JGB

Journal of Global Buddhism 2020, Vol.21 71–86
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4030985
www.globalbuddhism.org
ISSN: 1527-6457 (online)
© The author(s)

Research Article

Following Feeling: Karma and the Senses in Buddhist Nuns' Ordination Narratives

Sara Ann Swenson
Syracuse University

In Vietnam, the decision for young women to ordain as Mahayana Buddhist nuns is navigated through careful interpretations of feeling. Nuns state their decisions to "go forth" (*đi tu*) in youth were precipitated by feelings of peace and comfort in monasteries even before they understood Buddhist teachings. Such feelings are interpreted as indicators of past-life karmic bonds, which create "predestined affinities" in this life (*nhân duyên*). Youth determine pre-inclination for monasticism early in life by reading their bodily reactions to Buddhist spaces with or without adults' assistance. Nuns reclaim local cultural concepts of femininity by declaring that women have special capacities for discerning these predestined affinities and that they must assume unequal monastic rules because of their innate gendered nobility. This article nuances understandings of women's agency in global Buddhism by exploring how Vietnamese nuns interpret local concepts of the feminine body as resources for pursuing Buddhist ordination.

Keywords: Vietnam; Buddhism; gender; nuns; ordination; agency; emotion

On October 9, 2018, fourteen Mahayana Buddhist nuns and thirteen monks gathered to support the novice ordination of a ten-year-old girl named Xuân.[1] The service was held at a small monastery on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Normally, Dharma Flower Pagoda was a modest, quiet space where four to six nuns managed daily chanting services, holiday events, and neighborhood charity activities. I had been visiting Dharma Flower regularly throughout the past year. Still, when I arrived for Xuân's ceremony, I failed to recognize the building through the abundance of decorations and the crowd. Buddhist flags veiled the gates. Saffron-draped tables made a banquet hall of the parking area. One of the nuns, Sister Radiance, spotted me wandering past and

[1] All names of people and places, aside from major metropolitan areas, have been changed to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0

waved me in.[2] Xuân was busy organizing chanting books. She stacked them in her arms until they reached her chin, then marched to the shelves behind the monastery's main hall to put them away. Her confidence revealed mastery of the space and routines of the pagoda. I was told her smile suggested the peace of "having predestined affinity" (*có duyên*) for monastic life.

In conversations throughout my fieldwork, nuns who ordained in youth consistently stated that decisions to "go forth" (*xuất gia*; also *đi tu*)[3] were navigated through careful interpretations of emotions and sensations to determine whether they had predestined affinity for monastic life. Nuns stated their decisions to go forth in youth were preceded by feelings of "peace," "contentment," (*yên bình, an lạc*) and "comfort" or being "at ease" (*thoải mái*) in Buddhist spaces even before an intellectual grasp of Buddhist teachings was possible. One nun asserted that women are more naturally sensitive to feeling and therefore have a unique capacity to determine having *duyên*. Her statement reclaimed a widespread cultural stereotype in Vietnam and many other parts of the world that females are less "rational" (*lý trí*) and more emotionally driven than men (Gammeltoft, 1999: 178; Soucy, 2012: 165).

Women typically assume subordinate roles in global Buddhist monasticism. This power discrepancy has drawn scholarly attention to gender and authority issues in Buddhism, resulting in numerous studies on Buddhist women's agency.[4] Some studies have shown how patriarchal elements of Buddhism compound and have been compounded by gender discrimination in other local cultural contexts.[5] By contrast, this article explores how sensing predestined affinity has served as a resource

---

[2] Monastics are given new names when they ordain. These names are chosen by their masters and usually have special significance designated for that monastic. I have chosen English pseudonyms that convey this style and meaning in monastic naming. Furthermore, in Vietnam nuns are often called *sư cô* or *ni cô*, which is shortened to *cô*. While this is the same word for "Aunt" or "Miss," Buddhists include other grammatic indicators of respect to indicate that the monastic *cô* is set apart. At risk of conflating Buddhist traditions with Christian traditions in English, I follow the scholarly norm in Vietnamese Studies of translating the monastic *cô* to "Sister," which reinforces the distinction of the monastic *cô* from other titular pronouns.

[3] While sharing their ordination stories, nuns used the terms *xuất gia* and *đi tu* to indicate the moments they left home and took novitiate precepts. These terms most closely translate to "exit the family" and "go [become a] monastic," respectively. The phrase *xuất gia* is translated into Vietnamese from the Sanskrit *Pravrajyā*, which, in turn, is often translated as "going forth." In keeping with emic Vietnamese terms for assuming monastic life, I use words for ordination loosely to refer to the initial vows monastic women undertook in becoming "novices" (*sa di*)—as in Xuân's case. Nuns who went forth as novices in youth later received formal monastic educations and took full ordination vows to follow the Mahayana Vinaya. In Vietnam, there are different categories of novices depending on the age and Buddhist education status of those ordaining (Hòa Thượng and Thích, 2011). The nuns I spoke with did not electively describe their formal ordinations, but instead reflected on their personal experiences in decisions to go forth. As such, rather than detailing specific ordination levels and requirements, this article also reflects nuns' experiential processes in discerning feelings of *duyên* for ordination.

[4] For examples of recent scholarship on this subject, see Kawanami, 2013; Langenberg, 2018; Mrozik, 2020; Rowe, 2017; Salgado, 2013. These studies all build on anthropologist Saba Mahmood's theorization of agency, "in terms of the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral actions" (2005: 29).

