

Mastering Old Age

Buddhist Practice and Techniques of the Self among Elderly Laywomen in Hồ Chí Minh City

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of

The Australian National University.

27th September 2016

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I hereby certify that this thesis is my own original work.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The lay Buddhist women with whom I spent time during fieldwork told me that our encounters were predestined by the ties that I had had with them in our previous lifetimes. That was why I was brought to their Buddhist temple and made them my ‘teachers’ of lay Buddhist practice and aging experience. Influenced by my informants’ Buddhist worldview, I reckon that my PhD journey was a predestined opportunity for me to develop great friendship with the teachers and PhD colleagues in Australia. This thesis would not have been possible without their enormous support, care, affection, inspiration and encouragement.

First of all, I would like to extend my most sincere gratitude to Dr. Philip Taylor who guided me through this long journey. This dissertation has greatly benefited from his insightful guidance and careful supervision. His critical feedback, brilliant advice and painstaking editing helped me sharpen the arguments in this thesis. Dr. Taylor’s constant challenges on the limits of my arguments, interpretations and viewpoints enabled me broaden the horizons of my understandings of old age, Buddhism, and culture and society in Vietnam. While being grateful for his close supervision, I also very much thank him for letting me have the time I needed to think and hone the arguments on my own, and carving out the space for me to grow as an independent scholar. His intellectual inspiration has extended far beyond my academic life, and defines the way I interact with and understand things, events and people in my life from an anthropological perspective.

This research has brought me beautiful friendship with many lay Buddhist women in Hồ Chí Minh City, who not only guided me in Buddhist practices during fieldwork, but also warmly welcomed me to their home and shared with me the stories of their lives and families.

Their Buddhist wisdom taught me a lot about how to live in life with a Buddhist attitude of detachment and awareness of the impermanence of life. I want to thank Aunt Lan, Aunt Khai, Grandma Tính, Aunt Hóa, Grandma Gòn, Grandma Trí and many other laywomen, and the abbess and nuns of Ngọc Tịnh temple, for having treated me as their daughter, granddaughter and niece. They took very good care of me during pilgrimages and charity trips, and they were very patient and candid in responding to my curiosity about their Buddhist practices and personal lives.

I am grateful for having the opportunity to live and work with great anthropologists in the Department of Anthropology, both at the College of Asia and the Pacific and the College of Arts and Social Science of the Australian National University. I like to extend my thanks to Prof. Andrew Kipnis, Prof. Kathryn Robinson, Prof. Alan Rumsey, Prof. Kirin Narayan, Prof. Andrew McWilliam, Prof. Simone Dennis, Prof. Francesca Merlan, Prof. Mark Mosko, Prof. Thomas DuBois, Prof. Assa Doron and Dr. Ana Dragojlovic for their warm support and inspiration.

I am particularly indebted to the collegial support the Vietnam Studies Group (VSG-ANU) scholars at the ANU have given me during the years, through the regular VSG seminars and our many informal get-togethers. For this I thank Prof. David Marr, Prof. Li Tana, Dr. Judith Cameron, Dr. Ashley Carruthers, Dr. Do Thien, Dr. Kim Huynh, Bác Điền, Dr. Phúc Tô, Dr. Suzuka Sato, Dr. Yến Lê, Dr. Lan Thái, Dr. Trần Minh Hằng, Lamijo, Hiếu Nguyễn and Hà Việt Quân, for giving me the support and ease of an ‘intellectual home group’. I especially thank Dr. Do Thien for sharing in email exchanges his wisdom on Buddhist philosophy and cosmology.

I was extremely lucky to have many great friends at the ANU. We started PhD at the same time, attended the same Anthropology Theory and Ethnographic fieldwork courses, shared with each other the ebbs and flows of PhD scholars' lives and encouraged each other to finish our theses. I was very lucky to have a good friend, Dr. Annie McCarthy, who helped edit the language for my thesis chapters right before submission. Isabela Burgher kindly read and commented on a few chapters of mine while she was doing her own fieldwork in India. Dr. Sin Wen Lau, Katie Dyt, Dr. Tom Cliff and Dr. Y  n L   were very generous in sharing with me their theses which gave me good examples to write my own. Dr. Y  n L   devoted many hours to reading and giving comments on my thesis chapters. Many friends in the PhD thesis writing group at the ANU gave insightful feedbacks on my chapter drafts: Roger Casas, Andrew Leary, Xuan Dong, Ronja Ebele, Andrey Damaledo, Markus Bell, Visisya Pinthongvijayakul and Francesca Mosca. I like to thank A'an Suryana, Dario Di Rosa, Karen Tu, Maria Myutel, Lina Koleilat, Chen YiTsun, Shiori Shakuto, Benjamin Hegarty, Chen Liang, Stella Hutagalung, Jodie-Lee Trembath, Pasoot Lasuka, Gita Nasution, Tiffany Cone, Tsai Kai Yun, Rizki Fillaili, Udeni Ariyaratna, Geng Li and many other friends for accompanying me throughout the challenging and precarious journey of pursuing PhD studies in a foreign country, for sharing with me the joy of student life and bewilderment of midlife and mid-PhD crises.

I had very pleasant time writing with Jyostna Tamang, a friend from Department of Demography (ANU), who generously fed me with a lot of Kit Kat and tasty snacks whenever we wrote together. Dr. Kim Wells, a forester-friend from outside the ANU, kindly introduced me to the wild life of Australia, taught me tips to look for directions by gazing at the stars and how Australians celebrate Christmas. I was also grateful to friends in the writing group called 'Shut up & Write' which ANU organized for PhD students who are writing up their

theses. Even though I did not know all those friends' names since we shut up most of the time, I was very happy to share the passion for writing with them. My friends from pre-PhD life continued to provide me with moral support during my PhD study: Prof. Patrick McAllister, Prof. Kee Pookong, Prof. Ko Yiu Chung, Dr. Anna Dobrovolskaia, Dr. Thái Thị Ngọc Du, Yoshie Kushima-san and Miwako Muto-san.

In addition, the works involved in finishing a PhD would have been all the more difficult without the very effective support of our administrative staff Joanne Bushby and Penelope Judd. They both did amazing job smoothing out paperwork and making everything else much easier to allow me to fully focus on my study and writing. I want to thank Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for funding this research.

Last but not least, I would never be able to complete this challenging PhD journey without the love, care and trust that my father and mother, my sister and Gấu had for me. This thesis is dedicated to my beloved family.

Dr. Philip Taylor, my supervisor, once joked with me that my thesis is a merit-making one, since I had attended many Buddhist merit-making practices during fieldwork in order to collect data for this research. If I really could create good merit out of my attendance in various religious activities of my informants, I would like to dedicate the merit and Buddha's blessings to my family, my supervisor, teachers and friends at the ANU.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an anthropological study of old age and Buddhism in Vietnam. It explores how Vietnamese women utilise Buddhist practice to navigate the late stage of life. Embedded in the context of a fast growing aging population and the present lack of studies that focus on aging in Vietnam, this research looks to contribute to the understanding of aging and the life course, and the role of religious practice in informing and reconstructing the everyday experience of being old in Vietnam.

This research shows that Buddhism is a regime of practice that elderly women follow in their everyday life. As a daily practice, Buddhism shapes women's experience of being old, by transforming the temporal and spatial structure of their everyday lives, and extending their social networks and engagements far beyond their families and feminine roles at home. Buddhist imaginaries and conceptualisations of life redefine the way women conduct themselves in their everyday lives and perceive and live out their roles at home and in wider society. In the process, elderly women also transform Buddhist practice to make it respond to their lived realities. Buddhism is lived out by elderly women not as a doctrine but as a practical way of life. The way of life that Buddhism carves out for its elderly adepts is embedded in the socioeconomic landscape of the contemporary socialist market economy in Vietnam and is imprinted with its practitioners' gender- and age-specific habitus.

This research finds out that Buddhism is also a set of techniques that work on the self, through which elderly women redefine their relational personhood in their interactions with their families and the wider society. Buddhism provides its elderly adepts with self-mastery

resources which enable them face the dreadful thresholds of the final stage of life. As a technique of the self, Buddhism enables elderly practitioners to adjust their identities and personhood, which in turn give them a sense of purposefulness, agency and control over the various realities that emerge in the course of old age, such as physical decline, ambiguities in identity and loss of agency at the end stage of life. Old age is therefore mastered with Buddhist practice, and is transformed from a life stage of marginality and infirmity, to an experience of continuing personal development and empowerment.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Ngọc Tịnh temple¹, where the majority of my fieldwork took place in 2013, is a small Buddhist temple situated on a narrow lane in a crowded neighbourhood of District Four in Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam. One day in March 2013, an event was held in this neighbourhood which caught the attention of all elderly laywomen, who were the majority of the laity of this temple. Grandma Bảo, a very well-respected laywoman had passed away at the age of ninety-three. I had never met Grandma Bảo since she had stopped frequenting this temple a couple of years prior to my fieldwork, however, I learned a lot about her during her funeral, when I accompanied the laywomen to her house to chant for her spirit.

Grandma Bảo's funeral took place over three days at her house. During this time, Ngọc Tịnh temple's laywomen participated in a busy schedule of chanting sutras to make merit for her spirit several times a day. This was what laywomen and monks of Ngọc Tịnh temple often did for neighbourhood families with recently deceased members. The good merit that they made through the practice of sutra chanting was intended to assist the spirit of the dead in escaping from this life and to ensure a good rebirth in the next life. Grandma Bảo's house was located on the main road that ran through the crowded neighbourhood, which was also home to a lively market with many stalls and shops selling fresh food,

¹ This is not the temple's real name. I have used this pseudonym for the temple to insure the privacy of my informants. I also use pseudonyms for the laywomen whose stories appear in this thesis.

vegetables and household utilities overflowing onto the two pavements. Grandma Bảo's house was also partly a shop, selling rice. During her funeral, I learned that she had been a wealthy trader and her rice shop was one of the most successful businesses in this neighbourhood market. Part of her business success was however directed towards the support of Buddhism and she herself was instrumental in the foundation of Ngọc Tịnh temple. Grandma Bảo had made a significant donation towards the temple's construction, after a nun, having been granted a land plot by another wealthy laywoman, had come to the neighbourhood. Grandma Bảo also visited many families in this neighbourhood to raise additional funds for the construction of the temple, and encouraged people to become Buddhist followers of the new temple, which today is Ngọc Tịnh temple. After the temple was established in the 1970s, she became an active laywoman. By then she had already passed the rice shop to her daughter, and had time to frequent this temple for most of its rituals, including the chanting rituals that took place every night as well as other regular rituals that were held throughout the Buddhist calendar. She also volunteered in many of the other activities organised by the temple, such as cooking for full-moon rituals' feasts, travelling on pilgrimage trips, and participating in charity events. Not only did she help build and then frequent this small temple in her own neighbourhood, I was told that she also travelled very widely to many temples in Hồ Chí Minh City and further afield to remote rural areas. At all the temples she visited, she made generous offerings.

A friend of hers remembered how generous and devoted Grandma Bảo had been in her merit-making practices:

She always made more offerings than others. She was very generous. She also made a lot of donations to charity. She lived her life being such a kind person. Now the merit she made has been passed on to her children. You see her children are also very

wealthy. Her family is a very good family; her children supported her very well when she retired; and now her grandchildren too have all been to university and have good jobs. She made a lot of friends on her journeys to many temples. That was why so many temples, not only from our neighbourhood but also from other places in Hồ Chí Minh City, sent their monks and lay followers to chant for her at the funeral. You see, she had been preparing for all of this for many years.

Indeed, during the three days of her funeral, I always found her house crowded with monks in yellow robes, and lay followers in grey robes awaiting their turn to approach Grandma Bảo's coffin to pay condolences to her family, and to chant the Amitabha Buddha Sutra [Kinh A Di Đà] to make merit for her spirit. There were also many visitors who were friends and colleagues of her children and grandchildren. The relatives, all in white mourning robes, were busy greeting and fetching tea and snacks for the visitors. Her children took turns to stand next to her coffin to kowtow in return to those who came to offer their condolences. There were so many visitors that not everyone could squeeze into the small living room, which was occupied by the wooden coffin, wreaths of flowers bearing broad ribbons with words of condolence from the guests, and at one corner, an altar of the Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha governing the Pure Land, a heaven-like land which lay Buddhists considered the most ideal destination for rebirth. Visitors who could not get into the house would sit at the tables her family had prepared along the pavement. Many monks, and even a bigger crowd of elderly laywomen (and some laymen), were mingling and chatting with each other while waiting for their turn to approach her coffin.

I sat with the laywomen from Ngọc Tịnh temple at a table on the pavement. A laywoman who seemed to know Grandma Bảo's family better than anyone else, pointed to the two men who were standing across the road smoking cigarettes. They were Grandma Bảo's grandsons; both were doctors working in big hospitals in the city, she said. All her children and grandchildren had successful business or careers, thanks to the merit that their mother and grandmother had made for them. Looking at Grandma Bảo's daughter, who was already seventy and was then kneeling next to the coffin to kowtow to the visitors, the laywoman added:

Her daughter is now also following in her footsteps, frequenting Buddhist temples, making offerings to the temples and donating money to charity just as the mother had done. Not everyone is as meritorious as her children, only losing their mother at their own old age. Her children looked up to her, and followed the way of life that their mother had walked as a Buddhist with such sincere faith [thành tâm].

Other laywomen nodded in agreement. Another said Grandma Bảo had walked on the right path of life, leaving behind her so many friends who admired her, as well as good children and grandchildren, who all missed her and wanted to be at this funeral to send her off. Her friends also talked about how she had died. One woman informed us that although Grandma Bảo had been too weak to walk to the temple in her final years, every day she had chanted sutras before the altar to the Buddha in her home right up to her last few days. Their old friend had been hospitalised for only ten days and peacefully passed away at home. They said Grandma Bảo must have accumulated a lot of good merit in this life and thus she must have had a very peaceful death, when, at the very time of death, she would have seen the Buddha who manifested to welcome her to his heavenly Pure Land.

The funeral itself was a demonstration of how other lay Buddhist women were leading a life devoted to Buddhist practices just as Grandma Bảo had done. The voluntary works that Grandma Bảo's Buddhist friends undertook during her funeral were among the very same activities that she herself had done as a lay Buddhist—volunteering, donating, doing charitable works, chanting sutras, performing rituals, making merit and belonging to a community of fellow lay followers. These elderly women immersed themselves in Buddhist practices every day, in their home, in the temple, and beyond as they participated in various activities that took them away from home for pilgrimage, charity, or to volunteer for events like funerals in their neighbourhood. Their participation in these activities constituted their belonging to the large community of lay Buddhist followers, who were usually women in their late fifties, sixties, seventies or even older, and who were in most cases free from the responsibilities of childrearing and supporting their families. Like Grandma Bảo, they dedicated their newly acquired free time to the practice of making and accumulating merit to pass on to their families, and to prepare for their own future aging, death and rebirth.

For her Buddhist friends, Grandma Bảo's funeral was less a sad event marking death or loss than a celebration of a life well-spent as a devout Buddhist. During the time of the funeral, her house was like a temporary pilgrimage site in the neighbourhood, where lay Buddhists and monks came to perform rituals and make merit. The funeral was a time when big gatherings and many social activities took place among the laity of the many temples in the neighbourhood. Although her friends praised her for a 'life dedicated to Buddhist practice' [một đời tu], their praises were predominantly directed at the post-retirement stage of her life, when she had been free from familial duties and could devote significant time to Buddhist practice. What was remembered and marked by her friends was her service in many temples she had visited, her charitable works in enabling the construction of Ngọc Tịnh temple, the

good merit she had left behind and the peaceful death and rebirth in the Pure Land that her friends believed she must have had. The years when she had not practiced Buddhism - when she was working as a rice seller to bring up her seven children - were obscured, outshone by her thirty-something glorious years as an active Buddhist. Her final years of life were not noted as a time of health decline or dependence on her children, but rather were remembered by her friends as very active years, filled with travel and activities which defined her as a devout, sincere-minded [thành tâm] and well-connected Buddhist.

This thesis is an anthropological study of old age and of lay Buddhist practice in urban southern Vietnam. It explores how elderly women in Hồ Chí Minh City navigate their transition out of the workforce and into 'old age' through the adoption of Buddhist beliefs, worldviews, moral codes and modes of living. Rather than explore Buddhism simply as a religious doctrine, this research is attentive to how Buddhist discipline, as a regime of practice, provides its elderly adepts with a new worldview, a guide for living, a community of belonging and a set of resources to comprehend and adapt to the realities of old age that assist them in navigating their journey towards the end stages of life. The thesis demonstrates the experience of elderly laywomen as they are inducted into a Buddhist community which consists of lay followers, monks and Buddhist supernatural powers, which together create a structure in which women can give new meaning to their efforts, practices and experiences of old age. This research explores how elderly women's bodies, hearts and minds are trained and artfully reshaped to recognise the truths of the world as laid out by Buddhism. Inspired by practice theory (Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 1984, 2006), this thesis explores how elderly women master the disciplines of Buddhism, and in turn reshape them, imprinting upon Buddhist practice the values and habits of a lifetime spent as traders, mothers and women in charge of the wellbeing of their families.

Drawing on Foucault's (1997) concepts of self-formation and technologies of the self, this thesis explores elderly women's adoption of Buddhism as a way of generating new resources of personhood that, in reframing their day-to-day lives, also empower, uplift and expand on what was previously impossible for these women. Buddhism provides elderly laywomen with an array of remedies for the infirmities of old age as well as offering a set of techniques that promise a peaceful transition, free from pain and suffering, from this life to the next. This thesis, therefore, explores how Buddhism is integrated and practiced by elderly women in their everyday life as a set of techniques of the self. It investigates the techniques that empower elderly women to cope with the realities of old age, such as infirmities, dependence on family, the loss of their previous roles and positions within their family and the loss of personhood, dignity and agency in the end stages of life. By exploring how elderly women practice Buddhism and integrate Buddhism into their daily practice, this thesis documents how women's interaction with Buddhism in daily life speaks to the reality of being old in Vietnamese urban society. In doing so, this research aims to shed light on topics such as aging and the life course, death and the end stage of life, conceptions of being old, old-age personhood and femininity, as well as the practice of Buddhism in urban Vietnam. Broadly then, this thesis hopes to contribute to the scholarship on aging, gender and religion in Vietnam.

Old age as a cultural construct

Most of the laywomen I met during fieldwork only started to practice Buddhism seriously and devotedly in their old age, when they were freed from familial responsibilities and duties towards their parents, children and spouses. Even among those who became Buddhists in

their younger years, old age was the time when they could take up the practice of Buddhism seriously and live their everyday life according to Buddhist discipline. Therefore, Buddhism is an important lens through which to explore these women's experiences of their old age.

Several scholars of Buddhist practice in Vietnam have noted the dominance of women of middle- or senior-age in Buddhist temples and activities (Đỗ Quang Hưng & Trần Hồng Quân 2009: 60; Dyt 2009: 8; Soucy 1999: 155, 2006: 107, 2009: 348, 2012: 3). However, research on religious practice in Vietnam has not paid sufficient attention to exploring the connection between Buddhist practice and the everyday experience of old age in Vietnam. Soucy's (1999; 2012) studies are among the few that look into gender, age and religious practice in Vietnam. Conducted among lay Buddhist practitioners in the north of Vietnam, Soucy's work provides this research with an intriguing and thought-provoking comparative case study and ethnographic account of how religious practices are involved in lay practitioners' identity making. In his analysis, Soucy focuses on how gender identities of men and women are displayed through their religious practice, and how age and life stages define men and women's practices. Soucy argues that religiosity is enmeshed in ways of being masculine and feminine for Vietnamese men and women, and shows how religious practice entails the social performance of gender identities. Informed by Soucy's (2012) insights, this research explores how the Buddhist practice of Hồ Chí Minh City's laywomen defines their old-age experience and self, and how the familial and social realities of old age in turn transform their practice.

Most studies of aging in Vietnam adopt the perspective, and further the interests of policy makers, healthcare and insurance providers. For example, Knodel, Truong, Bui, & Friedman (2003) study the gender dimensions of support for the elderly in Vietnam; Giang

and Pfau (2009) examine the pension scheme for the elderly in Vietnam; and the United Nations Population Fund's report on the aging population in Vietnam (UNFPA 2011) summarizes demographic data, providing policy and program recommendations to the government to ensure Vietnamese elderly have a 'successful aging' experience. UNFPA (2011) reports that Vietnam is moving fast toward an aging population, with the elderly population (aged 60 and above) on track to reach 10 percent of the total population in 2017. However, the experience of old age and the identities of the elderly in the country, have not received adequate attention from researchers.

This thesis is also informed by the literature on old age and religious practice in other Asian societies. Many scholars (e.g. Eberhardt 2006, 2014; Menon 2012; Kalab 1990) have pointed to an increasing intensity of religious practices associated with old age in some Asian societies. These studies characterise religious practices as a cultural practice of old age, whereby religious activities provide the elderly with a platform to fulfil cultural norms and ways of being and living deemed appropriate for the elderly. Eberhardt's (2006) study of a Shan community in north-eastern Thailand, for example, illustrates the cultural inter-linkage between religiosity and Shan people's cultural conceptualisation of life stages. Shan's theories of selfhood and human development revolve intensively around Buddhism and local beliefs. According to Shan understanding of the life-course, the development of a person from early childhood to old age is measured largely by his or her level of self-control, from an emotionally-driven child, to an emotionally-controlled adult and finally an emotionally-detached old person. An old person in this Shan community, will, in order to train a 'disciplined and quiet mind' and be free of 'craving or desires', practice Buddhism intensively, staying in temples and practicing an ascetic lifestyle in order to better detach

from the mundane world, and be prepared for the next stages of the life cycle – death and rebirth.

Some studies of old age in Asian societies also characterise elderly people's deep absorption in religious practice as a culturally-defined action that the elderly follow in order to detach themselves from the social world and to prepare for death. For example, Kalab's (1990) article on elderly lay Buddhists in Cambodia, describes how the elderly meditate during the rainy season retreat at the temple to contemplate their own death and rebirth. Menon's (2012) study in the eastern Indian state of Orissa shows that old women are expected to withdraw from household affairs that have become the responsibility of their daughters-in-law, and instead achieve self-refinement through religious activities, pilgrimages and meditation.

Depicting how religious practices enable people live out the cultural norms of their age, these studies point to the ways that age is a cultural and social construct, a fact stressed in the literature on age and life cycle (e.g. Traphagan 2000: 9; Jenike 2004: 220; Andaya 2006: 197-225; Lamb 1997, 1999, 2000, 2014; Menon 2012). The cultural construction of life stages is paralleled by the construction of a set of appropriate cultural actions that, in the case of my research and other studies of aging in Asia, are made visible to the public through religious acts. Thus, a Shan man upon entering old age is expected to detach from the mundane world, an expectation he realises by adopting Buddhist practice and a commitment to an ascetic life. Old age is thus a cultural system (Geertz 1966) within which religious practices are actions through which culturally appropriate ways of being old are realised.

One drawback of studies of aging such as these is a preoccupation with death and detachment, which obscures other facets of everyday experience of being old, such as the

transition out of prior familial roles, potential marginalisation within both the family and in society, alterations in physical and mental capabilities, and changes in the material and financial relationship with their children. Likewise, these studies often fail to recognise how a person's specific socioeconomic circumstances shape his or her experiences of being old, and in turn shape the way, and extent to which religious practices are incorporated and interwoven into everyday life in old age.

This research, therefore, looks beyond the conceptualisation of old age as a cultural system in which religious practices are undertaken to fulfil culturally-defined ways of being old. Instead, it focuses on the specificities of everyday life and daily practice of Buddhism for elderly women in Hồ Chí Minh City. I draw on these women's lived experience as insightful windows onto how, on the one hand, Buddhist practice operates over the life stage – what Buddhist practice does and means to old women, how it speaks to the multiple lived realities of old age for Vietnamese women – and, on the other, how Buddhism and the experience of being old are mutually entwined. In this thesis I characterise Buddhism as a regime of practice that shapes the everyday life experiences of one group of elderly women and provides them with a reservoir of ideas and techniques that transforms what it means to be elderly.

Buddhism as a regime of practice of old age

Studies of Buddhism by Vietnamese scholars have mainly concentrated on the interpretation of textual and orthodox Buddhism, or history of the development of Buddhism in Vietnam (e.g. Trần Hồng Liên 1995, 2004; Nguyễn Quang Điền 1993; Trần Quang Độ 1976; Nguyễn Duy Hinh 2008). These works reflect the views of doctrinal specialists, or of governmental

institutes and largely do not capture the ways Buddhism is practiced and comprehended by lay practitioners. Recent works on contemporary Buddhist practice look further into Buddhist ethics to explore the ways practitioners comport themselves in the everyday life, comparing followers' embodiment of Buddhist moral disciplines with the image of the ideal citizen promoted by the Vietnamese state during the war and during the period of building socialism (e.g. Trần Quang Độ 1976; Tạ Nguyễn Tấn Trương 1992; Nguyễn Quang Điền 1993; Hoàng Thi Thơ 2002; Trần Hồng Liên 2002; Lê Hữu Tuấn 2002; Lê Văn Đỉnh 2007; Nguyễn Thị Diệp 2011).

Elderly laywomen in Hồ Chí Minh City with whom I spent time did not always understand or practice Buddhism in the ways proclaimed in these orthodox teachings or specialists' interpretations. While philosophical and abstract Buddhist notions such as no-self [vô ngã], impermanence [vô thường], suffering or enlightenment were very pervasively present in women's daily conversations and rationalisations for their acts and ways of being, laywomen interpret and utilise these terms and the body of Buddhist knowledge associated them in ways that may differ widely from experts' conceptualisations. These philosophical, abstract and highly ritualistic expressions of Buddhist concepts are vernacularised by laywomen, translated into daily terms that can be used to talk about events that happen in their own lives. A discussion of these practical day-to-day 'translations' of Buddhist concepts and precepts enrich this research, providing insights into how Buddhism operates in the everyday life of the elderly, and how its teachings, concepts, explanations and perceptions are put to use by laypeople to make sense of themselves and their lived realities.

This research explores Buddhism as a set of practices, rather than as the observance of doctrine. Viewing Buddhism as a practice of everyday life, this thesis examines how

Buddhism changes laywomen's experience of old age, and how it enables elderly women in urban southern Vietnam to negotiate with and make sense of their experience of old age. In addition, as a practice of life, Buddhism is also enmeshed in significant transformations. Therefore, this study explores both how elderly women's experience of old age is transformed by the practice of Buddhism, and how, in the process of immersing themselves in Buddhism, elderly women transform Buddhist practice to better respond to the lived realities of their stage of life.

As a practice, Buddhism is embodied by these women not only within monastic spaces, but is also integrated in all other aspects of their lives, which remain structured, though perhaps to a lesser extent than previously, around familial relations and obligations. Buddhism is appreciated by laywomen less as a philosophy of life, and more as a corpus of practical knowledge, which they learn and master by doing. They are not indoctrinated, but entangled and drawn into Buddhist practice by letting it pervade many aspects of their lives. Buddhist practice provides laywomen with the transformative potential to shift the boundaries of, and increase the value attached to, their position within their family and society. From being marginalised and dependent at home, these women re-structure their lives around the work of merit-making at temples, work which brings supernatural blessings to their children and many generations of ancestors prior to them, as well as to many generations of descendants after them. Through Buddhist practice these women are no longer retired and unproductive elderly people, but are able to believe again in their important role of providers, who are privileged with the power to accumulate supernatural blessings for their families. Daily engagement with Buddhist practices transforms the temporal and spatial realities of these women's life. From occupying no specific roles at home, they become preoccupied with the busy schedule of various rituals and events of the Buddhist calendar. While travelling

on pilgrimage or charity trips, elderly laywomen expand the spaces in which their lives are lived and extend the experience of their old age far beyond the domestic and familiar spaces where they lived and worked in their earlier years. These experiences of travelling diversify women's life stories and enable them to accumulate knowledge about places and people in far-flung places. Buddhist beliefs also transform how they perceive and give meanings to their lives and the relationships and engagements they have experienced. An understanding of life informed by the Buddhist rule of karma enables elderly women to define old age as a separate realm of life, a realm outside of the entanglements of familial responsibility and strict social roles, a space in which they can devote themselves to Buddhist practices and self-cultivations by following Buddhist ethical codes.

At the same time, in this process of immersing themselves in and being transformed by Buddhism, elderly women also transform the practice itself. They vernacularise Buddhist abstract concepts to explain the everyday issues they face in life, and draw on its prescribed rituals and practices as a resource to remedy any problems they may encounter. For these women, Buddhist rituals are not only an act of worshipping the supernatural powers but also a way to structure their everyday life and a means for them to take care of their families. In mastering Buddhist practice, elderly women transform and assimilate it to fit within frameworks and worldviews already familiar to them. They domesticate and make Buddhism a routine daily regimen which in terms of temporality structures their everyday lives. Likewise, the social network they create through their Buddhist practice, defines the spatiality of their everyday movement. Additionally, these women turn Buddhism into a practice that reflects the habitus which they embodied throughout their earlier life as women in the home, as traders in society, imprinting it with the broader social context in which their life has taken place.

In this thesis I focus on the Buddhist practice of elderly women mostly from lower-working-class communities. As such a significant background to these women's lives is the rapidly changing consumerist market economy in urban Vietnam, a context that I will discuss further in the latter part of this chapter. The roles that these women performed for their families, their social engagement as petty traders in markets prior to retirement, their duties in managing expenses and income, their role of providing material and emotional care to their family, and their educational background are both explicitly and implicitly continued and reproduced in Buddhist practice in old age. This continuity often results in women emphasising certain aspects of the practice, such as repentance for past sins, the accumulation of good merit and elimination of bad merit, cultivating gentle and generous dispositions as opposed to their previous disposition as profit-oriented traders and particularly stressing their merit-making labour on behalf of their families.

Buddhism is conceptualised by lay Buddhists as the way of life [đạo]. Envisioning Buddhist practice as the way across the realm of old age places emphasis on the characteristics of Buddhist practice to shape the experience of old age, and in turn to be shaped by the life situations of those who practice it. The way of life that Buddhist practice carves out for elderly women is one among the many ways to live out old age in Vietnam. However, this way of life has its specificities, distinction, and uniqueness due to the way it is shaped by Buddhist understandings and teachings about the nature of life, the self and moral principles as to how to comport oneself through the passage of life. Farquhar and Zhang (2012: 22), writing about the social and cultural practices of Beijing elderly, describe these activities as the tactical 'escape without leaving' (Certeau 1984), as the cultured, deliberate, and creative ways of living the everyday life, and as the way (dao) of nurturing life

(yangsheng). Buddhism can also be said to be the way of nurturing life of old age for elderly laywomen in Vietnam.

Inspired by studies investigating the interplay between individual practices and the surrounding society, system, and culture (Ortner 1984, 2006; Bourdieu 1977), this research explores Buddhism as a regime of practice in old age. It explores the way Buddhism transforms the experience of old age, the self and personhood elderly women embody, and in turn how Buddhism itself is transformed by the realities, priorities and demands arising out of the lived experience of old age. This research focuses on the lived experience of Buddhism, as opposed to Buddhism as a doctrinal framework. By applying microscopic lens to elderly women's daily practice of Buddhism, this research illustrates the wider context in which these activities are embedded: the experience of old age in contemporary Vietnamese society and the realities of religious practice in urban Vietnam.

Buddhism as a technique of the self

In pursuing Buddhist practices in their everyday life, elderly practitioners adopt Buddhism not only as a regime of activities that shape their experience of old age, but also as a set of technical practices that work on and develop the self. Discussing Buddhism as work on the self may seem incompatible to the Buddhist doctrine which, at its core, emphasise the absence of a self, or 'no-self' [vô ngã]. Buddhist doctrine of no-self teaches that the self is dependent on a series of causations, thus a permanent, non-changing self does not exist. However, my observation of how Buddhism is lived out by lay practitioners reveals that Buddhism provides elderly adherents with the techniques to shape their identities and personhood, which also work upon the experience of old age, which, unless transformed through purposive actions, is

lived and construed abjectly as a condition of lack, marginality, infirmity and liminality. Buddhism converts old age into an experience of personal development, of being under fortuitous protection and of having power over life and death.

In observing and participating in various religious activities of my elderly informants, I was often struck by how devoted these women were to their Buddhist practice, which they believed prepared them for the experiences awaiting them in the later stages of life. By practicing Buddhism, elderly women prepare themselves for illnesses, loss of familial roles and status and even for death and rebirth. Therefore, as is illustrated in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, participating in the funeral of Grandma Bào, her lay Buddhist friends remarked on how well she had prepared for her own death. Her friends believed that she had left aside a lot of good merit for her children who would be bestowed with good blessings from the Buddha even after she had passed away and no longer made merit for her family. They also said she went to many temples, made ample offerings and donations and connected herself to big networks of monks and laity, who chanted for her spirit after her death. Although laywomen only remarked about Grandma Bào's thoughtful preparation for her own death, what I learned during fieldwork was that this process of preparation through Buddhist practices was a painstaking work on the self to make it ready for the various realities of old age. Elderly women cultivate a self that is subordinated in the patronage relation with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, by imagining themselves as the child of these supernatural powers and thus being protected by them. Laywomen also follow various merit-making practices, which they believe load themselves with good merit which invite good blessings unto them and their families. They also submit themselves to the Buddhist principles which stress that how a person's life unfolds is dependent on his or her merit and karma. This knowledge in turn requires women to train themselves to follow Buddhist ethical codes and

discipline in order to cultivate good merit while avoiding committing sins and creating karmic debt. For these women death is not an alienating experience or a scary topic for daily conversations; laywomen proactively discuss death and how to prepare themselves for it. As such, not only do Buddhist practices prepare the self for the realities of life, they also train the self for the last moment of life, and for the transition to a new life following a rebirth.

Previous studies have shown that religious practices are a means by which traders, women and other marginalised people in Vietnamese society gain self-affirmation, power and self-confidence (e.g. Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009; Phạm and Eiper 2009; Endres 2008, 2015; Salemink 2010; Leshkovich 2006, 2014; Taylor 2004). These studies show how women transgress their own social classes, gender and background and assume an empowered voice and authority through their enactment of supernatural powers through spirit mediumship, cultivation of relations with powerful spiritual patrons in god and goddess worship, or Buddhist practices. Kirsten Endres' (2008) research, for example, explores how women, especially from marginalised groups, practice mediumship to empower them in confronting the challenges and uncertainty of modern society in Vietnam. Phạm Quỳnh Phương (2009) illustrates how women mediums embody the power, vision and authority of the spirit of Saint Trần Hưng Đạo, a famous military hero in the history of Vietnamese resistance against foreign invasion. Other studies describe how women gain self-affirmation and power in their life ventures through cultivating relations with powerful spiritual patrons (e.g. Soucy 2000, 2006, 2009, 2012; Taylor 2004; Leshkovich 2006). These studies show that women's alliance with powerful religious deities is a means for them to cope with anxiety, uncertainties, marginalisation, and infirmities in their lives. Such practices have become a means for women to deal with the unpredictability and precarity associated with Vietnam's transition to a market economy. Building on these previous studies on women's religiosity,

this research hopes to focus specifically on the later life stage of women in Hồ Chí Minh City, and how the religious practices they are involved in empower them to cope with lived realities specific to being old.

While certain stages of life have their own specificities, old age is a stage in which multiple changes occur in a woman's life, such as loss of familial roles, marginalisation both in the home and more broadly in society, being left out from productive and social activities, loneliness, ambiguity of identity, bodily changes, post-menopause, declining health, infirmities, loss of mobility and the capacity to take care of oneself. This research aims to illustrate how, through religious practices, elderly women cultivate techniques to cope with these various aspects of old age. While some studies approach self-empowerment through religious practices by focusing solely on embodiment or forged connection with supernatural powers, in this research, I lean more toward the idea that the performance of religious practices are also the practices of self-making and self-portraiture (Taylor 2004: 90-100). Specifically, that these are practices through which practitioners gain an understanding of the self and master the self, which may or may not indicate an empowerment of the self or resistance to the social realities in which the practitioners live. This research shows that the performance of Buddhist belief and practice effects the ways elderly women perceive themselves, define their identities and their personhood in relations to other people in their lives. Buddhist practices also provide elderly women with a platform to cultivate a sense of self that is in control of various happenings and uncertainties experienced in life as an elderly person.

Mahmood (2012a, b), in her study on women's involvement in Islamist movement in Egypt, explores the role of repetitive performance of Islamic practices and feminine virtues,

such as humility, modesty and shyness, in shaping the self of women practitioners. Mahmood argues that repeated outward performativity, through rituals, liturgies and worship, shapes inward piety. For example, Egyptian Muslim women through the bodily act of wearing the veil cultivate the inward feminine virtue of shyness (Mahmood 2012a). The veil is crucial not only as a means to tutor oneself but simultaneously integral to the practice of shyness. Instead of being preoccupied with whether such enactment of feminine virtues through bodily acts contributes to reproducing women's subordination to male authority or to resisting and subverting the patriarchal social order, Mahmood (2012a: 8) argues that a discussion of agency should begin with an analysis of practices of subjectivation, which looks into the process of self-formation that makes the subject's social imaginary possible. Mahmood pays attention to the formation of the pious self through repeated performativity of Islamic practices and virtues. In her discussion of performativity, Mahmood (2012a: 162) draws on Butler's (1997) conception of performativity which is at the core of Butler's theory of agency. According to Butler, the repetition of the performance of a norm makes the structure of the norm unstable since the reiteration may fail or may be undertaken not for the purpose of consolidating the norm. Mahmood, however, points out that religious performances does not easily fit into this picture that Butler draws between performativity and a person's agency in resisting a dominant structure. The reiteration of religious practices does not destabilise the practices but instead further consolidates them. Therefore, instead of assuming whether the reiteration of a practice will change the meanings of the practice, Mahmood (2012a: 166) suggests that one should look deeply into the 'architecture of the self' that shapes the ways the practitioners live their everyday life in which religious practice is a part. In looking into how the self is formed in the process of living according to religious practices, virtues and imaginaries, we can understand the different modalities of agencies which escape the logic

of resistance and subversion of the norm. In her research, Mahmood is interested in finding out how living according to Islamic virtues affects women's ability in inhabiting patriarchal social order.

Drawing on Mahmood's discussion on religious performance as work on the self, this research illustrates the role of Buddhist practices, ethical codes and imaginaries of life not only in shaping the religiously virtuous and pious self that is submitted to Buddhist supernatural powers for protection and security, but also in forming and honing the boundaries of old-age personhood in elderly women's relations with society and their families. Buddhism provides elderly women with a modality of actions through which they handle various realities, shape the ways they experience their old age and cultivate a sense of agency and control over the various occurrences in their everyday life. Buddhist rituals, activities and disciplines are instrumentalised by elderly women as a reservoir of techniques of self-training and mastery, by introducing into their everyday life the technical practices that alter their modes of being, bringing them in line with the Buddhist ethical codes and the operation of a Buddhist self in this world. Foucault (1997: 87) defines techniques of the self as 'the procedures which [...] suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge'. Buddhist practices that elderly women perform are the technical practices for self-understanding, self-mastery and cultivation, which, as Foucault perceives, comprise of bodily practices, spiritual exercises or ways of conducting oneself in the everyday life. The chapters that follow this Introduction show how Buddhist practices are utilised in the everyday life of the elderly women as a repository of techniques to define themselves according to their Buddhist imaginary of life, and to cultivate their 'self'

to a point at which they can cope with, or even be empowered to face the uncertainties of illness, loss of personhood and agency that often accompany the end stages of life.

Buddhist practices therefore transform the experience of old age from a process of self-cessation into a process of continuing self-formation. Old age is inherently also a part of life, for life as defined by Ingold (2013: 8) is a process in which we 'never-endingly and collaboratively... [are] creating ourselves'. Arguing that human beings are unceasingly 'becoming', Ingold (2013: 8; 2014: 389) conceptualises living as a 'work in progress', while Farquhar and Zhang (2011: 11) describe life as a 'process of unceasing genesis', 'an evolutionary process of becoming'. Old age is therefore also situated within this process of becoming, and as such old people continue to create themselves. This perception of old age as a process of becoming, during which a person continues to cultivate his or her self in relations to the realities that this life stage presents to him or her, departs from how old age is imagined in some Asian societies which previous studies have characterised (e.g. Eberhardt 2006, Traphagan 2000; Jenike 2004; Long 2012; Lamb 1997; 1999; 2000; Menon 2012; Kalab 1990). In these studies, old age is usually characterised as the final stage of the process of self-formation that has taken place throughout the previous stages of the life course. The self, gender identities, and social roles change throughout the life course and reach the final and static stage in old age. Eberhardt's (2006: 148) ethnography of Buddhist Shan conceptualisations of the life cycle, for example, characterise the trajectory of human life and the development of the self throughout the life course. Old age is here the highest stage of development for the Shan self, which is formed and transformed through the lifelong process of self-mastery achieved by the practice of Buddhism and other folk beliefs. Thus, in this conceptualisation, the self, reaches its final highest state of development in old age. Some other studies describe a process of a reverse development of the self in old age, where the self

bounces back to its beginning. For example, Traphagan (2000: 104) and Jenike (2004: 220) describe how old age is considered in Japanese culture as a second childhood, when a person becomes senile, weak and is allowed to be dependent on others for care. In other Southeast Asian cultures, old age is perceived as the time when women's femaleness is lost at the end of menstruation, with elderly women embodying ambivalent structures of personhood. Old women therefore are believed to habituate worlds of the living and the dead, embodying both male and female traits and possessing spiritual potency (Andaya 2006: 222; Cool and McCabe 1983).

This research shows that old age is a process of constant defining and redefining the boundaries of personhood, roles, and positions in society. For elderly lay Buddhist women, Buddhism provides them with a reservoir of techniques of the self, a range of models of and for their ways of being in this world. Through Buddhist practices and disciplines, they cultivate a self that is subordinated to supernatural patrons, who oversee their existence, thus providing security and protection for them amidst the uncertainties of life. However, simultaneously this subordination provides a sense of agency and control, enabling women to cultivate an exalted personhood and a sense of purpose associated with the provision of supernatural care and relief to their families and other people in the society.

In exploring elderly women's practice and cultivation of a Buddhist self, this research is informed by studies on religion in Vietnam that have looked into how religious practice is embedded in and informed by the economic, social and political contexts of its practitioners (e.g. Taylor 2004; Endres 2008; Saleminck 2010; Leshkowich 2006; Soucy 2012). These studies illustrate how local social contexts trigger certain type of religiosity,

for instance making particular religious deities especially efficacious and popular, as well as shaping practitioners' religious subjectivities.

Soucy (2012: 63-5), for example, points out that the radical differences in the ways men and women in Hanoi express their religiosity, practice Buddhism and relate to others in their practice are rooted in the political discourse on religion that took place in northern Vietnam after 1954. While men are far more tied to the secular Communist Party, hence the often-found avoidance and skepticism towards religious beliefs and practices among men in Hanoi, women are, on the contrary, less affected by the state's view of religion (Soucy 2012: 64). Therefore, men and women engage with religion in very different ways, which makes religiosity closely linked to the construction of gender identities in Vietnam (Soucy 2012: 67). Another illuminating example is Leshkovich's (2006) analysis of a successful woman entrepreneur who practices Buddhism in Hồ Chí Minh City. In this insightful case study of one woman, Leshkovich (2006: 280 – 90) shows how this businesswoman's religiosity and sense of self are shaped by her awareness of the emergent class stratification after Đổi Mới, and of Vietnam's cultural context, which make it hard for a woman to excel in both maximizing her material gains and maintaining her feminine morality. In response, the woman in Leshkovich's case study utilises her Buddhist practice as a way to show that she is a socially ethical entrepreneur, a virtuous mother and wife in her family, a high-class businesswoman who distinguishes herself from superstitious spirit-worshipping low-class petty traders, and a meritorious Buddhist who is blessed by the Buddha to succeed in trade. Discussing the cult of goddesses in southern Vietnam, Taylor (2004: 5-6) illustrates the social situations in which this effervescent spiritual practice is embedded, which are the decline of centralized socialist economy, liberal economic reforms, international trade and aid relationships and, as the result of these rapid reforms

and changes, individual anxieties. This socioeconomic background gives rise to religious subjectivities that can assert agency and manage anxiety amidst uncertainties among adherents (Taylor 2004: 87).

Informed by these works, this research attempts to explore the cultivation of a Buddhist self of Hồ Chí Minh City's elderly laywomen not only in relation to the patronage relations that these women build with Buddhist deities, but also in regard to the wider socioeconomic context in which their old age and piety are rooted. In the discussions following this chapter, I look into how the religious subjectivities that these women cultivate through their everyday religious engagement are sensitive to their social class background as urban petty traders; to the market economy which influences the form of religious agency they cultivate; as well as to the gendered dynamics and cultural perceptions of old age that define their roles at home and in society as elderly women. Grounding this discussion of old age, gender, Buddhist religiosity and self-cultivating practice in local context, this research hopes to illuminate the broader circumstances in which particular Buddhist subjectivities are compelling for southern Vietnamese elderly women; the rationalisation behind their self-cultivating practice; their chosen ways to engage with the discipline; and the religious agency that they aspire to attain.

The fieldwork

Ngọc Tịnh temple, where I conducted fieldwork for this research, is among more than one thousand Buddhist temples in Hồ Chí Minh City (Trần Hồng Liên 2010: 263; Giác Ngộ 22/9/2012). Being the biggest city and economic centre in southern Vietnam with a population of more than eight million people, Hồ Chí Minh City is also a place with a very vibrant religious

life, marked by the presence of many world religions like Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, and several of Vietnamese religions, such as Hòa Hảo Buddhism or Cao Đài (Đỗ Quang Hưng & Trần Hồng Quân 2009: 1; Trần Hồng Liên 2002: 47). Regarding Buddhist practice in the city, Trần Hồng Liên (2010: 236) highlights that Hồ Chí Minh City has more Buddhist branches than anywhere else in the country, with both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist temples, and also temples following Vietnam's Khất Sĩ school of Buddhism. The number of Buddhist practitioners in the city is reported variously from source to source, from a figure of only just more than one million (Đỗ Quang Hưng & Trần Hồng Quân 2009: 5) to about four million, which would account for roughly half of the city's population (Trần Hồng Liên 2010: 263; Giác Ngộ 22/9/2012).

When I started my fieldwork in late 2012, drawing on the networks of my mother, I was introduced to Ngọc Tịnh temple, a small temple following the Vietnamese Khất Sĩ Buddhist tradition located in District Four of Hồ Chí Minh City's centre. This temple was where I spent most of my time during fieldwork, observing and participating in its laity's activities. Through my participation in the activities of this temple I developed connections with many laywomen from temples in other districts as well as in other provinces in southern Vietnam. However, Ngọc Tịnh temple remained the base of my one-year fieldwork. Many stories appearing in this thesis revolve around the daily practices, lives and families of the elderly lay followers at Ngọc Tịnh temple with whom I spent time and practiced Buddhism.

