

Special Focus: Buddhism and Resilience

Buddhism and Resilience in Post-tsunami Thailand

Monica Lindberg Falk

Lund University

This article focuses on Buddhism and resilience in the recovery process following the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami in Thailand. It is based on an anthropological study and deals with how the disaster was handled on a local level and gives examples of Buddhist practices and counselling. The article emphasizes Thai Buddhist monks' and nuns' interactions with the survivors and Buddhism's capacity to strengthen resilience building. It highlights the role of Buddhist temples in providing aid and taking care of survivors in the wake of the disaster, including the indispensable function of Buddhist monks to conduct funerals and other ceremonies, and their vital responsibility for helping the survivors overcome their suffering. The article also shows how the Thai *sangha's* institutional gendered structure negatively affected Thai nuns' potential to help out after the disaster.

Keywords: Buddhism; anthropology; resilience; disaster; Thailand; gender

The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26 2004 killed more than 230,000 people and more than two million people were left homeless or displaced. Thailand was one of the four worst hit countries with more than 8,000 deaths and 8,500 people injured. December 26 was a Buddhist observance day in Thailand, and when the tsunami waves hit, many people were at temples listening to Buddhist talks and participating in ceremonies. At one small temple in Phang Nga province, about thirty villagers had gathered and a young monk was leading the ceremony. They had finished chanting and the laypeople had received the five Buddhist precepts when a car full of people passed the temple at high speed. The monk heard them shouting, "The water is coming! The water is coming!" and he saw people running along the small road outside the temple. When he looked at the sea, he saw that the water rose incredibly fast. He realized that they were not safe where they were, and they had to move to higher ground. The only possibility the monk saw was to climb the trees. He chose a tamarind tree, and the villagers followed him. They helped each other to climb the trees, while others scaled the bell tower, the big Buddha statue, or the stupa (reliquary monument). The monk said that he had had a good overview of the disaster from his position high up in the tree. He



could have followed the crowd and left the temple, but he said he did not want to abandon the lay people who had come to the temple. Some of them were frightened, and he felt that he had to stay with them. He said that leaving them would have been wrong, and he would have regretted doing that for the rest of his life. He said: "I thought, if we die, we would die together."¹ Most villagers trusted the monks' ability to help out in times of crises and they felt safe at the temple. That became obvious after the tsunami when the temples became a center for disaster relief.

In the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, the Thai Buddhist monastic order (*sangha*) mobilized quickly and became a key network that was central to recovery efforts. On the day the tsunami struck, monks from Bangkok and elsewhere in Thailand organized themselves and travelled to the area to help the local monks at the small village temples with their duties. The Buddhist response to the disaster had a highly gendered character. Because of the Thai *sangha*'s male structure, Thai nuns could not help out in the same way. In the post-tsunami situation, the nuns' formal weaker position had negative consequences for the nuns' possibility to assist the survivors. In contrast to other parts of Thailand, there were few nuns in the tsunami-hit areas. Nearly all temples lacked a nuns' section and there were no nunneries besides in Phuket province. Most nuns who went to help the survivors went individually or together with lay people (Falk 2015: 80–88).

Nobody in the areas affected by the tsunami escaped its effects, but poor social and living conditions that were present before the tsunami meant that some were more vulnerable than others. Generally, women are more vulnerable than men to natural hazards (see Enarson 2012; Bradshaw and Fordham 2013). David Alexander (1997) argues that so called natural disasters are fundamentally social in nature, and other researchers have shown that the impact of natural hazards reflects how a society is structured (Wisner et al. 2004; Tan-Mullins et al. 2018: 116).

Research on post-disaster recovery have shown that religious and spiritual beliefs often bring comfort and hope, which help survivors to heal and move on with their lives (Pargament 1997; Ellison and Katz 2010; Koenig 2006). The responses of disaster-stricken people invariably involve the moral and ethical core of the belief system and include a deep delving into concepts of both social and cosmological justice (Oliver-Smith 1996: 308).