[5] For example, in her research on ascetic women in Tibetan Buddhism, Kim Gutschow shows how local concepts of gendered purity reinforced misogynistic Buddhist rhetoric, as womanhood was considered a karmically "inferior birth" (2004: 17, 199–201, 207, 255). Similarly in Unni Wikan's ethnographic research in Bhutan, Buddhist ideas about

for Buddhist women to practice agency in navigating youth ordination. I use theoretical approaches from intersectional feminist scholarship to emphasize that Buddhist nuns in Vietnam are not "powerless subjects" trapped under local and global gendered oppression, but are complex social actors reshaping religion and society through their participation (Mohanty, 2007: 340, 350–351).

In Buddhist monasticism, nuns are generally beholden to the "eight special rules" or *gurudharma* (Vietnamese: *bát kỉnh pháp/bát kỉnh giới/bát trọng pháp*). The *gurudharma* were legendarily established by Gautama Buddha during the creation of a women's monastic order (Falk, 1989: 159). The Buddha's queen aunt and stepmother Mahāprajāpatī (Vietnamese: *Ma ha ba xà ba đề*) was the first to appeal for women's ordination (Sponberg, 1992: 15–18). The Buddha conceded on the grounds that nuns adopt the *gurudharma*, which, among other stipulations, require nuns to defer to monks even of junior standing (LeVine, 2013: 15). The *gurudharma* are one of the most direct ways that "institutional androcentrism" has been systematized across Buddhist monastic orders, including in Vietnam (Sponberg 1992: 13). In his ethnographic research on Buddhism in northern Vietnam, Alexander Soucy has noted that "nuns are always subordinate to monks, always standing behind monks and never taking leadership roles in rituals" (2014: 344). Though the nuns I met in southern Vietnam held active leadership roles within their communities, hosted public events, and led rituals at their own temples, I also saw nuns consistently defer authority in the company of monks.

Buddhist studies scholars have critiqued these inequalities as causing a comprehensively negative impact on women in Buddhism.[6] Some nuns have also called for the *gurudharma* to be abandoned to promote women's equal authority in the sangha (Chen, 2011: 16). However, the nuns I spoke with in Vietnam sidestepped discussions about institutional gender roles altogether: they reframed the *gurudharma* as a sign of women's innate nobility, explaining that these rules associated all women with the royal status of Mahāprajāpatī and served as a reminder that women must overcorrect for their natural royal bearing to treat men as spiritual equals on the path of Buddhism. Identifying and asserting a sense of *duyên* for ordination was another way in which they employed local cultural understandings of female embodiment. These positions affirmed the value of women in Buddhist monasticism without directly confronting asymmetrical institutional gender hierarchies and behaviors. In this article, I focus on the role of *duyên* in ordination to show how nuns in southern Vietnam affirm a place for all women in Buddhism by recasting feminine emotional sensitivity as a spiritual skillset. A uniquely feminine capacity to sense *duyên* allows girls to determine having a predestined affinity for monasticism early in life. It later allows nuns to reflect on the sincerity of their motivations for ordaining.

---

karma were used to justify violence against women, as women were believed to be "nine reincarnations below a man" and therefore inevitably prone to greater suffering (2013: 215).

[6] For example, Nancy Auer Falk has argued that institutional gender inequalities, exemplified by the *gurudharma*, contributed to the short-lived nature of women's monasticism in many countries (1989: 160).

Methodology

This article is based on eighteen months of ethnographic research on contemporary Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, conducted from 2017 to 2019. My broader research during this time focused on Buddhist charity programs. I spoke with approximately four hundred monastic and non-monastic lay volunteers involved with twenty-five organizations, working closely with nine main groups. However, during weekly and monthly visits to several monasteries, I also engaged in conversations with resident nuns about Buddhist teachings and their personal lives as monastics. As such, this article reflects conversations with lay people participating in Buddhist charity organizations and monastics who were both involved and not involved with charities.

Throughout my fieldwork, I developed close relationships with sixteen Mahayana nuns at four different monasteries. I heard variations on their ordination stories through hours of casual conversations while traveling together, sharing meals, and discussing Buddhist texts and philosophy. Conversations occurred mainly in Vietnamese with occasional English. All of the nuns engaged with this study were part of Vietnam's Mahayana Buddhist majority and members of the Kinh ethnic group which constituted 85.3 percent of the national population (United Nations, 2019). I met nuns both through introductions from lay charity volunteers and fellow monastics. While nuns lived at different monasteries, many had attended Buddhist education centers together and knew one another. They maintained relationships across monasteries through personal visits, emails, phone calls, and social media.[7] The nuns and novices I spoke with spanned ages ten to sixty. Ten of the monastics I interviewed stated they had ordained as novices by age eighteen. Of these ten, all but two were also first-generation migrants to Ho Chi Minh City, having come from rural areas in the Mekong Delta (Long An, Tiền Giang, and Hậu Giang provinces), and central Vietnam (surrounding Huế). Their desires for monastic life usually began years before they could persuade parents and guardians to allow them to *xuất gia*—a word for ordination that means to "exit the family." The five nuns who joined monasteries after age eighteen said they wanted to ordain in youth but first tried nonreligious careers or attended college at their parents' request. Similarly, the five nuns who ordained at ages seventeen and eighteen had waited to finish high school as a concession to their mothers. Of the nuns who ordained before age eighteen, one went forth at age sixteen, one at thirteen, two at ten, and one at three. I analyze how these nuns described feelings of predestined affinity for monasticism as a significant factor in compelling and enabling their decisions to go forth.

---

[7] The data for this research best supported a close, in-depth qualitative study. Because I met nuns through a method of chain-referral introductions (Schensul et al., 1999: 240–242), I was not in a position to gather similar data from monastic men. Vietnam also has Theravada and *Khất sĩ* monastic orders not represented here. In the Mekong Delta, Theravada Buddhism is especially associated with enclaves of ethnic minority Khmer communities, like those in An Giang and Trà Vinh provinces. Subsequently, this article does not offer a comprehensive overview of monastic ordination experiences in Vietnam but instead contributes nuanced insights into how a small sample of Kinh Mahayana nuns emphasized the significance of feelings in their decisions to ordain.

