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Questions of ordination legitimacy for newly ordained Theravāda *bhikkhunī* in Thailand

Tomomi Ito

In Thailand the widespread assumption that bhikkhunī ordination has already been disrupted and that as a result Theravāda Buddhist women can no longer be ordained has been challenged by a group of women who have received the full monastic precepts from foreign saṅgha and practise Theravāda Buddhism in yellow monastic robes. Public concerns have centred on whether such bhikkhunī ordinations are possible, and how women could become bhikkhunī in a 'correct' way. Both supporters and opponents are often vocal in discussing ordination ceremony procedures, based on their interpretation of the vinaya, the monastic disciplines. This paper argues that it is not a matter of 'right' procedure, but rather of the authority of the religious institution or tradition that validates one's ordination. Even if a woman is ordained as a bhikkhunī by the 'right' procedure, her status remains unstable unless the religious authority of her country sanctions her ordination. In other words, it is only a political decision made by a religious institution — in the case of Thailand, the National Saṅgha — that can reinstate 'legitimate' bhikkhunī ordination.

For centuries after the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* ceased to exist in Sri Lanka in the eleventh century, Theravāda Buddhist women were told to abandon their hopes of becoming fully ordained as *bhikkhunī*. There was a widely held perception that women could not become *bhikkhunī* in the absence of a *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, an assumption derived from the *garudhamma* (eight rules) given by the Buddha to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the first *bhikkhunī*, as the conditions for women's admission to the order. The *garudhamma* included a rule that prescribes that a *bhikkhunī* candidate be ordained by both *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī saṅgha* after a two-year probation.

Tomomi Ito is an Associate Professor at Kobe University, Japan. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: itot@kobe-u.ac.jp. First, I am grateful to all the Thai *bhikkhunī*, *sāmaṇerī*, and people involved in the *bhikkhunī* movement for kindly allowing me to interview them and maintaining friendly communications. I would like to thank Venerable Dr Jampa Tsedroen and Dr Thea Mohr for the opportunity to present the original version of this paper at the First International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha, Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages, University of Hamburg, July 2007, which I think was a historically important conference, even though His Holiness the Dalai Lama had yet to ordain women as *bhikkhunī* in Tibetan Buddhism. I also thank all the presenters and participants. Their opinions, and the Congress's consequence, determined by His Holiness's closing words, helped me clarify the ideas in this paper. Many thanks also go to friends at the Sakyadhita International Buddhist Women's Conferences with whom I share important updates on this subject.

The first essential task for the restoration of the disrupted Theravāda *bhikkhunī* order was to refute that common presumption.

Concerned Buddhist women established international networks to discuss the reintroduction of *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in the Theravāda and Tibetan traditions, in which there was no existing *bhikkhunī* ordination lineage. Through international collaboration, the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* was restored in Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism: in 1996 in Sarnath, the Korean order held a historic ordination ceremony for 10 women from Sri Lanka, and in 1998 in Bodhgaya, Taiwan's Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order hosted an international ordination ceremony at which a further twenty Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* were ordained. The *bhikkhunī saṅgha* has been developing steadily in Sri Lanka; at present it has several hundred members.¹ The ordination of Sri Lankans further stimulated Thai women to seek ways to become *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī*.

The recent revival of *bhikkhunī* ordination aroused considerable public and academic interest in Thailand and elsewhere. Thai Buddhists in general were interested in whether it was actually possible, whilst scholars were concerned with public reaction to the claim of a break with precedent. Thai public debates on *bhikkhunī* ordination are examined in Varaporn Chamsanit's Ph.D. dissertation and Martin Seeger's article, both of which became available while this paper was awaiting publication.² These studies both point to a range of important issues in Thai public debates, such as the significance of strict *vinaya* adherence in the Theravāda school, and the question of cross-lineage ordination in which an East Asian Mahāyāna *bhikkhunī* preceptor ordains Theravāda *bhikkhunī*. On the one hand, opponents, reinforcing the common assumption, insist that no Theravāda *bhikkhunī* exist, hence no woman can be ordained as a Theravāda *bhikkhunī*; if ordained by a Mahāyāna preceptor, the woman should also be a Mahāyāna *bhikkhunī*. On the other hand, the leading Thai *bhikkhunī*, Dr Chatsumarn Dhammanandā, suggests that the *vinaya* lineage of Chinese *bhikkhunī* goes back to Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* who travelled to China in the fifth century to ordain the first group of Chinese women.³

Aside from public debate, the reactions of Thai *mae chi* (eight-precept female practitioners) is another important gauge of the social significance of *bhikkhunī* ordination. In the absence of a *bhikkhunī* order, Thai women generally become *mae chi*, despite their lack of formal status as ordained Buddhist nuns. One may expect that *mae chi* would be enthusiastic about the opportunity to become *bhikkhunī*; however, the reality is not so simple. Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel conducted joint research on Thai *mae chi* who had received higher doctrinal education and then served as Pāli teachers, and sought their opinions about *bhikkhunī* ordination in

1 By the early 21st century, there were 165 *bhikkhunī* registered at the board of *Bhikkhunī Sāsana* in Sri Lanka at Dambulla. Bhikkhunī Bhadra, *Higher ordination and bhikkhunī order in Sri Lanka* (Dehiwala: Sridevi, 2001), p. 29. By mid-2004 there were approximately 400 *bhikkhunī* and an estimated 800 *sāmaṇerī* waiting to be qualified for higher ordination. See <http://www.sakyadhita-srilanka.org/history.html> (last accessed 27 June 2007).

2 Varaporn Chamsanit, 'Reconnecting the lost lineage: Challenges to institutional denial of Buddhist women's monasticism in Thailand' (Ph.D. diss., The Australian National University, Canberra, 2006); Martin Seeger, 'The *bhikkhunī*-ordination controversy in Thailand', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 29, 1 (2006): 155–83.

3 Varaporn, 'Reconnecting the lost lineage', p. 216 and chapter 5; Seeger, 'The *bhikkhunī*-ordination controversy', pp. 161–3.

Thailand.⁴ The authors indicated that in their interviews most intellectual *mae chi* presented negative views about becoming *bhikkhunī*. Why are Thai *mae chi* so negative about becoming *bhikkhunī*? The reasons given in the interviews by Collins and McDaniel are roughly the same as the ones I gathered from *mae chis* at the Thai Mae Chi Institute and *upāsikā* disciples of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu when I asked the same questions in 1999 and 2005.⁵ How should this Thai Buddhist women's repetition of clichés be interpreted?

I have followed the *bhikkhunī* ordination movement in Thailand since Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's pioneering *sāmaṇerī* ordination in February 2001 through interviews with Thai *sāmaṇerī*, *bhikkhunī*, and their supporters and opponents. In the course of my research in Thailand up to March 2007, thirty-four Thai women had ordained as *sāmaṇerī*. Among those Thai *sāmaṇerī*, seven had ordained as *bhikkhunī* by the end of July 2007.⁶ Not all those Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* are Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā's disciples; there are several groups of former *mae chi* and laywomen who were inspired by the idea and sought their own means to receive *bhikkhunī* ordination. Unfortunately, some of the Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* have found it difficult to remain in their yellow robes. As far as could be traced, in May 2007 there were eleven *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* who gave up their yellow robes and clothed themselves as *mae chi* or *upāsikā*.⁷ These numbers reflect the slowness of Thai Buddhist women's hopes for full ordination as well as their desire not be embroiled in controversy; the expansion of *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* ordination is impeded by the potential risks of being ordained.

4 Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel, 'Buddhist "nuns" (*mae chi*) and the teaching of Pāli in contemporary Thailand', *Modern Asian Studies*, 44, 6 (2010): 1373–408.

5 Tomomi Ito, 'Buddhist women in *dhamma* practice in contemporary Thailand: Movements regarding their status as world renunciates', *Journal of Sophia Asian Studies*, 17 (1999): 147–81; Tomomi Ito, 'Dhammamātā: Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu's notion of motherhood in Buddhist women practitioners', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 38, 3 (2007): 409–32.

6 The seven Thai *bhikkhunī* include Dhammanandā (ordained in Feb. 2003, Sri Lanka), Dhammarakkhittā (in May 2005, Ayutthaya, Thailand), Rattanāvalī, Silanandā and Dhammamittā (in Mar. 2006, Ayutthaya, Thailand), Sukhettā (in June 2006, Sri Lanka) and Dhammadhīrā (in July 2007, Sri Lanka). According to the website run by Dhammanandā (www.thaibhikkhunis.org/eng/, last accessed 12 June 2007), there were three more Thai *bhikkhunī* who ordained earlier overseas: Bhikkhunī Varaporn (ordained in 1988, Los Angeles), Bhikkhunī La-O (1988, Los Angeles) and Bhikkhunī Katannuna (1998, Bodhgaya).

