USE OF THESES

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Reconnecting the Lost Lineage

Challenges to Institutional Denial of Buddhist Women’s Monasticism in Thailand

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Except as cited in the text,
this work is the result of research carried out by the author.

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Abstract

This anthropological thesis examines the complexity of the relationship between women's monasticism, gender and institutional Buddhism in the social and political context of Thailand. It starts by asking a simple, but persistent, question as to why it is difficult for women to gain full access to monasticism and be formally recognized in their capacity as ordained monastics. Three other questions also guide the direction of this study, namely: Despite the difficulty just mentioned, what has enabled various forms of women's monasticism to emerge at different points in history? How can we account for these distinctive forms of women's monasticism? And, what does the condition of women's monasticism tell us about the nature of institutional Buddhism and Buddhist monasticism in Thailand?

Based on both ethnographic and historical research, this thesis traces the gender threads that run through the historical development of the Thai Theravada Buddhist monastic institution. It aims at a contextualized understanding of the 'process' in which the monastic institution has become strongly gendered as a male domain. In analytical terms, this thesis moves away from the familiar framework of most previous studies of gender and Buddhism in Thai society, which tend to consider women's religious practice against the background of a purportedly static, monolithic and all-encompassing notion of 'Thai Buddhism' or 'Thai Buddhist culture'. This pre-existing framework tends to take for granted that gender and women's religious practice are shaped by the overarching Thai Buddhist culture, and not vice versa. This thesis, instead, argues that the
relationship between gender and institutional Buddhism is always dynamic and mutually reinforcing, with gender conceptions and women's religious practice also playing a vital role in reconstituting the monastic institution over time. This analysis casts a new light on the constructed and shifting nature of institutional Buddhism and the monastic order, and gives a contextualized explanation for the persistent institutional denial of women's monasticism.

This thesis also examines the emergence of different forms of women's monasticism at different points in history, with an emphasis on Theravada samaneri (female novice) and phiksuní (female monk) as the most confrontational of the female monastic forms. The thesis argues that institutional Buddhism together with the male monastic order has become consolidated as the most important source of religious legitimation in Thai society. Given this Buddhist hegemony, women, when faced with constraints imposed by institutional Buddhism, may not necessarily want to alienate themselves from that context of institutional religion, but rather seek to become part of it by engaging in a monastic vocation. The proliferation of different forms of women's monasticism thus constitutes women's creative attempts to this end. In most cases, women who seek monastic lives have been discreet and restrained in the construction of their monastic identities so as not to be perceived as openly transgressing institutionally monitored gender roles for women. The emergence of Theravada samaneri and bhikkhuni, with their use of similar religious symbols and a near equivalent status to those of male monks, is thus regarded as a challenge to the accepted gender conception in institutional Buddhism. The fact that monastic women have had to negotiate their religious identities and practices amidst the constraints posed by institutional Buddhism has resulted in a number of paradoxes in Buddhist women's monasticism in Thailand.
Notes on Non-English Terms and Titles

This thesis contains a number of non-English terms with different linguistic origins, most of which are from the Thai language. However, several Thai words, especially those used in the context of Buddhism, have their origins in the Pali or Sanskrit languages. There are generally accepted ways of transcribing Thai, Pali and Sanskrit words, respectively, using the roman alphabet. However, the Thai pronunciation, and roman transcription, of Pali and Sanskrit words often differs considerably from their form in the classical languages of Buddhism. Given this linguistic variation, I use the following pattern of transcription in this thesis:

- Apart from the two exceptions noted below, all words are transcribed according to the Thai pronunciation and are placed in italics. Where applicable, roman transcriptions of the Pali (or to a lesser extent Sanskrit) versions of these words will be given in parentheses when they first appear in the thesis. For example, the word for ‘female monk’ appears as phiksuni (Pali: bhikkhuni) for the first time, and as phiksuni in the rest of the thesis.

- An exception to this transcription pattern is the names or titles of Pali texts. For these specific names and titles, I use already accepted roman transcriptions, and the words are capitalized. For example, the Tipitaka, the Vinaya and the Gotami Sutta.
• The other exception is Buddhist terms that have been in common usage in English-language literature on the subject. For these terms, I adopt the received roman script forms and italicize them to acknowledge their non-English origins. Examples of these words are *dhamma*, *sangha* and *nibbana*.

Since distinguishing between different categories of monastic women is important in this thesis, I use specific category names, including *phiksunī, samaneri, mae-chi, sikkhamat* and *ubasika*, as titles before the names of specific monastic women, for example, *Phiksunī Voramai* and *Ubasika Ki*. I use the Thai ‘*Phiksunī*’ as titles before names of foreign female monks for reason of consistency, while acknowledging that those foreign female monks refer to themselves slightly differently, using either the Pali ‘*Bhikkhunī*’ or the Sanskrit ‘*Bhikṣunī*’ or ‘*Bhikshuni*’.

An exception to this pattern of titles is the use of Venerable (Ven.) in place of the title to acknowledge another way in which some of the better-known women discussed in this thesis are frequently addressed in English. The title Venerable (Ven.) is also commonly used in English to refer to Buddhist male monastics.

A glossary of non-English words used in this thesis is given after the conclusion chapter.
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Introduction

Arriving at the Topic

In late 2001, a group of Women’s Studies graduate students at Thammasat University in Bangkok proposed a course on ‘Women and Buddhism’. They invited a well-known Buddhist scholar, Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, to be a guest lecturer for the course. As it happened, Dr Chatsumarn was no longer a university professor at the time. The 56-year-old woman had ‘gone forth’ — a trope for Buddhist renunciation and ordination — in February of that year. She had received her first ordination in Sri Lanka and become a female novice (Thai and Pali: *samaneri*) of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Known by her ordained clerical name as Dhammananda, she was, at that time, on her path to become a fully ordained female monk (Thai: *phiksuni*; Pali: *bhikkhuni*) in another ceremony that was to take place in two years time.¹

Her ordination was an audacious act given the established view among Buddhists in Thailand that the Theravada female ordination lineage has been

¹ According to Theravada monastic rules for female ordination in the Buddhist canon, a woman must first be ordained as a *samaneri* (female novice), sometimes called a *sikkhamana* (aspirant for female monk ordination). She must remain in that probational state for two years before she can receive a higher or full ordination and become a *phiksuni* (female monk). This rule of a two-year probational period does not apply to male ordinands. Eventually, Dhammananda became fully ordained as *phiksuni* in February 2003. See Chapter 4 for detail.
lost for centuries and can never be revived. This understanding, propounded by Buddhist religious authorities and reinforced by a legal decree issued in the late 1920s, holds that an ordination of Theravada female monk, or *phiksunī*, must be conferred by a quorum of at least five Theravada *phiksunī* and led by a *phiksunī* preceptor. Since it is also held that the original Theravada *phiksunī* lineage died out in Sri Lanka and India in the 11th century CE and that this female lineage never arrived in the transmission of Buddhism to Southeast Asia, no Theravada *phiksunī* exist today to officiate at a woman’s ordination ceremony. As this argument goes, it is therefore not possible for a legitimate ordination ceremony for women to take place in the Theravada tradition either at present or in the future.

Shortly after Venerable (Ven.) Dhammananda returned from her first ordination in Sri Lanka early in 2001, the local media started to report her ordination, and a heated public debate ensued. Among other things, there was talk of a possible rift in Thai Buddhism if Theravada *phiksunī* ordination was allowed to continue.

By the time the ‘Women and Buddhism’ course proposed by Thammasat University students was due to start in November 2001, the media interest in the *phiksunī* issue had subsided, but without any resolution of the controversy. It was at this point that I learned about the course, which would take place not

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2 Ven. Dhammananda received both her lower *samaneri* and higher *phiksunī* ordinations in Sri Lanka. A Sri Lankan *phiksunī* preceptor presided over each of these ordinations. At her higher ordination in 2003 in particular, twelve *phiksu* (male monks, Pali: *bhikkhu*) and ten *phiksunī* officiated at the ceremony to meet the requirement of the scripturally-based monastic rules. The successful restoration of *phiksunī* ordination in Sri Lanka in the second half of the 1990s is discussed in Chapter 4.
at the university campus but at Watr Songdham Kalayani, or Songdham Kalayani Monastery, where Ven. Dhammananda resided. I asked the course organizer for permission to attend. I had for some time been interested in Buddhist teachings and had started to read some basic doctrines. All the books that I had read up to that point were written by male monks or male scholars. I had not had the opportunity to learn about the history of Buddhism and Buddhist doctrines from women. Despite my interest in Buddhism, I had never laid hands on the Tipitaka, the complexly organized forty-five-volume Buddhist canon.

My unfamiliarity with the Buddhist canonical texts was not unlike the experience of the majority of Buddhists in Thailand. Popular Buddhist teachings in Thai society rely primarily on interpretations of the canon by religious authorities, namely monks. Historically, Buddhist laypeople in Thailand have not been encouraged to learn directly from scriptural texts. I grew up hearing Buddhist sermons by prominent monks broadcast at 8 a.m. every Sunday morning, following the national anthem, on Radio Thailand and other government-owned radio networks; but I had never heard any Buddhist sermons from women, let alone learn as many stories of historical and

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3 See an explanation about the choice of the word watr, used specifically for women’s monasteries, in the section Defining ‘Women’s Monasticism’ below.

4 Jackson (2003: 18) states that the interpretation of Buddhist teachings in Thailand “has been a static field” with the majority of monks faithfully adhering to received interpretations drawn from established commentarial texts.

5 Gellner gives some historical background to this, saying: “Traditionally lay Theravada Buddhists have had no access to the scriptures, unless they have themselves spent time as monks” (2003: 47). Although the Pali-language Tipitaka has long been translated into the Thai language and has become more accessible, reading these extensive texts is still not a common practice among Thai lay Buddhists. See discussion of local attitudes on Buddhist texts in P Van Esterik (2000: 68-69).

6 This does not mean that there are no female dhamma teachers in Thailand. Rather, it is that they are small in numbers and the circulation of or access to their teachings is very limited. Also, most of these female teachers concern themselves with meditation.
contemporary women who lived monastic lives as I did during that thirteen-week course taught by Ven. Dhammananda.

On 10 February 2002, shortly after the Women and Buddhism course ended, an ordination ceremony of another Thai woman took place at Watr Songdham Kalayani. I joined the fifty or so laypeople, mostly women, who attended this ceremony led by a Sri Lankan female monk according to Sri Lankan Theravada ceremonial procedures. Also witnessing this ceremony was a mixed group of monastic women from Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and the Tibetan community in India. These monastic women came from different Buddhist traditions: Theravada, Mahayana and Tibetan. Six Thai male monks were present as witnesses at the event.8

The next morning, national newspapers flashed sensational headlines about the first woman ordained on Thai soil, and the possibility that this incident would lead to the creation of a new Buddhist sect (Bangkok Post 2002a; Daily News 2002a). The government reacted by setting up a panel to investigate the validity of the ordination and its impact on Buddhism. It was in this manner that another round of public debate began.

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7 It was by coincidence that these monastic women from different countries gathered at this ordination ceremony. They came to Thailand to participate in an international Buddhist monastic meeting held by a non-governmental organization prior to the ordination date. Ven. Dhammananda was among the participants, and she invited these other monastic women to attend the ordination ceremony.

8 A decree issued in 1928 by the Thai Buddhist Supreme Patriarch, which is still in force today, prohibits male monks and novices from conferring monastic ordination on women. By not taking active part in the ceremony but acting merely as witnesses, the six monks did not violate the ruling of the decree. However, their presence and the fact that five of them performed a Pali recitation to consecrate the monastery area prior to the ordination ceremony can be read as a tacit challenge to the authority of the official monastic institution. The 1928 decree is discussed in Chapter 2.
The widespread controversy over women’s ordination and the severity of the perceived threats (e.g. causing a rift in Thai Buddhism and thereby jeopardizing national security) posed by this female monastic initiative were quite puzzling in a sense. If one could pretend to look at the issue from a naı̈ve, uninformed perspective, this was a seemingly minor matter of a few women resolving to change their lifestyle. This new monastic lifestyle was signified at the concrete level by changes in such aspects as clothes and hairstyle (wearing yellow robes and shaven heads), personal name (adopting a Pali-language ordained clerical name), food-intake practice (taking only two meals a day), sexual practice (becoming celibate), and type of residence (living in a monastic residence); and all of this was marked by a ceremony that took only about an hour to complete. After all, monastic ordination (for men, that is) is normally considered a virtuous act and a cause of appreciation and celebration in Thai society. So, why the controversy?

We can start to gather possible answers to this puzzle from studies on gender and Buddhism in Thailand and other Theravada countries. These studies consistently point to the perceived cultural inferiority of women according to normative Buddhist values, and the consequential historical exclusion of women from the institution of monkhood. From literature on the historical development of institutional Buddhism and the official monastic institution (the sangha) in Thailand, we also learn that successive political regimes have traditionally drawn on institutional Buddhism and the sangha for the legitimation of their power. In turn, the legitimizing authority of the sangha relies on the notion of religious purity derived mainly from the practice of celibacy among its members as well as the custom of gender segregation in everyday monastic practice and at the institutional level. Intentional or not, the
Theravada *phiksunī* ordination initiative represented a gender transgression of this religio-political minefield, which has long been the ground for the articulation and sometimes contestation of religious and secular male institutional power.

**Shifting the Analytical Perspective**

This thesis is about the practice of women’s monasticism in relation to institutional Buddhism in Thailand. Here, I focus on the Theravada *phiksunī* ordination initiative that took place in the early 2000s, but also take into consideration other forms of Buddhist women’s religious vocation, past and present. Four basic questions have guided the direction of this study: First, why was it difficult for women to fully participate in the religious vocation and to be formally recognized as monastics in the context of Thai Buddhism? Second, despite the difficulty, what enabled different forms of women’s religious vocation, especially the confrontational Theravada *phiksunī* ordination, to emerge at different points in time? Third, how can we account for these different forms of women’s religious vocation? And fourth, what does the situation of women’s monasticism tell us about the characteristics of institutional Buddhism and the monastic order, or the *sangha*, in Thailand?

This study moves away from the analytical framework, common among studies of gender and Buddhism in Thailand, that posits Thai Buddhist culture and the institution of monkhood as being static, monolithic and all-encompassing in its influence and authority. This pre-existing analytical framework tends to build on a rather ahistorical premise that institutional Buddhism and the *sangha*
constitute a male religious stronghold, a domain of male religious authority that has tended to exclude women's involvement except at its margins or indeed outside it. According to this framework, women can only react to this overwhelming cultural and institutional power by playing a marginal role as lay supporters of Buddhism. As for women who wish to pursue the Buddhist religious vocation, they are obliged to either occupy a subordinate religious and social status compared to male monks, or else develop their ascetic identity and practice in a meaningful way outside of and apart from the male monastic institution.

In my shift of analytical perspective, I am not denying the fact that Buddhism has influence on the gender structure in Thai society, or that the monastic institution is in effect a male domain. Rather, I contend that the analytical framework outlined above allows us to see only part of the picture of the complex relationship between gender and institutional Buddhism. To begin to capture the complexity of this relationship at all, we need to see gender as being in a dialectical relation with institutional Buddhism and the monastic institution. In this dynamic relation, gender values and Buddhist institutions interact in ways that continually and mutually affect, reinforce and reshape each other.

In this consideration, I follow Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990) proposition. Taking her cue from Foucault, she engages studies of resistance and proposes that we do not only study resistance in and by itself as a sign of human freedom and the ineffectiveness of systems of domination. Rather, we should strategically read various and changing forms of resistance for what they have to tell us about the
forms of power and the complex ways in which these forms of power function and evolve.

In this thesis, I do not frame the practice of women's monasticism in the language of resistance, for this practice does not emerge necessarily in opposition to the power of the institutional religion that governs it. Still, the analytical perspective proposed by Abu-Lughod can be useful here. For while this thesis seeks to understand what it is like to be monastic women in the Thai Buddhist context, it also asks what the monastic experiences of women can tell us about the hegemonic nature of institutional Buddhism and the sangha, and how the sangha has made efforts to maintain the male-dominated status quo amid changes on the gender front.

In the next section, I will locate this thesis in the context of other relevant studies. This should also provide further background for understanding women's religious vocation in Thailand.

Situating the Thesis

Reflecting on the underlying motivations for this thesis, I returned repeatedly to the pages in my field notes in which I recorded a trivial but revealing incident. Here is my edited note:

In December 2003, I accompanied a friend to visit her uncle, a former medical doctor who was ordained as a monk after his retirement and lived now at his own monastic residence (samnak-song) built with his family's
funds on a large plot of land in a central province of Thailand. It was one of my friend’s family visits and I joined her unintentionally.

I had not met the monk before and our initial exchange took place in a politely distant manner. As my friend and I were about to leave, the monk asked about me. What subject I studied, he questioned. Anthropology was my deliberately broad answer. I was wary of discussing the research topic because of the unresolved public controversy over women’s ordination. But the monk was determined to hear more. Anthropology, yes, but what exactly was the research about, he continued to ask. I briefly replied that I was researching Buddhist *nak-buat phu-ying*, or ‘ordained women’, in Thailand.

“What do you mean by ordained women?” the monk asked again after a slight pause. Before I could finish my answer, he shot back with a sudden change in tone. “There are no ordained women in Thailand. *Mae-chi* [traditional white-robed nuns] observe only eight precepts. They are *ubasika* [Pali: *upasika*, meaning ‘pious laywomen’], not ordained. Those *phiksumi* who claim to have received their ordination from Sri Lanka have violated the Buddhist conventions [*phuthabanyat*]. Their ordination was invalid. So, there are no ordained women in Thailand. How can you research something that does not exist? How can you invent something that is not there?”

This personal encounter with a denial of the existence of monastic women in Thailand illustrates how denial is a condition that frames women’s monasticism in a significant way. One of the aims of this thesis is to enquire into the sources of this kind of denial: How has it been constituted? How does
it function? And what are its consequences? To be certain, discursive negation does not necessitate or even imply actual annihilation or non-existence. As this thesis reveals, despite popular rhetoric to the contrary, women’s monasticism in the Theravada tradition has never been totally erased. Innovative forms of women’s monasticism have emerged at different points in the history of Theravada Buddhism despite institutional constraints.

_The Gender of the Sangha_

Studies of gender and Buddhism in Thailand often focus on how Buddhism casts influence on gender relations in society, and not vice versa. They seldom ask how the gender dynamics in society affect people’s understanding of Buddhism, or how the sangha functions to maintain its predominantly male composition and identity. Examples of these studies can be found in the much-quoted exchange between the anthropologists Thomas Kirsch (1975a, 1985, 1996 [1982]) and Charles Keyes (1984) on the images of women in Thai Buddhism. Kirsch argues that Thai women and men are ascribed differential relationships to Buddhist roles, norms and values. According to him, women are stereotypically seen as being more attached to worldly matters than men, therefore, women’s relation to the Buddhist salvation is qualitatively different from that of men. This has the effect of denying women access to full ordination into monkhood, and of women’s religious roles being poorly developed and not highly regarded (Kirsch 1996: 21, 1975a: 185). Despite his different interpretation of the images of women, Keyes (1984) substantiates Kirsch’s argument by confirming that the dominant image of Thai women in the traditional Buddhist culture is that of mother-nurturer of both her children.
and the Buddhist religion. Because of their different ‘natures’, Keyes argues, men are seen as being able to detach themselves from worldly concerns by joining the monkhood while women can achieve their redemptive detachment by first becoming mothers and then ‘sacrificing’ their sons to become monks. Also cited in this Kirsch-Keyes exchange is a different view from Khin Thitsa (1980). Making her points from a feminist perspective, Khin Thitsa sees Buddhist traditional attitudes as a major cause of the devaluation of women.

Penny Van Esterik (1996 [1982]) also uses Buddhism as a reference system to evaluate women’s lives. She argues that the differentiation between the ordained and non-ordained statuses, and not between male and female, is the most critical dimension of the order of social identities in the central Thai village where she conducted her study. She contends that “women per se are not devalued: nonordination is devalued” (1996: 54). But since the fully ordained status has, until recently, been accessible only to men, we can question if Van Esterik’s two models of differentiation (based either on ordination or gender) make any difference in describing the status of women in general.

Commonly, these works on gender and Buddhism depict the formidable influence of Buddhism on the formation of the gender order in Thai society (see Kirsch 1975a: 117, 1996: 13, 1985: 305; Keyes 1984: 226; Khin Thitsa 1980: 5). In doing so, the authors often posit the so-called traditional Buddhist culture as static and all-encompassing, and the interactions between Buddhism

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9 While Keyes acknowledges changes in the social reality for Thai women, especially in relation to prostitution, he effectively seals “the traditional Buddhist culture” off from other detrimental social factors such as “the new secularized image of woman as sex object” and “the increasingly materialistic culture of Thailand” and declares these factors as non-Buddhist (1984: 236). Kirsch, however, points out that the ‘new’ image
and gender as unilateral, with the former casting influence on the latter, and not vice versa. Craig Reynolds concludes that this discussion about the influence of Buddhism on gender “came to an impasse, because gender was not conceptualized as a discursive and changeable category that depends on context, institutional practice, and ritual” (2006: 128). Nicola Tannenbaum, in her thorough review of the literature on gender and Buddhism in Thailand, argues that a major drawback of this analytical stance is “to conceive of Thai society and culture as primarily Buddhist and to look to Buddhism to explain all cultural patterns” (1999: 241). She suggests that analyses of gender in Thai society should move away from the Buddhist framework.

Far from doing this, Barbara Andaya (2002) proposes an alternative historical perspective for understanding the connection between gender and Theravada Buddhism. She suggests that we reconceptualize and historicize the relationship between women and Theravada Buddhism to see women as active agents exercising their female agency as mother-nurturer to Buddhism and, one may add, clients of the institution of monkhood. With this proposition, Andaya points significantly to how early Theravada Buddhism that spread from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia “adapted to the gender dynamics of local environments” (2002: 4). This adaptation, she says, helps explain the widespread and lasting popularity of Theravada Buddhism in the region.

10 I somehow find Andaya’s (2002) hypothetical notion of ‘universal’ motherhood that cuts across different cultures, historical periods and social stratifications among women problematic in its claimed degree of pervasiveness. This universal notion is exemplified in such statements as: “women of all classes could identify with the mothering role these ‘royal patrons’ exemplified” (2002: 3, original emphasis) and “the singularly female experience of giving birth is one linking strand that stretches across class and culture alike” (2002: 30). This problematic notion aside, her contribution in shifting the historical perspective of pan-Theravada studies from influences of the political elite to active roles and experiences of women must be acknowledged.
Taking this point on the gender adaptation of Buddhism further, I argue that the institution of the Buddhist monkhood continues to exist in a dynamic relation with the local gender order. A gendering process has been put to work in which the institution of monkhood draws on selected local gender values in order to reconstitute itself in a particular gendered way, thus maintaining its male hegemonic authority.

To demonstrate this point in the case of Thailand, I will examine the eventful period of Buddhist reform and bureaucratization of the sangha in the mid 19th and early 20th centuries. It is true that the historical development of the sangha in these periods and its consequences have been well studied (for example, Reynolds 1973; Somboon 1982; Ishii 1986; Jackson 1989; Phaisan 2003). However, the fact that this institution has been exclusively male means that the gender aspect entrenched in its authority has escaped the attention of these otherwise illuminating works (except for brief discussions of women’s ordination in Phaisan 2003). By turning the analytical gaze to the development of the sangha, I try to answer the question of how this institution draws on certain gender values in Thai society in order to maintain its male-dominated status quo.

*Women’s Monasticism and Institutional Constraints*

Another set of studies that provides an important foundation for this thesis concerns the identities and practices of ascetic or monastic women in

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11 See comments on the lack of gender consideration in Thai historical studies, including studies of monkhood, in Reynolds’ article (2006) on “Engendering Thai Historical Writing.”
These works contribute to our knowledge about Buddhist female ascetics and monastics, who have long been part of the Thai religious landscape. Naturally, several of these works focus on different aspects of the oldest and most visible type of women in religious vocation called mae-chi (discussed below). Examples of works on mae-chi include Nerida Cook (1981), Sidney Brown (1997), Monica Falk (2002), Parichart Suwanbubbha (2002) and Majorie Muecke (2004). Other works also reveal the existence of other less familiar categories of monastic or ascetic women. John Van Esterik (1996 [1982]) explores the rarely studied women meditation teachers. The works of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (1991a) and Tomomi Ito (1999, 2002) then explore other monastic or ascetic identities, including silajarini, phutthasawika or light yellow-robed nuns, ubasika and earlier cases of phiksumi (see detailed discussion of these categories in Chapter 3). Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn (1997, 2000) brings to our attention yet another rarely studied category, the sikkhamat, who form the female monastic wing of the organized reformist group Santi Asoke. These studies provide important signposts for further research.

However, in my discussion of these different forms of women’s religious vocation, I will shift the focus from merely exploring the different types of women’s monastic identities and practices to examining the dynamic relationship between women’s religious vocation and the sangha. Here, I see the different forms of female religious vocation in light of the engendering of possibilities in women’s monasticism. I thus enquire into the ways in which the sangha and its historical supporter, the state, contended with gender

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12 For the difference between ‘ascetic’ and ‘monastic’ as used in this thesis, see the section on Defining ‘Women’s Monasticism’ below.
challenges in the form of women’s monasticism. I argue that while the perception that women could not become monks has its roots in the Buddhist scriptures and the centuries-old history of Thai Buddhism, this perception has in recent Thai history been reified and institutionalized to the point of becoming a dominant discourse, the discourse of the impossibility of *phiksuni* ordination.

Another constraint in women’s monasticism to be discussed in this thesis concerns the perpetuation of the ambiguous status of the traditional form of monastic women, the *mae-chi*. These normally white-robed women who shave their hair, live in monasteries or nunneries, and variously observe either the eight or ten Buddhist precepts,\(^ {13} \) are not formally recognized as having an ordained status. They are officially classified as laywomen despite their dedication to a monastic existence. According to Peter Jackson (2003: 60), laypeople are not considered to have significant religious standing in the Buddhist hierarchy. This lack of formal recognition of *mae-chi* corresponds with a religious belief which holds that *mae-chi* constitute a lesser ‘field of merit’ (*na bun*).\(^ {14} \) This notion deems that *mae-chi* are not capable of

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\(^ {13} \) The eight Buddhist precepts feature abstention from: 1) killing, 2) stealing, 3) having sexual intercourse, 4) lying, 5) taking intoxicants, 6) eating at inappropriate times, 7) dancing, singing, playing music, engaging in unseemly performances, wearing garlands, and using perfumes and other skin beautification substances, and 8) sleeping on high and large luxurious mattresses. For the ten precepts, the first six rules are identical whereas the seventh rule is divided into two, with one last extra rule added to the list. Thus rules number 7 to 10 of the ten precepts include abstentions from: 7) dancing, singing, playing music, and engaging in unseemly performances, 8) wearing garlands, and using perfumes and other skin beautification substances, 9) sleeping on high and large luxurious mattresses, and 10) accepting gold and silver (or money in the modern form).

\(^ {14} \) The notion of ‘field of merit’ is based on an agricultural-related metaphor in which individual and the collective body of Buddhist monastics are compared to a field on which laypeople can sow their virtuous support. This is based on a belief that such deeds will yield religious merit, which will in turn bring good life and prosperity to the laypeople performing such deeds.
generating as much merit as monks in return for material and other forms of support from the laity. Together, these factors place mae-chi in a lower religious status when compared to monks.

Considering these two institutional constraints together, I argue that women who seek a religious vocation are confronted with the now dominant discourse of the impossibility of phiksunī ordination on the one hand, and the relatively low status of mae-chi on the other. This situation has compelled a number of women to creatively seek alternative forms of religious vocation that circumvent these limitations. In this situation, the constraints have paradoxically led to the emergence of innovative forms of women’s religious vocation.

*Women’s Religiosity and Religious Change*

In a way, the attempts to institute Theravada phiksunī ordination in the early 2000s may be regarded as a continuation of the emergence of alternative forms of women’s religious vocation discussed above. However, we should not ignore the specific context that made this latest and most confrontational ordination initiative possible. While broad social change that affects the condition of women’s religious vocation, particularly the educational and economic advancement of women, do get some mention in previous studies of women’s religious vocation, a meaningful dialogue is yet to be made between these studies and the growing literature on the shifting landscapes of Buddhism and religiosity in Thailand.\(^\text{15}\) Whereas women’s monastic initiatives in recent

\(^{15}\) The few exceptions to this include: J Van Esterik’s discussion of the popularity of lay women meditation teachers in relation to the widening gap between traditional
history may be represented under the rubric of women pursuing archaic aspirations for Buddhist asceticism, these female monastic projects are in fact the products of their contemporary times and social conditions, not least the conditions of institutional and popular religion.

In their attempts to capture the fast changing religio-political landscape of Thai society, scholars have moved away from the language of ‘reform’ and ‘modernization’ as a characterization of changes in Thai Buddhism. Terms such as ‘fragmented’, ‘privatization’, ‘commodification’, ‘post-modernization’ and ‘hybridization’ have now been used to interpret the conditions of Buddhism and religiosity in Thailand in the 1980s and 1990s (see Keyes 1999b; Jackson 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Taylor 1993a, 1999; Pattana 2005). In sum, these studies see the waning of the centralized authority of institutional Buddhism. This is coupled with a parallel decline in the traditional role of the state in monitoring and controlling Buddhism and the sangha. This situation was heightened by a growing sense of public disenchantment with the authority of the sangha due to frequent media reports of sexual scandals and corruption within this institution (Jackson 1997, Keyes 1999a). Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles Keyes describe the declining influence of the Buddhist monastic institution as the “decomposition of the familiar order” (2002: 1). But as Jackson points out, “[a] declining interest in institutional Buddhism should not be mistaken for a necessary decline in religiosity” (1997: 76). Instead, there has been increasing demand for alternative forms of spiritual fulfilment that range from “less tainted forms of Buddhism” (Jackson 1997: 80) to various

Buddhism and the urban educated elite (1996 [1982]: 39-41); and Kirsch’s attempt to raise questions about changes in Buddhist values and practices, particularly the declining practice of male ordination, and their impact on the image of laywomen as mother-nurturer of the monastic order (1985: 316-317). However, these discussions are limited in scope and deal mostly with laywomen.
popular religious cults that lie both within and outside the bounds of Buddhism (see Apinya 1993; Suriya et al. 1996; Jackson 1999a, 1999b; Morris 2000, 2002; Tanabe 2002; Pattana 1999, 2005).

By bringing this broader religious change into perspective, we will see the connection between the development of women's religious vocation and other religio-political factors. This will partly explain why the move to institute Theravada phiksuni ordination became possible at this point in Thai history. I contend that the practice of women's monasticism such as the phiksuni ordination initiative in the early 2000s both emerged from and contributed to the growing plurality in the Thai religious landscape.

Women and Supernatural Practices

While spirit-worship practice has always been part of Thai religiosity, recent literature acknowledges a phenomenal change in the past few decades. This change has seen a decline in village-based traditional practice of ancestor spirit worship and animism. Replacing this is the burgeoning of 'professional' spirit mediumship in urban cities (Irvine 1984; Suriya et al. 1996; Tanabe 2002; Pattana 1999, 2005; Morris 2000, 2002). This upsurge of urban spirit mediumship is variously described as being symptomatic of uneven development and modernization processes or as an indicator of the crisis of modernity (Irvine 1984: 315; Pattana 1999; Morris 2002). Public disenchantment with institutional Buddhism and the state-sponsored sangha also contribute to the growth of cultic practices. Yet, the relation between spirit cults and Buddhism is not simply one of opposition. While spirit
mediumship often draws disapproving comments from people who identify with doctrinal or rational Buddhism, the boundary between mediumship and popular Buddhism is in fact porous. Spirit mediums generally draw on Buddhist idioms and practices as important sources of legitimacy (Pattana 1999: 163, 134; Morris 2002, 2000: chapter 4). The Buddha, his renowned disciples, and other monks revered for their magical power have been incorporated as supreme deities in the cultic belief system (Pattana 2005: 477-479). Also, a number of monks and ex-monks are known to participate in spirit-medium and other supernatural practices (Irvine 1984; Morris 2002: 86).

In gender terms, studies of urban spirit mediumship unanimously point to the prevalent female presence in this practice, both as mediums and clients. Two questions can be asked of this gender aspect: why more women than men participate in this practice, and what gender implications can we draw from this female predominance. So far, there are only scattered answers to the first question. Pattana Kitiarsa attributes this to “the changing construction of Thai female gender” in “a postmodernizing Buddhist society” (1999: 313-315). He says that working-class urban migrant women, who are the main partakers as both mediums and clients of spirit mediumship, have “lost the traditional matrilineal kin supports and resources once entitled to them in rural communities” (1999: 314). Faced with harsh living conditions, economic and otherwise, these women turn to spirit mediumship to find spiritual mitigation of their problems. Pattana also mentions in passing that the exclusion of women from the monkhood contributes to more women turning to spirit cults than men (1999: 314). Jackson (2004: footnote 11) confirms this last point saying that the debarring of women and effeminate homosexual men from full ordination
as monks, thus denying them “the most respected spiritual status” in Theravada Buddhism, may contribute to their turning to spirit mediumship.

As for the gender implications of women’s participation in spirit mediumship, most writers agree that these practices help to expand the normally limited ritual space of women, allowing them the opportunity to engage actively in spiritual and ritual practices. Female mediums’ appropriation of popular Buddhist beliefs (by including prominent Buddhist figures in their pantheon of deities and performing conspicuous merit-making offerings to Buddhist monasteries) and ascetic practices (vegetarianism, temporary sexual abstinence and meditation) can be interpreted as women’s “incursion into masculine space” (Irvine 1984: 320). Nevertheless, this kind of gendered appropriation of male spiritual authority by female mediums often leads back to the confirmation of masculine potency and power in the supernatural realm. Oftentimes, female mediums have to negate their feminine gender and sometimes their female physiology (such as in claimed early menopause due to supernatural sanctions or as a result of meditation) in order to effectively assume the ritualized masculine roles and authority of the mostly male deities by which they are possessed (see Irvine 1984).

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16 Women’s incursion into the male spiritual or religious space is not limited to urban spirit-medium practices. Tanabe’s study (1991) of a traditional spirit worship practice, the phi meng cult, in northern Thailand recounts the ritual in which women are possessed by mostly male ancestor spirits. While in trance, one of the possessed women will undergo a skit-like ordination ceremony. This ritual performance, as Tanabe puts it, “allows the woman, through the ritualised reversal, to become a man who is powerful and sensual, and at the same time who has the privilege of being a monk” (1991: 202).
Women’s Monasticism as a Quest for Modernity

The literature on spirit-mediumship provides a window into the diverse religious world in which women take part. Works on this topic seem to come to the same conclusion, that urban spirit mediumship is an alternative religious space for women in the face of their marginalized position vis-à-vis institutional Buddhism. The Thai historian Nidhi Eoseewong (1995: 172) contends that Buddhism and supernaturalism were components of the same inclusive notion of religion in the past, that is, before the Buddhist rationalization project which started early in the Bangkok period (1782-present). Nidhi argues for the case of gender division of spiritual labour in the religious system from the past. In this ‘religion’ (with no one specific name), women played leading roles in supernatural and spirit practices, he says. Thus, men performed as nak-buat (here translated as ‘religious experts’) of Buddhism, and women of supernaturalism; and both male and female religious experts enjoyed a somewhat equal degree of respect in their different capacities (Nidhi 1995: 172). Nidhi concludes that the attempts to purge Buddhism of supernaturalism have seen a critical erosion of the religious role of women.

If this is the case, we may argue that women’s increasingly visible attempts to carve out their religious vocation in connection with institutional Buddhism is one among a number of responses by women, urban spirit mediumship included, to the historical devaluation of their religious standing. Put another way, women’s aspiration for the Buddhist ascetic or monastic vocation, which first emerged as a public issue in the late 1920s and again in the early 2000s, has been a reaction to, or an unintended by-product of, the Buddhist
rationalization and modernization project. Once this state-sanctioned religious modernization project became popularized, the control of its impact was unleashed from the hand of the mostly male ruling elite. By closing off the supposedly non-Buddhist practices and delegitimizing women's religious roles in those practices, the modernization project has rendered institutional Buddhism the dominant source of religious legitimacy and authority. It is an ironic twist of history that the masterminds of the Buddhist rationalization and modernization project would not be able to maintain full control over the ways in which the wider population approached the hegemonic Buddhism. Consequently, Buddhism became an indispensable source of religious authority that people who desire an acknowledged religious status must now try to tap into. These people included those who found themselves marginalized by the Buddhist modernization project, such as women and practitioners of supernatural beliefs. This situation may explain the conspicuous presence of Buddhist beliefs and practices (or their approximation) as an indispensable source of legitimation in the contemporary spirit medium practice discussed above.

Other social factors also came into play, for religious modernization was not an isolated process but arose in a broader social context. Scot Barmé (2002) puts together a picture of Bangkok in the first few decades of the 20th century, where the effect of secular modernization had trickled down from the ruling elite to the emergent middle class of that time. Debates about equality between the sexes, especially in education and employment, started to appear in the

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17 In a seemingly parallel development, Morris (2002: 80) states that spirit mediumship, in which female practitioners were prevalent, started to emerge as a discourse, to be documented as "a problem demanding commentary", in Siamese and English-language accounts in the late 19th century.
bourgeoning print media. When the hegemonic institutionalized Buddhism amalgamated with the popularized secular modernism, it is not surprising that cases of women seeking their legitimate place within the rationalized or institutionalized Buddhist realm would soon, overtly or subtly, emerge. This is evident in the short-lived case of women's ordination initiative in the late 1920s.

This modernist historical background of female religious vocation points significantly to the 'gender lapse', or the omission of women, inherent to the grand Buddhist reform and modernization project. The overall influence of this modernization project, put forward by the political elite in the mid 19th century, has lasted well into recent years.\textsuperscript{18} Given this background, the contemporary female monastic initiatives, the Theravada \textit{phiksuni} ordination in particular, do not reflect the state of 'post-modernization' that scholars ascribe to the diffused landscape of Thai religiosity at present (for example, Jackson 1999a & b; Taylor 1993, 1999; Pattana 1999, 2005). Unlike the diffuse popular cultic beliefs and practices, the different female ascetic or monastic projects discussed in this thesis feature certain degrees of rationalization, institutionalizing aspirations and adherence to certain Buddhist conventions. Thus, I argue that these female religious projects may be better understood as a quest for modernity; it is a quest to become part of the hegemonic modernized Buddhism even, in more recent cases, at the time when modernity and the centralized authority of institutional Buddhism and the \textit{sangha} are already described as being in 'crisis' (see Jackson 1997; Keyes 1999a & b; Morris 2002; Tanabe & Keyes 2002; Phaisan 2003). However, in their pursuit of becoming part of the modernized Buddhism, the women engaging in Buddhist

\textsuperscript{18} See Jackson (2003) for a recent modernist Buddhist movement in Thailand.
ascetic or monastic vocation must also seek to more or less transform the gender order of this modernist religious project, which excluded them in the first place.

*Forces of Transnationalism*

Since the 1980s, there has been a revival of fully ordained female monastics of the Theravada tradition. This revivalist initiative has been transnational in scope. It has been driven in a large part by an international network of Buddhist women of different traditions and countries under the name of the Sakyadhitā International Association of Buddhist Women,\(^1\) set up in the late 1980s by a group of Buddhist feminists from different countries, including Chatsumarn or later Ven. Dhammananda from Thailand mentioned earlier. One of the aims of this network has been to promote *phiksumi* ordination of both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions in different countries. Every two years, Sakyadhitā holds an international conference at which lay and ordained women of different Buddhist traditions from different continents converge. The organization’s website (http://www.sakyadhitā.org) provides preliminary information about *phiksumi* ordination. Besides, Buddhist monastic organizations from the advanced economies of South Korea and Taiwan, in their efforts to propagate Buddhism, have also played key roles in organizing international ordination ceremonies for women in both the Mahayana and Theravada traditions. A number of women from different countries – Burma (Myanmar), Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the United States and Vietnam – have since taken ordination in the Theravada tradition.

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\(^{1\text{9}}\) *Sakyadhita* means ‘daughters of the Buddha’.
A perspective from Thailand has also seen a number of women travelling on and off, since the 1970s, to different countries including Taiwan, the United States, China (the PRC and Hong Kong), Malaysia, India and Sri Lanka, to seek their ordination in either the Mahayana or Theravada tradition. As recounted above, in 2002, a Sri Lankan *phiksunī* preceptor was invited to officiate at an ordination ceremony in Thailand. During my fieldwork in 2003, a group of Theravada *phiksunī* flew in from different countries to spend their three-month rains-retreat and participate in female monastic training in Thailand.

Transborder mobility of people, texts, beliefs and practices is not new to the history of Buddhism. Nevertheless, the pace, scope and numbers of women participating in this transnational mobility at present are unprecedented. Amid these vibrant scenes of what Arjun Appadurai (1996) terms “global flows” of people, information, ideologies and practices, it is hard to draw the line between Thai and the so-called universal Buddhism. It is also difficult to tell where the authority of the traditional, state-supported Thai *sangha* ends and the transnational legitimacy of women’s monasticism supported by diverse non-state agents begins.

Thus, our consideration of women’s religious vocation in Thailand necessarily leads us beyond the local context. The Theravada *phiksunī* ordination initiative of the early 2000s, for example, was enabled in a large part by the ever more extensive and fast-paced transnational connections and mobility. Unlike most of their predecessors, women seeking the monastic vocation in the late 20th and

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20 The rains-retreat is often translated as the ‘Buddhist Lent’. In Southeast Asia, this three-month retreat lasts through the peak of the rainy season. During this period, monks are supposed to restrain from unnecessary long-distance (i.e. overnight) travelling.
early 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries were not necessarily confined by national boundaries and the limits these boundaries impose.

\textit{The Appeal of Tradition}

This transnational aspect of women's monasticism, accelerated by the compression of time and space enabled in turn by advanced communication and transportation technologies, may be described as 'the consequences of modernity' (Giddens 1990) or 'the condition of postmodernity' (Harvey 1989). And while one may think that the content of this modernity or postmodernity should be filled with avant-garde ideas and practices, the case of \textit{phiksuni} ordination initiatives reminds us that the modern is not always the opposite of the traditional. As global flows facilitate changes that are deemed modern or postmodern, they also help spread traditionalist ideas and practices across borders. And not only traditions are transferred and received; they can also be invented to serve specific purposes (Hobsbawm 1983). As Giddens states: "For most of its history, modernity has rebuilt tradition as it has dissolved it" (1996: 8).

As will be evident in this thesis, in the attempts to change the situation of women's monasticism in the first years of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, the yearning for what is deemed traditional also persisted among the monastic and lay women involved in this process of change. For one thing, the Theravada \textit{phiksuni} initiative represents an attempt to return to the traditional roots of the female monastic tradition. Because these roots were said to have been cut off, the ordination tradition had to be re-created. More importantly, it has to be re-
created in a way that implies continuity with "a suitable historic past" (Hobsbawm 1983: 1). This explains why the connection with Sri Lanka was important to the Theravada phiksuni ordination initiative in Thailand, at least in the pioneering cases. An accepted view in Southeast Asia holds that Sri Lanka is the fount of the Theravada tradition and "the land of genuine Buddhism" (Thongchai 1994: 27). Also, history has established that the Theravada phiksuni lineage started and flourished in Sri Lanka from the 3rd century BC until its unexplained disappearance from the country around the 11th century. Via the connection with Sri Lanka, advocates of the Theravada phiksuni ordination contended that they were reconnecting the present-day phiksuni ordination with the traditional Theravada female ordination lineage that existed in the remote past. To be certain, references to suitable historic pasts feature significantly in both the advocacy of and opposition to the Theravada phiksuni initiative. It also happened that both sides might allude to the same past, but with different interpretations. This testifies to the appeal of tradition, and how tradition and history are continually redefined.

Defining 'Women's Monasticism'

Correct definitions and the right to certain definitions are always at issue for Buddhist monastic women, not only in Thailand but also in other societies. The ambiguity of the notion of women's religious vocation is partly a product of academic representations. Kim Gutschow (2004: 9) attributes the exclusion of nuns from early Western Buddhist scholarship to the bias among Western scholars who valued classical religious texts over diverse local practices in which nuns took part. This omission, she says, has also been perpetuated by
the local male-dominated monastic elite in their narrative of Buddhist history and their emphasis on textual knowledge. Paula Arai (1999: 9) tells us that “deciding who is a nun is multifaceted and controversial”. This problem, she says, often arises from the narrow categorical definition of nun, which delimits ‘nun’ to mean women who adhere to the full set of scripturally-based monastic discipline or who have the so-called ordination lineage. This is despite the fact that Buddhist monastic women in different societies (also monastic men, such as in Japan) do not necessarily commit themselves to the full or same set of monastic rules and may not “have” or “care about” the ordination lineage (Arai 1999: 9-10). Likewise, Bernard Faure comments that scholarly “uncritical acceptance of [scriptural] orthodoxy” has resulted in the obliteration of the history of nuns who were not “regularly ordained” (2003: 25, 36). As he argues: “The sociological reality of nunhood was also much more diverse and complex than what official sources … would let us believe” (Faure 2003: 25).

There is also the legalistic issue of definitions. In the Thai language, the closest meaning of the English word ‘monastic’ is nak-buat, which literally means ‘ordained person’.21 But in official and legal discourses in Thailand, the word nak-buat does not apply to women. Even mae-chi, the oldest and most visible type of women who follow the Buddhist religious vocation, are not officially counted as ordained. Rather, they are regarded as belonging to the religious stratum of the laity. The Sangha Act that governs Buddhist

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21 While the English word ‘monastic’ has its etymological link to the place of living – the monastery – the Thai term nak-buat places an emphasis on the act of ordaining or taking ordination, which arguably implies ceremonial acts (nak = prefix for a person who regularly undertakes a certain activity, buat = to ordain or be ordained). In my translation of nak-buat as ‘monastic’, I do not emphasize the English etymological link with the ‘monastery’. This is because most of the women studied for this thesis live at different types of religious establishments, few of which qualify as monasteries proper.
monastics in Thailand makes absolutely no mention of any categories of women who follow the Buddhist religious vocation, not even mae-chi.

Moreover, in 1928 the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch issued a decree which prohibits (male) monks and novices from conferring monastic ordination on women. This decree, which is still in force today, declares as illegitimate the initiation of women into any of the three scripturally-sanctioned female monastic categories, namely, phiksumi (female monk), samaneri (female novice) and sikkhamana (aspirant for female monk ordination).

In a positive light, some mae-chi count as a blessing this lack of legal recognition, for they then do not have to subject themselves to the control of the state-monitored sangha. However, this autonomy comes at the cost of a lack of equal access to government funds and other forms of support available to male monastics. And although mae-chi are not legally recognized as 'ordained', they do enjoy a greater sense of belonging to, and social recognition as part of, Thai Buddhism as compared to women of other monastic categories. Thus, in more confrontational scenarios, three Theravada samaneri (female novices) I met in the field reported having been harassed in public places and being threatened with arrests on the grounds of impersonating (male) monks. These experiences illustrate how women of monastic categories other than mae-chi may be treated in ways that make them feel alienated in the context of Thai Buddhism. In the milder context of everyday life, the word mae-chi is often used to label all other types of ascetic or monastic women whose self-chosen identities are unfamiliar to the wider public.
The issue of definition affects not only the women’s self-labelling practice but also the labelling of their residential places, as in the case of women’s monasteries. The Thai word for a Buddhist monastery is ‘wat’ (วัด). In official terms, however, wat means the residence of (male) monks (phra-phiiksusong). The construction and establishment of wat is regulated by the sangha law proclaimed and administered by the Thai state. To set up a monastic place equivalent to a wat for women, one must avoid breaching the official definition and regulations concerning wat. Yet to allude to the religious connotation of the word wat, the founder of Songdham Kalayani Monastery, Phiksuni Voramai Kabilsingh (see Chapter 3), adopted the homophone watr (วัดร) - a Sanskrit-derived word which means ‘practice’ (Sanskrit: vatra) – as the category name for her monastic residence. In doing this, she followed the precedent of the residential place set up near Bangkok in the late 1920s for a group of women ordained at that time (see Chapter 2).

Being aware of the highly contentious nature of the act of defining women’s religious vocation, in this thesis I adopt an inclusive definition of women’s monasticism. This definition encompasses the ways of life of women who follow a celibate religious vocation according to the rules of their religious groups. This is regardless of whether or not they have received full ordination as phiksuni, adhere to the full set of scripturally-based monastic rules for women (the Bhikkhuni Vinaya), or live in monasteries proper. This inclusive definition is necessary if one wishes to avoid the pitfalls of the uncritically orthodox academic representations and the exclusionary legalistic definitions of women in the Buddhist religious vocation discussed above. To use the

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22 See regulations on the construction and establishment of Buddhist monasteries (wat) in the Ministerial Rule No. 1 (B.E. 2507 [1964]) issued in accord with the 1962 Sangha Act. This Ministerial Rule is still in force today.
words 'monastic' and 'monasticism' with women in religious vocation is to launch into the 're-gendering' process of these conventionally male-identified words in order to reclaim their applicability to women.

To further explicate the choices of terms used, in this thesis I use the words 'monasticism' and 'monastic' to identify the forms of women's religious vocation that reflect the women's intention to become part of an established or aspired-to-be-established religious vocational group. However, given the largely episodic nature of women's religious vocation in Thailand at present, one must be careful not to assume homogeneity within these umbrella terms 'women's monasticism' and 'monastic women'. Thus, I also use women's specific category names, such as *phiksuni, samaneri, mae-chi* and *sikkhamat*, to specify each distinctive form of women's religious vocation.

Nevertheless, to acknowledge the different religious aspirations and forms of religious vocation of women on the ground, I also use the word 'ascetic' to describe women who engage in a very personalized form of religious vocation, with a demonstrated intention not to become members of any established, or intended-to-be established, religious groups. These women usually have no intention to establish a religious group with a collective identity – although their personal charisma might draw some admirers and followers to gather around them. The category *ubasika* discussed in Chapter 3 is an example of the ascetic women thus defined.
Fieldwork

The pattern of my fieldwork was dictated in part by the present condition of women’s monasticism in Thailand, which can be described as organizationally and geographically dispersed. Of the different types of ascetic and monastic women covered in this thesis, some consist of only a small number of individuals, with most of the women living in small groups or individually. Conducting research with them meant that I had to move, figuratively and physically, between different individuals, groups and geographical locations. This is admittedly at the cost of losing depth with respect to some individuals and groups.

My fieldwork was undertaken between January 2003 and April 2004. I spent the most time with Theravada phiksumi and samanerī. Until the end of my fieldwork, seven women had been ordained in the Theravada tradition (one as a phiksumi and six as samanerī). These categories of monastic women, although small in number, were fragmented in terms of their sites of ordination, the religious authorities who had ordained them, and types and locations of their residences. My main fieldsite was at Watr Songdham Kalayani in Nakhon Pathom province, about one-hour drive on the South-bound highway from Bangkok. Two women ordained in the Theravada tradition lived at this women’s monastery, one of whom is Ven. Dhammananda, who is a central figure in this thesis. Other residents at this monastery included a small number of mae-chi who came and went, some five or six long-term lay female residents and an ever-fluctuating number of temporary female residents and visitors who spent from a few days to a few months at this place. During the Buddhist rains-retreat of 2003, lasting from early July to early October, the monastery
hosted training for a group of seven Theravada female monastics (six monks and a novice) from Burma/Vietnam, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. During my stay at this monastery, I was assigned miscellaneous tasks such as typing, doing errands, interpreting lectures by or for English-speaking visitors and writing short articles for the monastery’s newsletter.

I also alternated between staying at Watr Songdham Kalayani and travelling to meet with monastic or ascetic women, male monks and laypeople of other groups at other places. This included other Theravada female novices who lived elsewhere. Other groups of monastic women I conducted research with include sikkhamat of the Asoke reformist Buddhist group, phiksunī and samaneri of the Mahayana tradition, and a number of mae-chi. I also interviewed a few women who identify themselves as ubasika. As much as possible, I tried to participate in different activities, such as annual religious ceremonies organized by different religious groups, or simply to pay repeated visits to, and have follow-up meetings with, a number of women from each group.

Furthermore, I had the opportunity to follow some of the apparent ‘global flows’ of people, beliefs and practices that took place during my fieldwork. This first-hand observation of the religious global flows has enabled me to have a better understanding of the current transnational characteristic of women’s monasticism. For example, I received kind permission from Ven. Dhammananda to join her on a trip to Sri Lanka in February 2003 to observe her phiksunī ordination ceremony. Three other phiksunī ordinands from Burma (Myanmar) and the United States also received their ordinations on the same occasion. In mid 2004, I attended the 8th Sakyadhita International Conference
of Buddhist Women held in South Korea where about one thousand monastic and lay women of different Buddhist traditions came together from some twenty countries.

