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Dhammamātā: Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's notion of motherhood in Buddhist women practitioners

Tomomi Ito

The notion of dhammamātā is one of the last items of the legacy of the late Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. In order to accord women practitioners better social status and provide them with opportunities for spiritual training, Buddhadāsa avoided committing himself to the reintroduction of bhikkunī ordination. Instead, he proposed the notion of dhammamātā, which literally means 'dhamma mother'. This article postulates that by using the metaphor of the mother, Buddhadāsa invited less conflict, appealing to the high respect which Thai people generally held for women. Moreover, the article argues that with dhammamātā Buddhadāsa challenged the common notion of motherhood which usually regards women as nurturers of the Saṅgha. Dhammamātā nurture people's spirituality through their teaching and virtues. Whilst the social impact of dhammamātā cannot be compared to that of bhikkunī, whose yellow robes visually suggest a status equivalent to that of male bhikkhu, the concept of dhammamātā was a new creation revolving around the image of the female religious teacher, a role that Buddhist women had wanted.

The monastic lifestyle differs considerably from common notions of women's happiness. Physical beauty is generally considered important for women, but those who choose the Buddhist monastic life shave their heads and eyebrows and observe precepts which include abstinence from wearing make-up, dressing up and wearing perfume. Moreover, women in ascetic practice must renounce family life, where many women would normally find intimacy and happiness as wives and mothers. Even unmarried women who have expertise in professional occupations are told that for them true happiness does not lie in competitive success. Nevertheless, in contemporary Thailand a small number of women of considerable achievement in both their education and their profession willingly renounce their worldly careers to dedicate themselves to Buddhist ascetic practice.

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In contrast with societal admiration of men who become ordained monks, a woman's renunciation of materialistic life for religious practice is often looked upon with a jaundiced eye because of a traditional stigma: Thai people tend to consider renounced Buddhist women practitioners either as sad people who may have suffered seriously from being broken-hearted or as helpless people who have no way to support themselves other than relying on religious charity. Therefore, in Thailand it is difficult for women practitioners to find sufficient social support for their doctrinal studies and ascetic practices, whereas male monks and novices take such support for granted. This is an unfortunate disadvantage for women with substantial ability and strong motivations. They have limited social support and no appropriate environment in which to develop their potentialities in the realm of Buddhism. In short, there is a significant gender-based bias in the social reality of Thai Buddhism.

One of the most noteworthy disadvantages for Buddhist women has been the lack of opportunity for formal ordination. In Theravāda tradition the ordination lineage of Buddhist nuns called *bhikkunī* – the female equivalents of *bhikkhu* (the ordained male monks commonly seen in contemporary Theravāda Buddhist countries, who don yellow robes and observe the 227 monastic precepts) – was disrupted in eleventh-century Sri Lanka, before the prototype of present-day Theravāda was transmitted to Thailand. Unlike the formally ordained *bhikkunī* who observe the 311 monastic precepts, Thai Buddhist women practitioners commonly become *māe chī*, who have their heads shaven, don white robes and regularly keep the eight precepts designated for pious lay people doing short-term ascetic practice in a temple. Thus *māe chī* are formally regarded as laity even though they are determined to follow a religious path for life, renouncing the secular world. Their ambiguous status – factual renunciants, yet without formal ordained status – is one of the reasons why society tends to expect *māe chī* to assist with domestic aspects of monastic life such as food preparation, rather than offering them support and opportunities for religious training equivalent to that enjoyed by *bhikkhu*. Although there are increasing efforts to raise the social status of women practitioners, there are only a small number of places providing opportunities exclusively for women's ascetic practice.¹

Later in his life, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu (1906–93), one of Thailand's most highly respected *dhamma* teachers, attempted to improve social conditions for women practitioners' conduct of ascetic practice. Buddhādāsa's prime mission was to disseminate *lokuttara dhamma*, the teachings and practices aimed at achieving the supramundane state of *nibbāna*. In the past, Thai Buddhists were only familiar with the moral teachings known as *lokiya dhamma*, linked more generally to merit-making, while they tended to consider *nibbāna* as being too difficult for ordinary people to attain. By contrast, Buddhādāsa promoted the practical application of *lokuttara dhamma* in daily life for overcoming suffering through the release of attachment, which is a major cause of suffering. He taught that by putting *lokuttara dhamma* into practice, people could experience a temporary *nibbāna*. His interest was focused on what he

