

EMPOWERMENT, ITS CRITIQUE FROM A FEMINIST AND BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE AND *BHIKKHUNI* ORDINATION

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Abstract

The article discusses the conceptual understanding of the term empowerment as contributing to transforming unequal gender relations focusing on the context of the struggle for full ordination as *bhikkhuni* for religious women in the Thai Theravada Buddhist tradition. As *bhikkhunis*, religious women move to a higher moral realm and is considered as "fields-of-merit", a status previously available only to men who have access to full ordination. However, the relevance of the term empowerment is also critiqued firstly, from a feminist perspective that it is derived from a patriarchal discourse fixated with power. Secondly, the notion of empowerment is analyzed from a Buddhist perspective of non-attachment or letting go. In the process of discussing the relevance of the term empowerment the social position of *mae jis* (religious women who observe eight precepts, shave their heads and wear white robes) are highlighted. Broadly, the struggle for the ordination as *bhikkhuni* for religious women is situated in the debate on whether Buddhism supports gender in/equality.

Keywords: empowerment, gender in/equality, women, religion, Buddhism.

Introduction

Focusing on the key term empowerment, the paper traces its development and definition that address the imbalance in gender relations. Specifically, an analysis for understanding full ordination as *bhikkhuni* (holder of 311 precepts) as empowerment is provided in the context of Theravada Buddhist in Thailand. The circumstances and struggles of religious women² that include both *bhikkhuni* and *mae chii* (holder of eight precepts) are drawn to provide a background for understanding the differential access in power in the religious domain between men and women. In addition, examples from the Sakyaditha's (Daughters of The Buddha) experiences of organizing for the recognition of *bhikkhuni* ordination are drawn upon to illustrate the concept of empowerment. The paper also critiques the concept of empowerment from both a feminist and a Buddhist perspective with its responses highlighted. As a paper concerning the issue of empowerment and gender equality for women in terms of the

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possibility of full ordination in Buddhist traditions where it is still inexistent, it will start by exploring the basic question of whether Buddhism supports gender in/equality.

Gender In/Equality in Buddhism?

Whether there is gender equality in early Buddhist history is still a contentious issue. Scholarly textual analysis yields three main arguments. Firstly, Buddhism is characterized by gender discrimination; secondly, Buddhism advances gender equality; and thirdly, there are multiple voices since at a particular stage in history there is textual evidence of gender discrimination and/or gender equality. An article in the first group highlight incidents in Buddhist texts that reflect the female sex as inferior vis-a-vis the male sex such as in the study of a female past birth of the Buddha by Ohnuma (2000). Both Boonsue (1989) and Patana (2004) studies on Buddhist texts popular to the Thais arrive at similar conclusions. Boonsue (1989, 52-55) observed further that the Thai National Women's Development Plan (1982-2001) is unable to redress gender inequality as it does not address the ideology of female inferiority in Buddhism.

On the other hand, an example of a scholarly writing in the second group that advances gender equality is *Thai Women in Buddhism* by Kabilsingh (1991). In her book, Kabilsingh points out that at the very basic level Buddhism offers a liberating spiritual path to both women and men. She then goes further to argue that the Eight Special Rules or *gurudharma* which subordinates the female monastics to male monastics may well have been a reflection of the viewpoint of monks who recorded the texts rather than the actual words of the Buddha. Nonetheless, Kabilsingh (1991, 27) implicitly acknowledges that there are multiple voices at work when she refers to Kajiyama Yuichi's (1982, 70) distinction of five historical stages in relation to the various Buddhist attitudes toward women's potential for enlightenment. These attitudes range from no differentiation based on sex to the inability of a woman to be a Buddha, the necessity for a woman to transform to a man in order to attain enlightenment and being able to attain enlightenment as a woman.