But one does not always have to travel far to be able to observe this transnational mobility on the religious front. Transnational activities also took place at home. During my fieldwork in Thailand I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to spend time with the group of Theravada phiksuni from different countries who came to spend the rains-retreat and participate in monastic training at Watr Songdham Kalayani in 2003. This is not to mention numerous other foreign visitors and researchers who were drawn to this monastery by the phiksuni phenomenon. Beliefs and practices also travel with people. Thus, in another example, in mid 2003 I participated in a religious retreat led by a group of Thai and foreign, female and male, monastics from the lineage of the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hahn. This retreat took place at a provincial Theravada monastery in Thailand. In fact, the monastics of this France-based Vietnamese Zen lineage travelled to Thailand from different Western countries, and they have led more religious retreats in Thailand since.

Lastly, about the treatment of identities of the people studied. Both real names and pseudonyms are used (with pseudonyms indicated as such) depending in the most part on the choices of the people involved. Real identities of the people with whom I met and talked casually while in the field will not be revealed for reason of maintaining privacy. For identities of the research locations, information about well-known public places will be disclosed. In other cases, I will describe only the broad regional or provincial locations and
relevant socio-cultural attributes of the places, also for reason of maintaining privacy of the people involved.

Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into two parts. The first part, chapters 1 to 3, deals with historical and contextual issues. Chapter 1 traces the influence of local gender values in the history of the sangha, focusing on the defining period of Buddhist reform and bureaucratization of the sangha in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Chapter 2 discusses a short-lived incident of women’s Theravada ordination in Siam the late 1920s and its legacy. This ordination incident transpired as an overt gender challenge to the sangha. In Chapter 3, I demonstrate that despite institutional constraints on women’s full participation in monasticism, women have created or adopted alternative monastic or ascetic forms for themselves.

The second part of the thesis, chapters 4 to 6, brings into focus the attempts to institute and institutionalize phiksumi ordination in the Theravada tradition in Thailand in the early 2000s. Chapter 4 discusses pioneering cases of phiksumi and samaneri ordination. This chapter reveals personal motivations and backgrounds of the women involved as well as the local and transnational social contexts that made possible their ordinations. Chapter 5 enquires into the context and content of the public controversy over Theravada phiksumi ordination. The chapter reveals the different, often conflicting, rationales put forth by people of different social positions. Chapter 6 examines symbolic and ritual practices of monastic women. This chapter focuses on the practices of
Theravada *phiksunī* and *samaneri* but also brings into view similar practices by women of other monastic categories. The aim is to understand the implications of women engaging in practices that have been identified with the male monastic authority.

The conclusion chapter draws together major analytical themes that emerge in the course of this thesis, which reflect the complex relationship between women’s monasticism and institutional Buddhism. It discusses the gendering process and the hegemonic authority of the *sangha* as well as gender disruptions to this hegemony. The chapter closes with a discussion of the paradoxical condition of women’s monasticism produced by the constraining context in which it has taken shape.
Chapter 1

The Gender of the Sangha

In the first three and a half years of his reign, King Mongkut or Rama IV (r. 1851-1868), issued no fewer than five royal decrees addressing the problem of sexual misconduct of monks and their relationships with women (Prachum prakat ratchakan thi 4 [PPRT4] 2004). More decrees on the similar matter were to follow as the years wore on. The monarch, who spent 27 years before his accession to the throne as a Buddhist monk and was known for his zealous adherence to scriptural orthodoxy, seemed particularly troubled by this issue. He repeatedly ordered monks and women who engaged in courting or sexual relationships to declare their wrongdoings to the authorities with a promise that their culpable misconducts would be pardoned.¹ The fact that the monarch had to re-issue orders on the same topic several times points to either the persistence of the problem or the monarch’s preoccupation with it, or both.

¹ These include decrees with the following titles: (1) ‘Monks and novices who are in love with women and have committed parachik [Pali: parajika, the gravest violation of the monastic discipline] should ask for pardon and their penalties will be lifted’ (Phiksus samanen rak-khrai phu-ying jon theung pen parachik hai ma lu-kae-thot ja yok that hai) issued in 1853; (2) ‘Wrong religious adherence and people with false beliefs’ (Kan theu satsana lae phu thi theu phit) issued in 1858; (3) ‘A law on monks, novices, and lay monastery-dwellers’ (Phraratchabanyat phra-song samanen lae sit-wat) issued in 1859 and, (4) ‘A law instructing monks, novices, and lay monastery-dwellers who have committed misconduct to ask for pardon and their penalties will be lifted’ (Phraratchabanyat hai phiksus samanen lae sit-wat meau praphreut anajan laew hai ma lu-kae-thot sia ja yok that hai) issued in 1860. See PPRT4 2004: 34-35, 208-210, 226 & 264-266.
In one of these decrees issued in 1854, King Mongkut complained about the rampant sexual misconduct and lack of religious faith and discipline among monks and novices of his day. Monks and novices, he said, could easily commit sexual misconduct because of the ease with which they could meet women. In an attempt to curb the problem, he decreed that male monastics could no longer meet women in their residences (kuti), whether the women were their mothers, sisters, relatives or others. As for women, he suggested that an announcement be made prohibiting them from entering Buddhist monasteries altogether. Should a woman be found going into a monastery, the police should arrest and fine her an amount of three tamleung.

King Mongkut’s concern about the problematic relationships between male monastics and women was not unprecedented. A section of the Ecclesiastical Law (Kot Phra-song), issued some fifty years earlier by the founder of the Bangkok dynasty, King Rama I (r. 1782-1809), also described rampant sexual relationships between male monks and women, the latter including the traditional form of Buddhist nuns, mae-chi (then called rup-chi). Apart from imposing stricter rules of conduct on monks, the ecclesiastical law issued by King Rama I also instructed laywomen not to forge intimate relationships with male monks. Masters and parents were exhorted to keep an eye on their female dependents or ordained male relatives in order to prevent them from engaging in sexual relationship. The same law also prohibited mae-chi from residing in monastic compounds and nearby areas (Kotmai tra sam duang, vol. 4: 206-220).

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2 A decree entitled ‘Prohibition of monks and novices from meeting and talking with women in their residences’ (Ham mi hai phiksu samanen khop phu-ying ma phut thi kuti) issued in 1854, in PPRT4 2004: 53-55.

3 It is doubtful if this prohibition against women entering a monastery was actually enforced.
According to the scripturally prescribed discipline for monks, engaging in sexual intercourse constitutes one of the gravest offences and would result in the termination of their monkhood. While an immediate remedy to this problem had been to defrock guilty monks as prescribed in the scriptures, the early decades of the Bangkok dynasty saw the monarchical state trying to impose additional penalties on the perpetrators and their accomplices. More than that, these state rulers, such as King Rama I and King Mongkut discussed above, tended to consider it part of the solution to keep women out of the sacrosanct monastic space altogether.

In this chapter, I discuss the gender aspect of the historical development of the Thai Buddhist monastic order, the *sangha*. Here, I argue that the gendered historical development of the *sangha* is one of the conditions that make it difficult for women to pursue a Buddhist monastic vocation and to be formally recognized as ordained monastics in the Thai context. One of the persistent aspects of this gendered historical development is the exclusive maleness of the *sangha*. Given that the institution of female monks or *phiksuni* ordination had not spread to Southeast Asia before it disappeared from India and Sri Lanka around the 11th century CE, there is no doubt that Buddhist monkhood in Thai society has always been a male practice. However, I argue that although exclusive maleness, or the institutional exclusion of women, has been integral to Thai Buddhist monkhood from the past to the present, this institutional gender characteristic has not been impervious to disruption and change. Rather, this male exclusiveness of Thai Buddhist monkhood has needed to be reconstituted and maintained over time for the *sangha* to remain a predominantly male institution.
This chapter focuses on Buddhist reform and bureaucratization of the Thai sangha, starting in the second quarter of the 19\textsuperscript{th} until the early decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. This period of Buddhist reform and monastic bureaucratization is often considered to be a defining period in the history of Thai Buddhism in many ways (Phaisan 2003: 13, 17). For one thing, it was a period of dramatic change in the notion of monkhood and monastic practice, deriving mainly from increased interconnection between the sangha and the state. This transition was in effect accompanied by enhanced religious authority of the sangha and its members. In this thesis, I argue that the transition of monkhood in this period had an inherent gender aspect that helped to intensify the historical gender divide in Buddhist monasticism and reaffirm the exclusive maleness of the sangha.

In discussing the relationship between gender and power, the feminist historian Joan Scott states that “concepts of power, though they may build on gender, are not always literally about gender itself” (1988: 45). It is also true that concepts and practices of gender may be developed for the purpose of gaining or retaining power, but this purpose may not be consciously or explicitly articulated as such. This gendering process, in which gender is integral to the maintenance of other forms of power, is the case when we consider the Buddhist reform and monastic bureaucratization. As examples from the royal decrees and Ecclesiastical Law cited above show, control over the relationship between women, as a gender category, and the monastic order was one of the key concerns for the institutionalization of Buddhism. In other words, gender was, and still is, implicated in the consolidation of institutional Buddhism and the monastic order. In this process, ‘women’ became progressively constituted as ‘the other’ whose physical embodiment and sexuality came to be
increasingly regarded, in a formal discourse, as a threat to the purity of the *sangha*.

In any case, the relationship to be explicated in this chapter is not one of a simple dichotomy of gender and Buddhism, for both notions are not discrete and static but have been affected and constantly reshaped by other social forces. Like other countries in Southeast Asia in the 19th century, no other social forces were more domineering for the Thai state, or Siam at that time,\(^4\) than the presence of Western imperialist powers and the threat of being colonized. That Siam was not directly colonized by Western powers is a fact well known. But this does not mean that the kingdom was free from the impact of imperialist expansion. In this light, Buddhism and gender were among the local concepts and practices that were reconsidered and reconfigured as the country entered into a precarious relationship with the West.

The following discussion is divided into four parts. First is an outline of the Buddhist reform and monastic bureaucratization, and how Buddhism became an essential cultural marker of the self-civilizing Thai state in its encounter with the West. The second part discusses how the ruling elite reconfigured gender values in society as a means to maintain its status quo in this transitional period. In this process, members of the elite drew on Buddhism as an effective cultural marker to justify their gender values and practice, and to transform these class-specific values into a legitimate representation of Thai culture. In the third part, I outline the changing notion of monkhood from the popular conception of monastic ordination as a cultural practice (or as a rite of passage for young men) to the rising importance of monkhood as a profession.

\(^4\) The name of the country, Siam, was changed to Thailand in 1939. When writing about the events that took place before 1939, I use ‘Siam’ and ‘the Thai state’ interchangeably.
Here, I point to how gender and other social values of the ruling class found their way into the institution of monkhood. The fourth part discusses the gender implications of the changing notion of monkhood and their impact on the position of women vis-à-vis institutional Buddhism.

**Buddhist Reform and Buddhist Modernity**

The rising significance of Buddhism, particularly ‘rational’ Buddhism, as a source of legitimation of temporal ruling power in Thai society can be traced back to the beginning of the Bangkok period in the late 18th century or slightly earlier (Reynolds 1973: vi; Wyatt 1982; Saichon 2002). During the reign of King Rama I, the ruling class drew substantially on Buddhism to legitimize the newly founded dynasty and to impose social order at that transitional period. Saichon Satayanurak (2002) describes the type of Buddhism promoted by Bangkok rulers at that time as humanistic and rationalistic, with an increased emphasis on textual knowledge, disenchantment with superstitious beliefs and confidence in human ability to achieve Buddhist enlightenment. This movement at the beginning of the Bangkok era explains why Buddhism continued to stand as an important ideological foundation for Siam in its encounter with Western imperialist powers later in the 19th century.

One of the effects of the earlier revitalization of Buddhism at the beginning of the Bangkok era was the rising significance of monasticism in the eyes of the ruling class. While short-term ordination had been a traditional practice among

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5 Jackson (2002: 163-166) argues that the practice of Buddhist legitimation of political power can be dated back to the thirteenth-century Sukhothai Kingdom.
royal sons, there was a sharp increase in the number of princes who decided to make a long-term profession in the sangha from the first up to the fifth reigns of the Bangkok dynasty (Reynolds 1973: 66-67). Jackson (1989: 68) argues that this “increased royal interest in Buddhism” was in fact part of the monarchy’s scheme to strengthen and expand the centralization of its power. Evidence of this is the fact that several monks from the royal family were placed in important ecclesiastical positions during this period (Reynolds 1973: 67; Jackson 1989: 66).

Amid the increased royal presence in the sangha, the entrance of one particular prince into monkhood turned the history of Thai Buddhism to a new page. In 1824, a prominent member of the royal family and likely heir to the throne, Prince Mongkut, was ordained as a monk. He remained in the monkhood for more than two and a half decades before leaving the monastic vocation in order to ascend the throne in 1851. From early in his monastic career, he started an orthodox religious movement that would later be described as a Buddhist reform. The legacies of King Mongkut’s reform can be divided into two strands: intellectual and organizational. In intellectual terms, the prince monk further incorporated scientific thinking and rationalism into Buddhist teachings, at the same time demythologizing traditional cosmological belief and its emphasis on otherworldly lives. Also contrary to the royal Buddhist tradition was his de-emphasis of the Buddhist goal of enlightenment, or nibbana (Thai: nipphani). In his thinking, nibbana was beyond the

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6 The extent to which this ideal goal of nibbana was prevalent in folk or village Buddhism in the past is disputable. Here, I refer to this Buddhist ideal goal as belonging to the royal Buddhist tradition due to existing records of how several Thai kings in the past expressed their wishes to either achieve nibbana, arrive at the state of buddha (variously expressed in Thai as phutthaphum or phothiyan), or become a bodhisattva (Thai: phothisat). For further discussion, see Phaisan 2003:11-18.
achievement of ordinary people, and only in extremely rare cases could ordained monks hope to realize this ultimate goal (Phaisan 2003: 13, 15). In logical terms, the spread of this teaching about the inaccessibility of nibbana not only deprived laypeople of the hope to achieve this highest spiritual attainment. The teaching also highlighted the significance of monkhood as the only possible avenue of enlightenment, and therefore the prime source of religious authority.⁷

In organizational terms, the prince monk Mongkut is remembered for his founding of a new monastic order, the Thammayut. The name of this order, which literally means the order ‘adhering to the dhamma or doctrine’ (Reynolds 1973: 95; Kirsch 1975b: 16), indicates its strong inclination for scriptural orthodoxy. Although relatively small in its membership, the Thammayut Order, with its close connections with the monarchy, received special support from the state. Its members rose to important ruling positions within the sangha (Jackson 1989: 89-90), and have continued to do so to this day.

The incorporation of the sangha into the state structure became more institutionalized during the following reign of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910). A son of King Mongkut, King Chulalongkorn, sought to strengthen the monopolical control over the sangha by encouraging his half-brother, Prince Wachirayan (1860-1921), to enter and stay in the monkhood. Prince Wachirayan received his ordination as a monk in 1879 when he was

⁷ However, this teaching about the inaccessibility of nibbana did not completely uproot the aspiration to achieve this religious goal among certain groups of Buddhists. This is evident in the existence of forest monks who mainly focus on meditation practice (see Kamala 1997), and the emergence of a lay meditation movement in the 1950s (see John Van Esterik 1977).
approaching 20 years old, and maintained an active ecclesiastical-cum-
bureaucratic career in the *sangha* for the rest of his life. At a relatively young
age, he was promoted to the head of the Thammayut Order and was later
appointed as the Prince-Patriarch or the royal supreme leader of the Thai
*sangha* (Reynolds 1973: 68 (note 11), 145-146, 151; Jackson 1989: 66; Phaisan
2003: 69).

During this period of governmental restructuring and monastic
bureaucratization, monks of the Thammayut Order served as important agents
of change which culminated in the consolidation of the monarchical state
power. Bangkok monks and monks from provincial areas who received their
training in Bangkok were instrumental in expanding the centralized *sangha*
administration that paralleled the secular governmental system. They also
helped to spread to provincial areas the monastic culture and practice favoured
by the royal court and urban elite.\(^8\) In many cases, the *sangha*’s authority and
the monastic culture that radiated from Bangkok were in tension with local
monastic hierarchies and diverse Buddhist traditions in different parts of the
country (Phaisan 2003: 55-56).

Ecclesiastical education was also crucial for the consolidation of the national
*sangha*, thus the introduction of a uniform curriculum for Buddhist and Pali
studies and centrally-managed exams for monks nationwide. In 1902, the first
modern law on the administration of the *sangha* was issued, which tightened
the state’s control over individual monks and monasteries. The ways in which

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\(^8\) The royal-style monastic practice includes, for example, the use of paraphernalia (e.g.
fans, clerical-style shoulder bags, cushions, and teapots) by monks, the use of spoons
and forks at mealtimes, the prevalent use of clerical vocabulary and specific seating
practice, and the prohibition of monks from engaging in manual labour as in the
maintenance of their monastic compounds (Phaisan 2003: 55).
the modern ecclesiastical education and legislation affected monkhood will be discussed below. For now, let us consider how the Buddhist reform was connected to the advent of modernity in Siam.

All the changes outlined above were far from being merely internal affairs of the Thai state. At a personal level, the prince monk Mongkut was an earnest student of Western languages and scientific knowledge (Reynolds 1973: 84-85, 2006: 172-173). His exposure to Western ideas and values was shaped in a large part by equally earnest teachers, the Western Christian missionaries living in Siam. Such exposure to Western thought and cultures was also the case with other members of the Bangkok aristocracy (Reynolds 2006: Chapters 8 & 9; Loos 2006). Yet, the ruling class’s personal experiences with all things Western were not completely personal but were also in response to the larger global change, namely the ever-greater presence of Westerners and Western powers in Southeast Asia at that time.

In some indirect way, the presence of Westerners in Siam also affected local monastic affairs, for it provided more reason for King Mongkut to worry about the conduct of monks. In one of the decrees issued in 1853, he declared that misconduct of monks would bring shame to the country in the face of the international community (hai seuam-sia phra-kiat tor ban tor meuang ai kap nana prathet). Six years later, in 1859, the situation did not seem to have improved, and the monarch felt the need to issue another decree justifying his intervention in monastic affairs. Having described the waywardness of monks, he stated that “should non-Buddhist foreigners living in this capital city see

9 A decree entitled ‘Prohibition on inviting monks and novices to engage in misconduct’ (Ham mai hai chak-seu lae chuan phiksu samanen praphreut anajan) issued in 1853, in PPRTS 2004: 36-37.
how these monks conduct themselves, they would condemn Thai people of Siam for paying respect to errant persons not at all worthy of veneration. These decreed messages indicate a point in time when local monastic affairs came into contact with global change. In this case, the behaviour of individual monks was not perceived as merely being internal to the sangha, or the Thai state for that matter. Now, monastic conduct became connected with the image of the kingdom, whose ruling class became increasingly concerned about its standing in the international community.

Tamara Loos (2006: 18-24), in her study of Siam between the 1850s and 1930s, describes the country as undergoing processes that produced an ‘alternative modernity’. This was the type of modernity in which the Thai ruling elite chose to adopt the European form of modernity, but only partially, while effectively maintaining, or in fact strengthening, certain political and religious characteristics beneficial to their class. This development of selective modernity was possible given Siam’s specific position of not being directly colonized and yet having fallen inevitably under the threat of imperialist aggression. Consequently, this alternative modernity saw the strengthening of monarchical power and the integration of Buddhism and the sangha into the building of the Siamese nation-state. In this local form of modernity, there was no fundamental conflict between reformist Buddhism and modernization (Kirsch 1975b: 19, 22). In fact, Buddhism became a key feature of Siam’s

10 A decree entitled ‘[His Majesty is] upholding Buddhism’ (Song thamnu bamrung phra phutthasatsana) issued in 1859, in PPRT4 2004: 235-238.

11 Loos’s (2006) insightful analysis conceives the paradoxical position of Siam from a more complex perspective, considering not only Siam and the West but also Siam’s colonizing relationships with its neighbouring states. She thus positions Siam both as “a victim of European imperial aggression and as a colonizing power with imperial ambitions of its own” (2006: 2) especially in its relationship with Muslim states in the south.
modernity to the point that it might be called ‘Buddhist modernity’ (Loos 2006: 22, 94-99). More than ever, Buddhism was used in a relativist fashion as a cultural marker that distinguished the Thai state from the West, and the Thais from their non-Buddhist ‘others’. And there were few other social aspects in which Buddhism was put to work more effectively than the construction of the gender order in society.

Reconfiguring Gender

To give a single, coherent and also accurate picture of gender values in Siam in the mid 19th century is an unrealistic task. First of all, there was never a singular set of gender values and practices in the society at any given time. In an analysis of the status of Siamese women during this historical period, Junko Koizumi (2000) brings to attention the issue of class difference among women and discusses how the status of a woman was relational, shifting according to the situation and the type of relationship she was dealing with. Apart from this relationality of gender positions, there was also the wider global context to consider. At a time when the political, economic and social conditions of the country were greatly swayed by Western imperialism and its imposition of change, gender values were in flux.

While there is limited historical evidence revealing how commoners adjusted themselves in terms of gender in response to changing social conditions, the shifting gender values of the ruling class can be traced in their writings. A frequently quoted set of such documents is the collection of royal decrees issued by King Mongkut, some of which have been discussed above. Issued
through the 17 years of his reign, several of these public statements concerned
the relationships between women and men in different contexts. At first
glance, these decrees might be taken as emancipatory for women. For
example, a few of the decrees unprecedentedly allowed palace women,
including the King’s concubines, to resign from their positions at will. A few
others introduced the idea of women’s consent to marriage arrangements and
prohibition of the sales of wives and children.

However, these written records of the monarch’s gender attitudes have proved
to be cryptic and sometimes self-contradictory. Scholars thus have different
views about what meanings might be extracted from these documents in terms
of the status of women. Koizumi (2000) provides perhaps the most penetrating
analysis of King Mongkut’s attitudes towards women as reflected in these
decrees. She cogently argues that the decrees did not have the all-positive
impact on women as often construed, but were scattered with internal
contradictions. She also points out that the king’s “patriarchal and class
consciousness” was not far below the surface of these documents (Koizumi
2000: 256). One of the several manifestations of this consciousness was his
revoking of an old law prescribing the distribution of children in the case of
divorce.12 Whereas the old regulation stated that the sons were to follow the
mother and the daughters the father, the monarch instead stipulated that for
divorced couples of high-ranking officials, the father was to solely determine
the fate of the children (see Koizumi 2000: 263).

Another already well-studied case of the elite’s gender perspective in the mid
19th century is a piece of writing on polygyny by a prominent Thai aristocrat,

12 A decree entitled ‘A law on elopement’ (Phraratchabanyat laksana lakpha) issued in
Jao Phraya Thipakorawong. This writing is a part of his book entitled *Kitjanukit* (Thipakorawong 1965), first published in 1867, at a time when print technology was still predominantly in the hands of Western missionaries and the ruling elite (Reynolds 2006: 56). Reynolds (2006), in his critical reading of this passage on polygyny, calls it “a Thai Buddhist defense of polygamy”\(^\text{13}\). It can be inferred from other parts of Thipakorawong’s book that this passage was his response to Christian missionaries’ criticisms of polygynous marriage, which was common among the Thai male elite at that time.

A point of concern for this thesis is how this passage, which is a mere five pages, helped to justify polygynous marriage in Buddhist terms (for a complete English translation of this text, see Reynolds 2006: 208-212). Briefly, the text features an interpretation of the Buddhist precept on sexual misconduct that forms one of the five basic precepts for the right livelihood of lay Buddhists.\(^\text{14}\) The writing elaborates on different hypothetical scenarios of non-monogamous sexual relations, and then passes a judgement as to whether or not the men and women involved in each of these scenarios breach the precept.

To defend his proposition that men should be allowed to have several wives, and women only one husband, the author built his argument around the idea that women and men had different natures. He cited unsourced “learned authors of the (Pali) commentaries” to support his view that men had the prerogative in sexual relations. He then drew on a fable to prove that women’s

\(^{13}\) The book *Kitjanukit* features a rationalistic view of miscellaneous worldly and religious issues, including natural science, geography, cosmology, and comparative religions. The discussion on polygyny comprises a small section in this book.

\(^{14}\) The five precepts include: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no untruthful speech and no consumption of intoxicants.
nature was so “ruthless” that “[i]f a woman has many husbands, she is likely to kill those whom she does not love” (here I use the English translation by Reynolds 2006: 208, 209). The author concluded with a statement that although the Buddha commended faithful marital relationships among lay Buddhists and criticized non-monogamous practice as a cause of mental defilement, he did not spell out any prohibition on polygynous practice.

This passage on polygyny is an example of how the elite used Buddhist teachings to support their gender values. To be more specific, it exemplifies how Buddhist tenets were stretched and twisted in the service of maintaining the gender status quo of the male elite. In doing so, the author artfully stated his own assumptions about the different natures of women and men using Buddhist rhetoric. The passage demonstrates how, having arrived at a political and cultural crossroads, the Siamese male ruling elite came to realize that certain aspects of their gender values and practices could no longer be taken for granted and needed to be defended in order to preserve their privileged position, which was in itself profoundly gendered.

Local religions and the family structure were the two cultural components of colonized societies that Western imperialist powers were more willing to leave unchanged (despite their criticisms), for these components served as a marker of the native, and therefore primitive, culture (Loos 2006: 5). In the case of Siam, the local male elite turned this niche ideological space to their advantage by wedding their gender values to Buddhist rhetoric. This combination was to be expected when we consider the historical significance of Buddhism in Siam’s political and cultural life. In an attempt to maintain their privileged status, the Siamese male elite sought to reconfigure the gender positions of
women and men. This reconfiguration was not so much about creating a new gender order. Rather, it involved re-presenting the elite’s gender values, sometimes buttressed with Buddhist tenets, as the normative gender order of Thai culture. A similar process in which the ruling elite turned their class-specific values into a norm also occurred in monastic practice. This will be discussed next.

The Changing Notion of Monkhood

In 1858, King Mongkut issued a decree entitled ‘Wrong Religious Adherence and People with False Beliefs’ (Kan theu satsana lae phu thi theu phit) (PPRT4 2004: 208-210). It contained a passage describing how typical it was for divorced, widowed and unmarried women to be attracted to monks who had been ordained for a long time, for these well-established monks often possessed ecclesiastical ranks and money earned from their regular allowances as well as ritual performances and sermons. These women, as the decree went on to describe, would try every possible way to seduce the monks in question to leave the monkhood. The monks, who were rather inexperienced in sexual matters, would be driven crazy by their sexual relationships with these women (and would comply with the latter’s demands). King Mongkut stated in this decree that cases of women being attracted to monks, and of disrobed monks taking widowed or unmarried women as their wives were “common everywhere” (PPRT4 2004: 210). Having expressed obvious discontent about the situation, the monarch declared that “women seeking monks to be their [prospective] husbands, and monks seeking widowed women or spinsters to be their [prospective] wives” would be punished by law (PPRT4 2004: 210). He
also prescribed penalties for other monks and laypeople who knew about these relationships but failed to report such cases to the authorities.\textsuperscript{15}

As this passage in the decree dealt with unseemly relationships between monks and women, it also revealed the standard of monkhood that the monarch was trying to foster. According to this royal aspiration, monks were supposed to serve long-term, or better life-long, religious service. These monks might enjoy worldly privileges such as royally endowed ecclesiastical ranks and regular allowances. As such, they were part of the ecclesiastical administrative structure under the king's patronage. They should be skilled in religious rituals and sermons. They might be known to have accumulated wealth gained in return for their religious services, but this went without a note of resentment from the monarch despite the fact that the scripturally based monastic discipline prohibits monks from accumulating personal wealth. In the monarch's view, these model monks were vulnerable to the threat of women, especially those outside proper marital relationship (divorcees, widows and unmarried women). Yet, according to the decree, relationships between monks or former monks and women were not infrequent. This behaviour, seriously problematic in the eyes of the monarch, seemed to be tolerated to a certain extent by the wider population, as shown by the mention of monks and laypeople who knew of these relationships but did not report the cases to the authorities.

The above reading of the decree reveals the incongruity between the standard of monkhood aspired to by the monarch and the way in which monkhood was actually practised on the ground. Careful reading of this decree also points to

\textsuperscript{15} A decree entitled 'Wrong religious adherence and people with false beliefs' (\textit{Kan theu satsana lae phu thi theu phit}) issued in 1858, in \textit{PPRTS} 2004: 208-210.
the selective nature of this standard of monkhood in relation to Buddhist doctrines. While sexual relationships involving male monastics were condemned, as they were meant to be according to doctrinal teachings and the monastic discipline, other practices also antithetical to the goal of spiritual attainment in monkhood, such as accumulation of wealth and attachment to the social prestige of ecclesiastical ranks, were not only tolerated but were constitutive part of the state-sanctioned ecclesiastical administrative system.

We will consider the state's mechanisms to realize this standard of monkhood below. For now, we can surmise that this elitist concept of monkhood aimed more or less at building a cohort of long-term professional monks under the state-administered ecclesiastical structure. This process might be described as the professionalization of monkhood. For this monastic professionalizing project, the possibility of acquiring social prestige and wealth provided incentives for men to stay long term in the monastic order. Meanwhile, the relationship between monks and women could only be seen as a disincentive to the monastic professionalization project. The novelty of this attempt to promote long-term professional monkhood will be more evident when we turn now to consider the popular notion of monkhood that was upheld and practised by the wider population at that time.

*The Popular Notion of Monkhood*

In their evaluation of monastic practice in provincial areas in a report written in 1900, the monastic authorities from Bangkok were dismayed at the state of
monkhood they had witnessed in the southern province of Phuket. A passage in this report quoted in Reynolds (1973: 258) reads:

People here care for books only seriously enough to be able to read, since their intention is to become ordained, nothing more. Only a few know what it means to be well-schooled, as most of the people in those provinces want to take their vows for ordination and leave it at that. Once they have been ordained there is hardly any [interest in] dhamma and the Vinaya, to the extent that they think ordination alone is sufficient to acquire merit.

This passage points to the difference between the conception of proper monkhood upheld by the monastic elite in Bangkok and the popular notion of monkhood practised in provincial areas.

In the early 1910s, when Prince Wachirayan, then the Prince-Patriarch of the Thai sangha, made excursions to the South and North of the country, he noted the common practice of temporary ordination. He saw that monks in remote areas were in most cases newly ordained. According to his observation, rural men would normally stay in the monkhood for one, two or at most only a few more years. The Prince-Patriarch also met a number of elderly monks who had been ordained for not very long. During his trips, which had the effect of asserting his authority as the supreme leader of the sangha in remote territories, some monks in those rural areas tried to avoid him for fear that they might be defrocked because of their lack of doctrinal knowledge or their ‘incorrect’ ordinations according to the Bangkok standard (Wachirayan 1961, 1968).
By reading Prince Wachirayan's record of his excursions, we can easily discern his aspiration to establish a uniform standard of monkhood nationwide. Most of his comments focused on the corporeal practice of monkhood such as the (often unkempt) robing styles of rural monks, their (often rustic and unsynchronized) Pali chanting, their (often poor) maintenance of monastic compounds, their proper or improper mannerisms, and their knowledge of the ecclesiastical administrative networks or the lack of it. At several provincial monasteries, Prince Wachirayan ordered his entourage of Bangkok monks to perform Pali chanting in front of their rural counterparts so that the latter could learn to chant better (Wachirayan 1961, 1968).

From Prince Wachirayan's account, with its focus on outer appearances of monks and monasteries, we learn little about how monasticism was actually practised in the larger part of the country. To have a clearer picture of the popular conception and practice of monkhood, we have to resort to ethnographic studies of Buddhist monkhood of a later period in Thailand, most of which were conducted in the 1960s and 1970s. This seemingly anachronistic approach to the understanding of changes in the notion of monkhood is valid when we consider the fact that changes in the conception and practice of monkhood that resulted from the elite-initiated reform and bureaucratization processes were by no means complete.

In studies of monasticism in Thailand, Buddhism and monkhood are often divided into dichotomous types such as: village Buddhism vs. pristine or doctrinal Buddhism (Tambiah 1970: 62), village monks vs. monks in urban monasteries (Bunnag 1973: 49-50), and regional Buddhist traditions vs. modern state Buddhism (Kamala 1997: 254-256). These dichotomies suggest
that village or regional Buddhist traditions represent popular Buddhism that has not been completely overridden by the Buddhist reform initiated from urban areas. Stanley Tambiah, in his ethnographic studies of rural monkhood in the Northeast of Thailand in the 1960s, states that while the centralization of sangha administration and the hierarchization of the ecclesiastical offices was nation-wide in its scope, “one ought not to exaggerate the relevance of this centralization and hierarchization” for rural monastic communities (1970: 78-79). Barend Terweil (1979 [1975]) tells us that the centralized curriculum of Buddhist studies and exams for monks, which was part of the modernization of the ecclesiastical education started in the 1890s, was but a “recently introduced” activity at the provincial monastery in central Thailand where he conducted his study in the late 1960s. These fragments of ethnographic accounts point to the gradual and incomplete impact of the centralization of the ecclesiastical administration and education, especially in rural areas. This, however, is not to deny the impact of the Buddhist reform and monastic bureaucratization on rural monkhood altogether. Works on urban monks and monasteries such as that of Jane Bunnag (1973) and Richard O’Connor (1978) indicate the migration of monks from remote areas to regional urban centres in order to further their ecclesiastical education and pursue their long-term monastic profession. Thus, the monastic bureaucratization did not completely annihilate the popular monastic practice but rather led to the coexistence of the popular and officially-sanctioned notions of monkhood in Thai Buddhism.16

16 Forest or wandering monks, although relatively small in number, make up a distinctive type of monkhood. Nevertheless, forest monkhood has also been affected by the centralization of sangha administration and education. As a result, the category of forest monks also features internal differences such as between monks with and without formal ecclesiastical education, and between those who keep to the wandering habits and those who have been drawn to sangha administrative positions. There are also forest monks who engage in magical practice and those who strictly commit to doctrinal orthodoxy. See Kamala 1997, Taylor 1993b and Tambiah 1984.
What did the popular notion and practice of monkhood in the past most likely look like then? From anthropological studies of monkhood in Thailand, we gather that the practice of temporary or short-term ordination was prevalent (Tambiah 1970: 99-102; Keyes 1986: 69; Bunnag 1973: 37, 47). Although there were long-term monks, classified by anthropologists as ‘professional’, ‘career’, ‘permanent’ or ‘experienced’ monks (Tambiah 1968: 58; Bunnag 1973: 37, 48; Terweil 1979: 103-104), these long-term monks were in the minority and their prolonged monastic vocation was often not their intention when they were first ordained.

Similarly, men who decided to be ordained out of their own religious piety or desire for spiritual achievement were relatively small in number. Several anthropological studies affirm that young men were often pressured to take ordination by other people, not least their mothers who believed they would receive their share of merit from their sons’ ordination (Terweil 1979: 101; Keyes 1986: 88; Tambiah 1970: 102). In this light, temporary ordination into monkhood counted as a cultural rather than religious practice. This type of ordination served as a rite of passage that transformed young men from the pre-adult stage into adulthood, or from being raw (dip) to ripe (suk) (Keyes 1986: 69; Tambiah 1970: 102; Terweil 1979: 102).

Contrary to the strict discipline of sexual detachment of the ideal monkhood envisioned by the ruling elite, the popular practice of temporary ordination bore a strong connotation of young men’s maturity and marriageability. Keyes observed that men who had been ordained temporarily were “much more desirable as a marriage partner” (1986: 83, 76-77 & 88; see also Tambiah 1970: 99, 144). The popularity of male ordination as a rite of passage and an
indicator of men’s marriageability can still be traced in a central Thai idiom *buat korn biat* (literally, ‘to be ordained before cuddling up’), which playfully suggests that a man spends some time in the monkhood before he gets married.

Kamala Tiyavanich, in a study of forest monks in the first half of the 20th century, also recounted incidents in which people in provincial areas looked to monks as potential marriage partners for their unmarried daughters or female relatives (1997: 137-138). This was to the abhorrence of the forest monks concerned, for several of these forest monks had by that time gone through the formal ecclesiastical education modelled after the Thammayut orthodox tradition (see Kamala 1997; Kirsch 1975b: 21).

In popular practice, boys and men may also be ordained for other reasons that were not primarily religious. Before the introduction of secular primary education, Buddhist monasteries served as the main provider of literacy education for young men. David Wyatt (1966) affirms that Buddhist monkhood in the past served as “an avenue of social mobility” for Buddhist men through their acquisition of literacy and other traditional knowledge. The growth of secular education in the 20th century led to a gradual decline in the role of the *sangha* as a provider of basic education. However, a more advanced educational opportunity opened up for ordained men (Bunnag 1973: 46-47). In more recent times, this has included the opportunity to complete graduate or postgraduate degrees in Buddhist Studies abroad, especially in India and Sri Lanka.

As for elderly men, particularly those who had lost the support of their families or who had retired from their career life, the *sangha* provided a refuge and
social welfare for their old age (Tambiah 1970: 99; Bunnag 1973: 37). Some retiree monks might also find a new position of authority in the monkhood.

In addition, men might decide to be ordained for not-so-noble reasons. Some young men might remain in the monkhood to avoid military conscription (Terweil 1979: 103). Other reasons for men’s ordination are reflected in a rhyme known in central Thailand which includes ordination in order to: fulfill a promise to a god, escape poverty, flee from one’s wife, save money, eat better, and join friends in the monastery (Terweil 1979: 103).

Another issue to consider regarding the notion of monkhood is the relationship between members of the sangha and laypeople. Once ordained, men in the sangha enter into a paradoxical relationship with the laity in that they have to depend on the support of laypeople for their livelihood while maintaining the monastic ideal of detachment from the worldly life. As Kirsch puts it, “the monk is dependent on lay support to maintain his separation from society” (1975b: 10). This paradox aside, women were, and still are, central to lay support of the sangha at the local level, and their roles in maintaining the sangha vary. In their culturally prescribed role as mother, women have contributed to maintaining the number of monks, often by encouraging their sons to be ordained, even if temporarily for the purpose of accumulating merit. In the everyday context, there is no doubt that women have been active in providing daily sustenance necessary for the continuity of the sangha and its upholding of the monastic practice of living on alms food (Tambiah 1970: 143-144). Also, women have made up the majority of the congregation at monasteries (Tambiah 1970: 145-146). As we are about to conclude that laywomen have played active roles in relatively mundane matters such as
providing food for monks and attending religious activities, historical evidence also shows that laypeople in influential positions, women included, could in the past voice their opinions effectively in matters pertaining to the sangha administration, such as the appointment of the abbot at a local monastery (for examples of this, see Reynolds 1973: 213-214).

While the popular notion and practice of monkhood outlined above have continued to exist, the Buddhist reform and monastic bureaucratization gradually brought about a new notion of monkhood, one that would be more in line with the conception of standardized professional monkhood first introduced by the elite and later popularized among urban middle-class Buddhists.

*Professionalizing the Monkhood*

Historical analyses of the impact of the Buddhist reform led by King Mongkut often point to increased orthodoxy in Thai Buddhism. However, we should also note that this orthodoxy was selective in nature and was informed by King Mongkut’s personal outlook, most importantly on gender and class. For gender, we see from examples of the decrees dealing with the relationship between monks and women discussed above how the monarch clearly posited women as a threat to monkhood.

In terms of class, King Mongkut’s class-based interest also shaped his conception of the monkhood. A few years after he had left monkhood to become king, King Mongkut observed with great concern the rising number of senior and learned monks leaving the monkhood to take up positions in his
royal government. On the one hand, the monarch was worried that this situation, if allowed to continue, would deprive the sangha of qualified teachers, leading to a decline in ecclesiastical education (Wyatt 1966: 50). However, in the decree entitle “Monks who will leave the monkhood to enter the government service” (phra-song thi ja seuk ma rap ratchakan) issued in 1854 (PPRT4 2004: 43-44), King Mongkut revealed his class bias. In this decree, the monarch expressed anxiety about the influx of former monks of commoner background into positions of prestige and power in key governmental departments, the positions which, in his view, should be reserved for well-born men from royal and noble families. As he stated in the decree:

His Majesty wishes to have only men of noble families to fill positions in the Departments of Interior, Defence, and Ports. ... Monastery-dwellers [that is, former monks] should obtain governmental positions only in the Departments of Juries, Scribes, Ecclesiastical Affairs, Royal Pandits, and Ecclesiastical Court [which are of less political significance]. Monastery-dwellers who are not of noble family background may not aspire to positions in departments other than these five mentioned (PPRT4 2004: 44).

In this case, while King Mongkut’s effort to promote long-term monkhood can be interpreted as an expression of concern for the welfare of Buddhism,17 his views and actions concerning the monkhood were also influenced by his desire to maintain the privileged status and political power of the members of his own class.

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17 Wyatt interprets King Mongkut’s discouragement of long-term monks from leaving monkhood as the monarch’s “explicit determination to maintain the old customs” (1966: 51). However, questions remain as to what the contents of these ‘old customs’ were, and how old they actually were.
The dilemma of whether to keep learned monks in long-term religious service or allow them to leave the monkhood and enter the government service became less problematic during the following reign, as King Mongkut’s Buddhist reform became effectively schematized and institutionalized by his sons, King Chulalongkorn and Prince Wachirayan. As a result of this progressive monastic bureaucratization scheme, the sangha was turned into a bureaucracy that could offer a career path and prestige for the long-term monks needed to fill new administrative positions in the expanding centralized sangha nationwide.

What were the mechanisms used for the monastic bureaucratization? And what were their impacts on the notion of monkhood? On the one hand, the monastic bureaucratization scheme aimed at tightening the state’s control over monkhood and monastic practice in both organizational and intellectual terms. The organizational control over monkhood was most effectively exerted in the 1902 Sangha Law and subsequent legal codes. Among the areas of control imposed by the central sangha were appointments of preceptors authorized to confer ordinations, qualifications of men to enter the monkhood, construction and classification of monasteries, registration of all monks and novices, and monitoring of individual monks’ mobility (Phaisan 2003: 59-60). In short, the monastic practice became formalized, and much of the Buddhist religious and cultural practice became codified by law. Yoneo Ishii sums up the impact of the Sangha Law saying that: “For the monk, … he could only be recognised as a monk if he submitted to the control of the united sangha organization. For the layman, the consolidation of the sangha meant it became impossible to seek salvation outside this organization.” (1986: 51) By implication, the codification of several aspects of monastic practice turned the exclusively male
monkhood into an officially recognized, if also controlled, category of personhood.

In intellectual terms, the orthodox version of Buddhism promoted by the Thammayut Order became progressively mainstreamed through the modernization of ecclesiastical education, which started in the 1890s. Among important milestones of this modernization process were the introduction of a new Pali language curriculum with a focus on monastic discipline, the improvement of the centralized examination system, the founding of two Buddhist ‘academies’, and the production of Buddhist standard texts ‘in print’ aiming at improving textual knowledge and the conduct of monks throughout the country according to the Thammayut standard (Reynolds 1973: Chapter 5). Spiritual practice, such as meditation, was not part of this modernized educational system, for such practice was not measurable by academic exams (Phaisan 2003: 28-29). In all, the establishment of the nationally co-ordinated ecclesiastical education and examinations had the effect of homogenizing interpretations of the Buddhist doctrine so that they were in line with the Bangkok-controlled standard (Jackson 1989: 70), and textual knowledge was prioritized over spiritual practice in formal Buddhist education.

In addition, the monastic bureaucratization process also allowed the incorporation of the monkhood into the secular governmental system. Two initiatives during the reign of King Chulalongkorn contributed to this change. One was the use of Buddhist monasteries as venues and monks as teachers for the introduction of primary education countrywide, starting in 1898. Prince Wachirayan, at that time the head of the Thammayut Order, was charged with planning this mass education project, and a number of senior monks were
appointed as ‘education directors’ to oversee its implementation (Reynolds 1973: 244). Monks with literacy skills were recruited to teach at the initial stage of this project (Phaisan 2003: 51). This initiative brought monks and monasteries into the governmental system, although for a limited number of years due to the proliferation of secular schools later in the 20th century. This educational initiative nevertheless opened up a new career path for male members of the sangha.

The other initiative was the establishment of the sangha administrative system that mirrored the secular governmental system. The expansion of centralized sangha administration meant that a good number of trained monks were in demand to fill administrative positions. In addition to this was the introduction of an ever more sophisticated ecclesiastical ranking system with well-defined hierarchical honorary ranks. The power to confer these ranks became a monopoly of the central sangha. This does not mean that there was no ecclesiastical ranking system prior to this centralized system. On the contrary, multiple ecclesiastical ranking systems existed in which local communities in different regions followed their own ecclesiastical administrative and honorary ranking systems (see Phaisan 2003: 62-65). In any case, the sophistication of centralized honorary ranks, enhanced with the grand authority of the central sangha, allowed monks to aspire to formal and bureaucratic-like career advancement in the monkhood.

The changes outlined above gradually put monkhood in a new light. On the one hand, the monastic bureaucratization resulted in the formalization of monastic ordination and monkhood, which in turn brought the Buddhist monkhood under closer control of the state. On the other hand, the
introduction of the bureaucratic-like *sangha* hierarchy and the modernized ecclesiastical education meant that the Thai Buddhist monkhood, now more than ever before, offered the prospect of a long-term career imbued with prestige and authority accessible to the broader male population. This new, professionalized notion of monkhood necessarily departed from the popular functions of monkhood as a rite of passage, a means to gain merit, a local source of literacy and traditional knowledge, and a refuge for men in old age. It also weakened the perception of monkhood as a form of ascetic practice, as in the case of forest monks who were drawn to administrative positions (see Kamala 1997). Nevertheless, the new perception and practice of monkhood did not completely override the popular notion of monkhood and monastic ordination. Yet, this structural change of the *sangha* transformed the Buddhist monkhood into a formal institution with codified rules and regulations monitored by the secular state. In the next section, I will discuss how this modernization process intensified the gender divide in institutional Buddhism.

**Gender of the Sangha and the Position of Women**

The Buddhist monkhood in Thailand has long been an unmistakably male institution. However, while women might have been culturally excluded as full members of the *sangha* in the past, the bureaucratization of the *sangha* helped to institutionalize those cultural patterns into a new legally buttressed religious field. In this institutionalized religious field, the exclusion of women became implicitly formalized. And if the monastic bureaucratization strengthened the exclusive maleness of the *sangha* only in an implicit way, a discursive process also took place that effectively underpinned the notion of
‘woman’ as the other against which the purity of the sangha and the professionalization of monkhood were measured.

In her discussion of sexuality and the Buddhist goal of enlightenment, Suwanna Satha-anand (2001) points out that it is one’s entanglement in sex and not women per se that is the obstacle to one’s achievement of enlightenment. Considering this link between sexuality and enlightenment in relation to King Mongkut’s depiction of women as a threat to monkhood discussed above, we can see two points of contradiction. First, we see that the monarch was not concerned as much about the goal of enlightenment, or nibbana, as he was about building an institution of long-term professional monkhood. In other words, his concern was more institutional than soteriological. Thus emerged the selective orthodoxy that upheld the strict celibacy rule (or the public appearance of it, as in the strict prohibition of all forms of physical contact between monks and women) while tolerating other forms of worldly attachment. Second, King Mongkut did not make the fine distinction between sexual entanglement and women as the cause of distraction from monkhood. For him, women and sexual entanglement were one and the same. As a result, women in general were strongly positioned as antithetical to the monastic life. Moreover, the thought that women might aspire to religious practice, not to mention living a monastic life, had no place in this discourse that accompanied the institutionalization of Buddhism.

The unfavourable portrayal of women vis-à-vis the monkhood was further developed and institutionalized by Prince Wachirayan. The prince monk was the author of almost all textbooks that have been designated for use in the centralized ecclesiastical examinations until today (Ishii 1986: 77). In an
example drawn from *Entrance to the Vinaya*, a textbook explaining the Buddhist monastic discipline, the prince gave his interpretation of the different degrees of sexual offences in the monastic life. In his explanation, while lustful outer physical contact with women constitutes a middle-range offence for monks, the same act involving hermaphrodites or male homosexuals makes a lighter offence. Yet, the offence is the lightest when the same act involves men and male or female animals (Wachirayan 1992: 57). This interpretation of the monastic rules is apparently gendered, for it seeks to determine the severity of the offence based neither on the perpetrator’s intention nor the nature of the offensive act but on the gender of the other party involved. According to this interpretation, women prove to be most perilous, the most serious threat to the monastic life compared to people of other genders.

How this kind of adverse attitude towards women was instilled into the monastic life can be exemplified in the cautious view towards women held by forest monks. Kamala’s book (1997) on forest monks of 20th century Thailand provides examples of gendered mental constructions by monks. It should first be noted that most of the monks discussed in Kamala’s work belonged to the Thammayut Order, and several of them, especially those of the younger generation whose words are quoted below, had received a certain level of formal ecclesiastical education and were familiar with textbooks written by Prince Wachirayan (see Kamala 1997: 54, 58-59, 60, 62). While Kamala does not make a connection between the monks’ ecclesiastical education and their gender attitudes, this association should be borne in mind while reading the monks’ accounts.
In Kamala’s book, the chapter on “Battling Sexual Desire” recounts several mental ordeals of the monks fighting off “glimpses of women,” “thoughts about women,” and “encounters with women.” As the author states: “Many monks found [sexual] temptation more difficult to resist than hunger, loneliness, and illness. All feared the female power to undermine the rule of celibacy” (Kamala 1997: 127). In the words of one of the monks: “A woman, more than any force in the world, can easily put a man under her power. ... She can make a man attach to her or destroy him with five weapons: her body, her voice, her smell, her taste, and her touch” (Kamala 1997: 131). The same monk was quoted as saying: “The worst fear that any ascetic has is to encounter women... [for women are] worse than a tiger, a bear, or an evil spirit” (Kamala 1997: 134-135). From this perspective, women are reduced to their mere physical embodiment. More importantly, they are portrayed as the prime hindrance to monks’ spiritual achievement.

This attitude towards women reveals a few facts about the gendering process in the monastic life. First, it reveals how the ideal Buddhist ascetic life, not to mention the administrative organization of the sangha, has been constituted as an exclusively male realm. Second, the exclusive maleness of monkhood needs to be reconstituted and maintained, most importantly by formal and informal discursive means, as in Prince Wachirayan’s authoritative text and the accounts of the forest monks just discussed. Third, in this discursive practice ‘women’ as a gender category are often portrayed as a negative reference, the prime threat to the monastic life from whom monks should dissociate themselves completely in order to maintain their purity.
Another gender implication followed the modernization of ecclesiastical education in which the value of monkhood came to be assessed according to the secular educational model (as in academic exams). As a result, when it came to the long-term monastic vocation, doctrinal study had greater priority over ascetic and spiritual practice as the measurement of religious achievement. Kamala argues the case by distinguishing between what she calls “regional Buddhist traditions” and “modern state Buddhism” (1997: 280). The regional Buddhist traditions, she says, emphasizes ascetic and meditation practice, in which both monastic and lay practitioners, men and women, could take part. Meanwhile, modern state Buddhism emphasizes the study of religious texts that, until recently, has been rather exclusively accessible to male monks and novices.\(^{18}\) We may then say that the expansion of the modern state Buddhism with its emphasis on formal ecclesiastical education did not only shift the course of religious learning in general, but also strengthened the male monopoly of religious learning through the institutionalization of Buddhist education, which was exclusively available to male monastics. By indirectly devaluing traditional forms of religious practice, which had been open to women, the growth of modern state Buddhism in the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries also widened the gap between male monks as educated religious experts and women as lay adherents to the religion.

Lastly, the limited opportunity for women to participate fully in ascetic practice has also been undermined by the centralized sangha administration. Kamala states that “[b]efore and beyond Bangkok’s influence, women actively

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\(^{18}\) Until as recently as 1997, higher ecclesiastical education was reserved for male monastics only. Prior to 1997, laypeople, including women and the traditional form of monastic women or mae-chi, were not allowed to enrol in undergraduate and graduate programmes at the government-sponsored Buddhist universities.
participated in their religious communities as skilled meditators, healers, or teachers and were highly respected by local people" (1997: 283). According to her, there were female religious practitioners in the past who wandered the forest in small groups on pilgrimages or practised meditation in secluded places in the same fashion as forest monks. It was also a common practice that forest monks would allow female practitioners, oftentimes including their mothers, to take to the forest with them along with other male monks and novices (Kamala 1997: 282). However, when the orthodox Thammayut Order eventually recognized the practice of forest monks in the late 1930s, this recognition did not extend to women practitioners (Kamala 1997: 286). Monks who allowed women practitioners to join their forest wandering practice were admonished, and the sangha administration “eventually suppressed the custom of female ascetics going wandering or going on almsround” (Kamala 1997: 286, see also Note 66 of Chapter 10). This clearly reflects the position of the centralized sangha against women engaging in a religious vocation.

To conclude, the changes outlined in this chapter gradually put the Thai Buddhist monkhood in a new light. On the one hand, the monastic bureaucratization resulted in the formalization of monastic ordination and monkhood, which in turn brought the monkhood under the closer control of the state. On the other hand, the introduction of the bureaucratic-like sangha hierarchy and the modernized ecclesiastical education meant that the Thai Buddhist monkhood, now more than ever before, offered the prospect of a long-term career imbued with prestige and authority accessible to the broader male population. This new, professionalized notion of monkhood necessarily departed from the popular functions of monkhood as a rite of passage, a means
to gain merit, a local source of literacy and traditional knowledge, and a refuge for men in old age. This is not to say that this new perception and practice of the monastic career has completely overridden the popular notion of monkhood and monastic ordination altogether. Yet, this structural change of the sangha transformed the Thai Buddhist monkhood into a formal institution, with codified rules and regulations monitored by the secular state.

