

Carving Out a Reflective Space for Posterity: the Case of Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera and the Indomitable Spirit of Buddhist Leadership

*Asst. Prof. Dr. Dipti Mahanta
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University*

*“Truly, wisdom springs from meditation;
without meditation, wisdom wanes;
having known these two paths
of progress and decline,
let one conduct oneself
so that wisdom may increase.”*

- Dhammapada, Verse 282

Introduction

The framework of Buddhist leadership ideally unites the individual spiritual quest and the ideological commitment of leading this quest to forge social benefits. Buddhist leadership is thus operative not on a unidimensional level alone, but rather manifests itself on multidimensional planes along the trajectory of a self-oriented ‘gesture’ of spiritual search and a socially-committed ideological stance. Within this individual-social nexus the realization of such truths as the *tilakkhaṇa* through the practice of Vipassanā meditation and the development of a mindset bestowed by the sublime qualities of *mettā*, *karunā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā* function in tandem. Besides, strict conformity to Vinaya is the hallmark of Buddhist leadership that is clearly reflected in the life and ideological standpoint of Venerable Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera¹, a well-known Thai monk who genuinely tried to strengthen the Thai Sangha’s administrative role by creatively fusing the two monastic tasks namely, the task of learning or *Gantha-dhura* and the task of meditation practice or *Vipassanā-dhura*.

¹ Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera was also known as Phrapimolatham and Phra Buddhajarn. The title of Phrapimolatham was conferred upon him in 1949 (BE 2492) and much later in 1988 (BE 2531) he was promoted to the rank of Somdet Phra Buddhajarn. In 1957 the Burmese government bestowed upon him the title of Aggamahāpandita for his leadership of the contingent of the Thai Buddhist Sangha which participated in the Chatthasangāyanā Assembly in Rangoon. For more biographical details including his numerous ecclesiastical ranks and positions see *Āsabhanusorn* [Commemoration Volume printed on the occasion of Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera’s twenty-first death anniversary]. Khonkaen: Pimolatham Institute, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khonkaen Campus, 2010 (BE 2553).

Venerable Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera was born on 8 November 1903 (BE 2446) in Ban Ton village in the northeastern province of Khonkaen. His father, Phim Duangmala and his mother, Jae Duangmala were subsistence farmers. From his humble beginnings as a village boy from the northeast who entered the monastic life as a novice at the age of fourteen, Somdet Āj rose to prominence quite early in his life upon initially holding the abbotship of many well known temples in Ayutthaya province and later the abbotship of Wat Mahāthat, a temple under royal patronage in Bangkok. As a young novice at Wat Srijan in Banton sub-district he embarked on his first ecclesiastical studies from palm-leaf dhamma manuscripts. Although his early education was in Isan Dhamma Script and Thai Noi language, he mastered central Thai through a year-long training that soon secured him a job as a teacher at the age of sixteen. Three years later, however, he resigned from his teaching position and headed to Bangkok with the decision to further his ecclesiastical studies. In Bangkok, he was rather fortunate to reside at Wat Mahāthat under the tutelage of many senior and learned monks who were recognized both for their scholarship and steadiness in the Vinaya or disciplinary practice. It was at this time his childhood name Khamta was replaced by a senior monk with ‘Āj’ meaning boldness that well matched with his courageous and determined character. Bearing this new name he went forth for his higher ordination on 18 June 1923 at the age of twenty. As he forged ahead and engrossed himself with his dhamma studies, he successfully completed the VIII grade of the Pāli ecclesiastical examination and all the three levels of the Dhamma examination and gradually began to display great skills in five major areas – ecclesiastical education, Abhidhamma study, ecclesiastical administration, dhamma propagation and dissemination of Vipassanā or Insight meditation.² Early in 1951 (BE 2494), he started his ambitious project of a nation-wide revival of Insight meditation which later spread to the neighbouring countries of Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia as well as to distant countries in Europe and the US. Actively playing the role of Thailand’s first monastic ambassador to the West, he made extensive contacts with political and religious leaders and was invited by the MRA to join religious tours around the world in 1958-1959 to spread the teachings of the Buddha³.