This article focuses on Buddhism and resilience building in Thailand after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and explores how Buddhism contributes to recovery and to developing resilience after the disaster. Resilience is a much debated and elusive concept whose meaning changes from context to context. Resilience both communicates the capacity to survive sudden disturbances and it is also a measure of the capacity to recover from the impact of a hazardous event. Earlier understandings saw resilience as inherent, reactive, and outcome-oriented and not something that could be developed. The emphasis was on restoring the pre-disaster status as quickly as possible (Manyena 2006; McEntire et al. 2002). Later understandings have become more process-oriented and involve capacity building, mitigation, emergency preparedness, planning changes and development of the affected community (Klein et al. 2003; Manyena 2006: 437–439). In this article, I argue that resilience should be located within a broader perspective that also includes social relations, belief

¹ Interview, 15 April 2007.

systems and justice. Linda M. Hartling (2010) points out that resilience processes within individuals are formed by social networks and are to a great extent relational. Today, proactive resilience is emphasized, and that is linked to adaptive capacity. Here resilience become the outcome of planned preparation (see Klein et al. 2003). This article shows how Buddhist monks and nuns helped the survivors in the resilience-building process through mindfully changing basic behaviors and thought patterns.

In the following, I first provide an outline of the methods employed and a brief presentation of the local setting where this study was carried out. I then turn to examples of how Buddhist monks and nuns helped survivors deal with their suffering, something that gave them strength and some hope for the future. The tsunami became an example of the Buddhist teaching about the conditions of life: that life is unpredictable and inevitably involves dissatisfaction and suffering of various kinds. The article continues with monks' explanations of the tsunami and the importance of that for developing resilience. It then explores the importance of rituals and illustrates how monks and nuns introduced practices that improved resilience. Finally, I briefly describe the role of protective amulets and additional, non-Buddhist, techniques that monks and nuns used to aid the recovery process. Throughout the article, the complexities of the response to disaster are outlined, including how gender inequalities within Thai Buddhism's patriarchal structures affected the possibilities of response.

Methods

The ethnography for this article is from long-term anthropological research that followed the post-tsunami recovery over five years. It was carried out primarily in small fishing communities located mainly in Phang Nga, the worst-hit Thai province (Falk 2015).²

I first visited the tsunami-affected area at the beginning of January 2005 with a small group of *mae chi* from Bangkok.³ The nuns said that they wanted to help the survivors with their mental. When nuns travel, they commonly stay at Buddhist monasteries. However, this was difficult in the tsunami-affected areas because very few monasteries had a nuns' section. Thus, the nuns I was travelling with had arranged to stay with one of their relatives who lived in one of the affected areas. As soon as we arrived, we visited some of the villages that were badly hit by the tsunami. I noted that especially female survivors appreciated talking with the nuns. The nuns explained to me that women feel a closeness to the nuns because they are women. They said that laywomen can talk about certain issues

² This research project was supported financially by the Swedish Research Council, VR.

³ Thai nuns mentioned in this article are Theravada Buddhist nuns and named *mae chi*. They have been in Thailand for centuries and most Thai women who renounce lay life and become nuns receive *mae chi* ordination. They follow the eight or ten Buddhist precepts and their position outside the official *sangha* has given the nuns autonomy to govern themselves. However, they lack formal religious authority and they do not have the same financial support from the government and other benefits that the monks enjoy. Today there are fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhunis*) in Thailand, but they are not recognized by the Thai *sangha*. Since 1998, it has been possible for Thai women to receive *bhikkhuni* ordination abroad, and since then the number of Thai *bhikkhunis* has been increasing. The Thai Buddhist monks are forbidden to give women *bhikkhuni* ordination (see e.g., Falk and Kawanami 2018).

with them that they do not bring up in conversation with the monks. It was obvious that the survivors' recovery benefitted from nuns' assistance after the tsunami and it would have been beneficial if more nuns had been present.

Over subsequent years I continued to study Buddhist responses to the tsunami. I investigated local initiatives that used Buddhist leadership to deal with the catastrophe and carried out interviews with survivors, relatives, relief workers, officials, and Buddhist monks and nuns. I also conducted interviews with mental health doctors and relief workers who had valuable information about the recovery process. I have masked the identity of all informants to protect their anonymity. Obtaining information about people's experiences was made possible because I spent a long period in the region and was able to regularly meet the survivors. Together with my assistant, I gathered narratives about people's experiences of the tsunami and explored if and in what ways Buddhism had been important in their recovery. The main techniques used were participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, life stories, and narratives. Temples and temporary shelters were initially obvious sites for collecting information, and I met many of my informants there. Through informants' networks, I met survivors that I would otherwise not have encountered, some living in remote locations. I interviewed monks and nuns who were permanent residents at the temples in the affected areas and monks who had travelled to the afflicted areas to help the monks at the local temples to carry out their duties after the disaster. Due to the complexity of the research site and the sensitive nature of working with traumatized informants, I needed to adapt my research techniques to the context. Much information was collected through informal conversations. My assistant and I avoided asking questions that caused the survivors to relive the tsunami.

