

Mae Chi (Buddhist Nuns): Problems and Opportunities of Access to Higher Education Organized by Thai *Sangkha*¹

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1. Preamble

Over the last ten years or so, opportunities for higher education have become more available to female ascetics. In 1999, Mahapajapati Buddhist College, in cooperation with Mahamakut Buddhist University, launched a bachelor's degree program for Buddhist nuns. It is the first Buddhist College created primarily for Buddhist nuns and women in general.² In addition, Ven. Mae Chi Sansanee Sthirasuta, the founder of Sathira

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² *Mae Chi* Khunying Kanitha Wichiancharoen and the Foundation of Thai Nun Institutions under Her Majesty the Queen's Royal Patronage, in conjunction with the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, initiated the project under the patronage of His Holiness Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara the Supreme Patriarch. Mahapajapati Buddhist College is a division of Mahamakut Buddhist University.

Thammasathan, set up a Master's Degree program in cooperation with Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University. Known as Savikasikkalai, the program was established in 2008 (Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University Announcement, 2008). As a matter of fact, education for Buddhist nuns has been available since 1990, albeit only at primary and secondary education levels. It was organized by Dhamma Chariniwitthaya School (School for Buddhist Nuns), a branch of the Thai Nun Institutions Group, at Paktho District, Ratchaburi Province, and taught by a group of nuns from the Institutions. The subjects taught included general education at primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels under the non-formal education scheme, as well as Pariyatti, Dhamma, and Pali. The program was offered gratis to ordained young women as well as those who were not ordained but vowed to observe the *Sīla*.³ Another Mae Chi center at Sala Santisuk, Nakhon Chaisi District, Nakhon Pathom Province, has also opened a Pali education program to Buddhist nuns since 1978. In⁴ the meantime, the social image of the Buddhist nuns has improved. Ven. Phra Phaisan Wisalo provided an interesting insight:

In all likelihood, another group of women living in the monastery is *Mae Chinuns* who enjoy a greater role and status, partly because those who join the order come from the educated middle-class background and partly because the nuns themselves have been striving for greater self-development. This can be seen, for instance, in the establishment of self-regulating bodies (Thai Nun Institutions) and various activities to educate and train nuns in the learning of the Scriptures and practice of Dhamma (Mahapajapati Buddhist College). Undoubtedly, the success of the *Mae Chi* movement is due in greater part to the support of middle-class laywomen

³ *Mae Chi* Anamphai Bhasakchai, Director of Dhamma Chariniwitthaya School, Paktho District, Ratchaburi Province, 28 May 2012, interview.

⁴ *Mae Chi* Sunantha Riangaem, *Mae Chi* center at Sala Santisuk, Nakhon Chaisi District, Nakhon Pathom Province; Pali ix, doctoral candidate, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, 15 June 2012, interview.

whose attitude toward *Mae Chi* has become increasingly positive. (Phra Phaisan Wisalo, B.E. 2556 [2013]:191)

Furthermore, there was another phenomenon which came about as a result of the National Education Act, B.E. 2542 (1999) and Amendment (No. 2), B.E. 2544 (2001) by which Thai Buddhist nuns henceforth have the right to higher education at state universities from the first degree to the doctoral level. For the bachelor's degree programs offered by conventional universities, this may involve some kind of entrance competitive examination. For open universities, they can apply directly. Nevertheless, some subjects are not open to ascetic persons. Assistant Professor Channarong Boonnoon explained that: "Some subjects involve activities inappropriate to ascetic people."⁵ In addition, state universities offer special programs (weekends and evenings) in which *Mae Chi* could enroll. Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University has launched master's degree and doctoral programs for laypersons and *Mae Chi* since 1999. One year later, in 2000, it started an undergraduate program in Buddhism (*Abhidhamma*) for *Mae Chi* and laypersons.⁶ Meanwhile, Mahamakutrajavidyalaya University, the other Buddhist University, has provided the opportunity for Buddhist nuns to be enrolled in the bachelor's degree program since 1999, in the master's degree programs since 2002, and in the doctoral program since 2006.⁷ This indicates that there has been considerable change in higher education that allows greater access to *Mae Chi*. Some academics, both Thai and Western, have conducted studies on this topic; however, no in-depth study has been made on higher education for *Mae Chi* provided by the two Buddhist universities. Admittedly, the increased opportunities to *Mae Chi* will account for some significant changes, and therefore they warrant more serious studies by the academic world.

⁵ Assistant Professor Channarong Boonnoon, Chair, Department of Philosophy, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, 25 October 2012, interview.

⁶ Bachelor of Arts Program, Abhidhamma Subject, Faculty of Buddhism, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University.

⁷ Graduate School, Mahamakut Buddhist University, Phutthamonthon District, Nakhon Pathom Province.

In 2007, Linberg Falk, an anthropologist, wrote about *Mae Chi* in a book on Buddhist female ascetics (Linberg Falk, Monica, 2007) that they were “not entitled to study at the Bachelor’s degree level at the two Buddhist universities in Thailand,” and that “there are few opportunities for them to attain higher education.”⁸ In the same work, she mentioned that the Buddhist universities tended to offer education for selected individuals, citing Mahamakutrajavidyalaya University as a case in point that allowed *Mae Chi* to be enrolled in the doctoral program on an individual basis (Lindberg Falk Monica, 2007: 201). She elaborated further that the Thai nuns “have been excluded from the Buddhist universities, with the exception of some courses that are open to them.”⁹ However, she mentioned only the opportunity for the first-degree education at Mahapajapati Buddhist College without referring to Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya or Mahamakut Buddhist Universities that have allowed nuns (and women in general) to study at every degree level.¹⁰

In her book *Bat Nao*, first published in 2010, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni wrote:

...At both Buddhist universities in Bangkok – Mahamakut Buddhist University and Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University – education had hitherto been available only to Buddhist monks and novices of the Dhammayuttika and Mahānikāya Sects. Even though financial support from the government comes from the taxes paid by the citizens of both sexes, Buddhist education provided by the two Buddhist

⁸ Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit*, p. 218.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁰ Faith Adiele wrote the following about *Mae Chi* education: “I know that *maechi* are often relegated to the *wat* ghetto, cooking and cleaning and serving monks to earn their keep. Religious study is generally not open to them, certainly not at the two Dhamma universities in Bangkok...” (Adiele, Faith, *Meeting Faith: An Inward Odyssey*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2004, p. 65). This book was published in 2004, five years after the Buddhist nuns were allowed to study at the doctoral level. It is possible that Faith Adiele did not touch upon the matter because it was written before the change and was not updated.

universities was catered only to Buddhist monks. Is this socially just and acceptable? *Isn't this a form of structural violence against the female sex at the state level?*¹¹

In her article, however, she did not touch upon the opportunities open to women that enabled them to have access to education at either Buddhist university or how both universities support Mahapajapati Buddhist College and Savikasikkalai which are organized and taught by Buddhist nuns. In her doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Minnesota in 2010, Kaoru Adachi wrote that “the lack of educational opportunity is another concern for the Buddhist nuns. While the government supports monk education at university level through two Buddhist universities, it provides no such support for *Mae Chi*. The repercussions of such lack of opportunity are serious” (Adachi, Kaoru, n.d.: 40). This statement seemed to have been concluded on insufficient and incomplete information.

In this paper the researchers will describe, analyze and assess the development of higher education offered by the Thai *saṅgha*, especially in terms of its potentiality and effectiveness from the past to the present. It will include the parts played by Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University and Mahamakut Buddhist University in light of the experience of *Mae Chi* nuns who have undergone education at various levels offered by the two universities, Abhidhamchotikavidyalai College, and the Pali studies program. It will also analyze the problems and opportunities of education access in terms of the *saṅgha* as providers and *Mae Chi* as recipients. With regard to *Mae Chi*, the researchers will not leave out the part that society plays in their lives, while also taking into account the roles of gender in education opportunities provided by the *saṅgha*. Gender difference is clearly seen when it comes to *Pariyatti* education, especially in

¹¹ Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, *Bat Nao* (Bangkok: Songsayam Co. Ltd., B.E. 2553 [2010], p. 57). The reference here comes from the article “Structural Violence against Thai Women.” She wrote that “this article was originally written in English and was presented to a conference on Thai Studies organized in U.S.A. in April, 2005. But I think that it might directly benefit the reader; so *Sekhiyadhamma* translated it into Thai” (Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, *Bat Nao*, p. 52).

Pali studies for monks and for *Mae Chi*, concerning *Niccabhadda* (monthly food allowance given by the state) (*Mae Chi* Nat-hathai, B.E. 2552 [2009]: 227-228). The government recognizes only Pali ix certification of the monks as equivalent to the bachelor's degree, but not so in the case of *Mae Chi*, nor does it provide budgetary support for their Pali education.¹² The research by Parichart Suwanbubpha talked about *Mae Chi* education a decade ago in this manner: "Although *Mae Chi* are Thai citizens entitled to the same rights and freedom as any other person under the Constitution, in reality certain education institutes will not allow them admission on the grounds that they are ascetics and therefore should not attend the same classes as laypersons, male or female" (Parichart Suwanbubpha, B.E. 2545 [1992]: 109). Montri Suepduang gave an interesting account of *Pariyattidhamma* education for the monks that *Mae Chi* nuns were not allowed to join as follows: "Education that is being provided by other *saṅgha* groups (not the ones offered by MCU and MBU) does not allow women sufficient opportunity to participate in. Women or *Mae Chi* cannot study *Pariyattidhamma* with monks and novices; nor are women allowed to teach *Pariyattidhamma*" (Montri Suepduang, B.E. 2551 [2008]: 212). However, the allegations of both Parichart Suwanbubpha and Montri Suepduang were not fully substantiated.