7 Among the eleven were four former *sāmaṇerī* in the Chiang Mai group who ordained in Sri Lanka in February 2006, according to Dhammanandā's website (<http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org/eng/>, last accessed 12 June 2007). Six former *sāmaṇerī* ordained at a temple in Yasothon, and the other one ordained as a *sāmaṇerī* through Dhammanandā's assistance and then as a *bhikkhunī* by a visiting Asian Theravāda *bhikkhu* (Rattanāvalī, interview, 19 June 2006; Rattanāvalī, email, 8 May 2007; a disrobed woman, interview, Bangkok, 11 Sept. 2006). As of the end of July 2007, out of the original thirty-four Thai women who had ordained as *sāmaṇerī* or *bhikkhunī*, subtracting the eleven who had already disrobed and the three who were in Sri Lanka for further study and practice, there were nineteen *sāmaṇerī* or *bhikkhunī* in Thailand, and one *sāmaṇerī* was planning to return from Thailand. The three in Sri Lanka were Sāmaṇerī Poonsirivara, Bhikkhunī Sukhettā and Sāmaṇerī Kaññārattana. Kaññārattana left Thailand for Sri Lanka in Apr. 2007 in order to prepare for her higher ordination as a *bhikkhunī*. (Rattanāvalī, email correspondence, 3 May 2007). According to Dhammanandā's website, <http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org/eng/> (last accessed 12 June 2007), Dhammavijjani will be returning from Sri Lanka to take up residence in Chiang Mai.

In Thailand, the National Saṅgha does not have the legal authority to forbid Thai women's *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* ordination through foreign Buddhist orders, however, so those ordained elsewhere do have that choice and can live with the Buddhist community's support.⁸ Nevertheless, the Saṅgha's displeasure with *bhikkhunī* ordination is hinted at in the preservation of the 1928 Saṅgharāja's proclamation which banned *bhikkhu* and even *sāmaṇerī* of all the Buddhist orders in Thailand from ordaining women as *bhikkhunī*, *sikkhamānā* and *sāmaṇerī*. In addition, it is a penal offence to disguise oneself in monastic garb to mislead people in order to solicit money.⁹ Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* have to be ready to defend themselves when questioned as to whether they have been 'rightly' ordained; such continual questioning of their status is one of the major obstacles for Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* to keep wearing the yellow robes.

This paper explores the notion of 'right ordination', i.e. the legitimacy of ordination. First, the paper will review Thai Buddhist debates in order to highlight that both *bhikkhunī* supporters and opponents base their stance on the *vinaya* texts to examine 'right procedures' by which 'right ordination' could be materialised. Second, the paper will consider whether the ordinations of Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* were recognised as legitimate when they chose one of the procedural options that *bhikkhunī* ordination supporters argued to be valid. Third, the paper will examine cases of foreign *saṅgha* in which a less normative procedure — which *bhikkhunī* opponents in Thailand hardly count as a 'valid' option — produced 'legitimate ordination' in their countries. While some cases here involve the Mahāyāna tradition, it should be kept in mind that in the history of these countries ordination legitimacy has had no less significance than those in Theravāda Buddhist countries, and that 'private ordination' was strictly distinguished from 'legitimate ordination'.¹⁰ Last, the paper will demonstrate that the legitimacy of ordination is not supported solely by some

8 Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* do receive sufficient support and respect in their local communities. In Theravāda Buddhist society the yellow monastic robes serve as a cultural code that is inseparably linked to the ordained status of an individual who dons them; Buddhists instantly know that they should pay respect and offer alms to anyone in the yellow robe, regardless of gender, even though many Thais understand that *bhikkhunī* ordination is no longer available. Tomomi Ito, 'Ordained women in yellow robes: An unfamiliar "tradition" in contemporary Thailand', in *Out of the shadows: Socially engaged Buddhist women*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Delhi: Sri Satguru, 2006), pp. 168–71.

9 *Ruang kan-buat phiksuni nai prathet thai* [*Bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand] (Bangkok: Committee for Women's, Children's, and Elderly People's Affairs, Senate of Thailand, n.d.), pp. 51–3.

10 During the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and Song Dynasty (960–1279), the status of *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* was strictly controlled by the government in order to oust unauthorised, privately ordained (私度 'sī dù') monks and nuns. Those who wished to ordain as *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhunī* had to obtain the requisite government certificate for ordination permission (度牒 'dù dié') before their ordination ceremony at a temple. Authorised *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* joined the monastic register, were separated from the civil register, and received a precept certificate (戒牒 'jiè dié') and a list of members who ordained at the same ceremony (同戒錄 in Japanese; 同戒录 'tóng jiè lù' in contemporary Chinese) from the temple they ordained at. These documents proved that the formal ordained status was authorised by the government and a monastic order. The ordination certificate lost its significance from the Ming Dynasty onwards, so *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* proved their status by means of temple-issued documents of a precept certificate and lists of members present at the ordination ceremony. Kanji Ogawa, 'Kinsei chugoku bukkyo ni okeru kai no hen-yo' [Transformation of monastic precepts in early modern Chinese Buddhism], in *Bukkyo ni okeru kai no mondai* [Issues regarding precepts in Buddhism], ed. Nihon Bukkyo Gakkai [Japan Buddhist Studies Association] (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1975), pp. 156–78.

‘right’ procedure, but rather is firmly determined by those who have the authority over the interpretation of tradition.

‘Right’ ordination and procedure for restoring *bhikkhunī*

Soon after the renowned female Buddhist scholar Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh made a public appearance as a *sāmaṇerī* in Theravāda robes in 2001, the propriety of reinitiating *bhikkhunī* ordination attracted the attention of the Thai public. In Thailand Chatsumarn was already known as a prominent advocate for the restoration of *bhikkhunī saṅgha* since the time of her mother’s *bhikkhunī* ordination in Taiwan in 1971, although, contrary to her wishes, the Thai Saṅgha recognised her mother as a Mahāyāna *bhikkhunī*, not as a Theravāda *bhikkhunī*.¹¹ Because of Chatsumarn’s continued advocacy of *bhikkhunī saṅgha* restoration, her ordination as *Sāmaṇerī Dhammanandā* had a much greater social impact than her mother’s ordination (hereafter Chatsumarn is referred by her ordained name ‘Dhammanandā’).¹²

Given the disruption of the *bhikkhunī* lineage in the Theravāda tradition, a major question in the Thai debate was whether there was a viable method for the ordination of women as *bhikkhunī*. Thai Buddhists tend to believe that women’s ordination is no longer possible because the ordination ceremony requires both *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* preceptors, and in contemporary Theravāda Buddhism (before the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* was firmly restored in Sri Lanka) there were no *bhikkhunī* preceptors. Opponents tended to reinforce this common notion of women’s ordination by referring to precedents in early Buddhist history regarding the origin and transmission of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*; whereas supporters of *bhikkhunī* restoration presented an alternative interpretation of the same stories by invoking the principles of women’s rights and gender equality, which they argued should be applied to the religious realm just as they are guaranteed by the Thai constitution in the secular realm.¹³

Negative opinions on bhikkhunī ordination revival: Procedural problems

Opponents of *bhikkhunī* restoration often cite the *vinaya*’s requirement of both *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* preceptors’ involvement in the ordination ceremony. One example would be the statement below by the renowned monastic scholar P.A. Payutto Bhikkhu, who often voices his opinions over controversial Buddhist issues. While many Thai Buddhists respect his opinion as being scholarly, according to one senior *bhikkhu* Payutto’s views are supported by a group of *bhikkhu* elders who do not make public statements in the name of the Thai Saṅgha.¹⁴ Payutto writes:

11 Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991); Tomomi Ito, ‘Buddhist women in *dharmā* practice’, pp. 147–81.

12 For more on Chatsumarn’s ordination and its social impact, see Tomomi Ito, ‘New beginnings: The *bhikkhunī* movement in contemporary Thailand’, *Bridging worlds: Buddhist women’s voices across generations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press, 2004), pp. 120–4.

13 *Rai-ngan phon kan-suksa ruang kan-buat phiksuni nai prathet thai* (study report on *bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand), brochure distributed at a panel session held at a Senate meeting room on 11 Mar. 2003.

14 Interview, Phra Srīpariyattimolī (Somchai Kusalacitto Bhikkhu), Maha Chulalongkorn Buddhist University, Bangkok, 28 Aug. 2002.

