finished for presentation at the kathin ceremony, apparently provided the basis for community rituals found in medieval Sri Lanka.74 In Southeast Asia it seems that the usual ceremony of donating yellow robes was called Cula-kathin, but a more difficult and more meritorious form was known as the Mahā-kathin.75 Surviving descriptions from Laos and Burma indicate that it had developed a particularly local flavour which may have been inspired by such stories as Māyā's dedicated weaving for her son. The object was for a group of women working together to spin, weave, dye, cut and sew the cloth in the span of a few days so that the robes would be ready to be donated to the monks. It was popularly believed that the common endeavour and group unity meant a magnification of the merit gained, which then accrued to the individuals involved. The benefits were considerable; as local Jātaka stories reminded listeners, householders who offer kathina cloth will never be reborn.

74 Mainstream traditions say that Māyā died shortly after the Buddha’s birth. The links between motherhood, cloth and Buddhism find a powerful symbolic statement in a Pali work, the Pāṇḍukāḷāṇisamsāna, which became popular in Southeast Asia and was typical of the extracanonical ānisamsa genre (telling the advantage of doing good deeds). Originally associated with the Pāṇḍukāḷikas, a group of ascetic monks prominent in Sri Lanka between the eighth and tenth centuries, the text recounts the story of a merchant whose daughter died giving birth to a still-born baby. Washed, dried and dyed, the first pāṇḍukālī, or robe of the ascetic Buddha, was in fact an expensive piece of cloth that had been wrapped around the dead foetus and afterbirth. According to this text, ‘The pāṇḍukālī robe is the best. It is while wearing it that the Buddhas have liberated all creatures…’ The Pāṇḍukāḷikas themselves were so honoured that robes and clothing were distributed to their mothers by Sri Lankan rulers and other notables; see Wilhelm Geiger, Culture of Ceylon in Mediaeval Times (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960), p. 202; Strong, The Legend and Cult, pp. 71 – 2; G. Martini, ‘Brapaṇḍukāḷāṇisamsāṇi’, BEFEO, 60 (1973): 61, 71; and Gunawardana, Robe and Plough, pp. 41 – 4, 168.
into a low-ranking family, and will be assured of happiness, riches and fame.\textsuperscript{76}

This discussion is not meant to imply that emphasis on displaying devotion through \textit{dāna} was a preserve of Theravāda. However, it is significant that the Theravāda centres in Sri Lanka were encouraging \textit{pājā} through gift-giving at precisely the time when their religious connections with Southeast Asia were growing stronger. The familiarity of propitiating the supernatural linked highly local activities carried out in specific places and at specific times to a much larger religious culture that emphasised not only individual responsibility for performing \textit{dāna} but the benefits it could impart. In the words of a fifteenth-century inscription from the Shan kingdom of Keng Tung, ‘the \textit{upāsikā} Queen Siridigha . . . the capable lady who is named Rājamātā (royal mother), filled with faith, presented lands (to the monastery so as to earn) shares of merit . . . ’\textsuperscript{77} And although the wealthy always enjoyed advantages in the display of \textit{dāna}, all women, regardless of social status, could become participants in the merit-making cycle.

\textbf{The maternal metaphor in early Buddhism}

While Theravāda’s emphasis on the value of gift-giving provided opportunities for any woman to display her religious devotion, as mothers or future mothers individuals could equally identify with the maternal/nurture metaphor which also emerges in medieval Sri Lankan writings. This metaphor, of course, built on well-established antecedents. The ‘cult of the mother’ was strongly entrenched in early India, and a mother’s protective love had been held up by the Buddha as a kind of standard for the monk’s feelings toward the entire universe.\textsuperscript{78} But while a mother’s loving kindness is frequently invoked ‘as a paradigm for human relationships’ in Indian Buddhist literature,\textsuperscript{79} the metaphor was especially evident in Sri Lankan texts, where the association between the Buddha and an individual was conceptualised in very personal terms. In the words of one well-known work, ‘One should go for refuge to the Buddha saying, “I go for refuge to my immortal noble mother... ”’\textsuperscript{80} It might even be said that supportive relationships between child and parents, and especially between a son and his mother, were depicted as essential for progression along the spiritual path. In Sinhalese


\textsuperscript{80} Hallisey, ‘Devotion in the Buddhist Literature of Medieval Sri Lanka’, vol. I, p. 117.
traditions, for example, the story of the Buddha’s past existences commences ‘with a life in which he formally begins his career as a Bodhisatta by receiving it as a blessing from his mother’. A text composed around 1400 shows how the future Buddha ‘practised the virtue of looking after his mother’, even saving her life when the two are shipwrecked at sea. Still today, according to Gombrich, a common Sinhalese saying is Ammā gedara Buddun, ‘the mother is the Buddha of the home’.81

The mother-nurture theme that emerges in Buddhist writings, especially those from Sri Lanka, may cast some light on the appeal of Theravāda in early Southeast Asia, where the mother–child link was well established as a vehicle for religious symbolism. No student of history will forget that Ta Prohm was dedicated to the mother of Jayavarman VII (1178–c.1220 CE) who is venerated in the form of Prajñāpāramitā, the mystic mother of the Buddhas.82 Exploration of the ways in which the literary and visual iconography of maternal care was manifested in different Buddhist contexts awaits historical investigation.83 In the Southeast Asian context it is noteworthy that some of the earliest reliefs found in Myanmar, possibly dating from as early as the sixth century CE, depict the story of Máyā and the Buddha’s miraculous birth, an episode which has never lost its appeal to lay followers. In a society where a king could assert that ‘all women who are not old should have children’,84 gestation and parturition were infused with a highly charged symbolism that could generate its own allusions. Indeed, the editors of a Northern Thai chronicle written in Pali in the early fifteenth century have detected a deliberate parallel between the story of the pregnant Queen Cāmadevi’s arrival in Haripūñjaya, and the womb-like enshrinement there of a Buddha relic inside a cetiya. When she later builds a forest temple and provides the monks with food and drink, she becomes in sense a mother-surrogate as well as a merit-gaining donor.85

