

Orality, Memory, and Spiritual Practice: Outstanding Female Thai Buddhists in the Early 20th Century¹

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Through a study of a number of biographies of outstanding female Thai Buddhists in the period between 1880 and 1950, I want to investigate the access of Thai women to Buddhist teachings and practice. Here I will give particular attention to the religious life and work of Khunying Yai Damrongthammasan, who appears to have produced one of the first significant Buddhist treatises ever authored by a Thai woman. In addition, I will also examine how her major teacher Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn Jaroen Nāṇavaro conveyed and reflected on Buddhist knowledge. In order to add further evidence to the major arguments I intend to develop in this article, I will also investigate, albeit only briefly, or refer to relevant aspects of the

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religious life of a number of female Buddhist practitioners of the same time period, many of whom did not come from a privileged social stratum as Khunyng Yai did; she belonged to the nobility. The case studies will allow me to examine the significance of orality and memory for female Buddhist practice and education in early 20th century Thai Buddhism.

*“Better than a thousand useless verses
is one useful verse,
hearing which one attains peace.
Better than reciting a hundred meaningless verses
is the reciting of one verse of Dhamma,
hearing which one attains peace.”*²

Introduction

In her study of the “History of Women’s Education and Activism in Thailand”, Costa argues that “... as women were barred from the monkhood by virtue of their sex, they were denied learning at the *wat* [monastery] and, as a result, prohibited access to an enormous body of knowledge considered to be culturally and socially valuable.”³ She also writes that “In 1915, the government initiated an [...] education plan [that] attempted to give girls more educational opportunities. But prevailing cultural attitudes slowed such advancement for a number of reasons. First, the general public still believed that women should care for the home and family and that book learning was unsuitable for girls. Second, the majority of schools were located in provincial monasteries, and it was thought indecorous for women to attend school in these principally male religious spaces.”⁴ Similarly, Darunee Tantiwiramanond argues that “The most important consequence of banning women from the order, however, was to deprive women of literacy. Prior to the early 20th century, literacy was imparted solely in Buddhist monasteries.

² *Dhammapada*; verse 101 and 102, Acharya Buddharakkhita (transl.), 1985, p. 39.

³ Costa, 1997, [online resource]; see also Barmé, 2002, pp. 21-22. Costa notes however that “It is clear that elite women *did* receive formal education in the palace, though subjects were gender specific.” (Costa, 1997, [online resource]).

⁴ Scholars have stated that only around 1921, when the Thai state made education compulsory for both genders, did the number of literate women begin to increase significantly. See e.g. Barmé, 2002, p. 135. Relying on Vella (1978), Keyes writes that “between 1921 and 1925 the percentage of female students throughout the country jumped from seven to thirty-eight” (Keyes, 1991, p. 96). See also footnote 13.

Female education was suppressed by religious mechanism: physical contact between the lay female and (male) monks was considered sinful. Consequently, women were barred from knowledge...⁵ The seven case studies examined in this article will show that both Darunee's and Costa's statements appear to be too simplistic with regard to women's access to (text-based) knowledge, and the roles of women in Thai Buddhism; they certainly require qualification.⁶ As I will show, a shortcoming of Darunee's and Costa's statements is that they overlook the importance of orality and memory in Buddhist learning environments, at the very least when it comes to the transmission of Buddhist knowledge. My case studies will not only show that women had access to (sometimes high-ranking) monk teachers who taught them; it will also suggest that in the study of Buddhist teaching, literacy did not often play a decisive role in the pedagogical relationships between a Buddhist master and his students, and this applies to both male and female students.

In Thailand, there has been a strong oral/aural culture for a long time, as monks have committed large amounts of Pali texts to memory, be it for giving blessings, as a part of their meditation practice, or as part of their preparation for Pali language exams. In fact, until 1912 Pali language translation examinations were held entirely in oral form; only then was the written examination for Pali language gradually introduced.⁷ It has been argued that during the reign of Rama IV (1851-1868), the acquisition of knowledge through reading started to become increasingly important.⁸ Also, with the arrival of print technology and the proliferation of printed books in Thailand during the 19th century, oral transmission of knowledge certainly decreased in importance.⁹ Nonetheless, it seems that the increasing availability of printed texts and the arrival of a modern educational system have not eclipsed the importance of orality and memory.

Thus, Thai historian Nidhi Eosewong believes that "it is possible that the majority of Thai people are still in a culture of listening rather than of reading and the very reason why Thai people read little is because we are not familiar with

⁵Darunee Tantiwiranond, 1997, p. 172.

⁶Even though Darunee alludes to *maechis* (see below) in this context, she does not mention their educational opportunities here, but rather discusses the "inferiority" and "the derogatory status of ... *mae chi*" (Darunee Tantiwiranond, 1997, pp. 172-173).

⁷Ministry of Education (publisher), 2527 [1984], p. 44. For an interesting study on the importance of orality and memory in northern Thai Buddhism see Veidlinger, 2006.

⁸Saichol Satayanurak, 2546 [2003], p. 252.

⁹See Pathom Takhananan, 2551 [2008], p. 14.

this form of receiving information.”¹⁰ He argues that a considerable amount of old (*boran*) Thai literature was to be read out so that people could listen to it. Even nowadays, he observes, Thai bestsellers still have an oral character: “[authors] for example create texts that are like a conversation with the reader.”¹¹ Thai scholar Chetana Nagavajara also underscores the importance of orality and memory in traditional textual practices when he argues that “texts were written down in an effort to safeguard them against oblivion and at the same time to constitute a kind of literary trust for the benefit of the general public and posterity. But the quest for permanency does not preclude dissemination through the oral tradition. Those who could read continued to commit the fruits of their reading to memory, ...” He recalls how his grandmother, “who was among a small number of women in those days who could read and write, ... [g]rowing up in the oral tradition... [n]aturally, ... was endowed with an extraordinary memory (which was common to her contemporaries) and possessed a large repertoire of literary works that she could recite. It was perfectly natural for her to recite... for a few hours.”¹²

Through a study of a number of biographies of female Thai Buddhists and the teaching approaches of one of the most eminent Thai monks in the period between 1880 and 1950, I want to make a contribution to the study of Thailand’s educational history by investigating these women’s access to Buddhist teachings and practice. Thus, in my study of the women’s life stories and, if available, texts they have authored, I will focus on how they conceived knowledge and their acquisition of it. It must be emphasized, though, that my article will deal neither with formal public education¹³ nor with formal monastic education in Thai history; nor will I directly engage with the above-mentioned arguments regarding

¹⁰Nidhi Eoseewong, 2549 [2006], p. 74.

¹¹Nidhi Eoseewong, 2549 [2006], p. 74.

¹²Chetana Nagavajara, 1994, p. 33.

¹³It has been argued that before the introduction of compulsory education in Thailand (until 1939 known as Siam) in 1921 there were significant differences in the education of men and of women. Terwiel for example writes that “Since prior to the 1930s girls were not allowed to learn in the monastery schools, only a limited number of privileged women could read and write.” (Terwiel, 2012, p. 104) Similarly, Keyes has argued that “Some women in premodern urban settings did become literate, but rural women were, almost without exception, illiterate until after the compulsory primary education was instituted.” (Keyes, 1991, p. 123) Terwiel also states that “it can be shown that traditional monastic education was remarkably effective. During the first half of the nineteenth century, when the traditional system was still operative, European and American residents remarked on the large proportion of adult Thai males who could read and write, Not [sic] only government officials and princes possessed these skills, but also ordinary workmen, farmers, and fishermen.” (Terwiel, 2012, p. 106).

gendered differences in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. I will, however, demonstrate and investigate the importance and persistence of orality and memorization in Buddhist learning environments before and after compulsory education was introduced in 1921. I will argue that the women in my study have achieved a level of knowledge that was perceived to be on par with that of men. This type of knowledge has been deemed as the most valuable and desirable type of knowledge. My case studies will help to demonstrate that memorisation and recitation have been regarded as an integral and important part of the spiritual training of both monks and female monastic practitioners for a long time in Thai history.

In the first part of this article I will discuss in some detail how Khunying Yai Damrongthammasan (1886-1944) and her major teacher Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn Jaroen Ñāṇavaro (1872-1951) acquired, conveyed and reflected on knowledge. A study of their educational ideas and practices is particularly revealing for a variety of reasons. First of all, Khunying Yai appears to have produced one of the first significant Buddhist treatises ever authored by a Thai woman. Secondly, both have been praised for their advanced knowledge of Buddhist teaching and the way they have conveyed it. Thirdly, a study of the gendered aspects of this student- teacher relationship is insightful and of significant interest for the study of the complex roles of women in (Thai) Buddhism more generally. The fact that we have relevant sources concerning their lives encourages us to examine and reflect on them in detail.