District Four, where Ngọc Tịnh temple is located, used to be in the outskirts area of Sài Gòn (Saigon), the old name of Hồ Chí Minh City prior to the reunification of north and south of Vietnam in 1975. Due to urbanisation and expansion of the city, District Four now is one of the central districts of the city. Three sides of it are lined with the Saigon River and

canals, with the other connecting it to the other districts of the city. It has a population of roughly 200,000 people with the majority being Kinh people, the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Quận 4, 2016). Many people from the city are familiar with the following saying about the four ‘specialities’ of Saigon, which are ‘Eating in District Five, sleeping in District 3, dancing in District 1, robbing in District 4’ [Ăn Quận 5, nằm Quận 3, múa ca Quận 1, trộm cướp Quận 4]. This saying paints a picture of the four districts that existed from the early days of Saigon, with District Five having a high concentration of Chinese-ethnic people and being a place for fine cuisine, District Three with many French villas being a good place to live, District One with theaters, bars and clubs for entertainment, and District Four, which was long reputed as the area of the poor working class and the stomping ground of groups of gangsters and criminals. Certainly this image of District Four is now more a memory or a rumour, rather than a real fact. Together with the growing of the city, District Four has now been developed from its marginal position and has become a crowded central district, with the rising of many office and apartment buildings, and new orderly residential areas.

Most of the followers of Ngọc Tịnh temple live in the same neighbourhood where the temple is located. This neighbourhood is located in the old quarter of the district which is near to Saigon port, which means this neighbourhood is primarily a congregation of people from working-class backgrounds who do manual labour and trade in markets to earn a living. The neighbourhood is constituted by a complicated labyrinth of narrow alleyways, with small concrete houses built wall-to-wall to each other. These alleyways, according to what people told me, grew organically with the settlement of residents and did not follow any systematic urbanisation plan. Many people living in this neighbourhood sell goods and food in the busy market that spanned the length of the six-meter-wide road that pierces through this

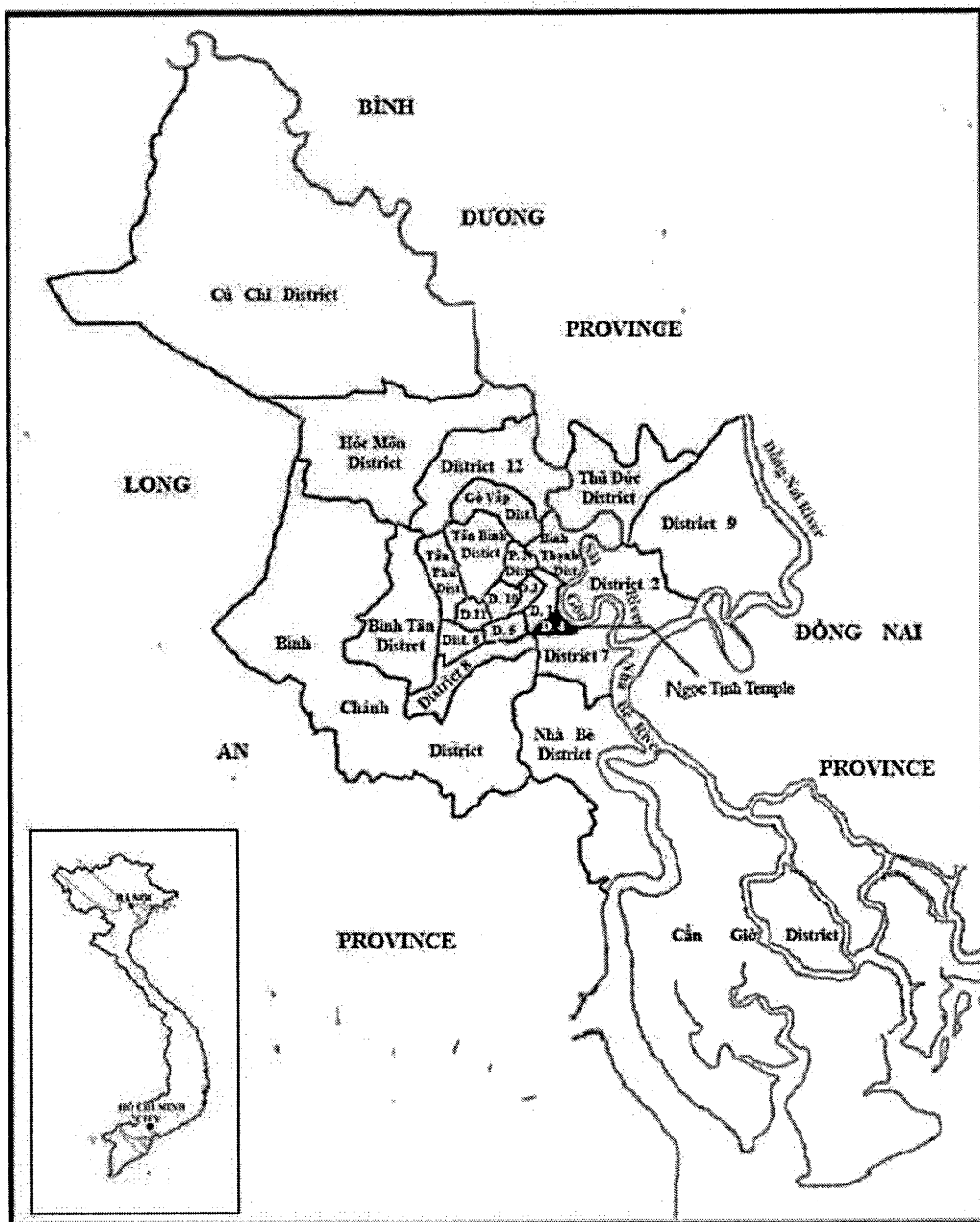


Figure 1.1: Map of Hồ Chí Minh City

neighbourhood. The laywomen of Ngọc Tịnh temple are also mostly retired traders. Before retirement, they sold food and fruits in this market or in other markets in the city, or were in various trading jobs such as managing a shop, a tailor's or barber's or working as money lenders or real estate brokers. Most of them are living with their grown-up children and their families.

Ngọc Tịnh temple, its community of elderly women practitioners and its broader neighbourhood, provided me with a rich social landscape in which the stories of elderly laywomen's Buddhist practices and experience of old age could be explored and described. Despite being small, Ngọc Tịnh temple is a typical example of the spaces in which ordinary citizens of the city enact their religious lives. Many temples in Hồ Chí Minh City, like Ngọc Tịnh temple, do not occupy big areas in prominent locations on big streets, but are enwrapped in crowded residential areas and serve the religious needs of their direct neighbourhood. Ngọc Tịnh temple is tucked between houses. Without the board on which the temple's name is inscribed, the symbol of a karma wheel at its front gate, the yellow wall paint and the tall statue of Quan Âm Bodhisattva standing on its veranda on the second floor, the temple would be indistinguishable from the simple two-storey houses of its secular neighbours. On the first floor is the kitchen and the private rooms of the abbess and two resident nuns. The second floor is the worshipping space, with a Main Hall [Chánh điện] where a big statue of the Sakyamuni Buddha, or the Gautama Buddha, sits. This Main Hall is also where all the rituals are conducted, including the chanting rituals in which lay followers participate every night. Also on the second floor is a small Ancestor Worshipping room [Nhà thờ Cửu Huyền], where numerous urns filled with the ashes of deceased people— who are its late followers or their relatives— are kept on the shelves and visited every day by relatives and the nuns. Many women became lay followers of this temple after sending the urns of ashes of their late family members here for venerating, and they themselves wish to be sent here after their death. Outside on the veranda stands a white statue of Quan Âm Bodhisattva of Mercy, where laywomen make prayers for themselves and their families before proceeding to the Main Hall for nightly chanting rituals.

Ngọc Tịnh temple follows Khất Sĩ Buddhism, which is a Vietnamese branch of Buddhism founded by the monk Minh Đăng Quang in 1944 with the motto of following and spreading the dharma of Sakyamuni Buddha. However, many laywomen of this temple do not distinguish the Khất Sĩ Buddhist school from the Mahayana Buddhist practices that are more prevalent in most temples in the city and the country. Laywomen of Ngọc Tịnh temple often visit other Mahayana temples in the city and in other provinces on pilgrimages. Laywomen also frequently participate in activities and rituals in four other temples also located in their neighbourhood, which all follow the Mahayana school of Buddhism. Therefore, despite referring to themselves as practitioners of Khất Sĩ Buddhism, lay followers also follow the Medicine Buddha Sutra chanting rituals in one Mahayana temple on Saturdays to make merit for the good health of their families. They attend the Eight-Commandment rituals on Sundays in another temple, and travel on pilgrimage and charitable trips organised by another big Mahayana temple located in another neighbourhood also in District Four. Some of them also chant mantras which have their origins in Tantric Buddhism. For these laywomen, Buddha, despite whatever temple he may be found in, is the same Buddha, so it does not matter which Buddhist branch they follow as long as they feel that their practices are efficacious.

The small and close-knit laity of Ngọc Tịnh temple offered me many opportunities to learn about Buddhism and to be involved in the everyday life of the elderly followers and their families. I was coached by the laywomen on how to chant the sutras, how to perform rituals and other practices they thought I should focus on to bring good luck into my life. The laywomen considered Ngọc Tịnh temple as their 'home temple' [chùa nhà] since it was located in their neighbourhood, and was also the place they sent the urns filled with the ashes of their late family members and where they frequented every day to make merit for their

families. Proceeding to build my network from this temple, I had several opportunities to get to know more about my lay Buddhist friends' lives in the neighbourhood, their histories, their families and their connections with other neighbours. My connections and friendships with the laywomen were at first confined within the temple's venue and during the times of rituals. Yet after a couple of months, I spent more time in their homes than in the temple. I also became a loyal customer of their family businesses – drinking soymilk in Aunt Lan's shop, getting my haircut in Aunt Khuong's daughter-in-law's barber shop, having breakfast in Grandma Tri's family's noodle shop and buying rice from Aunt Uc's stall². By being involved not only in their religious practices at the temple but also in their trades and family lives, I could observe many aspects of their activities, and witness first hand how religious practices were interwoven in the multiple spheres of their lives.

I particularly enjoyed and found a lot of inspiration from the vibrant and unruly life of their neighbourhood and its market, where my elderly friends had spent most of their lives. The randomness and liveliness of life in this neighbourhood, and of the stories that I encountered and collected about its habitants, balanced my experience of the orderly and ritualistic structure of the monastic life in Ngọc Tịnh temple. The market itself was a great source of information during my process of gathering data. I spent a lot of time in the soymilk

² In this thesis, I use kinship terms to refer to my informants. I also used these terms, such as 'aunt' [đì/cô/bác] or 'grandma' [bà], to address them when I was doing fieldwork. They called me 'child' [con] or 'niece' [cháu]. Kinship terms are prevalent in daily dialogues in Vietnam. I used the term 'aunt' to address laywomen who are at my parents' or my real aunts' and uncles' ages, which are in their fifties or sixties. I used the term 'grandma' for older laywomen, who are in their seventies and above.

shop of one Ngọc Tịnh temple laywoman, Aunt Lan, to whom I was closest during fieldwork. Her soymilk shop was located on the main road inside the market, just a few doors away from Grandma Bảo's rice shop. In the morning I spent several hours in her shop, drinking soymilk, talking to her and her customers, who were also mostly laywomen of Ngọc Tịnh temple on their way back from shopping for food for their families. I enjoyed listening to them chatter and gossip about other neighbours or lay followers, about the various temples and pilgrimage trips they knew of and about the myriad things happening in their homes. Aunt Lan's shop was a great spot for me to lazily sit and watch the flow of life and trade in the market just outside her doors and gossip with Aunt Lan about the people who passed the shop. Those pleasant moments sitting with Aunt Lan and her friends in the shop gave me a lot of stories besides the observations I made in participating in the rituals and activities at the temple. The stories of Ngọc Tịnh temple, its elderly laywomen, their lives, their neighbourhood and market are told in this thesis, and are the ground from which I develop my analysis of old age and Buddhist practices in Hồ Chí Minh City.



Figure 1.2: The neighbourhood market located on the main road of Ngọc Tịnh temple's neighbourhood



Figure 1.3: The Main Hall of Ngọc Tịnh temple



Figure 1.4: The Ancestor Worshipping Room of Ngọc Tịnh temple



Figure 1.5: The statue of Quan Âm Bodhisattva on the veranda of Ngọc Tịnh temple

Thesis structure

The six chapters following this introduction describe various aspects of the practice of Buddhism in the everyday life of elderly laywomen. Chapter Two illustrates how Buddhist beliefs, worldview and imaginaries shape the way elderly women think about life and old age. Elderly women review and conceptualise the life they have lived as daughters, wives and mothers who were in charge of their families' wellbeing, through their beliefs in predestined karma and merit. This perception of life, informed by Buddhist notions of karmic debt and ties, enables women to carve out old age as a separate realm of life in which they experience relative autonomy from their previous feminine roles as caregivers within their families. In the 'outside realm of life' of old age, women pursue the Buddhist way of life which shapes their lifestyles, defines their identities, self-comportment and moral practices.

Chapter Three illustrates how Buddhism is domesticated by laywomen as 'work' similar to the income-generating trading practices that they performed in their earlier years to earn a living for their families. This chapter explores elderly women's conceptualisation and performance of productive old-age, through their understanding of the ways they work to nurture their families through their Buddhist practice. It characterises the inflection of elderly women's habitus in society and in family, which resonates with the appreciation for productivity in the wider context of a socialist society.

Chapter Four characterises the process of obtaining knowledge and wisdom through Buddhist pilgrimages. It portrays old age as a stage of continuing personal development, which is displayed in merit making, learning and obtaining wisdom and knowledge through Buddha's teachings and through expanding the spatial realities in which women's lives are lived.

The next three chapters describe Buddhism as a reservoir of resources and techniques which its elderly adherents draw on to cope with physical decline, loss of social status, familial roles and with uncertainties, infirmities and the maintenance of personhood and dignity in the end stage of life. Chapter Five characterises the transformation of old-age personhood through women's performance of charitable practices. This chapter highlights the role of Buddhist charity practices as a source of empowerment. Through depicting how the figure of Quan Âm Bodhisattva is a model of and for elderly women's embodiment of social identities as good doers, this chapter highlights charity practices as a technique of the self through which elderly women transcend their socioeconomic status and domestic realm of activities.

The last two chapters delve into the Buddhist techniques used to cope with inevitable facts of the end stage of life: illnesses and death. Chapter Six, on illnesses and infirmities, describes how elderly women adjust their 'selfhood' to conform to the limitations of old age, through their consciousness about the impermanence of life and the cultivation of personhood that embodies diminishing agency and energy as it increasingly submits to supernatural protection. Chapter Seven, on death, describes the exit of death and moving on beyond life, to more life. It explores the ideal death that old women strive for: a quick liberation from life and the retention of personhood, dignity and supernatural blessings even until the last moment of life. These last two chapters explore the role of Buddhist practice in inculcating the belief in elderly women that they have control and agency amidst their late life-stage transitions.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I reiterate my arguments and stress the importance of Buddhist practice both in creating meanings and structures of personhood for my elderly

informants, and the degree to which laywomen created and sought to maintain 'continuity' of their personhood through the domestication and incorporation Buddhist philosophy into their lived experience of old age in urban Ho Chi Minh City.

Chapter 2

Outside of Life [Ngoài Đời]

Introduction

A 72-year-old lay Buddhist woman with whom I often travelled on pilgrimages commented that I should have concentrated on working, earning money, and repaying my parents for having brought me up, instead of spending so much time in Buddhist temples. She said:

Old people like me no longer have to worry about life, family or what happens in the society. We have time to practice Buddhism, while young people like you have so much to strive for in life. Young people always hurry [tắt bật]. They have to race with their own life [chạy đua với cuộc sống]. Young people say they practice Buddhism. But in fact they cannot even follow a vegetarian diet or refrain from alcohol. Nor do they have time to show up in the temples regularly. I was like that too when I was young. Now, you just have to concentrate on working, earning money to repay your parents [báo hiếu cha mẹ] and saving as much as you can. That is good enough. Wait until you become old like me, then you will see you have all the time you need to practice Buddhism.

This advice echoed a common perception that Buddhist practice is for old people who have already retired from income-generating work and have time to pursue the practice of faith.

This perception, which links Buddhist practice with being old, was reflected in elderly laywomen's frequently-uttered rationalisation for their Buddhist practice: 'I am old now, so I go to the temple' [Già rồi nên đi chùa]. When I first joined the laity of Ngọc Tịnh temple, I

was the only person under the age of fifty who showed up regularly at many rituals and activities of this temple. There were a number of men and women in their twenties or thirties occasionally attending practices at this temple, however, they did not come regularly and they could only attend the chanting ritual that took place in the evening after working hours. Therefore, at first some laywomen at Ngọc Tịnh temple found my regular presence quite strange. Being in the age group of these women's grown-up children, I was supposed to be working for eight hours a day in an office, be married, have children and dedicate my time to earning money for my family. However, when I became closer to the laywomen and they learned that I was interested in learning about Buddhist practices, the women started to make friendly jokes about my premature devotion to Buddhist practice. A woman half-jokingly, half-seriously asked whether my parents were worried about my spending too much time in a Buddhist temple with old women, instead of finding a marriage partner. Another woman teased me so: 'So at your age you have already experienced too much suffering in life! That is why you want to get 'outside of life' and stay here at a temple. Why not become a nun and practise Buddhism all day?'

Elderly laywomen perceived practicing Buddhism in old age as being 'outside of life' [ngoài đời], while young people who were still entangled in familial duties and societal responsibilities were still 'in life' [trong đời]. I was supposed to be 'in' life by marrying, supporting my own family and taking care of my parents at the same time. Although strange or perceived as premature my frequent presence in the laywomen's community was also perceived as a sign of good merit. Laywomen said I must have accumulated a rich stock of good merit in my previous lives, which manifested in this life as the free time, money and chances that allowed me to practice Buddhism at young age. They said only people who were very 'meritorious' [có phước] were able to 'encounter the Buddha's teachings' [tìm được

Phật pháp] early in life, since most people had to fulfil their responsibilities to their families before being able to frequent the temple in their later years. My experience of the ways these women tried to re-conceptualise my presence among them, from ‘strange’ and inappropriate to a result of merit accumulated in my past lives, piqued my curiosity about how the elderly women perceived life and old age, and how they conceptualised the connection between practicing Buddhism and old age.

Delving into the life stories of the elderly laywomen I met in Ngọc Tịnh temple, especially of Aunt Hóa, a laywoman of this temple, this chapter illustrates elderly women’s thoughts about life and old age. This chapter illustrates that elderly laywomen define their lives in regards to the responsibilities and social roles in which they were entangled as the caregivers of their families. The chapter argues that this conceptualisation of life as entanglements, however, is also the means through which elderly women carve out for themselves a realm in life for old age in which they experience relative autonomy from family duties and devote themselves to Buddhist practice. This chapter describes how these elderly laywomen create a space ‘outside of life’ through their Buddhist practice, which in turn pervades many aspects of their everyday life.

Life and karmic debt

Aunt Hóa’s house was on one narrow lane in the labyrinth of back alleys where Ngọc Tịnh temple was located. Although her house was only a five-minute walk from the temple, I was often lost on my way to her house for all the lanes were indistinguishable from one another. Luckily, her house was identifiable due to a jackfruit tree growing in her fenced little yard, which was indeed a very rare scene in this neighbourhood where space is rare and land is too

valuable for trees. Her neighbours gossiped that the tree had served as a ‘curtain’ to protect her money from getting out of her house and her pocket. The evidence of this tree’s efficacy was shown in her family’s wealth and in the fact that she had become rich rather quickly with her money-lending business. Although most people in this neighbourhood were involved in trading activities as petty sellers in markets or as owners of little shops, Aunt Hóá was particularly noteworthy because, as her neighbours noted, she had built up her wealth from very humble beginnings. However now in her mid-sixties, Aunt Hóá had retired from all her business activities, while her children followed in her footsteps to become money lenders, real estate brokers and shop owners.

Having retired from her business, Aunt Hóá now turned to Buddhist practice. Although she still helped her children in housework and childcare, she reported that her life now as a retired woman was very relaxed in comparison to her earlier life. While on a pilgrimage trip organised by Ngọc Tịnh temple’s abbess, our car passed a busy market near the city centre. Aunt Hóá pointed at a corner of the market, which was then occupied by many street vendors and food stalls selling noodles and instant food, and told me that that market corner was her very first workplace. When she dropped out from school in her teenage years, she started her trading career by selling pancakes at that market to help her parents earn a living. She was very hardworking and was willing to do extra work to earn more money. While other sellers only sold one dish, she switched from one dish to another to attract customers who were given more choices at her stall. She sold pancakes with meat on usual days, and vegetarian pancakes on days in a lunar month when Buddhists follow a vegetarian diet. Then she increased the variety of food, by making *laksa*, rice-paper rolls, and many kinds of rice cakes. She had a lot of customers. Having begun with pancakes, she went through many different trades, and finally when she saved enough money she established

herself as a money lender in her neighbourhood. Being a money lender was less laborious than working in the market, she told me. In this occupation, she only had to be at home and could take care of her children while working. 'Whatever I did, I did very well,' she said, 'that was why my husband became dependent on me in all matters.'

While she was successful in her trade, her husband's success did not match hers, and the burden to feed the family fell increasingly on her shoulders. Therefore, she worked very hard to bring up her four children and managed all the affairs of her family. Although unhappy in her marriage, she put up with it and never divorced her husband. She believed that her marriage with him was a result of the predestined tie and debt [duyên nợ] between them from the previous lives. She considered that she owed a karmic 'debt' [nợ] to her husband, and that she had become his wife in this lifetime in order to pay this 'debt'. Aunt Hóá explained to me that she could have married someone else with better economic prospects, but she ended up marrying her husband, whose family was as poor as her natal family, simply because her mother had a good connection with his mother. She explained, 'Then, I was young, so I would just sit wherever my parents put me' [cha mẹ đặt đâu con ngồi đó]. After they married, as Aunt Hóá told me, her husband could live a very enjoyable [sướng] life with no worries and hardship since she was very talented in trade and hardworking at home. She took on most of the labour required to earn a living, running her business, while birthing and raising children. She believed her life had unfolded that way because she had to pay off a debt to her husband in this life by spending it together as a married couple. 'Probably in my last lifetime, he was someone to whom I was indebted,' she said, 'so in this life, I became his wife to repay what he had done for me.' She said nowadays so many young people got married and then divorced as soon as they faced conflicts or dissatisfaction in their married life. It was because they did not understand that their marriage

was formed by the force of karmic debt. If they broke up before the debt was finished, they would still meet again to finish off the debt in another lifetime. Aunt Hóà and her husband still remained husband and wife, and she just let him live his life the way he wanted to, while she spent her time at the temple. She said the karmic debt between them would only be over at the end of their lives.

In the stories of their lives, laywomen often drew on the concept of karmic debt to give meanings to the relationships, responsibilities and entanglements they had experienced in life. Debt, they believed, was triggered by interactions between two beings in their previous lives, which result in one having to pay a debt to the other in their encounters in the present life. As a laywoman explained to me, the people we encounter in this life, be they friends, colleagues, lovers or family members, were those with whom we had predestined tie [duyên] from previous lives. But we are bonded only to the people with whom we had predestined debt [nợ]. Drawing on the Buddhist belief in karma and reincarnations of bonds between beings through multiple lifetimes, laywomen utilised the notion of karmic debt to give meaning to the duties and responsibilities they had shouldered in life. Speaking about their indebtedness to their families, these women marked the tie they had with familial duties as a result of a predestined and larger-than-life dynamics of transferring of the self, karma and debt from one lifetime to another.

Karmic debt is not only used to explain for the bond between spouses, but it is also believed to be the reason underlying obligations and heavy responsibilities women have towards other people, usually family members. Sometimes, by describing a responsibility to another person as a manifest of a preordained debt, a person indicates feelings of frustration and tiredness on account of the weight of this duty. A laywoman of Ngọc Tịnh temple, for

example, never missed the chanting ritual at the temple since, as she explained, she felt so depressed at home. She was deeply upset by her youngest son, who refused to look for a job and find a wife; instead he insisted on becoming a monk. She could not bear the thought that her youngest son would live an ascetic monastic life and be detached from his family. However, no matter how hard she tried to connect him to her friends and acquaintances who could find him a job, he always sabotaged all her efforts by either refusing to attend the job interviews, or quarrelling with his bosses after only few days at work. Her two other children had to take care of their own families, so the youngest son was her responsibility. Because of this son, she still worked for income as a rice seller at the market so that she would not have to depend too much on her two married children for all the expenses at home. Her friends at the temple, who had already retired from income-generating work and could depend on their children, expressed their pity for her heavy karmic debt with her son. She, too, often complained to her friends about this ongoing karmic debt:

I don't know what I did to my son in our previous lifetime, but it put me so much in debt to him in this life. I will have to take care of him until the end of my life to pay up all the debt. But what will happen after I am no longer around? Who will take care of him? Of course his older brother and sister will not want to do that. They have their own families to take care of. Whenever I think of that future, I feel so worried.

Karmic debt [nợ nghiệp] between people is conceptualised by laywomen as operating in a similar way as financial debt [nợ nần]. People who are heavy in debt have to keep on working to pay it off. Likewise, the women who still endured hardship in old age to support themselves or even their grown-up children were said by their friends at the temple as having a very heavy debt [nặng nợ], that they had to work off through the fulfilment of their responsibilities

toward their families. Elderly women talked about 'debt' as a spiritual factor with which they described their experience of being women in life and in relations with others, especially with their families. Speaking about their indebtedness to husbands, parents, children or other members in their families, they integrate their feminine roles as primary caregivers into a broader inter-lifetime dynamics of selfhood, articulated through the framework of karma and debt.

Few studies on Vietnamese womanhood have discussed this notion of karmic debt in women's explanatory frameworks. There are, however, several studies that discuss 'moral debt' [on] which indicates the emotion of indebtedness that underlies the obligations and reciprocal relations between members in the family in Vietnam (Jamieson 1993: 16-7; Taylor 2004: 99; Jellema 2007: 441-3; Soucy 2006: 111; 2012: 110-2). For example, children have to return the filial or moral debt to their parents who gave birth to them and brought them up. Soucy (2012: 110-4) highlights that women put in a lot of effort to cultivate moral debt [on] with their husbands and children in their acts of self-sacrifice for their families. By performing their roles as mothers and wives well, women claim power within their families. Moral debt is also like financial debt, which needs to be returned and continues to exist until fulfilled (Soucy 2012: 111). Talking about indebtedness within their families, the laywomen I met in Hồ Chí Minh City conceptualise the responsibilities and obligations they have towards their families as a karmic and predestined bond that exists between persons. Instead of empowering them or bestowing on them the moral virtues as a good wife, mother and daughter, karmic debt, in their perceptions, even constrains them within their duties at home.

Previous studies on Vietnamese womanhood and femininity have noticed the prominence of the notion of fate in Vietnamese women's narratives of their lives (e.g. Schafer 2010: 162; Gammeltoft 2006: 597, Leshkovich 2006: 287-8, Endres 2008, 2015). Fate [số] is a feminine 'narrative model' (Gammeltoft 2006: 597) which women draw on to endow meanings to the suffering, hardship, societal disdain and resentment they face in life. Like karmic debt, the conceptualised power of fate over a person's life reflects the Buddhist belief in inter-lifetime transmitted karma. These studies have explored the ways young women in their reproductive and productive years used the notion of fate to give meaning to the hardship and resentment they encountered in life despite their good will and desire to live according to feminine ideals and virtues. I have observed, however, that the elderly women in my research rely more on the concept of debt to narrate their lives, rather than on the power of fate. Using the concept of debt, elderly women sought to characterise the life they lived, and emphasise the responsibilities and duties that they had shouldered.

Life is therefore conceptualised by elderly Buddhists as tangled plane of debts and responsibilities. Drawing on the Buddhist concept of karmic debt, these women think about life as a realm of entanglement, in which they undergo hardships to pay their karmic debts and in the process fulfil their responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of their families. This way of thinking about life reflects a gendered perspective which imagines life, specifically women's life as characterised by duties in the space of the home. At the same time, however, this conceptualisation of life as state of entanglements also carves out old age as a separate realm of life to which women can move into when their responsibilities towards families have been fulfilled.

The outside of life

One of Aunt Hóá's most unforgettable memories of the days she worked in the market was of observing, as she worked late into the night at her food stall, the old women in the neighbourhood leaving home in their grey Buddhist robes for the temples. She felt so inspired by just looking at these old women's neat and plain outfits and their calm relaxed energy, which contrasted with her work clothes, her busyness, and the heavy luggage she had carried every day to the market, which included cooking utensils, fresh food, plastic plates, wooden chopsticks and spoons for her food stall.

I felt the desire to wear the grey Buddhist robes like the old women. I even told one of them that when I got old I would also wear a Buddhist robe and go to the temple. But at that time I did not have time to go to temples at all. On the days of full-moon rituals, I sold food at my stall while in my mind I quietly prayed to the Buddha to bring me many customers who would buy all the food I had prepared, so that I could clean up and go to the temple to catch the full-moon chanting ritual. But I often missed the ritual because I always had to work until late at night.

Two years before I met Aunt Hóá, her wish had come true. On one full-moon ritual, she and her friend came to Ngọc Tịnh temple to take the ritual to become Buddhists, and since then they have participated in the activities taking place at the temple. She referred to that time as the time when she stepped out of life.

I thought to myself I am old now, so I should become a Buddhist [quy y] and have a Buddhist name [pháp danh]. I should get outside of life [ra ngoài đời]. After my children got married and moved out, I had nothing to do at home. I picked an

auspicious day, went to the temple and undertook the initiation ceremony to become a Buddhist.

Another laywoman, who had been a Buddhist since childhood, also talked about the time when she was free at home and started to go to the temple again as getting to the 'outside of life'.

I used to go to the temple very often with my grandparents when I was a kid. But after I got married, I just stopped. There was no time for temples. My husband got sick during his last few years. Then he passed away. He was a very gentle man, but our life together had always been very hard. I often fell ill myself because I had to worry about a lot of things – about our children, about money, about our parents, and many other things. In his final years I took care of him while he was bedridden. Our karmic debt was finished when he passed away. We human beings are born into this world to pay a debt to each other. After he died, I was no longer busy at home and I gradually became healthy again. So I started to come to Ngọc Tịnh temple every day for chanting. Then I thought, how about eating only vegetarian food [ăn chay]? I have been a meat eater for sixty years of my life. How about getting out of life? When I got outside of life, I would only eat vegetarian food; I would recite the Buddha's name; I would contribute my labour as my offering to the temple for the rest of my life.

Conceptualisation of life as entanglement provides elderly women with a means to embark on another stage of life which is less focused on supporting the family and is characterised with more personal autonomy than when they were 'in life' [trong đời]. Debt as the conceptualised force behind the ties between women and their loved ones also allows space

for these women to ease their way out of responsibilities as debt can be paid off. This allows for the completion of responsibilities and duties within a lifetime, and the possibility that after a woman's debts are repaid she can have a life of her own structured not by her karmic debts but around her practices of merit-making. When familial responsibilities were shifted to younger generations, elderly women considered it was the time when they can partially withdraw from the familial responsibilities that they had undertaken throughout their adult lives, and get outside the realm of life. The next section will describe how Buddhist practices that elderly women pursue every day construct their way of life as outside of life.

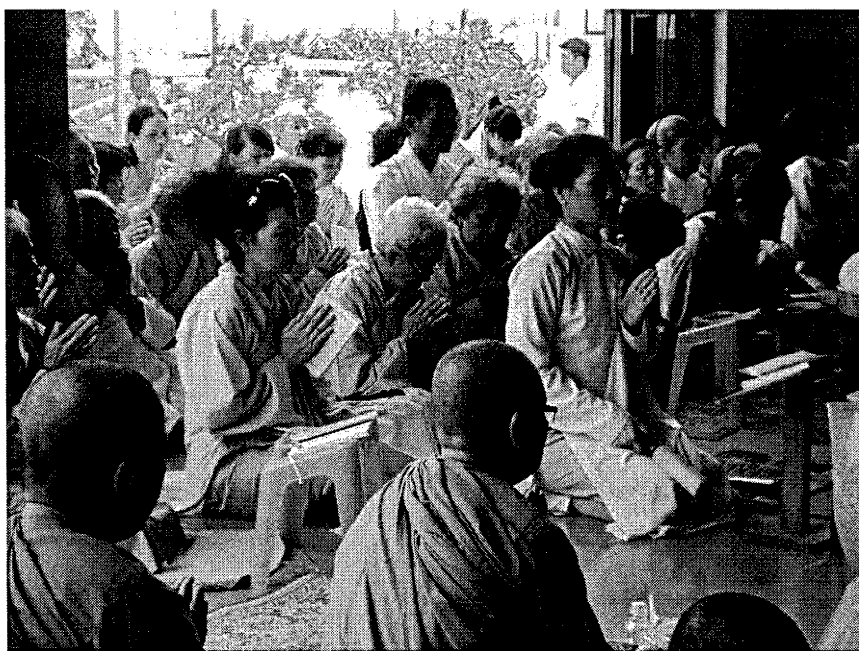


Figure 2.1: Laywomen in dharma robes

The Buddhist way of life

Having retired from her work, Aunt Hóa now surrounded herself with things, activities and people that belonged to 'đạo'. Đạo literally means 'the way' or the religion. With đạo, laywomen refer to the Buddhist teachings, rituals, ethic codes and practices that they followed

in their everyday lives. When Aunt Hóá was at home or when she went to the market to shop for food, she often wore pajamas of the same grey colour as the grey lay Buddhist dharma robe. Going to the temple, she would wear the grey dharma robe [áo tràng]. For the past couple of years, Aunt Hóá no longer wore the colourful pajamas that she used to wear before she became a Buddhist, which Vietnamese housewives usually wear at home or when they get out for grocery shopping at the market or to visit their relatives' and friends' houses. She called these clothes which she used to wear for work and for household chores as 'life's clothes' [đồ đời]. Aunt Hóá referred to the grey clothes she now wore as the 'clothes of đạo' [đồ đạo], since these clothes bore the colour of Buddhism, and they spoke to her present identity as a 'child of the Buddha' [Phật tử] and marked her belonging to a community of lay Buddhists, who also wore grey robes whenever they came to temples. Every day Aunt Hóá went to the temple to chant Buddhist sutras and at home she watched the DVDs that her friends copied for her that recorded the monks' sermons. She called these activities 'studying đạo' [học đạo]. Aunt Hóá was very proud that she now could recite from memory many mantras and quote paragraphs from the sutra texts after only two years frequenting the temple. Attending the rituals and activities not only in Ngọc Tĩnh temple but also in several different temples in close proximity to her house, Aunt Hóá belonged to a big network of lay Buddhists she called 'friends of đạo' [bạn đạo]. Wearing the dharma robes of the same grey colour, these lay Buddhists are all children of the Buddha, hence 'sisters of the same family' [chị em cùng một nhà].

In a book which explores the everyday practices of self-care of Beijing people, Farquhar and Zhang (2012) define the way [dao] as the 'social and sociable craftwork, cultural practices', that the Beijing elderly follow to 'form and craft – to nurture (yang) – their lives' (p15). For Beijing people, the way is the daily practice of 'eating and sleeping,

talking and singing, playing ball and taking pictures, writing and painting, writing poetry line by line, playing chess to banish the blues, chatting of heaven, speaking of earth' (p18) to maintain a state of moderate wellbeing of the body and soul. Following the way, Beijing elderly do not detach themselves from ordinary life and society, but instead the way of life they follow goes along the usual rhythm of 'rising and resting' of life, by emphasising the continuity, of 'simply living on' (p126-7) to craft a more wholesome life.

The Buddhist way [đạo] that Aunt Hóa and her friends followed in their everyday life pervaded many aspects of their lives. It transformed their sense of self and imposed discipline on their dress code, diet and the way they related to others and to their families. Being among the few young people frequenting the temple, I was often coached by laywomen on how to practice đạo. One of the first lessons I learned was the importance of becoming a Buddhist and having a Buddhist name. Buddhist names are used prevalently among lay Buddhists. Having a Buddhist name indicates that a person has become a child of the Buddha [Phật tử]. Becoming a Phật tử, the laywomen often told me, would mean I was blessed with supernatural protection from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas so long as I had faith in and prayed to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with a sincere mind [thành tâm].

I did not know the real names of many of my Buddhist informants, since they introduced themselves and were addressed by their friends and monks in the temple with their Buddhist names. Only when I came to their houses did I hear their secular names being used by their families or by their neighbours. These names were usually derived from their husbands' names which were defined by their husbands' birth order in the family. The names identified these women in relation to their husbands' birth order among his siblings, which also indicated their husbands' positions within their patrilineages. Being called by their

husbands' birth order, women adopted their husbands' identity, position and role in their lineages, and were identified by others for their role in their husbands' families. Kinship relations come to frame these women who are known as the wives, daughters-in-law, mothers and grandmothers of kin within their husband patrilineage. Their previous maiden names and birth orders within their own lineages become secondary and are used in paperwork or within their natal families.

However, when frequenting temples and religious rituals, which connect them to the community of lay-followers, laywomen use their Buddhist names on a daily basis. These names, given by monks, indicate, first of all, that these women are the 'children of the Buddha', and secondly indicate the branch of Buddhism they follow. The names also imply the quality of these women's personalities, and the character of their lives. Women describe how the monks who had conducted their initiation ceremonies, before giving them their Buddhist names, had observed or sensed their character, or had consulted with them about which names they liked. Many laywomen I met were proud and happy with the Buddhist names they had been given, believing that these names well represented their personalities. For example, no one called Aunt Hóá by her real name, or her husband's name anymore. Everyone called her Ngọc Hóá, with Ngọc indicating that she was a Buddhist of Khất Sĩ Buddhist branch, and 'Hóá' implying a 'transformation' that she hoped she would see in her life after becoming a Buddhist. Another lay Buddhist woman, Aunt Diệu Lai, was also called Mrs. Six (Bà Sáu), as her husband was the sixth child in his family. She was also known as 'mother of the fish seller', because her daughter owned a fish stall in the neighbourhood market. Yet in temples and among her Buddhist friends, she was known as Diệu Lai, with the character Diệu indicating that Aunt Lai was converted to Buddhism by a monk in Pure Land Buddhism. She preferred using this name, since she believed the monk had given her this

name with the implication that she would have a good future ('Lai' means 'to come', indicating what is to come in the future). Another laywoman, whose Buddhist name was Ngọc Khiêm, belonged to the school of Khất Sĩ Buddhism. She would often praise the monk who gave her that name because, in her opinion, it correctly summarised her personality. Khiêm is derived from the word 'khiêm nhường', meaning humbleness.

Buddhist names, therefore, do not take into account mundane kinship relations and lineage that women belong to, nor do they reference these women's positions and functions within their husband's or their own families. Many laywomen told me that those with Buddhist names are demarcated as 'children of the Buddha'; and thus they are marked out as members of the laity. Their belonging to a certain patrilineage is thus obscured, and replaced by a new Buddhist self which is embedded in a fictive 'lineage' that links supernatural powers with fellow lay followers, all of whom are 'sisters of the same family'.

Having a Buddhist name is so commonplace that many women I met in the temples asked me whether my name 'Thu' was my Buddhist name. On hearing that it was my real name, they encouraged me to become a Buddhist and get a Buddhist name instead, so that my efforts in Buddhist practice in the temples will 'not go to waste' [không bị phí]. A laywoman I met during fieldwork was very keen on advising me to have a Buddhist name. She kept telling me that without a Buddhist name while frequenting a temple, I was only practicing Buddhism in a fashion of someone 'squeezing in for a lift' [đi ké]. I did not meet that laywoman again for a while. When we met again, her first question to me was whether I had become a Buddhist during her absence. I replied that I still had not. She was very disappointed. She scolded me for having made no personal progress at all after many months

hanging around in a Buddhist temple. She again tried to educate me about why I must become a Buddhist:

When you become a Buddhist, you will have a Father and a Mother in the temple.

Your Father is the Buddha, and your Mother is Quan Âm Bodhisattva of Mercy.

Without a Buddhist name, you are just an orphan [trẻ mồ côi] in the temple. How sad!

While others have parents, you have not.

For many laywomen, the status of being 'Phật tử' implies a spiritual privilege. Several laywomen told me that those with Buddhist names will be accepted to the Pure Land after death. Having a Buddhist name is to claim kinship and connection with supernatural powers, and invite patronage and protection from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the Buddhist pantheon. Therefore, Buddhist names mark out Buddhists from non-Buddhists; those privileged with protection from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and those not; those who have a chance to be reborn in the Pure Land and those who do not. Laywomen also believed that with a Buddhist name and with a rich stock of good merit cultivated through their devotion to Buddhist practices, they had the access to spiritual powers to bring blessings and protections both to themselves and their loved ones in difficult times. Women often told me that a family with only one person devoted to Buddhism is already very meritorious, and that a single person's 'force' [lực], empowered by the good merit he or she made through Buddhist practice, could save the family from adversities and infirmities.

Talking about their daily practice of Buddhism, many laywomen also emphasised the five precepts, which outline the five ethical principles that lay Buddhists should follow. These precepts are: not killing or causing harm to other living beings [không sát sanh], not taking the not-given [không trộm cướp], avoiding sexual misconducts [không tà dâm], avoiding

false speech [không vong ngữ], avoiding intoxication that clouds the mind [không rượu chè]. Others mentioned to me that a Buddhist should train herself to avoid the Three poisons in life, which are ‘greed, anger and ignorance’ [tham sân si] since they cause harmful illusions and attachments to life. Others explained to me the impermanent [vô thường] nature of life, stressing that nothing stays the same forever and thus human beings will only cause suffering to ourselves if we do not understand this fact and attach ourselves to things that will change anyway. They also explained to me the importance of doing good deeds, of cultivating good merit and reducing bad karma. These actions, they stressed, will have crucial influence on my wellbeing and luck in the rest of my life, and also in my coming lives. These religious practices constitute the art of everyday living for these elderly lay Buddhist women.

For many Buddhists I talked to, being Buddhist is also a marker of their moral superiority over others, because in their opinion, Buddhists ‘understand the way’ [hiếu đạo] and act upon this understanding and thus behave better than those who do not. Buddhists, they claim, would not act according to their own selfishness, ignorance, and desire, since they know that deeds derived from these negative attitudes create bad karma which only have negative influence on one’s happiness and wellbeing in this life and beyond. Mistreating someone in this life can trigger karmic debt, and the debt will have to be paid in through encounters in following lifetimes. Buddhists who ‘understand the way’ should also view and react to the unfolding of events in life with an attitude of detachment [buông xả] and with the awareness of the impermanence of life.

Buddhist concepts, such as impermanence, detachment, ‘greed, anger and delusion’, are transformed into down-to-earth concrete quotidian ‘how-to-live’ advice for everyday experiences. During my fieldwork, I jotted down lists of to-do and not-to-do activities, based

on what elderly women taught me about how a good Buddhist should behave. What a lay Buddhist should do included: 'eat vegetarian food', 'recite the Buddha's name to keep the mind pure and still', 'do good deeds', and 'give alms to the sangha, the poor, the blind and the disabled'. These practices were geared towards both merit-making and the avoidance of sin. By eating vegetarian food Buddhist laywomen avoided killing animals and hence committing a sin. By practicing generosity and compassion by giving to the less privileged women generated merit. The not-to-do list was much longer and ranged from commonsense ethical dictums such as 'don't quarrel with others', 'don't take things that do not belong to you', 'don't betray your partner', to more detailed advice about day-to-day practices of eating, dressing and interacting with others. I received much advice from laywomen about how to adjust the way I thought, spoke and acted, in order to not lose good merit or create sins and karmic debt while interacting with people I meet in life. There was one laywoman at Ngọc Tinh temple who was especially aware of which acts were merit-making and which resulted in the loss of merit. She had built up this knowledge through her painstaking effort to attend as many sermons and to watch as many DVDs recording monks' speeches as she could. She was very eager to let her friends at the temple know whether what they were doing would unintentionally cause them a loss of good; this habit made some people uncomfortable around her. Some activities that she advised may result in inadvertent loss of merit are, wearing short-sleeve pajamas to a temple, showing movies about secular life to monks on pilgrimage bus, speaking to monks while not joining one's hands to show respect, or putting the sutra books on one's thigh or on the floor while chanting. 'A lay Buddhist must always be self-conscious about his or her act,' she commented, 'otherwise we might lose merit and cause sins without even knowing.'

The Buddhist practice that elderly laywomen follow in their daily life is, therefore, not constrained within the canonical texts of Buddhism, but is rather contained in exchange of reminders and advice on how to live an everyday life in accordance with Buddhist principles. When a woman is young, her sense of self and the way she conducts herself in life is focused on fulfilling her caring role within her family. The Buddhist practices that laywomen pursue in their everyday life in old age however does not centre on cultivating a personhood and self-comportment that is directed outward through service to others. Instead, these practices are directed inward, and focus on improving the self of the practitioner. In talking about their daily Buddhist practice, laywomen put emphasis on ‘fixing’ [sửa], training and transforming themselves to become better persons. A laywoman described to me her experience of practicing Buddhism to get rid of greediness:

When I was young, whenever a seller returned me more change than necessary, I would not say a word. But now I never do that. I will return the extra money to the seller. I have been listening to monks’ sermons about greediness. I have to listen to the sermons many times to consequentially stop feeling greedy. Only by listening to many sermons can we absorb the lesson and implement what we learned. Now I know it is a sin to take possession of others’ belongings. Listen to those sermons! You will become very gentle [hiền lành]. You will feel your mind so still [tĩnh tâm]. You can fix your own self [sửa chữa được cái người của mình]. You won’t feel disturbed or angry. You can let go [buông xả] of things. Because you can let go, you will feel so light [nhẹ nhàng]. But I am still buying lottery tickets. I hope I can win the lottery, so that I will have a lot of money to go to temples. That means I am still greedy. My mind is still disturbed by desire for material things. We cannot be perfect right away. We are not Buddhas or fairies [tiên Phật]. We can only fix ourselves bit by bit.

Another old laywoman explained to me that Buddhist practices [tu] are ‘to train oneself and to accumulate virtues’ [tu thân tích đức].

‘Practicing Buddhism’ [tu] here means to train the self and to accumulate virtues. We can practice at home [tu tại gia]. Good merit we get from our practices will be bestowed on our family. Our home will be happy; our children will respect us for our virtues.

The Buddhist ways of moral conduct, daily practices and rituals emphasise self-cultivation, stressing that everyone must be accountable for his or her own good or bad deeds, which will result in good or bad merit respectively. Every action being conducted by the body [thân], every word being uttered by the mouth [khẩu], and every thought being formed by the mind [ý] must strive for goodness, in order to reduce bad karma and produce good karma for the practitioner. As such, daily practices such as the five precepts, the avoidance of greed, anger and ignorance, the highly-structured rituals of chanting, reciting, meditating, or walking while meditating are all designed to train a lay follower in Buddhist personhood. This personhood is constituted through the actions of the body, mouth and mind as they do good deeds, say good words and have good thoughts. These practices do not confine women practitioners to her household duties and roles. In fact if practiced strictly they require withdrawal from household life.