Contexts of Youth Ordination in Vietnam

In southern Vietnam, youth ordination is considered common (Dharma, 2013: 154).[8] This popular perception is difficult to verify, as annual statistics on Buddhist ordination ages and numbers are not available. Several lay research participants suggested that state statistics about the overall number of monasteries and monastics are also not fully representative because they do not include informal, private, or unaffiliated monasteries (c. f. *Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam*, 2016). Some of this discrepancy is likely a byproduct of the state's regulation of religion. Registration and legal approval for religious organizations are required through the Government Committee on Religious Affairs (*Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ*).[9] Unrecognized, private, and informal religious groups do exist in Vietnam, but the nature of state religion policies makes it difficult to assess their numbers.

Even at monasteries affiliated with the National Sangha,[10] novices may not be officially counted until youth reach an age where they can legally begin Buddhist education. The Government Committee for Religious Affairs stipulates that monastics cannot begin the curriculum for "Buddhist primary school" (*cấp sơ cấp Phật học*) until age twelve. This "broad foundations" (*kiến thức cơ bản*) course varies by temple and usually lasts about two years, though the timeframe is not regulated. At age sixteen, novices can move to a regional institution to begin intermediate studies (*Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ*, no date). The flexibility of Buddhist education before intermediate level means that the status of youth novices is largely determined by individual monastery leadership—contributing to the lack of comprehensive statistics.

Definitions of "Fate" and "Predestined Affinity"

Among the lay and monastic Buddhists I met, feelings of attraction or repulsion were interpreted as indicators of "previous life" *(kiếp trước)* karmic bonds which shape predestined affinities in "this life" (*kiếp này*). Karmic bonds are created through relationships with people, places, and things. Whether positive or negative, I was often told that the strength of one's emotional reaction to something was an indicator of the extent or intensity of past-life exposure. When nuns are drawn to Buddhist monasteries in childhood, their families and supporting communities often discern that the child had extensive exposure to Buddhism in a previous lifetime. A "fondness for nuns, monks, and monasteries in small children" is similarly interpreted as "evidence of familiarity with monastic life from past incarnations" in Buddhist cultures beyond Vietnam (Tsomo, 2013: 59). In Vietnamese, this is called "having *duyên*."

[8] I make this differentiation because Mahayana Buddhist cultures and practices in northern and southern Vietnam are regionally distinct. For an overview of the regional history of Vietnam which has fostered these variations, see Taylor, 2013.

[9] The process of gaining legal recognition takes a minimum of five years, as most recently determined by the "*Luật tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo*" (Law on Belief and Religion), passed in 2016 (*Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ*, 2016). Under this policy, unrecognized religious groups can face fines, sanctions, detention of leadership, and other forms of police intervention (Bui, 2019: 157–158).

[10] I capitalize "Sangha" when referring to the official national organization. The word is not capitalized when referring to monastics generally.

The word *duyên* derives from the Mandarin Chinese term *yuán* or *yuánfèn*.[11] Among other renderings, *yuán* has been translated as "predestined affinity" (Chan and Lee, 1995: 96) and "pre-fated bond" (Fisher, 2014: 85). However, these terms shift slightly in a Vietnamese context, where the linguistic equivalent to *yuán fèn*, "*duyên phận*" or "*số phận*" is regarded as more of a fixed, astrological fate. By contrast, the *duyên* of *nhân duyên* is a mutable, relationship-driven bond that can change across one or many lifetimes. Everyone inherits a fated life at birth (*duyên phận*, *số phận*), but may transform these given circumstances through actions, relationships, and choices which affect and are affected by *nhân duyên*. *Nhân duyên*, in turn, can influence the more fixed *số phận* of a future birth. The concepts are separate but related, blending elements from Buddhism, folk religion, and astrology.[12] Hereafter in this article, *duyên* refers strictly to *nhân duyên*—the consequences of past-life relationships which cause predestined inclinations toward people, places, things, and preferences in this life.

In Vietnam, *duyên* is invoked in everyday conversations among lay and monastic Buddhists. Exclaiming "[we] have *duyên*!" is a way of expressing friendly affinity for a new acquaintance. This exclamation implies that both parties have a strong sense of connection from a past lifetime. Such bonds may turn out to be "beneficial, good" (*duyên lành*, *thiện duyên*)—through pre-inclinations to mutual support, love, and friendship, or "harmful, inimical" (*duyên nghịch, ác duyên*)—through pre-inclinations to jealousy, hatred, and rivalry. Having *duyên* is often spoken of as a karmic debt (*nợ*) to be paid across lifetimes. "Underpaying" or "overpaying" perpetuates the relationship into future lifecycles. I was also warned that pronouncements of having *duyên* might be insincere claims made with manipulative intentions such as financial gain. People can "create" new (*tạo ra*) *duyên* without "feeling" (*cảm thấy*) past *duyên*. To discern whether such exclamations were sincere, a shopkeeper who attended Dharma Flower Pagoda instructed that we must "see how we feel" toward the speaker. The term for "feeling" that research participants used was a verb—an act of perception which can also be translated as "experiencing" or "sensing." This term, *cảm thấy*, is made up of the roots (1) *cảm*, as in the nouns "emotion" (*cảm xúc)* and "physical sense" (*cảm giác*) and (2) *thấy* for "seeing" or "finding." To "see how one feels" is to discern and "find" feeling on a jointly physical and emotional

---

[11] Many Vietnamese Buddhist terms share linguistic roots with Chinese because of overlapping historical developments in Mahayana Buddhism across these regions. For analysis of other ways Vietnamese draws on Chinese language roots, see Phan, 2013.