1 See Tomomi Ito, 'Buddhist women in *dhamma* practice in contemporary Thailand: Movements regarding their status as world renunciates', *Journal of Sophia Asian Studies*, 17 (1999): 147–81; and Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making fields of merit: Buddhist nuns challenge gendered orders in Thailand* (Göteborg: Göteborg University, Department of Social Anthropology, 2002).

regarded as the 'core' or 'essence', rather than forms and rituals, which he often called 'outer coverings' or 'shells' of a religion.²

Buddhadāsa's promotion of the transcendent state of *nibbāna* for everyone regardless of ordained status, gender, nationality or religious faith appeared to be encouraging for underprivileged women practitioners, yet it was not until he was approaching the age of 80 that he realised that social disadvantages could be significantly hindering the spiritual development of women practitioners. He proposed an ideal for female practitioners which he named *dhammamātā*, which literally translates as 'dhamma mothers' or 'mothers of dhamma', and a place for dhamma practice by *dhammamātā*, the Dhammamātā Hermitage. *Dhammamātā* are thus counterparts to *bhikkunī* and alternatives to conventional renunciant female practitioners in Thailand.

Buddhadāsa's notion of *dhammamātā* is a significant topic to study for two reasons. First, it is a ground-breaking attempt by a Buddhist intellectual firmly rooted in traditional values to solve the problem of gender inequality in Thai Buddhism. The loss of the *bhikkunī saṅgha* is the most prominent source of gender inequality of Theravāda Buddhism, but in a tradition which highly values the continuation of traditional formality, the restoration of the lost ordination lineage is generally considered impossible.³ In Thailand and elsewhere people often express difficulties in accepting the ideal gender relations proposed by women's movements, even when such proposals are accompanied by a reasonable rationale. One of the reasons for such difficulties is the perception of a gap between traditional and new alternative gender norms. Buddhadāsa, rather than persuading people to make a radical change in their traditional view, by proposing *dhammamātā* appealed to a dominant local value which affords women a position of respect. This can be seen as attempted social change rooted in local tradition.

Second, although a number of scholars have examined Buddhadāsa's unique interpretations, his notion of *dhammamātā* has not been studied extensively. Probably Santikaro Bhikkhu's article is one of the few written in western languages which mention *dhammamātā*, but it is only introduced in a paragraph in the final remarks as one of the projects of Buddhadāsa in his final years.⁴ Since Buddhadāsa came to the idea of *dhammamātā* in his later years in the early 1980s, it was not included in the major studies of his thought by Donald K. Swearer, Peter A. Jackson and Louis

2 See, for example, Buddhadāsa's three wishes (*panithān*) for future generations in Phutthathāt Phikkhu [Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu], *Mōradok thī khō fāk wai* [Legacies to be bequeathed] (Nonthaburi : Kōng Thun Wuthi Tham, n.d.), pp. 1–2.

3 See *Sākyadhīā: Daughters of the Buddha*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1988); Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991); Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *Women under the bo tree: Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); *Buddhist women across cultures: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1999); *Innovative Buddhist women: Swimming against the stream*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000); and Charles S. Prebish, 'Varying the *Vinaya*: Creative responses to modernity', in *Buddhism in the modern world: Adaptations of an ancient tradition*, ed. Steven Heine and Charles S. Prebish (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 45–74.

4 Santikaro Bhikkhu, 'Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu: Life and society through the natural eyes of voidness', in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist liberation movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 185.

Gabaude in the late 1980s.⁵ Buddhadāsa has often been regarded as one of the most prominent Buddhist thinkers who led contemporary Buddhists to engage in social works, largely because of his emphasis on *nibbāna* as being accessible in one's present psychological state in worldly circumstances. Nevertheless, even though many Buddhists claim that their commitment to social issues was inspired by his teaching, Buddhadāsa himself planned few actual projects for social works such as rural development and public health.⁶ In fact, his emphasis on the 'core' of religion tended to disregard such external social phenomena as forms and rituals and social circumstances of religious practices. Thus his teachings may be interpreted as proposing that an individual should aim at a spiritual goal, focus on spiritual training, and tolerate any social circumstances, no matter how unfavourable.

