

Imagined Laity and the Performance of Monasticism in Northern Thailand*

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This article explores ways in which a monastic community in northern Thailand, with whom I conducted ethnographic field research between 2011 and 2014, constructed a sense of duty to their ascetic disciplines in relation to how they thought their lay supporters expected them to approach their rules. Drawing on insights from the social sciences on how group identities are created and maintained through performance, I focus particularly on lay-monastic relations to understand how monks and novices in this context construct a monastic in-group by conforming to the expectations of the lay community who support them. Rather than concentrating on how the monastic community engages the actual lay community, though, I focus on how monastics orient their behavior towards an “imagined laity,” a lay community which may not exist in reality but upon whom monastics project ideas of what they think laypeople expect out of them and how laity may react to certain behaviors. This projection of expectations onto an imagined laity, I argue, is an important mechanism by which the monastic community self-regulates its behavior and which shapes its understanding of their monastic rules.

Keywords: monastic-lay relations, social performance, Thailand, Theravāda

In social psychology, self-schemas are mental models individuals have of themselves that they derive from previous experiences and use to process new information pertinent to themselves.¹ People construct these models through both how they perceive themselves² and how they think others perceive them.³ As self-schemas are largely built through social interaction—drawing on what others say about a person, how others act towards someone, or how a person imagines others think, speak, and act regarding him or her—people often adjust their behavior in ways that promote a particular image of themselves. Individuals may act in ways confirming what others think (or what they imagine others think of them) or in ways that contradict these expectations. In so doing, people attempt to shape their self-image and how they believe others in society see them. The evaluation of one’s self-concept—his or her sense of the

¹ Hazel Markus, “Self-Schemata and Processing Information About the Self,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35, no. 2 (1977): 63–78; Hazel Markus, “Self-Knowledge: An Expanded View,” *Journal of Personality* 51, no. 3 (1983): 543–65.

² Mark W. Baldwin and John G. Holmes, “Salient Private Audiences and Awareness of the Self,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 6 (1987): 1087–98.

³ Hazel Markus and Elissa Wurf, “The Dynamic Self-Concept: A Social Psychological Perspective,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 38 (1987): 299–337.

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degree to which one's self-image aligns with a particular characteristic—can influence his or her sense of belonging to a group⁴ and relationships with others.⁵

The maintenance of a particular self-concept and its consequences for a sense of belonging to a group connects to the broader sociological phenomenon of what Erving Goffman called face-work, maintaining appearances so as to project and foster for others a particular image of oneself.⁶ Beyond just the social image of an individual person, though, face-work and the presentation of self is also about maintaining the image of a group one belongs to. As Goffman noted:

[T]he performance serves mainly to express the characteristic of the task that is performed and not the characteristic of the performer. Thus one finds that service personnel ... enliven their manner with movements which express proficiency and integrity, but, whatever this manner conveys about them, often its major purpose is to establish a favorable definition of their service or product.⁷

The group whose favorable definition one is establishing may be a family, a profession, or a religious community. What particular group membership is activated depends upon what group is most salient within a given situation. As in the case of service personnel, clothing or some other physical marker indicates one is a representative or part of the group, activating concerns about the group's image. In the dramaturgical approach Goffman took, individuals perform front stage to convey an image of themselves and the communities to which they belong.

The Buddhist monastic community, the Sangha, similarly performs a part with laypeople as the audience. The Sangha plays the role of moral and spiritual exemplars, encouraging laity to live well and to support and practice the Dhamma. As Michael Carrithers noted in his discussion of the 5th-century Theravāda Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, "The virtuous monk 'gives pleasure and

⁴ Marilyn B. Brewer and Joseph G. Weber, "Self-Evaluation Effects of Interpersonal Versus Intergroup Social Comparison," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 66, no. 2 (1994): 268–75.

⁵ Susan E. Cross, Michael L. Morris, and Jonathan S. Gore, "Thinking About Oneself and Others: The Relational-Interdependent Self-Construction and Social Cognition," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82, no. 3 (2002): 399–418.

⁶ Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," *Psychiatry* 18, no. 3 (1955): 213–31.

⁷ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 77.

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inspires trust,’ or, perhaps better, ‘inspires faith.’⁸ Throughout the Bhikkhu-vibhaṅga—the section of Pali canon that contains monks’ training rules—monks are reminded that their behavior should “bring satisfaction to non-believers and cause the number of believers to increase.”⁹ Monastics ideally cultivate a self-image to convey to the lay community a “favorable definition of their service.”¹⁰ Carrithers and other scholars¹¹ have often focused on monks and movements interested in reforming monastic behavior to “inspire faith” among laity by returning to ideals gleaned from texts like the Pali canon. Less attention, though, has been paid to how ordinary monks and novices practice and perform their presentation of monasticism in everyday life.

In this article, I explore how face-work and the maintenance of a positive self-image influences Buddhist monks’ and novices’ orientation to the Vinaya, the code of monastic discipline. Given self-image and face-work are connected conceptually by their mutual dependence on a concern about what others think, my main question is: How do beliefs about what an out-group (in this case, lay Buddhists) thinks about an in-group (in this case, Buddhist monastics) impact monastics’ interpretation of and engagement with Buddhist monastic law? This article looks at how monastics’ thinking about how laypeople may perceive them shapes their behavior rather than focus on what particular texts like the Vinaya—or its commentaries—dictate monastic behavior to be. I contend that monastics adjust their behavior not only when they are “on stage”—in the presence of watching laypeople—but also “off stage,” hanging out among themselves. My point is not to downplay the importance of other sources of influence on monastic behavior such as texts. In writing about a contemporary monastic community in northern Thailand, I highlight a source of influence that has not received as much attention: how thoughts about a

⁸ Michael Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka: An Anthropological and Historical Study* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 50–51.

⁹ Mohan Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life: According to the Texts of the Theravāda Tradition*, trans. Claude Grangier and Steven Collins (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 130.

¹⁰ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 77.

¹¹ For example, Richard F. Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhadāsa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2003).

layperson's view of monastic rules can influence how monastics themselves interpret the nature and function of these rules and adjust their actions accordingly.

Learning to Imagine Laity

Let me provide an example of this concern about laypeople's perception of monastics' behavior. In the principal temple of Namsai district,¹² in northern Thailand, Phra Mai,¹³ a 26-year-old monk who had been ordained first as a novice nine years earlier, was charged with mentoring Pan, a 12-year-old novice who had been ordained recently. One afternoon Phra Mai took Pan to one of the temple's chanting halls to train Pan on how he, as a novice, should bow to a Buddha statue, as well as how he should sit and stand. For over an hour, he gently directed Pan in practicing all the steps of bowing properly.

Phra Mai demonstrated how to kneel as men in Thailand do rather than the way women kneel. As Pan mimicked his movements, Phra Mai showed how to extend his arms out in front of his body with elbows in front of his knees while he prostrated his body. Then he demonstrated how to stand from a kneeling position, bringing his right foot up in front of him first, standing with his weight on his right foot, and then bringing his left foot forward so it was even with his right foot. As Pan tried it himself, he moved too quickly. The fast movement prompted Phra Mai to comment that Pan needed to stand from a kneeling position so that "it will look natural but a natural that's correct" (*man cha du baep thammachat tae wa thammachat thi thuktong*).¹⁴

At the end of this bodily training, Phra Mai broached the subject of why it was necessary for Pan to comport his body in a way that was both natural looking and correct. He explained:

If you're a novice, sitting in front of laity, then you must care—[you] must think of the laity's feelings. Being a novice is called being a field of merit. . . . It means being a field of merit for laity. You don't have to do anything. Suppose some laypeople see us. They see us sitting calmly and peacefully; they will be pleased and gain merit. They don't have to do anything with us. That's being a field of merit.