In order to strengthen my major arguments I will also examine, albeit only briefly, or refer to the religious life of a number of other female Buddhist practitioners of the same time period, many of whom did not come from a privileged social stratum as Khunying Yai did; she belonged to the nobility. Some women were from socially privileged classes whereas others were from rather poor families, so at the moment it is not clear how far these case studies and the network of female practitioners I am investigating are representative of the situation of a larger number of female practitioners of that time. At the very least these case studies give some interesting insights into these women's study of the *Dhamma* (the teachings of the Buddha) and the support they have received. Some women in my study actually knew each other and seem to have belonged to a network of female practitioners; others were probably only loosely connected to this network; sometimes it is however not entirely clear if these women met each other or knew of each other (in some cases this seems rather unlikely); but they were all at

least contemporaries. These investigations will allow me to reflect on the significance of orality and memory for female Buddhist practice in early 20th century Thai Buddhism.

My case studies will also demonstrate in what ways women had access to what they deemed to be (the most) valuable knowledge, despite the fact that they were illiterate. In fact, in the following investigation I will also show that for many of these women literacy did not play an important, if any, role in their quest for knowledge. The women of my study received their knowledge in or near monasteries, often with the support of or directly from monks. Thus, while adding more nuances to the educational history of Thailand, my study will also offer insights into how knowledge and education were conceptualised before modern concepts of education became prevalent in Thailand. It will also add to our understanding of gender relations within Thai Buddhism, in particular between monks and women, both *maechis* (ordained women who shave their hair, wear white robes and keep the Eight or Ten Precepts) and lay-women (*upāsikā*).

Case Study 1: Khunying Yai Damrongthammasan

Dhammānudhammapaṭṭipatti is the title of a collection of five dialogical texts, which were first published anonymously and separately between 1932 and 1934.¹⁴ These five texts, which are still being reprinted and widely disseminated either together or as single texts, have widely been praised as outstanding and valuable pieces of Thai Buddhist literature. This is thanks to the profundity and obvious extraordinary scholarly competence with which numerous difficult Pali canonical teachings have been explained in these texts. The original editions of these five texts have been published without naming an author. Moreover, they exhibit an unusually advanced understanding of the *Dhamma* of its author. These two factors combined must have lent to the authorship of these texts being attributed to the ‘Father of the Thai Forest Tradition’, Luang Pu Man Bhūridatto (1870-1949). This happened probably some 20 years ago, if not earlier, but it is not clear as to how exactly this attribution took place. Luang Pu Man certainly is one of Thailand’s most eminent and famous monks and often referred to as a “national saint”, many people believing that he has achieved full awakening. This attribution of au-

¹⁴[no author mentioned], 2475a [1932a]; [no author mentioned], 2475b [1932b]; [no author mentioned], 2476a [1933a]; [no author mentioned], 2476b [1933b]; [no author mentioned], 2477 [1934]. These texts have also been published as a collection with the title “Achieving Awakening within Seven Days” (*jetwanbanlutham*), Praphot Setthakanon (ed.), [no date].

thorship happened despite the fact that Luang Pu Man never claimed to have written these texts. In fact, the content and style of the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts together with the major biographies of Luang Pu Man clearly show that it is extremely unlikely that he was involved in the production of these texts.

In recent research, together with my Thai co-researcher Naris Charaschanya-wong, I have been able to find evidence that conclusively shows that the real author of these texts is Khunying Yai Damrongthammasan.¹⁵ Thus, Khunying Yai can be regarded as one of, if not the first, female author of a significant Buddhist treatise in Thai Buddhist history. These facts make it compelling to study her texts and biography in more depth in order to explore how she acquired her enormously detailed and comprehensive knowledge, and how she conceptualised knowledge.

Unfortunately, despite her extraordinary life, her high social status and closeness to a number of high-ranking monks, there is a scarcity of biographical sources on her. One reason for this may be her humility; people who knew her personally consistently described Khunying Yai as a very humble person (*thomtua*).¹⁶ Her humility is also likely to be a reason why she published her major texts anonymously. The biographical data we have on her life make consistently clear that Khunying Yai was not interested in promoting herself, despite the high respect many people had for her deep understanding of Buddhist doctrine and what was perceived to be highly developed Buddhist practice. At the moment, we are in the process of reconstructing her fascinating and inspiring life story, and there are still numerous significant gaps in what we know about her life. In the following I will only focus on aspects of her biography that are related to education.¹⁷

Khunying Yai was born into the nobility and received private education at home. She belonged to one of the richest families in Thailand. She had been interested in the study of Buddhist teachings since a very early age (see below). She was married to a famous judge, Phra Ya Damrongthammasan (Sang Wisetsiri),

¹⁵See Seeger and Naris, 2556a [2013a] and 2556b [2013b]; Seeger, [in press]; see also Disanayake, 2013 [online resource].

¹⁶Here it should also be noted that authorship questions in Thai Buddhism are often complex. Many Buddhist texts have emerged with the (partly significant) help or input of monks, *maechis* or laypeople; but despite this, often the text is then ascribed to a single teacher (who may not have had a significant, if any, impact on the final text version) or, as in the case of Khunying Yai's texts, is published anonymously (see e.g. McDaniel, 2008, p. 180; Seeger, [in press]).

¹⁷At the moment, together with Khun Naris I am working on a book with the title "*pucchā-vissajjanā wa duai kan patibat tham*" (*pucchā-vissajjanā on the practice of Dhamma*) that will contain all her texts and a detailed and comprehensive biography of her.

who was a noble and a devout Buddhist too. From a young age she suffered from a severe form of diabetes. As a consequence of this she must have been in a lot of physical pain, and increasingly so towards the end of her life. In 1922 together with her husband she started to build the monastery Wat Thammikaram in the southern province of Prajuabkhirikhan. The construction of this monastery was supported by the King of Siam, Rama VI (r. 1910-1925), who even visited the construction site. During the last ten years of her life she was living in the white robes of a *maechi*. After the death of her husband in 1940, she spent most of her time practising Buddhist meditation at Wat Thammikaram, which has become one of the most important temples in the whole province. Her cremated remains together with those of her husband are buried in this monastery underneath the major Buddha figure in the ordination hall (*uposathāgāra*).¹⁸

Much of what we know about her knowledge acquisition and Buddhist practice comes from the recollections of the abbot of Wat Sattanartpariwat in Ratburi, Phra Thepsumethi (Yuak Cattamalo, 1914-2002), who as a young monk listened to Khunying Yai's explanations of Buddhist teachings. He reported: "She had an excellent memory and was able to recollect the content of long-ago discussions with a high degree of precision."¹⁹ According to Phra Thepsumethi, from a young age she was able to recite all the 423 verses of the canonical book *Dhammapada*. In addition she was also able to memorise a large number of *Dhamma* principles/teachings (*laktham*). Based on her unusually advanced knowledge Khunying Yai was teaching monks. Even highly educated monks were in awe of Khunying Yai's vast knowledge and precise understanding of Buddhist teaching. At a very early age she herself was a student of the still highly revered monk Somdet Phra Wanarat (Thap Buddhasiri, 1806-1891)²⁰ of the prestigious Bangkok temple Wat Somanaswihara. Later she then became a student of another highly revered and high ranking monk: Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn, abbot of the Bangkok monastery Wat Thepsirin (see below). Whilst still living in Bangkok, in the tallest building in Siam at the time (owned by her family), she is reported to have been able to develop a highly concentrated state of mind of one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*) and then able to recollect former life times. But according to Phra

¹⁸ Khunying Yai's husband, Phra Ya Damrongthammasan (Sang Wisetsiri), was a student of Pali language; he was ordained as a monk for a short period of time and later pursued a career as a judge. He generously supported the famous Bangkok monastery Wat Mahadhatu as well.

¹⁹ In: Somphong Suthinsak, 2537 [1994], p. 95.

²⁰ As Khunying Yai was born in 1886, she must have been extremely young when she became a student of Somdet Phra Wanarat Thap.

Thepsumethi's account she was not only capable of remembering her own former lives but could also recollect (*huanraluek*) the lives of some relatives. Phra Thepsumethi writes that these types of knowledge are comparable to *pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa* (recollection of one's former life times) and *dibbacakkhu* (divine eye). He also seems to believe that Khunying Yai may have achieved transcendental states of mind.²¹ This is of course highly reminiscent of the Buddha's own biography: in the night he found awakening the Buddha went through these stages of insight into the workings of *kamma* before he finally gained complete liberation (*vimutti*). Thus, Khunying Yai's life has been understood to integrate successfully the theoretical study of Buddhist doctrine (*pariyatti*), Buddhist practice (*paṭipatti*) and, possibly, "penetration" (*paṭivedha*).

When compared to her own biography, the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts seem to contain several clues to key events in her own life and concerns. Thus, even though not certain, but at least possible, the themes of *viveka* (seclusion) and renunciation that recur throughout these texts seem to correspond to key events in her own life, such as when her adopted son²² was starting school, which allowed her to become a *maechi*.