Some people ask questions such as ‘Why does not [the Saṅgha] give women a right of ordination to become *bhikkhunī*?’, referring to [gender equality guaranteed in] the constitution. Some say, ‘If there is no *bhikkhunī saṅgha* let *bhikkhu saṅgha* ordain [women] to be *bhikkhunī*’. Some say something like ‘Theravāda School is narrow-minded; why don’t they adopt the Mahāyāna Schools’ options for ordaining women?’ Some ask, ‘Why does not the Saṅgha administration, namely the Elders’ Council, sanction *bhikkhunī* ordination?’ Actually the reality is clear and simple: women had the right to ordination in the Buddha’s time, and now they still have the right to become *bhikkhunī*. However, the problem is that at the present time there is no one who has the right to ordain women as *bhikkhunī*. There are some people who, because they don’t know the procedure of *bhikkhunī* ordination, insist that *bhikkhu saṅgha* should ordain [women as] *bhikkhunī* without the involvement of *bhikkhunī saṅgha*.¹⁵

On the *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony itself, Payutto considered the elder *bhikkhunī*’s oral examination to be most important, with the elder *bhikkhu* serving simply to confirm the decision of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*:

The *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony is almost complete at the stage of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*’s [oral examination]. The [following] stage of the *bhikkhu saṅgha*’s [precept conferral] is only for the purpose of hearing and acknowledging what the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* has done. Therefore, the *bhikkhu saṅgha* does not have the right to ordain women as *bhikkhunī*, if the candidates are not yet ordained by the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*.¹⁶

Payutto provides further grounds for the *bhikkhu saṅgha*’s inability to ordain women: ‘If the *bhikkhu saṅgha* ordain [women as] *bhikkhunī* or *sāmaṇerī*, sooner or later feminists will disagree, asking what right *bhikkhu* have to ordain women, and why *bhikkhunī* aren’t allowed to ordain women.’¹⁷

Phra Devatilaka (Rabaep Ṭhitañāṇo Bhikkhu) is another senior monk who often voices his ‘personal’ views on contemporary Buddhist controversies based on his ‘academic’ standing. He is involved in the Thai Saṅgha’s politically active circle, and quite often his opinions can be perceived as strongly protective of the Thai Buddhist tradition.¹⁸ Phra Devatilaka has made the same point as Payutto about the roles of the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in the *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony. He even strongly criticises women who do not complete the two stages of the ordination ceremony:

15 Phra Thammapidok (P.A. Payutto), *Panha phiksuni: Bot thot-sop sangkhom thai (Bhikkhunī questions: Lessons to review Thai society)* (Bangkok: Sukkaphap chai, 2001), pp. 10–11. All translations from Thai and Japanese in this article are mine unless otherwise indicated.

16 Phra Thammapidok, *Panha phiksuni*, pp. 11–12.

17 Ibid., p. 12.

18 Phra Devatilaka heads a group of *bhikkhu* called the ‘Defendants of Security of Buddhism’ (Klum phithak khwam-mankhong khong phra phutthasasana; the English name appears in the group’s English publications). His best-known publications include *Phaen thamlai phra phutthasasana* (Bangkok: Klum phithak khwam-mankhong khong phra phutthasasana, 1983) and its English edition entitled, *A plot to undermine Buddhism* (Bangkok: Defendants of Security of Buddhism, 1984). These books are published under Phra Devatilaka’s former monastic title, ‘Phra Sophonkhunaphon’ (in the English edition, the author’s name appears as ‘Venerable Phra Sobhon-Ganabhorn’). In these books Phra Devatilaka strongly criticises interreligious dialogue as a Roman Catholic Church strategy to undermine Buddhism.

now one of the steps [of the ordination ceremony] is no longer available. If we are to establish the *bhikkhunī* group, where can we start? Since only the [male] *saṅgha* exists, without having a first group [of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*], a second group cannot be generated. Those [women] who ordain [as *bhikkhunī*] should be accused of unauthentic ordination transgressing the *vinaya* [in Thai, *buat mai thuk tong tam phra thamma winai*]; if they don *bhikkhunī* costume to deceive the world, they will receive the result of that wrong-doing [*pen bap kae tua eng*].¹⁹

The strong tone of those two influential *bhikkhu* seems to indicate that the *Saṅgha* elders are offended, as if they were being forced to change their ‘narrow-minded suppression’ of women’s rights to ordination.²⁰ Taking the *Saṅgha* elders’ intentions into consideration, the lay Buddhist teacher Thongyoi Saengsinchai compared the general behaviour of religious Thai Buddhists with that of *bhikkhunī* advocates. He indicates that ordination would not be demanded if a person were genuinely pursuing enlightenment; such a person would not get stuck on the issue of ordination when it was not available, but rather would pursue enlightenment without ordination.²¹ Thongyoi asked why *bhikkhunī* advocates do not intend to be ordained by a teacher or at a school in which they have faith and which can ordain *bhikkhunī* by following the principles of the school. But then he also questioned their demand to establish the Theravāda *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in the Thai *Saṅgha*, when that lineage had not been transmitted to Thailand, and there is no teacher to turn to.²²

To summarise the arguments against *bhikkhunī* restoration: on the one hand, there is a tendency to think that the ceremonial involvement of the dual *saṅgha* of *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* for women’s ordination is an essential requirement for producing new *bhikkhunī*; on the other hand, ordained status tends to be regarded as a non-essential formality or transient status which is less significant than religious practice for enlightenment. Perhaps the insistence on a traditional form for women’s ordination procedure is a convenient reason for dismissing so-called feminist claims. In addition, the voices of Thai *bhikkhunī* who intended to shed light on low-status Buddhist women’s hard work and contributions were not readily heard by those of high status.²³

Models of ‘legitimate’ ordination procedure: The Senate Subcommittee’s proposal

Bhikkhunī supporters argued that the disruption of the female ordination lineage did not prevent contemporary Buddhist women from ordination. One of the highest status groups of *bhikkhunī* supporters was the Thai Senate Subcommittee for

19 Phra Thepdilok (Rabaep Ṭhitaṇṇo), ‘Lang ma eng muan fon an chun chai’ [Pouring in just as refreshing rain], in *Ruan chai chao phut* [Home of mind for Buddhists] (Bangkok: Sun Songsoem Phutthasasana haeng Prathet Thai, 2001), p. 16.

20 Interview, Phra Srīpariyattimolī, 28 Aug. 2002.

21 Thongyoi Saengsinchai, ‘Panha ruang phiksuni’ [Questions about *bhikkhunī*], in *Khai pritsana panha phiksuni* [Answer questions about *bhikkhunī*], ed. Nawa-ek Thongyoi Saengsinchai and Chamnan Nisarath (Bangkok: Parian Tham Samakhom, 2001), p. 21.

22 Thongyoi, ‘Panha ruang phiksuni’, pp. 17–18.

23 Rattanāvalī often mentions this point in our private conversations. Bhikṣuṇī Chan Linh Nghiem (a Thai Buddhist nun who ordained in Thich Nhat Hanh’s order in France; also known by her Thai name Bhikkhunī Niramisa) also indicated a similar point about her work both before and after her ordination. Interview, Bhikṣuṇī Chan Linh Nghiem, Bangkok, 13 Mar. 2007.

Women's Affairs, which belonged to the Committee for Women's, Children's, and Elderly People's Affairs. The involvement and leadership of female senator Rabiaprat Phongphanit in particular has been a significant contribution to the *bhikkhunī* debate in Thailand.

The origin of Rabiaprat's interest in the *bhikkhunī* issue was her entrance into a Master's programme at Thammasat University. In 2002, at the age of 52, when she took the elective 'Women and Religion' course taught by Sāmaṇerī Dr Chatsumarn Dhammanandā, Rabiaprat said that she realised for the first time that women's freedom and equality of opportunity in Buddhism had been expropriated.²⁴ At high school, Rabiaprat had attended weekend Buddhist classes at a temple and received an award for her excellent result in the Buddhist doctrine examination, but she had not questioned the absence of *bhikkhunī*, despite having memorised the four Buddhist groups as consisting of *bhikkhu*, *bhikkhunī*, *upāsaka* and *upāsikā*. Decades later, as one of only 20 female senators, Rabiaprat found the structural gender disparity in Thai Buddhism a serious issue which she should work to redress. In 1999 Rabiaprat stood for election as a representative of women in Khon Kaen province at the request of housewife groups and the Red Cross, of which she was president. Although her husband was an influential bureaucrat who had been the governor of Khon Kaen and other provinces,²⁵ Rabiaprat was confident that she could work independently on women's issues, and her contributions resulted in her receiving two awards: the Outstanding Women in Buddhism Award (*Rangwan satri di den nai phuttha-sasana*) and the Supreme Woman Award (*Rangwan yot ying*), both in 2003. Inspired by Dhammanandā's lectures, Rabiaprat said that she was determined to take on *bhikkhunī* restoration as her political mission in her remaining three years of her term as a senator.²⁶

For the *bhikkhunī* restoration movement in Thailand, the involvement of Senator Rabiaprat constituted encouraging support since she was in a position to marshal other legislators' support to give legal standing to newly ordained *sāmaṇerī* and future *bhikkhunī*. By coincidence, from late 2001 to 2003 amendments of the Saṅgha Act were being discussed publicly, and the parliament was expecting to examine a draft bill, and it appeared that there was a chance to include the term '*bhikkhunī*' in one of the bill's provisions.²⁷ According to Rabiaprat, the government's original drafter of the Saṅgha bill never agreed to mention *bhikkhunī*, yet once the bill came up to the senate, Rabiaprat could propose a motion to amend it.²⁸ In reality, however,

24 Interview with Senator Rabiaprat Phongphanit in a meeting room of the Senate, Bangkok, 12 Mar. 2003.

25 Her husband Soemsak Phongphanit served as an administrative vice minister of the interior and a junior minister of the interior in the Thaksin Shinawatra's government until the coup in Sept. 2006.

