

PANEL

Karma, Gender, and Displacement: Negotiating Buddhist Moral Worlds in Myanmar and the Thai Borderlands

Convener

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Panel Description

This panel examines how gendered subjectivities are constituted, negotiated, and contested within Buddhist moral worlds in Myanmar and along the Thai–Myanmar border. Bringing together ethnographic research on women, queer individuals, and migrant men, it approaches Buddhism not simply as doctrine but as a lived moral condition that structures everyday life, social belonging, and vulnerability. Across these cases, Buddhist concepts such as kamma (karma), hpone (spiritual power), merit-making, and ideals of moral personhood operate as a shared moral grammar through which gendered lives are evaluated, disciplined, and reimagined.

Rather than treating religion as a stable cultural backdrop, this panel positions Theravada Buddhism as an active force in the production of gender hierarchy and moral value. It asks: How do women craft agency within devotional traditions often framed as submissive? How are queer subjects rendered morally precarious within Buddhist heteronormative frameworks? How do displaced migrant men reconfigure masculinity when economic survival conflicts with religiously inflected ideals of the “good man”? Across rural Myanmar and Northern Thailand, Buddhist moral discourse does not simply regulate bodies—it produces differentiated forms of recognition, stigma, aspiration, and exclusion.

The panel intervenes in dominant scholarship that either romanticizes Buddhism as inherently tolerant or reduces it to conservative patriarchy. Instead, it demonstrates how Buddhist moral worlds generate both constraint and possibility. Women’s devotional practices can become sites of embodied authority; queer lives reveal how karmic narratives and spiritual hierarchies naturalize vulnerability; migrant men’s participation in queer sexual economies unsettles normative masculinities tied to heterosexual virility and moral respectability. In each case, gender is not external to religion but co-constituted through everyday moral practice.

Collectively, the papers argue that Buddhism functions as a translocal moral infrastructure linking village monasteries in Myanmar to migrant communities in Thailand. Within this infrastructure, gendered subjects are continuously evaluated through karmic logics, spiritual hierarchies, and ideals of merit and respectability. Yet these same frameworks are reinterpreted, negotiated, and strategically mobilized by women, queer individuals, and migrant men. By placing devotional reinterpretation, queer precarity, and displaced masculinities into conversation, the panel offers a timely and regionally grounded contribution to debates on gender and religion in Southeast Asia. It invites the conference to

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consider how moral worlds travel across borders—and how gendered bodies become the terrain upon which Buddhism's promises, pressures, and possibilities are lived.