The mother-nurture theme in medieval Buddhist literature also merits attention because monks from Southeast Asia who studied in Sri Lanka initiated the translation of Pali and Sinhala texts, and themselves provided vernacular commentaries.86 As Sheldon

83 For instance, between the seventh and thirteenth centuries a common topic in Chinese Buddhist writings on family relationships is a son’s indebtedness to his mother because of her ‘kindnesses’, particularly giving birth and breast-feeding. In seventeenth-century Vietnam images of a mother’s self-sacrifice and the obligations thus incurred by her children were used by early missionaries in their explanations of a Christian’s duties. The notion that merit-making can save relatives from hell exemplified in the Phra Malai legend also has parallels in the Chinese story of Mu Lian. However, a significant difference is the Chinese view that motherhood is inseparable from sexuality and pollution, and that a son has the obligation to redeem his deceased mother from hell, where she has been consigned as a result of her own desires. Victor H. Mair, Tun-Huang Popular Narratives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 87 – 121; compare Alan Cole, Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 133, 176 and 232, with writings by Alexandre de Rhodes cited in Peter C. Phan, Mission and Catechisis: Alexander of Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam (Maryknoll, NY: Orvis Books, 1998), p. 220.
84 Reynolds and Reynolds, Three Worlds, p. 115.
Pollock has shown us, thinking about audiences located in a different geocultural space was intrinsic to this linguistic transmission and the choice of appropriate literary languages. Comparison of works from Southeast Asia with their Pali and Sri Lankan prototypes thus has the potential to reveal small but significant additions or deviations. For example, the sixteenth-century *Jinakalambalpakaranāth* ("The Sheaf of Garlands of the Epochs of the Conqueror"), written in northern Thailand, adapts Pali and Sinhalese material to provide a verisimilitude that reflects important connections between the text and its audience. As in a Sinhalese recounting, the Bodhisatta's mother is directly involved in his spiritual journey, for she is part of the 'first arousing of thought' which leads him on the path to Buddhahood. However, in the Sinhala version the Bodhisatta is depicted simply as a poor man who cares for his mother, but in “The Sheaf of Garlands’ he supports his mother by collecting firewood and leaves from the forest. His whole purpose of going to ‘the Land of Gold’ (Suvannabhumi, often identified with lower Myanmar) was to ensure that his mother would not be in want. The frequency with which this theme occurs is summed up in one Thai text, which simply notes that it is ‘customary’ for a Bodhisatta to show gratitude towards his mother.

Against the background of expanding vernacular usage, the fact that ‘The Sheaf of Garlands’ was composed in Pali deserves comment. The choice of a language that could reflect local inflections and pronunciation and yet remain accessible to scholars from Pagan or Sukhothai or Luang Prabang suggests that the author was cognisant of the linguistically diverse environment in which the itinerant monk operated. In the second place, the use of Pali highlights the intermediary role of monks, whom Cœdès saw as a key factor in the popularisation of Buddhist doctrine. It was their linguistic skills that provided a conduit for the elucidation of Buddhist teachings to a lay audience for whom Pali was unfamiliar and who yet believed communication with the Buddha could best be achieved 'by addressing Him in His own language'. The monk–lay connection would have been especially influential in the period under discussion, when Theravāda in Sri Lanka was invoking the nurturing role of mothers as a religious metaphor, and when this influence was extending into a Southeast Asian environment where motherhood had a high place. There seems little doubt that monks were fully aware of their female listeners. Inscriptions repeatedly affirm the presence of devout laywomen in communal ritual and in Buddhist congregations; the story of Queen Cāmādevī of Haripūñjaya was accordingly intended to 'enlighten the mind and kindle the interest' of women as well as men. In 1720 a French missionary remarked that a group of Thai women listening to a monk reading 'a book of fables' were so engrossed that they did not notice him enter the monastery's teaching hall, in contrast to their 'less assiduous' husbands who whiled away the time outside. Indeed, the women may have had a vested interest in this recitation, for

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91 Swearer and Sommai, *Legend of Queen Čāmā*, p. 44; Brereton, *Thai Tellings*, p. xxi.
according to the same source, villagers who sponsored readings by monks were also involved in selecting the subject. 

It is likely that the most favored presentations consisted of Jātakas, stories of the Buddha’s former lives, which have long been the foremost illustration of the Buddha’s teaching and an index to appropriate action in this existence. 

Undoubtedly the most popular of these was the Vessantara Jātaka, which recounts the penultimate incarnation of Gotama Buddha. The story of how Prince Vessantara gave away all his possessions, including his wife and children, in his passage towards Buddhahood is at least as familiar to Theravāda followers as the Buddha’s own biography, and sometimes more so. In Southeast Asia its prevalence in the mental world of Theravāda Buddhists was intensified because Vessantara-like figures recur in several of the Paññāsā-Jātaka, locally composed stories which had the same force and authority as canonical Jātaka. 

Although one must be cautious in assuming that projections of religious ideals necessarily bear directly on human behaviour, the rendering of beliefs through images, whether written or visual, spoken or heard, lay at the core of the imaginaire of Southeast Asian Buddhism. The murals, statues, banners and paintings that surrounded listening audiences were intimately related to textual recitation and monastic exposition. 

Like the physical presence of relics, the tangibility of text and depiction interacted with the immediacy of sound to relocate Buddhist teachings, confirming their pertinence and applicability through a cultural osmosis that blended ‘reality’ and ‘representation’. 

This convergence of sense helped make stories like that of Vessantara so familiar that they could be appreciated even when presented in a language other than the vernacular. Listening to Pali, for instance, was extremely meritorious but the very likelihood that textual recitations were often incomprehensible allowed audiences even greater rein to localise, arrogate and at times enact their imagery. 