26 Interview, Rabiaprat, 12 Mar. 2003.

27 In my interview on 18 Mar. 2002 at her temple in Nakhon Pathom province, Dhammanandā said that she received a copy of a draft bill of the new *saṅgha* bill from a male member of the drafting committee in the parliament seeking her advice on it. In order not to provoke scepticism, Dhammanandā did not suggest including the term *bhikkhunī* in it; she rather suggested that 'others' be mentioned in the provision about orders belonging to the Thai Saṅgha. Currently in the Thai Saṅgha there are four orders: Mahanikai, Thammayut, Chinnikai (an order rooted in the Chinese monastic tradition) and Annamnikai (rooted in the Vietnamese tradition). The draft bill is yet to be finalised, so it is uncertain whether Dhammanandā's suggestion will be taken into account.

28 Interview, Rabiaprat, 12 Mar. 2003.

after a few years of tense dispute among the Saṅgha elders, consensus could not be reached on the Saṅgha bill, so lay Buddhist bureaucrats had to abandon it, because they could never offend the opposing elders. Consequently, Rabiaprat did not have a chance to push through the legalisation of *bhikkhunī*. Similarly, her proposal to abolish the 1928 Saṅgharāja's proclamation, which banned Saṅgha members from ordaining women, could not be approved immediately. Nevertheless, her advocacy in parliament and in public have contributed to clarifications regarding *bhikkhunī* ordination.

In order to promote understanding about *bhikkhunī*, Rabiaprat raised questions in parliament, held several public seminars in Bangkok and the provinces, and distributed many copies of booklets and video CDs about the *bhikkhunī* discussions. She also invited several academics, bureaucrats, and members of women's and religious organisations to become members of the Subcommittee for Women's Affairs; the Subcommittee studied the history and precepts of *bhikkhunī*, as well as the possibilities of and obstacles to Thai women's ordination, based on the advice of monastic and lay Buddhist intellectuals.²⁹ After six months of study, in 2003 the Subcommittee issued a booklet entitled *Bhikkhunī ordination in Thailand*, which provided answers to important questions, including possible procedures for the ordination of women as *bhikkhunī*.³⁰

Exploring stories from the *Tipiṭaka*, the booklet identified five alternatives permitted by the Buddha.³¹ The first *bhikkhunī* ordination method was to receive the *garudhamma* from the Buddha, just like Mahāpajāpatī, the first *bhikkhunī*. The second was the case of 500 women who followed Mahāpajāpatī's ordination; the Buddha granted *bhikkhu* permission to ordain them. The third was Bhikkhunī Bhaddākuṇaḍḍhilaesḍā's ordination, performed by the Buddha himself. The fourth was the most formal ordination ceremony, the so-called 'dual ordination', conducted by both male and female *saṅgha*, represented by an elder *bhikkhunī* (*pavattinī*) and an elder *bhikkhu* (*upajjhāya*). The fifth one was a rather exceptional case; where there was a high risk of a *bhikkhunī* candidate being ambushed or assaulted on her way to the village where her *bhikkhu* preceptor stayed, the Buddha permitted the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* to send a delegation to the *bhikkhu saṅgha* to receive the *bhikkhunī* candidate's ordination from the preceptor.

Among the five options for *bhikkhunī* ordination, the Senate Subcommittee's booklet explained in most careful detail the fourth one involving dual *saṅgha*,

29 Chaired by Rabiaprat, the Subcommittee consisted of 10 other members: Mrs Wisa Banchamano, Dr Prayong Temchawala, Mrs Amphaiwan Trisakun, Mrs Methini Phongwet, Mrs Napha Setthakun, Associate Professor Mali Phrukphongsawali, Mrs Wanlapha Nilaphaichit, Dr Naphasi Maniwong and Miss Siriphon Phinyosirithon. The Subcommittee sought advice from both intellectuals who favoured and opposed *bhikkhunī* restoration: the supporters included Bhikkhu Kosin Paripunnō, Bhikkhu Mano Mettānando and Sāmaṇerī Dhammanandā, while those against included Bhikkhu Rājakavī and Bhikkhu Devatilaka. The Subcommittee also acknowledged those names of renowned Buddhist monks and academics in Thailand, such as Bhikkhu Sripariyattimolī, Bhikkhu Ariyamedhī, Bhikkhu Prasoen Tiradhammo, Professor Dr Amon Raksasat, Sathianphong Wannapok, Thongkhaw Phuangrotphan and Bhikkhu Visāladhammabādī. *Ruang kan-buat phiksuni nai prathet thai* [*Bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand], pp. 6–7.

30 *Ruang kan-buat phiksuni nai prathet thai* [*Bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand].

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–14.

which is considered the normative procedure for subsequent generations of Buddhists. The Subcommittee's interpretation of the 'dual ordination' was a challenge to Thai Buddhists' commonly held notions about women's ordination. The booklet describes the process of a *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony as follows:

at first a female candidate has to ordain as a *sikkhamānā* (i.e. a *sāmaṇerī* at a training stage [in Thai, *khan khem-khon*]) strictly keeping the six *anudhamma* [conformity or accordance with the Law] precepts continuously for two years. After that, she can ask for [higher] ordination [to become a *bhikkhunī*]. The candidate has to have a *pavattinī* (a *bhikkhunī* who has ordained for twelve years) and pass an oral examination *antarāyikadhamma* given by a *bhikkhunī saṅgha*. When the candidate has passed the *antarāyikadhamma* and is permitted to join the group of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, an 'intelligent *bhikkhunī*' takes her to a *bhikkhu saṅgha* for ordination by the *bhikkhu saṅgha*.³²

Working from the interpretation quoted above, the Senate Subcommittee developed the argument that it is the role of a *bhikkhu saṅgha* to ordain a *bhikkhunī* candidate, and the role of a *bhikkhunī saṅgha* is simply to ask her some questions in order to judge whether she can be a member of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*. That is to say, in the *bhikkhunī* ordination the *bhikkhu saṅgha* plays the essential part, whereas the presence of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* is less important, contrary to popular belief. The Subcommittee reinforces its argument as follows:

The oral examination *antarāyikadhamma* by a *bhikkhunī saṅgha* came to exist as the result of an incident involving a female candidate who felt embarrassed to answer questions of *antarāyikadhamma* to a *bhikkhu saṅgha*, because the questions dealt with body parts. The female candidate did not dare to answer the questions; this presented an obstacle to ordination. Therefore, the Buddha prescribed that a *bhikkhunī saṅgha* would play the role of *antarāyikadhamma* examiner.³³

Considering examination by a senior *bhikkhunī* as an unimportant element of the ordination ceremony, serving only to avoid the embarrassment of female candidates, the Subcommittee presented its challenging interpretation:

Therefore, we can conclude that [women's ordination] was done only by a single *saṅgha* [i.e. *bhikkhu saṅgha*]. If there is no *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, *bhikkhu saṅgha* can ask questions concerning *antarāyikadhamma*; and if female candidates do not feel embarrassed to answer those questions, they may pass the oral examination *antarāyikadhamma* and can move on to the next step of the ordination ceremony.³⁴

This interpretation was a turn away from Thai Buddhists' traditional conception of women's ordination and stood in remarkable contrast to those of influential *bhikkhu*. While Payutto and others argued that the role of the *bhikkhu* preceptor is just to confirm the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*'s decision to permit its new members, the Senate

32 Ibid., pp. 12–13; The notes in parentheses are in the original, those in square brackets are mine.

33 Ibid., p. 13.

34 Ibid., p. 13. Following the last sentence cited above referred to *antarāyikadhamma*, Bhikkhunī Khandhaka, page 346 of *Tipiṭaka*, Thai edition, Vol. 7.

Subcommittee argued that the crucial element of the transmission of female ordination lineage was the *bhikkhu* preceptor who performed the main conferral of precepts to the candidate, not the senior *bhikkhunī* who gave the oral examination. Hence, the absence of a *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in contemporary Thai Theravāda Buddhism does not preclude women's *bhikkhunī* ordination.