The multiplicity of voices on the topic of whether there is gender equality in Buddhism is also reflected in Alan Sponberg's (1992, 3-36) article on "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism". He classifies these four attitudes as a) soteriological inclusiveness; b) institutional androcentrism; c) ascetic misogyny; and d) soteriological androgyny. Sponberg emphasizes that he purposely uses the term soteriological inclusiveness instead of soteriological equivalence to make the point that while the spiritual path is open to women it does not signify sameness or a lack of hierarchy between men and women socially and spiritually. In this hierarchy, the female sex is perceived as inferior to the male sex. Herein lies the difference between Sponberg and other authors such as Kabilsingh and Kajiyama whose writings as I have mentioned earlier suggest or argue for spiritual equality in the earliest Buddhist attitude toward women and the feminine. In Kajiyama's (1982, 61) own words, "Gautama asserted equality in the religious ability of men and women in the face of societal discrimination against women".

According to Sponberg, the earliest Buddhist attitude of soteriological inclusiveness toward women and the feminine is followed by institutional androcentrism as the early Buddhist community became more established. Institutional androcentrism refers to the institutional structure and regulations of the monastic order that maintain the then prevalent social standards of male authority and female subordination. A more progressively negative attitude toward women and the feminine in Buddhist literature than institutional androcentrism is ascetic misogyny. Sponberg observes that ascetic misogyny is manifested in vituperative attacks on women and the feminine as polluting and detestable such as the portrayal of women as weaker beings or being the cause of men's downfall. These attacks stem from the psychological fear of the power of the feminine to undermine male celibacy. Nonetheless, this attitude is not left unchallenged in Buddhist literature. The fourth and final attitude of soteriological androgyny toward women and the feminine is actively egalitarian although it is not devoid of androcentrism. Femininity and masculinity are seen as mutually complementary and equally essential to the ideal state with enlightenment depicted in the form of a sexual union representing the androgynous ideal. While Diana Paul's (1985, 303) study of the images of the feminine in Mahayana Buddhist texts also noted a multiplicity of voices, she nonetheless makes the observation that there is an egalitarian strand in Buddhism and this ideal is correlated with the increase in popularity and influence of these Buddhists texts.

The debate on whether there is gender in/equality in early Buddhism is an open-ended one. What the actual situation is cannot be absolutely determined. Scholars' stances based on textual and inter-textual analysis is an approximation of what is the most likely scenario based on the evidences presented. Nonetheless, Arai's (1999) study on women and Buddhism in the context of Japan, Brown's (2001) study in Thailand and Gutschow (2000) study in the Himalaya found that Buddhist women have experienced structural violence. According to Sivaraksa (2005, 8), structural violence refers to violence inherent in the structures of a culture and society which in the context of this article denies religious women spiritual equality.³

Similarities and Differences among Religious Women with a Focus on Thailand

While Buddhist women are diverse in terms of culture, class, education and so forth, there are also similarities confronting them in terms of their secondary position or the structural violence they face as religious women. The context of their struggle for the improvement of women's status and position in society will mainly be based on the Thai context with references made to other traditions and countries. The two categories of religious women discussed are *mae chiis* or ascetic women in Thailand who hold eight precepts and *bhikkhunis* or fully ordained religious women who keep 311 precepts. The social position of *mae chiis* are presented not to only show the difficulties and challenges they faced as religious women but also to lay the groundwork for understanding why official recognition for *mae chii* and in particular, *bhikkhuni* ordination is empowering.

The Social Position of Mae Chiis

As opposed to the situation in China, Sri Lanka and other countries, a female monastic order was never established in Thailand. Nevertheless, to fulfill their spiritual quest women can become *mae chiis*. *Mae chiis* not only observe eight precepts but also shave their heads and wear white robes. However, their position is an ambiguous one without any formal ordination. As recently as 2003 the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs rejected a proposed nun's law that would have accorded *mae chiis* legal recognition as ordained persons (Falk, 2003). The ambiguity of their situation is further reflected in the contradictory positions held by the government who denied them the right to vote on the basis that they do not fall under the worldly realm, similar to the way monks are regarded. Yet, unlike monks, *mae chiis* do not necessarily receive reduced fares on public transportation and free or discounted rates for medical treatment (Brown, 2001).