This is a qualitative research using the following methodology:

1. In-depth interviews of two groups of the population using open-ended questionnaire:

1.1 Education providers who play a role in the planning and education policy for ascetics and laypersons at both Buddhist universities: rector of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, rector of Mahamakut Buddhist University, deputy rectors for academic affairs, and other senior monks at various administrative levels. The objective in interviewing this group is to study their attitudes, viewpoints, and experiences in the administration, management, and implementation of education for female ascetics.

¹² Dr. Dhanyamas Netnoi, Pali ix, B.A. (Abhidhamma), Ph.D., faculty member of Mahamakut Buddhist University, 10 August 2011, interview.

1.2 Recipients of education consisting of *Mae Chi* students of Pali studies, *Abhidhamma* studies, and higher education at various levels. The researchers chose to conduct individual interviews because they wanted to collect biographical information about education experiences, focusing on obstacles and problems that they encountered in their studies, while encouraging them to share their views, attitudes and recommendations during the interviews.

A member of the research team (i.e. *Mae Chi* Kritsana Raksachom) was one of the first students who received the kind of education provided by the *sangha* from the master's degree to the doctoral level (in 1999 and 2002 respectively), and has been a faculty member of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University for the past four years. This fact ensures that she has had the experience as both an education recipient and provider, thus enabling the research team to review the data, make use of the existing network, create trust in the informants, and develop a set of open-ended questionnaire for *Mae Chi* in an effective and becoming manner. (At the same time, the team also needed to take in account any bias that might occur.)

2. Focus group: This involved group interviews of ten *Mae Chi* students¹³ of Pali studies, *Abhidhamma* studies and university education. The objective was to obtain information on attitudes, experiences and other personal feelings that would help the research team see the differences and similarities in their attitudes and experiences of education in a clearer manner. This would enable us not only to see more clearly the structural problems and assess the effectiveness of education provision but also to see what *Mae Chi* meant when they said that their social status and education provision had improved, including the positive and negative experiences that they underwent in their daily life (e.g. traveling by bus, gaining greater respect from the public, and interacting with the people in various ways). The researchers chose to use the focus group method with *Mae Chi* students of Pali studies, *Abhidhamma* studies and university education because it was a very effective way to collect and assess data. It involved a dynamic

¹³ Conducted at Wat Chanasonghkham, 16 July 2010, for 3 hours and 17 minutes.

interaction of *Mae Chi* members who agreed to join the focus group and intended to share their attitudes and experiences and compare notes as well as considering various recommendations. (However, it must be noted that the group does not represent all the nuns in the country.)

3. Quantitative data collection: In the initial phase the research team developed a set of questionnaires. When distributed, about 300 copies were returned. The purpose was quantitative data collection. Nevertheless, the questionnaire was distributed only at universities and Thai nun institutions. In other words, data were collected only from selected groups of *Mae Chi*. It was not possible, therefore, for the research team to come to a statistical conclusion on the basis of these 300 copies of returned questionnaire, because in a number of issues the respondents could not represent all Thai nuns in the country.¹⁴ However, the researchers made use of the opinions and recommendations expressed in the returned questionnaire, together with the information from interviews, to bring to light a set of structural problems and the extent of the effectiveness of education provision in a clearer manner. Therefore, although this questionnaire was not directly used for quantitative analysis, it was a very useful source of qualitative information for the research work.

One of the main objectives of the research was to analyze data collected from the interviews with education providers and recipients, as well as the views expressed in the returned questionnaire. The data was intended for comparing the experiences and attitudes and for assessing the potentiality and effectiveness of education provided by the *saṅgha* for Thai *Mae Chi*.

2. Provision of higher education by the Thai *saṅgha*

To better understand the present situation, it was necessary to study the historical context of education organized by the *saṅgha*. The research

¹⁴ The researchers intends to develop the questionnaire and, on the basis of this research experience, distribute it to a wider circle in the future in order to be able to come to a statistical conclusion.

team, therefore, studied the works of Ven. Phra *Bhramagunabhorn* (P.A. Payutto) in particular, because he had pursued this matter for an extended period of time, speaking about and providing interesting analyses of monk education. He was at one time also a high-level administrator at Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University.

Prior to King Rama V's reign, the *saṅgha* was the primary provider of education, with the Wat acting as the seat of learning, a place for healing ailments, and a center for teaching Dhamma to people of all ages, male and female. Around 1889 (Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, B.E. 2540 [1997]: 3), Mahathat Withayalai College was created and later changed its name to Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya.¹⁵ In 1893, Mahamakutrajavidyalaya (Mahamakut Buddhist University) was created (Ministry of Education, B.E. 2536 [1993]: 526). Both Buddhist seats of learning were established by King Rama V, with the *saṅgha* acting as the provider of Pali and other modern sciences. The king also issued a law on Thai education in 1898, again with the *saṅgha* as the provider of education for the general public. This, indeed, was considered the first education act of the country. The act clearly spelled out monk education and the role of the *saṅgha* in the provision of public education. The act ended with a note specifying that Mahamakutrajavidyalaya would be a place for learning *Vinaya* and academic subjects, while Mahathat Withayalai would focus on law (Phra Rajavaramuni (Prayoon Dhammacitto), B.E. 2542 [1999]: 2-3). After the reign of King Rama V, Thai education has undergone considerable changes. The role of the Wat as educational center has diminished, and so has the role of the monks as imparters of knowledge.

Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto) explained that “after the death of King Rama V in 1910, the notion of national education has undergone a drastic change whereby monk education and public education were completely separated. The state has acted as the sole provider of public education or education for all, including all higher education. Modern

¹⁵ The name was changed to Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya on 13 September 1896. (Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, B.E. 2540 [1997]: 3)

education for monks and novices, which started more than a decade earlier, has come to a stop and disappeared” (Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto), B.E. 2529 [1986]: 36). It seemed as though the state attached less importance to monk education. There was no mention of Buddhism in the national education plan. He explained further in 1986 that “in all national education programs and plans since 1913, no mention has been made of monks, Wats, *Pariyattidhamma*, or *Buddhacakka* ever again (Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto), B.E. 2529 [1986]: 36). It was not until 1946 when the *saṅgha* of the Dhammayuttika Sect started to provide university education to monks and novices at Mahamakutrajaavidyalaya (Mahamakut Buddhist University, B.E. 2536 [1993]). In 1947, the *saṅgha* of the Mahānikāya Sect followed suit (Mahamakut Buddhist University, B.E. 2540 [1997]: 22). Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto) commented that “such action, in line with King Rama V’s benevolent policy, was meant to bring back opportunity for higher education for children of farmers who did not have access to State universities which seemed to to for people with economic means in the most part and neglected those in the rural areas” (Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto), n.d.: 40-41).

Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto) mentioned in particular the year 1974 in which “not more than 6% of state university students were from farmer families. In view of the fact that the majority of the Thai population – 76-80% – lived in the rural areas, the state investment in education turned out to be designed for people who already enjoyed greater opportunity and advantage” (Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto), B.E. 2529 [1986]: 39). So, despite the government’s effort to provide university education, the rural society did not really enjoy its fruit. The renowned monk gave the following account of the number of students at Buddhist universities: “Between 1968 and 1973 at Mahamakutrajaavidyalaya, about 99% of the student monks came from rural areas, 91% from farmers’ families, compared to state universities where they accounted for only 6% or 8%, while most students were children of government officials and businesspeople from urban areas” (Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto), B.E. 2529 [1986]: 44).

As a rule, people from the rural areas could not get access to university education provided by the government. Phra Debvedi (P.A. Payutto) mentioned that “people did not enjoy equal education opportunities.

People in the remote areas and the poor did not get access to state education and had to resort to the traditional channel of the Wat” (Phra Debvedi (P.A. Payutto), n.d.: 14). As a consequence, it was the task of the Wat to provide education for those who came to be ordained. Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto) added further that “actually it should not be not the duty of the *saṅgha* to provide education for the poor; it should be the government’s duty.” However, the *saṅgha* did what they could; certainly, the quality of its education could not be compared to that of the state. He commented that “it was not too bad, but it was not completely effective. Students from the rural areas that came to the *saṅgha* did not always receive the best possible education. It was incomplete. The state did not recognize such education; it was something that just happened as a by-product of the old way of doing things – the old role of the *saṅgha*” (Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto), n.d.: 43-44).

