

Thai Buddhism, women and social change
พุทธศาสนาไทย สตรี และการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางสังคม

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Abstract

The status of Thai women has been formally recognized in the Thai Constitution since 1932 and despite their playing major roles in society both inside and outside the household, their status remains unequal to that of men. In terms of Thai Buddhism, “maechi” – female devotees who shave their heads, wear white robes and practice eight precepts – are only recognized and accepted within the religious domain by the Thai sangha and public. Maechi are regarded as inferior in religion. Bhikkhuni on the other hand, have been one of the fourfold divisions of Buddhism since the Buddha’s time. Dr. Chatsuman Kabilsingh rebelled against the Thai sangha’s prohibition against women being ordained as bhikkhuni and opted to be ordained in Sri Lanka as Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. Bhikkhuni practice 311 precepts, and although they are marginalized by the Thai Sangha, they are respected by their many followers. They teach the dhamma and give dhamma trainings both locally and internationally. They also follow the Buddhist disciplines strictly. With the discipline and positive attitude of bhikkhuni, they are able to support the dhamma practice of Buddhists and help the Sangha to maintain Buddhism. It is the time for Buddhism in Thailand to rid itself of unwarranted sex discrimination and provide a clear path for women to take their place alongside men as monks.

Keywords: social change, Thailand, buddhism, gender, bhikkhuni

บทคัดย่อ

รัฐธรรมนูญยอมรับสถานะของผู้หญิงไทยอย่างเป็นทางการในตั้งแต่ปี พ.ศ.2475 และแม้ผู้หญิงจะมีบทบาทสำคัญในสังคมทั้งในและนอกบ้าน แต่สถานะของผู้หญิงไทยยังคงไม่เท่าเทียมกับผู้ชาย ในด้านพุทธศาสนาไทย “แม่ชี” – ผู้หญิงที่โกนศีรษะสวมชุดสีขาวและถือศีลแปด - เป็นที่รู้จักและยอมรับในศาสนจักรและสังคมไทย ในทางศาสนา แม่ชีมีสถานะที่ดีกว่า ในอีกด้านหนึ่ง ภิกษุณีเป็นหนึ่งในพุทธบริษัทสี่ที่ระบุไว้ในพระพุทธานุญาตตั้งแต่สมัยพุทธกาล ดร.ฉัตรสุมาลย์ กบิลสิงห์ ได้กบฏต่อข้อห้ามของพระสงฆ์ไทยในการห้ามผู้หญิงบวชเป็นภิกษุณีและเลือกที่จะบวชที่ศรีลังกา และมีฉายาว่าภิกษุณีธัมมฉันทา ภิกษุณีถือศีล 311 ข้อ แม้ว่าภิกษุณียังเป็นกลุ่มชายขอบในทัศนะของมหาเถรสมาคม แต่ก็ได้รับความเคารพจากญาติโยมเป็นจำนวนมาก ภิกษุณีสอนและฝึกอบรมธรรมะทั้งในระดับท้องถิ่นและระดับนานาชาติ อีกทั้งยังปฏิบัติตามหลักของพุทธศาสนาอย่างเคร่งครัด ด้วยการมีวินัยและทัศนคติเชิงบวกของภิกษุณีนอกจากจะสามารถสนับสนุนการปฏิบัติธรรมของชาวพุทธแล้ว ยังช่วยมหาเถรสมาคมในการจรรโลงพระพุทธศาสนาด้วย ถึงเวลาแล้วที่พระพุทธศาสนาในประเทศไทยจะต้องไม่เลือกปฏิบัติทางเพศอย่างไม่สมเหตุผล และเปิดทางให้ผู้หญิงมีโอกาสเช่นผู้ชายที่จะอยู่ในฐานะพระสงฆ์ให้ชัดเจนด้วย

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1. Introduction

Thai women's status has been recognized in the Thai constitution since 1932, which mentions that man and woman have equal rights. Their roles in society, with respect to Buddhism in particular, have been recognized gradually. In Thai Buddhism, "Mae Chi" or "maechi"¹ are known as woman who dedicate their lives to religion. Later on, efforts to revive "bhikkhuni" in Thai society led to unofficial recognition and acceptance by the Thai sangha. However, both organisations have played the roles in empowering women in terms of the dhamma and secular lives. This reflects that there is no sex discrimination in the attainment of enlightenment in Buddhism. This article will briefly present about the status of Thai women from past to present, the status of Thai maechi from past to present, the status of Indian women in Buddhism in the Buddha's time and a brief history of Thai Bhikkhuni, and maechi contribution to Thai society.

