

AWAKENING THAI NUNS: WISDOM AND SUCCESSES

Mae Chee Amphai Tansomboon
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University

1. Introduction

The purpose of Buddhism is not to rise to a high status in worldly human society; but to develop one's own virtues, to purify one's heart and mind and to awaken through or by practicing *sīla*, *samathi* and *paññā*. The objectives are: first to purify oneself, to gain wisdom, and then to help others escape suffering. Initially, Lord Buddha taught all His disciples – men, women, monks and novices – the same basic concepts: the same Four Noble Truths, the same Five Precepts, the same Three Trainings and the same Eightfold Path. He summarized these in the *Ovatta Patimokkha* as: “Avoid evil, do good, and purify your heart and mind.”

"*Sabba papassa akaranam,
Kusalassupasampada,
Sachitta pariyodapanam,
Etam Buddhanasasanam.*"

Avoid all evil,
Cultivate the good,
And purify your heart.
This is the teaching of the Buddhas

Avoiding evil means following the Five Precepts: avoiding killing, stealing, adultery, lying, and intoxicants. Cultivating the good means: practicing *dana* or generosity; *sīla* or morality; and *bhavana* or meditation. Meditation is the key to purifying the heart and mind, developing spiritual values and living happily by discarding defilements (*kilesa*) and developing wisdom.

Only after attracting a large group of disciples, did Lord Buddha begin to distinguish distinct rules with different precepts for various groups for living harmoniously in their diverse positions and circumstances. Lord Buddha replied to Venerable Ananda that women could attain enlightenment just like men if they practice well. Now, however, we find five precepts for lay people, eight precepts for nuns, ten for novices, 227 for bhikkhus and 331 precepts for bhikkhunis. It sounds simple, but it is difficult to maintain virtue rigorously in accordance with such rules.

More broadly, Lord Buddha also directs people to follow the Eightfold Path in order to live happily. One should always think, act and speak correctly. This is easy to say, but hard to maintain in practice. One must overcome the hindrances. The key underlying objectives are first to purify yourself, developing spiritual value to be a good person and to gain wisdom and awaken, then extending your help to others. Spiritual values are crucial. If one can maintain pure spiritual values, and awaken through wisdom acquired, one will live contentedly. This is one's first duty to oneself. Afterwards, one can extend help to others.

Worldly values stress getting ahead, being superior and winning based on personal desires. In contrast, the supra-mundane values of Noble Disciples emphasize resolution, modesty, humility and consideration. The Buddhist path is: training yourself to know yourself, purifying yourself, and making yourself into a refuge unto yourself.

Teaching about pride (*mana*), Lord Buddha proclaims that any comparison of yourself to others – even considering yourself inferior – is “pride.” One's proper duty is only to focus on one's own self improvement. Let others worry about their own self

improvement. Any comparison with others only causes defilement and suffering. Accordingly, **Mae Chees** should:

- Awaken without feeling sensitive about any problems they have encountered.
- Develop their own virtue, applying wisdom to each social situation to act appropriately.
- Be wise in Dhamma and able to transfer their knowledge to others appropriately.
- Accept their status and role as their *lokadhamma*, not searching for higher *lokadhamma*.
- Just perform their duties well, knowing that the uniform is not important.
- Measure themselves by their own standard; a personal WOW! means adequate virtue.

In this paper, I, as a Thai *Mae Chee*, will argue that there are myriad opportunities in Thailand for *Mae Chees* to gain wisdom and awaken and to progress directly along the Buddhist path, working for their own salvation and helping others without becoming embroiled in political struggles for higher status as *Bhikkhunis*. I will proffer numerous examples to demonstrate that many *Mae Chees* have succeeded in developing themselves, contributing significantly and strengthening Buddhism while maintaining the contentment, modesty and humility expected of a devout Buddhist.

2. Mae Chee Nuns

A *Mae Chee* is a laywoman who decides to spend her life as a renunciant. She enters a monastery and is ordained by a *bhikkhu* making the commitment to observe eight precepts. The term *chee* derives from *tha chee* meaning a woman who wears white. A *Mae Chee* leaves lay life behind and has little concern for society outside the monastery. She wears white, shaves her hair, eats two meals a day and chants daily in the temple like the monks. *Mae Chees* take the Triple Gem as refuge, learn Dhamma, practice meditation to purify their minds and cultivate merit to reach *Nibbana*. About half of *Mae Chees* are over 50 years old. They ordain to develop spiritually, seek deliverance and attain enlightenment and generally search for inner peace and tranquility in a gentle, humble way, contented with their simple lives, chanting, meditating and strictly observing eight precepts.

