

Buddhism, miraculous powers, and gender

Rethinking the stories of Theravāda nuns

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In November 2009, a group of senior monks affiliated with Wat Nong Pah Pong, an internationally renowned Thai temple in the forest tradition of Ajahn Chah, met to consider their official reaction to the ordinations of four women by Ajahn Brahmavamso at a branch monastery in Perth Australia. Their initial response was to solicit an acknowledgement of wrongdoing from Ajahn Brahm; when he did not comply, they unanimously revoked the status of his monastery, Bodhinyana Monastery, as an official branch monastery. This act by senior Thai monks not only severed Ajahn Brahm's affiliation with Wat Nong Pah Pong, it also represented a clear denunciation of the attempt to establish a *bhikkhunī* (fully ordained nun) order within the Thai *saṅgha*. Their response echoed the reactions of a majority of Thai monks to the 2001 *sāmaṇerī* (novice) ordinations of Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā), a respected Buddhist scholar and professor of philosophy at Thammasat University in Bangkok. Dr. Chatsumarn's supporters viewed her *sāmaṇerī* and subsequent *bhikkhunī* ordinations as a bold call for the admittance of women into the Thai *saṅgha*. Her critics viewed her actions as divisive to Thai Buddhism. Both the cases of Ajahn Brahm and Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā made international headlines because they highlighted a debate within Thailand and around the world regarding the relatively low status of female renunciators (*mae chi*, Thai) in Thai society and in other Theravāda Buddhist countries.¹

¹ A version of this paper was first presented at the International Association of Buddhist Studies conference, Atlanta, June 25, 2008. For an ex-

Since there are no “officially sanctioned” ordained nuns in the Theravāda tradition today, contemporary nuns generally are afforded neither the religious status nor the social status granted to their male counterparts. At best, Thai Buddhists regard them as pious laywomen who observe the eight precepts.² At worst, they are viewed with suspicion, pity, and even contempt. In an editorial in the *Bangkok Post*, Sanitsuda Ekachai writes:

Outside religious circles, it is widely believed that young nuns have entered the sisterhood because they are broken-hearted while old nuns living at monasteries are perceived as mere temple hands. And beggars posing as nuns only worsen their already lowly image. Unlike monks, nuns get very little social support and must work, usually in menial jobs, to support themselves.³

In order to counter negative stereotypes and to improve the status of nuns, Sanitsuda, along with a number of other social activists and progressive monks and nuns, seeks to transform this image of the Thai nun – from heart-broken young woman or old temple-maid to a legitimate representative of the Buddha’s teachings and practice. For those who support the reestablishment of the *bhikkhunī* order, legitimacy is linked to ordination; as a result, many search for ways, either through recourse to historical analysis, textual reinterpretation, or a hermeneutic of social ethics, to support the reintroduction of an official order of nuns. Other supporters focus less on ordination and more on improving the education of nuns.⁴ Khunying Kanittha Wicheanchaoen, a former women’s rights activist and lawyer, for instance, spearheaded the founding of the Mahapajapati Theri College for nuns in Nakorn Ratchasima in order to provide

tensive discussion of recent debates over *bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand, see Seeger 2008.

² Pious men and women commonly observe the eight precepts, especially in their later years. The eight precepts include observance of the *pañca sīla* training precepts along with these additional rules: abstention from eating at an “unseasonable time;” from participating and attending musical and theatrical events and wearing perfumes and jewelry; and from the use of high or luxurious beds.

³ Sanitsuda Ekachai 1996.

⁴ See Brown 2001 and Lindberg Falk 2007.

nuns with the same opportunity for higher education as their male counterparts. Other activists have supported Dhammajarinee Witthaya, a school for young girls and nuns in Ratchaburi, which offers an affordable education for under-privileged young women. Still others showcase how the simple lives of contemporary *mae chi*, which are detached from the formal institutions of Buddhist monasticism, already embody the ethos of the Buddhist tradition.⁵ Within these discourses, advocates promote ordination, modern education, and simple living as the vehicles through which contemporary Thai nuns may improve their social standing.⁶

These efforts undoubtedly will aid in altering discourses about nuns in Thailand and in other Theravāda Buddhist countries. They promote positive images of female renouncers, which counter the disparaging stereotypes of the young broken-hearted nun and the old temple-maid. There are, however, other sources for religious authority, respect, and adulation in the Theravāda tradition. Advanced skills in meditation, for instance, have long been a source for authority within the Buddhist tradition. In the so-called popular traditions of South and Southeast Asia, this authority has often been established and mediated through the possession of miraculous powers (*itthirit*, Thai, *iddhi*, Pāli) and superhuman knowledge (*apinya*, Thai; *abhiññā*, Pāli). Within this tradition, there are stories of nuns in the past and in the present who have established

⁵ Brown 2001: 26–27.