2. A brief chronology of changes to the status of women in Thailand

Since 1932, Thai women have been recognized and formally permitted to hold positions previously held by males only, as the following, chronology shows:

- a woman representative in the National Assembly (1949)
- President of the United Nations Association of the World in Geneva (1956)
- the first woman judge (1965)
- the first female industrial engineer (1967)
- the first female mayor (1969)
- first two female ministers (1976)

As for legislation, many laws guarantee the rights of women equal to those of men in society, as described below:

- the first long-term development plan for women (1982 - 2001) was created (1979)
- the first female sub-district headwoman (1982)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was ratified (1985)
- the National Committee for Promotion and Coordination of Women was established as a permanent organization (1989)

- the Thai Cabinet ordered all government agencies to review equality limitations in governmental positions, giving women the opportunity to hold all positions, apart from those related to national security (1991)
- a cabinet resolution recognized 1992 as “Thai Women’s Year”; Long-term Women's Development Plan was reviewed; Thai women whose husbands were foreigners gained the right for their children to hold the nationality of their mother; extended the maternity leave period extended from 45 to 60 days in government offices and 90 days for private workers; abolished child prostitution and gave women the opportunity to engage in a career equal to men (1992)
- cancelation of the prohibition against women holding the position of deputy district chief (1993)
- appointment the first female governor (1994)
- appointment of female investigative officers to police stations for the first time (1995)
- appointment the first female district chief and the first ten female generals (1996)
- The Thai cabinet agreed in principle to create the office of National Committee for the Promotion and Coordination of Women as a Department (1997)
- draft bill giving the right to married women to retain their maiden name (1999) (‘sa-tha-na-phaap-sa-trii-thai-adiit-pat-cu-ban’ (Thai women’s status from past to present, n.d.).

However, although there have been many positive formal changes for the status of Thai women, Vichit-Vadakan (1994) explained that woman’s-and family related issues fall outside the direct domain of law in Thai society. Thai women tended to help the family by working outside and were considered as good workers, obedient and not demanding. Although women have made gains in the workplace, they remain less than fully equal with men in terms of their status in society.

3. A brief history of the Thai maechi

The word “Chi” refers to a kind of priest who wears white, also known as “Chi-pa-khaaw or Chi-phaa-khaaw” or “Rue-si-chi-phrai” meaning ‘forest ascetic’. Nowadays, “Chi” is used to address a woman with shaved hair and eyebrows and wearing white. Another interpretation of “Chi” derives from “Chi” or “Chi-na” meaning “winner”. (Mae-Chi, n.d.)

A western observer’s account of Siam mentions the status and lives of maechi in the 17th century and reports seeing white-robed, shaven-headed women living in the grounds of Buddhist temples. Most of these women were aged and had no family to provide for them. Records from prior to this time do not explicitly mention maechi in Thailand; it is likely that some records were lost in the destruction of the Ayutthaya Kingdom in the 18th century. The marginalization of maechi in Thai society may also have played a role in their exclusion from historical records (Maechi, n.d.).

In 1969, the first nationwide meeting of maechi was organized by the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand, and in the same year, the Queen's Foundation for Thai Maechi was formed to organize maechi scattered throughout Thailand (Maechi, n.d.).

Maechi practice eight or ten Buddhist precepts. The title “maechi” is reserved only for females, and serves as a means to gain entry into the spiritual life of Thai Buddhism. However, as a result of both the institutional and societal perceptions of maechi, they are normally seen as being of inferior status compared to the bhikkhu (Seeger, 2007, pp.13-14).

Education is an important tool for maechi empowerment in order to be able to help the country’s development. A number of Buddhist institutions provide higher education for maechi and other women. According to the study of Raksaa-chom and Martin (2013), the Thai sangha provides access for maechi to higher monastic education with appropriate accommodation and financial support. Since 1951, the Mahanikaya Sangha has supported maechi in their abhidhamma studies, and in 1963, the Dhammayuttika-Nikaya Sangha permitted maechi to pursue pali studies in a similar way to monks. As a consequence of the enactment of the University Acts in 1997, both Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University and Mahamakut Buddhist University have been able to admit maechi to study there. The quality of life for maechi has improved significantly over the last 10 years.

In 1998, the Mahapajapati Buddhist College was established by the Thai maechi Institute, together with the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women and Mahamakut Buddhist University. It is affiliated with Mahamakut Buddhist University which promotes the status of maechi and other women by providing a bachelor degree course. The

Faculty of Education offers Buddhist studies and the Faculty of Humanities, English programs. Scholarships are available to those able to meet the regulations of the college.

During their four years of study at this college, many have addressed their bad habits and developed a positive mindset. After graduation, some pursue further studies and others resume regular lives. With Buddhist and secular knowledge, they are able to graduate and apply themselves to the benefit of society.

