

## Woman Monks: An Anomaly or a Misnomer?

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### ABSTRAK

*Tempoh millenaria ketiga bermula dengan satu kejutan besar di kalangan penganut agama Buddha di Thailand apabila seorang bekas profesor dalam bidang falsafah telah ditahbiskan menjadi bikkhu perempuan di Sri Lanka. Majlis tertinggi pentadbiran agama Buddha Thailand tidak mengiktiraf bikkhu perempuan, bahkan melarang sebarang pentahbisan tersebut dilakukan oleh mana-mana bikkhu. Terdapat kira-kira 300,000 orang bikkhu – dan kira-kira 10,000 orang wanita yang dipanggil mae chi yang memakai busana keagamaan warna putih. Kedudukan mae chi dari segi status sosial dan kerohanian adalah sangat rendah dan mereka biasanya dianggap sebagai golongan tunabiarawan, bukan golongan biarawan. Dalam penulisan bahasa Inggeris mereka sering dirujuk sebagai nun (rahib perempuan), iaitu satu rujukan yang agak mengelirukan. Sebab itulah istilah nun tidak digunakan bagi golongan wanita yang baru sahaja ditahbiskan. Istilah tradisional dalam bahasa Pali/Sanskrit yang digunakan bagi wanita yang telah ditahbiskan ialah bhiksuni dan bhikkhuni, tetapi istilah ini tidak meluas dipakai di Thailand, kecuali untuk merujuk kepada bhiksuni dari China, Taiwan, Korea atau Tibet yang sekali sekala datang melawat ke Thailand. Pada hakikatnya tidak terdapat sebarang istilah bagi nun dalam masyarakat Thai. Namun demikian, semenjak pentahbisan pertama yang dipelopori oleh wanita Thai itu, beberapa orang wanita Thai lain telah ditahbiskan sebagai calon-bhiksuni oleh bhiksuni dari Sri Lanka, sama ada di Sri Lanka atau di Thailand. Makalah ini menghujahkan bahawa jika sekiranya perkembangan seperti ini dibenarkan terus menerus berlaku, maka golongan “bikhu perempuan” Thai itu terpaksa mewujudkan satu kategori sosial yang baru, yang merangkumi identiti dan ruang sebagai nun atau bhikkhuni yang tulen.*

### ABSTRACT

*The third millennium started with a bang in Thai Buddhist circles when a former philosophy professor was ordained a Buddhist nun in Sri Lanka. The Thai Buddhist hierarchy does not recognize nuns, and has, in fact, forbidden monks to ordain women. Thailand accommodates some 300,000 Buddhist monks – and some 10,000 white-clad Buddhist women, called “mae chis”. The social and spiritual status of these women has traditionally been extremely low and they are regarded as laywomen. In the English literature, they are confusingly*

called “nuns”, hence the reluctance to use the same category for these newly ordained women. The traditional Sanskrit/Pali terms for ordained women are “bhiksuni” and “bhikkhuni”, which are not well-known in Thailand, as these persons have usually been visiting Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean or Tibetan “bhiksunis”. There is simply no category of genuine “nuns” in Thai society. Several women have been ordained novice nuns in either Sri Lanka or Thailand by Sri Lankan nuns after the trail-blazing act of the first Thai woman. This article argues that if this trend of ordaining women is allowed to continue, the Thai Buddhist “woman monks” will have to create a completely new category, identity and space for themselves as genuine “nuns” or bhikkhunis.

## INTRODUCTION

Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh resigned from her position as professor of Buddhist Religion and Philosophy at Thammasat University, divorced her husband, and the day before the full-moon night in February 2001 was ordained a Buddhist novice nun in Sri Lanka. The news about her ordination spread out only a month later, when she appeared in the Thai media – both press and TV – with her shaven head and in brick-coloured robes. Initially, the army-run TV Channel 5 banned her interview, but eventually educational Channel 11 and private UBC Nation Channel 8 were able to interview her on TV (Sanitsuda, 3 May 2001). She was known to be a vocal supporter of female ordination. Her own mother, Voramai Kabilsingh, was in 1971 ordained a *bhiksuni* Taiwan. The daughter moved to the same temple with her elderly mother.

