

Glimmers of a Thai Bhikkhuni Sangha History¹

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“Although history would indicate that in the past there have been both bhikkhunis and samaneris in [the lands now known as] Thailand, from the time of the Aśokan missions of arahantas Sona and Uttara to Suvannabhumi, up until the Ayutthaya Period, and even into the twentieth century [in the northern regions], there is little or no public knowledge nor a sense of connectedness to this distant and more recent past.”

This sentence within “Mining for Gold: A Bright Vision and Exploration into the Essential Nature and Purpose of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in the Ancient Texts and Lives of the Noble Ones...”, my 2007 paper to the First International Congress on Buddhist Women, elicited significant surprise, interest and curiosity amongst both friends and eminent fellow monastic Sangha members who have read it, particularly those who have lived in Thailand for many years, but say they “never had a clue.” The information that I’ve come upon in the past years has largely been brought forth by the simple merit of the interest stimulated by the rare appearance of a female form clothed in the patchwork saffron robe, both during my time in Thailand and elsewhere amongst the Thai people, scholars and Sangha members. For those mentioned above who had requested sharing knowledge of the details, they are laid forth here for reflection and consideration. As the in-

¹ Originally published on request as an appendix to “Mining for Gold: A Bright Vision and Exploration into the Essential Nature and Purpose of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in the Ancient Texts and Lives of the Noble Ones and Brought to Life through Living the Pure and Perfected Holy Life in the Modern World,” the author’s paper and presentation to the First International Congress on Buddhist Women in Hamburg, Germany 2007. The original paper and appendix are available on the Congress website here: <http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/150.0.html>. This updated version (v2.2) was published, sans most diacritics due to printing capabilities, in pp 111-122 of *Gautami Samayiki*, 5th Year, 5th Issue, Srabon 1422, July 2015.

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formation is substantial and deviates from the main theme and flow of "Mining for Gold" it was set forth separately in an appendix to that paper. Now, seven years later, it has been reedited in minor points, updated and independently republished in the periodical *Gautami Samayiki*. However, the work shown here with this important subject is still just a beginning. It is my hope that, as a beginning, it might at least encourage an opening of ideas and views, as well as further research and publication. Gladly, in the seven-year interval since original publication, some of this research has begun.

A Weaving of Threads

Like weaving threads together, the lines of a sketch, or beginning to lay out pieces of a puzzle, I will lay out what I have come across for consideration. The clues span a vast period of time, from roughly the 3rd century BCE through to the 20th century, a period of perhaps 2,300 years, nearly as long as Buddhist history itself. I will divide this time span roughly into three sections as mentioned in the "Mining for Gold" text: (1) the ancient period or time of the Aśokan missions of Sona and Uttara to Suvannabhumi, (2) the middle period of various "Thai" kingdoms up until the founding of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, and (3) the period of more recent history reaching into the twentieth century and modern times.

Ancient Period

The first references to bhikkhunis in the lands now known as Thailand come from the records of the Aśokan missions of the arahanta theras Sona and Uttara to Suvannabhumi, the ancient and famed "Land of Gold." Although the exact boundaries of the ancient Land of Gold are unknown, the Thai people have strong emotional ties to the history of this land that may be seen in many facets of their culture, in the ancient name of one of the Thai provinces, Suphanburi, and the modern new Suvarnabhumi International Airport. Local peoples and various historians assert the Land of Gold to be related to territories now known as Burma, Thailand and Laos, as well as parts of Southern China, Cambodia and Northern Malaysia, as well as perhaps even parts of Indonesia.

The journey of Sona and Uttara Thera to Suvannabhumi is recorded in the important Pali commentary on the Vinaya the *Samantapasadika*, in the ancient Sri Lankan chronicles the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* as well as in the Vinaya commentary *Sudassanavinayavibhasa*.³ According to the *Samantapasadika*, the theras “ordained 3,500 men and 1,500 women, establishing the Buddhadhamma.” In Thai Buddhist historical texts, this record appears in the Thai *Ruan Song Pra Thera Bye Prakat Pra Sasana Ni Thang Prathet—About Theras Going to Teach Buddhism Abroad* where we find that:

“Youths in the group of royal males of the number of 3,500 ordained. The royal female youths in the number of 1,500 ordained. Thus, the theras firmly established Buddhism in the area of Suvannabhumi. Thereafter, the young people of the royal heritage received the Dhamma lineage of Sona and Uttara.”⁴

The exact location of the ordinations is disputed. I have no intent to propose which site might have actually been the real and true location of the Suvannabhumi bhikkhus’ and bhikkhunis’ ordination or whether the Aśokan Missions happened as recorded, but rather to show that *the Thai people themselves* lay both historical and emotional claim to the site that their own Buddhist textual records indicate was the place where 1,500 women were ordained *as bhikkhunis* from the very beginning of the recorded establishment of Buddhism *in their land*.

The Thai people regularly speak of the location of this great happening, the foundation of the Buddhism in their land, as having occurred at the “First Chedi” Nakhon Pathom (Skt: *Nagara Prathama Chaitya*), thousands of people coming

³ A text of Sri Lankan origin taken to China and translated by Sanghabhadra about the time of Buddhagosa. The Chinese translation of the title of this Sinhalese Vinaya commentary (*Shan-chien lii p’i-p’o-sha*, 善見律毘婆沙 T24., no 1462) has been retranslated into Pali as the *Sudassanavinayavibhasa*. Web: <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha220b.htm> (f 1). The record appears in the Chinese text at: http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T24/1462_002.htm (p.686, a13–p.686, b11).

⁴ *Ruan Song Pra Thera Bye Prakat Pra Sasana Ni Thang Prathet*—p 119: “Puak dek ni tragoon praman 3,500 buat laew. Khuntida praman 1,500 nang gan buat laew. Pra thera nan dye pradit tan prasasana hye damrong man yu ni kwan suvanabum nan laew doy prakan cha ni. Jam derm ther nan ma chon [p 120] chow suvanabum gau dye thang cheu pauk dek ti gert ni ratchathragoon wa Sonuttara serp ma.”. Web: <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha220b.htm> (f2). Thai script: เรื่องส่งพระเถระไปประกาศพระศาสนาในต่างประเทศ, p119 “พวกเด็กมีตระกูลประมาณ 3500บวชแล้ว กุลธิดาประมาณ1500นางก็บวชแล้ว. พระเถระท่านได้ประดิษฐานพระศาสนาให้ดำรงมั่นอยู่ในแคว้นสุวรรณภูมินั้นแล้วด้วยประการฉะนี้ จำเดิมแต่นานมาชนชาวสุวรรณภูมิก็ได้ตั้งชื่อพวกเด็กที่เกิดในราชตระกูลว่า โสไนฺตระกูลสืบมา.”