The inscription left by a leading monk in Sukhothai in fact records that his own religious life had been inspired by that of Prince Vessantara. In his eagerness to attain nibbāna, he too had given away his dearest

94 K.R. Norman, Pāli Literature (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), pp. 177 – 8; Horner and Jaini trans., Apocryphal Birth-Stories. The Paññāsā-Jātaka appear to have been first written down in Chiang Mai, from whence they were carried to Burma; the Khmer collection differs in arrangement and content from the Burmese and Thai versions.
95 A report from Laos in 1930, for example, describes the recitation of the Vessantara Jātaka which took place in a temporary structure decorated with cloth paintings depicting scenes from the story (S. Karpèles, ‘Chronique: Laos’, BEFEO, 31 [1931]: 332).
97 In 1865 King Mongkut commented on the fact that Thai monks could chant the Vessantara Jātaka in other styles ‘such as that of the Lao, Mon, Burmese and Khmer’ (quoted in Terry E. Miller, Traditional Lao Music: Kaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand [Westport, CT/London: Greenwood Press, 1985], p. 38).
possessions, and had 'adorned his wife and two daughters splendidly, putting gold [bracelets] on their wrists and rings ... and offered them as a gift to whoever came and asked for them, because of his great [faith?].'98

If we accept that individuals could appropriate all or parts of the imagined world into their own 'world system', the Vessantara Jātaka should be of particular relevance to historians of gender. Although the theme is the importance of unqualified dāna, it is firmly located within the family, and the translators of the oldest surviving Pali text are probably right when they speculate that 'women formed the great majority of most audiences.'99 When the widow Lady Ming had her meritorious acts inscribed on stone, the fact that she and her late husband had listened to a recitation of the Vessantara Jātaka was specifically mentioned, and an inscription of 1,536 notes that Mrs Sen commissioned a copy.100 Such references may themselves contain a sub-text. In a region where families could easily disintegrate through illness, death or capture in war, sorrow was part of the human condition; a woman who lost a child, however, experienced a very particular poignancy. The hope of recruiting supernatural assistance to ensure maternal and infant well-being is suggested by the fact that the most common image found among Thailand's famed Sawankhalok miniatures, dating from between 1350 and 1500, is that of a woman holding a child.101 It is thus not difficult to imagine that women would empathise with the grief of Vessantara's wife Maddi after her husband gives away their children to serve an old Brahmin, and equally rejoice when they are restored to her. Like the Rāmāyana in India (and indeed, in Southeast Asia), the Vessantara Jātaka came to occupy far more than a literary space.102 It became 'real' and 'alive' because its symbolic trajectories were propelled by the lives of ordinary people, and the popular appeal of what is commonly termed the 'Great Jātaka' is attested by the range and variety of its representations. In the reliefs along the walls of Pagan's eleventh-century Ananda temple, for example, we find scenes such as Maddi's agonised search in the places where her children had played, her distraught discovery of their toys, and the family's joyful reunion.103

The message of the Buddha's loving relationship with his family continued to exercise a powerful hold on conceptions of ideal human relationships as Theravāda

98 A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, 'King Lödaiya of Sukhodaya and his Contemporaries. Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 10,' JSS, 60, 1 (1972): 118.
99 Cone and Gombrich, Perfect Generosity, p. xxi; G.H. Luce, 'The Jātakas at Pagan', JBRJ, 58, 2 (1975): 231 – 3. It was commonly believed that those who listen to the Vessantara Jātaka would be reborn in the time of the Metteyya, the Future Buddha. Collins draws parallels between the values of renunciation, Buddhahood, seasonal fecundity and rebirth that provide a context for the recitation of the Vessantara Jātaka (Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities, pp. 43, 376).
100 Griswold and Prasert, 'Inscription from Vát Hin Tán', p. 72, and 'Inscription of Vát Khema', p. 138.
102 Pollock argues that in India the cult of Rāma can be traced to specific circumstances in the twelfth century when Hindu kings saw in the Rāma-Rāvana struggle a parallel to their own conflicts against the Turks (Sheldon Pollock, 'Rāmāyana and Political Imagination in India', Journal of Asian Studies, 52, 3 [May 1993]: 263).
Buddhism confirmed its dominant position in mainland Southeast Asia. A poem in Pali written in Burma sometime in the fourteenth century links mother, father and teacher with the Three Noble Jewels (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha): ‘To these Six with pure faith/Respectfully having paid homage.’ It is quite understandable that when one Mon ruler planted a sacred bō tree he erected ‘a statue of the exalted mother of the Buddha’ and another of the Buddha’s father. In medieval China Alan Cole views the Buddhist discussion of family matters as part of a sustained effort ‘dedicated toward locking the family and the Buddhist monasteries into a symbolic relationship.’ In this sense, both the Buddhist state and Buddhist teachings in Southeast Asia were also deeply implicated in the inculcation of ideas that underlay what European historians have seen as the ‘invention’ of the family.

In the traffic between the religious imaginary and the social realm, however, it was the mother–child bond which received particular emphasis. According to early Thai medical texts, even an unborn child was aware that much was owed to a mother’s kindness, and that birth carried with it the inescapable duty to demonstrate gratitude. The motif of maternal protection and sacrifice is also evident in popular literature, like the Lilit Phra Lo, an epic Thai poem conventionally dated to the fourteenth century; here, the hero says to his mother ‘Less than a wife is [sic] a hundred lovers,/ Less than a mother a thousand wives./ Hard it is to give birth and rear a child,/ To you, dear mother, so much is owed.’ Seeking a simile which could describe destitution and vulnerability, the Burmese court lady well known as a poet, Ma Khwe, summoned up the protective maternal relationship: ‘I am like a son separated from his mother, whom people persecute.’