Chatsumarn – or Samaneri Dhammananda by her novice name – had been an active member of the Buddhist community both in Thailand and internationally. She has written over 40 books, taught for over 25 years at Thammasat University, participated in numerous national and international conferences and published her own magazines NIBWA (Newsletter on International Buddhist Women’s Activities) and Yasodhara to promote female ordination.

Chatsumarn stayed in the category of novice nun – *samaneri* – for two years, after which she became a *bhikkhuni* or nun. A novice nun is expected to spend three years studying Buddhism under her preceptor, i.e. the monk who gave her the precepts and thus ordained her. Chatsumarn herself being a well-known scholar, this requirement was reduced to two years. Her preceptor monk lives in Sri Lanka and she kept in touch with him by e-mail. As a novice nun, she lived in a small *kuti* in the temple Wat Songdharmakalyani in Nakhon Pathom. Her daily routine consisted of the following: waking up before sunrise, meditating, going for an alms round on Sundays and teaching lay people, who come to visit her. She became a vegetarian and reduced her meals to two, i.e. no food after noon.<sup>1</sup>

Samaneri Dhammananda was fully ordained a *bhikkhuni* in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in February 2003 and is now called Dhammananda Bhikkhuni ([www.dailymirror](http://www.dailymirror)). As a fully ordained nun, she is allowed to manage her own temple, ordain new novices and thus help increase the number of ordained women in Thailand. Only a few months after Chatsumarn's novice ordination, a Thai *mae-chi*, Chamnean Rattanaburani, travelled to Sri Lanka to be ordained a *samaneri* as well. She – Samaneri Rattanavali by her new name – had already spent 9 years as a white-clad *mae-chi*, assisting and serving the monks in a temple. Her wish is, however, to devote more time to studying the scriptures. She will spend three years as a *samaneri* in Sri Lanka studying with the monks and nuns there. Her parents have bought a plot of land in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, where she hopes to set up a temple as a *bhikkhuni* (Phatarawadee 11 July 2001).

One year after Chatsumarn's ordination, a third Thai woman, Varangghana Vanavichayen, also a former *mae-chi*, was ordained in Thailand at Wat Songdharmakalyani. She took the name Samaneri Dhammarakhita. She was the first Thai woman to be ordained a *samaneri* in Thailand by a group of Sri Lankan monks and nuns (Sanitsuda 11 February 2002). After her, several other Thai women have been ordained novice nuns. In 2003, there were 14 women living in Dhammananada Bhikkhuni's temple. She organized a retreat during the rainy season for six *bhikkhunis* in 2003 and is planning to organize similar retreats for a larger number of ordained women in the future ([www.thaiapro.com](http://www.thaiapro.com)).

### WHAT IS A "WOMAN MONK"?

Chatsumarn's mother Voramai Kabilsingh, who passed away in 2003, was never officially recognized in Thailand as a nun, under the excuse that she was ordained in Taiwan, and hence belonged to the Mahayana, not to the Theravada Buddhist tradition. The problem with the Theravada *bhikkhuni* lineage is that it was allegedly broken some 1,000 years ago. According to the rules, a monk cannot ordain a new nun on his own. Rather, a nun must be ordained both by a monk and a nun. Because the old *bhikkhuni* lineage was broken, no new *bhikkhunis* could be ordained, and hence there were no *bhikkhunis*. This became a Catch 22 situation.

Most of the Theravada Buddhist countries have offered women strictly limited access to spiritual life. This has in practice meant a look-alike life as a nun with a shaven head, robes, modest dwellings, some dietary rules, celibacy and frugality. These women usually observe five precepts, whereas a fully ordained nun observes a total of ten precepts and 311 monastic rules. The Buddhist encourages the practitioners to refrain from killing, stealing, practising illicit sex, lying and using intoxicants. There is a set of additional rules to make up to eight precepts. They are refrain from watching entertainment, decorating oneself, sitting or sleeping on elevated benches. The eight precepts also require celibacy.

Some lay Buddhists may also follow these additional rules temporarily or permanently.

All Theravada Buddhist countries have women in this spiritual category. In Sri Lanka, they are called *dasasilamata* with reference to the ten precepts (Pali: *sila*) that they observe. This demand include to regulate one's meals and to live without money. In Burma, they are called *thilashin*, which also refers to the precepts (*sila*, Burmese: *thila*; *shin* refers to the female category). In Thailand and Cambodia, they are known as *mae chis* and *don chis* respectively. "Mae" means mother, while "chi" refers to an ascetic. *Mae chis* usually follow five or eight precepts. A radical Buddhist group in Thailand has over the last 30 years ordained ten precept-nuns, called *sikkhamats*, which means studying mothers.