¹² Namsai, the names of all temples, and the names of all people are pseudonyms.

¹³ *Phra* is an honorific in Thai, similar to Venerable, added to the front a monk's name.

¹⁴ In transliterating Thai, I follow the Royal Thai General System (RTGS).

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If a monastic sits nicely, then any layperson who passes by will see him and he or she will feel good and calm. In much of Thailand, monks and Buddhist spaces such as temples play an important role in the cultivation of calmness.¹⁵ Moreover, experiencing and acting with good feelings like this are ways laypeople can make merit. According to Phra Mai, by looking neat and tidy in his bodily comportment, Pan will help create good merit for laity and embody a “field of merit” (*na bun*) for the lay community.

Being a field of merit means accepting alms (*than*; Pali: *dāna*) from laypeople who are seeking to do a good deed. Monastics receive food, robes, and other requisites—including money in some contexts—from laity but do not reciprocate the giving of material goods.¹⁶ Such non-reciprocal giving is a quintessential form of making merit to achieve a better rebirth as the Sangha is the unsurpassed field of merit.¹⁷ The role of being a receptacle for laypeople’s generosity relates to monastics’ duty to “give pleasure and inspire trust” discussed above. Monks’ and novices’ presence and acceptance of offerings at merit-making ceremonies reinforces the idea that monastics are worthy of respect and are proper receivers of alms.¹⁸ Performing this role of being a field of merit is paramount in the monastic role.¹⁹

Besides the importance of being a field of merit, there are many ways Phra Mai could have framed the necessity for Pan to bow, sit, and stand in specific ways. He could have—as he had done in other situations with novices I observed—explained that Pan needed to train his body in order to train his mind. In such contexts, Phra Mai told novices he wanted them to pay closer attention to their actions so they could “know themselves” (*ru tua*) better, and knowing themselves better would lead to insights into

¹⁵ Julia Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 55–59.

¹⁶ Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 213.

¹⁷ Torke Brekke, *Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism: A Social-Psychological Exploration of the Origins of a World Religion* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 107.

¹⁸ Maria Heim, *Theories of the Gift in South Asia: Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Reflections on Dāna* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 70.

¹⁹ For more on merit making and the Sangha as field of merit in Thailand, see Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 140–43.

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Buddhist teachings about the self. In this interaction with Pan, though, he did not emphasize this function of training the body. Nor did Phra Mai suggest that by working on his bodily comportment Pan might gain direct experience into the three characteristics of reality: impermanence, non-self, and unsatisfactoriness. Phra Mai also did not use this training to get Pan to think about the Sekhiya rules, the 75 training rules of the Vinaya on how monastics should move and eat neatly. The Sekhiya rules “train individuals to be well-behaved, and to be models of good behavior for society.”²⁰ Nor did Phra Mai encourage Pan to follow prescriptive behaviors or avoid proscriptive ones outlined in the Vinaya or other texts simply because they are rules. That is, he did not list pertinent rules of the monastic code of disciplines and tell Pan he should follow them because they are derived from the Pali canon.²¹

Instead, Phra Mai directed Pan to imagine some laypeople walking by or being present. With these imagined laypeople raised in his mind, Phra Mai directed Pan to further imagine how they would think, feel, and react to his presence. By imagining how they would feel, Pan would be able to adjust his bodily behavior in such a way to ensure those feelings were positive ones. Phra Mai connected ideal behavior to how he thought laypeople might emotionally react.

Imagining laypersons—what I call the “imagined laity”—was more than a pedagogical tool to train new novices and monks in Namsai. It was an organizing concept drawn upon by monastics to explain norms of monastic behavior and a heuristic for knowing how to act in a given situation. Beyond this example, imagined laity powerfully influenced monastics’ behavior during my fieldwork in northern Thailand. Time and again monks and novices judged their behavior by imagining that laypeople were present and how they might respond to such behavior. Apart from using imagined laity in training newly ordained novices such as Pan to act in particular ways, monks conjured imagined laity when talking

²⁰ Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life*, 142.

²¹ While the 75 Sekhiya rules are part of the monks’ Pāṭimokkha and not part of novices’ ten precepts, novices in Namsai were often taught that they should follow Sekhiya-derived rules. For example, monks taught novices to recite several dozen rules like, “Novices ought to determine to learn that they shall not eat sticking out their tongue” (*sammanen phueng thamkhwam sueksa wa rao chak mai chan laep lin*) and “Novices ought to determine to learn that they shall not nibble mouthfuls of food” (*sammanen phueng thamkhwam sueksa wa rao chak mai kat kham khao*).

among themselves and when talking with me both when I was a foreign, lay researcher and during the nine months in which I was an ordained monk.

As discussed above, imagining others (e.g., members of an out-group) and how they perceive oneself can impact one's identity and sense of belonging to an in-group. Thus, imagined laity served a dual role for the monastic community I knew in northern Thailand. First, it shaped monastic behavior in a way similar to an appeal to the Vinaya, or monastic rules, for directing behavior. Rather than appeal to texts or interpretations of texts to decide what the correct way to act was for monastics, appealing to an imagined layperson and his or her affective reaction to a monk's behavior helped monastics know how to act in a given situation. Second, imagined laity worked to strengthen monastic self-identification with the Sangha by rendering laity as an other that made monastics' sense of belonging more salient. Such a sense of belonging led them to perform face-work to portray a positive image. In maintaining their image by performing their monastic duties according to the expectations of an imagined laity, monastics were—to paraphrase Goffman—establishing a favorable definition of their service being a field of merit.

Reconciling Textual & Social Influences on Monastic Behavior

Social scientists working in Buddhist contexts have long demonstrated how social theory can illuminate the ways in which Buddhists understand and practice their religion. An overriding theme in this discussion has been the extent to which Buddhist philosophical concepts and ethical tenets outlined in traditional texts are taken up, used, and understood by everyday Buddhists. In terms of monastic behavior, this has often meant a comparison between what canonical texts like the Vinaya say monks should do and how actual monks in Buddhist societies really act. Thus, understanding the reproduction and change of Buddhist beliefs and practices has often been framed as a dialectic between ideals expressed in texts and the reality of complex, modern life. That is, there are certain ideals that should be lived up to, but actual beliefs and practices in the real world do not correspond exactly with the ideals.

Mel Spiro, for instance, proposed separating out two goals of Buddhism. While trying to avoid reducing religions to “primarily classification systems,” he ultimately laid out two kinds of Buddhism in

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Burma.²² First was “nibbanic” Buddhism with its emphasis on the soteriological goal of enlightenment and the monastic virtuosos who strived towards it by rejecting the physical world. Second was “kammatic” Buddhism, which was more concerned with worldly affairs, not transcending them. Kammatic Buddhism was the purview of most contemporary Buddhist laity and ordinary village monastics whose ordination was more for the good merit associated with the ritual than striving towards enlightenment in this lifetime. It also represented a “doctrinal shift” for Spiro.²³ That is, while nibbanic Buddhism was the ideal form of the religion presented in texts, the way actual Buddhists practiced—including monastics and their ascetic disciplines—did not align with this ideal; the discrepancy between the two is what led Burmese Buddhists to understand and practice the religion as Spiro described it.

