

Please your mother, become a monk

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Early in the morning all along the road women are waiting to offer food to passing Buddhist monks to build up good karma. Men don't do that. That has to do with two universal characteristics of men. Men don't cook. And men are less religious than women. But it has also to do with something else: men can become monks themselves, and build up good karma in that way.

Over the last few months I regularly witnessed a procession when the next young man was ordained as monk. He would sit in the back of a pick-up truck under a parasol. The truck drives in walking speed through the village, followed by a throng of dancing people. I noticed that often the monk-to-be looks decidedly unhappy.

Maybe it is all the attention; maybe it is the crazy outfit he has to wear before he gets his monk's robes; maybe it is the fact that he is supposed to be sober, while all the rest in the procession are thoroughly plastered. (That remains remarkable to me. One of the five Buddhist precepts is to abstain from alcohol.)

But it is also possible he looks so unhappy because he doesn't want to become a monk at all. But he really has no choice. Women can't build up good karma by becoming a monk. Thai Buddhism came up with a counter-weight. Part of the good karma you gain by becoming a monk, is transferred to your mother.

Becoming a monk is not very popular anymore with young men. But one argument still carries a lot of weight. Therefore in many places throughout the country you now see billboards. They show an idyllic picture of a Buddhist temple, with the slogan: "Please your mother, become a monk!"