Her texts contain numerous highly interesting features that deserve much more detailed study. One of the most important features for the purpose of this article is the many lists that can be found throughout Khunying Yai's texts, such as the 10 *saṃyojanas* (the fetters that bind human beings to rebirth), the 4 *vesārajjas* (types of self-confidence), the 10 *balas* (types of power) or the 15 *carāṇas* (practices/conducts). There are also numerous quotations in Pali with their translations given in Thai. The way that these lists and quotations are embedded in these dialogues makes clear that they had been learned by heart by the people involved in these dialogues²³ and their function was to trigger discussions and explanations. The content of the texts makes it clear that the author must have had a close familiarity with Abhidhammic teachings; in fact the popular 10/11th century Abhidhamma compendium *Abhidhammatthasaṃgaha* is referred to and seems to have been an important source text for Khunying Yai's own work.²⁴ Also,

²¹ Somphong Suthinsak, 2537 [1994], p. 95.

²² Khun Prasop Wisetsiri was the son of Phra Ya Damrongthammasan with another wife, but Khunying Yai brought him up since birth.

²³ As I argue elsewhere, it is not clear how far, if at all, these conversations may have actually taken place or are imaginary (Seeger, [in press]).

²⁴ At that time this influential Pali text *Abhidhammatthasaṃgaha* had already been available in a Thai translation.

another prominent feature of Khunying Yai's texts is the comparison between different *Dhammas*. Often *Dhamma* teachings are explained by showing the differences from seemingly similar teachings (*tangkan*). The structure of Khunying Yai's texts is also quite obviously similar to the textual structure of the Pali canonical *suttas*, incorporating numerous repetitions and embedding *Dhamma* lists in a narrative. In addition, there are numerous references to orality. Thus, rather than being read, a book is "listened to" (*fangnangsue*) and the study of *Dhamma* teachings is often described with the word *fang* (to listen) rather than with "to read" or "look at". The word "listen" (*fang*) is mentioned more than 80 times in the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts,²⁵ often in phrases such as "to listen to" "an explanation", "a speech", "teaching", "sermon" (*thet*), specific *suttas* or "verses from the Buddha" (*tamkathaphraphutthaphasit*), the *Dhamma* or "*Dhamma* expositions" (*thammapariyai*). In addition to this, *sadap*, which also has the meaning "to listen to", occurs eight times in the texts. The words "to write" (*khian*) and "to read" (*an*), however, are not mentioned once. In the "Eight Questions on the *Dhamma*" (*Atthadhammapañha*), a text she authored before the publication of the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts (and which crucially helped to prove conclusively her authorship of her subsequent, anonymously published texts), when not familiar with a specific phrase in one of the questions she literally replies: "I have never heard and never listened to this within the tradition."²⁶ Another typical statement can be found in *paṭipattivibhāga*, one of the five *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts, where she states that "We are very fortunate in that we were born [into a time period during which] the Buddhist teaching is available; this enables us to listen [*fang*] to the *Dhamma*..."²⁷ Moreover, in her texts Khunying Yai rather often refers to memorisation, using words like "to recollect/recall" (*raluek*) and "memorise" (*jamsongwai*). Her texts make it abundantly clear that for Khunying Yai there is a close connection between (right) memory, (real) knowledge and (right) Buddhist practice. This is also evidenced in the following dialogical passages:

²⁵I should mention that this includes the occurrences of the word *fang* when it is used in connection with the Buddhist teaching on the six senses (*āyatana*), which is referred to quite frequently throughout the texts. Here it is of course not surprising that *fang* is used.

²⁶Khunying Yai Damrongthammasan, 2474 [1931], p. 9.

²⁷[no author mentioned], 2475a [1932a], p. 35. My emphasis.

“Question

I am a [Buddhist] practitioner, which means I observe the precepts and lead a virtuous life [*mitham*]. I also possess an understanding of numerous *Dhamma* teachings. Why then am I still affected by worldly conditions [*lokadhamma*]?

Answer

Your knowledge is only on the level of *saññā* [perception, recognition]; you have not gained insight [*ruhen*] on the level of *paññā* [wisdom]; but you understand that you know because when thinking about a specific *Dhamma* teaching you have memorised [*jamsongwai*] you gain clarity about it on the level of *saññā*; but this is not really knowing, which would be knowing on the level of *paññā*, like the knowing of a noble disciple [*ariyasāvaka*] ... Remembering numerous *Dhamma* teachings is called *pariyatti*...”²⁸

Elsewhere Khunying Yai gives the following explanation:

“Question

Paying homage [to the Triple Gem], using flowers, incense and candles, and saluting the Triple Gem, reciting holy texts [*suatmon*], such as the daily morning and evening chanting and the chanting of other texts that are the words of the Buddha [*buddhabhāsita*], does this all not [simply] constitute worship by offering material things [*āmisapūjā*], as it is not [the practice of] *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*?

Answer

Do not misunderstand this point! For example, when showing respect to and prostrating in front of the Triple Gem, this constitutes Right Action [*sammākam-manto*], to recite the virtues of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Saṅgha* constitutes *sammāvācā* [Right Speech]; both of them are parts of the *sīla* group. As for the mind that recollects the virtues of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Saṅgha*, this should be seen as a part of the *samādhi* group. As for the morning chanting that describes the five *khandha* as impermanent [*anicca*] or not-self [*anattā*] and the reciting of other *suttas* that contain the teaching of the Three Characteristics [*tilakkhaṇa*], when recited with a focussed and attentive mind [*jaikamnottam*], clarity about

²⁸[no author mentioned], 2475a [1932a], pp. 6-8.

impermanence, un-satisfactoriness and not-self will arise. Thus, when reciting [in this way] this should be seen as a part of the *paññā* group. This means that the Threefold Training is complete and thus constitutes *paṭipattipūjā*, the worship through practice.”²⁹

These passages show that for her reciting Buddhist texts with a correctly focussed and attentive mind constitutes mind-development (*citta-bhāvanā*) in accordance with the spiritual path. This is in line with early Buddhist ideas about recitation, as observed by a number of Buddhist studies scholars. Thus Bhikkhu Anālayo, for example, argues that “early Buddhist oral tradition also served as a way of meditating or reflecting on the *Dhamma*... recitation undertaken for its own sake does seem to function as a means of mental development (*bhāvanā*) in a wider sense, and as such could become a tool for progress on the path to liberation.”³⁰ Similarly, Collins states that “The oral/aural dimension of Buddhist texts is not only a matter of learning and public performance: it plays a role in meditation also.”³¹ Or as expressed in the words of Gethin: “mindful recitation of a text ... operates as a kind of recollection of Dhamma (*dhammānusati*), a traditional subject of meditation.”³²

What is also remarkable is that one of her major source texts for the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts is *Soḷasapañha*,³³ which forms the last part of the canonical book *Suttanipāta*. The fact that Khunying Yai refers to or quotes from this text quite often is noteworthy for several reasons. First of all, like the structure of the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts *Soḷasapañha* is also based on questions and answers: 16 Brahmin students approach the Buddha with questions, to which the Buddha provides answers. But what is at least equally interesting is the fact that in the *Nandamātāsutta* of the *Aṅguttaranikāya* the female lay-follower Veḷukaṇṭakī Nandamātā is reported to have risen in the morning and recited this very text. The deva king Vessavaṇa, who happened to overhear her chanting, praised her for this with the words “*sādhu, sādhu*” (“well done, well done!” AN. IV.63). Also, in the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, Veḷukaṇṭakī Nandamātā along with Khujjuttarā is said to be a model of a female lay follower (AN.I.89). In the commentaries she is described as an *anāgāmī* (non-returner; that is someone who has achieved the third level of awakening) and able to recite the Pali canon (SnA.I.369).

²⁹[no author mentioned], 2475b [1932b], pp. 15-16.

³⁰Anālayo, 2007, p. 16.

³¹Collins, 1992, p. 126.

³²Gethin, 1992, p. 166.

³³In the West, this text is more widely known as *Pārāyanavagga*.

Of course we do not know whether the textual structure of *Soḷasapañha* and the fact that this text was recited by an outstanding lay woman influenced Khunying Yai in her decision to refer to it so often. But it is certainly worthwhile to point out these similarities. In fact there are other canonical elements she was integrating in her texts and that combine outstanding spiritual practice by women with the status of lay disciple. In her *Aṭṭhadhammapañha* text, apart from referring to the Buddha, she refers to only three other Pali figures, all of whom are female lay followers.³⁴ For Khunying Yai, these three female figures are examples of persons with unshakable confidence in the *Dhamma*. One of them is Mallikā, the wife of the Senāpati (general) and also later judge (!), Bandhula. The other one is Uttarā, who hired the prostitute Sirimā for her husband so that she could keep the Eight Precepts. The third one is Queen Sāmāvātī, who was the mistress of another remarkable canonical figure, Khujjuttarā. Khujjuttarā is said to have been able to memorise sermons by the Buddha which later became the canonical book *Itivuttaka*. She memorised what the Buddha taught in order to teach Queen Sāmāvātī and her 500 ladies-in-waiting. The Buddha praised Khujjuttarā as the foremost of his laywomen disciples in terms of her learning (AN.I.26).

These biographies of Pali (post-)canonical figures clearly resemble a number of elements in Khunying Yai's own biography. In particular, the resemblances in terms of memory, orality, and recitation of Buddhist texts as an important part of female Buddhist teaching and learning are noteworthy. Despite the relatively frequent references to female canonical figures in the *Aṭṭhadhammapañha*, her texts do not discuss matters related to gender at all. This is of course not surprising, given her understanding of the *Dhamma*.