As seen from the discussion above, the sangha bureaucratization and the consequential professionalization of monkhood have reinforced the exclusion of women from Buddhist monasticism. Women were not only ‘left out’ from the Buddhist modernization project of the 19th and early 20th century Siam due to the said inherent maleness of the sangha; they were also ‘actively excluded’ in their position as the prime threat to the modernized sangha and professionalized monkhood. At one level, this active gendering process contributed to sustaining the exclusive maleness of the sangha at the time of rapid political and cultural changes. This underpins the fact that the historical development of Thai Buddhism was by no means gender neutral nor was its development a “natural” process, but it was instead a result of ongoing gendering efforts.

In the Introduction of this thesis, I propose that the past and present initiatives to institute women’s monasticism may be understood as a quest for Buddhist modernity. From a gender perspective, the Buddhist modernization project of the 19th and early 20th century Siam can be described as incomplete modernization, for women were largely omitted from this project. Still, the aura of modern and institutionalized Buddhism grew attractive even to those who were excluded from it, namely women in this case. Thus, when secular
modernist concepts such as that of justice and gender equality were to settle in Bangkok in the early decades of the 20th century, an alternative modernist Buddhist project would also take shape, even if in a much more sporadic fashion. This would be a project to institute female monkhood in Thai Buddhism. This is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 2

Women’s Ordination in the 1920s

By mid morning on 7 September 1929, the spacious grounds surrounding Nonthaburi Provincial Court on the eastern bank of the Chao Phraya River just north of Bangkok were teeming with a large crowd. These people, who made up the largest gathering ever “from the time the Nonthaburi Court was built”, had travelled not only from within the area but also from Bangkok and other provinces.¹ A news writer claimed that reporters from every single Thai newspaper were on the premises with their cameras ready.² By the time the court session started, “a large crowd of all classes” packed the courtroom and many more flocked in the doorways, windows and staircases.³ These people were there to hear the court’s verdict on an unprecedented case of four young women who had refused to relinquish their yellow robes that marked them as ordained Buddhist monastics.

The immediate lead-up to the day of the court’s verdict had started just over a month earlier, in late July 1929, when a local newspaper reported that eight female novices, or samaneri, had launched into a monastic practice of going on

¹ ‘Reuang ying uttari buat nen’ (On Women Heretically Ordained as Samaneri), Sri Krung, 9 September 1929 – from National Archives R7 M26.5/248. This news report gives an estimate of 1,000 people gathering at Nonthaburi Provincial Court on that day.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
alms-rounds to collect food from lay supporters in their neighbourhood. These women had been ordained on separate occasions over the previous one and a half years, starting from April 1928, and had lived together at a place in Nonthaburi Province designated as their monastic residence. The same news report, although written with an antagonistic tone, admitted that the women had been well received during their alms-rounds, that they had received plenty of food offerings, and that laypeople had paid respect to them as they would do to male monks and novices.

This report of the women going on alms-rounds effectively irritated the people in power, not least the incumbent monarch himself. The minutes of the cabinet meeting on the day following the news report recorded how King Rama VII "handed a copy of Thai Num, with the story and photos of the samaneri, to Somdet Jao-fa Kromphra Nakhonsawan [then the Interior Minister], and said that something must be done, one way or another." The monarch’s words set the prosecution in motion. The samaneri issue was on the agenda of the next three cabinet meetings. Upon being consulted, the Attorney General initially admitted that to his knowledge the female novices were not violating any state law. The cabinet then turned to other legal experts for a different view. Having probably combed through the Sangha Act that governed Siam’s Buddhist monastic order as well as other secular laws, the executive unit finally settled for a few articles of the Sangha Act dealing with the keeping of order within the sangha. One minor clause from the penal code was also added,

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5 Ibid.

6 ‘Rai-ngan prachum aphi-ratthamontri’ (Minutes of the Cabinet’s Meeting), no. 12/2472, 24 July 1929 – from National Archives R7 RL20/107.
which allowed for the prosecution of people who disobeyed the state authorities. For lack of more pertinent legal code, these provisions were deemed applicable, even if questionably, to the case.

A few days prior to the day of the court verdict, local government officials delivered to the women the orders of the government and sangha administration instructing them to give up their robes. Four out of the eight ordained women decided to obey the orders; the others did not and were eventually arrested. During the court hearing, the women were told that by claiming to be ordained samaneri and putting on the robes similar to those of ordained monks, they had engaged in “an act that disgraced the religion” (pen kan kratham an pen het hai seuam-sia kae phra satsana). And by refusing to give up their robes on the initial orders, they were charged with disobedience to the authorities. For these charges, two of the women, Sara Phasit and Sanit Yimyeuan, aged 19 and 17, were sentenced to eight days in jail and a fine of 20 baht each. Another woman, Chawi Raksiri, who was under 16 years old, received half the sentence. The youngest of the women, Jongdi Phasit, at less than 14 years of age, received a suspended sentence.

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7 The samaneri were charged with violating Articles 4, 31, 40 and 42 of the 1902 Sangha Act, and Clause 2, Article 334 of the Penal Code.
8 See Minutes of the Cabinet’s Meeting, no. 13/2472, 2 August 1929; no. 14/2471, 9 August 1929; and no. 15/2471, 16 August 1929 – from National Archives R7 RL20/107.
9 ‘Jap nen phuying seuk laew’ (Female Novices Defrocked), Sri Krung, 5 September 1929; ‘Senabordi thammakan rap meu nai narin’ (Minister of Education Deals with Mr. Narin), Thai Num, 5 September 1929; and ‘Thang ratchakan bangkhap hai samaneri seuk’ (Government Forces Samaneri to Be Defrocked), Bangkok Kammeuang, 5 September 1929 – from National Archives R7 M26.5/248.
10 ‘Aiyakan forng nen phu-ying laew’ (Prosecutor Files a Case against Female Novices), Sri Krung, 6 September 1929 – from National Archives R7 M26.5/248.
12 ‘Samaneri pleuay-kai nai tarang mot’ (Samaneri Naked in Jail), Thai Num, 8 September 1929; ‘Long-thot samaneri’ (Convicting Samaneri), Phim Thai, 8 September 1929; and
The moment after these sentences had been delivered, there was a chaos. The convicted women refused to walk to the prison ground. Neither did they agree to take off their robes and put on the inmate’s uniforms. Several hundred onlookers stood watching as the young women fought a group of prison guards and female inmates who were deployed to carry them away to the prison compound and to force them out of their robes.\(^{13}\)

In a way, this account of the historic court case may be described as the beginning of the demise of women’s ordination in the late 1920s. Although the women and their supporters did not simply give in, but brought their case to the Court of Appeal soon after completing their short prison terms, they failed to convince the court to declare their convictions invalid.\(^{14}\) This was followed by unsuccessful petitions to the king.\(^{15}\) Faced with this institutional denial and difficulties in sustaining themselves, the women, one by one, quit their monastic lives, with the last of them, Sara, leaving the religious vocation around the year 1934 (Siriphorn 1983: 38).

\(^{13}\) ‘Reuang ying uttari buat nen’ (On Women Heretically Ordained as Samaneri), *Sri Krung*, 9 September 1929 – from National Archives R7 M26.5/248.

\(^{14}\) ‘Samaneri pleuay-kai nai tarang mot’ (Samaneri Naked in Jail), *Thai Num*, 8 September 1929; and ‘Reuang ying uttari buat nen’ (On Women Heretically Ordained as Samaneri), *Sri Krung*, 9 September 1929 – from National Archives R7 M26.5/248.

\(^{15}\) ‘Fi-pakinarthiyeun tor san utthorn meua-wan ni’ (Narin’s Discourse Presented to the Court of Appeal Yesterday), *Thai Num*, 16 October 1929; ‘Sam samaneri jam-loey thalaeng-kan yok het hai hen wa jao-phanak-ngan sang phit kotnai’ (Three Prosecuted Samaneri Issue a Statement Claiming that the Authorities Gave Unlawful Orders), *Daily Mail*, 21 September 1929; and ‘Thanai khorn samaneri thalaeng kharom’ (The Lawyer of Samaneri Gives a Statement), *Sri Krung*, 20-22 September 1929 - from National Archives R7 M26.5/248.

\(^{15}\) ‘Phrabaram-ratcha-ongkan hai narin lerk khit’ (Royal Instruction for Narin to Give up His Ideas [on female ordination]), *Krungthep Daily Mail*, 27 March 1930 (1929 by the old calendar) – from National Archives R7 RL20/107.
But to end this historical account at that would be to belie the complexity of the incident and its lasting impact. To better understand this female ordination initiative, we need to consider the incident in the context of the social and political conditions of Siam at that time. Whereas the few academic accounts on women’s ordination in the late 1920s demonstrate an attempt to add this incident to the historical narratives of women in Buddhism in Thailand (see Chatsumarn 1991a; Ito 1999 & 2002), this chapter aims for a contextualized understanding of this ordination initiative. Here, I argue that the 1920s ordinations were an unanticipated consequence of the long process of Buddhist reform and modernization discussed in Chapter 1. Furthermore, the ordination initiative did not arise out of religious impulse alone. The incident was also influenced by the rising tides of political modernity in Siam at that time. It was amid the confluence of Buddhist reform and modernization on the one hand, and secular modernity on the other, that the 1920s female ordination arose.

At a tangible level, this female ordination endeavour was short-lived and involved only a small number of women. For that reason, it does not seem to have had a significant impact on women’s monasticism as a whole. But as we shall see later in this thesis, the impact of this historic ordination could still be felt long after its demise. One of the enduring impacts of the ordination initiative stems from the negative reactions of the sangha and government, which were embodied most clearly in a restrictive decree issued by the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch in 1928, shortly after the ordinations. This decree, discussed below, has shaped an ongoing discourse of the ‘impossibility’ of women’s ordination in Thai Buddhism. This discourse, in turn, has played a dominant role in framing the course of women’s monasticism in Thailand up until the present time.
In the following parts of this chapter, I first describe how women’s ordination came to take place in 1928. I then discuss institutional reactions to the ordination. Next, I examine how this ordination initiative was informed by two streams of modernity: one being Buddhist in nature and the other more secular. Last is the analysis of how the discourse of the impossibility of women’s ordination became formalized following the issuance of the Supreme Patriarch’s decree in 1928, and how the impact of this discourse has endured.

**Women's Ordination in 1928**

As much as one may wish to learn about the active roles of the eight women ordained between 1928 and 1929, little has been recorded by way of written history that allows us direct access to their life background (except for the two sisters to be discussed shortly), their thoughts or feelings. Instead, one very vocal man dominated the scene.\(^{16}\) Narin Phasit (1874-1950), the father of the first two women ordained, was known for his eccentric ideas, uncompromising political criticisms and reformist religious activities. Earlier in his career, Narin had been a successful provincial governor, but he later became disillusioned with the bureaucratic system, fell from favour and was stripped of his official rank. Throughout his life, Narin’s oppositional political activities would land him in jail several times, causing him to spend almost nine years of his life in prison. In any case, Narin had already become an embattled public figure by the time he arranged for his two daughters to be ordained in 1928 (for Narin’s biography, see Sakdina 1993). The thought of establishing the

\(^{16}\) See Barmé (2002: 134) for how debates on the status of women in early 20th century Siam were “largely a male discourse” put forth in the public domain by the male elites.
phiksunī sangha, or the fully-ordained female monastic order, in Thai Buddhism had been with him for many years before the actual ordinations took place. He was a co-founder and the manager of a lay Buddhist organization called Phuthaborrisat Samakhom (Association of Buddhists) from 1912 to 1915. During that period, he had already been harbouring the thought of "changing white-robed chi into yellow-robed ones, that is, into phiksunī and samaneri" (Narin [1929] 2001: 22).

At the time of their ordination, Narin’s elder daughter, Sara, was 18 years old, and Jongdi, the younger one, was 13. Jongdi said in retrospect that, initially, she was ordained to fulfill her father’s wishes and to keep her elder sister company (Athit Rai-sapda 2002: 16). In contrast, Sara was most likely ordained out of her own religious conviction. She had been a white-robed chi and spent about two years at a recognized nunnery at Wat Sa-pathum in Bangkok before her yellow-robed ordination.17 Narin’s (2001) account, focusing on the public controversy surrounding the ordination, gives very few hints as to what Sara and her sister thought about their ordinations. However, in a rare newspaper interview in 1928, Sara stated that she had studied Buddhist teachings and had long wished to be ordained.18 Prior to her ordination, Sara also travelled with her father to meet monks in provincial areas in search of supporters for their ordination initiative (Narin 2001: 76-77).

The rite of ordination of Sara and Jongdi was a secret affair. Until now, it is still not known to the public exactly where and how they were ordained, not

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17 ‘Nang-seu reuang samaneri’ (Book on Samaneri) – from National Archives N R7 M/8 Box 1. See also Siriphorn 1983: 38 and Athit Rai-sapda 2002: 16.
18 ‘Nang-seu reuang samaneri’ (Book on Samaneri) – from National Archives N R7 M/8 Box 1.
even which monk(s) ordained them. This, as we will see shortly, did not save one suspected monk from being harassed. The most we can gather from Narin’s own words and a few other supplementary accounts is that the ordination took place in late April 1928 while Narin, his two daughters and a son were travelling via Petchaburi Province to the South of Siam. When they made that trip, Sara and Jongdi both had become chi, with shaven heads and in white robes. As it happened, none of the monks and laypeople they met while stopping over at Buddhist monasteries in Petchaburi suspected that the two young sisters would soon engage in a controversial act quite unprecedented in the history of Thai Buddhism. When the group got on a train to an unspecified destination further south, the impression they left behind was of a family on a leisure trip. A few weeks later, a rumour spread in the town of Petchaburi that two women “ordained in the yellow robes” had travelled past the province by train from the South. At that point, nobody had a clue as to who they were. Only shortly afterwards were they identified as Narin’s daughters.

Back in Bangkok, news of the ordination soon hit the press. After this trip, the ordained sisters settled into their family’s home on the bank of the Chao Phraya River in Nonthaburi Province. For some years before the ordination,

19 This information is put together based on various sources including: Narin (2001), Sakdina (1993), Chatsumarn (1991a), and Ito (1999, 2002).

20 About whether women in yellow robes had ever existed in Southeast Asia, Kamala (2003: 290) quotes a 1931 account by a missionary called Hermann Norden. In this account, Norden recounts his encounter with “young women in yellow robes and with shaven heads” in the area called Muang You in northern Laos in the nineteenth century. Kamala states that these women “could have been bhikkhunis” (2003: 290) whereas Norden does not specify the categorical name of these women, merely referring to them as “a Buddhist sisterhood”.

21 ‘Somdet phra sangkhurat jao sang reuang nai aat’ (The Prince Patriarch Gives Instruction on Mr. Aat), Bangkok Kammeuang, 6 September 1928 – National Archives R7 M26.5/41.
Narin's house had served as a meeting hub for his Buddhist associates who came together to discuss all things Buddhist. He sometimes called his place *Phutthaborrisat Sathan* meaning 'Buddhists' place' (Narin 2001: 57). Following the ordination of Sara and Jongdi, however, the elaborate home compound was used for an additional purpose; part of it was designated *wât* Nariwong, a monastery for women.\(^{22}\)

**Institutional Reactions to Women's Ordination**

Less than two months after the ordination, the then Buddhist Supreme Patriarch, *Kromluang* Chinaworn Siriwat, issued a decree prohibiting monks and novices from giving ordination to women. To ensure that Narin and the ordained women were officially informed, the District Chief of Nonthaburi Municipality sent them a letter with a copy of the decree enclosed. In his letter, the District Chief also ordered Narin's daughters to stop 'dressing up in imitation of ordained monastics' (*taeng-tua lîan-baep banphachit*). As can be expected, Narin did not bow easily to this show of power. In response, he wrote a very lengthy letter, with thirty attachments, explaining his ideas not only about the virtue of women's ordination but also the state of decline in Buddhism and the need for the religion to be restored.

In this letter, which was soon published as a book, Narin questioned the legality of the decree and defied the authority of local government officials to

\(^{22}\) Please refer to the section on Defining 'Women's Monasticism' in Chapter 1 for the translation and usage of the word 'wât'. It is likely that Narin used this homophone in order to avoid any bureaucratic impediments that might arise from giving the women's monastic place the same name as that of male monks. Nariwong literally means 'women's lineage'.
deal with matters related to his daughters’ ordination. At one point, he challenged the authorities to come and “defrock the samaneri if [they] dare” (Narin 2001: 139). The Supreme Patriarch’s decree thus failed to have an immediate legal effect in the case of Sara and Jongdi, for the women continued to lead their monastic lives wearing the yellow robes for the next one and a half years.

But this defeat of authority was not to last, for history has shown us how the process of sangha bureaucratization, which accelerated in the 1890s, had successfully incorporated the sangha administrative system into the state power structure. In the first few decades of the 20th century, this connection between the sangha and the state was further strengthened by the nationalist ideology propounded by King Wachirawut (r. 1910-1925), which erected Buddhism as one of the three pillars of the nation. Buddhism then became a facet of Siamese national identity. For this reason, when the authority of the sangha alone proved incapable of putting an end to women’s ordination, the government felt the need to intervene. These institutional reactions will be discussed shortly.

In the mean time, the search for the monk(s) who gave ordination to Sara and Jongdi began. Phra Aat, an ordinary monk in his late sixties who welcomed Narin and his children at his monastery in Petchaburi on their way to the South, was suspected of the act. In his petition submitted to the Supreme Patriarch at a later date, Aat said he was framed in a ploy by local senior monks in their attempt to find a guilty party. Aat reported being summoned to, and detained at, another monastery in Petchaburi; he was finally forced to disrobe and leave the monkhood against his will. After being defrocked, Aat travelled to
Bangkok to lodge a complaint with the Supreme Patriarch, who refused to condescend to consider his case. When his complaint proved futile, Aat moved on to submit a petition to King Rama VII. As his case unfolded, Aat successfully proved, not without difficulties, that he had nothing to do with Sara’s and Jongdi’s ordinations. Following the closure of his case in December 1928, he was reinstated as a monk at a monastery in a northern province. Thus, the question as to who ordained the two sisters remained unanswered.\(^{23}\)

In the several months following the issuance of the Supreme Patriarch’s decree in 1928, discussions of women’s ordination continued in the press. Despite its lack of immediate legal enforcement, the decree led to a series of debates between detractors and advocates of women’s ordination. The press at that time branded the people involved in the ordination as “hideous elements” (sanaiat-rai) who were “enemies” (sattru) of and “rebels” (khabot) to Buddhism. One newspaper called on the government to “eradicate” (kamjat) them, with another newspaper calling for the death penalty of the people involved (Sakdina 1993: 59).

What did the ordained women themselves think about this antagonism? We only have Sara’s brief words to learn from. In what is probably the only newspaper interview she gave as a monastic woman at the peak of the controversy, Sara answered a similar question posed by a journalist saying, “I don’t give it [the government’s reaction] a thought. I only think about the

\(^{23}\) In interviews they gave in their elderly years, Sara and Jongdi still refused to disclose the name(s) of the monk(s) who gave them ordination. See Siriphorn (1983: 37) and Athit Rai-sapda (2002: 20).
duties I have to fulfill according to the *dhamma vinaya* [Buddhist teachings and discipline]."  

In the end, it was the controversy in the press and the report about the women going on alms-rounds, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, that irritated the monarch. It was his frustration that triggered the government into taking action to end the women's monastic vocation. A news analysis of that period stated that the underlying problem with women's ordination was not that the ordained women had violated any laws as such, but that Narin, in his strong criticisms of the *sangha*, had offended the latter. As the anonymous analyst went on to say, it had become clear that the group of ordained women had had no intention of confining their activities to their private residence, but had made their presence conspicuous in public through such actions as going on alms-rounds. The same analyst also accused the women of trying to propagate what he called a 'heretic sect' (*latti uttar*).  

As mentioned earlier, the government’s legal action resulted in four of the ordained women who refused to give up their monastic robes being sentenced to brief jail terms and fines. Having fulfilled all the penalties, however, three out of the four convicted *samaneri*, led probably by Narin, lodged an appeal with the Court of Appeal. In their written statements presented to the court in October and November 1929, the women challenged the legality of the orders issued by the government and the *sangha* administration that had led to their

24 *Bangkok Kanmeuang*, 28 July 1928, quoted in 'Nang-seu reuang samaneri' (Book on Samaneri) – from National Archives N R7 M/8 Box 1.  


26 Ibid.
prosecution. Their lawyer also argued in court that the jurisdiction of the 1902 Sangha Act was in fact limited to internal affairs of the *sangha* and matters related to its members, namely Thai male monks and novices. As non-members of the *sangha*, the women were outside the jurisdiction of this law.

Once their judicial appeal had proved unsuccessful, the *samaneri* appealed to the queen, possibly hoping to earn her sympathy as a woman. But this was also to no avail. In her reply, the queen gave a number of reasons for not lending her support to the *samaneri*. However, when Narin filed a formal petition on the same issue to the king a few months later, he received an almost identical reply from the monarch. As it turned out, it was the king who drafted the queen’s reply to the earlier petition of the *samaneri*.

In an interview in later life, Sara said she and the other young women continued their monastic practice after they were released from prison (Siriphorn 1983: 38). However, to avoid possible intervention from the *sangha* and the state, Narin suggested that the women wear dark brown robes of a Japanese-looking style for a while. As the state’s attention died down, the

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27 ‘Fi-pak narin’ (Narin’s Discourse), *Thai Num*, 16 October 1929; and ‘Sam samaneri jam-loey thalaeng-kan’ (Three Prosecuted Samaneri Issue a Statement), *Daily Mail*, 21 September 1929 – from National Archives R7 M26.5/248.


29 Letter from Queen Ramphaiphanni to Chao Phraya Woraphongphiphat, dated 19 December 1929 – from National Archives R7 RL20/107.

30 King Rama VII’s response to Narin’s petition, dated 22 March 1930 (1929 by the old calendar); and ‘Phrabarom-ratha-ongkan’ (Royal Instruction), *Krungthep Daily Mail*, 27 March 1930 (1929 by the old calendar) – from National Archives R7 RL20/107.

31 ‘Samnao rai-ngan got dik thai 43/2472’ (Copy of Report of the Cancellation of Petition No. 43/2472 – from National Archives R7 RL20/107.

32 About this change to Japanese-style robes, see also ‘Thit neri jongdi klap buat ik kra’ (Former Samaneri Jongdi Reordained), *Thai Num*, 11 September 1929 – from National Archives R7 M26.5/248.
women shifted back to the type of robes they had worn before the court case and again start travelling to different provinces. However, their monastic life became much more restricted following the outcome of the court case and the monarch’s public statement against their initiative. Also, the financial situation of Narin’s family, the main supporter of the samaneri, suffered as Narin shifted his interest and activities to other political issues. The female ordination initiative that started in 1928 came to an end with Sara leaving the monastic life in 1934, when she was 24 years old (Siriphorn 1983: 38; see also Chatsumarn 1991a: 47).

Two Streams of Modernity

Before turning to the ideological influences that informed this women’s ordination initiative, it is useful to understand the social and political context of Siam at that time. The 1920s was a time of significant social and political changes in Siam.\textsuperscript{33} By that time, the immediate threat of colonial expansion and the urgency of the last decade of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century to centralize secular and religious power had been largely settled. And when the fifteen-year reign of the British-educated King Wachirawut came to a close in 1925, talk of Siam as a modern ‘nation’ with its three ideological pillars – the nation, the religion (meaning Buddhism), and the monarchy – had already become commonplace among Bangkok’s aristocracy and literati (Wyatt 2003: 216). For more than half a century, Siam’s economy had been linked with the global commodity

\textsuperscript{33} For a comparative view of political and social changes in Southeast Asian countries in the 1920s and 1930s, see Hewison & Rodin 1994.
trade controlled by imperialist powers. Although the economic recession of the period had cast pessimistic shadows on the face of the nation (Wyatt 2003: 222), the public education sector, especially in urban areas, was swelling with hopeful young people who aspired to move up the social ladder after graduation (Copeland 1993: 53).

With the growth of the literate population, the commercial press became popularized (Barmé 2002: 135-136; Copeland 1993: 53-54). News of foreign countries, including neighbouring countries as well as Europe and America, had been available for local consumption for several decades (Reynolds 2006: 58). Stories imbued with modern political ideas, such as the history of the French Revolution and news of the Bolsheviks, appeared in newsprint alongside debates about the social and economic situations and the future of Siam (Copeland 1993: 62-63, 160-164). The fast growing number of ‘salaried bureaucrats’ (Loos 2006: 162) and young educated men and women in the capital city led to the formation of a new middle class (Barmé 2002: 9, 135). Meanwhile, industrial labourers made their collective existence felt via news of labour conflicts and strikes (Copeland 1993: 65-67). Aspirational linguistic terms found in the press, such as ‘citizen’ (phonlameuang), ‘equality’ (khwamsamerphak), ‘right’ (sit or sitthi) and ‘justice’ (khwam-yutitham), reflected a new political consciousness. At that moment in history, Siam was on the brink of a major political change which, arriving in June 1932, saw the absolute monarchy replaced by an intermittent constitutional democratic regime. In short, Siam had joined the global march towards modernity, albeit on its margin.

34 This is usually dated from the signing of the Bowring Treaty between Siam and Great Britain in 1855. Loos states that “the Bowring Treaty typically marks the beginning of ‘modern’ Siam in most histories” (2006: 41).
Given this broad social and political context, we now turn to Narin’s life background and his writing on the issue of women’s ordination. Less than a year after his daughters had been ordained, and attesting to the popularity of the print industry, Narin published a book titled ‘Statement on Samaneri at Watr Nariwong’ (Thalaengkan Reuang Samaneri Watr Nariwong). In this statement, Narin discussed not only the virtue of women’s ordination but also the state of decline in Buddhism and the need to tackle the problem. Written in the midst of the ordination dispute, this document captures the controversy at its peak, when its conclusion was still unknown.

*The Legacy of Buddhist Reform*

From the many expressions of his thought, we learn that Narin was a firm monarchist (Sakdina 1993: 142-144). Despite his other progressive political ideas, he never called for a regime change. As extremely critical of the government as he was, he surprisingly placed great trust in the monarch to reach the right judgment on various issues, including women’s ordination (about which he would be disappointed later). In matters related to Buddhism, he praised the former King Mongkut for the legacy of his Buddhist reform efforts, particularly the founding of the initially strict-practising monastic order, the Thammayut. Ruminating on the widespread laxity and unrestrained misconduct of Buddhist monks of his time, sixty years after the King’s death, Narin wrote: “Having seen this [deteriorated state of monkhood], I can’t stay idle really. I feel indebted to [King Mongkut], and would like to express my gratitude to his majesty” (Narin 2001: 88).
Narin was among the urban male population that benefited from the legacy of the Buddhist reform and modernization in many respects. For the broader context, the historian Wyatt (2003: 202) describes the impact of the Buddhist reform in the early 20th century as follows:

The reform Dhammayutika [Thammayut] sect of Buddhism founded in the mid-nineteenth century by Mongkut had, by the early twentieth century, a profound effect on religion. It was more rigorously intellectual and scholarly, and less ritualistic, and it lay heavy stress upon the education not only of its monks but also of the lay population.

Typical of his peers, Narin received his basic education at a Buddhist monastery. At the end of the 1880s, Narin, then 15 years old, was ordained as a novice into the Thammayut order. Narin might not have had the opportunity to learn much about Buddhist doctrines at that time, for he spent less than a year in the novitiate before leaving it for a governmental position. Still, Narin’s biographer concludes that it was likely that his Thammayut connections helped land him, a young man of a commoner background, in a bureaucratic career, and these same connections may also explain his firm loyalty to the monarchy (Sakdina 1993: 122).

If Narin did not have a chance to study Buddhism in his early years, such an opportunity nonetheless came later in his life. Having resigned from the position of provincial governor at the early age of 35, he turned to studying Buddhism (Sakdina 1993: 122). His approach to Buddhist learning, this time in the early 1910s, is indicative of the legacy of the Thammayut reform. At that time, instead of following the traditional mode of relying on the interpretations of canonical texts and commentaries by local monks, Narin
availed himself of numerous Buddhist texts accessible at that time thanks again to the flourishing print industry. He then attempted his own interpretations of those texts (Sakdina 1993: 122-126).

As it turned out, this legacy did not remain entirely truthful to the intention of the masterminds of the Thammayut reform, notably its initiator King Mongkut and his ordained son, Prince Wachirayan. In the minds of these ruling-cum-religious elites, monks and laypeople should engage in different levels of Buddhist learning and practice, with monks concentrating on esoteric scholarly studies and strict monastic code of conduct, and laypeople just adhering to basic moral prescriptions deemed suitable for their less esteemed worldly life (see Phaisan 2003: Chapter 1). A close reading of Narin’s life story and published works points to a departure from this elitist vision of reformist Buddhism, at least within the circle of Narin and his lay Buddhist associates mentioned throughout his writing. Reading into the background of Narin’s accounts of his religious and political activities, including his 1929 statement on women’s ordination, we get a glimpse of what might count as a lay Buddhist awakening, if not a movement, in Siam at that time. These lay religious activities seemed to involve constellations of laymen, including former monks, who had gone through reformist, text-based Buddhist learning at one or another stage in their lives, and who engaged as lay experts in esoteric doctrinal knowledge and sometimes ascetic practice (see for example, Narin 2001: 207-212). While the state of lay Buddhist consciousness and activism in the early 20th century is a subject that requires extensive research in itself,35 it is enough to say here that the consciousness manifest in Narin’s yearning for

religious rationalism and his call for strict monasticism reflects the legacy of
the Thammayut reform, but one with a twist unintended by its royal architects.
For with his knowledge of Buddhist texts, Narin was able to challenge the
authority of the sangha and its ordained members in ways that blurred the
hierarchical divide between the ordained and the lay, although most of his
challenges did not bear the fruits he desired.

Another unintended product of the Buddhist reform and modernization that
concerns us here is the female ordination initiative. Given the exclusive
maleness of the monastic order and the elites’ concern to keep monasticism a
male domain (discussed in Chapter 1), the possibility of women’s full
ordination could not have entered the minds of the forefathers of the
Thammayut reform and bureaucratization of the sangha. Nevertheless, the
case for women’s ordination in the late 1920s was significantly strengthened
by reformist ideas. This is evident in arguments put forth by Narin and other
sympathizers of women’s religious quest (for these sympathizers’ views, see
Narin 2001: 99-104, 153-186). The reformist Buddhist mindset was apparent
in Narin’s claim on the legitimacy of women’s ordination based on Buddhist
canonical texts. And this rationalist claim was manifold. To get a taste of
Narin’s text-based, rationalist claims, we now examine how he juxtaposed
different parts of the Buddhist canon to construct his argument for women’s
ordination.

In his 1929 statement on the samaneri, Narin acknowledged the procedural
limitations laid down by the female monastic disciplinary code. This
scripturally-based code requires that a phiksuni of 12 years standing preside, as
upatcha (Pali: upajaya) or preceptor, over a female ordination ceremony
(Narin 2001: 96). However, Narin countered this procedural limitation with other Buddhist doctrinal teachings and argued that one can legitimately breach this ritual rule. The most effective of these canonical teachings cited by Narin were the Gotami Sutta and the Kala Ma Sutta. The Gotami Sutta features the Buddha’s encouragement of a modest ascetic life. Meanwhile, the Kala Ma Sutta highlights the Buddha’s teaching that, in the process of forming one’s own experiential judgement of righteousness, one can rightfully examine and dispute different kinds of authority, including the authority of texts and teachers. Narin thus asserted that the modest ascetic lifestyle of his ordained daughters was in accord with the teaching of the Gotami Sutta. And by refusing to cling to the limiting procedural rule of the ordination ceremony, he claimed to have followed the Buddha’s instruction given in the Kala Ma Sutta. Narin further substantiated his claim with the canonical story of how the Buddha, immediately before his death, allowed for minor monastic rules to be amended. With this juxtaposition, Narin effectively argued that the Buddha encouraged men and women to live the modest monastic life. And should there be textual or procedural (therefore minor) obstacles to this monastic end, those obstacles could be rightly disputed and defied (see Narin 2001: 93-98).

Apart from this emphasis on textual knowledge, another aspect of the legacy of the Buddhist reform and modernization can be explored through the question: Why did women’s ordination come to be so highly contentious an issue? This question becomes salient when we consider that a religious vocation was not the only area of gender contestation in urban Siam at that time. Barmé (2002: Chapter 5), for example, explores gender debates in the Siamese press, mainly in the 1920s. These debates included such issues as the government’s refusal to enrol female students in the law school, the government’s refusal to allow
women to apply for taxi-driver licences and the controversy over women enrolling for sports and physical training courses. In another example, Loos (2006) examines the development of another highly contentious nexus of polygyny, marriage and family law in Siam from the mid 19th century up until the 1930s. But none of these contested gender issues seems to carry the same degree of persistence in the public sphere as the dispute over women's transgression into the monastic realm — which has lasted well into the beginning of the 21st century, and is likely to continue into the future.

To answer this question about the persistent contestation in the area of women and monasticism, we should also consider the reciprocal relationship between Buddhism and political power in Thailand. This relationship, in which the state and Buddhism have played mutually supporting and legitimizing roles, has been well discussed in a number of studies and does not need to be restated in detail here (see for example, Reynolds 1973; Somboon 1982; Ishii 1986; Jackson 1989). Suffice it to say, as discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 1 of this thesis, the processes of Buddhist reform and bureaucratization of the sangha in the second half of the 19th century resulted in the stronger and more homogeneous religious authority of the sangha. Apart from the consolidation of the national sangha and its authority, these reform and modernization processes also resulted in the marginalization of other forms of religious beliefs and practices. This rendered institutional Buddhism and the sangha an unparalleled source of religious legitimation in Thai society. With this analytical perspective, we can start to grasp the reason why Narin and the ordained women focused on the monastic realm as the key site of their religious contentions. For their mindset too was likely shaped by the overarching religious reform and modernization processes, so much so that
they saw access to institutionalized monasticism, women’s access at that, as an indispensable goal of their religious struggles.

It is important to note also that the legitimizing authority of the *sangha* was greatly strengthened by the Buddhist reform. And this legitimizing authority rests to a large extent on the notion of purity manifested in the practice of celibacy among its members as well as the appearance of gender segregation in both the institutional and everyday monastic contexts. This significance of the notion of purity in upholding the legitimizing authority of the *sangha* explains why the *sangha* needed to defend its practice of gender segregation in monasticism. This analytical point reveals the high stakes the *sangha* held in safeguarding the exclusion of women from the core of its institutional authority, that is, the monkhood. From this perspective, women’s ordination posed a fundamental challenge to the institutional maleness upon which the legitimizing authority of the *sangha* rested. Thus, this female religious initiative came to be considered as highly contentious and needed to be contained and suppressed.

We now turn to my next argument that women’s ordination in the late 1920s was also influenced by the modern political consciousness of the time.

*The Influence of Modern Political Awareness*

Women’s ordination in the late 1920s was also a case of mediated or localized political modernity. The most obvious evidence of the influence of political modernity lies in Narin’s expression of his allegiance to the nation. Yet, his
idea of the nation was of a particular formulation. As he wrote in his 1929 statement on his daughters’ ordination:

I dare commit to this issue [of women’s ordination] because I have declared that I really love the nation, Buddhism and the monarch. My love for Buddhism, in particular, is the greatest ... Buddhism is going through a serious decline, and I am trying to find ways to improve the situation (Narin 2001: 16).

Here, we see that Narin’s perception of the nation followed closely the conception propagated by King Wachirawut, starting in the early 1910s. Whereas Benedict Anderson (1991: 11-12), in his compelling reflections on the origin of nationalism, states that the decline in the significance of religious belief necessarily preceded the rise of the nation in eighteenth-century Western Europe, this was not the case for Siam in a later historical period. By the late 1920s, the monarchical design and manoeuvring of a particular conception of nationalism had started to bear fruit. One aspect of this nationalism saw faith in Buddhism not as an outmoded predecessor of the nation, but a very essential part of it. Unlike in Europe, this was a localized version of modern political awareness in which secularism was not part of the vocabulary. Wyatt (2003: 216-217) calls this conception ‘elite nationalism’, in which respect for the triad of nation-religion-monarchy (chat-satsana-phramahakasat) – and not free and egalitarian expression of political views – took centre stage. In this formulation, the three pillars of Thai nationalism have become firmly interconnected, and loyalty to one commands loyalty to all (Wyatt 2003: 216). In a way, Narin’s declaration of his love for the three pillars exemplifies the success of this elite nationalist campaign. By using ‘Buddhism’
interchangeably with 'religion', Narin's statement also reveals the dominance of Buddhism in the religious and political life of Siam. Inspired by this kind of awareness, Narin thus saw the fate of Buddhism as being closely connected with the well-being of his nation. As he wrote at one point:

All we Thai nationals should be loyal to Buddhism ... Should there be a case when we have to die for [Buddhism], we should do so wholeheartedly, for Buddhism can contribute more to our nation than we ourselves can hope to do (Narin 2001: 17-18).

From the two quotes above, the connection between women's ordination and the modern political thought of Siamese elite nationalism should become clear. In Narin's view, the establishment of the phiksuni order, with the promise of their high quality religious contribution, would help to strengthen Buddhism, which would in turn guarantee the prosperity of the nation (2001: 15, 77).

But the nationalist conception formulated and propagated by the monarch was not the only ideological currency of the day. Whereas this monarchical nationalism sought to place the monarchy at the centre of the Thai nation, a competing discourse also emerged which called for equality as well as the rights and freedom of the citizens, including women (Copeland 1993, Barmé 2002). Hence, Narin claimed his position as a citizen (phonlameuang) and taxpayer in his reaction to the attempt made by religious and government authorities to end women's monasticism (Narin 2001: 112, 194, 198). In his view, gender equality was part and parcel of social justice. Thus he demanded that for justice to prevail, women should have the opportunity to contribute to the society. As he wrote: "Now in almost all parts of the world, people have
submitted to the principle of justice. …. These days in foreign countries, women are considered as knowledgeable as men” (Narin 2001: 9).

News of foreign countries that appeared in the press also enabled the literate population of Siam to form ideas about themselves and their nation in comparison to those other countries. Thus, in Narin’s view, the ignorance of the majority of people in Siam about the rational and true essence of Buddhism was in effect holding back the progress of Siam as compared to countries like Japan and the United States (Narin 2001: 48). Just as knowledge of more advanced societies might cast Siam in an unfavourable comparative light, it also offered the hope of betterment or possible escape, especially for someone like Narin who in his life had never travelled beyond the bounds of his country. Upon reading news about the ordination of a Japanese woman in Honolulu, he expressed his hope that the Japanese phiksuni might one day travel to Siam to give rightful ordination to Thai Buddhist women (Narin 2001: 148). In a moment of his cosmopolitan dream, Narin wrote that if he could find no way of establishing women’s ordination in Siam, he might “sell [his] properties and move abroad” (2001: 49). Indeed in September 1930, following his failed petition to the monarch for the latter’s support of women’s ordination, Narin ordained himself as a monk. This self-ordination – unusual for the Buddhist monastic tradition that normally requires a quorum of ordained monks to ‘confer’ ordination on its would-be members36 – was part of Narin’s plan to

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36 An explanation why Narin decided to ordain himself instead of seeking ordination from other monks can perhaps be found in one of his petitions to King Rama VII, dated 31 March 1930 (1929 by the old calendar) – from National Archives R7 RL20/107. In this petition, Narin related how he wished to be ordained as a monk in memory of the deceased prince Kromluang Songkhla Nakharin at the prince’s cremation ceremony earlier that month. However, Narin said he had failed to convince any preceptor monks (authorized upatcha) to ordain him. This incident partly contributed to Narin’s desire to go abroad, for he stated in this petition that, “if I do not attempt to seek another
travel abroad in a frugal fashion to realize his various religious and political ideas in foreign lands. Narin’s dream of travelling abroad would have come true if the captain of the passenger ship to China that he was about to board, for a reason not clearly identified, had not stopped him from boarding the liner despite his possession of a proper ticket and all the necessary travel documents (Sakdina 1993: 64-70).

Another point that illustrates the influence of modern political thought in the case of women’s ordination was Narin’s claim to freedom of religious practice. In an early development of the modern rhetoric of religious freedom in Siam, the Siamese government under King Rama V first issued a ‘Proclamation of Religious Toleration’ in 1878. It should be noted, however, that this proclamation was issued in response to the demand of Christian missionaries calling for Siam’s protection of their proselytizing activities in the defiant northern tributary state (Morris 2000: 177).

Nevertheless, a record of the awareness of the modern principle of freedom of religion can be dated back to the reign of King Mongkut, which ended ten years before the 1878 Proclamation of Religious Toleration. To make his case, Narin (2001: 145) cited this record of King Mongkut’s support for ‘freedom of religious practice’, which appeared in a Buddhist publication of his time. According to this record, King Mongkut, in dealing with an ongoing conflict between monks of Thammayut and Mahanikai sects over their different robing styles, expressed his support for the separation of religious and secular political affairs. The king thus withdrew his political authority over the monastic conflict, and allowed the disputing monks the ‘freedom to engage in religious

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[Buddhist] sect in a far-away land, if I insist on living in this domicile, there would be no chance of any member of my family being ordained".
practices' (*seriphap nai an patibat phra-satsana*) as they saw fit (Narin 2001: 145). Referring to this royal deliberation, Narin wrote: "If the government were aware of these words of his majesty, they would not have interfered with [women’s ordination]" (2001: 145). Narin then went on to interpret this notion of religious freedom to mean "religious practice according to personal preferences … that holds no intention of deception" (Narin 2001: 145).

By implication, the government’s ignorance of the principle of religious freedom and Narin’s need to formulate his own interpretation of the term is indicative of the novelty of this concept in Siam at that time. As we see here, it was the elite who, in a specific circumstance, invoked this modern rhetoric of religious freedom. Narin’s citing the idea to justify his women’s ordination project is yet another example of how modern political thought, first introduced to Siam by the elite, could also be used to question the legitimacy of the elite’s ruling.\(^{37}\)

**The ‘Impossibility’ of Women’s Ordination**

In this section, I engage in a close reading of the Supreme Patriarch’s 1928 decree prohibiting male monastics from giving ordination to women. This task is crucial because the decree, cited below, did not merely stimulate a debate about women’s ordination in the months following the ordination. In a way, the decree, which emerged at the time when the status quo of the male *sangha*

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\(^{37}\) See also ‘Sam samaneri jam-loey thalaeng-kan’ (Three Prosecuted Samaneri Issue a Statement), *Daily Mail*, 21 September 1929 – from National Archives R7 M26.5/248. In this statement, the *samaneri* also referred to King Mongkut’s support for the principle of freedom of religion.
was directly challenged, provides an archetype of the ongoing discourse that the legitimate ordination of women can never possibly take place. This discourse has had a long-lasting, even if not absolute, effect in inhibiting overt contestation against the male monopoly of Buddhist monasticism in Thailand. To elaborate this argument, I begin by quoting the short decree in full.\(^{38}\)

\begin{center}

**Decree**

**Prohibition of Monks and Novices from Conferring Monastic Ordination on Women**

For a woman to become a *samaneri* according to the Lord Buddha’s permission, she must receive an ordination from a *phiksuni*. He only permitted a *phiksuni* of more than 12 years standing to serve as a *pawattini* or *upatcha* [both meaning ‘preceptor’]; he did not permit a *phiksu* [male monk] to act as a preceptor [for women]. The *phiksuni* lineage has long been completely extinct. Since no *phiksuni* exists who can give a *samaneri* ordination, no *samaneri* likewise exists who has been ordained by a *phiksuni*. They declined and disappeared together. A person who confers a *samaneri* ordination lays down that which the Buddha did not lay down, and revokes that which the Buddha stipulated. Such a person is an adversary [*sian-nam*] of the religion, a condemned example.\(^{39}\)

For this reason, monks and novices of all orders may not give ordination as *phiksuni*, *sikkhamana* [*phiksuni* aspirant] and *samaneri* to women from now on.

Issued on 18 June 1928

*Kromluang Chinaworn Siriwat*

\end{center}

To start with, the following points are worth noting about the content of the decree. First, the decree does not explain why it was articulated in the first place; there is no mention of the actual occurrence of women’s ordination


\(^{39}\) A more common use of the word ‘*sian-nam*’ is found in the political phrase ‘*kamjat sian-nam phaen-din*’ or ‘to wipe out the enemy of the land’. To use the word ‘*sian-nam*’ in a religious context is less common.
anywhere in the text. Second, this deceptively short statement refers repeatedly to the Buddha’s permission and what he laid down or stipulated. Third, this decree does not contain any punitive clause. It does not state how the violator of the prohibition set forth by the decree is to be punished. Instead, it seeks to condemn the violator as an ‘adversary’ (sian-nam or ‘a thorn in the side’) of Buddhism. This makes the decree read more like an admonition than a legally enforceable document. Fourth, the text states emphatically that the phiksuni lineage has been ‘completely extinct’ (mot sapsun khat cheua-sai, literally translated as ‘finished, lost, discontinued lineage’, all in one phrase). It also states that the other scripturally identified categories of ordained female monastics – samaneri and, by extension, sikkhamana – have all ‘declined and disappeared together’ (seuam sun pai tam kan). Lastly, it is important to note that the decree, although dealing with an issue clearly related to women, does not address women directly. It does not prohibit women from seeking ordination but rather prohibits male monastics from giving ordination. This results in the decree being a communication internal to the male monastic community.

*The Decree as ‘Timeless’ and ‘Legitimate’*

The absence of any mention of the actual ordinations of women in late April 1928, which took place just weeks prior to the drafting of the decree and was the reason for its articulation, gives an impression that the message of the decree is timeless, being a reiteration of the stipulation handed down from the time of the Buddha. Also, frequent references to the Buddha’s permission and
stipulation make the prohibition against male monks ordaining women appear as if it was an exact rule laid down by the Buddha, whereas this is not the case.

The contrived nature of this decreed prohibition becomes apparent when we consider the text of the Bhikkhu Vinaya, or the scriptural monastic code of conduct for male monks. The Vinaya, widely regarded as the constitution of the Buddhist monastic order, is divided into two sets of rules, one for male monastics and the other for their female counterparts. In other words, male and female monastics follow separate sets of rules. As it happens, the male code of conduct does not contain any mention of the condition under which male monastics may or may not give ordination to women. In fact, other parts of the Buddhist scriptures tell us that there were cases of male monks giving ordination to women in the past. The point in the decree which states that a woman is to receive her ordination from a phiksuni, or female monk, of at least 12 years standing appears in the female code of conduct. Technically speaking, the female code of conduct only applies to female, and not male, monastics. In this light, the decreed prohibition is at best an attempt to enforce part of the female code of conduct on male monastics.

*The Sangha-State Relation*

This lack of firm grounds in the Vinaya may be the reason why no punitive clause could be found for violation of the decree. Consequently, the absence of a punitive clause casts doubt on the enforceability of this supposedly legal stipulation by the Supreme Patriarch. As mentioned earlier, in 1929 when the cabinet, by the order of the monarch, consulted the Attorney General to find a
way to put an end to women’s ordination, the initial response of this leading legal expert was that no legal charge could be made against Narin and the ordained women (Narin 2001: (16)). Nevertheless, the fact that the case of women’s ordination was eventually brought to a court of law and a verdict was soon passed ordering the women to disrobe leads us to another consideration about the close relationship between the sangha and the monarchical state.

By the 1920s, Siam had gone through several decades of its ‘self-civilizing’ project (Jackson 2004a). A good part of this project had to do with the modernization of Siam’s legal system to match that of Western countries (Loos 2006). And in view of the modern legal regime, the separation of church and state was ideal. Given the aspiration of Siam to achieve the modern legal model, the reality of mutual dependence of the state and the dominant Buddhist institution, as manifested in the state’s dealing with women’s ordination, did not go unnoticed both by state authorities and advocates of women’s ordination. Caught in the dilemma of wanting to conveniently impose state laws to end the practice of women’s ordination while aspiring to Siam being regarded as a modern state at the same time, King Rama VII expressed his frustration about the limits of modern laws. “It is most appropriate to allow for secular laws to protect the religious institution,” said the monarch when he learned of the cabinet’s doubt about the righteousness of imposing state law to end women’s monastic vocation.\(^40\) As he went on to say: “The separation between the secular and religious spheres is a recent fashion. The idea came perhaps from French lawyers. But I think this is ‘absolutely crazy’ (ba thi sut). And we should definitely not follow the French example.”\(^41\) Given this view of the

\(^{40}\) A record of King Rama VII’s response to Minutes of the Cabinet’s Meeting, no. 13/2472 (1929) – from National Archives R7 RL20/107.

\(^{41}\) Ibid (italics added to indicate the use of English in the original).
incumbent monarch, it is not surprising that when the sangha’s authority failed to take effect in the matter of women’s ordination (apart from condemning it), the state, with its political and legal power, would readily intervene.

By considering the ideas and practice surrounding the church and state relationship in this case, we see how the practice of women’s ordination did have an unsettling effect on an important issue facing Siam at that time. In a small way, the women’s ordination initiative rendered questionable Siam’s aspiration to modernize its legal system, especially in the area of the relationship between religion and political power.\(^\text{42}\)

\textit{Paradoxical Position of Women}

How do we account for the fact that the decree, despite its subject matter being directly related to women, is exclusively directed towards male monastics while treating ‘women’ as a secondary concern? Paradoxical seems to be the word that best explains the position of women in this decree. In principle, the Buddhist monastic community is a non-productive unit. This means that the monastic community must rely on material support from the lay community for its subsistence. Women, in their widely recognized traditionally ascribed role, have been predominantly responsible for providing daily sustenance to monks. For this reason, the male monastic community is not in a position to dismiss the importance of women in maintaining the sangha. However, up until 1928,

\(^{42}\) I say “in a small way” here because, unlike the comparable issue of polygynous marriage practice in Siam, the legal aspect of women’s ordination did not feature as part of Siam’s legal reform project that was tied to its political negotiations with western imperialist powers at that time. For the importance of the issue of polygynous marriage practice in Siam’s legal reform, see Loos (2006).
women had been successfully kept at the threshold of the monastic order. They had never before been recognized as ordained members of the Thai Buddhist sangha on a par with male monks. This has constituted the normative position of women, in which their peripheral relationship with the sangha is allowed insofar as they do not try to join the ranks of male monastics.

The paradoxical position of women in the 1928 decree reflects the normative position of women just described. Because women, as important as they have been as supporters of the sangha, could never become members of this central Buddhist institution, they were, and still are, not subject to the sangha’s legal authority. As such, they cannot be directly punished by the sangha law for their ‘transgressive’ acts. As seen in this case of women’s ordination, it was only with the intervention of the secular state that women’s transgression into the monastic realm could be prosecuted.

*Institutionalizing the Discourse of ‘Impossibility’*

Prior to the ordinations in 1928, doubt existed as to whether or not samaneri and phiksuni ordination could be legitimately revived. At best, one can say that the public view towards women’s ordination at that time was one of indecisiveness. Narin claimed that before the ordinations of his daughters he had travelled to more than twenty central and southern provinces in order to sound people out about the possibility of ordaining women. As for the result, he admitted that there were both “people who agreed [with the idea], and several who didn’t” (Narin 2001: 77). However, he asserted that a number of monks expressed their willingness to give ordination to women should the time
come for such a ceremony to take place (Narin 2001: 78). If this expression of willingness by a number of monks was possible in a situation where no official prohibition of women’s ordination existed prior to 1928, the issuance of the Supreme Patriarch’s decree in June of that year did have the effect of authorizing the view of the detractors of women’s ordination. In other words, the decree formalized the view that women’s full ordination could not be revived.

Although the legal enforceability of the 1928 decree remains questionable, this quasi-legal document was not a vain attempt, for its discursive influence has endured. As an official order proclaimed by the supreme religious leader revered for his position at the apex of the national Buddhist hierarchy, the words of the decree carry special weight. For a good number of people, the decree was, and still is, taken as an unchallengeable statement. This statement includes the ultimate claim that the phiksuni lineage is ‘completely extinct’, and a strong implication that women’s ordination cannot possibly take place now or in the future. With the promulgation of this decree, the idea of the impossibility of women’s ordination became institutionalized.

The special weight of the decree also applies to the accusation that those who give ordination to women are ‘adversaries’ or sian-nam of Buddhism. Belying its literal translation as ‘thorns in the side’, the word sian-nam conveys a strong connotation of illicit opposition against an established institution, such as the country or kingdom. The word is equivalent to an ‘enemy’ or ‘traitor’, which must be wiped out. So, whereas the decree lacks a specific legal indictment and provision of penalty, it has effectively established the degree of severity of
the crime of women’s ordination. With the word ‘adversary’, it has posited women’s ordination as a violation of the integrity of the religion.