Alternative moral engagement in old age

One day, as usual after a chanting ritual, I and other laywomen sat down for a chat in a small room adjoining the Main Hall [Chánh Điện] where the big Buddha image was located. It was

approaching the seventh lunar full moon ritual, which some laywomen thought was a very good time for non-Buddhists to take the initiation ritual to become Buddhists. Some laywomen advised me to grasp this opportunity to become a Buddhist as a way to make merit for my parents. However, there were other laywomen who advised me not to become a Buddhist yet and instead wait until my old age. The latter stressed that because I was still young and was still fully engaged in all the secular businesses of life, such as work, relationships, earning money and taking care of my family, this would be a barrier to my observance of the five precepts, which are at the core of the daily practices of a lay follower. Aunt Hóia told me that her children also had not practiced Buddhism yet, although they never protested against her practice. 'None of my children have Buddhist names yet,' she said, 'If they convert to Buddhism now, they will easily commit sins by not following the five precepts. They still have to drink with their colleagues. They still have to do business. It is very difficult not to lie, not to drink while they are still in life.'

Another time, I asked Aunt Lan, my closest friend during fieldwork, about the practice of precept keeping and why it was so difficult for young people to follow. It was then a Sunday, and her daughter was also at home helping Aunt Lan manage her little soymilk shop. Aunt Lan answered my question, addressing both me and her daughter as if we had both made typical examples of how young people would fail in being good Buddhists.

You two are young and of course you have to work. For example you sell clothes at the market. You try to make your customer buy a t-shirt, but when your customer puts it on, you look at her and think 'Oh no, she looks terrible in this t-shirt.' But will you say that to her? No! If you say the truth, how can you sell the t-shirt? How can you get the money? You must lie. You will say 'Oh, the t-shirt looks great on you!' so

that your customer will pay you money. There, you already broke the precept of 'no lying'. You are a woman in the family and you must cook for your husband and children. You must buy a living fish because a living fish tastes better than a dead fish. You want your family to have a good meal. So you pick a living fish, and ask the vendor to bang the fish's head and kill it right in front of your eyes. Then you bring it home and fry it for dinner. There, you violate the precept of 'no killing'. When you are married, can you be sure that you will not commit adultery? It happens all the time. You meet so many people at work. See, on TV, people in America live with each other even though they are not married. Many people divorce now because of adultery. It is easy for a young person to violate the 'no sexual misconduct' precept. It is very difficult for young people like you girls to keep the precepts. You lie, you commit adultery, you bang the fish's head and cut the chicken's throat. You have to do all these things every day to earn a living and to gain a foothold in the society.

Aunt Lan's daughter, an employee of a factory in the city, agreed with her. Even though the daughter had followed Aunt Lan to the temple to convert to Buddhism in her early years, she did not go to the temple at all and was not practicing Buddhism. The daughter also added her thoughts on why a young person should not be involved in Buddhist practice yet:

When you go to work, you must not let people bully you. You must fight back. Even though you want to refrain from 'greed, anger, and ignorance' because you are a Buddhist, you cannot just sit there and let people bully you. You must fight to defend yourself. That's life.

I asked Aunt Lan whether it was easier for her, a 62-year-old, to keep the precepts. She responded that it was not easy for anyone to always follow the precepts, even for old women

like her. 'But it is easier for old people,' she said, 'I try to keep as many precepts as I can. I am not a vegetarian, but I do not kill fish or chicken. I always make sure the fish is already dead when I spot it at the stall. I am old, so there is no way I would commit any adultery. Unlike young people, old people like me just say what we think. We are old. We do not need to lie because we do not struggle to earn a living as young people do.'

Buddhist moral principles and the discipline required for everyday practice is considered by many elderly laywomen as being beyond the capabilities of young women who are still enmeshed in life. Not only are Buddhist ethical codes difficult to observe, they are also impractical for a woman who is still involved in social relations and economic activities to support family. This perception resonates with Eberhardt's (2014) observation of the Shan Buddhist community in Thailand where it is generally regarded that young people have greater involvement in the world than the elders. Thus, for them to observe a Buddhist ethical code would only result in inconvenience and burden, and could even prevent them from fulfilling their duties towards their children and elderly parents.

Following Buddhism as the practice of everyday life in old age, elderly practitioners submit themselves to an alternative moral system that is different from that which they followed in their younger years. These women live a life defined by a set of Buddhist moral codes that summon the practitioners to live in accordance to Buddhist precepts, through which they constitute a Buddhist self. In the earlier life stages, a woman's virtues are defined by and confined within her roles as a mother, a wife and a daughter in her family. Her daily practice, self-conduct, and directionality of her sense of self and duty are family-oriented and are focused on fulfilling her caring role at home. In old age, the Buddhist principles of moral conduct, daily practices and rituals, on the contrary, combine to cultivate an alternative

personhood that embodies moral practices primarily concerned with improving the self for the benefit of the self. Following Buddhist ethical codes, laywomen follow a classification of everyday practices into good or bad deeds, which will result in good or bad merit respectively.

Laywomen who talked about the difficulty for a young woman to live following Buddhist moral codes and practices constantly reflected on their own self-comportment in life when they were young. When talking about young women's engagement in life, the most typical example that these women drew on was that of a trader; this was unsurprising considering trading was the occupation that most of them had undertaken while they were young. Most of the laywomen I met during fieldwork had worked as sellers of vegetables, fruit, rice or other food in the market in their earlier years. Wealthier women owned shops or ran money-lending service in their neighbourhoods.

In Vietnam, the practice of trading is often associated with moral ambiguity (Endres 2015: 236; Leshkovich 2006: 294, 2011: 277). Trade is often described with terms implying the negative nuances of exploitation or taking advantage of others for one's own benefit, such as 'taking profit' [lấy lời], 'eating profit' [ăn lời], or 'seeking profit' [kiếm lời]. The Vietnamese colloquial phrase to describe commercial exchange as 'eating profit atop the heads and throats of others' [ăn lời trên đầu trên cổ người khác] implies the cut-throat practices of maximising profit in sales. Traders are thereby placed on the fringes of moral and social order (Leshkovich 2006: 294). This perception is reflected in the post-war period of 'high socialism' (1975-86) when traders were branded as 'potential antirevolutionaries' who needed to be remedied by the state, and thus had to join socialist cooperatives (Leshkovich 2011: 277). This period right after the fall of Saigon was remembered by many laywomen I met during fieldwork as a difficult time that harshly affected their livelihood and

families. Some of them experienced a sudden bankruptcy because they could not sell in the market, reversals in their social status and wealth, and later family disintegration and loss when some family members fled the country. Many of them were made employees in state-run cooperatives [hợp tác xã] to produce certain products requested by the state. Some were involved in risky and illegal trades, such as smuggling goods across Vietnam-Cambodia border.

Following the introduction of Đổi Mới market-oriented economic policies in 1986, although entrepreneurial activities flourished in Hồ Chí Minh City, petty traders' status has remained ambivalent. They are critiqued as backward, uneducated, and unable to contribute to the development of the modern market socialist economy (Leshkovich 2011: 278). Petty traders are classified as insignificant to economic development, compared to modern entrepreneurs and businesspeople. However, even though the lower class status imposed on petty traders is politically and economically constructed, it is naturalised by being gendered as a feminine occupation (Leshkovich 2011: 279-80). The politico-economic and cultural context in which laywomen have lived their lives and were involved in society as petty traders has produced in these women narratives about their work as low class and morally ambiguous. Besides, women's economic roles in their families do not displace their domestic duties. Rather their economic contribution is thought of as an additional resource which women can draw upon to fulfil their primary duty, the management of the household (Luong 2003: 203). Therefore, even though trading practice contains the possibility of breaching moral codes and locating them in lower social class, sustaining the family's wellbeing is still the prioritised role in a young woman's life.

Although the moral ambivalence related to their trading practice was not their main concern in these women's younger years, it emerges as a significant aspect in their religious practice in old age. The concern about the moral price to be paid for their trading works is one of the reasons behind the women's devotion to Buddhist practice. While petty trade in general occupies a lower social and moral class position in wider society, within the Buddhist community certain types of trade were even more specifically classified as those with a heavier moral price than others. Certain trades are considered by lay Buddhists as especially sinful, such as money lending, running a restaurant that serves meat, or jobs that involved the slaughtering of animals. For example, money-lending is seen as a very immoral [thất đức] job since a money lender can earn very high profit while taking advantage of other people's misfortune. A butcher, a restaurant owner who serves meat, and fish sellers also create sins since their jobs involve taking the lives of innocent animals. Even having retired from their work, what these women did for money in their younger years still defines their identities within the secular network of neighbours and even to an extent among their Buddhist friends. Although Aunt Hóá had been retired from her trade for a couple of years, her neighbours still talked about the money-lending practice that she had been involved in that had brought her a lot of profit. Her neighbours said because of this job she now had to 'concentrate on practicing Buddhism and making merit' [lo đi tu làm phước] in her old age to make up for all the bad merit she must have made as a money lender. Another laywoman of Ngọc Tịnh, who was now eighty years old, was highly respected by all the laity and monks since she was among the first practitioners of this temple. However, some people also told me that she practiced Buddhism very seriously after retirement from her occupation as a seller of pork porridge because she was afraid of being sent to hell after death for the job she had done to raise her seven children.

Buddhist practices are, therefore, seen as the remedy for the infringement on morality and virtues for women traders, who were too busy to repent for their sins when they were still involved in trade to support their families. Making merit in Buddhist practices is believed to compensate for the bad karma caused by trading activities that are negatively described as 'buying cheap selling dear' [mua rẻ bán mắc]. Hence Buddhist practice is a way for former traders to reconcile the moral ambiguity that is culturally-attached to their occupations. While 'life' is conceptualised by laywomen as the time when a woman is entangled in familial duties, engaging in trading to earn a living for their families, old age, which takes place outside of life, is perceived as a time to make amends for any shortages in regards to morality, and even for the harm done while they are still 'in' life.

The middle path through old age

Aunt Hóá often said she had nothing to do at home, and that her children were very caring for her and did not let her do much at home. 'I am 'warm' now [Bây giờ 'ấm' rồi]'; she often said to describe how contented she was to be sheltered by her children and their filial piety. Being supported and loved by her children in old age was a reward for Aunt Hóá after the many hardships she had gone through in life. In Vietnamese 'ấm' [warm] conveys the nuanced meanings of 'secure', 'safe', 'stable', or 'steady', as in the adjective 'êm ấm' [calm and warm], which describes a stable and happy state of a family; or in the noun 'tổ ấm' [warm nest], which means family. It also has the additional meaning of 'prosperous', 'affluent', and 'abundant', as in the proverb 'ăn no mặc ấm' [eat full and wear warm], which indicates the sufficient material possessions of an individual or a family. Elderly women in the Buddhist laity often showed their friends how 'warm' their old age is. For these women being able to

enjoy a warm old age means being surrounded and cared for by filial children and grandchildren, who respect, love and support them.

Being supported and cared for by filial children was also considered by the women in the Buddhist community as a sign of the fulfilment of responsibilities, of a job well done in taking care of their families, of high karmic status and a completion of their karmic debts. The women in Ngọc Tịnh temple often demonstrated to their peers how 'warm' their old age was by displaying the financial support they received from their children. Spending time in the community of elderly lay followers, I often heard women sharing stories of the career progress of their children or the academic performance of grandchildren at school. Aunt Hóa, for example, attributed to her children's success in business to her capability to donate generously to the temple. She was indeed one of the most generous donors of Ngọc Tịnh temple, which gave her a reputation among her elderly peers as being very 'meritorious' [có phước lắm]. Another elderly laywoman also wanted to show her peers how much she was loved and taken care of by her children, so she asked her oldest daughter to buy her a golden ring to wear to the wedding receptions of the children of her Buddhist friends. She wanted specifically her oldest daughter to buy the ring for her, since she often told her friends about that daughter who was the only one in her family to complete university education and have an office job with a stable income. Her daughter may have wondered why her seventy-year-old mother suddenly insisted on having gold jewellery to wear among her group of elderly Buddhists. However, for the elderly mother, the ring was a symbolic display of her enjoyment of sufficient material resources provided by her filial and successful daughter. The ring would also show her friends her excellent fulfilment of her lifetime role as a mother who could bring up a daughter with a university bachelor's degree.

Most elderly women I met were still actively involved in helping their children in their family lives. Karmic debt was therefore a very subjective matter which was perceived differently by different women. Most elderly laywomen I met did not consider cooking for the family, taking care of grandchildren and tending to household's work while their children were out at work as a manifestation of a remaining karmic debt. For many women, their attendance at the temple was largely affected by what happened at home. Therefore, during certain times in the year such as at the beginning of school year, or when school holidays had started or when a new grandchild was born, laywomen would suddenly disappear from the regular activities of the laity, and instead remain at home to help their children take grandchildren to school and bring them home, or care for their daughters or daughters-in-law after childbirth and look after the newborn grandchildren. Although some laywomen may have thought of these emerging new duties at home as an indicator that the karmic debt they had with their families was not over yet, they were still willing to leave aside their religious activities to be at home for the children.

Hence being outside of life did not imply a cut of ties, the complete dissolution of karmic debt, the abandonment of families, or a final withdrawal from mundane society and everyday concerns. Being outside of life did not mean severing ties with the things that constitute life, such as family-centric responsibilities, feminine roles as women in family, as well as other obligations that centre around women's positions as caregivers in the home.

Several anthropological studies on aging in different cultures and societies have pointed out a tendency for the elderly to withdraw from society, family and community in old age (e.g. Eberhardt 2006, Lamb 1997, Kalab 1990). Sarah Lamb's study (1997: 287-9), for example, notes that elderly women in West Bengal (India) attempt to dissolve substantial-

emotional bonds [maya] with their kin, home, possessions, and land as part of their preparation for death. In Eberhardt's (2006: 155-8) study Shan elderly in north-eastern Thailand distance themselves from mundane concerns, stay at the temples and pursue intensive Buddhist practice. Old people in Cambodia renounce worldly vanities to attend temples for extended periods to pray, mediate and contemplate death (Kalab 1990). According to these studies, old people are expected to leave the mundane realm of life, abandoning central positions in the home, economic and social spheres to younger generations. As they detach themselves from these worldly concerns, elderly people within these cultures create new centres for themselves in spiritual places such as temples by performing religious practices that connect them with other worlds, such as with the world of death, or the world of supernatural powers.

Yet an attentiveness to the stories of the elderly laywomen I spent time with during my fieldwork suggests that an engagement with Buddhist practice by no means completely detached them from the mundane life of their households. Instead, these women followed a middle path, lying between entanglement in mundane life and responsibilities toward their families, and complete detachment characterised by complete devotion to Buddhist practices and ways of life. Rather laywomen practiced Buddhism while negotiating with life in the home. By incorporating Buddhist practice into their everyday life with their families, and by undertaking Buddhist practice as one among their many daily practices, these women remain mothers, grandmothers and wives at home, while embodying a new sense of self as 'children of the Buddha' in the temple. Their Buddhist practice is likewise framed in terms of service to their families as the merit they make is not for them alone, but also for the wellbeing of their families. As they do not renounce their families to become ordained monks, elderly laywomen are not completely outside of life. Their stepping 'outside' of life is only temporary,

confined to the times when they participate in intensive chanting practice at the temples or at home, or when they are travelling on a pilgrimage that usually takes from one full day to a couple of weeks, or when they are away from home for a Buddhist-practice retreat that requires them to stay at a temple to follow a monastic life for a specific period of time. Therefore, laywomen remain active women in their families, even while they devote a lot of time, effort and in some cases money to participate in Buddhist activities at temples. Yet while Buddhist practice is understood within the frame of familial service, life in the home is also imbued with Buddhist precepts, as these women attempt to live up to Buddhist moral codes in their everyday lives with their families.

Buddhist practices provide old laywomen with the space for claiming more individuality in the later stage of their lives. Laywomen are not accompanied by their families to the temple in which they spend time with a non-kin community of lay followers in an extra-domestic space. Practicing Buddhism also provides elderly women with a culturally-sanctioned activity that enables them to pursue their own autonomous path of aging.

Being both inside and outside of life, with the family and yet at the same time away from it, presents to some laywomen issues and conflicts that require negotiation with their families. One of the often-heard issues arising from laywomen's Buddhist practice in the home was their vegetarian diet. Aunt Hóá, for example, had practiced a vegetarian diet for almost one year when I met her. Many lay Buddhists follow a vegetarian diet for at least two days a month, on the full-moon day and on the last day of the lunar month. Others may be vegetarian for more days, such as for four days or ten days in a month. Only few opt for a strict full-time vegetarian diet like Aunt Hóá as most elderly women live with and cook for their families. One day I asked Aunt Hóá how she could practice vegetarianism while cooking

for and sharing meals with her family. Aunt Hóia responded by telling me about the conflicts she often had with her husband at the dining table:

I still cook meat and fish for my family. I still flavour the food with fish sauce. But I never taste the food I am cooking to see if it is nicely flavoured or not. My children and husband can add salt, fish sauce, pepper or chilli to make the taste suit their likings. If they do not like my food, they can cook for themselves. At home, we have meals in the same dining table. It is just that they eat meat and I eat vegetarian food. My children are never bothered about my decision to become a vegetarian. Only my husband protested. He thinks my vegetarian diet is such a nuisance and only makes things become complicated. I know he does not like the fact that I leave home often and have more things to do and more friends than him. He is a member of a morning-exercise group that consists of retired men and women in the neighbourhood. They meet in a park and do exercise and then have coffee, but they only meet in the morning. For the rest of the day, he only stays at home and watches television, while I join the chanting groups and go to many temples. So at home he is being naughty and disturbing my vegetarian practice. Sometimes, he uses his chopsticks which are used to take meat and take food from my bowl, which is only for vegetarian food. Another time, he took a slice of pork and placed it in my bowl, which had only rice and tofu. I was so shocked when I found a piece of pork in my bowl. How could I eat the food in my bowl then?

The case of another laywoman was rather more threatening to her Buddhist practice. When her husband fell ill, her children expected her to stay at home to be with him instead of travelling with a lay Buddhist chanting group to temples in rural areas for many days in a

month. However, she insisted on continuing to go to temples, believing that what she was doing was for the good of the family. She believed that the good merit she was making through Buddhist practice would bestow blessings on the family. Besides, she also believed that she had done all she could for her family prior to adopting Buddhist practices. She considered her debt repaid and that it was time for her children to take up the responsibilities to care for their ill father. The conflict in their family only ceased after the father had recovered and moved in with the family of a daughter.

Both minor and major issues of this kind occurred in the homes of many laywomen and were brought up in discussions with friends at the temple. These issues mostly derived from the gap between the expectations of these women and their families about how they should conduct themselves in their old age. In the story of the laywoman whose husband was ill, the conflict arose when she deliberately defined the way of life she wanted to follow. Her deliberately-drawn clear-cut line between life, which was occupied by her family and her duties towards them, and the 'outside' of life, which was for her religious passions and activities, seriously clashed with her family's wishes. Aunt Hó'a's ongoing conflict with her husband seemed to be less serious since it reportedly occurred only at the dining table, although it may have arisen in other aspects of their shared life as well. Yet her deliberate choice to become a vegetarian brought the separate realm of her Buddhist practice to the table of her family. As such, while Aunt Hó'a was sitting at the same table and cooking for her family, she did not mix the food, and thus deliberately drew a line between her outside-of-life world of Buddhist asceticism and the mundane life of her family.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has explored what elderly laywomen think about life, and how they position their current stage of old age, in relation to their perception of life in general and their younger years in particular. The reflections and narratives of elderly laywomen about their life shows that they conceptualise life as an entanglement in responsibility and duty towards their families, which they characterise through the Buddhist lens as predestined ties and debt. This understanding of life as entanglement, at the same time, also reflects these women's gendered conceptions of life. Laywomen put at the centre of their lives the familial duties and the hardship they shouldered to fulfil their tasks as women and caregivers in their families.

Conceptualising life as entanglements, however, also suggests that old age lies outside of life, and is thus a period of disentanglement from the duties that a woman in reproductive and productive years of her life performs for her family. Old age is conceptualised by laywomen as the time they can step out of these social feminine roles. With retirement and the independence from their children, or the passing of their spouses, women perceive old age as the right time to step outside of life. Buddhist practice becomes the way of life that enables them to construct the experience of old age that lies beyond family entanglements, and provides them with a set of moral codes, practices and disciplines that pervade their everyday lifestyles, in turn building around them new social networks and a renewed sense of self and purpose. Buddhism as the way of life becomes the regime of old age, and enables laywomen disentangle themselves from their previous way of life and self.

By practicing the Buddhist way of life, these women also chart a path that distinguishes them from their own younger selves. Following the Buddhist way, elderly women 'fix' and make up for what they perceived as moral shortcomings of their younger

years when they had to fight for the interests and wellbeing of their families. In distinguishing themselves from their younger selves, laywomen, at the same time, reinforce the gendered roles and responsibilities that women play in society and in their families, and mark Buddhism as a niche of the old. Buddhist practices are considered by elderly laywomen as too difficult for the young, whose directionality in life is focused on providing for the family and thus entangled in the quotidian mundane concerns of life. By practicing Buddhism, elderly laywomen leave life behind for the young. As they practice Buddhism they define what it is to be old.

However, although elderly laywomen define themselves and their religious practice as detached from life and entanglements, their path is not extreme or life-denying. Elderly women pursue Buddhist practice while they are still engaged with and entangled in the family life in which they still take very active caring roles. Buddhist practice thus represents to them a middle way that is neither strictly segregated and disengaged from life and yet not completely immersed in it either. Buddhism gives them a way to handle the liminality of old age with respect to life. For these women, Buddhism gives them a place that is both inside and outside of life.

Chapter 3

Buddhist Work

Choreographed Life, Freedom in Discipline and Religious Productivity

Strolling along the streets in Hồ Chí Minh City around eight or nine o'clock at night, one cannot miss the vibrant scene of hundreds of elderly laypeople in grey robes pouring out from Buddhist temples to go home. This scene bears some resemblance to the rush-hour when school students and workers leave schools and factories in the afternoon. Yet this 'rush-hour' is caused by the mass departure of lay Buddhists from chanting rituals that take place every night at many temples. Those who live near to the temples they attend walk slowly with their fellow lay Buddhist friends and neighbours along the streets and alleyways back home. Those who live further or are too old to walk have their children or grandchildren waiting to pick them up on motorbikes. These Buddhist elderly diligently commit themselves to a fixed daily schedule of rituals at the temple, just like students to school hours, or factory workers to their work shifts.

A typical day of Grandma Tánh

Grandma Tánh was one of these devout lay followers. She rarely missed the chanting ritual that took place every night at seven o'clock at Ngọc Tịnh temple. She was seventy years old, and while she was not the oldest one in Ngọc Tịnh temple, her hunched back, grey hair, and

toothless smile, meant she fitted well into my stereotypical image of the appearance of an old woman. I therefore always thought of her as my oldest informant. She also wore a pair of very thick glasses that she had worn when she was young and was working as a silversmith.

Now living with her two unmarried daughters and the family of her son, she spent most of her time at home looking after the house while her children were at work and her grandchildren at school. Her children were factory workers in an industrial zone in Hồ Chí Minh City. On weekdays they worked from morning until night, leaving Grandma Tính home alone most of the time. Grandma Tính's family life was rather typical of families in modern urban Vietnam. While younger generations in a household integrate themselves into the fast speed of industrialised urban life, which often takes them out of home to participate in productive activities in the society, the old and retired are left behind in the wake of this fast moving society.

Most retired laywomen I met described their life at home as 'free' [rảnh] or as marked by 'having nothing to do' [không có gì làm]. Yet, in reality, these women made meaningful and important contributions to their children's families by performing household tasks such as looking after grandchildren, housekeeping and cooking. Though these tasks are important and save significant time and money for their children, they are considered by both elderly women and their families as 'light work' [công việc nhẹ nhàng] that elderly parents, who are by now exempt from paid work responsibilities, can perform for their families. As such, elderly women's time at home is generally perceived as 'unoccupied' [rảnh], and therefore can be flexibly modified in accordance to the demands of other family members who are working.

However, the daily religious practices undertaken by Grandma Tánh added complexity to the way she engaged with time in her day-to-day life. Every day she woke up at half past four in the morning. Before preparing breakfast, she chanted fourteen times the Mantra of Great Compassion [Chú Đại Bi], which she had memorised a long time ago. She also recited the Buddha's name while turning the beads in her prayer string until she completed twenty-five rounds of the string. She finished this morning ritual at six. Then she burned incense in all the five altars in her house, including the altars to the Buddha and Quan Âm Bodhisattva, her late husband, the God of Land [Ông Địa], and the God of Wealth [Thần tài]. Then she prepared coffee and breakfast for her family. After eight when everyone left for work and school, she was on her own in the house. At three o'clock in the afternoon, she again recited the Mantra of Great Compassion seven times, and recited the names of Quan Âm Bodhisattva and the Medicine Buddha while turning the prayer beads multiple times. During the day, she recited the Buddha's name silently in her mind to train her mind to constantly contemplate the Buddha. Like many other Buddhists, she believed that this practice was to prepare for the moment of dying. If a person could recite the Buddha's name only once at the critical moment of dying, he or she would be reborn in the Buddha's world - the Pure Land (see Chapter Seven). At night, when everyone returned home, she changed into the grey robe for lay Buddhist use, and left for Ngọc Tánh temple to chant sutras.

Having retired from her job as a silversmith almost twenty years previous, Grandma Tánh remained as busy as a working person. Religious practice had become the encompassing regime according to which she oriented her everyday life. Besides the nightly chanting rituals, on Sundays, she also participated in a practice in which lay practitioners follow the Eight

Commandments [Thọ Bát Quan Trai]³ for one day and one night in another temple in a nearby neighbourhood. Sunday was the one day in a week when she did not compromise or accede to any requests from her children to stay at home and look after the house. Besides the nightly chanting rituals and the Eight Commandments ritual on Sunday, Grandma Tính also participated in all monthly and yearly Buddhist rituals in Ngọc Tịnh temple and other temples with which she had a connection. Without these religious practices, her daily schedule would have perhaps looked rather unoccupied and loosely structured due to her unspecific roles in her family and her retirement from productive activities. Regular religious practices that she performed at the temple and at home became a form of post-retirement work for her.

This chapter characterises Buddhist practice as a form of work that women perform in old age to bring good merit to their families. In describing chanting rituals at the temples, the chapter illustrates that through commitment and self-submission to ritualistic discipline on bodily acts and verbal expressions, elderly women actively internalise their gendered-specific and occupational habitus into religious practice. They transform their religious efforts into a ritual work of care that produces spiritual capital for the benefit of their families. The chapter describes how this work of care is performed in an extra-familial context of the temple and how religious practice is conceptualised as similar to monetary exchanges and household-management tasks that these women performed earlier in their lives as traders and

³ The Eight Commandments include the five precepts that lay Buddhists follow in their everyday life, which are no killing, no stealing, no committing to sexual misconducts, no lying, no consumption of intoxicants. There are three extra precepts that are followed for one day and one night in the Eight-Commandment practice, which are no personal adornments, no dancing, singing, listening to music and sleeping on high bed, and no eating out of regulated hours (from 11am to 1pm).

householders. It illustrates how elderly women's emphasis on the productivity of religious rituals transforms Buddhist practice into a commodity to be transacted in Vietnam's emerging market economy. Focusing on religious productivity, the chapter also explores how daily religious practice transforms these women's temporal experience of old age.

Everyday ritual work

Every night, at half past six, Grandma Tính left home for Ngọc Tịnh temple for the chanting ritual. She considered this nightly chanting ritual as work she performed to earn good merit for her family. She wore brown pajamas, and in one hand, she carried a small grey fabric bag that had an image of a lotus embroidered on it. In this bag was the grey Buddhist robe that she would put on once she reached the temple. To her family, she simply 'went to the temple' [đi chùa] to 'chant sutras' [tụng kinh]. To her, this routine meant far more than that. She went to the temple to chant sutras in order to 'make merit' [làm phước] and to 'do Buddhist work' [làm Phật sự].

On that day, Ngọc Tịnh temple held a repentance ritual, which always took place twice a month, one right before the full moon, and another on the last day of the lunar month. Repentance is considered by Buddhists as a very important ritual in which a practitioner repents not only for his or her own sins in this life and myriad previous lives, but also for the misdeeds committed by his or her living and deceased family members. This ritual aims to reduce the bad merit that affects a person's luck, good fortune and wellbeing in the present and future lives. The merit made in this ritual is also dedicated to one's dead relatives to help their spirits— if they are still stuck suffering in hell or in bad reincarnations due to bad merit caused by past bad deeds— to be liberated into a better life.

Ngọc Tịnh temple always got busy around half past six every night. The rather empty temple which was occupied by only one abbess and two nuns gradually filled with more than thirty loyal followers coming for the chanting. Laywomen came in their pajamas, the home clothes they wore for housework and for going out and about in the vicinity of their houses. Most of them arrived at least fifteen minutes to half an hour before the chanting started. First, they put on their grey dharma robes [áo tràng] for lay Buddhist use. The lay Buddhist dharma robe is plain, a grey ash colour and is designed quite similarly to the Vietnamese traditional dress, the *áo dài*, with two flaps and with buttons at one side. The robe is made loose so that it is not clingy, easy to wear and can be easily put on over an existing layer of clothing. Therefore, elderly laywomen usually came in their home clothes; those who were more well-off and sophisticated also wore accessories and jewellery. When they reached the temple, they only had to put on their robes as an extra layer before proceeding to the Main Hall. The robes are like uniforms, which are designed to remove distinction and create sameness among lay Buddhists. To a certain extent, these robes do obscure differences in wealth, social classes and statuses, family backgrounds and personalities that elderly women embody and display through the sophistication of their secular clothing and accessories. The grey robe symbolically expresses the person's humility, and submission to the protection and power of the Buddha. The only identity exposed in a person's appearance after putting on her grey robe is her being a 'Phật tử', or a 'child of the Buddha'.

The grey robe is also a symbolic passport to the ritual community of lay Buddhists, and a marker of inclusion or exclusion in a Buddhist laity (Soucy 2012: 133), although this 'passport' can be easily purchased at any number of shops near Buddhist temples. During the first few weeks of fieldwork, I came to Ngọc Tịnh temple in the formal clothes I usually wore at work, which were trousers and long-sleeve shirts. When I first joined the chanting group,

laywomen would politely advise me to sit behind everyone else, because the front seats were only for those in grey robes. Gradually when I grew closer to the laity, elderly women started to make frank comments about my clothing. One lady told me to buy a grey Buddhist robe, as my clothes made me look 'strange' [kỳ cục] and 'unlike everyone else' [không giống ai]. I explained the reason for my hesitance, that I was not a Buddhist. She responded rather impatiently: 'But you must look like us to be one of us'. Eventually I bought myself a grey Buddhist robe from a shop, and wore it to a chanting ritual at Ngọc Tịnh temple, feeling as anxious as a primary school pupil on her first day to school. My new clothing style was received far more positively than I had expected. The elders gathered around me and commented on my robe. They were very pleased and some even promised to take me to a shop they knew to buy a robe at a cheaper price. No one paid attention to the fact that I was a non-Buddhist in a Buddhist robe. After this revolutionary change to my dress code, I was received more fully into various activities at the temple, rather than just running errands in the kitchen. I was told to move further to the front during the chanting. I was given the chance to serve food to monks at full-moon rituals, and carry robes which were the offerings to monks at the important Ullambana Ritual [Lễ Vu Lan] in the seventh lunar month ritual⁴. These were considered honourable tasks that generated a lot of good merit.

⁴ The fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month is the Ullambana Ritual [Lễ Vu Lan]. The origin of this festival is to be found in the story of Maudgalyayana [Mục Kiền Liên] who travelled to hell to find that his mother had been banished to hell as a hungry ghost. He wanted to save her but did not know what to do. He sought for advice from the Buddha, who told him that the combined efforts of Buddhist monks could help his mother escape her fate. This story was developed into the ritual of making offerings, such as robes and food, to monks on the Ullambana Ritual. Therefore, in this ritual, Buddhists display their filiality to their dead parents by making offerings to the sangha to make merit for their dead parents. It is also believed

With their grey robes on, elderly laywomen proceeded with the regulated steps of a chanting ritual. First, they approached the statues of the Buddha in the Main Hall, and Quan Âm Bodhisattva on the veranda. They prostrated themselves on the ground to express their faith and submission to the supernatural powers. Then, they sat up, joined their hands in front of their chests to make their private prayers to the divine powers. After making personal prayers to the two most revered powers in the temple, they visited the Ancestor Worship Room, where urns containing the ashes of deceased lay followers of this temple, as well as their relatives, were kept. Here women usually stayed for a long while, to present offerings to and have conversations with and burn incense to their late relatives. At seven o'clock, the abbess and other nuns dressed in the yellow robes of ordained monks imposingly ascended the Main Hall from their own rooms located downstairs. Laypeople rose from their cushions on the floor, joined their hands and made a deep bow to greet the monks. After the abbess and other nuns sat down on their own cushions, everyone else also sat down, cross-legged, behind little portable desks on which sutra books were placed. All women kept an upright posture, hands joined in front of their chests or laid in their laps, throughout the process of chanting.

The abbess chanted through a microphone connected to loudspeakers that produced a rich bass tone and was followed by all her lay Buddhist disciples. The leading voice of the abbess and those of the elderly chanters were molded into a wave of sound that calmly and

to be the time when an absolution for the sins of the dead takes place in the netherworld. Thus, throughout the seventh lunar month, many families conduct, outside their houses, a ritual for the lonely ghosts who are released from hell and wander in this world. In this ritual a lot of food is given away to passers-by on the street.

authoritatively conveyed messages about supernatural powers, the blissful Pure Land, the barbarous hell, and lessons about the rule of karma [luật nhân quả]. Every day the abbess decided which sutra book to use for chanting from the temple's small collection, depending on the events happening at the temple on that day. Available on the temple's book shelves were sutra books also found in other temples, such as the Earth-Womb Bodhisattva's Original Vows Sutra [Kinh Địa Tạng Bồ Tát Bản Nguyên], the Lotus Sutra [Kinh Diệu Pháp Liên Hoa], Daily Reciting Sutra [Kinh Nhật tụng], the Amitabha Buddha Sutra [Kinh A Di Đà], the Medicine Buddha Sutra [Kinh Dược sư] and others. On days when a layperson's family celebrated a death anniversary or a mourning ritual, or when a new urn of ash was brought to the temple, the laity would chant the Amitabha Buddha Sutra or the Earth-Womb Bodhisattva's Original Vows Sutra to make merit for the dead. When a lay follower made a request to the abbess to chant sutras to make merit for a family member's recovery from illness, they would chant the Medicine Buddha Sutra. On general days, they chanted the Lotus Sutra.

Especially on the repentance days [ngày sám hối], laypersons followed the abbess to chant the Repentance Verse [Kệ Sám hối]. In order to repent for their sins, lay followers did not need to verbally recount what sins they personally had committed during the last half month. Instead, similarly to chanting other sutras, they only had to chant out loud the words printed in the sutra books:

From a time without beginning, I have done so many vicious deeds

Only because of Greed, Anger and Ignorance,

They are coming from body, mouth and mind

Now I sincerely ask for forgiveness in my repentance.⁵

(Excerpt from Verse of Repentance)

Then, a long list of more than eighty Buddhas' names was recited. To each name the laywomen stood straight up and prostrated themselves on the ground, then repeated the same process when the next Buddha's name was recited until all names were chanted. Even though most of the laity were beyond their sixties, they all attempted to complete the full round of recitations.

The rituals always ended with the chanting of small pieces of sutras and mantras, such as the Heart Sutra [Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh] and the Mantra of Great Compassion [Chú Đại Bi], and again with the recitation of the names of Amitabha Buddha and Quan Âm and Earth Womb Bodhisattvas. These mantras and sutras were recited by heart by elderly laywomen, since they all had memorised them after having chanted them thousands of times at the temple or individually at home. After reading the sutra, they recited short verses to dedicate the merit they had made in that day's chanting to all sentient beings and to their own ancestors and families. Following this, the abbess read a long list of names of people, living or dead, who were lay followers' relatives to pray for peace [cầu an] for the living, and for spirit liberation [cầu siêu] for the dead. To this reading out loud, followers again prostrated on the ground,

⁵ Từ vô thủy con tạo bao nghiệp ác

Do bởi tham, sân, si,

Từ thân, khẩu, ý mà sanh ra

Nay con xin thành tâm sám hối tất cả.'

joined their hands and whispered the names of the Buddha and of Quan Âm Bodhisattva, and softly spoke their own prayers dedicated to their living and deceased relatives.

As Grandma Tính explained to me, the deceased relatives who might have still been stuck in hell or in bad reincarnations were desperately looking forward to the good merit their descendants 'made' [làm] and 'sent' [gửi] to them. These suffering spirits and beings might have had no means to go to temples and make merit for themselves. The fact that a person could be inducted into Buddhism and could go to the temple for daily practice is in itself an indicator of the good merit with which the person was bestowed. Those stuck in bad reincarnations or in hell might have not been blessed with such good merit to be able to practice Buddhism to improve their existence. Therefore, they had to rely on the merit their descendants who still remembered and thought of them were making for them. Just as good merit could save a late relative or ancestor from bad reincarnations, it was also vital in summoning supernatural blessings and protection for living family members (see Chapter Five) and for preparing for its maker a good death and a favourable rebirth (see Chapter Seven).

Merit-making rituals are pursued with regularity, commitment and physical effort as a form of work that requires laywomen to display perseverance and discipline. They confine themselves to these austere routines, structures and bodily disciplines with a clear directionality and purpose, which are to make good merit for themselves and for their families. The good merit made in these rituals is also dedicated to the ancestors from many generations. Rituals, given their routinised proceedings with very little variation, enable lay followers to compose themselves as a ritual workforce during the time they spend in the temple. Collectively united in their participation in and contribution to a ritual, they individually put

their faith, physical effort, bodily and mental discipline to ‘work’ for the spiritual blessings for themselves, their families and their ancestors.

Ritual acts of intercession for kin conform to the devoted, sacrificial, nurturing and relational disposition that characterise the domesticity these women have pursued their entire lives. While spending their time in the extra-domestic space of the temple and with a non-kin community, elderly laywomen still embody the domestic feminine disposition of actively striving for the good of their loved ones. Here, the boundaries between the living and the dead do not apply as these women also seek to take care of the wellbeing of the spirits of close deceased relatives, like their own late parents, in-laws or spouses, as well as of distant ancestors whom they just referred to ambiguously as ‘cửu huyền thất tổ’⁶. For these kin spirits, they frequent the temple to chant sutras, make offerings and conduct mourning rituals and death anniversaries. Besides, they also believe the good merit they make is put in a good-merit repository that will bring good luck in life for the many generations of descendants [con cháu], whom they may not live long enough to meet in this lifetime. Therefore, as a form of work, rituals and their associated good merit are believed by these women to bring good things not only to themselves, but also to innumerable people directly or indirectly related to

⁶ ‘Cửu huyền’ indicates the nine generations, including the four generations of ancestors before one’s own generation, and the four generations of descendants after one’s own generation. ‘Thất tổ’ means seven generations of one’s ancestors (Đạo Phật Ngày Nay, last access date August 8, 2016). The board with Chinese words ‘Cửu huyền thất tổ’ [九玄七祖] is often displayed on the ancestors’ altar in a Vietnamese home, as well as at the room to keep urns of ash in Buddhist temples. This expression is often heard in daily life, simply meaning multiple generations of ancestors.

them, both back in time to ancestors long dead and forgotten, and forward to future descendants, who have not yet even been born.

Religious activities provide elderly women with opportunities to perform a kind of work that they have undertaken much of their lives but which has become inaccessible to them owing to old age. For elderly women, retirement from work, declining health, and the culturally sanctioned expectation that elders should rest and let their children support them as part of their filial duties, means they have limited day-to-day opportunities and means to take care of their families. Owing to old age and infirmity, they no longer possess the physical strength, mobility or dexterity to physically care for their loved ones. However, religious rituals such as chanting do not require such qualities. Instead, to perform a ritual well, a woman needs only an ash-coloured Buddhist robe, and the commitment to submit to ritual structure, routine, and discipline. Religious merit-making rituals provide the elderly with a means, a venue and a regime that enables them to continue a career of providing care for their families.

On the face of it, elderly women's pre-occupation with merit-making may seem a detached and otherworldly pursuit that takes place outside their domestic space, away from their families, and in interaction with non-kin networks. However, it does not contradict the intimate care-giving orientation they have embodied throughout their adult lives. Although they withdraw to the austere setting of the temple and immerse themselves in impersonal ritual routines, the care that they provide to their families through performing these religious rituals is very intimate and personal. It may result in liberation for a trapped ancestral spirit, success in finding a marriage partner for a child, good academic performance for a grandchild, a recovery from an illness for a family member or even delaying the date of death of a dying

family member so that he or she can die on an auspicious day. Despite the fact that it is conducted beyond home, detached from the family, and routinised in the form of religious rituals, the work that a woman performs in the extra-familial space of a temple is very much continuous with the intimate work of care for her family that she has performing her entire life to date.

Corporeal discipline and freedom from internalisation of rules

Despite their highly ordered nature, rituals in a ‘home temple’⁷ [chùa nhà] are a good deal less formal than the rigidly-structured and disciplined retreats for lay Buddhists held in bigger temples. One day I followed Grandma Tính to attend a one-day practice for lay Buddhists held at a big Buddhist temple in Hóc Môn – an outskirts district of Hồ Chí Minh City – Hoàng Pháp temple. This temple is famous as a venue for lay Buddhists not only in the city but also in other provinces who come to practice Buddhism. It organises retreats for laypeople to practice Buddhism, which can last for weeks or just one day, the latter often held on the weekend. The structure of these retreats is designed by monks at the temple and is very simple and easily followed by anyone regardless of their educational background and age. These retreats are made to be particularly suitable for people of senior age, who made up the majority of participants. Most of the practices only require practitioners to sit cross-legged and recite the Buddha’s name and a short amount of chanting from sutra books. Most of the

⁷ This is how laywomen referred to the temples where they come for daily practice. For convenience, most laywomen have their ‘home temples’ right within their neighbourhoods or in close proximity to their houses.

chanting is conducted based on a little book called *Tu Phật Thất* [Seven days of Buddhist practices] which includes short sutra excerpts taken from various sutra books and combined into this small collection by the temple's monks.

The chanting ritual I observed was attended by thousands of practitioners sitting dispersed in the many halls of the temple. We sat cross-legged for several hours and recited Buddha's name, following the instructions of a monk speaking to us through speakers installed in each chanting hall. In the hall where we were seated, hundreds of laywomen, mostly old, occupied almost every inch of the hall, surrounding a large sitting statue of the Buddha. They were sitting like the Buddha himself, cross-legged and hands laid in their laps, and they recited mechanically and monotonously the Buddha's name, following the monk who spoke to us through speakers. After more than one hour and a half, tiredness obviously appeared on many faces; however, none of them gave up or left the room but persevered with the tough practice.

The same austerity was pursued during lunchtime. When the voice of the monk announced through the speakers that it was lunchtime, everyone slowly stood up, hands joined in front of their chests, and one after another joined a long line walking out of the room while making no sound. In the dining hall, tables, chairs, food, plastic bowls, chopsticks and glasses were all prepared by another group of laywomen volunteering at the kitchen. No one made a sound, except a monk standing at one end of the hall instructing us the steps to perform during the noon ritual [*cúng ngô*], such as when to join hands in front of one's chest, when and how many times to recite the Buddha's name, when to stand up, or when to sit down. The lunch took place in an enforced silence, since everyone attempted to eat and use spoons and chopsticks as quietly as possible. Table etiquette was also followed under clear rules –

spoons were for individual use to take food from one's own bowl; chopsticks were for taking food from a common dish; one action followed another, as signalled by the sound of a bell. At the end, everyone waited for others to finish before retreating from the room in line.

In participating in these rituals on a regular basis, laywomen move from the collective life they share with their family, to an alternative collective life, made of routine, structure and discipline of religious practices, which they shared with the sangha and fellow lay followers. Secular life, personalities, family backgrounds, social statuses or wealth are obscured to give way to uniformity, homogeneity and routinised harmony of collective experiences of a ritualistic life. This collectivity is also manifested in the way their bodily acts and conducts are ritualised, homogenised and performed in accordance with everyone else in the laity. The homogeneous and routinised structure of proceedings and deportment of the body during rituals makes this part of the day, week, month and year stand out from secular activities as an impressively disciplined regime. During these chanting rituals, all laywomen sit upright, compose themselves by laying their hands in their laps, or join hands together in front of their chests, and chant out loud each and every word from the sutra book. Or they stand up, join their hands in front of their chests, eyes gazing at the smiling face of the Buddha's image, recite his name and slowly prostrate themselves on the ground in front of him. Or they sit still on cushions and join their hands, while quietly murmuring their private prayers to the Buddha about their own personal situations. Grey robes, Buddhist names, familiarity with the temple's structure and routine, and mastery of the ability to chant by heart the Mantra of Compassion or the Heart sutra are all the hallmarks of being a member of this collectivity.

In these practices, practitioners are positioned in and live an alternative reality in which actions and words are planned in advance, uniformly performed and uttered following step by step. Rituals therefore comprise a rigidly-structured, highly-ritualised and bodily-choreographed part of these women's everyday life that contrasts with their rather loosely-assembled secular day-to-day life, in which activities revolve around events that may arise at any moment. During rituals at the temple, the complicated nature of interactions and experiences in everyday life is replaced by mechanic and simple recitations and chanting. Such simplicity and structure construct an almost surreal lived reality, an oasis, an experience of *communitas*. Indeed, spending time in ritual practice at the temple was often described by laywomen as an experience that helps them restore peace of mind, in particular because of the ways the atmosphere and activities at temples are very different from those at home. A laywoman told me that every day, no matter how busy she was, she always went to the temple. During the one hour she spent at Ngọc Tịnh temple, she could calm her mind and feel relaxed by sitting down and chanting sutra, before returning home and back to her housework.

In talking about going to temples for chanting, elderly laywomen often describe this practice as bringing about a 'still mind' [tịnh tâm], 'peaceful and relaxing body and mind' [thân tâm an lạc], 'light body' [nhẹ người] or 'light mind' [nhẹ lòng], as is illustrated in a laywoman's description of her experience while chanting sutras.

Going to the temple, you suddenly feel so mild [hiền]. Your mind feels so still [tịnh tâm]. You should try to read the sutra books that the temple provides, then you would feel very light [nhẹ]. You don't feel disturbed and angry. You can let go of things [xả]. You will feel your body and mind free and joyful.