Besides, higher education managed by the *saṅgha* was not even included in the state education plan. It received a very small financial assistance from the Department of Religious Affairs. Chamnong Thongprasert described how such education was first managed: “In matters concerning classroom buildings, teaching staff and budgetary management, this aspect of education management was perhaps something new to the *saṅgha* who did not yet fully understand its complexity. They had little experience, thus giving a feeling that education did not go as smoothly” (Chamnong Thongprasert, B.E. 2532 [1989]: 17). This may be considered as a management problem. He referred to his own experience¹⁶ that “A budget of 60,000 baht a year was given by the Department of Religious Affairs. It was barely enough. All the administrative

¹⁶ Special Professor Chamnong Thongprasert was among the first batch of students in 1987. A Pali ix scholar, he received a fellowship from Asia Foundation to further his studies at Yale University, USA. He was an instructor at Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University in 1954 and former Director of the Fine Arts Division, Art Officer level 8, between 1979-1980. Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University Council appointed him as a qualified person from 1997 to 2012. Currently, he is an advisor to the Rector, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, a member of the Royal Institute of Thailand, Logic Division, and a member of the Graduate School Committee.

work was carried out at the monks' individual *Kuṭi*. The work could not be done quickly. There was no central office. Classes were on and off" Chamnong Thongprasert, B.E. 2532 [1989]: 3-39). Also "at the beginning of the program, students attended class in the evenings. Otherwise, there would be no class, because during the day there were no teachers available. Learning and teaching were conducted under candlelights. There was no electricity then" Chamnong Thongprasert, B.E. 2532 [1989]: 21). Besides lacking monetary and human resources to manage and provide higher education, the saṅgha had to deal with another serious issue. At one time, the more developed the state education was, the less importance it attached to monk education, eventually leading to non-recognition of monk universities and Pali studies. Despite being aware that their education was not legally endorsed, monks and novices had little choice but to continue with it. As the number of monks and novices studying at Buddhist universities grew, the amount of financial support from the government became insufficient to cover growing expenses. It was minuscule compared to that given to State universities. Ven. Phra Bhramagunabhorn (P.A. Payutto) provided figures that reflect such unequal treatment: In 1973, Thammasat University with 8,500 students received 42,883,300.00 Baht from the national budget, averaging 5,045.00 Baht per head. In the same year, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya with 975 monk/novice students was given a budget of 600,000 baht (of which 150,000 baht was from the National Budget in the form of subsidy) coupled with some assistance from the Central Religious Property and Asia Foundation and general donations, averaging 615 baht per head" Phra Bhramagunabhorn (P.A. Payutto), B.E. 2552 [2009]: 38-39) (Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, 1986: 64-80). Therefore, Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto) concluded that "monk/novice education was directly sponsored in the most part by the general public who contributed as much or as often as they felt like it. It depended least on the state budget, whereas state education was supported by taxpayers' money exacted by the state on a regular basis" (Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto), B.E. 2529 [1986]: 109. Due to the fact that the government did not recognize the qualifications from both Buddhist universities, their graduates

could not pursue a master's degree in Thailand.¹⁷ Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto) gave insightful information on the monks' education qualifications thus: "If a monk completed his Pali 9 or earned his degree from a university not recognized by the state, he would continue his studies in India" (Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto), B.E. 2529 [1986]: 68). S.J. Tambiah wrote about the accreditation of Pali studies of monks and novices about 36 years ago that "monks or novices who completed their Pali iii could go on to study at Thammasat University. Sometime after World War II they were required to have at least Pali vi qualification. More recently, no Pali education, no matter at what level, could get them to continue any further studies" (Tambiah S.J., 1976: 294).

Both Buddhist universities tried to convince the government to recognize their degrees and status. In this connection, a group of senior monks and university administrators¹⁸ submitted a bill on Buddhist Universities in 1957. In that same year a military coup took place, leading to political change and instability. The bill itself met with much opposition from some people in high positions and was not taken up for consideration. The *saṅgha* continued to push forward until the year 1984 when the government passed an act recognizing the qualifications of graduates

¹⁷ Gosling said in 1980: "There is a certain irony in the fact that the secular universities in Thailand do not recognize degrees from the Buddhist Universities. Graduates from both Mahamakut and Mahachulalongkorn have no difficulty in finding places in post-graduate courses at Indian Universities and to a lesser extent at universities in Europe and the U.S.A. One Mahachulalongkorn undergraduate who had passed prayog nine was fairly recently allowed to transfer directly to an undergraduate course at Cambridge. But even on completing his Mahachulalongkorn B.A. he would not have been eligible to start an undergraduate course at any secular Thai university." (Gosling, David, 1980, "New Directions in Thai Buddhism", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 14. No. 3, p. 418). See Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "Buddhism and National Development: A Case Study of Buddhist Universities", p. 65.

¹⁸ Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Dhammananda Bhikkhuni) wrote in 1986: "The central problem regarding these Buddhist universities (which the monks themselves emphasize as the most urgent) is the need to be academically recognized by the government." (Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "Buddhism and National Development: A Case Study of Buddhist Universities", p. 78).

of Buddhist studies. The act, however, gave recognition only to those who graduated with a bachelor's degree and in Pali studies (Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, B.E. 2540 [1997]: 62). It stated that "those who have graduated in Buddhist Studies under the *Pariyattidhamma* program in the Dhamma section and Sanam Luang Pali ix Section called "Pali ix scholars" shall use the abbreviation "Pali ix" (Act on Recognition of Qualifications of Graduates of Buddhist Studies B.E. 2527 [1984]). This marked the first step of achievement of the *saṅgha*, but it was not their actual aim. The recognition by the government at this stage focused only on the degree qualification, not the university. The state limited the *saṅgha* education to only the first degree level; the *saṅgha* could not provide graduate studies at a master's degree or doctoral levels. Between 1984 and 1996, monks who completed their study at a Buddhist university could not pursue higher studies in Thailand if they maintained their religious status. Phra Rajavaramuni (P.A. Payutto) pointed out the inequality of education when the state limited the kind of education provided by the *saṅgha* to the first-degree level only, saying "the *saṅgha*, the main pillar of Buddhism in Thailand at present (1986), could study only to a first-degree level. Those who aspire to higher education have to leave. This can be done in two ways: 1) leave the country, e.g. to India or 2) leave the Wat, i.e. leave the monkhood, and study as laypersons." Consequently, the *saṅgha* submitted another bill on Buddhist Universities in 1994, and the government passed the act in 1997 whereby both Buddhist universities each have an act of its own and receive subsidy from the government as their main source of income, as specified in Section 13 about "general subsidies granted by the government on a yearly basis."¹⁹

Two years later, in 1999, they admitted laypersons to study, including *Mae Chi*. An explanatory note to the Act stated that "such education institutions are established as universities to provide education, conduct research, promote and provide Buddhist academic services to monks, novices, and laypersons."²⁰ With the Act in place, both Buddhist universities

¹⁹ University Act, 1 October, B.E. 2540 (1997).

²⁰ University Act, 1 October, B.E. 2540 (1997).

are now put in a secure position as far as the budget is concerned. Student monks and novices have to pay the registration fees, as do *Mae Chi* nuns in the same amount. Laypersons, both male and female, pay full fees.

It could be seen that as a result of unequal treatment, the Buddhist Universities had been beset with inadequate and uncertain budgets for 50 years or so. They were able to continue their work thanks to the public donation given on an irregular basis. Another important point in this context was that such inequality in education was seen not only in economic terms but in the gender dimension as well. Prior to 1927, Thai women had no access to education at the Wat; only a small group of selected elite women, e.g. those at the royal court, were literate (Anek Nawikmun, B.E. 2547 [2004]: 28) (Terwiel, Barend Jan, 2012:102-104).

3. Inequality in higher education for Thai Mae Chi: a historical perspective

In this section, the research team will provide an overall picture of higher education and Pali studies, including Abhidhamma studies, at both Buddhist Universities after the passage of the University Act.

There is very little written record on Thai Buddhist nuns. It seemed as though historically women did not want to become *Mae Chi* when they were young. It was something they might do in their older years. Monsieur de La Loubère recorded in 1689 about *Mae Chi* in the Ayutthaya period that “Siamese women became ascetics when they were old. There seemed to be no young Buddhist nuns. *Mae Chi* nuns were not found in every Wat” (Simon de La Loubère, B.E. 2548 [2005]: 507). Another account by Nicholas Chervais, a Frenchman living in Thailand during the Ayutthaya period, talked about *Mae Chi* as follows:

Siamese women loved freedom more than to give themselves up to the convent like our nuns who were prepared to stay there for life. Thai nuns would become ascetics when they reached an age in which they were bored with all the worldly matter. Once they became nuns, very few would leave. Since they had to be in close contact with the monks a lot of times,

permission was given for them to become *Mae Chi* when they were more than 50 years old to avoid any criticism. They had to have their heads and eyebrows shaved just like a *Bhikkhu* and wore white robes. White was a polite color. The Siamese used it for mourning and for important ceremonies. These *Mae Chi* nuns did not stay in the monastic abodes. They left their family and stayed together in a group of 3-4 close to the Wat. They did not only give a religious vow and observe the *Vinaya* rules just as the monks did, but they also conducted themselves in the *Vinaya* as strictly as the monks in every way, including daily praying and chanting for a long time in the Uposatha hall. They spent most of their time serving the monks, taking care of food and other chores, and making merits. They visited the poor and the sick, helping others in every possible way, in the spirit of giving. They did not have their own home; they lived in the Wat. The activities of these old nuns focused mainly on practicing Dhamma or making merits by helping maintain Buddhism and serving the monks. (Nicholas Chervais, n.d.: 54)

The first activity ever recorded in the history of Thai *Mae Chi* occurred in King Rama V's reign. Mention was made of the study of *Abhidhamma*, lasting 7 year and 6 months, the course consisting of 9 steps. It was first launched in 1951 at Wat Rakhang Khositaram, Thonburi, Bangkok, (*Abhidhamchotikavidyalaya*. B.E. 2554 [2011]: 75). It was provided by the *saṅgha* of Mahānikāya Sect led by Phra Phimontham (At Asabhamahāthera).²¹ *Mae Chi* nuns were admitted to study together with the monks. In 1966, two *Mae Chi* graduated. From then to the present day (2011), the total number of *Mae Chi* graduates from the *Abhidhamma* program was 152. The average highest number of graduates

²¹ Former chief abbot of Wat Mahathat Yuwaratcharangsarit, former ecclesiastical minister of administrative bodies (under the *Saṅgha* Act B.E. 2484 [1941], former president of Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University Council on two separate occasions (1948-1961 and 1980-1989), his last ecclesiastical rank being Somdet Phra Buddhācāriya.

was 10 in 1995, while the rest saw about 7-9 graduates per year.²² In 1968, the *saṅgha* of Wat Mahathat Yuwaratransarit, Tha Phra-chan, Bangkok, of the Mahānikāya Sect, offered an *Abhidhamma* program in which the nuns studied together with the monks. The number of *Mae Chi* graduating from the *Abhidhamma* program from 1968 to 2011 was 250. The year 2011 saw the greatest number of *Mae Chi* graduates – 19. The rest saw 10 to 14 graduates (*Abhidhamma* Student Registration Division, n.d.). Since 1981 the *Abhidhamma* program has come under Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya, with 57 branches set up both in Bangkok and in the rural areas (*Abhidhamchotikavidyalaya*. B.E. 2554 [2011]: 75-76).