As his various projects met with success one after the other and he climbed the ecclesiastical ladder with sheer diligence and hard work by first serving as the deputy ecclesiastical governor of Ayutthaya province in 1933 (BE 2476) and then as the abbot of Wat Mahāthat and an ecclesiastical administrative minister in 1948 (BE 2491), he found himself in a difficult context for his reformist ideas in the 1960s as dictatorial rule came to grip Thailand’s political scenario with Army General Sarit taking hold of premiership. Prime Minister Sarit’s dictatorial regime was met with tough resistance from different quarters of

² His greatest contribution to Abhidhamma study was his authoritative translation of the *Visuddhimagga* from the original Pāli into Thai. For his contributions to dhamma propagation in foreign countries see *Sasanakij Nai Tang Prathet* [Ecclesiastical Duties Abroad], Bangkok: Wat Mahāthat Publication, 1983 (BE 2526), and for dissemination of Vipassanā meditation see *Somdet Phra Buddhajarn Kab Vipassanā Thura* (Commemoration Volume) compiled by the National Board of Vipassanā. Bangkok, 1990 (BE 2533).

³ The US based Moral Re-Armament (MRA) Group which was active in the 1950s and 60s in developing interfaith dialogues among religious leaders and general public upheld four guiding principles – absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love which Somdet Āj compared to the four virtues of truthfulness (*sacca*), self-control (*dama*), forbearance (*khanti*) and generosity (*cāga*).

the country and a rising communist insurgency in the impoverished and underdeveloped Northeast (also known as Isan) destabilized the government's policy of ruthless subjugation and the attempt at defining 'nationhood' against the backdrop of coercive social conformity, political docility and superimposed cultural homogeneity – an attempt that was and is diametrically opposed to the much desired acceptance and celebration of 'differences' within a nation marked by ethnic and linguistic diversities. It was during this conflictual era that Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera became a direct victim of racial discrimination, suspicion, false allegation and groupism within the top brass of the hierarchical Sangha vying for power and positions⁴.

As the ecclesiastical administrative minister, one of the first demands from the government side that was directed towards him was the formulation of the Sangha Code prohibiting lay communists from entering the monastic life. To his rational way of thinking and precise judgment, this demand not only seemed absurd but also harmful for the propagation of Buddhism in the long run. Upon reflection he realized that unless and until the government itself identified communists among the general populace it would not be feasible for the Sangha to formulate the monastic stipulation, since no monastic had the tool and means to selectively identify communists among the lay followers so as to refuse higher ordination and given the political dimension of the matter, the act itself fell outside the domain of monastic spiritualism. He thus argued that the doors of Buddhism ought to remain open for higher ordination to any layman who had faith and the desire to enter the monastic life. In his view had the Sangha declared denial of higher ordination based on the allegation of allegiance to the communist ideology, that would have proved detrimental not only to the abiding faith of the laity on the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha but would also have negatively affected the healthy and reciprocal relationship between the monks and the lay community. Nevertheless, some senior most Sangha members who hesitated to take the matter directly into their own hands unanimously decided to place it squarely on Somdet Āj and demanded that it was his responsibility to formulate the monastic code in order to comply with the government's demand. The venerable Somdet's refusal to do so was later interpreted as his lack of respect for the elders and the discipline (Vinaya) as a whole and the rumor spread that he was himself a communist⁵.

Allegation after allegation heaped up and he was eventually defrocked and put behind the bars without any valid proof of alleged compliance with the communists. In this swift turn of events what was apparent was the unpleasant truth that most high ranking Sangha members stepped back from the scene and their deliberate silence and lack of willingness to stand united to give moral support to Somdet Āj displayed their indifference to his persistent effort at strengthening the role of the Sangha in reviving and revitalizing the trend of Vipassanā meditation practice. While the present writer is more interested in what followed within the confined and restricted shelter of the prison walls, the venerable Somdet's

⁴ For more details see the interview of Phrapimolatham with Stephen Carr "An ambassador of Buddhism to the West" in *Sasanakij Nai Tang Prathet* [Ecclesiastical Duties Abroad], Bangkok: Wat Mahāthāt Publication, 1983 (BE 2526).

⁵ See chronological details of all the legal suits against Somdet Āj in Phromrin, Thong-in. *Kan Sueksa Santivithi Khong Phrapimolatham (Āj Āsabhamahāthera)* [A study of the peaceful means of Phrapimolatham (Āj Āsabhamahāthera)], unpublished master's dissertation in Thai, Bangkok: Mahachula Graduate School, 2008 (BE 2551).

predicament remains a glaring example of victimization of innocent people on the ground of racial discrimination and ideological difference which when looked from the Levinasian perspective is symbolic of violence to the ‘other’. Levinas’ reflection on ethics and the other are particularly relevant to us for a better understanding of the other. In Levinas’ perspective the central violence to the other is the denial of/to the other his/her own autonomy. He calls this violence “totalization” and it occurs whenever one limits the other to a set of rational categories, be they racial, sexual, or otherwise. Indeed, it occurs whenever one already knows (however partially/pretentiously) what the other is about before the other has ‘spoken’, that is, it is the inscription of the other in the same.⁶