Describing their corporeal experience during these practices, which are defined by austere routine and bodily discipline, women emphasise detachment, the emptying of the mind and the letting go of mundane concerns. Once the chanting begins, these women compose and enmesh themselves in uniformity, order and corporeal discipline. They confine their verbal expressions to the words printed in sutra books and the recitation of the names of divine powers. They also immerse themselves within a collective performance and in interactive harmony with fellow followers and the sangha.

This internalisation of rules produces a sense of freedom and liberation from the mundane everyday life's dispositions and habitus. This phenomenal experience of liberation from mundane life, albeit transient, offers a glimpse of the Buddhist liberation while remaining in the world. Laywomen would often tell me how according to Buddhist beliefs, liberation is not only attained in the escape to a remote world away from reach, but can also be found in the present and in the world in which one is living. These practices are, therefore, the medium through which these women achieve liberation of mind and body and liberation from mundane attachment while still remaining in the secular world. These ritualistic practices also cultivate a religiously disciplined approach to the self. In observing these routines and ritual structures, participants also noticed their own corporeal reactions to the practices that they were undertaking. To describe these reactions they used phenomenological expressions such as 'light', 'still', or 'free.'

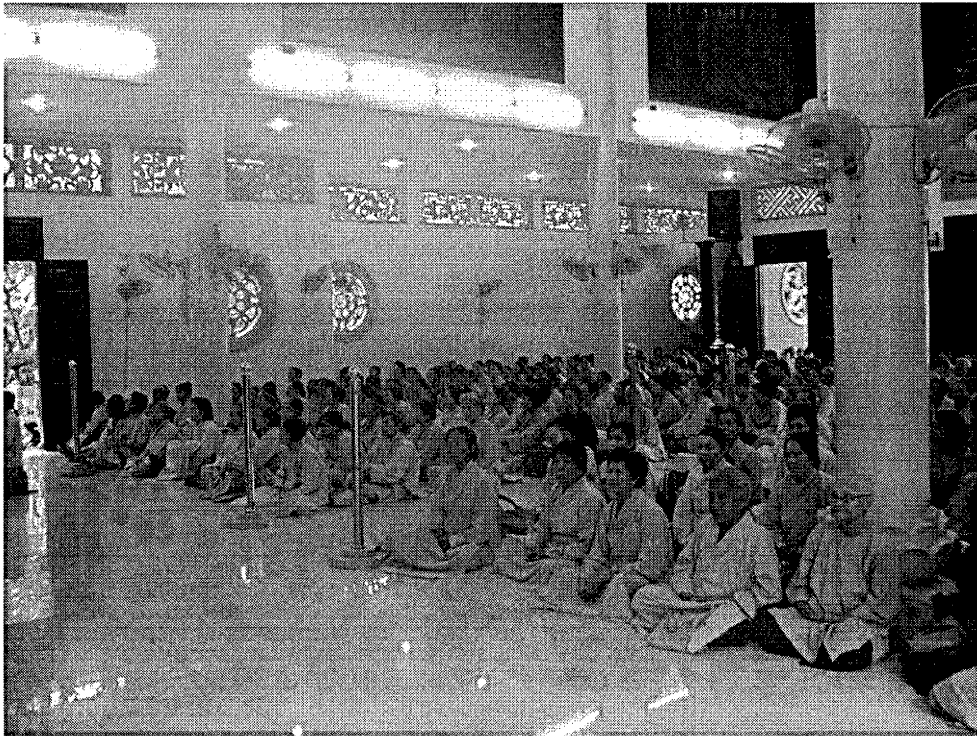


Figure 3.1: A Chanting ritual at Hoàng Pháp temple



Figure 3.2: Laywomen reciting the Buddha's name at lunchtime in Hoàng Pháp temple

These qualities of still-mindedness, peace and letting-go are not only emphasised by women when talking about their temple-based chanting practices, but are used pervasively when they talk about their daily self-comportment and their interactions with others both inside and outside the family. One woman said that chanting helped her feel younger and vitalised, and that, after taking up chanting, her chronic high blood pressure had disappeared. Aunt Lan, my key informant who sold soymilk, told me she started to go to temple when her sister living in the United States, who had become a devout Buddhist long before her, advised her to go to temple. The sister had advised her:

You are old now. In the evening, you do nothing at all. So why not go to a temple?

You will read sutra books so that your mind would be less greedy, angered and under any illusion [tham sân si]. You will be tamed [bớt hung dữ].

Aunt Lan followed her sister's advice to frequent Ngọc Tịnh temple, where their parents' urns of ash were being kept, to chant sutras. She said she indeed was 'milder' [hiền bớt] after a couple of months going to the temple every night, chanting and praying to Quan Âm Bodhisattva. Before that, she said she had been very aggressive. Whenever people said something that offended her, she would retaliate sharply. But now when someone offended her, she would just murmur in her head the name of the Buddha to keep herself from angrily responding to others' comments which would result in bad merit. She told me Buddhists are in general gentler and milder than non-Buddhists, that true Buddhists would never say things that hurt others and that when someone irritated them, they would just say 'Mô Phật' [Namo Buddha].

Mahmood (2012a: 161) has argued that the outward behaviour of the body is the means through which the interiority is realised. Similar to a Muslim woman's veil which is

the means through which she acquires the interior feminine virtue of shyness, the bodily disciplines in Buddhist practices are integral for elderly laywomen to achieve and live out the Buddhist habitus of being liberated from worldly desires and illusions.

Immersing themselves in ritualistic discipline, these women liberate their mind and body from the mundane world. However these rituals remain deeply embedded in the women's lived realities, familial concerns and social habitus. The rituals are important to laywomen not only because they allow them to enter an alternative highly-ordered and choreographed experience of the everyday life, but also because of their efficiency in bestowing good merit and spiritual care on themselves and their families. Ritual productivity and how it reflects the social settings and habitus of elderly laywomen will be the topics of discussion in the following sessions of this chapter.

The materiality of spiritual merit

A key focus of elderly women's Buddhist practice is the production of merit [phước]. Merit is conceptualised not as an abstract idea, or an invisible and otherworldly object. Instead it is conceptualised by lay Buddhists as real and valuable commodity which must be earned and saved, and like other properties, can be transferred, spent, or lost. One laywoman, in explaining to me her reasons for visiting temples to accumulate good merit, pointed at invisible points on the ground, as if there had been leaves or something tangible lying scattered over the place. She said 'Now we are doing all of these (chanting sutra and making offerings at that temple) to pick up merit [lượm phước].' I often heard similar expressions that describe spiritual merit as tangible material objects throughout my fieldwork. From the first days I spent in Ngọc Tịnh temple, I had overheard elderly laywomen asking each other

whether anyone wanted to ‘deposit money into the bank’ [gửi tiền ngân hàng]. At first I presumed they collectively owned a coop-bank account. However, as time went by, I realised it meant giving their monetary offerings to an eighty-year-old laywoman who volunteered as the treasurer of the laity. After collecting the money, she would then pass the money on to the sangha as offerings. These women related the practical act of giving their money as offerings to the sangha with the alternative imagery of depositing good merit in an otherworldly bank. From this imaginary bank that stored individuals’ ‘savings’ of spiritual capital, good merit could be ‘withdrawn’ in times of adversity to reverse the bad consequences into a neutral or good ones, or at least lessen the effects of potential negative happenings. Merit is thus materialised and even monetised by being assigned monetary value and transacted as a currency or a material reward that a person gets after doing good deeds. Merit is associated with economic terms that are used in trade, earning income and property exchange, such as ‘making merit’ [tạo phước], ‘earning merit’ [kiếm phước], ‘picking up merit’ [lượm phước], or ‘losing merit’ [tổn phước] and ‘running out of merit’ [hết phước].

Accumulating good merit in religious practices is, thus, perceived by these women as the equivalent of activities that generate income, build up life savings and act as a form of financial insurance. Formerly these activities were embedded in being householders and traders. The same vocabulary of handling money, accumulating savings, managing costs and expenses is applied to merit which is conceived of as a real concrete object being circulated within the market economy.

Perceiving merit as a specific tangible object with monetary value indicates how Buddhist practice and belief are embedded in and affected by the lived realities and gendered-specific, occupational and class habitus of its practitioners. Handling merit as money reflects

women's continuing embodiment of the feminine roles that they performed in their earlier years. Within their families, these women were in charge of managing income and expenditure. In 'earning merit', 'saving merit', 'spending merit', 'losing merit', or 'giving merit to one's progenies', they mark their religious practices not as spiritual otherworldly acts, but instead as familiar activities, a simple extension of the caregiving and income earning roles they have, and continue to perform in this new way for their families.

When these women were young, they were in charge of budgeting and managing their families' finances to assure all their families' needs were met. In Vietnam, women's control over household finances is reflected in the expression 'the hand controlling the trunk of keys' [tay giữ hòm chìa khóa]. This expression implies that women are responsible for carefully balancing income and expenditure and to ensure that all the needs of the family are met. This responsibility required these women to continually be calculating. It was an aspect of their marital life which many laywomen described as exhausting. One woman told me that her late husband, who had worked at a company, only had had to go to work and brought home a pile of money on the paydays, while she had been the one who had had to worry about whether or not that amount of money was enough to pay all the bills. Her husband's salary had often not been enough to cover all the household expenses, but that had not been his worry, but hers. Laywomen's performance of merit-making rituals in the temple followed the same logics that they had previously followed in sustaining the wellbeing in their family. Thus merit must be earned and saved before being spent. Merit was accumulated as a safety net

for bad times and was also put in savings ‘accounts’ for their children and their families as an inherited fortune⁸.

As such, religious practices are a form of post-productivity productivity. Religious practices are compared to work, and merit to income. Yet this view of religious practices as productive and thus useful activities to pursue is, in many cases, only shared among lay followers and does not always extend to their families. Some women were subject to complaints from their husbands who were concerned about their belief, devotion of time, money and effort to activities that took place beyond household and kinship networks. Of particular concern was women’s dedication to schedules that overlapped or even conflicted with activities at home. A woman told me that her husband was not pleased with her going to temples so often to worship ‘outsiders’ [người ngoài], by which he meant the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other deities and spirits being venerated in a temple’s premise. He argued that it was sufficient just to worship the ancestors at home who would definitely bring protection and blessings to their descendants. She was afraid that her husband would make

⁸ This understanding of merit as tangible and valued capital that elderly laywomen earn through their Buddhist practice to sustain their care for their families during old age is comparative with Soucy’s (2012) discussion on symbolic capital and moral debt [ơn] that northern Vietnamese laywomen create within their families through their pious practice. Soucy (2012: 98) mentions that by involving in Buddhist practice, women bring home lộc, which is the offerings that embody the Buddha’s blessings. Lộc, as any gifts, is a symbolic capital that generate feelings of moral debt (ơn) and reciprocal obligations among family members. Practicing Buddhism and bringing lộc home is more prevalent among women practitioners due to women’s central roles as creators of happy families and as caregivers in the family (Soucy 2006). Ơn or moral debt, in Vietnamese symbolic economy, represents the currency of exchange (Soucy 2012: 111). As such, ƠN is created by women through their self-sacrificing practice, and it is owed by the families and continues to exist until fulfilled. It is intriguing to compare these two explanations that northern and southern laywomen use to discuss about the outcomes that they ‘produce’ through their Buddhist practice. While laywomen in my research cultivate merit, which is imagined as tangible and valueable as currency, of which efficacy is diffused and spent among family members, including the practitioners themselves, northern laywomen in Soucy’s (2012) study cultivate ‘debt’, which is imagined as material that create and sustain status for women in their families. Soucy points out that by cultivating moral debt, women gain power in a social context in which they are subordinated.

bad karma by having such sinful thoughts. Therefore, she always quietly left home when he did not notice so that he would not have to complain. At home, she would chant in her own room and lock the door, so that her husband could not stop her. She told me that it was because of his lack of ‘understanding of the way’ that made him say those things. In fact, she never ignored the ancestors at home, always remembered the date of their death anniversaries and presented offerings to their altars, while pursuing her faith in the Buddha. In her point of view, the ancestors keep the home safe, but only the Buddha would lead her to liberation. Likewise, some laywomen’s children perceive their mothers’ religious pursuit as counterproductive, or as a waste of time and money by donating their allowances to a temple’s monks who also receive donations from other sources. However, there were also many cases in which these women’s families just let them do whatever they wanted, and supported their religious interests by giving them money, or even joining them in these activities. These women who are sponsored by their children in religious pursuits would proudly tell their friends that their children though still young already ‘understand the way’.

Religious productivity

Talking to Grandma Tính, as well as to many elderly laywomen about their daily activities, I could quickly sense their busyness. They always had a schedule of rituals, pilgrimage trips or charity work in which they were going to participate. One reason for this busyness was the desire to take advantage of the time [tránh thủ thời gian] when they were still healthy enough to go to temple, chant sutras, go on pilgrimages, and recite the Buddha’s name. Anxieties about the scarcity of time are especially experienced by laywomen in their late old age. Grandma Gòn, for example, who had to rely on a wheelchair for her mobility, hired another

fellow practitioner to take her to and fro between home and the temple on her wheelchair every night. When it was near to the Lunar New Year [Tết] of 2013, her assistant announced that she would take ten days off during the New Year. Feeling frustrated and powerless, she accused her assistant as a person with ‘no heart’ [không có tâm] to abandon her at home during those important first days of the New Year to make merit. Like Grandma Tính whose mobility was restricted due to disabling conditions, she never missed a ritual at the temple. She said to me one day: ‘My time is limited now. I do not care much about ‘life’s things’ [chuyện đời] any more. I only focus on making merit to pave my way to the Pure Land.’

Every Sunday, Grandma Tính left home for another temple in her neighbourhood and stayed there for the Eight Commandments ritual. Grandma Tính took this ritual very seriously. She believed that the merit cultivated in only one day and one night of practicing the Eight Commandments was equal to that made in one year of chanting. One day, this ritual fell on the same day with a seven-times-seven-days funeral service⁹ at Ngoc Tinh temple for a late laywoman, who was her old friend. Despite the abbess’ invitation, she excused herself from joining. After we got out of hearing range of the abbess, Grandma Tính explained to me that it was because she never missed a Sunday’s Eight Commandments ritual. ‘My friend must have been welcomed to the Buddha’s world already. She went to many temples in her lifetime.

⁹ Every seven days after a person’s death, a ritual called ‘cúng thất’ [the seventh-day ritual] is conducted by Buddhist monks at the dead’s family to pray for spirit liberation. The final and most critical ritual is the seven-times-seven-days ritual [cúng bốn mươi chín ngày] which takes place on the forty-ninth day after the death. On this day, it is believed that the spirit of the dead will be judged based on the good and bad merit the deceased accumulated in his or her lifetime. Based on this balance of good and bad merit, the spirit’s place of rebirth will be decided.

But now is my turn to prepare my own 'luggage' to the Pure Land', she said. She visualised the good merit she was making in Buddhist practice as the luggage for her departure to the Buddha's world at the time of death. For this purpose, the Eight-Commandment Ritual was immensely important since, in regard to the amount of merit it makes, it is more efficient and 'productive' than any other rituals.

Writing about time, Bourdieu (2000) noted that time is meaningful and purposeful when it is associated with the pursuits of an interest, things-to-do, a practice and with the outcomes and future that those practices will result in. When an acting agent bestows significance and interest upon a practice, he or she 'invest[s] in a game and in its forth-coming (son à venir)' (Bourdieu 2000: 206). By doing so, the acting agent constitutes a reality which is constructed by the pursuit of the game and by the expectation of the forth-comings of the 'game' and temporalises himself or herself in this new reality. Elderly women construct their and their families' future by making merit in the present life. For example, Grandma Tính positioned her present period of old age in the timeframe defined by her Buddhist view of existence as a continuation and transition from life to life. Her activities also reflected her understanding of the rule of karma according to which past deeds will manifest as an event or happening in the present and future. Following this belief she believed the time she had in old age should be spent in doing good deeds, which will produce good merit and thus a good life in the future.

Productivity in old age is not a commonly-discussed issue in the literature on aging in Vietnam. Most research on aging in Vietnam has looked at the elderly in Vietnam as recipients of care, service and support from society and from family, rather than as contributors (e.g. Giang and Pfau 2009; Knodel, Truong, Bui and Friedman 2003). Old

people are often perceived as dependents, who contributed their youthful days and efforts to the society in their younger age and thus deserve being cared for by their families and the society in old age. Old age in Vietnam is, therefore, often described with terms that depict non-action and non-productivity, such as ‘relaxing/leisure’ [an nhàn], ‘free and worriless’ [thảnh thơi], ‘warm’ [ấm], etc.

Participating in nightly chanting, or spending one hard day observing the Eight Commandments like Grandma Tính might be considered rest, leisure or recreational activities that old people pursue during their free time in old age. However, for old laywomen, these activities are productive activities producing significant amounts of good merit. Time in old age is thus not just a time for a well-earned rest, but it is another time of productivity, where women undertake labour which nurtures the present and future lives, not only of the practitioners themselves but also of their families and late relatives and ancestors. Old age is therefore a valuable resource and a limited time in which to prepare for future lives. Especially for elderly women in later old age, such as those in their seventies or eighties like Grandma Tính, this urge to be ‘productive’ in their religious practice is even more profound.

Temples have different rituals and activities that fulfil certain realistic needs of lay Buddhists, especially those of senior age. A temple in the same neighbourhood as Ngọc Tịnh conducted a Medicine Buddha Sutra chanting session every Saturday, which was very well-attended by elderly Buddhists since they believed chanting this sutra would bestow the good blessings of health on themselves and their families. Ngọc Tịnh temple, despite being very small, attracted a good number of followers from its neighbourhood, and one reason behind its popularity, as laywomen told me, was its cozy and well-tended Ancestor Worshipping Room [Nhà thờ Cửu Huyền], where urns of ash of the temple’s late followers were kept.

Many elderly laywomen at Ngọc Tịnh told me that they hoped they themselves would be venerated in this room after their death. A laywoman even told me that she frequented this temple every night for chanting and for all its major rituals and festivals, because she wished to be 'sent' here after she died. One day, I met her in Ngọc Tịnh temple during the grave-cleaning festival [Tết Thanh Minh] in the third lunar month. Many followers and non-followers came to the temple on that day, to visit their relatives' urns of ash in the Ancestor Worshipping Room to clean the room, the urns, burn incense and place offerings. The laywoman also came to help clean the room. After the ritual ended, she and I sat down on a wooden couch outside the room. She wholeheartedly praised the room as the best ancestor worshipping room she had ever seen in Hồ Chí Minh City:

I have visited many temples and saw their Ancestor Worshipping Rooms. I like this temple's Ancestor Room the most. In others, Ancestor Rooms look very dark, gloomy and scary, while in our temple the room is cozy and bright; the way the abbess arranged the urns is very nice too. When I die, I wish to be sent here to be with my friends and be near to the Buddha. My children can come visit me whenever they want to since this temple is near to our house.

Buddhist practice is therefore not only a form of discipline of the body, mind and speech that enables them to achieve a Buddhist liberated subjectivity that detaches themselves from the everyday concerns in mundane life. The practice they followed is also deeply embedded in their social settings and their social habitus which is defined by their female gender, senior age, occupation and social class. Women's concerns about the productivity of religious rituals resonates with the high value attributed to virtues of diligence and self-reliance in Vietnam's

culture (Le 2015: 237), as well as the socialist ethics that emphasise and connect a person's contribution to the community with full personhood and citizenship (Gammeltoft 2008).

In submitting themselves to the temporal structure and bodily disciplines during rituals, elderly women actively endow their practice of faith with economic and productive meanings. Through Buddhist rituals, they remain productive and continue to take care and contribute to their families and kin communities, even though this religious performance may not be appreciated as a form of productivity beyond the ritual community in a temple. Buddhist rituals are therefore transformed into an extra-familial platform where they can continue the caring roles that they performed during their adult life. The experience of old age is transformed from being unproductive and dependent to that of continuing productivity and contribution to family and kin community. Spending time practicing Buddhism in the temples, elderly women also take care of their own death, mark burial and veneration sites for themselves after death and create merit for their futures lives

Efficiency in religious practice

Conceptualising their religious practice as productive activities which produce good merit for themselves and their families, laywomen's everyday life is endowed with meaning and purpose. Their time is oriented toward efficient religious activities. Through their busyness and active engagement in religious practices, they perceive themselves as active agents in their own life, who make merit to sustain their own wellbeing and prepare for their future death and life, as well as building the foundation for the wellbeing of their loved ones. A variety of Buddhist temples and spontaneous lay-Buddhist groups who organize their own

rituals and practices provide laywomen with many options to choose from, based on how efficient they perceive these activities are according to their own demands and needs.

One day, after pursuing a one-day Buddhist retreat in Hoằng Pháp temple, Grandma Tính and I took the bus back to the city. Buses to and from Hoằng Pháp temple and the city were always fully loaded with elderly laywomen in their grey robes. On the bus I sat next to a woman, probably in her early seventies, who had just migrated to the city from the north of Vietnam. Asking her what she thought about the retreat that she had attended that day, I received a full-blown answer stating her opinion about how retreats in a big temple like Hoằng Pháp are better than any other religious practices in any other temples.

You see, if we want to be liberated [giải thoát] and be reborn in the Pure Land, we must practice Pure Land Buddhism. Pure Land Buddhism makes liberation become easier to attain. It is the simplest and fastest way to liberation. It is the shortcut to the Pure Land. The practice of Pure Land Buddhism in Hoằng Pháp temple is very simple, but it will lead us to reach the destination. Other temples also follow this school of Buddhism, but practicing Pure Land Buddhism in Hoằng Pháp temple is the best. Hoằng Pháp is the biggest temple in Hồ Chí Minh City, thus the monks there are also the best and the rituals they conduct also help us make more merit than in other temples. I notice that, in other temples, they chant sutras a lot. They recite Buddha's name only a little bit, while in this temple we mainly recite his name. I prefer it that way. I think it is the right way. We should chant sutras to understand the Buddha's words, but we don't have to do it too intensively. In Hoằng Pháp, we chant very little, and we spend the rest of our time to recite Buddha's name.

She did not practice Buddhism when she was still in the north, because she thought Buddhist practices are not as good in the north as in the south, particularly in Hồ Chí Minh City. 'Buddhist practices 'in here' (in the south) are the best', she commented. She continued comparing religious practices in Hồ Chí Minh City with those in her hometown in the north:

I did not want to become a Buddhist while I was still out there (in the north). Religious practices out there are very depressing and not as solemnly practiced as in here. I went to temples many times there too, but I always left and felt no inclination to become a Buddhist. Here, right after the first time I visited Hoằng Pháp, I decided to become a Buddhist. People out there only go to temples twice a month, not every day as we do here. They pray to the Buddha to ask for material things. They do not understand that the Buddha has nothing material to give. But things are changing. There are temples in the north where lay practitioners recite Buddha's name at length, but they still have not practiced this as well as in the south.

While listening to her, I recalled my conversation with another laywoman I met at Ngọc Tịnh temple, who was at that time in the process of applying for migration to Australia to live with her two sons' families in Sydney. While her sons were applying for immigration paperwork for her, she prepared herself for a shift in her Buddhist practices upon her migration to a new country. When I came to visit her at her house she showed me a thick book that she had been given by a Vietnamese monk living in Sydney during her last three-month visit and stay in Australia. The book contained verses that were not intelligible to me, which she explained were the mantras that Buddhist monks and practitioners in Australia chanted. In order to prepare herself for Buddhist practice in a new country, she spent time at home chanting and memorising these mantras. Similarly to the northerner lady I met on the bus from Hoằng Pháp

temple, this laywoman also praised the Buddhism that Vietnamese monks and practitioners in Australia were practicing. She believed spending time to memorise the mantras was the most effective way to be reborn in the Pure Land.

In Australia they practice Tantric Buddhism [Mật Tông]. They chant mantras. Only excellent monks in Vietnam are invited to Australia to practice Buddhism. They practice Buddhism with integrity and virtue there, unlike monks here always compete with each other for support from lay practitioners. Here we only chant sutras in Vietnamese, while there in Australia they chant in Sanskrit. Pure Land Buddhism is too simple. We only have to recite Buddha's name. People believe by doing so they can be liberated to the Pure Land. But a monk I met there told me that it still depends on our karma. But mantras in Tantric Buddhism are, indeed, very powerful. If we can recite a specific mantra at the moment of dying, our spirit will be able to escape from this life immediately and we will be reborn in the Pure Land. The Buddhism in Australia takes longer and much more effort to master, since it is far more advanced and thus produces us more merit.

Concerning the effectiveness in making merit and in liberating their spirits after death, they compared chanting sutra with reciting Buddha's name, chanting sutras with chanting Tantric Buddhism's mantras. They also categorised different places in regard to which venue provides more efficacious practices, such as practicing Buddhism in the south versus in the north, in Vietnam versus overseas, or in big temples versus small neighbourhood temples.

As such, religious practices, like other commodities in the present market economy and thriving consumerism in urban Vietnam, are provided with a lot of options and choices by many 'religious providers'. Religious practices are therefore a form of commodity, from

which the practitioners pick the one that best meets their needs and their specific situations. Besides temples, which are institutional organizers and disseminators of Buddhist practices and knowledge, there are also lay Buddhist practitioners who individually organise groups to practice Buddhism in ways which they believed enhance the good merit and directly respond to their needs.

Lay-organised chanting groups

During fieldwork, I followed several sutra-chanting or Buddha-name-reciting groups that were run by lay Buddhist individuals. Leaders of these groups designed the religious rituals for followers of their groups, following a structure which resembled that of rituals held in temples under monks' guidance. However, they added some improvisations in the procedures or in the collection of sutras they would chant, which they believe enhance the rituals' effectiveness in making merit. Leaders of these lay Buddhist groups were called 'người dẫn chúng' [the persons who provide guidance]. Most of the lay Buddhist leaders I met during fieldwork were laywomen in their sixties who had retired from household work and economic activities. They were also the people with good health, good connection, charisma, good organising skill and willingness to put in intensive effort and time to recruit and mobilise group members, to find sources of support, to connect their groups with temples or families where they would come to chant sutras, and to take care of all the miscellaneous details involved in the group's activities. Aunt Thanh was one person like that.

At first Aunt Thanh just came to nightly chanting rituals in a temple in her neighbourhood. She said she was 'discovered' by the monks for her beautiful voice. She was invited to lead the chanting of lay followers in her temple. One life-turning experience

happened to her when she had a one-week retreat at Hoằng Pháp temple, which helped her realise that the chanting ritual at her home temple was so loosely-structured. At her neighbourhood temple, the chanting ritual included reciting the Buddha's name, then chanting bits of sutra from the books and finally dedicating good merit to all sentient beings, and to practitioners' families and ancestors. In participating in chanting rituals in Hoằng Pháp temple, she could feel the stronger merit-making force of those rituals since the force derived from a collective and powerful recitation of Buddha's name by a huge group of people, who all chanted following a regulated pace and rhythm. She made up her mind that after the retreat she would form a lay Buddhist group to disseminate Buddhist practices following the Hoằng Pháp style in her neighbourhood. So during the retreat, she carefully jotted down in her notebook all the proceedings of the retreat, such as the rhythm of recitation, when to raise one's voice, when to lower it and how to walk in meditation. She went home after that retreat and invited friends to join her. They borrowed the venues of small rural temples, whose custodial monks were willing to lend out their main halls since such lay Buddhists' practices would bring them new followers and make their temples better known. At first Aunt Thanh's group raised money among themselves to pay for transportation and meals. Later wealthy followers and some temples sponsored most of the cost.

To make her designed chanting ritual more appealing as the 'right way' leading to the Pure Land, she made some improvisations from the structure of the chanting ritual she learned in Hoằng Pháp temple. Besides recitation of the Buddha's name, her group members also chanted the Repentance Verse [Kệ Sám hối] which Aunt Thanh thought would enable them to diminish their bad merit. They also chanted the forty-eight vows [bốn mươi tám lời nguyện] of the Buddha, which she believed would enforce lay followers' determinations to be reborn in the Buddha's world.

Lay Buddhist self-run groups, like Aunt Thanh's, are very active and prevalent. They are usually formed among close friends, neighbours and fellow lay Buddhists from the same temple. Small groups like Aunt Thanh's usually cooperate with small temples in the city or in the rural areas. The groups have a venue for their practice, and the temples have lay followers and vibrant lay Buddhist activities. Some groups also choose to perform their rituals at the home of a member or acquaintance, or in the families who invite them to chant for the family's wellbeing, or for an ill member's recovery or a deceased member's spirit liberation. The activities and composition of rituals that these groups follow are designed and improvised by lay followers themselves to best meet their needs, such as to prepare themselves for death and a Pure Land rebirth, to pray for good health or to make merit for their families' wellbeing.

During fieldwork, I also observed cases in which lay Buddhist chanting groups competed with the temples' rituals. For example, in one temple, a lay Buddhist chanting group was formed among followers to chant sutras in front of the Quan Âm Bodhisattva statue standing in the courtyard of the temple, while the chanting ritual of the monks took place in the Main Hall and in front of the Buddha statue. They were groups of elderly parents and grandparents, who wanted to pray for their children's traffic safety while traversing on the road for work. While the monks' rituals followed an unchanging and consistent structure, the lay Buddhist chanting rituals got more and more elaborate with time. At first, they were only a small group, who brought their own wooden bell to add rhythm to their chanting. They quickly expanded in size and attracted so many followers that they occupied the entire courtyard. They chanted bits of sutra that were familiar to all practitioners, and spent the rest of the time of the rituals to recite Quan Âm's name. Soon lay Buddhists' rituals were decorated with an even more sensory spiritual atmosphere when followers started to burn

candles around the statue of the Bodhisattva and on round tables put on the courtyard. Meanwhile the monks' rituals in the Main Hall were only dimly lit with cold neon light and scented by only three sticks of incense in front of the Buddha statue. The only thing that made the monks' rituals appear more solemn was the big bronze bell which the monks stroke to define the rhythm of their recitation of the Buddha's name. Lay Buddhists' exuberant activities and occupation of the courtyard made the temple open its gate until very late at night, long after the monk's chanting ritual finished. The group gradually gained great popularity. Many followers I met in this temple told me they often visited this temple but always stayed outside and never went into the Main Hall where 'unfriendly nuns' stayed. Visiting this temple again two years after fieldwork, I learned that the group was now sponsored by many wealthy followers. Now everyone who came to chant on the full-moon rituals was given free meals which were, as I was told, better than the vegetarian feasts provided by the temple.

With the emergence of lay Buddhist groups who design and practice their own rituals, Buddhist practice is customised to meet the demands of its practitioners. Members of lay Buddhist groups appropriate the orthodox practice of Buddhism and customise it to put emphasis especially on the practice which they believed would result in most good merit. This pragmatic approach to Buddhist practice of elderly laywomen whom I studied in Hồ Chí Minh City can be added into Soucy's (2009) comparative study of men's and women's performances in Buddhist temples in Hanoi. Soucy (2009) notes that laymen utilise the Buddhist temple as a venue for the performance of knowledge. Therefore, in men's performance of religiosity, they associate themselves with orthodox teachings and Buddhist texts, to detach themselves from the common perception of religious activities as weak and feminine acts of seeking for reliance on supernatural powers. The female followers in my

research seem to be indifferent in reserving the orthodoxy of their practice. Laywomen's performance at Buddhist temple vividly reflects their pragmatic approach to Buddhism and encompasses the concerns and demands specific to their senior age group, gendered and occupational habitus. Women's religious performance, instead of characterising a common perception of feminine reliance on external forces, seems to speak to their desire to be self-sufficient, to continue to provide for family and to be proactive in taking care of their own wellbeing in old age. Through reconstructing religious practices, elderly women also express their agency and active engagement in their practice of faith. They seek for the efficient approach to merit-making, instead of passively following the ritual traditions imposed upon them by religious institutions and authorities.

Concluding remarks

This chapter characterises elderly laywomen's engagement with Buddhist rituals as a form of post-retirement work which they perform to make good merit for their families. As a form of work, Buddhist practices produce concrete and valuable products which are the good merit, which is believed to bestow supernatural blessings on the practitioners and their families. Buddhist practice thus reflects elderly women's life experience and habitus as women who were responsible for incomes and expenses in their households, and as traders who were involved in trading practice in the marketplace to support their families. No longer possessing the means to provide for the family, laywomen engage themselves in merit-making rituals in the temples, which they believe produce the karmic income that ensures the wellbeing of their families. Good merit is thus perceived by laywomen as possessing material and monetary value in the moral economy operating within the community of elderly merit makers, who

‘make’ and ‘save’ merit for their families just as they used to do in their income-generating work in their younger years.

Chapter 4

Journeys in the Impure Land

Travel Experience and Transcendence of the Old-age Self

Aunt Lan's adventures

I first met Aunt Lan, the laywoman who inducted me into the exuberant experience of pilgrimage, on the last day of 2012. I was sitting on the floor in the kitchen of Ngọc Tịnh temple, waiting to depart on a short charitable trip to distribute gifts to patients in a hospital in Hồ Chí Minh City. The room was gradually filling with laywomen who were all strangers to me. Everyone was cheerfully chatting about their families, the temples they had visited, or about their common acquaintances. No one seemed to notice me. Then a short and tanned woman briskly walked into the kitchen. She was wearing a green worn-out suit and plastic flip flops. Her short grey hair was hidden under an old hat. Her facial features, the wrinkles on her forehead and crow's feet around her eyes all seemed to be smiling, giving her the air of a person easy to be with. She smiled and nodded greeting everyone in the room, but she did not stop to talk to any of them. Instead, she suddenly walked towards me. When she was a few steps away from me, she took off her hat and sat down on the floor. Using her hat as a make-shift fan, she fanned her face and loudly complained to an unidentified audience about the mid-day heat. Realising that it was a heaven-blessed chance for me to start talking to anyone, simply anyone, at this temple, I asked her whether it was, like myself, her first time

going on a temple trip. She immediately became animated; her eyes widened and she began to excitedly tell me her stories about travelling on pilgrimages:

I have been on pilgrimage so many times. Numerous times. Uncountable. Have you seen the map of Vietnam? Vietnam is long, and I have travelled almost everywhere, except to Hanoi. I had not gone to the north yet, although my parents were of northern origin. I even went to the southernmost point in Cà Mau.

When we first met on that day, Aunt Lan had just returned from a pilgrimage to the island of Phú Quốc, a famous tourist site in southern Vietnam. This pilgrimage took place during the Buddhist Rainy Season Retreat [Mùa an cư kiết hạ], when monks and nuns stay within their temples to devote themselves to their practice. Aunt Lan, together with other pilgrims were led on this pilgrimage by a monk, who took them to visit ten monasteries in Phú Quốc to make offerings and donate dry food to monks and nuns staying there for intensive practice.

Interrupting our conversation, a laywoman began teasing Aunt Lan suggesting that she must have spent more time on the beach than in temples to get so tanned. The joke turned out to be partly true. Eagerly, Aunt Lan began detailing the leisure activities she enjoyed during the pilgrimage. Pilgrims were given much time to visit tourist sites and to go to local markets to shop for souvenirs. Aunt Lan fondly recounted her good memories of enjoying herself on the sunny beach in Phú Quốc. 'The sand there is so white and clean,' she remarked, 'unlike Vũng Tàu [which is a beach popular to Hồ Chí Minh City dwellers due to its proximity to the city].' She also visited a local aquarium, and was very impressed when she found an eight-point starfish: 'I had never seen a starfish in my life. I had always thought starfish has only five points, like the yellow star on our national flag. But the starfish in the aquarium had eight points. I know now, that starfishes have eight points.' Once the

pilgrimage left Phú Quốc, she followed the group back to the mainland and visited Bạc Liêu where she was taken to the villa of the wealthiest landlord in that province during French colonial times. Here she was impressed by the extravagant lifestyle of the once-richest man in the region, a figure about whom stories and myths still circulate widely in southern Vietnam, known as ‘Công tử Bạc Liêu’ [The Young Master of Bạc Liêu]. ‘I heard stories about this young master, but they were all just rumours,’ Aunt Lan continued, ‘but I know him now! I know how his house, I know what his dining room, his bedroom and his garden looked like. I even found his portrait in one of the rooms. People had told me he was an ugly man, that he had many women in his life only because of his money. But in fact, the portrait was of a very handsome man. Công tử Bạc Liêu was in fact a handsome man!’

Then, suddenly remembering something, she took off a bracelet of prayer beads made of shiny and smooth brownish and yellowish stones that she wore on her wrist, and showed it to us. ‘I bought these in a temple we visited on that trip,’ she said; ‘this kind of stone is only available in that place. You cannot find these beautiful stones in Saigon. The nun at the temple said that these local stones can cure high blood pressure. She advised me to wear these stones to regulate the circulation of air and blood in my body.’ Aunt Lan’s friend held the prayer beads in her hands and remarked how cool the stone felt, adding in agreement that stones with such a rare quality could not be found in Saigon. At that, Aunt Lan took another much longer string of scented wooden prayer beads from her grey fabric bag. She had bought them during a pilgrimage she had made the previous year. Aunt Lan then commented that she bought a lot of food, fruits, and local agricultural produce whenever she travelled, and distributed them to her children who in turn shared them amongst their families, in-laws and workmates. She rarely bought anything for herself, except prayer beads. Her friend, lightly shaking her head in admiration and probably a little bit of jealousy, spoke to me:

She must be bestowed with a lot of good merit [có phước lắm] to be able to travel that much, you know. Her legs are still strong, unlike mine. She is very healthy and free [khỏe re]. Her children all grew up; she has no family burden. She has no worries about money. I never travel out of the city. Even when my son said he would buy tickets for me to travel on pilgrimages, I refused. Why? I have bad carsickness. My legs are too weak. I can fall anytime just walking inside my house. How can I travel hundreds of kilometres like her!

Aunt Lan, trying to encourage her friend, suggested that she should travel on at least one pilgrimage a year to visit temples and make new-year merit during Tết [Vietnamese New Year].

It now is the end of our lives; we should travel here and there to know things [Cuối đời rồi, đi đây đi đó cho biết]. If we do not travel now, when will we ever do it? Life is just impermanent [vô thường]. Nothing remains the same forever. We should travel a lot to know things, before our own 'journey' in this life comes to an end.

Aunt Lan said that her children fully supported her travel. Her oldest daughter and her sister who was living in United States, and who paid for most of her trips, persuaded her to travel while she was still healthy. 'I am afraid that one day I will just stay at home and watch television. When I see the scene of a beach on the TV, I will not regret that I did not travel to a beach, because I actually did go to many beaches along Vietnam's coast. When I see the pictures of mountains, I will be relieved that I also did climb some mountains,' she rephrased what her daughter and sister had advised her.

Aunt Lan, like many other laywomen I met during fieldwork, hardly travelled at all when they were young. I asked Aunt Lan whether she travelled with the family when her

children were still young. She replied by describing to me the harsh reality of that time, in the 1970s, when she had to work very hard to support the family, and when travelling for leisure was totally out of the question. For many women like Aunt Lan, travelling with pilgrims, lay Buddhist friends and monks on pilgrimage, to a rural temple for charity or for chanting, or to a river for a fish-releasing ritual¹⁰, was a new experience that could only be enjoyed in old age.

Travelling is only possible in old age, when women are no longer entangled in familial responsibilities and constant pressure to earn a living for their families. Attending trips organised by Buddhist monks or lay Buddhists was the first time many women were able to move far beyond their familiar lived space and accumulate exotic experiences of places, things and people. As a privilege of old age, travel contains the possibility of leisure, of learning and seeing new and exotic things, opportunities unavailable to these women in their earlier years. It expands spatial lived realities, adds experiences, events and new knowledge to their life stories as well as providing the opportunity for self-indulgent leisure. Travelling in old age is also regarded as an opportunity to complete themselves, to make up for what they missed or did not have a chance to do due to familial engagements, as well as to educate themselves by becoming ‘understanding and knowing persons’ [người hiểu biết].

¹⁰ Many Buddhist temples I knew during fieldwork organized trips to Saigon River for lay Buddhists to release fish to pray for peace [cầu an] for their families. These trips were organized on Days of Celebration [Ngày vía] in Buddhist calendar, such as the Celebration of Amitabha Buddha’s Birthday on the seventeenth day of the eleventh lunar month, the Celebration of Quan Âm Bodhisattva on the nineteenth day of the second and sixth lunar months.

Drawing on the stories about pilgrimages and trips that elderly laywomen shared with me during fieldwork, this chapter explores how the religious practice of travelling is positioned in the conceptualisation of the life course, and is juxtaposed by elderly laywomen with their experiences of old age. This chapter illustrates the meanings that elderly lay Buddhist women bestow on travelling as a practice of old age. It reveals that the practice of religious travel frames the experience of old age as a time to accumulate life wisdom, to extend life experience and to fulfil the self. Through a discussion of religious travelling, the

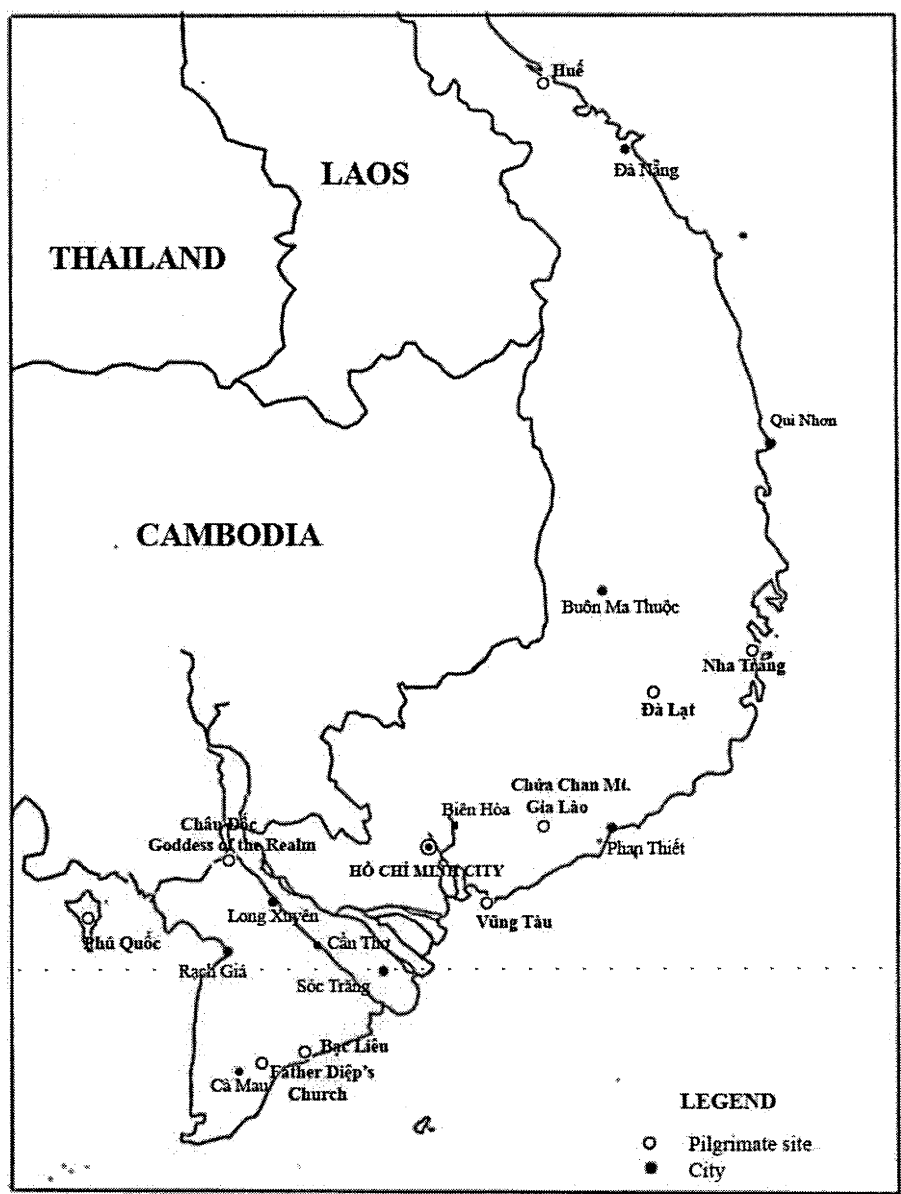


Figure 4.1: Map of pilgrimage sites mentioned in this chapter

chapter displays how the practice redefines the position of old age in the life course and the perception of old age as the end of life. It shows how through travel elderly laywomen challenge the embodiment of aging, and as such revitalise the old-age self.

Knowledgeable self

After that first encounter at Ngọc Tịnh temple, Aunt Lan and I became good friends, and she became my key informant. She introduced me to many laywomen in and beyond Ngọc Tịnh's laity, took me with her on multiple trips and pilgrimages, and kindly let me participate in many gatherings of her family. Almost every morning when I was in the city, I visited her at her soymilk shop. Her shop occupied the front yard of her sister's house, which was located on a narrow street, in which a busy market consisting of shops and stalls selling fresh food, vegetables, household utilities, clothes and many other things filled the pavement. Aunt Lan's soymilk shop was one of them, though it was probably the most humble of all the shops. Her shop had only two plastic tables and a few plastic chairs for customers. At one corner was all the produce, consisting of two or three bottles of soymilk which she made every morning, a bucket of ice cubes, and some cans of soft drink. She did not need more than that since she had very few customers. I often spent hours at her shop, which was also a good place for me to absorb the vibrant life of the neighbourhood and to talk with Aunt Lan, and let myself be caught in conversations between her and her neighbours, or laywomen from Ngọc Tịnh temple who would stop by on their way home after grocery shopping. Aunt Lan's favourite topic of conversation was the pilgrimages she had taken. She kept returning to the stories about the Young Master of Bạc Liêu, the beach in Phú Quốc, the aquarium star fish, and many other vibrant and colourful stories she had collected on her journeys.

One day I came to see her after a period of absence. She eagerly informed me that she had just returned from a pilgrimage to Huế, the old capital city in central Vietnam, and invited me to come with her to her house to see the photos taken during the trip. I was more than happy to accept this invitation. I waited till she closed the shop, and walked with her to her home, which was located deep in the labyrinth of back alleys. Her house was very small and looked rather run-down from the outside. She invited me into the front room facing the street. This room was used as a multifunctional space, first as a living room, then as a room where her husband's and parents' altars were kept, then as a parking place for two motorbikes of her children, and at night as her bedroom. In contrast to what I had imagined, this front room, into which anyone could look, did not contain any objects that hinted at her rich adventures and travel experiences. No souvenirs or photos were hung on the wall, or displayed in the glass cabinet. Everything in the room belonged to her children: two motorbikes, and two desks on which two laptops were placed. At night, she would spread a mattress down on the floor between furniture, walls and motorbikes to sleep on.

Aunt Lan took from the wardrobe three photo albums which were as thick as phone books. They were the collection of all the photos she had taken on all the pilgrimages she had made over the last five years, since she had started to travel. It took us more than an hour to look through all three albums. She stopped at certain photos taken of groups of pilgrims, pointed to certain people and told me what she knew about their occupations, families, and children. Many other photos evoked fun memories, which she recounted to me in detail, telling me what happened at the moments the photos were taken.