From our interviews with Khunying Yai's adopted son, Khun Prasop Wisetsiri, we know that the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts were to a large extent, if not entirely, produced orally: whilst she dictated these texts from memory, Khunying Yai's servant Khun Phueng Chuenjit noted them down. This is remarkable in that even though she must have possessed at least basic writing skills and was able to read, she preferred to dictate these rather complex texts. That this method of text production seems to have been quite normal for her is shown by the fact that Khunying Yai even dictated private letters.³⁵ We do of course not know, and probably never will, exactly how the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts were produced, and it

³⁴Khunying Yai Damrongthammasan, 2474 [1931], p. 7.

³⁵Seeger and Naris, 2556b [2013b], p. 142.

seems likely that Khunying Yai read the texts (or had them read out) once Khun Phueng had noted them down, and edited them. Not only did she produce her texts orally but she also had a servant read out Buddhist texts to her, sometimes for large parts of the day. In addition, she received a significant amount of her knowledge through listening to the teachings of her main teacher Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn Jaroen Ñāṇavaro. For a certain period of time, probably for several years, she visited him in his monastery Wat Thepsirin almost daily in order to learn from his oral instructions and explanations.

Despite the enormous memory an oral production of the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts would require, in the light of what I have described above this does make perfect sense. We not only know that she must have possessed an enormously precise and highly developed memory, but she also grew up in an oral culture in which the memorisation of long texts seems to have been rather common. We also know that people she knew, or must have been close to, memorised long texts as an integral part of their Buddhist practice.

Case Study 2: Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn Jaroen Ñāṇavaro

In order to investigate further these themes of orality and memory in the context of Buddhist teaching, learning, and practice, I would now like to explore the biography of Khunying Yai's main teacher, Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn Jaroen Ñāṇavaro. Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn has not only been celebrated as an expert on the Pali canon and Pali language, but also as an accomplished administrator of the monastic community.³⁶ His admirers also often refer to his strict adherence to the monastic rules (*vinaya*), describing him as an exemplary monk.³⁷ He was the editor of 11 books of one of the most influential Thai editions of the Pali canon and also edited fundamental Thai textbooks for the monastic study of Pali language and Buddhist teaching.³⁸ Some people believed him to have achieved the state of a noble person (*ariyapuggala*), that is Buddhist sainthood.³⁹

Phra Dunlayaphaksuwaman, a judge and student of Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn, writes that Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn was 'very strict' (*khreng khratmak*) with monks of his monastery in requiring them to attend the daily

³⁶See e.g. Prasok, 2554 [2011], p. 53.

³⁷See e.g. Buddhādāsa, 2554 [2011], p. 125.

³⁸Thirachai Thongthammachat, 2554 [2011], p. 186.

³⁹See e.g. Thirachai Thongthammachat, 2554 [2011]. The following description and discussion is based on letters written by his students and texts produced by himself.

communal recitation of Buddhist texts, twice a day, in the morning and in the evening.⁴⁰ Only newly ordained monks were allowed to use chanting books as a memory aid. In this context Phra Dunlayaphaksuwaman also refers to one of Thailand's most famous monk, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, who "said that 'to attend the daily chanting is like meeting the Buddha.'" ⁴¹ Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn's *Dhamma* teachings have been described as "profound" and "impressive" (*truengjai*) but at the same time as "easily accessible" ⁴² and "pleasant sounding".⁴³ Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn even gave *Dhamma* teachings to the Thai King (Rama VII), who praised him for his sermons.⁴⁴

Phra Dunlayaphaksuwaman, paraphrasing (or directly quoting?) Chao Khun Dhammatrailokajarn, a close student of Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn, writes that "The *Dhamma* teachings [of Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn] were organised in a system and pleasant sounding from the beginning to the end. [He distinguished clearly] different aspects of a *Dhamma* teaching and then provided appropriately detailed explanations of each. This was done in a way that avoided confusion [in the minds of the students] and allowed the listeners to gain clarity of what he presented. Sometimes he translated Pali quotations from the *tipitaka* [*phrabali*] into rhyme with the aim of helping his listeners to memorise [what they had heard]..."⁴⁵

In a small book with the title "Questions and Answers about *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*", which he edited (*truatkae*) and whose content he approved (*hENCHOP DUAI*), the foreword indicates that the 32 questions and answers the book consists of are for the memorisation of the Buddhist teaching: "Once the different *Dhamma* points have been memorised, their content can be contemplated..."⁴⁶

For the author of this foreword these questions and answers seem to serve as a kind of key when listening (!) to *Dhamma* sermons (*dhammadesanā*) or discussions (*dhammasākacchā*). This key is to facilitate understanding of what was heard. The reader of the book is addressed:

⁴⁰These daily recitations of Buddhist texts by heart are still widely practised in many monasteries, other monastic communities and even private houses.

⁴¹Dunlayaphaksuwaman, 2554 [2011], p. 18.

⁴²Luang Parinyayokhawibun, 2554 [2011], p. 58.

⁴³See e.g. Vāsana, 2554 [2011], p. 106.

⁴⁴Vāsana, 2554 [2011], pp. 106-107.

⁴⁵Dunlayaphaksuwaman, 2554 [2011], p. 23.

⁴⁶Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn, 2481 [1938], [foreword].

“I ask you ... diligently to memorise this book, for once you can remember its content, you will see the benefits through your own mind.”⁴⁷

The questions of the book then trigger numerous *Dhamma* lists, such as the five *khandhas*, 40 *kammaṭṭhānas*, 12 *āyatanas*, and the 6 *viññāṇas*. Similar to Khunying Yai’s understanding, this book makes it clear that memorisation of *Dhamma* lists does not solely aim at retaining information and facilitating understanding of sermon texts (listened to), but clearly also has a transformative aspect. The text, once memorised, becomes a part of one’s life.⁴⁸

Another book by Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn is also revealing in this regard. In *Uposathasīla*, published in 1929, he states that this book forms a part of “the curriculum for female and male householders and is to replace *vinaya*” studies of monks in the case of lay people’s studies. This text was developed as a textbook for the newly created *Dhamma* learning system for lay people and offers a translation of the *Uposathasutta* in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* (IV.248). In the first paragraph of his translation into Thai, Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn highlights twice the oral character of the sermon and that the Buddha wanted his monks to listen attentively, that is with mindfulness. His translation is followed by a commentary that consists of questions and answers, starting off with a short explanation of the word *uposatha*, and then giving the Eight Precepts in a list “in order to facilitate their memorisation [*jamngaingai*].”⁴⁹ One of the initial questions is: “When the one who knows this content recites this text, and does so with a mind that focuses on the content, this will very effectively make his heart peaceful and [make him] experience wholesomeness [*kusala*], positive qualities and benefits; it may even sometimes allow the temporary suppression of the hindrances [*nīvaraṇa*], which is called ‘*tadaṅga-pahāna*’ (the momentary abandoning of [*kilesa*; mental defilements]); can this be regarded as the meditative development of the recollection of morality [*sīlānussati*]?” And the answer to this question is “Yes!” (*dai*).⁵⁰ Albeit in slightly different terms, this certainly is in line with Khunying Yai’s understanding of proper recitation and the objective of

⁴⁷ Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn, 2481 [1938], [foreword].

⁴⁸ See e.g. Anālayo, 2011, pp. 857-858.

⁴⁹ Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn, 2522 [1979], p. 7.

⁵⁰ Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn, 2522 [1979], p. 8.

When providing an explanation of the first of the four “virtues that lead to welfare and happiness in the future”, the *saddhā-sampadā* (accomplishment in faith), Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn writes that “to be accomplished by faith means to believe that the Buddha really gained true understanding of reality and that his teachings are correct. Thus, you will not have doubts nor will you hesitate; you

it, as described above. Recitation of memorised Pali texts can, or perhaps better, should be understood as a meditation of and for mindfulness.

The pervasiveness and importance of orality and memory in Buddhist education of that time also become clear in Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn's scholarly work. When producing a Thai translation of the *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta*, Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn "translated it and a Pali scholar monk of the Third Pali Level [*parian3prayok*] noted down what was dictated."⁵¹ Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn did this translation following the request of a female lay follower: when she listened to the chanting of the *sutta* in Pali "confidence/faith arose" in her. She wished to have a translation that would allow her not only to understand the meaning of this *sutta*, but also to recite (*suat*) its Thai translation. Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn's translation of the *Mahāsatiṭṭhānasutta*, another major Pali canonical text, emerged in a similar way. When he learned that Noi Paurohit, another female lay follower, was able to recite the entire *sutta* by heart, he prepared a Thai translation of the text, by asking the son of this Thai woman to note down his oral translation. This took place in 1896. Noi Paurohit then also learned the translation by heart (the Pali text of the *Mahāsatiṭṭhānasutta* comprises some 27 pages!) and was then not only "able to recite the complete *sutta* both in Pali and Thai by heart, but also practise in accordance with it until her death [in 1931]."⁵² What the background of these two translations shows is that writing was perceived as a means for memorisation. Memorisation is to enable "real" understanding of these texts by internalisation, contemplation, and ultimately realisation.