As these categories of *dasasilamata*, *thilashin*, *mae chi* and *don chi* have usually been translated into English as "nuns", it has become problematic to talk about the *bhikkhuni* category of nuns – hence the awkward term of "woman monk". This term refers to a new category of nuns that has not existed before and is on the same spiritual and hierarchical levels as the category of monks, *bhikkhus*. It may take some time before the linguistic confusion is sorted out.

The legal status of the *mae chis* is that of a laywoman, *upasika*. *Mae chis* wear white, that is a white blouse, white long skirt and a long piece of white cloth on their shoulder. They often also wear white slippers and carry a white shoulder bag. They shave their heads and eyebrows like the monks. White – as a colour – is regarded a lay colour (Lindberg Falk 2000, 63-64).

Theravada Buddhism traditionally emphasizes *vinaya* rules, i.e. monastic rules of conduct, precepts and behaviour. As the women who have practised Buddhism in the above-mentioned groups only follow a limited number of rules, not all 311, they have been hierarchically and spiritually placed on a category far below monks. It is worth noticing that the monks only have 227 Patimokkha rules. The spiritual hierarchical category is based on the number of precepts and rules followed. In practical terms, this has led to a situation where these women, particularly in Thailand and Cambodia, are used as temple servants. Their main duty is to serve the monks: prepare food, wash dishes, clean the premises, work in the garden and sell amulets at the shop. With very few exceptions, these women have been regarded spiritually as being in a low category.

The low spiritual status attached to these women has again led to a situation where they receive little respect from lay people, no alms and no donations. Monks go on their daily alms rounds, providing an opportunity for lay people to give donations to the monks and reciprocally earn merit (Pali: *puñña*). Additionally many lay people come to the temples to donate – sometimes superfluously. In recent years Thailand have seen several scandals where substantial sums of money have been donated to monks, embezzled by monks, or eventually stolen from the monks. Some monks have access to credit cards, luxury cars, and large bank accounts. Some monks have invested temple funds as their private prop-

erty, and yet others have sold temple land for golf courses. The list of sordid scandals seems endless. To the dismay of many monks, these scandals have been widely publicized. None of these scandals and accusations involves *mae chis*. There are a few *mae chis* on the streets of Bangkok begging for money. They are viewed as being in the same category as ordinary beggars.

The state cannot decide on how to deal with the *mae chis*; the Ministry of Transport and Communications does not recognize *mae chis* as religious persons and charges them full fares on trains and buses, where the monks often go free or pay half fares. The Ministry of the Interior recognizes *mae chis* as religious persons along with monks, but denies their right to vote in any elections (Aree 15 May 2001).

Organizations and colleges have been established to promote the status of *mae chis*, and some success has been achieved. It is particularly the younger women who have benefited from the new colleges. The first Buddhist university for *mae chis* opened in 2002 in the Nakhon Ratchasima province. The university, called Maha Pachabodee Theree, has place for 30 students, and was founded by *mae chi* Khunying Kanittha. *Mae chi* Khunying Kanittha Wichiencharoen, who passed away in 2002, was a celebrated female lawyer, who had always actively promoted the position of women. “Khunying” is a honorary title bestowed on her by the king. She was the head of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women.

The Institute of Thai Mae Chi (Sathabaan Mae Chi Thai) now has some 4,000 members. Some other sources give a much higher number of members in the Nuns’ Association of Thailand: 13,000 members (Phatarawadee 11 July 2001). According to the chairperson *mae chi* Pratin Kwan-orn, about 50 percent of these members are interested in studying Buddhism and engaging in social work. The rest are more interested in “being helped than in giving help” (Atiya 30 May 2001).

## THE HISTORY OF WOMAN MONKS

“The Buddha instituted a fourfold society consisting of *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunis*, laymen and laywomen”, states the Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Kusuma (2000, 5). Buddhist literature, particularly the Vinaya Pitaka, outlines the disciplinary and procedural rules for the Buddhist order, the *sangha*. It also summarizes the story of admitting women to the *sangha*.