At one point in our perusal of the photographs, Aunt Lan suddenly asked me a question that seemed not at all related to the photos and the memories enwrapped in them: ‘Niece, have you heard of Thầy Bộng?’

I told her I had never heard of that name.

Looking a bit sad, she told me the story of Thầy Bộng:

Most people did not know Thầy Bộng when he was still alive. His name still is not well known, even among frequent temple goers. But I knew him. I was taken to his temple by accident by a pilgrims’ group I travelled with. Even now I don’t remember the temple’s name, or where it is. I must have predestined bond with that monk to have been able to see him on that day.

Then her eyes widened, she recounted her surreal encounter with Thầy Bộng, her voice resonating with amazement:

I asked him why people called him Thầy Bộng [Monk Hollow]. He said because he did not have intestines. His belly was just an empty space, all hollow [bộng]. He showed us his belly; there was a long scar on it. I asked him where the food went then. He honestly answered that he himself had no idea where the food went. Because he did not eat. He only drank water, but only very little. He was blessed with so much good merit. I could see it by looking at his face. He did not look ill or starved. He looked exactly like the Buddha, gentle, and with long ears. When I looked at him, I knew I was looking at a Buddha manifested in our world.

Thầy Bộng had passed away a couple of years before; Aunt Lan recalled how sad she was when she had heard the news. It was her most memorable trip.

Finally she looked at me rather concerned: ‘Thu, you should travel more to know these and those places [biết chỗ này chỗ kia], to know things [biết chuyện].’ She even quoted a Vietnamese adage to emphasise her point that I needed to travel to improve my knowledge:

Travel to know here and there.

Staying at home with mother when will you ever get wise?

[Đi cho biết đó biết đây.

Ở nhà với mẹ biết ngày nào khôn?]

Travelling is often associated with the process of learning new things, gaining wisdom, as is illustrated in the proverb that Aunt Lan quoted above, or in another well-known adage ‘One day of travel, one sieve of wisdom’ [Đi một ngày đàng, học một sàng khôn]. Travelling on pilgrimage, for charity purposes or with Buddhist chanting groups is, besides making merit or experiencing leisure, usually described by pilgrims as a practice to get to ‘know’ [biết] things, places, and people. During fieldwork, having listened to many stories about pilgrimage trips, I noticed elderly women often emphasised that travelling is an opportunity to transform themselves into people who ‘understand and know’ [hiểu biết] things.

Accumulating wisdom [trí huệ] is one goal of laywomen’s religious endeavor in daily life. Wisdom is ‘understanding and knowing’, and indeed, becoming an ‘understanding and knowing’ person is often emphasised in the way laywomen talk about their Buddhist practice. One day, before we started a night chanting ritual at Ngọc Tịnh, laywomen in their grey Buddhist robes came into the Main Hall one by one and found their familiar spots to sit on the floor, in front of the big statue of the Buddha. One laywoman had come early and prepared low portable desks, on which the sutra books that we would chant that day were placed. The

page from which we would chant had been carefully bookmarked, so that when the chanting started we only had to turn to the assigned page and chant along. I was then sitting with Aunt Thu, a friend of Aunt Lan's. A chubby laywoman with short grey curly hair, probably in her seventies, came in and sat near to us. She was a newcomer to the temple; however, Aunt Thu knew her since they lived in the same neighbourhood and went to the same market every morning. The two laywomen started to talk about their children; the new laywoman told us she wanted to come to temple to cultivate peace in her mind. 'At home I always have a headache. My mind is not still,' she explained, 'my children and their wives and husbands quarrel all the time.' Aunt Thu suddenly asked: 'But can you read?' I was a bit taken aback by this very frank and confronting question. I expected the new laywoman would be annoyed, but she was not. She replied in a matter-of-fact tone: 'I know how to read, write and count [biết đọc, biết viết, biết đếm].' Aunt Thu, nodded her head, and said with a sympathetic voice: 'Same with me. That is good enough.' Then she told us about the education she had had in her childhood:

I was sent to school by my father. At that time, many girls never went to school. Their parents thought girls did not need to study. But my parents loved girls as much as they loved boys. So they sent us all to school. I finished primary school, and had to take the entrance exam for high-school. But I was not a bright pupil. I always scored lowest in class. So I failed the exam. But my parents still wanted me to go to school. So they paid hefty tuition fees to send me to a private school for girls. But then they could not afford it for long, so I dropped out. But by then I could read, write, do arithmetic. I wanted to help my parents. We were poor. So I started to work in a fabric shop behind Bến Thành market.

The new laywoman, who was not as lucky as Aunt Thu, said she was not sent to school at all. But she had learnt how to read, write and do basic arithmetic from different people she had met in life. Smiling contentedly, she declared: ‘And now I know how to go to the temple [biết đi chùa].’ With ‘knowing how to go to the temple’, she implied her having the access and ability to practice Buddhism, to learn the Buddha’s teachings, which Buddhists believe only people with good merit could have opportunities to attain. Those without sufficient good merit will be ‘blocked’ from the temples by different forces in their mundane life, such as poverty, an ill family member who needs to be taken care of, a new-born grandchild who needs a grandma to stay at home while the mother is at work, or family’s disagreement with religious practice. Buddhist practice is seen as an opportunity in life, similar to the prestige of being sent to school, even only primary school, where a person learns how to read, write and calculate. Buddhist practice is, indeed, perceived as an opportunity to ‘know’ and to ‘understand’, to cultivate wisdom and become knowledgeable.

Most of the elderly laywomen I met during fieldwork had very little school experience. Some laywomen at Ngọc Tịnh temple studied only as far as to complete primary school, then dropped out of school to work to earn a living while still in their early teenage years. It is through Buddhist practice that they perceived of themselves as people who ‘understand the way’ [hiểu đạo], who ‘know the Buddha’ [biết Phật], who practice to attain both knowledge and wisdom [trí huệ song tu]. Talking about themselves prior to practicing Buddhism, or about other people who are not Buddhists and who behave abominably in their daily interactions, they use terms such as ‘do not understand the way’ [không hiểu đạo], or ‘in the dark’ or ‘benighted’ [u minh]. One day, I was sitting at Aunt Lan’s soymilk shop with a laywoman who stopped by to have a glass of soymilk before going home with a heavy basket of fresh food. It was around eight o’clock in the morning, when the residents of the

neighbourhood rushed to work or to do their shopping. The small street market was packed with motorbikes and pedestrians, who traversed this small path connecting two major streets of the district. Housewives unhurriedly walked along the road, stopping at stalls to buy food, while motorbikes had a more difficult time trying to get through this two-way traffic which seemed to obey no rules as everyone just tried to move forward into whatever empty space they could find in front of them. A motorcyclist who lost his patience, loudly and relentlessly sounded his horn. When the conditions were not improved to his liking, he started to yell and curse people around him. The laywoman, witnessing all these happenings from inside Aunt Lan's shop, got very annoyed. Standing on the pavement in front of the soymilk shop, arms akimbo, she yelled to the man:

That is not acceptable! We Buddhists pray every day for the peace for everyone, not only for our families. We even put altars outside of our home to pray for peace and safety for all sentient beings in the world. While you, you are cursing the world simply because you cannot control what is in your mind!

'A person who "understands the way" would never behave that way', she later remarked to us. As illustrated in Chapter Two, Buddhist practice is seen as the way of life. Committing themselves to Buddhist ethical codes and discipline these women devoted great attention to the comportment of the body and self, to thoughts and speech, integrating Buddhism into their everyday practice. Understanding the way to live life accords with the Buddhist worldview which teaches the impermanent nature of life, and the principle of karma that emphasises the consequences of all actions and that every action must be due to a bad or good deed conducted in the past. Not knowing these truths, a person is still in the dark [u minh], performs actions that result only in bad karma and fails to fully comprehend and appreciate

that the ups and downs in life are the outcomes of his or her own actions. Some laywomen told me that generally Buddhists are morally better than non-Buddhists, since those who 'understand the way' have better manners and attitudes in life. Buddhist practice is also perceived by elderly laywomen as a process of learning, of mastering the way of life. Chanting the Buddha's words is therefore a part of mastering this way of life, and thus to become a wise, moral and knowledgeable person.

Not only is Buddhist practice a means of becoming wise and knowledgeable, the rituals that take place in temples impose a vigorous orderly structure on practitioners' bodies and minds, resulting in a sort of school-like experience for laywomen. In Buddhist rituals, which were discussed in Chapter Three, women conform to uniformity in performance, listen to sermons, read out loud from sutra books, memorise what is taught by monks and what is written in sutra texts. Rituals in Buddhist temples are a simulation of a school life that many of them had very limited experience of.

Memorising sutras and mantras or citing monks' sermons is how laywomen express and share their knowledge to their friends. In their conversations, they often quoted by heart mantras and pieces of sutras that were often chanted at the temple, such as the Great Compassion Mantra, the Heart Sutra, or the Sutra to dedicate good merit to sentient beings. They also showed their friends how much they could memorise of the sutras, or what they remembered of what famous monks had said in their sermons recorded on DVDs. Not only reciting what they had heard and memorised, some laywomen also shared their understandings and interpretations of the sutras, based on what they had learned from monks, as well as from their experience of the efficacy of those sutras in their own lives. This knowledge acted as a form of cultural capital used to distinguish themselves as wise and

knowledgeable. Aunt Lan often complained to me that no matter how many times she chanted the Great Compassion Mantra, she still could not memorise it, even though she believed this mantra could be cited by heart by almost all devout Buddhists. She felt shy to admit this, and so that no one in the laity would notice, she would, during the chanting ritual, always sit behind everyone else so that no one saw that she always looked into the book. A laywoman who was a leader of a chanting team I met during fieldwork was known among her network of friends as someone who spent a lot of time doing research on the sutras. Having taken many classes organised by temples and attended many monks' sermons that interpreted the words of the Buddha, she believed that she was in the position to disseminate the Buddha's teachings to the world, which she did by founding a chanting group.

Knowledge of the Buddha's teachings is said to be 'absorbed' [thấm] into the body and mind of a practitioner by performing the same practice over and over again. By chanting the same sutra repeatedly, over a course of time, a follower will be able to absorb the teaching into himself or herself, and will be able to understand the deep meanings embedded in the sacred texts. Despite having had little education, some women spoke very beautifully and passionately about what they understood about the texts they chanted every day. One of those inspiring moments was when a laywoman in her seventies passionately described to me what she felt about the Buddha's words:

The Buddha's words contain great depth and multiple layers of meanings. Like leaves in a jungle. Like the depth of the ocean. Buddhists, like me and my friends, had to spend a lot of time to learn and understand his teachings to practice them correctly. For example, the Mantra of Great Compassion is said to be very efficacious, but most people don't understand what its words mean. That's why they cannot feel its efficacy.

It is a string of spells. It is not in our language [the Mantra that is printed in sutra books in Vietnam is written in Vietnamised-Sanskrit]. But I understand it. If you want to understand it too, you have to chant this Mantra many times in day, many days in a year, and for many years in your life so that it is absorbed into you [thấm vào mình]. Only then can you understand the wise and deep words of our Buddha.

‘One day of travelling, one sieve of wisdom’

Despite being a devout Buddhist, Aunt Lan travelled not only to Buddhist temples but, like most other Buddhists I met, also to pilgrimage sites dedicated to local sacred powers and efficacious gods and spirits. On a pilgrimage to Cà Mau, the southernmost province of Vietnam, she followed other pilgrims to a Catholic church, whose late priest, known as Father Diệp (Cha Diệp), is widely and reputedly credited with supernatural powers¹¹. The spirit of this priest is believed to bestow blessings on people’s businesses, regardless whether they are Christians or not. Some Buddhists emphasised to me that Father Diệp was especially efficacious to non-Christians. That is why, they said, more non-Christians know and worship him, and display his portraits in their houses, shops or cars than do Christians. Aunt Lan also visited Châu Đốc in An Giang province, where the shrine of a reputedly efficacious spirit, the Goddess of the Realm [Bà Chúa Xứ] is erected. She told me she had followed her trader

¹¹ The real name of this Catholic church is Tắc Sậy. It is located in Bạc Liêu province, on the highway connecting Bạc Liêu and Cà Mau province. Tắc Sậy church is the burial site of the priest Trương Bửu Diệp, and is widely known as Father Diệp Church.

friends to make offerings to this Goddess. But she did not like the Goddess from the first glance, because she looked so fierce. Staring at the Goddess' face, she thought to herself: 'This Lady looks so aggressive, unlike Buddhists' Quan Âm Bodhisattva.' A few days after returning from that trip, she accidentally got an electric shock while plugging in an electric device at home. Feeling so scared, she believed that it was a punishment from this very powerful Goddess for having such a disrespectful thought. She also travelled to Chứa Chan (or Gia Lào) mountain (Đồng Nai province), where there is a big tree with one top and three roots. This strange tree is rumoured to be the manifestation of the three gods of the forest. There, she rented a walking stick to walk up the mountain very early in the morning when the air was still cool and when the flow of pilgrims was not too crowded. In her stories, there appeared many names of temples famous to pilgrims from all over southern Vietnam. Some are the formal names of those temples; some are just nicknames pilgrims give to the places referring to something or someone they are famous for. The Candle temple, for example, has a huge candle that has been alight continuously for two hundred years. The Vegetarian-crab-noodle temple and the Pancake temple are named by pilgrims after the good food they offer to pilgrims.

While in rituals, knowledge is 'absorbed' through enforced discipline and ascetic constraints on one's course of action, travel is an active and expansive effort to get to know new things, places, food, events, and people and to interpret and disseminate these experiences to those who stayed behind at home. The knowledge women get from chanting, rituals and sermons is received from those who are considered superior in the monastic hierarchical order of wisdom and power, at the top of which sits the Buddha [Phật], and the sangha [Tăng], whose duties are to disseminate his words and teachings [Pháp]. This knowledge is prepared and served to adepts in the form of sutra books put in front of them

whenever a chanting ritual starts, or presented to them in monks' sermons. In travelling, on the contrary, women proactively and experientially claim knowledge of the world, and take this knowledge home with them. This knowledge is accumulated individually by travelling to new places, enjoying new experiences, and encountering new people and their ways of life. The knowledge is then recited in women's own words, interpreted according to their frame of reference and disseminated to friends and families in the form of personal stories, like those that I heard from Aunt Lan and others. This knowledge is pictorially collected in photograph albums, which act as a prompt for the travel stories they shared with their friends. Photos affixed in the albums themselves are the means to record the knowledge they collected and brought home from their travels, just as the Buddha's wisdom was recorded in sacred texts.

In Vietnam, elderly people are considered as having already accumulated a rich repository of life experience, wisdom and knowledge by virtue of having lived a long life. This commonly-held belief associating old age and wisdom is expressed in many Vietnamese proverbs and adages, such as 'The older the ginger, the spicier' [Gừng càng già càng cay]; 'If you want to sew you must find needle; if you want to know you must find old people' [Muốn may thì phải tìm kim; muốn hay thì phải đi tìm người xưa]; 'The old know things, the young know eating' [Già quen việc, trẻ quen ăn]; 'Wisdom is not for the young, health is not for the old' [Khôn đâu đến trẻ, khỏe đâu đến già].

However, what Aunt Lan and other laywomen told me about their Buddhist practice as 'to understand the way', and about travelling as 'to know' suggests that they perceived old age as the beginning of a process of accumulating wisdom, rather than as the culmination or embodiment of wisdom per se. Although life experience had taught them much, old age

brought a new opportunity to gain true wisdom, through Buddhist practice. Many of these laywomen stressed that their life knowledge was narrow in scope. Even though most of them had been to school, they emphasised that school had taught them little more than the practical skills of 'reading, writing, and doing calculations'. This body of knowledge was sufficient for them to earn a living, to support themselves and cope with life. It enabled them to sustain the wellbeing of their parents, spouses and children. As such it was valued for its practicality and as a means for these women to fulfil their roles and duties as daughters, and later as wives and mothers in their families.

However, the knowledge that they obtained through Buddhist practice in old age belongs to a different dimension. Learning the Buddha's words helped them to understand the nature of life; travelling to know things, places, people and experiences enabled them to comprehend life and the wider world. This was knowledge not to serve the practical purpose of supporting the family, but rather to become a better person, gain a more comprehensive awareness of life, learn what lay beyond the space of their everyday life concerns, and understand the circumstances of different places and people.

Travelling, as a religious practice, transforms the experience of old age. Old age is not the end stage of personal development and formation in life. Rather, through religious travel, old age is converted into an ongoing process of self-cultivation and betterment. Through Buddhist practices of mobility, old age is approached as a continuous process of learning. Even at the end of the life course, life keeps revolving, changing, adding new elements and experiences, and expanding into new spaces and social networks. Travel, besides being a merit-making practice, is a journey to claim knowledge and transform oneself into a knowledgeable person. This process of self-cultivation does not happen solely through

static and enforced bodily disciplines, or restrictions on speech, movements and thoughts. It also is effected through mobility, traversing geographical space, enjoying new freedoms, places and people, and through experiences that greatly depart from the circumscribed routines and duties that structured everyday life in their younger years.

‘Journeys in the impure land’: Travel to transcend old age

Spending days, weeks and months with Aunt Lan at her shop and home, I gradually understood why she liked telling me stories of pilgrimage so much, far more than updating me about the miscellaneous details of her day-to-day religious practice or about her family life. Every morning, she woke up before dawn, made soy milk and prepared breakfast for her two unmarried children who were living with her. Then she came to the shop and stayed there until midday. In the afternoon, she came to the shop again until night. She returned home, cooked and had dinner before going to Ngọc Tịnh temple for chanting. One son of hers, who was married and had moved out, himself had two sons, who were probably her second favourite topics besides pilgrimage. Her oldest daughter, in her forties, and her youngest son, in his thirties, were unmarried and stayed with her. She knew her neighbours and Ngọc Tịnh’s laywomen well, since they sometimes stopped and shared their stories with her. However, she still liked talking about pilgrimage the most. None of these stories about her, her children’s and her neighbours’ quotidian lives could ever compete with the details about the adventures she had had.

Stories of all her pilgrimage adventures stretched her life over a vaster canvas of space than had she only spent her life at home. They gave the story of her life a diversity of plots, scenes and settings, as she related the various events that had played out in different situations

and places. Therefore, when Aunt Lan told her friends about the past pilgrimages she had gone on, she emphasised many times the fact that she had been to almost every place in the 'long' land of Vietnam. The pilgrimage stories emplotted her life, via her travel experiences, into a host of different provinces and places in southern Vietnam; in each place she had good memory of interesting encounters with certain things or events. Travel experience transformed her from a sixty-two-year-old widow selling soymilk in a no-name shop in an alleyway market, to an experienced, daring and bold traveller in her own travel stories. These pilgrimages added enjoyment in her life and widened her life experience far beyond the city and her family.

Without travel, Aunt Lan's everyday life would have been rather dull and routinised. She also had some feelings of disappointment about her two unmarried children. Although all her children had grown up, her life still revolved intensively around them. Besides managing the small shop, she cooked for her working children, and took care of the two grandsons during summer holiday.

However, the stories and memory of pilgrimages banished all the restlessness and routine of her everyday life. Recounting her stories of pilgrimage so many times, keeping the memory of these trips alive through photo albums, Aunt Lan could revive those moments anytime, and fill the eventless days at the shop, which had very few customers, with stories about wonder, effervescence and enjoyment. Besides, pilgrimage stories were all about her, what she did, said, and saw. Travel stories, therefore, were different from the other life stories she told. She was the main character in the travel stories. She also characterised herself as a reflective subject in her depiction of what she observed, of her experience of certain places, and of her thoughts when she encountered something or someone extra-ordinary. Sometimes

when she felt like it she would tell me her family members' life stories as well. Those stories included the memory of her father who had worked as a driver for an important French officer in the north during the colonial time; she told me how he had driven a very nice car. There was a story about her husband's family, whom she lived with right after marriage. Another story was about her sister's family fleeing the country after 1975 on a boat, while she and her family could not follow them as they did not have gold to pay the people who arranged the journey across the sea. Other stories were more contemporary, about her children's jobs and relations at their workplaces. These stories were about the significant others in her life, and her interactions and life with them. Travel stories, on the contrary, were predominantly about herself. Travel experience is therefore an interaction she had with her own self.

Turner and Turner (1978) characterise pilgrimage experience as a *communitas* which escapes from the structure of ordinary existence. This viewpoint has been challenged by other scholars who studied pilgrimage in various cultures (e.g. Sangren 1993: 564; Coleman 2000; Taylor 2014). Taylor (2004: 14), for example, argues that pilgrimages often 'reflect and reproduce the quotidian relations and distinction'. Focusing on pilgrims who are traders worshipping the Goddess of the Realm in southern Vietnam, Taylor (2004) points out that pilgrimage is isomorphic to these women's lives in the marketplace (p261). Travelling on pilgrimages to the same places, with the same people allows pilgrims to localise their everyday life in the new localities (Coleman 2000). In his writing on pilgrimage to Walsingham (England), Coleman (2000: 163) notices that pilgrims' recurrent return to the place makes events and things 'falling into place' for them, rather than introducing to pilgrims a simple anti-structural opposite of home and everyday church life.

In my analysis of the pilgrimage and travel stories that elderly women brought home from their trips, I focus on how these stories and experiences are positioned in their conceptualisation of old age, the life course and their everyday life. Their stories suggest that travelling enables women to transcend the structure of the life course, where old age is typically considered the final stage of self-development, personal formation, knowledge accumulation, physical vitality and of accumulation of life experience. Yet women such as Aunt Lan expressed vitalised and youthfully bold and daring selves through their portrait of themselves as travellers. For them, travel is as much a movement through space as it is a race against time, a race to get as much experience and knowledge about new places and people as possible before physical decline prevents them from leaving home. Travel re-boots the life course, by putting processes of learning and accumulating knowledge and life experience in old age and making this stage of life the beginning of new life-enriching and self-cultivating regimes. Travel transforms old age into a time to claim what was missed in previous stages of life, such as the opportunity to gain knowledge, to have fun and indulge oneself.

Travelling is often described by elderly laywomen using the terms and expressions that provoke a romantic imaginary of courageous sojourners, who walk on an exotic land. Notions such as ‘dusty travelling’ [đi bụi], ‘travelling in the impure land’ [đi ta bà], ‘travelling vigorously’ [đi dữ lắm] convey the vision these elderly pilgrims have of themselves as bold, daring, adventurous and detached from the household. A laywoman who travelled to numerous temples in south and central Vietnam spoke to her lay Buddhist friends that her destiny was to ‘travel in this impure land’. She said only when travelling did she feel healthy. Being at home and practicing Buddhism only in one temple, she would feel very tired and fell sick all the time. A journey in the impure land, which is the world of human beings, is her metaphoric way to describe herself as an experienced traveller, who conquered and

transgressed geographical space and cultural distance. The imagery of a pilgrim, like the Buddha who mythically travelled in the impure land and left his footprints (Taylor 2014: 37), produces an enlarged self-image and bestows their journeys spiritual and otherworldly essences.

The notion of ‘bụi’ [dust] is also often used in elderly women’s descriptions of their trips. One day, I talked to a seventy-year-old laywoman and her daughter about the two Lunar New Year pilgrimages that I had just undertaken with them. On the first pilgrimage to Chùa Chan Mountain, we climbed the mountain, first to the strange tree with three roots which is believed to be the manifestation of the gods of the forest, and then to a Buddhist temple with an efficacious Quan Âm image which is located on the way to the top of the mountain. On this trip, pilgrims slept in local people’s ‘motels’, which were actually empty rooms in people’s houses. Each customer paid 20,000 Đồng (about 1 Australian dollar and 20 cents) for a mattress, a pillow, a blanket and a small spot on the floor to spend the night. On the second pilgrimage to ten temples in the Mekong Delta, we did not have a place to sleep. We were on the bus for more than one day and travelled through the night. Whenever we reached a temple, no matter how late at night or early in the morning, we had to change into grey Buddhist robes, and followed the monks to the temples and chanted sutras to make merit.

Happily recounting the fun memories on these two pilgrimages, the mother said to her daughter that they would have to take me to a famous temple in Long Thành (Đồng Nai province), where monks lit thousands of candles every night to pray for spirits of the dead. With thousands of candles alight every night, the temple looked like a star on earth, as the temple and its candles were the only bright spot in that area, surrounded by rice fields and no competing light. The daughter warned me.

However, Thu, if you want to join us, you have to accept to travel with dust [đi bụi].

You have to eat with dust [ăn bụi] and sleep with dust [ngủ bụi] as well.

I asked her what she meant by ‘bụi’ [dust]. She said pilgrims would sleep wherever they could find a place inside the temple, or outside the temple. If they could not find a place in the temple, they would have to sleep outside. The temple was so remote that there were no food stalls nearby, so they had to share the same ascetic diet as the monks. The road to the temple was so dark, and usually their bus would be the only one travelling along the road leading to the temple’s gate. Here, both mother and daughter bust into laughter with pride: ‘That’s what we are. We are ‘dust’ travellers! [dân đi bụi].’ In their stories, dust may imply literally the dust on the road. The notion of ‘bụi’ in Vietnam also implies the unpredictable, unsheltered and unprotected nature of life on the street, often led by homeless vagabond people and street children, or ‘dust-of-life children’ [trẻ bụi đời] (Le 2015: 250). It was intriguing to me that travelling as a pilgrim was compared with living a street life, which is in fact why my two female companions laughed about themselves, and is what they were so proud about. Their notion of ‘travel with dust’ [đi bụi] also constructs the experience of travelling and of being pilgrims in the world as one of being out-of-place, of being located outside the usual structures of the everyday, and the quotidian way of life.

Seeing themselves through the stories of dusty travellers, elderly laywomen enact a self that is ageless, active, adventurous, exploring, curious and not defeated by negative physical and mental symptoms of old age, such as immobility, disabling conditions, senility, or decline of physical and mental capability. This connection between travelling and self-cultivation in old age is also reported in Danely’s (2015) study of elderly Japanese pilgrims and a form of pilgrimage which is confined within the space of their neighbourhood in Kyoto.

This form of pilgrimage is developed by the Kyoto's elderly to watch over their neighbourhood for children's safety. Danely (2015: 7) highlights that by participating in a pilgrimage, although only within their own neighbourhood, Japanese elderly pilgrims develop 'watchful subjectivities' that diverge from the usual representations of the elderly as marginal, dependent and invisible. Through the experience of movement through the outdoor spaces, Japanese elderly revitalise and experience physical self-reliance, mental discipline, and spiritual serenity.

Travelling in old age is also a race with time. That is why Aunt Lan advised her friend that since they were already old, 'if we do not travel now, then when will we ever do it?' I heard many remarks from laywomen about their worries that they would feel regret about not travelling to places they wanted to go later in life when they became too old to go anywhere. Pilgrimages, which take place around the same time every year, act as a regular opportunity for friends to update each other about each other's energy and health in comparison with the previous year. A laywoman in her nineties, probably the oldest pilgrim I met during fieldwork, often travelled on short pilgrimage trips, organised throughout the years by Ngọc Tịnh temple's abbess, to prominent nuns' temples in Hồ Chí Minh City. The laywoman, being the oldest in the group, was taken care of by everyone; she was indeed a very amiable old lady, always smiling, her spectacles perched down her nose. On one trip like that, sitting among us on the taxi, she smilingly said: 'I will not be able to join you all next year.' Another younger laywoman responded: 'Oh yes, you will. You will stay healthy, keep your legs strong, and will join us next year.' But the old laywoman insisted: 'No, I will not. I am ninety-three now. I will go and kowtow to all the nuns we meet today, and tell them they will not see me again next year.' Not at all convinced, another laywoman laughed: 'Yes, you will. You said the same thing last year. You will join us next year and will say the same thing again!'

On a pilgrimage to temples in the Mekong Delta, after a long drive throughout the night, we finally arrived at one temple. As we stepped out of the bus we found no temple in sight, only a temple gate opening to a long muddy road, seemingly leading to an indefinite end. The road was wet and muddy, lined by beautiful green rice fields dotted by some houses and tombs. A decision was quickly made; the bus could not run on this road, so all pilgrims had to walk to the little temple about one kilometre down the road. Quickly, local Honda-taxi drivers [honda ôm] rode their motorbikes approaching us and offering a ride for a small fee. Some elderly laywomen declined the offer, insisting that a motorbike ride was only for 'the old and feeble' [già lụm khụm], and not for them since they were still 'not that bad' [không đến nỗi].

Travelling, with all the ordeals it imposes on one's body and physical capability, keeps old age in check. Many women told me that they felt healthier when they travel. It seems that by travelling, they sustain themselves and keep themselves from being taken over by aging. Women therefore project themselves with positive and youthful images of reckless travellers, who keep on journeying the impure land, living life on the street and who go home with stories of exuberant events and mythical figures. Being able to travel is also a way to make a statement about their agency as a capable person, denying the common image of an elderly person as weak, bed-ridden, senile, dependent and passive.



Figure 4.2: Pilgrims are taking a nap in a temple in Vĩnh Long province

Among several pilgrimages I joined during the course of my fieldwork, I was deeply impressed by a very short trip that covered only fifteen kilometres from the city centre to a branch of the Saigon River at the outskirts of Hồ Chí Minh City. On this trip I was randomly seated next to a laywoman in her late fifties. She looked much older than her age with her thin salt-and-pepper-hair, wrinkles and crow's feet around her shy eyes. While this was just a short trip organised by the temple to the Saigon river for lay Buddhists to release fishes to pray for peace for practitioners and their families, this woman was greatly excited. She kept turning her head backwards to her two friends sitting behind us, commenting on people and vehicles on the street. Talking to her, I learned that she had only started to travel two years ago, after her husband's grandparents and parents had all passed away. Being a daughter-in-law staying with the husband's family, one of her primary duties was to care for the ailing elders. She mocked her own static way of life back then:

People did not believe that I, born and brought up in Saigon, never travelled to Đà Lạt. How could I travel anywhere then? Since I got married I have always been busy for more than thirty years. My husband's grandparents, then his parents fell ill, and I also had to work as a tailor at home, and took our daughter to school.

After all the elderly in the family passed away, she had time and started to frequent a temple every night to chant sutras, and attend pilgrimages organised by temples in her neighbourhood. Now she travelled widely on pilgrimages, organised through a temple near her house, and had been to Đà Lạt and Nha Trang, which are especially popular as holiday getaways for dwellers of Hồ Chí Minh City. She recounted how she and other pilgrims were treated as kings and queens at one temple on one of the pilgrimages she attended:

In one temple where our group arrived very late at night, they lit candles and served a vegetarian buffet to welcome us. A buffet! I was amazed. When we were still on the bus, I hoped that they would just give us a simple dinner, like rice with tofu, or instant noodles. But they gave us a buffet! They put soya sauce in golden bowls imported from Thailand, can you imagine that? What a luxury!

Recalling her time during pilgrimage she kept repeating how fun [vui] and enjoyable [sướng] it was, how well-treated pilgrims were at temples they visited, and how considerate the monks were in organising the trip. 'It was so enjoyable. The monks took care of everything for us,' she emphasised when commenting on how well-organised the trip was. Imbued with effervescent enjoyment and leisure experience, like the surprising buffet that she mentioned, pilgrimage indeed was an extravagant reward for her after a long married life being subordinated in the husband's family. While at home she took care of others; on pilgrimage she is 'taken care of'.

Travelling is thus often referred to in elderly laywomen's conversations with their peers as a reward. First of all, it is a reward for their life achievements as mothers who raised filial children, who worked hard to pave way for their children's completion of education, establishing their own stable families and careers. Children and their support enable them to have a carefree old age to spend in travelling. Secondly, being able to travel also indicates their good health conditions, which do not limit their mobility and ability to care for and enjoy themselves on trips. Those who are able to travel a lot, like Aunt Lan, are often admired by their friends as 'being very healthy' [khỏe lắm], 'having strong legs' [chân khỏe], and especially as 'having a lot of good merit' [có phước lắm]. Travelling is, therefore, also an indicator of karmic status. Only those who are in good health, easy mobility, no familial occupation and sufficient financial affordability can travel. It is a sign of the absence of karmic debt, that one has cleared all debts relayed from past lives to others in one's life to be able to freely travel. Without a great stock of merit and absence of karmic debt, they would not be able to leave the family for leisure time.

Concluding remarks

Through the stories of elderly women's pilgrimages, this chapter explores the role of travelling in shaping experiences of old age and old-age personhood. Most elderly women from low working-class backgrounds in this research had very few chances to travel in their younger years, since they had to focus on earning a living and saving for their families. Old age is a time when they travel beyond the familiar spaces in which they had spent their entire lives. Therefore, travelling is bestowed with significant meanings in these women's

experience of old age, the stories they tell about their lives, and the way they present themselves to other people.

Similar to other Buddhist practices performed by elderly women, travelling is not only a merit-making activity, but also a means to cultivate a knowledgeable self. Buddhist practices provide women with experiences akin to going to school, which many of them had little experience of in their earlier years, due to their families' demands on them to start working from an early age and the low expectations on women to get a formal education. In daily Buddhist practice, they follow instructions, routines and disciplines. They familiarise themselves with readings and interpretations of Buddhist texts, take in monks' sermons and enact what they 'learn' in their everyday lives. Practicing Buddhism, elderly women believe they are empowered by the Buddha's wisdom, and live their lives following their understanding of the 'way' that Buddhism sets out for them.

In travelling, they obtain knowledge of people and places that are far beyond their neighbourhood, workplaces and families. This experience marks their status within the community of elderly peers as those who are blessed with good merit, the support of their children, and health that is good enough to be able to travel. This experience also enriches their life stories with events that revolve around something other than their families and household duties. In travelling, elderly women push the limits of their physical capabilities, as well as redefining the meaning of the late stage of life as a time of exploring, self-betterment and building up knowledge and wisdom. Sharing their travel stories, elderly women endow on themselves the subjectivities of adventurous travellers and knowledgeable persons who have seen and experienced much in their lives. These stories also obscure their physical limitations and replace the aggravations of old age immobility with tales that

highlight their vital and daring qualities as travellers. These experiences of travelling enable women to transcend the mundane construction of old age as a time of decline and decrepitude. Old age is enriched with experiences of learning, getting wise and knowledgeable; with journeys that expand the space in which their lives are lived; and with their embodiment of a vital and exploring self.

Chapter 5

Doing Bodhisattva Work

Empowered Self and Exalted Personhood in Buddhist

Charitable Practice

Introduction

On the balcony of the second floor of Aunt Khai's house is a 1.2-meter-tall statue of Quan Âm Bồ Tát, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and Mercy, a female Bodhisattva who is probably the most widely-revered and venerated divine power in the Buddhist pantheon in Vietnam (Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc 2008: 28). The Quan Âm statue on Aunt Khai's balcony was not much different from the popular manifestation of this female Bodhisattva in Buddhist temples, although much smaller in size and height. Standing in the open space, such as in the courtyard of temples or on the balconies of private houses, Quan Âm is usually manifested in the image of a beautiful gentle middle-aged lady in long dress, wearing a contemplative look on her face, one hand holding a vase of sweet dew, the other hand a willow wand, eyes looking down sympathetically and forgivingly to believers kneeling and praying to her.

Every night, no matter how tired Aunt Khai was after a long day travelling on charity trips to Mekong Delta, taking care of the family and tending to her small shop, she always came to this statue and spent roughly one hour kneeling in front of Quan Âm, chanting sutra and praying for her family's wellbeing. She also prayed for peace for 'all sentient beings' [tất cả chúng sanh], and for the prosperity and thriving trade for the families of people who

donated their money to her charitable projects. Aunt Khai believed Quan Âm ‘added strength’ [trợ lực] for her charitable work to overcome all the barriers on her charity journeys. She believed she was blessed and looked after by Quan Âm because she was doing ‘Bodhisattva work’ [công việc Bồ Tát] to take care of the needy. Every night, she chanted sutras from a small laminated book that had copies of sutras and mantras that are familiar to lay Buddhists, such as the Great Compassion Mantra, the Heart Sutra, and the Repentance Sutra. She would conclude her private nightly chanting session at home by renewing her vow to Quan Âm:

Namo Quan Âm Bồ Tát. I vow that I will commit myself to saving suffering sentient beings. Namô Quan Âm Bồ Tát. I wish to be reborn in the Pure Land. I pray for Quan Âm’s blessings so that I can take care of people living in rural remote areas.

Her charity team included mostly her friends living in neighbourhoods in close proximity to her place. They were also Buddhists, all above sixty-years-old, and were mothers and grandmothers living with the families of their children and grandchildren. They were pensioners, retired traders, or still managing family businesses or helping their children to run them. Although not all of them were wealthy, they gathered allowances they got from children or their own pensions, and relied on their personal networks of friends, relatives and trader friends to fund their charitable works. Once every few months, when they collected enough money and goods, they would rent a car and travel to rural villages in the Mekong Delta, where they were connected to recipients and local authorities by their local Buddhist friends, or by their families and in-laws who lived in those areas.

These charitable activities open to them whole new experiences and new connections, and vastly expand their knowledge of places far beyond the home, which ordinarily would not be accessible to them as female householders. Aunt Khai proudly told me that her name

is widely known throughout villages in the Mekong Delta. Her group had gathered money to connect a poor village to the electric supply in Vĩnh Long, build a concrete bridge crossing a small canal in Đồng Tháp, and buy wheelchairs for old people with no children's support in a commune in Đồng Nai. They are one of many lay Buddhist groups in Hồ Chí Minh City who spontaneously conduct charitable projects using the resources they collect among themselves, families and people they know. They use the resources to buy gifts for orphans, poor people and people with leprosy; dig wells and build bridges crossing canals in the Mekong Delta; repair roads or build simple houses for people in disaster-struck areas; and provide free meals for patients in big hospitals in Hồ Chí Minh City.¹²

12 Aunt Khai's group was one among the many lay Buddhist groups I knew during my fieldwork in Hồ Chí Minh City. One group in the neighbourhood where I did fieldwork consisted of laywomen from Ngọc Tịnh temple and other nearby temples who collected money among themselves to buy gifts, which were mostly dry food, for people with leprosy in a leper's village in Đồng Nai province. When they gathered an amount of produce and money, these laywomen would travel to this village, where they were connected to the inmates through a Buddhist temple located inside the village, and distribute gifts directly to the recipients. Another group I sometimes travelled with was of laywomen who were retired traders of the biggest market in District Four. This group is quite well-known among lay Buddhists in the district as a 'strong' group, since its members had a big network of acquaintances, friends and families who worked as traders and tended to donate generously to charity to make merit for themselves, their businesses and families. This group donated money to build bridges, roads and houses for the poor in villages in Mekong Delta. Besides, lay Buddhists also participate in charity works organized by their temples, such as the regular charitable distribution of money and dry food to the poor living in the same neighbourhood or district during lunar full-moon rituals, or cooking and giving away food to patients in big hospitals in Hồ Chí Minh City, or charitable constructions of houses or bridges in rural areas. There are many charitable events organized among lay Buddhists themselves or by the temples they frequent, to which the women can make monetary donations or contribute their labour in preparing the gifts or cooking the food.

One day in early 2014, I followed Aunt Khai on a trip to a village in Vĩnh Long for which her group had collected an amount of money equivalent to three-thousand Australian dollars to connect the poorest nine households there to the commune's electricity supply. We travelled around two-hundred kilometres to the village to participate in a ceremony organised by the nine families to celebrate the completion of the project. The ceremony was also attended by a few cadres from the commune's people's committee. The venue for the ceremony had been set up by the villagers the day before on the land of one of the villagers. Village women made a lot of noise in one corner of the garden, making vegetarian rice pancakes for lunch for the Saigonese laywomen, and cooking other food that goes well with rice wine for the village officials and male residents. Cadres representing different departments at the commune's office took turns to read their speeches formally commending the visiting 'philanthropists from Saigon' [các nhà hảo tâm từ thành phố] for their civic contribution. The speeches made reference to the official slogan, 'Virtuous in life, Righteous in religion' [Tốt đời Đẹp đạo], which encourages religious followers to pursue socially-engaged activities, especially benevolent works, of benefit to the wider society (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2014)¹³. However, shortly after that, the official language

¹³ The speeches of the local cadres speak to the recent policies changes of Vietnamese government towards religion. The state perceives religion not only as a source of moral and symbolic values to boost societal development and encourage collective consciousness of shared identity; but also a material resource that contributes to public welfare (Taylor 2007: 32-4). The Ordinance on Religions and Faiths passed in 2004 is said to indicate a major advance made by the government in supporting religious groups to engage in humanitarian work (Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc 2009: 52). This political attitude toward religious groups' contribution to welfare was also one of the key topics advocated in the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha held in Hanoi on November 6th 2011.

and formal atmosphere faded as proceedings were taken over by the monotone and assertive chanting of the Great Compassion Mantra that laywomen performed next to a make-shift altar to invite Buddha's blessings to the poverty-struck village, joined by the officials who also respectfully joined their hands and bowed their heads in silence.

The highlight of the ceremony was when a high-ranking official of the commune awarded Aunt Khai a glass medal bearing the inscription of President Hồ Chí Minh recognising the laywomen's contribution to 'bring electric light to the poor', and notifying them of other development projects that were short of funds in their locality. Aunt Khai happily accepted the medal. In her response speech, she advised the villagers to recite Buddha's name every day so as to rid themselves of their heavy karmic debt, which she believed was the hidden cause of their poverty. She expressed her appreciation at being awarded the medal and announced that she would place it as an offering on her family's ancestral altar, at which some officials and friends could not but help bursting out in laughter, perhaps owing to her incongruous mixing of secular and spiritual realms of exchange.

Watching Aunt Khai laughing happily and looking proud in her role as the leader of a group of 'philanthropists from Saigon', I was inspired to understand what made Aunt Khai and her friends so energised and passionate in charitable practice like this, despite the painstaking work entailed, from travelling to such remote places, building connections with the authorities of a village, schools and other recipients, seeking donations, signing contracts with construction contractors, and enduring the paperwork that was sometimes compulsory in certain localities.

This chapter explores elderly laywomen's charitable practice and how it impacts on elderly women's old-age self and their perceptions of the roles and places they occupy in

society as the elderly. This chapter argues that Buddhist charitable practice is a source of empowerment for old women. It shows that by appropriating Quan Âm Bodhisattva figure as a model of and for their charitable practice, and for their identities as patrons, elderly women cultivate an empowered self with which they transcend space, gendered roles, socioeconomic statuses and realms of activity in which their old age is confined. Charity is not merely the practice of gift giving that encourages selfless acts. Charity is practiced by laywomen as a 'technique of the self' to embody Bodhisattva-hood, live in society with a Bodhisattva's compassionate engagement, detach themselves from the narrow domestic femininity that focuses on family self-interest, and cultivate an exalted selfhood embarked on benevolent missions performed for fellow humans. Drawing on Foucault's (1997) discussions on subjectivity, self-knowledge and techniques of the self, this chapter characterises elderly laywomen as emulating a Bodhisattva's selfless caregiving subjectivity and enacting an exalted personhood in their practice of charity.

Life as a female householder

Although taking charity very seriously as 'work' she performed for Quan Âm, at sixty years of age, Aunt Khai's main job was still to manage the family's small shop, take care of her husband who was in poor health, and, from time to time, help her daughters look after their children. Products were stacked up against the wall, and covered almost every inch of the floor on the ground level of her two-storey house. At one corner of the shop was the kitchen. Every time I came to see her, we were never left alone to talk for more than ten minutes. She darted around as quick as a squirrel, tending the shop and kitchen simultaneously in her sleeveless pajamas. Leaving me sitting on a divan in the kitchen while she tended to

customers' demands, she played me the videos of her group's previous charitable trips. Sometimes while cooking or taking care of the shop, she stopped in front of the television and pointing at herself on the screen, laughing and commenting buoyantly at her own appearance and speech.

Watching Aunt Khai happy and joyful in her role as a 'person with good heart' [nhà hảo tâm], the Vietnamese term for charity doers, travelling widely to poor remote villages in rural areas, meeting many people from all walks of life, one might think that she was a woman of influence, with connections to influential and wealthy people in the city, or that she herself was a very well-off person who had been doing charity for a long time. In fact, Aunt Khai embarked upon these effervescent experiences of being a charity doer only six years ago. She was an ordinary wife, mother and grandmother, living in District Seven, Hồ Chí Minh City. She got married early when she was eighteen, and started to work in a market as a rice seller even earlier. When she was young, she was very focused on working to provide for her family, improving their economic life, and was engaged in society mainly through her rice-selling booth in the market.

Then no one knew her as 'Aunt Khai'. 'Khai' was part of the Buddhist name that she was given by a monk when she became a lay Buddhist to make merit for her family. However, at that time, she was still young and was extremely busy taking care of the family. Going to temples and donating money, time and labour to make merit – she had thought at that time – were simply luxurious pastimes. She wondered why she had selected the name 'Khai', which is a Sino-Vietnamese word meaning 'to open'. Then, being deeply tangled in the daily calculation of household expenses and trading jobs to earn a living, this name appealed to her as potentially predicting a new way to make money, such as bringing her family to a rural

area where land was cheap, and where she could ‘open’ a farm or a shop, to improve her family’s economic life. However, such a possibility seemed like a wild dream, as she had no money and house, and had to live with her husband’s family in downtown Saigon, selling rice in a market, taking care of her husband’s parents and her children while he was a soldier in the army of South Vietnam’s government and stayed away from home most of the time.

At that time, she was always known to all neighbours, friends and relatives as, at first, ‘Dì Bảy bán gạo’ [Aunt Seventh who sells rice], and later when she had a shop right at home, as ‘Dì Bảy bán quán’ [Aunt Seventh who runs a shop]. These names indicated her primary social identities as a wife, mother, daughter-in-law and trader. The name Seventh [Bảy] indicated her husband’s birth order in his family. Adopting his birth order as her name since they got married almost forty years ago, as Vietnamese women do, this name indicated her position in her husband’s patrilineage, and defined her relation to others, her duties and status in the lineage. The jobs she did as a petty trader were supplementary to her main responsibilities to take care of her husband and children, the parents and ancestors at home.

The focus of these earlier years in her life was overwhelmingly on the family. This focus defined the way she conducted herself in society, her relational personhood in her interactions with others, such as friends, customers, and fellow traders. However, although she spent a lot of time out of the home and in the market, she considered herself less a member of society than a woman of the family. She was very pragmatic and drove hard bargains to ensure that her trade would reap profits to feed the family. Indeed, she was quite a successful seller, which enabled her to save enough money to afford a cheap and large plot of land in the then rural muddy outskirts area of the city, which later became District Seven, to build their own house and move out of her parents-in-law’s place. Therefore, these days, some of

her jealous neighbours thought she devoted herself to charitable practice in her late years in life to compensate for the sins that traders make in ‘eating profit over the cost of others’ (this topic is discussed in Chapter Two). This poor and sparsely-populated rural area later became a focal point of urbanisation following the establishment of a huge industrial zone, and got rapidly crowded so Aunt Khai’s land became very valuable. She divided her house into two, one half for the family’s use and the other for renting to factory workers, which earned her extra income to quit her laborious job as a rice seller and open a shop at home. The name ‘Khai’ was correct in its prediction of her burgeoning economic prospects. The shop’s sales went rather smoothly as it was located in a now-very congested residential area. Despite being the one who had brought her family the economic stability which was far better than their origins, Aunt Khai interpreted her work as a tough experience she had to endure to feed the family, and saw the shop as a way to earn ‘some cash’, and as a safety net for her and her husband’s old age, so that they would not become a burden on their children’s shoulders.