This theoretical distinction between nibbanic and kammatic Buddhism has consequences for understanding monastic behavior. According to Spiro’s framework, nibbanic virtuosos would practice according to the texts, the best guides for reaching the ultimate goal of nibbana. Monastics within kammatic Buddhism, though, would focus on whatever practices generated the most merit, regardless of any textual basis. Maximizing their own and the laity’s good kamma would be the goal. Such a division, Spiro reasoned, resulted from educational differences. As he put it: “The essentially medieval world view which informs the peasant mentality—with its spirits and demons, miracles and magic, animism and supernaturalism—similarly informs the mentality of the monk.”²⁴ Spiro’s distinction between two Buddhisms explained discrepancies between the ideal and the real, between what texts and experts said about how monks should act and how monastics—and laity—actually acted in everyday village life.

While Spiro’s framework of two Buddhisms has been widely critiqued,²⁵ the idea remains that there is a purer Buddhism that people follow with soteriological goals in mind and a more common

²² Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 6.

²³ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 97.

²⁴ Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 364.

²⁵ See, e.g., Douglas Osto, “Merit,” in *The Buddhist World*, ed. John Powers (New York: Routledge, 2016), 358; John S. Strong, “Rich Man, Poor Man, *Bhikkhu*, King: Quinquennial Festival and the Nature of *Dāna*,” in *Ethics, Wealth, and*

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Buddhism that people follow to have a better, easier life.²⁶ Scholars continue to organize their analyses around dichotomies such as “worldly” and “other-worldly” concerns. Take, for instance, the anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa and his work on Thai Buddhism. Pattana drew a distinction between textually based “traditional” Buddhism and “popular” Buddhism.²⁷ The latter kept religion relevant in people’s lives, addressing worldly concerns, and easily adapted to changes from globalization, urbanization, etc. Through these changes, which Pattana saw as leading to “hybridization,” popular Buddhism took on the beliefs and practices of neighboring religious traditions. Such local traditions included animism, supernaturalism, Chinese Buddhism, and Indian Brahmanism. These practices made religion relevant to people’s pressing worldly concerns such as money, health, or love. Popular Buddhism deviated from the ideal soteriological goals of “traditional” Buddhism even if it drew on some elements of it.

Such a distinction between traditional and popular Buddhisms also shapes the understanding of monastics, their behavior, and how they approach their ascetic rules. Namely, a dichotomy of Buddhisms would suggest a dichotomy of monastics: those who are more focused on the texts of traditional Buddhism and what the texts promulgate concerning their ascetic practices compared to those who are more focused on the popular Buddhist practices like spirit mediumship²⁸ or amulets. A monastic’s position on the plane of ideal/other-worldly versus real/worldly orientations is a function of his²⁹ commitment to traditional or popular Buddhism. A monk who aligns his ascetic practices more with traditional Buddhism would act in ways that demonstrate his commitment to the ideal goals of

Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics, ed. Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 121.

²⁶ Brekke, *Religious Motivation and the Origins of Buddhism*, 25.

²⁷ Pattana Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2012), 1–2.

²⁸ Cf. Rosalind C. Morris, *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Marjorie A. Muecke, “Monks and Mediums: Religious Syncretism in Northern Thailand,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 80, no. 2 (1992): 97–104.

²⁹ I use “his” here rather than a gender neutral pronoun as in Thailand monks and novices are overwhelmingly male because the Thai Sangha does not currently formally recognize *bhikkhunī*.

enlightenment and not committed to worldly concerns like material wealth and the supposed rampant consumerism affecting popular Buddhism. Conversely, a monk who aligns his practices to worldly concerns of popular Buddhism—what Michael Carrithers termed a “village priest”³⁰—would act in ways that demonstrate his commitment to laypeople’s merit-making activities. Such a theory of monastic practice would suggest that there are monks who are concerned with the Vinaya and its rules as they are written and those who pay little heed to the formal canon when determining their actions.

More recently scholars have complicated such simplistic dichotomies like traditional/popular. For instance, Anne Blackburn has expanded the notion of what texts constitute the textual tradition of Buddhism: The “practical canon”—stories, texts, etc. that are not part of the “formal canon” of the Pali canon texts—can be just as important, if not more important, in shaping the beliefs and practices of a religious community.³¹ Others have complicated the notion that local village monastics are disconnected from the larger global processes that shape their practices.³²

Within the Thai context, Justin McDaniel has demonstrated that Lan Na texts continue to influence northern Thai Buddhism. They do so even after modern attempts to bring the northern Thai Sangha under the control of the central Thai government and its state-sponsored, “traditional” Buddhism based on the “formal canon.”³³ McDaniel and other scholars discussed above have challenged us to reconsider such a simple bifurcation of an ideal Buddhism rooted in texts that has its aims in other-worldly goals and a real Buddhism practiced by the common person that has as its aim worldly pursuits. Moreover, McDaniel has shown how monastics and their actions need not fit into one or the other but that

³⁰ Carrithers, *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*, 15.

³¹ Anne M. Blackburn, “Looking for the Vinaya: Monastic Discipline in the Practical Canons of the Theravāda,” *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999): 281–310.

³² Thomas Borchert, *Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on China’s Southwest Border* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2017); Michael Lempert, *Discipline and Debate: The Language of Violence in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

³³ Justin McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

monks may blur the line between ideal, textual Buddhism and the supernatural aspects of Buddhism.³⁴ Similarly, recent scholars have emphasized the need to look at the everyday experiences of Buddhist monastics and laypeople.³⁵ Doing so moves beyond an assumption that the study of religion needs to focus on texts and the experts who study and embody the texts' ideals.

Moving away from the study of how monastics do or do not practice according to texts has allowed for the study of other sources that influence monastic life. Jeffrey Samuels, for instance, has demonstrated how the maintenance of positive affect among newly ordained novices and their families shaped a monastic community in Sri Lanka.³⁶ Besides elaborating on the seemingly “worldly” function of monasticism,³⁷ such work has illuminated the complex relationship between the monastic and lay communities.

In my own fieldwork in rural northern Thailand, I encountered similar affective concerns, especially when it came to issues of eating after midday and sports.³⁸ As in Samuels' case, the novices—and some monks—I knew would often have a meal in the evening. Many of the monasteries had semi-hidden, cleared fields they would use for playing soccer, takraw, badminton, or other sports out of view from the main areas of the temple. Monastics' discourse around these practices was often framed in terms of potential affective consequences. They were worried that if laypeople who were unfamiliar with their monastic community saw them eating supper or playing sports, the laypeople would feel hurt.³⁹

³⁴ Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

³⁵ Cassaniti, *Living Buddhism*, 21–29.

³⁶ Jeffrey Samuels, *Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

³⁷ See, e.g., Jane Bunnag, *Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Layman: A Study of Urban Monastic Organization in Central Thailand* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Roger Casas, “The ‘Khanan Dream’: Engagements of Former Buddhist Monks with the Market Economy in Sipsong Panna, PR China,” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2016): 157–75.

³⁸ By affect, I am referring to feelings or experiences that occur beyond conscious awareness yet that impact people's judgments and actions in ways similar to language or rational thought. In recent years, scholars have grown increasingly interested in how affect shapes people's ability to act in the world. See, e.g., Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–3.