In 1963, Mahamakut Buddhist University, the *saṅgha* of the Dhammayuttika Sect, offered a Pali program consisting of nine steps to *Mae Chi*, using the same curriculum as that for the monks. The program could be taken both by *Mae Chi* and monks. Mahamakutrajaavidyalaya was merely a place where testing and certification of Pali education were held for *Mae Chi*. It did not come under the supervision of the Pali Division of the *Saṅgha* Supreme Council as was the case with monk education. Therefore, *Mae Chi* did not take the same examination as the monks (Gosling David L., 1988: 126). The first batch of *Mae Chi* students was 12. No *Mae Chi* from the group completed Pali grade ix; Pali vi was the highest they could achieve.²³ In 1986,²⁴ only one *Mae Chi* completed Pali ix. It took

²² *Mae Chi* graduated in 1966; 3 in 1967; 3 in 1971; 2 in 1972; 4 in 1973; 9 in 1974; 9 in 1975; 6 in 1976; 1 in 1977; 3 in 1978; 1 in 1979; 4 in 1980; none in 1981; 1 in 1982; 2 in 1983; 4 in 1984; 5 in 1985; 1 in 1986; 1 in 1987; none in 1988; 4 in 1989; none in 1990; 5 in 1991; 5 in 1992; 6 in 1993; 5 in 1994; 10 in 1995; 7 in 1996; 9 in 1997; 3 in 1998; 5 in 1999; 4 in 2000; 1 in 2001; 4 in 2002; 5 in 2003; 4 in 2004; 3 in 2005; 7 in 2006; none in 2007; none in 2008; 2 in 2009; 1 in 2010; and 1 in 2011. The total number of *Mae Chi* graduates from 1966 to 2011 was 152 (Student Registration Division, Wat Rakhang Khositaram, Bangkok, 2011).

²³ *Mae Chi* Prathin Khwan-On, President of Thai Nun Institutions 2012, one of the graduates of the first Pali class, head of Thai Nun Institution at Paktho, Ratchaburi Province, 25 May 2012, interview.

²⁴ *Mae Chi* Somsī Charupheng, the first Thai nun to complete Pali ix, Wat Chanasongkhram, 17 December 2012, interview. Mahamakut Buddhist University, printed material).

23 years before any nun could reach this level. From 1963 to 2011, at most two *Mae Chi* nuns graduated with Pali ix a year. In 49 years, the number of *Mae Chi* with Pali ix in Thailand was 20.²⁵

Mahamakutrajaavidyalaya certified Pali education of *Mae Chi* nuns by granting them certificates and honorary fans in the tradition of the *Saṅgha*. An announcement by Mahamakut Buddhist University said that the program would “use the curriculum and achievement measurement criteria of *Pariyattidhamma* in the Sanam Luang Pali Section *mutatis mutandis*” (Mahamakut Buddhist University, B.E. 2543 [2000]). The granting of certificates and honorary fans was made in different ways. For completion of Pali iii, vi and ix, the nuns would receive both certificates and honorary fans. Those with Pali iii and vi would receive them from His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch, while those with Pali ix would receive from Her Royal Highness Princess Soamsawali. Her Royal Highness conferred the honorary fans to the Pali ix graduates for the first time in the history of *Mae Chi* education in 1986 at Education Council Building, Mahamakutrajaavidyalaya.²⁶ Those who completed Pali i-ii, iv, v, vi, vii, and viii would receive only certificates from His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch or his representative.

Although *Mae Chi* received the same kind of Pali education as monks and novices, discrepancy still existed. The latter group with Pali ix qualifications received a monthly allowance from the government via the Department of Religious Affairs then or the Office of National Buddhism today. This was not the case for *Mae Chi* with the same qualifications because Pali education for *Mae Chi* was not the responsibility of the *Saṅgha* Supreme Council; rather, it was provided by Mahamakutrajaavidyalaya. Monk education was recognized by the B.E. 2527 [1984] Act. Section 3 said

²⁵ 1 *Mae Chi* completed Pali ix in 1986; 1 in 1990; 1 in 1995; 2 in 1996; 2 in 1997; 2 in 1998; 1 in 1999; none in 2000; 1 in 2001; 1 in 2002; 2 in 2003; 1 in 2004; none in 2005; 1 in 2006; 1 in 2007; 1 in 2008; none in 2009 and 2010; and 2 in 2011. (Registration Division, Mahamakut Buddhist University, printed material).

²⁶ Dr. *Mae Chi* Duangphorn Khamhomkul, the second Thai nun with Pali ix, faculty member, Mahapajapati Buddhist College (*Mae Chi* College), Pakthongchai District, Nakhon Ratchaima Province.

that “Buddhist subjects refer to the knowledge which monks and novices are required to study under the Pariyattidhamma program in the Dhamma section and Sanam Luang Pali Section” (Act on Recognition of Qualifications of Graduates of Buddhist Studies B.E. 2527 [1984]). By the time the Act was passed, *Mae Chi* nuns had already formed the Foundation of Thai Nun Institutions.²⁷ Still, no support was forthcoming for them to study at either Buddhist University.

Thammasat University was established on 27 June 1934 (<http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/>, accessed on 17 May 2012). Professor Dr. Watchara Ngamchitcharoen explained the reason why there was no Buddhist nun student at the university: “There is no rule or regulation forbidding them to study at Thammasat University. The fact was that none applied. This might be due to the Thai traditional belief that ascetics should not get involved with worldly learning. Also, Thailand might look at *Mae Chi* as someone in between a layperson and an ascetic. As a consequence, no *Mae Chi* applied for admission. In 1985, there were monks studying in master’s degree programs at Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University, but there was no *Mae Chi* studying at Thammsat University. In 1997, when Thammasat opened a program in Buddhist Studies, one *Mae Chi* applied. From 1997 to 2011 there were 11 *Mae Chi* students, one of whom was about to be the first to graduate.”²⁸ In addition, Thammasat was a traditional university in that students were required to sit in a competitive examination, and the university would select the qualified candidates on the basis of their scores. It was different from an open university which required no competitive examination. Most *Mae Chi* viewed themselves as ascetics and would rather devote themselves to the study of Dhamma and *Vipassanā*. Some *Mae Chi* might decide to study at an open university, i.e. Ramkhamhaeng University ([http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramkhamhaeng University](http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramkhamhaeng_University) accessed

²⁷ Foundation of Thai Nun Institutions was created on 28 August 1969.

²⁸ Professor Dr. Watchara Ngamchitcharoen, faculty member of the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Pali ix, B.A. in Buddhist Studies, M.A. in philosophy (University of Delhi, India), Ph.D. in Philosophy (Chulalongkorn University), 22 May 2012 at Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya, interview.

on 17 May 2012). The year 1977 saw its first *Mae Chi* graduate – *Mae Chi* Udomsi Choket. Five years later, in 1982, *Mae Chi* Sisalap Upamai and *Mae Chi* Yuphin Duangchan went to the same university. *Mae Chi* Sisalap Uppamairecounted that “...at the beginning my Wat did not allow me to study at Ramkhamhaeng University on the grounds that I had taken up an ascetic life and should not attend a university in the worldly setting. However, once I did, the Wat did not raise any objection and let me study until I graduated. A *Mae Chi* from Wat Paknam was the first to study at Ramkhamhaeng University.”²⁹ Sukhothaithammathirat University, established 1978, was also an open university ([http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukhothaithammathirat University](http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukhothaithammathirat_University) accessed on 17 May 2012). This was another university that *Mae Chi* nuns chose to study at. They chose these two universities because the fees were not too high and they were easy to access. Any religious person could attend. There was no limit to the student admission. Students had to do a lot of self-study. Private universities, likewise, had no restriction for *Mae Chi* to study. The research team was not able to check the number of *Mae Chi* students enrolled at the above two universities or at private universities, as they prefixed their names with Miss according to their national ID cards when they applied for admission.