The setting

All disasters are local in the sense that local communities are the first to respond to a catastrophe. In Thailand, six provinces in the south of Thailand's west coast were hit by the tsunami. Worst hit was Phang Nga province, with a population of 246,000 inhabitants comprising about thirty percent Muslims and seventy percent Buddhists. The population also includes an ethnic minority group called Moken/Moklen and a large number of migrant workers from Myanmar.

In small communities like those in Phang Nga, local temples are places for gatherings and religion is intertwined in the daily life. Therefore, it is no surprise that many of those who had escaped the tsunami sought refuge at the temples. Temple buildings became crowded, and when the buildings were filled to capacity, survivors stayed in tents on the temple grounds. Later, many temples were active in setting up temporary shelters on or near their grounds. Buddhist monks provided leadership and counselling and distributed donated food and material necessities to all survivors. Temples were not just a refuge for survivors of the tsunami; many dead bodies were brought to them, and some temples became core forensic sites. Temples also became communications hubs and were especially important for distributing information about missing people. Notice boards with names and photographs of missing people were set up, as were computers used in the identification of dead bodies. The authorities met with survivors and other people who

searched for missing relatives and the authorities worked with documentation of dead bodies and of people missing.

Of the 110 Buddhist temples in Phang Nga province, about fifteen are located close to the sea and were affected in one way or another by the tsunami. A few were destroyed, others partly damaged. Some temples in the affected area were crowded with people seeking refuge while others were overloaded with dead bodies. A monk at a temple which had had to deal with about 1,500 dead bodies told us that the situation had been extremely grave in the aftermath of the tsunami. He said the smell from the corpses had been almost unbearable, but they could not leave the temple since they had to be with the dead bodies, and they also had to receive everyone who came to visit and participate in the ceremonies. After identifying the corpses, they cremated them. The monk described how they cremated the dead continuously from six in the morning till eleven o'clock at night.⁴ Another small temple became a center for many aid projects and hosted more than 1,000 people who sought refuge there. It was a lot to organize for the monks and they had to provide food, shelter, medicine, clothes, and other essentials. Both temples responded to the survivors' needs in similar ways: the monks helped survivors to understand the significance of the tsunami, and they conducted rituals that were central to the survivors. Both monks and nuns organized activities such as self-help groups, meditation retreats, temporary ordination, boat construction and that helped the recovery. A central theme of conversations with the survivors was how to make sense of and deal with their suffering.

Suffering

The level of suffering experienced by many tsunami survivors was extreme. Take the case of Somchai. When I first met him he was standing outside his damaged house. Most of the inhabitants of his village had been killed by the tsunami. He himself had lost nine family members: his wife, three sons, and five grandchildren. When I met him, he looked gloomy, later explaining that he was still looking for his missing family members. After the tsunami, he lived with his youngest son, his only child to survive the disaster. Ironically, Somchai had brought his family to Phang Nga in search of a better life. He said that he is now forever tied to that village since his family members died in Phang Nga. He had made a vow that if he found all missing relatives he would ordain as a Buddhist monk and dedicate the merit gained to the deceased. That was understood to benefit the deceased karmically. In the meantime, he often sought comfort at the village temple and said it helped to talk with the monks about how to deal with his suffering.

In Theravada Buddhist teachings the Four Noble Truths are central: (1) the truth of suffering (*dukkha*); (2) the cause of suffering (*samudaya*); (3) the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*); (4) and the path leading to the cessation of suffering (*magga*). It is thus not surprising that Buddhist monks and nuns felt that a core aspect of their teachings was to help lay people deal with their suffering after the tsunami. Most survivors adapted to the new situation, but some, like Somchai, continued to experience emotional distress and remained impaired, especially those who experienced ambiguous

⁴ Interview 14 April 2006.

loss when their relatives' dead bodies could not be recovered. In these cases, families continue to hope that the missing person would be found alive; the process of grieving thus remained unresolved (Falk 2015: 173–174).