³⁹ Besides familiarity being key to how laypeople were presumed to respond to monastic transgressions, in the context of my fieldwork, monastic informants also drew upon the uniqueness of northern Thai Buddhism. That is, if a layperson they

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Alternatively, looking neat and tidy in their robes or chanting soothingly were seen as leading to positive affect among laity.

The case above of Phra Mai training Pan similarly demonstrates a concern with laity's feelings. Yet the lack of actual laypeople present whose feelings they need to be concerned about points to something more going on. Namely, Phra Mai was encouraging Pan to imagine a lay community and how these imagined laity would affectively react to their behavior. In this case, Pan was encouraged to imagine how laity would affectively react to the ways in which he sat, bowed, and stood. Affect remained important. The imagined laity's potential merit gained by seeing Pan behaving in an aesthetically pleasing way was rooted in their positive affect spurred by seeing a properly behaving novice.

In the remainder of this article, I further explore how monastics in Namsai constructed an imagined laity, drawing on their conceptions of laity to steer their behavior. In so doing, they constructed a monastic in-group with which they identified that was defined against an imagined laity as an out-group. Such a focus on laypeople's feelings and merit-making activities may suggest these monks were little concerned with the Vinaya and its injunctions on monastic behavior. That is, such "village priests" in Namsai would be concerned with maximizing what they considered good merit. Their concerns would differ from monastic virtuosos who practice according to the Vinaya, regardless of the laity's feelings. However, the monastic community of Namsai was concerned with the Vinaya. Additionally, an imagined lay community and its presumed reactions to the monastic community was another way behavior was regulated in Namsai. What is of particular interest here—and why Goffman's theories on face-work and the social management of expectations are particularly helpful—is that prior work on the interactional production of norms of monastic behavior (e.g., Samuels) largely focused on actual interactions between

were unfamiliar with saw them eating dinner or playing sports, they would rationalize it as not a problem because they would assume the layperson knew that "northern Thailand is like this" (*phak nuea pen yang ni*). Drawing on regional uniqueness is also an important thing to consider when thinking about how Buddhists make sense of their religious practices, cf. Katherine A. Bowie, "Polluted Identities: Ethnic Diversity and the Constitution of Northern Thai Beliefs on Gender," in *Southeast Asian Historiography Unravelling the Myths: Essays in Honour of Barend Jan Terwiel*, ed. Volker Grabowsky (Bangkok: River Books, 2011), 112–27.

lay and monastic communities. But the example of Phra Mai shows that, even out of view of laity, monastics may continue to regulate their behavior according to what they presume the laity's expectations to be.

The Field Site

The research for this article began as a study of how the institution of Buddhist monasticism in Thailand shaped boys to be particular kinds of moral adult men. I began preliminary fieldwork in 2010, traveling around northern Thailand for a month interviewing abbots and monks about the kinds of boys who became novices and how they tried to instruct them. In 2011, I stayed at Wat Namsai, the main temple in the district I call Namsai for three months, teaching English to the monks and novices who attended school at the temple. Staying on the temple grounds allowed me to better observe the day-to-day lives of the monastics both when there were a lot of laity around for a ceremony and late at night when there were only a few laypeople around. From 2012 to 2014, I conducted long-term fieldwork, continuing to focus primarily on Wat Namsai and surrounding temples. I occasionally visited other temples across northern Thailand, villages where the monks and novices I knew came from, and government and private secondary schools. This range of sites allowed me to better understand the broader context, including people's concerns about the moral and masculine development of boys.

During my extended fieldwork, I was ordained as a monk temporarily for nine months, staying at Wat Doi Thong, a smaller temple than Wat Namsai. Besides myself, there were three monks and 14 novices who lived at Wat Doi Thong. One of the monks and all the novices attended school at Wat Namsai along with the other monastic students in the area. Of the novices, six came from Karen villages in the district of Om Goi to the west of Chiang Mai, four came from Karen villages in Tak province near the western Thai-Myanmar border, and four came from Shan villages in Wiang Haeng on the northern Thai-Myanmar border. They all had attended primary school in their home villages and then decided to become novices in order to continue their secondary education for free at a temple school, a common occurrence in Thailand. Most would end up leaving monasticism after finishing their secondary

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schooling. Some would continue their education, getting a bachelor's or master's degree as a monk before disrobing and returning to lay life. Even fewer would remain as monastics for their entire lives.

A number of lay families who lived in the area supported Wat Doi Thong. A typical weekly Buddhist day (*wan phra*) was attended by about 10 core lay supporters. Larger ceremonies at the temple attracted many more participants. Some lay families who helped support Wat Doi Thong had deep roots in the area and worked as farmers, day laborers, entrepreneurs, or police officers. Other families were newer arrivals to the area from other parts of Thailand such as the central and southern regions. They often came as civil servants to work at a nearby government facility. Such regional diversity meant the monks and novices at Wat Doi Thong often did not know the expectations lay supporters had when it came to monastic behavior.

Being temporarily ordained as a monk at the smaller temple of Wat Doi Thong, which had a core group of lay supporters while also attracting some non-regulars from the city of Chiang Mai or elsewhere, allowed me to observe and discuss with monastics their wide range of encounters with laity. While I was always marked as the *farang* (Western) monk, which often shaped my interactions with other monastics and laity, the opportunity did allow me to observe a range of interactions among monastics and between monastic and lay individuals. Familiarity was a key factor in shaping how the monks and novices at Wat Doi Thong interacted with laity: the monastics were often much more lax in following the rules of the Vinaya when they were around other monastics and familiar laity than they were around laity with whom they were less familiar.

Yet, as I began to notice, there were many instances in which even outside the presence of any laity, the monastic communities of Wat Doi Thong and other temples acted or talked about the need to act as though laity were present. Regardless of how actual laity interacted with the monastics, such imagined laity shaped how monks and novices acted. Imagined laity were not a subgroup of laity. They were a heuristic, a stereotypical group monastics used to reflect upon.

Constructing Imagined Laity

When imagining laity, monastics I knew assumed laypeople had both very rigid and very high expectations of monastics. As one abbot put it when describing how he felt that he had to be careful of the way he spoke, being sure to not say something that might be considered vulgar: Laypeople, he explained, have very “high hopes” (*khwamwang sung*) when it comes to monks’ behavior. “Monks don’t want to shatter their hopes,” he said, “which would make them [the laity] uncomfortable. Many monks ... are afraid of hurting the laity’s feelings and hopes.” Whether or not laypeople actually had such high hopes was irrelevant. Instead, the very possibility that there might be a layperson who would feel disappointed by a monastic’s actions guided their behavior.

While we have seen with the case of Phra Mai and Pan above how imagined laity may be brought to mind by monks early in the novices’ training, how does imagining laity’s expectations shape and reinforce monastics’ in-group identity? Presently, I describe four cases from my fieldwork to address this question. The first case explores why monastics see it as important to imagine laity and their expectations because they inform the monastics on how to behave. The second case is about how older monks socialize younger novices into the importance of imagining laity. The third case explores how novices practice imagining laity among themselves. The final case looks at an example that flips the usual script of laity having high expectations, demonstrating how monastics may also imagine laity who are more flexible in their expectations of monastics.