⁶ Those who favor the model of the “educated nun” do so within a modernist framework that equates religious status with a modern religious education. The most distinguished and highly-respected monk in Thailand today, for instance, is Phra Prayudh Payutto, a Buddhist scholar-monk who is renowned for his completion of the nine exam levels at a remarkably young age. The other ideal, which is promoted in academic and reformist discourses today, is that of the “humble, simple nun.” In the current postmodern age, this ideal nun, along with her male counterpart, serves as a counterpoint to the forces of religious consumerism and global capitalism. In these circles, academics and social critics alike criticize what they perceive to be narcissism and rampant materialism within the ranks of the organized *saṅgha*; in contrast, they praise those monks and nuns who embody simplicity in the face of an increasingly consumer-oriented Thai society.

authority as religious teachers and exemplars through their possession and use of miraculous powers.

Stories of miraculous events and supernatural powers abound in the Pāli canon, in the Pāli commentaries, in the historical chronicles of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, and in the vast vernacular literature of South and Southeast Asia that relay stories about Buddhist images, relics, amulets, and contemporary meditation masters. In fact, the sacred biographies of the Buddha and Buddhist saints are peppered with stories of miracles and superhuman powers – stories of reading minds, of conquering demons and spirits, of displays of power for the purpose of conversion, and of miraculous travels to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia as well as to the various heavens and hell-realms. In these stories, Buddhist authority is established and mediated through the possession and demonstration of miraculous powers.

The central story of the Buddha's awakening, for instance, involves his ability to view his own karmic past and the past of others. This is not a trivial attainment, but rather, a vital part of the nibbānic experience. These two powers comprise the two of three knowledges (*tevijja*) that one attains directly before awakening. The story of the Buddha's awakening provided the foundation for the common belief that advanced skills in meditation enable practitioners to view their own karmic legacies and that of others too. In other sections of the canon, these special abilities are listed as two of the Buddha's six *abhiññā* (higher powers), which include possession of magical powers (*iddhi-vidha*), the divine ear (*dibba-sota*), the ability to penetrate the minds of others (*para-sattānaṃ ceto pajānāti*), the ability to remember all of his former lives (*pubbenivāsa-anussati*), the divine eye (*dibba-cakkhu*), and the extinction of all cankers (*asavakkhaya*), which facilitates purity of mind and grants awakening. One who possesses the last *abhiññā* is an *arahant*; those who possess only the first five abilities are powerful beings who may be close to awakening but who are not yet fully awakened. As with the three knowledges, these powers both validate and mediate authority within the Buddhist tradition. This is as true for the Buddhist saints as it is for the Buddha himself.

The story of Phra Mahāmogallāna, the master of psychic powers, who conquers Nandopananda, the royal *nāga* (serpent), for instance, is simultaneously a story about the power of Phra Mahāmogallāna and the authority of the Buddha. This story is found in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (the Path of Purification), a famous fifth-century CE commentary on the Buddhist path. According to the story, the Buddha flew to the highest heavens with Phra Mahāmogallāna and 499 other monks. When they passed Nandopananda's dwelling, the *nāga* king became enraged. In order to subdue him, Phra Mahāmogallāna transformed himself into a huge royal *nāga* and then fought the serpent king. After Phra Mahāmogallāna had won, he forced Nandopananda to pay his respects to the Buddha.⁷

Miraculous powers serve to authenticate the spiritual abilities of exemplars and to disseminate the Buddha's teachings. These exemplars are preservers of the tradition, whose importance is elevated by the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha. They preserve the tradition not simply through their study and teaching of Buddhist doctrine – they preserve the tradition through the purity of their practice and, I would argue, through their possession and use of miraculous powers. In the Mahāyāna tradition, miraculous powers function as an advanced soteriological tool for the bodhisattva's liberation of sentient beings. While the use of miraculous powers is not an explicit part of the path within the Theravāda tradition, their use, as described in the stories of the Buddha and Buddhist saints, is for similar ends: to disseminate the *dhamma* and to lead others to awakening. In Thailand, one of the most popular and beloved of Buddhist saints is Phra Malai (Phra Maleyya, Pāli), who traveled to the heavens and hells to preach the Buddha's *dhamma* to all sentient beings.⁸

In addition to these well known examples, the Pāli canon and local traditions possess similar stories about Buddhist nuns who use their miraculous powers in the service of the *dhamma*. These stories demonstrate how miraculous powers functioned as both a

⁷ For a description of this story and other tales of Mahāmogallāna's miraculous powers, see Hecker 2003.

⁸ See Brereton 1995.

source and sign of spiritual authority. While they do not negate the undeniable presence and impact of misogynistic ideas about women in Buddhist texts and societies, they do offer another interpretive lens for examining the lives of Theravāda nuns and their followers. We therefore must reexamine which sacred biographies we choose to highlight and how we choose to read them. The story of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the first Buddhist nun, is an instructive example.