A mother’s selfless care incurred lifelong obligations, and to treat her with anything other than the deepest respect was a sin of the greatest magnitude. Derived from the Buddhist canon but relayed though vernacular story-telling, the tale of the robber-murderer Angulimala provides a salutary warning. Had he carried out his plan to kill his mother, he would have been condemned to an endless cycle of death and rebirth and was only saved when the Buddha converted him before he could commit the act. In the same vein, the Phra Malai legend specifically warns its audience that mistreatment of a mother is tantamount to striking a monk. Those guilty will be reborn in hell, where they will suffer the most terrible agonies. ‘These warnings apply as much to the highborn as

106 Cole, Mothers and Sons, p. vii.
107 Mulholland, Herbal Medicine, p. 18.
108 Women in Thai Literature (Bangkok: Office of the Prime Minister, 1992), p. 70. We obviously have no figures for maternal mortality in early Southeast Asia. It is worth emphasising, however, that with every pregnancy a woman faced the real possibility of death. In England around 1600 it has been estimated that 1 in every 100 births resulted in the mother’s death (Dr Merry Wiesner-Hanks, personal communication, 3 May 2000).
109 Khing Mya Tchou, Les femmes de lettres birmanes, p. 42.
111 Bretenon, Thai Tellings, p. 58. In a Cambodian legend, a prince who unknowingly commits incest with his mother builds a stūpa as a means of expiating his sin; see Ashley Thompson, ‘Introductory Remarks Between the Lines: Writing Histories of Middle Cambodia’, in Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia, ed. Barbara Watson Andaya (Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai‘i, 2000), pp. 47 – 68.
to a village man. In another episode from the legend of Queen Cāmadevī, a king ignores the complaints of a woman whose son had rebuked her. She then appeals to the Earth Mother, who causes the king’s city to be destroyed.112

**The power of mother’s milk**

Mention of the powerful Earth Goddess serves as a further reminder of the contradictions inherent in representations of ‘femaleness’ in Southeast Asian Buddhism.113 In this often ambiguous iconography, where even the womb could be depicted as a place of foetal angst and discomfort,114 the most potent and unassailable symbol of protectiveness and loving kindness was that of a woman nursing a baby at her breast. While the offering of milk has a special place in Buddhist texts, where it is often associated with a gender-neutral moral goodness,115 in practical terms it was the quintessential symbol of motherhood. The kindness-milk-mother association would also have been highly significant in a context where all babies were breast fed, sometimes for several years. As Lu’Tai’s *Traibhāmikākhaṭā* puts it: ‘It is normal for people in this world, for the Bodhisattva, and for the animals, that once the newborn baby has left its mother’s womb, her love causes the blood in her breasts to become milk, and to flow out from her breasts so that the child can suck it and be nourished. This is characteristic of living things.’116

The imagery of maternal nurture could also be translated into powerful religious parallels. One early Pali biography composed in India around the first or second century BCE relates the life of Buddha’s aunt, Gotamī Mahāpajāpatī, who reared him after the death of his natural mother, Māyā. In a study of this text, Jonathan Walters has suggested that Gotami, the founder of the Buddhist order of nuns, is presented both as Buddha’s female counterpart and as his mother. Since she nurtured the Buddha’s physical body

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113 Imported from India, where it was particularly evident during the Gupta period (fourth–sixth centuries), the image of the Earth Goddess who witnessed Buddha’s enlightenment was localised in Southeast Asian iconography. Here she was said to have defeated the evil forces of Māra by wringing a flood of water from her hair (itself emblematic of fertility), a motif which is unknown in India. Khmer images have been dated to the later Angkor period, but the first known depiction in Southeast Asia is a Pagan bronze from the eleventh or twelfth century; Donald M. Stadner, ‘Pagan Bronzes. Fresh Observations’, in *The Art of Burma*, ed. Donald M. Stadner (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1999), p. 63. For Indian origins, see Janice Leoshko, ‘The Case of the Two Witnesses to the Buddha’s Enlightenment’, in *A Pot-Pourri of Indian Art*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1988), pp. 39 – 52; and John P. Ferguson, ‘The Great Goddess Today in Myanmar and Thailand: An Exploration of her Symbolic Relevance to Monastic and Female Roles’, in *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations*, ed. James J. Preston (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 286. I am grateful to Elizabeth Guthrie, who is working on the earth goddess, for information and helpful references.
115 In the Buddhist Utopia the suckling of children is quite separate from the possession of mammary glands. According to the *Traibhāmikākhaṭā* cosmology the moral perfection of the inhabitants of the northern continent, Uttarakuru, is such that babies can extract milk from sucking the fingers of passing men and women. In other local texts such as ‘The Sheaf of Garlands’ and the Burmese ‘Glass Palace Chronicle’, a holy man can similarly care for his children with milk that comes from his finger; Reynolds and Reynolds, *Three Worlds*, p. 132; Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities*, p. 322; Jayawickrama, *Sheaf of Garlands*, p. 98; Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce, *The Glass Palace Chronicle* (Rangoon: Rangoon University Press, 1960), p. 5; Van Esterik, ‘Nurturance and Reciprocity’, p. 40.
with her breast milk she greets him as his mother, and a son's indebtedness is conveyed in the final stanzas, when he praises Gotami's achievements while holding her corporeal relics in his hands. However, the text provides an intriguing twist to the mother–child imagery, for Gotami in turn worships the Buddha as the equivalent of her own mother because he has fed her with the milk of the Dhamma. In medieval Sri Lankan works the message is even more emphatic: 'the Buddha is like a mother; the Dhamma is like mother’s milk; the Sangha is like milk-drinking children.' Subsequent authors developed the conception further. Like a mother, says one eighteenth-century text, the Buddha gives his followers the draught of ambrosial milk, he carries them with the arm of compassion, he holds them on the hip of kindness, he proffers the breast of his sweet voice. It may happen that babies hit their mother with hand and foot and scold and abuse her, but the mother does not get at all angry but kisses and comforts [their] hands and feet, and...gives them delicious sweet milk to drink, and thus consoles them... Thus the jewel of the Buddha is like a mother to the inhabitants of the three worlds. It may well be possible to track more evidence of this Buddha–mother association in Southeast Asia. For example, one of the figures on the base of the famed sixteenth-century Anoma Buddha image in Mrauk-U, the ancient capital of Arakan, depicts a child nursing at its mother's breast as a reminder of the Buddha's maternal-like compassion.