4. A brief history of the status of women in ancient India

India has been a patrilineal society since ancient times but the status of women in India changes from time to time. In Rig Vedic, sons were preferred as they carried on the family name and traditions and also performed beneficial religious rites for parents after they passed away. Daughters were free and had the chance to study. Daughters had a share in their father's property, and women had an equal share in the social and religious life because a man without a woman was considered deficient.

In the epic period, women had an honored status in society. The Ramayana reflects the ideal Hindu woman. In the Mahabharata, women could advise men on social and religious issues, and they had an effective role in the social and political life of the society.

According to the ancient Laws of Manu (V, 147-8), girls were taught that, when they were young they were under the control of parents, and after marriage, they were under their husband's command. When the husband died, they were under their son's control, as cited by Press Swarna de Silva, 1994:

“By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent”.

However, the status of women in ancient times was periodically positive and negative.

5. Status of women in the Buddha's time

The Buddha proclaimed a message that was to be universal, without exception as to race, caste or sex. Both men and women could become Buddhas, which is a universal law. Buddhism considers that men and women have equal rights. Husband and wife share equal responsibility and discharge their duties with equal commitment. The wife helps with the

husband's affairs when he is absent. The husband has to take care of the wife and consider her as a companion, friend and partner.

5.1 Bhikkhuni in Buddha's time

After the fifth phansa² of the Buddha's enlightenment, his father, King Suddhodana, became sick. The Buddha visited him in Kapilavattu city. He offered blessings to his father until the father also attained enlightenment without ordination, before finally passing away. One day, after the funeral, Maha Pajapati Gotami, his foster mother, went to see him, sat to one side and said, "Lord Buddha, would you please give women the opportunity to be ordained in your dhamma and vinaya." The Buddha said to her, "Gotami, please do not be delighted with that; it is very hard to live a monastic life in the dhamma and vinaya. She implored the Buddha in a similar way three times, but got the same answer." (Dhammacaro n.d.).

After that, the Buddha went to Vesali city and stayed at Kotagarasala in the Mahavana forest. Maha Pajapati Gotami, together with other women, followed him for ordination but the Buddha refused again. Finally, Ananda asked him whether women could become enlightened or not. The Buddha said they could. Then he asked the Buddha to ordain his foster mother. The Buddha told him that if she accepted the eight special rules (*garudhamma*) of training for a bhikkhuni, he would allow her to be ordained. Pajapati Gotami had to agree to *garudhamma*³ before she could be ordained, and these rules were later incorporated into the bhikkhuni Vinaya.

Therefore, by means of this ordination method, Maha Pajapati Gotami was the first bhikkhuni in the Buddhist tradition by accepting the eight garudhammas which Ananda had brought her, and only she was ordained by this method. Other female followers received ordination from the monks, but during the ordination, the women had to answer 24 points for themselves as clearance that they were fit for ordination. Some, however, were reluctant to provide such personal information, so the Buddha, understanding the limitations, then allowed the bhikkhuni to ask questions. This was the introduction of dual ordination: bhikkhu and bhikkhuni. Later, this ordination came to pose an obstacle to ordination lineage where there was no existing bhikkhuni sangha. (Dhammananda, 2010, p.10).

The Buddha changed the traditional worldview of Indian society by allowing women to join the female order of the Sangha, which removed the gender barrier in recognition of the fact that women are as capable of enlightenment as men.

The bhikkhuni sangha in the Buddha's time in India continued for at least one hundred years. In the 11th century, Muslims attacked and occupied India and erased the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni sanghas. (Dhammananda, 2010, p.13).

Female monastic communities in the bhikkhuni lineage were established in Vajrayana/Theravada Buddhist communities which existed previously, but became extinct between the 11th and 13th centuries. Bhikkhuni ordination continues in the East Asian communities. In Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, ordination of bhikkuni in Theravada Buddhism has been revitalised. In Thailand, however, the bhikkhuni issue remains in debate, an issue which will be discussed later in this paper.

The Buddha exhorted that the dhamma should represent him after his passing away. Dhamma has no gender differentiation. Nirvana can be attained by any male or female through Sila (morality), Bhavana (spiritual growth), and Pañña (wisdom). Moreover, pure Buddhist practice is not ritual, although later, in some Buddhist countries like Thailand, the syncretism of religions and local beliefs accumulated in multiple rituals such as in worship practices, chantings and offerings to monks.

In Thai Buddhist history, women have tried to participate in Buddhism in various guises such as:

- 1) **śrāmaṇerī** (Sanskrit.)/**sāmaṇerī** (Pali) 'a novice maechi'
- 2) mae chi (Thai), maechi (English)
- 3) **bhikkhuni** (Pali)/**bhikṣuṇī** (Sanskrit.)