“After spending four *vassas* (residence period during the rains) after his enlightenment, the Buddha visited Kapilavatthu, his native royal city, at the request of his ailing father, King Suddhodana. At that time, Mahapajapati, Buddha’s foster mother requested him to admit her to the Order. Mahapajapati was not alone in desiring to join the Order. Five hundred Sakyan ladies, whose husbands had left household life, were also eager to be admitted to the Order.

After his father's death, the Buddha went back to Vesali, refusing the repeated request of Mahapajapati for admission into the Order. The determined foster mother of the Buddha and a widow of the recently deceased King Suddhodana, having cut off her hair and put on bark-dyed clothes, accompanied by five hundred Sakyan ladies, made her way to Vesali where the Buddha was staying in the Mahavana, in the Kutagara Hall.

The Venerable Ananda saw them outside the gateway of the Kutagara Hall, dust-laden with swollen feet, dejected, tearful, standing and weeping. Out of great compassion for the ladies, the Venerable Ananda interceded with the Buddha on their behalf and entreated him to accept them to the Order. The Buddha continued to stand firm. However, when the Venerable Ananda asked the Buddha whether women were not capable of attaining Magga and Phala Insight, the Buddha replied that women were indeed capable of doing so, provided they left household life, like their menfolk.

Thereupon Ananda made his entreaties again, saying that Mahapajapati had been of great service to the Buddha, waiting on him as his guardian and nurse, suckling him when his mother died. Since women were capable of attaining the Magga and Phala Insight, she should be permitted to join the Order and become a *bhikkhuni* (Guide to the Tipitaka 1993, 2-3). After this persuasion by his favourite disciple Ananda, the Buddha finally admitted women to the Buddhist Order. This is a much-debated topic among Buddhist scholars: why did the Buddha initially reject women? Would he have admitted women, if his own foster mother and his favourite disciple had not put so much pressure on him? Did they do right or wrong in forcing the Buddha to ordain women as well?

According to Chatsumarn, the Buddha rejected Queen Mahapajapati's appeal out of compassion for her well being... For women who had led comfortable lives in the palace to adopt to the lives of recluses, was not at all easy (Chatsumarn 1996: 24). Nevertheless, the reason for finally accepting women was that ... But after showing her sincere interest and conviction by following him from one village to another, he was convinced of her sincerity (*ibid*).

This event is regarded as the birth of the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* or the Order of nuns. *Bhikkhuni Sangha* was founded when Queen Mahapajapati, the Buddha's aunt and stepmother, along with five hundred (500) royal women, approached the Buddha for admission to the Order" (Chatsumarn 1996, 4). *Bhikkhunis* are governed by two different sets of rules, again a topic of controversy. On the other hand, the monks are ruled by a set of 227 Patimokkha rules. The most serious rules for monks are the four *parajikas*, infraction of which results in expulsion. These rules deal with breaking the rules regarding celibacy, stealing, killing and boasting about being enlightened. Other types of infraction result in various milder punishments.

For the *bhikkhunis* there are 311 Patimokkha rules, of which there are eight *parajikas*. The reason why women need more rules than men is usually simply explained by the supposed capriciousness of women. The Patimokkha rules

basically deal with various types of misbehaviour committed by monks, which seems to indicate that the rules were laid down after these misdeeds took place. Monks and nuns also follow the ten precepts, which are broad but strict guidelines for an ordained person. Hence, one could draw the conclusion that ordained women indeed committed more misdeeds than their male colleagues.

The 311 Patimokkha rules for *bhikkhunis* have been carefully preserved in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, even if the tradition now rejects the *bhikkhunis* (Bhikkhuni Kusuma 2000: 5). There is another set of rules, which the Buddha laid down as a condition before admitting women to the Order. These rules are called *garudhammas*:

1. A *bhikkhuni*, even if she enjoys a seniority of a hundred years in the Order, must pay respect to a *bhikkhu* though he may have been *bhikkhu* only for a day.
2. A *bhikkhuni* must not keep her rains-residence in a place where there are no *bhikkhus*.
3. Every fortnight a *bhikkhuni* must do two things: ask the *bhikkhu sangha* the day of *uposatha*,<sup>2</sup> and approach the *bhikkhu sangha* for instruction and admonition.
4. When the rains-residence period is over, a *bhikkhuni* must attend the *pavarana* ceremony conducted at both the assemblies of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*. In each assembly she must invite criticism on what has been seen, what has been heard or what has been suspected of her.
5. A *bhikkhuni* who has committed a *sanghadisesa* offence must undergo penance for a half-month, *pakkha manatta*, in each assembly of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*.
6. Admission to the Order must be sought from both assemblies by a woman novice only after two years' probationary training as a candidate.
7. A *bhikkhuni* should not revile a *bhikkhu* in any way, not even obliquely.
8. A *bhikkhuni* must abide by instructions given her by *bhikkhus*, but must not give instructions or advice to *bhikkhus* (Guide to Tipitaka 1993: 3-4).