[12] Tine Gammeltoft has traced how people in northern Vietnam accentuate the distinction between "fate" (*số phận*) and "laws of karma" (*luật nhân quả*) to dissolve implications of moral causality for children born with disabilities (2004: 143–145). Gammeltoft writes: "In contrast to karmic ideas, which are categorized as superstition, notions of fate are considered relatively respectable" (2004: 147). I did not find this distinction in my own research. Rather, the nuns and lay people I spoke with coped with the same issues of moral culpability in a perceived misfortunate fate by emphasizing how negative conditions were created by karma from past lives for which those born into present lives were blameless. The distinct differences among northern, central, and southern Buddhist practices in Vietnam may account for some of the variations between Gammeloft's research and mine. Furthermore, attitudes toward popular religion across Vietnam have changed rapidly amid ongoing policy reforms and economic development (Schwenkel, 2018: 528–529). These social and cultural changes may also contribute to general shifts away from concerns about superstition.

level. According to the shopkeeper, we can "feel-find" (*cảm thấy*) whether we have *duyên* for someone or something by paying attention to our emotions and sensations. These feelings also reveal the nature of past *duyên* as beneficial or inimical.

When I adopted the shopkeeper's interpretation too completely, a nun from a different pagoda encouraged me to remember that the nature of *duyên* can change. For example, inimical *duyên* can be converted to beneficial *duyên* through intentional kindness, acts of compassion, and creating merit together. Bonds of *duyên* can also "wear out" if not fueled or maintained (*hết duyên*), a reason sometimes cited to explain the end of a romance. Other times, *duyên* was invoked as a reassurance of the speaker's flexibility around uncontrollable factors like traffic and the weather: "*Tùy duyên,*" people would say, "It depends on *duyên.*" *Duyên* can be as mutable as the people and places it connects. I include these details to show that determining *duyên* is not a process unique to Buddhist monastics or to women. Rather, *duyên* is one culturally available resource for describing attraction to and repulsion from people, places, and things—including monastic ordination. Discerning the strength and nature of *duyên* is an important factor in the process of deciding when to follow its inclinations.

Feeling Before Knowing: Nuns' Narratives of Going Forth

The following stories show how determining *duyên*, while found through bodily emotions and senses, was often a process of group interpretation and debate. In some cases, parents helped children identify having *duyên* to go forth, while in other cases, children had to persuade and reassure parents of their predestined affinity for monasticism. Either way, nuns and novices sensed *duyên* to ordain as youth through a complex matrix of family and social dynamics. In Xuân's case, the ten-year-old's decision to go forth occurred in the context of a family tragedy with support from a monastic aunt. While watching a large crowd of lay women arrive for Xuân's ordination, I asked Sister Radiance which woman was Xuân's mother. Sister Radiance replied that no one from Xuân's family was present. The single mother could not arrange time to travel while caring for Xuân's three siblings. Instead, one of the laywomen would film the ceremony on her smartphone and send it to Xuân's mother over Facebook.

I first met Xuân at Dharma Flower Pagoda just a week before her ceremony. She had spent several months staying with her aunt, who was a nun in a nearby city. Unfortunately, her aunt's monastery was already at capacity and lacked adequate education resources for someone Xuân's age. When the abbess of Dharma Flower Pagoda, Master Clarity, heard about this predicament from another master, she volunteered to take Xuân in. While we waited for the ceremony to begin, Sister Radiance revealed that this was Xuân's second try at monastery life. After previously spending three months at the aunt's monastery, Xuân missed her mother and siblings so much that she decided to return home. Once she was home, the girl longed for the pagoda again. This time when she returned to her aunt's monastery, she was committed to staying. After transferring to Dharma Flower Pagoda, Sister Radiance explained that Xuân continued to perform her commitment by constantly smiling, executing her chores precisely and promptly, and never once complaining of homesickness.

In the days before her ordination, Xuân would pause while helping with chores, run a hand over her ponytail, and catch Sister Radiance's eye. "*Nóng quá!* It's so hot!" she half whined, half joked,

asking to have her head shaved earlier than the scheduled ceremony. Sister Radiance explained that Xuân's antics indicated her eagerness to go forth. The acceptability of such eagerness sets the register of monastic feelings in Vietnam apart from other regions, particularly Taiwan. Hillary Crane's research on Buddhist nuns in Taiwan shows that both positive and negative feelings are regarded as problematic (Crane, 2006). Crane describes a rare incident of seeing a Taiwanese nun cry as she sought advice over how to neutralize her feelings of desire for Buddhahood (ibid.: 90). Rather than reprimanding Xuân for her performance of desire for ordination, however, nuns at Dharma Flower Pagoda read Xuân's actions as sincere readiness to go forth, even after her first failed attempt to stay at a monastery. This relative openness to emotions may be embedded in different local cultural relationships between Buddhism and gender. Other aspects of Crane's research demonstrate how nuns in Taiwan strive to take on masculine identities in language and appearance, for example by referring to one another as "Dharma Brothers" (Crane, 2000). Similarly, nuns of the Taiwan-based Incense Light Community researched by Chün-fang Yü aspire to become "heroic men" and "deny their femininity" (Yü, 2013: 211). Yü complicates this claim by describing how nuns at Incense Light "still essentialize that femininity" by arguing that women are "by nature more patient, gentle, kind, and... attracted to Buddhism because these characteristics correspond closely to Buddhist ideals" (ibid.: 211). By contrast, the nuns I spoke with in Vietnam neither aspired to cultivate masculine traits nor claimed that feminine characteristics naturally fulfilled Buddhist ideals. Instead, femininity was viewed as a bodily apparatus for accessing spiritual insight by sensing *duyên*. As the next section of this article argues, Vietnamese ideas about gender open possibilities to different relationships between emotion, femininity, and monasticism for the nuns I interviewed, distinct from nuns in other cultural contexts.