According to the traditional vinayas, when a woman wants to ordain, first she has to be a **śrāmaṇerī** by practicing the Ten Precepts⁴ as their code of behaviour. Maechi practice eight precepts but bhikkhuni have to practice 311 precepts - more than monks who practice 227 precepts. Maechi shave their heads, wear a white robe and mostly stay separately in the monastery compound⁵. Some are schoolgirls who seek religious discipline training during vacations. They usually spend some time with the maechi and may or may not shave their head, but they do also wear white robes. Additionally, some laywomen are permitted to practice the eight precepts with the maechi for a period without having their head shaved. As for bhikkhuni, they wear a long-sleeved saffron-coloured blouse along the robe, and they have no choice but to go shaven-headed.

As mentioned earlier, the bhikkhuni lineage died out between the 11th and 13th centuries and there were no bhikkhuni left to give ordination. For this reason, the leadership of the Theravada Bhikkhu Sangha in Thailand deem fully ordained bhikkhuni as impossible.

“Equal rights for men and women are denied by the Ecclesiastical Council. No woman can be ordained as a Theravada Buddhist maechi or bhikkhuni in Thailand. The Council has issued a national warning that any monk who ordains female monks will be severely punished.” (Mettanando, 2005). Most Thais are unfamiliar with the history of the Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha and believe that the Buddha never ordained women. Many Thais believe that women become Mae-chis because they are running away from personal problems (Maechi, n.d.).

5.2 The first bhikkhuni in Thailand

In Thai society, around the 1920s, a Thai politician named Narin Klueng supported the bhikkhuni sangha by allowing his two daughters, Sara and Chongdi, to ordain together with six other women. Sara, his older daughter, ordained as a bhikkhuni but was later imprisoned and forced out of the robes. Eventually, the movement died out after she was suspiciously kidnapped while on her morning alms round. (Dhammananda, 2010, p.17).

In 1928 the Sangharaja issued an order forbidding Thai monks from ordaining women. When the first Thai constitution was adopted in 1932, the king was positioned under this constitution, so Sangharaja regulations prior to 1932 should have been rendered null and void. But in 2004 when Ven. Dhammananda ordained, the present Council of Elders still referred to this obsolete rule as the reason for not supporting bhikkhuni sangha in the present era. (Ibid)

Bhikkhuni Bodhisatava Voramai Kabilsingh was ordained as bhikkhuni of the Sung San Monastery in Taipei in 1971, which is Mahayana, not Theravada. Still, she was the first bhikkhuni of Thailand. She returned to turn the family home in Nakhonpathom near Bangkok into the Songdhammakalyani Monastery, today called *Songdhammakalyani Bhikkhuni Arama* meaning “temple where women uphold the Dhamma”. There, she offered those interested a Buddhist education and attended the poor and needy for more than 30 years before she passed away in 2003 aged 96.

In 2001 when her daughter Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was ordained, first as sammaneri and later as a bhikkhuni in Sri Lanka, the issue of bhikkhuni returned to the public interest. She received full ordination as a Theravada bhikkhuni in Sri Lanka in 2003, but why did she go to Sri Lanka to be ordained?. The answer is because she had to be ordained as *sāmaṇerī* first and then later by at least five members of the bhikkhu sangha as well as five members of the bhikkhuni sangha. The problem was that since there was no bhikkhuni sangha in Thailand, she had to receive ordination in Sri Lanka⁶. She is a Thai woman who received full ordination as a Theravada bhikkhuni, and today she is the abbess of Songdhammakalyani Monastery where there are only bhikkhuni.

After her ordination, numerous studies were undertaken related to her circumstances, and her case was raised and discussed in parliament. The Deputy Prime Minister, Dr. Vishnu Krue-ngarm, explained clearly that “according to the Constitution, there was nothing in the law that prevented women from being ordained, but acceptance is under the jurisdiction of the Sangha, meaning the Council of Elders”. But the Sangha under the Council of Elders could not make any legal judgement as the Sangha Act itself has defined the word sangha as relating only to bhikkhu. (Dhammananda, 2010, p.18)

In 2014, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni was appointed as a female preceptor by a Sri Lankan preceptor during a group ordination for women monks in Songkhla, Thailand (ibid). Since her ordination, she has been opposed by the Thai Bhikkhu Sangha as well as others (both men and women). She explained that this is perhaps because of culture in that Thai people are only familiar with male ordination and believe there is no need for women to be ordained; they can still practice the dhamma and achieve nirvana. In her opinion, this is not really true. The Buddha said that ordination is a short cut way that makes us focus clearly, which is proved by her ordination. (Sindhusen, n.d.).

5.2.1 Current situation of bhikkhuni in Thailand

Several branches of Dhammananda Bhikkhuni's Songdhammakalyani Bhikkhuni Arama have been established in other provinces. Today, there are more than 100 bhikkhuni who have been independently ordained in Sri Lanka residing in more than 20 provinces in Thailand. These include Mahayana bhikkhuni. These bhikkhuni are officially permitted to ordain other women.