What I have shown is that with regard to their formal elements, origin and objectives, the texts of Khunying Yai and Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn are strongly influenced by early Buddhist texts. In the following I want to provide some shorter case studies in order to add further weight to my arguments and show that both Khunying Yai and Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn were not exceptions in their pursuits. They accurately preserved text content and form, and also followed a variety of textual practices characteristic of text production and preservation in early Indian Buddhism.⁵³

will attentively listen to his teachings and memorise them...." (Sathiankoset Nakhapraphip Foundation, 2523 [1980], pp. 85-86).

⁵¹ Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn, 2474a [1931a], [preface].

⁵² Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn, 2474b [1931b], p. (๓).

⁵³ See Anālayo, 2007 and 2011, pp. 855-877.

Case Study 3: Upāsikā Ki Nanayon

The scholar monk Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu correctly observes of Upāsikā Ki Nanayon (1901-1978) that she is “one of the best-known Dhamma teachers, male or female, in Thailand”,⁵⁴ and Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu praises her as an “extraordinary woman”, whose “objective was genuine understanding of the *Dhamma*.”⁵⁵ Upāsikā Ki, also known under her pen name Ko Khao Suan Luang, was born into a family of Chinese merchants in the province of Ratburi. Like Khunying Yai she developed a strong interest in Buddhist teaching from a young age. Even though not ordained as a *maechi*, she started to observe the Eight Precepts from the age of 24. In 1945, together with her aunt and uncle, she moved to a remote hill in Ratburi province in order to devote her life entirely to the practice of meditation. This hill, Khao Suan Luang (thus her pen name), has now become one of the most famous meditation centres for female practitioners in the whole country. During the second part of her life, Upāsikā Ki gave a large number of sermons. These texts were recorded, transcribed and then printed or disseminated as audio-tapes. In the course of the last nine years of her life, once her sermon texts had been transcribed and edited by her followers, they were read out to Ki Nanayon so that she could then approve of the content. In this way, four large volumes of her texts emerged.⁵⁶ In an autobiographical text, Ki Nanayon recounts how her mother taught her how to memorise and recite Buddhist texts when she was only three to four years old: “Before going to bed, her mother taught her how to recite holy texts every night. If [Ki Nanayon] forgot to recite the Buddhist texts before falling asleep, [she] had to get up again and do her chanting before she was [allowed] to sleep again.”⁵⁷ Only at the age of 11-12 did Ki Nanayon start to practise how to read. She received her reading lessons at home.⁵⁸ After her eyesight had deteriorated, she started to compose her *Dhamma* poems in her mind. Her biography reports that “It was amazing that she was able to compose long texts entirely in her mind ... entirely flawlessly [without any need to edit and correct these texts. These texts] rhyme and are pleasant to listen to whilst conveying profound and impressive *Dhamma* teachings.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴Thanissaro, 1995 [online resource].

⁵⁵Cited in Khao Suan Luang (publisher), 2544 [2001], pp. 198-199.

⁵⁶Khao Suan Luang (publisher), 2547 [2004], p. 7.

⁵⁷Khao Suan Luang, 2544 [2001], p. 200.

⁵⁸Khao Suan Luang, 2544 [2001], p. 201.

⁵⁹Khao Suan Luang (publisher), 2547 [2001], pp. 3-4.

Case Study 4: Mae Chi Kau Saetan

Mae Chi Kau Saetan (1870-1968) was ordained as a *maechi* at the age of 40 at one of Thailand's most famous and historically significant monasteries, Wat Phra Pathomjedi, Nakhon Pathom. Three years later, together with four or five other *maechis*, she then moved to the newly founded monastery Wat Saneha, also located in Nakhon Pathom. There, in the afternoon, when monks were instructed in meditation practice, the female practitioners would listen to those instructions too. During the night they then put the instructions into practice.⁶⁰ Mae Chi Kau was to a large extent responsible for the construction of the ordination hall (*uposathāgāra*) of Wat Saneha, which is regarded as one of the most beautiful in the area. She contacted laypeople and encouraged them to make donations.⁶¹ Her biography tells us that she must have had a very influential position in her temple: she is described as an advisor (*khu-khit*) to the abbot.⁶² According to her biography she was like an elder sister to the abbot.⁶³ The success of the then only recently founded monastery Wat Saneha in terms of Buddhist practice, numbers of monastic residents, and education has been ascribed to the successful teamwork of Mae Chi Kau and the abbot. She is described as self-confident and speaking with a firm voice. Mae Chi Kau was famous not only in the local area but also known amongst senior monks in Bangkok, which is some 60 kilometres away. She was in charge of a community of about 80 *maechis*.⁶⁴ She is consistently described as outspoken, and would admonish monks and novices when she perceived them showing 'inappropriate' behaviour.⁶⁵ Women wishing to become ordained as a *maechi* at Wat Saneha had to undergo intensive training first in order to internalise the rules of the female monastic community. Once ordained, they were required to pursue meditation practice during the night time. They were also required to participate in the recitation of Buddhist texts twice a day. Mae Chi Kau also regularly took other female practitioners to the graveyard to practise meditation there.⁶⁶ The biography reports that in its early years Wat Saneha was visited by a respected and experienced meditation teacher who gave daily instruction in meditation to the female monastics. Some of the highest ranking monks and famous meditation

⁶⁰The Monastic and Lay Community of Wat Saneha (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 9.

⁶¹The Monastic and Lay Community of Wat Saneha (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 14.

⁶²The Monastic and Lay Community of Wat Saneha (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 15.

⁶³The Monastic and Lay Community of Wat Saneha (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 19.

⁶⁴The Monastic and Lay Community of Wat Saneha (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 16.

⁶⁵The Monastic and Lay Community of Wat Saneha (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 19.

⁶⁶The Monastic and Lay Community of Wat Saneha (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 24.

masters of her time, such as Chao Khun Upāli Guṇūpamācariya (Jan Siricando, 1857-1932) also visited the monastery and taught meditation there. Her biographer also mentions that Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn often frequented Wat Saneha and knew Mae Chi Kau. It is not clear, though, how far she also received *Dhamma* teachings from him.⁶⁷ Mae Chi Kau's spiritual practice also consisted of daily meditation with a focus on mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*). Her biography says that due to her regular meditation practice, she was able to develop and maintain until old age an extraordinarily precise and vast memory.⁶⁸

Case Study 5: Upāsikā Nu-nueang Thapmeng

Upāsikā Nu-nueang's (1887-?) biography was published by the accomplished Pali scholar, one of Thailand's most influential insight meditation (*vipassanā*) teachers in the Burmese style, Phra Chodok Nāṇasiddhi (1918-1988). Already a high ranking monk, in 1968 Phra Chodok praises her highly in the foreword of this biography (when Upāsikā Nu-nueang was still alive): Upāsikā Nu-nueang "has consistently been trying to establish herself in the noble quest [*ariyapariyesanā*; the quest for *nibbāna*]. She should be very much congratulated [*anumodanā*] on this by the sages; there is only a rather small number of people who consistently lead their lives in accordance with the *Dhamma*, being able to reach the other shore."⁶⁹

Her biography tells us that Upāsikā Nu-nueang was the daughter of farmers and had no opportunity to go to school. From a young age she had the intention of becoming a *maechi*, but "I cannot read. How then can I memorise and recite texts [*thongbon*]...?"⁷⁰ She asked her uncle to teach her how to read and divided her time between developing her reading skills and working in the rice-fields. Her biographer describes her as having a good memory.⁷¹ At the age of 17, when eventually able to read, she intended to become ordained as a *maechi*. When she told her friends about her wish, they mocked her, saying that someone so young could not do so. However, around 1905 she "often had the opportunity to visit the local monastery in order to listen [*fang*] to Buddhist teachings [*Dhamma*] and

⁶⁷The Monastic and Lay Community of Wat Saneha (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 16.

⁶⁸The Monastic and Lay Community of Wat Saneha (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 26-27.

⁶⁹Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. (๗-๘).

⁷⁰Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 2.