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī

The story of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's foster-mother and aunt, is well-known today in both academic and Buddhist circles because her story of renunciation and awakening is also the founding story of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*. The Pāli version of this story is located in the *Cullavagga* (chapter ten). Following the death of her husband, Mahāpajāpatī asked the Buddha to allow women to be ordained. The Buddha initially refused Mahāpajāpatī's request, and Gotamī departed from the Buddha in tears. Rather than accepting this as his final proclamation on the issue, however, Gotamī cut off her hair, donned saffron-colored robes, and together with 500 other women headed towards the town of Vesālī where the Buddha was staying. When Ānanda, the Buddha's attendant, discovered her wish to be ordained, he petitioned the Buddha on her behalf. After much debate, the Buddha finally acquiesced to Ānanda's request, with the provision that Mahāpajāpatī accept eight additional rules (*garu-dhamma*). These rules clearly placed *bhikkhunī* under the authority of monks and thereby institutionalized the inferior position of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*. In the *Cullavagga* version of this story, the Buddha laments that his admittance of women into the order will have a deleterious effect on the duration of his *dhamma*: it now will last only half as long. In other versions of this story, the Buddha is willing to put his *dhamma* at risk – not for the sake of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her followers – but for Ānanda, whose own progress on the path may be jeopardized by his being distraught over Mahāpajāpatī.⁹

⁹ See the translation in Strong 2008: 63–68.

When read from a modern feminist perspective, the story of the founding of the *bhikkhunī* order presents a conflicted message for Buddhists and scholars who attempt to reconstruct early Buddhist views on women's religiosity. From one perspective, the story of the founding of the *bhikkhunī* order demonstrates the power and determination of Mahāpajāpatī, who was, according to the tradition, the first fully ordained Buddhist nun in the *saṅgha* of Gotama Buddha. Early Orientalist scholars, such as I.B. Horner, Mabel Bode, and Caroline (Foley) Rhys-Davids, clearly viewed Mahāpajāpatī as a symbol of and for women's power,¹⁰ as do many contemporary nuns today who see their lives in Mahāpajāpatī's struggle for ordination. *Bhikkhunī* Kusuma, a contemporary Theravāda nun, for instance, praises Mahāpajāpatī and her 500 followers for their determination. She writes,

I think that it is pertinent to point out here that Sakyan women took a bold step in making this historic march in spite of the Buddha's reluctance. By their very honesty of purpose, they convinced the Buddha, as well as the tradition-bound Indian society of the fifth century B.C.E., that monastic freedom was as essential for women as for men. The Buddha, therefore, granted their request. This incident is an eye-opener for us today. It proves beyond any doubt that if our intentions are pure, no amount of obstacles can hinder us. In all humility, I myself am a witness to this fact, for I am a Sri Lankan who dared to become a *bhikkhunī*.¹¹

This portrait of Mahāpajāpatī, as the determined nun who fought for equal rights for Buddhist women, arises within specific interpretive contexts. In the first case, Horner's, Bode's, and Rhys Davids' portraits of Mahāpajāpatī as a liberated woman must be situated within broader Western discourses on liberal feminism in

¹⁰ I.B. Horner, an early English scholar of Pāli Buddhist texts, argues that, "in the Vinaya the woman called Mahāpajāpatī is represented as the leader of the women...her many attempts and failures to win her heart's desire bear witness to the her determination, no less than to the urgency of the need which prompted her" Horner 1930: 102–103. For an excellent review of the perspectives and contributions of I.B. Horner, Mabel Bode, and Caroline Foley Rhys-Davids, see Collett 2006.

¹¹ *Bhikkhunī* Kusuma 2000: 11.

the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the second case, the portrait of Mahāpajāpatī as a woman who fought for ordination against all odds fits well within contemporary discourses on the restoration of the *bhikkhunī* order in Theravāda Buddhism.

Other scholars and practitioners today view Mahāpajāpatī through a slightly more critical lens. For them, the story of her ordination reveals the misogynistic character of early Buddhism in ancient India – whether you attribute these negative statements in the Pāli canon to the Buddha or to the male redactors of the texts.¹² From this perspective, Mahāpajāpatī is portrayed as relatively weak figure in the story: she not only accepts the eight additional rules – she is unable to convince the Buddha to ordain women in the first place. Liz Wilson, for instance, argues that Mahāpajāpatī, far from being a liberated woman, only reinforced female subordination: she renounced only after she became a widow, and she submitted to the eight additional rules.¹³

Scholars commonly base their interpretations of Mahāpajāpatī as a Buddhist practitioner and as a woman upon her story of renunciation. There is, however, another important story of Mahāpajāpatī in the Pāli canon, which is not as widely known in the West. It is the story of her last encounter with the Buddha, when she asked him to grant a different request. It is located in the *Therī-apadāna*, a collection of stories about the lives and past lives of early Buddhist nuns composed around the second century BCE.¹⁴ This story has striking parallels to that of Mahāpajāpatī's request for ordination, but in this story the Buddha does not relay doubts or concerns about the contamination of the *saṅgha* by female renunciants; rather, in this story, Gotama Buddha requests that Mahāpajāpatī demonstrate her miraculous powers in order to prove to skeptics that women can experience nibbāna, the summum bonum of Buddhism.

In this story, Mahāpajāpatī went to the Buddha to request permission to die – for permission for her great going out (*parinibbāna*).

¹² See Lang 1986 and Paul 1985.

¹³ Wilson 1996: 143–145.

¹⁴ I rely here on Jonathon Walters' translation of the *Gotamī-apadāna* in Walters 1995: 113–138.

The Buddha granted her request, but he asked that before she died she demonstrate her powers to those “fools who doubt that women can grasp the truth.”¹⁵ In order to prove definitively the spiritual power of Mahāpajāpatī, the Buddha asks her to demonstrate her miraculous powers to the skeptical crowd. The *apadāna* then details the miraculous powers of Mahāpajāpatī.