5.2.2 Some opinions of people towards bhikkhuni

Controversial opinions shared on social media by individuals and organisations can be analysed according to Foucault's concept on discourse, as in the following examples:

(1) Positive views

(a) Today's Buddhism exists in the modern era in which people accept and demand equal rights. If we recognize that each person has equal potential to become enlightened and the equality of all humans, then allowing women to ordain as bhikkhuni in this current society should be easier than in the Buddha's time.

(Thaveesak, 2009)

(b) The Thai Sangha is not ready to confront new challenges. It is not only the new problems arising from globalization, but old problems such as

‘bhikkhuni ordination that the Thai Sangha kicks down the road rather than solving them.

(Thaveesak, 2009)

(c) Ordination can simplify enlightenment.

(Matichon, 2001))

(d) I see that, normally, women support Buddhism more than men. Therefore, the more women get ordained and practice Dharma, the more it will help to nurture and spread Buddhism. At least it would help to convince the monks and draw their attention to the Dharma of Discipline. (Wannapok, 2014)

(2) Negative views

(a) I don’t agree, and it is not necessary for maechi to ordain. Only eight precepts are required and still many maechi cannot follow the practice. Ordination as bhikkhuni requires even more discipline.

(Asoke, 2001)

(b) There is no need to ordain for enlightenment.

(Asoke, 2001)

The comments above reveal both agreement and disagreement of people towards bhikkhuni ordination. Concerning the positive views, bhikkhuni ordination offers an equal right to both males and females to seek enlightenment, legal support and means to attain enlightenment. As for the negative views, even if a maechi wishes to change her status from maechi to bhikkhuni, it is too difficult for them to follow the 311 precepts. Besides, female ordination deviates from the Buddhist cannon. Moreover, Thai people are familiar with maechi but not with bhikkhuni, so it will take time for them to change their attitude and accept bhikkhuni.

6. The contribution of maechi and bhikkhuni to Thai society

Maechi and bhikkhuni in Thai society play a major role in distributing and teaching Dhamma to people – women and youth in particular, as described below.

Many maechi have become teachers of the Dhamma, but in this digital era, they need to change the ways they distribute and teach it to children and youth and instead act as “coach” or “facilitator” in order to serve as “developer” (Piyawan-on, 2012).

Bhikkhuni have duties both in religion and society related to the spiritual uplift and empowerment of others. They must do this selflessly and with a service mind. The following are some suggestions for how this can be done:

1) Ordain more single women over 18 years old. As “sikhhamana”, they practice six precepts for two years. If they fail in this regard, they have to restart. After the two years, at 20, they can be ordained as bhikkhuni by pawattini or bhikkhuni preceptor.

2) Ordain more laywomen as **sāmaṇerī** for nine days and nine nights. They have to shave their hair and undertake in a religious ceremony as a requirement of ordination.

3) Organise Sunday Dhamma classes for the public.

4) Receive food from laymen on specified days.

5) Do morning chanting at 5.30 and evening chanting at 19.00. Do meditation and attend daily dhamma sessions together.

6) Morning and evening, all bhikkhunis and **sāmaṇerīs** must tend to the garden or clean the drains. The same work is done together to keep pride in check.

7) Help develop a network of Thai bhikkhuni to maintain the quality of bhikkhuni according to the Vinayana and to train bhikkhuni to preserve the virtues of Buddhism.

8) Study the dhamma with bhikkhu who have been ordained for more than 20 years and who are experts in Dhammavinaya.

9) Accept invitations to teach the dhamma and attend international conferences.

10) Help revitalise Buddhism in India starting in Nagpur. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni has invited young girls from this city to study at her monastery in Thailand for several years.

11) Disseminate the dhamma in various forms to the public, nationally and internationally.

Although, there is debate within the Thai Sangha over the bhikkhuni issue, Buddhism should be supported by the fourfold structure of Buddhists: bhikkhu, bhikkhuni, ubasok and ubasika. Positive and negative issues related to bhikkhuni are raised from time to time by the Thai Sangha and some laymen, often without any solution. However, in 2015, Thai bhikkhuni themselves were given permission to ordain other women as bhikkhuni, just as Dhammananda Bhikkhuni had been ordained 12 years earlier. Since then, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni has made extra strong efforts to behave according to the dhamma in an effort to maintain Buddhism for all human-beings.

7. Discussion

In this analysis, I apply Gramsci's of cultural hegemony, concept, which refers to domination or rule maintained through ideological or cultural means. It is usually achieved through social institutions to allow those in power to strongly influence the values, norms, ideas, expectations, worldview, and behavior of the rest of society (Cole, 2020). R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is defined as a practice that legitimizes the dominant social position of men, and the subordinate social position of women (Connell, 2005). The hegemonic masculinity theory derives from Marxist theory and Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony.