⁷¹Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 2.

this increased her familiarity with the [Buddhist] religion.”⁷² She pursued intensive meditation practice (*bamphenphawanapenkanyai*). At the age of 19, together with a *maechi* she wanted to practise a specific set of austere practices (*dhutaṅga*) which are widely followed by monks of the forest tradition. These practices may involve dwelling in the jungle or in graveyards and sleeping in the open air under a special umbrella with a mosquito net attached to it. But she was told by her teacher that “for young women this is demeritorious [*pāpa*].”⁷³ This was why she continued her practice of keeping precepts and meditation in a monastery. Only when she nearly died of cholera, and her father had made a vow that if she escaped death he would allow her to become a *maechi*, was she finally able to be ordained. This must have happened around the year 1906.⁷⁴ Mae Chi Talap, who, the biographer says, had been a minor wife of King Rama IV (r. 1851-1868) and ordained as a *maechi* after the King’s death,⁷⁵ became Mae Chi Nu-nueang’s mentor. Mae Chi Talap took her student to numerous monasteries to study the *Dhamma*. It is noteworthy that Mae Chi Talap studied and practised the *Dhamma* as a student of the famous meditation master Somdet Phra Wanarat (Thap Buddhasiri),⁷⁶ who, as mentioned above, was also the teacher of Khunying Yai. Mae Chi Nu-nueang’s biographer describes Mae Chi Talap as “an advanced master [*ajanchansung*] who has *listened* a lot to higher *Dhamma* [teachings].”⁷⁷ What is also of interest for the purpose of this article is the way that Mae Chi Talap’s teaching is described: “Mae Chi Talap taught [Mae Chi Nu-nueang] a lot: first, on a basic level she taught her to have faith in the qualities of the Buddha, of which there are three...” What then follows are other *Dhamma* lists. It seems that Mae Chi Talap wanted her student to memorise these lists in order not only to learn the Buddha’s teach-

⁷² Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 4.

⁷³ Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 5.

⁷⁴ Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 10.

⁷⁵ It seems that the biographer may have been confused here, as another source states that the minor wife of R.IV with the name Talap passed away in 1885 (Wannaphon Bunyasathit, 2553 [2010], p. 288). If this is correct it is not possible for her to have become Mae Chi Nu-nueang’s mentor. In this case it may be possible that the biographer is referring here to Talap Ketutath (1852-1928), a minor wife of Rama V (r. 1868-1910). I have not been able to clarify this at this stage (but see footnote 76).

⁷⁶ As Somdet Phra Wanarat passed away in 1891, this fact, together with all the other significant biographical dates given, makes it more likely that Mae Chi Nu-nueang’s biography is correct with regard to the biography of Mae Chi Talap (see footnote 75). According to Mae Chi Nu-nueang’s biography Mae Chi Talap must have died around 1908/9.

⁷⁷ Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p.14.

ing, but also to increase faith and confidence in the *Dhamma*.⁷⁸ Mae Chi Talap must have been an effective teacher, as many “influential people” (*phuyai*) and lay women (*upāsikā*) from Bangkok followed her instructions.⁷⁹ Mae Chi Talap also took Mae Chi Nu-nueang to practise *dhutaṅga*. Mae Chi Nu-nueang studied the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*; she actually was literally “chanting/reciting” this text.⁸⁰ In her fourth year as a *maechi* she was able to recite the entire translated version of the *Mahāsatipatṭhānasutta*. She also managed to complete the study of “five Pali grammar books” (this must have happened around 1910).⁸¹ Further noteworthy features of her biography are the extensive travels she undertook as a *maechi* in order to study the *Dhamma*, and the (probably informal) networks of male and female practitioners of which she was a member. On her journeys, Mae Chi Nu-nueang was even able to study the *Dhamma* with the great meditation teacher Luang Pu Man.⁸² In addition, she often visited Wat Saneha; there Phra Khruvinaysangworn⁸³ “paid a lot of attention” to teaching female lay followers. “When he wanted to learn about the level of understanding of the *upāsikās* he would use the technique of asking them questions”, the answers to which he would then assess. His questions, so Mae Chi Nu-nueang’s biographer tells us, were on the highest level of monastic *Dhamma* studies (*nakthamek*) and the *upāsikās* were giving their answers based on their understanding of the famous Theravāda manuals *Visuddhimagga* and *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*.⁸⁴ The knowledge of Pali language, Buddhist doctrine and meditation that Mae Chi Nu-nueang was able to accumulate over the course of her ordained life must have been hugely impressive, in particular when taking into account that she had not had access to formal education. But even though it contains many distinctive biographical features, Mae Chi Nu-nueang’s biography makes it clear that she was not exceptional in being a female Buddhist with an extraordinarily advanced level of understanding of the Buddhist doctrines, as there were numerous other Buddhist women whose knowledge of Buddhist teachings was no less impressive.

⁷⁸ Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 15. My emphasis.

⁷⁹ Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 15.

⁸⁰ Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 18.

⁸¹ Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 19.

⁸² Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 31.

⁸³ This should probably read “Phra Khrusangwornvinay” and refer to Phra Khrusangwornvinay (At Jutindharo). See *The Monastic and Lay Community of Wat Saneha* (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 13.

⁸⁴ Phra Ratchasitthimuni (publisher), 2511 [1968], p. 26.

Case Study 6: Maechi Kaew Sianglam

Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam (1901-1991) arguably is the most famous female direct monastic disciple of Luang Pu Man.⁸⁵ She is believed to have realised the fruit of *arahant*-ship (*arahattaphala*) in 1952. Her sainthood has been celebrated in the construction of two rather expensive and large stupas (relic containers) in which visitors can pay their respect to her remains. Parts of her bones that are on display in these stupas have transformed into crystals. Such crystallised bones are powerful signifiers of spiritual perfection, as it is widely believed within Thai Buddhism that these transformations only occur in the bones of someone who has achieved Buddhist sainthood. As I have investigated Mae Chi Kaew's extraordinary biography and the veneration of her in some detail elsewhere,⁸⁶ here I want to focus on how she obtained her knowledge. In her teenage years, Mae Chi Kaew received instruction from Luang Pu Man on an individual level and was able to achieve some unusually quick successes in her spiritual development. But due to her gender, her ordained life began only when she was 36 years old: before then she was several times denied permission to become ordained. Luang Pu Man is reported to have told her that "If you were a boy, I would have ordained you as a novice so that you could have come with me. But since you are a girl, accompanying me would be difficult with regard to the *Dhammavinaya*... Stop practising meditation!" At the age of 17 she was married and her husband forbade her practising meditation at the temple. He allowed her to recite Buddhist texts, though. In the then rather remote area in the northeast of Thailand where she lived, there was no local school. One of her major biographies literally tells us that "She was not able to study books; learning how to write and read was even more out of reach for her. The only thing she could do was to memorise the teachings of her teachers. She was [however] able to memorise all [she learned from her teachers]. She committed it to memory and then recited it until it entered her mind. Formerly, when she observed others reading and writing, she was jealous, thinking that 'In this life time I was born as a stupid hillbilly who had no opportunity to acquire literacy.' But now as she had become old, she understood that being literate or illiterate does not make any difference. It is just the same, for her Buddhist practice has been a clever approach in following the teachings of her highly revered masters."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ See: Silaratano, 2009; Seeger, 2010; Suniwan Tangphaithunsakun, 2549 [2006].

⁸⁶ Seeger, 2010.

⁸⁷ Group of Followers, 2550 [2007], p. 77.

Case Study 7: Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem

Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem (1895-1964) was born into a rather poor family.⁸⁸ As with other women in this study, Mae Bunruean's interest in the study of Buddhist doctrine began at a very young age and she also received support in this from a rather well-known monk. Her biographer assumes that the teachings of the famous and highly revered Luang Ta Phring, abbot of the monastery Wat Bangpakok, were the catalyst for her spiritual career. Even though she probably received some very basic education in the Thai language when young, at the age of around 60 she 'wrote' that "I can only write my name. I am not educated [*mai dairiannangsue*]."⁸⁹ However, for the occasion of the celebrations of the Buddhist year 2500 her disciples implored her "to compile [her] *Dhamma* [teachings]" with the intention of donating 7,500 copies of her book to monks. Mae Bunruean was highly revered by her followers, of whom she had many during her life time. In contrast to Mae Chi Kaew, she has left quite a number of her *Dhamma* teachings. She is still highly revered by what appears to be an increasing number of Thai people. She is believed to have achieved the highly advanced transcendental level of non-returner (*anāgāmi*), if not *arahant*; thus it is believed that she was able to enter the mental state of *nirodha-samāpatti* (level of 'extinction') which, according to Theravāda Buddhism, is accessible only to a non-returner or fully awakened one. Unusually for a woman, she produced Buddha amulets that have become highly sought after objects on the booming Thai amulet market, even though she produced 100,000. Due to her rigorous practice, she is believed to have possessed a wide range of supernormal powers, that is five, or even all, of the six *abhiññās* (higher knowledges), which she also used to cure people. Though believed to have achieved transcendental states of mind, Mae Bunruean has become more famous for her supernatural powers, altruism and effective healing. High-ranking monks, amongst them the future Supreme Patriarch, praised her spiritual practice highly. Her main teacher, the eminent monk and abbot of the famous Bangkok monastery Wat Samphanthawong, Phra Maharatchamangkhalajan (Thet Niddesako, 1886-1967), reports how Mae Bunruean together with numerous other women received *Dhamma* teachings on a regular basis for up to more than an hour, the level of teaching gradually and adequately increasing. "Once the *Dhamma* teachings have finished, the women were asked questions in order to assess their understanding and check what they had memorised

⁸⁸ For a more detailed account and analysis of her biographies see Seeger, 2013.

⁸⁹ Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem, 2528 [1985], p. 9.