Gotamī bowed to the lord then leaped into the sky. Permitted by the Buddha, she displayed her special powers. She was alone, then she was cloned; cloned, then alone. She would appear, then disappear; she walked through walls and through the sky. She went about unstuck on earth and also sank down in it; she walked on water as on land, without breaking the surface. Cross-legged, she flew like a bird across the surface of the sky...¹⁶

Following her impressive display of miraculous powers, the narrator of her *apadāna* states that Gotamī’s actions persuaded those who were skeptical of a woman’s spiritual abilities. Gotamī then told her audience how, after numerous lifetimes, she had become an *arahant* (an enlightened disciple of the Buddha). Following the recitation of her sacred biography, she then used her miraculous powers for the last time: She flew into the air and died. The 500 women who had accompanied her on her final visit to the Buddha also, at that moment, passed into their final *nibbāna*. In his eulogy for Gotamī, the Buddha said, “Know this, O monks, she was most wise, with wisdom vast and wide. She was a nun of great renown, a master of great powers. She cultivated ‘divine-ear’ and knew what others thought. In former births, before this one, she mastered ‘divine-eye.’ All imperfections were destroyed; she’ll have no more rebirths.”¹⁷

There are a number of striking parallels and contrasts between the story of Mahāpajāpati Gotamī’s death and the story of her renunciation. In both stories, she seeks permission from the Buddha for her going forth – in the first case, it is for her ordination and in the second case, it is for her *parinibbāna*, her final going forth. The

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 126.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 126–127.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 137.

cast of characters is also the same in both stories: Gotama Buddha, Mahāpajāpatī, her 500 female followers, and even Ānanda. But the tone of these two stories is radically different, as is the portrait of Mahāpajāpatī herself. In the story of her renunciation, she is portrayed as determined, but weak: she acquiesces to the Buddha's refusal to ordain women and to his eventual proclamation that *bhikkhunī* accept the eight additional vows. It is Ānanda's argument that eventually persuades the Buddha, not Gotamī's. In the *Gotamī-apadāna*, however, Gotamī is presented as a spiritual master and leader. She is determined and powerful. In the ordination story, the Buddha asks her to undertake rules that place her in an inferior position to that of monks. In the death story, however, the Buddha asks her to demonstrate her power to those who continue to doubt her abilities and spiritual attainments.

So, what is the power of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī? For those who view her as a champion of the rights of women, her power is expressed through her determined fight for ordination. For those who view power as the right to be independent of male authority, then the story of Mahāpajāpatī only highlights how the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* was inextricably trapped by the confines of a patriarchal society. The *apadāna* text, however, describes Mahāpajāpatī's power in traditional Buddhist terms: she is a master of the three special knowledges (*tevijja*), the four analytical knowledges (*paṭi-sambhida-ñāṇa*), the eight deliverances (*aṭṭavimokhā*), and the six higher knowledges (*abhiññā*). These powers are a reflection of her spiritual perfection.¹⁸ She was an *arahant* (an awakened one). She possessed the ultimate power of wisdom (*paññā*), and she possessed a wide range of miraculous powers: she could fly through the air, emit flames from her body, and see all of her past lives with her "divine eye." It was because of her elevated spiritual status that the earth trembled and the gods wept upon her death. It was because of her spiritual power that 500 women followed her into *parinibbāna*.

¹⁸ In fact, Jonathon Walters (1994) argues that the *Gotamī-apadāna* portrays Gotamī as a female Buddha. One clue is the use of the name Gotamī throughout the text instead of Mahāpajāpatī.

While the story of Mahāpajāpatī's fight for equality is well-known in the West, the story of her death and her display of miraculous powers is relatively unknown.¹⁹ The relative obscurity of her death story is not surprising given the fact that over the past two hundred years of Theravāda Buddhist scholarship, scholars have sought to de-emphasize tales of miracles and superhuman powers within the Buddhist tradition in favor of stories that present Buddhism as a rational and ethical philosophy. In fact, many modern scholars and practitioners of Theravāda Buddhism have used "miraculous powers" as a wedge between Theravāda, the purported orthodox tradition, which denounces miraculous powers, and that of the perverted and corrupt Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, which revel in them.

Contemporary nuns and miraculous powers

Given this propensity to ignore miraculous powers as a source of authority, it is not surprising that recent scholarship on contemporary Buddhist nuns in the Theravāda tradition pays little to no attention to nuns with miraculous powers. Rather, this literature tends to focus on their need for ordination, improved education, and the recognition of how their simple lives embody authentic Buddhist religiosity. There are, however, two contemporary Thai nuns, Mae chi Thosaphon (or Thanaphon)²⁰ and Khun Yay Ubasika Chandra Khonnokyoong, whose lives do not fit the portrait of the average Thai nun painted by most scholars and activists today. These nuns already possess authority within their respective communities. Their authority does not stem from ordination, education, or simple living; rather, their authority, like Gotamī's, is mediated and vali-

¹⁹ Jonathon Walters is the principal exception to this generalization. Liz Wilson also mentions the *Gotamī-āpadāna* in her book, *Charming Cadavers*, but she interprets the text in a radically different way from Walters. In her reading of the text, the parallels between Gotamī and the Buddha, such as their mutual offering of milk (Gotamī nurses the infant prince, and Gotama gives her the milk of the *dhamma*) only highlight Gotamī's inferiority to the Buddha. See Wilson 1996: 30–32.