In any case, the 1928 decree was not solely responsible for the production of the discourse of the impossibility of women’s ordination. Less than two months after the decree was publicly announced, the Supreme Patriarch, in reply to Narin’s letter, confirmed his objection to women’s ordination. This time, he charged Narin with an act of ‘heresy’ (*uttari nork-rit*), a term rather alien to the context of the heterogeneous beliefs and practices of Thai Buddhism. To be certain, a number of senior monks of high-ranking administrative positions followed the Supreme Patriarch in condemning Narin and the ordained women in the press. Among their charges against women’s ordination were: that the people involved in women’s ordination were ‘crazy’ (*pen ba*); that the ordained women ‘impersonated the [monastic] status’ (*lakkaphet*); and that women in general were ‘the enemy of celibacy’ (*pen kha-seuk kae phromajan*) (see Narin 2001: 117-120). These condemnations from leading religious authorities certainly played a part in affirming the idea that women’s ordination was impossible, and that the practice was something never to be aspired to.

**The Discursive Legacy of the 1920s Ordination**

The discursive legacy of the 1928 decree is lasting. In Chapter 5, we will see how, more than 70 years on, the decree and the arguments given therein have

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continued to be cited by religious authorities, not least the current Supreme Patriarch, in their opposition to women’s ordination in the early 2000s. Striking also is the manner in which the people involved in women’s ordination of the early 2000s were condemned, somewhat indirectly, as violators of the Buddha’s convention and sinners against Buddhism (see Chapter 5). For a long time, academic literature, especially anthropological accounts of women’s position in Thai Buddhism, has portrayed the fact that women could not become monks as entrenched in a timeless ‘Thai Buddhist culture’. The fact that this ‘impossibility’ of women’s ordination was once unclear and in dispute, and was actually challenged by a group of Siamese women and men, has vanished into the far all but forgotten background of the history of Thai Buddhism.

But the historical account of women’s ordination in the late 1920s was not to disappear completely from the public memory. Narin’s sense of history – strengthened in a large part by the ever-growing print industry – meant that the story of women’s ordination of the late 1920s would reach beyond the confines of his time. Entrusting this story to his printed books, Narin foresaw that this story about women’s ordination would eventually “become part of the chronicles of Siam,” and would “be of benefit to people of the future” (Narin 2001: 152). His 1929 ‘Statement on Samaneri at Watr Nariwong’ was his attempt to make the struggles for women’s ordination a lasting mark in history. Until recently, this book, with an initial print run of 1,000 copies, has been a rare document. Much as Narin had anticipated, the second edition of this book on samaneri was reprinted more than seven decades later, in 2001, shortly after a similar controversy over women’s Theravada ordination re-emerged in Thai society. Amid the renewed challenge of women’s ordination at the dawn of the
21st century, both the 1928 decree of the Supreme Patriarch and Narin’s published statement have enjoyed a second life in public discourse. They are proof of the persistence of gender contestation in Thai Buddhism. In the next chapter, we will examine how this contestation in the monastic field has led to the proliferation of alternative forms of women’s monasticism in Thailand.
Chapter 3

Alternative Forms of Women’s Religious Vocation

The end of the endeavour to ordain women in the late 1920s, discussed in Chapter 2, did not have the effect of extinguishing monastic aspirations of women all together. Rather, this failed attempt has informed the choices of identity expressions made by women of later times. For one thing, the defeat of this historical female monastic pursuit has taught a number of women leading a religious life to circumvent what the sangha and the state have declared ‘impossible’ for women – namely, that women may be ordained as monastics and wear the symbolically significant yellow robes just as male monks. These formal constraints have paradoxically resulted in the creative diversification of forms of women’s monasticism that elude institutional interference. Thus, the institutional constraints on women’s monastic practice earlier in the 20th century have, even though not by intention, opened up the possibilities for multiple religious expressions by women in the times that follow.

In this chapter, I recount stories of women of different monastic categories past and present. Although these accounts of lives and practices of individual women may seem fragmented, they are windows into a number of distinct forms of female monasticism. An important commonality among these different monastic forms lies in the fact that they emerged within the same
restrictive context of Thai Theravada Buddhism. The period from the end of the late 1920s ordination initiative until the turn of the 21st century has seen the emergence of different forms of women’s monasticism and other ordination attempts. These different categories of female religious vocation discussed in this chapter include: ubasika, phutthasawika, silajarini, sikkhamat as well as phiksun and samaneri of the Mahayana tradition. It is important to note from the beginning that the emergences of these categories were sporadic and their stories fragmented. In most cases, the women who joined these categories, with the exception of sikkhamat, hardly formed organized groups. Some of the categories, including phutthasawika and silajarini, were not be sustained in the long run. Besides, it is highly arguable if the category ubasika should be counted as ‘monastic’ given the women’s self-intended non-ordained status. Yet, this non-ordained status should not lead to the exclusion of this ascetic category ubasika from our consideration. For I argue that the characteristic of women’s monasticism that emerged in the seven decades between the end of the 1920s and the most recent wave of Theravada phiksun ordination in the early 2000s has always been marked by indistinct and loosely-defined religious identities. It is in fact the indefiniteness of these female monastic identities that makes them appear less challenging to the male monastic institution, thus enabling them to emerge and exist without much interference from the authorities (except the cases of sikkhamat and phutthasawika discussed below).

Before moving on to these alternative female monastic forms, I start the next section with a discussion of mae-chi. As the oldest and largest group of women living ascetic lives in Thailand, and with a failed attempt by a group of mae-chi to call for legal recognition of their status as ‘ordained persons’ discussed below, mae-chi represents the ambiguity that is characteristic of
women's monasticism. Also, amid the controversy over Theravada women's ordination in the early 2000s, a few opinion-leading monks suggested to the public that measures be carried out to improve, and perhaps officially recognize, the status of mae-chi, so that mae-chi would make a worthy alternative to the controversial phiksuni ordination. A discussion of the ambiguous religious status of mae-chi will allow us to see more clearly the relatedness among different categories of women's religious vocation.

The Ambiguous Status of Mae-chi

Given that mae-chi make up the oldest and largest category of women living ascetic lives in Thailand today,¹ a question remains as to why women who wish to lead religious lives would not simply become mae-chi. There are a number of related answers to this. One of the answers can be found in the words of a woman who refused to become a mae-chi. Chatsumarn, the woman who later became fully ordained as phiksuni, explains in one of her books that mae-chi “find no place in any existing religious structure and do not quite fit any of the religious categories” (1991a: 36-37). What does this mean? To answer this question, we now turn to the religious culture that conditions the status of mae-chi.

¹ There are no official records of the total numbers of mae-chi in Thailand. The National Statistics Office, which keeps annual statistics of Buddhist monastics in the country, only collects numbers of male monks and novices. The Office does not count mae-chi as monastics. During my fieldwork, I discussed this issue with a few leaders of the Thai Mae-chi Institute, who gave estimated total numbers of mae-chi that ranged between 10,000 and 13,000 (see also, Parichart 2002: 19).
Mae-\textit{chi} as a category of monastic women has existed in historical records of Siam since the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767) (Cook 1981: 39; Chatsumarn 1991a: 36). However, the compound word \textit{mae-\textit{chi}}, or simply \textit{chi}, has an obscure origin (Chatsumarn 1991a: 36-37). Unlike the Pali-derived words \textit{phiksuni} and \textit{ubasika}, the Thai-language term \textit{mae-\textit{chi}} does not have an explicit origin in any of the Pali texts. The category \textit{mae-\textit{chi}} does not stand by itself as one of the four scripturally-identified categories of the Buddha’s followers, which include \textit{phiks} (male monks, Pali: \textit{bhikkhu}), \textit{phiksuni} (female monks, Pali: \textit{bhikkhuni}), \textit{ubasok} (laymen, Pali: \textit{upasaka}), and \textit{ubasika} (laywomen, Pali: \textit{upasika}).

The common Thai term used to describe an act of a woman becoming a \textit{mae-\textit{chi}} is ‘\textit{buat}’ as in ‘\textit{buat \textit{chi}}’, meaning ‘to be ordained as \textit{mae-\textit{chi}}’. It is important to note that this word ‘\textit{buat}’ (to ordain or be ordained) is also used for ordination of male monks and novices. Nevertheless, while the ordination procedures of \textit{phiks} and \textit{phiksuni} are prescribed in the canonical Tipitaka, there are no canon-based rules for the ordination of \textit{mae-\textit{chi}}. Often, the ritual procedures of \textit{mae-\textit{chi}} ordination is a simple affair, with the person being ordained taking verbal refuge in the Triple Gems\textsuperscript{2} and reciting either the eight or ten precepts to which she will commit. A monk or a senior \textit{mae-\textit{chi}} may preside over this ritual, but this is not necessarily the case. And not every \textit{mae-\textit{chi}} undergoes an ordination ritual that is witnesses by others. Some women may shave their hair, change their clothes and take the precept vow on their own. This lack of scriptural verification of their monastic identity, both in terms of their category name and their ordination procedures, partly contributes to the ambiguity of the monastic status of \textit{mae-\textit{chi}}.

\textsuperscript{2} That is, the Buddha, \textit{dhamma}, and \textit{sangha}. 
Also, the white colour of mae-chi's robes is an ingrained part of their identity. In certain parts of the country, mae-chi are called by the Thai term mae-khao or 'women in white', and the act of becoming mae-chi is sometimes described in some regions as buat khao or 'being ordained into white'. The white colour, however, adds to the ambiguity of their status within the Buddhist monastic structure because white is also the colour of pious laypeople. Oftentimes, lay Buddhists choose to wear white, or sometimes white and black, when they subject themselves to temporary observance of the eight precepts and spend their time at a monastery. In addition, white clothing is also used for a man about to be ordained into Theravada Buddhist monkhood. Before a full ordination ceremony starts, a male ordinand will normally have his head shaved and put on white clothes. In this context, the white colour signifies a short transitional period that marks the changing of status of a man, from being a lay person to becoming a monk. This transitional stage, in which a male ordinand dresses himself in white, may last overnight, a few hours, or less. In comparison, the anthropologist P Van Esterik interprets the fact that mae-chi wear white on a permanent basis to mean that the women are placed "permanently between states" (1996: 57), for mae-chi do not fully belong to the laity, and, unlike male ordinands, they are not on their way to being fully ordained.

In legal terms, mae-chi are not recognized as nak-buat or ordained persons. For the past decade, there have been calls for the legal recognition of mae-chi as ordained persons (Ito 1999: 160-165; Falk 2002: Chapter 9), but this has been to no avail. There are conflicting views among different legislative and executive bodies regarding the ordained status of mae-chi. Since 1979, the Office of the Council of State, which is responsible for drafting laws and
providing legal advice to the government, has defined *mae-chi* as *nak-buat* (Parichart 2002: 8). Despite this, the category *mae-chi* has never been included in any of the Sangha Acts that govern the Buddhist monastic order, past or present.

In March 2002, the Department of Religious Affairs, acting as the Secretariat of the Sangha Council, issued an official letter stating its refusal to consider a draft Mae-chi Act proposed by a group of *mae-chi*. The main tenet of this draft Act was the legal recognition of *mae-chi* as Buddhist ordained persons. The Department of Religious Affairs stated two justifications for the rejection of the draft Act. First, it stated that:

> From the time Buddhism arrived in Thailand, according to historical records of the Sukhothai period [the 13th-14th centuries CE] until now, the only existing types of *banphachit* or *nak-buat* [both meaning ordained monastics] have been Theravada *phiksu* and *samanen* [male monks and novices]. ... There are no historical records of *phiksun* and *mae-chi*.

The letter went on to describe the classification of the Buddha’s followers into two main types, the ordained and the non-ordained, stating that those who count as the ordained – *banphachit* or *nak-buat* as specified in this letter – are those who have gone through an ordination ceremony as prescribed by the Buddha. The same letter also stated that “there is no mention of *mae-chi* ordination in the Tipitaka.”

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4 Ibid.
classified as non-ordained laypeople. In addition, by citing the over-700-year history of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand in just one sentence, this state religious institution discursively erases the historical existence of mae-chi as monastics and, at the same time, denied the possibility for women in general to engage in monasticism.

The second reason given by the Department of Religious Affairs for its refusal to consider the draft Mae-chi Act was that the administrative system of mae-chi as proposed in the draft Act would be "an imitation of the sangha administration, and might create administrative problems to the sangha." It is not clear from this letter how the similarity between the existing administrative structure of the sangha and that proposed for mae-chi might create problems. However, the anxiety about this administrative similarity expressed by the Department of Religious Affairs can be interpreted as stemming from two related reasons. First, this similarity in the administrative structure threatens to blur the hierarchical demarcation between the ordained and the non-ordained, or between monastics and the laity, in Thai Buddhism. According to this view, monks as ordained monastics should not be treated similarly to mae-chi who are officially classified as non-ordained. Second, the idea that mae-chi might come closer to male monks, at least in administrative terms, threatens to weaken the gender hierarchy in institutional Buddhism. As discussed in earlier chapters, this double divide – between the ordained and the non-ordained on the one hand, and between males and females on the other – has been a key feature of the structure of relations in institutional Buddhism in Thailand. In this light, we may then conclude that the Department's prediction of

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5 Ibid.
administrative problems cited above is indicative of an institutional desire to safeguard the status quo of male monasticism in Thailand.

Thus, in administrative terms, different government offices continue to treat mae-chi differently in their rules and regulations. For instance, the Election Commission of Thailand regards mae-chi as ordained individuals, therefore they, like male monastics, do not have the right to vote in political elections. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Transport and Communications, Public Health and Education do not consider mae-chi as ordained. Hence, they are not entitled to transportation concession, health services or other welfare benefits otherwise provided to male monks and novices (see Parichart 2002: 8-12).

Furthermore, literature on the social status of mae-chi often depicts them as coming from poor economic and educational backgrounds, and the majority of them becoming mae-chi in their old age. Studies of mae-chi often cite a popular opinion that young women do not become mae-chi unless they are physically ill, mentally unstable or have failed in their worldly life (see for example, Ito 1999: 150; P Van Esterik 1996: 45, 49; Chatsumarn 1991a: 40). How well does this literature reflect the reality of mae-chi’s lives today? Opinions of the mae-chi I met during my fieldwork seemed to differ depending on their individual experiences. Younger mae-chi with better education may not necessarily agree with this negative stereotype.

As in one example, I attended an international conference on Buddhist women in South Korea in 2004. Also attending the conference was a group of mae-chi from Thailand. Together we listened to a presentation outlining the often-mentioned subordinate status and disadvantaged situation of mae-chi. After the presentation, a young mae-chi who was a graduate student at a university in
Thailand turned to me. "That is not always the case, you know," she said, referring to the report on the subordination of *mae-chi*. This opinion is echoed by some other *mae-chi* I met during fieldwork. One of these *mae-chi* was a woman in her late thirties who came from a provincial background. She first became a *mae-chi* in her teen years and has received her education from high school to the doctoral level all in the Theravada monastic settings. During our conversation, the *mae-chi* assured me she had received good material and livelihood support from monks. Her teacher monk from her provincial hometown had supported her education and helped to secure her a residence at a large monastery in Bangkok. She also received partial scholarships for her studies from this Bangkok monastery. Unlike *mae-chi* living in several other monasteries, she maintained that she did not have to cook for the monks. She was also invited to give sermons to lay attendees at the monastery on a regular basis and to teach courses at the two Buddhist universities. This *mae-chi*, it should be noted, is among the small number of *mae-chi* who have completed the highest level of Pali studies (*parian 9*) and is the first of the currently few *mae-chi* enrolled in the doctoral programme at one of the two Buddhist universities in Thailand.⁶

Although statistics are hard to come by, it is probably the case that better off *mae-chi* are still in the minority, even if growing in numbers. Several of these better-educated *mae-chi* are now associated with more established organizations such as the Thai Mae-chi Institute and Mahapajapati Gotami Witthayalai, a college for *mae-chi*. In other cases, better off *mae-chi* may come from an advantaged social and economic background that affords them a head start in their monastic lives.

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Over all, however, the situation of mae-chi can still be described as ambiguous. Discussing the general situation of mae-chi in Thailand, a senior mae-chi who had spent more than forty years in the religious vocation, said she had witnessed numerous limitations and problems mae-chi had to face. Until now, she commented, the status of mae-chi had not been satisfactory. Those who lived under the leadership of charismatic mae-chi might do better in terms of lay support, she said, but those who did not would need to struggle to maintain their religious livelihood.\(^7\)

The ambiguous status of mae-chi is also reflected in people’s views towards them. During my fieldwork, several times I heard remarks made by laypeople, and in some cases male monks and female monastics of other types, that mae-chi were not nak-buat, that is, ordained monastics. Reasons for this supposition vary. Some said mae-chi took only the eight-precept vow, just like pious laypeople, and in many cases had not gone through an ordination ceremony. Therefore, they were not fully ordained. Others commented on the stereotypical livelihood of mae-chi. Mae-chi, they said, still had to perform household-like activities such as cooking and cleaning while living in monasteries. Unlike monks, who normally receive support from the laity, a considerable number of mae-chi had to financially support themselves or live off their families. According to this view, the livelihood of mae-chi did not represent the true homeless path of the ordained.

Despite their ambiguous status, the category mae-chi nevertheless exhibits some advantages over other female monastic categories. Their position on the

\(^7\) Mae-chi Pratin Kwan-orn, the President of the Thai Mae-chi Institute, speaking at an informal group discussion on "Nuns in Thailand" during the 8th Sakyadhita International Conference of Buddhist Women, South Korea, 2 July 2004.
fringes of the *sangha* means that *mae-chi*, unlike monks, are not under the jurisdiction of the *sangha*, a fact that a number of *mae-chi* appreciate.\(^8\) Also, the long history of *mae-chi* in Thai society means that they enjoy an unquestionable status of belonging to the Thai Theravada tradition, despite a lack of legal recognition. Perhaps in an attempt to confirm this sense of belonging, the Thai Mae-chie Institute, a non-governmental organization formed in 1969 and now under the royal patronage of the Queen, has made an effort to standardize the identity and practice of *mae-chie* nationwide. These attempts include the issuance of identity cards for *mae-chie* who are members of the Institute, and the prescription of a code of monastic conduct, dress code and ordination procedures. Some of these regulations are modelled after the code of conduct for male monks. For example, the *mae-chie* identity card is called *sutthiban* (certification book) to replicate the legally-prescribed *sutthibat* (certification card) of male monks.\(^9\)

Despite these institutionalizing efforts of the Thai Mae-chie Institute, the ostensibly unified category of *mae-chie* is in fact not homogenous. Their undecided status means that *mae-chie* do have some room to manoeuvre their monastic expressions and practices while enjoying the sense of belonging to Thai Theravada Buddhism. This situation is exemplified in the case of the *mae-chie* in brown robes, who are discussed next.

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\(^8\) See Ito’s (1999: 164-165) discussion of opposition to the draft Mae-chie Act. Some *mae-chie* argue that the draft Act, which aimed at institutionalizing, standardizing and monitoring various aspects in the life of *mae-chie*, would put them under state control and significantly restrict their freedom.

\(^9\) I gathered this part of information from my discussions with different *mae-chie*, and also from studying the regulations of *mae-chie* as they appear in the Foundation for Thai Mae-chie Institute (1999).
Mae-chi in Brown Robes

"Mae-chi must shave their hair and eyebrows once a month and must use the same pattern of clothing ... all in white and no other colour," says Rule No. 26 of the Thai Mae-chi Institute (Foundation for Thai Mae-chi Institute 1999: 14). During my fieldwork I met mae-chi of different monastic affiliations who wore their robes not in white but different shades of brown. Of particular interest for this discussion is a small group of mae-chi at a nunnery in a province in the North of the Central Plains, who follow the practice of forest monks.

I first came to know this group of mae-chi through a chance meeting with Phi Nee (pseudonym), one of the mae-chi's followers. "When I first met her, I told myself I have found my teacher," Phi Nee said of Mae-chi Prapha (pseudonym), the head of the nunnery. "Who says there are no phiksuni in Thailand?" she continued, "Mae-chi Prapha is a phiksuni to me." This great reverence for the head mae-chi, equating her to a fully ordained phiksuni, became clear to me upon my visits to the nunnery. Mae-chi Prapha, probably in her fifties, was greatly respected at her nunnery where she shared the residence with four other mae-chi who came from urban middle-class professional backgrounds. The head mae-chi was addressed as luang-mae (Venerable Mother), a rare female-gendered word adapted from the more common term luang-phor (Venerable Father) used with senior or elderly male monks.

Upon my first visit, I also learned by way of observation how disciples and other mae-chi paid respect to luang-mae by squatting down and bowing three times to the floor, the act of greeting and parting usually reserved for Buddha images and monks. This act of respect should be made to the head mae-chi
with or without her physical presence in the immediate vicinity. Thus, when I entered the main shrine hall of the nunnery on the first morning of my visit, I was gently guided by a mač-chi to first offer three bows to the Buddha images enshrined in the hall, followed by another three bows towards an ornate cabinet standing beside the main Buddha image which, I was told, held holy relics. The last set of three bows was then made facing an empty white-painted concrete wall, towards the direction of Mač-chi Prapha’s residential building located some thirty metres away. Only later was I to learn of the reason for this extraordinary reverence for the head mač-chi.

By way of making acquaintance at our first meeting, Mač-chi Prapha half-teased and half-reminded me about my worldly career as a postgraduate student craving for worldly knowledge. This kind of knowledge, she said, would only serve to feed my atta, the egotistic self. That the head mač-chi should call attention to the spiritual drawbacks of higher education is understandable. Her own life background offered a contrast to that of most people around her, whether they were other ‘educated’ mač-chi at the nunnery or her mostly middle-class disciples and admirers.

Mač-chi Prapha came from a family of farm labourers in the North of Thailand. Having lost her mother when she was young, she had to look after her younger siblings and started working early in life. As a child living in a rural village, she knew very little about Buddhist teachings. “Until my teen years, I knew nothing about mač-chi. I never saw one,” she told me. Her only monastic role models were local male monks. “I saw that monks were quite content. Their lifestyle was simple. With shaven head, they did not have to worry about hairstyles. They seemed at peace with themselves. I wished I could live like
that." So much so that, "at that time, I often thought I wanted to just stop breathing, die, be reborn a man, and be ordained."

The knowledge that women too could be ordained was "important news" to the young Prapha, who by the age of eighteen was determined not to take on the burden of married life. "I wrote to a monk who hosted a radio program asking if women could be ordained. He replied to my letter on the radio," she told me. This piece of information let loose her imagination. "I pondered a lot about what it meant for a woman to be ordained, how she would dress, how she would live her life, and what she would be doing," she said. Before that, she had only heard religious taboos about women. "People said that when an ordained woman had her period, she would have to wear black and go sit and say prayers by the temple wall," Mae-chi Prapha went on to say. "She would not be allowed to join any ritual ceremonies or to enter the temple building. That would be a sin. That was what people said back then," she said. After a few years of postal communications with the monk, Prapha's wish to be ordained was fulfilled. She became a white-robed, eight-precept mae-chi. As it turned out, it was the radio host monk who arranged for her ordination.

In common with several other monastic women I have met, for Mae-chi Prapha, life after ordination was one on the move. She moved from one place to another in search of an environment conducive to religious learning and practice. During those years, she learned different meditative techniques, took courses in Buddhist doctrines and read several books. However, she told me that all these practices and studies did not "take root in the mind". So, she decided to, as she put it, "pack the books away, take up an alms-bowl and a klot [a set of umbrella and mosquito net used by wandering monks when
sleeping outdoors]. She then set off on a wandering trip with a few other mae-chi.

During their wandering practice, the group of mae-chi met with a wandering monk who expressed his support for women practitioners. The monk later helped to mobilize lay support for the mae-chi and to acquire the plot of land that was to become their nunnery. Upon setting up the nunnery, Mae-chi Prapha and four or five of her mae-chi friends felt the need to intensify their practice. They felt that the eight precepts were inadequate for advanced practice. At one point, they had a chance to visit some sikkhamat of the Asoke Group (discussed below) and learned the latter’s way of practice. “The sikkhamat were able to observe the ten precepts strictly,” Mae-chi Prapha recalled, and then said, “They suggested that we study the Tipitaka for more comprehensive interpretation of the monastic discipline.”

During the phansa (Pali: vassa) or the rains-retreat of 1995, Mae-chi Prapha embarked on intensive meditative practice, making a vow not to lie down on her back for the whole three months. This period of severe practice, she said, provided her with a foundation necessary for further practice under the guidance of a famous forest monk at his monastery in the Northeast. At the monastery of her master forest monk, the mae-chi engaged in another six months of “severe practice” (patibat khan ukrit). During this time, she ate only rice with vegetables and fruit, cut down on sleeping and conversations, and spent most hours of the day alternating between sitting and walking meditation. “I walked until the soles of my feet broke into wounds,” she told me, “When that happened, I wrapped my feet with pieces of rag and kept walking.” Mae-chi Prapha then described the fruit of her severe meditative practice as the
“complete uprooting of all doubts.”\textsuperscript{10} It is this story of her extraordinary meditative achievement and the elevated state of mind that has earned Mae-\textit{chi} Prapha the high veneration from her followers.

When asked why \textit{mae-\textit{chi}} at her nunnery wore all-brown clothes rather than the normative white, \textit{Mae-\textit{chi}} Prapha gave two related answers. First was a practical answer I heard from other \textit{mae-\textit{chi}} wearing brown clothes elsewhere: the dark brown colour was easy to care for. “We work,” she said. “As you have seen by yourself, we tend the garden and make charcoal here. Brown clothes are practical because they are not easily soiled and easy to wash,” she explained. In the immediate sentence that followed, however, the head \textit{mae-\textit{chi}} said, “Also, brown is the colour of the buddhahood.” According to her, the Buddha prohibited his ordained disciples from wearing white, which was the colour for Brahmins. “The Buddha told his disciples to go to places like graveyards, forest areas or under the trees to practice meditation. White robes do not suit those places,” she said. “The word ‘buddha’ means the enlightened one,” she went on. “What are we enlightened about in this case? We are enlightened about appropriate clothing. In brown, we dress as buddhas, as the enlightened ones,” \textit{Mae-\textit{chi}} Prapha concluded.

\textsuperscript{10} The expression ‘complete uprooting of all doubts’ is my translation from the Thai phrase ‘\textit{mot-sin mai leua khwam song-sai dai dai}’. This expression was also used by \textit{Mae-\textit{chi}} Prapha’s famous forest monk master. From my casual discussions with her followers, I learned that \textit{Mae-\textit{chi}} Prapha is one among other \textit{mae-\textit{chi}}, residing at other nunneries, said to have achieved high meditative skills and the elevated state of mind under the guidance of this forest monk. When I inquired further about specific characteristics of this particular state of mind, her followers offered other vague descriptions such as “the mind becomes the holy relics” (\textit{jai pen phra that}) or “the mind becomes the \textit{dhamma}, the \textit{dhamma} becomes the mind” (\textit{jai pen tham, tham pen jai}). The phrase ‘complete uprooting’ is also used by other Buddhist practitioners in other contexts to describe the arising of intuitive religious wisdom or awareness.
Interestingly, the *mae-chi* of this nunnery change to the normative white robes when they go out of their nunnery compound, such as on morning alms-rounds in a nearby small district town. On one occasion, the nunnery hosted a *pha-pa* ceremony.\textsuperscript{11} *Mae-chi* Prapha’s master came to preside over the ceremony and receive the offerings. An estimated two hundred people from various provinces attended this event. On the day of the ceremony, all the *mae-chi* of the nunnery wore their usual brown sarong or lower garment, but put on white blouses and covered almost the whole length of their clothes in white robes. Why did they have to change the colours of their clothes back and forth, I later asked *Mae-chi* Prapha. Why couldn’t they wear the brown robes all the time? “Because the society still does not accept this [*mae-chi* not wearing white], and we are not ready [to go against the society],” was her revealing answer.

*Ubasika*

The word *ubasika* – a Thai Buddhist term that has its origin in Pali (*upasika*) – literally means “female lay devotee”. The term is one of the four canonical categories of the Buddha’s followers, denoting non-ordained women. There is no notion of monasticism or ordination in the literal sense of the word. Despite this orthodox definition, however, the word *ubasika* has long taken on other meanings in the Thai context. In the broadest sense, *ubasika* denotes all Buddhist laywomen. In more specific terms, the word means pious women

\textsuperscript{11} *Pha-pa* is a Thai word shortened for *pha-pa-cha* which means clothing discarded in graveyards. A story about the origin of this word has it that in the time of the Buddha, members of the *sangha* clothed themselves in robes made from shrouds or clothes left on charnel grounds. This ascetic custom is no longer practised. However, the term *pha-pa* is still used to mean the religious ceremony in which laypeople offer new robes to monks. Increasingly now, money rather than robes has become the focus of the *pha-pa* ceremony.
who practise dhamma, often subjecting themselves to the strict observance of either the five or eight precepts.

In this thesis, I focus on a particular group of women who, by their cumulative formation of religious identity and practice, has added yet another meaning to the word ubasika. In this specific case, ubasika is used to denote a small number of women who have renounced their household lives, live as ascetics at some type of Buddhist religious establishment, shave their hair, wear uniform-like clothes of a long black skirt or sarong and a white blouse, observe the eight or ten precepts on a permanent basis, but do not undergo any form of ordination ritual. From the orthodox perspective, these women belong to the lay realm. Yet, they may refer to themselves as phu-buat or nak-buat (both meaning “ordained person”) and call themselves ubasika.¹²

One of the first women known to have set a model for ubasika is Ubasika Ki Nanayon (1901-1977), better recognized by her pen name of Kor Khao Suanluang. Ubasika Ki was a contemporary of Sara and Jongdi, the women ordained in the late 1920s discussed in Chapter 2. Ki was born into a merchant family in Ratchaburi province, with a Chinese father and a Thai mother. She never learned to read and write in school, but educated herself with the help of a literate neighbour. The woman was also a self-taught student of dhamma, both in terms of text and practice (Samnak Patibattham Khao Suanluang 1993: 29). Her biographical story reveals that she learned of the news about Sara’s and Jongdi’s ordinations with great enthusiasm. In her late twenties, and by that time already a keen religious practitioner, Ubasika Ki and her younger sister spent three days rowing a small boat along the waterways from

¹² Ito (2002: 8) calls this type of ubasika “de facto ordained females.”
Ratchaburi to visit the ordained sisters in Nonthaburi Province. Ki was inspired by the idea of having a 'wat' (monastery) especially for women to practise *dhamma* (Anonymous 1995: 30). Sara and Jongdi also returned a visit to Ki (Ito 2002: 5). During World War II and after her father died, Ki, at the age of forty-four, closed down her business in her hometown, and moved to a remote area in the same province where she pursued her ascetic ambition. There, Ki built a place of *dhamma* practice especially for women, known later as Samnak Patibattham Khao Suanluang (Khao Suanluang Centre for Dhamma Practice) (Anonymous 1995: 30-31).

Towards the end of the 1930s and the early 1940s, before she started the *dhamma* centre, Ki was involved in a petition calling for the term *ubasika* to be used as the official title for women who had passed official examinations in *dhamma* studies. The intention was for the title *ubasika* to be used in place of the marriage-identified titles of *nang-sao* (Miss) or *nang* (Mrs). Although some prominent monks, including the Supreme Patriarch at that time, expressed their support for this cause, the change was hampered by bureaucratic and legal complications and the unsettled political climate at that time. After she started the *dhamma* centre, however, *Ubasika* Ki abandoned the petition attempt and turned her attention to religious teaching and practice (Ito 2002: 5-7). Throughout her life, *Ubasika* Ki never became a white-robed *mae-chi*. She shaved her hair, wore a white blouse and black sarong, lived as an ascetic and *dhamma* teacher, and called herself *ubasika*. There is no clear explanation as to why she chose this form of ascetic life and not that of *mae-
chi. However, there is evidence that mae-chi tended to be regarded disparagingly at that time (Ito 2002: 6-7).13

UbasiKa Ki’s choice of an ascetic identity, together with her teachings, has had an influence on a number of women. Among them is a small group of well-educated women disciples of the renowned Phra Buddhadasa (Ito 2002: 8).14 One of these women is UbasiKa Khun15 Ranjuan Inthrakamhaeng, a former senior official at the Ministry of Education, university professor and literary critic. UbasiKa Khun Ranjuan had a chance to learn dhamma practice under UbasiKa Ki for a short period. Impressed by the latter’s teachings and practice, UbasiKa Khun Ranjuan, who left her worldly career and lay life in 1981, had decided early on that when the day arrived that she would leave the worldly life, she would take up the same ascetic form as UbasiKa Ki.16

In one of her public speeches, UbasiKa Khun Ranjuan acknowledged the fact that Buddhist ascetic women still lacked a clearly defined legal and social status that would assist them in their religious life. Nevertheless, she used the term phu-buat, or less often nak-buat, to refer to her religious status. She described the transitional act of becoming an ubasika as buat jai, ‘being

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13 Ito (2002: 6-7) presents part of the correspondence between UbasiKa Ki and the well-known reformist monk Phra Buddhadasa between 1939 and 1940. In one of the letters, Phra Buddhadasa commented on the critical condition of mae-chi in white robes at that time, describing them as “do nothing but just wander begging, chant and wait for people’s support” and “are not so much of use” (Ito 2002: 6-7).

14 Ito (2002: 8) identifies four well-educated women disciples of Phra Buddhadasa who followed or have followed “the path of Ki.” In fact, there have been several more women of less outstanding backgrounds who have followed Ki’s lead as ubasika, especially those who reside at Khao Suanluang Dhamma Practice Centre.

15 ‘Khun’ (for unmarried women, and ‘Khunying’ for married women) is a royal-endowed title comparable to ‘Lady.’ This title was granted to Ranjuan in recognition of her work as President of the Librarians’ Association.

ordained in the mind’ or ‘being mentally ordained’ (Ranjuan 1994: 20, 34 & 54). As seen in this case, the term *buat*, ‘to be ordained’, plays a significant part in the self-perception of *ubasika*. Here the term is used liberally to denote individuals’ commitment to religious vocation in a way that disregards the issue of legality and social recognition of women religious practitioners. It is this disregard of the formally recognized status that seems to characterize the category of *ubasika* discussed here.

*Phutthasawika and the Early (Mahayana) Phiksumi*

The category *phutthasawika* (from the Pali *buddha savika*) took shape around the mid-1950s with the eight-precept ordination of Voramai Kabilsingh (1908-2003), who later became a *phiksumi* of a Taiwanese lineage. Voramai must be born just one or two years before Sara, the first known Theravada female monastic discussed in Chapter 2. However, Voramai’s monastic career started twenty-eight years after that of Sara. No concrete links exist between the story of Sara’s ordination in the late 1920s and existing records of Voramai’s life. Nevertheless, a number of adept choices Voramai made around her monastic identity and practices, including the way she established the category *phutthasawika*, seem to point to her awareness of the pitfalls of the 1920s ordination. Voramai’s monastic life also reveals how a woman in her position, with good educational and career backgrounds and exceptional personality, could solicit support from a senior member of the *sangha* and negotiate her way around the restrictive authority of the *sangha* and the state.
Born of a Chinese father and an ethnic Lao mother (who became a *mae-chi* later in life), Voramai received her early education at a Catholic school in Bangkok and continued her education briefly in Penang, Malaysia. Upon returning to Bangkok, she worked as a school teacher, and was enrolled in a physical training course, a subject unconventional for women of her time. She was trained in judo, boxing and sword fighting, and used to participate in boxing matches against male opponents. In her mid twenties, Voramai was the first and only Thai woman to join in a bicycle trip from Bangkok to Singapore. She later married a promising politician and worked as a news reporter (Voramai 2003: 9-35).

Around the mid 1950s, following a life-threatening illness, Voramai developed a strong interest in Buddhism and began to take meditation lessons with several well-known teachers. She started a magazine called *Wipatsana Bantherng-san* (Insight Meditation Entertainment Magazine). In 1956, she decided to take the eight-precept vow equivalent to that of a *mae-chi* and went through an ordination rite presided over by a high-ranking monk, Phra Phrommuni (Phin Thammaprateep), then the Vice-Abbot of Wat Bowornniwet, the centre of the orthodox Thammayut order in Bangkok (Anonymous c.1987).

Accounts of Voramai’s ordination procedures reveal how she was aware of the limitations on women’s monastic identity in Thai Buddhism, and how she was determined to overcome these limitations. According to her daughter – Chatsumarn Kabilsingh or Phiksuni Dhammananda – Voramai decided from the beginning to distinguish herself from white-robed *mae-chi* by wearing robes of a light yellow colour (*si dork buap* or ‘gourd-flower colour’). She informed her senior monk preceptor of this intention and received his approval.
However, to prevent any repercussions for the preceptor, Voramai put on white robes on the day of her ordination and changed to the yellow robes shortly after (Voramai 2003: 49). One could assume that Voramai’s attempt to protect her preceptor might have been informed by news reports of the aftermath of Sara’s ordination back in the late 1920s, when the monk suspected of ordaining Sara and her sister was forced to leave the monkhood.

Soon after she had become a light-yellow-robed nun, Voramai bought a piece of land and, in 1962, started to build a Buddhist monastery for women. The construction was completed in 1970. Avoiding the use of the Thai word ‘wat’ which denotes a monastery and monastic residence for male monks, Voramai named her monastic place ‘Watr Songdham Kalayani’. This linguistic choice points to Voramai’s awareness of the limitations on women’s monastic activities and how her awareness might have been informed by the 1920s ordination. The word ‘watr’, as discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 2, was first used by Narin Phasit to name the monastic place Watr Nariwong, which he had built and dedicated as the residence of his daughters, Sara and Jongdi, and the other women ordained in the late 1920s. In Voramai’s time, the name Watr Songdham Kalayani was carefully chosen to mean ‘a place where women perform dhamma practice’ (Chatsumarn 1991a: 51).

After taking the eight-precept vow in 1956, Voramai started to ordain other women and girls. She called them ‘phutthasawika’, a Pali-derived word which means ‘female disciples of the Buddha’. From her own records, Voramai ordained several batches of women, some as small as two to five women, others as large as twenty or more (Voramai 2003: 122-169). It was perhaps the rapid growth of this unprecedented community of women in light-yellow robes
that caused suspicion among local government officials. The lack of precedent for a community of women in yellow robes residing at a place called ‘wat’ – albeit a homonym with a different spelling – alarmed local authorities in Nakhon Pathom Province, where Voramai’s monastic place was located (Voramai 2003: 187-188). The local district chief decided to report the case to the Department of Religious Affairs, which deferred to the sangha administration to pass judgement. As it happened, Voramai’s preceptor, Phra Phrommuni, was by that time a member of the sangha administrative body (then called ‘sanghamontri’). Chatsumarn (1991a: 51) describes the Sangha Council’s meeting to deliberate on the case as follows:

[Voramai’s] preceptor, Phra Pronmuni [sic], a respected member of the Council, quietly told the committee that he had given her ordination and simply asked the committee members, ‘Can we wear this color (light yellow)?’ The committee members replied in the negative. He then stated that if monks cannot wear light yellow robes, the council should have no objection to Voramai’s wearing them.

On the use of the word ‘wat’, a judgement was also passed in favour of Voramai. Since the word literally means ‘practice’, the Council members could not find any reason to object to its usage (Chatsumarn 1991a: 51).

After her initial ordination, Voramai kept seeking ways to be fully and legitimately ordained as a phiksuni. She approached several monks to discuss the possibility, but they gave her the same answer, that such ordination was not possible because there were no phiksuni in Thailand who could ordain her (Chatsumarn 1991a: 52). In 1971, fifteen years after she first became an eight-precept nun, Voramai learned from her daughter that women could be fully
ordained as a *phiksuni* in Taiwan. With this information, she travelled to Taiwan and received *phiksuni* ordination at Sung San Monastery in Taipei. Chatsumarn describes her mother’s ordination as being conferred in the Dhammagupta sub-sect of the Theravada tradition. But as the author notes: “To the general public in Thailand, Voramai is still only a mae ji [mae-chi]. To the Thai *sangha*, her status is, at best, that of a Mahayana *phiksuni*, and she is not considered to be part of the Thai Theravadin tradition” (Chatsumarn 1991a: 52)

Following her full ordination, *Phiksuni* Voramai came back to Watr Songdham Kalayani and continued her various religious and charity activities. She continued to ordain other women, asking them to observe more precepts than *mae-chi* and calling them ‘*anu-songkhani*’ (Voramai 2003: 51), a term she had created by matching two words of the Pali origin, namely, the prefix *anu* which means ‘small’ or ‘after’, and *sangha* which means ‘a monastic community’. The ending *ni* was probably added as a marker of the female gender of the word, as in *phiksuni*. This newly created term could be roughly translated as ‘junior female monastic’. However, most of these girls and young women stayed ordained only temporarily, and none followed Voramai to become fully ordained as *phiksuni*. Still, Voramai lived to see the *phiksuni* ordination of her daughter, Dhammananda, shortly before her death in June 2003.
Silajarini

Little information is available about this small group of ten-precept monastic women in brown robes. Scanty records indicate that the category silajarini (Pali: silacarini) was initiated by a learned monk of the Mahanikai order, Phra Sisuthatsamuni (Thongsuk Suthatso), a former abbot of Wat Chana Songkhram in Bangkok (Ito 1999: 155). The first silajarini ordination was given to five mae-chi at this monastery in 1957 (Ito 1999: 155; c.f. Chatsumarn 1991a: 37). Ito states that the category silajarini was initiated in order to “upgrade” the level of women religious practitioners “where bhikkhuni [phiksuni] is not an option” (1999: 155). The announcement of Phra Sisuthatsamuni on the occasion of the first silajarini ordination, cited in Ito (1999: 155), reveals the motivation behind the creation of this form of women’s monastic practice:

*Sila charini* [Silajarini] is translated as ‘women who always act according to precepts’ or ‘women who observe precepts forever’. By following ideas of Buddhism, here we set up a kind of ordained woman, who is different from bhikkhuni [phiksuni], sikkhamana, samaneri, or mae-chi….

Here, the need to create a new category of ‘ordained women’ that is different from other types of monastic or ascetic women is worth special attention. The points of distinction between silajarini and mae-chi are in the colour of their robes and the number of precepts observed. Silajarini wore brown clothes and committed themselves to ten instead of eight precepts. The brown colour of silajarini robes served as a tangible marker of their distinction from mae-chi. However, the essential point of distinction lay in the number of the precepts observed. Technically speaking, the ten-precept vow worked to elevate the status of silajarini to that of the ‘ordained ones’. By observing the ten precepts,
silajarini attained a religious status equal to that of female and male novices (samaneri and samanen, respectively). But samaneri ordination was prohibited by the 1928 decree of the Supreme Patriarch (discussed in Chapter 2). And it is likely that the Vice Abbot who gave silajarini ordinations was aware of the defeated samaneri ordinations in the late 1920s. This might be the reason why this senior male monk needed to be discreet and creative in the way he formulated this new category of ordained women. As such, the emergence of silajarini exemplifies how the restrictive context of Thai Theravada Buddhism led, unexpectedly perhaps, to the diversification of monastic categories for women.

However, the fact that the category was initiated by a learned monk from an established monastery did not guarantee the sustainability of the group. Silajarini ordination, it turned out, did not receive much support from other members of the male sangha beyond a couple of other monks. The number of silajarini started to decline not very long after the category originated (Ito 1999: 156). Chatsumarn (1991: 61) reveals that around the time of her writing, there were three silajarini living together in seclusion at a nunnery in Bangkok. The latest trace of silajarini appears in Ito’s paper, for which she managed to interview one silajarini in 1998 (Ito 1999: Note 62).

*Sikkhamat of the Asoke group*

I had met and talked with some other sikkhamat, the ten-precept monastic women of the Asoke Buddhist reformist group, at other Asoke communities before my first visit to Pathom Asoke, one of the Asoke communities in
Nakhon Pathom Province. However, it was at Pathom Asoke that I hoped to talk with one of the first women ever to become a sikkhamat, Sikkhamat Mabanjop. This woman had lived a monastic life for more than thirty years. In fact, she became an Asoke monastic member before the term sikkhamat, the Asoke-specific term for the highest rank of their monastic women, was coined.

I had heard about Sikkhamat Mabanjop before meeting her in person. The information derived from an internally circulated collection of life histories of the sikkhamat (Anonymous 1981), her published booklet on the early days of Asoke (Mabanjop n.d.), and her two-volume story of barefoot walking pilgrimages across the country in the heyday of Asoke asceticism (Sahatsansai 2002). In 1971, leaving behind her parental family, her overseas-educated fiancé and a promising career at a commercial bank, Sikkhamat Mabanjop, then in her twenties, was the first person to become a devoted disciple of the now highly venerated leader of Asoke, Samana¹⁷ Phothirak (Mabanjop n.d.: 2, 5). Their meeting occurred before the Asoke group took shape and became established, with ten branch communities in all regions of the country today.

The story such as that of Sikkhamat Mabanjop, that is, the story of a person who renounces the comfort and security of lay life to take up extreme asceticism, receives great admiration among Asoke followers. It offers a parallel to the story of Samana Phothirak, who himself was a successful television host, song lyricist and writer surfing the peak of a glamorous career when he decided to become a monk in 1970, at the age of thirty-six. Asoke members, in turn, regard Samana Phothirak’s story as following in the

¹⁷ Due to their conflicts with the mainstream sangha, discussed later in this section, male monks of the Asoke group agreed not to refer to themselves using the Thai word phra or the Pali-derived word phiksu, which have been in common usage to mean Buddhist monks. Instead, they call themselves samana, also a Pali word meaning ‘recluse’.
footsteps of the Buddha, who renounced the affluence of his royal court life for the same purpose (Mabanjop n.d.: 51).

Samana Phothirak's zealous and uncompromising asceticism, with an emphasis on practice rather than doctrinal knowledge, paved the way for the ideals of austerity, strict vegetarianism, and frugally self-subsistent livelihood that were to become the hallmarks of Asoke. The intense and rarefied ascetic practice of Asoke attracts followers who have grown weary of the mainstream institutional Buddhism and the lax sangha (Jackson 1989: 167). At the same time, Asoke's strict asceticism and Samana Phothirak's bold criticisms of the sangha and mainstream monks serve to distance the group from the sangha administration. The mutual antagonism between the Asoke group and the sangha administration has led to their continual discord. In 1975, following a series of antagonistic interactions, the Asoke group declared independence from the Thai sangha, stating that the group's monastic members would no longer be under the jurisdiction of the sangha administration. The sangha administration seemed to accept the Asoke's decision at first, only to change track and seek to re-establish its legal authority over the group more than a decade later.

The chronic conflicts between the Asoke group and the sangha culminated in court cases which began in 1989. Peter Jackson (1989: Chapter 7) and Heikkilä-Horn (1997: 68-74), in their separate studies, come to a similar conclusion that political frictions contributed significantly to the tension between the Asoke group on one side and the sangha and the state on the other.18 Towards the end of 1995, more than six years after the Asoke cases

18 In 1988, a prominent and extremely devout follower of Asoke, Major General Chamlong Srimuang, formed and led a political party called Phalang Tham (Righteous
had first been filed, the Criminal Court came to its verdict and found Samana Phothisarak guilty of violating the Order of the Sangha Council that had instructed him to leave the monkhood. The ordinations of Asoke monks and sikkhatā conferred by Samana Phothisarak, who himself was not a legally authorized preceptor, were declared invalid. Moreover, because of their use of monastic robes and alms-bowls and their alms-rounds practice, the monks and sikkhatā of Asoke were pronounced guilty of ‘impersonating’ Buddhist monastics and were sentenced to two-year suspended imprisonment (Chamnan 1997: 112-113).¹⁹

The dispute over the legality of Asoke monastics had a great impact on the formation of the Asoke monastic identity. Through a series of negotiations with government representatives in mid-1989, the Asoke group agreed to modify the attire of their monks so that they would look different from the mainstream monks.²⁰ The group also agreed to no longer refer to their monastics as phra (monk), phiksu-song (a collective term for monks), nak-buat (ordained person) or nak-phrot (ascetic) (Chamnan 1997: 57). Instead, the group opted to refer to their monks using another Pali term samana (recluse). These changes failed to satisfy members of the Sangha Council, who demanded that Samana Phothisarak perform a monastic rite to terminate his monkhood; the demand with which the Asoke leader refused to comply. This

¹⁹ In 1997, the Court of Appeal confirmed the ruling of the Criminal Court and the sentence imposed on the Asoke monastic followers (Sanitsuda quoted in Heikkilä-Horn & Rassamee 2002: 21).

²⁰ By adding brown long-sleeve inner shirts and adjusting the way they wear their robes.
situation led to the legal charges against the Asoke monastics in mid-1989 as discussed above.

To better understand the significance of symbolic objects such as the robes, we should acknowledge that during the Asoke court cases, *samana* and *sikkhamat* of the Asoke group underwent changes in the style of their monastic clothes a few times. For example, when their leader, *Samana* Phothirak, was arrested and forced to change into white robes, other male *samana* followed suit and changed the colour of their outer robes from deep brown to white while retaining the brown inner clothes. The female *sikkhamat* also changed the colour of their outer robes from brown to grey while keeping the dark brown blouses and sarongs. At present, over seven years after the Appeal Court ruling in 1997, all the *samana* of Asoke have shifted back to wearing their original all-dark-brown robes with a slight difference in the way they fold their robes. The *sikkhamat* still keep the clothing pattern developed during the days of the court cases. Both the *samana* and *sikkhamat* have continued to use alms-bowls and to go on alms-rounds on a daily basis.

To return to *Sikkhamat* Mabanjop’s monastic journey, the *sikkhamat* said she first became deeply interested in Buddhist teachings in her early teens, following the death of her mother. She had also turned vegetarian years before she met the then *Phra* Phothirak. Her life with the Asoke group started in 1971, one year after Phothirak became a monk. Having resigned from work, she

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21 According to *Sikkhamat* Boonjing Asoke-trakul (conversation, 9 July 2003), this choice of *sikkhamat* costume features a combination of styles borrowed from different sources. While the sarong was thought to represent something Thai, the design of the top piece, which has evolved since the day of the court cases, now features a long-sleeve cloak with a faint Chinese look, all in the deep brown colour. The same *sikkhamat* told me that this latest design of the top piece and the grey colour of the outer robes were ‘borrowed’ from the Mahayana tradition.
moved to Wat Asokaram where the ordained Phra Phothirak was residing, and became his first lay disciple. It is worth noting that the first group of Phothirak’s disciples consisted of a few women who were attracted to his unconventional interpretation of Buddhist doctrines, his strict asceticism as well as his vegetarianism (Mabanjop n.d.: 9 ff).

Sikkhamat Mabanjop started her life as a monastic in 1972. This turning point is of specific interest here, for it involves negotiation over monastic forms and practices available to women. Here I quote her written account of the development of her monastic identity (Mabanjop n.d.: 25):

I had already shaved my hair and had been alternating between brown, black or grey clothes and going places barefoot for some time. People said that I was as crazy as my teacher. ... Before I decided to shave my hair and not to wear the proper [mae-chi] attire, I went to the head mae-chi to ask if my behaviour would violate their rules. The mae-chi gave us [Mabanjop and another woman] permission [to dress as they wished]. ... We then became chi dang [a play on words, literally means ‘mae-chi in tainted colours’].

The reason Mabanjop did not want to become a mae-chi lies in her aspiration to subject herself to stricter practice. She wanted to take the ten-precept vow instead of the eight precepts taken by the majority of mae-chi.22 The abbot of Wat Asokaram rejected her wish. Sikkhamat Mabanjop’s account reveals her attitude towards the situation of women’s monasticism at that time:

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22 The most important distinction between the eight and ten precepts is that the latter prohibits the handling of money.
I was very angry and went to argue with them. I asked, 'Why should you be propagating the religion and teaching people to perform good deeds if you would want to prohibit them from observing more precepts? You say the Buddha did not allow women to be ordained. You are ... lying. If being ordained means to cook and offer food to monks ... I would rather just stay home' (Mabanjop n.d.: 25).

In the end, Mabanjop and the other woman gave in. They agreed to take the eight-precept vow and became white-robed mae-chi to keep to the norm. After their initial ordination, however, they immediately proceeded to take the ten-precept vow with the then Phra Phothirak. This two-step procedure allowed the women the legitimacy of the mae-chi in white robes, while enabling them to fulfil their wish to observe the ten precepts.

It was from around 1973 that the collective monastic identity of Asoke women started to take shape as part of the formation of the Asoke group. The development of this female monastic identity was stimulated by and large from the split between Phra Phothirak's group and Wat Asokaram, the monastery where members of the group had been residing from the beginning of the 1970s. Interestingly, the tension between the two groups manifested itself again in a disagreement over the colour of women's monastic clothes. According to Mabanjop (n.d.: 28-29) this dispute occurred when members of the would-be Asoke group decided to go on a wandering trip. To prepare for their trip, the group members, lay disciples and mae-chi included, all planned to change the colour of their clothing to the dark brown (si krak) typical of wandering monks. This plan upset senior members of Wat Asokaram who pointed out that the presence of mae-chi in colours other than white would be
translated as a religious schism. Following this conflict, the then Phra Phothirak and his disciples decided to leave the monastery for good and started their own monastic community in Nakhon Pathom Province.

The term ‘sikkhamat’ had not been coined until around the year 1977. Before that, monastic women of Asoke had difficulty identifying themselves to other people. Back then, they alternated between two terms: chi-krak (meaning ‘mae-chi in brown’) and mae-nen. The latter was a newly created compound word consisting of mae (mother, woman) and nen (short for samanen or male novice). As Sikkhamat Mabanjop (n.d.: 49) writes:

> We were determined to keep this form [of monastic women in brown].
> We were distinct from chi because we did not wear white. We were different from chi both in colour and in practice. Therefore, we should go by a different name that would correspond with our form. … We were observing the ten precepts … so we could say we were ‘nen’ [i.e. novices].