I interviewed one monk who related how he counselled survivors on the multiple aspects of Buddhism's view of suffering. He used the tsunami to exemplify the different dimensions of suffering and provided the survivors with perspectives on how to deal with the consequences. He told them not to think about what they could have done differently because it was impossible to do anything about the past and about death. He emphasized that it was important for lay people to follow the Buddhist precepts and improve themselves morally in order to create better circumstances for themselves mentally, spiritually, and physically. After the tsunami, he said, laypeople needed encouragement, so he had often gone to the temporary shelters and advised residents on how to relinquish suffering. Because he believed survivors had difficulty concentrating, he explained suffering in simple terms to help them to deal with their loss. He also emphasized the value of helping each other. The survivors were in a unique position to support each other because they shared the same experiences. The monk said that survivors also sometimes came to the temple at night to pay respect to the Buddha statue; doing this, they attained some peace of mind.⁵

Another monk that I talked with said he examined life in general together with the survivors. They talked together about suffering from a Buddhist perspective, and a theme the monk addressed was impermanence (*anicca*). He explained to the survivors that everything is in a process of change also the difficulties he experienced. Yet another monk said that some men chose to ordain as a way to conquer suffering. He himself considered mindfulness to be best practice because that helped the survivors focusing on living in the present moment.

The monks and nuns I interviewed never asked the survivors about how badly the tsunami had affected them and how many people they had lost: doing so would make them think of the disaster and increase their suffering. They seemed to share a tacit understanding that they should not talk about the past. One monk said that working in the Buddhist way in a disaster situation simply meant that they encouraged people, gave them hope, and tried to make them happy. The monks focused on the present and they stated that it is not fruitful to think about the past because it is impossible to alter past events.⁶ Instead, monks and nuns tried to reduce the survivors' suffering by helping them to accept their new circumstances. They sought to help the survivors appreciate life and give them hope for the future. Many of the survivors had lost everything, and it was comforting for them to hear the monks emphasizing that it does not matter if they are rich or poor, everyone can be a valuable person and support the society. The Buddhist approach was to accept what has happened and understand that suffering is an intrinsic and unavoidable part of life and that all human beings experience suffering regardless of wealth and status.

⁵ Interviews July 2007.

⁶ Interview April 2006.

Explanations

Not only did survivors need help to make sense of the suffering they were experiencing, they also sought explanations for the tsunami itself. When the tsunami hit, most Thai monks and lay people were ignorant about the tsunami phenomenon. Afterwards, the monks said they searched for information. The most common explanation about the tsunami I heard from local monks was that it was caused by nature, but both scientific and Buddhist explanations about life and death were essential knowledge for the survivors' recovery and resilience building.

One monk who took care of many survivors after the tsunami said that he divided the explanations into three simple steps: The first and most important step was to find out and understand what had happened; the second step was to accept what had happened; and the third step was to adjust the mind to be ready for the next day, the next week, the next month, and the next year. Like other monks, he stressed the importance of helping others because the survivors would gain strength by doing so.⁷ Another monk explained to the survivors that there were three components that operated together in a disaster such as the tsunami: first nature (*thammachat*), second *kamma* (*kam*), and third the accident (*ubathihet*), here meaning the calamity. The monk said that when these three components coincide a catastrophe like the tsunami occurs.⁸

A highly respected monk in the affected area said that most people think that the tsunami is caused by nature, but he thought differently. He said that it is human beings who make this world heaven or hell and that has to do with individual people's *kamma*. A natural hazard can happen without killing anybody, but if people do not have *bun* (Buddhist merit) and are full of greed they will suffer. He said that it is *kamma* that causes a natural hazard to become serious, and it is *kamma* that both influences nature and shortens people's lifespans. However, immediately after the tsunami, the monk did not explain the disaster with reference to *bun*. Rather, he considered it his main role at that time to guide lay people so they could reduce their suffering and use their wisdom (*panja*) to improve both their material circumstances and their minds.⁹ Thus, directly after the tsunami struck he simply told the survivors that the tsunami was caused by nature. Only later, when it appeared that the survivors were recovering, did he try to explain and teach them about *dhamma*, about cause and effect, and about *kamma* related to the disaster.¹⁰

Another example of how monks and nuns adapted their explanations to the level of understanding of villagers at that time is a monk who survived the tsunami and had moved to live on a small island two years before the tsunami struck. Many people had died on that island, and the monk together with all the survivors had been evacuated to the mainland. He spoke daily with the villagers, who now lived in the temporary shelters. In the beginning, he said, the most important thing was to encourage the survivors so they would gain some hope. He stressed that it was important

⁷ Interview April 2007.

⁸ Interview July 2007.

⁹ Interview April 2007.

¹⁰ *Dhamma* is a word with many meanings; here it refers to the Buddhist view of the nature of things, the teachings of the Buddha. *Kamma* (Pali) or *karma* (Sanskrit) refers to intentional or volitional actions.

for the survivors to calm down. He said: “We shared experiences and I wanted them to relax. The main thing that the survivors wanted to know was why their family members had died.”¹¹ He said that the explanations he gave was guided by how well he thought the survivors felt. For those who he considered were in better shape but were suffering after losing family members, he commonly used stories from the Buddha’s teaching to show that they are not alone and give them hope to overcome their grief. He tried to encourage those who were in worse shape and to give them a reason to continue living.