When I first asked why Xuân was ordaining so young, Sister Radiance answered succinctly that Xuân felt "comfortable" or "at ease" (*thoải mái*) in the pagoda. The word *thoải mái* is used to describe both the physical comfort of soft furniture and the social comfort of feeling "relaxed." Sister Radiance explained Xuân's comfortability was an indicator that she had *duyên* to ordain. During a bus ride the following weekend, Sister Radiance returned to the conversation, adding that Xuân's father had passed away that year. His death left the mother alone to raise four children under age twelve. Resources in the family were strained. Home became a stressful environment. These factors contributed to the mother's willingness to allow her daughter to go forth. I surmised that the pagoda provided a functional solution to a financial problem: raising four children alone was difficult for Xuân's mother. The aunt had taken in her obedient niece to help. To an outside listener, youth ordinations like Xuân's might seem driven by poverty, practicality, and material needs—not spiritual inclinations. However, Sister Radiance instantly curtailed my analysis. She continued by clarifying that *both* parts of Xuân's story were necessary to explain why she was ordaining. Tragedy compelled Xuân's mother to consent, but if Xuân had not felt sincerely comfortable at the pagoda, she would never have had the emotional fortitude to return and stay. The girl's peaceful dedication to ordination revealed that she had *duyên.* Xuân had likely been a monastic in a previous life, or had other extensive past-life exposure to Buddhist teachings. The strength of these karmic bonds enabled

Xuân to rediscover Buddhism readily in this life. Both tragic circumstances and emotional resonance had come together for Xuân's ordination to occur.

I include Sister Radiance's telling of Xuân's story to counter skeptical dismissals of *duyên* in compelling youth ordination. Sister Radiance affirmed that Xuân's difficult family situation was a factor in her arrival at the monastery but did not comprehensively account for Xuân's ability to stay. Xuân may not have had anywhere else to go, but her feelings of peace and even "joy" (*vui*) at the monastery indicated that the girl still had agency in the situation. Sister Radiance may have been reading much of her own ordination story into Xuân's. While Sister Radiance did not lose a parent, her home life growing up was unstable. Her brother's alcohol abuse and gang involvement compelled her mother to move the family cross-country to live with in-laws. There, Sister Radiance witnessed domestic violence among her relatives. When Sister Radiance visited a fortune teller (*thầy bói*) to hear her astrological fate, she was appalled to learn that she, too, was fated to marry young, have a bad marriage, and remarry. By cultivating merit to improve her karma, she could amend and shift her astrological fate. At age thirteen, Sister Radiance decided to ordain—a move which would simultaneously create merit and transform her undesired destiny. She went to live at a nearby monastery. Yet, after several months, she missed her mother terribly and decided to come home. When she returned home, she was once again unhappy and rejected family life. The second time she went forth, at age nineteen, Sister Radiance remained a nun. By the time of Xuân's ordination, Sister Radiance had been a nun for fourteen years and was beyond the age of her predicted marriages. Reflecting on her own ordination story, Sister Radiance recalled that before "going forth" she really "knew nothing" (*không biết gì*) about the Buddha's teachings. She only knew that when she visited the pagoda, she felt "joy" (*vui*) and "comfort" (*thoải mái*). She liked the sweet fruits that the nuns gave her and enjoyed being around the monastics. These feelings were sharply contrasted by the chaos of home. Following her feelings into the pagoda was *duyên*, she said, but she also had to strengthen her *duyên* and create merit by studying Buddhism in order to transform her fate. Together, following feelings of predestined affinity and pursuing knowledge of Buddhism allowed her to change the course of her life.

Sister Radiance's ordination narrative parallels the stories of two other nuns I met from different provinces just outside Ho Chi Minh City. First, Sister Diligence ordained at age ten, two years after the death of her mother. At that time, Sister Diligence had already started to visit a neighborhood pagoda regularly. She liked to visit the pagoda because she felt "comfortable" there. Just before her mother's death, her mother had consented to Sister Diligence's desire to go forth. However, her father was still worried this was too big of a decision for his young daughter to make. He was reluctant to allow her to ordain, but also could not care for her and her siblings alone. Sister Diligence was sent to live with an aunt who was a nun in a rural province of southern Vietnam. She had been living as a nun at her aunt's monastery for ten years, but had not yet taken formal vows, when her father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. After years of constantly "requesting his permission" (*xin phép*), Sister Diligence finally persuaded him that she was "happiest" (*hạnh phúc nhất*) at the pagoda. Her father consented to her ordination on his death bed when she was twenty-three years old. Like Sister Radiance, Sister Diligence says she knew little about Buddhist teachings when

she was drawn to the pagoda but considered herself lucky for growing up in the monastery. The nuns taught her that sickness and death are a part of life, helping her cope with losing her parents, while also teaching her the basics of Buddhism. While she felt she could not formally ordain until receiving her father's approval, Sister Diligence affirms that she truly became a nun at age ten.

Finally, of the nuns I spoke with, Sister Verity ordained the youngest, at age three. She does not remember deciding to live at the pagoda but does recall visiting there with her mother. She felt so "comfortable" at the monastery that when her mother tried to take her home, she threw a fit and would not stop crying. Tantrums over leaving the pagoda happened consistently enough that her mother, a devout Buddhist, discerned that the daughter had a powerful *duyên* for monasticism. Her mother sent her to live at the neighborhood pagoda and visited daily.