to pay their reverence to the site daily for this reason. The Burmese people locate the site in Burma at Thaton where there is also a shrine devoted to this most famous and venerable of occurrences. However, according to research done by Ven. Ratanavali Bhikkhuni, contemporary Thai Buddhist historians locate the site of the first ordinations at the ancient Thai city of Nakon Si Thammarat (Skt: *Nagara Sri Dharmaraja*). According to interviews conducted with local Nakon Si Thammarat historians, it is well known that Buddhism first entered Suvannabhumi in what is now known as Nakon Si Thammarat, not Nakhon Pathom. The Thai commentary and chronicle references above are anthropologically linked to the Nakon Si Thammarat Yak Chedi (*Yaksa Chaitya*) through the accompanying commentarial and chronicle story of the theras displaying their power over the supernatural forces the people had feared and worshipped by subduing the yak-sas (ogres, cannibals, flesh-eating giants) before teaching the Dhamma and giving ordination. The main Nakon Si Thammarat Chedi, built in Sri Lankan style, is also linked by local history directly to the commentaries' and chronicles' history of the arrival of the theras Sona and Uttara. The chedi is recorded to have been built in conjunction with the Sri Lankans to commemorate the site where Indian Prince Kumar and Indian Princess Hemachala (whose statuary images remain there) came with a tooth relic of the Buddha, now enshrined there in memory of it being the site of the establishment of the Buddha Sasana. This is confirmed by Phra Raj Suwan Maytee in *Pan Din Ton: Nakon Pathom dan gert Prabuddhasasana*.

Neither the Pali *Samantapasadika* nor the Thai account say *what* the noblemen and women were "ordained" (Thai: *buat*) as. However, by the famed statement that "Buddhism has only been established in a land when both sons and daughters of that land have been ordained [as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis and are able to recite

their *Patimokkha*,]⁵ it may be inferred that it was upon such ordination that the pronouncement "the Buddhadhamma has been established" was made in the end of the *Samantapasadika* account. This is confirmed by the less well-known *Sudassanavinayavibhāsa* which does specify that the men and women were in fact ordained as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.⁶

Another point of interest is that according to the Thai Vinaya Pitaka version of the *Samantapasadika*, as related by former Thai Senator Rabiaprat Pongpanit in

⁵ Although this statement has been attributed to Ashokan son Mahinda Thera in his words to Sri Lankan King Devanampiyatissa regarding his reason for calling for his bhikkhuni sister Sanghamitta Theri and her peers to establish the Bhikkhuni Sangha, it is based upon various quotations from the Tipitaka. As amalgamated and paraphrased briefly from Bhikkhu Analayo's 2007 "Women's Renunciation in Early Buddhism":

Numerous early canonical passages concur with the clear statement given in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* that the Bhikkhuni Sangha is an integral part of Buddhist community, particularly the *Lakkhana Sutta* and the *Pasadika Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. Even those outside the Buddhist order apparently perceived the existence of proficient female Buddhist monastics [bhikkhunis] as indispensable for the completeness of the Buddha's Sasana, as in the *Mahāvaccagotta Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, where we find the wanderer Vaccagotta, soon to enter the Buddhist Sangha and become an Arahanta, proclaiming that: "If, in this teaching, only the Reverend Gotama and the bhikkhus were accomplished, but there would not be accomplished bhikkhunis, then this Holy Life, would be deficient in that respect"—(*sace ... imam dhammam bhavañc' eva Gotamo aradhako abhaviṣṣa bhikkhu ca ... no ca kho bhikkhuniyo aradhika abhavimsu, evam idam brahmacariyam aparipuram abhaviṣṣa ten' angena.*)

The degree to which the existence of the bhikkhunis is integral to the welfare of the Buddha Sasana is highlighted in *Samyutta Nikāya* 16.13: "*bhikkhu bhikkhuniyo upasaka upasikayo satthari ... dhamme ... sanghe ... sikkhaya ... samadhimim sagarava viharanti sappatissa. Ime kho ... pañca dhamma saddhammassa hitiya asammosaya anantaradhanaya samvattanti.*" The conditions that lead to the duration of the Dhamma after the Buddha has passed away are treated in the *Anguttara Nikāya* which states these requisite conditions to be that "the four assemblies be respectful towards the Teacher, the Teaching, the Community, the training and towards each other"—(*bhikkhu bhikkhuniyo upasaka upasikayo satthari ... dhamme ... sanghe ... sikkhaya... aññamaññam sagarava viharanti sappatissa. Ayam kho ... paccayo yena Tathagata parinibbute saddhammo cira hitiko hoti.*)

According to the *Dakkhinaṅgā Sutta*, from the perspective of merit, a gift given to the Ubho-to Sangha comprised of both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis is superior to that given to the Bhikkhu Sangha alone, thus the absence of the Bhikkhuni Sangha would result in a deficiency of the Order as a recipient of gifts. Finally, in *Samyutta Nikāya* 42.7 we find that, in addition to being treated as superior recipients of offerings, the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are reckoned together when it comes to receiving teachings, as they constitute the superior field for the Buddha's instructions—(*seyyathapi ... khetam aggam evam eva mayham bhikkhu-bhikkhuniyo.*)

⁶ The record appears in the Vinaya commentary (*Shan-chien lu p'i-p'o-sha*, 善見律毘婆沙 T24., no 1462) *Sudassanavinayavibhāsa* Chinese text at: http://www.cbeta.org/result/normal/T24/1462_002.htm (p.686, a13–p.686, b11). Specifically: "三千五百人為比丘僧，一千五百人為比丘尼，於是佛法流通。" at p.686, b5.

her 2002 report to the Thai Senate, both men and women appear to have been ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone, as there is no mention of bhikkhunis among the “five bhikkhus, samaneras, upasakas, brahmans, high ranking government officials and members of royalty totaling thirty-eight persons”⁷ who comprised the Aśokan mission. In fact, all of the Aśokan mission records in which both men and women are recorded as ordained in various countries surrounding India by the arahanta missionaries following their teaching, other than the Sri Lankan record, follow this same pattern. This does not necessarily mean that the calling upon of bhikkhunis to perform the dual ordination did not happen, as this part of the historical records could certainly have been lost in many cases. However, that is speculation. The history in its current form could equally well, without such speculation, be seen as giving precedent, in the behavior of numerous arahant Dhamma teachers of great renown, for the ordination of both women and men as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis by the Bhikkhu Sangha in the absence of a Bhikkhuni Sangha.⁸

The Middle Period: the Kingdoms of Pattani, Angkor, Sukhothai, Lanna-thai and Ayutthaya

According to scholarly works on the Buddhist history of this area in the middle period, there appear to have been bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of various Buddhist schools and traditions—Theravada (Theriyā, Sthavira, Sravakayana or Hinayana), Mahayana and Vajrayana—spread throughout the lands of South and Southeast Asia. Middle period references specifically to bhikkhunis in the area that is now named Thailand come from the Pattani, Lanna-thai and Sukhothai periods as well as the Ayutthaya period.