Imprisonment and the practice of Vipassanā meditation

Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera was imprisoned from 1962-1966 (BE 2505-2509) at the Santipal jail of the Central Bureau of Investigation in Pathumwan. In an attempt to humiliate him the police officer-in-charge snatched and tore off his robes and compelled him to disrobe. As a Buddhist country, Thailand’s penal codes dictate that no prisoner-monk is permitted to wear the robes once he is incarcerated. The wearing of the yellow robe that symbolically stands for purity and spiritual leadership goes back to the Buddha himself. As a mendicant renunciant the Buddha’s only apparel was the yellow robe and the same dress code that was made a part of the monastic disciplinary code (Vinaya) was uniformly adhered to by all his ordained disciples. The historicity of the fact bears great significance to all Buddhists and so in Thailand any monk when sentenced to imprisonment is disallowed to continue to wear the robe. A monastic behind the bars would be a disgrace to the nation and so the first attempt of the legal power holders was to delimit access to Somdet Āj to the ‘sign’ of monasticism – the ‘Robes’. But Somdet Āj’s forcible disrobing was only symbolic of physical humiliation to him and in the absence of any formal rite of leaving the Order, he claimed that no real disrobing ever took place. When his righteous claim to the yellow robe was violated through political and legal intervention, he had but little choice and so he wore an off white dress (a pair of pajamas and a shirt) similar to the ones worn by lay devotees during a meditation retreat.

At this crucial moment in his life, when interventionist politics through legal and retributive measures restricted and curtailed all his monastic duties the impact was stupendous externally, but not at the personal level. The dress had changed, but not the mind and he continued to abide by his previous monastic codes – having only one forenoon meal a day, observing the precepts, practicing Vipassanā meditation, paying homage to the Buddha and chanting regularly⁷. Practicing Vipassanā meditation daily became the central activity for him inside the prison walls. The trajectory of his earlier effort at a nation-wide revival of Vipassanā meditation had come to take yet another significant turn and finally reached even the smallest space available in the prison cell – the dark niche turning into an illumined

⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1969.

⁷ See the prison notes *Phajonman – Bantheuk Chiwit Haa Pii Nai Hong Khang* [Struggling Against Evil – Record of Five Years in Jail]. Bangkok: The Central Office of Vipassanā Meditation, 1987 (BE 2530).

meditation zone! What could be the biggest irony to the legal forces' ignobility and disregard of a senior ecclesiastical leader who until then had been ordained for more than forty years?⁸

Looking at Somdet Āj to understand the Thai female monastics' situation

Almost half a century later, today the silent role that Somdet Āj played inside the prison cell comes alive to us once again as a very powerful gesture of commitment to the ideals of spiritual leadership. A critical reflection on his quiet resistance brings to light that aspect of moral integrity and *dhammic* determination by the sheer power of which he forged ahead of the artificial creation of nationhood by brutal forces that bred on racial discrimination, injustice and victimization of the 'other'. Thai female monastics who are in the process of re-defining their roles as active members of the Sangha, be it the white-clad *maechees* (nuns who observe eight precepts) or the 'radical' saffron-robed *sāmanerīs* and *bhikkhunīs*, have much to ruminate on from the inspiring example of Somdet Āj.

Taking a close look at the predicament of Somdet Āj we see many points of convergence in the situation of female monastics in present day Thai society. Just as Somdet Āj was a victim of racial discrimination, the female monastics to a great extent are victims too, not necessarily of racism but gender discrimination, especially when their 'low' socio-religious status is considered from a strictly feminist perspective. Again, the denial of access to Somdet Āj's righteous claim to the yellow robe and his imprisonment bear symbolic and metaphorical resemblance to the denial of *bhikkhunī* ordination (*upasampadā*) to aspiring Thai female monastics.⁹ If Somdet Āj's imprisonment was conditioned on political grounds, the sinuous grip of cultural and monastic codes have 'imprisoned' and will continue to imprison the female monastics to a time difficult to estimate, since a lot of ground work and unified struggle is needed on various fronts – academic, political, legal, socio-cultural and above all spiritual. I regard this moment as a moment of crisis for female monastics. But just as every cloud has a silver lining, there is a positive side to this crisis, provided one is ready to 'let go' the feminist approach and look at the matter from a more spiritual perspective which to my belief is neither easy nor unworthy as some radical feminists might think.

Higher ordination is denied to women by the Thai Theravāda *Bhikkhu* Sangha on the ground that it would lead to the violation of the monastic code that states clearly that *bhikkhunī* ordination requires dual approval, each from the *Bhikkhu* Sangha and the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha and since the Theravāda *Bhikkhunī* Sangha lineage had been defunct for centuries, the revival of the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha based on single approval of the *Bhikkhu* Sangha directly leads to the violation of a code distinctly laid down by the Buddha himself¹⁰.