In Buddha's time, *Mae Chees* were counted as pious *upasikas* or lay-women rather than clerics. This is also the current perspective of Thai Buddhist law. Although *Mae Chees* shave their heads, wear white robes and live a monastic life, they are not legally considered ordained by the Department of Religious Affairs. An abbot is responsible for *Mae Chees* only in that they reside in his temple. Absence of legal status results in denial of certain benefits enjoyed by monks, such as reduced fares on public transportation. Yet *Mae Chees* are also denied the right to vote in Thailand as official members of the Sangha, because they are supposed to have rejected worldly concerns.

Mae Chees have existed in Thailand throughout recorded history. Evidence from two marble tablets engraved in an ancient language indicates that *Mae Chees* existed in Thailand in BE 264 (279 BC) when Sona Thera and Punamuni Thera came as missionaries to Suvanabhumi. The chronicles of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya contain many references to *Mae Chees*. There are similar women in many other Buddhist cultures today. In Sri Lanka, *dasa-silamata* or "ten-precept mothers" wear yellow robes. Burmese nuns called *silashin* or "Possessors of Morality" wear a long-sleeved pink blouse with brown robes, and take eight precepts. In Nepal, nuns who observe ten precepts are called *Anagarika* or "Homeless."

In conclusion, Thai *Mae Chees* generally live in peace, focusing on learning Dhamma and practicing meditation to their maximum capacity, purifying defilements and

cultivating the four noble paths. With determination and the protection of the Triple Gem, they endure obstacles arising from their ambiguous status or lack of prestige rather than getting involved in political conflicts. They just respectfully continue their constructive contributions to Buddhism and society. Eventually their devotion will be recognized, but this is not their major concern. Protests, demonstrations and complaints are contrary to the peaceful life of a *Mae Chee*.

3. Wisdom

Thai *Mae Chees* have essentially the same opportunities for personal development as monks. Individual progress is primarily a private matter more dependent on internal factors such as resolve and diligence than on social support. In addition, *Mae Chees* actually have more opportunity for helping others because they are subject to fewer restrictions.

As far as social support is concerned, many Thai temples accept *Mae Chees*. In addition, there are numerous Dhamma Practice Centers throughout Thailand specifically for *Mae Chees*. Lavish funding is not necessary or even generally conducive to inner spiritual progress. Many good meditation masters -- both Bhikkhus and *Mae Chees* -- are available as teachers for *Mae Chees* throughout Thailand.

Mae Chees have the same opportunity as monks to study scripture and take national examinations in both Dhamma and Pāli. My colleague here has already attained the highest Pāli 9 level. *Mae Chees* can also study in Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya and Mahamakuta Universities for BA, MA and PhD degrees - just like monks.

In addition, *Mae Chees* have myriad opportunities for social service which are not generally available to monks; for example: they can help orphans, AIDs victims, and addicts.

Finally, like monks, *Mae Chees* can give the greatest gift of all: spreading Dhamma. As I will illustrate, numerous *Mae Chees* have contributed substantially to the spreading, strengthening and long life of Buddhism as talented meditation masters and authors. As *Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta* has concluded: "There is a great deal that women can do in our existing roles."

4. Successes

Many Thai *Mae Chees* have worked very hard and very successfully for their own benefit as well as for the benefit of Buddhism, Thai society and our small planet -- extending their help to those caught up and suffering in today's hectic, competitive world of high-tech consumerism. Some have had widespread effects as meditation masters or authors. Others have often played an important role behind the scenes, inspiring and guiding others to transcendent levels of peace and happiness. Teaching people to take the Triple Gem as their refuge rather than trusting in magic or holy water and to resolve issues skillfully and nonviolently, using Buddhist concepts. I will only present a few examples from my personal knowledge to illustrate my point.

4.1 Mae Chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong

Perhaps the most extraordinary success story is *Mae Chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong*, trained by Phra Mongkolthepmuni, who was one of the best *Mae Chee* meditation masters and the recognized founder of Wat Phradhammakaya.

While studying at Wat Paknam, she was initially eager to learn Dhammakaya

meditation to discover where her father had taken rebirth. She diligently devoted her time to practicing meditation and attained advanced-level Dhamma. *Mae Chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong* did not have to study in Dhamma classes or work in the kitchen. Instead, Phra Mongkolthepmuni often taught her Dhamma through meditation and by asking her questions. She was assigned to help Thailand and Thai society through meditation.

After Phra Mongkolthepmuni passed away, *Mae chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong* taught Dhammakaya meditation at her residence in Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen. She devoted her time teaching people to be good Buddhists, practicing *dana*, *sila* and *bhavana*. She trained her disciples to perform good *kamma* and to practice the perfections (*parami*), including giving (*dana*), ethical conduct (*sila*), and meditation (*samadhi*).