Encoded in such metaphors was also a belief in the regenerative and healing power of mother's milk. The earliest extant Pali version of the Vessantara Jātaka, which served as the model for countless vernacular renditions in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, provides a graphic description:

And when Maddi saw the children in the distance and knew they were safe...she sprinkled them with streams of milk from her breasts... The children rushed up to her, and they too fell senseless on top of their mother. At that moment two streams of milk flowed from her breasts into their mouths, and if they had not received so much relief, the two children must have perished, their hearts parched.

Notions of the restorative power of mother’s milk appear to have struck a responsive chord in Southeast Asian societies. According to one scholar, this motif is absent in Indian prototypes but is very evident in Thai and Lao versions of the Rama Jātaka, still regarded as a sacred text and often chanted by monks during the Buddhist Lent. In the Lao text, the nine sons of Ravana's wife Suddo are healed after suckling her breast; in the
Thai version the wounded Indrajit is also restored after being fed mother’s milk. The same mode, a chronicle from northern Thailand describes how this source of extraordinary vitality enables the twin sons of Queen Cämadevi, though themselves still babies, to attack and defeat the enemy. Early Thai medical texts even identified the four types of wet-nurses whose breast milk is so infused with ‘medicinal properties’ that it is like ‘the nectar of the gods’, enabling a child to resist disease. It is against such beliefs that we should view reliefs on Pagan’s Ananda temple which depict the careful choice of sixty-four wet nurses for Vessantara. The conceptualisation of Buddhism as a nurturing religion where the faithful were ‘fed’ by the milk of the Dhamma would have been in complete accord with indigenous Southeast Asian notions that children owe a life-long debt to the women who suckled them. The belief that a real debt is owed is apparent in an inscription left by a Pagan ruler who ‘suckled at the breast of mother U Pon San’ and accordingly gave lands, attendants and cows to his wet-nurse ‘as the price of the milk I drank’. This reference serves as a useful reminder that the wet-nurse herself is symbolic of generosity, most evident in the devotion of the Buddha’s own foster mother, Gotami Mahâpajâpati. The Sinhala versions of Gotami’s life make this explicit: ‘In this birth you were not born from my womb, but I did the deeds of a mother for you with great love . . . [giving] the ordinary attention paid to a child that all mothers of the world give to all children.’ The thirteenth-century author of the Sinhalese text Buttsaranya thus found it appropriate to compare the Buddha with a wet-nurse ‘who saves her breast milk for the prince, though her own child cries’. Such images gave further support to the high position that wet-nurses already held in Southeast Asian cultures. A foster mother stood in the same relationship to a son as a birth mother, and while her milk could protect him from harm, her own character could be directly transmitted to those she suckled. It is hardly surprising to find that Queen Cämadevi’s story describes how a number are honoured in the palace, or that in Pegu in 1689 the most politically influential figure was the prince’s wet-nurse. The chanted version of the Phra Malai, which must have incorporated many older oral traditions, sees incest between men and their wet-nurses, as well as with their mothers, as a sign of the disappearance of Buddhism.

129 Brereton, Thai Tellings, pp. 104 – 5.
In the localisation of Buddhist traditions through story-telling, which became a prime vehicle for the transmission of religious-cultural mores, the life-long respect that a child should evince for a mother and mother-like figures such as the wet-nurse is a principal preoccupation. An intriguing example is a locally composed Jātaka modelled on the canonical Birth Stories which contain accounts of the Buddha's former lives. Called the 'White Crow Chronicle' (Tamnân Kâ Pu‘ak), it was customarily recited in northern Thailand and Laos during major Buddhist ceremonies such as the thêt mahāchât or preaching of the Vessantara Jātaka. In this story a white crow, the mother of the five Buddhas of this aeon, returns from seeking food to find her nest and five eggs swept away by a flood. In a manner reminiscent of Maddi's lament, she bewails the loss of her young and expresses her fears for their safety. Eventually she dies of a broken heart and is reborn as a prince in Suddhavasabrahma heaven.130 A hen, a cow, a female turtle, a nòga (serpent) and a washerwoman, individually finding one of the five eggs, adopt and lovingly rear the Bodhisattva who emerges from each. When the young men wish to become forest hermits, each foster mother bestows her blessing, thus helping to place her son on the path to nibbâna. Finally meeting in the forest, the Bodhisattas discover their common origin and are reunited with their birth mother. However, because they had been unable to serve her and repay the debt they owe for her 'boundless compassion', they decide to make replicas of her footprint so that they and others can pay their respects.131

Buddhism, motherhood and royal exemplars

Given a context where a more personalised association between the Buddha and the refuge-taker evoked the intimate relationship between mother and child, it is quite understandable that a ruler's compassion and kindness were often likened to maternal love. As kings sought to attain Buddha-like status – a notion quite acceptable in Theravāda tradition132 – chronicles of their reigns describe not only the manner in which they collected scriptures and white elephants and established stūpas, but their parental care and protection. In the famed Shwezigon inscription the Pagan king Kyanzittha (1084 – 1112) assured his subjects that he would feed them with rice and bread, and that 'the people shall be like a child that is in its mother's bosom', while Burmese chronicles depict kings as loving their subjects 'like their own womb-children'.133 In a similar mode, the ruler Alaunghpaya (1752 – 60) conveyed the disorder that preceded his reign by invoking the image of maternal separation found in the Buddha's own sermons, a time 'when mothers could not find their children, nor children their mothers'.134

