

***Gender and the Path to Awakening: Hidden Histories of Nuns in Modern Thai Buddhism*, by Martin Seeger. Nordic Institute of Indic Studies, Monograph Series, no.144. 342 pp. Preface. Silkworm Press, Chiang Mai, Thailand/Nias Press, Copenhagen. Denmark. ISBN 978-87-7694-258-8.**

Reviewed by Sarah Shaw

At a time when many are speaking for, about, instead of, or on behalf of nuns, it is pertinent and refreshing to read a book that explores the lives of six twentieth-century nuns in detail, analysing and recounting what they had to say about their practice and life. Seeger is in a particularly strong position to do this. One of the few Western scholars with real knowledge of the Buddhist background, language, culture and history of Thailand, his work, based on years of ethnographic and bibliographic research, provides an essential service to those of us who cannot speak Thai, but would like to find out more. And it is always much easier to assimilate a large body of information about practices, procedures and doctrine if we can attach it to the specificity of detail and evocation associated with particular persons. The lives of a number of nuns are chosen, many of whom are now considered arahants or saints: Khunying Yai (Khunying Damrongthammasan Yai Wisetsiri, 1882–1944), Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem (1895–1964), Mae Chi Kaew (1901–1991), Mae Chi Nari Karun (1876/7–1999), Mae Chi Phimpha Wongs-udom (1912–2010), and Mae Chi Soda (1920–2009). They present admirable and awe-inspiring examples; the histories given by Seeger offer a varied and nuanced picture of many features peculiar not only to their personal practice, but also to the milieu and religious background to female Thai spiritual life in general over the last 140 years.

Seeger has chosen only women who have died, a decision that allows him to see their lives as a whole, including, importantly, their deaths, funerary celebrations and subsequent reputation. For this is a distinguished group: those whose attainments were so highly respected that in some cases *stūpas* and memorials have been erected in their honour and their relics seen as objects of devotion. After a brief survey of some parameters of the research and archives accessible to him, Chapter 1 sets the scene: it is particularly helpful for anyone interested in Southeast Asian culture and female participation, both lay and monastic, over the last century or so. Seeger addresses the complexities of the Thai attitude towards gender and spiritual practice, and provides a useful historical account, noting the presence of an apparently strong *bhikkhunī* order in ancient times, that went into decline before disappearing completely. For the nuns' order technically does not exist; the direct ordination line has been lost and has traditionally been thought not to be then capable of re-instatement. So the participants in a monastic life discussed here take eight or ten basic precepts and live as nuns, not eating after noon, living a celibate life and so on. Seeger explains the background economically and effectively, along with the Pali canonical precedent for the nuns' order. This chapter includes reference to material which suggests the ordination could be re-established if permitted.

A number of issues are raised in this and later chapters. The first is the simple difficulty of accessing reliable material about these women. The significance and necessity in some Northern and Eastern Buddhist schools for autobiographies and sacred biographies as central to communicating the lineage of a particular guru, Rinpoche line or master is not a characteristic of Southeast Asian literary composition. Religious autobiography is not indigenous: the genre, so embedded in the Western literary environment since the seventeenth century, has never historically been a natural mode though, as Seeger notes, it is there in early texts. The interpretation of the fourth *pārājika*, common in South and Southeast Asia, whereby monks – and nuns – refrain from boasting wrongly of meditational achievement had, until the early twentieth century, led by common consensus to a reticence on such matters; lay practitioners share this caution. It was only with the great biographical traditions of the Northeast Thailand monastic schools that this situation changed, and then only marginally (pp.44–45). Even Ajahn Mun, whose arahantship was widely celebrated, did not make the claim himself (pp.122–124). Most monks or nuns would not speak of such matters to this day and tend to refer to meditational attainments only circuitously. Seeger explores this reluctance to use the autobiographical mode, and then too, other attendant

problems: not only is there a far greater reticence amongst female practitioners, but it is sometimes difficult in such Thai literature to tell the difference between autobiography and biography: fluidity in the use of first and third person is frequent, with 'mother' (*mae*) or 'teacher' (*ajan*) often applied to content that could have been written or dictated by the practitioner or students. Subsequent editors often insert sections, or doctor and revise anecdotes that may have been in the first place recorded by someone else, or placed after the event.

Despite these problems, Seeger has compiled a considerable archive of personal recollections, anecdotes, hagiographies, pictures, press-cuttings, contemporary comment and material objects such as amulets: basic facts about the lives of the women are made succinctly but vividly accessible. We receive a sense of the quite different backgrounds of each, as their circumstances, education, practice and background are discussed in turn in Chapter Three. Their routes to taking the holy life are varied and shed a fascinating light on the obstacles, difficulties and societal pressures they had to overcome simply to engage in the monastic life. The pulls of lay life, social pressure, opposition from husbands and families and disapproval for their chosen path feature frequently. Their practice interests are wide and varied. Most were highly adept and experienced in a number of traditional meditative skills: most memorised chants and texts not only for their teaching, but as a spiritual practice. Many are said to have acquired considerable psychic ability and depth in *samatha* meditation as well as *vipassanā*; some were accredited in their lifetimes with supernatural powers (pp.75; pp.86–9). The deployment of these for healing and inspiration to others also features (pp.248–9). Many, if not all, seem to have been seen as approaching or reaching awakening. They are a formidable host.