4. Access to university education by Thai Buddhist Nuns

After the passage of the Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya Act and Mahamakutrajavidyalaya Act in 1997, *Mae Chi* education had constantly improved, especially over the last ten years. *Mae Chi* nuns could now study to the doctoral level. All this was due to a more secure position of monk education. In other words, the two Buddhist universities were accredited and had legal statuses. According to Buddhist University Acts of 1997, the universities were designed to be seats of learning and research, with the objectives of providing education, conducting research, promoting and

²⁹ *Mae Chi* Sisalap Uppamai, Wat Paknam Phasicharoen, Pali iv, visiting instructor of Mahapajapati Buddhist College, Member of Thai Nun Institution Committee, Advisor to Deputy Director for Administration of Thai Nun Institutions, 14 June 2012, interview.

providing Buddhism-related services to monks, novices and laypeople.³⁰ As a result, in 1999 Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University began to admit *Mae Chi* and laypersons to the master's degree program. There were four *Mae Chi* nuns in the first batch; three graduated.³¹ Of the three Buddhist nuns, two eventually completed their doctorate, one at Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University and the other at University of Delhi, India. Both became instructors at Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University and Mahapajapati Buddhist College.³² In 2000, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University established a doctoral program, although it did not admit laypersons and *Mae Chi* to study at the first degree programs until 2005. The reason for the delay was that the University Administration finished amending its rules and regulations for the graduate level earlier than it did with the undergraduate level.³³ From its first admission in 1999 to 2011, there had been one *Mae Chi* doctoral graduate, 13 master's degree graduates,³⁴ and 8 first-degree graduates.³⁵

Besides, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University recognized all *Abhidhamma* programs hitherto taught but not yet certified by the Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University Council. The Council announced the accreditation of *Abhidhamma* studies in 2003 as follows: "The certificate of Majjhimābhīdammika-Eka is equivalent to that of upper secondary education, and the certificate of *Abhidhamma Panditais* equivalent to a bachelor's degree" (Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, 2003).

Mahamakut Buddhist University, on the other hand, first admitted *Mae Chi* to the undergraduate program in 1999, to the master's degree

³⁰ Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University Act and Mahamakutraajavidyalaya University Act.

³¹ Printed material, Graduate School, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, 1999.

³² Associate Professor Dr. Phra Sigambhirayarn, Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, 4 August 2010, interview.

³³ Associate Professor Dr. Phra Sigambhirayarn, Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, 4 August 2010, interview.

³⁴ Records, Graduate School, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University.

³⁵ Records, Faculty of Buddhist Studies, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University.

program in 2002, and to the doctoral program in 2006.³⁶ There were 43 *Mae Chi* graduates with a bachelor's degree, 29 with a master's degree, and one with a doctorate.³⁷ The numbers of *Mae Chi* graduates from both Buddhist universities were different. Presumably, the Foundation of Thai Nun Institutions had its office located in the compounds of Mahamakut Buddhist University, so the nuns became more familiar with this university from the very beginning since 1969.³⁸ Pali studies had never been recognized since the course began in 1963. In 2000, the University announced its recognition of Pali studies taken by *Mae Chi* as a university certificate to be in line with those of the monks. Those with Pali v could continue to study at the undergraduate level, while those with Pali ix could pursue a master's degree program at either Buddhist University, as well as applying for a master's degree program at any other public university.³⁹ The announcement read: "The University Council has decided to approve Pali studies from level 1-2 to 9 held at Mahamakut Buddhist University with an abbreviated name of "P.S." based on the curriculum and achievement measurement criteria of *Pariyattidhamma* in the Sanam Luang Pali Section *mutatis mutandis* and to recognize their qualifications as equivalent to those of the Sanam Luang Pali counterpart" (Mahamakut Buddhist University, B.E. 2543 [2000]). The University announced its support of the Pali studies program for *Mae Chi*, using the same standard as monk education in every way, with the abbreviated "P.S.", short for Pali Studies.

Thus, both Buddhist Universities had clearly shown where they stood with regard to *Mae Chi* education. Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University recognized the qualifications of *Abhidhamma* graduates who could now apply for a master's degree program, while Mahamakut

³⁶ Phrakhru Palat Sampiphadhanaviriya, Dean, Graduate School, Mahamakut Buddhist University, 12 August 2011, interview.

³⁷ Records, Graduate School, Mahamakut Buddhist University, 2011.

³⁸ Foundation of Thai Nun Institutions, originally located at MBU Building, Wat Bowonniwetwihan, Bangkok, in 2005, was later moved to Mahamakut Buddhist University, Salaya Sub-district, Putthamonthon District, Nakhon Pathom Province.

³⁹ Phrakhru Sutadharmakovid, Head of Student Development Division, Mahamakut Buddhist University, interview.

Buddhist University recognized *Mae Chi* qualifications of Pali ix as equivalent to a bachelor's degree and eligible for a master's degree pursuit at either Buddhist University.⁴⁰ The research team interviewed high-level administrators of both Buddhist Universities and were told that they wanted to promote education for *Mae Chi* and other laywomen so that they are well versed enough in Dhamma to teach and bring worldly and spiritual benefits to society. In light of the attempts over the past 50 years or so, both Universities seemed to take a long time before they finally admitted *Mae Chi* nuns to their programs. The interviews provided similar explanation in that no university law had been passed to allow them to do so, that there was no budget set for the purpose, and that they did not come under the supervision of the government. They received some limited funding from the Department of Religious Affairs and from the general public. Their management, therefore, was on a slippery slope and rather random. There was no clear direction, and there were not enough classrooms. In this connection, MCU Rector Professor Dr. Phra Dharmakosajarn (Prayoon Dhammacitto) explained succinctly that "there was neither a legal act for the Buddhist Universities nor enough budget."⁴¹ Phra Sudhidhamanuvatra (Thiap Siriñano) added that "the Buddhist Universities managed their education on the basis of public donation. The *Saṅgha* did not have much money for such management or for necessary expenses."⁴²

⁴⁰ A high-level administrator from Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University said that "We think that we will promote *Mae Chi* education status. Mahamakut Buddhist University offers Pali studies for *Mae Chi*, while Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University provides *Abhidhamma* education for them, which the law has now made possible." (Associate Professor Dr. Phra Sigambhirayarn, Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, 4 August 2011, interview).

⁴¹ Professor Dr. Phra Dharmakosajarn, Rector of Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, Member of the Royal Institute of Thailand, abbot of Wat Prayunwongsawat, Bangkok, 3 August 2010, interview; Associate Professor Dr. Phra Sigambhirayarn, Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, 4 August 2010, interview.

⁴² Assistant Professor Dr. Phra Sudhidhamanuvatra, Dean of Faculty of Buddhist Studies, Assistant Abbot of Wat Phrachetuphonwimankhlaram, Bangkok, 3 August 2010, interview.

5. Challenges of teaching students of different sexes

Before 1969, a group of *Saṅgha* that managed higher education had attempted to propose a Buddhist University bill. Unfortunately, some senior monks from both Dhammayuttika and Mahānikāya Sects did not agree with the idea and so did not support the bill, afraid that the traditional Pali studies for the monks might suffer and that it might deter people from learning Pali. Monks that studied at a Buddhist university where knowledge both of the world and of Dhamma were taught would leave the monkhood to live a secular life. Above all, they were concerned with the purity of the student monks. At that time, some senior monks and politicians shared a similar view that monks should study only Pali and *Dhamma-Vinaya*.⁴³ Thus, the University Acts were instrumental to expanding education to cover laypersons. Phra Dharmakosajarn (Prayoon Dhammacitto) addressed his concern to a House Committee that “if only monks were admitted and if their number declined, what could we do? Therefore, we should admit lay students as well.”⁴⁴ Phrakhru Palat Suvadhanavajiragun (Sawai JotiKo) talked about separate classrooms: “The House Committee agreed in principle but instructed that in practice classrooms should be kept separate to avoid any problems of sexual morality and chastity” (Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, n.d.: 70). “One should not overlook the question whether or not it becomes the status of monkhood. The administrators of both Universities are well aware of the issue and have made it a policy to have separate classrooms.”⁴⁵ Phra Sigambhirayarn (Somcint Sammapañño) explained the situation as follows:

at that time society did not want women to study in the same place as monks. If they wanted to learn, they must learn in a separate classroom. There was some criticism from senior

⁴³ Phra Sudhivarañāṇa (Narong Cittasobhaṇo), Deputy Rector, Nakhon Ratchasima Campus, 28 September 2011, interview.

⁴⁴ Professor Dr. Phra Dharmakosajarn, Rector of Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, 3 August 2010, interview.

⁴⁵ Phrakhru Palat Suvadhanavajiragun (Sawai JotiKo), Deputy Rector for International Affairs, 18 August 2011, interview.

administrators that we did not have enough rooms already. If we had to provide separate teaching in separate classes, the room shortage would become worse. As it was, we did not have enough instructors. Separate classrooms would surely pose more problems.⁴⁶

After all the changes that have taken place in education management, at the undergraduate and master's degree levels monks and laypersons now study in separate classrooms, but they share the same classroom at the doctoral level. The reason for allowing doctoral students to study together is that they have reached an acceptable maturity. Besides, university administrators now regard the presence of women at a Buddhist university as something quite normal. In almost every Wat in Thailand, it is women who usually come to make merits and perform various religious ceremonies. Instructors, too, include monks, laymen and laywomen. There is an explanation about allowing laywomen to teach. Monks would have to pay greater attention to their learning and conducts; they have to transcend the gender issue and learn to keep their minds intact.⁴⁷ Mahamakut Buddhist University not only accepted *Mae Chi* as students but also create a college specially designed for them. It is called Mahapajapati Buddhist College which admits women with grade-12 qualifications to study at the Faculty of Religion and Philosophy and Faculty of Education (Teaching Buddhism and Teaching English programs) for a bachelor's degree. Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University also plans to create a college for *Mae Chi* students within the campus at Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya, Wangnoi District, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province. At the same time it supports Sathira Thammasthan, a nunnery in Bangkok, in establishing a master's degree program called "Sāvika Sikkhalai"⁴⁸ to all students, whether *Mae Chi*, laymen and laywomen. It receives donation from the general public for the construction of college buildings.