130 The highest abode, inhabited by beings of very high spiritual qualities who have not yet gained full emancipation.
131 I am most grateful to Dr Swearer for allowing me to consult a draft translation of this chronicle, to be included in Donald K. Swearer, Becoming the Buddha: Image Consecration in Northern Thailand (forthcoming).
132 Gunawardana, Robe and Plough, p. 175. See, for example, the inscription of 1141 CE set up by Alaungsitthu of Pagan (1112 – 47), in which he hopes to model himself on Gotama Buddha and become a Buddha himself (G.H. Luce and Pe Maung Tin, 'The Shwegyugi Pagoda Inscription, Pagan, 1141 AD', JBRS, 10 [1920]: 67 – 74).
Representations of the mother–son relationship, which Bernard Faure has identified as a significant theme in the biographies of Buddhist monks in Japan, may well have a counterpart in the ruler-dominated Buddhism of Southeast Asia.\(^\text{135}\) If the king were a Buddha in the making, then by extension his mother was potentially the Perfect Woman, whose support was necessary in any great enterprise. In the words of a sixteenth-century Thai scholar, “The mother of the Enlightened One is neither wanton nor addicted to liquor; and she is one who has fulfilled the perfections for 100,000 aeons with no violations in the observance of her five precepts from birth itself.”\(^\text{136}\) And though the source material for Southeast Asia is far from rich, it does allow for glimpses of the emotional moorings of debt and obligation that were thought to anchor a son to his mother. Lu’Tai, for example, dedicated his *Traiphūnikāthā* to his mother, who was to receive all the merit acquired when he preached the Dhamma to her (as Buddha had done to his own mother).\(^\text{137}\) In the legend of Queen Cāmadevī, a Mon king similarly offers thanks to the *devas*, the guardian deity of the city, and the statue of his mother, all of whom assisted in bringing him victory in battle.\(^\text{138}\) Royal women were also participants in perpetuating the mother–son imaginary, in which they had a vested interest; Buddha's sermon to his mother was among those episodes which a dowager queen in fifteenth-century Keng Tung chose to adorn a specially-constructed relic casket.\(^\text{139}\)

Some authorities have been sufficiently confident to suggest that this type of literary, artistic and performative representation – produced in particular communities at particular times – was not only localised but historically induced. For instance, one art historian has commented that the image of the Buddha walking, characteristic of Sukhothai art, was most commonly used in connection with his return after having preached to his mother in Tāvatimsa Heaven (second in the Buddhist hierarchy of six heavens). In her view, this is related to the importance of royal mothers in the political and religious life of Sukhothai during the fourteenth century.\(^\text{140}\) From this standpoint it is revealing that scenes showing the Buddha's birth and the Buddha preaching to his mother in Tāvatimsa Heaven are especially popular in Thai monasteries and temples, where women are often important donors.\(^\text{141}\)

Nor has the prominence of the ‘royal mother’ trope in Buddhist Southeast Asia been lost on scholars who have used early inscriptions and court chronicles to reconstruct chronological histories. Emmanuel Guillon, for instance, believes that the Yangon area was traditionally the appanage of the queen of Pegu, since an inscription of 1448 mentions the name of each queen (more often a queen mother) who had previously restored or embellished the Shwedagon pagoda. He takes this line of thinking further, suggesting that when Mon kings used the title *Bañā* (normally given to a crown prince), it was a formulaic statement that they were ruling in the name of the queen mother, even though they themselves were actually the reigning monarch.\(^\text{142}\)

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137 Reynolds and Reynolds, *Three Worlds*, pp. 46, 349.
139 Griswold and Prasert, ‘Inscription from Keng Tung’, p. 84.
cakkavatti-type titles included ‘Mistress of the White Elephant’, apparently shared power with her religious teacher and son-in-law, the future king Dhammaceti (1472 – 1492). As late as the eighteenth century, Burmese law codes still stipulated that the chief queen was expected to help her son in administration should the ruler be away from the capital.

Although the dearth of sources means it may never be possible to track the ‘royal mother’ theme in a sustained context, this cumulative evidence, even if scattered, may yet open up interesting lines of inquiry. At the very least it can provide some corrective to the privileging of males in Southeast Asia’s political life. As elsewhere in the region, for instance, senior women were often recruited as adjudicators and mediators in state affairs. A fragmentary text from Cambodia dealing with the years 1575–1618 thus accords the women of the Khmer royal family, especially the Queen Grandmother, sole credit for resolving the political crisis of the 1590s. After five weak kings followed each other in rapid succession, the royal women were instrumental in bringing Baromreachea VII (Srei Soriyopor, r. 1602 – 19) to the throne. From these and other episodes one can justifiably infer that a mother’s support was often critical when a prince’s succession to the throne was in dispute. By the same token, withdrawal of that support could spell the end of his chances, even when the mother was a woman of lesser status. In another instance the decision of the ‘Siamese concubine’ of a deceased Khmer ruler to ally with her grandson rather than her son was instrumental in the latter’s downfall, and it is possible that she played a role in the Thai intervention in Cambodian affairs in 1452.

Permitting greater space to royal women in Southeast Asia’s political history should also serve as a reminder that the Theravāda world was finely nuanced there, in gender as in other matters. On the basis of available historical sources Wyatt has argued that the new and more inclusive Buddhism he has discerned during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was especially pronounced in the north of Siam beyond Phitsanulok. One could extend his argument further by suggesting that women in this ‘frontier’ area may have been particularly touched by the emphasis on ‘a simple, central idea of merit’ which could involve both individuals and communities. In the adjoining uplands the distinctive traditions of Northern or Yuan Buddhism are well recognised, but anthropologists working in this region have also been intrigued by the authority women exercise in the domestic sphere. Several studies have drawn connections between women’s status and the prominence of matrilineal spirit cults, which accord females a prominent ritual role in communicating with the supernatural world.