Pattani (3rd—17th Century CE)

⁷ *Samantapasadika* 62-63.

⁸ See Bhikkhu Anālayo’s 2014 SIJBS Vol. 3 article “On the *Bhikkhuni* Ordination Controversy” p. 2 to learn more about the legitimacy of bhikkhu-only ordination of bhikkhunis. Web: <http://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/fileadmin/pdf/analayo/BhikkhuniControversy.pdf>. See also Tathaaloka Theri, “Bhikkhus’ Right to Ordain Bhikkhunis” (forthcoming).

Moving through time from the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE, we come to the Kingdom of Pan Pan, not far removed from modern Nakonsi Thammarat. Pan Pan was later known by the Thais as Pattani and is considered by them to be one of their ancient historic kingdoms. Earlier historical records of Pan Pan span the 3rd through the 7th centuries of the Common Era; later records of Pattani extend through the 17th century, up until the absorption of the kingdom in the modern Bangkok period.

In his work *Nuns of Southeast Asia* (3.6), Peter Skilling relates this finding:

“[In] Ma Tuan-lin’s description of the Kingdom of P’an P’an in his *Wen-hsien Tung-k’ao*: ‘There are ten monasteries where Buddhist monks and nuns study their canon. They eat all types of meat, but restrain from wine.’ Wheatley and others have concluded that P’an-p’an was located in the vicinity of the Bay of Bandon in peninsular Siam.”

The record is estimated to be related to the 7th century CE. The word translated into English as “nuns” by Skilling in the record is the Chinese character *ni* (尼) commonly used as an abbreviation of the three Chinese characters *bi-ku-ni* (比丘尼) or *bi-chu-ni* (苾芻尼), but also sometimes used to together refer to samaneris (*śa-ma-nī* or *śa-mi-nī*, 沙弥尼 or 沙彌尼). Normally however, the words 尼僧 (*ni-seng*), are used as an abbreviation for the “Bhikkhuni Sangha” as a collective, or to refer to an individual “female Sangha member” thereof, that is, a bhikkhuni. Although the record is Chinese, the description of the food consumed by the monks and nuns does not bear the marks of the vegetarian discipline of the Chinese Mahayana schools which forbade meat-eating, nor are these the ritual wine-drinking and meat-eating practices of the Ari or Tantric practitioners; thus it seems most likely that these female Buddhist monastics would have belonged to one of the Theravadin or Sravakayana schools.

Angkor Kambudēśa (12th—13th Century CE)

In Yasodharapura aka Angkor, in the “Land of the Kambus” commonly known as Cambodia, not far from the eastern border of contemporary Thailand in an area known as “Nakhon Siam” during its period of inclusion in eastern Thailand in the later Ayutthaya period, we find further records of Buddhist monastic women who were *pabbajita*, “those who have gone forth”. The *pabbajita* designation includes bhikkhunis, sikkhamanas and samaneris. In the Phimeanakas [K.

485] Sanskrit inscription of Buddhist Queen Indradevi, we find record of her sister Jayarajadevi's specially establishing a royal religious endowment called Dharmakīrti for the benefit of hundreds of orphaned and abandoned young women, who she compassionately "regarded as her own daughters." The inscription records that she sponsored their undertaking ordination in Buddhism (*pravrajyat*), the Sanskrit form of the Pali word *pabbajja* mentioned earlier. Bhikkhuni *upasampada* is not mentioned explicitly, although the inscription does specifically mention the presence of a *sīma* associated with Dharmakīrti, and the young women's undertaking renunciant "vows" (*vrata*) in lines LXXIX-LXXX.⁹ In his *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (23), Ian Harris writes:

"How large the nuns' order was at this time is impossible to say, but the involvement of two principal wives of such a powerful king must have had a beneficial impact."

First Jayarajadevi and then also her elder sister Indradevi were married to King Jayavarmin VII, and the three appear together as a dynamic royal trio in numerous works of art, in which they are together portrayed in numerous works of Buddhist art as the trinity of the Buddha, Avalokiteśvara and Prajnaparamita. According to the *Glass Palace Chronicle*, their son, Tamralinda, became a bhikkhu in Sri Lanka with the Mahavihara school, and returning after ten years as a thera, was instrumental in the spread of Pali Theravadin Buddhism from the 1190 CE. Both Mahayana and Theravada were highly popularized in this period with first Mahayana and then Theravada Buddhism becoming the state religion of this region.

Sukhothai (13th—15th Century CE)

According to Thai records as related by the Research Department of Rajavidyalaya Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Royal Thai University (hereafter abbreviated as "MCU") there are Sukhothai records of bhikkhunis ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone. The question was raised by the MCU monastic schol-

⁹ Per Skilling, 3.6, Nuns in Southeast Asia, from "A Note on the History of the Bhikkhuni-sangha (II): The Order of Nuns after the Parinirvana", *WFB Review* (37). See also Ashley Thompson's "Performative Realities" in *At the Edge of the Forest*, (107-116) for English translation of sections of the inscription. Sanskrit text with French translation is published in "Grand Stele de Phimanakas" in *Cœdes Inscriptions Du Cambodge*, EFEO, Paris 1966 (171, 178). English translation is also available in Trude Jacobsen's 2007 "In Search of the Khmer Bhikkhuni" pp 77-78: <http://www.jocbs.org/index.php/jocbs/article/view/44/71>.

ars whether the (perhaps) original practice of ordaining bhikkhunis by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone may have continued in Thailand from the Aśokan period, rather than being replaced shortly after the original ordinations by the dual-ordination practice. Since these bhikkhunis did not have dual ordination, modern monastic Thai Buddhist scholars have said they may not be considered to have constituted a legitimate historical Bhikkhuni Sangha, having not met the full criteria for ordination as bhikkhunis.¹⁰ However, it may be noted that according to Vinaya texts, in the time of the Buddha, neither bhikkhunis ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone nor even those ordained by the "bhikkhu rite," rather than the "bhikkhuni rite,"¹¹ were to be considered *not* ordained.

Lanna-thai (13th—16th Century CE)

In *Nuns of Southeast Asia* at 3.6, Skilling further relates that:

"[I]n Lanna Thai literature (Catalogue of Palm Leaf Texts on Microfilm at the Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai) there are two texts entitled *Tamnan Bhikkhuni Dona* and *Tamnan Sindu Bhikkhuni*, which from their titles are the biographies of bhikkhunis. These bhikkhunis do not seem to be listed in the Tipitaka—at least they are not listed in Malalasekara's DPPN, thus there is the speculation that they might be later bhikkhunis' histories."¹²

According to further research by Ayako Itoh on Lanna Thai records related to bhikkhunis, there were bhikkhuni *tamnans*¹³ preserved at five temples, which

¹⁰ From the author's journal, as reported to the author by scholar monastics in the MCU Research Department during the author's time with the Research Department at MCU in 2003-2004 CE.