In 1970, *Mae Chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong* gathered a pioneer group of her disciples to establish a meditation center known as Wat Phra Dhammakaya. She was the de facto founder of this temple, appointing her leading disciple Phraraj Bhavanavisudhi (Venerable Dhammajayo) as the abbot. She envisioned a temple with a clean, peaceful atmosphere suitable for meditation practice, where individuals could become really virtuous human beings.

Wat Phra Dhammakaya has become a very large, well-known temple using modern technology to spread the Dhamma. More than a thousand people gather there for meditation practice every Sunday and on special religious days. The temple has spread Dhamma all over Thailand and abroad. At present, there is a very popular Dhamma TV program called “Dao Dhamma” on Wat Phra Dhammakaya’s DMC Channel. People can tune into this program and listen to Dhamma talks. This is a good way to teach people about the law of *kamma* to become aware of the results of their actions.

Without any formal position or social support, *Mae Chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong* established the largest temple in Thailand which still continues to successfully spread Buddhism worldwide. She did this all through the inner power of her high-level meditation. This is an extremely impressive example of the incredible opportunities available to *Mae Chees* without formal recognition as *Bhikkhunis*.

4.2 Mae Chee Wanjai Chukorn

Mae Chee Wanjai Chukorn is another meditation master trained by Phra Mongkolthepmuni. She became a *Mae Chee* when she was young. *Mae Chee Wanjai* studied Dhamma up to the third level while also practicing meditation. Phra Mongkolthepmuni trained her as his assistant (“a conqueror of evil”) in advanced meditation. He sent her out to many different places to teach Dhamma. In 1983 (BE 2526) after Phra Mongkolthepmuni had passed away, *Mae Chee Wanchai* established the Suan Kaew meditation practice center for *Mae Chees* [*Samnak Patipatti Dhamma Suan Kaew*] at Jombueng in Ratchaburi Province.

Her objectives were to provide education opportunities and meditation practice for women and children. The center’s most important activity is a spiritual development session called “Renunciation Practice” [*Nekkhamma Patipatti*] which is organized on important religious occasions all year round. She also gives personal consultations to help release women from suffering and established a foundation to use the interest earned for charitable work promoting Buddhism, aid for communities, and support for young students who are good in studies but lack the money to continue in school.

Another successful project is the Buddhist Sunday School established to promote ethics and moral education among the youth, teaching young people to be good children and good citizens with good behavior, moral conduct, and virtue. She teaches them to keep Buddhism in their hearts as their refuge. The most important virtues are honesty,

gratitude and devotion.⁹ Thousands of students apply here to take the Dhamma examinations each year.

Mae Chee Wanjai Chukorn has received the Dhammachakka Pillar Award in recognition of her contributions to Thai society. She humbly accepted this award, but does not work for such personal honors. She is content with benefitting society and is happy to do her duty, following the Buddha's path.

4.3 Ajahn Tritha Niemkham

Ajarn Tritha Niemkham is President of the Phra Mongkolthepmuni Wat Paknam Alumini Association. She actively supports all Wat Paknam activities and communities. She became a *Mae Chee* when she was young and devoted her time to studying Dhamma up to level three and practicing meditation up to advanced levels. She had to study very hard at night, studying Dhamma and meditation simultaneously. She later gave up being a *Mae Chee* because of health problems, but remained an active supporter of Wat Paknam in all kinds of charity work for the benefit of the community.

While Phra Mongkolthepmuni was alive, she served in many capacities at Wat Paknam, creating programs that have continued up to the present. She served as a member of the Board of the Luang Phor Wat Paknam Foundation from its inception in 1981 (BE 2524) and became Chairperson of the Phra Mongkolthepmuni Wat Paknam Alumni Association in 1989 (BE 2532). Her main activity is to helping people with various problems – illness, business, family problems, and charity needs. She also raises funds for needy students and supports many Buddhist activities both in Thailand and abroad.

Ajarn Tritha spreads Dhammakaya meditation, promotes Dhamma unity, and conducts merit-making activities which do not involve politics. The association has organized many activities fostering unity and cooperation among disciples. The association both conducts merit-making activities at Wat Paknam and also extends help to other temples in Thailand and abroad. She is instrumental in helping people develop faith and encourages *Kathina* and other contributions.

Ajarn Tritha was behind the most important construction project at Wat Paknam: a marble Tipitaka engraved with the Pali scriptures that was built at Buddhamonthon from 1989-1998 (BE 2532-2541). There were in the total of 1,418 pieces (or 709 pairs) of marble slabs engraved with the Tipitaka. Each was 1.1 meters in width and 2 meters in height. The Phramaha Vihara was built with concrete and iron in Thai architectural style as a place to exhibit the marble Tipitaka.