⁸ As more and more inmates joined him in the practice of Vipassanā meditation and morning and evening chanting, Somdet Āj named (re-christened) the prison cell as Santipalaram. Santipal was the original name of the jail to which he added the word Aram meaning temple or monastery to signify the activities he was involved in. For a reflective analysis of the event see Sathiepong Wonapong's article "Somdet Phra Buddhajarn: Āj Phuongāj" in *Somdet Phra Buddhajarn Āj Āsabhamahāthera Ramluak Nuengroi Pii* [Commemoration Volume marking the centennial celebration of his birthday anniversary]. Khonkaen: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khonkaen Campus, 2003 (BE 2546), pp.15-24.

⁹ Somdet Āj's forcible disrobing reminds us of the dire predicament of two sisters, Sara and Chongdi, who were the first Thai women to be ordained as novices in 1928. While both of them were coerced to disrobe by legal authorities, Sara being the older was imprisoned for the unprecedented act of donning the yellow robes.

¹⁰ "Where women stand by" an interview of Phra Dhammapitaka (PA Payutto) by Sanitsuda Ekachai, Bangkok Post, Thailand September 22, 2001.

Now the monastics who express this kind of Vinaya-related objection are not inventing the code on their own and the truth is that they are simply not prepared to modify the code since any such modification means tempering with the Vinaya. At the same time, monastics from the progressive camp (mostly western monks and nuns who are at a very privileged situation of having no existing Sangha of their own to control and dictate them directly) tend to consider the former group as conservative (some would even go to the extent of using the word fundamentalist) attaching perhaps all the negative connotations to the term. While logically both the traditionalists and the progressives are right in the contexts of the framework of their argumentation for or against the matter, it is rather difficult to make both the parties see eye to eye. It is as if there is already a schism within the Theravāda Bhikkhu Sangha over the issue of women's higher ordination. Only time will prove how deep the schism goes and to what extent it negatively affects the integrity and unity of the Theravāda tradition as a whole.

Given the schismatic and tension-ridden side of the matter the most pragmatic step for a Thai female monastic would be to intellectually distance herself from both the traditionalists and the so-called progressives and tread her own Middle Path by establishing her mind on the practice of Vipassanā meditation. The results of Vipassanā meditation practice transcend gender, racial and linguistic barriers. So for the white-clad *maechees*, full-time dedication to Vipassanā will bring dignity to their otherwise low profile and greater recognition from society in the long run and for the yellow-clad *sāmanerīs* and *bhikkhunīs*, it will enable them to see their own dilemmic situation as it-is-in-itself, letting go both animosity (towards the opposing camp) and jubilation (towards the supportive side). The present transitional phase in Thai monastic history is the best time for female monastics (in whatever form or apparel they appear) to prove their potentiality as Vipassanā masters. Why not take up the challenge and regard the denial of higher ordination as a *catalyst* to the realization of the state of egolessness? This is the surest way to merge the great hiatus created by history (or his-story?) leading to a new way of serving oneself, one's community and Buddhism with a non-confrontational, non-assertive, non-demanding, yet powerfully motivated resistance that would add a new dimension to the concept of Buddhist leadership.

Many Thai female monastics have already made outstanding contributions to society through psycho-ethical and penitential counseling, Buddhist hermeneutical exegeses and in-depth canonical studies; but most significantly what still remains to be undertaken is playing the role of genuine Vipassanā meditation master for the sake of establishing oneself on the best route to dhamma practice and at the same time helping to build a society the foundation of which would rest on the ideal Buddhist values of contentment, selfless giving and mindfulness, values that are on a steady decline in this age of consumerism.¹¹ It is my strong conviction that once having attained the true realization of egolessness female monastics will

¹¹ As I write this, I envision that one day Thailand will have female meditation masters of the stature of Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Sao, Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Thet, and Ajahn Buddhādāsa. All of these great monks' dedicated effort at the practice of Vipassanā meditation have not only strengthened the foundation of Thai Theravāda Buddhism but have directly affected the lives of many individuals both in Thailand and abroad. In particular, Ajahn Chah's teaching method and his direct, simple and profound dhamma talks (which were originally delivered in the Isan language to his pupils from diverse religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds) have inspired many people across the globe.