In the pre – Buddhist period—and still in Thailand today – men constituted the political, religious and social structure which operated as the controlling mechanism (power) through which they asserted authority to judge and make decisions on a full range of rights, including those of women. Simply put, this was because women were considered inferior to men, much as they continue to be by many today.

Although the Buddha allowed women to ordain, he also fixed rigid conditions on their practice and they remained under the control of monks due to the insecure social conditions of the time. Despite this, women retained the same rights and opportunity to attain enlightenment as men.

In the Thai case however, there is no space for women interested in Buddhism to devote themselves to studying and distributing Dhamma as monks do. Being maechi is traditionally and informally accepted by the Thai Sangha and society, though they are subordinate to monks. They often have to serve the monks and do temple activities, and many do not have the opportunity to study Dhamma as they intended. Fortunately, Buddhist Universities and open universities have been established where maechi can register and study as far as Ph.D. level, though few choose to do so. Many maechi accept their status and do not wish to deviate from the tradition since established means enable them to learn, practice and sometimes to teach Dhamma, which ultimately is their goal in becoming maechi. They are not active in claiming their rights and accept their subordinated status in Thai Buddhism, and from the Sangha's and society's perspective, as long as there are no demands from maechi in terms of equal rights to bhikkhu, they can be accommodated peacefully.

That said, there are a few Thai women who have in fact dared to find their own way to becoming ordained correctly in Sri Lanka such as Dhammananda Bhikkhuni. But this is rare as it is contrary to the conservative mindset of the Thai Sangha, which still champions the original decree of the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch in 1928 denying bhikkhuni ordination. Moreover,

the Sangha's restriction on dual ordination (bhikkhu and bhikkhuni) applies despite the fact that during the Buddha's time monks could ordain women as the Buddha had permitted. The traditional reluctance of women to answer personal questions led the Buddha to allow the bhikkhuni sangha to clarify those points for them. After reservations were cleared up, then the female novice could be brought to the bhikkhu sangha for acceptance into the Sangha. This was the beginning of dual ordination. Today, although there is no bhikkhuni lineage in Thailand, the Thai Sangha continues to insist on dual ordination, thus denying women some of the basic rights to be involved in Buddhist monastic life. Furthermore, it shows that the Thai Sangha does not care about the sustainability of Buddhism's fourfold division as described by the Buddha (Dhammananda, 2010, p.69). The Sangha's hold on official authority denies the status of bhikkhuni in Thai society. This correlates with Gross Rita's Gender and Buddhism study in 1993 which found that in the past, Buddhist interpretation was under a patriarchal framework which limited female opportunities. This finding is the same as that of Apinya Fuangfusakul, Pramuan Phengchan and Somrit Ruechai (Buabal, 2017). However, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda has tried to negotiate with the Thai Sangha by being formally ordained in Sri Lanka and continuing her Buddhist mission for the benefit of society with a right view.

Although bhikkhuni remain marginalized, according to her followers, Dhammananda's practices and contributions to society are significant, for girls and women in particular. It is possible for women to be ordained like men, as Dhammananda's case shows. Moreover, mothers can play a major role in their daughter's ordination, in the same way that the father does in a son's ordination, and bhikkhuni ordination also brings happiness and virtue (bun) to the parents. Therefore, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni leads the way to equal rights for women through entry into the monkhood for women in Buddhism.

This phenomenon reflects the hegemony of the Thai Sangha, which is very conservative regarding the rights and duties of women who simply seek to ordain, practice and teach the dhamma, and maintain Buddhism as male monks do. The Sangha prefers to blame the women and does nothing to consider or resolve the issue.

Laymen believe that if women are accepted into the order of monks, Buddhist life will be shortened. In fact, the Buddha said in the texts that "Buddhism will decline when the fourfold organization of Buddhists: bhikkhu, bhikkhuni, ubasok (laymen) and ubasika (laywomen), no longer respect the Buddha, dhamma and Sangha, no longer have respect for the rules and meditation, and no longer respect each other" (Dhammananda, 2010, p.27). Nonetheless, the Thai Sangha

does not focus on the core teaching of the Buddha, but rather implements the old myths⁷ and relies on outdated decrees to exclude bhikkhuni. Finally, there is no solution for bhikkhuni.

Since the Thai Sangha has failed to make positive decisions for bhikkhuni in Thailand, the bhikkhuni are forced to ignore any negative reactions. They have a strong determination to maintain Buddhism and upgrade society spiritually through their teachings and knowledge distributed to the public through publications and social media. For their good deeds, the laity trust them and donate for their activities. Bhikkhuni monasteries offer a close and warm environment for laywomen, girls and children who wish to participate in Dhamma learning and practices. Although bhikkhuni may not be invited by the Thai Sangha to participate in any functions or activities together, they are recognized and invited by supporters afar.