However, not all Asoke people agreed with the term mae-nen. To bridge the different opinions, Phothirak proposed the more formal and distinctively Pali term sikkhamat, which means ‘female student’. In my interview with him, Samana Phothirak confirmed that the word sikkhamat was chosen to replicate ‘sikkhamana’ (female novice to be ordained as phiksuni), whose ordination is prohibited by the 1928 Decree (discussed in Chapter 2).\(^{23}\) The word sikkhamat thus illustrates the formation of a female monastic identity that taps into the Theravada authority embedded in the Pali language, while eluding the authority of the sangha administration. Meanwhile, the story of Sikkhamat

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Mabanjop illuminates the roles of women in the formation of the Asoke group and how Asoke monastic women have negotiated their monastic identity as part of their larger religious community.

**Mahayana Samaneri and Phiksuni**

"How do you call her, again?" asked a middle-aged woman in a small group of friendly school teachers who had travelled a long way from the central province of Lopburi to offer pha-pa money at a small and quiet monastic residence in a Thai-Cambodian border province. "Seu-fu, I call her seu-fu," I replied, trying myself to get the pronunciation of this Chinese monastic title as I thought was right.\(^{24}\) The woman mumbled the word twice, but still did not get it quite right.

The subject of our conversation was Samaneri Mei Hui (pseudonym), or Seu-fu Mei Hui as she preferred to be called, a Mahayana novice in her early forties. The woman received her samaneri ordination from a Sino-Thai Mahayana phiksuni at a Chinese shrine hall on the outskirts of Bangkok. She had been a Mahayana monastic for less than four months when I first met her. In the ten years before that, she had been a mae-chi, and as such was a keen adherent to Theravada Buddhism. Seu-fu Mei Hui's shifting monastic journey is illustrative of the possible shift between different monastic categories and different Buddhist traditions in Thailand today.

\(^{24}\) Seu-fu is how Thai speakers pronounce the Mandarin word shi fu, a non-gendered term which means teacher or master.
A few weeks after our first meeting in October 2003, I visited Seu-fu Mei Hui at her residence in the border province about four hours drive east of Bangkok. Here, she shared the compound, in separate living quarters, with her Theravada teacher monk, a mae-chi and two other laywomen. It was during this visit that I met and befriended the group of school teachers who came to make a pha-pa offering mentioned above. Having last met Seu-fu Mei Hui while she was still a Theravada mae-chi, this group of merit makers needed to make an effort to adjust to her new ‘Chinese’ monastic identity. Feeling uncomfortable to raise the issue with the samaneri herself perhaps, they turned to me to seek my explanation as to what type of ordination she had undertaken and how they should address her now. "I can never get it right," one of them complained after trying to repeat her new Chinese title, seu-fu, a couple of times without much success. "I am used to calling her mae-chi," the woman announced before falling back to calling the ordained woman by the old familiar Thai term ‘mae-chi’.

In between helping the merit makers with their pha-pa activities, Seu-fu Mei Hui and I managed to talk about her life as a monastic woman. Her story of having traversed the winding path in search of the ‘right’ form of monastic life is typical of several other monastic women I have met. Seu-fu Mei Hui said she first developed a serious interest in Buddhism during her years as a science student at a Bangkok university in the early 1980s. It all started when she joined a retreat at the well-known Wat Suan Mokkh led by the reformist monk Phra Buddhadasa. “I had no interest in Buddhism before. When I was a child, my mother often told me to go to the monastery but I did not see the point. I was critical of Buddhism and asked questions such as what merit was and why we should worship the Buddha image.” At Wat Suan Mokkh, she experienced
the “peace of mind” for the first time and simply “did not want to leave.” She had since learned different meditative techniques from different schools and had gradually strengthened her meditative skills over time, to the point that she felt a strong wish to be ordained.

Being the eldest child, Seu-fu Mei Hui said she felt a sense of responsibility for her family. She had worked for some years at an established laboratory in Bangkok, saved up money, and built a house for her elderly grandfather and mother. She waited to see her two younger brothers complete their education and get jobs. After nine years of learning dhamma and practicing meditation as a laywoman, she thought it was time to leave the worldly life. The decision did not come lightly, however. She was worried about the uncertain prospect of maintaining sufficient material support from the laity should she decide to be ordained, a prospect that a male ordnand could easily take for granted. “I kept asking myself: Should I be ordained and find no support, should I have no rice to eat, would I still go for it?” the samaneri described her anxiety. After all the contemplation, she found that her answer was still ‘yes’. “I wish to achieve total liberation within this lifetime,” she said to me firmly.

Being on the bookish side, Seu-fu Mei Hui studied the Bhikkhuni Vinaya, the disciplinary code for female monks in the Tipitaka, when she was still a laywoman. She wished to be fully ordained as a phiksuni but had no clue as to where she could seek that kind of ordination. “I never wanted to be a mae-chi. I wanted to be a phiksuni. But I knew of no place that offered such ordination back then,” she told me. Confined by limited choices, she decided to seek ordination as a mae-chi in 1991. The way the Mahayana novice narrated her flight from lay life was in line with the familiar Buddhist narrative of going
forth from home to homelessness. As she described: "The day I left home, I took with me only one bag in which I put three sets of white clothes, a rice bowl, a spoon, and a few other necessities. This was so that I would be able to stay or move anywhere as needed." Her ascetic path, as it unfolded later, required that she indeed move constantly. She started as a chi-phram, or laynun,\textsuperscript{25} at a monastery. Shortly afterwards, she felt so strongly an impulse to be 'actually ordained' that she became restless. Packing her bag, she headed off again to a monastery close to the Thai-Burmese border in Kanchanaburi Province, where she eventually became a mae-chi.

From her account, Seu-fu Mei Hui seemed a keen practitioner. In her early days as a mae-chi she tried to adhere to some extra rules of conduct as prescribed in the Bhikkhuni Vinaya. She also took up some of the austere thudong (Pali: dhutanga) practices, and tried not to handle money. However, as she soon learned, the adherence to these extra precepts proved difficult, and not only for the practical reason of day-to-day living. The strict, therefore different, practices had further implications for one's position in the hierarchical setting of a monastic community. According to her, taking additional rules upon oneself while living in a communal setting might invite a negative interpretation. A mae-chi in that situation might be regarded as trying to position herself above other religious practitioners, including monks. Feeling discouraged, she finally gave up the money-related vow and moved to another nunnery where each mae-chi received a small stipend and cared for their own daily living.

\textsuperscript{25} A chi-phram normally takes a temporary vow of the eight precepts and stays short-term at a monastery. She usually wears all-white clothes but does not shave her hair.
Asked why she was not satisfied with being a mae-chi, Seu-fu Mei Hui, like several other monastic women I have talked to, resorted to the kind of beyond-this-life explanation often manifested in a strong sense of destiny or in the form of revelatory dreams. In her case, Seu-fu Mei Hui told me she often had haunting dreams of herself being a monk in her past lives, sometimes clad in the yellow robes and other times as a Mahayana phiksuni. With these dreams, she felt that it was her destiny to live a fully ordained life.

But why did she choose to be ordained in the Mahayana tradition despite her strong adherence to Theravada Buddhism? To this question, the Mahayana novice said it was difficult for an ordinary woman like herself to be ordained in the Theravada tradition as the well-known Dr Chatsumarn, or Phiksuni Dhammananda, had done (see the Introduction and Chapter 4). “Theravada phiksuni ordination is still controversial,” she said, “It still provokes discord in the society. I am not ready to move against the tide.”

As a Theravada-turned-Mahayana monastic woman living in predominantly Theravada-dominated environments, Seu-fu Mei Hui still had much to negotiate and compromise with in terms of her religious faith, monastic practice and identity. In any case, women’s monasticism in the Mahayana tradition in Thailand is complex. On the one hand, the Mahayana tradition provides women of Chinese ethnic background with the comfort of cultural and religious familiarity. On the other hand, as seen in the case of Phiksuni Voramai and Seu-fu Mei Hui, the Mahayana tradition also avails itself to women who may culturally identify with the Theravada tradition, but who choose to overcome the ‘impossibility’ of phiksuni ordination within their home tradition by crossing over to the Chinese-oriented school. And while the
preliminary ordination as Mahayana samaneri, or female novice, can be sought from Mahayana phiksuni in Thailand, women who wish to be fully ordained as Mahayana female monks still have to seek their ordinations in foreign countries like Taiwan, mainland China, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. This is because the two officially recognized Mahayana monastic orders in Thailand, namely the Chinese Order (jin nikai) and the Annam Order (annam nikai or the Vietnamese Order), follow the lead of Thai Theravada tradition and do not confer phiksuni ordination on women. By adopting Mahayana ordination, women who initially identify with Theravada Buddhism have to engage in a trade-off. By seeking Mahayana ordination, they agree to take on a culturally ‘foreign’ identity so that they will be able to lead monastic lives as they wish, in their own country.

From the previous chapter, we learned that all the scripturally-defined monastic categories for women, namely phiksuni, samaneri, and sikkhamana, have been made ‘impossible’ to realize in the official discourse of the sangha and the state. At the beginning of this chapter, we have learned of another social and institutional constraint that lies in the ambiguous religious status of mae-chi. Yet, the chapter demonstrates how the restrictive context of Thai Theravada Buddhism has indeed contributed to the diversification of alternative forms of religious affiliation for women. These diverse female monastic forms illustrate a complex reality of women’s monasticism in Thailand. For one thing, while these different forms of women’s ascetic or monastic identities have emerged out of a shared restrictive context of institutional Buddhism, we see that women who aspire to a religious vocation in institutional Buddhism have come from different social backgrounds. They also hold different religious
aspirations, some focusing more on individual soteriological goal, others emphasizing as well on building collective monastic identities for women.

An important subtext of the diversification of female ascetic or monastic forms discussed in this chapter concerns the relationships between religious women and some male members of the sangha. As seen in some of the cases discussed above, the relationships between women's religious aspirations and individual male monks have not always been in the negative. We have learned from the experiences of these women how certain members of the male sangha have lent their personal (as opposed to institutional) support to various monastic endeavours of women. Some, such as the preceptor monk in the case of silajani, even acted as an initiator of a new female monastic identity. These cases of men's support for female religious aspirations remind us of Narin's struggles to establish a female monastic order in the late 1920s (in Chapter 2). The cases of constructive relationships between male monastics and religious women discussed here point to the fact that the male sangha itself is not a monolithic institution. It does not have one unified position on women's monasticism.

Furthermore, the cases of women's quest for a religious vocation discussed above reveal to us the complexity of the relationship between institutional Buddhism and women's monasticism in Thailand. As seen in this chapter, women, despite their being structurally excluded from the mainstream monastic institution, do not always want to alienate themselves from the hegemonic institutional Buddhism altogether. On the contrary, a number of women have sought to relate themselves, one way or another, to the dominant religious institution, albeit at its margins. Creativity thus plays a crucial role in
this restrictive and paradoxical context. Women, as seen in this chapter, have been creative in the various ways they have built or chosen their diverse female monastic forms so that they could evade the dominant discourse of the impossibility of women’s legitimate ordination in Thai Theravada Buddhism. In the next few chapters, we will examine another creative process of establishing an even more challenging female monastic form, namely the Theravada samaneri and phiksuni, in the early 2000s.
I had met Ven. Dhammananda a few times back in the 1990s when she was still an academic. But clad now in a somewhat wrinkled, eye-catching, deep orange costume – a long-sleeved blouse, a sarong-like lower garment, and a patched robe that covered almost the full length of her tall figure, draping heavily on one shoulder – there was little trace in her of the person she used to be. Her hair and eyebrows were shaved, exposing her bare scalp and the lines above her eyes where hair used to be. Her facial complexion had turned a shade darker than I recalled, probably because of lack of the use of sunscreen products. Her name had also changed. If you had called her ‘Dhammananda’ over five years ago, she would not have turned her head, for she was then known by her birth name, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh.

When I last saw her in 1995, Dr Chatsumarn, then in her early fifties, looked typical of a senior woman professor one would find at any university in Thailand. Well groomed, with neatly set wavy hair, visible facial make-up behind large-framed glasses, and dressed in an elegant fine-silk top and skirt of matching colour. She was known not only for her expertise in Buddhist Studies but also for her other roles as a talented writer and translator, engaging public speaker and host of television dhamma programmes. Most persistent were her activities as an advocate of Buddhist women’s full ordination as
*phiksun*, a cause often regarded as unprecedented and illegitimate according to the Theravada Buddhist tradition observed in Thailand.

But to move from being a proponent of women's ordination to being ordained herself was a bold step, especially for a formerly married woman and mother of three. Now, her shaven head, the orange monastic robes, her new name, and the monastery at which she resided, all announced that she had severed the ties with her former life as a laywoman. She was no longer a university professor but a female monk, addressed no longer as *Ajahn* or Teacher/Professor but as *Luang Mae* or Venerable Mother by her disciples. Speaking frequently from her seat on a bright yellow cushion in front of the altar full of Buddha statues at her own monastic residence on the outskirts of Bangkok, she now gave fewer lectures and more sermons, explaining and trying to convince her audience how the Buddha's teachings could cure suffering of the human mind. This was her new profession, a different life.

The latest endeavour to institute *phiksun* ordination in Theravada Buddhism began in Thailand in 2001. In February that year, Ven. Dhammananda was ordained as a *samaneri*, or female novice, in Sri Lanka.¹ From that time until the end of my fieldwork in April 2004, seven women received their ordinations as *samaneri* in the Theravada tradition. It was also during this period, in February 2003, that Ven. Dhammananda received her second ordination, a higher ordination that elevated her monastic status to that of a *phiksun*. This made her the only Theravada *phiksun* living in Thailand at that time.

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¹ A woman must spend at least two years as a *samaneri* or novice in order to be eligible for *phiksun* ordination. See Footnote 1 in the Introduction.
The number of women who were ordained in this manner, considered out of its context, may seem small and insignificant. Yet, the emergence of women’s full ordination in the Theravada tradition in the early 2000s was phenomenal for it sought to institute an order of monastic women that, although commonly held to have been permitted by the Buddha in early Buddhism in ancient India, is believed to have never existed in Thai society. However, it was not the lack of precedent for phiksuni ordination that made this particular phiksuni stand out from other categories of monastic women. It was more that the category phiksuni, or female monk, represented a claim for an equivalent religious status to that of male monks. As such, the emergence of phiksuni ordination, also called ‘full’ or ‘higher’ ordination in English, inevitably challenged the male status quo of the Thai Buddhist sangha.

This chapter examines how the endeavour to institute and institutionalize phiksuni ordination in the first half of the 2000s took shape. It considers the circumstances surrounding the ordination of Ven. Dhammananda as a pioneering individual. As will become clear in this chapter, Ven. Dhammananda’s ordination was never meant to be an individual project aiming at personal spiritual liberation alone. The hope to institutionalize the phiksuni sangha, or the order of female monks, was always part of her motives. Yet, the ideal of Theravada monasticism which highlights individual spiritual liberation (Kirsch 1996: 17) tends not to approve of an ordination that is solely motivated by a social cause, such as the achievement of gender equality in monasticism. In the case of Ven. Dhammananda, her personal spiritual motivation and her aspiration to institutionalize the phiksuni sangha coexisted and reinforced each other. In her reasoning, her veneration for the Buddha necessarily led to the need to institute and institutionalize phiksuni ordination. This combination of
individual and institutional motivations puts her ordination in a unique situation; it placed her monastic endeavour in confrontation with the male monastic institution whose identity rests to a significant extent on the practice of gender segregation, more specifically the exclusion of women, as discussed in earlier chapters.

This confrontation and the fragility of the nascent state of the institutionalization of phiksuni ordination further necessitated careful rhetorical and practical moves on her part. These careful moves are reflected in her rationalization of her own ordination, her narrative of the history of phiksuni ordination, her deployment of transnational connections and her discreet choice of seeking ordination in Sri Lanka. These moves are discussed in the first part of this chapter. I then discuss the recent revival of phiksuni ordination in Sri Lanka as a product of the international Buddhist women’s movement. This leads to a discussion of Ven. Dhammananda’s phiksuni ordination ceremony that took place in Sri Lanka in 2003 and the significance of the ‘Theravada-ness’ of this ordination.

It should be noted here that the narration of Ven. Dhammananda’s path towards ordination in this chapter is not an attempt to write her thorough biographical account. Rather, the account outlined here represents selected parts of her life story that help illustrate the situation in which Theravada phiksuni ordination became possible in recent times. As will become clear, hers is an exceptional case of a woman with high social and cultural capital, a life condition that most other women would find hard to replicate. So while her case is central to the story of Theravada phiksuni ordination in Thailand, it does not represent a single and unified path followed by all of the small
number of women who had received ordinations in the Theravada tradition thus far.

Towards Ordination

In February 2001, Phiksuni Voramai Kabilsingh or Venerable Grandmother (Luang Ya) was soon to turn ninety-three years old. She was the first recorded Thai woman who was legitimately ordained as a phiksuni in 1971, albeit in the Taiwanese lineage associated with the Mahayana, thus non-Thai, tradition. Old and physically fragile, she remained at all hours in her bed set in a small enclosure of a glass-walled room on the second floor of the main building at Watr Songdham Kalayani. It was Ven. Voramai herself who founded this women’s monastery – so far the only Buddhist monastery for monastic women in Thailand – with her personal funds and unyielding optimism forty years ago. Clothed in a yellow monastic costume, her hair regularly shaved by her caretaker, the elderly Luang Ya dwelled most of the time in her quiet rest. She rarely spoke beyond necessity.²

It had been many years now since the vibrant activities which once filled the space of this three-story building – activities such as dhamma talks, offerings of food to the Buddha and ancestor spirits, healing meditative sessions, and other merit-making ceremonies – had faded as the health of the Abbess weakened. During these twilight years, this dimly lit hall, scattered with dusty

² This account of the first meeting between Ven. Dhammananda and her ordained mother after the former received her ordination in 2001 is my reconstruction based on different sources including: Ven. Dhammananda’s casual conversations with her visitors, my conversations with the monastery’s residents, my observation of the hall in which this meeting took place both before and after Ven. Voramai’s death, and a newspaper article.
wooden shelves and wood-and-glass cabinets filled with old books, magazines and stacks of used yellow clothes, had been haunted only by memories of the bustling crowds of light-yellow-robed nuns who were her followers, female and male lay disciples, young orphans she cared for, and visitors who once flocked on its shiny wooden floor as seen in photographs of the old days.

It was in this subdued environment that her daughter, Ven. Dhammananda, who had last stepped away from her mother’s bedside earlier in the month as a laywoman, as Dr. Chatsumarn, and as the mother of Ven. Voramai’s grandsons, returned. She had just arrived back from Sri Lanka, a trip that had changed her life dramatically. Cloaked in the monastic robes of intense orange colour familiar to the eyes of Theravada Buddhists, with her head entirely shaved to symbolize her ascetic status, Ven. Dhammananda stepped close to the bed to greet her mother, bringing into view the illuminating brightness of her new robes.

“I asked her what she thought of [my ordination],” said Ven. Dhammananda, whose newly acquired ordained name means ‘one who rejoices in the Buddha’s teaching,’ recounting her first meeting with her mother after her ordination.³ As she went on to say, “She simply stroked my face, playing with my head as if to confirm that it really was shaved. After a while, she let me go as she always did. Since I have worn the holy robes, however, she wai [joined her palms in front of her chest as a respectful parting gesture] to me.”⁴

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³ All the quotes in this paragraph are from Atiya (2001a).

⁴ In hierarchical interpersonal interactions in the Thai society, it is unusual for an older or more senior person to offer the gesture of wai to another younger or less senior person. The only common exception is the encounter between monks and laypeople, in which laypeople, regardless of their seniority, are expected to pay respect to monks.
Looking back on her life, Ven. Dhammananda’s decision to live a monastic life was not totally unexpected. The story of her ordination, in her own telling on different occasions, intertwined with the story of her mother, the late Phiksuni Voramai who passed away in June 2003, four months after her daughter, her only biological child, eventually received a full ordination and became a phiksuni.

Ven. Dhammananda had known a monastic lifestyle from early in her life. She was less than twelve years old when her mother had been ordained as a light-yellow-robed nun and soon started the construction of the monastery that would become the monastic residence for both the ordained mother and daughter. Ven. Dhammananda also had a brief experience of ordained life just one year following her mother’s monastic initiation. “My home was like a nunnery anyway,” she recounted in her biography (Phimphan et al. 2001: 41). During the summer holiday of 1957, she “sought some fun” by shaving her head and took the eight-precept vow as a light-yellow-robed nun for forty-seven days (Phimphan et al. 2001: 41).

A religious vocation was not an unknown choice of life in Ven. Dhammananda’s family. Her maternal grandmother, discharged of family burdens in later life, had become a mae-chi (white-robed nun considered not fully ordained). Her politician father, Korkiat Satthasen, a repeatedly elected Member of the Parliament from the South of Thailand, spent the last years of his life as a monk and remained so until death. Story has it that Korkiat supported Ven. Voramai’s quest for ordination; and when she eventually became a phiksuni, he bowed to the ground in front of his former wife to pay
respect to her as someone who represented the lost lineage of phiksuni (Phimphan et al. 2001: 45).

Nevertheless, living in the shadow of her mother’s unconventional life was not easy. The feeling of ambivalence was always with Ven. Dhammananda in her childhood through to her midlife. In her words as recorded by Phimphan et al. (2001: 207):

I used to think I was unlucky to be born to my mother because that [life] came with great responsibilities. People had such high expectations of me that I found them hard to live up to. In the ten years before I became seriously engaged in dhamma practice [around 1979 when she was in her mid thirties], the fact that people should expect me to continue my mother’s work was a big problem in my life. I kept telling myself I would not be ordained because it was a duty. I would be ordained only if I wanted to.

Despite her orientation to women’s monastic life at a young age, Ven. Dhammananda said her deepened interest in Buddhism only developed when she did her postgraduate studies in Buddhism in Canada in the early 1970s. Her doctoral dissertation unsurprisingly compared monastic disciplinary rules for female monks in six Buddhist schools (see Chatsumarn 1991b). It was through her studies at a university in Canada that she learned of the possibility of phiksuni ordination in Taiwan, information which she passed on to her mother, enabling the latter to receive ordination and to become a phiksuni eventually in 1971. This anecdote of how Ven. Voramai’s full ordination became possible through her daughter’s overseas connections was a precursor for the significance of Ven. Dhammananda’s international linkages in her
attempt to institute phiksuni ordination in the Theravada tradition in Thailand three decades later.

Even with her education in Buddhist Studies, for Ven. Dhammananda to personally associate herself with her mother’s monastic trajectory in public did not come naturally. In the early days of her academic career, she avoided making too obvious a link between her academic work on women in Buddhism and her familial ties with Ven. Voramai. This, she said, stemmed from her attempt to maintain the so-called academic objectivity that she valued in those days. Also, she was worried that she might be seen as acting in her personal interest to promote her own mother (Phimphan et al. 2001: 118-121). It was not until she became deeply committed to women’s ordination activism later in life that she started to feel more comfortable making known the familial relation in public. Her appreciation of the mother-daughter tie became more apparent following her own entrance into the monastic life. In her efforts to inform the public about the issue of women’s ordination, Ven. Dhammananda began to chart a historical account of the movement for phiksuni ordination in Thailand that linked her ordination to the past, including that of her mother’s.

A History in Three Waves

In Ven. Dhammananda’s narrative, the ordination of her mother was not the beginning of the story of phiksuni ordination in Thailand. In recounting the phenomenon, she often framed its historical evolution as “three waves of the bhikkhuni [phiksuni] sangha in Thailand” (Yasodhara 2003: 5), starting with the ordination of a small group of women, led by Narin Phasit’s daughters,
Sara and Jongdi, in the late 1920s (see Chapter 2). Ven. Voramai’s ordination came as the second wave, and her own as the third.

Ven. Dhammananda recognized the significance of the 1920s ordination for its pioneering role. She thought her mother, a contemporary of Sara and Jongdi, must have been influenced by the idea of women’s ordination initiated at that time. Her father, she said, was one of the people who shared Narin’s vision that the phiksuni order should be reinstituted for the good of Buddhism.

However, Ven. Dhammananda seemed to see the 1920s event as having a more negative than positive impact on later attempts to institute women’s ordination. She attributed the negative impact to Narin’s controversial character and his relentless criticisms of the male sangha and the government, resulting in a strong backlash against his initiative to introduce phiksuni ordination. In her view, the negative institutional responses to this first-wave movement in the late 1920s and the ensuing imposition of legal constraints on women’s ordination made her mother’s quest for ordination, which began some thirty years later and considered the second wave, more difficult. To Ven. Dhammananda, the failure of the first-wave movement that lingered on in people’s memory meant that her mother could not start her ordination initiative “from a clean slate.”

One thing Ven. Dhammananda thought her mother learned from Narin’s case was the detrimental effects of criticizing the male sangha and the government. Therefore her mother made a point of not saying anything against these powerful institutions, and “[s]he persevered through her positive actions

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without fighting the oppositional forces. She did a lot of work in social welfare.\textsuperscript{6} It should be noted, however, that Ven. Voramai was known for her spiritual healing power and her contacts with the supernatural world. In any case, Ven. Dhammananda acknowledged her mother’s contributions of goodwill (Ven. Voramai was able to secure a sizable following, part of which continued to support Ven. Dhammananda’s monastic activities) and material resources (the construction of the monastery, for instance). But she also saw shortcomings in her mother’s approach. One was the fact that Ven. Voramai received her ordination in Taiwan; therefore, she was regarded as belonging to the Chinese or Mahayana tradition – an innocuous and negligible outsider to the Thai Theravada tradition. Besides, Ven. Voramai was alone in her full ordination. While she had a considerable number of followers who were ordained as light-yellow-robed nuns, none of these women followed her in taking full ordination and forming a community of \textit{phiksuni}. Thus, this second-wave movement did not become institutionalized.

Then came the third wave, that is, Ven. Dhammananda’s \textit{samaneri} and \textit{phiksuni} ordination in 2001 and 2003, respectively. Speaking at her temple within days of her return from her \textit{phiksuni} ordination ceremony in Sri Lanka in 2003, Ven. Dhammananda was particularly earnest and optimistic. Ordained women, she said, “must realize that we are in a very important situation, that whatever we do will greatly affect this existing movement” (\textit{Yasodhara} 2003: 7). She also pointed to the advantages of social change that women of her time enjoyed compared to those of previous generations. In her view, the process of globalization with its far-reaching media and information

\textsuperscript{6} A talk entitled “Three waves of \textit{phiksuni} in Thailand” by Ven. Dhammananda at \textit{Wat} Songdham Kalayani, 26 August 2003
networks, the higher level of education of both the ordained women and members of the society in general, and her effort to “build up the structure to support the bhikkuni [phiksuni] sangha” all contributed to the strength of the present movement (Yasodhara 2003: 7). With great spirit, she declared, “We must succeed because we are the third wave. We have so much information from the first and the second wave[s]. We cannot allow any further failure” (Yasodhara 2003: 7).

I recall Ven. Dhammananda referring to herself once or twice as a historian. And here she did exactly what historians are supposed to do: create historical narratives (Scott 2001: 85). If, as the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra says, “to be an intellectual was partly to abstract … a few ‘facts’ from a larger whole, and to set them in a sequence of sorts” (2004: 85, original emphasis), Ven. Dhammananda’s training in her former academic career may have something to do with her articulation of this history. Her account of phiksuni ordination in Thailand is as much a historical account as it is a story about the practice of crafting history. In her historical practice, she singled out certain female monastic endeavours from different historical periods and strung them in a linear continuum characteristic of a common type of history. But this single account, as with other historical narratives, has many faces.

From the vantage point of institutional power, the official sangha in particular, this history wears a transgressive face, with stories of illicit attempts to pervade a legitimate institutional realm and destabilize the received norms and order. Contrarily, feminists and advocates of gender equality may see this as an empowering history of women’s agency that has long been cordoned off from
the grand history of Thai Buddhism. Yet, in my conversations with monastic women of other categories, I also have heard comments that Ven. Dhammananda’s account, as outlined here and in her other recent publications, was not exhaustive, that it left out other low-key monastic women who came between these peaks of the movement. Thus, while her narrative filled the gendered void in the history of institutional Buddhism in Thailand, it also left some gaps by highlighting certain people and events while overlooking others.

I see Ven. Dhammananda’s historical practice as a process of legitimation. Her historical narrative helped to locate her individual actions along side a series of other events that stretched back in time. Her otherwise isolated monastic endeavour could now be viewed though a historical lens. Her story then became part of a larger history. However, this is a history that was decidedly abbreviated, a historical patchwork that pieced together selected events in the past to serve a pragmatic end of gaining legitimacy in the present.

Renouncing Lay Life

In January 2003, a group of fifteen or so undergraduate students from an American university gathered in the modest library of Watr Songdham Kalayani to hear about the latest development of the situation of women in Buddhism in Thailand. These students were among the many groups and individuals, Thai and foreigners, who were drawn to this women’s monastery by Ven. Dhammananda’s authority in Buddhist Studies and by the story of her daring move towards phiksoni ordination. Once here, they tended to be charmed by her great gift as a public speaker and storyteller.
“When I was in my fifties, suddenly something happened. I lost interest in the glory of worldly life. It just peeled off like that. No more interest.” Ven. Dhammananda began the story of how she decided to be ordained.\(^7\)

During this talk, Ven. Dhammananda admitted to being “very worldly” in her previous lay life, being attached particularly to physical beauty. And one does not need to wander far to find proof of her past worldliness. In an obscure corner on the ground floor of the main building at Watr Songdham Kalayani, there hung a framed photo portrait of a middle-age woman with colourful make-up and a fine hairdo. This picture of herself as a laywoman, she explained, was put there as a reminder of her former life full of attachments. The following part of her story was reminiscent of the many tales of Buddhist world renouncers, which told of a rising weariness of the material world and the flight or ‘going forth’ from home to homelessness thereafter. As she recounted, “Suddenly that interest to beautify myself dropped completely. It became very strong and very clear. So, I started to dissociate myself from the worldly lifestyle step by step.”\(^8\)

In the year 2000, as the world was attuned to the excitements and anxieties about the new millennium, Ven. Dhammananda decided to carve out her own piece of historical time. “I wanted to mark out in the calendar of my life that I did something [striking] in the year 2000,” she said. For the first step, she travelled to Taiwan early in the year and joined the ceremony at which she committed herself to the vow of the bodhisattva precepts. This vow, common

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\(^7\) An untitled talk (to students of Dayton University) by Ven. Dhammananda at Watr Songdham Kalayani, 13 January 2003.

\(^8\) An untitled talk (to students of Dayton University) by Ven. Dhammananda at Watr Songdham Kalayani, 13 January 2003.
in the Mahayana tradition but rather unknown to Theravada followers, generally dictates a religiously pious lifestyle including the adherence to a vegetarian diet. Then, towards the end of the year, she took a further step familiar to the Theravada tradition; namely, to take the eight-precept vow similar to the ones observed by mae-chi and pious lay Buddhists in Thailand.\(^9\)

The taking of the eight precepts tended to bring her life closer to the path of the ordained in the Theravada tradition. Ven. Dhammananda seemed to have a vivid memory of this turning point in her life. “On the 9\(^{th}\) of December 2000, I served as the master of ceremony for the assembly of the World Fellowships of Buddhists. That function was the last of my engagements [in worldly life]. On the 10\(^{th}\) [of December], I took the precepts, she said.”\(^10\) Less than two months after that, she set off on another journey to complete the most important transformative step in her life thus far. On 6 February 2001, at Tapodharamaya Monastery in Colombo, Sri Lanka, she underwent a monastic ordination ceremony and became a samaneri or female novice in the Theravada tradition.

The story above does not represent all of the reasons why Ven. Dhammananda decided to be ordained. Elsewhere, for example, she stated that her experience of an illness (positional vertigo) was a reason for her apathy towards the worldly life (Dhammananda 2001c: 6). From this, one may conclude that there was no single reason, but complexly intertwined life situations, that led her to the path of the ordained. Besides, she was not the only person who came out in

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9 An untitled talk (to students of Dayton University) by Ven. Dhammananda at Watr Songdham Kalayani, 13 January 2003.

10 An untitled talk (to students of Dayton University) by Ven. Dhammananda at Watr Songdham Kalayani, 13 January 2003.
public to offer explanations as to why she decided to be ordained. For better or worse, her ordination in the form that replicated the conventional male monasticism inevitably put her monastic endeavour under public scrutiny. People from different social sectors expressed their diverse views in the media, either in support of or opposition to her ordination. Some took the liberty of interpreting her intention to be ordained from their own perspectives. For example, a conservative Buddhist academic was quoted in a newspaper as saying that Ven. Dhammananda sought ordination in order to elevate her own personal status, and to make up for her mother’s failure to gain acceptance from the official sangha (for her phiksumi status after her 1971 ordination) (Thai Post 2001c).

In Ven. Dhammananda’s reasoning, her desire to escape the weariness of a worldly life was only one part of her motives for ordination. On several occasions, she also cited her reverence for the Buddha as an important part of her inspiration. “When I became ordained, several people marvelled at how brave I was to have done so. I actually have no bravery. All I have is a strong faith in the Buddha,” she stated at one of her public talks in Bangkok. \(^{11}\) And in order to fulfil her sense of gratitude to the Buddha, she could do nothing less than try to establish phiksumi ordination in Thailand. For her, to institute women’s ordination was to restore the intent of the Buddha long forgotten in the Theravada tradition. As she stated, “To establish the bhikkhuni [phiksumi] sangha is one of the manifold expressions of one’s respect to the Buddha who established it.” \(^{12}\) This is the point at which Ven. Dhammananda’s spiritual pursuit and her aspiration to institutionalize women’s ordination merge. The


duality of her ordination project becomes apparent, with individual religious passion and institutionalizing aim always coexisting as integrated parts, one reinforcing the other. Thus her ordination could neither be portrayed as completely personal nor totally public.

Given the dual nature of her motives, it is worth noting that Ven. Dhammananda’s rationales for ordination were carefully situated within a Buddhist frame of reference. When asked if she was a feminist, and this question came up quite frequently, her answer was never an instant ‘yes.’ Often, she would say “I am a Buddhist before a feminist.”13 Her Buddhist frame of reference is manifest in her narratives of her apathy towards the worldly life, her reverence for the Buddha and her attempt to realize the Buddha’s permission for phiksun ordination. Although this frame of reference has a strong Buddhist tone, it is not necessarily one and the same with the frame of reference evident in orthodox Buddhist concepts. As a case in point, while the Thai Buddhist tradition allows for appreciation of the story of an individual ‘going forth’ from the lay to ascetic life, not every Buddhist sees the advocacy of phiksun ordination as a traditional way to venerate the Buddha. And certainly not every Buddhist necessarily agrees with Ven. Dhammananda that women’s monasticism represents “the beauty of Buddhism.”14 These examples of the ideological discrepancy between Ven. Dhammananda’s Buddhist ideas and orthodox Buddhist concepts may be interpreted in different ways. One way is to see it as a conflict between conservative and liberal interpretations of Buddhist principles. Alternatively, this discrepancy is evidence for diverse applicability and plurality in Buddhist concepts. And

13 See for example, Warner and Gayley (1998).

women's engaging in the monastic vocation has added to this plurality, both in ideological concepts and in practice, as will be seen in later chapters.

Transnational Connections

"I have to admit that the knowledge I have of Buddhism, I have learned from the English version of the Tipitaka," Ven. Dhammananda said in her usual firm voice, ending the sentence with a smile. She was addressing an audience who gathered in the main auditorium at a university in Bangkok.\(^{15}\) This academic gathering offered an appropriate setting to disclose her foreign source of knowledge. If anything, this mention of the foreign source hints at an elementary fact about her ordination – the significance of international connections that made it possible.

Ven. Dhammananda's trajectory which finally led to her ordination had wound its way across different geographical and social locales. It started at home. With her mother's ordination, home turned into a monastic space. For education, she got her first degree in Philosophy from the well-known Santiniketan University in India. She then travelled to Canada to learn about Buddhism. Her career in academia brought her and her words on the situation of Buddhist women in Thailand to numerous international academic and activist forums. In her more hectic times, she made up to nine or ten work-related overseas trips in a year (Phimphan et al. 2001: 151).

\(^{15}\) A speech entitled "Women in the Religious Realm" by Ven. Dhammananda at Sri Nakharinwirot (Prasanmit) University, 18 September 2003.
In her own account, Ven. Dhammananda acknowledged a 1983 conference at Harvard University, at which she presented a paper on the future of phiksumi ordination in Thailand, as a turning point in her career. Having had an encounter with “great feminists” from all over the world, and having been challenged about her non-engaged academic position, her efforts to maintain academic objectivity diminished. She came back to Thailand and started the English-language ‘Newsletter on International Buddhist Women’s Activities,’ the first issue of which was mailed out to her thirty-seven associates in different countries (Phimphan et al. 2001: 121). The newsletter’s mailing list has expanded considerably ever since.

In 1987, then a faculty member at a university in Thailand, she was one of the key figures in organizing the First International Conference on Buddhist Nuns in Bodhgaya, India. This activist-oriented conference saw the birth of Sakyadhita, an international association of Buddhist women that takes as one of its mandates “to help establish the bhikshuni sangha ...where it does not currently exist” (Sakyadhita n.d.). The Association was also responsible for organizing biennial conferences which brought Buddhist women from different parts of the world together to discuss their religion-related situations.

The story of Ven. Dhammananda’s transnational connections came full circle when, in 2001 and 2003, it was the Sri Lankan Chapter of the Sakyadhita Association that facilitated the preparation for the ordination ceremonies which initiated her as a Theravada samaneri and phiksumi respectively.

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16 The title of this newsletter was later changed to ‘Yasodhara.’
At the individual level, Ven. Dhammananda’s ability to forge and benefit from extensive transnational networks of Buddhist women can be attributed to her exceptional background. Her success in this area does not come as a surprise considering that she came from a privileged social background (her mother a recognized career woman and her father a successful national politician) and a unique family situation (with her mother’s ordination), together with her elite education (attending a top girls school in Bangkok followed by overseas higher education), and finally the many achievements of her professional life.

Beyond her personal status, however, it is also useful to consider the institutional context that prompted her need to engage in transnational activities in the first place, and what these extra-national linkages mean to the legitimation of her ordination. Ven. Dhammananda’s choice to communicate about the position of women in Thai Buddhism mostly with international audiences seemed strategic. It was born out of the social constraints on women’s monasticism in Thailand. As she said, “Earlier [in her attempts to address the issue of women’s ordination], nobody in Thailand would listen. Therefore, I turned to create movements in other countries” (Phimphan et al. 2001: 130). After she had attained the phiksuni status, she still found it useful to draw on the nexus of transnational religious and gender legitimation. This was probably because she had to live with the controversy arising from her ordination and a sense of uncertainty due to the lack of institutional recognition of her monastic status in Thailand. On one occasion, she remarked on the benefit of globalization, saying, “In this world of globalization whatever happens in a small area is known elsewhere. So the attack or attempt to silence us [Thai women seeking phiksuni ordination] from the world will be harder
because it will be known elsewhere. Also, the bhikkhuni [phiksunī] sangha is already in existence in a good many parts of the world” (Yasodhara 2003: 6).

Another aspect of the relation between transnational connections and the legitimation of women’s ordination is evident in the discreet decision Ven. Dhammananda made in regard to the location of her ordination. In order to see the complexity in this decision, it is worth asking why Ven. Dhammananda made the choice to be ordained in Sri Lanka and not elsewhere, given in particular the growing availability of Buddhist women’s ordination rites in countries like Taiwan, South Korea and some western countries.

Ven. Dhammananda admitted to being hesitant at first about the choices of country and traditional lineage in which she would be ordained. As she stated:

I was not sure about the [validity of] ordination lineage in Sri Lanka. But after a careful study, I found that the ordination in Sri Lanka was a correct form of Theravada ordination. Should I be ordained in Taiwan, I would have to shift away from my familiar ways. I would have to dress in the Chinese style and chant in the Chinese language, something that I am not familiar with at all (Phimphan et al. 2001: 214).

For one thing, ordination in Sri Lanka promised a high degree of cultural familiarity. As she reasoned: “The [Buddhist] practice [in Sri Lanka] is quite similar to that of Thailand,” and “We also use the Pali language alike” (Thammanurak 2001: 3).

Nevertheless, we should not forget that the wish to establish women’s ordination, and not merely personal spiritual fulfilment, was an integral part of
Ven. Dhammananda’s motives for ordination. Despite the extensive ‘internationality’ of her earlier approaches to promoting women’s ordination, her wish to see the phiksunī sangha take root in Thailand was necessarily culturally specific. For the female monastic order to be sustainable in Thailand, it should be accepted by Thai society at large including, ideally, the mainstream Thai Theravada sangha. The strife over women’s Theravada ordination in Thailand in the past had forewarned Ven. Dhammananda of possible opposition to her endeavour. Given the high level of conservatism in Thai Theravada Buddhism, her ‘internationality’ had its limitations. Part of these limitations comes from the strong influence of countries of the Mahayana tradition, such as South Korea and Taiwan, in the movement for women’s ordination. The Mahayana presence in the broader phiksunī ordination movement goes against the grain of Theravada conservatism and the religious nationalist sentiment among Thai Theravada Buddhists. Thus, while her transnational connections were crucial in many respects, Ven. Dhammananda could not afford to be ‘too international’ in her ordination and risk being labelled as foreign or alien to Thai Theravada Buddhism like her mother. To better understand Ven. Dhammananda’s choice of seeking her ordination in Sri Lanka, we will now turn to an account of the revival of phiksunī ordination in Sri Lanka in the late 1980s and the 1990s as the product of the international Buddhist women’s movement.
The Revival of Phiksunī Ordination in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is widely held to be the only Theravada country\(^\text{17}\) where the ancient phiksunī lineage from India was established in the 3\(^{rd}\) century BC (Weeraratane 1997). The history of the founding of the phiksunī sangha is still vividly portrayed in the tales of some archaeological remains, new and old mural paintings in temples, framed colourful posters hanging on nunneries walls and in Buddhist publications. This story entails the arrival of Princess Sanghamitta, the ordained daughter of the renowned Indian King Asoka, who crossed the waters in a ship from the Indian subcontinent, holding in her hands a branch of the sacred bo tree under which the Buddha attained his enlightenment. The story has it that Princess Sanghamitta and ten other female monks, enough to form an ordination quorum, travelled to Sri Lanka upon the request of the Sinhalese Princess Anula and other palace women who, having learned the teachings of the newly propagated Buddhism, wanted to be ordained. The mural at the famous Kaleniya Monastery in Colombo, for example, features a finely painted image of Princess Anula, in white robes with head shaven, holding up in her hands a bundle of ochre robes on top of a round black monastic bowl, apparently in an act of asking for ordination.

Contrary to this vivid portrayal, the account of how the ancient Sri Lankan female monastic order disappeared from the kingdom around the 11\(^{th}\) century has remained obscure (Bartholomeusz 1994: 21). We only know that the kingdom’s male monastic order was recorded to have disappeared together at the same time, and was later revived, more than once, with the help of the male monastic lineages of Siam and Burma. However, the female lineage never

\(^{17}\) The other so-called Theravada Buddhist countries are: Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand.
benefited from a similar revival attempt. Hence, together with the demise of the phiksuni order in India around the same period, the Theravada phiksuni lineage is said to have been lost altogether.

The idea of the “resuscitation” of phiksuni ordination was conceived in Sri Lanka in the 1890s (Bartholomeusz 1992: 45). Despite the enthusiasm, and partly in response to the growth of a lay Buddhist movement in the country at that time, the turn of the 20th century only saw the emergence of dasasilamata (Mother of the Ten Precepts), who shaved their hair and put on yellow robes but were considered non-ordained (Bartholomeusz 1994: Chapter 7). The anticipated restoration of phiksuni ordination in the Theravada tradition was enacted almost a hundred years later. In 1988, expatriate Sri Lankan monks in the United States made a groundbreaking move to confer Theravada ordination to a young Thai lawyer known by her ordained name as Dhammamitta (Bartholomeusz 1994: 186-187). However, this Thai woman was reported to have left the novitiate later due to family reason (Yasodhara 1997b).

In that same year, Foguangshan, one of the largest Buddhist monasteries of Taiwan, organized an international phiksuni ordination ceremony at Hsi Lai Monastery, its branch monastery in Los Angeles. With thriving optimism carried over from the First International Conference of Buddhist Nuns together with the founding of the Sakyadhita Association in the previous year, eleven Sri Lankan dasasilamata were recruited to be among two hundred and fifty women from sixteen countries to receive ordination at that ceremony in Los Angeles (Li 2000: 179). However, only five of the dasasilamata eventually went through with the ceremony; the other six withdrew citing the hardships
involved in the Mahayana-style ritual procedures.\textsuperscript{18} This ordination was generally seen as a failure back in Sri Lanka as the five ordained women returned to their home country to no structural support and eventually fell back into the religious practice and livelihood no different from that prior to their full ordination (see Bartholomeusz 1994: 182-183).

During my visit to Sri Lanka in 2003, I met with Phiksuni Dhammadarshika, who was one of the five dasasilamata ordained in Los Angeles in 1988. The woman had resumed her phiksuni identity and practice following the successful restoration of the phiksuni sangha in Sri Lanka in the mid 1990s. Now in her early fifties, she reflected on the difficulties of the 1988 ordination. Having been a dasasilamata for twelve years by the time of the ordination, she had studied the Pali language and Buddhist texts before deciding to come forward upon hearing about the recruitment for the Los Angeles ordination. Speaking in Singhalese with the help of a phiksuni interpreter, this is how she described the situation back then:

When I decided to go [to Los Angeles] I knew there would be difficulties. Even after we arrived there, we heard a lot of news [from Sri Lanka] about the opposition against the ordination, mostly by monks. After I came back, there was a large dasasilamata conference in Colombo. I attended that conference. There, they questioned me. They said we [the ordained women] were deceived by those people [who organized the ordination]. They said we had not received any phiksuni ordination actually.

\textsuperscript{18} Phiksuni Dhammadarshika, interviewed at Sakyadhita Centre, Sri Lanka, 20 March 2003.
The five of us lived in different places. So there was no unity among us. Also, the robes given at the ordination were different from the robes we use here. The colour was yellow but the patchwork pattern was different. We were afraid as well. We were the only five women wearing those robes at that time. We were afraid so we returned to wearing the dasasilmata robes.¹⁹

As a side note, two Thai women also received their phiksuni ordination at this 1988 Los Angeles international ordination ceremony. During my fieldwork, I learned that one of them, Phiksuni La-or, was living in more or less seclusion at a Chinese shrine hall in a provincial area in Thailand. The other woman, Phiksuni Phatchari, continued to live in the US. Both followed the Mahayana monastic dress code, although Phiksuni Phatchari told me during one of her visits to Bangkok that she put on the Theravada-style robes during her ordination ceremony, but decided to change to the Mahayana style immediately after that.²⁰

Seven years later, in December 1996, the Korean World Buddhist Sangha Council hosted a special phiksuni ordination ceremony for Sri Lankan women. Li describes this initiative as being part of “some competition in the race to establish a bhiksini [sic] lineage” (2000: 179). Ten Sri Lankan woman and dasasilmata were selected to join this ordination held in the Indian town of Sarnath, the historic place where the Buddha gave his first sermon after his enlightenment. Leading this group of women in taking their ordination was Mrs. Kusuma Devendra—a Sri Lankan counterpart of Dr. Chatsumarn, one

²⁰ Phiksuni Phatchari, interviewed at her residence in Bangkok, 27 October 2003.
may say, who had completed her doctoral degree in Buddhism, was well-versed in English, and was an indispensable speaker on the topic of women and Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Mrs. Devendra had been involved in the international movement for women’s full ordination since its burgeoning period in the late 1980s. A black-and-white copy of a photograph of this ordination showed ten Sri Lankan women standing in single file, all with shaven heads and wearing the multi-layered Korean-style monastic robes. When I met some of these women, including Phiksuni Kusuma, or the former Mrs. Devendra, in person in 2003, they were all wearing Theravada-style yellow monastic robes of the same pattern as that which Ven. Dhammananda adopted at her ordination.

A sketchy report on the 1996 Sarnath ordination mentions that Theravada male monks (most likely from Sri Lanka) participated in this ordination ceremony. They were responsible for conferring the lower samaneri ordination to the ten women. However, it was the Korean male monastics who presided over the central ritual procedure of higher phiksuni ordination (Chatsumarn 1997). This kind of arrangement that blended the Mahayana and Theravada traditions in ordination ritual was rare, if not unprecedented. The presence of the Theravada monks in this case hinted at the subtlety of this connecting moment when phiksuni ordination practice was transferred and transformed from Mahayana to Theravada. Such subtlety was crucial in the situation in which legitimacy of the revived Theravada phiksuni ordination was, and still is, highly contentious. Having learned perhaps from this ritual practice, the Taiwanese Fo Guangshan Monastery and their coordinates were apparently more attentive to the issue of traditional differences in their even larger international ordination ceremony that also took place in India two years later.
The announcement calling for applications for the 1998 Bodhgaya International Full Ordination Ceremony organized by the Fugoungshan Monastery was distributed widely to Buddhist monastic communities of the Mahayana, Theravada and Vajrayana (Tibetan) traditions in different countries. In this announcement, the sixteen centuries old connection between the ancient Sri Lankan Theravada phiksuni lineage and its Mahayana or Chinese counterpart was reaffirmed. “In gratitude of having received the bhiksunī lineage from Indian and Sri Lankan’s [sic] missionaries,” read the first page of the announcement, “the Chinese feel that it is their duty to return the lost bhikṣunī lineage to their ancestral lands” (Yasodhara 1997a: 3). The announcement also assured potential applicants that the issue of traditional differences in the ordination process would be tended to. “The ordination at Bodhgaya [where the Buddha attained his enlightenment, and described elsewhere in the announcement as “the most sacred place in India”] will be in accordance with one of the original Indian traditions,” read another part of the same document (Yasodhara 1997a: 4). Ordination candidates would be allowed to wear the robes of their own traditions, and senior male monks from Theravada and Mahayana traditions would be invited to witness the ceremony and give their blessings, the announcement stated.

The efforts to deal with traditional differences at the 1998 Bodhgaya ordination came largely as a result of discussions at the International Monastic Seminar hosted almost a year earlier at Fugoungshan Monastery in Taiwan. Attending this seminar were prominent monastics and laypeople of different Buddhist traditions, including the then Dr. Chatsumarn. The main objective of the ordination project was clear: to restore the phiksuni order of the Theravada tradition.
Backed by the international reputation of their highly charismatic leader, Master Hsing Yun, monastic representatives of Fouduangshan travelled extensively to different countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Europe during the several months of preparation for the 1998 Bodhgaya ordination, in order to solicit support from influential monastic figures for their ordination plan. In the case of Thailand, the Taiwanese monastic representatives reported on their meeting with the country’s Supreme Patriarch who said he would “look further into the issue” (Fouduangshan and Buddha’s Light International Association c.1998: 156).

In his writing, the senior Thai male monk Phra Sripriyattimoli (2001: 99-117) gives an enthusiastic report on this 1998 ordination. He was among the five Thai male monks invited as observers to this ordination ceremony. Meanwhile, several senior Sri Lankan male monks played a more active role by participating in the ritual procedures. A Thai woman, known by her ordained clerical name as Phiksun Katanyuta, received her ordination on this occasion. She had become a dasasilmata and was living in Sri Lanka at the time of the ordination (Yasodhara 1998: 12). The phiksun later returned to live in Thailand.

Back to Sri Lanka, a number of highly influential male monks living in and outside the country lent their earnest support to the Bodhgaya ordination. Some played key roles in giving advice and helping to organize the event, which ended up with about one hundred and fifty candidates (fourteen of whom were men) from twenty-two countries (Fouduangshan & Buddha’s Light International Association c1998: 176). Twenty dasasilamata were selected out of more than a hundred Sri Lankan applicants. The nine-day ceremony, from
15 to 23 February 1998, by and large followed the Taiwanese Three-Platform or Three-Altar Ordination ritual.²¹ Although there was a lot of talk about unity and harmony among different Buddhist traditions at this ordination, sectarian differences were evident in the ritual process, especially at the last stage or platform when the ordination candidates were to make a bodhisattva vow commonly perceived as a Mahayana practice. Li, who was present at this event, reports that, "once the ordination candidates had received the bhikṣuni ordination, the Theravadin acaryās [teachers] pointedly led all of their disciples out of the ordination hall and only returned for the closing ceremony two days later" (2000: 171-172).

In less than a month after the 1998 Bodhgaya ordination, a highly influential Sri Lankan monk, Ven. Sumangala, capitalized on the fresh success of the international ordination by organizing a local phikṣuni ordination at this monastery in Sri Lanka. At this ceremony, the newly ordained Sri Lankan phikṣuni who had just returned from their own ordination in India were invited to preside over the ceremony along with their male counterparts (Dhammananda 2001a: 13-14). Phikṣuni ordination ceremonies have since been periodically organized in Sri Lanka under the auspices of senior male monks of different sects. Not all Buddhist monks and laypeople of Sri Lanka supported the revival of women's ordination, but their opposition seemed to lose its impetus as time passed and the number of Sri Lankan phikṣuni kept growing. At the time of Ven. Dhammananda's full ordination in early 2003, there were already close to four hundred phikṣuni in the country.²²

²¹ The Three-Platform Ordination Ceremony, applied to both women and men, consists of three stages of ordination: samaneri/samanera (novice) ordination, phikṣuni/phikṣu (monk) ordination, and the bodhisattva ordination. The first two stages are common in the Theravada tradition while the last one is regarded as specifically Mahayana.