be able to guide the lay community to higher realms of spiritual maturity. Whether Thai female monastics should remain encased within the traditionally accepted form of white-clad *maechees* or transform themselves into gender conscious yellow-robed *sāmanerīs* and *bhikkhunīs* is not the issue/point, but a group of female monastics fully devoted to Vipassanā meditation practice is exigently needed in present day Thai society to fill that gap between a self/peer-declared *arahant* like Maechee Kaew¹² of the forest tradition of Venerable Luangta Mahā Buwa and a highly elitist form of the radical feminist stance of Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā.¹³ In the positioning of these two well-known figures, what is at once strikingly apparent is the polarized dilemma of Thai female monasticism; one leading to the reification¹⁴ of *arahantship* and the other to the fetishization¹⁵ of an avowedly individualistic (westernized) feminist position, both equally detrimental to the actualization of the state of egolessness. If any Buddhist monastic does not direct his or her mental energy to actualize the state of egolessness through Vipassanā meditation and lead himself/herself as well as others to the realization of dhammic truths in depth, then the monastic role would remain narrowly confined to a quasi-performative spiritual stage only.

Buddhist leadership and the practice of Vipassanā meditation

In this paper I have deliberately chosen to narrate about Venerable Āj Āsabhamahāthera since I believe that a contemporary example of dedicated effort can be a source of inspiration and moral courage to all of us.¹⁶ Extending the symbolic resemblance of Somdet Āj’s predicament to female monastics’ situation today, we see its underlying connection to our own lives as well. Although we are not all political prisoners or ordained monastics struggling for a long deserved social space of their own, yet from the Buddhist perspective the five aggregates – corporeality (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*) – that we time and again tend to recognize as our selves have already ‘imprisoned’ us all to varying degrees.¹⁷ Realization of this truth is necessary to make our day to day living less stressful and constricted. Years later after his release, when Somdet Āj was once asked to comment on his life in the prison, he replied with a tinge of joy, “Marvellous! I had the time of my life.” Behind his relaxed reply lay the poignant story of his endeavor to transform the physical confinement of the jail into a

¹² Bhikkhu Silaratana. *Mae Chee Kaew – Her Journey to Spiritual Awakening and Enlightenment*. Udon Thani, Thailand: Forest Dhamma Books, 2009.

¹³ See her interview on the AlJazeera English “Everywoman – Buddhist Nun and Hijab Fashion.”

¹⁴ I would have revered Maechee Kaew all the same for her dedicated effort even without Venerable Luangta Maha Buwa’s declaration and confirmation of her *arahantship* based on his supervisory investigation of her relics turning into crystal. The crystallized relic is not beyond the realm of *tilakkhaṇa*, so why rest one’s faith solely on that! Can’t we Buddhists go beyond this kind of fetishization and practice the Buddhadhamma without giving rise to any cultic trend?

¹⁵ In a recent interview when she was asked the question – “How many of the Maechees do you think actually want to become Bhikkhunis?, the most Venerable Dhammanandā replied, “They are *scared* (italics mine)... No we are not expecting Bhikkhunis to come out of Maechees. Within the social structure *they are scared*, especially as they have not had *the nod from the monks*. If they get the nod, then maybe they will do it.” How can one assume that all the maechees in Thailand are scared? Through the explicit use of the negative term so generically Ven. Dhammanandā is violating the ‘other’ within the latest binary of *bhikkhunī – maechee*, and committing herself to the act of Levinasian ‘totalization’ within her own clan. See the full interview on www.dhammadownload.com.

¹⁶ Although Somdet Āj passed away more than two decades ago, he is still looked upon as a living example, especially in the context of northeast Thailand (Isan).

¹⁷ See de Silva, Lily. *The Self-Made Private Prison*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1990.

state of mental freedom through the practice of Vipassanā meditation. Imprisonment and freedom are two sides of the same reality i.e. our corporeal being and it is through rekindling the role of individual leadership within each of us that the fettered self can be rescued. So what is this Buddhist leadership and what does it involve?

Buddhist leadership does not involve the role of ‘leading’ others through convincing and persuasive speech, canonical expertise, ideological standpoint, innovative meditation tool, political backing, accumulation of wealth, magical power of amulets, media attention, mask donning, etc but first and foremost in freeing oneself from the winding shackles of ignorance (*avijjā*) and defilements (*kilesa*). If this subjective and very personal element in Buddhist leadership gets severed, then the concept of leadership ceases to hold any true meaning; that is why, Buddhist leadership is different from all other forms of leadership. The foundation of Buddhist leadership is tied to mastering oneself first and then others; leading oneself first, one leads others and not the vice versa. And so no matter who we are, where we are, how well-known or least known we are, the onus of Buddhist leadership rests on each of us at the individual level prior to establishing this role in a wider context. And the pinnacle of this leadership is the realization of the state of egolessness with the constant aid of self-reflection alongside the practice of the three-fold training laid down in the Noble Eightfold Path, within the matrix of which the practice of Vipassanā meditation is so clearly embedded.