In each of these stories, nuns described how a physical and emotional sense of comfort while visiting pagodas drew them to monastic life. Each nun also described how she knew virtually nothing else about Buddhism and did not yet have a cognitive grasp of Buddhist teachings. The strength of their feelings signified having *duyên* from a past life. Because of their sensitivity to *duyên*, nuns could recommence a study of Buddhism early in this lifetime, which had presumably begun in a previous lifetime. In the cases of Sister Diligence and Sister Radiance, both girls had to self-determine having *duyên* with their respected pagodas of ordination. For Sister Verity, her mother initially determined she had *duyên*, although she embraced this interpretation as she grew older. As a nun, she recalled her mother's strong faith with admiration. Implicit in the ordination stories of Xuân, Sister Verity, and Sister Diligence, local nuns had to agree to raise young children at the monastery. Parents, nuns, and guardians also helped youth to recognize their senses of predestined affinity. Feelings of *duyên* were displayed behaviorally by smiling, being calm, and requesting to spend time at the pagoda. Senses of *duyên* at the monastery were occasionally heightened by contrast with feelings at home, as in Sister Radiance's "instability" among family but "joy" at the pagoda, and Sister Verity's disconsolate childhood, remedied by ordination. Reading feelings of *duyên* was a community process. An emotional pedagogy of "finding feelings" of attraction or repulsion through sensing bodily responses to people, as well as spaces, was both taught by adults to children and by children to adults. Sister Verity's mother read her daughter's feelings for monastic life at age three—an emotional pedagogy that Sister Verity internalized and shared as her own story. Alternatively, Sister Diligence finally convinced her dying father that the pagoda really was where she felt happiest. In either case, decisions around ordination were made collectively, following the performance, recognition, and interpretation of youth feelings of *duyên* in Buddhist spaces. Next, I explain how nuns engaged a unique set of local cultural concepts in approaching issues of gender, embodiment, and emotions.

Reading the Body as a Gendered Skillset

While other nuns spoke of gender and embodiment in more fragmented terms during our everyday interactions and conversations, Sister Fragrance presented a comprehensive theory of gender in Vietnamese monasticism within minutes of our first meeting. I met Sister Fragrance during a visit to her pagoda for an annual celebration of filial piety, *Vu Lan Báo Hiếu*. She noticed a foreigner in the audience and invited me to join her away from the refreshment tables afterward. We made our way

to a quiet bench through the swarming troupes of children who had just performed. I sat down and casually asked how long she had been a nun. Sister Fragrance remained standing and commenced a lecture on the nature of ordination in Vietnam. I later learned she held a graduate degree in Buddhist studies from a local university. Sister Fragrance asserted that women are more naturally sensitive to emotions and therefore have a special sensitivity for *duyên*. She explained that nuns in Vietnam ordain more readily than men because there are less cultural barriers for women to follow their feelings for *duyên* into the monastery. Building on Sister Fragrance's theory, I argue this view reclaims femininity as a positive spiritual resource for Buddhism. While her statistics were not verifiable through National Sangha demographic reports, the belief that there are more nuns than monks was widespread in Ho Chi Minh City.[13] For Sister Fragrance, the idea that there are more nuns than monks reinforced her conclusion that women's emotional sensitivity leads to greater spiritual sensitivity—hence more ordinations. She elaborated her point by describing how men have social pressures to follow "reason" (*lý trí*) and to pursue careers, earn money, and support their parents and grandparents in old age.

To contextualize Sister Fragrance's examples, I add that her list of men's responsibilities fulfilled Confucian-influenced aspirations toward filial piety. Under an ideal Confucian model, men act as the head of their households and serve as the main family providers (A. N. Tran, 2004: 214). Women are also beholden to specific behaviors and virtues, but women's social roles are, in theory, strictly subordinate, following the "three obediences" (*Tam tòng*) to fathers, husbands, and sons (Leshkowich, 2014: 14–15; Ngo, 2004: 47–48). Family resources like income and property rely less on women's activities, so there is greater leeway for women to gain permission to "exit the family." To be clear, this is a simplification of a complex system of social philosophy, which does not apply neatly across Vietnamese culture or history. In many homes, women provide the primary income. However, nuns' ordination narratives do reflect ways that Confucian ideals actualize in societal norms and family patterns, for example, through nuns' consistent concern with gaining parental permission to go forth.[14]

Sister Fragrance continued by explaining that men may also feel an inclination for monastic life, like women. Still, because of filial pressures, men might only ordain at much older ages, or choose not to ordain, exerting their masculine "reason" over "emotion." This aspect of Sister Fragrance's argument requires contextualization in Daoist elements of Vietnamese cosmology. In Daoist

---

[13] This belief parallels a general cultural perception that women are "more religious than men" and "correspondingly... participate in religious activity to a greater extent" (Soucy, 2012: 98–99).