Her responsibilities as a woman in the family intensively defined and constrained Aunt Khai’s social and ethical horizons, as her social engagement and moral conduct were dedicated to making the best possible profit to enable her to create a good life at home. Although she was a trader, her social identity was largely confined to her roles in the household. Despite all successes in her economic calculations and decision-making and navigating her family through tough economic times, she still considered herself largely as a housewife [nhà nội trợ], and a ‘petty trader’ [người buôn bán nhỏ], whose income was to pay for the expense of the family. This intensive family-centred identity reflects Lương’s (2003: 209) observation of Vietnamese women’s economic influence in the family as they are involved in trade, as well as previous studies’ emphasis on women’s caregiving role in the Vietnamese family (e.g. Rydstrom 2003; Soucy 2006: 119; Drummond 2004; Taylor 2004: 13). Women’s

economic contribution is couched within their default responsibility to support their families and is considered as part of the domestic division of labour shaping women's roles. Taking care of the family is the realm through which they gained their positions. The household is where their social status and position are grounded, cultivated and made sense. Aunt Khai's overwhelmingly familial focus and her economic disposition and pragmatism serving the interest of the family limited her social horizons, shaped her moral conduct and self-comportment, and defined her femininity as being bound to her domestic role as a mother and a wife.

Six years ago she was very ill. She started to frequent a Buddhist temple for daily practice to make merit for her recovery. At that time, she was less preoccupied with economic pressures, since the shop earned her a sufficient income to pay for all the expenses in the household and her children were all married and independent. However, she did not get any better. A lay Buddhist friend of hers explained to her that her illness was a karmic affliction [bệnh nghiệp]. It was caused by a karmic deficit that she must have accumulated in her previous lives, or in her earlier years working as a trader. That friend advised her to practice the virtue of giving [hạnh bố thí]. Following this advice, Aunt Khai made a vow to Quan Âm Bồ Tát that she would travel around to 'help sentient beings' [độ chúng sanh] in an effort to improve her health. She also erected a standing Quan Âm statue on the second floor's balcony of her house, became a strict vegetarian and displayed images of Quan Âm and of the Buddha on an altar next to the ancestral altar at home.

Aunt Khai started her benevolent career by joining charity trips organised by other laywomen and by the temple where she practiced Buddhism. However, soon she realised that she wanted to do more than merely contributing her money and participating on trips as a

member. With her friendly and appealing personality, she made friends with many lay Buddhists in the localities to which she travelled. They often rang her at her home to tell her about the difficult conditions of the poor in their places, about families that needed money for medical treatments, children that needed school stationary before the school year started, houses that needed to be repaired after a flood, or Buddhist temples that were calling for donations to erect a new Buddha or Quan Âm Bodhisattva statue.

Aunt Khai was motivated by the realisation that so much help was needed in rural areas. She talked to her friends and traders in the market where she used to sell rice, let them know what she heard and saw, and invited them to donate money or produce and travel with her to those places to distribute gifts to the needy. At first, only three of her neighbours, who were all traders, joined her. The four of them brought school stationary to a school in a rural commune in Đồng Nai province, which she was introduced to by her relatives living there. Their gifts were more welcomed and appreciated than they had expected. Not only did the teachers at the school gather selected pupils from early morning on a Sunday to await them, but they also assigned one little girl to read a thank-you speech to the ‘charity doers from the city’ [các nhà hảo tâm từ thành phố]. Not only were selected pupils and their parents waiting for them there, but also pupils who had not been selected to receive gifts, and their parents, waiting to see whether there were extra gifts to be delivered. Aunt Khai always remembered this first trip in a very emotional way. She said she always prayed to Quan Âm to make her win a first lottery prize, so that she could use all the money to send poor little children in rural remote areas to school.

In her following trips, her daughter joined her, with a video camera, and took footage of all the happenings during these trips, including how glad and grateful the recipients were

to welcome the visitors from Hồ Chí Minh City, how respectfully laywomen were received by not only villagers but also by local people's committees' officers. The footage was later sent to a photo shop that connected all pieces together into a DVD that was printed into dozens of copies. Aunt Khai gave these copies to traders and neighbours so that they knew what she had told them was true and how meaningful charitable work was. She said she wanted to 'educate' [dạy] people to do good deeds. These videos, indeed, had very strong effect. Aunt Khai soon had a longer list of donors – her friends in the market and neighbours – who all wanted to travel on trips to rural villages with her, directly give gifts to the poor that were paid for with their money, and later see themselves in DVDs of the trips, as well as read their names and the amount of money they had given printed in the subtitles of these videos. Aunt Khai's later charity projects got bigger in monetary value, which enabled her to sponsor the construction of houses for the poor, or small bridges crossing canals, or connecting a village to the public electric supply.

The charitable works that Aunt Khai and her friends performed greatly expanded her social activities and network, and diversified the space in which her life was lived and the lived reality of her everyday life as a sixty-year-old woman. She became a very well-connected person, and, as she told me, a well-known person in Mekong Delta. Charitable trips and myriad works revolving around these projects introduced her to people whom she would not otherwise have met in her daily life as a housewife, mother, grandmother and small shop owner, most of whose life was spent in Hồ Chí Minh City and revolved around taking care of the family. She had a long list of donors, who were from all walks of life that she encountered at her shop, in a nearby market, on pilgrimage and charitable trips that she made. She was often busy on the phone talking to friends in her team, people in the localities she was going to, local contractors and cadres. Even though she had no experience dealing with

local officers, or working with contractors and reading blueprints of construction projects that her team sponsored, her team members including pensioners of state-run companies, and an informal housing agent [trung gian nhà đất] and trader friends who helped her. She also became an experienced traveller. She remembered she had been very carsick when she was a young wife and had worried her parents-in-law when she vomited a lot on a bus trip to visit her husband in a military camp before 1975. But these days she travelled so much that she could stand on the bus all the way from the city to the Mekong Delta, leaving seats to more elderly participants, and could talk at length without feeling dizzy or tired. She thought she was blessed with good health by Quan Âm to do Bodhisattva's works.

The range of activities, networks and skills that charitable practice opened to Aunt Khai and her fellow elderly laywomen, new experiences of engaging with society and expanding their social identities. They set forth into society as 'philanthropists', charity-doing lay Buddhists, sponsors for a village, or partners of the governmental authority in local developmental plans. The narrow focus on family interests that had defined their social identity and ethical conduct in earlier years was replaced by practices of caring aimed at a broad and diffuse range of recipients. A calculating way of life and social relations were replaced by generosity, and embodiment of the Bodhisattva's spirit of compassion, in their efforts to help as many people as they could. This abrupt expansion of social identity, responsibilities and relations to others in society they experienced on charity trips had its inspiration in the figure of the compassionate Goddess of Mercy, the Bodhisattva Quan Âm.

The Quan Âm figure

Quan Âm is believed by her followers as existing everywhere. Her pervasiveness is implied in her name ‘Quán Thế Âm’ meaning ‘Hearing the Sounds of the World’. The belief in her responsiveness to all suffering beings’ cries for help is strong. Many stories are told about her manifestations in the world, as witnessed by people who are in danger or living in difficulties and despair. These stories are very contemporary, such as the story that was often heard in the early 1990s of her manifestation in the ocean responding to the despairing cry for help of Vietnamese boat people [người vượt biên] who were making extremely dangerous journeys across the sea to flee the country. The story was widespread and deeply believed in by the public, regardless whether they are Buddhists or not. A picture of a ghostly-white Quan Âm standing on a white cloud against a dark blue background was displayed in the living rooms of many houses, restaurants and temples in Hồ Chí Minh City at that time. This picture of hers was said to be painted by one of the boat people who were rescued by her in the big sea.

She is thus a broadly-believed divine being who exists right in the world, listening to all sentient beings’ cries for help, and using her power to help them out of adversities. This commitment to help sentient beings is reflected in the Bodhisattva’s vow not to become a Buddha until all suffering sentient beings are saved [độ]. She is said to possess infinite compassion and mercy, relentlessly give protection and care to anyone who pray to her. . . . Hedges’ (2012) study on the history of the development of the identity of Guanyin (the Chinese name of Quan Âm) in China notes that Quan Âm is seen as offering the most immediate help to any followers, rather than the more immaterial and transcendental rebirth into the Pure Land that Amitabha Buddha offers. Her efficacy also focuses on worldly

activities, rather than on otherworldly pursuits, hence Quan Âm's enormous popularity that makes her followers feel immediately connected to her.

In contrast to the distant otherworldly and ghostly image of Quan Âm on the sea is the serene portrait of her in seated position captured in the porcelain statues of hers sold in temple shops and displayed in homes, or on the dashboards of cars, buses and trucks. The seated image of hers is also inscribed in the pendants of necklaces that men and women, kids and adults wear, or in the prayer beads that Buddhists use for praying. Despite her serene, detached, and static position, Quan Âm is viewed as a very powerful Bodhisattva who sees all sufferings and hears all cries for help and extend her power to rescue any beings stuck in danger. She is generous and compassionate in her commitment to help others, as long as they wholeheartedly believe in her and recite her name.

During my fieldwork, I realised that for elderly Buddhist laywomen, Quan Âm is an exemplary figure of inspiration in their stages of life. Many laywomen told me that old women should keep a statue of seated Quan Âm for veneration at home. In seated posture, her two hands lie relaxed in her lap, and her eyes are half-closed, concentrating in meditation. They explained to me that a seated Quan Âm does not go anywhere; she stays inside the house and protects the family. A laywoman said: 'Old people walked too much in our long life. We now sit down and rest. So we venerate a seated Quan Âm.' On the contrary, a young person who is still entangled in all daily worries to earn a living, support a family and deal with complex relationships in life, should keep an image of a standing Quan Âm. A standing Quan Âm is said to go out to the society with the person and protects and gives blessings to him or her in all the endeavours in the society.

The distinction that Buddhist women make between a seated and a standing Quan Âm not only speaks to their desire to stay in this Bodhisattva's auspices all the time and in wherever they are. It also indicates the connections they feel between this Bodhisattva and their own identity, personhood and stage of life. Venerating Quan Âm and seeing themselves in this Bodhisattva figure, they give meaning to their domestic life in old age. Their being marginalised in the society, their retirement from economic and productive roles is rendered as a serene yet powerful period of meditation and rest, akin to that of a Bodhisattva after travelling in the wide world to watch over all suffering beings.

The figure of Quan Âm Bồ Tát is, therefore, a religious symbol that gives meaning to and is a 'model for and of' old-age personhood of elderly Buddhist women. Geertz (1966: 89-94) points out that religious symbols give meaning to social and psychological reality. In this regard, Quan Âm joins a pantheon of Vietnamese local gods and goddesses, such as the General Trần Hưng Đạo, Mẹ Ngũ Hành, Liễu Hạnh or Bà Chúa Xứ [Lady of the Realm] that have been the foci of anthropological enquiries into how local religious symbols speak to the lived realities of their followers (cf. Phạm 2009; Phạm and Eipper 2009; Taylor 2004). These goddesses, their competency and biographies exemplify the real-life difficulties, responsibilities and duties that women endure to provide for their families. Goddess of the Realm in Châu Đốc (Vietnam), for example, is a model of and for the social practices of women traders in the commercial world, women's economic competence and powers to bear and nurture life, to provide health, prosperity and progeny (Taylor 2004: 90-7). The goddesses – powerful, protective, responsive, and yet also demanding and potentially punitive – are models of and for women's femininity in their younger age, when they are entangled in struggles in life to support their family.

Nevertheless, Quan Âm's feminine caring power, despite sharing many resemblances with these powerful Vietnamese goddesses, is distinct from the other efficacious deities that so many people believe in. Quan Âm's efficacy derives from and is magnified by her serenity and infinite mercy and compassion for sentient beings, as contrast to other goddesses' embodiment of transactional conditional exchanges. She is a model of benevolent power which can be embodied and emulated by her believers. Therefore, Quan Âm is not only a source of responsiveness and efficacy that lay Buddhists rely on in adversities, but also a source of inspiration. Quan Âm is a mature, calm and powerful figure, whose feminine power derives from moral perfection, a compassionate and caring nature, and selfless and sacrificing practice of giving. She is an inspiring model of femininity, which many laywomen aspire to be like, hoping to live in this world with as much compassion, grace and influence as her.

The multivalent symbolism of Quan Âm also presents this female bodhisattva to women believers as a symbol for femininity that spans social space, roles, and functions. Quan Âm as 'virtuous mother' [mẹ hiền] keeps the family's welfare under her auspices, and yet as 'Lady Buddha' [Phật Bà], her remit is at the same time far broader and extends to all suffering beings.

Quan Âm is, thus, an exemplar for the transition between domestic and extra-domestic femininity. The Bodhisattva figure provides women with an exemplary model for disengaging from the wheel of a family-centred life that they were entangled with in their younger years, which not only defined their position at home but also their engagement and identity in society. A seated Quan Âm is preferred by old women not only because they imagine Quan Âm is situated at home with them, exhibiting care for their household, but also because the seated Quan Âm – who is in fact also serenely attentive to what happens outside

the home and able to assist those in danger anywhere and at anytime – enables them a reconstructed personhood that detaches them from the narrow-hearted family-centred and selfish disposition that they embodied in their younger age. Her fluid meanings makes her a transcendent model for old women that enables them make a transition from the narrow focus on family interests in their younger age, to fundamentally a new orientation as a full member of society. Her figure is particularly important in elderly women's charitable practice. Not only is she imagined to follow the Buddhist charity doers on their way to help the poor and the needy in society, but her caring power, sacrificial giving and vow to take care of all suffering beings are channeled into the practice of charity and the personhood and subjectivity that elderly Buddhist good-doers embody and enact in their charity journeys.

Walking in the world as a Bodhisattva

The significant meanings that Bodhisattvas hold in women's charitable practice have been mentioned and analyzed in a number of studies on Buddhist benevolent works. Nguyen-Marshall (2008: 81), studying poverty relief and charitable activities in French colonial Vietnam, notices that the existence of Bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism in Vietnam is tightly connected to acts of charity and compassion, which accumulate good merit and karma for opportunities toward enlightenment. Quan Âm, the female Bodhisattva of Mercy, is a figure especially attractive to female followers. The motherly image of Quan Âm further reinforces the qualities of compassion and motherly care expected of women, and rationalises the association of charity and women. Nguyen Marshall quoted Lu (1998) to point out the double effect that the Quan Âm image has on laywomen in Mahayana Buddhism; on one hand this worship of Quan Âm has a 'liberating' effect which affirms women's spiritual worth,

and on the other hand, it reinforces and essentialises the caring qualities traditionally expected of women. Studies on Tzu Chi, the biggest Buddhist charitable organisation in Taiwan (e.g. Lu 1998; Huang and Weller 1998; DeVido 2010) reflect the relation between Bodhisattva figure and women's social benevolent works. These studies notice that the image of Quan Âm holding a baby in China idealises women's position as that of mothers in China, and connects women's devotion to achieving a salvation through the practices of motherhood. By devoting to charitable cause in their participation in Tzu Chi, laywomen extend this practice of motherhood to wider society, to do meaningful things that benefit a broader group of people beyond their own families.

In looking into women's participation in benevolent works, the gendered aspect is the analytical focus of these studies. Huang and Weller (1998: 382), Nguyen Marshall (2008: 78) and DeVido (2010: 77-8) point out that charity expands the social space for women, but this does not result in personal emancipation for women from their traditional feminine roles in patriarchal societies. Charity was feminised and construed as an 'extension of the domestic sphere' and 'a gendered domain particularly suited for female engagement and organisation' (Nguyen Marshall 2008: 78-80). Therefore, the figure of a female Bodhisattva like Quan Âm is examined as a part of the analytical paradigm that views charity as the process of enforcement of gendered roles. What charitable practice does for women is also discussed in the broad discussion on gendered-specific social performance, in which women, by taking care of people beyond their kin network, reinforce their motherhood and nurturing femininity in wider society.

These insights certainly are relevant to elderly Vietnamese laywomen such as Aunt Khai who structure much of their lives in their later years around Buddhist charity quests.

The nurturing, compassionate and caring figure of Quan Âm who inspires these quests embodies recognizably maternal virtues that have been enjoined upon them throughout their lives and are embodied in their careers as female domestic householders. However, I argue that the Bodhisattva ideal enacted in Buddhist benevolent work is more than a simple continuity of feminine roles that reinforces conservative feminine values of nurturance. Through enacting this ideal in their charity work, their social identities are transformed.

I once asked Aunt Khai about her choice of erecting a big standing Quan Âm statue on the balcony of her packed house, instead of, to save space, buying a seated Quan Âm porcelain miniature from a temple's shop and placing it on an altar. She explained to me that, despite being old, she still travelled a lot for her charity. Whenever her Buddhist friends in rural areas rang her about poor people in their hometowns, she wanted to travel there to see the situations by herself. A standing Quan Âm is, like Aunt Khai, not at home, because she 'walks to rescue [people in] sufferings' [đi cứu khổ]. Quan Âm in upright posture demonstrates her mobility to save people from danger and adversities.

Aunt Khai believed she had been destined for the mission to travel and 'save' the suffering beings, like a Bodhisattva. In contrast with the way she interpreted her Buddhist name in her younger years, she now thought 'Khai' must be a metaphor for what she and her friends were doing: 'opening' the doors to better lives for poor people.

Laypeople believe that anyone can be a Bodhisattva. During my interactions with laywomen, I often heard of the stories about the so-called 'incarnated Bodhisattvas' [Bồ Tát tái thế], who are ordinary people in real life selflessly sacrificing themselves for the benefit of others. These people are praised by them as having a 'Bodhisattva's heart' [tâm Bồ Tát]. They are said to be, indeed, Bodhisattvas being reborn in this mundane world as ordinary

people to help those living in adversities they meet in their life, or to enlighten others to the Buddhist way of life. These Bodhisattvas can be the people who contribute their humble income for charitable causes, or doctors who volunteered to give medical treatments to disadvantaged people or socially-stigmatised people with leprosy, or laywomen who devote themselves to encouraging people practice Buddhism and spread the Buddha's teachings and sutras to non-practitioners.

One day, laywomen in Ngọc Tịnh temple told me about the death of a daughter of owners of a beer restaurant in their neighbourhood. The daughter had many times advised her parents to close this business. She explained to her parents that slaughtering innocent animals to serve as meals for drinkers was a sinful act and would cause the family very bad karma. The parents rejected her words, as they were earning a lot of money from the restaurant, until one day when the daughter fell very ill. Once again she requested her parents to close the business to make good merit for her recovery. This time, they followed her advice, and even became vegetarians and went to a Buddhist temple to make merit for her recovery. But it still could not save the daughter, who eventually died of the illness. However, in the laywomen's description, the daughter looked very beautiful when she died. They said everyone who saw the daughter when she was dead all realised that she was in fact a Bodhisattva reincarnated in this world to teach people around her, including her parents, about the sins of killing and eating innocent animals, and directing them to the way of Buddhist practice. The Bodhisattva was born into this world, amidst ordinary beings, and played her role as a daughter to save people from being deeply stuck in the way of living that only causes them to sin and accrue bad merit.

These stories about worldly incarnated Bodhisattvas reproduce the legend about Bodhisattvas as sacred beings with supernatural power and situate it in the settings of everyday life, in familiar contexts of their own neighbourhood, in the community that they are familiar with, and in the life stories of people they know. The stories speak to the belief that anyone can be an incarnated Bodhisattva. This belief, in some way, echoes Weber's (1992) observation of the doctrine of predestination in Puritanism, which indicates that some people are saved from damnation by God. Therefore people must regard themselves as the chosen ones, and with their performance of 'good works' in worldly affairs confirm this surety that they are chosen by God. Being an incarnated Bodhisattva is also a predetermined fact, and many elderly laywomen, through their emulating and performing Quan Âm Bồ Tát's self-denial and sacrificing involvement in practice of charity, enact Bodhisattva-hood and define themselves as Bodhisattvas in the mundane world.

The observations I made while participating in laywomen's charitable practice reveal that the Bodhisattva refigures the old-age self. Through charity, elderly laywomen such as Aunt Khai enact Quan Âm's way of being in the world, her responsiveness to the plight of others and her altruistic sacrifice to those in need. They colour their charitable practice with the Bodhisattva's otherworldly essence. Elderly laywomen depict charity practice as 'travelling on the Bodhisattva's path' or performing 'Bodhisattva work' and describe the recipients of their gifts as 'sentient beings' [chúng sanh]. They also use terms that lend their act of giving a supernatural character such as 'rescuing the people, saving the world' [cứu nhân độ thế], 'showing compassion for sentient beings' [thương yêu chúng sanh], or 'saving sentient beings from suffering' [độ chúng sanh].

In enacting Quan Âm Bodhisattva's compassionate subjectivity and mission to help those living in hardship, elderly women also gain access to and embody her power. Laywomen believed they help people just as the savior Bodhisattva Quan Âm 'turns around' [xoay chuyển] bad situations that her believers face in life. Aunt Khai had faith in the efficacy of her benevolent efforts. She repeatedly assured me and her fellow charity doers that their projects could change lives, if not of all recipients, then at least a few of them. Giving school utilities to children in rural schools, she believed at least one or two children would go on to university one day, and could work for the government in their hometown and, in turn, improve the lives of their local peers. Connecting poor households with electricity substations, she believed, would allow people to have a better livelihood, and for their children, to study at night, and learn things from television. She and her fellow charity providers believed their work would 'turn' people's lives for the better, although in reality they only quickly came to the place to distribute gifts and assistance and left with very little contact with the recipients, thus there was no way they could tell whether such improvement really changed the people's lives.

Their talks about charity, besides revolving around logistics of gathering money, buying gifts, or arranging the travel, were imbued with a sense of dedication to the plight of the people they were trying to help. Such sense of dedication resonates with the oaths that Bodhisattvas take to remain in this world to bless all the beings until no more suffering exists. In my interactions with laywomen who do charitable practice, like Aunt Khai, I could sense this feeling of dedication in their conduct of charity projects. Charity is thus not merely a pastime or a Buddhist merit-making practice, but 'work' [công việc] they perform for the good of others, which demands great dedication and caring capability. This is illustrated in a brief conversation between a laywoman and a representative of the inmates of a leprosy

village in the outskirts of Hồ Chí Minh City, where a group of lay Buddhists came to distribute gifts to all households. An old laywoman expressed, in her words, the compulsion she felt to help as many people as she possibly could, as if she as an individual ought to travel anywhere where there are people in need of assistance, and lift their burdens:

Laywoman: We sell food at the market; some of us sell lottery tickets. We receive allowances from our children. They work very hard too to support their families. We are not in abundance. Our situations are worse than many others in society, but we come here to do charity ...

Man with leprosy: You have a kind heart.

Laywoman: We must go to help sentient beings. We must love the patients [implying the villagers in this leprosy village]. You are sentient beings falling into this miserable plight. We must do whatever we can do for you. There is a lot of suffering beings in other places too; we must go there to help them. We sisters can only give very humble gifts. You can live on these gifts for only a few days, can't you? We wish we could give you more, but it exceeds our capabilities. We have to go to Mekong river delta as well, to dig wells for sentient beings there. There are many suffering beings in need of our help.

By enacting the Bodhisattva's moral attributes and way of being in the world and relating to others, elderly laywomen are using her figure as a model for their own conduct in society as women and as philanthropists. Interpreting Foucault's (1997) discussion of the relation between subjectivity and truth, the Bodhisattva's caring power, selflessness and sacrifice are established by laywomen as a truth about the ideal self and femininity. Emulating the Bodhisattva, elderly laywomen reconstruct their personhood by enacting her selfless

caregiving subjectivity, and embodying the Bodhisattva’s caregiving practice. Charitable practice becomes a ‘technique of the self’ through which they expand their previous narrow family-focused social identity as women, and detach, even only during the moments of charity trips, from domestic feminine personhood and social dispositions that only concentrate on the interest of the family. They step into society as philanthropists and worldly Bodhisattvas, with missions to change lives and lift burdens for people who are not their family, with eyes on being beneficial to all people, including the government, and with attention to the myriad contemporary mishaps and adversities in society.



Figure 5.1: A laywoman distributing gifts to rural kids in a school in Đồng Nai province



Figure 5.2: Sorting out gifts for people with leprosy in a lepers' village



Figure 5.3: A laywoman walking on the bridge that her charity group built for a village in Đồng Tháp. In her hand is the certificate that the local government awarded her group for their contribution.

Exaltation of the self in Buddhist charity

Through their involvement in charitable work in poor and remote rural communities, elderly laywomen such as Aunt Khai experienced a transformation in status. Previously Aunt Khai had been the denizen of a small and circumscribed urban neighbourhood, a petty trader, a mother, and a person who had a hard life. Now, with the Bodhisattva as her model, travelling constantly and helping a variety of people living in difficulty in many places, she gained a newfound sense of her own stature as a person on a salvational mission, doing important Bodhisattva work.

One factor precipitating this transformation in status was the effusive reception given by charity recipients in the rural communities she visited. Usually charity workers were met with warmth, gratitude and excitement, sometimes admixed with a certain amount of opportunistic flattery. This kind of reception was evident during Aunt Khai's first trip to Vĩnh Long where she and her friends, with me in tow, came to scope out the local situation before they made a decision to sponsor the connection of poor houses in the village to the electric supply. As soon as we entered Vĩnh Long province, we were received as special guests by Mrs. Linh who was a local Buddhist and a retired official of the local people's committee. She repeatedly expressed her gratitude to the 'philanthropists from Saigon', who were 'not deterred by the long distance' to come to help the poor people in this 'poor countryside'. This same atmosphere of anticipation was even more apparent in the village, where many villagers were standing along the road waiting for us. The news of 'philanthropists from the city' who had come to the village to connect their houses to the electricity supply drew people out of their houses. We were guided by a crowd of local women and their little kids along muddy roads interspersed with fruit trees, little ponds and small ditches crossed by makeshift bridges

made from dead trees. People eagerly invited us to every corner of their houses to inspect the living conditions carefully. The elderly laywomen followed them, took photos and talked to villagers about their livelihood, children and families.

At the end of the inspection, the vice-president of the people's committee came with the blueprint of the construction, which he must have been waiting to implement for a long time, waiting only for funding. We were all seated at a round table prepared by the villagers on the land of one family. The vice-president, the only one standing, talked us through the blueprints and cost of the project. Aunt Khai, representing the group, admitted that she had no experience of reading the blueprints of an electricity project. The vice-president then realised that the formal language that he was so used to as a government cadre was not at all suitable to this audience group, thus he switched to a briefer and informal version of his presentation.

When the talk became more informal and friendly, laywomen started to boldly confront the local officers. They questioned why these people had to live without electricity and other basic facilities for such a long time, why they had to rely on charitable groups from as far as Hồ Chí Minh City to fund the establishment of such a basic facility like electricity. They also posed many other challenging questions regarding the responsibilities of the government in taking care of the people, and asking where the money for helping them had gone. The cadres smilingly and politely responded to these head-on interrogations, saying that they too had to depend on the funding passed down to them from the higher governmental levels, and there were too many projects they wished to implement in this locality within their very limited budget. The cadres took this opportunity to invite Aunt Khai and her friends to

get involved in other developmental projects, such as building a small bridge and houses for the poorest residents in the community.

Back in the city after this pioneering trip, Aunt Khai told me she got phone calls from Mrs. Linh every day asking whether her group would fund the electricity project. 'They look forward to my next visit,' she said: 'they really need us.' After finally finishing the project some months later she seemed happy and proud. She told me she had earned the respect of local officials, who sought help from lay Buddhist donors to help improve living standards for the people in their locality. And she believed her activities had improved the way officials did their work. 'Because we came to a village in need, the officials told me they will pay close attention to that village now. It is because of us. The official from the people's committee told me that the government will do something to prevent damage from the next flood. I told them to do it fast before rainy season comes again.'

In a sense, her account of events could be dismissed as mere hubris, felt by a person who has let praise go to her head. In a somewhat self-satisfied way, she exaggerated her munificence and indispensability towards the rural poor and local officials, and thus experienced subjectively an exalted personhood. Putting it in other terms, however, one could say that she was having an ecstatic religious experience: vividly experiencing the world through her own Buddhist imaginary. Everything she encountered was reconstructed through that lens, including her own selfhood as a person with a Bodhisattva's mind and compassion.

On the way back from the trip to Vĩnh Long, laywomen in Aunt Khai's team talked about the exceptional feat they had achieved by mobilising a large sum of money to solve the electricity problem for this little remote village, while local official cadres had been struggling for years and yet could not help their own people. The laywomen concluded that

the task would have been impossible without the Bodhisattva's help and that only Bodhisattvas would be willing to travel to such remote, dirty and poor areas to help poor people, where even the local authorities had failed them. They also projected their religious imaginary onto the local officials with whom they had worked in their encounter. They believed that local officers had been touched by their efforts to travel a very long distance to do good deeds for their homeland, and must have learned something from their Bodhisattva's mind and compassion to 'love and take care of poor people'.

This manner of thinking was not uncommon among elderly charity workers. On the first charity trip I joined during fieldwork, I followed the laywomen of Ngọc Tịnh temple to an asylum for patients of schizophrenia in Hồ Chí Minh City. There, we followed the nurses to the many different parts of the asylum, where patients were living in segregated fashion, to distribute the food that we had prepared for them. At the end of the tour having dispensed food packages to patients throughout the asylum, we sat on the benches and had a rest. A laywoman explained to her friends that the government could not take care of all the 'suffering beings' in the society, thus it had to rely on Buddhist charity groups like ours to share the burden in taking care of the needy, the disabled, orphans and the elderly without children's support. It turned out that she had participated in many voluntary works to cook and distribute free vegetarian food to patients in big hospitals in the city. She had also travelled to the Mekong Delta with her friends, where she had 'dug a number of wells' [đào vài cái giếng] and 'built some concrete houses' [xây vài cái nhà bê tông] for the poor in rural villages, doing what local authorities lacked the capacity to do.

Laywomen who organised charity projects sometimes articulated a sense of moral distinction with regards to the contribution they believed they had made to their recipients

and the society. Some underlined the exceptional nature and scope of their charity efforts. One laywoman who prepared free meals for patients in the Oncology Hospital of Hồ Chí Minh City frequently remarked that her group served one-thousand servings for patients and their carers each day. Another laywoman felt that her charitable work with lepers distinguished her from ordinary people and even from the doctors who worked in hospitals. She once told me that friends and family members had advised her to stay away from recipients with leprosy since they feared that she might get infected with that contagious disease. She said it was an often-found reaction in the society to people with leprosy. But those with a Bodhisattva's heart would not think in such a way:

No one wants to get near to a leper and help him. They are worried for their own safety. They are like the doctors in the hospitals in the city who wash their hands whenever they meet patients – it's as if the patients who come to see them are lepers – even though they are just ill inside. Only people with a Bodhisattva's heart travel into a leper's camp and give them food and clothes.

Another laywoman also advised me to never be stingy in my donations to charity to help the poor. She advised me to donate my income to charity, and not behave like most young people in the society nowadays, who only spend money on their own leisure. She herself was living on children's allowance. However, she saved five thousand Dong (about thirty Australian cents) every day and donated to a group that travelled to a leper's colony, joining it whenever the group leader invited her:

Whatever you have, just give it away to charity. Once you give away your belongings for other people's good, you are a Bodhisattva. Your face will get very bright. Most people only want to enjoy themselves with the money they earn. They invest their

money in leisure and enjoyment. But us, we invest our money in the field of merit [phước điền].

Many elderly lay donors distinguish their charitable work from the work done by local authorities. When partnering with local authorities as investors in projects, elderly laywomen volunteer their opinions and suggestions on how better to develop a place, and how to improve life standards for local people. However, their challenge to bureaucracy goes beyond criticising work that may be seen as lacking in diligence or dedication. Taking the Bodhisattva's compassion disposition as a benchmark they reframe the work of local government as 'taking care of sentient beings', and propose spiritual solutions to end suffering and poverty. In their enactment of the Bodhisattva's care, they visualise poverty and social disadvantage as the product of karmic deficit and assess the government's work of providing welfare to the people according to the model of Bodhisattva's compassionate giving. A Bodhisattva's vow, in their opinion, applies not only to Bodhisattvas themselves, but also to people with authority and power to change lives, like state officials, who should live out this vow to be worthy and efficacious.

A number of studies on religious charity have paid attention to the enhancement of social status and recognition that charity givers achieve through their benevolent works (e.g. Eberhardt 2006: 138; Huang & Weller 1998: 387; Bowie 1998). Eberhardt's (2006: 138) study of a Shan Buddhist community in Mae Hong Son province, Thailand, notes that local middle-aged women's motivation to sponsor the boys' novice ordination festivals is not only to accumulate merit but also to pursue social status and recognition. More specifically, Bowie (1998) notes how the mechanism of Buddhist charity in northern Thailand is informed by local politico-economic context, class system and social inequality. Bowie (1998: 474-7)

argues that charity and alms giving in religious practice are in fact a mutual process, in which the poor shape the behaviour of the wealthy, and the wealthy utilise charity as a 'calculated act of class appeasement'. On the one hand, ethical principles and morality are the weapon that the poor use against the rich, to involve the rich into the charity giving system, particularly evident in the fact that most Buddhist merit making rituals in Thailand are conducted in public so that the wealthy can express themselves as people of virtue, and reap social recognition and prestige. On the other hand, the institution of merit making allows the elite to maintain their status quo, control the amounts of charity they want to contribute and soften the agony of the neediest by providing them temporary relief from the hardship caused by economic inequality. Weber (1978: 582) also notices this form of social stratification in Christian charity, in which giving alms is considered as necessary for the achievement of salvation by the wealthy. Therefore, following this mechanism, the poor are regarded as a 'status group' who possesses particular religious value. Weber notes that this relationship can be extended to relationships between classes. Charity thus can naturalise hierarchy and the class system through religious values and practices.

These arguments that charity is embedded in and marks out social inequality and class resonate with my observation of the charitable works of Hồ Chí Minh City's laywomen like Aunt Khai and her group members in rural villages. Although these laywomen are not from an social elite class like the Buddhist alms-givers as in Bowie's research, the way they were received as 'philanthropists from the city' by the people they met in rural villages defined their relationships with local recipients and authority as hierarchical, in which they embody a higher class, and their recipients a lower one. In their interactions with charity recipients and local authorities, these women were no longer elderly and retired women with no influential social roles in the city, nor petty traders who are often associated with lower class

and selfish benefit-seeking attitudes. Instead, in their roles as donors and charity givers, they were seen by their recipients as representatives of urban trade and wealth. They were expected to be generous and able to bring about improvements to the situations of their recipients.

Adding to the previous studies' arguments that religious charity, or charity in general, naturalises and enforces existing social hierarchy, class system and inequality, I suggest that charity also forges a temporary upgrade of class and social status for charitable donors who, in their daily lives, might not be from a wealthy background nor high social class. This abrupt surge in social status and recognition was what Aunt Khai, her friends, and many other lay Buddhist charity doers I met during fieldwork experienced in their interactions with their recipients, as well as with the authorities they worked with.

This surge in secular social status experienced on their journeys as charity doers is entwined with their religious experience of the charitable acts, specifically their belief that they are embodying Quan Âm's compassionate heart as they take care of suffering beings. The enforcement of status hierarchy between charity donors and recipients is expressed in their Buddhist viewpoint that distinguishes between meritorious people with Bodhisattva's heart and karmically-deficient suffering sentient beings. As such, by following Quan Âm Bodhisattva as the model for their charitable self-sacrificing acts, laywomen also project themselves as karmically and socially higher class.

Concluding remarks

This chapter shows how elderly lay Buddhist women's practices of charity transform their social identities. Benevolent works enable them to depart from their social roles as a female householder, expected to fulfil obligations at home as a wife, mother and daughter. This focus on family in their earlier years not only limits their social horizons but also constrains their engagement in society as a participant with wide involvement and public recognition for their contributions beyond the household. Laywomen drew on the figure of Quan Âm Bodhisattva to model their transition between domestic and extra-domestic femininity, between a narrow focus on their own family as a nurturer, breadwinner, and giver of life, to a proactive engagement in society as a 'philanthropist', a person who travels and helps the needy, an ideal citizen who takes care of her fellow citizens out of compassion and love. Charitable practice thus creates an experience of *communitas* (Turner 1967) in which elderly laywomen transcend gendered roles, social statuses, identities and spaces; meet their fellows; and enjoy moments of communion that they otherwise would have no chance to experience in their daily life as a female householder. Perceiving their charitable practice as following the Bodhisattva's path to give care to people who are living in difficulties, they enact the Bodhisattva's caring subjectivity and believe they themselves are incarnated Bodhisattvas by sacrificing themselves to take care of other human beings. This enactment of Bodhisattva-hood is an exaltation of the self, as is illustrated in their sense of responsibility to alleviate the adversities that other people face, in their belief that their benevolent efforts change life, and in their conduct that emulates the practice of a compassionate Buddhist deity who listens to people's calls for help and reacts with power to make life better.

Chapter 6

Impermanent Life

Divine Protection, Empowered agency and Spiritual Capital

I had to lie there on the hospital bed while a doctor put a big plastic tube into my mouth and thrust it deeper and deeper into my stomach. Oh my, what a pain! I lay there, could not utter a word and tears gushed out of my eyes. I vomited a lot later. I had to go through the same medical test six times. But while lying there and feeling the tube going deeper and deeper down my throat and into my belly, I came to understand why I became so ill in this life. I must have been a butcher in my previous life. I slaughtered pigs. I cut chicken's throats. That is why in this life doctors pushed tubes into my body, just as how I had pushed a knife into pigs' throats to kill them. Those are the punishments for my cruel actions towards innocent animals in my last life.

Grandma Ha told me this story of her illnesses and painful medical treatments after I commented to her that she did not look like she was already eighty-one years old. Observing her fair skin, pretty oval face, bright eyes shaded behind sunglasses, grey soft hair carefully hidden under the knitted hat that she always wore, and her lively disposition, I had guessed that she might be no more than sixty years old. I was taken aback to hear about her suffering because it was hard to imagine that someone so youthful and lively could have been in such poor health. She was indeed very healthy when I first met her in 2013. At that time, she was

not taking any medicine, even for light colds or for any of the other chronic illnesses that are often found in elderly people like high blood pressure, stiff joints or poor eyesight.

Visiting her at her house many times, I realised she was not only physically healthy but also young at heart. The interior of her small house did not at all conform to my stereotypical imagination of what the living space of an elderly lady should be like. No dark-coloured clothes hung on the walls; there was no smell of herbal oil or medicine in the air and no stuffiness that indicated that she spent most of the time at home. I imagined it must have been very different a couple of years before that, when she had always been heavily medicated and hardly left home at all. Her small house looked more like the room of a busy woman still in the prime of her working life who spent most of the time in the outside society. Her kitchen was very neat and simple. The only cooking utensil I could see was a rice cooker with two layers, one for cooking rice and one for steaming vegetables. All her daily vegetarian cooking was done with that single rice cooker. She had most of the meals in a day in temples, where she went to with her sutra-chanting team to chant the sacred Lotus Sutra. The house was not messy but not very tidy either. Clothes and balls of wool which she used to knit hats for her Buddhist friends for a small fee were scattered on the sofa and on her bed. Two items in her house that she was particularly proud of were the altar that enshrined white porcelain statues of A Di Đà Phật (Amitabha Buddha) and Quan Âm, sitting side by side, which she herself had assembled and decorated with little coloured twinkling bulbs, and a table with a glass surface under which were many photos of her children's families.

Only a couple of years prior to that, she had been very ill and suffered from multiple diseases, including kidney stones, high blood lipids, stomach-ache, high blood pressure and heartache. All her illnesses disappeared all of a sudden one night. That night, she felt severe

pain in her stomach again, yet she did not wake any of her children up because she had decided that she would never be sent to hospital again. She said she rather would die at home that night and would endure no more pain and nuisance from a life suffocated by medicine and hospitals. While she spoke to me about that night, she raised her hands forward, as if she was begging for something, to imitate her act of praying to Quan Âm that night:

I just sat on my bed, prayed to Quan Âm, recited her name, and meditated at length.

I prayed to her that I understood it was my bad karma from the previous lives that caused me this much suffering and pain. If we get seriously sick, it means we did bad things in the past, either in this or previous lives, and we have to pay for the bad karma we caused with those bad deeds. So I raised my two hands forward like this and prayed to Quan Âm Bồ Tát to let me pay for my past sins with these two hands. Let me redeem my karmic deficit by helping other people with these hands, not by living in illness and physical torture until the day of my death.

Her wish was granted, she said. Miraculously, from that night on, all her health problems disappeared. Since then she had never fallen ill again. She was so healthy that she could go to temples, join chanting groups organised by her lay Buddhist friends and leave her house every day. Her daughter who used to live in to take care of her could move back to her own family. She believed that Quan Âm and the Buddha had saved her and still looked after and protected her from all illnesses, bad luck or difficulties in life since then. Addressing Quan Âm as 'Mother' (Mẹ), she believed that Mother responded to all her prayers and was always near her to help her out in difficult times, such as when she felt herself in trouble, when she was unhappy with her children and grandchildren, when her money-lending service did not go well, when she travelled, or when she felt she may get sick again. 'All my prayers are

answered. All of them!’ she often said to me, with a mixed air of both astonishment and pride, implying she was the one chosen to enjoy this rare prestige.

In this chapter, I examine how elderly lay Buddhist women utilise Buddhist belief and practices to make sense of the afflictions and misfortunes they and their families encounter in life, and how they cope with these everyday-life problems through their religious practice. The focus of this chapter is on how elderly laywomen cope with illnesses, physical limitations and declining health by relying on Buddhist practice as a way to retain their agency and control over their own wellbeing in the late stage of life.

This chapter argues that elderly laywomen rely on Buddhist practice as a technique to cultivate a subordinated subjectivity in their patronage relations with supernatural powers, whom they believe provide them with protection in times of difficulties and infirmities. Through practicing Buddhism, they also cultivate a merit-loaded subjectivity in their submission to karmic rules to make and save good merit and improve their karmic balance, which, in turn, lessens the effects of misfortunes or even make them disappear. Elderly laywomen vernacularise the Buddhist notion of ‘impermanence’ [vô thường] to describe the realities of life, especially of the late stage of life, which is characterised by physical weaknesses and limitations over which they have little control. Buddhist practice provides them with a reservoir of techniques to cope with bodily deterioration in old age and enables them to gain a sense of agency and control over the changes that take place in their everyday life. Submitting themselves to patronage relations with divine powers and to the rules of karma combined with the folk theory of moral reciprocity, elderly laywomen believe that they can protect themselves and their families against the wild impermanent nature of life, in which bad things can happen all of a sudden and beyond control. This agentive subordination

to supernatural beings gives them the foundation to believe that they are capable of channelling the divine power to protect themselves and their families against infirmities and misfortune. It also shapes their perception of themselves as empowered agents who act as the liaisons between supernatural beings and the mundane world, and can bestow supernatural blessing not only to their kin but also to other people and the country more broadly.

Ritual community of care in temples

Many laywomen I met during fieldwork became Buddhists, or started to devote themselves to Buddhism as a daily practice when they or their beloved ones encountered certain illnesses, or when they had just recovered from a serious disease. A woman in her seventies told me that when she was still in her fifties, she went to the temple every night without letting her husband, then still alive, know she was seriously ill. After having constant menstruation for many weeks she had been diagnosed by the doctor as having tumours in her uterus. The doctor advised her to undertake a surgery to 'burn' these tumours. On hearing the word 'burn' she was so scared that she never visited that doctor again, and instead followed her aunt to Ngọc Tịnh temple to chant Buddhist sutras every night to recover from the symptoms. Another woman also returned to the temple when she was diagnosed with a serious liver disease after having been absent for many years since she got married. She chanted the sutras and wrote her name down for the abbess to pray for her safety. She told me that since she was so committed to practice in the temple, after a while her doctor found nothing wrong with her liver.

Health problems are daily concerns of elderly laywomen and are brought into temples and infuse their daily religious practice. They usually said: 'Old people always live with one

disease or another' [Già rồi, không bệnh này thì cũng phải bệnh kia]. My conversations with the Buddhist laywomen often started with or turned to health issues. They would talk at length about poor eyesight, stiff backs, dizziness caused by sudden surging blood pressure, and the devices that their everyday life depended on, such as reading glasses, dentures, knee and back support bands, wheelchairs, walking sticks and medicines. Pilgrimage buses reeked with the fumes from oil balms, which in Vietnam are considered as a quick fix for bad backs, stiff joints, carsickness and basically any kind of commonly-found disease. Wandering in temples, one easily could find among the freely-distributed sutra books and DVD recordings of renowned monk's sermons the prints-out of recipes and poems teaching which food, herbs or fruits are good to tackle chronic diseases often found in old people, such as high blood pressure, diabetes and even methods to prevent and cure cancer.

Women also often compared their present physical condition to when they were younger. They often reflected on the flexibility and strength of their body in the past, which enabled them endure much laborious work to support their families. Their bodies were imprinted with the hardship of life that they endured in life as women responsible for the wellbeing of the family. The bodily weaknesses and limitations that they experience in old age are perceived by them not only as the symptoms of aging, but also as the imprints of years of hardship to provide for their family. An eighty-year-old laywoman of Ngọc Tịnh, now having to rely on a wheelchair, proudly reminisced about the thirty years she had daily carried two pots of pork porridge on her shoulders to a market quite far from her home to raise her children who eventually all went to university. She attributed to these years of hard work the deformities to her spinal cord, which caused her great difficulty in walking in old age. Other women told me about carrying heavy things such as sacks of rice or fruit every day to the markets where they used to work, even when they were very pregnant.

For many women, Buddhist practice is a remedy they discovered in a late stage of life when they started to encounter physical deterioration and became aware of the limitations of their bodies. Within the laity, which consists of mostly elderly women, words of advice are spread and followed about which sutras, mantras and practices are suited to tackle which diseases, and which techniques should be followed to prevent certain afflictions. These techniques range from commitment to certain practices, such as chanting the Great Compassion Sutra twenty-one or forty-nine times a day, reciting the Buddha's and Quan Âm Bodhisattva's names one-thousand-and-eight times a day, or adorning oneself with prayer beads that are believed to cure colds, high blood pressure and even diabetes.