Vipassanā meditation is the main tool of the Buddhist leader in the absence of which Buddhism as a way of life, practice and thinking is hard to achieve. The Buddha bequeathed this tool to his followers so that each individual had the means to testify for himself or herself the truths he had taught. The Buddha did not base his teachings on hypothetical assumptions but rather on a pragmatic, goal-oriented and experiential understanding. Derrida in his text *The Gift of Death* states that: “I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others”¹⁸. That is why for Derrida it seems that the Buddhist desire to have attachment to nobody and equal compassion for everybody is an unattainable ideal. Derrida’s skepticism about the conjugality of non-attachment and universal love and compassion in Buddhism arises because he looks at the matter from a purely theoretical perspective without the use of the practical method of Vipassanā. He thus missed the point and failed to realize the simple truth that because there is non-clinging to the dictates of the ego, the state of non-attachment arises and when there is non-attachment, universal love can arise spontaneously.

Non-clinging to one’s ego → non-attachment → universal compassion

Realization of *tilakkhaṇa* → the true practice of *brahma vihāra*

Now how this process works is to be realized and practiced by oneself through the cultivation of moment to moment mindfulness in order to fight with one’s defilements and the ego’s endless craving that gives rise to all the three evils – greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). And mindfulness is sustained through Vipassanā meditation that gives rise to experiential understanding of the three characteristics of existence – impermanence

¹⁸ Derrida, Jacques. (1992). *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

(*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*). This understanding is indispensable to free oneself from all defilements that arise from craving and attachment and when the mind is clean of selfish desire and clinging the four divine qualities – loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*) spontaneously blossom in the heart. Did the Buddha give up Vipassanā meditation after his enlightenment? Was he ever fully satiated with the practice of Vipassanā once his disciples became *arahants* and began to propagate the dhamma? So, true Buddhist leadership implies taking this core method as a sustained practice in life.

Vinaya and precepts no hindrance to Buddhist leadership

In the absence of Vipassanā it is not easy to understand the habitual working of the mind that naturally tends to grasp at everything. It is even more difficult to accomplish the state of non-attachment and egolessness. To a mind yet not free from attachment and ego-formation, certain aspects of the Vinaya will always appear useless, outdated, partial, undemocratic and even misogynistic. For instance, many feminists tend to read the eight heavy rules (Garudhamma) for bhikkhunīs as unjust that place ordained women at a very subservient position. No matter how undemocratic these codes may appear from the modern day perspective, in essence they were meant to be adhered to for the harmonious co-existence of the bhikkhu and bhikkhunī sangha. Will any negative energy be diffused suppose a much senior spiritually advanced bhikkunī pays her respects to a newly ordained monk? Will her spiritual maturity leave no trace on him? Will he be not humbled by her presence? Will not her perfection remind him of the hard work that awaits him? But the moment we assess the situation from a gender conscious outlook we fail to see the positive side and unnecessarily create tension between the conventions of age and sex and fail to view the two factors within the matrix of the three essential characteristics of existence (*tilakkhaṇa*) – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and selflessness (*anattā*).

In one of his keynote speeches delivered recently, the Oxford scholar, Richard Gombrich says, “In Thailand the Vinaya has been changed in a grotesque manner, so that monks may not only not touch a woman, but may not receive anything directly from a woman’s hand.”¹⁹ How would Gombrich, who has been a strong supporter of the issue of bhikkhunī ordination, react if one day he sees sāmanerīs and bhikkhunīs not touching any man and not receiving anything from a man’s hand directly? The code would equally apply to bhikkhunīs if the Theravāda bhikkhunī lineage is fully resuscitated one day. Now, if Thai monks’ keeping to the Vinaya can be openly castigated at an international forum as an act of misogyny, what would Gombrich call the bhikkhunī’s act – misandry or reverse sexism by

¹⁹ Richard Gombrich’s keynote address “Comfort or Challenge” delivered at the International Conference on Dissemination of Theravāda Buddhism in the 21st Century held in Salaya, Bangkok, Sep/Oct 2010. In it he commented, “In Thailand the Vinaya has been changed in a grotesque manner, so that monks may not touch a woman, but may not receive anything directly from a woman’s hand. This innovation applies not only to menstruating women, or to women who are of an age when they might be menstruating, but to all females from babies to centenarians. We are therefore dealing not just with a misguided ritual obsession but with true misogyny, a horror and dread of women, a fear that the slightest contact with a female is seductive and may inspire lust. When this is applied even to babies and young children, the necessary implication is so disgusting that I cannot even name it. Those who created such a rule and those who follow them need to be re-educated and to learn that women and girls are people, not objects”.

women against men or dread of men's unchastity? While from his ultra-modernist and individualistic perspective he sees only hierarchy, misogyny and exploitation, a non-individualistic approach (which is not always bad as some might think) is more helpful in understanding the relevance of the monastic code within its own context. The code does not necessarily imply impurity of the opposite sex but is a mindful reminder to both a monk and a laywoman (a nun and a layman, in the case of a bhikkhunī) of the state of perfection in celibacy a monastic ought to strive towards.