Monks were frequently asked why some died while others survived. Most monks said that they explained to the villagers that a person’s *bun* is dependent on their thoughts and deliberate actions, and they die when their *bun* is finished. But then some people wanted to know how young children, who had only had a very short life, could die because of their lack of *bun*. The monks’ answer to that was that their *kammic* status was not created in this life but rather in their earlier existences. The monks explained that those who died had come to the end of their lifespans, and they would have died under any circumstances. If the tsunami had not struck, they would have died from something else.

Kamma was also used to explain the deaths of monks in the tsunami. Two monks who lost their lives had lived at a temple on an island, but originally they were from other provinces in Thailand. One monk was from the south and the other monk came from the northeast of Thailand. A fellow monk who survived was convinced that the monks who perished were led by their *kamma* to the island to die there. He said that *kamma* chose the right time, and *kamma* is the best answer to why something happens unexpectedly.¹²

In my conversations with villagers, I found they experienced monks’ explanations about *kamma* and death as satisfying. It was a relief for many of those who had lost loved ones to know that it did not matter what they had done; it would have been impossible to rescue the deceased since they would have perished in any case. The survivors then directed their energy towards helping the departed to reach *nibbana* (nirvana) or to have a favorable rebirth through ritual. Helping the deceased gave the survivors strength, thus promoting resilience building. Families and relatives did not feel the need to seek further clarifications or justice elsewhere.

Rituals

Almost immediately after the survivors had found out that their relatives had perished in the tsunami, they turned to the monks and asked them to perform merit making rituals. That was a way to transfer religious merit and also a way to communicate between the living and the dead. The Buddhist monks were the vehicle for the communication; nuns were not involved. For many survivors, it was comforting and a necessary part of the recovery process to be in contact with deceased family members. Looking after their deceased relatives’ needs, survivors said, made them feel stronger.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Interview September 2006.

In Thailand, merit making (*tham bun*) is fundamental to daily Buddhist practices as well as to special ceremonies. A core form of merit making in Theravada Buddhism, the tradition of *dana*—whereby lay people provide monastics and temples with food and other material necessities—constitutes a bond between the lay and the ordained realms. Giving to the members of the *sangha* is deemed to be most meritorious and monks are “field of merit.” Certain groups of Thai nuns and some individual nuns are also considered “field of merit” by lay people. Ideally, giving should be done with a proper attitude of selflessness and detachment, with no expressed regard for the alms’ *kammic* outcome.

Local monks told me that after the tsunami the ceremonies that lay people asked for served three purposes: 1) Transferring religious merit (*bun*) and creating better circumstances for those who were killed by the tsunami; 2) communicating with the ghosts and informing them that they are dead and must leave and not create trouble for the living; and 3) making religious merit for the survivors’ families, relatives, friends and all living beings, including themselves. For survivors, these ceremonies were important ways to both tackle their grief and build resilience through their agency.

Monks stated that *tham bun* was the most important ceremony for relatives and for survivors after the tsunami. Families and relatives worried that the deceased would have an unfortunate rebirth because of the lack of merit and so wanted to offset that by *tham bun*. Therefore, the number of *tham bun* ceremonies increased tremendously after the tsunami. The monks became the essential vehicles in that transference process, and in several interviews they likened themselves to post offices: they sent off the dead person’s spirit (*winjan*) at the cremation ceremony, and they mediated the transfer of donations and messages from the living to the dead. The nuns in the tsunami-hit areas participated in but did not lead the *tham bun* ceremonies.

Communication with the deceased occurred both in dreams and through *tham bun*. Amoy, a woman who had lost her husband in the tsunami, told me that the Buddhist monks had helped her with instructions about how she could communicate with her deceased husband. She said that she dreamt that her dead husband was suffering and did not have any clothes. She talked with one of the local monks about the dream and wondered what she could do to help. The monk asked her to prepare two threads, one white and one red. She brought the threads to the monk and he made a ceremony at the *stupa* where her husband’s bones were kept. The night after that ceremony she had a dream that her husband was content and was wearing clothes. Amoy did *tham bun* frequently and dedicated the merit to her dead husband. She wrote his name on papers at ceremonies that included the burning of papers with names of the deceased, and she always said his name in merit making ceremonies.¹³

As stated above, in Buddhist thinking, the person’s *kamma* often explains the death (see e.g. Harvey 2000; Walters 2003; Watts 2009).¹⁴ But the lay people that I interviewed understood *kamma*

¹³ Interview March 2007.