These short biographies have certain recurring elements: Seeger traces several crucial threads running through their lives, and explores them in separate chapters. These include the notion of arahantship, and how it is validated and assessed in modern Thailand; material objects such as relics, *stūpas*, amulets, clothes and papers as manifestations and expressions of devotion; and the prevalence of orality, memorisation and chant as an underlying mainstay of female spiritual practice.

The themes of arahantship, relic devotion and *stūpa* construction are closely related, and inevitably linked now in Thailand to the genre of autobiography. For the twentieth-century stream of monastic biographies, from Northeast Thailand in particular, started to broach what had previously been the domain of rumour and speculation. The arahantship of several figures now started to be claimed

more widely, and in print. Female subjects for this genre are rather rare, but the notion that someone could be perceived and stated to be awakened gained more public prominence. *Stūpas* were constructed for some of these women amidst recognition that they had achieved enlightenment, though the women involved had often requested the minimum of fuss; the relics of some were said to have undergone crystallisations (*phra that*) confirming their *arahant* status (eg. pp.100-101; pp.145-149). In the wake of this, material objects such as amulets and other precious talismans emerged, validating the women as supreme exponents of meditation and spiritual attainment: Mae Bunrean was famously asked to consecrate amulets during her own lifetime, traditionally a male monastic preserve (p.171). The power of such validations in Thailand cannot be overestimated. As Seeger writes, such material objects “have often had a much wider and deeper impact on religious practices, emotions, and beliefs, than Pali canonical texts or sermons by contemporary figures” (p.180).

Chapter 5, on orality in Thai culture, is of particular significance for our understanding of Buddhist culture in the region: as so often in studies of female worlds, it opens a door onto a vibrant and hitherto hidden world of practice, ritual and oral transmission. Women were often prime exponents of oral recitation but such exercises were popular amongst everyone. Seeger’s discussion discloses a way of understanding the relationship of text, ritual and personal practice that is radically different from modern western models. Those interested in Southeast Asian monasticism are used to hearing accounts through the lens of Anglophone books, about or by men, designed or translated with a Western and international readership in mind. Westerners also assume that training in Buddhist text – and to a certain extent meditation itself – necessarily involves ‘reading’ and absorbing core texts through solitary engagement with a book. But the detail of the lives of these women challenge assumptions that literacy and formal education are necessary both for the transmission of teachings and for serious practice. The importance of ‘non-literacy’ then becomes fascinating: the meditative and cultural training of these women often depended upon an impressively knowledgeable background in Sutta, manual, commentary, and chant, all the more highly developed precisely because many women at the centre of female monastic life had come late in life, or not at all, to reading and writing themselves. In order to take ordination, some had to learn to read before compulsory female education was instated in the 1920s; but it is clear their mainstay remained the recited and chanted text (p.240–2). In traditional Thailand, as Seeger explains, a text was never really a solid artefact to read in solitude; oral teaching, learning and recitation had always underpinned

practice. Such transmissions are equally powerful but leave less obvious traces: more social, more suited to reflection, and working more actively on people's sensibilities, chants, stories, texts and recitative verses are assimilated in a way that is quite different from our modern patterns of engagement. Texts would be learned by heart, taught perhaps by mother to daughter, in largely undocumented transmission (p 182–193). Practitioners of both sexes have historically applied the mind and explored the meaning of the texts from a number of angles: Ajahn Mun recited texts as part of his core forest practice (p.209). As Seeger shows, through extensive quotation from monks and nuns, practitioners reflected on them, taking them as a basis for practice and considering their meaning; the very chanting and recollection of the text, with all its meaning and rhythms, was a primary element in their meditation. Khunying Yai, for instance, never talked about 'reading' texts, but 'listening' to them and 'reciting' them, using words like 'recall' (*valuek*) and 'memorize' (*jam son wai*) for her copious knowledge of Abhidhamma, Sutta and vernacular training manuals, employed for her recollection of the teaching (*dhammānussati*) and personal meditation (pp.185-193). It is a revelation to find in this chapter such a living tradition of textual knowledge, amongst those who have 'heard much' (*bahussuto*), present so recently in people who were deeply learned, but might not have read a word.