Mae chiis live a form of religious lifestyle based on a set of guidelines issued by the Thai Nuns' Institute in the mid-1970s. As *mae chiis* do not have an official legal position in the *sangha* there is no formal ordination conducted. Pious women who aspire to be a *mae chii* will request for the precepts from a monk or the head of a nunnery. In spite of the ambivalent position of *mae chiis*, the desire to lead a religious life is there as they form the biggest group of religious women estimated at around 10,000 (Kabilsingh, 1991).

Due to the non-recognition of the legal position of *mae chiis* in the *sangha*, they also have to struggle with meager resources (Kabilsingh, 1991). Unlike monks, they are unable to rely on the traditional reciprocal support between the monastic and lay people where monks provide spiritual nourishment and lay people offer material sustenance. In *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun*, Wabi is able to go forth as a nun not because of the support of lay people or from her poor family (Brown, 2001). Rather, she was fortunate to meet Mae chii Seni, an influential figure in her life, where they worked out an arrangement. Mae chii Seni offered her room and board as well as a small salary and the opportunity to lead a religious life with space and time for meditation, chanting and studying Buddhism while Wabi would care for Mae Chii Seni's elderly father and mentally retarded sister. According to Kabilsingh (1991, 39), contrary to the situation of

monks whom Thai society consider as "fields-of-merit" worthy of their support, *mae chiis* are not appreciated in a parallel way. In fact, a woman's decision to go forth as a *mae chii* is often attributed as an escape route from failures in their personal lives such as in relationships rather than a desire to pursue the spiritual path. Wabi's father, who has become a monk himself, was initially against her decision to become a *mae chii* and pointed out that "going forth as a *mae chii* is not the same as going forth as a monk. Thai society does not accept *mae chii*" (Brown 2001, 22). Furthermore, her father's observation of the life of a *mae chii* at his temple is not an inspiring one:

"She worked every day in the kitchen, cooking for all those people, she had to cook breakfast and lunch. The novices helped, but everyone else had to study. It was difficult. And she never chanted - she only cooked." (Brown, 2001, 22).

Being a *mae chii* does not necessarily afford women opportunities to deepen their *dharma* study and practice. This stands in contrast to monks who are provided with a systematic education in the monastery. In fact, *mae chiis* who lack such educational opportunities are hampered from developing their potential to be *dharma* teachers and offer spiritual guidance to laypeople (Kabilsingh, 1991, 41). This situation is reflective of many *mae chiis*, particularly those who live within temple compounds where they have to cook and clean for monks. Falk's (2003) research of *mae chiis* at the Ratburi nunnery supports the contention that *mae chiis* at nunneries have better conditions for their monastic training than their counterparts at the temples. At the Ratburi nunnery the public presence of *mae chiis* in the performance of rituals combined with their hard work and monastic discipline have gained them informal legitimacy as religious specialists and consequently acceptance as well as support from the laity (Falk, 2003, 15). This challenges the low perception of *mae chiis* as failures in love or that they become one only as a last resort. At another level, even if it may not be recognized as such, *mae chiis* are actually exercising their right to choose the spiritual path in defiance of societal expectations for them to marry and have children. Nevertheless, there are temples such as Wat Paknam where the opportunities provided have enabled *mae chiis* to develop their role as healers through meditation (Kabilsingh, 1991, 58). Furthermore, contrary to the general low level of education of *mae chiis* in Thailand, there are exemplary figures that defy this characterization such as Khun Mae Prathin, Khun Mae Sumon, and Khunying Kanitha⁴ who live the life of engaged Buddhists in improving the educational opportunities and social status for nuns in particular and women in general (Falk, 2003, 10-14).