²⁰ Mae chi Thosaphon's lay name is Thanaphon, and her early publications use both names.

dated through their miraculous powers. Both nuns are relatively well known public figures: one is a popular television personality whose life is the focus of several best-selling books, and the other founded the largest new temple in Thailand, the Dhammakāya Temple (Wat Phra Thammakai). As we shall see, these two nuns receive patronage and respect because they are viewed by their supporters as powerful religious persons who, through the power of their meditation, have developed superhuman knowledge (*apinya*, Thai; *abhiññā*, Pāli) and miraculous powers (*itthirit*, Thai, *iddhi*, Pāli). As with the stories of the great *arahants* of the past, such as Phra Moggallāna and Phra Malai, the sacred biographies of these nuns focus on their extraordinary powers: the ability to read-minds, to travel to the various realms of existence, to know the karmic heritage of other people, and even to heal those who are afflicted with karma-induced sickness. These stories serve as proof to their followers of the elevated spiritual status of these nuns.

Mae chi Thosaphon

Mae chi Thosaphon first came to my attention in April 2005 as I was perusing through bookstores in Bangkok. I noticed that in Thai language bookstores, in malls, grocery stores, street markets, and at the universities, that the face of one particular nun was prominently displayed on the covers of two best-selling books, *Koet Tae Kam* (Birth from Karma) and *Koet Tae Kam 2* (Birth from Karma Two).²¹ The nun was Mae chi Thosaphon, whose popularity has increased in recent years due to her ability to know the karmic history of individuals. This is one of the powers listed as one of the three knowledges (*tevijja*), which are accomplished right before awakening, and this power is one of the six *abhiññā* (higher powers). Her abilities were showcased on the popular television show, *Chuamong Phitsawong* (Surprise Hour), which combined ghost stories and tales of mysterious events with Mae chi Thosaphon's karma-readings. In her segment of the show, she interviewed people, many of whom were celebrities, and told them about their karmic pasts. Mae chi Thosaphon's karma-readings became so popu-

²¹ Burapha Phadungthai, *Koet Tae Kam*, and *Koet Tae Kam 2*, 2005.

lar in contemporary Thailand in 2005 that two books about her life and her karma-readings became bestsellers.

While television may be a relatively new medium for the display of miraculous powers, the stories themselves are not. As in the case of Phra Malai and other Buddhist saints, Buddhists can interpret Mae chi Thosaphon's display of such powers as a definitive sign of her advanced spiritual state. According to her biography in *Koet Tae Kam*, Mae chi Thosaphon began to develop miraculous powers as soon as she donned the white clothing of a *mae chi*. In fact, at that moment, she felt an energy flow throughout her body (*phlang ngan*). In the first few days of her meditation practice, she acquired the ability to view her past lives. Not long after that, she was able to read the minds of others. When her teacher, Luang Pho Prichad, realized that she had obtained the power of clairvoyance, he informed her that this was one of the *aphinya* (*abhiññā*, Pāli, special knowledges), which develops from advanced meditation practice. He told her that this was a power that she needed to harness. He warned her not to forecast the future of others but rather, to focus only on her own progress. If she did read the minds of others, she should do so in a detached manner. According to her biography, her teacher then tested her powers, who validated both her adeptness at stilling the mind and at seeing objects that are hidden from the ordinary eye.²²

In fact, Mae chi Thosaphon's biography abounds with tales of her miraculous powers. One such power is her ability to heal those who are suffering from "karma-sickness" (*rokh kam*), which, according to Mae chi Thosaphon, is commonly misdiagnosed by modern physicians. By touching the body, she is able to determine whether a particular ailment or injury is the result of natural causes or the result of karma. In one story, Mae chi Thosaphon touched a patient's knee and determined that the injury was the result of previous karmic actions. The patient had hurt someone in the past, and now the injured party was an angry spirit, who was enacting revenge by inflicting pain upon the patient's leg. In order to

²² Burapha Phadungthai, *Koet Tae Kam*, p. 42–55.

stop the pain, the patient had to transfer merit to the spirit.²³ Mae chi Thosaphon served a pivotal role in this exchange. She acted as a medium for the transfer of merit. In another story, Mae chi Thosaphon touched the head and chest of a patient with rheumatism. Through the power of her meditation, she was able, according to the story, to transfer a life-force (*pran*) from herself to the weakened patient.²⁴ Another power that is detailed in her biography is her power to forecast events in the future and in some cases, to affect the course of events and to avert disaster. For instance, one story credits Mae chi Thosaphon with protecting Thailand from the dreaded SARS disease.²⁵