The Importance of Imagined Laity’s Expectations

Monks I knew often thought laity had high expectations of them and how they should behave. They were also keenly aware, though, that these expectations did not always align with monastic rules according to the Vinaya. Monks often pointed out that laypeople were not very knowledgeable about the monastic rules. To paraphrase what Phra Mai told a classroom of newly ordained novices in their Vinaya class: It’s good the laity do not study the Vinaya, otherwise they would be able to point out all the

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monastics' mistakes. As such, they needed to devise a way to know how to act in these situations where what laity expected of them differed from what they read about the monastic rules.

To get a sense of how monastics handled lay expectations, I spoke with monks about how they viewed their rules compared to how they thought their lay supporters perceived the rules. A discussion I had with a 64-year-old abbot of a temple near to Wat Doi Thong exemplified the responses I often received. He had been ordained as a novice when he was 12 years old. Our conversation touched on monastics' need to balance their interpretations of the Vinaya's precepts with laypeople's understandings of the Vinaya's rules. The abbot reiterated the importance of monastics looking and acting a certain way:

A bad monk—his robes untidy, not speaking nicely—you listen to him; it's unpleasant sounding. So, when someone comes to listen to this monk—when someone comes and sees how this monk looks—faithfulness [*sattha*] will not arise. It will not arise for laity who come and see [this monk]. Therefore, we monks must protect the Sekhiya rules. It doesn't matter if we're in the temple or in the village. It doesn't matter if we're walking, lying down, or sitting. It doesn't matter what posture we're in. Monks must be neat and tidy because we must be an example for people to come and see that monks are neat and tidy.

The abbot explicitly connects the need to look tidy to the Sekhiya rules, the 75 training rules of the Vinaya that largely deal with how monastics should comport their bodies while sitting, standing, walking, or eating. To not follow any of the Sekhiya rules risks disappointing laity and thereby jeopardizing their support. This concern the abbot expresses here mirrors that of Phra Mai from above. While Phra Mai emphasized the importance of looking nice to foster positive feelings in passing laity, the abbot here emphasizes the danger of looking untidy: positive feelings will not arise for laity and they will lose faith in Buddhism. As such, he echoed the Vinaya's injunction for monks to act in a way that would foster faith in Buddhism.

The emphasis the abbot places on the Sekhiya rules compared to other portions of the Vinaya—in our discussion he did not bring up more major rules such as the Pārājika or Saṅghādisesa—demonstrates how he and most monastics thought about laity's approach to the monastic rules. The need to look and act a certain way in everyday interactions, which are behaviors addressed in the Sekhiya rules, were of paramount importance. The other rules, by contrast, were typically not as pressing in their everyday lives.

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Monastic informants who had been ordained for several years often made clear distinctions between those rules that “could not be fixed” (*kae mai dai*; i.e., the Pārājika rules) and those that “could be fixed” (*kae dai*; i.e., the remaining rules). Among these latter fixable rules, they further delineated those that were “difficult to fix” (*kae yak*; e.g., the Saṅghādisesa rules, which require major actions by the Sangha to correct the offense) and those that were “easy to fix” (*kae ngai*; e.g., the Pācittiya rules, which simply require being confessed). When I mentioned such divisions to lay informants, they were often surprised monastics would make such distinctions. To them, monastics should abide by all their rules equally. While not all laity felt this way, this expectation of following the Sekhiya rules just as strictly as any other rules may have weighed on the abbot’s mind as he stressed the importance of following the Sekhiya rules and thereby appearing proper and neat. Imagining that the laity held all rules of the Vinaya as being equally important meant the more minor Sekhiya rules held increased importance, especially as they emphasized monastics’ need to comport their bodily behavior in ways that would be aesthetically pleasing to lay onlookers.

The importance of imagined laity holding high expectations concerning the Sekhiya rules extended beyond just the monks. As we continued our discussion, we talked about how novices needed to be just as adamant in their adherence to these rules as the older monks, although there might be greater flexibility allowed for novices:

Me: I think now that I’ve seen the novices’ lives, some novices have learned that if they secretly break a rule and no laity see it, then it’s not a problem. For instance, eating—I know that in northern Thailand monks and novices will often eat in the evening. However, now there might be laity from other regions who do not know that monks and novices in northern Thailand eat supper. Monks may teach novices that if they eat, they must eat secretly so that laity don’t see. I’m not sure if novices learn like this then they will also break the Sekhiya rules so long as laity don’t see because it’s OK they do this. What do you think?

Abbot: Young novices still have little patience, so we have to bend [*anulom*] somethings. However, they have to keep the Sekhiya rules. In the Vinaya, we can bend things when we’re sick. [For example,] we can eat at the wrong time [*wikan*]*—*whether a monk or a novice—specifically if we’re unwell. But if we go elsewhere, somewhere where laity can’t see, and eat [at the wrong time], then it’s unnecessary. It’s inappropriate; it breaks the Sekhiya rules. Such novices break their precepts.

There are a couple key points here. First, the notion that novices should practice the Sekhiya rules on top of their standard 10 precepts is commonly held throughout Thailand. The abbot reinforces this

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position by saying that unless ill or some other reason they are unable to follow them, novices should abide by these rules just as monks should. Although novices may have less patience and ability to live according to the rules, they should still strive to do so. Second, the abbot suggests that monastics who fail to follow a Sekhiya rule break their precepts regardless of whether or not laity see them. Such a statement would seem to counter his earlier statement (as well as Phra Mai's above) that it is laity's reaction to behaviors and their potential loss of faith that are paramount in determining how to act. Here he appeals to the Vinaya as the arbiter of the right and wrong ways for monastics to act.

Yet, at the same time, he concedes that “we have to bend something.” The question, then, is what are they bending exactly and towards what? Are they bending rules towards their needs or trying to bend laity's expectations towards their own understanding of the rules? Furthermore, who determines when these things can be bent or not? He gives the example of being ill as a circumstance in which the rules can be bent. That is, rules can be bent in situations where monks' health or safety is in jeopardy.⁴⁰ Laity's expectations may also bend monastics' rules. When it comes to living up to the laity's expectations, monastics may need to speak, sit, move, and comport their bodies in particular ways regardless of what any Vinaya rules strictly dictate. For example, some laywomen in Thailand think it is against the monks' rules for them to directly offer something to a monk, needing to place it on a piece of cloth or something else being held by the monk. As such, Thai monks often carry around an extra piece of cloth (*pha prakhen*) for such circumstances. Doing so makes laity feel comfortable, ideally raising their faith in Buddhism and the Sangha. The face-work of positively portraying the monastic community is the guiding rule in such instances.

The abbot and I discussed other circumstances involving laity's presumed expectations that bent how monastics approached their rules:

⁴⁰ I use “bend” here, following my translation of the word the abbot used (*anulom*) to describe what they are doing. In Thai, *anulom* can mean to compromise, adapt, bend, or yield. I mean to point to circumstances—such as being ill—in which monks' rules are adapted from those rules for healthy monks under normal circumstances.

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Me: Laity may have high expectations about the Vinaya, but monastics may have different opinions about the Vinaya from the laity. I'm interested in how there can be a good relationship between monastics and laity if they have different opinions about the Vinaya.

...