Vinaya is the hallmark and not weakness of monasticism and through mindful adherence to it a monastic upholds the role of Buddhist leadership in all its chastity and sanctity. Emphasizing the significance of the monastic codes as supportive tools for the true realization of dhamma, the most venerable Ajahn Chah said, "All our actions – wearing the robes, collecting alms-food – should be done mindfully, according to the precepts. The Dhamma and discipline that the Buddha gave us are like a well-tended orchard. We do not have to worry about planting trees and caring for them; we do not have to be afraid that the fruit will be poisonous or unfit to eat. All of it is good for us. Once inner coolness is attained, you still should not throw away the forms of monastic life. Be an example for those who come after; this is how the enlightened monks of old behaved."²⁰

In a lay Buddhist leader the observance of the precepts play an equally significant and meaningful role. Ajahn Chah's inspirational message to his monastic disciples is a reminder to all of us – "Virtue and morality are the mother and father of the Dhamma growing within us, providing it with the proper nourishment and direction. Virtue is the basis for a harmonious world in which people can live truly as humans, not animals. Developing virtue is at the heart of our practice. It is very simple. Keep the training precepts. Do not kill, steal, lie, commit sexual misdeeds, or take intoxicants that make you heedless. Cultivate compassion and a reverence for all life. Take care with your goods, your possessions, your actions, your speech. Use virtue to make your life simple and pure. With virtue as a basis for everything you do, your mind will become kind, clear, and quiet. Meditation will grow easily in this soil."²¹

For the monastics the Vinaya and for the lay community the five precepts act as a protective armor that strengthens each group leading to the formation of a strong base for not only socio-economic but mental development and awakening of wisdom. Mindful adherence to the five precepts – abstinence from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxicants – are essential in securing optimal happiness, harmony and safety in human relationship. Negligence of the precepts has led to the escalation of many social evils like crimes, corruption, bribery, power abuse, prostitution, human trafficking, drugs and alcohol addiction to an alarming degree. Avenues of all sorts of sensual fulfillment are readily available in today's age of globalization, but safety zones are fast disappearing. Human life is dominated by endless craving and a sense of discontentment. Climate change and global

²⁰ Kornfield, Jack and Breiter, Paul, Ed. *A Still Forest Pool – The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah*. Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1985, p.113.

²¹ Ibid. pp.54-55.

warming are the phenomenal outcome of the quantum of *tanhā* underlying every heedless move of progress and change.

Buddhist leadership and non self-centered views and interests

Since Buddhist leadership is based on developing mindfulness and insight, it is neither nourished nor sustained by self-centered views and interests. Going against the dictates of the ‘I’ and all its self-centered propositions Buddhist leadership deconstructs all the binaries that arise from clinging to the self at the linguistic, ontological and conceptual/meditative levels²². In other words, Buddhist leadership helps to strike a balance between living and working selflessly for the benefit of oneself and others without at the same time upholding the ego and its endless claims for self-aggrandizement. Looking at the inspiring life of Somdet Āj we see the ideals of Buddhist leadership –truthfulness, moral uprightness, virtuousness, mindfulness, and self-integrity manifesting brilliantly even at troublesome hours when his life was beset with hardship from effects of interventionist politics. His moral standpoint enabled him to work for the benefit of the Buddhist community even when he was on the verge of losing his ecclesiastical position and power. He could have easily complied with the dictates of his superiors and the ones in power to successfully avoid all the vicissitudes in his monastic life – demotion, disrobing, imprisonment – but it was his unwavering faith in *dhamma* and the inspiration that he derived from Vipassanā meditation practice that perpetually guided him to act in a righteous manner devoid of any self-interest. The price he paid for his *dhammic* determination was very heavy, but because he did not deter from the right path he could carve out a space for posterity to reflect upon and put into practice the ideals of true Buddhist leadership and its indomitable spirit. During his imprisonment he confronted the challenge to meet social injustice head-on with his motto –

Evil and wickedness fill the world
They encircle the body and mind
The sole means of their destruction
Is goodness.