Moreover, being excluded in Thailand does not affect the faith of women who seek to be ordained, as they continue to pursue their religious practices for the maintenance of Buddhism and their and others' spiritual betterment internationally. In the millennium of cyber-communication, bhikkhuni around the world are able to share their experiences and knowledge widely. Therefore, they have connections and networks to support them and share with each other.

A survey conducted by the National Buddhism Office in 2019 found that the number of monks and novices had dropped from 252,851 to 174,091 (69%). The number of temples was 25,000 of which 6,000 were abandoned, which starkly reveals the threat faced by Thai Buddhism. However, given that women generally live longer than men, coupled with the fact that the number of men of ordination age (27) has dropped significantly, ordination of bhikkhuni will help offset the risks posed by this decline and at the same time give women access to the Buddhist teachings according to their needs and aspirations. Now is the time for bhikkhu and bhikkhuni, including maechi, to work together to sustain Buddhism in Thai society with the proper and exemplary practice that will inspire rather than divide.

In 2017-18, negative news regarding Buddhist monks' behavior included the following:

- (d) "Thai Police Arrest Buddhist Monks for fraud, robbery:... Among those arrested for embezzling temple funds was Phra Phrom Dilok. He is a member of the Sangha Supreme Council, the governing body of Thai Buddhists composed of the highest ranking monks in the country".

(Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 2018)

Such episodes fuel the notoriety of the monkhood in the eyes of many, and this confirms that regardless of gender, if one-in-robes fails to fully eliminate greed and desire, they are cheating – not just themselves, but all Buddhists as well as the institution of Buddhism. So, when the judges themselves are nefarious, do they have the right to judge others?

8. Summary

In the Buddha's time, Buddhism was open to both men and women equally to attain enlightenment. In Thai society, people are familiar only with the religious teachings and the fourfold organization of Buddhists that includes bhikkhu, bhikkhuni, ubasok and ubasika. Adherents have a duty "to study" the dhamma (the Buddha's teachings), put it into practice, and protect it" (Dhammananda, 2010, p.105). But Thais are less familiar with bhikkhuni; we know and notice only "maechi". However, the status of maechi means they are not formally accepted as ones who can guide the laity to attain merit, although there is an official institution for maechi. Only a small number are able to achieve a higher education along this path since the Thai Sangha relies on an outdated decree from before the first Thai Constitution to forbid the ordination of women for the reason that dual ordination was no longer possible. This narrow-minded interpretation reflects the hegemony of Thai monks who seek to retain authority without finding a suitable and just solution. It also exposes Thai Buddhism to inevitable decline as the Buddha himself had forecast would happen when the four divisions of Buddhism lost respect for the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and no longer respected each other. However, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni was ordained in Sri Lanka according to the Vinayana. She is the abbess of a monastery that welcomes those opposed to the misinformed and misogynistic attitudes of the male Sangha and others with regard to the role of women in Buddhism. She is not discouraged as she has the strong will to continue and teach Buddhism for the benefit of people's spiritual progress. Now, she can ordain women to be bhikkhuni based on her 12 years as a bhikkhuni. She has also created connections and networks among bhikkhuni in Thailand and at an international level. Although she is not involved with the Thai Sangha, she does not mind this and still continues her Buddhist mission for mankind and is supported by many Thai followers – especially women – as well as numerous well – wishers and defenders overseas.

The challenging issue for Buddhism in Thailand is that the number of monks and novices has declined dramatically (Khaaw-sod, 2019), and this together with the loss of the trust of followers following scandals in the Sangha has put the future of the faith in peril. Meanwhile, interest by women to ordain as bhikkhuni is high and given that the life expectancy

of women is greater than that of men, the time couldn't be better to replenish the ranks of monkdom with women. In order to relieve gender-based tensions between groups, sincere and open-minded cooperation between Sangha, bhikkhuni and maechi, and the laity will be a far more effective means of solving the current problems than obstinate denial, and will increase the confidence of youth that Buddhism can indeed play a constructive role in their lives, even today.

Notes

¹ Maechi are not recognized as monastics by the Thai government and are not eligible for monastic benefits. But they are also denied the rights of other lay citizens. In the 17th century, westerners recorded seeing white-robed, shaven-headed women who lived within the grounds of Buddhist temples. In 1969, the first nation-wide meeting of maechi was organized by the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand. The institute seeks to improve conditions for maechi by providing better access to education, and screening and placing potential maechi. It also seeks to ensure that all maechi possess a basic knowledge of Buddhist teachings and proper monastic behavior; maechi do not have the right to teach the Dhamma despite having to chant and do meditation. Their duties are cleaning, preparing food for monks and selling flowers in the temples. Only a few maechi are educated. ('maechi', <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/maechi>; 'Bhiksuni Ratnawali', http://bhikkhuni_rattanaali.blogspot.com/)

In Thailand, non-shaven-headed women in white robes called "Chii phram", often join maechi for temporary religious practice.