Abbot: The laity haven't studied the Vinaya. When monks don't work, dig, cut the grass, or plant trees, the laity criticize [the monks]. But if monks do too much, it breaks the Vinaya. It's an offense [*phit pen abat*]. This offense, however, is a small offense. So, monastics must do some work so as to prevent the worldly fault [*lokwatcha*] that is an untidy temple. Presently monks must work, clean, sweep leaves, and cut grass so that the area is not untidy.... Laity today are not like the laity of the past. In the past, laity came to the temple to clean and do this and that.... Monks receive money from laity who offer it.... In the past, they didn't give it to monks to carry because they walked everywhere. It didn't matter if they were carrying one or two kilograms [of stuff] or ten. Monks had to walk. But now there are monks who can't walk that much. When monks ride the bus or hire a driver, they have to carry the fare. If they don't have it, they can't ride. They can't go, [but] it's the duty of monks [to go]. So they have to accept money. It's normal. But we can't accept too much; it's dangerous.

The abbot here begins by constructing distinctions between the lay and monastic communities around how they think about the Vinaya. For him, the laity he has imagined do not know the details of the monastic rules, yet they have strongly held expectations of what monks are supposed to be doing and are willing to criticize monks for not living up to those expectations. This is particularly evident for the abbot in issues involving rules in the Vinaya about digging soil, the destruction of plant life, and handling money. The expectation imagined laity have of temples looking clean, tidy, and beautiful mixed with their unawareness of specific rules overrules the requirement for monastics to not destroy plant life.⁴¹ Similarly, the current realities of modern life in northern Thailand, in which monks need to travel but are unable to travel the distances required in the time given, means monastics need to handle money to arrange transportation. Imagining laity's potential criticism of monks for not showing up to an event outweighs the prohibition of handling money.

By imagining how laity might respond to a certain set of circumstances, the abbot delineates how monastics should act in each particular situation. The influence of the imagined laity affects how he

⁴¹ According to our conversation, it appears the abbot considers an untidy temple that results from monastics not cleaning to constitute a *lokwatcha* (Pali: *lokavajja*), an offense according to common opinion. Petra Kieffer-Pülz has pointed out to me (personal communication, June 1, 2018) that *lokavajja* offenses are discussed in the Vinaya commentarial literature and refer to more serious violations commonly seen as offenses like murder or theft. It would seem the abbot may be using *lokavajja* differently to refer to rules that emerge out of laypeople's expectations.

thinks and talks about the Vinaya and the need for both monks and novices to abide by their rules. At the same time, such discourse recreates and reinforces group distinctions between the lay and monastic communities. As a member of the monastic in-group, the abbot defines his membership in this group by contrasting how they must approach their rules, balancing those in the text of the Vinaya and those that are social expectations, with how he imagines laypeople approach the monastic rules. Having been a novice and then a monk for a total of over 50 years, he has had significant time to solidify his image of the laity's expectations. The younger novices who have been ordained recently have yet to construct a sense of the imagined laity's expectations and come to see themselves as belonging to a group whose actions are largely defined by these expectations.

Novices Learning to Imagine Laity

As we saw above with Phra Mai, there is a good degree of training novices must go through to learn what the imagined laity's expectations are and how to adjust their behavior accordingly. While I was a monk at Wat Doi Thong, Phra Udom, the abbot of the temple, spent a great deal of time lecturing, cajoling, and urging the novices—as well as newer monks like myself—to construct a model of what laity expected of them and adjust accordingly. There were frequent opportunities in day-to-day life for novices to learn how exactly to imagine laity.

Such a case arose toward the end of 2013 when a man from the city of Chiang Mai, who was not a regular supporter of Wat Doi Thong, decided he wanted to be ordained for a couple of weeks. He was in his 30s and had not yet been ordained. In Thailand it is customary for a young man to be ordained at some point before marriage. It may be for a few days when a relative such as a grandparent or parent passes away, or it may be for a few weeks or few months during the three-month rains retreat (*phansa*). As this man had been in his career for several years and was finally able to take some time off from work, he decided to use this time to become a monk. He wanted to be at a temple that was more removed from the city and, thus, quieter than urban temples, so he came to Wat Doi Thong having heard about it from a friend.

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As he was not familiar with the monastic community at Wat Doi Thong or in Namsai more broadly, Phra Udom was unsure about his expectations for monastic life or how he thought about the need for monastics to follow their rules strictly. In particular, Phra Udom was unsure how he felt about novices eating in the evening, which the novices of Wat Doi Thong were wont to do. Being unsure, Phra Udom defaulted to the assumption that he would be disappointed to see that the novices were not abiding by their precepts. Not knowing the man's expectations, Phra Udom drew on an imagined laity to know what the man's expectations might be.

Not used to having to hide their evening meals, the novices were instructed by Phra Udom on what they needed to do. In the process, he encouraged them to imagine laity's expectations themselves. During the two weeks this man ordained, Phra Udom told the novices they could only drink milk in the afternoons—no snacking on foods—and if they wanted to have an evening meal, then they would have to go to one of the novice's rooms which was in a far corner of the temple's grounds and use an electric kettle to boil water for ramen noodles lest the temporarily ordained man see them. This man would be a monk for two weeks under the impression that the monastics at Wat Doi Thong never ate supper.

Apart from reinforcing the layman's expectations of monastic behavior, such situations also reinforced for the novices the idea that they needed to imagine how others may react to their actions and adjust accordingly. The man's short stint of only two weeks as a monk and the fact that he was not from the immediate area rendered him more of a layperson than a monastic. He was never fully incorporated into the in-group of the Namsai monastic community. Instead, his presence presented the novices with an opportunity to construct an image of laity that has certain expectations of them, such as not eating after midday, and how not to act in ways that, as the abbot interviewed above suggested, would lead laity to lose faith in Buddhism.

At the same time the novices were learning to imagine laity, such situations reinforced their in-group identity as monastics. During the two weeks the man was ordained, I was staying at another temple. When I returned and spoke with the novices about their experience with him, Som, a 17-year-old novice, laughingly recalled how after the evening chanting was done several of the novices would head to the

small hut on the edge of the temple grounds where one of the novices lived. Cramming into a room designed for one person, they boiled water and made ramen noodles. Som described how the temporary monk they were hiding from was probably confused as to why several of the novices disappeared for an hour every evening, but he was confident the man never caught on to what they were doing. Som and the other novices expressed how they were relieved when he disrobed because it meant they could return to having a fuller supper of rice, vegetables, and fried eggs. Their sneaking away for covert eating, though, allowed them to strengthen their group cohesion and define themselves as longer-term monastics who needed to imagine what the out-group of laity—even those who would temporarily ordain for a few days or weeks—would expect of them and act accordingly.

Novices Practicing Imagining Laity

Learning to imagine laity and their potential reactions was not a one-time occurrence, and it did not always require an older monk present to remind younger novices to keep in mind how a layperson may feel about their behavior. Imagining laity was something novices practiced in their everyday lives among one another. Such practice among novices often involved playing jokes on one another. Scholars have noted the importance of play, joking, and teasing in learning social rules,⁴² language development,⁴³ and identity development, especially when it comes to norms about gender.⁴⁴ As a newly ordained monk, having been ordained shortly after most of the novices at Wat Doi Thong, I was sometimes included in these spontaneous practice sessions.

A few weeks after I had been ordained, I was walking with Chai, a 14-year-old novice from Tak province who had been ordained as a novice a little over a year prior. We were heading back to the temple

⁴² Ann R. Eisenberg, “Teasing: Verbal Play in Two Mexicano Homes,” in *Language Socialization Across Cultures*, ed. Bambi B. Schieffelin and Elinor Ochs (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 182–98.

⁴³ Peggy Miller, “Teasing as Language Socialization and Verbal Play in a White Working-Class Community,” in *Language Socialization Across Cultures*, ed. Bambi B. Schieffelin and Elinor Ochs (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 199–212.