“Mahapajapati accepted unhesitantly these eight conditions imposed by the Buddha and was consequently admitted to the Order” states the Guide to Tipitaka. Many women, however, have more difficulties in swallowing this set of rules. *Bhikkhuni* Kusuma (2000: 9) tried to argue that ... the *garudhammas* were pronounced on Mahapajapati while she was still a laywoman, before her ordination. The rules were also pronounced in reference to a person, Mahapajapati, who then accepted the rules. Nothing was mentioned about the other 500 Sakyan ladies. There seem to be no penalty for breaking the *garudhammas*. They are not found among the 311 Patimokkha rules and do not come up at the bi-monthly recitation of the *Patimokkha* (Guide to Tipitaka 1993, 4).

According to Bhikkhuni Kusuma, in Sri Lanka, the *garudhammas* were not adhered to even in the third century BC. Venerable Mahinda, the son of King

Asoka of India, ordained 1,000 women and did not observe the two-year-long novicehood for nuns. All women were ordained upon the arrival of Mahinda's sister, *bhikkhuni* Sanghamitta (Bhikkhuni Kusuma, 2000: 9). It would be difficult for autonomous nunneries to strictly obey particularly the second *garudhamma*, which states that *bhikkhunis* must stay in a temple with monks during the approximately three months' rainy season.

### THERAVADA BHIKKHUNI ORDINATIONS

A Thai man, Narin Klueng, had his two daughters, Sara and Chongdee, ordained novice nuns in 1927. The women were immediately arrested, disrobed and temporarily jailed (Sanitsuda 3.5.2001). The Supreme Sangha Council, also known as the Council of Elders (Thai: Mahatherasamakhom) issued a law the year after banning any monks from ordaining women.

In Nepal, there is a lineage of Burmese Theravada Buddhist *thilashins*, who had struggled to be ordained as *bhikkhuni*. In 1988, Taiwanese nuns from Xilai (Hsi Lai) monastery in Los Angeles invited Dhammavati Guruma, a prominent member of the Nepalese Theravada Buddhist community, and three other *thilashins* to be ordained according to Chinese rites. They were ordained according to the rites of the Dharmagupta lineage. In the fifth century, the Dharmagupta lineage of monastic disciples was brought from Sri Lanka to China. The Nepalese monks, however, refused to acknowledge the newly elevated status of these women.

In 1997, a group of five Nepalese *thilashins* went to China to receive ordination. In 1998, another group of Nepalese were ordained at Bodhgaya in India. By the year 2000, there were already 17 fully ordained Nepalese Theravada Buddhist *bhikkhuni* nuns. Many of these Nepalese Theravada Buddhists belong to the ethnic Newar community (LeVine 2000: 13-14).

Theravada Buddhism was established in Nepal in the 1930s. At that time, a handful of Newars began to regard the indigenous Buddhist Vajrayana religion as overly ritualistic and doctrinally stagnant. They came into contact with a Burmese monk, Candramani, who became their teacher. When Candramani returned to Burma, a young girl who had been his student followed him to Burma and continued her studies at a temple in Moulmein. She stayed in Burma for 15 years and returned only in 1964 to establish a school and a nunnery (LeVine 2000: 17-24). In 1988, she was ordained as *bhikkhuni* Dhammavati. *Bhikkhuni* Dhammavati had managed to create an active Theravada Buddhist community for women in Nepal.