Chapter 6, on gender, gathers these threads together, including the self-reflexive comments, where they can be found, of the women involved in issues pertaining to awakening and their role as nuns, alongside developments and obstacles faced by nuns. Seeger notes the complexity of factors involved; many issues westerners and modern scholars see as crucially important do not assume the same prominence amongst *mae chis*, who perceive the real chance in their lives as the opportunity to practise spiritual and meditative work; not all prioritise status, wealth, public position or even education, though Seeger carefully notes the often context-specific imbalances in these areas. Many nuns have not invested so much importance in features such as hierarchy, a lower social role, and domestic work: assuming a lower status and performing domestic tasks around and about are taken as a practice, as are other obstacles (pp.164–5; p.248). Such a position confers a power that can seem mysterious to Westerners, but means also that those wanting to intervene on their behalf need to be mindful of innate strengths and reserves that the order itself may already have which are sometimes less obvious to outside commentators. At any rate the notion that women have equal capacity for awakening, as suggested by the earliest texts, is generally accepted, and it seems many *mae chis* have taken refuge in that.

Seeger does not use words like ‘ought’ or ‘should’ in his account of their status and the issue of whether there should be fully ordained nuns, a commendable omission. He cites the now extensive discussion on this matter; he also carefully highlights the varied deprivations and lack of opportunities some endure in some regions of Thailand. His caution leads to reflection: one can understand the reticence of the sangha in Thailand to re-institute the nuns’ order, as the existing polarity of sangha and laity has for so many centuries been the bedrock of Thai life. But, as Seeger observes, “it seems only a matter of time before a Theravada *bhikkhunī* order will take root in Thailand” (p.31). In this light one can deeply admire nuns within Southeast Asia, and also internationally, who exercise patience in this regard. Women have a habit of just doing things they are not ‘supposed’ to, and doing them so well that in the end to deny their presence is impossible. This appears to be the case here. These determined nuns just wanted to practise the holy life and, as their biographies show, often overcame immense obstacles to do so. It struck me while reading that the process seems, at a completely different level of engagement, a little like the admission of women to Oxford University in the twentieth century: women simply worked as if undergraduates, not getting degrees until, in the end, their achievements and presence could be denied no longer. The nuns’ situation is different: their presence was validated a long time ago, and lost. But at an anecdotal level, a quiet resolve that I suspect will lead that way has always impressed me in the many nuns I have enjoyed meeting on visits and stays at temples and monasteries in Thailand. At Wat Mahathat in Bangkok I visited the nuns’ house, and could not have received a warmer or more self-assuredly confident welcome: they are just getting on with it. They have workable solutions to do what they want and, to a certain extent, are respected and supported in that; they do not see institutionalising their order as first priority. So you will not find nuns on high-powered committees, or with any great status as representatives of the sangha. The nuns seem patient: my impression is that they would appreciate respect and security and the same meditative and educational opportunities as men, but are not in a hurry to overturn systems; the situation is possibly changing (p.30–37). Clearly some would rise to the challenge of a high position if the chances were there.

One of the most interesting and informative features of this book is the light it sheds on the current debate about the re-instatement of the Buddha’s second assembly in Southern Buddhism. Seeger’s focus on nuns who have died, and hence undergone funerary rites, demonstrates how deeply these women are

now revered, with the status of some as awakened beings validated amongst the sangha and laity. The *stūpas* erected in their memory, and the folk mythology, material culture and popular acceptance key to sustaining religious traditions in Thailand have gradually absorbed them into the emotional and spiritual life of people in general; many now take the status of some as *arahants* for granted. By examining the way that the cult of relics, enlightenment stories, and accounts of *nimits* (images in the mind's eye; p.73) of these women appearing to modern practitioners are now pervading popular culture, he shows us what will be the key to the gradual acceptance of a *bhikkhunī* order – people at large are recognising the presence of four assemblies: of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. The book makes it abundantly clear that whatever the paperwork and administrative logistics needed to accommodate the restitution of the lineage of nuns in a formal sense, it has, for two or three hundred years been active in Thailand as a living entity and, despite the low status of nuns, is now informally recognised as such. However long it takes for public recognition validated by the sangha, and for the vows that would mean so much to many such women that acknowledge their connections in lineage to be publicly acknowledged, the nuns' order in Southeast Asian Buddhism already exists. As Seeger constantly reminds us, the women concerned live in a manner entirely in accordance with early teachings.

It is to this book's great credit that we feel this living continuity, assessed with a non-judgemental and nuanced appreciation of the density and complexity of the historical issues involved. And from a Buddhist Studies point of view, Seeger's sensitive and probing analysis of the lives of some women who have contributed to that presence opens a door on the often neglected or simply unknown worlds of female monastic and lay culture. He demonstrates with admirable even-handedness that an often highly sophisticated textual and meditative training animated the practice of women whose own preoccupations are concerned simply with living 'the holy life' as wholeheartedly as they can. One would not want future generations of nuns to live in this position; one hopes that future generations have more recognition and support. But the fact that these women seemed to turn disadvantages, including low status, to spiritual attainment is a testament to their extraordinary confidence, resilience and courage. I recommend Seeger's book for its rich insights into popular Buddhism in Thailand and the now deeply rooted culture of appreciation and recognition for the distinguished *mae chi* line.