⁴⁴ Benjamin Smith, “Of Marbles and (Little) Men: Bad Luck and Masculine Identification in Aymara Boyhood,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2010): 225–39.

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along the gravel road that branched off the paved main road. We were going to turn on the water pump that provided water to the temple from a canal that ran parallel to the main road. As we wound around a bend in the gravel road that led to the temple—and out of sight of any laity traveling on the road—Chai began to play a joke on me. Walking behind me, he put his hands on my back. He began running, pushing me forward and forcing me to run, too. “You broke the rules!” he exclaimed triumphantly, drawing on the notion that a monk running was aesthetically unpleasing, not neat and tidy as a monk should be, and therefore an act that would disappoint any on-looking laity. Given the connection monastics made between lay expectations and monastic rules, Chai interpreted the visually unpleasing image of a monk running as meaning running is against the monastic rules. I contested that there was no explicit proscription against monks running. However, Chai paid no attention to my objection; the fact that a running monk did not look proper to laity was enough for him to consider it a transgression.

As we continued up the path, another novice, Big, joined in on the joke. Pretending to be me and pretending there were laity around who saw me “run,” Big said emphatically, “It was necessary! It was necessary [that I run]!” By going along with the joke, Big reinforced the specter of imagined laity whose presence and whose expectations determined what constituted breaking a monastic rule or not. Going a step further, Big elaborated on imagined laity’s expectations by providing space in which monastics could mitigate the potential negative consequences of breaking these expectations. In claiming that there was some circumstance that rendered it necessary to run, Big opened up the possibility for circumventing this monastic “rule” as determined by imagined laity, putting into practice the similar notion described by the abbot above in our conversation. Just as monks might have to break their rules by handling money to fulfill their duty, they might also have to run to fulfill another, more pressing duty.

Big’s appeal to necessity in this imagined situation drew on interactions with actual laity, particularly laity who spent a good deal of time around monastics. For instance, in discussions I had with most of the lay teachers at the novices’ school, they described how they thought it was acceptable for novices to eat after midday and to play sports—two things many laity, and particularly imagined laity, would not approve of—because the novices were adolescents and still growing. The physical and mental

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changes the novices were going through made it necessary for them to eat supper and exercise regularly, according to these lay informants. Taking this notion of necessity, Big, Chai, and I reworked and applied it to our pretend situation of laity seeing me run. Imagined laity would feel disheartened and potentially lose faith in the Sangha and Buddhism by seeing a monk run. However, if we could have convinced these imagined laity that there was some circumstantial necessity for my running, then they might not have felt bad and, therefore, I would not have broken an assumed monastic rule. The hypothetical nature of this situation provided the novices the opportunity to reinforce for themselves the necessity of performing face-work when in the presence of actual laity whose expectations may not be known.

As in the case above with the novices surreptitiously eating supper, these instances of conjuring imagined laity while playing pranks on one another also reinforced the novices' in-group identities. Continuing on the topic of monastic rules, Chai asked me, "How many days was it before you broke a rule?" Recalling that a few weeks prior I had covertly driven myself and Phra Udom in the school truck to a nearby temple (I describe this incident in greater detail below), I told them it was about a week after being ordained that I first broke a rule. "A week!" Chai exclaimed, "I went 30 days before breaking any rule." Big, though, explained that of course Chai had not broken any rules the first month he was a novice. "[Chai] ordained during the summer camp," Big said, "They're much stricter about following the rules during that [camp]."

The camp Big and Chai refer to is the "novice summer camp" (*khroṅkan buat sammanen phak rueduron*), which is held annually in many districts throughout Thailand, including Namsai. It is an opportunity for boys to ordain for a few weeks during their summer break from school. While most disrobe after the camp ends and return to their lay lives, some such as Big, Chai, and the other novices at Wat Doi Thong stay on to complete their secondary education. At these camps, novices are taught to follow their monastic rules strictly.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ For more on these camps, see Michael R. Chladek, "Constructing 'The Middle': The Socialization of Monastic Youth in Buddhist Northern Thailand," *Ethos* 46, no. 2 (2018): 180–205.

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In asking when I first broke a rule and then comparing the lengths of time among us, the novices and I were making the assumption that monastics breaking rules was inevitable. While those who were ordained for a few weeks may be able to abide by all the expectations laity have, eventually all monastics will break some rule. This inevitability ran counter to imagined laity's expectation that monastics would refrain from breaking any rules unless unavoidably necessary. By forcing me to run and thereby break an expectation, Chai incorporated me into his notion of monastics who should perform their monastic duties neatly and properly in accordance with lay expectations but who inevitably also break the rules. As such, these small, everyday interactions among monastics allowed them to reproduce and play with notions of laypeople's expectations. This play both reinforced the image of imagined laity and fostered unity and camaraderie among the monastics. They were able to joke and tease one another because they had a shared model of what laypeople expected of them as they skirted around and played with the boundary of these expectations.

Imagining Laity as Being Familiar

While imagining laity often worked to distinguish the lay community from the monastic community, there were also instances in which monastics imagined laity in a way that rendered them familiar with the monastic community. As such, they would hold lower expectations of how monks should act. Just as imagined laity may have encouraged monastics to adjust their behavior to be in line with imagined laity's expectations, the imagined laity may also have been drawn upon to justify circumscribing rules and expectations. We have already seen this function of imagined laity in the case above where Big elicits the claim of necessity to mitigate an imagined layperson's discomfort with seeing a monk running. Here I elaborate on this process by describing in more detail the case of driving while a monk mentioned briefly above.

A couple weeks after being ordained I helped out at a meditation workshop being held at Wat Namsai, the main district temple, for school teachers in the area. Phra Udom, the abbot of Wat Doi Thong, and I had to travel from Wat Doi Thong to Wat Namsai every morning at four o'clock, at which

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time the workshop attendees awoke for morning meditation and chanting led by the monks. Not wanting to make a layperson get up even earlier and travel out of his or her way to pick us up, we decided to drive ourselves.

Monastic informants often grappled with making requests of laity. In instances such as this, monks would say they needed to *krengchai yom*, that is, be overly considerate of the laity (*krengchai* means to be considerate of others' time, feelings, or resources, and *yom* is how monastics refer to laypeople). Monks were reluctant to impose responsibilities on the laity. While the monastic community relied on a lot of help and support from the laity, the amount of support they gave could be a source of stress for monastics. Not being a burden on laity, possibly making them resent helping monastics or dislike Buddhism, was an important underlying principle within the monastic community. Thus, imagined laity's expectations were a double-edged sword: they expected strict adherence to what they believed to be monastic rules and, at the same time, they should not be overly burdened with helping the monastic community meet those obligations. Learning to *krengchai*, to be very considerate of the laity's time and resources, was an important skill for young monks and novices to develop; a skill that older monks often tried to instill in younger monastics.

Because many people in Thailand think that a monk who drives a vehicle breaks a monastic precept, we had to be careful about driving ourselves those mornings of the workshop. As Phra Udom was not skilled at driving a pick-up truck, the driving duty fell to me. We had devised the following plan to avoid detection by the laity: Phra Udom and I would leave from Wat Doi Thong around three thirty in the morning. We would drive to a nearby temple where a couple other monks helping at the workshop stayed. Another one of the monks from this temple, who was not helping at the workshop, would drive all of us to Wat Namsai, being sure to let us out away from and out of sight of the lay attendees of the workshop before driving back to his temple. Parking at a distance would hopefully prevent any layperson from seeing the monk driving.