143 Ibid., pp. 171 – 2; Blagden, Epigraphia Birmanica, vol. IV, part 1, p. 42.
144 Royal Orders of Burma, AD 1598 – 1885, ed. Than Tun (Kyoto: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1983), vol. III, p. 64.
145 Kennon Breazeale, personal communication (20 February 2001), who kindly provided a summary of this Thai translation of a Khmer chronicle.
146 Wolters, ‘Khmer King at Basan’, pp. 74 – 5. Gervaise also mentions that a Cambodian king (apparently Chestha II, 1618 – 27) left his queen (a Vietnamese princess) in charge of a Vietnamese force sent to help him against Ayutthaya (Natural and Political History, p. 195).
148 Wyatt, ‘Relics, Oaths and Politics’, p. 47.
149 See the contributions to ‘Spirit Cults and the Position of Women in Northern Thailand’, ed. Paul Cohen and Gehan Wijeyardene, Special Issue of Mankind (14, 4 [1984]); Richard Davis, Muang Metaphysics: A Study of Northern Thai Myth and Ritual (Bangkok: Pandora, 1984), p. 26; and Rosalind C.
It may not be remarkable, therefore, that the presence of women in inscriptions and chronicles from northerly areas is particularly obvious. Although Angkorian influence is certainly apparent in thirteenth-century Sukhothai, migration from Chiang Mai and elsewhere would have meant continuing exposure to upland forms of social and political organisation that may help explain the prominence of royal women. As one authority remarks, '[In Sukhothai] it seems to have been the custom for a Queen Mother, no matter what the king's age, to take an active part in affairs of state.' For instance, in 1400 Lu'Tai's daughter, the widow of the previous ruler, is said to have joined with her son in a campaign to recover territory held by Ayutthaya. 'Bold and intrepid', they 'led the army forth to fight and marched over the territories of numerous rulers ... jointly they destroyed the host of their enemies.' Senior royal women, whose longevity and status affirmed their vast store of merit, are depicted as possessing a special capacity to tap spiritual powers. Further north, belief in the special powers of queens is even more evident. A chronicle from Chiang Mai, for example, describes how in 1443 the king 'sent a force headed by the queen-mother' eastwards to Nan, where she ordered her army 'to surround the city of Phrae on all sides'. The cannon could not be fired, however, until she had first made the appropriate offerings. Accordingly, the queen mother 'arranged offerings ... consisting of an albino buffalo, thirteen albino chickens, 13,000 ducks, and a cushion and mats, betel nut tray, water ewer, new pots, new bowls and new mats – the full set'. The cannon was effectively fired and the town surrendered.

The Northern Thai material also suggests that joint rule by mother and son, or prolonged female regency, was an accepted political pattern. The history of Chiang Mai records that when a hog deer and her child suddenly appeared out of the forest the king founded a city at the spot, decreeing that henceforth 'this domain will have as rulers a mother and a son'. Historical endorsement of such legendary claims surfaces in several cases, such as a fifteenth-century inscription which indicates that a queen mother acted as regent when her son, the Chiang Mai ruler, was a minor. Around 1500 the term Mahâ Thewî also appears in Northern Thai inscriptions, apparently referring to the chief queen or mother of the late king, or mother or chief queen of the reigning king. A newly translated text from the Lu kingdom of Chiang Kheng, on the Upper Mekong, records that on numerous occasions when the throne was vacant or when a ruler had unexpectedly died, it was the queen mother who took control of the country. Occasionally her position as caretaker became permanent. In 1612, for example, the Queen Mother was installed with all the appurtenances that would have been used for a king – the crown, the sword, the umbrella, the betel set, the drum, the set of clothing –

152 Ibid., p. 26, n 39; Andaya, 'Statecraft in the Reign of Lu Tai', p. 17, n 37.
154 Ibid., p. 41.
155 Taken from explanatory information in the Nan museum, November 2000.
and ruled until 1637.\(^{157}\) Thus, when a monk in the Chiang Mai chronicle predicts that a lady-in-waiting will be a queen mother, he is also foreseeing a day when she will wield great authority.\(^{158}\)

For a historian of gender this material becomes more important when juxtaposed with Wyatt’s view that the progress of Buddhism was ‘easier and more rapid’ in the north of Thailand than in the south. In this region, he believes, kings felt less threatened by the new Buddhist morality because the influence of the Hinduised Angkorian model was far weaker and there was less distance between ruler and ruled.\(^{159}\) If this hypothesis is accepted, one might then be encouraged to give greater attention to the religious activities of well-born women and to ask whether their involvement was also a factor in Buddhism’s ‘easier’ penetration into the northern region. Descriptions of the dedication of Buddha statues, the feeding of monks, the presentation of cloth and the building of monasteries testify to the public merit-making of royal mothers and aunts and other wealthy women.\(^{160}\) Possessed of riches and status because of their great merit in past lives, they were also well placed to ensure that they and those around them would also enjoy felicitous existences in the future. They represented, in effect, the realisation of the upāsikā’s possibilities, and as ‘royal patrons’ they must have provided persuasive role models.

At the same time, the maternal experience also linked elite females in a very personal way to women of ‘the humble classes’, for whom motherhood was an affirmation of their importance in the community. Indeed, the way in which Buddhism generally mined texts and legends for personalities and episodes that could be appropriated to encourage and support the childbearing role may well repay investigation.\(^{161}\) For its part, the Sangha accepted that conception and childbirth represented a unique female contribution to the religious life of the community, and the rituals surrounding a boy’s entry into the monastery provided an opportunity to recognise this contribution. In the process there was an implicit acknowledgement of a mother’s partnership with the Sangha, for the novice’s very immaturity meant that responsibility for nurturing, guiding and protecting him was now delegated to the monkhood. As an early Cambodia chbap (code of conduct) dating from the seventeenth century or earlier puts it: ‘Oh you novices, your mothers

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157 Even in 1863, when the ruler of Chiang Kheng suddenly died, his younger brother was only appointed in his place after the nobles had submitted a petition to the Queen Mother; Pierre-Bernard Lafont, Le Royaume de Lyôn Khèn : Chronique d’un royaume tay la du haut Mékong (XVe–XXe siècles) (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998), pp. 119 – 20; see also pp. xxi–xxii, xxv, xxvii, 106, 116, 165.