⁴⁶ Associate Professor Dr. Phra Sigambhirayarn, Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, 4 August 2010, interview.

⁴⁷ Phra Sudhidhamanuvatra, Dean of Graduate School, 3 August 2010, interview.

⁴⁸ Phra Dharmakosajarn, Rector of Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, 3 August 2010, interview.

6. *Mae Chi* learning experience

Over the past 10 years or so, the image of *Mae Chi* has become more positive, mainly because they enjoy better and higher education and are an important force in the dissemination of Buddhism in the *Paryatti* and *Paṭṭatti* areas. In the past their schooling was rather limited, and their activities were confined mainly to Dhamma practice and work in the Wat. In the past, they would hardly be asked to teach morality outside the Wat except at some special places such as at the *Mae Chi* Center of Sala Santisuk, Nakhon Chaisi District, Nakhon Pathom Province. But even such occasions were rare. Since 1999, however, an increasing number of *Mae Chi* nuns have attained university education. One *Mae Chi* nun reported thus: “In the past the head of the *Mae Chi* would not allow us to learn anything outside. We were told to stay inside the Wat, to practice Dhamma. Nowadays, more opportunity is available. We can learn as much as we aspire to. We can learn anything that we want to. *Mae Chi* education has come a long way”⁴⁹ When they are educated and have conducted themselves within the framework of the teachings of the Buddha, they have become more accepted as the teachers of Dhamma and have played a greater role in the teaching of ethics to young people. One *Mae Chi* nun said: “*Mae Chi* who teach ethics and morality at schools in the urban and rural communities are respected as highly as monks and novices.”⁵⁰ This was in line with the interview given by another *Mae Chi* that “during summer training or morality training, *Mae Chi* nuns would be given an honor and asked to teach as well.”⁵¹ Another said that “in the past we did not have much opportunity to teach morality, but today more opportunity is available, and monks and novices accept us more readily. They even ask us to teach Pali to novices, something that rarely occurred in the past. In more recent time, *Mae Chi* nuns are better educated and are given more opportunity to teach. They are accepted both by monks, novices and laypersons.”⁵² Besides laypersons, the *Saṅgha*

⁴⁹ *Mae Chi* No. 1, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁵⁰ *Mae Chi* No. 2, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁵¹ *Mae Chi* No. 3, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁵² *Mae Chi* No. 4, 16 July 2010, interview.

have come to recognize their ability. Some Wats allow them to teach Pali to monks and novices on a regular basis, e.g. at the learning center at Wat Mahathat Yuwaratcharangsarit, Bangkok. One of the Mae Chi Pali teachers there said that “I taught Pali at the center from 1993 to 2011. More monks and novices gave me due respect.”⁵³ At Abhidhamchotikavidyalai College, there were 8 *Mae Chi* teachers of *Abhidhamma* out of 31 monk and lay teaching members. The students, both ascetic and lay, showed them due respect. One *Mae Chi* teacher said during the interview that “the students were more interested in the subject matter than the sex of the teachers.”⁵⁴ Another who taught at Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University from 2008 to present (2012) said that “Monk graduate students, both at the master and doctoral levels, appreciate and focus on the knowledge of the teachers. So, teaching has not met with any obstacles.”⁵⁵ There were two *Mae Chi* teachers at Mahapajapati Buddhist College (Nun College) under the supervision of Mahamakut Buddhist University. One who taught there for three years talked about her experience as follows:

...in recent years I saw more educated and able *Mae Chi* teach at Buddhist universities, and their abilities are recognized by both monks and lay persons. Besides, the new generation of monks and novices tend to pay more attention to the qualifications of the teachers. As a rule, at a Buddhist university there are a number of lay instructors. So, it is not a surprise that there are *Mae Chi* teachers at a Buddhist university.⁵⁶

With regard to Pali studies, the learning environment in which *Mae Chi* study side by side with monks and novices was cordial and easy-going. In an interview with a *Mae Chi* nun from the countryside, one learnt that “in the rural areas there are a lot of Pali classes, e.g. in Ratchaburi Province. Monks and novices always lend a helping hand. Teachers are good. Monk and novice students are ready to cooperate. The atmosphere is

⁵³ *Mae Chi* No. 5, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁵⁴ *Mae Chi* No. 6, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁵⁵ *Mae Chi* No. 7, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁵⁶ *Mae Chi* No. 8, 16 July 2010, interview.

friendly. Everyone pays respect to each other throughout the course.”⁵⁷ In Bangkok, some of the popular Pali learning centers include Wat Mahathat Yuwaratcharangsarit, Wat Sam Phraya, Wat Chanasongkhram, and Wat Rakhang Khositaram. One *Mae Chi* related her experience: “We learnt Pali viii and ix at Wat Sam Phraya. It was a happy learning experience. Monks and novices were friendly. After the course was over, we remain friends and continue to support one another.”⁵⁸ Between 1963-1985, the only Pali learning center that the *Saṅgha* allowed *Mae Chi* nuns to study in was in Bangkok. After *Mae Chi* Somsri Charupheng became the first nun to complete Pali ix in Thailand, there was a lot of enthusiasm among the Buddhist nuns to study Pali.⁵⁹ Soon after, every Pali learning center in the rural areas allowed *Mae Chi* to study.⁶⁰ A greater interest in learning also meant greater burdens, i.e. more expenses, on the part of the learners. Some depended on their parents for the upkeep, while others were supported by their lay friends. One *Mae Chi* nun said during the interview that “master’s and doctoral studies were supported by laypersons.”⁶¹ Some worked to earn money from teaching at the Wat, while receiving a monthly allowance from the Foundation. The money was used to pay for the course. It could be said that education opportunity was something that brought greater pride to the nuns’ families who no longer needed to be too concerned about the ascetic life of their daughters. They gave *Mae Chi* greater blessings, seeing how their religious life brought them not only the knowledge of the world but also Dhamma. In a sense, in becoming a *Mae Chi*, a woman has made it possible for her family, especially her parents, to “hold on to the end of her white robe [and go to Heaven].” This saying is reminiscent to one commonly made about parents of an ordained monk who, it is believed, will be able to go to Heaven simply by “holding on to the end of the saffron robe.” *Mae Chi* nuns conduct themselves just as monks do when receiving things from laypersons: “When her parents bring her food, *Mae Chi* will

⁵⁷ *Mae Chi* No. 9, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁵⁸ *Mae Chi* No. 10, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁵⁹ *Mae Chi* No. 11, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁶⁰ *Mae Chi* No. 12, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁶¹ *Mae Chi* No. 13, 16 July 2010, interview.

extend her hands to receive it just as a monk does and will bless them when the meal is over.”⁶²

Although the Wat allowed *Mae Chi* to study Pali with the monks, they were beset with another problem – accommodation. Some Wat may be able to accommodate them, while others have no such facility. Wat in Bangkok that serve as learning centers and at the same time provide accommodation for *Mae Chi* are Wat Mahathat Yuwaratcharangsarit Ratchaworamahawihan, Wat Chanasongkhram Ratchaworamahawihan, Wat Paknam Phasicharoen, Wat Rakhang Khositaram Woramahawihan, Wat Phleng Wipatsana, and Wat Soithong. Wat that provide accommodation but do not serve as learning centers are Wat Samphanthawongsaworawihan, Wat Parinayok, Wat Amphawan, Wat Boromniwat Ratchaworawihan, Wat Somnat Worawihan, Wat Mathantikaram, Wat Phawanaphiratararam, Wat Ratchasittharam Ratchaworawihan, Wat Chaomun, and Wat Awutwikasitararam. Not every Wat in Bangkok offer lodging to *Mae Chi* nuns, thus making life difficult for them. Their *Kuṭi* or lodging may be located in a place unsuitable to women, e.g. close to the toilet or crematorium, or in a place where a lot of people are seen coming and going. On the contrary, some Wat provide not only comfortable lodging but also a good school for *Mae Chi*. Some provide only lodging but no classroom, while others are teaching centers without accommodation. One *Mae Chi* said during the interview: “The first time I came to study, life was very difficult. Sometimes we found a place to live but no place to study. This was in 1993. It slowed down our study, and we were not getting any younger.”⁶³ In the rural areas, some Wat have lodging for *Mae Chi*; others do not. Some nuns were lucky to be accommodated at the Wat and be provided with textbooks.⁶⁴ Those living in the Wat with the support of the abbot do not feel that they suffered any disadvantage. Some Wat in the rural areas that offer *Abhidhamma* courses allow their *Mae Chi* students to accept offerings at funeral rites or other religious ceremonies

⁶² *Mae Chi* No. 14, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁶³ *Mae Chi* No. 15, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁶⁴ *Mae Chi* No. 16, 16 July 2010, interview.

held in the Wat.⁶⁵ Besides, some abbots encourage nuns to complete the *Abhidhamma* course and further their studies. Some nuns are provided with every kind of amenities and live a comfortable life without any problems. Some abbots do not consider gender an issue. “In some Wat the abbots assigned the nuns to teach. Practically all these nuns were graduates of the *Abhidhamma* or Pali studies.”⁶⁶ However, not every Wat promotes *Abhidhamma* or Pali studies; it all depends on the abbot’s policy. This applies also to the permission for the nuns to reside in the Wat.