The roots of the Bhikkhuni ordination in Sri Lanka allegedly go back far in history. King Asoka of India chose to send his own daughter, Princess Sanghamitta, a learned nun, with her retinue to go to Sri Lanka along with a branch of a bodhi tree. She then ordained Princess Anula and her female follow-



ers (Chatsumarn 1996, 9). The first seven Sri Lankan women received a *bhikkhuni* ordination from Mahayana Buddhist *bhiksunis* in Los Angeles in 1988. Another seven women were ordained in South Korea in 1996, but their status as Theravada Buddhist *bhikkhunis* was not recognised by the male *sangha*. In 2000, 22 Sri Lankan women were ordained in Taiwan and managed to finally gain recognition by the monks. In 2002, there were 188 fully ordained *bhikkhunis* in Sri Lanka and 6,000 *samaneris* (Phatarawadee 11 July 2001).

Since 1996, Sri Lanka has been giving *bhikkhuni* ordinations. Korean monks, who ordained 10 *dasasilamatas*, revived the lineage. In the beginning, this caused a furor in Sri Lanka, and their status was not recognized. Two years later, however, Sri Lankan Siam Nikaya, a Buddhist sect established originally with the help of Thai-Siamese monks, started to give ordinations to women (Phatarawadee, 30 May 2001).<sup>3</sup> The reason why the Thai promoters of female ordination accept the Korean Mahayana Buddhist ordination is that, according to them, the Chinese (Korean) Mahayana lineage originates from Sri Lanka, and is hence linked to Theravada tradition.

In Sri Lanka, there are approximately 3,000 *dasasilamatas*, the category of which has been the only one available to women. There are different levels of ordination for *dasasilamatas*. The most common one is ordination in ten lay precepts under the tutelage of a senior *dasasilamata*. Only 10 percent have an ordination equal to a novice nun, *samaneri* (Salgado 2000, 32). Most of these women have had poor education, are not respected by the people and hence, receive very little donations. Several *dasasilamatas* have now received full *bhikkhuni* ordination at Xilai (Hsi Lai) temple in Los Angeles; Sarnath India in 1996 by Korean nuns; Bodhgaya India 1998 by Taiwanese nuns; and Sri Lanka in 1998 (Salgado 2000: 33).

In 1997, a training course for nun novices, *seminaries*, was started by a controversial Buddhist monk, Sumangala from Dambulla. He had earlier shocked people by ordaining lower castes that had traditionally not been eligible for ordination. He encouraged the monks to ordain *bhikkhunis* without the presence of senior *bhikkhunis* because there were no *bhikkhunis* yet to join the ordination ceremony (Salgado, 2000:37-38). We can see that both in Nepal and Sri Lanka, the ordainment of women into Theravada Buddhist *sangha* has very much depended on a few individuals and their conviction and struggle to reach the goal.

## MONKS, NUNS AND 'WOMAN MONKS' IN THAILAND

Only one monk in Thailand has successfully ordained nuns into his group. Bodhiraksa, the leader of the Asoke Buddhist group has during the last 30 years ordained women as ten-precept nuns called *sikkhamats*. At present, there are 26 *sikkhamats* in the group. The *sikkhamats* are ordained in a dual ceremony pre-

sided over by both monks and *sikkhamats*. Before the ordination, the women must stay in the category of novices (*pa, krak*) for at least two years, but in practice, they stay much longer. The group has been careful not to claim the *sikkhamats* to be *bhikkhunis*, and has hence been able to avoid a confrontation with the state in this issue. Bodhiraksa is regarded as a controversial monk just like Sumangala in Sri Lanka, and Bodhiraksa has had his share of problems with the Thai state (Heikkilä-Horn 1996).

In order to improve the position of *mae chis* in the mainstream Thai sangha, both education and autonomous nunneries have been employed. One *mae chi* has done pioneering work to elevate the educational level of the *mae chis* and to increase their economic independence as well. More than 20 years ago, *mae chi* Prathin Kwan-orn received a piece of land in the Ratchburi province, where she now heads a well-established nunnery and runs the Thammacarini Witthaya School. Established in 1990, the school has some 60 students, all girls. They study secondary school subjects and learn some vocational skills. There are 49 lay students and more than 50 *mae chis* living at the nunnery. Over 100 students have already graduated from the school and about 20 have continued to colleges. The lay students wear white, but they do not have to shave their heads. All follow eight precepts (Lindberg Falk 2000:64-67). The *mae chis* of this Ratchburi nunnery go for daily alms rounds, just like the Asoke *sikkhamats*.