[14] Women's desires to gain permission to "exit the family" may further reflect gendered cultural training to demonstrate *tình cảm*: "the Vietnamese moral sentiment of care and concern for the other out of mutual affection and attachment" (Shohet, 2017: 568). Helle Rydstrøm's ethnographic research in northern Vietnam traced how women's childhood training to be *tình cảm* included behaviors of showing respect, self-denial, and obedience (2003: 51–52). Moral desires to demonstrate obedience toward parents while still recognizing feelings of *duyên* to exit the family highlight tensions between Confucian and Buddhist value systems which have long existed among East Asian contexts. For examples of how nuns navigate similar ethical tensions in Taiwan and South Korea, see Batchelor and Sunim, 2006: xv; Yü, 2013: 14.

philosophy, the cosmos is ordered in the complementary binary energies of "yin" (*âm*) and "yang" (*dương*). The linguistic roots of these terms signify the "shady side of the mountain" (yin, *âm*) and "sunny side of the mountain" (yang, *dương*)—a metaphor which indexes how both sets of characteristics are part of a balanced whole (Yun, 2013: 585). Yin energy equates with femininity, passivity, water, the moon, the earth, and cold, among other associations. Yang energy equates with masculinity, activity, fire, the sun, heaven, and heat, among others (Rydstrøm, 2004: 75–76). Yin-yang binaries are not viewed as merely metaphorical or symbolic but are often treated as properties of physical reality. Bodies carry and are shaped by yin-yang energies. The female body on the whole errs toward yin energy, but elements of the body, such as blood, err toward yang properties (Gammeltoft, 1999: 139; Rydstrøm, 2004: 76). Women must balance these energies to maintain physical health and appropriate gender characteristics in their behaviors and personalities.

As Daoist and Confucian cosmologies permeated and blended in Vietnamese culture through history (Gammeltoft, 2014: 141–142), Daoist feminine properties generally became, though not flatly, subsumed under Confucian gender hierarchies (Phạm and Eipper, 2009: 54; Yun, 2013: 586). Women and feminine yin properties were figured as subordinate to yang masculinity. This fusion not only placed women in subordination for the sake of family and social order, but also embedded a logic of gender hierarchy into the very physical constitution of women's bodies. Under this schema, a balanced healthy female body inherently has a more passive, emotional, physical constitution and a lower reasoning capacity than a male body and is therefore subordinate in society. Returning this Daoist framework to Sister Fragrance's argument: men may override their feelings of *duyên* through their active, masculine inclination to reasoning. As men ostensibly have both greater capacities and greater social pressures for self-actualization through career and educational pursuits, their spiritual inclinations to "exit the family" are more easily rationalized away. When men do ordain, I was told, they may not pursue monasticism "truly, sincerely" (*thật sự*), because they still feel pressure to reach high social positions in the Sangha to draw prestige for themselves or their families. Women's lower social position and greater emotionality, Sister Fragrance concluded, can be regarded as a spiritual blessing by allowing women to more easily follow *duyên* for ordination. Women can sense past-life affinities with Buddhism at earlier ages and are less likely to rationalize these feelings away to pursue worldly achievements. Ordaining younger and more "sincerely" affords women more time in this life to study and practice Buddhist teachings, with less societal distractions.

Conclusion: The Feminine Body as a Buddhist Resource

As demonstrated by Sister Fragrance's narrative, perceptions of feminine sensitivity to *duyên* can be an affirming resource for nuns, without directly confronting the asymmetrical gender hierarchies of Buddhist monasticism in Vietnam. My research shows how women articulate finding joy, peace, and meaning in monastic life regardless of structural gender inequality, and even by inhabiting the local concepts of femininity which often reinforce women's subordination. As Nirmala Salgado writes in her ethnography of Buddhist female renunciants and nuns in Sri Lanka—critiques of women's subordination tend to rely on an image of nuns as disempowered women lacking the self-knowledge which would inspire them to advocate for their own equal rights in the sangha (Salgado, 2013: 87–

88). My study joins work by scholars like Salgado by, instead, exploring how nuns in Vietnam engage local understandings of gender and the female body to practice agency precisely by reclaiming nonrational, feminine emotional sensitivity as a resource for connecting with Buddhist institutions.

This article contributes to conversations about gender and global Buddhism by showing how Vietnamese nuns drew on their understandings of emotions and female embodiment to literally "find comfort" in monastic life. Though the nuns I spoke with claimed they "knew nothing" of Buddhism before ordaining, but only followed their feelings into the monastery, these same ingenuous feelings became an important source of agency in their decisions to go forth. The less rational, more emotional qualities of femininity—often used to justify women's lower social position in Vietnam—were reclaimed as positive traits for identifying *duyên*. For these nuns, distinguishing women's unique capacities to sense and act on *duyên* affirmed the value of feminine embodiment as a means to access and pursue a Buddhist life.

Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude goes to the nuns who shared their stories for this article. Special thanks also to Gareth Fisher, Ann Grodzins Gold, and the anonymous reviewers who shared suggestions and feedback on earlier drafts. This research was supported by grants from the Robert HN Ho Family Foundation Dissertation Fellowship in Buddhist Studies, awarded through the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS); a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad grant (DDRA); and the Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship.

Corresponding author:

Sara Ann Swenson
Religion Department,
Syracuse University.
sara.ann.swenson@gmail.com

References

Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (Government Committee on Religious Affairs). No date. "*Những bước tiến trong công tác giáo dục-đào tạo của Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam*." http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/240/0/1566/Nhung_buoc_tien_trong_cong_tac_giao_duc_dao_tao_cua_Giao_hoi_Phat_giao_Viet_Nam Accessed June 23, 2020.

Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (Government Committee on Religious Affairs). 2016. "*Luật tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo*." http://pbgdpl.moj.gov.vn/qt/tintuc/Lists/PhoBienKienThucPhapLuat/Attachments/1537/Lu%E1%BA%ADt%20t%C3%ADn%20ng%C6%B0%E1%BB%A1ng%20t%C3%B4n%20gi%C3%A1o.pdf

Batchelor, Martine, and Son'gyong Sunim. 2006. *Women in Korean Zen: Lives and Practices*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Bui Ngoc Son. 2019. "Legal Regulation of Religion in Vietnam." In *Regulating Religion in Asia: Norms, Modes, and Challenges*, edited by Jaclyn L. Neo, Arif A. Jamal, and Daniel P. S. Goh, 146–168. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chan, Hoiman, and Rance P. L. Lee. 1995. "Hong Kong Families: At the Crossroads of Modernism and Traditionalism." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 26 (1): 83–99.