7. Funding for *Mae Chi* education

While there have been more positive changes in recent years, it cannot be denied that Thai Buddhist nuns still face a lot of learning obstacles. According to the interviews, the main obstacles lie in the funding. It is a common knowledge that *Mae Chi* are not universally recognized as ascetics whether in Thailand or abroad. As a result, Thai society has neglected them in many ways and not given them due respect. It cannot be denied that in several big Wat, the Buddhist nuns have to cook for the monks, clean, and take care of general chores. One *Mae Chi* said, “...we had to prepare food in the evening for the next day’s breakfast. It was our responsibility.”⁶⁷ Some Wat accept *Mae Chi* as cooks who prepare food for monks and novices. If they came to learn Pali and pursue higher studies, they would be rejected. Even if they were allowed to stay in the Wat, they still faced problems with food. In an interview, a *Mae Chi* university student remarked that “if we helped in the kitchen, we would not be able to study. Kitchen work starts at five o’clock; by the time we finish washing-up, it would be one o’clock in the afternoon. University education usually starts in the morning. If we do not help with the cooking, we have to buy or own food. We would not dare to eat in the kitchen.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *Mae Chi* No. 17, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁶⁶ *Mae Chi* No. 18, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁶⁷ *Mae Chi* No. 19, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁶⁸ *Mae Chi* No. 20, 16 July 2010, interview.

It is a well-received fact that Thai Buddhist nuns enjoy little social capital. Nevertheless, there are educational fundings available. This funding comes from various *Mae Chi* centers, the general public, the Wat in which they reside, or other educational institutes. The extent of the funding would depend on the economic situation of the donor. One *Mae Chi* nun said that “There were people who supported secular education of *Mae Chi* on a semester-by-semester basis.”⁶⁹ Some abbots promote *Mae Chi* education as a policy, and the nuns are able to pass different levels of Pali examination. The Wat would provide financial rewards for the nuns – 1,000 baht for each level – the same amount awarded to the successful monk/novice.⁷⁰ When a *Mae Chi* passes Pali ix, the Wat where she resides would award her 10,000 Baht. More prosperous Wat might raise the amount to 30,000 Baht. In addition, the Pali and Dhamma Graduates Association of Thailand at Wat Sam Phraya give an award of 3,000 Baht and Wat Phra Dhammakaya 7,000 Baht to each successful candidate. Both institutes organize and celebrate the event in honor of the recipient monks, novices, and nuns. In the case of the Pali and Dhamma Graduates Association of Thailand at Wat Sam Phraya and Wat Phra Dhammakaya, the recipients, whether monks/novices or nuns, receive the same amount of funding. Some Wat where the nuns reside also celebrate the event; several senior monks also offer more financial awards. On the other hand, *Mae Chi* nuns in some Wat do not receive any award when they pass the Pali tests. According to one nun, “the Wat never gave an educational funding or award.”⁷¹ An administrator of a Wat with nun residents said in the interview: “*Mae Chi* education is something we wish to have. It is the same with education for monks and novices. Once they enter the ascetic world, they need to study. The Wat offers education in Dhamma and Pali studies and wants to encourage the nuns to go on to university.”⁷² This corresponded with the statement by a *Mae Chi* nun who completed her Pali ix at Wat Paknam: “...after the

⁶⁹ *Mae Chi* No. 21, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁷⁰ *Mae Chi* No. 22, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁷¹ *Mae Chi* No. 23, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁷² Somdet Phramaha Rajamangalacarya (Chuang Varapañño), abbot of Wat Paknam Phasicharoen, 26 September 2010, interview.

completion of Pali ix, Somdet Phramaha Rajamangalacarya (Chuang Varapañño) offered an educational grant of 50,000 baht, and the Association of Luang Pho Paknam's Followers another 5,000 baht.⁷³ Again, "the Wat supports *Mae Chi* education by offering grants to *Mae Chi* nuns who pass the Pali and Dhamma studies each year. The amount of the grants is the same as that given to monks and novices."⁷⁴ However, some Wat are not financially equipped, and accordingly they "do not have any policy on awarding grants to *Mae Chi* nuns."⁷⁵

Abhidhamchotikavidyalai College, on the other hand, supports *Mae Chi* nuns with good scholastic achievements by providing textbooks, although no financial support is given. Savikasikkalai, however, offers two scholarships for *Mae Chi* nuns at a master's degree level to the completion of their studies, each worth 27,500 Baht per semester, and two scholarships at the undergraduate level to the completion of their studies, each worth 12,300 Baht. The number of scholarships varies according to the number of requests submitted to the committee of Sathira Thammasathan. In 2008, there were three *Mae Chi* students at Savikasikkalai Sathira Thammasathan in the master's degree program; one received a scholarship from Sathira Thammasathan.⁷⁶ The granting of scholarships by Savikasikkalai is made on a case-by-case basis; not every request is granted. In the case of Mahamakut Buddhist University, scholarships are given to monks, novices and nuns who study at the University at the undergraduate (1,000 Baht) and master's degree levels (3,000 Baht). Meanwhile, Mahapajapati Buddhist College, an undergraduate institution for *Mae Chi* nuns under the patronage of His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch, has available the Foundation of Mahapajapati Buddhist College Fund, H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri

⁷³ Dr. Mae Chi Duangphorn Khamhomkul, permanent faculty member, Mahapajapati Buddhist College, second Pali ix graduate in Thailand, 18 December, interview.

⁷⁴ Phra Dharmasudhi (Peer Sujato), chief abbot of Wat Mahathat Yuwanratcharangsarit Ratchaworamahawihan, Bangkok, 17 December 2012, interview.

⁷⁵ Phra Srivajramuni (Vajra thitamedho), Assistant Abbot, Wat Chanasongkhram Ratchaworamahawihan, Pali studies supervisor, 18 December 2012, interview.

⁷⁶ *Mae Chi* Kanchana Triamthanachok, Sathira Thammasathan, doctoral student, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 10 August 2011, interview.

Sirindhorn's Scholarships, and other grants donated by the public through the Foundation. The condition that the Foundation has set for *Mae Chi* nuns or laywomento be eligible for the fund is that they must follow the rule of chanting and praying on a regular basis.

With regard to the management of Pali studies by Mahamakut Buddhist University, between 2008 and 2010 the University was allocated "200,000 Baht from the national budget and 100,000 Baht in 2011. These budgets were allocated to the project for the maintenance of arts and culture (Pali studies) in the University's budgetary plan. They were meant for managing *Mae Chi* education."⁷⁷ Thammasat University offers a master's degree program in Buddhist studies that is attended by a number of *Mae Chi* and monk students. There is a fund for monks called the Fund for Buddha Image Making, 60 Years of Thammasat. The fund was established from the remaining money after the completion of the Buddha Image to celebrate the 60 thanniversary of Thammasat. It was intended only for student monks and novices of the university. *Mae Chi* nuns and laywomen may receive grants from the Bhikkhuni Voramai Kabilsingh Fund and occasionally from other private funds, such as the Royal Sports Club Fund. The persons eligible for these grants are student monks, student nuns, and lay students. There is no particular budget intended for *Mae Chi* nuns in the University plan, but grants are available for every student who passes the preliminary thesis requirements – each worth 8,000 Baht. At the same time, the university allocated budgets for various projects; for instance, in 2010, a budget of 100,000 Baht was allocated to hiring students as teaching assistants. In 2011, the instructors earmarked a fund of 10,000 Baht for their students. Two nuns were given the grant of 5,000 Baht each. Apart from these funds, *Mae Chi* nuns could receive assistance from other private sources that senior students obtained for their junior peers. Thammasat University tuition fees must be paid in full by monks and nuns alike. There is no exception. In some cases, followers of certain nuns might provide tuition fees for them. The nuns might also obtain grants from other senior monks. For instance, *Mae Chi* Nathahathai Chatthinnawat, a student

⁷⁷ Phrakhru Sutadharmakovid, 14 June 2011, interview.

in the master's degree program in Women Studies, received a scholarship from Somdet Phramaha Rajamangalacarya (Chuang Varapañño) Fund, the senior monk being the abbot of Wat Paknam Phasicharoen, Bangkok.⁷⁸ For Wat Mahathat Yuwaratcharangsarit, the Mahatatwitthayalai Foundation and Sisanphet Foundation have offered financial awards to *Mae Chi* nuns who pass Pali studies examination since 1989. In addition, the Wat also offers financial awards to *Mae Chi* nuns who pass Dhamma studies examination at each level.⁷⁹ Wat Yai Chaimongkhon, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province, provides educational support to *Mae Chi* nuns to study in master's degree and doctoral programs after their completion of Pali ix.⁸⁰ Also, *Mae Chi* nuns who study at Sala Santisuk Center, where Pali studies are taught, receive subsidies from the fund of the former landowner who donated the land for the construction of the center. This fund was under the care of Mahamakutrajavidyalaya Foundation which provided financial support for *Mae Chi*. This center has received much support from the public nearby in the form of money and pre-packaged food.⁸¹

8. Conclusion⁸²

As has been discussed above, over the past ten years or so, Thai Buddhist nuns have been given more opportunity and greater support for higher education provided by the *Saṅgha*. Most of the nuns interviewed, who had a positive educational experience, reported that greater access to university education was open to them: "In more recent times, there have

⁷⁸ Assistant Professor Dr. Montri Suepduang, Chair of Master's Degree Program in Buddhist Studies, Department of Philosophy, Thammasat University, 13 August 2010, interview.