[*thamkhwamkhaujailaekhwamkamnodjotjam*].⁹⁰ Her followers built a house for her in Bangkok. In this house they regularly met her and listened to her teachings and discussed what she had presented. Mae Bunruean has also been praised for her pedagogical skills: “She applied a variety of different, individualised methods [even including physical methods] by using her special knowledge to read her students’ mental dispositions in order to adjust her teachings [most effectively].”⁹¹ From her biographies it seems rather clear that Mae Bunruean gained her knowledge of Buddhist teachings mostly through oral teachings from various well-known and highly revered meditation masters of her time. Her transcribed sermon texts give impressive evidence of the enormously advanced and precise memory she must have had, given that she seems to have acquired most of her knowledge aurally.

Discussion

Even though the case studies above consider female educational experiences in the period between 1880 and 1950, the teaching and learning practices and relations between male monastics and the female Buddhists discussed seem to be the continuation of much older practices and ideas. Thus, we know that in the 1850s Western visitors observed that *maechis* were reciting Buddhist texts.⁹² In addition, accounts by Western travellers from the 17th century confirm that *maechis* were regularly listening to sermons. Thus, Nicolas Gervaise e.g., who visited Siam in 1683, wrote that *maechis* “listen to sermons every day and they spend much time praying in the temples.”⁹³ “Praying” here probably means reciting holy texts. Given that these Western observers did not give very detailed descriptions of *maechis*, it seems that *maechis*’ reciting of Buddhist texts must have been perceived as an important characteristic of their ordained life. This is of course fully corroborated by the evidence given above. It seems likely that for Siamese women practising Buddhism, the chanting/recitation and memorisation of Pali texts has been an important part of their spiritual practice for a long time and is not just a recent phenomenon. Thus, due to the existence and importance of oral modes of teaching and learning in Thailand before and after compulsory education was

⁹⁰ Phra Maharatchamangkhalajan in: Sujarit Thawonsuk (ed.), 1964 [2507], p. (13).

⁹¹ <http://www.dharma-gateway.com/ubasika/boonruen/ubasika-boonruen-08.htm> (accessed 07/01/2014)

⁹² Kameniar, 2009, p. 285.

⁹³ Cited in Skilling, 1995, p. 57.

introduced in 1921, women's access to knowledge and gender relations between monks and women seem to have been much more complex issues than presented by Darunee and Costa. Though some customs were/are there to ensure "appropriate" physical distance between monks and women, female Buddhists from different social strata had the opportunity to gain access to culturally significant knowledge in a monastic environment and with the help of (often high-ranking or famous) monks. Whilst this knowledge was to a large extent text-based, as it derived from canonical or other influential Theravāda texts, it was often transmitted orally. This type of knowledge has been regarded as the most valuable and desirable type of knowledge. The case studies above suggest that intensive pedagogical relationships between monks on the one side and *maechis* and laywomen (*upāsikā*) on the other existed well before the significant increase in literacy amongst Thai women during the first half of the 20th century. True, various restrictive cultural practices and gendered prohibitions, such as the refusal to ordain women as *bhikkhunīs*, had an impact on women's access to knowledge, as confirmed by some of the case studies above. Thus, from Mae Chi Kaew's biography we learn that as a girl she was allowed to go to the monastery only when accompanied by her parents. In addition, she had to sit as far away from the monks as possible.⁹⁴ Also, as mentioned above, Luang Pu Man did not accept her as his monastic student and forbade her continuing her meditation practice, because of her gender. But, at the same time, we also know from her biography that Mae Chi Kaew nonetheless had access to "great teachers", such as Luang Pu Man and Luang Ta Mahabua, and received individualised and direct teachings from them. Thus, even though the biographies of Mae Chi Kaew etc. refer to obstacles and disadvantages women had to face, in line with what I argued in my article on Mae Chi Kaew,⁹⁵ these gender specific challenges are depicted as somewhat minor when compared to their major objective of achieving liberation (*vimutti*).

As Mae Chi Kaew's biographies show, illiteracy did not prevent her from gaining access to the knowledge she and her community deemed the most valuable; this was possible because she was relying on oral modes of teaching and on memory. Moreover, note that, Luang Pu Man's practice has been described as very strict in terms of avoiding associating with women, in line with the instructions the Buddha gave to his monk attendant Ānanda in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*,

⁹⁴Seeger, 2010, p. 568.

⁹⁵Seeger, 2010.

advising his monks if possible to avoid looking at and speaking with women.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, for monks of the forest tradition and other teachers introduced in this study, keeping the “right” distance from women did not preclude intensive and regular teaching of female students. Thus, Mae Chi Kaew was not the only female disciple whose spiritual progress Luang Pu Man paid a lot of attention to. During the last five years of his life, Luang Pu Man was staying at a forest monastery in the north-eastern part of Thailand, near the village Baan Noong Phue. There he was teaching meditation to local villagers. In this community, already before his arrival, many female villagers had decided to take the robes and become *maechis*. Once ordained, they were living in a separate monastic residence close to the main monastery, so that they could “listen to the *Dhamma* sermons by Ajarn Lui Candasāro [a monastic disciple of Luang Pu Man] whenever the opportunity to do so arose.” Following his instructions, they were also practising meditation in graveyards. Whenever they encountered problems in their meditation they were able to consult the master about these. Female practice included not only intensive meditation and listening to sermons but also reciting Pali texts.⁹⁷ One of the *maechis* of the Baan Noong Phue community, Mae Chi Kang Thephin, was praised for her enormously advanced meditation and is believed to have achieved *ariyapuggala* status.⁹⁸ In Luang Ta Mahabua’s biography of Luang Pu Man, which is widely regarded as the most authoritative one, it is said that “[Luang Pu Man] made a point of advising her every time she came [and she consulted him often]. On such occasions, the monks would sneak up to listen quietly at one side of the meeting hall where their discussions were held, eager to hear her questions and his answers. Because her questions arose directly from her own experiences in meditation, these exchanges fascinated the monks.”⁹⁹ It is reported that up to 50 monks listened to Mae Chi Kang’s conversations with Luang Pu Man.¹⁰⁰ Luang Ta Mahabua even states that one of the reasons why Luang Pu Man stayed unusually long at this place was because of this woman’s practice.¹⁰¹ This and other biographies referred to above show that

⁹⁶“Kathaṃ mayā, bhante, mātugāme paṭipajjāma”ti? “Adassanaṃ, ānanda”ti. “Dassane, bhagavā, sati kathaṃ paṭipajjitabban”ti? “Anālāpo, ānanda”ti. “Ālapantena pana, bhante, kathaṃ paṭipajjitabban”ti? “Sati, ānanda, upaṭṭhāpetabbā”ti.” (D.II.141)

⁹⁷<http://www.luangpumun.org/watpab5.html> (27/06/2014)

⁹⁸Wat Pa Ban Tat, 2554 [2011], p. 205.

⁹⁹Mahā Boowa, 2003, pp. 341-342. (transl. from the Thai by Bhikkhu Dick Silaratano)

¹⁰⁰Wat Pa Ban Tat, 2554 [2011], p. 204.

¹⁰¹Mahā Boowa, 2003, p. 343.

even though there was no established institutional route of monastic education for women, many of them received individualised and intensive instruction from their monastic teachers (*phraajarn*). Rather than excluding women from Buddhist practice and knowledge, the major concern of these monk teachers seems to have been the “appropriate” physical and mental distance in these pedagogical relationships between monks and women. Luang Ta Mahabua’s biography of Luang Pu Man says: “Monks are especially vulnerable to the sounds of the opposite sex. If their *samādhi* is not strong enough, concentration can easily be destroyed. I must apologize to women everywhere because my intention here is not to criticize women in any way. It is the unsuccessful meditator that I am addressing here so that he may arouse mindfulness as an antidote to counter these influences and not merely surrender meekly to them.”¹⁰²

The importance of orality and memory can also be demonstrated by how Luang Pu Man taught monks. It is reported that he had an astonishingly high number of monastic students, more than 800. Most of his teachings were passed on to them directly, without making use of any written notes. “The reason for this may be sought in the fact that the teaching and studying of the *Dhamma*, according to the insight meditation lineage, does not regard books or manuals as important or necessary for the realisation of the truth as one’s own practice.”¹⁰³ Indeed, we have only one rather short text that is believed to have been written by Luang Pu Man himself. Moreover, Luang Pho Wiriyang, one of Luang Pu Man’s major direct disciples, writes: “Phra Ajarn Man never allowed anybody to write down his sermons. These have only been memorised, committed to one’s heart. If anybody tried to write down his sermons, he would have certainly scolded and reprimanded him for that.” In fact, one major text of Luang Pu Man, *Muttodaya*, came into being only because Luang Pho Wiriyang “secretly” and “thievishly” wrote down sermon texts by Luang Pu Man after having committed their content to memory.¹⁰⁴ Luang Pu Man himself was able to memorise numerous texts both in Thai and Pali.¹⁰⁵ Luang Pu Man also required those who wanted to study with him to learn by heart specific books with Pali texts together with the *pāṭimokkha* (the 227 training rules of the *bhikkhus*) within 3 years. “If they were not able to achieve this, they were not allowed to stay with him in the same monastic residence.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Mahā Boowa, 2003, pp. 92-93. (transl. from the Thai by Bhikkhu Dick Silaratano)

¹⁰³ Wirasak Jansongsaeng, 2553 [2010], p. 48.