¹¹ The legality of ordination of bhikkhunis via the bhikkhu ordination procedure is specified in the *Upalipariprccha* Vinaya text. See Shayne Clarke in *Dignity in Discipline* pp 234-235: "'Reverend, if a bhikṣuṇī is ordained with the formal act of a bhikṣu, is that one deemed to have been ordained?' 'Upali, [she] is deemed to have been ordained, but those who ordained [her] commit an infraction [a *dukkata* or 'minor' offense].'"²⁸ n. 28. *Upalipariprccha* 330b2-3.

¹² The translation of these texts into Thai was commissioned by Ven. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni in July 2007.

¹³ *Tamnans* are Thai historical/legendary chronicles or stories which give founding, background or explicatory information of "how it came to be" with regards to a lineage, a dynasty, a historical figure, or the establishment of a teaching or practice.

shows that Thai people of the past took a great interest in them.¹⁴ I have personally heard Thai monks tell one of these legends several times, the *Nang Sindhula Bhikkhuni Tamnan* story of the shrimp, the fish and the crab, attesting to at least one of the legend's lasting popularity. According to the story, the Sindhula¹⁵ Bhikkhuni was a wealthy patroness of the Buddha in his lifetime who was reborn in the area that is now Thailand. She was born into the ancient family lineage of the Aditya (Pali: Adicca) Hari-kula ksatriya ("Solar Clan" warrior/noble) family which was centered in Magadha in India but spread far and wide through Central, South and Southeast Asia. A very special and unique aspect of her legendary story is her ordination by the Buddha himself through his appearance by supernatural power (*manomayakaya*).

At Wat Phra Singh, a first grade royal temple in Chiang Mai there is an official notice posted in front of a small uposatha hall (not the main uposatha hall, but a second one) explaining it as a Dual Sangha Uposatha Hall.¹⁶ According to the Wat Phra Singh publication *Wat Phra Singh Varavihan*, it is believed to have first been built during the period of King Saen Mange Ma in 1931-1954 of the Thai Buddhist Era (1388-1411 CE). It was rebuilt by King Kawila in the year 2355 of the Buddhist Era (1812 CE) after it had fallen into disrepair during the interval period of Burmese occupation. The publication by the Fine Arts Department¹⁷ also states that it was used for *sanghakamma* and the two entrances were for two sanghas, a Bhikkhu Sangha and a Bhikkhuni Sangha.¹⁸ In the second edition

¹⁴ The five temples are: Wat Sao Hin (Chiang Mai) contains a *Tamnan Bhikkhuni*, Wat Mae Yuak (Chiang Mai) contains a *Tamnan Sindhula Bhikkhuni*, Wat San Khong (Sankamphaeng, Chiang Mai) contains a *Tamnan Bhikkhuni*, Wat Chiang Man (Chiang Mai) *Nang Sindhula Bhikkhuni*, Wat Pa Sak Noi (Sankamphaeng, Chiang Mai) contains a *Tamnan Nang Bhikkhuni*. Per email correspondance with Ayako Itoh 11 Aug 2008.

¹⁵ With regards to "Sindhula" which could also be transliterated "Sindhura," there is the question of whether the meaning in Thai is "Sindhu," that is, from the Sindhu peoples and area now called "Sindh" in India; or whether the meaning is "sin-dhura," or *sila-dhura* in Pali, which refers to a category of Buddhist monastics who observe and strenuously train in *Vinaya-sila* (Patimokkha-sila).

¹⁶ อุโบสถสองสงฆ์ (*Uposathasongsangha*, in contemporary Thai: *song sangha ubosot* which means "dual sangha uposatha [hall]).

¹⁷ วัดพระสิงห์วรมหาวิหาร, p.13

¹⁸ Thanks to Ayako Itoh and Nissara Horayangura (now Munissara Bhikkhuni) for sharing this information.

of *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* by David Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeo (p 203) the bhikkhuni uposatha hall is also mentioned:

"Later in s. 1179, the King Maha Setahatthi Suwannapathumī...So His Majesty the king ordered the royalty, relatives, officials civil and military, and the people to cut timber for the pillars and beams;...raised the great vihara of Chom Thong, and at the same time built the shrine of Inthakhin and first built the Great Reliquary of Wat Phra Sing, built next to¹⁹ the Bhikkhuni Ordination Hall on that same day."

"At Wat Phra Sing, there is an uposot behind the main vihara, next to the cetiya, which has two entrances, on the north and the south. This uposot is used for Sangha ceremonies involving both bhikkhu and bhikkhuni (male and female monks), the north side being for the women."²⁰

There is another dual ordination hall at Wat Suan Dok, a third grade royal temple in Chiang Mai, west of the old city walls, and site of the MCU Chiang Mai campus. The hall has two entrances, one at each side, and in the middle there are back to back Buddha images, one standing, one sitting. It is surmised that the bhikkhus would enter on one side and the bhikkhunis on the other. Each would perform their sanghakamma in their "half". As there is no wall separating the two halves, for dual ordination, the ordinands could simply walk from one half of the hall to the other. The back to back statues at Wat Suan Dok discern its dual-sima ordination hall from the dual uposatha hall at Wat Phra Singh.²¹ According to Christian Lammert's review of Daniel Veidlinger's *Spreading the Dhamma: Writing Orality and Textual Transmission in Buddhist Northern Thailand*, the Lanna na-

¹⁹ Aroonrut Wichienkeo later clarified that "next to" is correctly translated as "built covering over top of". Thus it seems that the 19th century CE great reliquary was built over top of the original 14th century CE bhikkhuni uposatha hall, and a new 19th century dual uposatha hall was built next to it. Per Ayako Itoh, the tamnan "เหตุการณ์ประวัติศาสตร์ล้านนาไทย" talks about a bhikkhuni uposatha hall. It says that "Kavila built the Great Reliquary of Wat Phra Singh on the bhikkhuni uposatha hall (here it does not state 'two sangha uposatha hall' as it is called but it says 'Bhikkhuni uposatha hall')."

²⁰ f 41. According to the Thai-language dissertation of Maechee Dr Kritsana (as explained by Nissara Horayangura), the 19th century Lanna Kings built the uposatha hall not for then current use, but to prepare it in advance and have it ready-to-use for the time of Maitreya Buddha. The hall is said to be modeled upon similar dual sangha ordination halls then still in existence in Sri Lanka.