In the darkness of the early morning on the second day of the workshop, I was driving out of Wat Doi Thong. Just then a layman, who was eager to make some merit by helping transport us monks to the

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workshop, came driving up the road just as I was driving out. We both stopped and Phra Udom got out to inform the layman that we would not be needing a ride, being careful not to divulge the fact that I was the one driving. Getting back in the truck, the abbot directed me to drive on. Laughing a little, he told me not to worry (probably telling himself this just as much as me). Surely the layman did not see me, a monk, driving the truck as it was still dark at that early hour and the windows were tinted. Still, the abbot added, even if he did see, we should not worry. Monks driving is a minor rule, he reminded me; some monks even argued driving did not break any monastic rule so long as there was a necessary reason to drive. Moreover, he imagined the layman was from the area, so he would probably know that monks sometimes drive when they find it necessary. Because he would be familiar with this aspect of monasticism, Phra Udom reassured me and himself that this encounter would not be a problem. Thus, imagining laity who were familiar with the monastic community and the specific practices of northern Thai Buddhism provided a heuristic through which Phra Udom and I could understand our behavior and how it might have impacted the feelings of laypeople without ever fully determining the layman's actual feelings.

Near the end of my time as a monk, there were several reports in news media of monks driving vehicles, particularly in northern Thailand. Some Thais became upset at this news and the Chief Superintendent of the Sangha in northern Thailand (*chaokhanayai honnuea*) issued a statement reminding monks that they were not allowed to drive under any circumstance.⁴⁶ Many monks I knew laughed at this pronouncement. Sometimes, it was necessary for monks to drive, they reasoned, especially when it would require laity to do more work for the temple and monastics. Yet, at the same time, they also knew that some laity expected monks not to drive under any circumstance. As such, monastics' imagined laity had the expectation that monks would not drive but might make exceptions where it was necessary.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ "Prakatchai kot ham 'phra-nen' khaprot laeo," *Thairath*, March 3, 2014, <http://www.thairath.co.th/content/edu/407399>.

⁴⁷ For a similar concern around monks driving in Sri Lanka, see Benjamin Schonthal, "Formations of Buddhist Constitutionalism in South and Southeast Asia," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 15, no. 3 (2017): 705–33; as well as Benjamin Schonthal, "Litigating Vinaya: Buddhist Law and Public Law in Contemporary Sri Lanka," this volume.

As this expectation was encouraged by the Thai state through higher level monks, we can see one mechanism by which the state tried to impact monastic behavior: by setting actual laity's expectations, which monks tried to live up to. While some scholars have suggested that state-sponsored attempts at influencing Buddhist practice in peripheral regions such as northern Thailand have largely been unsuccessful,⁴⁸ monastics in such regions did imagine laity who held expectations for monastic behavior that were supported by state agencies. In the dynamic relations among monastics, the laity they imagined existed, and actual laity, we can further see the relationship between monastics and the state and, as Thomas Borchert has noted, "Buddhist monastics as social actors, within political structures, and sometimes acting 'politically,' but not necessarily defined by politics."⁴⁹ I would suggest further research is needed to look at how imagined laity act as a vector for the transmission of state-sponsored ideals of monasticism to impact monastic behavior.

Conclusion

Steven Collins has suggested that monastics and laity "play out a form of socio-religious theater"⁵⁰ in which monastics are encouraged and often expected to accurately perform their ascetic ideals.⁵¹ Such a dramaturgical approach to lay-monastic relations resonates with Goffman's approach to how individuals present and perform their "selves" on the stage of everyday life. The metaphor of monastics performing Buddhism for laity suggests a division between being on-stage under the watchful eye of laity and being off-stage in which one can be more relaxed, not worrying about how his performance is being read. I have attempted to draw back the curtain a bit to show how monastics construct and rehearse the performance of monasticism. Rather than a site where laity's expectations can

⁴⁸ McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words*, 105.

⁴⁹ Thomas Borchert, "On Being a Monk and a Citizen in Thailand and China," in *Buddhism and the Political Process*, ed. Hiroko Kawanami (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 15.

⁵⁰ Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 35.

⁵¹ See also Steven Collins, "The Body in Theravāda Buddhist Monasticism," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 185–204.

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be ignored, the off-stage of monastic life is more like a dress rehearsal. There may not be actual laity present, but the imagined audience of laity still exerts an influence. While monastics may circumvent rules when they are not under the watchful eye of laity, imagining laity allows them to practice the face-work they engage in. This work on- and off-stage helps solidify monastics' sense of belonging to the monastic community as they worked together on enacting the expectations they attributed to the lay out-group.

The monks I knew in Namsai such as Phra Mai and Phra Udom were well-versed in the Pali canon and the Vinaya, having studied it for many years with well-regarded teachers. And they often imparted this knowledge to the younger novices and newly ordained monks they trained. At times Phra Udom consulted older monks more well-versed in the Vinaya about particular rules.⁵² Yet such texts were often not the main instrument for deciding how to enact their monastic role in their everyday lives. Instead, they considered how laypeople may react to their actions. Not knowing how actual laity may react, monastics thought about how some imagined layperson with very high expectations for monastics—expectations that came from what the layperson thought was aesthetically pleasing, what he or she assumed were rules in the Vinaya, and what the state and other actors had taught about how monks should behave—would react to their actions. The monks were serious about the Vinaya. They were also serious about fulfilling their monastic role by living up to laypeople's expectations.

In the four cases presented above, I have tried to outline how monastics thought about imagined laity in their day-to-day lives. The first case showed the importance of imagining laity: because laity did not know the details of the Vinaya but expected monks and novices to act in certain ways, the monastic community needed to imagine how laypeople would respond to know what to do. With the case of the man temporarily being ordained at Wat Doi Thong, I showed how younger novices learned the importance of imagining laity's expectations when deciding when and where to eat. The third case of the

⁵² For example, during the three-month *phansa* rains retreat, one of the monks at Wat Doi Thong was planning on traveling to multiple meditation retreats. Not remembering exactly how many nights a monk could be away from the place he had determined to keep *phansa*, Phra Udom contacted an older monk who knew the rules around keeping *phansa*.

novices Chai and Big playing a joke on me showed how novices, when just among themselves out of view of any laity, continued to draw on the imagined laity to think about whether or not it was permissible for a monk to run. Finally, the last case of Phra Udom's reaction to me possibly being discovered driving while a monk demonstrated how monks drew on an imagined laity and their possible reaction to reconcile their transgressions. Throughout these cases, monastics adjusted and understood their actions in a way that reinforced the distinction between monastic and lay communities.

When we think about how monastics approach their rules, we may often turn to what is written in texts such as the Vinaya or texts outside the Pali canon that offer stories and advice on moral behavior and how monastics should properly comport themselves. The ideals expressed in these texts, though, may not always align with the lived realities of lay and monastic communities. As such, we may seek to understand how the complexity of real lives and social realities shape monastic approaches to their rules. Focusing on this space between the ideal and the real in this article, I have articulated how monastics imagining lay observers and their ideals equally impact monastic behavior and their approaches to their rules. Imagined laity, in addition to texts—formal and practical—and actual lay-monastic interactions, are an important mechanism by which monastics regulate their behavior and think about what it means to live according to monastic rules.

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