Struggle for Full Ordination

Efforts to establish the *bhikkhuni* lineage in Thailand can be traced historically to Sara and Chongdi Basit who received ordination first as *samaneris* (novices) in 1928 and subsequently as *bhikkhunis* in 1932. From land donated by their father, a temple was constructed which serve as a *dharma* center and their residence. However, reactions to their ordination were mainly negative. The media generally crucified them and considered their ordination as an act causing schism to the *sangha* as well as heretical to be punished by death (Kabilsingh, 1991, 47). The Thai *Sangha* or ecclesiastical authority did not recognize the ordination since they did not follow the prescribed ordination procedure. Sara and Chongdi received their ordination only from monks whereas in the *vinaya* (monastic code of discipline) it is outlined that a *bhikkhuni* must first receive her ordination from the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* (female monastic order) followed by the *Bhikkhu Sangha* (male monastic order). This is because the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* is not in existence in Thailand yet.

Subsequently, the Thai *Sangha* declared Sara and Chongdi ordination as invalid and ordered them to disrobe as well as forbade monks from ordaining women as *sikhmanas*, *samaneris* and *bhikkhunis* (Kabilsingh, 1991, 46). While some elderly *bhikkhunis* chose to disrobe, they refused. The police arrested Sara and Chongdi and charged them with an act of disobedience to the Order of the *Sangha*. They were jailed for a few days. Undaunted, they continued being *bhikkhunis* after their release. Nonetheless,

their attempt to establish the *bhikkhuni order* were short-lived due to opposition from the male *Sangha* authority and lack of support from Thai society in general (Kabilsingh, 1991, 47-48). Due to these adverse circumstances, both Sara and Chongdi finally had to give up being *bhikkhunis*.

Similarly efforts by Voramai Kabilsingh, the contemporary of Sara and Chongdi, to establish the *bhikkhuni* lineage at a much later time met with resistance. Coming from a well-to-do background and being learned with a good network of support, she was able to establish her own temple in Nakhonpathom as well as handled the pressure and open conflict with the government on this issue successfully. Briefly, Voramai received her ordination as a *bhikkhuni* in Taiwan from both the *Bhikkhuni* and *Bhikkhu Sangha* in 1971. However, the Thai *Sangha* is only willing to accord her the status of a *bhikkhuni* from the Mahayana and not the Thai Theravada tradition. This is in spite of the historical fact that Chinese *bhikkhunis* received their lineage from Sri Lanka (like Thailand it is part of the Theravada tradition). Furthermore, their ordination lineage or *vinaya* is the same as the *Patimokkha* (monastic vows) followed by Chinese *bhikkhunis* from the Dharmagupta school which is considered by scholars as a sub-sect of the Theravada tradition (Kabilsingh 1988, 148). As Kabilsingh (1988, 148) points out what distinguishes the Mahayana from the Theravada tradition is its philosophical interpretation of the *Dharma* or teachings rather than its ordination lineage.

After Voramai's passing away from illness, her daughter, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, continues the effort to establish the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* in Thailand. A former professor in Philosophy and Religion in Thammasat University, her study of Buddhist thought and the monastic vows has further convinced her of the possibility to establish the *bhikkhuni* lineage in Thailand. The Buddha himself established the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* in the belief that all human beings can achieve enlightenment. Her ordained name, Dhammananda, means "she whose joy lies in the Dharma" (Bredie, 2004, 11). With this spirit, she purposefully walks the path to build a community of women at Watra Songdharma Kalyani comprising of *bhikkhunis*, *mae chiis* and laywomen (Barensen, 2005, 22). Wilasinee Phiphitkul, a feminist scholar in Thailand sees Venerable Dhammananda's work as "helping women to have a women's society, a woman's space within Buddhism" (Barensen, 2005, 21). In this space, women who follow a religious path can distinguish themselves in areas they dedicate themselves to whether it is practicing meditation, practicing chanting, Buddhist studies, or healing abilities. In addition to her initiatives to gain acceptance for *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand, Venerable Dhammananda also contributes tirelessly to such efforts internationally.