These powers, while important to her spiritual resume, are not the central focus of her public persona. The most popular skill that Mae chi Thosaphon possesses is her ability to know the karmic legacies of other people (*luang ru kam*). This was the power that was showcased on the television show, *Chuamong Phitsawong*. On the program, Mae chi Thosaphon would appear sitting next to one of the show's hosts and a guest, usually a Thai celebrity, who wanted to know the reason for unfortunate events in his or her life. In one story, a former Thai actress, Muan Fan, appeared on the show. She asked Mae chi Thosaphon why so many bad things had happened to her: she had become a minor wife of an important Thai businessman; she had become pregnant with his child; she had lost her husband, and she now no longer had work in the entertainment industry. Mae chi Thosaphon told her that this series of events occurred because of her past karma. In a previous life, she had been the first wife of a high-ranking man, and when she had found out that her husband had a minor wife, she used black magic to torture her. As a result, the minor wife committed suicide. According to Mae chi Thosaphon, Muan Fan's problems were the karmic results of her previous actions. To counter this force, Mae chi Thosaphon recommended that Muan Fan meditate on loving-kindness.²⁶

²³ *Ibid.* 57.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 58–59.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 72–73.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 138.

Chuamong Phitsawong is no longer on Thai television, but Mae chi Thosaphon's popularity has continued to grow. Books about her life, her "karma readings," and her interpretations of *dhamma* continue to top the best-seller list in Thailand even as new stories about miracles and special powers emerge and circulate in the Thai public sphere. Her popularity has also extended to the institutions of modern establishment Buddhism. In May 2009, Mae chi Thosaphon was awarded an honorary doctorate in Social Affairs from Mahachulalongkorn University by the acting head of the Supreme Sangha Council. She received the doctorate for her many acts of *khwam di* (good deeds). This honor not only granted her a university degree but also legitimized her authority within contemporary Thai Buddhism. Mae chi Thosaphon's story demonstrates how one Thai nun has overcome the stereotypical portrait of *mae chi* as old and broken-hearted temple-maids through her reputation as one who possesses the special powers of clairvoyance, healing, and reading karma.

Khun Yay Ubasika Chan

Another contemporary nun, who was similarly renowned for her skills in meditation, was Khun Yay Ubasika Chandra Khonno-kyoong (1909–2000).²⁷ Khun Yay was perhaps the most influential nun in Thai Buddhist history. Her life defied the typical characterization of Thai nuns as marginal and largely irrelevant to the religious landscape. She was one of the principal founders of the Dhammakāya Temple (Wat Phra Thammakai) in 1970, a temple that has now grown to a membership of over 200,000 practitioners. Her followers consider her to be the chosen one – the favorite pupil of the much beloved Luang Pho Sot (1884–1959). Luang Pho Sot was the highly respected abbot of Wat Paknam who was believed to have re-discovered the meditation technique (*wicha thammakai*) that was used by Gotama Buddha. Before Luang Pho Sot's death, he entrusted Khun Yay with the *dhammakāya* lineage. She was the

²⁷ The word *ubasika* (*upāsikā*, Pāli) technically means a laywoman. In Thai, it is reserved for especially pious laywomen, most of whom follow the eight precepts.

one who would pass down *wicha thammakai* to the next generation. If numbers are an indication of success, then clearly Luang Pho Sot was right to entrust her with the lineage, for the temple that she founded, the Dhammakāya Temple, has one of the largest followings in all of Thailand.

As in the case of her teacher, Luang Pho Sot, and the famed monks of the forest tradition, Khun Yay established her authority through advanced meditation practice, not through modern education. In fact, Khun Yay's lack of education actually helped to legitimize her power. Her followers highlighted the fact that she was illiterate because this authenticated her ability to garner religious wisdom through meditation rather than through academic study. Khun Yay's popularity at Wat Paknam grew as the result of her reputation as a meditation adept who possessed miraculous powers. In particular, her followers believed that she could travel to the various realms of existence to communicate with deceased relatives, to transfer merit to them, and to help people understand the karmic influences in their lives today.

Khun Yay began her meditation training in *wicha thammakai* in 1927 at the age of 18.²⁸ She initially studied under the tutelage of Ubasika Thongsuk, who was at that time a laywoman who taught the meditation technique of Luang Pho Sot. After training with Ubasika Thongsuk for six years, Khun Yay had the opportunity to study with Luang Pho Sot at Wat Paknam. Upon meeting Khun Yay, Luang Pho Sot granted her immediate access to his advanced meditation group (the meditation workshop) without having to take the usual tests that measure spiritual abilities. According to her sacred biography, Luang Pho Sot did not require her to take these tests because he recognized Khun Yay's advanced skills in meditation. Because of Khun Yay's inherent spiritual ability, it was not long before she attained the highest levels of *dhammakāya* meditation.

²⁸ Most of the biographical material on Khun Yay is taken from interviews with Dhammakāya members in 1998–99, 2001, 2005, and 2009. In addition, I refer to two published sources: *Anuphap Haeng Bun* (December 3, 2000), which was a Dhammakāya publication that reprinted a sermon by Phra Dhammachayo on the life of Khun Yay, and from *Second to None*.