²¹ Personal email correspondence with Nissara Horayangura (now Phra Munissara Bhikkhuni) 13 May 2011

garavasi lineage earlier centered on Wat Suan Dok may have later been overtaken by the Sri Lankan *arannavasi* lineage as led by Nyanagambhira who was ordained in Sri Lanka in the 1420s and disseminated this ordination throughout Lanna. This lineage gained prominence in the 15th-16th centuries with royal patronage from Kings Tilaka and Bilakapattanu. Its highly-valued written Pali texts, and Pali culture reached its zenith during this period.²²

It was during the Lanna-thai period that *Sanghanussati* chants including the recollection of the virtues of the Thirteen Foremost Bhikkhuni Disciples were composed and their recitation called for by the royalty for the blessings of the populace and nation.²³ Considering the formal veneration paid to the arahant bhikkhunis by even the great kings of the Buddha's time, it might be seen as ironic that in 2007 CE, bhikkhuni arahant statuary images from the Lanna-thai period were removed to Wat Songdhammakalyani (a bhikkhuni temple) from the Lanna-thai monastery where they were long enshrined, as modern local monks felt it inappropriate for men to show veneration to female-form arahant images!

Ayutthaya Period (14th—18th Century CE)

Further bhikkhuni records were spoken of at Mahachula,²⁴ recovered incidentally while conducting research related to the exchange of the upasampada ordination between Thailand and Sri Lanka, in particular the ordinations which facilitated the (re)establishment of the Thai Bhikkhu Sangha upon the founding of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya. These records indicate the existence of pre-Lankavamsa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sanghas in Thailand, up to the entry into the Ayutthaya period, at which time these Sanghas were discontinued and a new Bhikkhu-only Sangha established with royal patronage and support from the Bhikkhu Sangha lineage of Sri Lanka.

²² Published on 4 May 2011 on the H-Buddhism network as "H-Net Review Publication: Veidlinger,_Spreading the Dhamma_Reviewed by Christian Lammerts".

²³ The text of the thirteen arahant theris blessing chant can be found here: <http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Texts-and-Translations/Short-Pieces/Aggasavika-Bhikkhuni.htm>, and the audio here: <http://saranaloka.org/teaching/chanting/>.

²⁴ From the author's journal-recorded conversations on this subject with members of the MCU Research Department, while serving as English-language commemorative literature editor for the MCU-supported "Exchange of the Upasampada" event in 2003-2004 CE.

By way of explanation, it is recorded that the Kingdom of Ayutthaya was named after the Indian Kingdom of Ayodhya, famed birthplace of the Hindu God Rama and the "first man" Manu. In its ruling secular and religious leadership structure, the Kingdom of Ayutthaya showed a great harmonizing of the religious teachings and practices of its time: Brahmanistic or Hindu, and Theravada Buddhist. The king was thus availed of both the divine right to rule via the Brahman priests as well as the Buddhist messianic right as a "wheel turning monarch" and an incarnation of the Bodhisattva Phra Ariya Maitreya—the future Buddha. These were not ideas without precedent. In the centuries both preceding and following, history records many Asian rulers, both Thai and non-Thai, adopting similar means in various combinations of these same prevailing teachings.

The records²⁵ relate the causal reasoning behind the ending of the Bhikkhuni Sangha as "inappropriate relationship" with men and the Bhikkhu Sangha. This was interpreted by some Mahachula scholars to mean that there were allegations of sexual misconduct. Indeed, monastic sexual misconduct seems to have been a topic of literally mortal concern during the Ayutthaya period, as Skilling has found records of Buddhist monks being regularly punished to death by public roasting over fire for allegations made of such misconduct. For this reason, foreign documenters observed and noted that only women past their childbearing years were allowed to respectably don *even white robes* in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya.²⁶ Other scholars understood this statement regarding "inappropriateness of the bhikkhunis" to mean that it was considered inappropriate for women to have the similar/same status as *Brahman* priests²⁷ within the social/religious/ideological framework of the Ayodhyan Brahmanical tenants of the *Manudharma-shastra*, a system of philosophy and social order which had spread at that time from India to Thailand. This system by law subordinates women first to their fathers, then husbands and finally sons, and does not allow for the possibility of women's salvation other than through the "sacrifices" or the merit offered by their sons. Finally, there was the further speculation that the cessation of the

²⁵ Spoken of orally and noted in journal entries by the author, as above.

²⁶ Skilling—Nuns of Southeast Asia (as above at f.9)

²⁷ In the Buddha's teaching, a person rightly becomes a Brahman (holy) neither by birth-caste nor by gender, but rather by their own virtuous and noble deeds.

previous Sangha was simply, if nothing else, an oft-repeated and quite normal political move to ensure the loyalty of the clergy to the sovereign, and thus the solidarity of the kingdom.

As apparent in the *Kingdom of Siam* exhibit shown July-October in 2005 CE in the United States at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the writings and meticulous drawings of at least one foreign Jesuit missionary in Ayutthaya nonetheless still record the presence of at least one undoubtedly feminine,²⁸ saffron-robed, shaven-headed monastic sitting on raised-platform seats in distinctly Thai-temple environs during that period.²⁹ Skilling finds records of robed Buddhist renunciate women in those times still addressed as *bhagini*—"sisters," the Pali/Sanskrit form of respectful address used by both the Buddha and theas, as well as called *nang-chee*³⁰—"lady renunciates," a melding of Thai and Indic terms and the precursor of the modern, white-robed *mae-chee*.

According to the MCU-Wat Mahathat scholars, it could be reasonably assumed that some numbers of both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of lineages and traditions from the pre-Ayutthaya period would have continued to survive in areas of what is now known as Thailand outside of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya. This may be confirmed by later records of bhikkhunis and samaneris scattered throughout the surrounding regions.

²⁸ Due to the distinctively exaggerated double circle breast motif, which makes it obviously apparent that the otherwise androgynous-appearing monastic form is female. Note the mural paintings in the "Hall of the Reclining Buddha" at Wat Pho in Bangkok for another prominent example of this motif in depictions of bhikkhunis.

²⁹ The author here wonders whether this may have been a drawing of the fabled royal Ayutthayan princess who secretly fled the palace life to be ordained as a bhikkhuni and live the monastic life against the wishes of her father the King.