Venerable Dhammananda received her lower ordination as a *samaneri* in 2001 in Sri Lanka. Following the requirement to wait for two years before applying for higher ordination, she went back to Sri Lanka in 2003 to receive full ordination as a *bhikkhuni* in the Sri Lanka Theravada tradition. Officially, the Thai *Sangha* does not recognize her status as a *bhikkhuni*. Reflective of the official position, the Vice-Abbot of a temple in Thailand said "no" when asked the possibility of reviving the Theravada *bhikkhuni* lineage (personal communication, August 20, 2005). When it was pointed out that the *bhikkhuni* lineage in Theravada Sri Lanka has been revived, the Venerable

responded: "that's the Mahayana tradition, and not Theravada." The revival of the *bhikkhuni* lineage in Sri Lanka similarly has its detractors among the high priests and many monks there. As the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* in Sri Lanka was revived in 1996 and 1998 with the help of Chinese and Korean *bhikkhunis*, it is considered as belonging to the Mahayana tradition. Yet, historically, the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* in China was established in the 4th century by Sri Lankan *bhikkhunis* and from there the *bhikkhuni* order spread to Korea, Japan and Taiwan. Hence, supporters for the revival of the *bhikkhuni* order in Sri Lanka view it as a "return gift from China" (Weeraratne, 2005, 16-17). Contrary to popular perceptions that China is only composed of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the Theravada tradition does exist there, namely, in Yunan province where it is thriving. Furthermore, there are precedents in history as the Thai *Sangha* helped to reestablish the *Bhikkhu Sangha* in Sri Lanka in the 18th century (Wijayasundara, 1999, 84-85). Even if it is argued that the Chinese *Bhikkhuni Sangha* is mixed with Mahayana influence, the same can be said of Buddhism in Sri Lanka that is influenced by various Tamil Hindu practices (Weeraratne, 2005, 16). It is inevitable that as Buddhism travels to various lands it adapts to local culture. As it is, the study of religion necessarily intertwines with that of culture.

After Venerable Dhammananda received her novice ordination there were protests by the Thai clergy where some monks had put-up posters deriding it and channeling their opposition via the mainstream press (Barensen, 2005, 19). Venerable Dhammananda also received hate mails. Some detractors such as Thai monk scholar, Phra Dhammapitaka, favors the improvement of the education and status of *mae chiis* since for him it is impossible to establish a *bhikkhuni* order in the Theravada tradition (Ekachai, 2001). As for *mae chiis*, research show that 34 per cent of them support *bhikkhuni* ordination while 50 per cent are against and the remaining did not provide any response (Gosling, 1998, 136). In this study, those who are against cited amongst others the reason along the lines of Phra Dhammapitaka above that it is not possible to do so, the Supreme Sangha Council's rejection of it, and that one can still practice the *dhamma* or teaching without ordination. *Mae chiis* who support *bhikkhuni* ordination see men and women as equals, see ordination as assisting in the path of enlightenment or to gain acceptance in society. However, the figures are gradually increasing as there are now more than 10 Thai women who have chosen to be ordained as *bhikkhuni* since Venerable Dhammananda's ordination. The majority are based in Chiang Mai. At the same time, Venerable Poonsirivara is setting up another place of practice for *bhikkhunis* located not far from Bangkok.

While *mae chiis* and *bhikkhunis* face structural violence in Thailand, they are not a homogenous group as the depictions of them show. Poor *mae chiis* are in the majority but they are also those who come from a rich background, educated, and have a successful career before becoming *mae chiis*. *Mae chiis* at nunneries also tend to have better conditions to develop their practice. In the case studies of the Thai *bhikkhunis* from Sara and Chongdi to Voramai Kabilsingh and Venerable Dhammananda, it is obvious that they come from a well-to-do background and are able to establish their own temples. Furthermore, while the Buddhist Theravadin ecclesiastical authority does not recognize women's ordination as *bhikkhuni* in Thailand however in Sri Lanka

factions who support *bhikkhuni* ordination are able to proceed as there is no centralization of religious authority there.