Khun Yay's power of "seeing and knowing"²⁹ enabled her to help alleviate the suffering of others. Khun Yay quickly gained a reputation as an especially skilled meditation adept who could tell anxious families where their relatives had gone after death, and if need be, to assist these families in transferring merit to their deceased loved ones. If, for example, one believed that a relative had been reborn in one of the hell-realms, Khun Yay could use the power of her meditation to travel to this realm, to instruct the relative in the *dhamma*, and to transfer merit from the family to him. According to Phra Dhammachayo, the abbot of the Dhammakāya temple, Khun Yay could move as easily among the various realms of existence as she could move from building to building within the temple grounds.³⁰ As in the case of Mae chi Thosaphon, Khun Yay also developed a reputation for being able to read minds, to see the past lives of people in order to determine the cause of their particular problems, and to facilitate the healing of the sick and injured. Khun Yay was also consulted on missing-persons cases.

Of all of the stories of Khun Yay's miraculous abilities, the most well known is Khun Yay's heroic diversion of Allied bombs during World War II. According to Luang Pho Sot's and Khun Yay's biographies, the advanced meditation group at Wat Paknam collectively destroyed a number of Allied bombs through the use of their miraculous powers. One account went so far as to say that America had initially planned to drop an atomic bomb on Bangkok, but that the advanced meditation group used their miraculous power to be able to avert such a horrible catastrophe in Thailand. Needless to say, critics of the Dhammakāya temple often find great amusement in these tales going so far as to publish cartoons of Khun Yay flying in the air with her body strapped around a bomb. But to the faithful these stories validate her remarkable power and skill. Her ability to perform miracles, to know things beyond ordinary knowledge, to travel effortlessly through the realms of existence are all stand-

²⁹ The Dhammakāya Foundation translates the word *ñāṇadassana* (perfect knowledge) as "seeing and knowing" in *Second to None*, p. 32. The possession of *ñāṇadassana* is one characteristic of *arahantship*.

³⁰ *Anuphap Haeng Bun* (December 3, 2000), pp. 3–4.

ard indications of spiritual prowess within the Theravāda tradition. These were signs of her advanced skills in meditation.

In fact, it was this story of Khun Yay's diversion of Allied bombs that drew the interest of a young college-student, Chaiyabun Suddhipol (the future abbot of the Dhammakāya Temple), to Wat Paknam in 1963. He came because he had read a magazine entitled, *Vipassana Banteungsarn*, which relayed the heroic tales of Khun Yay and the others nuns who were part of the World War II campaign.³¹ For the young Chaiyabun, these powers were ample evidence of Khun Yay's advanced wisdom and skill in meditation. While Khun Yay had thousands of students over the course of her lifetime, her tutelage of Chaiyabun had a significant impact on her life. Chaiyabun, who was later ordained as Phra Dhammachayo, became the first abbot of the Dhammakāya Temple, and together he and Khun Yay transformed the Dhammakāya Temple from a small meditation center to one of the largest and fastest growing temples in Thailand with a following of over 200,000 practitioners.

To commemorate her contributions to the Temple and to the spread of *wicha thammakai*, the Temple cast a golden statue of her in January 1998, an honor usually reserved only for the Buddha, important Buddhist saints, and contemporary abbots.³² When she died in September of 2000, the Temple delayed her cremation for over a year in order to grant more people the opportunity to pay their respects to her and to make merit on her behalf. Thai Buddhists afford this courtesy only to the holiest of individuals in Thailand.³³ To my knowledge, it was the first time that such respect had ever been paid to a nun in Thailand.³⁴ Over the course of that

³¹ *Second to None*, p. 83.

³² The importance of Khun Yay to the Temple is also on display at the Dhammakāya store, where one can purchase Khun Yay memorabilia such as necklaces, pendants, and books.

³³ The body of Luang Phau Sot, for instance, has never been cremated. One can still pay respect to his physical body at Wat Paknam in Thonburi, Thailand.

³⁴ There are, however, striking parallels between the grandness of Khun Yay's funeral and that of Mahāpajāpati's as it was described in the *Gotamī-apadāna*.

year, weekly services at the temple included lengthy sermons on the life of Khun Yay, which were reproduced in the Dhammakāya Foundation's publication *Anuphap haeng bun* (The Miracle of Merit), and memorial meditation sessions in front of her casket, which was on display in the large assembly hall. On the day of her funeral, February 3, 2002, attendance at the temple purportedly surpassed 250,000. Shortly thereafter, the temple began construction on a large, pyramid-shaped, golden memorial for Khun Yay. Today, the memorial hall houses the golden image of Khun Yay, which is located in the meditation section of the memorial, and it displays a museum-like exhibit of Khun Yay's life, which commemorates her life as a meditation master and founder of the Dhammakāya Temple. The reverence paid to Khun Yay during her lifetime and after her death by the Dhammakāya community is striking given the general cultural prejudices against female renunciants in contemporary Thailand.

Despite her elevated status within the Dhammakāya community, however, scholars who are interested in the topic of "women and Buddhism" rarely mention her. One reason for this lack of attention may be her affiliation with the Dhammakāya Temple. Over the past three decades, the Dhammakāya Temple has been embroiled in several headline-making controversies. In 1998, the Temple was the focus of a yearlong controversy over its marketing of a miraculous occurrence at the temple, its purported commercialization of Buddhism, and its controversial teachings on *nibbāna*.³⁵ During that time, the national press portrayed Khun Yay as one of the masterminds behind the Dhammakāya Temple's purported commercialization of Buddhism and its proselytization of miraculous occurrences at the Temple.³⁶ As a result of this wider public image of Khun Yay, many have overlooked her extraordinary story of power and prestige.