She also originated the idea of planting trees in Buddhamonthon National Park. Buddhamonthon presently serves as a Buddhist Conference Center where Buddhists from all over the world come to join hands for world peace and extend the life of Buddhist teachings. Ajarn Tritha Niemsham always offers food to all the monks who come to Buddhamonthon for such activities. Ajarn Tritha Niemkham exemplifies the myriad opportunities open, even after a *Mae Chee* disrobes.

4.4 Mae Chees Yanee, Rampha, Ananda & Yupa

Mae Chee Yanee was one of the first *Mae Chees* to achieve high attainment in meditation. In 1969, she was a pioneer in setting up the Thai Nuns' Institute and was the first to hold the position of President. She organized a meeting of nuns from all over Thailand to develop unity and adopt standard regulations. Three years later, the Thai Nuns' Institute Foundation was established to support education for women and children.

There were also many other activities. *Mae Chee* Rampha, who was also an advanced meditator, became the second President.

Mae Chees Yanee, Rampha Buakamchay & Ananda have taken the lead in establishing and developing the Thai Nuns' Institute. *Mae Chee* Yanee founded the institute; *Mae Chee* Rampha has carried on her work as current President; and *Mae Chee* Ananda is seeking a permanent establishment in Bangkok. *Mae Chee* Ananda also actively helps people resolve various life problems they encounter. She was recently elected to lead *Mae Chees* in Thonburi and is in charge of building a Headquarters for the Thai Nuns' Institute in Thonburi called "*Ratanaprasart*." Together they demonstrate the opportunities for developing amenities for women without political struggles.

4.5 Mae Chees Yupin, Srisalab & Amphai

Mae Chees Yupin and Srisalab illustrate the opportunities for Mae Chees in Education. *Mae Chee* Yupin graduated with a M.A. degree from Mahidol University; and *Mae Chee* Srisalab graduated with a M.A. degree from Puna University in India. Both are now working at Mahapajapati Buddhist College in Nakornrajsima Province. I also fit into this category, having earned a BA degree in the United States and an MA degree from MCU's International Master of Arts Degree Program (IMAP) where I now serve as secretary and also teach international program. Other *Mae Chees* are currently pursuing MA degrees at Thammasat and Mahamakut Universities.

4.6 Mae Chee Duangporn

Mae Chee Duangporn deserves our admiration as the first of Wat Paknam, but just the second *Mae Chee* in Thailand to obtain grade 9 in Pāli, the highest level of achievement possible. She now teaches at Mahapajapati Buddhist College.

4.7 Other Mae Chees: Thunyanee, Jintana, Thongsuk, Thanom, Chaluey, Thaveeporn, Brahma, Etc.

Mae Chee Thunyanee Sutket is the Head *Mae Chee* at Wat Paknam. She supervises all the *Mae Chees* and serves as the chief cook in charge of meal preparation for monks and novices. Khun Jintana Osodh taught Dhamma in the community first as a *Mae Chee* and later as a laywoman. She came to Wat Paknam when she was very young and diligently worked in the kitchen and practiced meditation until Phra Mongkolthepmuni appointed her to be a Dhamma and meditation teacher. She now owns a herbal medicine shop and still teaches Dhamma to people in need. *Mae Chee* Thongsuk was good at teaching Dhamma. *Mae Chees* Thanom, Chaluey, Thaveeporn, Brahma, and many more have all contributed their best with humility and contentment in their hearts and no thought of seeking personal honor or status through political struggles.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is not necessary for *Mae Chees* to engage in political struggles for social equality. There are many existing opportunities to gain wisdom and awaken, and to progress along Lord Buddha's Noble Path - and many examples of successes have been shown, in doing so. We should diligently focus on making merit for our own salvation and then on helping others.

Thank you very much.

Bibliography

Chatsumarn Kabilasingh. **Thai Women in Buddhism**. “Mae Jis”. USA: Parallax Press, Berkeley, Ca, 1991.

Dhammakaya Foundation. **World Peace through Inner Peace**. Bangkok: Dokbia Publishing, BE 2542.

Interview with Ajahn Mae Chee Wanjai Chukorn. The Meditation Master of Suan Kaew Dhamma Practice Center. January 12, 2005.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, edited. **Buddhist Women in a Global Multicultural Community**. “Buddhist Women at Wat Paknam Temple in Bangkok”, by Mae Chee Amphai Tansomboon”. Malaysia: Sukhi Hotu Dhamma Publications, 2008.

Niemkham, Ajarn Tritha. **Twice-told Stories about Luang Phor and Wat Paknam**. Bangkok: Charoen Phol Books. 1984.

Phra Rajakavee. “Mae Chee and the Continuation of Buddhism.” **Journal of Thai Buddhist Nuns**. May-August, BE 2546.

Sujitra Phoolpipat. “The Role of Wat Phra Dhammakaya in the Present Society”, **MA.Thesis**. Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, Kerg University, BE 2539.