In contrast to the Theravadin Buddhist tradition, the Mahayana Buddhist tradition (whether it is in Taiwan or Korea) allows for the full ordination of women as *bhikkhunis*. Hence, the prominent and supportive role that Mahayana *bhikkhunis* have played in the introduction of *bhikkhuni* ordination for Theravadin Buddhist women at the international level as discussed earlier. Not only that but *bhikkhunis* in Taiwan outnumber their male counterparts and they are generally well-educated. These *bhikkhunis* are also able to play dominant roles in the temple even in temples where they co-exist with a male monastic order as seen in the Fo Guang Shan. Nonetheless, versions of male-dominance still persist and the idea of women as being of inferior birth as well notions of menstruation as polluting exists as in the Thai context (Cheng, 2007, 15-16).

Full Ordination as Empowerment and Interconnectivity

The term empowerment became popular in the context of development work and social change in the 1990s as a catchword for activists and in United Nations documents by replacing the term participation. Evaluating this as a step forward, Terselic (2000, 1) observes that unlike participation the term empowerment means “to contribute in a way that will lead to shifts in power relations” and to transforming existing power structures. Her understanding of the term empowerment has both external and internal dimensions that are dynamic and interactive. According to Terselic (2001, 1), empowerment engages with self-transformation to changing power relationships in society and related cultural patterns. Analyzing the usage of the term empowerment, Bhawe (2001, 1) has also detailed both its internal, external and interactive aspects. She delineated the three levels of social empowerment as the personal dimension or power within, power with each other or collective power, and power in terms of certain objectives such as social change.

In writings on Buddhism and gender equality, the term empowerment has appeared in the work of Tsomo (2006) and Tomalin (2007). Tsomo (2006, 12) focused on the internal dimension in particular as she observed the subtle message being conveyed to women that somehow they are not up to par when full ordination is denied them, thus relegating them a lower standing in the religious hierarchy. Tomalin (2007, 3) sees *bhikkhuni* ordination in Thailand as empowering for women since it elevates the status of women and challenges the belief that rebirth as a female is lower than male. For Tomalin, full ordination also counter-balances institutionalized religious hierarchy in everyday public religious practice where women sit at the sides and make her offering only after men have done so.

Significantly, the field work conducted with Venerable Dhammananda at her monastery in Thailand arrives at similar conclusion of full ordination as empowering for women. Venerable Dhammananda’s ordination as a *bhikkhuni* reclaims the symbolic space for women to be considered as “fields-of-merit”. Once ordained, she changes her status and role from merit-seeker to merit-giver in Thailand. In other words,

following the *bhikkhuni* path means that one moves to a higher moral realm. This is significant in Thailand as majority of Thais are concerned with accumulating merit by observing beneficial deeds to ensure a better rebirth in the next life. Examples of such observances are making donations to support the livelihood and work of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*, the maintenance and construction of temples, listening to the dharma, as well as observing the five or eight precepts.⁵ As the female gender can also be "fields-of-merit" a mother does not have to wait for sons to be ordained to enable her rebirth in heaven. Therefore, ordination as *bhikkhuni* affirms women's self-esteem and enhances female spirituality.

With *bhikkhuni* ordination, women lead in making offerings and sit at the front as observed during the *kathina* or robe offering ceremony in 2006 where Venerable Dhammananda presides over. Scenarios of women paying respect to *bhikkhus* or monks are complemented by that of men paying respect to *bhikkhunis* signifying the irrelevance of gender or at the very least diminishing its impact in one's station in life. In addition, *bhikkhunis* can relate to laywomen in ways that monks cannot due to the prohibition of close contact between monks and women and different life experiences due to their respective gender.