³⁵ See Scott 2009.

³⁶ See "Chan's Donation Methods Blasted," *The Nation*, December 1, 1998.

Conclusion

The literature on Thai nuns today has greatly improved our understanding of the lives of Thai nuns – from young women who decide to leave home to pursue a quiet life of simplicity to activists who seek to improve their lives and the lives of others by supporting *bhikkhuni* ordination and modern education. There are nuns, however, whom we continue to ignore. The nuns who are absent from this discussion are the nuns whose authority stems from their insight and miraculous powers – nuns such as Mae chi Thosaphon and Khun Yay Ubasika Chan. One might argue that the stories of Mae chi Thosaphon and Khun Yay are not as valuable to our understanding of the lives of Buddhist nuns since their authority is linked to dubious forms of Buddhist practice – a highly sensational television program (*Chuamong Phitsawong*) and a highly controversial Buddhist movement (Dhammakāya Temple), but I would object to such an assessment. It rests upon a dichotomy between the authentic tradition, which is commonly constructed as a rational, text-oriented philosophy, and its popular variants that contain deviant teachings and practices (such as a focus on miraculous powers).

Early Orientalist scholars embraced this dichotomy when they dismissed miraculous powers as irrational additions to an essentially rational ethical philosophy. Orientalist scholars, for instance, often focused on the Buddha's purported condemnation of miraculous powers in the *Kevaṭṭa-sutta*,³⁷ rather than noting the performance of miraculous feats in the *Apadāna* literature. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that English translations of the *Apadāna* was a relatively low priority for the early members of the Pāli text society.³⁸ At the same time, Buddhist reformist discourses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depicted the focus on

³⁷ While this *sutta* may express an anti-miraculous power sentiment within the canon, one might also interpret the story as a story about the proper *use* of Buddhist miracles. As in the story of Piṇḍola who shows off his miraculous abilities to win a contest, one might argue that the Buddhist tradition maintained that miraculous powers are to be used for teaching, not for the purpose of advancing one's own personal glory. See Davis 1998: 13–14.

³⁸ Walters 1994: 366–367.

miraculous powers within so-called popular Buddhism as backward and steeped in superstition. Walpola Rahula, a modernist Sri Lankan monk, for instance, referred to the pursuit of magical powers as “nothing but ‘spiritual perversion’.”³⁹ These biases against magical powers continue today, although now they are no longer simply deemed as “superstitious” or “backward;” today, they are disparagingly characterized as acts of “false advertising,” which lead religious consumers to buy dubious religious items and to patronize allegedly corrupt monks and nuns. Such judgments have led many to disregard the role of miraculous powers in contemporary Thai Buddhism or to regard them as a sign of decadence and corruption. Distinctions between authentic Buddhist religiosity and so-called deviant forms are found within the Buddhist tradition, but these distinctions should be the focus of our study; they should not be taken as self-evident truths about the nature of authentic Buddhism.

One consequence of the tendency to dismiss the importance of miraculous powers within the Theravāda tradition has been our failure to recognize how miraculous powers have served to authenticate the spiritual power of Buddhist nuns in the past and in the present. While stories of nuns with miraculous powers may not be as well known in Theravāda Buddhism as they are in the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, the stories do, nevertheless exist. As we saw in the case of Mahāpajapātī Gotamī, the *Therī-āpadāna*, a second-century BCE canonical text, is full of references to nuns who possess miraculous powers.⁴⁰ In addition, the *Mahāvamsa*, one of the chronicles of Sri Lanka, possesses stories of nuns with miraculous powers who help the Buddha to establish the tradition on the island by using their special powers to transport branches of the Bodhi tree from India to Sri Lanka.⁴¹ Moreover, in the biography of one of Thailand’s most famous modern forest saints, Phra Ajahn Man, we find a story of an eighty-year-old *mae chi*, who frequently

³⁹ Rahula 1974: 68.

⁴⁰ For an extensive reference to selections from the *Therī-āpadānas*, see Acariya Dhammapala 1999. I am greatly indebted to Ayya Tathaaloka Bhikkhunī for bringing these stories to my attention.

⁴¹ See Geiger 1950: 103.

conversed with the venerable monk about her attainments in meditation and her powers of clairvoyance and of special communications with beings in other realms of existence. We are told that her attainments rivaled that of many *bhikkhus*.⁴²

Their stories and the stories of contemporary nuns, such as Mae chi Thosaphon and Khun Yay Ubasika Chan, do not negate the undeniable presence and impact of misogynistic ideas about women in Buddhist texts and societies; they do offer, however, another interpretive lens for examining the lives of Theravāda nuns and their followers. In so doing, their examples change the discourse on Buddhist nuns from a discourse focused solely on the difficulties faced by contemporary Theravāda nuns to a discourse about how some Theravāda nuns attained religious authority despite the substantial prejudice against female renunciation in South and Southeast Asia.

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⁴² Phra Ācariya Mahā Bauw Ñānasampanno 1995: 260–263.

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