²² Mrs. Ranjani De Silva, personal communication, 5 February 2003.
Witnessing the Ordination Ceremony in Sri Lanka

On the morning of 28 February 2003, a quiet excitement spread through Sri Lanka’s Sakyadhita Centre, located on the lakeside in the town of Panadura about twenty kilometres south of Colombo. It had been ten days since a group of six women from Thailand, myself included, arrived at this training centre and residence for monastic women. This was the day when two women from Thailand would be ordained: Ven. Dhammananda herself as a phiksuni, and Phi (Sister) Ri as a samaneri. The other four members of the group came in their company, two lay supporters and two postgraduate researchers working on women’s ordination.

On this same occasion, three other Theravada samaneri would also receive their higher ordination and become phiksuni. They were Ven. Saccavadi, a Burmese samaneri enrolled in a doctoral program in Buddhism at a university in Colombo; Ven. Gunasari, a seventy-year-old retired medical doctor of Burmese background who had been working and living in the US for the past forty years; and Ven. Sudhamma, a former American lawyer.

The preparation for this ordination began with communications between Ven. Dhammananda and her Sri Lankan colleague and friend, Mrs. Ranjani De Silva, who was then the President of the Sakyadhita Chapter of Sri Lanka. Madam Ranjani, as we came to call her, had dedicated the past several years of her life to the revival of phiksuni ordination in Sri Lanka. With her experience and extensive connections with senior monks of Sri Lanka, she was well placed to act as the liaison for the ordination preparation.
Once initial decisions were made, Ven. Dhammaloka Mahathera, Deputy Chief of the Sangha Council of the sect of Amarapura Nikaya of Sri Lanka,\textsuperscript{23} known for his strong support for Theravada phiksuni ordination, was contacted. This elderly monk in his mid-eighties was no stranger to Ven. Dhammananda. They had met at former events concerning women’s ordination such as the 1998 Bodhgaya international ordination. He also coordinated her novice ordination in 2001, bringing together a quorum of five male monks of the Siam Nikaya\textsuperscript{24} to officiate at that ceremony. This time, his seniority meant that he would be able to bring together a quorum of at least ten male monks whose presence was necessary for a legitimate phiksuni ordination. If it was not for the senior Ven. Dhammaloka, these male monks might feel hesitant about officiating at this momentous ordination of a woman from Thailand, whose official sangha was known for its unaccepting attitude.\textsuperscript{25}

As seen from the above, Ven. Dhammananda’s long involvement in advocacy for women’s full ordination at the international level contributed greatly to the possibility of her ordination. Unlike her earlier novice ordination ceremony, for which she “went to Sri Lanka with no clue of how and when [her]

\textsuperscript{23} In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist monastic orders are divided into three main sects, namely Siam Nikaya, Amarapura Nikaya, and Ramanya Nikaya, each with its own independent administrative body. This is unlike the Thai sangha which is governed by a centralized administrative body, the Sangha Council, under the leadership of the Supreme Patriarch. Some commentators attribute the success of the revival of women’s full ordination in Sri Lanka to the absence of centralized monastic governance, thus allowing for differences in opinions and actions of male monks whose support was crucial for the feasibility of women’s ordination.

\textsuperscript{24} The Siam Nikaya, or Siamese Monastic Order, of Sri Lanka was established by envoys of Siamese monks who travelled to the island kingdom in the mid 18\textsuperscript{th} century. Ven. Dhammananda once stated that she had requested that monks who attended her samaneri ordination were from the Siam Nikaya. This request was probably part of her early attempt to build a connection between her ordination in Sri Lanka and Thai Buddhism.

\textsuperscript{25} Mrs. Ranjani De Silva, personal communication, 5 August 2003.
ordination was going to take place” (Yasodhara 2001: 9), the preparation for her higher phiksuni ordination ceremony this time round was well underway when we arrived.

Learning Legitimate Practices

The division of labour in the preparation for this ordination ceremony, administered in a seemingly impromptu style by Madam Ranjani, was so efficient that we visitors from Thailand were left with little to do. This, however, was not the case for the ordination candidates who needed some instructions and training in the ceremonial procedures. Thus, late afternoon on the second day after our arrival, I took a walk around the Sakyadhita Centre compound – lined with a few simple-structured buildings serving as a shrine hall, dining and residential halls, and an office. I then came upon the gathering of the ordination candidates (all except the Burmese graduate student, Ven. Saccavadi) and two Sri Lankan phiksuni in a rather empty library on the top floor of the office building. The women were busy discussing the ceremonial activities that would soon take place. Although my presence was not invited, the group was kind enough to let me sit through this training session.

Sitting cross-legged facing one another and bending over A4 printouts of Romanized Pali liturgical texts laid flat on the floor or held in their hands, the orange-robed women of different ages and backgrounds were almost literally putting their heads together. They were learning the steps of the ordination ceremony, a monastic ritual that had been closed to women for centuries. It was quite clear from their interactions that even the two Sri Lankan phiksuni
who were supposed to be the experts of the group—Ven. Sudarshana, probably in her thirties who was ordained in Sarnath in 1996, and Ven. Sudinna, a retired school teacher who received her full ordination in Taiwan in 2000—were also new to this formal monastic ritual of the Theravada tradition. Oftentimes the two instructors would turn toward each other in consultation or solicit opinions from the trainees.

But for now, the group had resolved on the steps of the first part of the ordination, the \textit{pabbajja}, in which the candidates would be re-ordained as novices before immediately proceeding to the \textit{upasampada} or full ordination ceremony. Both these two stages of the ceremony must be conducted within the same day according to the Theravada tradition. It was at the first stage of the ordination that the candidates would change from the white costumes they would be wearing in the short period leading up to the ordination ceremony to the ochre robes that would mark them as monastics. Also key to the novice ordination would be the taking of the ten Buddhist precepts. In between these key steps were several other details such as the offering of betel leaves to officiating monks, bowing, handing over and receiving back bundles of monastic robes and bowls, all these punctuated by recitations of Pali liturgical verses.

As it transpired, remembering the sequence of the ceremonial steps and memorizing the Pali verses alone were not enough. Correct and coordinated postures of the candidates were also important, probably for reason of both aesthetics and legitimacy; thus the need to practise bowing and other pain-inducing postures such as kneeling on one knee with the back upright and hands clasped on the forehead while taking the precepts. Buddhists always
bow three times to pay homage to the Buddha, the dhamma, and the sangha. But at this ordination ceremony, the three-bow set must be repeated three times, each time with a different starting posture: standing, half kneeling on one knee, and sitting on the back of the heels. It was this nine-bow practice that would later be reported in a Thai newspaper as characteristic of the Sri Lankan tradition (Traithep 2003).

Correct pronunciation of the Pali verses was also significant. The younger of the two Sri Lankan phiksuni instructors, Ven. Sudarshana, who was more senior to most Sri Lankan phiksuni in terms of ordination chronology, would act as the kammavacacarini (Thai: kammawajajan) or the Act-Announcing Teacher responsible for directing the ceremonial performance of the ordination candidates. It was thus her special concern that the candidates get the pronunciation of the Pali verses right. Besides, certain parts of the chanting must be repeated twice but with slightly different sounds at the end of certain words. For example, the word buddham would be pronounced buddhang in the second round. This, I was told, would make a correct and validated ordination ceremony.

Sitting in one corner observing the drill of the ritual procedures was an intimate learning experience for me. It was perhaps the last rays of the setting sun that crept in through the library door and windows that added a dramatic touch to the scene. Seeing the ordination candidates, the oldest of whom was seventy years old and still a novice, learning and practising these ritual steps which at times entailed difficult bodily postures, was like seeing the nascent identity of Theravada monastic women condensing into shape, slowly and intermittently. The moment also reminded me of how the legitimacy of this ordination ritual
that the women were striving for, especially the novice ordination, had always been readily and exclusively available to men and boys as young as seven years old in all Theravada societies (see for example, Keyes 1986).

It might be surprising to realize how the much-aspired for legitimacy of women’s ordination should lie in such simple matters as correct bodily postures and pronunciation. To quell this astonishment, one only needs to be reminded of the mid-nineteenth century conflicts between the Mahanikai and Thammayut Buddhist sects in Thailand, whose strife focused not on doctrinal content but such matters as different pronunciations of Pali liturgical verses, different ways of wearing the robes, or venues of ordination (see Kirsch 1975b: 9, Reynolds 1973: 81-103, Jackson 1989: 85).²⁶

The Ordination Ceremony

Although the ordination ceremony of Ven. Dhammananda and the other candidates would not start until mid afternoon, the day of the ordination was packed with meritorious activities from early on. The previous night, Madam Ranjani hosted an all night long paritta (verses of protection) chanting ceremony in memory of her late husband at her home in Colombo. Being the zealous proponent of phiksuni ordination that she was, she made sure this Singhalese religious ritual was a showcase of the burgeoning Sri Lankan phiksuni sangha that she had played a role in hatching and nurturing. Thus, no

²⁶ See Saichon (2002: 116-117) for a case occurring during the first reign of the Bangkok dynasty (1782-1809) in which a Siamese Supreme Patriarch ordered Lao monks under his jurisdiction to defrock and be re-ordained. The reason given for the Lao monks’ re-ordination was that, in their recitation of Pali liturgy at their initial ordination ceremonies, these monks pronounced the alphabet ‘ror’ as ‘lor’ (as a result of local linguistic variation).
male monks were seen at this ceremony, attended mostly by women guests of different ages in their all-white attire. Instead, more than twenty *phiksuni* in their yellow robes filled the house, taking turns in small groups to perform the chanting and other ritual acts. The ceremony came to a close in the morning with an offering of a morning meal to the female monastics, who would later in the day attend the ordination ceremony.

Early in the afternoon, the three ordination candidates who had stayed at the Sakyadhita Centre emerged from their rooms one by one. They were fully dressed in white garments from head to toe. The bright whiteness of their new clothes, furnished with a piece of white cloth tied into a headpiece, made them stand out from the small crowd of *phiksuni* and laypeople waiting to be transported to the Tapodharamaya Monastery in Colombo where the ordination ceremony would take place.

The whole ceremony, which lasted about three hours, could be divided into three stages: the *pabbajja* or novice ordination, the *upasampada* or *phiksuni* ordination, and the inaugural teaching for the newly ordained. The novice ordination was carried out in the *vihara* or the main worshiping hall where a large Buddha statue was enshrined, enclosed in a square concrete chamber at the centre of the hall and veiled behind wide lace curtains hanging from the ceiling. The sides of all the walls inside the hall featured newly painted floor-to-ceiling murals in bright-coloured panels depicting the Buddha’s life history, selected parts of the *Jataka* tales (stories of the Buddha’s previous lives), as well as a couple of stories of *phiksuni* of the Buddha’s time. Lay people were allowed into this hall to witness the ceremony closely.
However, the second and most central stage of the ordination in which the newly re-ordained novices would be initiated as phiksuni clearly required more sanctity and solemnity. Thus the ritual venue was moved to another house-like building some twenty metres away. This square two-story building, although small and plain in its architectural style, was regarded as the most sacred space on the monastery ground. This monastic assembly hall, called uposatha in Pali, was marked off by the sima or consecration stones laid on the bare earth at all four corners and at the midpoint of each side of the walls about one foot away from the building. Whereas more elaborate sima may be carved out of stone slabs into a particular shape, the consecration markers of this building were stones in their natural forms, each about a foot in diameter. No laypeople were allowed inside the consecrated building. To make sure that this sacred space was free of connections with the worldly realm, the flow of electricity was not to be activated and no electric devices were to be turned on inside the building during the ceremony.

The beginning of this second part of the ordination ceremony was an all-woman event. Only the quorum of female monks and the four phiksuni candidates entered the room on the ground floor of the consecrated building. They were to perform the antarayikadhamma examination in which the female candidates would be asked twenty-four questions, about half of them concerning female reproductive functions. These questions aim to ensure, for example, that a female ordinand has female sex organs, is not a hermaphrodite, and has no menstrual complications. While a similar examination process is also applied to male ordination, at least as I know of in the Theravada practice in Thailand, a male ordinand must answer only thirteen questions that duplicate general questions posed to a female ordinand. These general questions concern
the ordinand’s physical health, age, family relations, and other social obligations that may hinder her monastic life. A male candidate is not questioned about his reproductive functions. Standard ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers are expected for these ritualistic questions, are asked and answered in the Pali language. These questions are said to help ensure that only individuals with able bodies who are free from binding social obligations are recruited into the monastic community.

Watching at a distance through open doors and hearing the mostly (to me) indistinct sounds of the Pali verses, I tried to figure out the different steps of the initiation ritual that were going on in the consecrated space. The female monastics must have finished their questioning process when the male monks were called into the room. At its fullest capacity, the room could barely fit the twenty-six monastic bodies sitting cross-legged, knee-to-knee in two rows deep against the walls, adorned on one side with several framed photographs of prominent monastic and lay figures, local and foreign, including a portrait of the Thai king and queen. Twelve male monks and ten female monks were sitting on the opposite sides of the room, and the four candidates were in the middle, standing, kneeling on one knee, sitting with their legs folded under them, or bowing, depending on which stages of the ritual they were at. Most of the time their hands were clasped high on their foreheads.

Heat must have accumulated fast in that crammed space with no electric fans on, for I noticed some of the monastics wiping perspiration from their faces with yellow or orange handkerchiefs. But they did not have to endure the discomfort for too long because this most essential part of the ordination ceremony soon came to a close, with the male monks reciting the formulaic
Pali verses expressing their consent to accepting the ordination candidates into the *sangha* and finally giving their blessings. It was at this particular moment that the female novice candidates ritually passed into their new status, that of the fully ordained *phiksuni*.

The last stage of the ordination ceremony was held in a much more spacious and airy meeting hall that was part of the cluster of buildings in the monastery compound. The sight of rows of plastic chairs and tables lined with white cloth finally promised some comfort for the newly ordained *phiksuni* and the officiating monks. Neon lights, ceiling fans, and microphones were in full function in this hall where some thirty or so guests, laypeople and monastics, gathered in anticipation. It was time for the designated teacher, a male monk, to give an inaugural teaching to the newly ordained. The three-point Nissaya verses, chanted in Pali and translated into English, dictated the frugal use of three basic requisites: food, clothing, and medicines reminiscent of the mendicant life of the Buddha’s time.\(^{27}\) Equally indispensable for this ritualistic teaching was the reading of the eight grave violations of the monastic rules, which form part of the complete set of 311 rules for Theravada *phiksuni*. The ceremony at the monastery ended with a few prominent male and female monks taking turns to give speeches and the ordination candidates offering gifts to the officiating monks.

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\(^{27}\) Male monks are supposed to observe frugality in four kinds of requisites (the four Nissaya): depending on alms-food, wearing clothes made from discarded material, taking shelter under trees, and taking only fermented herbal medicines. However, the monastic discipline prohibits female monks from taking outdoor shelter. Thus, the Nissaya teaching delivered to newly ordained *phiksuni* dictated only of three kinds of requisites.
Being Theravada

In the days leading to the ordination, I had a chance to talk to Ven. Gunasari, the Burmese-born retired medical doctor who had travelled all the way from the US to receive ordination in Sri Lanka. Ven. Gunasari received her lower novice ordination at a Sri Lankan monastery in Los Angeles. She recounted how, even in the US, the hand of the Burmese government reached out to try to constrain her religious pursuit. News about her plan to be ordained travelled fast, and Burmese monks in California with whom she had studied Buddhism and meditation for the past two decades were told “in a secret way” not to have anything to do with her once she was ordained.28 Having experienced this unofficial intervention, the elderly Ven. Gunasari said she became even more determined to “not just sit ... and meditate” as she had somewhat envisioned her late life to be, but “make [phiksuni ordination] happen for future nuns.” While I truly appreciated this story which I regarded as an account of a monastic woman becoming politicized in the face of institutional constraints, I could not help but wonder why being Theravada was so important to her, and so I asked. “I was raised as a Theravada,” she replied. “When you have been raised since childhood as Theravada, your belief is more towards Theravada. It is very difficult for me to change, let alone suddenly, to Mahayana. Except for this phiksuni issue, I have no doubt about my Theravada belief.” Elaborating on her personal research on the historical connections between the phiksuni lineages of Sri Lanka and East Asia, she said firmly, “I don’t have any doubt that the [Theravada phiksuni] lineage can be connected [with the past lineage]. It can be connected. I believe in it.”

28 All the quotes by Ven. Gunasari in this paragraph are from my interview with her at the Sakyadhita Centre, Sri Lanka, 22 February 2003.
Being Theravada was crucial for the legitimacy of the ordination ceremony described above. The question here is: What does it take for a monastic identity and practice to be considered Theravada? For the monastics and lay people engaged in preparing for and conducting this ordination ceremony, including the ordination candidates themselves, the ritual ceremony was Theravada in nature. There was no doubt that these people, Sri Lankan and others, saw themselves as taking part in a Theravada ordination ceremony. The ‘Theravada-ness’ of the ordination practice discussed above was further reinforced by the way the ceremony was conducted by all-Theravada monastics, with the use of Pali liturgical verses, at a Theravada monastery, according to Theravada ritual procedures no different from that practised in such countries like Thailand (except for minor details such as the bowing postures and chanting styles and accents). All these characteristics spoke of the intention of the people involved in the ritual ceremony to adhere to their Theravada roots.

In addition, the fact that the ordination took place in Sri Lanka was practically and symbolically significant. In practical terms, Sri Lanka up to the year 2004 was the only country with enough Theravada phiksuni to form an ordination quorum. It was the only country where Theravada high-ranking male monks in administrative positions had authorized phiksuni to perform as preceptors at female ordination ceremonies. Symbolically, this island country was and still is considered the heartland of the Theravada tradition, the fount of Theravada Buddhism that spread to Southeast Asia at different points in history.

But not everybody sees a women’s ordination ceremony such as this one as genuinely Theravada. During my stay in Sri Lanka, our group from Thailand
had the opportunity to meet and talk with six senior Sri Lankan male monks. While most of these monks were in support of phiksumi ordination, one was careful in expressing his ‘neutral’ view, and one other declared, in the presence of the monastic women in our group, that the revived phiksumi ordination was not Theravada. The monk cited the involvement of Mahayana monastics in earlier ordination ceremonies as the reason for his refutation.

Hence it seems that the question does not end with ‘What does it take to be Theravada?’ Given the different views of what constitutes Theravada authenticity even among male monastic authorities such as in Sri Lanka and Thailand, a question that lies deeper in the issue of phiksumi ordination, whose answer remains to be found, is: Who or which institution has the authority to determine what is and what is not Theravada? Or, where does the authority lie which can decide on the essence of being Theravada? Does this authority, or right, lie within individual persons, in which case individuals can assess their sectarian allegiance and adjust their religious practice accordingly? Or, does this authority lie with some formal institutions that take upon themselves the responsibility to pass an official judgement as to what is and what is not Theravada? And, does this authority know the limit of national boundaries? These are questions that entail issues of power and contestation. The fact that there have been no absolute answers to these questions has perpetuated the precariousness of phiksumi ordination in the contemporary Theravada context. However, this precariousness has paradoxically opened up the possibility for disruptions and inventive enactments of Theravada identity beyond the control of any authoritative institutions. In the next chapter, we will examine how the Theravada phiksumi ordination initiated in Sri Lanka was received in Thailand, with a focus on the public debates on the issue in the early 2000s.
Chapter 5

Debating Theravada Phiksuni Ordination

During the primetime news program in the evening of 4 February 2001, a Bangkok television channel reported on the ordination ceremony of Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Ven. Dhammananda), which had taken place earlier that day in Sri Lanka. Awareness spread among the audience of the fact that Thailand would now have her own Theravada phiksuni. For Thai Buddhists by and large, this news was unprecedented, if not unthinkable. Within hours of the news broadcast, the information spread via the internet, and web board discussion on the issue began. Initial reactions were marked with perplexity and scepticism. Referring to the news broadcast of the night before, an internet user who visited larndham.net, a popular Thai-language website on Buddhism, started a string of web board discussions with a long title: ‘A Woman, Claiming to be Ordained from Sri Lanka, Says She is a Phiksuni. Is this possible?’ (Lantham Sewana 2001). This question of the ‘possibility’, or more accurately ‘legitimacy’, of Theravada phiksuni ordination was to become the point of contention in the public debate that followed.

Trying to capture the feel of the debate four years later, I sorted out documents on women’s Theravada ordination. Only then did a difference in the degree of intensity of the debates about the possibility of women’s full ordination in the periods before and after the 2001 ordination became evident. Before Ven.
Dhammananda’s ordination in 2001, the issue of women’s full ordination as phiksumi was publicly discussed only by a small circle of people, most of them urban-based women academics and journalists, a few lay Buddhist scholars and monks, and one or two well-educated female religious practitioners. Their views, not completely unified, were expressed through limited channels such as academic writing (in Thai and English), sporadic newspaper articles (mostly in English), and talks at seminars, the type usually attended by small gatherings of interested people.

As can be expected, the ordination of Ven. Dhammananda in the early 2000s instigated wider public discussion of this formerly rarefied issue. The discussion escalated to the level of a ‘fervent debate’, as one newspaper put it (Atiya 2001b:), and a wide range of people – men and women, clerical and lay, people with authority and the ordinary, scholar and otherwise – took part in this debate. At the height of the debate, from around April to June 2001, opposing views circulated at an accelerated pace. The types of medium used for the exchange of these different views varied and included radio, television, newspaper and magazines, books, the internet, and public meetings. To state their cases, opinion leaders resorted to a variety of sources of legitimation, be they scriptural or customary, orthodox or liberal, historical or contemporary.

In this chapter, I examine the debate on women’s Theravada ordination that occurred in the early 2000s. Viewed collectively, the act of debating women’s ordination constitutes a field of action in itself. This field of action, discursive in nature, is connected to the empirical experiences of women’s ordination discussed earlier, for words, written and spoken, provide an indispensable tool
for discussing and in turn defining and shaping the way in which those experiences unfolded.

The purpose of this chapter, I should emphasize, is not to prove right or wrong the substance of the arguments made in the debate. For a good part of this debate concerned issues of authenticity and different interpretations of the scriptures, the issues which remain highly contentious. My intention is not to prove the accuracy of these contentions, but to understand the different positions and perspectives from which people made their arguments.

In the following sections, I analyse the context and content of the early 2000s debate. I start with an overview of the content of the debate based on the titles of the many publications and seminars or talks. Then, the following section explores the development of the controversy and the people or organizations involved. The remaining part of the chapter examines the content of the debate, including the different perspectives and contesting arguments put forth in the debate.

What’s in a Title?

As noted above, discussions of women’s ordination between the 1920s and 2000s were sporadic and limited to a small circle of people. The scepticism surrounding women’s ordination is reflected in how the issue tended to be handled with caution in discussions prior to the early 2000s controversy. The caution was often expressed by way of posing questions rather than assertions, and proposing rather than demanding, especially among the people who
supported the idea of women joining the *sangha*. To give some examples, in 1975, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, in the title of one of early publications on *phiksumi* ordination, stated a simple question: “Do *phiksumi* still exist?” (Chatsumarn 1975). In 1987, a well-known feminist journalist attempted to stimulate discussion about women’s ordination in her article entitled ‘Rethinking the Place of Women in Buddhism’ (reprinted in Sanitsuda 2001a). Amid rising interest in women’s ordination at the international level in the mid-1990s, a scholar monk proposed in an article that the *sangha* consider the possibility of incorporating women more systematically into its structure. This article title posed a seemingly neutral question: ‘Is it Really Good to Have Women Ordained?’ (reprinted in Sripariyattimoli 2003: 72-82). The most confrontational discussion of the issue during this period came perhaps from the well-known social critic Sulak Sivaraksa. True to his uncompromising style of criticism, Sulak, in a book entitled ‘Women and the Yellow Robes’, questioned the merit of strict adherence to the monastic disciplinary text and asserted the right of women to adorn themselves with the yellow monastic robes – the right which he saw as having been endowed by the Buddha (Sulak 1995: 4).

Questions, question marks, and words like ‘problem’ and ‘controversy’ characterized the public discussions of *phiksumi* ordination that started in the first half of 2001. Once the previously latent challenge of women’s Theravada ordination became real, the discussion of the issue became more adversarial, rendering immediately apparent the opposing views among those participating in the debate. A glance at the titles of publications and public talks is telling. A number of these titles reflect the dominant attitude that sees the *phiksumi* issue as a problem. These titles include: ‘The Phiksumi Problem: A Test for
Thai Society’ (Dhammapitaka 2001), ‘The Phiksuni Problem’ (Thongyoi 2001), and ‘Phiksuni and the Buddhist Solution’ (Chatwaran 2001). As we see here, all these pieces of writing were published in 2001, within months after Dhammananda’s ordination.

From the opposite stance, the ordained Ven. Dhammananda, being a prolific writer herself, became industrious in producing and disseminating information about Theravada phiksuni ordination. She moved from an innocuous 2001 book title ‘A Conversation with a Female Monk’ (Dhammananda 2001b) to a more assertive line in another book title published in 2003 which reads: ‘Phiksuni Ordination is Impossible: A Nullified Discourse’ (Dhammananda 2003). Still, people of less opposing views saw the issue as a troubling dilemma. Hence, when a group of public intellectuals under the name Midnight University gathered to discuss the matter, their choice of topic was ‘Phiksuni: Ideas or Biases’ (Midnight University 2001). Another columnist entitled her newspaper article: ‘Phiksuni: Choosing Not to Choose’, referring in this case to the sangha’s seemingly detached and disengaged position on the issue (Mukhom 2001). Meanwhile, a scholar monk entitled his newspaper article: ‘Phiksuni Sangha: An Inevitable Choice’, urging the sangha to take constructive action on the issue of women’s ordination if the monastic institution wished to remain socially relevant (Phaisan 2001).

Apart from these expressions of uncertainty about the issue, the debate also cast women’s ordination as a confrontational issue. Writers of some other newspaper commentaries chose to use bolder headings such as ‘The Phiksuni Dispute’ (Khao Athit Rai-wan 2001), ‘The Dhammananda Controversy’ (Sanitsuda 2001b) and ‘Clergy Lose Monopoly to Serve Our Needs’ (Sanitsuda
2002). In their choices of titles, the writers of this last group of articles decidedly cast aside any attempt to be discreet about the issue. The titles clearly pointed to the challenging nature of women’s ordination. Also, a master’s thesis on phiksunî ordination completed in 2003 was entitled ‘The Discursive Contestation of Knowledge between Patriarchy and Feminism’ (Rabiebrat 2003). It is clear from its title that feminist tenets are central to this analysis that places diverse views on women’s ordination into two opposite camps. In a similar vein, another master’s thesis on the issue completed in 2002 describes the situation as an encounter between “conservative and progressive ideologies” (Valeerat 2002).

Life of the Debate

From the moment the debate on phiksunî ordination erupted in 2001, the Sangha Council, the ecclesiastical administrative body most likely looked upon to provide the answer to this public controversy, seemed unprepared to deal with the issue. In the couple of months following the ordination in February, several individual monks and Buddhist scholars came out and made their comments in the media. During this time, however, the Sangha Council maintained a detached position, showing signs of not wanting to be involved in the debate.

News related to the ordination hit the front page of newspapers again in late April 2001. This time it was not the ordination itself but an alleged ‘ban’ on two television programs scheduled to air interviews with the ordained Dhammananda that became news. Some commentators linked the cancellation
of the programs with the fact that the television channel was owned by the military, hence an unwillingness to engage in activities that would affect the authority of the sangha. The channel administration denied this. The program producers then came out and admitted self-censorship due to the sensitivity of the issue (Thai Post 2001a, 2001b). Following this news, which involved not only the ordination issue but also freedom of expression, much yearned for in the recent history of Thai media, the debate escalated to an almost inexorable level for the next several weeks. The blurb of a long feature article in a local English-language newspaper summed up the situation (Atiya 2001a):

A fervent debate has erupted in the wake of the ordination of Buddhist scholar Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh as a novice monk. The controversy has generated a lot of heat – but little light and, as yet, no solution.

Considering the uproar of the debate that followed, one may conclude that the alleged institutional attempt to silence the issue of women’s ordination – whether this institution be the media or otherwise – in fact helped to amplify the debate at this point.

In late May 2001, in the wake of the intensifying debate, the Supreme Patriarch (Somdet Phra Yanasangworn) eventually voiced his disapproval of women’s ordination. This occurred during his address to graduates of one of the two Buddhist universities in the country. The Patriarch cited the 1928 Decree in full, commending its content as ‘up-to-date’ (thansamai) (Naewna 2001). By abiding by this Decree, said the Supreme Patriarch, Buddhists would refrain from committing “not at all a minor sin against the Religion” (Naewna 2001). He warned his audience “not to dare offend [the Buddha] with wrongful speech and action that defy his stipulation,” for those who do so would not live a good
life (Naewna 2001). Although the Supreme Patriarch’s speech was not to be strictly taken as an official statement of the Sangha Council, many people considered this to be the de facto position of the Council. And this was to be the case until the Council make known its official stance on the issue more than a year later.

Given the normally short-lived interest of the media, the coverage of the debate in 2001 carried on for an unusually long time. The media interest was kept alive by incidents such as the Supreme Patriarch’s speech just mentioned; the eventual appearance of Dhammananda in a television talk program moderated by an outspoken senator-cum-television emcee;¹ and the announced decision of another Thai woman, a mae-chi, to follow Dhammananda in her ordination.² This initial round of the debate cooled down in the second half of 2001, with sporadic discussions of the issue appearing in less sensational types of media such as books (by both Dhammananda and her critics), magazines of Buddhist organizations, and academic seminars.

Before public interest in the ordination controversy could subside completely, on 10 February 2002, another Thai woman received her samaneri ordination in the same fashion as that of Ven. Dhammananda, this time in Thailand. This ordination took place at the only Buddhist monastery for women in Thailand where Ven. Dhammananda resided.³ A Sri Lankan female monk was invited to give the ordination. Witnessing this ceremony were about fifty laypeople –

¹ Khor khit duay khon, TV programme on the topic ‘Satri nai phuthasasana’ (Women in Buddhism), broadcast on Channel 9, 18 June 2001. This talk show was hosted by Senator Jermsak Pinthong.
² Mae-chi Jamnian Ratanaburi received her novice ordination in Sri Lanka in mid 2001.
³ Mae-chi Warangkhana Wanawichyen is known after her ordination as Samaneri Dhammarakkhita. See Bangkok Post (2002a).
mostly women of middle-class background – and a mixed group of monastic women from Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and the Tibetan community in India. These monastic women came from different Buddhist traditions: Theravada, Mahayana and Tibetan. Six male monks from Thailand were also present as observers of the ceremony. The event marked the first Theravada ordination of women on Thai soil in almost seventy-five years.

The next morning, national newspapers flashed sensational headlines such as “First Thai woman ordained” (Bangkok Post 2002a: 6) and “Ordained on Thai Soil...A Female Novice! Paving the Way to a New Buddhist Sect” (Daily News 2002a: 1). The country’s best-selling newspaper printed a front-page colour photo of the group of monastic women from different countries who had participated in the ordination ceremony as they were visiting a Buddhist stupa near the ordination venue. Accompanying the photo was a disparaging caption starting with the phrase “absolutely bizarre” (sut phileuk) (Thairat 2002a). In its next edition, the same photo appeared again on the front page with a caption that read: “Women with shorn heads on tour” (lon ying thua) (Thairat 2002b). On the following day, the Deputy Minister of Education, who was overseeing the Department of Religious Affairs at that time, ordered that a panel be set up to investigate the incident. The panel’s task was to enquire into the validity of women’s ordination as well as its impact on the stability of Buddhism and national security (Bangkok Post 2002b; Daily News 2002b; Matichon Rai-wan 2002). It was in this manner that another round of public debate began.

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4 It was by coincidence that these monastic women from different countries gathered at the ordination ceremony. They had come to Thailand to participate in an international Buddhist monastic meeting held by a non-governmental organization prior to the ordination date. Ven. Dhammananda was among the participants at this conference, and she invited these other monastic women to attend the ordination ceremony.
At the height of the controversy in 2001 and 2002, religious experts, clerical and lay, took turns to express their views in the media. Polls were conducted to measure the public’s reactions. Numerous books and articles were published that discussed the arguments of advocates and detractors of women’s ordination. At the same time, the Senate Sub-committee on Women (SSW), led by a female senator, Rabiebrat Pongpanith, who supported women’s ordination, decided to put the issue on its agenda. Between May and November 2002, the sub-committee ran inquiry sessions with experts and key figures in the debate. The sub-committee’s final recommendation was that the ordination was “not against the monastic disciplinary rules and Thai law” and that the legal status of Thai women ordained in the Theravada tradition should be spelled out in Thai legislation (SSW c.2003b). In October 2002, the senator in question tabled a motion on phiksun ordination during a senate session, prompting the cabinet to initiate the legislative process to recognize women’s ordination. However, the cabinet’s representative refused to make a decision and deferred to the judgement of the Sangha Council. The reason given for this deferral was that women’s ordination was a monastic affair and the state should refrain from interfering in the matter (SSW c.2003a).

Prompted in turn by this parliamentary process, the Sangha Council issued a brief resolution in December 2002 confirming the verdict of the Committee for the Security of the Buddhist Religion (Khana-kammakan khwam-man-khong haeng phra-phutthasasana) that the 1928 Decree concerning the ordination of women was to be upheld. In a quandary, or simply in an attempt to distance

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5 Senator Rabiebrat Pongpanith was then the Chair of the Senate Sub-committee on Women (SSW).

himself and the government from the sangha's position without offending the latter, the incumbent Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinwatra, addressed the issue of women's ordination in his speech to commemorate the 2004 International Women’s Day. He said that the government was in full support of equal opportunities for women in all spheres, except for women’s ordination. Then, he continued, “The government has no idea how to deal with the issue of phiksun ordination. We must withdraw from the matter.”

Contending Words

The debate on women’s Theravada ordination in the early 2000s reads in some respects like history repeating itself. The reasons cited to justify the revocation of women’s ordination in the 1920s were reiterated, such as the need to adhere to the letter of the Vinaya, the irretrievability of the lost Theravada phiksuni lineage, the alleged violation of the Buddha’s provisions, and the prohibition of the 1928 Decree. It is also interesting that after almost seventy-five years, issues related to modernity such as claims for the equality of women and freedom of religious practice – something of a novelty in the 1920s – still demanded strong assertion in the early 21st century.

Nevertheless, the social and political atmosphere of the early 2000s was clearly more open than before. As a journalist contributing to the ordination debate put it, “society has become too pluralistic for a single voice to dominate all others” (Sanitsuda 2002: 9). The number and social distribution of people

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7 Thaksin Shinwatra, speech on “The Promotion of Women’s Status,” delivered in commemoration of the International Women’s Day, 8 March 2004, at the Navy Convention Hall, Bangkok.
taking part in this debate were larger than in the past. The renewed spirit of democracy, embodied in the 1997 ‘new’ or ‘People’s Constitution’, had become an important social currency of the day.\(^8\) In this legislative package came strengthened notions of rights, liberty and equality. By the early 2000s, the changing economic structure had led to growing influence of the middle class and its women. More importantly, the dynamics of the relationship between the *sangha* and the state had changed, with the state’s interest in the position of the *sangha* waning considerably. Easier access to transnational connections and mobility also added to the diversity of arguments and actions concerning women’s ordination. In short, the nature of participation in and content of the women’s ordination debate in the early 2000s had become more complex and involved a larger and more diverse public than in the late 1920s.

At a superficial level, the conflicts concerning women’s Theravada ordination can be described as a clash between the old and the new; that is, between the conservative force in Thai Buddhism with its roots in scriptural orthodoxy, and the influx of modern liberal concepts such as constitutional rights and gender equality. However, a more nuanced reading of the content of the debate brings to light other underlying issues such as different approaches to the scriptures, the aspiration for sectarian purity, instrumental interpretation of canonical texts, selective use of histories, the link between Buddhism and national identity, and the shifting balance of power between the *sangha* and the state.

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\(^8\) The 1997 Constitution was abolished after a military coup that took place in Thailand on 19 September 2006.
The Vinaya question

The most frequently cited reason for the unfeasibility of phiksuni ordination in Thai Theravada Buddhism concerned the procedural technicality of the ordination ceremony for women. The recognized rules of phiksuni ordination as they appear in the Bhikkhuni Vinaya, or the female monastic rules, and the Gurudhamma⁹ prescribe that a woman who wishes to become a phiksuni must seek her ordination from a female phiksuni preceptor, and that such ordination (of women and not men) be approved by both the female phiksuni and the male phiksu sangha. This process is sometimes referred to in the English literature on Buddhist women’s monasticism as ‘double ordination.’ According to the argument against women’s ordination, the Theravada phiksuni lineage died out in Sri Lanka and India around the 11th century, and this female ordination lineage never arrived in Southeast Asia. Hence no phiksuni exist today who are eligible to act as preceptors and representatives of the phiksuni sangha to approve the ordination of women. It is therefore, according to this argument, not possible for the legitimate ordination of women to take place in the Theravada tradition at present or in the future.

One of the most influential voices in the ordination debate came from an orthodox monk and authority in the Buddhist scriptures, Phra Dhammapitaka (P. A. Payutto).¹⁰ In one of his talks on the issue of women’s monasticism, the monk emphasized the importance of adhering to the ‘principle’, pointing to the

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⁹ The Gurudhamma is a set of eight special rules believed to have been laid down by the Buddha for the bhikkhuni to follow. These rules essentially place female monastics in an institutional position lower than their male counterparts. Some scholars, by means of textual analysis, have questioned the claim that these rules were laid down during the time of the Buddha, suspecting that they might be a product of later interpolations. See Mettanando (2002).

¹⁰ As of October 2006, he has been promoted to the rank of Phra Phromkhunaphorn.
rules of phiksuni ordination as they appear in the scriptures. "We have to consider what the principle says, [that is,] what the Buddha has stipulated in connection with phiksuni ordination. We can do as much as the principle allows," he said (Dhammapitaka 2001: 8). As to what the principle says, the revered monk concluded, "The matter is clear and simple. Women today have as much right to be ordained as women of the Buddha's time. The predicament, however, lies in the fact that nobody is present now who has the right to give them ordination" (Dhammapitaka 2001: 10-11). Given his widely recognized authority on the scriptures, it is not surprising that Phra Dhammapitaka's view was taken up and quoted repeatedly by people who argued for the impossibility of phiksuni ordination. A booklet recording his discussions of phiksuni ordination was reprinted at least three times within four months following the 2001 ordination. His view, it can be said, represented the orthodox voice of Thai Buddhism.

Contrary or less orthodox views regarding the Vinaya question came from various sources including other male monks and lay Buddhist scholars. However, an extensive inquiry into the Vinaya question came not from a religious agency but a secular legislative body, the Senate Sub-committee on Women (SSW). This sub-committee held a view decidedly different from that of scriptural orthodoxy. The content of the sub-committee's report, based on almost a year-long study and released in March 2003, ranges from a historical account of the first phiksuni ordination in India in the 6th century BC to problems and obstacles in contemporary Thailand. The report also contains recommendations on social and legal solutions to the issue.
In relation to the Vinaya rules, which form part of the canonical Tipitaka, the sub-committee’s report lists eight different procedural methods of monastic ordination found in the greater volumes of the canon. Of these, the ‘double ordination’, which requires the presence of a quorum of at least five phiksuni and five phiksu (male monks) to preside over an ordination, is but one of the ordination procedural methods practised during the Buddha’s time. In another of the scripturally prescribed ordination procedures, male monks alone are allowed to give ordination to women. While certain ordination procedures, such as that conducted by the Buddha himself, had become practically unfeasible, the report argues that no records were found which had abolished the procedure that allowed male monks alone to give ordination to women (SSW c.2003b: 43-44).

The answer to the Vinaya question thus remains inconclusive. Since the different sides in the debate represented different interpretations of the canonical texts, the essence of these arguments was not so much about which proposition was accurate as it was about the different approaches one took to the rules of ordination. At one end of this debate was a view, based on Buddhist orthodoxy, that the letter of the Vinaya took precedence over all other concerns. From this perspective, the Vinaya text occupied the position of the sacred. The text was taken as fixed in time, set in the historical moment when the Theravada tradition was founded. The text was regarded as secluded from ephemeral social contexts, either at the time of its conception or at present. One could only study and carry out one’s practice according to the text, but could never review, re-interpret or amend it. As Phra Dhammapitaka affirmed, “when it comes to the Vinaya, all that the sangha, particularly members of the Sangha Council, can do is to provide the knowledge [about the Vinaya] and
follow the rules. We cannot expect the sangha to act as the Buddha [by amending the text]" (Dhammapitaka 2001: 13).

Moreover, the act of holding on to the letter of the Vinaya itself has been a crucial part of the identity of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. As a monk emphasized, "we cannot erase the Vinaya. If the Theravada tradition erases the Vinaya, that is the end. We will be Theravada no more. We are Theravada because we take the Vinaya strictly."\textsuperscript{11} However, it is misleading to take this position at face value, as actual monastic practices of Thai monks have changed over time and the Thai media has not been short of reports and criticisms of misconduct of members of the Thai sangha.

The other approach to the Vinaya views the text in a pragmatic light. The Vinaya is taken as a code of conduct necessary to maintain the harmonious and peaceful coexistence of members of the monastic community. Equally important is the role of the Vinaya in facilitating the deepest dhamma practice among monastic members. In other words, the disciplinary regime is a means to achieve the goal of an enlightened livelihood (Midnight University 2001). A scholar monk, Phra Phaisan Wisalo, maintained that the Vinaya guides the "external life" of monks so that the external livelihood will facilitate the advancement of their study and the propagation of dhamma (Phaisan 2003: 359). The underlying argument here is: it is the spirit, and not the letter, of the monastic rules that should have priority. This approach to the Vinaya allows for the possibility to re-read and re-interpret the monastic rules (Midnight University 2001).

\textsuperscript{11} A high-ranking monk, presenting his view at one of the inquiry sessions of the SSW held between May-November 2002. Records of these inquiry sessions appear in unpublished minutes of the meetings of the sub-committee.
Ordination Lineage and Theravada-Mahayana Divide

While the procedural correctness of the ordination ceremony was a prime concern in the debate on women’s ordination, the continuity or discontinuity of the lineage of female ordination was another crucial point of contention. Central to this lineage question was the demarcation between Theravada and Mahayana traditions, and whether or not Thai women ordained by the Sri Lankan phikuni sangha belonged to the Theravada tradition.

To understand the complexity of the lineage question, it should be noted that the present-day phikuni sangha of Sri Lanka was successfully revived only in the second half of the 1990s, with two pioneering groups of Sri Lankan women (ten in the first group and twenty in the second) receiving their ordination from phikuni preceptors from South Korea and Taiwan respectively. The intervention by the phikuni preceptors from these East Asian countries, known to follow the Mahayana tradition, helped to fulfill the double ordination requirement that women be ordained in the presence of the assemblies of female and male monastics respectively. However, this same fact led to a debate in Sri Lanka over the Theravada authenticity of the country’s newly revived phikuni sangha in the years immediately following the initial ordination. But with the blessing and support of a number of senior and influential monks of different sub-sects in Sri Lanka, women’s ordination in that country flourished, with group ordination ceremonies for women being

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12 The ordinations which took place in Sarnath, India, in 1996 and in Bodhgaya, India, in 1998 were not the first bhikkhuni ordinations of Sri Lankan women in recent history. In 1988, an international bhikkhuni ordination was held in Los Angeles, USA. Five women from Sri Lanka were ordained at this ordination. However, due to lack of systematic support in Sri Lanka at that time, it was difficult for these ordained women to continue their bhikkhuni practices after their ordination. For more detail of the ordinations, see Dhammananda (2001a) and Sripariyattimoli (2001).
held locally on a regular basis. In 2001, when Chatsumarn sought her lower samaneri ordination in Sri Lanka, there were reportedly over two hundred ordained women in the country (Sripariyattimoli 2001: 112). Nevertheless, the Mahayana elements in the first few ordination ceremonies of Sri Lankan phiksuni meant that the ordination of Thai women by Sri Lankan phiksuni preceptors remained questionable for the Thai sangha and people with a conservative Theravada inclination. According to this absolute Theravada perspective, as will be evident below, anything less than pure Theravada is basically not Theravada.

Two crucial counterarguments have been made in regard to the lineage question. One is that the origin of the lineage of phiksuni in East Asian countries can be traced back to the Theravada Sri Lanka. This historical proposition was first made available in the Thai language, albeit in a limited circle, in one of Chatsumarn’s early works. In her book entitled ‘Do Phiksuni Still Exist?’, Chatsumarn (1975: 65) cited Gomez’s (1964) account, rarely heard among Thai Buddhists, of a group of phiksuni envoys from Sri Lanka who travelled to China in the year 433 (976 BE) and ordained women in China. By citing this historical narrative, she tried to prove that the phiksuni lineage in China, and by extension Taiwan and Korea, was a continuation of the Theravada phiksuni lineage from Sri Lanka (Chatsumarn 1975: 65).

It is not surprising that people who sympathized with the cause of women’s ordination would readily take up this line of explanation. The SSW, for example, reiterated this argument with further academic references in its study report in favour of phiksuni ordination (SSW c.2003b: 33). However, this contention, even if it could be confirmed, did not result in instant acceptance of
phiksuni ordination in the Theravada tradition. As Phra Dhammapitaka (2001: 41) argued:

Even if it could be proved that the phiksuni [in Taiwan] belong to the Theravada lineage, the fact that there are only Mahayana male monks in Taiwan means that those phiksuni who have been ordained in the double ordination ceremonies in that country must have received their ordinations from Mahayana male monks. The Theravada essence has then been altered. Should we consider those phiksuni [so ordained] half-Theravada half-Mahayana?

The other counterargument against the contention that phiksuni were not Theravada sought to return to the history of early Buddhism. Not unlike Phra Dhammapitaka, the acclaimed lay Buddhist scholar Sathianphong Wannapok (2002) highlighted the need to adhere to the Buddha’s provisions. But it was the way he interpreted the Buddha’s provisions, based on a simple and often disregarded historical fact, which made a difference. While acknowledging that the Theravada phiksuni lineage had been lost, he pointed out that there was no such thing as a division between Theravada and Mahayana traditions during Buddha’s time. The sectarian schism, as recorded in the canonical text, came after the Buddha’s death. Thus, when the Buddha mentioned phiksuni in his provisions, it followed that he did not make a distinction between phiksuni of the Theravada and Mahayana traditions. As Sathianphong wrote in a newspaper article: “If a phiksuni sangha still exists, no matter of which tradition, the samaneri or phiksuni ordination conferred by that sangha is by no means a violation of the Buddha’s provisions” (Sathianphong 2002: 6). 13

13 For a similar view, see Phaisan (2003: 360-361) and Sripariyattimoli (2003: 119).
other words, if Buddhists were to take what was understood as the Buddha’s own provisions seriously, any attempt to invalidate women’s ordination based on the Theravada-Mahayana divide would be unwarranted.

Underlying this argumentative exchange is the issue of selective use of histories. While the argument that affirmed the Theravada-Mahayana divide exclusively took into account the moment the schism took shape and after, the contrary argument that maintained that the sectarian divide was irrelevant necessarily sought to go back further into the history of Buddhism. The latter argument focused on the time when the Buddha was alive, when a sectarian divide was nowhere to be found. As convincing as each side of the debate may sound, the contentions discussed so far are not as yet the end of the story. Now, we come to another related issue, the ‘foreignness’ of women’s ordination to Thai Buddhism.

‘Foreignness’ of Phiksumi Ordination and Thai Buddhist Identity

The need for women to seek ordination outside Thailand is inherent in the fact that phiksumi ordination, be it of the Theravada or Mahayana tradition, has never been officially recognized as legitimate within the Thai national territory. This led to the ascribed ‘foreignness’ of phiksumi ordination. Yet the degree of this foreignness varies according to the source of ordination, at least in the perception of the women seeking ordination themselves. Looking back on her mother’s ordination conducted in Taiwan in 1971, Dhammananda commented in an interview:
She was ordained in the Chinese lineage. Once her ordination was cast in that Chinese or Mahayana light, it was difficult for other women to follow suit. In Thailand we identify ourselves as Thai. That we should be ordained as Chinese monks (*phra jek phra jin*) is against our dispositions (Nasak 2001: 69).

In another article, she explained her choice of being ordained in Sri Lanka:

Now that *phiksuni* ordination is available in Sri Lanka ... I think it is a good opportunity for us to continue the lineage from [there], where the practice is quite similar to that of Thailand. We also use the same Pali language. I don’t have to learn a new foreign language (*Thammanurak* 2001: 3).

A close reading of these comments hints at how the aspiration to be accepted as Theravada and Thai is also part of women’s Theravada ordination in the early 2000s. This is evident in phrases such as ‘we identity ourselves as Thai,’ ‘similar [practices] to those of Thailand,’ or the fact that there was no need to learn a ‘foreign’ language. However, since the Thai *sangha* identifies strongly with the Theravada tradition and Theravada Buddhism has become part of Thai national identity, women’s ordination from any non-Thai lineage (Theravada or otherwise) continues to be regarded as ‘foreign’ or ‘other’ to Thai Buddhism. Comments on the foreignness or non-Thai ness of women’s ordination are therefore frequently intertwined with a refusal to recognize the ordination as belonging to the Theravada tradition. In one example, a Buddhist educator argued in a passionate tone:
[For ordained women,] you must be honest and tell the truth that you are
*phiksumi* of other traditions, and that you are not *phiksumi* of the Thai
*sangha*. Neither are you *phiksumi* as prescribed in the Theravada
Tipitaka (Thongyoi 2001: 37, emphases added).

As seen in this passage, being Thai and being Theravada are intertwined, and
failing to meet either of these twin qualifications means falling into a category
of being other to Thai Theravada Buddhism.

However, this essentially Thai-and-Theravada Buddhist identity has not gone
uncontested. A counterargument to the claim for a Buddhist nationalist
identity points to the transborder aspect of Buddhist history. Historically,
Buddhism has diversified and spread to multiple destinations, and there have
been exchanges of ordination lineages among different Buddhist societies from
the past to present. An example of this line of argument comes from the social
critic Sulak. Sulak argued that seven or eight hundred years ago, the Thai
(male) *sangha* used to embrace the Sri Lankan Buddhist ordination lineage as
its own. This Sri Lanka-derived lineage is still known in Thailand as
‘Lankawong’ (Pali: *Lanka vamsa*). For this reason, Sulak saw no problem that
Thailand should reconnect with the Sri Lankan lineage again in the case of
*phiksumi* ordination at present (Sekhiyatham 2001: 80).

Another scholar, Pramuan Phengjan, discussed the same historical fact about
the exchange of ordination lineages between the Sri Lankan and Thai
kingdoms in the past. He referred to the practice as a ‘custom’ (*jarit prapheni*).
He argued that any attempt to bar the practice of transborder exchange of
ordination lineages was “in contradiction to the custom” (Midnight University
2001). Such references to a historical linkage between Thai and foreign,
notably Sri Lankan, monastic lineages shed light on the hybridity of these
ordination lineages. This hybrid quality has been a vital part of Buddhist
monastic history in Thailand and elsewhere. While hybridity is not considered
a problem in men’s monasticism, the same quality in women’s monasticism,
together with its cross-traditional (Theravada-Mahayana) characteristics, has served to invoke a parochial view among conservative Buddhists in Thailand. Women’s monasticism is thus regarded in terms of otherness by parochial (male-oriented) Thai Buddhism.

The Secular and the Religious

One of the rationales given in support of phiksuni ordination concerns the need for the Thai Buddhist sangha to keep up with changing social conditions. Tending to the religious needs of women in the contemporary social and political context is one way for the sangha to remain socially relevant. During the debate of the early 2000s, connections were forged between women’s ordination, the spirit of democracy, and the notions of rights, freedom and equality as inscribed in the now abolished 1997 Constitution of Thailand (see footnote 8, this Chapter). The report of the SSW represents perhaps the strongest demand in this area. The report lists constitutional clauses that guarantee the principles of non-discrimination, equality between men and women, freedom of religious belief and practice, and human dignity. It also referred to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, to which Thailand is a party (SSW c.2003b: 3-4).

However, this link between secular legislative principles and religious values was not readily accepted by those who opposed women’s ordination; it was often argued against based on the basis that the secular state and religious institutions should remain separate. One example of this latter view lay in the speech that the then Deputy Prime Minister Visanu Khreua-ngam delivered in
response to the motion on phiksuni ordination raised during a senate session in October 2002. Defending the government’s decision to disengage from the issue of women’s ordination, the Deputy PM overseeing the National Buddhism Bureau stated repeatedly that the issue of women’s ordination, being a religious matter, was beyond the jurisdiction of the government. As he said,

This issue is definitely not within the state’s authority. ... This is a religious matter. ... It is a matter to be defined within their [the sangha’s] circle because the state had not been involved in laying down those rules from the beginning. Our country is not one of those countries that uphold religious law as the law of the nation (SSW c.2003a: 14-15).