At another level Venerable Dhammananda (2003, 10-11) also challenges the belief prevalent in certain section of Thai population that women soil the robes due to their menstruation by relating the story of how robes were traditionally made from rags used to cover dead bodies oozing with pus and blood and retrieved from funeral pyres. As Terwiel (2007, 3-4) has noted, among conservative sections of Thai society and where Buddhism is intertwined with magic, the yellow robe worn by monks is connected with positive magical power whereas women's menstruation and her lower garment can render the magical power obsolete. Phrased differently, women's menstruation and lower garments are equated with negative power and while it can be used strategically, it is part of a worldview that sees the female body as inferior. In the northern provinces of Thailand, women are prohibited from circumambulating the *stupa* containing sacred relics due to beliefs that their menstrual blood can disempower the relics (Kabilsingh, 1991, 32). Not only that, Thitsa (1980, 23) made the argument that the low value attributed to women's body in Buddhism propelled their entry into prostitution. By implication, *bhikkhuni* ordination and the understanding of menstruation as a natural process as proposed by Venerable Dhammananda (2003, 10) revalorizes the female body and is another example of empowerment that addresses both the internal and external dimension. In addition, Khuankaew (2002, 50-60) observes that although men in poverty can turn to monkhood for social mobility, women cannot and are instead forced to become prostitutes.

In discussing the issue of ordination, women's enhanced self-esteem relates to the inner dimension of empowerment or power within. Efforts towards changing the culture that sees the female birth as inferior compared to the male, and menstruation as pollution engage with the social or external dimension. The interactive dimension in terms of power with each other can be illustrated in the work of Sakyaditha (Daughters of the Buddha) of which Karma Lekshe Tsomo, is currently

the President. Sakyaditha's aim for gender equality is carried out through the provision of education and establishing *bhikkhuni* ordination in traditions and/or countries where it does not yet exist. This includes networking and working with both Buddhist religious and laywomen in an expression of power with each other as the founding of Sakyaditha is "as a global forum in which Buddhist women's concerns would be heard, acknowledged, and valued" (Tsomo, 2004, 5). This expression of power with each other is also reflected in the decision of the organizers of Sakyaditha conferences to hold them mainly in Asia to enable as many as possible financially disadvantaged Asian Buddhist women to attend.

What unites the diverse participants of the Sakyaditha conference according to Tsomo in an interview by Wong (2006, 5) is the "devotion to the Buddhist path" and sharing similar Buddhist values such as honesty, compassion and loving-kindness amongst other. I would also add here that the sense of interconnection with each other also stems from the general shared feelings for the issues and obstacles faced by Buddhist women in their practice and commitment to live a religious life in general and in particular the aspiration or support for ordination for Buddhist women. This can be evidenced by their attendance or/and papers written from various angles on this topic and related issues in the bi-annual Sakyaditha conferences.⁶ Although the participants come from various Buddhist traditions, there is deep respect towards each other's practices.

While the focus of this section is on the empowerment of Buddhist women through ordination, it is by no means the only way. At the very basic level, the provision of education for *mae chiis* as discussed in the earlier section can be interpreted as empowering since it enhances their status in society. Similarly, in Tibet of the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition where nuns do not yet have access to full ordination, they have received little religious education compared to monks. In Tsomo's interview by Wong (2006, 12), Tsomo noted the importance of education as empowerment for women as it relates to their ability to be self-sufficient, capable and confident of themselves and is a "powerful catalyst for long-lasting and far-reaching change".

Critique of Empowerment and its Responses

Bhave (2001, 1) has analyzed the origin of the concept of empowerment as being derived from a patriarchal discourse obsessed with power. Drawing a parallel, does the adoption of the term empowerment indicate similar obsession by women activists? For Moretti (2008, 1), the critical question as posed in the title of her article is "What Power Do We Want?". She differentiated between various kinds of power. Instead of the power of domination, she urged for the power of freedom. Instead of power based on control, egotism, individual and exploitation amongst others, she recommended the power to transform injustice that resides in an individual and collectively (Moretti 2008, 1).