In the final chapter of the booklet the Subcommittee proposed two possible ways 'of restoring women's *bhikkhunī* ordination that do not contradict the Buddha's prescribed rules'.³⁵ The first option is ordination with *bhikkhu saṅgha* alone taking the role of *antarāyikadhamma* examiner. The second option is by *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in foreign countries. In particular the Subcommittee considered the recently developed Theravāda *bhikkhunī* in Sri Lanka, who have formalised their ordination procedure and established a clear structure for their *saṅgha* which is recognised by international Buddhists.³⁶ On the seeking of assistance from *bhikkhunī* in foreign countries, the Subcommittee suggested three methods: first, sending Thai women to receive training and ordination by both *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in Sri Lanka; second, inviting both *saṅgha*, including a *pavattinī* (*bhikkhunī* examiner) and *upajjhāya* (*bhikkhu* preceptor) from Sri Lanka to hold an ordination ceremony in Thailand; and third, inviting only *bhikkhunī saṅgha* and ordaining Thai women in collaboration with Thai *bhikkhu saṅgha*. A note is added to indicate that involvement of Thai *bhikkhu* can only be possible once the 1928 Saṅgharāja's proclamation is lifted.³⁷

Given the status of the Senate Subcommittee, together with Dhammanandā's publications, the booklet served as a reliable reference for less informed Thai Buddhist women who were interested in *bhikkhunī* ordination.³⁸ Even though it did not succeed in its aim of obtaining Thai government endorsement of *bhikkhunī* ordination based on scriptural accounts, the booklet provided models of 'right procedure' for a women's ordination ceremony, including that conducted only by *bhikkhu saṅgha*, which is more easily available but contradicts the prevalent notion of 'right' ordination. Unfortunately, however, the booklet was of little help in narrowing the differences between the *bhikkhunī* supporters and their opponents themselves, particularly those *bhikkhu* or former *bhikkhu* intellectuals close to the Saṅgha elders. It seems that the rationale and interpretations of *bhikkhunī* supporters were not accepted by others, and those of their opponents only served to reconfirm scepticism; both sides of the debate dismissed each other's opinions as insignificant. Meanwhile, the post-ordination social realities experienced by Thai *bhikkhunī* pose the question of whether a 'right procedure' alone can fully convince a doubting public of the authenticity of their ordination.

35 Ibid., p. 60.

36 Ibid., p. 60.

37 Ibid., pp. 60–1.

38 For instance, a Thai *bhikkhu* who has ordained several Thai women as *sāmaṇerī* in his temple in Yasothon province in northeast Thailand said that they studied *bhikkhunī* issues through Dhammanandā's and the Subcommittee's books. Interview with the Thai *bhikkhu* who ordained *sāmaṇerī*, 22 Mar. 2004.

Thai women's *bhikkhunī* ordinations and validity

Whether or not they were influenced by the Senate Subcommittee's booklet, the actual ordinations undertaken by seven Thai *bhikkhunī* coincided with those suggested in the booklet's final chapter. Although the booklet presented those methods as ways 'of restoring women's *bhikkhunī* ordination that do not contradict the Buddha's prescribed rules',³⁹ the Thai Buddhist public did not perceive all methods as equally 'right' and 'legitimate'. People tended to consider those closer to their traditional conception of women's ordination as 'right' and remained sceptical toward the rest.

The choice of ordination in Sri Lanka

Regardless of what the Senate Subcommittee defined as 'right' ordination, Thai *sāmaṇerī* who were seeking a way for their own *bhikkhunī* ordination also held that a ceremony performed by dual *saṅgha* in Sri Lanka would be a preferable option by which they could best defend themselves from criticisms about authenticity. Even in the case of *sāmaṇerī* ordination, where a *bhikkhunī* preceptor is not necessarily required (an elder *bhikkhu* can also ordain a woman to be a *sāmaṇerī*), in order to meet contemporary Thai social expectations, it is desirable to be ordained by a Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* preceptor in a ceremony held in either Sri Lanka or Thailand. In addition, since Thais are familiar with white-robed *mae chi*, many believe that the reason for the absence of ordained women in yellow robes is a rupture of the female ordination lineage. Therefore, when a Thai woman receives either the full or novice monastic precepts from a *bhikkhunī* preceptor, Thai people tend to be better convinced that her ordination is 'legitimate'.

Unfortunately, however, ordination in Sri Lanka is not an easy option for less affluent Thai women. Among the thirty-four Thai women who have ordained as *sāmaṇerī*, only nineteen were ordained by a Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* preceptor, including the pioneering Thai *sāmaṇerī* (now *bhikkhunī*) Dhammanandā and three who had her backing, the second Thai *sāmaṇerī* (now *bhikkhunī*) Rattanāvalī, who had an American *bhikkhunī* mentor, and a group of fourteen *sāmaṇerī* headed by *Sāmaṇerī Nandañāṇī* who flew together for ordination in Sri Lanka in early 2006. Including *Nandañāṇī*'s large group, *sāmaṇerī* who had a Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* preceptor outnumber those who were ordained by a Thai *bhikkhu* preceptor in Thailand; however, they were a rather fortunate group who enjoyed the confidence of their teacher and a sponsor who could introduce them to a Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* teacher and help with their overseas travel expenses. Many Thai women would find it difficult to obtain international contacts and financial support. Some are not able to accept offers from prospective sponsors whose actual intentions are unclear, or they have even encountered interference by influential persons in their contact with Sri Lankan teachers; others have difficulty communicating in English with their Sri Lankan teachers.

When Thai *sāmaṇerī* consider higher ordination to become *bhikkhunī*, it is even more important than for their novice ordination to travel to Sri Lanka, i.e. the only Theravāda Buddhist country which has established both male and female *saṅgha*,

39 *Ruang kan-buat phiksuni nai prathet thai* [*Bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand], p. 60.

since it is the least controversial dual ordination option. Yet, some Thai *sāmaṇerī* did not take this option, even when they were put in contact with Sri Lankan teachers and offered sponsorship. Some cancelled their overseas training because of difficulties with foreign languages and unfamiliar customs. Some were in their sixties or even older and did not feel like going to live in a foreign country for several months or years. Others, while younger, had responsibilities such as the care of elderly parents and duties in their monastic communities. Summarising Thai *sāmaṇerī*'s comments given in interviews with the author, there was more concern with contributing to their own society and religion than with studying other religious traditions and cultures.

Among the limited number of women intending to ordain as *bhikkhunī* there were even fewer who could clear their private obstacles, although there were encouraging voices among Thai *bhikkhunī* supporters interviewed. Also, the situation of Thai *sāmaṇerī* can be viewed rather sympathetically if one considers that the expansion of the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* order only accelerated after 1998 when women's ordinations began to be conducted by the Sri Lankan *bhikkhu saṅgha*. At the time of this research (August 2007), in Thailand, since Dhammanandā's *bhikkhunī* ordination, three Thai *sāmaṇerī* have been able to go to Sri Lanka to receive higher ordination by the dual *saṅgha*.⁴⁰ Other Thai *sāmaṇerī* had to find other feasible means of ordaining as *bhikkhunī*.

The single saṅgha ordination option

After pondering whether to remain a *sāmaṇerī* or to go to Sri Lanka with other Thai *sāmaṇerī* for higher ordination, one Thai *sāmaṇerī* finally ordained as a *bhikkhunī* in Thailand in May 2005. Her *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony was conducted at an abandoned ancient temple in Ayutthaya through the initiation of a Theravāda *bhikkhu* preceptor who originally came from India, had ordained and was based in Tibet, and was temporarily visiting Thailand.⁴¹ She said that her ordination ceremony had the Indian *bhikkhu* as preceptor, a pair of Thai *bhikkhu* chanting to assist the ceremony, and another seven Thai *bhikkhu* as witnesses, but no *bhikkhunī* involvement. The abandoned temple still had its ancient stone boundary, so it satisfied the requirement for the conduct of Buddhist monastic ceremonies. The *bhikkhunī* was confident that women's ordination by *bhikkhu saṅgha* alone is an acceptable option, and her case was the first Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony held in Thailand.

The question here is how the Thai Buddhist public perceived the validity of women's ordination by a single *saṅgha* which differed from the procedure generally seen as standard. The above case of the Thai *bhikkhunī* is little known to the public,

40 The three include Sukhettā, Dhammadhīrā and Kaṇṇārattana. Sukhettā became a *bhikkhunī* in July 2006, after 18 months of training in Sri Lanka; Dhammadhīrā travelled to Sri Lanka in July 2007 for her higher ordination after three years of monastic training at Dhammanandā's temple; and Kaṇṇārattana began her training to prepare for her higher ordination in Sri Lanka in Apr. 2007. Rattanāvali, email correspondence, 8 May 2007.