Another increasingly known *mae chi* is Sansanee Stirasuta, who operates a garden-like centre in Bangkok, called Sathien Dhammasathan. She has her own weekly show on a TV channel, where she discussed about Buddhism with celebrities. A celebrated actress with her own theatre, Patravadee Mejudhon, staged a performance based on her discussions with *mae chi* Sansanee and on Buddhist teachings. The play was called in English "The Dhamma Bible".

With the visible rise of *mae chi* Sansanee, the controversy concerning the "woman monk" Chatsumarn has been somewhat forgotten. Chatsumarn herself has expressed her wish to focus on her current work in teaching Dhamma to women and girls and she wishes to avoid further publicity.<sup>4</sup> Chatsumarn goes for alms rounds, albeit only on Sundays. During the alms round she is followed by her son or 2-3 lay women followers who carry in their bags the food that cannot be put in her small Burmese bowl. She also teaches meditation on Sundays and is in this way build up a solid group of female supporters.

## REACTIONS TO WOMAN MONKS IN THAILAND

A highly learned monk, Phra Mano Mettanando, has published a book in Thai,<sup>5</sup> discussing the years right after the Buddha's death. The book explores the reasons behind the Buddha's decision to allow women to enter the order and the conditions he laid down for this. It also discusses the early societies of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* as well as the conflicts and politics within the *sangha* after the

Buddha passed away. He hints that in the subsequent power struggle, the *bhikkhuni* ordination was terminated. This view has angered the circles objecting to *bhikkhuni* ordination. Mettanando used to be one of the best-known monks of the controversial Dhammakaya sect. He is a physician by training, and has later received a doctorate in Buddhist studies in the USA (Paisarn 25. 7. 2002).

Most of the well-educated academic monks have been fairly receptive to the idea of giving women access to proper ordination. The elderly monks representing the top levels of the state Buddhist hierarchy, the Council of Elders, are less open-minded in gender issues.

## CONCLUSION

One benefit of the female ordination concerns women's access to spiritual merit (Pali: *puñña*; Thai: *bun*). In a Theravada Buddhist society, women traditionally can earn merit through their menfolk only. According to earlier research, the best way of earning merit is to become a monk (Kaufman 1960; Tambiah 1970) – even for a short period. The second<sup>d</sup> best choice is to give a son to the temple. The most common way for the women, however, to earn merit is to feed the monks on their alms rounds. This activity – important as it is – has always been ranked quite low. A *bhikkhuni sangha* hence would give women totally new access to earning merit, and would make them independent of their sons.

Another benefit would be that girls could this way pay their mothers the debt of gratitude that was incurred in early childhood. The sons pay their debt – also called “milk debt” – by becoming novices or monks for a week or two, while the daughters pay this debt for the rest of their lives.

An interesting aspect of the whole issue is that Western Buddhist women have become rather involved in it. A US-based association called Sakyadhita – Daughters of Buddha – has regularly been organizing international conferences for Buddhist women. The first conference was in 1987 in Bodhgaya; later, there have been conferences in Bangkok, Colombo, Ladakh, Phnom Penh, Nepal and in 2003 in Taipei, Taiwan. The conferences are run by Western *bhiksunis* of various Mahayana lineages, supported both morally and economically by Taiwanese, South Korean and Singaporean Mahayana *bhiksunis*. One of their stated purposes, repeated in their magazine Sakyadhita, is ... to help establish the Bhiksuni Sangha where it does not currently exist” (Sakyadhita 2002).

The activities and example of Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist nuns, and the persistent struggle of the Thai “woman monks”, will hopefully keep this movement in indigenous hands. Otherwise, there is the risk that it might lose credibility and could be rejected as a “foreign-based movement” by the more conservative elements of the Buddhist establishment. The Thai “woman monks” are faced with many challenges, one of which is to create a totally new category with adequate rules, even if applied from the ancient ones, in order to construct

a new category, identity and space for women as nuns in Theravada Buddhism in Thailand.

#### NOTES

1. Interview with Chatsumarn in Nakhon Pathom, 16 January 2002.
2. Buddhist rite observed on fullmoon and new-moon days.
3. The numbers vary radically from source to source: according to *The Nation* 30 May 2001, there are 200 *bhikkhunis*, 400 *samaneris* and 3,000 *dasasilamatas* in Sri Lanka.
4. Interview with Chatsumarn in Nakhon Pathom, 16 January 2002.
5. *Het Kerd Pho Sor* or B.E.0001 in English.
6. Second for Tambiah, third for Kaufman.

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