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BRAVE DAUGHTERS OF THE BUDDHA:  
THE FEMINISMS OF THE BURMESE BUDDHISTS NUNS

«Usually, the nuns in this country have to accept anything that the monks do or say, but I don't accept»,

Sayalay DIPANKARA

«Nuns are trying hard to reach a certain level and a certain status. All the nuns have many problems, the same problems, so we must insist, with patience»,

Reverend SACCAVADI

Burmese Buddhists nuns are acting now in a variety of ways to improve the conditions of their lives. Scholarship about Burmese nuns has tended to portray them either as passive victims of a male patriarchy or as non-confrontational ameliorators of their status in Burmese society. The former studies have focused on the injustices inflicted on these women by the monks and the lay community. These studies have offered insightful information regarding the social conditions of the nuns but have neglected exploring the types of agency retained by them<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Thameechit, *Burmese Sisterhood: Unacknowledged Piety in The Irrawaddy* VIII/9 (2000): <http://www.irrawaddy.org/database/2000/vol8.9/culturearts.html>; F. Lottermoser, «Buddhist Nuns in Burma», *Sakyadhita Newsletter* II/2 (1991): <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~tsomo/NewsLetters/2->

*Abstract*

This paper explores the ways in which Burmese Buddhist nuns have directly contested the monastic structure of Burma in which men are given a noticeably higher social status and an allegedly spiritual superiority. Most studies until now have focused on the oppressions suffered by these nuns, highlighting the injustices and struggles which the female Burmese monastics have to undergo in their daily routines. More recently, other studies have explored the modes in which the Burmese nuns have improved their status and exerted power without confronting the established monastic institutions. This essay looks at more overt modes of resistance that Burmese nuns have developed in order to transform the monastic establishment. Taking transnational feminist theories as a point of departure, this paper relies on the most recent anthropological research about this community and on my own interactions with Burmese nuns in order to explore the strong actions of a vocal group of nuns against what they experience as injustices and their demands for more what they consider their rights as monastic Buddhist practitioners.

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