41 Telephone conversation with the author, 29 May 2005. It seems more likely for a Tibetan to live in India as a Theravāda *bhikkhu* rather than an Indian Theravāda *bhikkhu* to live in Tibet under Chinese rule; but this is the Thai *bhikkhunī*'s verbatim description of her preceptor.

as her ordination ceremony was conducted rather quietly without media coverage. Her advancement of religious status was celebrated by her monastic friends: on her report of *bhikkhunī* ordination, Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā replied with a letter of blessing, and her *sāmaṇerī* friends also respected her style of ordination as a possible option. Later, however, when she sought a temple for residence, she encountered many questions about the legitimacy of her ordination.⁴²

Ordination ceremony by international dual saṅgha in Thailand

Aside from the case of the *bhikkhunī* who were ordained by the initiation of a *bhikkhu* from a foreign country, three other Thai *sāmaṇerī* had their *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony performed by international dual *saṅgha* in Thailand. The three *bhikkhunī* who were ordained as *sāmaṇerī* by different preceptors in different years organised their *bhikkhunī* ordination by international *saṅgha* by seizing the opportunity which arose at the 2006 Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards ceremony, when esteemed *bhikkhunī* and lay women were invited to receive overseas awards in Thailand. Their ordination ceremony was witnessed by non-Thai Theravāda and Mahāyāna *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, and by lay supporters.⁴³ They humorously referred to the event as an ‘underground ordination’ and did not wish to publicise further details of their ordination ceremony for fear of possible criticism about their ordination method. Their ordination ceremony was not reported by the media, so the legitimacy of their ordination was never caught up in public controversy. Again, however, one of the three *bhikkhunī* was questioned about the validity of her ordination upon her return to her temple of residence and was subsequently asked to leave the temple by the *bhikkhu* abbot. Even though the *bhikkhunī* insisted that her ordination ceremony followed one of the ‘right’ procedures for *bhikkhunī* ordination, the abbot was not convinced. Thus the question of ordination validity can be crucial, particularly when a *sāmaṇerī* or *bhikkhunī* has to rely on other people’s resources.

Thai bhikkhunī’s post-ordination experiences

How did higher ordination change Thai *bhikkhunī*’s lives? One of them said that she was very proud to be ordained as a *bhikkhunī*; although she was a little tired of confronting society, she could no longer hold back. Sometimes she received words of encouragement, but people generally kept asking her if it was right for a woman to don the yellow monastic robes; some even called her crazy. Many *mae chi* tried to find mistakes in her ordination so as to criticise it as ‘illegitimate’. Some *mae chi* said to her that Thai *bhikkhunī* have no status vested by the authorities; being a *mae chi* is preferable because the Institute of Thai Mae Chi is under the patronage of Princess Somsawalee, a member of the Thai royal family, i.e. the establishment in Thai society. According to the *bhikkhunī*, such *mae chi* are obstacles to the expansion of *bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand, as they discourage Thai women who express an interest in ordination, telling them nothing good happens after one becomes a *bhikkhunī*.

42 Interview, Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, 11 Sept. 2006.

43 Interview with one of the three Thai *bhikkhunī*, 19 June 2006.

Virtually the same as they experienced as *sāmaṇerī*, those Thai *bhikkhunī* who have their own monastery or even a hut for their religious practice on land owned by themselves or their family are relatively secure, whereas those who have to find a place to stay under someone else's supervision encounter more difficulties. One of the Thai *bhikkhunī* said that when she was a *mae chi*, she used to quite enjoy herself finding new places and meeting new people, and her friendly personality was usually welcomed. As a *sāmaṇerī*, she occasionally met some people who showed disrespect by calling her *chi* (a colloquial term of address for *mae chi*) or *nen* (a colloquial term of address for *sāmaṇera*, who are in Thailand young novice boys under the age of 20) instead of *sāmaṇerī*. Even after she ordained as a *bhikkhunī* in yellow robes, some people still called her a *mae chi* and would not prostrate themselves to show respect to her. Her opportunities for *dhamma* practice and sermon delivery were still very few, and *bhikkhu* expected her to do similar chores as when she was a *mae chi*: cooking in front of a hot stove, wiping windows, watering the garden and cleaning bird droppings from the outer corridors; any expression of reluctance was taken as a claim to a status higher than she deserved.

It is also not at all easy to find a monastic community that will accept a *bhikkhunī*, and much patience and compromise is needed. In one case, a *bhikkhu* abbot declined a *bhikkhunī*'s request to stay at his temple on the grounds that she had ordained 'improperly'. Eventually, the stress made her unwell, with symptoms including high blood pressure and depression. After moving from one temple to another several times, the *bhikkhunī* gave up her robes and joined a monastic community as an *upāsikā*. She said that as a newcomer to the community she had many *dhamma* friends, and she no longer had to defend herself and explain much to people; she enjoyed her simpler new life.

Another Thai *bhikkhunī* who lived in a *bhikkhu* abbot's temple as a *sāmaṇerī* received a shocking letter from the abbot upon her return to the temple after her *bhikkhunī* ordination. The letter said that because she had not 'properly' ordained in Sri Lanka, she was no longer permitted to live in the temple. Fortunately, there were several lay supporters who had faith in her potential to become a respected religious teacher, so they sponsored her Master's degree in another region of Thailand, and she was able to continue her religious study and practice as a *bhikkhunī*. However, the Thai *bhikkhunī* said she found it difficult to understand why her ordination in Thailand was criticised; she asked why it had to take place in Sri Lanka to be accepted. She also wondered why the same abbot who had protected her when she was a *sāmaṇerī* suddenly criticised her *bhikkhunī* ordination even though she had followed one of the ceremony procedures found in the classical scriptures and modelled after Sri Lankan practice.⁴⁴

The same procedural question had been posed to the first generation of contemporary Theravāda *bhikkhunī* from Sri Lanka and their teachers from Korea. The ordination ceremony of the Sri Lankan women followed a preliminary year-long monastic training by a senior Korean *bhikkhunī* teacher and had the then Supreme Master of the Jogye Order (the largest Buddhist order in Korea) Master Seo Am as the *bhikkhu* preceptor, and was conducted in the presence of highly esteemed Buddhist

44 Interview with the *bhikkhunī*, 20 June 2006.

representatives from Korea and other countries. Unfortunately, details of the ordination ceremony procedure were criticised by some keen advocates of *bhikkhunī* restoration.⁴⁵

Most international ordination ceremonies are supported by the generosity and loving-kindness of *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* from a Buddhist country with a well-established system of women's ordination agreeing to ordain women who wish to become *bhikkhunī* of another monastic tradition, in order to assist them to be able to work with an internationally respected status. For instance, those who ordain in the Jogye Order of Korea usually have to spend several years to acquire monastic manners and Buddhist philosophy before they are allowed to ordain as a *bhikkhunī*, but those who come to seek the assistance of Korean *bhikkhunī* to become *bhikkhunī* of other schools which do not have a female monastic lineage are exempt from the regular course of monastic training in the Jogye Order. After their ordination ceremony, those women can don the Theravāda or Vajirayāna robes and live as *bhikkhunī*, but without having a formal sanction of a traditional authority of the school, their ordained status is only acknowledged by those who respect them.

Without a consolidated status, new *bhikkhunī* ordained by international *saṅgha* may at many junctures face social difficulties in their schools and in countries that have the monastic tradition of those schools. That is to say, international Buddhist women's ordination ceremonies do not promise an instant uplifting of status.

Persistent questioning of ordination validity

In summary, the interpretational challenge to the standard *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony was an essential basis for the expansion of Thai women's *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* ordination. Even though in Thailand there is no *bhikkhunī* teacher who together with a *bhikkhu* preceptor initiates female candidates as full monastic members, some alternative methods of 'valid' *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony were presented to Thai women; as a result they became confident that *bhikkhunī* ordination was still possible and chose one of the 'valid' options.

Are Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* ordinations really recognised as legitimate when they follow the new interpretation of 'right' ordination? And, if so, who can perform legitimate ordinations? While *Bhikkhunī* supporters insist that such ordinations are valid, opinions vary among the mass of Thai Buddhists: some delightedly accept the new interpretation, which overturns the traditional assumption that *bhikkhunī* ordination is no longer possible; others feel uncertain about accepting unconventional attempts, relying instead on the Saṅgha's judgement. The Saṅgha's attitude toward Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* is diplomatically respectful, but hardly ever positive. Although the Thai Saṅgha has never issued any formal proclamation about the legitimacy of Thai women's *bhikkhunī* ordination, several elder Thai *bhikkhu* suggested the same point: the Thai Saṅgha respects *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* from other countries and other Buddhist traditions as legitimately ordained Buddhists; it also respects the ordained status conferred on Thai women by a *saṅgha* in a foreign country, so Thai *sāmaṇerī*'s and *bhikkhunī*'s overseas ordinations have been legitimate. One

45 Interview, Bhikkhunī Sang Won (Korean teacher of the first contemporary Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* who ordained in 1996 in Sarnath, India), Bo Myung Sa Temple, Seoul, 26 Sept. 2006.

elder Thai *bhikkhu* indicated, however, that those Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* are not members of the Thai Theravāda Buddhist Saṅgha. He expressed discontent that *bhikkhunī* are insisting that the Saṅgha elders have a wrong, narrow view, attempting to force them to change their attitude and accept women's ordination.⁴⁶ Since the Saṅgha elders have both power and authority, it is unlikely that they will make such an unhappy decision unless compelled to do so by some significant authority, such as the Thai royal family.