¹⁰⁴ For more on this, see Seeger, [in print].

¹⁰⁵ Thongkham, 2552 [2009], p. 70; see also Mahā Boowa, 2003, pp. 316-317.

¹⁰⁶ Thongkham, 2552 [2009], pp. 70-71.

Even some of Luang Pu Man's more famous male monastic disciples were not able to read and write, as they did not attend school. Thus, Ajarn Kongma, for example, had to learn by heart the *pāṭimokkha* rules orally (*paktopak*) before he was allowed to receive his ordination as a monk of the Dhammayuttika-nikāya (the congregation Luang Pu Man belonged to).¹⁰⁷ This and the examples above make it very clear that orality and memory were regarded as of the utmost importance and seen as an integral part both of male and female spiritual practice. These concepts of Buddhist knowledge are in line with Khunying Yai's definition of Buddhist learning (*pariyatti*), which nicely demonstrates that *pariyatti* is not necessarily to be understood as learning directly from written texts, but first of all and most importantly from orally transmitted texts: "The method to reach the *Dhamma* is by *pariyatti* because one has listened to the teachings of the Buddha; these teachings include numerous points and all are *niyyānikadhamma*, i.e. they can lead the practitioner to the release from *dukkha* [unsatisfactoriness] and cause the arising of faith and respect; this is called reaching the level of *pariyatti*."¹⁰⁸

In many of the biographies discussed above, writing was not perceived as being crucial for spiritual development. Only in Mae Chi Nu-nueang's, and to some extent in Mae Chi Kaew's, biography was the inability to write initially a concern. But what is interesting in Mae Chi Nu-nueang's biography is that even though literacy was initially thought to play a significant role in Mae Chi Nu-nueang's spiritual life, for her it was 'only' instrumental in getting access to the texts she wanted to learn by heart. As for Mae Chi Kaew, later in life she understood that for her spiritual practice, reading and writing skills were not important at all; what was a far more important concern than having *direct* access to written Buddhist texts was access to teachers. Despite being able to read and write because of her privileged social background, Khunying Yai preferred not only to listen to texts and instructions by her teachers, but also to dictate her own texts. At the same time, her texts consistently emphasize the importance of orality and memory as an integral part of Buddhist practice. In fact, there are instances that show that it is only due to the memory of female Thai Buddhists that texts by famous monks were being preserved. Thus, based on what she remembered from listening to sermons given by the famous meditation master Luang Pho Li Dhammadharo,

¹⁰⁷Thongkham, 2552 [2009], pp. 70-71.

¹⁰⁸[no author mentioned], 2475b [1932b], p. 10.

Mae Chi Abhivaṇṇā made notes. These notes were later on published.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Princess Wapibutsabakorn (1891-1982), a daughter of King Rama V (r. 1868-1910), committed to memory the teachings of Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn of Wat Thepsirin, which she had listened to and noted down later. Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn corrected and made further comments on these notes. These hand-written texts have been published in three volumes and have become an important source text for the teachings of Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn.¹¹⁰ Princess Beatrice Bhadravudadi (1876-1913), also a daughter of Rama V, is another good example. She “was very pleased to listen to *Dhamma* sermons.” She noted down what she remembered so that others could read and benefit from it.¹¹¹ In fact, when she listened to a sermon given by Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn, first “when listening to the sermon, I did not intend to remember it, but as [Somdet Phra Buddhaghosajarn] was talking slowly and clearly and the sermon was not too long, once it had finished it appeared that his words arose in the correct sequence in my mind.”¹¹²

The case studies above also reveal the extensive networking between their subjects allowing them to exchange knowledge and experience. They were travelling the country extensively as part of their ascetic practice (*dhutaṅga*) or/and in the search of a teacher. Wat Saneha in Nakhon Pathom, Wat Sattanartpariwat in Rattaburi, Wat Thammikaram in Prajupkhirikhan and the Bangkok temples Wat Somanaswiharn, Wat Prok and Wat Thepsirin, to name only a few, seem to have been important monasteries for female practice, knowledge exchange and networking. In these monastic centres, female practitioners were actively supported by monks in their pursuit of acquiring Buddhist knowledge (*pariyatti*) and spiritual practice (*paṭipatti*). During my research I discovered possible links between the outstanding female practitioners and teachers Khunying Yai, Ki Nanayon, Khunying Rabiap Sunthornlikhit and Ajarn Naep Mahaniranon.¹¹³

Between 1880 and 1950 there was a significant number of women with an impressive knowledge of Buddhist teaching. This is also confirmed by Narin Phasit,

¹⁰⁹ Sutthithamrangsikhaphiramethajan, Phra (Phra Ajarn Li Dhammadharo), 2552 [2009], p. 8.

¹¹⁰ Wapibutsabakorn, Princess, 2522 [1979].

¹¹¹ Beatrice Bhadravudadi, Princess, 2517 [1974], p. 13.

¹¹² Beatrice Bhadravudadi, Princess, 2517 [1974], p. 19.

¹¹³ Ajarn Naep (1898-1983) is the first famous female Abhidhamma teacher in Thailand. It seems that Wat Prok has been another important centre for the networking of female practitioners of that time. But further research is needed on the extensive networking between these women.

who has become famous for his unsuccessful attempt to re-establish the *bhikkhuni* order in Thailand in the 1920s.¹¹⁴ In 1929 he wrote that “In fact, I believe that in our time there are numerous women with Buddhist knowledge and authentic Buddhist practice comparable to that of men; there are even women who are better than men in these regards.”¹¹⁵ He then also refers to a number of individual *maechis* in various parts of the country as examples of women with an enormous knowledge of Buddhist teaching or outstanding spiritual practice.¹¹⁶

The Buddhist studies scholar Naomi Appleton has argued that “The female ordination lineage in Theravāda countries has long since died out, and attempts to reintroduce it have met with little support from the established institutions. Buddhist women are thus left with no role models for renunciation or spiritual achievements. The best they can hope for is to discharge their societal responsibilities well, give generously to the monastic community, including perhaps, the gift of a son for ordination, and aspire to rebirth as a man. This established tradition that women are not able to – or expected to progress on the path to awakening...”¹¹⁷ In light of the evidence presented in this article, Appleton’s argument appears to be incorrect and too simplistic, at least in the case of Thai Buddhism. While I do not deny that one may encounter the views described by Appleton, both in academia and in Thai Buddhism itself, here it must be reiterated that the religious roles of women and the relations between the (male) *saṅgha* and female practitioners in Thai Buddhism are much more multi-faceted and complex. The absence of a *bhikkhuni* order has undoubtedly had a major impact on women’s religious roles in Theravāda Buddhist countries, including Thailand. It is also clear from my case studies that women had to face barriers in their religious learning and practice that men did not have to. Nonetheless, in Thai Buddhism¹¹⁸ there have been numerous women who have pursued the path to awakening whilst being highly revered for their knowledge and genuine practice by sometimes a large number of Thai Buddhists, both male and female. At the same time, these women were intensively and generously supported by monks. In fact I conclude that in many respects the biographies of the women introduced in this article contain many elements that seem to be remarkably similar to textual and spiritual practices in early Buddhism.

¹¹⁴See e.g. Varaporn, 2006, pp. 73-108; Sakdina Chatrakun, 2536 [1993]; Seeger, 2006; Ito, 1999.

¹¹⁵Narin Phasit, 2544 [2001], p. 10.

¹¹⁶Narin Phasit, 2544 [2001], pp. 10-11.

¹¹⁷Appleton, 2011, p. 50.

¹¹⁸I would not be surprised if this also is the case in other Theravāda Buddhist countries.

Epilogue

In 1944 Khunying Yai attended the funeral of her long-term spiritual friend (*sahadhammika*) Khun Nai Thang Kotchasut (1858-1944), who was also a highly respected female practitioner, at the Ratburi monastery Wat Sattanartpariwat. There – it is at the moment not entirely clear why – she was examined by a famous physician who attested to her that “you will live for a long time.” Khunying Yai replied: “There is no need to console me, doctor!” Shortly afterwards, she invited a learned Pali scholar monk to recite her favourite Pali texts and discuss the *Dhamma* with her. Then she prostrated in front of him three times, and collapsed. The monk could not believe that Khunying Yai had died. The way she died combines what had been important to her throughout her life: respect for and closeness to the *saṅgha*, to listen to the *Dhamma* (*dhammassavanaṃ*) and to discuss the *Dhamma* (*dhammasākacchā*).

From the famous canonical text *Maṅgalasutta*:

...*kālena dhammassavanaṃ, etaṃ maṅgalam uttamaṃ.*
 *Samaṇānañca dassanaṃ;*
kālena dhammasākacchā, etaṃ maṅgalam uttamaṃ.

“...listening to the *Dhamma* on due occasions
 — this is the greatest blessing.
 ..., seeing recluses and having religious discussions on due occasions
 — this is the greatest blessing.”¹¹⁹

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¹¹⁹I thank Bhikkhu Anālayo for his comments on this translation.

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