Commenting on the inspiration drawn from the life of Somdet Āj, the most venerable Phra Dharmakosājarn, the Rector of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University once said, “The three messages that we derive from Venerable Somdet Āj’s life are – non-contentment in doing good action, non-retrogression from making an effort and developing a forgiving mind.”²³ A true Buddhist leader is never tired or hesitant to engage in righteous action, but at the same time is forever alert to the cultivation of a mind that is non-egoistic and non-self-

²² Mahanta, Dipti. *Buddhist Deconstruction in Practice: A Reflection on Luangpho Chah’s Dismantling of the Binary*, paper presented at the Third International Buddhist Research Seminar organized by the Buddhist Research Institute, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University and published in the Seminar Volume.

²³ Phra Dharmakosājarn (formerly Phra Thepsophon). *Somdet Phra Buddhajarn and the development of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University*. A special talk delivered in Thai on the occasion of laying the foundation of the Somdet Āj Centennial Building at MCU Khonkaen Campus on 26 July 2004 (BE 2547).

conceited. Since mindfulness begets not only loving-kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy but above all equanimity, a true Buddhist leader is not slavishly victimized by misanthropy and revenge even at the most unforgiving moments and so his or her mind is full of forbearance, forgiveness and open-mindedness.

Conclusion

Somdet Āj's political imprisonment, the female monastics' socio-religious confinement and our own existential entrapment within the folds of the five aggregates draw our attention to the relevance of Vipassanā meditation practice. With Vipassanā as the guiding practice the fight for socio-political justice and gender egalitarianism becomes a liberatory and meaningful endeavor without at the same time giving rise to schism, conflict and ignorance in the process. Rescuing the fettered self is the inevitable duty of all so as to bring a greater sense of joy and freedom to our lives. To do so begins with knowing one's own mind – how vacillating it is and how relentlessly it is tied up by the workings of its own ego. Knowing the mind truly is emptying it of defilements, burning down all the embers of evils within. In other words, it implies decoding the mind of all habitual inclinations. The next step is to encode the empty mind with moral codes/precepts and mindfulness. What gets reinforced in this process of decoding and encoding is the issue of Buddhist leadership and individual commitment to the ideals it embodies. The Buddha's final words: "Transient are conditioned things, try to accomplish your aim with diligence" are a reminder to the fact that the onus of actualizing and living up to the ideals of Buddhist leadership rests on each of us. However, in the absence of virtue, morality and realization of the state of egolessness Buddhist leadership can neither be actualized at the individual nor at the collective level.

References

Books in Thai

Āj Āsabhamahāthera. *Phajonman – Bantheuk Chiwit Haa Pii Nai Hong Khang* [Struggling Against Evil – Record of Five Years in Jail]. Bangkok: The Central Office of Vipassanā Meditation Wat Mahathat, 1987 (BE 2530).

Āsabhanusorn [Commemoration Volume printed on the occasion of Somdet Āj Āsabhamahāthera's twenty-first death anniversary]. Khonkaen: Phimolatham Institute, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khonkaen Campus, 2010 (BE 2553).

Phrakhu Siriwanawiwat. *Prabat Kan Sathapana*, Commemoration Volume printed on the occasion of the cremation ceremony of Somdet Phra Buddhajarn under royal patronage, 1990 (BE 2533).

Phromrin, Thong-in. *Kan Sueksa Santivithi Khong Phrapimolatham (Āj Āsabhamahāthera)* [A study of the peaceful means of Phrapimolatham (Āj Āsabhamahāthera)], unpublished master's dissertation, Bangkok: Mahachula Graduate School, 2008 (BE 2551).

Sasanakij Nai Tang Prathet [Ecclesiastical Duties Abroad], Bangkok: Wat Mahāthat Publication, 1983 (BE 2526).

Somdet Phra Buddhajarn Āj Āsabhamahāthera Ramluek Nuengroi Pii. [Commemoration Volume marking the centennial celebration of his birthday anniversary] Khonkaen: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khonkaen Campus, 2003 (BE 2546).

Somdet Phra Buddhajarn Kab Vipassanā Thura (Commemoration Volume) compiled by the Committee of the National Board of Vipassanā, Bangkok: National Board of Vipassanā, 1990 (BE 2533).

Books in English

Bhikkhu Silaratana. *Mae Chee Kaew – Her Journey to Spiritual Awakening and Enlightenment*. Udon Thani, Thailand: Forest Dhamma Books, 2009.

De Silva, Lily. *The Self-Made Private Prison*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1990.

Derrida, Jacques. (1992). *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Kornfield, Jack and Breiter, Paul, Ed. *A Still Forest Pool – The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah*. Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1985.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1969.