Thailand's religious authority, the national Saṅgha, can neither totally dismiss Thai women's *bhikkhunī* ordination, nor can it offer a conclusive definition of women's 'legitimate' ordination since it does not accept any female members. Given this uncomfortable latitude, individual Thai women can freely organise their own ordination by following a 'right procedure' based on their interpretation of the *vinaya* prescription. After their ordination, however, their social status as *sāmaṇerī* or *bhikkhunī* is not necessarily appropriately respected. Buddhist critics — including conservative *bhikkhu*, lay intellectuals, and even women ordained as *bhikkhunī* — can always identify some perceived problems with other women's ordinations by citing whichever traditional conceptions favour their view; yet they are not in a position to monopolise a definition of 'legitimate' ordination either.

The reality of Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* suggests that any kind of ordination procedure can be criticised as 'invalid' or 'illegitimate', and consequently the social status of all Thai *bhikkhunī* is insecure. It is not just the single *saṅgha* ordination ceremony that does not easily gain the full approval of the Thai Buddhist public, but also those performed by dual international Buddhist *saṅgha*. Some elder *bhikkhu* never call *Bhikkhunī* Dhammanandā by her ordained name, disdainfully referring to her as a *mae chi*, although her ordination procedure coincides optimally with the common notion of 'right' ordination, because hers was conducted by the dual *saṅgha* of *Sri Lanka*. In other words, even if an ordination were done exactly in accordance with the *vinaya*, without the sanction of an established authority, the appropriateness of the ceremonial procedure itself scarcely guarantees the legitimacy of the ordination.

Grounds for ordination legitimacy: Thai Buddhism in history and at present

If ordination legitimacy is not guaranteed by precise conduct of the 'right' ceremony, what can make one's ordination legitimate and socially secure? There is a dearth of research on the legitimacy of ordination in Southeast Asian studies — this is as true for *bhikkhu* as it is for *bhikkhunī*. In Buddhism in Southeast Asian history, 'legitimacy' most often meant the popular acceptance of the rule of the monarchy which maintained the purity of the Saṅgha, the field of merit for the lay Buddhist populace.⁴⁷ The political and material relationship between the monarchy and the Saṅgha, which bolstered each other's legitimacy, hints at an understanding of the legitimacy of *bhikkhunī* ordination. The monarchy provided the Saṅgha with not

46 Interview, 28 Aug. 2002.

47 Yoneo Ishii, *Saṅgha, state, and society: Thai Buddhism in history*, trans. Peter Hawkers (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986); *Religion and legitimation of power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg: ANIMA Books, 1978); Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation, and conflict: The political functions of urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989).

merely basic food, clothing and shelter, but also the land, slaves and corvée labour exemption, as well as monastic titles that strengthened the honorary status of *bhikkhu*. At times, the monarchy also revoked the ordained status of *bhikkhu* who failed the royal examination on Buddhist doctrine, particularly when the monarchy was interested in recovering the Saṅgha's rich property and manpower for its own use.⁴⁸ In a way, the ordained status of *bhikkhu* was in the hands of the monarchy; it could be secured, promoted or even revoked by the monarchy.

It is often argued that in premodern underpopulated mainland Southeast Asia the power of the monarchy was strong enough to control only the centre and the surrounding area; it faded with distance from the centre.⁴⁹ That is to say, the monarchy never fully controlled people and *saṅgha* in remote areas, so monastic communities at the periphery seem to have enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from the monarchy's patronage and intervention. In ethnic Lao peripheral areas, it was not the monarchy but the lay Buddhist community that hosted a ceremony called *thera phisek* and conferred onto a respected senior *bhikkhu* such titles as *ya khru* and *ya sa*.⁵⁰ Although more precise studies are required, the ordained status of *bhikkhu* was not always in the hands of those in power; in some cases it was also affirmed by the surrounding lay Buddhist community.

In Siam (and subsequently Thailand) ordination legitimacy was fully controlled by the government at the turn of the last century in conjunction with administrative centralisation. In 1902, under the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the Saṅgha Act was implemented and scattered local *saṅgha* were integrated into a single national Saṅgha which was organised in virtually the same manner as the local administration of the national bureaucracy. Yoneo Ishii indicated that:

[The Saṅgha Act's] Article 15, which stipulated that every monk and novice must be enlisted in a monastery, is one of the most remarkable provisions contained in the act. It was the basis for the Ministry of Public Instruction's communication of August 29, 1911, ordering that vagrant monks (*phra chorachat*) should be arrested and forced to disrobe. It meant that, after the promulgation of the act, those without monastic affiliation could no longer be recognized as monks.⁵¹

Furthermore, when a new *bhikkhu* candidate ordains to enter the order, the *vinaya* allows that he can be ordained by any *bhikkhu* with more than 10 years' experience; however, in present Thailand, no *bhikkhu* candidate would be legally sanctioned as 'legitimate' if he were not ordained by a preceptor appointed to that position by the national Saṅgha. Under the Saṅgha Act the government's permission was also required for the installation of a sacred stone boundary for monastic ceremonies, so a 'legitimate' ordination ceremony must be held in a place sanctioned by the government.⁵² By monopolising the appointment of 'legitimate' preceptors, the national Saṅgha of Thailand exclusively defines its 'legitimate' membership.

48 Ishii, *Saṅgha, state, and society*, pp. 82–3.

49 S.J. Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

50 Interview, Thonglith Candasaro Bhikkhu and Daoheuang Khampaseuth Bhikkhu, Vientiane, 22 Feb. 2005.

51 Ishii, *Saṅgha, state, and society*, p. 70.

52 Ibid., pp. 73–4.

In the present setting of Thai Theravāda Buddhism it is quite clear that what can make one's ordination most demonstrably legitimate is one's adherence to the laws enacted by the Thai government regarding membership in the national Saṅgha. Any monk or novice not in the possession of an ordination certificate (*nangsū sutthi*) can be arrested by the police for alleged attempt to deceive the Buddhist populace and collect alms in order to make a living. There is a fair agreement to consider those who ordained in a foreign country as exceptions; if requested by the police or other authority, they have to present an ordination certificate from a foreign Buddhist institution in order to prove that their ordination is 'legitimate'.⁵³ No doubt, the status of these ambiguous exceptions is not as stable as that of the national Thai Saṅgha members; it can be distorted any time by ill will. Without the sanction of the national Saṅgha and the accompanying support of the Thai legal system, an ordination cannot be fully legitimatised.

Saṅgha restoration and ordination legitimacy: Cambodian Buddhism after the Pol Pot regime

The contemporary history of neighbouring Theravāda Buddhist Cambodia shows that restoration of the 'legitimate' *Saṅgha* was a highly politicised matter. At the end of 1975, the Khmer Rouge government declared Buddhism to be a reactionary religion and promoted the destruction of Buddha images and scriptures and the disrobing of *bhikkhu* and *sāmaṇera*.⁵⁴ Consequently the Saṅgha and any visible religious ceremony and practice disappeared from Cambodia under the Pol Pot regime. As soon as Pol Pot's government was driven from power by the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin troops in January 1979, people resumed religious activities. Even though they had no preceptor who could 'properly' ordain them, former *bhikkhu* started to play monastic roles. At first, some former *bhikkhu* took white robes in order to hold memorial services for the deceased; eventually they were given yellow robes by village acquaintances and returned to live as *bhikkhu* without having a formal ordination ceremony.⁵⁵ Villagers compromised with the 'unauthorised' private ordinations in that desperate situation; they preferred the presence of a *bhikkhu* for their spiritual support rather than the traditional notion of formality. At that time there was no single monastic authority in Cambodia that monopolised a 'legitimate' ordination lineage; there were plural *saṅgha* consisting of freely ordained *bhikkhu* supported by communities of lay Buddhists.

The Cambodian Saṅgha was eventually re-established by the new political power, rather than the people, however. In September 1979 the new government organised

53 Interview, Mioao Sen Bhikṣuṇī, abbess, Fo Guang Shan branch temple in Bangkok, 10 Mar. 2007. Mioao is a Thai female *dhamma* teacher who ordained as a Mahāyāna Buddhist *bhikkhuni* in Taiwan with the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order, Taiwan's largest monastic group.

54 Referring to an article by David DeVoss ('Buddhism under the red flag', *Time*, 17 Nov. 1980, pp. 90–2), Charles Keyes writes that in 1980 it was estimated that more than 60 per cent of monks were executed during the Pol Pot regime. Charles F. Keyes, 'Communist revolution and the Buddhist past in Cambodia', in *Asian visions of authority: Religion and the modern states of East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall and Helen Hardacre (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), p. 56.