³⁰ *Naeng chi* is also a term found in the Middle Cambodian language for women renunciates. Jacobsen, in her 2013 "In Search of the Khmer Bhikkhuni" on p 84 writes: "In Middle Cambodian...*neang* was a title, meaning "Mistress" or "Lady", indicating a well-born woman." It thus seems to have been used virtually identically to the Indic word *Ayya* or *Ariya*, as was used for both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis as well as nobility in India. It is common in India even today among Buddhists in Maharashtra that bhikkhunis be address as *Ayyaji* or *Ariyaji*, the *ji* added at the end as a reverential honorific. *Gyi* is also still used in Theravada Buddhist Burma in much the same way, as a reverent addition to a Buddhist monastic title. It has been questioned whether the *chee*, *chi* or *ji* or Thai and Cambodian are related to the Indic *ji*, or mean "renunciate." As seen above with regards the bhikkhuni *tamnans* the word *nang* was used on occasion in Thai chronicles in explicit reference to bhikkhunis.

Pre-modern and Modern Period

Looking for evidence of the continuation of *kasaya*-robed Buddhist monastic women beyond the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, such evidence may be found in nearly all directions.

In the northwest of what is now Thailand, Mon records include bhikkhunis into the 14th century CE. In the northeast, records from Lao territories show yellow-robed female monastics into the 20th century. In the north, Thai-Yuan records of the Yuan Special Autonomous District in Southern China showed bhikkhunis into the 20th century. The Thai peoples of at least one locale in India also preserve the last remnants of a yellow-robed women's monastic tradition.

To the west in neighboring Myanmar, the *Burmese Chronicles of the King's Proclamations*, as translated by Dr. Tan Tun in *Ideas and Views*, shows royal permission granted as late as 1788 CE to women over age nineteen to ordain as bhikkhunis. Additional laws prevented the king's slaves from becoming bhikkhunis and, as late as 1810 CE, required both the bhikkhus' and bhikkhunis' discipline to be royally monitored. It may be noted here that, rather than the "thousand year gap" regularly spoken of, these records leave a gap of *less than 200 years*³¹ in the tradition of full ordination for women in Southeast Asia.

To the east there are more recent Thai-Lao records as well. Most well-known is the travel diary of Hermann Norden, as published by Kamala Tiyavanich in the chapter "Sisterhood of the Yellow Robe" in her book *Buddha in the Jungle*. Norden writes in his 1920s travel diary for the Royal Geographical Society of Great Britain of his visit to the isolated Muang You people:

³¹ The eminent teacher of Burmese Master Mahasi Sayadaw, Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw's 1949 CE reasoned proposal in his *Milindapanha Tika* for the reestablishment of the Bhikkhuni Sasana in Burma (although not accepted at that time) thus seems to have followed upon no more than 139 years lapse of the Southeast Asian Bhikkhuni Sangha. This in turn was not unprecedented. The earlier 1935 proposal by the senior Buddhist monk, Ven. U Adiccavamsa (Burmese: U Ardisavintha) in his 1935 CE *Bhikkhuni Sasana Upadesa*, (Burmese: *Beikkhuni Thathano Padeiktha*, "Overview of the Bhikkhuni Sasana) would have been made after only 125 years lapse (see Kawanami's 2007 "Bhikkhuni Ordination Debate," p 231).

“At the *bonzerie* (monastery or nunnery), I was astonished to see young women in yellow robes and with shaven heads; a Buddhist Sisterhood. They were busily sweeping an already tidy yard; an older woman superintending the work.”

To the north, the records are not only recent, but near contemporary. Dr. Hua Che Min, a Chinese scholar of Sinhalese language affiliated with the language department at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, has authored a book in Sinhalese about the Thai-lue people’s religious lives and practices in the Sip Song Panna Special Autonomous Region in Yunnan Province, Southern China. This book, *Theravada Buddhism in China* (in Sinhalese), records, as of the year 1991 CE, the number of temples and bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of both Mahayana and Theravada traditions, reporting that they have been largely untouched by the Chinese government. Phra Vutthichai Bhikkhu, in his 2006 visit to the area to support the renovation of the Thai people’s Theravadin temples, confirmed the reports of the book and reported that the temples look remarkably Thai.³²

Not only in China and in the regions surrounding modern Thailand, but in the homeland of Buddhism as well, the ethnic Thai peoples seem to have been among the last to devotedly preserve the remnants of their yellow-robed monastic traditions for women. In *Yasodhara Magazine*, Ven. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni reported her discovery of the presence of a tradition of saffron-robed female monastics in at least one ethnic Thai people’s community in India.³³

Once again returning to within the heart of the Thai Kingdom, images of saffron-robed women in Buddhist monastic life do not entirely disappear in the Ratanakosin Era, but may be found in the arts and histories related to the Royal Family.

Many Thais might be surprised to learn that the heritage of the early arahanta bhikkhunis and the later bhikkhunis’ missions were both affirmed and royally honored in Thailand. In 1836 CE, King Nang Klao—Rama III, established Wat Thepthidarom (Pali: *Devadhita-arama*) in Bangkok, the Monastery of the Heavenly

³² Personal interview with Phra Vutthichai Bhikkhu, 2006. Phra Vutthi (“Woody”) reports that by the time of his visit government intervention had occurred, as had Christian missionary activities, with substantial impact on the earlier Buddhist culture.

³³ See www.thaibhikkhunis.org – *Yasodhara Magazine*, “back issues.”

Daughter, named for his beloved eldest daughter who served efficiently as his personal secretary, Crown Princess Apsonsudathep. The monastery's Bhikkhuni Vihara houses statuary images of the Founding Mother of the Bhikkhuni Sangha Mahapajapati Gotami and fifty-two bhikkhuni arahantas, the images dedicated to his daughter (whose health was ailing) and his fifty-two children. The princess also contributed from her personal fortune to the construction. King Rama III further undertook the sixteen year and seven month-long month restoration of the Ayutthayan period monastery Wat Bodharam (commonly known as Wat Pho), initially begun by King Rama I when he established it as a first grade royal monastery in 1788 CE. King Rama III's son Prince Laddawan led in the restoration of the Western Vihara, the famed Temple of the Reclining Buddha, on whose walls may still be found the *Mahavamsa* mural paintings of the arrival of Aśokan daughter Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta (Skt: Sanghamitra) with the Bodhi tree to Sri Lanka,³⁴ her meeting with King Devanampiyatissa and her ordination of Queen Anula with her company of 500 women, establishing the Budhasasana. Other walls in the sanctuary of the Reclining Buddha are covered by extensive and elaborate mural paintings of the thirteen foremost bhikkhuni disciples of the Buddha and their stories, as well as paintings of the ten foremost laymen and laywomen disciples. This great restoration was undertaken by the king to maintain Wat Pho as "a center of both arts and knowledge for the Thai people, where descendants could look indefinitely."

In the years that followed however, few have even known to look. Until 2009, the doors of the Bhikkhuni Vihara in the Monastery of the Heavenly Daughter generally remained locked.³⁵ As robed, shaven-headed images of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis may look similar without close examination, even well-educated monks living for years at Wat Pho may never know of the content and meaning of its full-wall mural paintings, not to mention the throngs of tourists that pass through its halls each day.