¹⁴ Four chapters in Jonathan S. Watts’ volume: “*Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice*” (2009) address popular understanding of *kamma* in Thailand. The commercialized development of Buddhism is discussed as well as cases of

not only to be individual but also collective. That inclusive way of interpreting *kamma* was expressed by family members who joined together in merit making rituals and transferred religious merit to the deceased family member. Families did that together in order to increase the chances for good rebirth, and they said that being able to provide for those who had died made them feel better.

At Buddhist funerals, acts of sharing religious merit are central and, as already mentioned, relatives of the deceased make merit in order to ensure that the departed family member will have a favorable rebirth. This is of particular importance when a person has died a sudden or violent death. The distinction Thai people make between death caused by natural causes, such as sickness and old age, and death caused by accidents or violence is significant, since the latter is considered to have the potential to cause further deaths. Such deaths thus need to be treated with special care, and the time between death and cremation is hazardous. During this period, the deceased is in a state of limbo, not fully departed from this world and not yet transcended into a new existence. The corpse is dangerous because the spirit, seen as adhering to the body until cremation, has the potential to be a malevolent “ghost.” Survivors narrate how they handled their loss by using necessary ceremonies that included merit making, and how they tried to control “spirits” and “ghosts” after the tsunami. More unusual ceremonies became important in the search for missing persons and “new” rituals emerged in disaster situations (see Falk 2010).

The villagers frequently talked with the monks about how to handle ghosts and the deceased’s *winjan* (spirit). After a ceremony in a local temple, villagers approached a monk with questions about their deceased family members’ *winjans*. It is understood that the *winjan* is present, but it cannot be seen. A monk explained to villagers that the *winjan* is similar to the wind, something that can affect us but which we cannot see, touch, or communicate with. Monks and nuns said that it is only through meditation that a person can be aware of the *winjan*. When a person dies the form disappears and the only thing that remains is *winjan*. A monk went on to explain about the human existence and the five aggregates (*skandhas*): body and mind, feeling, perception, mental formations, memory and consciousness. He told the villagers that *kamma* would determine the new existences and he assured that they had done what they could do through ceremonies.¹⁵

Protective amulets

Faith in amulets has a long history in Southeast Asia. Many Thais have deep faith in the power of talismans such as amulets (see e.g. Tambiah 1984; Pattana 2012; Jackson 2016; Reynolds 2019). As Pattana Kitiarsa notes, people who feel that their personal health, or experience that their family or society’s stability and well-being are under threat seek psychological assurance from sources of supernatural power, such as Buddhist monks, lay spirit mediums, or ritual specialists (Pattana 2012: 113).

socially engaged Buddhist activities that turned peoples’ lives in positive directions. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu’s ways of understanding key aspects of Buddhism are central.

¹⁵ Observed in April 2006.

The monks and nuns with whom I spoke did not prioritize or encourage the use of amulets, but they also did not reject them entirely. In the first instance, both monks and nuns passed on meditation instructions to survivors as a way to focus their mind. One monk said that he instructed the survivors to hold the Buddhist precepts, since that was the basis of everything, but he added that that meditation was beneficial for some survivors and he gave Vipassana meditation instructions to those who were interested. Unfortunately, many had severe difficulties concentrating and were more interested in getting a talisman.¹⁶ Monks that I interviewed who under normal circumstances did not hand out amulets said that they used to bring amulets to temporary shelters and distribute them to villagers who asked for them. They explained that the survivors felt protected by the amulets and the amulets gave them comfort and helped to build some resilience. Nuns also reported giving amulets to survivors who asked for them.

In 2006, the villagers in Phang Nga began wearing the big circular amulet Jatukham-Rammathep, usually simply called Jatukham. This amulet was believed to bring the owner wealth and help them in the difficult economic situation after the disaster. For more than a year the amulet became extremely popular, not only in Phang Nga but all over the country (Pattana 2012: 111). I went with a family to visit the temple Mahathat Woromaha Vihan in Nakhorn Si Thammarat town, where the amulets were produced (Falk 2015: 181-182). The family had struggled greatly after the tsunami. They put their faith in the power of the amulet and after choosing very carefully they bought a set of amulets for themselves to be kept at their small shrine at home. They also bought amulets to wear around their necks and to give to close friends back home. The family wore the amulets for less than one year. After that they said they still had faith in the amulets but they stopped wearing them and placed them at their shrine.