⁷⁹ Memorandum, Phra Rajasiddhimuni, Assistant Abbot, Wat Mahathat Yuwaratcharangsarit Ratchaworamahawihan, 7 August 2011, interview.

⁸⁰ *Mae Chi* Somkuan Thongdee, Wat Yai Chaimongkhon, Pali ix, 8 April 2012, interview.

⁸¹ *Mae Chi* No. 24, 5 August, interview.

⁸² Some of the findings in this research support the work of Professors Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel (2010): "*Buddhist 'nuns' (mae chi) and the teaching of Pali in contemporary Thailand*" *Modern Asian Studies* 44,6, pp. 1371-1408. While they focused on the perspective and experience of *Mae Chi* teachers, we are more concerned with the educational experience of *Mae Chi* students and education providers.

been more opportunity for *Mae Chi*, making it possible for a younger generation of nuns to get better access to learning.” One nun reported her experience: “People began to see that *Mae Chi* nuns are able and knowledgeable. The public and society accord us the same respect as monks and novices enjoy. Monks and novices, too, have accepted us as their peers.”⁸³ Another reported that “Education has contributed to the change in the public view on women. When we visit our family members, we are given a warm welcome. They prepare food for us and offer it in the same way as they would do to the monks. We give them blessings. They treat us like monks. They consider us as ascetics. When we go home, they will hardly let us do anything ourselves. We have to be very composed.”⁸⁴ Indeed, “in (some) communities the image of *Mae Chi* has considerably improved.”⁸⁵ Such views were in line with Phra Sigambhirayarn’s definition of *Mae Chi* as follows: “*Mae Chi* is an *Anāgārika* which means more than a *Pabbajita*, because a *Pabbajita* is a monk or novice, but an *Anāgārika* has a wider meaning; it means an ascetic.”⁸⁶ This shows that education has made *Mae Chi*’s role, in the eyes of the public, resemble that of the monk. Again, one needs to emphasize that the difference between monks and nuns remain in different local traditions and customs. Furthermore, technological advancement has brought greater educational opportunity to the Thai nuns, as educational materials have become more available and within easy reach. Over the past ten years or so, they have enjoyed greater support, e.g. in the form of grants and scholarships, as mentioned above. However, it cannot be denied that there is no complete equality between ascetics of different sexes, as monks still enjoy greater financial and other material supports, including lodgings, availability of grants and scholarships, and recognition of achievement in Pali studies. Therefore, one still hears about the report that “most nuns have to pay for the utilities and other expenses themselves.

⁸³ *Mae Chi* No. 26, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁸⁴ *Mae Chi* No. 27, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁸⁵ *Mae Chi* No. 28, 5 August 2010, interview.

⁸⁶ Associate Professor Dr. Phra Sigambhirayarn, Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, MahachulalongkonrajavidyalayaUniversity, Assistant Abbot, Wat Pakham Phasicharoen, Bangkok, 8 August 2011, interview.

Sometimes, they have to leave the religious life to obtain the necessary money before they can return.”⁸⁷ Treatments at hospitals and on the public transport are also points of contention. (The treatments vary. Sometimes they have to pay; sometimes they do not.)

At the same time, both Buddhist Universities are able and willing to support *Mae Chi* with regard to admission, places of study, and grants/scholarships. A problem remains, however: the number of the *Mae Chi* candidates is still small, possibly because of the age issue. In the Thai tradition, men enter monkhood when they are still young, first as novices and as monks when they are 20. This is a matter of traditional practice as well as economic necessity. Children from poorer families that do not have much money still choose monkhood as the way to attain education. Therefore, boys can enter the *saṅgha* education system at an early age. On the other hand, there are few nuns who could do so. “There are very few nuns young enough to study at the undergraduate level and pursue further studies at the master’ degree level. Most tend to be much older.”⁸⁸ Another important reason is that nuns’ access to education also depends on the policy of individual abbots. Some Wat support *Mae Chi* education, while others do not. So, this study wishes to make two recommendations to promote a greater number of *Mae Chi* nuns to obtain access to university education provided by the *saṅgha*. These two recommendations should be implemented side by side as they lend support to each other as follows:

1. To create a new set of values and tradition: This is not meant for women only but for society at large. Attempts should be made to disseminate cases of *Mae Chi* nuns to show that a life of female ascetics can be beautiful. A system of ordination of young nuns should be put in place. (The *Mae Chi* ordination by Sathira Thammasathan is a good model and has proven to be quite successful.) This could be done parallel to the boy ordination

⁸⁷ *Mae Chi* No. 29, 5 August 2010, interview.

⁸⁸ Associate Professor Dr. Phra Sigambhirayarn, Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, MahachulalongkonrajavidyalayaUniversity, Assistant Abbot, Wat Pakham Phasicharoen, Bangkok, 8 August 2011, interview.

system. Such practice should encourage more girls to study Dhamma and pursue higher learning. The objective of this recommendation is to provide a good image at a personal level as a basis for a good image at institutional level. (The promotion of the image of *Mae Chi* institutions should be made and publicized in such a way that Buddhist nuns do not simply observe the Eight Precepts but the 75 rules of *Sekhiyavatta* as well.)

2. To set up an infrastructure whereby girls who intend to pursue higher learning but lack necessary resources can do so through ordination. Publicity should be launched. Data should be kept at the central administration to facilitate coordination between the Wat, education institute, and funding agency in an effort to find suitable abodes for *Mae Chi* nuns. At present, data on education opportunity are not effectively managed, as the system is mostly conducted by word of mouth. In addition, emphasis should be made to “feed” the nuns with educational potentials who intend to pursue higher education. A system should be put in place to facilitate *Mae Chi* education.

Besides coordination and policy formulation at the institutional level, there is also an issue of recognition of the legal status of *Mae Chi*. Argument has been made concerning the lack of legality of the ascetic status of *Mae Chi* in that it has clearly and definitely led to several problems encountered by them. It has been argued that “if there is a law in place, the *Mae Chi* status will improve. Education will also improve with more social acceptance.”⁸⁹ Another supporting argument is that the legal recognition will help “*Mae Chi* to stand on their feet with a greater sense of security and confidence so that they can proceed further by themselves,”⁹⁰ thus freeing them from the ambiguity as to their ascetic status. Besides, opportunity should be made available for them to teach in public or private school as well as learning centers of various Wat after they have completed their education. A nun stated that “no opportunity is given for *Mae*

⁸⁹ Phra Theppariyattivimol, Rector, Mahamakut Buddhist University, 13 August 2010, interview.

⁹⁰ Phra Theppariyattivimol, Rector, Mahamakut Buddhist University, 13 August 2010, interview.

Chi to apply their knowledge to the good of society or learning centers. This seems to be the domain of the monk. The nuns will do the manual work as usual.”⁹¹ Phra Suthivararañāṇa (Phramaha Narong Cittasobhaṇo) mentioned that “the development of *Mae Chi* could be made by changing the name to “Master Chi” with a clear status. They should be equipped with education and training equal to those of the monks. They should be given the opportunity to be part of religious education and to help propagate Buddhism to young people at various education institutes and to the general public” (Channarong Boonnoon, B.E. 2551 [2008: 80]). Meanwhile, a large number of the nuns are not really interested to enter the education system because they feel they are too old or because “they are ordained to get away from *Dukkha*, not to get educated.”⁹²

When students of both sexes first studied at a Buddhist university, the initial reaction was not positive for fear that it would cause sexual impropriety. Based on its experience, the research team found that such co-education is beneficial to the learning process and classroom dynamics. With regard to bhikkhuni ordination, most nuns do not feel that it would help women to get access to education. One nun said that “it does not seem to have anything to do with education here.”⁹³ Another nun who represented many of her colleagues said that “For me, to be a nun is enough. *Mae Chi* practice does not in any way stop us from attaining the fruits of *Magga* or *Nibbana*.”⁹⁴ Therefore, most nuns do not feel compelled to demand the presence of bhikkhuni or their revival.⁹⁵ This paper shows that, historically speaking, the lack of equality in the access to higher education provided by the *saṅgha* is not merely an issue of sex inequality but rather an inequality between people with good economic status and the socially disadvantaged.

⁹¹ *Mae Chi* No. 30, from the questionnaire.

⁹² *Mae Chi* No. 31, from the questionnaire.

⁹³ *Mae Chi* No. 32, 16 July 2010, interview.

⁹⁴ *Mae Chi* No. 33, 5 August 2010, interview.

⁹⁵ cf. Gosling, David L., “The Changing Roles of Thailand’s Lay Nuns (*Mae Chi*)”, p. 136.

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Interview

Kanchana Triamthanachok, *Mae Chi*.

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- Prathin Khwan-On, *Mae Chi*, Dr., Chairperson of Thai Nun Institutions in 2012, Head of the Nuns at Thai Nun Institution at Paktho, Ratchaburi Province.
- Phra Dharmakosajarn (Prayoon Dhammacitto), Professor, Dr., Rector of Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University, Member of Royal Institute of Thailand.
- Phra Dharmasudhi (Peer Sujato), Chief Abbot, Wat Mahathat Yuwaratcharangarit, Tha Phrachan, Bangkok.
- Phra Rajasiddhimuni, Assistant Abbot, Wat Mahathat Yuwaratcharangarit, Bangkok.
- Phra Srigambhirayan (Somcint Sammapañño), Associate Professor, Dr., Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, Mahachulalongkonrajavidyalaya University.
- Phra Srivajramuni (Vajra Thitamedho), Assistant Abbot, Wat Chanasongkhram, Bangkok
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