It should be noted that the Thai state does not necessarily shy away from engaging in issues pertaining to the sangha in all cases. On the contrary, the reciprocal relationship between the state and the sangha administration in Thailand has long been recognized and accepted. One may rightly say that the state-sangha relationship has been fundamental to various aspects of social organization in Thailand. Yet, this relationship has never been clearly defined or fixed. For this reason, advocates of women’s ordination, making their demands in the face of the unsettled relationship between the secular and the religious, had to try to accommodate both sides of the dichotomy. Again, turning to the extensive report of the SSW, we see an attempt to forge a harmonious affinity between modern secular principles and conventional religious values. A passage from this report reads,

These principles [of constitutional rights and human rights] are in line with the dhamma teaching of the Buddha, which states that women and
men who follow the principles of Buddhism are on an equal footing in
their capacity to achieve enlightenment (SSW c.2003b: 4).

In another example, Phra Phaison acknowledged social change — especially the
improved status of middle-class women — as a prime force behind the
contemporary call for the recognition of women’s ordination (Phaisan 2003:
191, 357). In his discussion, however, the scholar monk did not fail to make a
favourable link between contemporary social conditions and religious ideals of
the past, saying,

The importance of the advocacy for the phiksuni sangha to be established
in Thailand does not lie in the equal rights between genders. According
to Buddhist principles, women and men already have equal rights, at least
the rights to enlightenment and self-development. These equal rights are
undeniable (Phaisan 2003: 360).

From the above examples, we see that the relationship between the two
spheres, namely the secular and the religious, is not monolithic or fixed in time.
Rather, this relationship is quite malleable and is open to being shaped by
different discursive constructions in order to meet the social and political needs
of different groups and times.

The Social and the Spiritual

Another contested issue in the debate on women’s ordination concerned the
relationship between the social and the spiritual benefits of ordination. On one
side of the debate was an argument that Buddhist religious practice was
accessible to all people, lay or ordained, so women who yearned for a religious life did not need to be ordained to be able to practice dhamma and attain spiritual achievement. Thus, the attempt to institute women’s ordination was sometimes branded as a ‘craving’ for social status. A Buddhist educator, arguing against Theravada phiksun ordination, made his point by saying that enlightenment which derived from virtuous practice had nothing to do with ordination (Thongyoi 2001: 20). As he argued, “a woman craveingly striving for phiksun ordination ... is likely to have fallen under the influence of bhavatanha – the craving for [a certain state of] existence” (Thongyoi 2001: 21). This view was far from being a mere personal opinion. The Sangha Council, in its official resolution that ruled out the possibility for official recognition of phiksun ordination, restated this point saying, “Although [women] cannot be ordained as phiksun, [they] can still observe the eight precepts as guidelines for practice that will lead to a high moral achievement.”14

The sociologist Apinya Feungfusakul argued against this proposition. She said that one needed to make a distinction between internal (or spiritual) and structural (or social) aspects of religious vocation. While accepting the proposition that individual religious practitioners should concern themselves with the internal or spiritual practice with an aim to free their mind from all kinds of ideational distinctions, she contended that a conducive social environment such as in the monastic livelihood would contribute significantly to the attainment of that spiritual goal (Midnight University 2001). Phra Phaisan also supported this point. “As much as the community and livelihood

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of the phiksu sangha have provided men with a shortcut to the dhamma," he wrote, "the community and livelihood of the phiksu sangha will provide the same advantage for women" (Phaisan 2003: 359).

Another social aspect that came up in the early 2000s ordination debate concerned the possible impact of phiksu ordination on social change. Whether one wants it or not, phiksu ordination can hardly be viewed by the Thai Buddhist institution as merely the quest of individual women for religious life par excellence. The mutually reinforcing relationships between the purity of the Theravada tradition, the parochial characteristic of Thai Buddhism, and the Buddhist national identity discussed so far means that a challenge to any of these entities is likely to be perceived as a challenge to all the others. Thus, there was a worry that phiksu ordination, itself a challenge to the conventional Thai Theravada Buddhism, would cause problems not only for the sangha but also for the larger society. This worrisome thought is expressed in the following passage extracted from an article opposing phiksu ordination,

It is clear that the contemporary [call for] phiksu ordination is problematic. It has created a problem to the society. Clearly, it has brought about conflicts of opinions from the start. What more conflicts are we to expect if the ordination actually takes place? This is beyond our speculation (Thongyoi 2001: 18, emphases added).

This argument arises from a very specific mindset about what makes a good society. Obviously, a good society in this notion is one in which the status quo is maintained. Any possible change to this order is considered a 'problem.' Likewise, differences in ideas are regarded as 'conflicts'. From this
perspective, the attempt to institute *phiksu*ni ordination was a disruption to the existent social order; it created ‘conflicts’ and was therefore a ‘problem to the society’.

However, this concept of a good society in relation to the *phiksu*ni issue has been challenged. Whereas the arguments in the political sphere, e.g. the parliament, were loaded with terms characteristic of modern political discourse such as religious freedom, gender equality, women’s participation, constitutional rights and equal opportunities, there were also attempts to revisit and draw on the Buddhist ideal social structure as stipulated by the Buddha as the basis of an argument. This concept of a Buddhist social structure, which lends support to the idea of equality between women and men, is widely known among Buddhists in general as “the four companies” or four groups of people that form a Buddhist society. These companies are: *phiksu* (male monks), *phiksu*ni (female monks), *ubasok* (laymen) and *ubasika* (laywomen). The Buddha is known to have entrusted the responsibility to uphold the *dhamma* on these four groups of people. He is also known to have made a statement that the *dhamma* is likely to diminish if the four companies do not respect one another. Taking up this ideal social composition, Pramuan said,

The Buddha intends for a Buddhist society in which women and men are on an equal footing. …We now understand this principle in terms of women’s rights. But actually, this has always been a principle in Buddhism. …By allowing women to be ordained as *phiksu*ni, we are confirming our Buddhist belief which has been there from the past (Midnight University 2001).
He insisted that the *phiksuni* issue should not be understood as a struggle for the benefit of individual women, but rather as a struggle to resume a decent social structure according to the Buddhist principles whereby “gender will not be used as a justification to cut off opportunities or rights of others” (Midnight University 2001). The discussion on gender equality in Buddhism is an extensive topic in itself. Here, I only draw on ideas arising in the arguments on *phiksuni* ordination to demonstrate different perspectives of what makes a good society based on gender relations.

Contestation for legitimacy is at the core of the debate on women’s ordination. This contestation is largely manifested in attempts to return, in a discursive manner, to what each party perceives as the origin – in this case, the Buddha. Merely glancing at the great volume of texts that contribute to the ordination debate, one can hardly fail to notice catchphrases such as the Buddha’s provisions (*phutthabanyat*), the Buddha’s will or intent (*phuttajetana*) and the Buddha’s wish (*phutthaprasong*). The dominant sources of this much yearned for legitimacy are the canonical Tipitaka and the volumes of established commentaries.\(^{15}\) As seen above, both those people who supported women’s ordination and those who opposed it attempted to return to the ‘Buddha’ as the origin in their quest for legitimacy. The fact that the scriptural texts which are the sources of the legitimation in question have already been mediated did not deter these attempts. For the quest for legitimacy, as has been discussed in this

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\(^{15}\) According to the Tipitaka authority *Phra* Dhammapitaka, established Buddhist doctrinal commentaries include those written in the period from the Buddha’s time until around the year 900 BE (357 CE). Commentaries dated after that point in time are considered miscellaneous texts, thus of less authority than those that came before. See Dhammapitaka (2001: 55-57).
chapter, was in itself an act of discursive mediation, based on the interpretation of texts.

History also played an important legitimizing role in this debate over women’s ordination. As seen in this chapter, historical claims are rarely unified, revealing the fact that there are different ‘histories’ on which one can lay claim. Or at least there are different periods in history with different incidents that one can draw on to make one’s case. The fact that these histories are often remembered in an incomplete manner, and not in any fixed historical sequence, allows them to be cited selectively. Thus, histories as well as scriptural texts tend to serve as versatile sources of legitimacy for people of different beliefs and aspirations.
Chapter 6
Creating Female Monastic Practices

“Faith (sattha) is something that has to be built bit by bit, with perseverance.” Ven. Dhammananda stopped walking, turned to me and made this remark unexpectedly. “As for the alms-round,” she added, “it has taken a long time before we have had this many people [giving alms].” A group of women – six female monks from four different countries, two Thai mae-chi and three laywomen – had just stepped in from the narrow and quiet asphalt lane past the rear gate into the back garden of Watr Songdham Kalayani. A few fragrant frangipani trees stood on the green lawn that formed an island in the middle of the garden, surrounded by a calming lotus pond. Flanked by tall concrete fences, this sliding gate, a plain and heavy iron piece painted in lemon colour, marked the finishing point of the alms-rounds that the monastic women made every Sunday and Buddhist holy day (wan phra), which comes four times each lunar month.\(^1\) In common practice, this early-morning walking trip helps Buddhist (male) monastics in most parts of Thailand to secure their daily food, which is prepared and offered by lay householders.

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\(^1\) *Wan phra* (literally 'day of the monk', also religious day) comes four times each lunar month, on the 8\(^{th}\) and the 14\(^{th}\) or 15\(^{th}\) of the waxing-moon period, and the 8\(^{th}\) and the 14\(^{th}\) or 15\(^{th}\) of the waning-moon period.
For monastic women at Watr Songdham Kalayani, the route of their approximately two-kilometre Sunday alms-trip follows the lane that branches off from the Phetchkasem Highway. The narrow road runs along one side of this women’s monastery, leading away from the rumbling highway into a sparsely populated neighbourhood on the outskirts of Nakhon Pathom provincial town, about one hour drive southwest of Bangkok. “You remember that last bend of the road we made before we turned back, don’t you?” Ven. Dhammananda continued saying to me as the other monastic and lay women were heading towards the dining hall. “Initially,” she went on to say, “only that family of husband and wife and their little girl gave alms there, at the farthest point in the round. One day, they told me to walk further because someone living around the corner wanted to give alms too. So I went to that further point where another person waited to offer some food. For the first year or so, it was just this one person [who offered food at that place].” When she said this, my mind flashed back to a specific stop during the alms-trip where this morning I had seen a group of about a dozen people – adults and children who seemed to belong to two or three different households – waiting to make their food offerings. An increase in the number of alms-givers seemed to suggest that householders in the area had come to accept the alms-round practice of women at Watr Songdham Kalayani, notwithstanding that this is an untypical practice for monastic women.

In the preceding chapter, I discussed how the notion of legitimacy for Theravada women’s ordination has been discursively contested in the public sphere. This chapter moves on to consider ordained women’s enactment of their new roles in the area of monastic practice. Everyday monastic practice and religious rituals are constitutive of the monastic lifestyle and identity, and
as such form a strong basis for the legitimate monastic vocation. They are sites where different religious projects and expectations, be they reformist or popular in nature, meet. They also serve as a contact point between the monastic and the lay realms. It is also in these sites that official or scriptural requirements of legitimate monasticism and localized or popular monastic traditions merge. This chapter, therefore, explores the efforts made by the emergent Theravada monastic women to fulfil their monastic roles by initiating and carrying out everyday monastic practices and religious rituals. The chapter investigates examples of everyday monastic conduct – including the collection of alms food, the use of monastic robes, and the use of clerical vocabulary – as well as the women’s engagement in ritual activity. The aim of the chapter is not to provide a description of these monastic practices but to understand the implications of women’s involvement in the kind of practices that has been strongly identified with male religious authority.

This chapter focuses on the practices of Theravada monastic women. Despite their small number, the monastic practices of these women are worth the attention, for this is the category of monastic women that lays claim to a near-equivalent status to male monks. However, practices by women of other monastic categories will also be brought into view for the purpose of comparison. In addition, monastic practices provide not only the opportunity for monastic women to establish their identity; they also allow the laity to be involved in the process of monastic identity formation by either accepting or rejecting the practices. For this reason, the participation of laypeople in the monastic practices will also be discussed.
The Alms-round

One morning, just as she was about to walk out of the yellow iron gate to start the alms-round, Ven. Dhammananda turned to have a few words with two mae-chi who were to accompany her on that walking trip. It was a Sunday in January 2003. At that time, Ven. Dhammananda was still the only Theravada female novice living at Watr Songdham Kalayani. Three other Thai women who had been ordained in the Theravada tradition at that point were living separately elsewhere.

Of the two mae-chi going on the alms-round with Ven. Dhammananda that day, the older one in her early thirties had come to this monastery as a mae-chi a few months earlier. She had been a mae-chi for four years. Having heard of the possibility for full ordination in the Theravada tradition, she came to Watr Songdham Kalayani in the hope of gaining Ven. Dhammananda’s support for such ordination. The other mae-chi – a twenty-year-old woman – had shaved her hair, put on the white robes and taken the eight-precept vow for only a few days at that time. Hers was not an untypical case of a Thai Buddhist woman who, when facing a crisis in life, opted to become a mae-chi and take temporary refuge in religion.

“Now, let us think that we are going out to do our duty as daughters of the Buddha,” Ven. Dhammananda said slowly to the mae-chi. “Whether we will get food or not, it doesn’t matter,” she continued, “Just concentrate on spreading our compassion to the people who we will meet on the way and wishing them happiness.” Without more words, she walked through the opened gate. The rest of us followed quietly in single file, the two mae-chi in
front, with a teenage girl who lived under Ven. Dhammananda’s guardianship and myself following behind.

The first two to three hundred metres of the road were lined with a few houses and patches of idle, weed-filled land. The neighbourhood had yet to wake up fully. Apart from the driver of a pick-up truck and a motorcycle driving past, we encountered no other people along this first stretch of the route. Then, at the first turn of the road, in front of a fenced house; a middle-aged woman in casual clothes stood waiting. She was carrying a silver-coloured metal bowl which, as one could tell, contained freshly cooked rice. A tray holding a few different kinds of food packed in small portions sat atop a stool beside her. As the monastic women came near and finally stopped in front of her, the woman slipped off her flip-flops as a gesture of respect.\(^2\) The girl and I stepped out of the row to stand behind the monastics. Our instinctive move was a bodily acknowledgement that the food was to be offered to the monastics only, for monks, according to a popular Buddhist belief in Thailand, are the peerless ‘field of merit’ capable of generating the greatest meritorious reward for food and other material objects offered to them.\(^3\)

It was evident from the effortless interaction between the two sides that this lay woman was a regular alms-giver to the monastic women. As I would learn later, the woman and her grown-up daughter were among the people from the neighbourhood who seemed especially devoted to Ven. Dhammananda and her monastery. While the numbers of regular alms-givers increased gradually over

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\(^2\) Since it is typical for monks to go on alms-round bare-foot, laypeople are expected to take off their shoes when they make the food offerings so not to be standing in a ‘higher’ position than the monks.

\(^3\) For an explanation of the term ‘field of merit’, see footnote 14 in the Introduction.
the period of my fieldwork, and while visitors to Watr Songdham Kalayani came from a much wider geographical area, this group of ten or so devoted householders seemed to loosely form the core group of followers from the neighbourhood. Apart from giving alms on a regular basis, they also frequently attended ceremonial activities at the monastery and a few were there occasionally to help with house-keeping tasks.

For now, the woman filled each of the three monastic bowls with a large spoonful of rice and divided the rest of the food between the monastics. She then squatted down, back bending forward, hands clasped together on her forehead to receive a short Pali blessing from the monastic women. "May you, your daughter and other members of your family live well," said Ven. Dhammananda in the Thai language following the Pali chant. "May you all have good health and attain the purity of the mind, and may the spirit of your late mother also stay in peace," she said. By giving this additional blessing, the ordained woman added a personal touch to the Pali verses whose meaning might not be readily understood by most laypeople. If anything, her blessing which was extended not only to the living but also the dead meant that she either held a belief in the otherworldly life, or at least tried to conform to this line of popular belief among Buddhists.

The rest of the alms-trip went on in a similar manner. The monastic women continued on their way to other awaiting alms-givers. Not every household along the route gave alms; actually, the majority of them did not. This situation was quite normal even in the case of male monks. For those who gave alms, some were waiting on the roadside by themselves; but in most cases, they were families with parents or grandparents, often grandmothers, and
children. At some points, neighbours or relatives grouped together, each household unit with its set of food offerings.

Ven. Dhammananda seemed to be well acquainted with most of the almsgivers. When laypeople finished making their offering, she would sometimes ask after a missing family member, or passed her blessings to those not present. Although a few of the smaller children might not be fully active at this early hour of the day, most of the adults were shining with enthusiasm. Oblivious of the novelty of this religious activity, these small children were often urged by lay adults to pay proper respect to the female monastics. A socialization process was taking place which, if continued and multiplied, would fix Theravada female monks as a normal scene in the cultural landscape of Thai society.

Having learned about this experience of Theravada monastic women going on an alms-round, we can still ask questions: What is the significance of the act of going on an alms-round? And, how does it contribute to the attempt to establish women’s monasticism? For one thing, the Pali words bhikkhu (Thai: phiks) for male monks and bhikkhuni (Thai: phiksni) for female monks mean ‘beggars of alms’ (Wijayaratna 1990: 60). A procedural requirement of Theravada monastic ordination as practised in Thailand dictates that a man seeking to be ordained must avail himself of a set of robes and an alms-bowl (P. Tawan 1999: 19-20). Furthermore, one of the four points of Nissaya, the inaugural teaching given to ordinands at the end of every full ordination ceremony, states that monks should live on alms food.4

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4 For all the four points of the Nissaya, see footnote 27 in Chapter 4.
In actual practice, the act of giving and receiving alms food, as shown in the above account, does not simply serve the practical purpose of providing monks with daily sustenance only. The use of an alms-bowl and the act of going on alms-round also serve as a ‘key symbol’ (Ortner 1973) in Buddhist monasticism, along with the monastic robes to be discussed below. Although seeking alms food is not compulsory in contemporary monastic practice, it maintains the symbolic status of monks as the ‘field of merit’. A common Buddhist belief holds that offerings of food and other objects to individual monks or a community of monks will generate meritorious reward to the givers, resulting in spiritual and also material improvement in their lives.

The symbolic nature of the act of going on alms-rounds was especially evident in the case of monastic women at Watr Songdham Kalayani, for they went out to collect food from the neighbourhood only on Sundays and Buddhist holy days. On other days, the two daily meals at the monastery were prepared by lay residents, drawing on cash and in-kind contributions from visitors and supporters to the monastery. This lack of real need for the food collected during the alms-rounds added to the symbolic nature of this monastic practice. Here, the women’s practice of going on alms-rounds was less about collecting food than it was about assembling a following and building a sense of devotion among the laity.

The alms-round practice also symbolizes the ‘right livelihood’ for Buddhist mendicants, who are supposed to have renounced the worldly lifestyle that includes income-earning occupations. In practical terms, this ideal livelihood free of economic activities enables monks to devote themselves to religious study and practice. Such a livelihood is conducive to their spiritual practice of
detachment from worldly concerns. In this light, this type of livelihood also serves, symbolically, as a demarcation between the mundane lay life and that of the ordained. For a number of monastic women living with the ambiguity of their monastic status, the lay-ordained demarcation embodied in the practice of alms-round tends to be crucial, for it serves to confirm their identity as monastics.

Several women of different monastic categories who I met during my fieldwork expressed a similar view that the possibility of going on alms-rounds and unburdening themselves of concern for basic needs was imperative for the status of the ordained. Oftentimes, the majority of mae-chi and the small number of Mahayana female monks in Thailand who do not go on alms-rounds were mentioned as a foil for this ideal-type of the ordained. One of the sikkhamat, the ten-precept nuns of the Asoke Buddhist group (discussed in Chapter 3) who go on alms-rounds together with their male monastics on a daily basis, said to me: “If I were to take up a different form of monastic life, and could not sustain myself by going on alms-rounds, I wouldn’t have wanted to be ordained at all. It’s true that, as a sikkhamat, I may be regarded as a mere ten-precept nun. However, I am proud of my ordained status because I earn my living by going on alms-rounds.”

The Uncertainties of the Alms-round

If the accounts given above read like a story of women’s smooth engagement in going on alms-rounds, this is because not much has yet been discussed about the uncertainties and difficulties faced by monastic women in carrying out this
practice. Traditionally preserved for monks and novices who, until recently, happened to be male only, the alms-round has been one of the monastic practices that has served to reinforce the maleness of Buddhist monasticism in Thai society. This gender exclusivity has been engraved on the awareness of monastic women and other members of the society.

Samaneri Sukhetta received her ordination from a group of rural-based male monks in north-eastern Thailand in January 2004. She told me about her experience going on alms-rounds in a north-eastern village where she stayed after her ordination. Unlike Ven. Dhammananda, Samaneri Sukhetta lived on alms food. She therefore went on the alms-round everyday and did so by following the few male monks who ordained her and with whom she shared the monastic compound. “We do not get much food because most people in the village are poor,” she told me. But no matter how meagre the offerings might be, she always received her share from the villagers. “They offer me sticky rice and bits of other food, like chilli paste, as they do to the monks. They do not question my presence,” she noted. Nevertheless, our conversation reminded her of her previous experience of being a mae-chi in white robes before her samaneri ordination. “I was a mae-chi for four years. All that time, in my mind, I never felt secure,” she said. “Even when I was carrying the alms-bowl during the alms-round, I did so without confidence. I repeatedly asked myself: Doesn’t the bowl belong to the monk? Can I hold it? Do I have the right to do this?”

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5 Following Ven. Dhammananda’s ordination in 2001, a few Theravada male monks in Thailand started to ordain women as samaneri. Given that the 1928 decree of the Supreme Patriarch (discussed in Chapter 2) still exists which prohibits male monks from ordaining women, these ordinations that have taken place in Thailand in recent years have been kept low-profile. No legal action has been taken against these monks so far.
Ven. Dhammananda herself did not start going on alms-rounds until about a year and a half into her novitiate. And when she decided to start going on alms-rounds on a regular basis in the second half of 2002, some of her followers felt the need to prepare the neighbouring lay communities near her monastery for this activity. I was told that this initial group of followers, mostly Bangkok-based middle-class women, went from house to house in the neighbourhood to hand out a leaflet explaining about the planned alms-rounds. Phi Da (pseudonym), one of the long-term lay residents of the monastery, said that on the first morning Ven. Dhammananda went on the alms-round, her lay followers drove two cars slowly behind her for fear of negative reactions against the practice. "That was so that if something bad happened, we would be able to get Luang Mae (Venerable Mother) into one of the cars and drive away," Phi Da told me, still with a trace of excitement months after the event.

The gender exclusivity of the alms-round has also made its way into the history of institutional Buddhism, albeit in an obscure way. In Chapter 2, I have discussed how it was a news report of a group of ordained women going on alms-rounds in the late 1920s that sparked the government's legal action against them, leading to the end of their monastic lives. Kamala Tiyavanich (1997: 286) also states that the sangha authority suppressed the presumably sporadic practice of female religious practitioners going on alms-rounds in the early decades of the 20th century.

The entrenched gender exclusivity in the alms-round practice is also reflected in people's reactions to women who carry out the practice. It is true that there have been cases of monastic women, in most cases white-robed mae-chi, who are successful in establishing their alms-round practice. One example is the
case of a small number of mae-chi living at Sathian Thammasathan in Bangkok, led by the well-known Mae-chi Sansanee Sthirasuta. The mae-chi at this nunnery went on alms-round everyday (Bangkok Post 2003). Mae-chi living at an established institution, such as a branch nunnery of the Thai Mae-chi Institute, are occasionally invited by people in their neighbourhood to collect alms food (Falk 2002: 169-181). But there are also cases of suspicion and prohibition as well.

In February 2004, I visited the Maha Prajapati College in an outer district of Nakhon Ratchasima Province. The place is also known as ‘wittayalai mae-chi’, or the ‘college for nuns’, where seventy-six young women, fifty of them mae-chi, were enrolled in undergraduate programmes in Buddhist Studies and other secular subjects that year. On the first morning of my visit, I followed a small group of mae-chi students on their alms-round. True to the symbolic nature of the practice, each morning, only four or five mae-chi students took turns to go on alms-rounds in nearby villages. That particular morning, to save us from a long walk, a young woman drove a small group of mae-chi, a few lay students and myself in a pick-up truck to the villages.

At the first village, a short drive away on a potholed dirt road, two mae-chi, a lay student and myself took off our slippers, got off the back of the truck and started walking in single file along a narrow road that cut through a rural community. The truck then moved on to drop the rest of the group in the next village. Ahead on the roadside of this first village, a few alms givers, middle-aged and elderly women, were already waiting in the morning light. The mae-chi followed the normative practice of maintaining explicit solemnity and a sense of detachment while collecting alms, with their heads lowered, eyes
gazing at the road surface in front of them. Unlike Ven. Dhammananda, they did not greet or talk to the alms-givers. Neither did they chant any Pali blessings in return for the alms. But as usual, once the alms-givers finished their offering, most of them squatted down to pay respect to the young mae-chi as the latter took leave. As seen from this interaction, the mae-chi seemed to have gained acceptance and respect among the villagers.

Back at the college, however, a mae-chi who was a senior staff member told me that things had not always been as smooth as they had become. The college with its sizeable number of students had moved to this remote campus only about a year earlier. At that time its activities were not known to the locals. When the mae-chi first started to go on alms-rounds, people in nearby villages did not really know who they were and what they were up to. Thus, as the mae-chi recalled, after the first couple of days of the alms-rounds, a pick-up truck drove into the college compound. With it came a group of local people who, feeling suspicious about the activities of the unidentified young mae-chi, decided to track them down. But upon learning about the college and its activities, they were pleased and became supportive of the institute. “However, some monks admonished us for going on alms-rounds,” the senior mae-chi said. “They said it was not our duty,” she continued, “but we would like to create a new role for ourselves, to keep up the faith [among the people] and to let ourselves be known in the local community.”

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6 Regarding the purpose of mae-chi’s alms-rounds, the well-known mae-chi Sansanee Sthirasuta, in her article in Bangkok Post (2003), said that, “The alms rounds don’t just yield food, they also gain us a community, and friends, especially with people who are having troubles. Our rounds are a kind of a ‘how-are-you’ inquiry to the community – the spirit of the visits brings comfort, even healing.”
More extreme is the case of *Ubasika* Sunee (pseudonym). I met this monastic woman at a monastery in the heart of Bangkok where she was taking Pali language and Tipitaka studies courses. The woman had taken the set of vows similar to *mae-chi* but insisted on wearing dark brown robes. She told me to call her *ubasika*, the Pali term for a pious laywoman, which has for some time been adopted by a number of women who live their lives in a similar way to that of monastics but do not wish to be identified as *mae-chi* or ordained women (see Chapter 3).

*Ubasika* Sunee had moved to Bangkok from a forest monastery in the Northeast where she said her choice of dark brown robes had been accepted. In the capital city, however, the *ubasika* had difficulties, not only in securing a place to stay in a monastery, which she attributed to the unconventional colour of her robes, but also in obtaining daily food. A native of Bangkok and having travelled considerably in and outside Thailand as an ascetic, she was determined to sustain herself by going on daily alms-rounds. “I have made a resolution not to own a kitchen [not having to cook to sustain herself],” she explained. But after a few days of going out to receive alms food in the morning streets of Bangkok, she was summoned by the abbot of her residential monastery (a different place from her place of study). The chief monk reproached her for going on alms-rounds. “After that I tried to live on food left over from monks,” the ascetic woman said. Her other alternative was to get food from her friends and acquaintances at the monastery where she studied.

*Ubasika* Sunee once let me accompany her when she was going to receive food from one of her patrons, a woman food vendor near her place of study. The affair was simple. As the *ubasika* arrived at the busy food stall on the roadside,
the stall owner greeted her and, without asking, told one of her helpers to
arrange for two kinds of prepared food and a portion of cooked rice to be put in
a plastic carrying bag for ‘khun-mae’ or ‘mother’, meaning the ubasika. The
latter took the bag of food, said thank you and left.

By sustaining herself mainly with food donated in this manner, the ubasika
considered herself as living on alms-food. She was confident in her religious
status and believed she was capable of delivering merit to laypeople in return
for their offerings. This was a case of a monastic woman who tried to realize
the Buddhist ideal of the right monastic livelihood by living on alms-food, but
without having full access to the composite symbols of carrying a monastic
alms-bowl and walking the streets at a certain hour of the day to collect food.

The Robes

After breakfast one morning in mid September 2003, Ven. Suthida (pseudonym)
was getting ready to go on a trip. She was one of the five foreign female
monks who had come to spend the phansa or rains-retreat with Ven.
Dhammananda at Watr Songdham Kalayani. Ven. Suthida was now busy
tidying up her yellow monastic robes in the hall on the ground floor of the
monastery’s main building. A few lay residents were doing their chores nearby.
Soon it became obvious that the female monk was putting extra effort into
arranging the large, patched, rectangular piece of outer robe that was to wrap
over her long-sleeved blouse and a sarong-like lower garment. The warm and
humid air dictated that she stood in the middle of the hall beneath a ceiling fan.
Loosely enveloped by the robe from her shoulders down to just above the
ankles, she was trying to trimly roll one edge of the robe towards her side so that the fabric would cover both shoulders and wrap snugly around her body.

"Do you need a hand?" a laywoman asked the robing monk as her effort started to grab the attention of the laywomen in the hall. "No, thanks," she replied, clearly immersed in her effort. Ven. Suthida’s relatively young age and her pleasant temperament had earned her a special fondness from the lay community at the monastery. Two of the laywomen put down their chores and started to make comments among themselves, with a tone of affectionate amusement. The female monk, now aware of the uninvited attention directed at her, looked up to give an explanation. "This," she said in English, calling attention to the robing style she was trying to put on, "is called the full robe." She went on to explain that this robing style was meant for Theravada monks who were about to go out of the monastic compound. "When we go out people will look at us. I am not doing this for myself but for all the bhikkhuni," said the female monk with an uncharacteristically serious tone. Seeing that the onlookers were rather amused by her explanation, she softened, then said, "one day, when you become bhikkhuni, you will know."

As with other types of uniforms, the Buddhist monastic robes are loaded with symbolic meanings and values. It was therefore not surprising to see Ven. Suthida making particular effort to achieve a ‘proper’ robing style. In fact, the complicated robing style she was trying to achieve replicates the formal robing style of male monks of the influential Thammayut sect in Thailand (except that male monks do not wear the long-sleeved shirt underneath). Introduced during the reform period in Thai Buddhism in the mid-nineteenth century, this style of wearing the monastic robes was itself the centre of an ecclesiastical dispute at
that time (see Reynolds 1973: 91, 100-102). Ven. Suthida’s effort to dress in
the ‘appropriate’ robing style is just one of the anecdotes that confirm the
centrality of clothing practice for the fledgling Theravada female monastics.

Historically, the sacredness and institutional characteristic of the yellow
monastic robes has been gendered. With the exception of the short-lived
attempt to institute women’s ordination in the late 1920s discussed in Chapter 2,
only men have been entitled to be ordained as monks and to wear the yellow
robes throughout the history of Thai Buddhism. Therefore, the significance of
the small number of women taking up the yellow robes could hardly be
underestimated. The gender exclusion in the use of the yellow robes has been
reinforced in Thai society by a strict prohibition of physical contact between
male monks in their yellow robes and female persons. By keeping women
physically apart from monks and the yellow robes, the male monastic
institution has been able to successfully construct and maintain the appearance
of religious purity that has been linked to the legitimacy and legitimizing
authority of the institution.

To many Buddhists, the thought of a female body coming into contact with the
sacred yellow robes, as in the case of Theravada female monks, is
counterintuitive at best. At worst, the idea is considered sacrilegious. On one
occasion in March 2004, I participated in a small informal meeting among
supporters of women’s ordination at a provincial monastic residence not far
from Bangkok. Senator Rabiebrat, an advocate of women’s ordination, told the
group about her experience trying to solicit support for women’s ordination
from one of her female friends who was known as a generous donor for
religious activities. As it turned out, the senator was disappointed because the
woman in question refused to make any donation. "She said I could ask her for anything except support for female monks," the senator recounted. The woman the senator spoke of simply reasoned that she could not come to terms with the idea of women wearing the yellow robes. A male monk then gave an account of a similar reaction from a senior government official when they discussed the issue of women's ordination. The monk reported the official as saying that he simply could not accept the fact that women should put on the monastic robes.

A comparable case of objection against the female body coming into contact with a sacred location or object led to a heated public debate in the national media in Thailand in early 2004. The case started with Senator Rabiebrat, who perhaps considered herself a champion of women's rights in the religious sphere, sending a letter to the National Buddhist Bureau. In her letter, Rabiebrat asked for an explanation for signboards put up at certain monasteries in the North of Thailand that prohibited women from entering the inner areas of some Buddhist stupas that contained holy relics. News of this inquiry by the senator provoked strong reactions from certain groups of people in the North, including politicians and academics. These people defended the prohibition on women going near certain stupas as a long-standing traditional practice that was based on an established local belief that women's bodies, with menstruation, would contaminate the sacred space and offend the holy relics placed inside the stupas (for more details of this debate, see Women's Health Advocacy Foundation 2005).

At its core, the concern about women wearing the monastic robes was based on the same belief that gave rise to the above concern that sought to prohibit
women from entering a sacred religious space. According to this traditional belief, women’s menstruation, and their bodies by extension, had a polluting effect that would demean the sacredness of the robes. Ven. Dhammananda, as a long-time advocate of women’s religious participation, had been dealing with the issue of the symbolic impurity of women for quite some time. At a public seminar, the leading female monk returned to the story of the origin of the robes to counter this question. She dubbed this concern about the supposed polluting effect of women’s menstruation a misconception. To disentangle this belief, she went to the extent of denying the sacredness of the robes altogether:

Some people ask, ‘When women are ordained, how will they put on the robes? Ordained women who put on the robes will soil them with blood.’ This is a misconception. ... In fact, the robes originated from cloth used to cover corpses. The discarded cloth was then washed, cut, dyed and sewn into the robes. There is nothing that can be described as sacred in the robes themselves (Dhammananda 2004a: 22).

Nevertheless, the lack of precedent of women wearing the yellow robes did not always result in unwelcoming attitudes among laypeople. Real encounters with women in the yellow robes also allowed laypeople to acquaint themselves with this new form of women’s monasticism. In the case of Watr Songdham Kalayani, receiving visitors had become a routine at this women’s monastery. Some people admitted to visiting the monastery simply out of curiosity after having learned about the coming into existence of female monks from the media. Curiosity aside, news about women in the yellow robes did not seem to provoke a sense of resentment or objection among these visitors. In a different setting, the following story of the manner in which Samaneri Dhammarakkhita came to settle at a monastic residence in an outer district of Chiangmai
Province in the North of Thailand may not represent the attitudes of people in rural communities as a whole, but it gives an example of the accepting attitude of laypeople.

*Pa Jan* (*pa* = aunty, Jan is a pseudonym), the owner of a grocery shop in the northern village near where *Samaneri* Dhammarakkhita lived, had become her most active local patron. The woman in her sixties told me how, one day, she had received a phone call from a senior and well-respected *mae-chi* she had known for a long time. With that call, she learned that another *mae-chi* who used to stay temporarily at the hilltop monastic residence near her village had "taken the yellow robes" (*Samaneri* Dhammarakkhita was a white-robed *mae-chi* for nine years before her Theravada novice ordination in 2002). The ordained woman now wished to return and settle at the then deserted monastic residence, but wondered how the villagers would receive her in the yellow robes.

*Pa Jan* was asked to find out about this. She went to talk with the customary village leader in charge of the village monastery (*phor kae wat*), the official village head, and also the one monk who lived at the village monastery (a different location from the hilltop monastic residence). "*Phor kae wat* said there should be no problem. The village head is my relative so I could sort that out with him. And the monk also said yes," *Pa Jan* recalled. But didn’t she and other villagers think a woman wearing the yellow robes could be a problem, I asked. *Pa Jan*’s answer was short and simple: "We know her. We have met before. So, there is no problem."

The fact that a number of women had chosen to be ordained in the Theravada tradition and wear the yellow robes despite the public controversy that
resurfaced after Ven. Dhammananda’s ordination in 2001 indicated how these women saw some indispensable value in the robes. Some laywomen or mae-chi I talked to during my fieldwork, when discussing their religious aspiration, said they wished to be ‘ordained in the yellow robes’ (buat pha leuang or buat nai pha leuang). Depending on subjective experiences, the yellow robes might have different meanings for different women. However, for those who have chosen to wear the robes, their choice of the monastic tradition and clothing has led to a common outcome. By taking up the robes that have long been a key symbol of male religious authority, these women have defied both the symbolic and corporeal gender demarcations that have been a defining characteristic of Buddhist monasticism in Thailand.

Given the different meanings the yellow monastic robes tend to have for different women, it would be overly hasty to come to a conclusion that all ordained, or would-be-ordained, women held as their ultimate goal the abolition of gender exclusion in monasticism. Other reasons, most importantly their aspiration for spiritual achievement, was always part of the rationale for taking up the monastic robes. For example, Ven. Dhammananda, upon her return from an academic lecture at a university in Bangkok in September 2003, told me how a foreign student posed a question about the political implications of her robes. “The student said that by putting on these robes I was making a political statement,” she said from her sofa seat, her hand grabbing the orange robes that had been her only type of clothing since her ordination. “That is probably true,” she continued, “but I did not think about making a political statement when I first decided to wear these robes.”
The Clerical Vocabulary

Quite a few people lingered on in a seminar room at the Parliament House in Bangkok at the end of a heated public discussion on the issue of phiksuni ordination. The air-conditioners kept humming and the neon lights were still on despite the deserted panel table and rows of empty chairs. The seminar, convened by an earnest supporter of women’s ordination, Senator Rabiebrat, aimed at releasing the findings of a study conducted under the supervision of the Senate Sub-committee on Women. While all the panellists, chosen by the seminar organizers, were clearly in support of women’s ordination, there was an intense debate between advocates and opponents of women’s ordination among the audience during this half-day seminar in which an estimated two hundred people participated.

During the seminar, I sat near the back of the room not far from a group of some ten or twelve mostly middle-age men and women. This group of people stood out from the rest of the participants due to their constant jeering and agitated talking among themselves while the panellists and other supporters of women’s ordination spoke. A member of the organizers told me later that they belonged to an ultra-conservative Buddhist group. However, despite the unresolved differences and disagreements at this seminar, time ran out and the formal debate had to close for the day.

It was early March 2003, just a few days after Ven. Dhammananda had returned from her higher ordination ceremony in Sri Lanka. She had accepted the invitation to be among the audience at this seminar. Knowing perhaps that antagonism could be triggered easily at this public event, she remained silent throughout the meeting. After the seminar, however, a few interested people
gathered around her with questions. About two metres away, I noticed three
members of the ultra-conservative group standing by and looking intently at
the female monk. Their look could be described as anything but friendly. I
then moved to stand between the two groups and could overhear the
conversations from both sides. The questions to Ven. Dhammananda were
general ones, and she was answering them referring to herself with the clerical
first-person pronoun ‘atama’ (Sanskrit: ātma, Pali: atta). Having spent quite
some time with her, I had become accustomed to her use of the clerical
vocabulary and, like her followers, was in the habit of addressing her using the
clerical terminology normally used by monks and also by laypeople when
speaking about or with monks.

“Listen to that,” said a woman from the conservative group to the others
standing by her side. There was a clear sense of disapproval in her tone. “[She
is] using the word ‘atama’. Did you hear that?” Their antagonistic look
intensified. Before the situation got worse, a member of the seminar organizers
decided to usher Ven. Dhammananda, who seemed unaware of the mounting
tension, away into one of their office rooms. They asked her to wait there for a
while and saw to it that she took leave safely in a Parliament car some
moments later.

As Reynolds notes, in the Thai language “the use of special pronouns and
vocabulary dramatizes the separation between lay and monastic life and
identifies the monk as a special class of being” (1973: 5). Given that in
Thailand in the past only men could be ordained as monks, this lay-monastic

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7 Thai has a large number of first-person pronouns that are used to denote status
differences between the speaker and people spoken to. The pronoun atama, (from the
Sanskrit ātma, meaning ‘oneself, myself’) is used only by monks, and is a speech
marker of their religious status.
separation has intersected significantly with gender demarcation; it has kept monks not merely as a ‘special’ but essentially ‘gendered’ class of beings. Yet, this gender demarcation has been so embedded in the everyday life of Buddhists, both monastic and lay, that clerical pronouns and vocabulary have been taken for granted to be applicable only to ordained men. That the linguistic practice associated with clerical vocabulary should apply to a female person has been rather unheard of. However, the advent of Theravada female monastics has given life to a new form of linguistic interaction. Women’s use of clerical vocabulary has resulted not only in a sense of disapproval as noted above. It has also led to moments of doubt, and also linguistic innovation that has helped to consolidate the monastic identity of ordained women.

Due to lack of precedent, the use of clerical vocabulary did not come naturally for monastic women. The practice had to be cultivated and sustained. Ven. Dhammananda’s insistence on using clerical vocabulary meant that she was often asked about her choice of linguistic practice. In one of her books, she addresses two questions which read: “You call yourself ‘atama’. Isn’t that the same word used by male monks?” and, “You are now an ordained woman. How should we address you?” (Dhammananda 2001b: 18 & 21). In her answer, she simply explains the meaning of the word, which she says can be applied to both men and women, and asserts the appropriateness of using this and other clerical pronouns in her case.

Nevertheless, not all the women ordained in the Theravada tradition felt comfortable with adopting the male-oriented clerical terms. For example, Samaneri Dhammarakkhita, ordained in the Theravada tradition in Thailand by a Sri Lankan preceptor in 2002, expressed a sense of uncertainty about her own
linguistic identification. During my visit to her residence in Chiangmai Province I noticed that, unlike Ven. Dhammananda, she did not use the first-person pronoun ‘atama’. Instead, she referred to herself either as ‘luang-phi’ (venerable elder sibling), ‘mae-nen’ (‘mae’ = mother, and ‘nen’ = novice; put together, they form an intelligible but uncommon term that can be roughly translated as ‘female novice’) or some other lay pronouns. When asked about this, the female novice said she felt uncomfortable using the word atama when she was merely a novice and not yet a fully ordained female monk. “Once I have received my higher ordination and become a fully ordained monk, then I will be able to use the word ‘atama’ with confidence,” she said.

When viewed in a positive light, the lack of a recognized linguistic identification system for monastic women provides a space for agency and linguistic innovation. In my fieldwork situation, several positive experiences occurred during my first encounters with some of the monastic women. Due possibly to the ambiguity of their monastic status, some of these women tended to keep a low profile and did not engage much in formal interactions outside the context of their everyday life. This was the case when I met Phiksuni Somjai (pseudonym), a strict-Theravada-turned-Mahayana female monk who had been ordained for more than four years. I addressed her as luang-phi or ‘venerable elder sister’. “That is a good term,” the female monk noted contentedly. “Nobody has ever called me so. That term is good.” Then, we continued to talk for a while on the topic of linguistic identification. “Since I became a female monk, my friends have struggled to find the right term by which to call me. They even tried calling me luang-pheuan (literally

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8 Luang-phi is a common respectful form of address for a monk that tends to be used in more informal contexts of lay-monastic interaction.
‘venerable friend’ which does not exist in the male-oriented clerical vocabulary). That sounds a bit unusual,” the Mahayana phiksuni admitted.

I also received a similar response during my first conversation with Samaneri Rattanavali, ordained in Sri Lanka in 2001. At the beginning of our meeting, the novice referred to herself by a neutral lay pronoun ‘rao’ (literally ‘we’ but also used to mean ‘I’, denoting no kin relationship). Having noted my choice of addressing her as luang-phi, however, she said that she liked the term. “That sounds good. I will use the term from now on.” And for the rest of that conversation and at our later meetings, she adopted ‘luang-phi’ as her first-person pronoun.

Religious Rituals

Phiksuni Voramai Kabilsingh, the former abbess of Watr Songdham Kalayani and mother of Ven. Dhammananda, passed away on 24 June 2003. Her death coincided with the arrival of the foreign phiksuni for the 2003 rains-retreat, which started at the beginning of July. After her death, it was decided that her body would be kept at the monastery for about one hundred days before the cremation would take place.9 A corner of the hall on the ground floor of the main building at Watr Songdham Kalayani was set aside for this purpose. Numerous vases of fresh flowers and green potted plants filled the area, concealing almost in entirety a casket that was covered by a fine piece of

9 This practice of keeping the body of a dead person for a period of time before cremation is common among Thai Buddhists in the case of respected and revered people, such as religious figures, senior members of well-to-do families and members of the royal family.
golden embroidered fabric. Ven. Voramai’s portrait in her yellow monastic robes looked out from a golden wooden frame set on a stand. From time to time, light smoke rose from burning incense sticks placed in a ceramic pot in front of the casket. With this arrangement, the body of one of the pioneering phiksuni in Thai Buddhist history was put to rest. For about half an hour each night, for the next three months, the visiting female monks and a novice in residence at the monastery would recite Pali chants dedicated to the dead.

In addition to performing the funeral chanting, itself a new experience for the monastic women and lay residents of the monastery, the arrival of foreign female monks meant that the nightly gatherings in the hall were charged with enthusiasm. During one such gathering a couple of days after the arrival of two experienced phiksuni from Sri Lanka, the conversation that followed the funeral chant shifted to the question of how to recite certain Pali verses. At one point, Ven. Dhammananda asked the more senior of the two Sri Lankan phiksuni to teach her how to recite a well-known and special Pali chant. Leaning towards the senior Sri Lankan phiksuni, Ven. Dhammananda pointed her index finger to her own face and said intently, “I need you to teach me.” The Sri Lankan monk appeared a little surprised. Having seen Ven. Dhammananda perform the funeral chants earlier in the evening along with the novice and two other mae-chi, the newly arrived Sri Lankan phiksuni said she would have assumed that Ven. Dhammananda had already learned from Thai male monks how to do Pali chanting. “No, they don’t teach us,” the Thai female monk replied, referring to her male counterparts, “We invited them over to chant [on other occasions] and we observe how they do it.”
I observed that Ven. Dhammananda did not try to hide the fact that most monastic ritual practices were new to her. Oftentimes, she would mention in passing the fact that she still had to learn how to perform the rituals properly. She once told those around her how she was studying different Pali chants with Sri Lankan female monks in Sri Lanka in the days leading up to her ordination. At that time, she said good-humouredly that she was “learning the tricks of the trade for monks” (rian withi than-ma-ha-kin khorng phra). On another occasion when introducing other newly arrived foreign phiksunī at Watr Songdham Kalayani, she told a small gathering of laypeople that, “[Theravada] phiksunī are something new in each of our countries. So, you laypeople please bear with us. Every one of us is still learning.”

Funeral Rite

The funeral chanting for Ven. Voramai was a case in point. Among Theravada Buddhists in Thailand, funeral chanting has almost universally been the business of male monks. Furthermore, details of the ritual procedures have been localized in the Thai context. Thus, when the foreign phiksunī in residence at Watr Songdham Kalayani later joined the funeral chanting for Ven. Voramai, they had to learn this Thai traditional practice from Ven. Dhammananda. Traces of their learning process appeared in sheets of printed romanized Pali verses that the phiksunī often placed in front of them as they chanted while sitting cross-legged on a raised platform. Copies of the Thai
transliteration of the same verses were later distributed among the lay residents so they could "help the monks to chant" as Ven. Dhammananda put it.\footnote{At all other Theravada Buddhist funerals I have attended in Thailand, it was solely the monks who performed the chanting. Laypeople were never asked to join them in the chanting.}

The unsynchronized pace and tune of the chanting and a few wrong starts indicated the beginners' stage during the first couple of weeks into the nightly funeral chanting practice. Three months later, at a ceremonial gathering of about two hundred laypeople a week after her mother's cremation, Ven. Dhammananda publicly reflected on the \textit{phiksuni}'s learning process: "All the \textit{phiksuni} who have come here had never chanted the Abhidhamma [the Pali verses chanted at funerals in Thailand] before. But we practised every night for more than one hundred nights. We moved from not knowing how to chant to being quite fluent in the end."

Of particular interest here is Ven. Dhammananda's self-awareness, and more importantly public acknowledgement, of the constructed quality of religious rituals. Here, religious rituals were cast in the light of vocational skills that had to be learned and practised. This pragmatic depiction of religious rituals risks going against the grain of popular Buddhist belief which holds that the rituals are sacred activities efficacious in generating merit for people. This does not mean, however, that this leading \textit{phiksuni} discounted the significance of rituals. On the contrary, her striving to engage in ritual activities must be read as her realization of the importance of ritual practice in the monastic life, especially in the context of traditional Buddhism. And for female monastics to be able to master ritual activities, they needed to learn and practise.
Learning the Ritual

Formal Buddhist ritual practice has been the domain of male authority, and the gender segregation within this field of practice has been resolute. This case can be illustrated by the fact that Mahayana female monks in Thailand, despite their fully ordained status, normally do not preside over formal religious rituals (with the exception of funeral chanting for Chinese families). In August 2003, I attended a religious ceremony at a Chinese shrine hall in Bangkok. The shrine also served as the residence of Phiksuni or Seu-fu Prani (pseudonym), an ethnic Chinese who had lived the past nineteen years as a fully ordained Mahayana female monk. This annual ceremony, called the-krajat in Thai, is not of a particularly Buddhist nature, for it aims at feeding and distributing merit to wandering souls of the unknown dead. Still, Mahayana Buddhist monks were invited to perform a religious rite, which was one of several activities at this ceremony. In this case, a group of five male Mahayana monks from another province were invited to perform the rite. One of them was particularly adorned with a red outer robe and a regal red hat during the ritual performance. Melodic chanting, gong beating, waving of incense sticks, and elaborate movements of arms and fingers went on for the most part of the service, punctuated by music of a Chinese traditional style played by a band of laymen on the side. All through this ritual event, Phiksuni Prani, dressed in full dark robes, situated herself among lay participants some distance away from the central altar around which the ritual-making monks stood.

At the end of this religious rite, I wandered out of the ceremonial hall and approached a laywoman, who told me she had come to make offerings at this shrine once in a while over the past few years. Wanting to learn her opinion
about the role of female monastics, I made an observation that the seu-fu, by which I meant Phiksuni Prani, did not take an active part in the religious rite herself. "She is a mae-chi," the woman responded at once, as if I had missed a most obvious fact. I replied saying that the seu-fu had been fully ordained as a female monk, but this message did not get across. "She is a mae-chi," the woman repeated, "It has to be monks who perform the rite. A mae-chi cannot do that."

During another visit to this shrine hall, I discussed the issue with Phiksuni Prani. My question was: Could Mahayana female monks preside over formal religious rituals? The phiksuni said that it should be possible for female monks to officiate at religious rites, but that it had not been a common practice. She cited a shortcoming, namely the limited number of Mahayana female monks in Thailand. More importantly, most ritual performances required training. "It is not that you would be able to perform any ritual ceremony at will. You have to learn and practice. We have never learned to do it," she said.

Underlying the expressed need to learn the rituals is the idea that rituals should be based on conventions. The situations of male and female monks in Thailand differ in this regard. Male monks, if they so wish, may learn to perform different rituals by slipping into the already established monastic environment readily available to men. However, a similarly established and conducive learning environment is not readily available to female monastics in Thailand.

Being aware of this shortcoming, Ven. Dhammananda had decided that a good part of the activities of the phiksuni during the 2003 rains-retreat would concentrate on learning the monastic rules and religious rituals. Thus, most mornings during the retreat, the phiksuni sat together at a table in the
monastery library. They then occupied themselves with a careful study of the content and detailed interpretations of the Bhikkhuni Vinaya, the set of 311 monastic rules for women. The content of these monastic rules ranges from meticulous elements of daily living to certain monastic ritual procedures. Ven. Saddhasumana, the most senior of the Sri Lankan phiksuni, acted as the teacher of the group. She was in turn guided by a Singhalese book of commentary of the Pali scriptures. On special Buddhist holy days (wan-phra yai), however, the phiksuni did not hold a class because on these days Theravada monks normally attended the communal Patimokkha recitation, namely the ritual recitation of the monastic rules.

Reciting the Patimokkha

The 2003 retreat at Watr Songdham Kalayani saw the institution of a number of religious rituals by female monastics. Ven. Dhammananda herself often stressed the significance of the 2003 retreat, saying that it was the first time ever in history that a sufficient number of Theravada female monks, despite being from different countries, came together to form a Theravada phiksuni sangha or a female monastic community on Thai soil. The number of the phiksuni is important here. By convention, most monastic and ceremonial rituals require the presence of at least four to five monks. The recitation of the Patimokkha is a case in point. In principle, this practice amounts to a purification process in which monks listen to the recital of all the monastic rules. They are expected to declare their violations of any of the rules and relevant corrective actions should then be determined. In actual practice, however, this purifying ritual is performed with various degrees of strictness at
different monasteries. Symbolically speaking, the practice tends to serve as a defining activity for the existence of the Buddhist monastic community. This is especially the case for female monks whose choice of monastic vocation and identity remains disputable.