Other techniques

Some visiting monks brought special methods that survivors with difficulties to concentrate could use to calm their minds and to build resilience. One example was a so called “cooking therapy,” organized by a Buddhist group from Bangkok. They focused on mindful food preparation and cooking, while avoiding any discussion of the tsunami. The nuns belonging to that Buddhist group explained to me that cooking together with the villagers had a relaxing effect on the survivors. Both nuns and monks in that group stated that what the survivors needed most in the early stage of recovery was help to handle their mental suffering and encouragement to go on with their lives (Falk 2013).

Another example was a self-help group led by a Buddhist monk who introduced a special free weaving technique. That monk had earlier introduced the same weaving technique in Chiang Mai and Kanchanburi provinces as a kind of meditation technique for those who, for various reasons, could not use traditional Buddhist meditation methods. The monk said that the weaving helped people to concentrate and it had positive effects on troubled minds. He conducted Buddhist ceremonies, taught Buddhist principles and instructed the survivors how the weaving could calm their minds. Many survivors were diagnosed by mental health doctors with post-traumatic stress

¹⁶ Interview June 2007.

syndrome (PTSD) and for them weaving became therapeutic. They said that talking was difficult, but weaving made them calmer and they expressed their feelings through the colors of the threads and the patterns they designed (see Falk 2012).

Conclusion

This article displays how Buddhist monks and nuns have contributed to resilience building after the tsunami. The article proposes that resilience is strengthened through emphatic and empowering relationships. Taking a relational view on resilience moves the concept away from something that is intrinsic only to some people, to something that is available to all (Hartling 2010).

A religious institution has the capacity to act in all the different stages of disasters. In Thailand, the Buddhist *sangha* became a key network and central in the aftermath of the tsunami. That were important for resilience building and for mobilizing mitigation projects. The Buddhist monks' responses to the disaster demonstrated the *sangha's* efficiency. Initially, monks from sixteen provinces came to assist the local monks at the temples in the affected areas. They helped out with cremations and other ceremonies and gave survivors support and psychological counselling. Both monks and nuns were sensitive to individual survivors' mental conditions after the tsunami. The monks and nuns were inventive, attentive and adjusted their ways of explaining and helping the survivors so that would be as curing and beneficial as possible.

The *sangha's* network was also effective in mobilizing financial and other resources to the impacted regions, and the monks arranged activities for the survivors as an aid to recovery. In contrast, the Buddhist nuns lack of formal monastic authority displayed how gender inequality had consequences for the survivors who only to a very limited extent received aid and assistance from nuns.

Many survivors sought refuge at the Buddhist temples. Ceremonies and religious practice played significant roles in resilience building both in terms of individual and communal capacities to prepare for, withstand, and adapt to changed conditions after the tsunami. Religious practices helped people develop a sense of connection and well-being and it was especially important to maintain the feeling of belonging and to keep social relationships. It was obvious that ceremonies became important for individual survivors to share merit and to cope with suffering. Many survivors said that ceremonies made them feel that they could do something that matters and that made them stronger. They had agency and that meant that they had some power over their lives. The ceremonies were also important as a means of binding communities together by communicating ideas about life and death and sharing sense of meaning, understanding and feelings of belonging and creating social solidarity.

Religion in general is considered to have a positive impact on coping with stressful situations as well as answering meaning-of-life questions (see e.g. Glicken 2006: 23; Oliver-Smith 1996; Pargament 2010: 195). This article supports the notion that Buddhist practices, Buddhist teaching, networks and self-help groups create agency and are important in building resilience. It reveals how the well-known gendered structure of Thai Buddhist institutions played out in a disaster situation

and how the lack of gender equality created obstacles for Buddhist nuns to assist the survivors, something that the survivors would have benefitted from.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my informants for generously sharing their knowledge and experiences with me, Nantana Pidtong for her research assistance, Nalika Gajaweera and Julia Cassaniti for organizing the panel: “Buddhism and Resilience: Transnational Buddhist Conceptions of the Good” at the AAA Conference in San Jose, November 2018 and the editorial teams, and the reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

Corresponding Author

Monica Lindberg Falk
 Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies
 Lund University
Monica.Lindberg_Falk@ace.lu.se