Physical limitations and health problems due to old age are shared topics of daily conversation that produce among elderly laywomen in a temple's laity or in a group of pilgrims a sense of sisterhood and solidarity. Limitations of the body that imposed on activities or on mobility become the demarcators and identities for a 'subculture' of the old in temples (Hochschild 1978: 49). Sharing more or less similar health issues, they had endless conversations to update each other about their health conditions and those of people they know, and the remedies that they themselves applied or had heard about from others. They expressed care for and were helpful to each other. These health issues are also often incorporated in light-hearted jokes that mock the symptoms of agedness which many of them shared. Through these jokes, the unspeakable could be spoken and relationships produced (Nelson 2001) as the inconvenience caused by illnesses and physical limitations was brought to the surface of the conversation, and not at all concealed, even when sometimes the symptoms of illness might be embarrassing to the ears of outsiders. Jokes turn these embarrassing and inconvenient symptoms of oldness into a shared identity and shared life experience, which in turn become the social capital connecting them and producing a sense

of comradeship and in-groupness. For example, laughing at their constant need to go to toilet while on pilgrimage trips, elderly pilgrims reversed the phrase ‘sacrifice your body for your country’ [xả thân cứu nước] that was used as a Vietnamese wartime slogan, and played a word game by using the homonym of ‘country’ [nước], which is ‘water’ [also nước], and of ‘sacrifice’ [xả], which is ‘release’ [also xả] to rephrase the slogan to ‘release the water to save your body’ [xả nước cứu thân].

One day, sitting and waiting for a noon ritual under the shade of the veranda with her elderly laity, Ngọc Tịnh temple’s abbess, possibly wanting to break the silence and help people forget the midday heat, wittily cracked a joke that if she could expand her little temple to a bigger one, she would dedicate one building as a ‘childcare centre’ that would only accept ‘children’ from 70 years and above. Her elderly disciples immediately burst into laughter. Knowing that they were the ‘children’ that the abbess was talking about, the women did not feel at all offended, and instead drew themselves into this joke and even provided further details about the childishness of the old that the nun missed in her witty fiction. Several of them said they would line up for the ‘childcare centre’. They said at the ‘childcare centre’, each of them should be distributed a wooden bell [mõ], as ‘toys’, and they would compete with each other to see who could make better sound with the wooden bells. They demanded for an instalment of an elevator that only accepted laywomen above sixties, while the younger had to take the stairs. In the ‘childcare centre’, they said, there should be a room particularly for those who were about to ‘return to the Buddha’ [về với Phật], indicating those who were dying. In that room, the abbess should assign her monks to always be present, to chant sutra and recite the Buddha’s name to enable the dying a safe departure to the Buddha’s world after death.

The jokes, despite being exchanged in a carefree and joyful manner, implied a dark reality of old age that elderly laywomen were very aware of and experienced in their everyday life. This inconvenient reality, as encompassed in this joke, includes physical limitations, such as difficulty with mobility, senility, and the clumsiness of old people that made them comparable with little children, and the inherent decline of personhood and agency that they experience as their health declines, especially at the time of death.

For many elderly laywomen, Buddhist practice is vital for preparing for and coping with the negative changes that the later stage of life brings. Being in the sisterhood of elderly laywomen, who share similar experience of physical limitations in the late life stage, through talks and jokes, they can normalise the inconvenience and discomfort which otherwise would be endured individually and with less sympathy and understanding among the younger and able-bodied family members at home. Not only is the temple a secular community of friends and peers, it is also a spiritual community of care, from which women expect ritual support that help them deal with the threats of infirmities and prepare them for death. Chanting sutras at temples, they also pray for each other's peace, health or quick recovery from infirmities. When one of them was seriously ill, the entire laity would follow the abbess to the home of that person, and chant sutras to pray for quick recovery. Or if a friend passed away, they would chant for an easy liberation of the soul. This ritualistic support was extended well beyond death, as they continued to chant for their friends' spirits' liberation in funerals, at the friends' homes and at death anniversaries organised at the temple.

Many women relied on the Buddha's and Bodhisattva's mercy through Buddhist practice as remedies for their illnesses, as opposed to often dreaded, costly, annoying and painful medical treatments. They were hesitant not only about the cost, and the burden put

on their children by submitting to medical care, but also dreaded feeling uncomfortable and having to go to hospitals to do blood tests and other complicated check-ups, let alone having to undergo body-invasive medical techniques. The practice of Buddhism is considered by them as an added supernatural supplement to medical treatment for their illnesses, or even as the sole healing method that they apply for their diseases. Grandma Ha, for example, abandoned hospitals, doctors and medicine and focused only on praying to Quan Âm and on making merit by chanting the Lotus Sutra and by helping people, which she did by lending money for interest to her neighbours (which many of her Buddhist friends were sceptical of as a method of merit making and criticised her for that). As opposed to the potential pain, burden and interruption to everyday life that medical treatments are perceived to cause, without necessarily delivering satisfactory results, they prefer to rely on Buddhist practice which is believed to deal with the root of the sufferings and lends them the divine powers' hand to protect themselves and rid them of illnesses.

Impermanent life

When we parted that day, Grandma Ha stood at the door watching me unlock my bike and, possibly still contemplating the story of the peculiar night when she bargained for her health with Quan Âm, she gently advised me:

We must have faith to live in this life, child. Without faith, how can we possibly live in this tough life? Bad things can happen when you least expect them. Life is impermanent [vô thường]. You should pray to Quan Âm. You should pray wholeheartedly and sincerely [thành tâm], then Mother will [nghe] your wishes. Mother will 'turn and change' [xoay chuyển] all the bad things for you.

Many times in my fieldwork, I heard this comment on the necessity to have a faith, to believe in the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to be able to cope with the toughness that life presents. The Buddhist notion of ‘impermanence’ [vô thường] is used very broadly and prevalently by Buddhist followers. Impermanence implies ‘things naturally arise and fall in accordance with impersonal causal processes’ (Ladwig and Williams, 2012: 2). In Buddhist belief, nothing will stay the same forever. Everything will change. However, as humans attach themselves to things and processes which will be changed anyway, suffering is thus an inevitable factor in their life due to this lack of awareness and acceptance to the inherent nature of impermanence of life. Impermanence is among the abstract notions in canonical Buddhist teachings that are employed and used in everyday life by lay followers, with meanings which depart from the orthodox understanding and are in sync with lived realities of practitioners. The meaning of impermanence is modified to best fit into the daily concerns of the lay Buddhists, thus it is used widely by the followers, regardless their level of familiarity with Buddhist texts (Spiro 1982; Cassaniti 2006: 59; Abrahms-Kavunenko 2013: 351).

While ‘impermanence’ emphasises the ever-changing nature of all things, circumstances and objects in life, and thus encompasses all the negative and positive changes, lay Buddhist followers tend to use this term to talk about changes for the worse in life, such as declining health, or the blurry line between being healthy and being ill, or being active and being dependent and bedridden, a line many of their friends had crossed in old age. Impermanence is especially used in talks about death. The often-heard comment ‘life is impermanent’ [đời là vô thường] is made when they heard about the death of a friend, or a sudden accident that someone they knew had, or when a person’s health went bad without any warnings.

A laywoman once told me the story of a daughter, who became a nun, writing a letter to her parents to advise her parents to devote their late life to Buddhist practice. The laywoman concluded that those parents were so meritorious to have such a wise daughter, who, regardless her young age, was already aware of the impermanent nature of life. She emphasised: 'Life is impermanent. We never know when and how we will die.' Another woman once told me the story of her turbulent earlier years of life, in which she suddenly lost her husband in the final year of the war, which threw her family out of affluent life and into poverty, and forced her to take up a trading job to raise four children. At the end of the story, she also expressed how deeply she felt the rule of impermanence had operated in her own life. However, in describing the nature of impermanence to me she focused on the deterioration of health in her later years, and on the death that she was awaiting, rather than on the many setbacks and unexpected events that had occurred in her eventful life:

Life is too hard. Anything can happen. We never know what will happen tomorrow. Today we live, but who knows tomorrow we may die. I am old now. I don't know when I will bid farewell to this world. So I practice Buddhism to save merit for the future. When I die, I want to be reborn in the Buddha's world. I do not want to return to this impure land [cõi ta bà] in the next life, because life is so hard here. Everything is impermanent and we never know what will happen.

Impermanence therefore is vernacularised by elderly laywomen to characterise what they feel and perceive about the last stage of life which is in close proximity to death, and in which they expect negative changes in their health condition over which they have little control. The factor of 'not knowing' what will come next, of having no control over one's own life, body, health and death makes this impermanent nature of old age dreadful and thus necessary

to prepare for. They prepare for it by the practice of Buddhism. Grandma Ha and many other laywomen emphasised to me the indispensability of having faith as a survival kit to get through this part of life.

Being a child of the Buddha

Among the lay followers who came to Ngọc Tịnh temple earliest every night for the daily chanting session was a woman in her sixties. She looked so thin that everyone expressed worry for her wellbeing. Being a quiet woman, she never joined the chats that laywomen often had before chanting. Instead, she followed her own private ritual to burn incense and kowtow to all the altars of the late monks and abbesses of the temple. She then had a lengthy contemplation and quiet talk in front of the urns of ash of her two sons, who had died prematurely a couple of years ago of illnesses. People in Ngọc Tịnh temple did not know much or talk about her. One thing everyone knew was that she was ill herself, although no one knew for sure what illness she had that made her look so pale and thin. Every night, she spent a considerable amount of time in front of the white statue of Quan Âm standing on a lotus at the balcony of the temple. She first placed a bottle of water that she carried from home on the pedestal, and prostrated herself on the ground many times and quietly spoke her prayers to the Bodhisattva, her eyes gazing upon the statue wholeheartedly and with devotion. Then she joined others for the chanting. At the end of the chanting, she would come near to the sitting statue of the Buddha, join her hands in front of her chest and engage in another long quiet conversation with the Buddha. Then her hand stretched forward to touch the statue and she wiped her hands over her face and head.

Finally, before she left, she returned to the statue of Quan Âm, prayed and prostrated herself on the ground to the Bodhisattva again, and, while bowing, moved toward the pedestal and took the bottle of water. After raising the bottle in front of her face to express her gratitude to Quan Âm for all the supernatural blessings that the Bodhisattva had bestowed and put into this bottle of water while she was chanting sutras in the Main Hall, she returned home. Her best friend at the temple told me that she drank the water blessed by Quan Âm every day to cure herself from her disease. That water was the offerings she made and received back from Quan Âm, 'charged' with supernatural power and potency (Soucy 2006). By giving and receiving the offering charged with potency, she bound herself to the subordinating relationship she had with Quan Âm, in which she was the recipient of Quan Âm's protection and healing power. Subordinating herself to the protection of Quan Âm and the Buddha was the method she followed to cope with the illness that she was enduring.

Spiro (1982) noted that Theravada Buddhism in Burma provides protection rituals, or a 'Buddhist technology', that believers adhere to, believing that by conforming to these rituals they would be bestowed by the Buddha with protection against pain, danger and suffering in life. For elderly laywomen in my research, the 'Buddhist techniques' that they adopt to cope with the reality of physical limitations, and the uncertainty and transience of life in old age, are not only confined to protection rituals, but also include how they conduct themselves in relation to supernatural powers which builds and enforces a patronage relation between themselves and those powers. In the relationship with supernatural beings, they are in the position of the weak, vulnerable and powerless who need to be supported and assisted. These techniques put them in subordinated status vis-a-vis their supernatural protectors.

Vietnamese Buddhist call themselves ‘Phật tử’ [child of the Buddha], which is the Vietnamese term to address Buddhists. They also address Quan Âm as ‘Mother Quan Âm’ [Mẹ Quan Âm] or ‘Virtuous Mother’ [Mẹ hiền] and also, though less prevalently, call the Buddha ‘Father’ [Cha]. One 70-year-old laywoman told me that all people who wear the grey suits for lay Buddhist use, like herself, are all ‘sisters in a family’ [chị em trong cùng một nhà] because they all share the same ‘Mother’ and ‘Father’.

However, the connection that they strive to forge with the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas is not necessarily similar to a child-parent relationship. In this connection with the divine powers, followers embody the position of a person vulnerable to external forces and changes, and thus needing supernatural protection. This relationship is, however, not always as unconditional as a child-parent one. Lay followers earn the protection of the divine beings by submitting themselves to the superiority of supernatural powers, displaying sincerity, and adjusting their behaviour to the codes of practice adopted in their sacred precincts. A divine response is forthcoming only for those who are sincere, patient, and committed to the faith they have for the Buddha and Bodhisattva. In order to secure the protection of the divine powers, elderly laywomen impose on themselves the disposition of committed and devoted followers who believe in and submit to the supernatural protection both in thoughts and in actions. This subordination is cultivated by the discipline imposed on the mind [cái tâm], and daily practice.

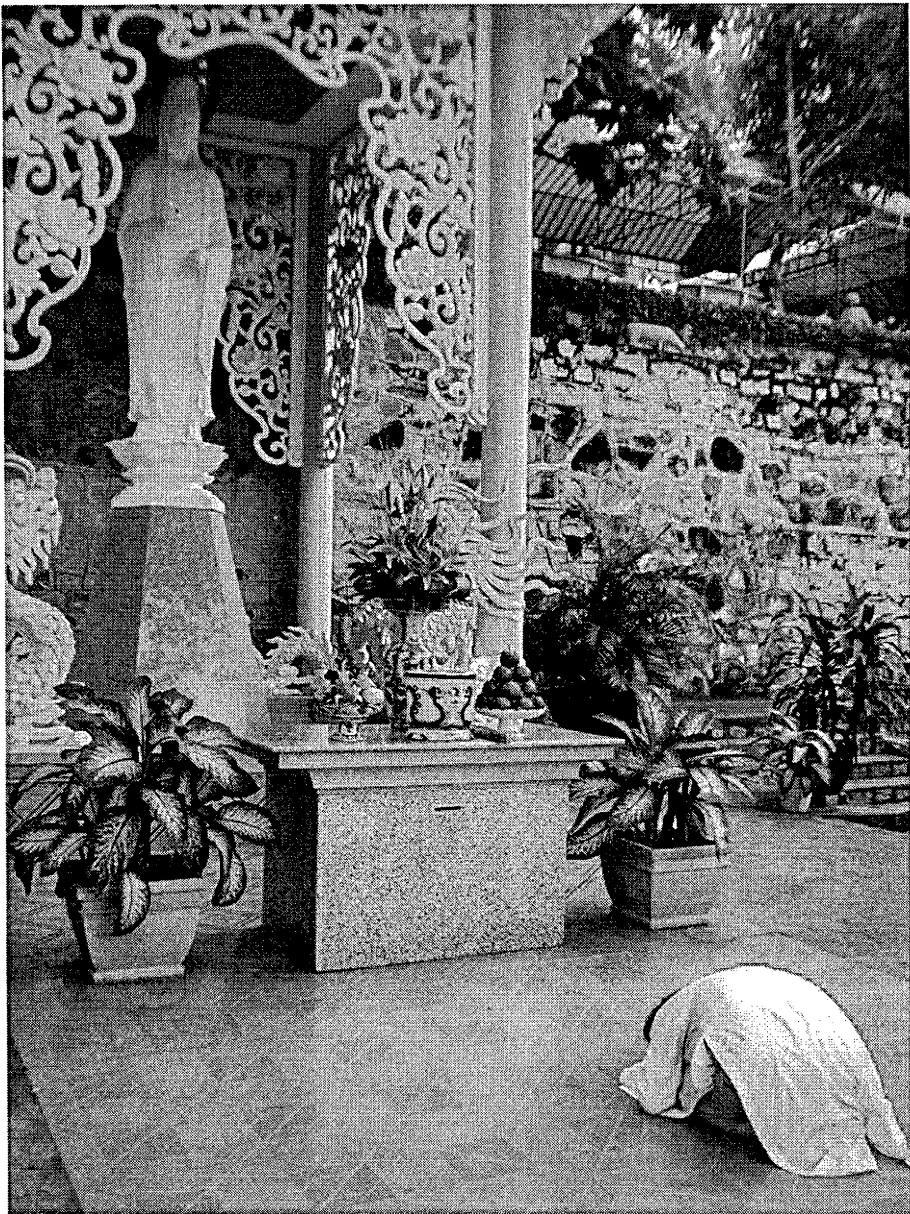


Figure 6.1: A laywoman prostrating herself on the ground in front of the Quan Âm statue

Sincere mind

One day on a pilgrimage trip with the laywomen from Ngọc Tĩnh temple, I sat next to two elderly women on the bus who were discussing passionately a sermon they both had watched on a DVD, about a woman from China who recovered from cancer by praying to the Buddha

every day. I tried to jump into their conversation, by asking them a question without realising that such a question might upset them as it cast lay Buddhists' practice in a pragmatic self-interested light.

‘Aunties, does going to temples bring us good luck?’

One of the two elderly women imposingly and disapprovingly looked at me and responded sternly to my pragmatic attitude which cast aspersions on the sincerity and wholeheartedness that lay Buddhists embody in their practice:

You should not go to temple to seek for good luck! Don't you understand? Your luck has been predetermined by the karma that you accumulated during many of your previous lives. When you go to a Buddhist temple, you should not pray for good luck. You should not pray for fortune, for being prosperous, for winning a lottery. You should pray for good health. That's all that matters.

Then she turned to her friend and spoke to her as if I no longer existed:

There are those people who do not understand lay Buddhists. They thought we go to temple to seek for benefit, for luck, or for money.

Her friend added:

Most people are mindless [không có tâm]. They don't know that chanting a sutra will not cure them from diseases. The efficacy that Buddha's words bestow on them and their life depends a lot on their sincere mind. It is not easy to be blessed with divine power. There is no instant response. It is not that we get sick and we go to the temple to chant for a couple of days and get well right away.

The woman continued:

It takes a long time to sharpen a knife. Same with our mind. It takes very long to purify our mind [làm tâm trong sạch]. The miracle happened to the Chinese woman because she had prayed to the Buddha with a sincere mind, wholeheartedly.

Eventually she turned to me:

You should not think that you practice Buddhism to gain something in return. You should make your mind pure when you come to Buddhism. Your mind must not calculate, it should just follow what the Buddha teaches without calculating, like 'If I do this, will I gain that?' When you give alms, you should not think you give away ten-thousand Vietnamese Dong to get one-hundred-thousand Dong in return. You should not think you help the poor for your own prosperity later. We do good deeds, without any calculation. It is your Mind [cái tâm] that wants to give alms. It is your Mind that believes in the Buddha, and wants to do good deeds. You must be sincere [thành tâm].

I was advised by many lay Buddhists to cultivate a mind that is filled only with sincere faith, for according to them, only with a sincere heart could my prayers be heard [nghe] and responded to [cảm ứng] by the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. In their terms, 'có cảm ắt có ứng', meaning 'if there are feelings there will be responses', indicates that sincerity, honesty and wholeheartedness in one's own wishes will trigger the responses from the divine powers to exert positive effects on the situations. According to Grandma Hà in the anecdote at the beginning of this paper, by praying sincerely, Quan Âm will 'turn and change' the bitter situations she faced in life. The element of sincerity in one's faith has also been mentioned in other studies on religious practices that followers perform believing that these practices can protect themselves from danger and afflictions. Spiro (1982), in his book on Theravada

Buddhism in Burma, noted protection rituals' efficacy is guaranteed by the Buddha's power only if the devotees have sincere faith in him (p149). This element of sincerity is also mentioned in Blofeld's (1988) study on the Chinese folk belief in Kuan Yin (Quan Âm), the Bodhisattva of Compassion. It is believed that who calls on Her with sincerity will be rescued from suffering and harm, and even can be reborn in the Pure Land despite the demerits in his karmic balance.

The notion of *tâm* can be translated as mind, heart or soul in English, although it has diffuse meanings in Vietnamese. It can be interpreted as a person's conscience, morality and thoughts. In Buddha's teachings, the mind, *tâm*, is the origin of the karma as it is the source of our thoughts, which will govern our action and speech, which are conducted by the body and mouth, that can in turn result in a good deed which ends in good merit, or bad deed which yields bad merit. Body, mouth and mind [*thân khẩu ý*] are therefore the three origins of actions, words and thoughts that bring good or bad merit to a person. Therefore, most self-disciplinary practices that a Buddhist follows focus on monitoring these three elements, to think good thoughts, do compassionate things and say kind words.

The mind is where the interaction between the worshipped and the worshipper takes place. It is where the prayer is composed and sent to the supernatural power. A pure mind is therefore so difficult to attain since it requires an intensive discipline over one's own thoughts. Thus, the laywoman who scolded me for having such a disrespectful scepticism about lay Buddhists' motivation to practice Buddhism emphasised to me how much effort is needed to purify the mind. In fact, the display closest to possessing a sincere mind I witnessed during fieldwork was the glow in the eyes of followers when they looked up to the statue of Quan Âm Bodhisattva, Earth Womb Bodhisattva or the Buddha. In their eyes, I thought, glowed

feelings of admiration, reverence, trust, imprecation and submission. A sincere mind is talked about, claimed and displayed through actions and words. And through discipline over one's own actions and speech, a sincere mind is cultivated and secured.

The idea of the mind that is pure and filled only with sincere faith is concretised and realised through actions of worshipping and making offerings, even physically-demanding ones, as well as through the alterations of lifestyle, dietary choice or activities which might have big impact on laywomen's everyday life. Many of them adopt strict vegetarianism, even though they are still cooking meat for their families, or travelling a lot with chanting teams, on pilgrimage or put a lot of effort in doing charity. During fieldwork, many times I felt in awe of the unbelievable strength and perseverance that elderly laypeople put into their religious practice and rituals, which required intensive physical effort, strength and endurance. Their efforts were remarkable given their senior age and the physical limitations that they often complained about, such as weak heart, blood pressure, or stiff joints. One example of such practices is prostrating on the ground before the image of the Buddha and standing up before prostrating again. This process could be repeated many times. The Repentance ritual that takes place in all temples on the fourteenth and the final days of a lunar month is one of the occasions when laywomen prostrate themselves for more than eighty times every time the name of a Buddha is recited. This practice, despite being very exhausting, is repeated in many different rituals, and is even made a ritual by itself, in which lay followers spend one morning or one day only to recite the Buddha's name and prostrate themselves on the ground every time the Buddha's name is repeated. Once in a chanting session, we followed the instruction of a 60-year-old lay Buddhist woman leader to chant the forty-eight vows of the Amitabha Buddha, to each of which we would stand up and prostrate ourselves on the ground before standing up again to chant the next vow. While I found myself out of breath and

dizzy around the middle and decided not to stand up but sat where I was and joined my hands chanting along, other laywomen around me, all above 60, did not give up that easily but laboured through the whole session. Later they commented that although they were tired they tried to go through this practice to show their sincerity to the Buddha. With sincerity, the Buddha would hear and respond to their prayers.

Laypeople also make a vow [phát nguyện] to the Buddha and Bodhisattvas to undertake a certain act of self-denial and ascetic practice in their everyday life in return for supernatural blessings. A laywoman I met who was diagnosed with a dangerous liver disease made a vow to the Buddha that she would chant the sacred Great Compassion Mantra one-hundred-and-eight times every time she took her medicine so that her liver tumour could disappear. Although she did not understand what this mantra was about and why it was so powerful and efficacious since its words [in Vietnamised Sanskrit] were not comprehensible to her, she had heard and met many people who said it was very good and could cure diseases. She committed to her vow for the first few days, but then realised that chanting the mantra that many times took too much time and made the herbal medicine cool down and taste too bitter. So she renewed the vow to the Buddha that she would instead chant the Medicine Master's True Words [Chú Dược Sư] from the Medicine Buddha Sutra [Kinh Dược Sư], which is shorter and can be finished before the medicine turned cold. She committed to the vow this time, and always chanted the sutra before taking the medicine. She said in the following check-ups the doctor could not see any trace of the tumour. A vow is an intense and solemn display of one's commitment to subordinating oneself to the protection of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as it requires alteration of the lifestyle, everyday activities and thus asceticism from the followers. Therefore it is taken very seriously. Laywomen instructed me that before I made a vow to the Buddha or to Quan Âm to commit to certain practice for

blessings for a certain aspect in my life, I must think very carefully because once a vow is made it must be complied to. However, a vow can be updated to meet changed situations. On certain occasion when a vow cannot be kept, one must pray to the Buddha or the Bodhisattva to whom one had made a vow to, apologise for not being able to follow the vow at that specific time, and must repent for one's non-commitment after that. I did not encounter any case where a vow was abandoned in the middle, but only one case when even a person's prayer was not granted, she still followed the vow to practice strict vegetarianism for the rest of her life.

There is also a reservoir of techniques that laywomen follow to cure themselves, or to pray for their beloved ones who were ill, which also speaks to their subordination to the power of the divine being and alter their daily practice in life. For example, they spend a considerable amount of time in a day to chant the Great Compassion Mantra for seven-times-certain number times a day, the Medicine Buddha Sutra, the Lotus Sutra which is very long and may require an entire day to finish, reciting the Buddha's and Quan Âm Bodhisattva's names while turning the beads in the prayer beads that lay Buddhists wear around their wrists and necks. The short Great Compassion Mantra is especially said to have magical healing power over all diseases, even the most dreadful ones like cancer. Prayer beads are said to be good to prevent cold, flu, to moderate the circulation of substance in the body and thus, can be used to cure high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes.

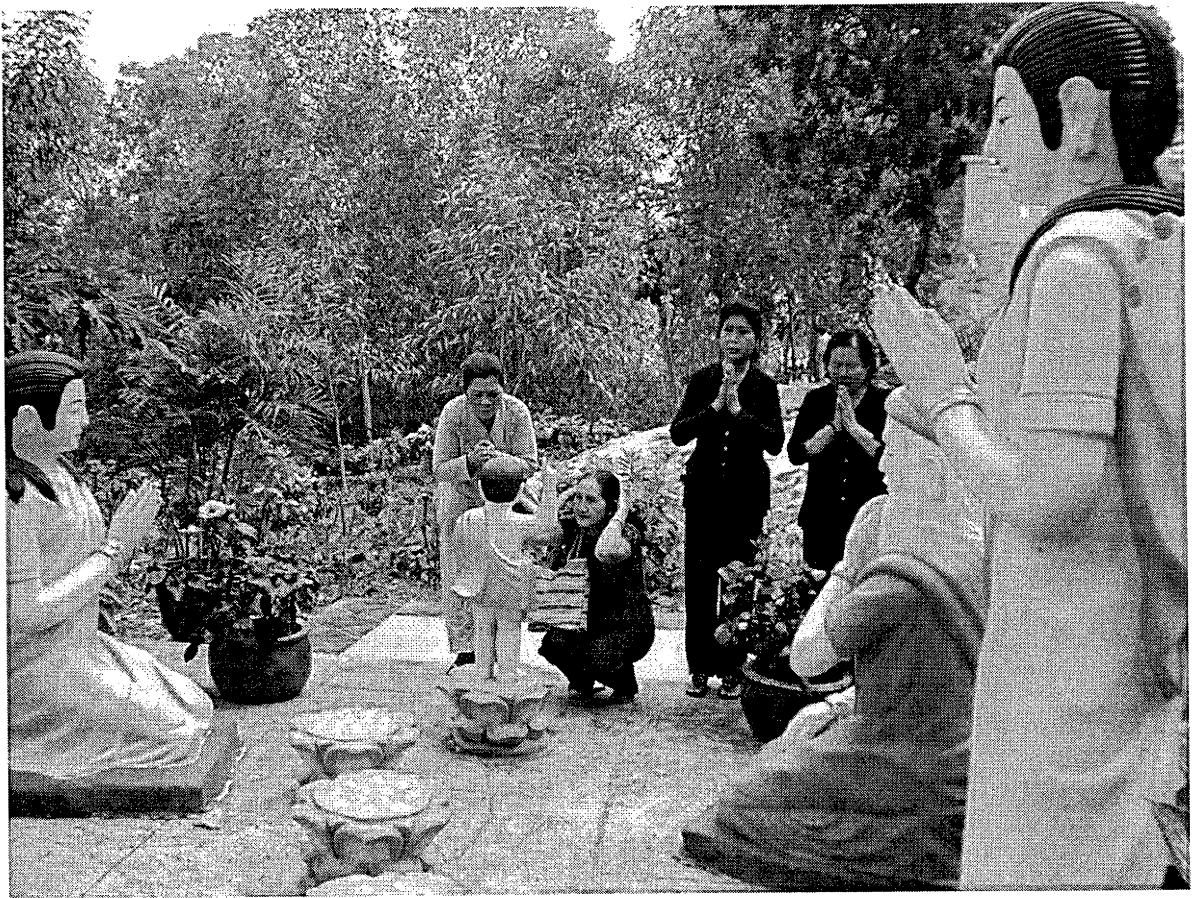


Figure 6.2: Laywomen touching an Infant Buddha statue for blessings

Merit as spiritual capital

Many elderly laywomen believed that illnesses and misfortunes a person encounters in life were the manifestations of that person's karmic deficit. It means that that person had done bad deeds in the past, either in this life or in previous lives, which caused bad merit and resulted in bad consequences. Grandma Hà thought it was the bad merit she had caused from being a butcher to earn a living in her previous life that made her fall so seriously sick in this life. Considering being a butcher as a sin, she used it as a rationalisation for all the illnesses she had suffered. Illnesses, especially those that are incurable or caused a person a lot of

bodily pain and consumes a lot of money for treatment, and are found all of a sudden when the person was completely healthy, were usually referred to as ‘karmic disease’ [bệnh nghiệp]. This indicates that the cause of the disease was the bad karma that the person has. Incurable diseases, like cancer, are perceived as ghost-disease [bệnh ma], which is the consequence when a person is followed and harmed by the spirits of the beings whom that person hurt and caused damage to in the previous lives. A laywoman with a liver tumour told me that when she was diagnosed with this disease by the doctor, she decided she must battle with it from its root, as she believed the doctor’s prescribed treatment was only to deal with the symptoms. She thus switched to Chinese medicine prescribed by a herbal-medicine doctor introduced by her friend, and went on pilgrimage to many temples to make offerings, and chanted the Great Compassion Mantra forty-nine times every day at home. She believed by doing so, she could make good merit to balance the bad merit she had accrued in her previous lives. She also hoped that the spirits of the beings which she might have harmed in her past lives, who were following her and wreaking havoc in her current life, would be tamed by the Buddha’s words, and also practice Buddhism, embody a gentle and merciful mind and stop hurting her.

The rules of karma are invoked to explain many aspects and events in life, not only illnesses, but also a person’s marriage, family life, fortune, children’s filial piety and relationships with others. One pleasant Sunday morning, I was at Aunt Lan’s soymilk shop chatting with her and her neighbour. They both talked about a woman, their mutual acquaintance, whom they described as a very mean person. Aunt Lan and her neighbour talked about how such a mean person, who never did good deeds to cultivate good merit, still could be bestowed with so much divine blessing that smoothed her path of life and enabled her make such a big fortune and have an easy life, while they, being devout Buddhists –

saving money to make offerings to the temples, giving alms to beggars, working hard all their life – were still poor. The neighbour explained this unfairness in life by reference to karma:

Our life is like a wheel. The wheel runs on a smooth road until it tumbles over a rock. She is mean, but she enjoys good luck and wealth because in her previous lives she did a lot of good deeds that yielded her great amount of merit, which is now enough for in this life she can live in prosperity, have a happy family, be healthy without much endeavour. When the wheel reaches a point where the good merit runs out, things will go bad. That is why, well we see this happens all the time, some people who were so rich suddenly get bankrupt, some people who were healthy suddenly fall seriously ill. While for us, we are poor now. But we save our money to help the poor, to offer to the temples. We will have easier life in the next life.

Spiro (1982) pointed out that the rule of karma in doctrinal Buddhist teachings leaves little opportunity for the followers to escape from the present life's pain, and the solution the doctrine provides is also otherworldly, which is an absolute escape from the cycle of life and death (p141). However, the rule is modified by practitioners to soften its harshness and allow for 'mutability' in it (p142). Spiro's Burmese Buddhist informants performed protection rituals to create merit which, they believe, can create immediate change in their karmic balance, and can impede danger or even can bring it to an end (p151). Likewise, on that Sunday's discussion in Aunt Lan's soymilk shop, her neighbour assured us that we still could change our lives for the better right in this life:

Good merit we make in this life can be used in this life as well. It makes the wheel spin faster for us when we are in difficult times so that the good times in life can come sooner than if the wheel just turned at its normal speed. If we have enough good merit,

it can even make the ‘rock’ disappear. So instead of being sick or having an accident at that moment, our good deeds in the past made the difficulties disappear. We never know for sure what will happen in life. The only thing we can do to be sure is to go to temples, pray to Buddha and the Bodhisattva, make merit to remove the ‘limits’ [hạn] that are allocated somewhere in our life.

Submitting themselves to the karmic rule, laywomen use it as a narrative and explanation for events taking place in life, especially for negative occurrences and illnesses. They also seek in it a hedge against unexpected problems or bad luck in the future. By following Buddhist practices to make good merit, they increase the stock of good merit against bad in their karmic balance. In their understanding, karma operates in accord with a folk theory of moral reciprocity, as illustrated in a popular Vietnamese saying that is usually quoted in daily conversations: ‘Ở hiền gặp lành’ [Living kindly, encountering good (things)]. By doing good deeds, one will reap good consequences in life. Conversely, by doing bad things, one will face bad consequences. Moral acts are therefore reciprocated and immoral acts are punished. There are answers to and consequences for all deeds one does. However, just as misfortunes unfold in life in an unexpected manner, as expressed in laywomen’s understanding of life as being impermanent, the prospects for good occurrences taking place cannot be forecasted. Still, in order to ensure life is filled with goodness, they should do good deeds, by making merit, donating money to charity, giving alms to beggars and making offerings to the sangha, so that good fortunes will be bestowed in their lives, or in their families’ lives, either in this life, or in future incarnations.

Good merit is therefore a form of capital. As discussed in Chapter Three, merit is handled and considered by laywomen not as an abstract concept, but as real thing with value,

which they labour through Buddhist practice to ‘earn’, ‘save’ and ‘spend’, and must be very careful not to lose – by committing a sin – which can ‘cost’ them good merit. Merit is talked about by elderly laywomen as a kind of saving which is earned and put aside for future needs. When they or their beloved ones fall ill, or when business goes bad, they hope it is the time when their accumulated good merit pays off, as in the economic terms a laywoman used to explain to me the benefits of her Buddhist practice:

This practice [we would chant the thick Lotus Sutra book at the temple on that day] is like sending money to a bank. Life is impermanent. What we earn in this life will hardly matter at all at the end. When we die we cannot use money or take it with us. So instead of keeping our money to ourselves, we should send it as offerings to the pagoda. It is like sending our money to a bank in the Pure Land. Sending money ‘there’ we can use it later in our next life. We can also use that ‘money’ when accidents happen to us.

This woman was very proud of her family as everyone was a devout Buddhist and had made very generous offerings to many temples. She said:

If we do not make offerings to the Buddha and monks, when serious illnesses come, nothing can save us, even money. Making offerings is to leave aside a fund for your future. When illnesses attack you they will be beaten by the good merit you grew. We do not lose a thing when we make offerings to Buddha. Don’t ever be stingy when you make offerings to the Buddha.

Merit, as ‘spiritual capital’, takes time to accumulate’, or ‘produce profits’, but it can delay or reduce negative outcomes or even completely avert accidents, suffering or afflictions one might face in the future. Its accumulation also entails what Bourdieu refers to as a ‘labor of

inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor', and 'converted into an integral part of the person' (Bourdieu 1986). Merit-making activities are thus a process of creating for themselves a good-merit-loaded subjectivity, which the practitioners believe will pay off with their smooth transition through the bad times in life, with safe recovery from dangerous diseases, and with good fortune and a happy family.

Empowered agency

In early November 2013, the super typhoon Haiyan, recorded as one of the strongest tropical cyclones, entered Southeast Asia and caused high casualties in the Philippines. Right before the typhoon, expecting that Haiyan would strike in full-force in central and northern Vietnam, Vietnamese media and government had called for people's caution and cooperation to minimise the devastation of the typhoon. Haiyan eventually spared Vietnam and did not affect Hồ Chí Minh City at all. The next day, the most lively discussion topic at Ngọc Tịnh temple was, unsurprisingly, about the typhoon that Vietnam had just escaped 'miraculously'.

Aunt Sixth, staring at the crystal clear sky outside the window, commented that she had prayed a lot to Heaven and the Buddha [Trời Phật] during the last couple of days when the news about the super typhoon on its way to attack Vietnam was broadcast on the television. She prayed for 'good rain and harmonious wind' [mưa thuận gió hòa]. Heaven and the Buddha had responded to her prayers and had driven the typhoon out of Vietnam. Other laywomen around us then nodded their heads in agreement and admitted that they also had prayed intensively when the news about the coming super typhoon flooded all television channels. Aunt Sixth said:

I prayed to the Buddha to keep sentient beings [chúng sanh] safe. Vietnam is the safest place because we the people practice Buddhism very devoutly here. Here we recite Buddha's name, and our voice of recitation of His name echoed to the sky. We build Buddhist temples all over our land. Therefore we are protected and saved from this typhoon.

Another one said if everyone in this country practiced Buddhism, this country would be the safest place in the world because it would channel the Buddha's protection toward this land. The accumulated force from the prayers of everyone who practiced Buddhism in this country would be enough to keep all sentient beings safe in times of catastrophe.

It was exciting for me to see how the nation's hottest news that featured in all the media around that time was inserted into elderly laywomen's discussions, and interpreted and reconstructed in their religiously-rich vocabularies and perspectives. The typhoon was interpreted as a collective 'impermanence' that confronted not only their families, but also all other 'sentient beings' living on this earth. The typhoon's sudden change of route which spared the country from the worst damage was also interpreted as a direct outcome of the sincere prayers they made to the divine powers. Their prayers possessed the power that 'echoed to the blue sky', and conveyed the people's plea for help to the supernatural beings, who responded by 'driving' the ferocious typhoon away.

Being Buddhists, they acted as a liaison with the supernatural powers. The religious practices that they performed on a daily basis at home, despite being private and solitary, nevertheless built an access to the protection and blessings of the supernatural forces and directed those auspicious forces not only for their own favour, but also of the benefit of the public. The significance of their practices and sincere prayers was not confined only within

the personal realm of life, but also had expansive efficacy in protecting a bigger group of people, and even the nation. All laywomen shared the same joy, pride and confidence in discussing the Haiyan typhoon and their efforts in blowing that typhoon away and keeping the country and the people safe. Their joy reflected the belief that they were the selected people who were favoured by divine powers, not only in their individual prayers, but also in the wishes they made for all beings in general. It showed that their sincere mind, imbued with the utmost faith in the Buddha, had been attested to by the Buddha himself, and displayed publicly in the beneficial results brought to the nation. It also showed that they were people with meritorious power, who possessed good merit not only sufficient to keep themselves safe from adversities, but also abundant enough to bestow blessings on others.

Although submitting themselves to the protective power of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, and to karmic rules, these techniques of subordination attest to elderly laywomen's attempts to seek agency and control over the negative occurrences, infirmities and misfortunes that may happen to themselves and to their families. Underlying their humility and submissiveness to the superior powers is their belief that they themselves possess the power to produce miraculous changes that conquer illnesses, tackle adversities that they and their families encounter, and even bestow protection to the wider society. Indeed, embodying a subordinated, weak and powerless subjectivity in their relations with divine power affords them the belief that they can conquer the dreadful impermanence of life. They do this by paving the path of life with enough good merit to remove any 'rock' that life presents, and by securing protection and oversight from the divine powers for themselves and their loved ones.

Chapter 7

Techniques of Death

Death indeed was and is at the centre of Buddhist culture and has on a ritual, ideological and even economic level played a crucial role in its development and spread. Death was from its beginning an event that was seen as particularly central to Buddhist interests. Throughout Asia it has always been recognised that Buddhists are specialists in death.

(Ladwig and Williams, 2012:1)

Almost every day during my fieldwork, I learned something from these 'specialists' about this mysterious realm of human experience. Elderly laywomen I met in Ngọc Tĩnh temple, and on pilgrimages and charitable trips, discussed about death, prepared for death, and gave advice to each other about how to be ready for a good death. Sometimes the topic of death and rebirth could be brought up in brief passing comments; other times it would trigger lengthy and more serious discussions. These discussions were nevertheless not dismal and depressing. Most of the time, they revealed attitudes about death and dying not as the grim end of life towards which their lives were powerlessly moving. Rather, death was talked about as an experience in life that is greatly meaningful, which they wanted to do as much as they could in their daily practice to prepare for. As such, death is integrated into the everyday lived experience of elderly women. They discuss the deaths of their friends and the people they know, as well as contemplating and planning for their own deaths. Underlying these

discussions about death are, in fact, their preparation for life, be it the end stage of life or another life after death.

I once found myself caught up in a discussion on death and rebirth on a trip with a lay Buddhist chanting group to a temple in Bình Dương, a neighbouring province of Hồ Chí Minh City, to chant the Lotus Sutra [Kinh Pháp Hoa]. We travelled out of the city on an auto-rickshaw. The vehicle, transporting ten elderly laywomen and me, raced fast along a highway swarming with other vehicles: heavy trucks, minivans, cars, and motorbikes. Sitting on the narrow bench at the rear of the vehicle with no door and with the whole wide highway unfolding beside me, I felt the survival need to hold firm to my seat with both hands. My elderly companions, in contrast, in their neat grey lay Buddhist robes, calmly held their two hands together, and recited ‘Nam Mô Bồ Tát Quan Thế Âm’ [Namo Quan Âm Bodhisattva] to pray for travel safety, following a rhythm like a song. They closed their eyes or looked down, apparently oblivious to the noise, smoke and panoramic scenes of industrial zones, rice fields and houses on the two sides of the highway.

After the recitation finished, the group leader told us that one of her friends had suddenly passed away while holding her hands together and chanting the same Lotus Sutra we would chant on that day. While chanting, that laywoman suddenly said she felt tired. She could not even join her hands together in front of her chest in a praying posture. Her team members immediately took her to a hospital nearby but they could not save her. She fell into coma and peacefully passed away. One of the laywomen on the auto-rickshaw immediately concluded that her death was due to a sudden heart attack after a long period sitting cross-legged on the cold floor and concentrating intensively on the thick Lotus Sutra book (which may take one day to chant from cover to cover). No one in our group thought negatively

about this sudden death. On the contrary, all of them applauded it as a very good death. The leader emphasised:

She died 'lightly' [nhẹ nhàng], with no illness at all. Not even a single day being bed-ridden. I had just chatted with her the previous day, and the next day I heard she already was dead. Her death entailed no pain, no warning sign or illness.

One lady wondered where the spirit might have gone after such a sudden death. Other ladies asserted she must have already been reborn in the Buddha's world after such good death that followed neither pain nor illness, especially while she was chanting such a meritorious book as the Lotus Sutra. They said dying while chanting this sacred Buddhist text, her mind must have been visualising the image of the Buddha when she passed away. By contemplating the Buddha's image in her mind when she passed away, she must have seen the Buddha manifesting himself in front of her, to welcome her to the Pure Land, which in Buddhist belief is the western heaven governed by the Amitabha Buddha.

Then a heated debate on how to attain a good death and a Pure Land rebirth broke forth. One said the dying must recite the Buddha's name at the time of death to 'return to the Buddha' [về với Phật]. Another said the dying must free their minds completely, must let go of everything, must not feel any happiness or sorrow, nor regret for property, spouses and children that they have to leave behind, and only to visualise the image of Buddha in one's mind [tâm tưởng Phật]. Another one said we should make a vow that we would be reborn in the Amitabha Buddha's world every time we prayed or chanted a sutra. The leader, finally, read us this poem which she learned by heart from a female monk which she considered as the guideline for her Buddhist practices.

I pray for a fast death

No pain, no disturbance to others

I long for the moment of my rebirth

So now I am cultivating good merit.

I pray for a light and peaceful 'sleep'

No sorrow, no anger, no complaint

No envy, no hatred, no resentment.

Until I bid farewell to this life

I pray for a timely and peaceful 'sleep'.¹⁴

She concluded that was the core of the practice; that we should not be greedy and pray for so many things. A peaceful death was all that mattered. She also advised her friends:

Now our legs are still strong; our eyes are still good; we should go. We should go to temples, chant sutras and make merit. When the time comes, we will just lie down and peacefully pass away.

Everyone else was silent in agreement. They all seemed to be contemplating what they had just discussed. Meanwhile, I was greatly bewildered by the unusual mixture of reality and dream, of life and death in the liminal space of the auto-rickshaw. We were contemplating death and dying, and an otherworldly land of the afterlife, while sitting in a diesel fume-filled

¹⁴ "Sleep" in this poem implies death.

vehicle, enwrapped in the intensity and urgency of life on the highway and the busy city outskirts around us.

Having not thought much about death, nor what to do to meaningfully prepare for it, I realised then that death was among the everyday concerns of the elderly laywomen; a large portion of their everyday religious commitment is devoted to the process of preparation for their own deaths. I noticed their concerns about death revolved inextricably around such questions as how to attain a good death, and how to safely and quickly move on to the next life, ideally in the blissful world of the Pure Land.

From the early days of my fieldwork, I met laywomen who advised me to become a Buddhist, because among the good things that Buddhism would do for me, according to them, was to be welcomed by Amitabha Buddha to his world after death. Inhabitants of that world already had escaped the vicious circle of death and rebirth, unlike in the impure land of this life, where humans are believed to be in the ‘world of suffering’ [bê khổ], where beings are born, get old, become ill and die [sinh lão bệnh tử]. Beings entangled in a process full of pain and suffering are fated to be reborn again and again into the same vicious cycle. The only resolution to escape this continuous and endless process of suffering, to attain an absolute escape from this world, is to be reborn in the world of the Buddha.

In this chapter, I will discuss how death is conceptualised by elderly lay Buddhist women. Discussing elderly laywomen’s desires for a good death, this chapter characterises the Buddhist practice they follow to enable them live the end stage of life with dignity, full personhood and agency. The sad, lonely and painful ordinary death is replaced by a Buddhist good death, by the warm and happy image of death as a journey to unite with the Buddha, to live in his ultimately blissful world. Focusing on the Buddhist practices that elderly

laywomen follow to pave their way to a good death and Pure Land rebirth, the chapter argues that with Buddhist practice as a technique of the self, elderly laywomen cultivate a disposition and subjectivity that they believe will bring them to the Buddha's land. With Buddhist practice, they attempt to master the experience of dying, and conquer death, by replacing it with a dignified experience of passing the final moments of life in mental and physical soundness and peace, and in readiness for an immediate continuity of life. Buddhist practice is, therefore, also a technique of empowerment, with which adepts believe they can transcend the natural process of 'birth, oldness, illness and death' to retain full personhood, femininity and agency until the end of life and immediately move on to the next better life.

Death as a transitional stage

One day, the mother of a laywoman in Ngọc Tịnh temple passed away. Following the laywomen and the abbess, I went to the funeral at her home to chant sutras, which is what Ngọc Tịnh temple's laywomen usually did voluntarily for families in their neighbourhood whose members had passed away. They did so to make merit for the dead, so that the spirit of the dead could be liberated and be reborn in a good world. After we had chanted, the abbess of Ngọc Tịnh temple, standing in front of the coffin, gave a short sermon that was listened to very attentively by family members as well as by everyone else present at the funeral. In fact, that sermon was addressed to the spirit of the dead, to whom the abbess spoke with a persuasive and motherly voice, as if she were comforting a confused person who did not know what had happened and what it would do from now. First, she expressed the gratitude to the mother who had spent all her life dedicated to taking care of the children. The rest of

the speech was to lecture the spirit of the late mother about the impermanent nature of the life which had been lived, and that now it was the time to move on.