³⁴ Images can be seen here: <http://www.photodharma.net/Thailand/Wat-Thepthidaram/Wat-Thepthidaram.htm>

³⁵ Up thru 2008 the doors generally remained locked, however now (in 2014) the Bhikkhuni Vihara is regularly opened to tourists and both lay and monastic pilgrims, including a growing number of Thai bhikkhunis and samaneris.

The majority of pre-modern records that are often seen related to ordained women in the saffron robes and the Thai royalty might be considered tragic.

Perhaps the most famous is the diary of Anna Leonowens and the Western movies *The King and I* and *Anna and the King* based upon it. Anna Owens was the British governess to the Royal court of Siam from 1862-1865 CE, during the reign of King Mongkut—Rama IV, who was a highly-disciplined Buddhist monk himself for many years and founder of the reformed monastic order the Dhammayuttika Nikaya before ascending to the throne. In her book *Romance of the Harem*, she relates the pitiful story of the favorite consort-wife of the king, Lady Tuptim, who was engaged to be married when she was chosen for the royal harem. Her fiancé, Pilat, ordained as a Buddhist monk after her leaving, and when Lady Tuptim felt trapped by the confines of her palace life she escaped and secretly ordained as a novice / *samanera* at Phra Pilat’s temple. Upon her discovery there, although affirming purity, the two were tried and sentenced to death by fire. We can only imagine the impact such a shocking event may have had upon the thoughts and views of the royal princes and their heirs, amongst them, Prince Chulalongkorn, the son of King Mongkut who was later to become Rama V, the king to follow, and Prince Wachirayan, the son who was to become Sangharaja.

Under the reign of the beloved and revered King Chulalongkorn—Rama V (the son of King Mongkut tutored by Anna Leonowens while a prince)—Siam lost border territories to colonial powers, to France for Laos and Cambodia, to Britain for Burma and northern Malaysia. However the King was able to maintain independence, declaring Siam an independent kingdom in 1886. A son of King Chulalongkorn’s, Rama VI—King Vajiravudh—reigned from 1910 to 1925, during which time he increased the westernization begun by his father and grandfather, including mandatory primary school education and a system of standardized basic education for the Buddhist monastic Sangha. Prince Wachirayan (Vajirananavarovasa) was appointed and empowered by King Vajiravudh as *Sangharaja*—“Sangha King” or “Supreme Patriarch” of Siam.

Texts authored by Prince Patriarch Vajirananavarorasa for the progress and knowledge of Buddhism and education of the Sangha in the monastic discipline of the Vinaya included the *Vinaya Mukha* and its English-language translation *En-*

trance to the Vinaya. As these texts are often studied in place of the Vinaya itself, they have led (and still continue to lead) the vast majority of Thai-educated Buddhist monks to hold beliefs expressed therein, such as: a "person who wishes for *upasampada* [full bhikkhu or bhikkhuni ordination] must be male" and "if one has committed serious offenses or one is a woman, then such persons cannot receive the *upasampada* and their ordination would be known as *vatthu-vipatti*, literally, defect[ive]." ³⁶ Later, in Volume III of the *Vinaya Mukha* we find two speculative theories propounded by its author now known by historians to be incorrect: the first, that the Bhikkhuni Sangha "existed temporarily, for no great length of time... [and] probably disappeared in Lord Buddha's own days;" ³⁷ and the second, that from the time of Sanghamitta Theri, daughter of Emperor Ashoka, "it is agreed that the bhikkhunis disappeared." ³⁸ In this case, the "agreement" seems to have become the self-fulfilling prophecy for a nation. With a concerted effort made to spread and establish a statewide system of secular and monastic education three generations of lay children, samaneras, and bhikkhus, from the early 1900s until the present, all came to be educated that the Bhikkhuni Sasana had died out in India not long after the Buddha's time, the last bhikkhuni being Sanghamitta Theri.

Additionally, according to both Buddhist monastic scholars and Buddhist historians such as Tiyavanich, in the twentieth century, diverse, local, ethnic traditions of Buddhism in Thailand were legally replaced by State Buddhism for the sake of a Unified Thai Nation and Sangha. Empowered by the Sangha Acts of 1903 and 1928 CE, both secular and religious laws were made forbidding the ordination of women due to a perceived political threat. ³⁹ For the sake of a centralized Thai State and uniformity of Sangha standards, although in divergence from Vinaya, from that time it became illegal for local Elder Buddhist monks to give ordination

³⁶ *Entrance to the Vinaya I*, pgs 4-5 on fulfilling conditions (*sampatti*) for ordination. Thai version published in 1903.

³⁷ *Entrance to the Vinaya III*, pg 268. Thai version published in 1921, English in 1983.

³⁸ *Entrance to the Vinaya III*, pg 269, as above.

³⁹ According to members of the Research Department at MCU-Bangkok, until that time Chinese Mahayana traditions in Thailand still had both Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sanghas in Thailand, but with the establishment of these laws, they voluntarily gave up their practice of ordaining women in-country.

within their local Sangha traditions and lineages *to even men*, unless they were trained, certified and appointed as *upajjhayas* (preceptors) by State Authority.

At the time of the original writing, scholar Peter Koret was currently working on the histories of several Thai women ordained as bhikkhunis and disrobed by law during the early 1900s in the Sangha Acts period above.⁴⁰ These include the two daughters of outspoken political critic Narin Klung (one of the political threats mentioned above) who were ordained as bhikkhuni and samaneri along with a number of other women.⁴¹ Due to their father's political conflicts, the daughters, Sara and Jongdi, were arrested and most of their Sangha disrobed, while the two sisters were taken to prison where the elder sister was disrobed by force. When released from prison the daughters maintained their monastic life but changed the color of their robes. Their Sangha ended one day when the elder sister, Phra Bhikkuni Sara, was kidnapped by a rider on horseback while she was walking on almsround. Due to the negative reaction to that event within the Sangha, the then Sangharaja of Thailand passed a law forbidding any and all Thai bhikkhus from acting as preceptors in ordaining women as either samaneris, sikkhamanas, or bhikkhunis (female novice, probationer or fully ordained monastic members of the Sangha).

Nonetheless, brown-robed women *samanas* continued to be noted by outside observers in association with the bhikkhus of the revered Thai forest sangha *dhutanga kammattana* tradition living in remote and outlying areas even late into the twentieth century.