References

- Alexander, David. 1997. “The study of natural disasters, 1977–1997: Some reflections on a changing field of knowledge.” *Disasters* 21 (4): 283–304.
- Bradshaw, Sarah and Maureen Fordham. 2013. “Women, Girls and Disasters.” A review for DFID. Report produced for Department for International Development, UK.
- Ellison, Koshin, Paley and Craig L. Katz. 2010. “Rituals, Routines, and Resilience.” In *Creating Spiritual and Psychological Resilience: Integrating Care in Disaster Relief Work*, edited by Brenner, H. Grant, Daniel H. Bush and Joshua Moses, 181–193. New York, London: Routledge.
- Enarson, Elaine. 2012. *Women Confronting Natural Disaster: From Vulnerability to Resilience*. Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Falk, Monica Lindberg. 2010. “Recovery and Buddhist Practices in the Aftermath of the Tsunami in Southern Thailand.” *Religion* 40: 96–103.
- Falk, Monica Lindberg. 2012. “Gender, Buddhism and Social Resilience in the Aftermath of the Tsunami in Thailand.” *South East Asia Research* 2: 175–190.
- Falk, Monica Lindberg. 2013. “Thai Buddhists’ Encounters with International Relief Work in Post-Tsunami Thailand.” In *Buddhism, International Relief Work and Civil Society*, edited by Hiroko Kawanami and Geoffrey Samuel, 27–49. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Falk, Monica Lindberg. 2015. *Post-Tsunami Recovery in Thailand: Sociocultural responses*. New York: Routledge.

- Falk, Monica Lindberg and Hiroko Kawanami. 2017–2018. “Monastic Discipline and Communal Rules for Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar and Thailand.” *Buddhism, Law & Society*, 3: 39–68.
- Glicken, Morley D. 2006. *Learning from Resilient People: Lessons We Can Apply to Counselling and Psychotherapy*, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications. pp 23–26.
- Hartling, Linda M. 2010. “Strengthening Resilience in a Risky World: It’s All About Relationships.” In *The Power of Connection: Recent Developments in Relational-Cultural Theory*, edited by Judith V. Jordan, 49–68. London and New York: Routledge.
- Harvey, Peter. 2000. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundation, Values and Issues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, Peter A. 2016. “The Supernaturalization of Thai Political Culture: Thailand’s Magical Stamps of Approval at the Nexus of Media, Market and State.” *SOJOURN* 31 (3): 826–79.
- Klein, Richard, J.T., Robert J. Nicholls & Frank Thomalla. 2003. “Resilience to natural hazards: How useful is this concept?” *Environmental Hazards* 5: 35–45.
- Koenig, Harold, G. 2006. *In the wake of disaster: Religious responses to terrorism and catastrophe*. Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.
- Manyena, Siambabala Bernard. 2006. “The Concept of Resilience Revisited,” *Disasters*, 30(4): 433–450.
- McEntire, David, A., Christopher Fuller, Chad W., Johnston & Richard Weber. 2002. A Comparison of Disaster Paradigms: The Search for a Holistic Policy Guide. *Public Administration Review*, 62(3): 267–281.
- Oliver-Smith, Anthony. 1996. Anthropological Research on Hazards and Disasters. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25: 303–328.
- Oxfam, 2005. “The Tsunami’s Impact on Women,” OXFAM.
- Pargament, Kenneth I. 1997. *The psychology of religion and coping*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Pattana Kitiarsa. 2012. *Mediums, Monks, & Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Pimolwan, Isalapakdee. 2006. Unpublished, presentation at the 2nd Annual Conference of Population and Social Research, Asia Hotel, Bangkok. Organized by Research Institute of Population and Social Research, Mahidol University (In Thai.)
- Reynolds, Craig J. 2019. *Power, Protection and Magic in Thailand: The Cosmos of a Southern Policeman*. Acton ACT: ANU Press.
- Tambiah, Stanley J. 1984. *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tan-Mullins, May, Jonathan Rigg and Carl Grundy-Warr. 2008 “Responses and Resilience of Fisherfolks on the Tsunami Event in Southern Thailand.” In *Crucible for Survival: Environmental Security and Justice in the Indian Ocean Region*, edited by Timothy Doyle and Melissa Risely. New Jersey, New York and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Walters, Jonathan S. 2003. “Communal Karma and Karmic Community in Theravada Buddhist History.” In *Constituting Communities: Theravada Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South*

and Southeast Asia, edited by John Clifford Holt, Jacob N Kinnard, and Jonathan S Walters, 9–39. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Watts, Jonathan. S. Ed. 2009. *Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

Wisner, Ben, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, And Ian Davis. 2004. *At Risk: Natural hazards, people's vulnerability and disasters*. Second edition. London, New York: Routledge.