The Patimokkha recitation was held for the first time at Wat Songdham Kalayani on Sunday 13 July 2003, or on the eve of the rains-retreat. Ven. Dhammananda did not fail to celebrate the significance of the day. “Today is a historic day,” she stated at the Sunday late-morning gathering of some thirty visitors and residents. Earlier that morning, the female monks had performed their first Patimokkha recitation. “It is the first time ever that a phiksuni sangha has recited the Patimokkha in Suwannaphum,” Ven. Dhammananda reasoned, evoking a sense of historical significance by using the ancient name of the geographical area of which Thailand and its neighbouring Southeast Asian countries are part.11 She explained that by means of the Patimokkha recitation, the phiksuni borisat, or the collective body of female monks, had marked its existence. “Now, we still have to depend on the phiksuni invited from foreign countries [to perform the recitation],” she declared, “But when the time comes when we can have all Thai phiksuni to recite the Patimokkha, Buddhism will be firmly established [in Thailand].”

Beneath this hopeful announcement of the coming into being of the collective body of female monks, one can also detect Ven. Dhammananda’s self-awareness of the unconventionality of the female gender in the monastic vocation. In this instance, a monastic practice such as the Patimokkha recitation was marked off as an activity that constituted women’s monasticism.

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11 Suwannaphum is the Thai pronunciation of the Sanskrit suvarnabhumi, meaning ‘golden land’.
Women could now engage in this formerly male-exclusive ritual; and the ritual helped in turn to define and solidify the monastic identity of women. It was perhaps this self-awareness of the unconventionality of women’s monastic identity that impelled Theravada female monks to try to adhere to the legitimate, though male-oriented, conventions of religious ritual practice in the first place.

Kathin Ceremony

Women’s awareness of the constructed nature of religious rituals, as in the case of Ven. Dhammananda, was particularly gendered. For such awareness was infused with the awareness of the unconventionality of their own gender in that area of practice. I am tempted to go so far as to say that by her frequent public acknowledgements of the constructed quality of religious rituals and the need to learn to master them, Ven. Dhammananda was underscoring women’s religious ritual practice as distinct from that of men. This had an indirect effect of engraving on the public mind the fact that women had now achieved the monastic status, albeit one that was still in the process of being established.

The kathin (Pali: kathina) ceremony at Watr Songdham Kalayani which took place in October 2003 provided an example of Ven. Dhammananda’s recognition that women’s ritual practice had to be constructed; and it should be constructed with a fine balance between adhering to the male-oriented conventions and making distinct the particularity of women’s monasticism.

In earlier years when Ven. Voramai was the only female monk and abbess of Watr Songdham Kalayani, she used to receive offerings of robes made
annually by her lay disciples as a fulfilment of the *kathin* ceremony. With hindsight, Ven. Dhammananda suggested that the ceremonies performed during the time of the late abbess were not correct because there was only one *phiksuni* at the monastery. The *kathin*, she said, must be received by a collective body of *phiksuni*. Convention has it that this ceremonial ritual requires the presence of at least five monks, and it must take place within one lunar month after the end of the rains-retreat (Anuman 1986: 70). The *kathin* ceremony was the biggest event organized at Watir Songdham Kalayani that year. It entailed a modest funfair and a midday feast that catered for the few hundred people who had come to attend the ceremony. These festive activities ended after lunch to give way to a formal monastic ritual featuring the *phiksuni*.

For the monastic women, the preparation for the *kathin* rite had begun a couple of weeks earlier and consisted of learning and rehearsing the liturgical process and recitations. To match the solemnity of this ceremony, the female monks dressed in their formal set of robes on that day, each adorned with an extra piece of folded robe (*sanghati*) on their left shoulder and a belt. A set of fine new robes specially made by a devoted lay follower was the centrepiece of the ceremony. The laity was supposed to offer the set of robes indiscriminately to the collective body of the female monks, who should then give it to the neediest among them. The *phiksuni* had decided in advance that, for this first year, the robes would go to Ven. Dhammananda. In actual practice, the offerings made at the *kathin* ceremony extended to other material objects such as more new robes and bowls for other female monks and money donations to the monastery. Some of the donations were displayed by attaching banknotes flag-like to thin wooden sticks that were then pierced in the trunks of a few young banana plants that had been set in pots to make the so-called *kathin* trees.
At the beginning of the ceremonial rite a laywoman, a long-time disciple of both Ven. Voramai and Ven. Dhammananda, read out a short Pali verse that denoted the offering of the robes. The fact that it was a woman and not a man who led the laity in the offering process should be noted, for in common practice, it has been almost universally men who have been in charge of such a leading role at religious ceremonies.

The key part of the monastic rite did not last long. Apart from peripheral activities such as public announcements of names of major donors and the amounts of their contributions, the essence of the ritual came down to the offering of the one set of robes mentioned above. The procedure consisted mainly of two phiksuni chanting a Pali motion requesting the consent of the rest of the monastics for the decision to give the robes to Ven. Dhammananda. When it was clear that there was no objection, the same two phiksuni announced in Pali that the robes now belonged to Ven. Dhammananda. The latter then uttered a Pali recitation which declared that she had given up her old robes and accepted the new ones. One piece of the new robes was placed on her left shoulder as a symbolic act that she had changed to the new robes, and a mark of three small dots (bindu or kappabindu in Pali) was made using a red ballpoint pen on one corner of the new robe to symbolically stain it, thus make it ‘allowable’ or ‘lawful’ according to the monastic rules. The rite came to a close with all the members of the monastic assembly offering their words of congratulations in Pali.

In fact, I would not have captured many of the details of this esoteric liturgical process conducted all in the Pali language had it not been for the explanation that Ven. Dhammananda gave to the audience of about two hundred laypeople
immediately after the end of the *kathin* ceremony. I also benefited from the monastery’s video record of the event. Ven. Dhammananda states in one of her articles that the *kathin* ceremony was video recorded “for further study and training” (Dhammananda 2004b: 218). “The steps of the ritual might seem lengthy,” the female monk said once she had finished with the procedural explanation. “But now that I have explained the procedural steps to you, you can now appreciate what we have done,” she said. “Usually, male monks would not be bothered with giving you this explanation because they think that this is their business,” she continued, “For me, I think it is you laypeople who have offered these *kathin* robes. So, you should know what we the monastics do with them and how.” During the same speech, she also explained some procedural details of the Patimokkha recitation that had usually been exclusive to monks. Here, Ven. Dhammananda quite consciously differentiated her type of monasticism from that of male monks by explaining ritual processes and emphasizing the role of the laity in ritual practice. With these explanations, she was making monastic ritual affairs appear more accessible to laypeople—all this with gender difference as the subtext.

### The Laity

It was mealtime at *Watr* Songdham Kalayani. The sound of the midday bell reverberated from the top of the bell tower to the far end of the compound. In the dining hall, a small crowd gathered, and an array of food was appetizingly displayed in plates and bowls of different colours and sizes on a long table. The female monks were the first to move quietly towards this table in the order of their ordination, the longest ordained being the first in the row. Before they
started to serve themselves, a laywoman in a white shirt and pants squatted down next to the table, stretching her arms out, touching the edge of the table lightly with both hands, palms facing up, her head bowed. The female monks, standing, each with an empty monastic bowl in one hand, touched the opposite edge of the table with their other hand. With this simple gesture, the monks accepted the food offered by the lay patrons. They could now start to put the food in their bowls and move back to their seats.

With a sudden thought and in a bid to make myself useful, I swiftly stepped out of the group of laywomen standing near the table. Two plates of food lay further to one side of the table, seemingly out of reach for the monks. I reached out to those plates and pushed them to the centre of the table. Exclamations broke out from behind. Two hands simultaneously grabbed me by the arms and pulled me back. “The food has already been offered,” a woman, agitated as she was, tried to explain, “You must not touch it before the monks finish their servings.” I had spoiled the ritual, and now it was my turn to sink on my knees and touch the table to repeat the offering gesture in order to make up for my mistake. I looked up to see the female monks touching the other end of the table, smiling, to my relief.

From this example, we see that oftentimes it is not only the monastics but also laypeople who put effort into shaping and safeguarding what they deem correct monastic conduct and ritual practice. While the official sangha administration and relevant state organs play a role in maintaining the structural standard of the monastic conduct, such as by issuing laws and regulations and administering the penal process, it is ordinary laypeople who often play a role, more or less actively, in keeping up proper monastic practice at the level of
everyday life. Nancy Barnes (1996: 284) argues that it is within the practical interest of the laity to see to it that monks adhere scrupulously to the monastic rules for this will guarantee the purity of monks as the field of merit efficacious in generating meritorious reward to lay supporters; thus the laity, particularly those of the Theravada devotion, are generally unwilling to accept changes in the traditional way of the monastic order.

It should be pointed out, however, that in the actual safeguarding of monastic conduct and ritual practice, the scripturally-based monastic rules and localized norms of practice are often conflated. It is often the result of this conflation that informs people’s perception of what constitute ‘correct’ monastic practice. This evolving understanding of correct practice influences the conduct of the monastics as well as laypeople who come into contact with them. Lay influence is often played out in elements of daily living; and it is more so in the case of female monks whose incipient monastic status allows their identity and practice to be relatively malleable in the eyes of interested and hopeful lay supporters.

Numerous anecdotes of lay individuals attempting to realize their understanding of proper monastic conduct occurred during the course of my fieldwork at Watr Songdham Kalayani and elsewhere. In a trivial incident at Watr Songdham Kalayani, I greeted a foreign phiksumi by showing the usual gesture of joined palms and bowed head. The foreign female monk, not knowing the Thai norm in which monks were supposed to be at the apex of the social hierarchy and should never return the same greeting gesture to a lay person, did so. “No,” a laywoman cried out in English when she saw this. She was shaking her head and waving her hand disapprovingly. “Cannot, cannot,”
she said hastily to the monk and tried to give a further explanation by alternating between the greeting sign and shaking her head and waving her hand to mean ‘no’. Or, at another time during a merit-making trip to a provincial monastery, a small group of laywomen – committed supporters of female monastics from Bangkok – were sitting on the floor of the main monastery hall having a casual conversation while waiting for the merit-making ceremony to begin. At one point a female novice walked over and sat down on the floor beside them. Seeing this, a laywoman turned to the novice and told her that she perhaps should not sit on the floor at the same level as laypeople. “Aren’t you supposed to sit on a monk’s cushion (asana)?” the woman further suggested by way of questioning. The novice brushed the question aside saying that they were all in a casual setting, and not in the middle of a ritual ceremony (during which the proper seating for monks is usually marked off with a raised platform and/or mats and cushions).

As trivial as each of these incidents might seem, cumulatively they played a part in shaping and reinforcing the pattern of traditional monastic conduct in the context of everyday life. This lay influence in fashioning the monastic conduct was persistent and imperceptible at times. But by capturing the details of these seemingly minor incidents, we see the process in which ‘tradition’ was made and remade. This does not mean, however, that the people involved in this process were always conscious of their active roles in the making of tradition. Nor does this mean that different people or groups of people had the same understanding of what ‘the tradition’ should look like.

On a separate note, these acts of shaping and reinforcing the monastic tradition often remained at the level of tangible conduct. The emphasis on the aesthetic
aspect of monastic conduct was not limited to women’s monasticism alone. Male monks are also expected to behave in a way that makes them worthy of respectful admiration and faith (na leuamsai sattha), and this right conduct was often measured by the aesthetic of their bodily gestures. Thus, when a senior male monk gave a sermon to the visiting phiksuni at Watr Songdham Kalayani during the 2003 rains-retreat, he emphasized the aesthetic side of the orderly conduct of monks. He compared monastic communal living with a vase of assorted flowers. And this is part of the sermon I have transcribed: “Assorted flowers, when arranged orderly, look beautiful. Without order, the beauty is lost. Like us living in a monastic community. If we can maintain the beauty of our conduct in daily living, people will have respectful admiration and faith in our way of life (mi khon leuamsai sattha nai kan-pen-yu khorng phuak-rao). It is this way of life that has sustained Buddhism and the monastic community until today.” The point was clear: proper tangible monastic conduct led to laypeople’s admiration and faith in the monastries and, I would add, material support for them. This would in turn result in the continued existence of the monastic community as the upholder of Buddhism.

Lay influence on the monastic conduct is not limited to matters of daily living alone, but also involves the more abstract aspect of religious belief. Of all the women ordained in the Theravada tradition who lived separately during my fieldwork, Ven. Dhammananda was the most well-known. Her fame, her effort to organize various activities to meet the needs of laypeople (women in particular) and the convenience of having a monastery of her own, all contributed to the number of laypeople (again mostly women) coming to her and her monastery. Several of these people became her committed supporters and disciples. But people came to Watr Songdham Kalayani with their own
approaches to religion and found different attractions in the place and in Ven. Dhammananda's monastic practice. This spectrum of different modes of religious belief ranged from strictly rational doctrine-based or reformist Buddhist approach to belief in supernatural power and a preoccupation with afterlife experiences. And it seemed to me that Ven. Dhammananda had tried to accommodate the different religious interests and needs of the laypeople who had come to her. This was despite the fact that such effort might lead to her engaging in different kinds of religious practices, not all of them mutually consistent. Furthermore, in a situation where a monk engaged in different and sometimes conflicting types of religious practices, it was likely that he or she might experience a shifting following, with the coming and going of people of different interests among his or her followers.

Ven. Dhammananda's position in this regard is a difficult one. Her being the pioneering female monk with a prominent background, her outstanding attempt to establish a female monastic order and her extensive media exposure gained her considerable support from, and a following among, urban professional and entrepreneurial middle-class women. Some among the initial group of her followers admitted to not having been interested in Buddhism before their coming into contact with her. A businesswoman who defined herself as a feminist told me she had first learned about the female monk from the media. With her feminist inclination, she decided that this was a cause she should support. Another Bangkok-based business owner said she had wanted to make merit on her birthday but had never made offerings to any other Buddhist monasteries. So, she decided to come to Wat Songdham Kalayani, known to her as a female monk's monastery, to check it out. She said that she had since learned the different aspects of Buddhist teachings. "Luang mae [Ven.
Dhammananda) was the one who lit the flame in us,” said another woman from the same group. However, with their evolving interest in the type of Buddhism which can be roughly labelled as ‘rational’, these women had explored and found attraction in activities of other Buddhist groups as well, and had since divided their time and devotion between Ven. Dhammananda’s monastery and Buddhist activities elsewhere.

At the other end of the spectrum of religious belief were people, some of them from the monastery’s neighbourhood, who looked for advice and help in supernatural matters from Ven. Dhammananda. It was probably not too easy for her to dispense with this kind of expectations given that her mother, Phiksuni Voramai, was known and revered among followers for her spiritual healing practice and her teachings about lives in the otherworld. Thus, while following the female monastics on an alms-round, I overheard a conversation between two middle-age women from the neighbourhood who had just finished offering their food. “Last week I fell sick and at night I dreamed of her,” said one woman to the other, nodding her head in the direction where Ven. Dhammananda was standing. “In my dream she came to help me,” the woman went on to say, “and when I woke up I felt better.” “That’s good,” said the other woman with a smile, “she came to help you.”

At the monastery later that day, I told Ven. Dhammananda about this conversation. She replied saying that there were people from quite a number of households in the neighbourhood who held “this kind of belief”. She then launched into a story of an elderly woman from an extended household nearby who was possessed by a spirit. A few members of this household were among the regular alms-givers. When the possession took place, they came to the
monastery to invite Ven. Dhammananda to help out. I did not see the female monk in action dealing with this possessing spirit, but a lay resident at the monastery later described to me how Ven. Dhammananda had towered over the ailing body and "talked to the spirit." She reportedly asked with a loud voice who the spirit was and what it wanted. Having conversed enough with the spirit, she then ordered it to leave the body and ended the session with Pali recitations.

In recounting this story, Ven. Dhammananda did not go into the details of her actions. Instead, she gave me her interpretation of the incident. "This is a big household with several people living together. Sometimes they ran into conflicts with each other," she started by giving some background of the family. "But, you know, as the Thais are, they wouldn't discuss the matter openly, and tension mounted. This tension exposed itself in the form of illness, of spirit possession. Then, they asked me to go and help, so I went to do some recitations." Ven. Dhammananda said she also took the opportunity to let the possessed woman say what she had to say. "I let the spirit speak, but in fact it was the [possessed] woman who spoke. This allowed her to articulate her grievances. Psychologically, it helped," Ven. Dhammananda explained. She then passed a comment on her own teaching strategy, "this is a way of teaching people according to their own context."

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the significance of everyday monastic conduct and ritual practice in constituting the monastic identity of women. I suggested that by paying attention to the details of these practices, we see the process in which the so-called monastic tradition has constantly evolved.
These practices are often too diffuse to remain under the complete control of any one institution. They are regulated by certain norms, but constantly give way to manoeuvring and continual changes.

In the case of Thai Buddhism, the fact that everyday monastic conduct and ritual practice are diffuse and cannot be fully regulated does not mean that these practices are insignificant in the eyes of religious authorities. On the contrary, as scholars of Thai Buddhism have argued, the central points of contention in Thai Buddhist monasticism as demonstrated in past conflicts within the male monastic order lie more in the notion of 'correct practice', most notably those practices that may be considered superficial, such as the colours and different ways of wearing the monastic robes, the use of alms-bowls, differences in chanting styles and so on. These elements of the monastic conduct, so ingrained in the daily life of Buddhists that they seem negligible, actually form an important part of the monastic identity and legitimacy in Thai Buddhism.

As I have shown in this chapter, the emphasis on correct monastic practice has not escaped the awareness of the small number of newly-emerged Theravada monastic women. In trying to establish their monastic standing – in ways that are inevitably related to male monasticism – the women have paid particular attention to cultivating 'correct' monastic practice. However, the notion of correct practice that has circulated in mainstream monasticism is not likely to be applied readily and unproblematically to monastic women. This situation has led monastic women to a dilemma of trying to comply with the Thai Buddhist conventions in monastic practices, conventions which have been male-oriented, while having to defy the gender conceptions inherent in those
conventions, which seek to exclude women and deny female monasticism in the first place.
Conclusion

Theorizing Women's Monasticism and Institutional Buddhism

During the course of undertaking this study, I sometimes heard the question: “Why would some women want to become monks?” At other times, the question was put slightly differently, and asked: “Why do women want to be ordained?” There are no quick and clear-cut answers to these seemingly simple questions. This thesis originated from a desire to understand the intricate and dynamic social processes, played out at both the individual and institutional levels, which affect women’s religious aspirations and vocations. This thesis has thus examined the dialectical relationship between women’s monasticism and institutional Buddhism in the context of Thailand from both the historical and contemporary perspectives. It has sought to understand various social and political forces – including Siam’s encounter with Western imperialist powers, the elitist religious reform and modernization project, the rise and development of modern political consciousness among the population, the reciprocal relationship between institutional Buddhism and the state, and the ever-expanding transnational connections between people in different societies – that have affected gender conceptions, the notion of the Thai Buddhist monkhood as well as women’s position vis-à-vis institutional Buddhism.
Furthermore, by analyzing both discursive actions and actual practices in the field of women's monasticism, this thesis has sought to explain the persistence and change that have occurred in the relationship between Buddhist monasticism and women's religious vocation. It has thus offered an insight into how institutional denial and constraints in the area of women's monasticism have led to the emergence of different forms of women's religious vocation that have, more or less, posed a gender challenge to the male-dominated institution of Theravada Buddhist monkhood in Thailand.

I started this thesis by asking four questions: First, why was it difficult for women to participate fully in the religious vocation and to be formally recognized as monastics in the context of Thai Buddhism? Second, despite this difficulty, what enabled different forms of women's religious vocation, especially the confrontational Theravada phiksumi ordination, to emerge at different points in history? Third, how can we account for these different forms of women's religious vocation? And fourth, what does the situation of women's monasticism tell us about the characteristics of institutional Buddhism and the monastic order, or the sangha, in Thailand?

In this conclusion, I draw on major conceptual themes that have emerged in this thesis in order to provide analytical responses to the four questions above. In the following sections, I will first discuss the 'gendering process' of the sangha, which has contributed to maintaining the male hegemony of the monastic institution. Next is an analysis of the incomplete nature of the male hegemony of institutional Buddhism. Here, I argue that this male religious hegemony, being culturally rooted and dominant, renders it difficult for women to carve out their monastic vocation on the one hand. Yet, on the other hand,
the *sangha*’s hegemony is not absolute or complete, making it possible for
different forms of female religious vocation to emerge. Nevertheless, it would
be a mistake to conclude that these different female monastic identities, having
emerged within the same constraining context of Thai Buddhism, necessarily
exist in complete harmony. Thus, in the next section I discuss the complexity
of women’s monasticism in light of the disjuncture in the relationships among
different female monastic identities. I argue that this disjuncture has in fact
been an outcome of the intricate relationship between the hegemonic power of
the *sangha* and women’s monasticism. Last is an analysis of the paradoxical
condition of women’s monasticism. Close scrutiny of women’s monastic
practices reveals how monastic women tend to be faced with paradoxes due to
the fact that they have to lead their monastic lives in the constraining context of
Thai Buddhism.

**The Gendering Process of the Sangha**

There are several possible explanations as to why it is difficult for women to
fully assume the monastic identity and practice in the Thai Buddhist context.
Here, I consider two related explanations that I think are central to the issue:
one concerns the gender order of the religious sphere, the other is the gender
logic that supports this gender order.

In many ways, the endeavour to institute and institutionalize women’s full
engagement in monasticism has been difficult because it was a move against
the weight of history and received tradition. One of the most important aspects
of this historical tradition is the maleness of the *sangha*. In other words, the
sangha has been historically and traditionally constituted and reconstituted as a male domain to the point that the maleness of the sangha is taken for granted as a fixed, if not also natural, order of things. This religious gender order is also decidedly hierarchical, with male monastics occupying the higher echelon by default of their ordained status while women, being either non- or semi-ordained, are ranked in the lower stratum of the laity. This gendered socio-religious hierarchy has largely been secured and maintained by the fact that only men may be ordained as novices and monks. This ordained status has allowed ordained men to have access to religious symbols that command respect, such as the yellow robes, and has entitled them to perform religious rituals. These religious symbols and ritual practices are popularly regarded as crucial, although not doctrinally ideal, sources of religious authority.

As mentioned in the Introduction, one of the main arguments of this thesis has been that we should not regard this religious gender order as timeless, monolithic, and impervious to change. The above explanation tells us what the religious gender order looks like in the Thai Buddhist context, but it does not quite explain the logic behind this gender order. This brings us to the second explanation about the maleness of the sangha. In her seminal work, Scott (1988: 44-45) maintained that gender is a persistent and recurrent means by which relations of power are articulated. As such, gender – the social organization of sexual difference – functions as an objective set of references deployed to legitimize power relations in many ways (Scott 1988: 45). In

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1 In principle, and with only few exceptions such as physical disabilities, all men are eligible for ordination. Normatively speaking, young Buddhist men in Thailand were, and to a lesser extent still are, expected to be temporarily ordained and spend some time in the monikhhood. Statistics of the year 2005 show that 57.8% of male Buddhists in Thailand aged 15 years and older have been ordained at some points, either as novices or monks (National Statistics Office 2006).
Chapters 1 and 2, I have discussed historical processes in which the male-dominated status quo of the *sangha* has been maintained. In the context of Thai Theravada monasticism, ‘women’ as an objective category has been regarded as an other against which the male identity of the *sangha* has been measured and maintained. In other words, women are the other whose absence from the *sangha* is necessary in order to maintain the maleness of the *sangha*. In this gendering process, the members of the celibate male monastic institution do not only practice sexual disinterest and detachment as doctrinally required. To maintain the social acceptability of the *sangha* as the legitimate upholder of the religion and the prime source of religious authority, it is not sufficient for the *sangha* to be pure; the institution should also be seen as pure. To maintain this public image of the *sangha* as pure, it is deemed necessary for this male-dominated institution to exclude women from the central domain of monkhood.

However, this gender logic that seeks to exclude women from the monastic realm altogether might be seen as contradicting another important ideology of Theravada monasticism, one which establishes that members of the *sangha* should renounce the lay lifestyle and should not concern themselves with mundane worries of the householder. Ideally, monks should live only on alms-food and other material support given by the laity, much of which comes from women. It is not surprising therefore to see another gender ideology take root which, as discussed in the Introduction, encourages women to act as supporters or ‘mother-nurturers’ of the *sangha*. Andaya confirms this point saying that “[t]he *sangha* had always favoured the devout laywoman over the female ascetic” (2002: 29). To give an example, the scripturally-based Buddhist teachings that have circulated in Thai society treat as exemplary two lay female
figures from the Buddhist canon: one is Visakha, a wealthy married woman and benevolent supporter of the Buddha, whose stories appear in a number of sections in the Sutta collection; the other is Princess Matsi (also Madsi), the extremely self-sacrificing wife of Prince Vessantara from a famous Jataka tale.² According to Andaya, the ‘maternal/nurture’ metaphor in Theravada Buddhism emerged in medieval Sri Lankan Buddhist literature and likely spread to Southeast Asia through monks from the region who travelled to Sri Lanka and initiated the translation of these texts (Andaya 2002: 15-16). The historical advent of this ideological emphasis on female piety in the form of merit-making coincided with the disappearance of women’s full ordination (Andaya 2002: 29). As for women who insist on devoting themselves to the religious life under this gender order, they may assume the semi-ordained status of mae-chi. Women who live other forms of religious vocation may also be tolerated as long as they do not attempt to disrupt the peripheral position of women vis-à-vis the sangha.

No matter what logic is behind this gendering process, up to this point in the discussion we seem to have conjured up a picture of an all-encompassing and invincible male hegemony of the sangha and a fixed religious gender order. This picture is hard to dispel indeed, and this is perhaps the reason why it has served as the prevalent analytical backdrop to a good number of previous studies on gender and Buddhism in Thailand. However, the cases of women’s attempts to pursue a religious vocation discussed in this thesis have

² While there are few critical discussions of the role of Visakha, the Jataka story of Princess Matsi has received considerable attention from Thai feminist writers. In 1985, the woman novelist Sri Dao Reuang wrote a provocative short story entitled ‘Matsii’, which challenges the dominant concepts of motherhood and Buddhist-inspired male superiority in Thai society (see Kepner 1996). The feminist Buddhist scholar Suwanna Satha-anand (1997) also gives an insightful feminist critique of the received interpretation of the role of Matsi. See also Kornvipa Boonsue (n.d.).
demonstrated otherwise. These cases of either subtle or overt disruption to the normative religious gender order point up the likelihood that the gender hegemony of the sangha may not be as pervasive and unchanging as it has been represented in a number of studies.

**Incomplete Hegemony of the Sangha**

The feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1996), in her article entitled ‘Gender Hegemonies’, maintains that hegemonies are incomplete. She thus argues for an analytical viewpoint that takes into account ‘loose ends’ of hegemonies, or counterhegemonies in other words. She maintains that to see certain meanings or values as hegemonies is to recognize them as “culturally dominant and relatively deeply embedded but nonetheless historically emergent, politically constructed, and nontotalistic” (Ortner 1996: 147). This analytical perspective, I would add, also reveals how hegemonies are not stable, how they are susceptible to contestation, and how they need to be constantly maintained if they are to remain dominant. This is because hegemonies evolve in context. As cultural values, they evolve in dialectical relationships with the social and political conditions of their times and spaces. This is also the case with the male hegemony of the Thai sangha.

It is important to note, however, that not every act of maintaining the gender hegemony of the sangha is a conscious act, nor does it necessarily constitute a conscious project with a clear intention to uphold male domination. Gender concepts and practices may be developed as a means to an end of gaining or retaining power, but may not be consciously or explicitly articulated as such.
Because of the sometimes implicit characteristic of the relationship between gender and hegemonic power, we may need to look beyond acts or events that carry an explicitly gendered message in order to better understand this relationship.

In writing this thesis, I have re-read the history of Buddhist reform and bureaucratization of the sangha in Thailand in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and have found that gender interests were entrenched in these ostensibly gender-neutral processes. Although few direct references to gender appear in historical studies of the sangha, we learn from the broader context of Buddhist teachings and monasticism that the concern about sexuality and gender is constitutive of the notion of ‘purity’ central to the sangha’s identity and authority.3

One of the intended contributions of this thesis is to demonstrate how the gender hegemony of institutional Buddhism and the sangha is not primordial, monolithic, or unchanging. Rather, this hegemony is contingent upon contexts, gender and otherwise. I contend that the consolidation of monarchical state power by means of the centralization of the sangha administration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had gender implications on women’s monasticism. For one thing, the Buddhist modernization project – with the introduction of modern monastic education, administrative offices and legislation – gradually brought Buddhist monasticism under tighter control of the state. Consequently, Buddhist religious practices became increasingly regulated by official rules.

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3 Gender is by no means the only constitutive feature of the purity of the sangha. A number of historical studies of the sangha point to other features, such as the rise of scriptural orthodoxy and the great emphasis on ‘correct’ monastic practices during the period of reform and rationalization of Buddhism in Thailand in the 19th and early 20th centuries (see a discussion of this in chapter 1).
The fact that this historically-emergent official Buddhism only recognized male monasticism contributed to the strengthening of male hegemony in the religious realm. As noted above, hegemony has evolved in context. It has been made and remade, and in this constant remaking both its intensity and scope may shift, and indeed have shifted, over time.

Ortner’s suggestion that we look for the loose ends of hegemonies should draw our attention to the different forms of women’s religious vocation. The emergence of a female religious vocation points exactly to the loose ends of the male monastic hegemony. Such emergence demonstrates that it has been possible to interrupt the dominance of male monasticism, and the interruption may take different forms and approaches. A close reading of cases of overt gender challenge to the male monastic authority – such as the Theravada ordinations of women that took place in the late 1920s and early 2000s – has brought to light how the sangha and the state have had to make an effort to retain the male monopoly of monasticism. This reading also reveals to us the mechanisms that the sangha and the state have employed in their reaction to gender disruption. It offers a new insight into how effort has had to be exerted to maintain the male monastic hegemony in Thai Buddhism in the face of challenges and disruption.

The Complexity of Women’s Monasticism

In any case, the emergence of different forms of women’s religious vocation should not be read simply as a linear and coherent progress of women in the religious sphere. As seen from this thesis, women’s religious vocation differs
not only in form but also in terms of the women’s aspirations, their modes of belief and practice, their religious goals, and the approaches they take towards achieving these goals. More importantly, these different forms of female religious vocation may or may not mutually support one another. In one example of mutual reinforcement, a Mahayana phiksuni from Bangkok told me during my fieldwork that the publicity surrounding Theravada phiksuni ordinations made it easier for her to identify herself as a fully ordained woman, whereas in the past people often mistook her for a mae-chi.

However, the mae-chi and phiksuni are the two female monastic identities that are often juxtaposed. This is mainly because of their relatively high visibility: mae-chi for their numbers and length of existence, and phiksuni for the public controversy around them. In the wake of Theravada phiksuni ordinations, we tend to hear more senior monks expressing their wishes to see an improvement in the status of mae-chi. From this perspective, mae-chi is regarded as an organically Thai form of women’s religious vocation, therefore a better (or at least less problematic) alternative to the controversial Theravada phiksuni.\(^4\) In a casual conversation I had during my fieldwork, a mae-chi who also worked as an academic confirmed this observation. She noted that monks seemed more willing to support mae-chi now, or else, as she concluded, “a number of mae-chi might want to become phiksuni”.

\(^4\) For example, Phra Dhammapitaka states that the category mae-chi is “something we already have and is good in itself” (2001: 46). However, he also admits that mae-chi have been neglected and their situations should be improved (Phra Dhammapitaka 2001: 46). In another example, Phra Sripariyattimoli (2003) agrees that phiksuni ordination is feasible in principle, but the idea may not be realized any time soon due to the degree of conservatism within the Thai sangha. He therefore suggests, as an alternative, that the Thai sangha should formally recognize mae-chi as nak-buat or ‘ordained persons’. (Phra Sripariyattimoli 2003: 108-118).
To be certain, not all mae-chi wanted to become phiksuni (see for example, Falk 2002: 250, 258). Another example is indicative of the complexity of the relationship between different forms of women’s monasticism. This incident, which I witnessed, took place at an international conference where much discussion was devoted to issues related to phiksuni and phiksuni ordination. During a small-group discussion among ordained and lay women from different Buddhist traditions and countries, an American Mahayana female monk, who was familiar with the situation of monastic women in Thailand, made an optimistic remark about the future of Thai phiksuni. She forecast with confidence that the number of phiksuni in the country would increase noticeably in the next few years. At this point, a senior mae-chi from Thailand, who was known for her long years of meditation teaching, raised her concern via a Thai-English interpreter. “So, what do you think of mae-chi?” she asked the group. “What about mae-chi like us?” she went on to say, intently, “This is as far as we can get, to be mae-chi, practise Buddhism, and work to spread the religion the best we can. What, then, do you think of us who are mae-chi just like this?”

This exchange at the conference, between a young and hopeful American female monk and a senior Thai mae-chi – the latter often stereotypically regarded as belonging to a category of quasi-ordained and disadvantaged religious women – reveals a disjunction in the relationships between different female monastic identities. By discussing such disjunctive relationships, my intention is not to emphasize the tension among women, but to draw attention

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5 The 8th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, 27 June – 2 July 2004, South Korea.
to this disjuncture as an outcome of the complex relationship between the male monastic hegemony and women’s monasticism.

Close scrutiny of this complex relationship also reveals the productive side of the male monastic hegemony. This hegemony, it should be noted, is not realized only by the negative means of exclusion or marginalization of women from the monastic sphere. The hegemony also functions positively to arguably achieve the end result of maintaining the status quo. One example of this is the popular Buddhist teachings that selectively praise and promote the role model of women as benevolent supporters or mother-nurturers of the sangha as discussed earlier. Another example is the support expressed by senior monks for the advancement of the status of mae-chi as a better alternative to Theravada phiksunī ordination discussed above, which could as well be read as a positive function that has originated from within the hegemonic realm of the male-dominated Buddhist monasticism. This positive function may be regarded, by the same token, as a means to maintain the male status quo of Thai Buddhist monasticism.

Because of the intricate relationship between women’s monasticism and male monastic hegemony just outlined, it is important that studies of gender and institutional religion maintain the sense of complexity of this relationship throughout. While we are on the issue of complexity, I should note that this view of complexity should not be limited to the consideration of women’s situations alone. For the male sangha itself is not homogeneous. This is evident in the fact that there are individual male monks who have expressed their support for women’s full ordination or other advanced monastic status for women – some at the risk of jeopardizing their own position within the
sangha.\textsuperscript{6} Also, the sangha’s relationships with different groups of monastic women are not the same. As it has turned out, women of socially and economically advantaged positions whose monastic status poses less gender challenge to the mainstream monastic order tend to be more successful in forging constructive relationships with the male sangha. Therefore, we see here that the nature of the relationship between women’s monasticism and institutional Buddhism is not monolithic, but is contingent upon numerous contextual factors. In the next section, I will discuss how this complexity gives rise to the paradoxical condition of women’s monasticism.

**Paradoxes in Women’s Monasticism**

My last point in theorizing the relationship between women’s monasticism and institutional Buddhism concerns how the hegemonic nature of the male monastic institution has resulted in a number of paradoxes in women’s monasticism. Some of these paradoxes have resulted from institutional attempts to preclude women from the monastic sphere. Others have arisen from the women’s need to negotiate their religious identities and practices within the limits set by the male monastic institution. In all, these paradoxes reflect the constraining context of institutional Buddhism within which different forms of female religious vocation have taken shape.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{6} This includes a few Theravada male monks who have ordained women in Thailand in recent years.

\textsuperscript{7} This analysis of the paradoxical condition of women’s monasticism was inspired by Joan Scott’s (1996) book, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, in which the author contends that paradoxes (as in the feminist debate of equality vs. difference) are constitutive of feminism, and these paradoxes are the product of contradictions inherent in the male-identified discourses of citizenship, individualism and individual rights within which feminism saw its own birth.
The most fundamental of these paradoxes that is symptomatic of official Buddhism concerns the very existence of monastic women. The institutional denial to formally recognize women as nak-buat (ordained persons) has created a situation in which practically the whole population of women who have variously followed one or another form of monastic vocation in Thailand, despite their actual existence, has no formal existence in the framework of official Buddhism.

Another paradox surfaces at the point of encounter between the male religious hegemony and women’s monastic initiatives. This paradox, which concerns gender and the dichotomy between this-worldly and soteriological affairs, exposes contradictions in the discourses surrounding women’s monasticism, especially those related to Theravada phiksunī ordination. On the one hand, the ultimate goal of Buddhism lies in the transcendental state of nibbana – the extinction of mental defilements and sufferings. Monastic life is ideally described as a shortcut to this highest spiritual achievement, a state in which the physical sexual features, and by extension gender, of the practitioner are said to be irrelevant (see for example, Kulavir 2002: 98). Yet, the arguments for and against women’s monasticism are saturated with this-worldly concerns of legality and social acceptability, both of which are loaded with different gender conceptions. Whereas doctrinal Buddhist teachings emphasize the severing from worldly attachments, much of the controversy around women’s monasticism arises paradoxically from women’s adoption of material objects which are symbolically attached to the male monastic identity, such as the wearing of the yellow robes and the use of alms-bowls.
A further paradox arises from the need of monastic women to negotiate their religious identities within the restricted possibilities and limited symbolic resources available to them. This paradox emerges from the co-existence of what seems contradictory in the practice of women’s monasticism: radical motivation and action on the one hand, and the aspiration for traditional authenticity on the other. Here I focus on the case of Theravada phiksuni.

It should have become clear at this point that the Thai sangha is an intricate manifestation of a male hegemony, with its own systems of knowledge, symbols and practices that form part of the local cultural system. Also, it should have become clear that the Theravada phiksuni is a form of women’s monasticism that has moved farthest into this male-dominated religious terrain.

The attempt to institute Theravada phiksuni ordination necessarily entails different forms of gender subversion: that of knowledge (e.g. the phiksuni lineage can be reconnected), of symbolic identification (e.g. women wearing the yellow robes) and of religious status (women being monks). These subversive moves are radical in that they require the women involved to defy the long-standing monastic and cultural conventions that hold that women may not wear the yellow robes and become monks. This process of change also requires that the women re-define, or in fact re-gender, the monastic tradition by means of their discursive acts and monastic practices so that the tradition would now include women as religious experts on a par with male monks. Yet, this move is necessarily paradoxical, for the women first have to breach the male-oriented conventions of the monastic tradition in order to become part of that tradition themselves. In this situation, the women have to try to bring change to the gendered monastic tradition and, at the same time, try to uphold
certain 'traditional' value and legitimacy of that tradition with which they identify themselves.

What meaning can we make of these paradoxes? Do they reflect a flaw in women's monasticism? In a different context, Scott states that paradoxes "do not signal a defect" (in feminism in her case); rather, they are symptomatic of the difficulty of the situation in which women have to operate (1996: 173). The same applies to the situation of Buddhist women's monasticism in Thailand. In itself, a paradox signifies multiplicity, the co-existence of differences. The paradoxical condition of women's monasticism exposes the inconsistency and inadequacy inherent to the discourses of male monasticism. These paradoxes also unveil the constructedness of the monastic tradition, and how this tradition has in fact been defined and redefined in a gendered way to exclude women. This is so that the male monastic authority can be maintained, in the name of purity and traditional correctness.

However, paradoxes are not necessarily negative. The paradoxical condition of women's monasticism has kept open a space in which women can negotiate and manoeuvre their religious identities. For if we argue that the monastic tradition has been constantly redefined in a gendered way to maintain its male-oriented characteristic, it should be possible to project a further redefinition of this monastic tradition in order to change its gender-exclusionary characteristic and to open up a space for people who have been previously excluded. It is these creative acts of negotiating, manoeuvring, defining and redefining that have always been at the core of different forms of women's religious vocation in Thailand.
Glossary

Note:  (P) = Pali, (T) = Thai.

**Abhidhamma** (P) – The analytic presentation of Buddhist doctrine as recorded in the Tipitaka (see below). In Thailand the Abhidhamma is popularly known as a collection of liturgical verses selected from the Abhidhamma section of the Tipitaka that is recited at funerals.

**ajan** (T) – A teacher; faculty member of the university.

**Antarayikadhamma** (P) – A set of questions about the state of being (gender, illness, etc.) of a phiks or phiksuni ordinand asked at the time of ordination and for which inappropriate answers may disqualify the ordinand from receiving ordination.

**Asoke** or **Santi Asoke** (T) – The name of a reformist Buddhist sect of male and female monastics and laypeople in Thailand. Established in the 1970s, the sect is known for its strict observance of vegetarianism and ascetic austerity, as well as uncompromising critical comments on the mainstream sangha by its leader, Phothirak (also known as Bodhiraksa).

**atama** (T) – The first-person pronoun (‘I’) used by ordained monks (from the Sanskrit atama meaning ‘self’).

**banphachit** (T) – A monk, monastic or ordained person (from the Pali pabbajita, with the same meaning).

**bindu** or **kappabindu** (P) – A small dark mark applied to a new robe to smudge it so as to make it permissible for a monk to wear (pronounced phintu in Thai).
binhabat (T) – The daily ritual gathering of alms-food by monks (from the Pali pindapata).

bodhisattva (P) – A buddha-to-be, or one who has resolved to attain enlightenment in order to help others (also bodhisatta, pronounced phothisat in Thai).

buat (T) – To ordain or be ordained.

buat korn biat (T) – An idiom meaning ‘to be ordained before cuddling up’.

chi-karak (T) – A mae-chi (see below) who wears dark-brown robes.

chi-dang (T) – A mae-chi in tainted colours, an uncommon term used by one woman to describe her clothing pattern.

chi-phram (T) – A laywoman who commits for a short period to the lifestyle of mae-chi but without shaving her hair.

dasasilamata (P) – A Sri Lankan Buddhist nun who observes the ten Buddhist precepts.

dhamma (P) – The Buddha’s teachings; virtue, righteousness or justice.

Garudhamma (P) – The eight chief rules for the female monk.

Jataka (P) – A collection of stories of the Buddha’s past lives that forms part of the Tipitaka (pronounced chadok in Thai).

kamjat (T) – To eliminate, abolish or get rid of something.

kammavacarini (P) – A female monk who leads the ordinand in recitation and other formalities at the ordination ceremony.

kathin (T) – A ceremony at which laypeople offer new robes to an assembly of monks to mark the end of the rain-retreat (from the Pali kathina).

khabot (T) – A rebel against; to be rebellious; a rebellion (sometimes pronounced kabot).
**khwam-samerphak** (T) – Equality.

**khwam-yutitham** (T) – Justice.

**kuti** (T) – A residential unit of monks in a monastary.

**Langka-wong** (T) – Name of the monastic lineage of Theravada monks from Sri Lanka that was adopted by the Thai kingdom in the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya periods.

**lon** (T) – Shorn-headed (a derogatory or disparagingly humorous term).

**luang-mae** (T) – Venerable Mother, a rare colloquial title and pronoun for a senior female monk.

**luang-pheuan** (T) – Venerable Friend, an unusual and rarely used word created by a small circle of acquaintances of a particular female monk in their attempt to find an appropriate term to address her.

**luang-phi** (T) – Venerable Older Sibling; a colloquial title and pronoun common for male monks. Recently, some female novices and monks have started to adopt this word for themselves.

**luang-phor** (T) – Venerable Father, a colloquial title and pronoun common for a senior male monk, usually the abbot of a monastery.

**luang-ya** (T) – Venerable Grandmother, a very rare colloquial title and pronoun for a very senior female monk. So far, this term has been used to address only one female monk, Voramai Kabilsingh.

**mae** (T) – Mother.

**mae-chi** or **chi** (T) – A woman who shaves her head, normally wears all-white garments including a robe, and observes either the eight or ten Buddhist precepts; a small number of mae-chi can also be found wearing all-brown clothes (see chi-krak above).

**mae-nen** (T) – A colloquial title and pronoun used by Asoke followers to address the sikkhamat (see below).
Mahanikai (T) — The name of the Theravada order of the majority of monks in Thailand.

Mahathera Samakhom (T) — The name of the national administrative body of the Theravada Buddhist monastic order in Thailand, translated in this thesis as ‘the Sangha Council’.

Mahayana (P) — The name of the Buddhist tradition mainly professed in East Asian countries and Vietnam, and among the Buddhist populations of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore; sometimes called the Northern School of Buddhism. The Mahayana tradition in Thailand is made up of two monastic orders, the Chinese and the Vietnamese, called jin nikai and anam nikai respectively in Thai (pronounced mahayan in Thai).

na bun (T) — A field of merit. An agriculturally-related metaphor in which Buddhist monks are compared to a field on which laypeople can sow their virtuous support. It is believed that the support will yield merit, which will in turn bring good life and prosperity to the lay provider of the support.

nak-buat (T) — An ordained person; religious expert.

nak-prot (T) — An ascetic.

na leuamsai sattha (T) — Worthy of respectful admiration and faith.

nibbana (P) — The state of enlightenment which is the supreme goal in Buddhism; the extinction of all mental defilements and sufferings; the end of the cycle of rebirths (pronounced nipphan in Thai).

nikai (T) nikaya (P) — A monastic order, sect, school or tradition.

nissaya (P) — The ideal basic means of support for monks as stipulated in the Buddhist canon, namely, alms-food, robes made of discarded cloth, dwelling at the foot of a tree, and medicines made of fermented medicinal herbs.

Pali (P) — The Pali language used as the main language in Theravada canonical texts; the Pali canon or the Tipitaka (see below).
parachik (T) – A grave offence resulting in expulsion from monkhood; spiritual defeat (from the Pali parajika).

Patimokkha (P) – The collection of monastic rules as contained in the Vinaya section in the Tipitaka, divided into the Bhikkhu Patimokkha for male monks and the Bhikkhuni Patimokkha for female monks. Also, the fortnightly ritual recitation of the Pali Patimokkha by an assembly of monks at the monastery (pronounced patimok in Thai).

ten ba (T) – To be crazy.

pen patipak (T) – To be antagonistic or hostile to.

phansa (T) – The rain-retreat; the Buddhist lent (from the Pali vassa).

pha-pa (T) – A merit-making ceremony at which robes and other material offerings, including money donations, are presented to monks.

pha-pacha (T) – Garments collected from the burial ground, regarded as suitable for monks and nuns in the Buddha’s time.

phiksu (T) – An ordained male Buddhist monk who observes the 227 monastic rules (from the Pali bhikkhu and the Sanskrit bhikshu).

phiksu-ni (T) – An ordained female Buddhist monk who observes the 311 monastic rules (from the Pali bhikkhuni and the Sanskrit bhikshuni).

phiksu-song (T) – A collective group of ordained male Buddhist monks, also phra-phiksu-song, (from the Pali bhikkhu-sangha).

phonlameuang (T) – Citizen.

phor-kae-wat (T) – A senior male villager who takes care of a local monastery’s affairs (northern Thai dialect).

phor-luang (T) – A village headman (northern Thai dialect).

phothiyana (T) – The state of enlightenment (from the Pali bodhiyana), see nibbana above.
phra (T) — A monk; title for monks, royal family members, gods, goddesses, deities, holy figures, and auspicious objects or abstract entities (as in phra phuttha-sassana or ‘Buddhism’).

phu binthabat ha liang chip (T) — Literally ‘one who earns a living by going on alms-rounds’, that is, a nun or monk.

phutthabanyat (T) — A Buddhist convention; a rule of statement that was laid down by the Buddha.

phutthaborisat (T) — The four categories of people who make up the Buddhist community, namely, phiksu (male monk), phiksuni (female monk), ubasok (layman) and ubasika (laywoman).

phutthajettana (T) — The Buddha’s will or intent.

phutthaphum (T) — The state of enlightenment (from the Pali buddhabhumi), see nibbana above.

phutthaprasong (T) — The Buddha’s wish or aim.

phutthasasana (T) — Buddhism.

phutthasathan (T) — A Buddhist place; euphemistic term for ‘monastery’ used by members of the Asoke group instead of ‘wat’ to avoid conflict with the Sangha Council.

phutthasawika (T) — A female disciple of the Buddha, used as the name of a now-defunct group of women who shaved their hair, put on light yellow robes, and observed the eight precepts (form the Pali buddha savika)

phu-ying (T) — Woman (sometimes shortened to ying).

samana (P) — A recluse or Buddhist monk, euphemistic title-prefix and pronoun for a male monk of the Asoke group used in place of the word ‘phra’, ‘phiksu’ or ‘phikkhu’ to avoid conflict with the Sangha Council.

samanen or nen (T) — A male novice who observes the ten precepts (from the Pali samanera).
samaneri (P, T) – A female novice who observes the ten precepts.

samnak-song (T) – A Buddhist monastic residence that has not been formally registered with the National Buddhist Bureau (previously Department of Religious Affairs) as a monastery or wat (see below).

sangha (P) – The monastic community; monastic order; used more frequently in this thesis to mean the hierarchical administrative system of the monastic order under the command of the Sangha Council (pronounced song in Thai).

saniat rai (T) – An inauspicious object, person, or action.

sattha (T) – Faith, confidence.

sattru (T) – An enemy.

sian-nam (T) – An adversary.

sikkhamana (P) – A female novice undergoing a probational period of two years before taking the full bhikkhuni ordination.

sikkhamat (T) – The categorical name of monastic women of the Asoke group, who have taken ordination according to the group’s procedural practice and observe the ten Buddhist precepts.

si-krack (T) – The dark-brown colour; commonly used for the monastic robes of Buddhist forest monks and a small number of mae-chi. This colour is also used for the robes of male and female monastics of the Asoke group.

silajarini (T) – The categorical name of a small group of monastic woman, started in 1957. The women observe the ten precepts and wear dark-brown robes. In the 1980s, only three silajarini were reported to still maintain their identity as such.

simma (P, T) – The consecrated area of a monastery.

sitthi (T) – A right or entitlement, also pronounced as sit.
seu-fu (Mandarin-derived word) – Master; a not-very-common title and pronoun used with and by some Mahayana female monastics.

songkhani (?) – A rare term created by one woman, Voramai Kabilsingh, and used as a title for her religious status.

sut phileuk (T) – Absolutely bizarre.

Sutta (P) – The sermons and dialogues of the Buddha as recorded in the Tipitaka (see below).

tamleung (T) – A unit of the old Thai currency that is equal to four baht (no longer in use).

Thammayut (T) – The name of the Theravada monastic order founded by Prince Mongkut (later King Mongkut) in the first half of the 19th century, and characterized in its early days by strict adherence to established Buddhist texts.

than-samai (T) – Up-to-date; modern.

the krajat (T) – A merit-making ceremony held by Mahayana Buddhists on the full-moon day of the seventh lunar month according to the Chinese calendar.

Theravada (P) – Name of the Buddhist tradition that represents the mainstream religion of Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and Thailand; sometimes called the Southern School of Buddhism (pronounced therawat in Thai).

thudong (T) – Austere monastic practices (from the Pali dhutanga).

Tipitaka (P) – Name of the Buddhist canonical texts comprised of three main parts, namely, the Vinaya, Sutta and Abhidhamma; sometimes called the Pali canon.

ubasika (T) – A Buddhist laywoman. The word is also adopted as a loosely-defined categorical name for a number of women who live ascetic lives much like mae-chi – normally shaving their heads, wearing plain and uniform-like clothes, observing the eight or ten Buddhist precepts, and
residing at monasteries or nunnerys – but who do not seek ordination rites to mark themselves as ordained (from the Pali *upasika*).

*ubasok* (T) – A Buddhist layman (from the Pali *upasaka*).

*uposatha* (P) – The consecrated assembly hall within a monastery compound (pronounced *ubosot* in Thai).

*utari nork-rit* (T) – Heretical.

*vihara* (P) – A shrine-hall or temple (pronounced *wihan* in Thai).

*Vinaya* (P) – The code of monastic discipline that governs the livelihood and practice of male and female monks as recorded in the *Tipitaka*.

*wai* (T) – To greet or salute with joined palms.

*wan phra* (T) – A Buddhist holy or religious day, literally ‘day of the monk’, that comes four times each lunar month.

*wat* (T) – A monastery; residence of members of the *sangha* (which implies ‘male monastics’).

*watr* (T) – A monastic daily routine, duty, observance, service or custom; a homophone for ‘wat’ used euphemistically to call two specific monasteries for Buddhist female monastics in Thailand – *Watr Nariwong* and *Watr Songdham-kalayani* in order to evade legal clauses in the Sangha law which stipulate that the *wai* is the residence of members of the *sangha*, which implies ‘male monastics’. (The word is from the Sanskrit *vatra*.)
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Hall ceremony at the Phnom Penh shrine. Monks (center) performed a ritual. People make offering while singing. A Mahakarma Phoekum (in brown-robes) sitting with people.

Sikkhamma recieving food from lay members of the Arok group.

Mae-chhi going on alms-round.
In Thailand, a rural temple in the North of
Thailand to be seen. (Photo: Residence of the North-East of
Thease, a rural residence ceremony in a rural temple.
A samanam ordination ceremony.

A samanam ordination ceremony.

Residence of the North-East of
Both Sit Lankan plastic and
in Sit Lanka in February 2003.
A samanam ordination ceremony.
The main building at War Songdham Kalayani, Nakhon Pathom.

Theravada phikum from different countries studying the monastic discipline during the 2003 rains-retreat at War Songdham Kalayani.

Phikum from different countries going on a alms-round near War Songdham Kalayani.