55 Phra Rapin Duanloi, 'Kansuksa sathanaphap khong phra song kamphucha rawang kho. so. 1975–1989' [A study on the state of Cambodian monks between 1975–1989] (M.A. diss., Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, 2002).

an ordination ceremony for seven former *bhikkhu* by inviting a preceptor and a group of *bhikkhu* from the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam, which is inhabited by ethnic Khmer who are Theravāda Buddhists. The youngest *bhikkhu* among the reordained seven, Venerable Tep Vong, was appointed Vice-Chairperson of the Central Committee of the Khmer United Front for National Construction and Defence; as a preceptor he conducted the 'official' reordination ceremonies of former *bhikkhu* in Phnom Penh and in each province.⁵⁶ All other 'unauthorised', 'private' reordinations were declared 'invalid', and all the reordination applicants were told to ordain by means of Tep Vong's initiation. The 'official' ordination was only permitted to men above the age of 50 years whose labour and military service contribution was considered relatively low. Thus while the emergence of 'privately' ordained *bhikkhu* in post-Pol Pot Cambodia reflected Cambodian people's spiritual needs, the government's establishment of the national Saṅgha amounted to its subordination of religious personnel.⁵⁷ The monopolisation of 'legitimate' ordination lineage was inseparable from state intervention to establish control of the monastic members.

The restoration of the Cambodian Saṅgha hints at an interpretation of the meaning of a 'right' ordination. A guarantee of 'right' ordination has to do with authority and power. At the time of difficulty, ordinary Buddhists may compromise monk's lack of 'right' ordination which is in total agreement with the *vinaya* prescriptions as far as they have faith in the person of an ordained individual; but it is the politically powerful authority that is interested in introducing and dominating a 'legitimate' ordination ceremony. Detailed descriptions of precise ordination procedures in the classical scriptures and the traditional Buddhist notions of ordination lineage, which are believed to have been transmitted from the Buddha and his original *saṅgha*, are rather convenient bases for a political power to cite as grounds for re-establishing a 'legitimate' *saṅgha*. It is not difficult for a politically powerful authority to invite a respected preceptor from a remote place who can convince people of the existence of an inherited 'right' monastic lineage. Through the invitation of a 'right' preceptor and a theatrical production of a 'right' ordination ceremony which coincides with people's traditional notions, the authority can seize control of individuals ordained through the new procedure and integrate them into an authorised religious institution. Such establishment of a 'legitimate' *saṅgha* in which common Buddhists have faith was the traditional way for a new political power to consolidate the legitimacy of its rule.⁵⁸

56 Ian Harris, 'Buddhism in extremis: The case of Cambodia', in *Buddhism and politics in twentieth-century Asia*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Continuum, 1999), pp. 66–7; Yukio Hayashi, 'Kambojia ni okeru bukkyo jissen: Ninaite to jiin no fukko' [Buddhist practice in Cambodia: Actors and temple restoration], in *Kambojia: bunka to shakai no dainamikusu* [Cambodia: Dynamics of culture and society], ed. Hisatoshi Ohashi (Tokyo: Kokon Shoin, 1998), p. 188.

57 Tomomi Ito, 'Kambojia bukkyo: Futatsu no kyosan-shugi seiken no keiken to shakai e no kakawari' [Cambodian Buddhism: Its experience of two communist regimes and social engagement], *Kokusai bunka gaku* [Cross-Cultural Studies], 10 (2004): 17–35.

58 Smith, *Religion and legitimation of power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*; Ishii, *Saṅgha, state, and society*.

The authorities and ordination legitimacy: Cases of East Asian saṅgha

Summarising the historical examples examined in the discussion above, when the governing authority intends to control Buddhist monastic communities under its power, it monopolises ordination legitimacy and integrates all the legitimately ordained *bhikkhu* into the unified Saṅgha. Procedural details such as preceptor qualifications and the sacred stone boundary are conveniently used to define 'right' ordination.

Looking at the recent history of *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in Mahāyāna Buddhist East Asia, *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremonies were not necessarily conducted by dual *saṅgha* of *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* but were sanctioned as 'legitimate'. In Korea, which has one of the most consolidated contemporary *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, dual ordination was a rather recent development; it was only in 1982 that dual ordination for *bhikkhunī* was institutionalised.⁵⁹ Before that, Korean women were ordained by a *bhikkhu* preceptor without the involvement of an elder *bhikkhunī* in their ordination ceremony, but they became *bhikkhunī* and performed their full duties as Buddhist nuns performing religious practices, teaching and conducting ceremonies. Their 'legitimate' *bhikkhunī* status is not created miraculously by a ceremony; rather, it is guaranteed by the authority and traditional formality of the consolidated monastic order that they entered.

In Taiwan, whose *bhikkhunī saṅgha* is also widely known for its significant role and contribution, the government has abandoned its traditional duty to keep a register of Buddhist ordination since the 1980s, and candidates can be ordained freely. In the tradition of Taiwan and China there are several temples known as ordination ceremony platforms; these have *vinaya* expert elders who can give lectures to ordination candidates about monastic disciplines and play the role of preceptor in ordination ceremonies. Depending on the preceptor's policy, a *bhikkhunī* ordination ceremony can be conducted by dual *saṅgha* of *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* or by a single *bhikkhu saṅgha*; both procedures are recognised as valid in Taiwan, although there are increasing numbers of people who prefer dual *saṅgha* ordination along with the diffusion of *vinaya* knowledge.⁶⁰ In the case of Taiwan it is the commonly practised tradition that authorises a range of 'valid' ordination procedures.

Unlike those in Thailand and Cambodia, Buddhist orders in Korea and Taiwan are not organised into a single national Saṅgha which monopolises the definition of legitimate ordination. In the social setting of Buddhist orders in Korea and Taiwan, what sanctions ordination legitimacy is not the political power or a centralised religious authority; it is rather the tradition and traditional formalities that each order has developed in its history. People recognise affiliation to one of the traditional

59 Interview, Bhikkhunī Il Beob (Director of Academic Division, Korean Bhikkhunī Association), Korean Bhikkhunī Association, Seoul, 27 Sept. 2006.

60 Interview, Huimin Bhikṣu (President of Dharma Drum Buddhist College, Taiwan; Professor at Taipei National University of the Arts), Hamburg, 19 July 2007. Huimin explained in the interview that ordinary *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* are not confident enough to teach *vinaya* to candidates, so they send their disciples to one of those special temples for ordination ceremonies, but as benefactors they are responsible for the rest of their disciples' regular monastic education. He said that in Taiwan a preceptor has only nominal significance; a benefactor is an essential teacher from whom newly ordained individuals receive substantial lessons. Candidates have to decide their benefactor teacher and affiliating temple before they apply for an ordination ceremony.

Buddhist orders as a 'legitimate' ordination, as they trust the well-established formalities in each Buddhist order. Although the presence or absence of a centralised religious authority gives rise to differences of such a magnitude that comparison is difficult, the diversity of ordination legitimacy in East Asian Buddhist countries hints at a way around the question of legitimacy of the Thai *bhikkhunī* who have organised their ordination ceremony independently. A female order can be institutionalised through formal procedures after a few decades or centuries.

Conclusion

It is important to ask once again by way of conclusion: what makes an ordination legitimate? The cases examined in this paper indicate that there are two kinds of religious establishment whose ordinations are accepted as 'legitimate': one is a centralised religious authority validated by the governing political power, and the other is a well-established religious organisation in whose tradition people place their confidence. This article does not conclude that a challenge to the establishment in the form of a new tradition is impossible, but it suggests that an individually organised ordination, which follows a 'right' ceremonial procedure, cannot easily win public confidence.

A question worthy of consideration is why 'private' ordination is not perceived just as 'legitimate' or 'valid' as initiation into a well-established religious order. Voices from Thailand and other Buddhist countries say that there are some people of ill-intention who take up robes simply to solicit money, and such 'fake' monks and nuns can undermine the general public's faith in Buddhism and ordained individuals who are supposed to conduct their lives for higher Buddhist purposes. Therefore, people often seek to clarify whether an unfamiliar individual in a robe is worthy of their offerings by tracing the details about ordination place, affiliated order and preceptor. People can place credence in the monk or nun in that he/she has received sufficient training to become a respectable practitioner. Put another way, people are confident that an established Buddhist order would be responsible for its members as being respected renunciants.

For the sceptical Thai Buddhist public, it is often difficult to distinguish a 'right' ordination based on a 'right' procedure for reintroducing a lost *saṅgha* from a 'fake' ordination aimed at taking advantage of faithful Buddhist supporters, since neither is sanctioned by any formal Buddhist institution. Consequently, and most unfortunately, Thai *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* are often placed in a vulnerable position. Questioning the 'legitimacy' of their ordination and fearing intervention by the authorities, people can urge them to leave their temple of residence, even when in reality the source of trouble is a small emotional conflict with an abbot or an influential supporter. Individual women can challenge the injustice of gender discrimination for ordination opportunity and take up the monastic robes to begin a new female order. But such a situation can persist as long as the authority does not sanction their ordination as 'legitimate'. This is no doubt a rough and a rough and thorny path. On this path newly ordained *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* take up significant tasks and responsibilities: as individuals they have to be renunciants worthy of people's respect, and as a group they have to develop a consolidated female order which can engender sufficient faith to earn both support and new ordained members.