² Phansa is a period of three lunar months during the rainy season when Buddhist monks retreat to their temples for Dharma study and to avoid any unnecessary travel. Although they may still go out to seek alms during the day, they must return to sleep at their temple and aren't permitted to defrock during phansa (<http://www.thai2english.com/dictionary/1376408.html>).

³ The Eight Gurudhammas are ("heavy rules") as follows:

1) A bhikkhuni ordained even for a hundred years will have to pay respects to a monk ordained for but one day.

2) A bhikkhuni must not spend the rains period in a residence where there is no monk.

3) Every two weeks, a bhikkhuni should request two things from the order of monks: the asking of the Observance day and inviting the monk to give exhortation (ovada).

4) After the rains, the bhikkhuni must be invited before both the orders in respect of three matters: what was seen, what was heard and what was suspected.

5) A bhikkhuni, offending against an important rule, must undergo manatta (discipline) for half a month before both the orders.

6) When, as a sikkhamana, she has been trained six anudhammas for two years, she should seek ordination from both the sanghas (bhikkhu and bhikkhuni sanghas)

7) A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a bhikkhuni .

8) From ordination day onwards, admonition of monks by bhikkhuni is forbidden, although admonition of bhikkhuni by monks is not. (Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, 2010, p.7)

⁴ The Ten Precepts upheld by *śrāmaṇerīs* are:

- 1) Refrain from killing living things.
- 2) Refrain from stealing.
- 3) Refrain from unchastity (sensuality, sexuality, lust).
- 4) Refrain from lying.
- 5) Refrain from taking intoxicants.
- 6) Refrain from taking food at inappropriate times (after noon).
- 7) Refrain from singing, dancing, playing music or attending entertainment programs (performances).
- 8) Refrain from wearing perfume, cosmetics and garlands (decorative accessories).
- 9) Refrain from sitting on high chairs and sleeping on luxurious, soft beds.
- 10) Refrain from accepting money. ('*śrāmaṇerī*', <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%9A%C4%81ma%E1%B9%87er%C4%AB>)

⁵ Eight precepts for maechi are:

- 1) I will abstain from being harmful to living beings
- 2) I will abstain from stealing.
- 3) I will abstain from all sexual practices.
- 4) I will abstain from telling lies.
- 5) I will refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs that lead to carelessness.
- 6) I will abstain from eating after noon.
- 7) I will abstain from listening to or playing music, songs, wearing flowers, jewellery and other ornaments.
- 8) I will refrain from living or sitting in high and luxurious places ('the 8 precepts', http://en.dhammadana.org/dhamma/practice/8_precepts.htm).

⁶ She selected Sri Lanka as the Thai Sangha has had Lanka lineage since the Sukhothai dynasty. After the termination of Sri Lankan Buddhism, King Boromkot, at the end of Ayutthaya Dynasty,

sent Siamese Buddhists to promote Buddhism in Sri Lanka. This was known as “Siamese Lineage”. In 1998, the beginning of bhikkhuni ordination took place there by both sides of the Sangha. Later, they were reordained into the Theravada order by ten monks who had been ordained for more than 20 years to make it correct according to Vinayana. Bhikkhuni Dammananda ordained in Sri Lanka because she wanted to be ordained into Theravada, which is the closest to Thai Theravada. (Usawadee Sindhusen. ‘Bhikkhuni Dammananda, Ph.D in Philosophy and Religion who bends on being Bhikkhuni, Sindhusen, n.d.), 2nd August 2015

⁷ Myths relating to women’s status;

- 1) Women are of lower birth.
- 2) Women are an obstacle to the purity of monks.
- 3) Enlightenment is only for the far advanced practitioners.
- 4) It is not important to know about Nirvana.
- 5) Ordination of women in Theravada Buddhism has long been extinct.
- 6) Ven. Sanghamitta was the last of the Theravada bhikkhuni .
- 7) Women need dual ordination to become bhikkhuni.
- 8) If women were allowed to wear a saffron robe, they would spoil it during menstruation
- 9) Thai monks cannot give ordination to women.
- 10) Women ordained in Taiwan are Mahayana, hence they cannot be accepted into Theravada., etc.

Bhikkhuni Dhammanada mentioned that this check list can be further added to whenever we find more of these negative myths which have blemished the beauty of the Buddha’s teachings. (Dhammananda, 2010, p.64)

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