In chapter nine of JL Taylor's *Forest Monks and the Nation State* (p 288), Taylor describes TC Pharmaceutical's founder Chalieu's patronage of the late Ajahn Wan Uttamo, a *dhutanga kammattana* bhikkhu in the lineage of Loung Por Mun, at Wat Tham Amphaidamrongtham in Songdao district of Sakon Nakhon in the 1970s. According to Taylor, in the 1960s Ajahn Wan had settled at the secluded Wat, well-known for its caves, 30 kilometers off the Udon-Sakon road. At the

⁴⁰ Koret was working on this in the year 2008 CE. The resulting book, *The Man Who Accused the King of Killing a Fish: The Biography of Narin Phasit of Siam 1874-1950*, was published by Silkworm Books in 2012. See especially Ch V "The First Order of Female Monks in the History of Thailand," pp 99-220.

⁴¹ Photos and history in Thai here: http://neobuddhism.blogspot.com/2012/09/blog-post_3529.html and <http://neobuddhism.blogspot.com/2012/09/blog-post.html>.

time of Taylor's visit there were fifteen bhikkhus, ten samaneras and six resident nuns in the three *samnak* there. In the footnote ten (p 308) he relates:

"[I]n the *mae chii khana*, yet standing apart, was a well known local meditating *mae chii* who goes around with the appearance of a fully ordained monk. She claims to have been "ordained" by Wan himself, and certainly was held in high esteem by the other *mae chii*."

He goes on to remark that this is the only such case he encountered, remarking that it is worthy of more thorough future investigation. As Taylor was ordained in the tradition himself for at least part of the time of his research, and his highly detail-oriented and distinguishing type of observing mind is noteworthy in his writings, it seems reasonable to assume that, whether male or female, he would be able to distinguish between the appearance of a novice and a fully ordained monk in Thai forest tradition. This in turn leads to the question whether the unnamed woman may have been ordained by Ajahn Wan and his community as a bhikkhuni. In relation to Taylor's reported observations Ven. Bhikkhu Sujato has also written:

"Near where our Poo Jorm Gorm hermitage is, there was a cave called Tham Maechee ("Cave of the Mother Recluse"). Apparently a nun in brown used to stay there, in that very remote district, and walk pindapata in the village. Also, Ajahn Chah's nephew Ajahn Gunha used to ordain nuns in brown with the ten precepts until he was asked to stop by the authorities."⁴²

Although then no longer allowed in Thailand, by 1983, less than a decade later, another leading disciple of Ajahn Chah's, Ajahn Sumedho, was able to obtain special permission of Thai Sangha authorities to give the ten precept pabbajja with the wearing of the patchwork *civara* robes to women renunciates in the tradition of Ajahn Chah abroad in the far-away English countryside.

Returning to the Thai capital and jumping back in time again a little, twenty-eight years after the 1928 law passed, in 1956 CE, a Thai lady Voramai Kabilsingh received ordination as a samaneri not from a remote forest monk in an outlying province, but from Phra Prommuni of Wat Bawanniwet, the King's own ordination master. Although she wore light yellow robes of a different color than Thai

⁴² Via email correspondence 2008.

bhikkhus, in the 1960s she was charged with the illegal act of impersonating a bhikkhu. After learning of the continuation of Sanghamitta Theri's line in the Chinese Dharmagupta bhikkhuni lineage of Taiwan, in 1971 she traveled for the full bhikkhuni ordination there, receiving the ordained name of Shih Ta-Tao Fa-Shr—Venerable Mahabodhi Dhammacarya. In the year 2001, thirty years after her full ordination, *Loung Mae* (“Venerable Mother”) Mahabodhi's daughter Prof. Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, herself a respected Buddhist scholar and teacher, traveled to Sri Lanka to receive samaneri ordination and two years later the bhikkhuni ordination upon the revival of the tradition of the bhikkhuni upasampada there. Given the ordained name Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, her ordination together with the beneficent works of others, has paved the way for a gradually but steadily increasing number of Thai women, both Theravadin and Mahayana, to be ordained as samaneris and bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka, in Taiwan, and once again in Thailand. As their stories are many, they will not be told here.⁴³ Fortunately, it is the very spirit of further research into the Buddhist texts coupled with dedication to the higher purpose of the Buddhasasana and the welfare of the Monastic Sangha, so championed by Kings Mongkut and his sons King Chulalongkorn and Prince Patriarch Vajiranavarorasa, which has brought this about. In the year 2003 CE, after extensive research and review by the Thai Senate, the secular law banning women's ordination in Thailand was found unconstitutional and revoked as contrary to freedom of religion.

Eleven years later, in 2014 CE (2557 BE), Dhammananda Bhikkhuni (aka Loung Mae Chat Dhammananda) lives with a growing community of bhikkhunis, sikkhamanas and samaneris at the monastery founded by her bhikkhuni mother, Wattra Songdhammakalayani, this just one of a growing number of established

⁴³ Many of these women have been awarded as “Outstanding Women in Buddhism” in observance of the United Nation's International Women's Day at the United Nations in Bangkok. Their information may be available through Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards Secretary General Dr. Tavivat Puntarigivat or Founder Venerable Rattanavali Bhikkhuni, and found online at: <http://iwmcf.net/awards>.

bhikkhuni monasteries and temples in Thailand. In December of 2014,⁴⁴ she became qualified to be appointed by the Bhikkhuni Sangha as a preceptor, she herself able to fully support the ordination of bhikkhunis in Thailand.

In Conclusion: A Different Definition

Thus, as I have been told by knowledgeable Thai researchers and Buddhist academics, the common statement "*Thailand has never had a Bhikkhuni Sangha*" or "*Thailand has never had bhikkhunis,*" to current knowledge, might be more accurately and correctly stated as:

Within the domains of the current Chakri dynasty of Rama kings, since its foundation; that is, in the Ratanakosin Era from the Ayutthaya Period through the Bangkok period (1782 CE -present), Thailand has not yet had a *royally- or State-sanctioned* Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha *with dual ordination*.

This is *not* to say that there have never been bhikkhunis or bhikkhuni sanghas amongst the ethnic Thai peoples, nor that the lands, now known as Thailand, have never been host to the Buddhist Bhikkhuni Sangha. In fact, the pattern that appears within the historical threads, when woven together, does seem to tell quite a different story.

⁴⁴ This update was largely prepared in May of 2014 and further updated as here in Dec of 2014. On 29 Nov 2015, the first publicly-celebrated ordination of eight Thai women as bhikkhunis was held at Thipayasathadhamma Bhikkhuni Arama in the southern Thai province of Songkhla on the island of Koh Yoh. Ven. Dhammananda was one of the main supporters of this ordination, and was appointed as a bhikkhuni preceptor at this time. For more information on this ordination see: <http://www.dhammadharini.net/bhikkhuni-path/entering-monastic-life/-it-begins-here-in-our-hearts-bhikkhuni-ordination-in-thailand>, and <http://www.bangkokpost.com/lite/topstories/449843/ssc-ban-riles-female-monks>. There have been many further news articles.