Nonetheless, according to Bhave (2001, 1), the term empowerment relates to the male ego in its role of being the provider of empowerment for women. In this sense, Buddhist women using the term empowerment need to be cautious and not

fall in this ego trap of being the source of empowerment since the Buddhist practice is to let go of the ego. Similarly, the term empowerment that relates to women building their self-esteem and by association ego, contrast with the Buddhist practice mentioned above. However, the practice of letting go of the ego has been critiqued as being based on the male experience (O'Neill 1996, 28; hooks 1996, 288). In contrast, the practice suited for women are "learning to trust and acknowledge their own experience and perceptions" (O' Neill, 1996, 28) as they are "trying to get an ego" (Hooks, 1996, 288 and 290). I asked a female Buddhist leader in a center in the United States if it is true that women do not have an ego (personal communication, in July 2003). Her response was "no" but that their sense of ego is entirely different from men, for example, based on being sacrificial and serving others. In other words, it is not that women do not have self-esteem but its basis is different. This means that it is still relevant for women to practice letting go of the ego. Taking the argument further, the diversity of women means there are various basis for women's sense of ego and it is not necessarily defined in terms of being sacrificial or serving others as there are women who are obsessed with power as well.

At the broader level, detractors of full ordination for women as *bhikkhuni* criticized such movements as being concerned with seeking status and causing schism in the monastic order. Venerable Dhammananda responded by asking why the issue of status seeking does not arise when men ordained as *bhikkhu*. Instead of understanding Buddhist women's movement for full ordination as causing conflict and schism, it is perhaps more useful to look at it as compassionate action. Following the suggestion by Sivaraksa (2005, 138), another option is to understand this movement as a practical example of the application of the broadening of the third precept of abstaining from sexual misconduct to include other misconduct against women such as discrimination to address contemporary issues and concerns.

Conclusions

While scholars have pointed to the existence of equality for women in Buddhist texts, this is not necessarily the case in practice. Women who aspire to be *bhikkhunis* have been accused of being obsessed with status while men who do so are highly praised and looked upon. Despite the resistances women faced to be *bhikkhunis* in Theravada Buddhist Thailand, the number of *bhikkhunis* and centers supporting their practice have gradually been growing over the last few years. Their persistence to reclaim *bhikkhuni* ordination stems from the Buddha's legacy of setting up a female monastic order. The Buddha's wisdom is reflected in the contemporary context as well. *Bhikkhuni* ordination is empowering for women morally, spiritually and socially; it strengthens women's inner selves, elevates their status in society, and promotes social and cultural change that recognizes women as equals in the spiritual and religious domain.

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Notes

- ¹ The paper prefers to use the term religious women instead of nuns. As Venerable Dhammananda (2003, 6) points out, the term nun signifies a much lower status in comparison to priest whilst the term *bhikkhu* (monks) occupies a more or less similar position to that of *bhikkhuni* ('female monk').
- ² For examples of structural violence committed against religious women in Thailand see Dhammananda, *The Structural Violence Against Women* (Thailand: Songdhammakalyani Temple, 2005).
- ³ For more details on the legal and educational initiatives by *mae chii* Khunying Kanitha to improve the status and lives of *mae chiis* as well as critic of her legal initiative see, Alycia Nicholas, "The Work of Mae Chi Khunying Kanitha Wichiencharoen", in *A Collation of Articles on Thai Women and Buddhism*, edited by Virada Somswasdi and Alycia Nicholas (Chiang Mai, Foundation for Women, Law and Development and Women's Studies Center, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 2002).
- ⁴ The five precepts are recommendations for ethical conduct and include abstaining from harming living beings, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, false speech, and consuming intoxicating drinks as well as drugs. The eight precepts comprise all the five precepts mentioned except for the third precept which changes to abstaining from all sexual activity. The other three additional precepts are firstly, abstaining from untimely meals (or solid food after noon); secondly from entertainment such as dancing, singing, and music as well as personal adornment such as wearing garlands, cosmetics, jewellery, and perfume; and finally from high or luxurious beds.
- ⁵ Some examples of the books published from the Sakyaditha conferences are Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Out of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2006); Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices Across Generations* (Taipeh: Yuan Chuan Press, 2004); and Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Sakyaditha: Daughters Of The Buddha* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1988).