Chen, Chiung Hwang. 2011. "Feminist Debate in Taiwan's Buddhism: The Issue of the Eight Garudhammas" *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 1 (1): 16–32.

Crane, Hillary. 2000. "Are Buddhist Nuns Men at Heart?" *Magistra* 6 (2): 31.

Crane, Hillary. 2006. "The Stoic Monastic: Taiwanese Buddhism and the Problem of Emotions." *Asian Anthropology* 5 (1): 85–110.

Dharma, Bhiksuni Karuna. 1988. "Nuns of Vietnam." In *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha*, edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 154–159. Berkeley: Snow Lion Publications.

Falk, Nancy Auer. 1989. "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: the fruits of ambivalence in ancient Indian Buddhism." In *Unspoken Worlds: women's religious lives* edited by Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross, 155–165. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Fisher, Gareth. 2014. *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas: Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in Contemporary China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Gammeltoft, Tine. 1999. *Women's Bodies, Women's Worries: Health and Family Planning in a Vietnamese Rural Community*. Richmond: Curzon Press.

Gammeltoft, Tine. 2014. *Haunting Images: A Cultural Account of Selective Reproduction in Vietnam.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam (Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam). 2016. "*Thống kê tăng, ni, phật tử ở Việt Nam: Lý luận và thực tiễn.*" https://phatgiao.org.vn/thong-ke-tang-ni-phat-tu-o-viet-nam-ly-luan-va-thuc-tien-d24104.html.

Gutschow, Kim. 2004. *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hòa Thượng Thánh Nghiêm and Thích nữ Tuệ Đăng Dịch. 2011, April 10. "*Sa Di Giới Và Các Loại Sa Di.*" *Thư Viện Hoa Sen.* https://thuvienhoasen.org/a9848/chuong-2-sa-di-gioi-va-cac-loai-sa-di

Kawanami, Hiroko. 2013. *Renunciation and Empowerment of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar-Burma: Building a Community of Female Faithful*. Leiden: Brill.

Langenberg, Amy Paris. 2018. "An Imperfect Alliance: Feminism and Contemporary Female Buddhist Monasticisms." *religions* 9 (190): 1–24.

Leshkowich, Ann Marie. 2014. *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

LeVine, Sarah. 2013. "At the Cutting Edge: Theravada Nuns in the Kathmandu Valley." In *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 13–29. New York: Routledge.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2007. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *boundary 2* 12 (2): 333–358.

Mrozik, Susanne. 2020. "Sri Lankan Buddhist Nuns: Complicating the Debate over Ordination." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36 (1): 33–49.

Ngo, Thi Ngan Binh. 2004. "The Confucian Four Feminine Virtues (*tu duc*): The Old Versus New—*ke thua versus Phat huy*." In *Gender Practices Contemporary Vietnam*, edited by Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstom, 47–73. Singapore: Singapore University.

Phạm Quỳnh Phương and Chris Eipper. 2009. "Mothering and Fathering the Vietnamese: Religion, Gender, and National Identity." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4 (1): 49–83.

Phan, John Duong. 2013. *Lacquered Words: The Evolution of Vietnamese under Sinitic Influences from the First Century B.C.E. through the Seventeen Century C.E.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Rowe, Mark. 2017. "Charting Known Territory: Female Buddhist Priests." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 44 (1): 75–101.

Rydstrøm, Helle. 2003. *Embodying Morality: Growing Up in Rural Northern Vietnam.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Rydstrøm, Helle. 2004. "Female and Male 'Characters': Images of Identification and Self-Identification for Rural Vietnamese Children and Adolescents." In *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, edited by Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstrøm, 74–95. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Salgado, Nirmala S. 2013. *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schensul, Stephen L., Jean J. Schensul, and Margaret D. LeCompte. 1999. *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Schwenkel, Christina. 2018. "Religious Reassemblage and Late Socialist Planning in Urban Vietnam." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86 (2): 526–553.

Shohet, Merav. 2017. "Troubling Love: Gender, Class, and Sideshadowing the 'Happy Family' in Vietnam." *Ethos* 45 (4): 555–576.

Soucy, Alexander. 2012. *The Buddha Side: Gender, Power, and Buddhist Practice in Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Soucy, Alexander. 2014. "Thầy Phổ Tịnh: A Vietnamese Nun's Struggles in Canada." In *Flowers on the Rock: Global and Local Buddhisms in Canada*, edited by John S. Harding, Victor Sogen Hori, and Alexander Soucy, 333–354. Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Sponberg, Alan. 1992. "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism." In *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, edited by Jose Ignacio Cabezon, 3–36. Albany: SUNY Press.

Taylor, Keith. 2013. *A History of the Vietnamese*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tran Ngoc Angie. 2004. "What's Women's Work? Male Negotiations and Gender Reproduction in the Vietnamese Garment Industry." In *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, edited by Drummund and Helle Rydstrøm, 137–157. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. 2013. "Transforming Women's Position in Buddhism: Strategies." In *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 326–329. New York: Routledge.

United Nations. 2019, December 18. "Results of the Population and Housing Census 01/4/2019." *United Nations Viet Nam*. https://vietnam.un.org/en/28931-results-population-and-housing-census-0142019

Wikan, Unni. 2013. *Resonance: Beyond the Words*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Yü, Chün-fang. 2013. *Passing the Light: The Incense Light Community and Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Yun, Sung Hyun. 2013. "An Analysis of Confucianism's Yin-Yang Harmony with Nature and the Traditional Oppression of Women: Implications for Social Work Practice." *Journal of Social Work* 13 (6): 582–598.