Spirit [Hương linh oi]! This body now has become ugly and un-usable. You should not hold on to it and to your family. You should spend your next forty-nine days remaining in this world listening to the recitation of the Buddha's name, to the chanting of Buddha's teachings, and understand the temporariness [tạm bợ] of the life you lived and the body you were in. Spirit! You should soon reincarnate into another better life, and have a new better body.

Finally, the abbess turned to family members who were in their white mourning robes kneeling on the floor next to the coffin, and advised them to devote themselves to making good merit on behalf of the spirit of their late mother for the next forty-nine days, which is believed to be the time the spirit of the dead remains in the world before reincarnation.

For the living, material things are property. But for the dead, the only property they can carry with them on the journey to the next life is merit [phước đức]. The entire family should on behalf of the spirit of your mom eat only vegetarian food, do good deeds, make offerings to temples and give alms to beggars and the poor. These are to prepare the luggage for your mother's spirit upon her departure from this life.

When the funeral at home ended, the coffin of the mother was escorted by the family, monks, lay Buddhists and neighbours to the crematorium. At the end, what was left of the mother was an urn of ashes that her daughter brought to the ancestor worship room at Ngọc Tịnh temple. Every night, her daughter, who had been her caregiver when she was ill and bedridden, came to the temple to chant for her spirit's liberation from life. The daughter also followed

all the advice of the abbesses, joining many pilgrimages and charitable trips during the forty-nine days after her mother's death.

The body [cơ thể/thân] is usually singled out by lay Buddhists as the most vivid imprint of the nature of impermanence of life, as is shown in the decline, malfunction and inconvenient pain and illnesses that the body carries in old age. Yet the body is what people are most attached to, as it carries their identity, their self-perception and self-value.

Many laywomen nevertheless said we should not love our own body too much, since it, like other material things we owned or made in life, will not follow us at the time of death. 'This body [cái cơ thể này],' a laywoman explained to me, 'will return to sand and dust' [trở về với cát bụi].

When you are young, you are beautiful. You are proud of yourself. You put on make-up; you wear jewellery. But when you are old, you will become ugly. You will become ill. When you die, you have to leave this body behind. So just don't give it too much importance. Don't spend too much money on yourself, on your food or clothes. Instead, donate money to the sangha.

This transformation of a person's body and existence into ashes at the time of death is a concrete reflection of the image of 'sand and dust' [cát bụi], which is a notion that often appears in Buddhists' talks about what happens to the physical existence of a person after death. When one dies, one will 'return to sand and dust' [trở về với cát bụi.] 'Sand and dust' indicates not only the end but also the beginning, so that when a person dies he or she will arrive at the end, which is also the origin of life. The insignificance of 'sand and dust' is thus a demarcator of both the beginning and the end of life, and expresses the temporary fleeting nature of life, which takes place within a structured brief passage of time before the person

returns to the nameless, prevalent and unstructured 'sand and dust'. The image of sand and dust contains within it meanings of vulnerability to external forces and power, absence of agency and structure. 'Return to sand and dust' [về với cát bụi] indicates metaphorically the vanishing of a person, the loss and disintegration of a human's body, vitality, personhood and agency at the time of death. Once healthy, young, independent and autonomous, the person will age, get weak and ill, and finally die and disappear back into sand and dust.

However, the Buddhist death, about which Ngọc Tịnh temple's abbess lectured the spirit of the late mother, or what laywomen on the auto-rickshaw talked about, was not an absolute termination of life, a total loss of the person, personhood and agency. Instead, the death they talked about entails life going through a transition stage, before being continued again in a different form, a different body, and ideally in a different world called the Pure Land. Life, as such, is not bounded by non-existence, or fleeting and insignificant sand and dust, but is continued with more life, which the spirit of a person moves on to. Most devout lay Buddhists I met during the fieldwork aspire to have a good death, and a good rebirth, which promise the continuation of life and the emergence of new body, new self, new identity, in a new better life. They follow devotional religious practices that create not only good merit necessary for a good rebirth, but also train their mind and body to achieve a certain state of dying that they believe will assure a Pure Land rebirth.

The practices that they follow to train themselves for the critical moment of dying are to get through the transition stage between this life and the next life safely and quickly. The vision of death as a stage between lives resonates with Victor Turner's (1969) concept of rites of passage, or 'transition' that are marked by the three phases: separation, margin or threshold, and re-aggregation or re-incorporation. The liminal period in between is characterised as

ambiguous and bears none of the attributes of the past and the coming stage. It is the threshold between the separation stage when an individual or a group separates from an earlier social structure, set of cultural conditions, and the re-aggregation stage when the individual again reaches a relative stable state (p94). Robert Hertz (1960), in his essay on the mortuary practices of the Dayak tribes of Borneo, also characterises the temporary period in which the dead are temporarily excluded from human society, as a stop on the passage from the visible society of the living into the invisible society of the dead. Therefore, during this temporary period between the two states of being in the world of the living and of being in the land of the dead, the body of the deceased person is given a temporary burial before the final internment; during this stage the soul undergoes a parallel period of probation.

This temporary period that the soul of the dead goes through in Dayak culture is equivalent to the forty-nine days after death in Buddhist belief when the spirit has not yet reincarnated into the next life, and still lingers in this world, to be nourished by the meritorious acts of its living relatives. I was told by laywomen that on the forty-ninth day, the spirit attends a court in which all the good and bad deeds that the person did in his or her lifetime are reviewed and good and bad merit is measured. Depending on the balance of good merit that the dead has, his or her next life will be decided. In the worst case scenario, he or she could be sent to hells, where inhumane and terrible tortures are awaiting. In better cases, he or she could be reborn as human, but the destiny of that person – being in a rich or poor family, being a man or a woman, being beautiful or ugly, being healthy or ill, being happy or unhappy – is also decided by the good merit from the previous lives. The most ideal rebirth is in the Pure Land, where the person lives in blissful life forever with no more death and rebirth. As such, during the forty-nine days, family of the dead will dedicate themselves to making as much good merit as possible to help the deceased be given a good rebirth at the

'court'. However, although there are many different scenarios of rebirth, most devout laywomen I met during the fieldwork only think about a Pure Land rebirth.

Devoting themselves intensively to religious practice, laywomen aspired to go through the process of dying, death and rebirth peacefully, smoothly and without confusion, and quickly arrive in a next life, in a good world after death. Many laywomen I talked to hoped they would see the Buddha and their beloved Quan Âm Bodhisattva manifesting in front of themselves at the moment of dying, and go with them immediately to the next life in the Pure Land at the very moment of dying. As such, they wished to shorten and even delete the ambiguous 'liminal' transitional period of the forty-nine days. As can be seen from the discussion on the auto-rickshaw, what the laywomen were most concerned about was to get through the transitional stage of 'death' quickly and painlessly, to immediately reach the ideal rebirth in the Pure Land. Their discussion was not about death, but about transcending the experience of dying and death, and cultivating a continuity of life.

As such, laywomen hoped to tame the mysterious and ambiguous experience of death by structuring it into a very brief transitional stage, called a good death, which they wished to go through without physical suffering and confusion, or dependence upon others. Practicing themselves to prepare for death, elderly laywomen hoped not to suffer or to be reliant on others while powerlessly waiting for death. Instead, they wanted to make a quick jump from life to life. The following sections of this chapter aim to illustrate in further detail what the Buddhist laywomen mean by a 'good death' and the techniques of death that they adopt.

A good death

In discussions with elderly lay Buddhist women, I often encountered the terms ‘die lightly’ [chết nhẹ nhàng], ‘die well’ [chết tốt], ‘die fast’ [chết nhanh] or ‘die easily [chết dễ] to refer to a good death that occurs without pain, suffering, physical torment and extended period of being bedridden. The kinds of good death that are most admired are those occurring during sleep, with hardly any pain or illness prior to them. As illustrated in the conversation on the auto-rickshaw at the beginning of this chapter, the type of death that the lay Buddhist elderly wished to have is not one characterised by bodily suffering, passiveness and inactivity. The woman who died a good death in the story was very much in activity at the moment of her death (chanting a sutra book), in good health (no illness), and in mobility (she was travelling away from home with a chanting group independently from her family).

One 66-year-old laywoman told me that every day she prayed to the Buddha for a ‘one-second pain, one-hour death’ [đau một giây chết một giờ], with which she implied a painless and non-bedridden death so that she did not have to bother her son’s family whom she was living with. Many other laywomen also told me that they prayed for a ‘fast death’, a ‘light death’, without disease and physical pain. When one of their friends was ill and bedridden, they would form within the laity a ‘chanting assistance group’ [ban hộ niệm], and chant the sutra about the Earth Womb Bodhisattva [Địa Tạng Bồ Tát], who governs the netherworld of the dead, the Medicine Buddha Sutra [Kinh Dược Sư], or the Amitabha Sutra [Kinh A Di Đà] which is about the Pure Land governed by Amitabha Buddha. They believed that by chanting these sacred texts, the merit they made would ‘add force’ [trợ lực] to their friend, contribute to the stock of good merit of the ill person for a quick recovery. If that person could no longer recover, they believed the good merit they made would enable the

person a quick death, without lingering too long in life while suffering in pain and imposing a burden of care on the family.

Elderly laywomen usually talked to each other about the dull prospect of being bedridden and ill at the end of their lives, and of bothering their children or children-in-law to take care of them, as the worst-case scenario that one can encounter at the end of old age. This is quite in conflict with the pride of a 'warm old age' they liked to display to their friends, by showing how much their children loved and cared for them and supported them materially and emotionally. Being loved and taken care of by the children is an indicator of the rich stock of good merit, and of their successful achievement as a mother and a woman of the family. Nevertheless, most laywomen told me that they did not want to be a trouble to their children at the end of life. One woman said if she became too weak and immobile, her children would feed her, wash her, change clothes for her, clean her waste and make her bed. But she did not want to be bedridden for more than one month, thus she always prayed for a fast death, in order not to bother her children too much.

A prospective future of being weak, immobile, bedridden and dependent casts a grim shadow on older laywomen's daily life and motivates them to pursue religious practices as rigorously and as devotedly as they can, while they still can, to create merit which might 'mute' these risks, or at least delay them as long as possible to shorten the period of suffering prior to death. One seventy-year-old woman I bumped into on almost every charitable trip told me that within the seven days in a week, she is away from home for almost all seven. Even though she was living with her son and his family, she did not want to bother her daughter-in-law to do anything for her. Being at temples and on trips all the time, she had free meals at the temples. In the evening, when she returned home, she would hand-wash her

Buddhist robes by herself and hang them outside to dry in readiness for the next day of travelling. Home was a place to rest at night, but she went to the temple whenever she could because she knew her 'time' would come soon. She dreaded to think about the time when she was too weak to go to the temple and had to lie in bed. Thus, she prayed to Buddha to enable her to go to the temple till the very end, and when she was too weak to go, let her die and not linger in this life to burden her children.

Dying a good death means the dying can die 'fast and lightly', suffering as little pain as possible, being bedridden only for a short time or not at all, retaining their physical and mental capability to the end, and thus maintaining their agency till the last stage of life. These ideals of dying a good death speak to their conceptualisation of nurturing femininity that they have performed throughout their adult life. As illustrated elsewhere in this thesis, being a woman in the family during their productive years has meant these laywomen have taken a major share of household work, and has required being a good mother to her children, a good wife to her husband, a good daughter to both of their natal families, and worshipping his and her in-laws' ancestors, while also being the manager of household affairs and often the main breadwinner of her family. Their major roles in life have been as caregivers and nurturers, and these roles endure even after their children have grown up and have their own families. Similar observations have been made in several previous studies on gender practices in Vietnam (e.g. Lê Thi 1999; Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết 1999; Nguyen-Vo 2002; Luong 2003: 203; Werner 2004: 115; Ngo 2004).

Therefore, the experience of relying on others for everyday basic care at the end stage of life is dreaded because it is antithetical to the self-perception and identity that laywomen hold during a long life as nurturers, caregivers and breadwinners in their family. They no

longer can successfully perform these feminine roles as they have done throughout their adult life. Such deaths will turn them into someone who depends on others for care, who does not nurture the wellbeing of others and instead is cared for and fed by others. Even in old age when they do not work for income, reproduce or rear children, they still continue this nurturing feminine role in the family in helping their children in myriads aspects of everyday household life, and 'producing' good merit that bestows spiritual blessings on the family (see chapters Three and Six). Many of them emphasised that they did not want to become 'a burden to their children' [làm phiền con cái]. The importance of maintaining as much independence as a full adult person at old age is also emphasised in anthropological research on the end stage of life in other East Asian countries (e.g. Long 2012: 130; Traphagan 2000: 5; Jenike 2004: 223). Long's (2005) research on dying and death in Japan observes that Japanese elderly women preferred 'pokkuri', or a sudden death, to a 'rosui', which is a gradual death. While gradual death allows preparation and opportunities for children to express their love toward their mothers through the performance of filial duties, a sudden death, on the contrary, releases the family from the burden of providing care to the dying. Long notes that women prefer sudden death and this preference speaks to their strong identification in society as the family caregivers, instead of being care recipients. Jenike (2004: 223) noticed the existence of numerous pokkuri-dera, or temples where the elderly pray for peaceful and timely death, and buy amulets for the prevention of senility and other disabling conditions of old age.

Literature on old age and death in Vietnam and Asia has paid a lot of attention to bad, violent or unjust deaths. 'Bad deaths' are sudden and untimely, (Eberhardt 2006; Do 2007), such as those who die in the prime of their life, who have not mentally prepared themselves for their own death (Eberhardt 2006: 60), or who die at the borderline of premarital age,

infancy or pubescence (Do 2007: 162). Kwon (2008: 86) and Fox (1973: 351) described bad 'deaths in the street' as those that are sudden, violent and take place away from home, such as on the streets or in the battlefields. These bad deaths are troublesome because they interrupt the moral worldview centred on the home and collapse the ritual appropriation that should turn the kindred dead into a benevolent ancestor of the family, that usually follows a good 'death in the house'. Vanina (2012: 199), writing about the ceremonies to the dead in Phunoy in northern Laos, also documented the distinction between the 'good dead', those who died an 'ordinary' death that enables them to be encrypted into the community of the ancestors, and those experiencing a 'bad death', who died abnormally such as in an accident or by suicide, and thus might become malevolent spirits that pose danger to the living community. The spirits of the dead, especially those who die untimely deaths, can pose dangerous threats to the living community because of the level of attachment between the dead spirit and its people and community (Eberhardt 2006: 60). These studies do not discuss much about good deaths, nevertheless, through extrapolation, a good death can be understood as what a bad death is not. A good death is timely, takes place at home, and results in the successful escape from life and reincarnation of the spirit in the next rebirth instead of becoming a troublesome spirit lingering amidst the living.

The painless good death that does not cause burden to others, which older lay women in my research envisioned and aspired to achieve, intriguingly is in tension with these structuralist characterisations of good and bad deaths. The 'good' and 'bad' deaths as characterised in structuralist analysis are apparently framed within a temporal and spatial framework that normalises functional reproduction of the social order. Good deaths are those happening at the 'right time', that is, only after the next generation of the family has been successfully reproduced, and in the right place, which means a death taking place at home,

allowing the spirit of the dead to be transformed into a benevolent ancestral being. Bad deaths are, on the other hand, 'bad' if they take place at the wrong place, such as far away from home, on the street, in a battlefield, or in a conflict zone, and at the wrong time, such as when good people die suddenly, or a young woman dies unmarried or childless (Do 2007: 162).

Good deaths for the old lay Buddhist women I studied do not emphasise these attributes. The time and space of death are not central in their imaginations. Dying at home is considered much better than dying away from home, such as at a hospital, or tragically in a traffic accident on the street or in a suicide. However, dying in a temple, or on a pilgrimage while performing Buddhist practices, such as chanting, or reciting the Buddha's name is also considered a very good death and more promising of a Pure Land rebirth than dying at home. Dying at home, relatives' grief and tears might cause stronger attachment and prevent the spirits from leaving this life for the next one. Dying at a very young age triggers pity in others, however, dying at very ripe age but being bedridden and dependent with a serious and physically-tormenting illness is not a good death either.

An elderly woman who is bed-ridden for a very long time, or tortured with pain, disability and immobility, thereby causing a burden to fall on children's shoulders, is said to have a very heavy karmic debt. It is said that she has to linger for so long in life, suffering from pain and being bedridden, in order to pay for the bad karma she had caused. Hearing about a neighbour who had died in her nineties, after four years of being bedridden, senile and suffering four strokes, laywomen in Ngọc Tịnh temple discussed why that poor old woman had to linger so long in such a miserable condition. They said it must be due to the heavy karma from her previous lives that prevented her from dying and being liberated from suffering. Dying at the 'right' time and place – at a ripe old age, at home, surrounded by one's

devoted children – are not, for these laywomen, sufficient components for a good death. Rather, what is desirable is a quick, painless and agentive exit from life, passing swiftly and mindfully into the next existence with one's wellbeing, autonomy and personhood intact.

In these aspirations to die well, the imagination of death is transformed from its frequently grim and ugly connotations, such as of pain, suffering, physical disability, body decomposition, family grief and sorrow, to a prospective scenario of otherworldly beauty, of a death characterised by calmness and dignity, a 'light and fast' good death, and the romance and heroism of the lone 'journey' to reunite with the Buddha. A Buddhist good death is also set in contrast to a 'return to sand and dust', for it promises the elderly lay practitioners continuity of life in a 'return to the Buddha', and immediate passage to a new next life, which is gained by the merit and karma that they cultivate in this life through Buddhist practice. The idea of a good death also gives them the belief that they can retain agency, physical and mental capability until the final moment of their life and thus master the experience of dying, death and rebirth.

Techniques of dying

Living in the neighbourhood of Ngọc Tịnh temple, Grandma Diệp, a seventy-two-year-old laywoman, was considered a strange loner by her neighbours, for she rarely participated in any events in the neighbourhood, such as wedding ceremonies, death anniversaries or meetings. She often shut her door, and only opened it when she needed to brush dirt out of her house. Whenever she appeared on the alleyway, she always walked very fast, straight to the main road and to the bus stop to go a temple in an outer district of the city, and rarely stopped to talk to people. Even though the door was often shut, her neighbours knew whether

she was in or not. When she was at home, she always turned on an audio device that recorded a monk reciting 'Namo Amitabha Buddha' [Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật] incessantly, which could be heard by people living nearby.

Once I glanced into her living room while she was sweeping the floor, and saw on the walls several huge posters of Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha who governs the Pure Land. One huge poster of the standing Buddha was hanging from the mezzanine and covering a large part of a wall and several smaller ones hung on other walls. When I came up to her and expressed my admiration for these posters, she was very pleased. From then on we talked. I came to understand why she was very quiet and rather isolated in her own world.

It is time to think for myself. I no longer mind anything in this earthly world [trần gian]. Now I know only the Buddha [biết Phật] and have to prepare my way to the Pure Land.

Although she lived only a few doors away from Ngọc Tịnh temple, she rarely came for chanting at night. Instead, she travelled very frequently with a Buddha-name-reciting team [ban niệm Phật] to various temples in Hồ Chí Minh City. Her team of laywomen did not chant sutras, rather they focused only on reciting the Buddha's name. She told me that it was a new trend in recent years for people who followed Pure Land practice [tu Tịnh Độ], because it was the 'shortcut' [đường tắt] to a Pure Land rebirth. For more than ten years since becoming a Buddhist practitioner, she had followed several chanting groups to chant various sutra books in different temples. However, for the last few years, she only followed a Buddha-name-reciting group to train her mind for the last moment of life. 'The practice is very simple,' she said, 'but definitely will bring us to our 'destination'. We can recite Buddha's name

basically anytime in a day, like while we are sweeping the floor, cooking, washing dishes or doing anything else.’

The reason for this practice is to ingrain it deeply into her mind, so that even at the moment of dying she could whisper the words ‘Namo Amitabha Buddha’, which she believed had the magical power to bring the Buddha by her side and take her spirit to the heavenly Pure Land. I asked her whether we could be conscious enough at that dying moment to utter the Buddha’s name. I had touched her biggest concern. She immediately told me it was her worry too, hence she did not waste a minute to recite Buddha’s name any time she could in a day to train herself for this critical moment.

This practice reflects a Buddhist belief that the last moment of thought of a dying person influences the form of his or her next rebirth (e.g. Tapp 1993: 289; Stone 2007:135). Stone (2007) in her chapter on esoteric deathbed practices, cited Jichihan (1089-1144), a prominent monk in Heian Japan, who explained that recitations of Buddha names, incantations and spells at the time of death was a way of ‘uniting the practitioner’s body, mouth, and mind with those of the Buddha’ (p146). These practices help the followers to realise the union with the Buddha (p162). The most often-practiced one is to recite the Buddha’s name, which is simple, and can be performed by anyone. Buddhists practice the techniques of dying to embody these religious patterns of thoughts, contemplation and visions, which they believe can draw them closer to the supernatural deities who have the power to take them to the desirable rebirth.

These techniques involve at once the body, mouth and mind [thân khẩu ý] of the practitioners, which, in Buddhist teachings, are the three parts that cause sin and misconduct and thus create bad merit and karmic debt for a person. Thus, everyday Buddhist practices of

the techniques of dying include practicing self-control over one's body, speech and thoughts. Decorating her house with several huge posters of Amitabha Buddha, Grandma Diệp inculcated the image of the Buddha in her thoughts, so as to always visualise the Buddha in her mind [tâm tưởng Phật] even at her last breadth. In addition, she always recited the Buddha's name at all times throughout the day, to control her speech. When she did not have to do housework, she performed the meditating sitting posture, with legs crossed and hands held together while reciting Buddha's name. These practices were to shape, discipline and control her body, mind and speech to prepare for the moment of death.

This training can be performed in private, quietly and personally. It can also be performed collectively in small or huge groups. Once I followed a lay woman to join a one-day Buddhist practice in Hoàng Pháp temple, the biggest Buddhist temple in Hồ Chí Minh City. There, we were gathered in a huge hall, with a big Buddha's statue at one end, with hundreds of other laywomen. From a speaker hung on the ceiling was the voice of a monk reciting 'Namo Amitabha Buddha' three times; the crowd followed him to recite three times, and the process repeated itself for hours throughout the whole day. I was told that in other halls of this temple were other same-sized groups of lay practitioners simultaneously being instructed by the same monk to recite the Buddha's name. They guessed he probably was sitting somewhere in this temple and reciting through a microphone and his voice was being brought to all halls and spaces of the temple through the speakers. The voice of the monk was monotonous, patient and unhurried, like an echo from another world instructing thousands of lay practitioners in this earthy world to repeat after him. His voice, alternating with the wave of female voices of the lay followers, created an otherworldly soundscape with an incessant rhythm of repeated sacred words: 'Namo Amitabha Buddha', 'Namo Amitabha Buddha', 'Namo Amitabha Buddha'...

At the end of the day, we took a city bus back home. This bus route is always crowded with Buddhist practitioners. Sitting next to me were two old women in their grey Buddhist suits, sharing the two ends of a headphone connected to a brown audio device with the Chinese character 'Buddha' [佛] engraved on it. I soon started to talk with one of them. She gave me her end of the headphone to listen. Coming out from the headphone was the voice of a monk chanting repeatedly 'Namo Amitabha Buddha', 'Namo Amitabha Buddha', 'Namo Amitabha Buddha'... The space of the bus suddenly became invaded by the Buddha's name. Whether recited collectively or in privacy, the sound of Buddha name recitations and sutra chanting dominated the lived space and experience, and even dreams, of the practitioners, transforming mundane space into a peculiar space devoted only to forging connection and union with the supernatural power. Repeatedly reciting the Buddha's name, adorning their living spaces with images of the Buddha, filling their rooms with the automatic and incessant recitation of the Buddha's name from an MP3 player that can be purchased in any temple shop, elderly laywomen reconstructed the space of their everyday life in which the Buddha is a pervasive presence.

Not only is living space infused with the Buddha's name, so too are the minds and body of laywomen. This practice of repeatedly reciting the Buddha's name is a technique to train the body to cultivate a disposition that wholeheartedly embraces the Buddha's presence. Embodying this disposition, laywomen believe they are transported to his world. The effects of this practice of repeated recitation of Buddha's name on lay women's bodily habitus and disposition is similar to how the veil donned by Muslim women in Egypt has an effect on their bodies to engender a religiously virtuous identity (Mahmood 2012a). Mahmood's research revealed that repeated bodily acts, such as donning a veil, train memory, desire and

interest to behave according to established standards of conduct, in this case it was the virtue of shyness that Islam woman should embody. Mahmood argues that the body is, thus, a medium, rather than a sign, of the self (p166), since through its acts, the inward dispositions become synchronised with performative behaviours. Thus, wearing the veil is both to train a woman the attribute of shyness, and is integral to the practice of shyness as the act of wearing a veil enacts shyness.

Similar to the veils of Muslim women, through their repeated reciting of the Buddha's name and contemplation of his image in their living spaces, elderly Buddhist laywomen train their bodies to realise a religiously ideal status. Such training enables them to enact a self that they believe is crucial for achieving instantaneous transition from a mundane life to a new life in the Buddhist heaven. The Buddha's name is thus employed as a technique of the self, operating on the 'bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being' to transform individuals in order to 'attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Foucault 1997: 225). In invoking the Buddha as an ever-present reality, elderly women attempt to subvert the experience of dying and death and achieve continuity in life. By training the body to make the Buddha pervasively present as the sole object of their speech, gaze and comportment, they attempt to transcend the experience of death as a complete failure of the body (Lock 1996: 218). Cultivating a bodily habitus that displays in every act the Buddha's presence, they thereby transcend death and achieve union with his heavenly world.

‘Return to the Buddha’

One night after finishing a chanting session at Ngọc Tịnh temple, I walked with Grandma TÍNH back to her home which was located a few alleyways away from the temple. Her humpback made it difficult for her to walk, however, she never missed a chanting ritual. It was then very close to the Lunar New Year [Tết] of 2013. The temple’s ritual was less well-attended than usual, since many practitioners had already returned to their hometowns to conduct the ritual of cleaning grass on the tombs [tảo mộ] of their relatives, or spend time at home helping their children do shopping and decorate their houses for Tết. While we were together counting who had missed the ritual on that day, Grandma TÍNH suddenly became quiet. She looked contemplative for a while and suddenly told me: ‘I am also preparing the luggage for my journey home’ [chuẩn bị hành trang về quê]. Thinking that she herself was leaving the city, I asked her where her hometown was. She giggled at my foolishness, and answered ‘The Pure Land’.

That night’s chat with Grandma TÍNH provoked me to recall that I seldom heard elderly laywomen talk about death as a ‘return to the ancestors’ [về với Ông Bà/tổ tiên], which is usually how Vietnamese talk about what happens after death. Rather, they often talk about death as a ‘return to the Buddha’ [về với Phật]. Death, as a ‘journey’, may thus indicate a departure from family and all familial concerns. The ‘journey home’ is not to join the ancestors, but to another life, ideally to ‘return to the Buddha’ [về với Phật]. Contemplating their own death as a journey ‘to return to the Buddha’ in a supra-otherworldly Pure Land which is completely detached from the world of the living, elderly laywomen may conceptualise death as an absolute detachment from the life that they are living.

A good death therefore depends not only on how a person dies, but also on what happens after death. A good death is to be followed by the spirit's *siêu thoát*. *Siêu thoát* implies an escape, a release, or a 'departure' out of the familiar space and world where the dead person has lived and has been attached to during his or her lifetime. The Pure Land, or the blissful heavenly land governed by Amitabha Buddha, is the most ideal station of rebirth for lay Buddhists. From the first few days of fieldwork, I was impressed by the clarity in their mind about the ideal end stage of life that they wished to have, which is the onset of a light death [chết nhẹ nhàng] and a rebirth in the Ultimate Blissful Western World [vãng sanh Tây Phương Cực Lạc]. A good death is followed by the successful escape of the spirit from this life, body, and all worldly attachments to be reborn in a new better life, ideally in the Pure Land. Previous studies on Buddhist death also emphasise the importance of dead spirits' liberation after death (e.g. Eberhardt 2006: 60-70; Vanina 2012; Desjarlais 2014). These studies illustrate the rituals organised by the living to 'cut off' or 'diminish' the dead spirit's attachment to life, its people and family. However, these studies do not explain what such desire for an escape from life after death demonstrates about the lived realities of old age. What lived realities do they want to be liberated from?

Elderly laywomen often refer to the commonly-heard notion of 'life as a world of suffering' to talk about their wish to be 'released' [giải thoát] from life after death, to be reborn in the blissful world of the Buddha. One day on a trip, a laywoman and I had a conversation about her wish to 'return to the Pure Land' in her afterlife. Our car was running on a highway, lined by green rice fields and peaceful countryside landscape. Looking distantly out of the window, the laywoman said this impure land is full of suffering and hardship, as if she was seeing right at that moment, passing in front of her eyes, a panoramic display of all the worldly sufferings. Thus, she had made up her mind not to return to this

worldly plight in the next rebirth. She said, if she earned enough merit she would be reborn in the Pure Land, a place of bliss free of want and suffering. This perception of contemporary life as an impure land is a Buddhist construction of existence as suffering. The vision is quite different to the state's developmentalist ideology of the world as a stage for realising continuous human and material progress. In the Buddhist vision, suffering in the world is inescapable, the result of the individual demerit accumulated in past lives and of the harmful actions of cruel and unenlightened beings inflicted upon the poor and weak. According to the Pure Land Buddhist ideology of salvation, individuals might transcend such suffering only by exiting the incessant cycle of rebirth into such a world and gaining rebirth in the blissful Pure Land overseen by Amitabha Buddha.

This notion of 'life as a world of suffering' is accompanied by the notion of the karmic debt a person has with family and with others with whom he or she is attached to in life. Owing to this debt, he or she has to endure hardship and sacrifice to share life with and care for those people. As discussed in detail in chapter Two, the Buddhist notion of 'debt' can have a neutral meaning, implying merely the predestined ties one has with the people one meets and shares one's life with, and these ties are result of the merit and karma one had triggered with these people in previous lives. However, 'debt' is usually used by laywomen with rather negative meanings, such as when they talk about the relationships and attachments they have had to sacrifice themselves for, or endure hardships and hurtful emotions to sustain. Therefore, they talk about death as the time when the 'debt' is paid up, when they can cut the attachments to with whom those they have had unpleasant or painful experiences, and yet cannot detach from in this lifetime. A laywoman, unsatisfied with her husband's drinking habit and practically non-existent contribution to their family, said they were bound as husband and wife in this life by the karmic debt she had with him from the previous life.

Therefore, even though being unhappy in the marriage she remained in the relationship. She believed that only at death could this karmic debt be fully paid and their tie could be cut off.

Death, thus, is the demarcator for the end of ‘debt’, and also of the familial duties and responsibilities that they have performed throughout life. Nevertheless, the release that death may provide from unsatisfactory relationships is far from secure. According to Confucian-inspired ancestor beliefs prevalent in Vietnam, the prospects for the afterlife are as an ancestor, reliant on living descendants for veneration, and entangled with them in relations of mutual obligation (Jellema 2007: 471-3). This places the spirit of the deceased in a relationship of dependence and vulnerability, reliant forever on the piety and dedication of intimate but not-necessarily reliable descendants and indeed at risk of becoming a wandering ghost should future generations of descendants ever neglect their filial duties. The alternative standard Buddhist conception of reincarnation offers prospects of rebirth into a better station in the next life, however, if one’s karmic balance is not favourable rebirth may just as readily propel one into a worse situation. Moreover, whatever type of rebirth is obtained, the next life is sure to be full of social entanglements, painful attachments, sacrifice, suffering, illness and death for all but those whose exceptional merit qualifies them for Buddha-hood. By contrast, the Pure Land represents a truly radical alternative for it alone as an afterlife destination promises release from the bonds and attachments that have defined their lives in this world. The Pure Land appeals not only for its promise of everlasting bliss but, also for the prospective release from attachment, and thereby suffering, that it holds out for those who gain entry there.

The Pure Land thus may appear to Buddhist laywomen not only as an otherworldly magical world but also as antithetical to the structure of the life they have lived as women of

family. Laywomen often describe to me that it is very blissful in the Pure Land, where habitants only practice Buddhism all day long with no worries, sadness, hardship, suffering, fear or death. A rebirth in the Pure Land, living under auspices of the Buddha, thus may be a utopia that women construct in their imagination out of the materials of the lived realities of their lives, which are imbued with familial responsibilities and duties in producing progeny, child rearing, taking care of spouses and elderly parents, as well as performing hard work to earn a living in society. A good death, followed by departure for the blissful Pure Land, where habitants live happily forever a carefree life, free from suffering, protected by the Buddha, and never threatened and tortured by the vicious circle of birth, old age, illness and death, is thus a significant life-turning transition. Such a death is not the end, but the opening to a radically new and better life.

Concluding remarks

This chapter discusses elderly Buddhist laywomen's conceptualisation of death and the practices they undertake to prepare for their own death. Their concerns about death, and the Buddhist practices that they follow to prepare for this mysterious life event, powerfully revolve around the desire to continue life. Death in Buddhist belief is not the end, but rather a transition between one existence and another, a passage from one life to another. The ideal of a good death reflects elderly women's wish to minimise or mute the infelicitous characteristics of the end stage of life, and of dying as an experience of physical and mental disintegration, bodily failure and heavy dependence on family for care. A good death, in which the dying does not suffer pain, disability, immobility, extended reliance on others and other degrading conditions, is ideal because it enables a person to avoid painful and

undignified experiences which threaten the loss of personhood and agency as well as the feminine identities and roles that a woman has embodied all her life.

The ambiguous and frightening meanings of death as the loss of self are also eliminated in elderly laywomen's conceptualisation with their imagination of death as a 'return to the Buddha', a departure for the heavenly Pure Land governed by the Amitabha Buddha. Death becomes a life-changing experience, a transition to a new better life, with a better body, status and eternal happiness and security. The strange and disturbing images pervasively attached to death are replaced by a warm image of death as a reunion with the Buddha whom they venerate and whose teachings they scrupulously adhere to in old age. The image of a blissful-yet-otherworldly and detached Pure Land speaks to their vision of a utopia which stands in contrast with the life that they are living. As such, a return to the Buddha's land is equivalent to a 'release' [giải thoát], an escape, a departure from the familial responsibilities and feminine roles that they have performed in life. However, such departure is only attained via a good death, one that is 'quick' and 'light', and accords with women's wishes not to become a burden to their family. When they no longer can care for their family, they try not to degrade the image of nurturing femininity that they have embodied in life by becoming dependent and being a burden to others.

For elderly laywomen, Buddhism is not only a practice of living, but also of dying. It serves as a technique of empowerment that enables elderly women to disentangle from painful and degrading attachments, assists them through experiences of suffering and physical decline, and transforms the experience of dying into a quick jump from mundane life to a supernatural life. In order to prepare for death, Buddhist women follow practices that impose on their body and mind a disposition of unceasing devotion to the Buddha, immersing

themselves incessantly in his name and image and making him forever present, which they believe will enable their acceptance to the Buddha's world. Practicing these techniques of dying, elderly women believe they can transcend the strange, undignified and painful experience of death, and convert this last experience in a human's life into a means for gaining entry into a new and permanently better life.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Buddhism and the Mastery of Old Age

This thesis has investigated through an anthropological lens old age and Buddhism in Vietnam. It explores the Buddhist practice of elderly women in Hồ Chí Minh City and how elderly women use Buddhism to give meaning to, define and navigate the late life stage. The thesis sees Buddhism as a regime of practice of old age. It shapes and powerfully transforms the lived experience of old age, the structure of everyday life, and the personhood that elderly women embody in this stage of life. The thesis finds that in the process of immersing themselves in Buddhist practice and engaging its disciplines in their everyday lives, they also transform Buddhism to make it respond to the specificities of their lives. Buddhism is assimilated and domesticated in their lives and worlds, and how it is practiced reflects its elderly adherents' gender-specific, occupational and class habitus, as well as the wider social context of contemporary Vietnam's urban south. The thesis also apprehends Buddhism as a resource of empowerment for the elderly. It shows that Buddhism serves as a model of and for empowered old-age personhood, and as a reservoir of techniques that enables its elderly practitioners to face uncertainties, infirmity and death with a sense of agency and control.

This study approaches Buddhism from an ethnographic perspective. It investigates Buddhism as practiced by the elderly, as opposed to a doctrinal approach to Buddhism which puts emphasis on book knowledge, theological and doctrinal understanding, and observance of the faith. The study puts emphasis on Buddhism as practiced, rather than as indoctrinated,

and on how Buddhism is lived in the everyday life of elderly practitioners. It shows how a Buddhist cosmology is assimilated by them as the way of life they follow in their old age, and how, through it, they express and transform their personhood and sense of the place they occupy in their family and in society as elderly women. The data used in this research was collected during long-term fieldwork that involved intense participation and observation in a network of senior-aged women practitioners mainly located in District Four in Hồ Chí Minh City, but also spanning across other districts in the city.

Following this ethnographic approach, this study delves into the specific transformations wrought by religious practice, such as how Buddhist practice shapes the temporal structure of a day of an elderly laywoman, how it widens the diversities of place and space in which its elderly adherents live their lives, and how it is utilised when practitioners face illness, infirmity and death. Inspired by practice and subjectivity theory (Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 2006; Foucault 1997; Mahmood 2012a) by turning a microscopic analysis on elderly women's daily practice of Buddhism, this research illustrates the wider context in which these activities are embedded, which is the experience of old age in contemporary Vietnamese society and the realities of religious practice in the country.

This research finds that old age as reconstructed through Buddhist practice in Vietnam has a clear emphasis on activities. These activities include learning, mastering Buddhism and practicing it in ways that emphasise its efficacy and productivity in bringing auspicious blessings, and cultivating good merit and individual accomplishment. In their imaginary of the process of old age, Buddhist practice is approached as a personal journey of self-improvement that nurtures life and leads toward liberation from life after death. Such tendencies of productivity, activity and individual self-cultivation resonate in both how Buddhism is practiced by elderly women, and how they live their old age. This model of old

age as imbued with independence and individualism reflects the sociopolitical landscape of the socialist market economy, and of increasing personal autonomy and consumerism in contemporary Vietnam. Nevertheless, with religious practice being considered a cultural practice of old age, Buddhist activities also more or less detach elderly practitioners from many of their former familial, business and social realms in which they may be marginalised or occupy unspecific roles. Religious practice enables them to reconstruct the scope of their activities and social engagement, and redefine their relational personhood in interaction with family and society when they move into new roles in old age.

Buddhism as a regime of practice

Inspired by the model of examining how the action impacts on the system and how in turn the system impacts on the action (Ortner 1984, 2006), this thesis argues that Buddhism as a set of practices in old age powerfully transforms the 'system' in which it is embedded, which is the condition of intimate attachment, familial identity and domesticity that is held up as a feminine ideal and embodied by a Vietnamese woman throughout her adult life (Drummond 2004; Luong 2003; Soucy 2000, 2006; Taylor 2004; Rydstrom 2003; Endres 2015). The thesis shows that with their induction into the Buddhist world, elderly adepts are detached from these familial expectations and routines and reintegrated into a world apart with its own disciplines, expectations and routines. Buddhist elderly form their own community, set apart from the spatial and temporal co-ordinates of mundane household life. The new Buddhist realm they enter has its own exemplary figures and hierarchy of values, and sets them on a path of extra-domestic religious activities that become the lived reality of old age.

Although steeped in the Buddhist worldview from an early age, it is only when they become detached from everyday household activities in old age that women make Buddhism

central as a practice of life. This thesis shows Buddhism's demands on the body and soul are unfamiliar and strict and must be learned, as a regime of bodily practice. Through activities such as pilgrimages and chanting sessions, women are practically inculcated into Buddhist personhood. These activities induct them into an alternative way of life not restricted to the ideals of Vietnamese feminine domesticity and sets them on a personal journey of self-cultivation independent from family. Buddhism is thereby a transformative practice in old age. It redefines and reconstitutes old age not as the last stage of life, in which a person has reached the limits of self-development, but rather as a continuity of personal formation, aligned with Buddhist disciplines of self-comportment and moral codes.

At the same time, being embedded in the lived realities of old age, Buddhism as a set of practices is immersed in the everyday concerns, relations and social circumstances of the everyday life of its practitioners and is transformed in ways reflecting these concerns and circumstances. Buddhism becomes a source of repentance and undoing for the past misdoings of retired traders, a reservoir of knowledge, and a productive system in which an old retired woman still 'works' to produce and save good merit as 'nourishment' and 'property' she provides for her family. Assimilating Buddhism into the habitus of gender, social class and occupational background, these women's religious practices show the mutual effects between Buddhism and the social setting in which it is embedded, practices which are shaped in turn by its adherents' old age, and the unique social, existential and cultural factors entailed in the late stage of life.

In this regard, a significant dimension in which Buddhism is transformed by the habitus of its elderly practitioners is the productive aspect of their 'work-like' Buddhist practice. My elderly interlocutors approached Buddhism in regards to the good it can cultivate for their families and themselves. Buddhism fills the structure of elderly women's everyday

life with regular chanting sessions, repentance and merit transference rituals, full-moon rituals, pilgrimages and charitable trips, as well as many other activities. This concern with industry and productivity indicates the embeddedness of the practice of old age and of Buddhism in the lives of its adepts and, more broadly, in contemporary Vietnam's society which remains shaped by a socialist emphasis on productivity even as it is driven along the paths of marketisation and consumerism. Buddhist practice is also marketised, with great diversities of 'services' which promise to produce results that are beneficial to the elderly.

In turn, the products from their Buddhist practice enable practitioners to resolve existential problems that they face as elderly people, helping them to retain agency and control over their own body, health and life, and to continue to contribute to and participate in their children's families. The practice produces in them the good merit that can be passed on to their families as blessings, when they no longer possess the place, means and physical capability to take care of their families, and that can be saved for themselves in times of infirmity and death.

Empowering the old-age self

Buddhism diverts old age away from being a stage of life when an elderly person may be marginalised in society and family, or may be regarded as weak and powerless and in physical decline at the end stage of life. Instead, with Buddhist practice, elderly women can confront and transform these dreadful thresholds by replacing them with the busy schedules that religious practice imposes on the temporal structure of their everyday life, with intensive social activities and networking in lay Buddhist communities. Buddhist practice inculcates in them a sense of purposefulness and accomplishment that they attain from merit-making activities at temples. It provides them with a sense of control over their own life via, for

instance, the patronage relations they forge with supernatural powers such as the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that bring them protection in face of adversities.

This takes us to the second theoretical paradigm that this thesis applies, which is a Foucauldian-inspired framework that looks into the practice of Buddhism as a technique of self, as a means of self-cultivation, self-knowledge and empowerment. Here, Buddhism is seen as a source of power, a reservoir of techniques that elderly women lean on to maintain agency and dignity, amidst their awareness of the negative aspects of old age such as physical decline, dependency on others for basic care and needs, and fears of being bedridden, and losing dignity and personhood in the moment of death.

One of the prominent examples of the way Buddhist practice transforms and empowers elderly lay practitioners is charitable practice. In practicing selflessness, performing acts of giving and sacrifice, elderly women enact a caregiving Bodhisattva-hood, which enables them to expand their feminine roles far beyond home, and transform their sense of self into that of Bodhisattvas in the mundane world. Their charitable practice reconstructs their self-presentation to wider society and refutes marginalisation. Through it they re-engage themselves in life not as petty traders, mothers and wives who work hard to support family, but as larger-than-life selfless personae who are involved in activities they deem to be influential and socially-meaningful. Modelling themselves subjectively upon the female Bodhisattva Quan Âm, elderly women partake of this benevolent figure's supernatural essence of compassion and mercy and experience exalted personhood through the practice of charity. The exalted subjectivity they experience through charitable practice is more than a mere extension of femininity beyond the domestic realm and family-oriented nurturing subjectivity (c.f. Weller and Huang 1998). In these transcendent moments as sponsors of constructions of public infrastructure, of an orphanage or hospitals' meals, they also enact an

ideal image of the bureaucrat, or socialist cadre who dedicate themselves to improving life of the disadvantaged in society. Their subjectivity as charitable donors entails a transcendence in regards to their class habitus and social position as defined by their female gender, senior age and occupational background.

Buddhism as a technique of the self also includes submission to external rules and powers, such as when confronting infirmity and death, elderly laywomen lean on Buddhist practice to forge patronage connections with supernatural agents, in hope that they and their families are protected by their powers. They also submit themselves to the karmic rules, which bestow remedies for the misfortunes they experience in life based on a theory of moral reciprocity and their balance of good and bad merit. Although these techniques of subordination to external forces and rules appear passive and submissive, through them, they channel the agency of supernatural powers and harvest the fruits of moral action to gain a degree of control and agency over their own final stage of life.

One of the most significant concerns of elderly laywomen in seeking control over life is how to prepare for death. Concern about death is lurking behind many religious practices, however, not as a negative disposition that continuously influences their motivations and ways of practicing Buddhism. Death is prepared for, talked about in everyday chats with friends and families, imagined and even rehearsed for. This quotidian thought of death is concretised in a range of technologies to deal with death: to prepare for having a good death and a quick liberation from this life. These 'techniques of death' are acquired through advice and experience, learned from sermons and sutra books and picked up through observations of the 'good' and 'bad' deaths of people they know. Despite being technologies of death, they nevertheless are very much about life, about maintaining personhood, independence and agency, and nurturing an ideal of feminine autonomy until the final moment of life.

Implications for future research

As illustrated in this thesis, Buddhist practice and experience of old age reflect and are transformed by practitioners' habitus and by the society in which they are embedded. Future research can consider diversifying the ethnographic approach to old age and Buddhist practice by expanding the direction and scope of analysis in regards to temporal, spatial and social dimensions. As such, elderly women from rural areas or different regions, from a higher educational background, or embodying a different social habitus, might have different priorities in their religious practice to these elderly women from a working-class southern Vietnamese urban neighbourhood, whose self-comportment through old age and in their practice of the faith is influenced by their earlier days of working as petty traders to support their families.

A more confining focus on the timeline of old age can also result in highly specific and detailed understandings of different sub-stages and experiences within this late stage of life. This study traverses the broad arc of old age, from when laywomen encounter old age, through when they leave responsibilities for nurturing in the family to younger generations and immerse themselves in new activities, networks and projects, to stages when they face illnesses, the possibilities of being bedridden and fully dependent on others for care, and contemplate seriously what their death will be like and how to prepare for it. A focus on a specific stage of old age, such as illness, disability, dependency, or proximity to death, or other thresholds such as encounters with grandmotherhood, great-grandmotherhood or the loss of a spouse, and how Buddhist practice is integrated into these experiences, can give us perspectives with higher resolution on old age, the life cycle, death and the enactment of personhood throughout the life course of the elderly in Vietnam.

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