158 Wyatt and Aroonrut, Chiang Mai Chronicle, p. 68.

159 Wyatt, ‘Relics, Oaths and Politics’, p. 49.

160 For example, J.C. Eade, ‘The Mangrai Buddha Image of Chiang Mai: A Computer Assisted Reading’, JSS, 81, 1 (1993): 39; Penth, ‘Historical Notes’ mentions the king Phra Yo of Chiang Rai (1487 – 95) and his mother, both of whom were pious Buddhists frequently mentioned as religious donors (p. 181). Several inscriptions located in the museums at Chiang Saen, like that dated 1496 from Wat Prasart, also record donations to monasteries by queen mothers and their sons. The inscriptive evidence for merit-making by wealthy women in Sukhothai is examined by B.J. Terwiel, ‘The Urgency of Making Merit in Early Thai History’, forthcoming.

161 For example, following his conversion by the Buddha the disciple Angulimāla became a protector of pregnant women whose help could be solicited to facilitate an easier birth, and the chanting of one group of Pali texts associated with him was ‘specifically sanctioned’ to assist in a difficult delivery. The presence of his statue at Pagan’s Shwezigon pagoda indicates Angulimāla’s appeal (Strong, Legend and Cult, p. 241).
have put you under the authority of the teacher.' In effect, mother and Sangha had become allies in guiding a youth along the path to adulthood. This alliance between laywomen and the institutions of Buddhism was critical, for without the monkhood Theravāda could not survive. The religious rituals which marked important stages in the maturation of every young Buddhist male properly honoured his mother, serving as a reminder that it was she who had given him life, who had fed and clothed him, and who had now released him to depart on his spiritual journey.

Conclusion

As Cœdès noted more than five decades ago, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries mark a watershed in Southeast Asia, a primary reason being the penetration of Theravāda. Although there can be little doubt that this development helped to redirect the course of regional history, scholars are still seeking to understand the enormous and lasting appeal of this particular nikāya. The role of rulers and monks undoubtedly provides some explanation, but the privileging of male initiatives may well leave historians of gender dissatisfied. Despite inherent contradictions between the alleged ‘high status’ of women in Southeast Asia and their ambiguous position in Theravāda traditions, ‘female agency’ has never been an issue in the region’s religious historiography.

Drawing on the work of scholars who have studied medieval Sri Lanka, this admittedly speculative essay has tried to think about ‘female motivation’ in terms of the interaction between women and the Sangha. It began by suggesting that Theravāda Buddhism’s arrival in Southeast Asia coincided with far-reaching developments in Sri Lankan monasteries. The Sangha had always favoured the devout laywoman over the female ascetic, and it is hardly coincidental that the disappearance of full ordination for nuns was accompanied by a greater emphasis on merit-making or dāna as a manifestation of female piety. It was during this period, too, that the metaphor of the Buddha as mother and the valorisation of the maternal role emerged as a significant theme in medieval devotional literature.

Meanwhile, in their efforts to strengthen links with the community, monks also placed a new importance on the use of vernacular languages as a vehicle for the moral guidance of the laity. Moving into Southeast Asia at a time when its basic receptivity to lay involvement had been enhanced, Theravada Buddhism offered continuing opportunities for all women to acquire merit through gift-giving and thereby counter their relegation to an inferior position. Activities that were considered quintessentially female, such as preparing food and clothing, became a kind of religious currency that could be ‘exchanged’ for the expectation of future rewards, both spiritual and material. Applying the arguments of anthropological colleagues retrospectively, I see a long history in the interaction which they have identified between religion, motherhood, and nurture. Although Buddhism certainly projected varied and sometimes conflicting images of ‘femaleness’, I believe that the trope of motherhood was initially the most conspicuous, and that it was recognised and embraced by Southeast Asian cultures. Obviously, the elevation of the maternal role is only one of many possible factors that may have drawn women to Buddhist teachings. Yet it is

also apparent that the celebration of a mother’s selflessness became an identifiable element in Buddhist praxis which was made evident in the great merit-making act of presenting a son to the monastery. Reinforced by religious texts and their vernacular renditions, the mother–son relationship was most compellingly manifested at the highest levels of society. Sources from northern Thailand are particularly striking in presenting royal women as personifications of the potentiality of upāsikā religiosity. Though this would appear to affirm the place of the ‘royal patron’, I have also argued that the imagery associated with motherhood was unequivocally endorsed by the larger community. I realise that this claim for elite-village inclusiveness can elide very real variations in situation and condition, and that feminist interest in the historicisation of difference has pointed to the misconceptions that can arise from treating ‘women’ as an undefined social category. Nonetheless, despite its manifold environments, I remain convinced that the singularly female experience of giving birth is one linking strand that stretches across class and culture alike.

I have been mindful, however, of the need to locate gendered considerations in a wider framework if they are to make any impression on the historical enterprise. Although this essay has concentrated on Theravāda Buddhism, motherhood is among the most universal of human experiences; it was surely not without thought that a medieval Sri Lankan scholar referred to the ‘mothers of the world’.163 Comparisons of the ways in which the language and images associated with child-birth and child-nurture were parlayed into the actuality of human relationships across different cultures and belief systems offer a potentially rich field for historical investigation. Methodologically, however, this calls for an eclectic and interdisciplinary approach that moves beyond the archival confines within which so much historical research is conducted and accords serious consideration to the products of the imagination – art, literature, performance, crafts, folklore, oral traditions.164 Though undoubtedly yielding indispensable resources, the preoccupation with textual interpretation in religious studies has not always been in the best interests of gender history because the academic propensity for doctrinal classification – ‘Theravāda’, ‘Mahāyāna’, ‘Tantric’ – can mask important commonalities. The tendency to concentrate on the written word is particularly problematic in regard to pre-modern societies, where literacy was far less common among women than men. As yet dimly understood, the complex and indirect means by which illiterates accessed text-based learning and began to perceive themselves as part of a larger religious community have the capacity to reveal much about the acceptance and localisation of transcultural ideas. While it is likely that future research will affirm the influence of the elite in disseminating and legitimising new modes of thought, we must also be alert to the fact that the effectiveness of high-ranking exemplars was predicated on quite different assumptions about ‘being’ a woman and ‘being’ a man. It goes without saying that gender will provide a ‘useful’ perspective in comparative explorations of the historical processes by which the supralocal imagination is transmitted and re-contextualised.165