It was the question of gender inequality that prompted Buddhadāsa in his later days to reconsider his basic attitude and directed his attention to social engagement, namely by providing women with better conditions and opportunities for monastic training. His concept of the Dhammamātā Hermitage was one of the very few cases where Buddhadāsa worked to implement a reformative project. This article examines the following three aspects of Buddhadāsa's thoughts on women's *dhamma* practice: first, how he shifted his attitudes towards women's rights to ordination and *dhamma* practice; second, his notion of *dhammamātā* and his appeal to motherhood; and third, the social implications of the notion of motherhood in the Thai context.

Shift in Buddhadāsa's attitude towards women's rights in Buddhism

It seems that before the idea of *dhammamātā* dawned upon Buddhadāsa at around the age of 80, he was not particularly interested in women's opportunities to enter *dhamma* practice. Sources consulted for this article point to three main incidents which prompted Buddhadāsa to think about the gender issue in Buddhism: first, the *bhikkunī* restoration movement in the late 1920s; second, a plea by one of his female followers in the late 1930s; and third, his sister's illness from the late 1960s onward.

Narin Phāsīt's bhikkunī restoration movement

One of the first incidents that stimulated Buddhadāsa to think about women's disadvantages in Buddhism was the movement for the reintroduction of female

5 Buddhadāsa's thought has been extensively studied and is widely known in western languages through the publications of three scholars: Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa, *Me and mine: Selected essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa*, tr. and ed. Donald K. Swearer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhadāsa: A Buddhist thinker for the modern world* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1988); and Louis Gabaude, *Une herméneutique bouddhique contemporaine de Thaïlande: Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1988). With a new preface and epilogue, Jackson's book was reprinted in 2003 as *Buddhadāsa: Theravāda Buddhism and modernist reform in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books). However, it does not include Buddhadāsa's thoughts on women practitioners. Nor did I deal with this topic in Tomomi Ito, 'Discussions in the Buddhist public sphere in twentieth-century Thailand: Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and his world' (Ph.D. diss., Australian National University, 2001).

6 For instance, the following studies refer to Buddhadāsa as a significant Buddhist thinker pertaining to rural development work and engaged Buddhism: Sērī Phongphit, *Religion in a changing society: Buddhism, reform and the role of monks in community development in Thailand* (Hong Kong: Arena Press, 1988), pp. 8–11, 28; *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher Queen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), pp. 4–5.

ordination in Thailand in the 1920s. In 1928 Narin Phāsīt (1874–1950), a provocative social critic who proposed a number of unique ideas for political and religious reforms, asked the Thai public to consider the possibility of women's ordination.⁷ Narin had his two daughters ordained as *sāmaṇerī* (Buddhist female novices) and lodged them together with some other *sāmaṇerī* in a temple he had built. Narin's intention was to create a complement for the four original groups in Buddhism: *bhikkhu*, *bhikkunī*, *upāsaka* (laymen), and *upāsikā* (laywomen) (by then *bhikkunī* no longer existed in Theravāda Buddhism). He also hoped that the newly ordained women would perform ideal Buddhist practices for overcoming suffering, which he could hardly find in practice among Buddhist monks at that time. Narin presented his plan to the public through both public print media and his own freely distributed booklets; sometimes in his publications he even bluntly criticised the existing state of Buddhism and the *Sanḅha* elders. A number of people accepted his claim as reasonable, yet most newspapers, along with the religious and political authorities, responded antagonistically and regarded his loud criticisms and calls for justice as the pursuit of fame.⁸

News of Narin's movement for the reform of Buddhism, including the issue of women's ordination, reached his intellectual contemporaries, young Buddhadāsa and his younger brother Dhammadāsa Phānit (1909–2000), who remained a layman. Dhammadāsa was always Buddhadāsa's important intellectual co-worker; in 1933 they launched together an epoch-making Buddhist journal in Thailand, *Phutthasāsāna* (*Buddhism*). Interestingly, however, the brothers had clearly differing attitudes toward Narin. In my interview with 90-year-old Dhammadāsa in 1999, in response to my question about Narin's movement for women's ordination, he smiled delightfully and said that he had faith in Narin. Dhammadāsa recalled an exciting event from his youth. He recounted that having thought that Narin was doing the right thing, he sent a letter expressing appreciation of Narin's work. Narin, in turn, responded with a gift of his books.⁹ Dhammadāsa suggested that Narin visit Buddhadāsa, who was then studying Pāli in Bangkok.

Unlike Dhammadāsa, Buddhadāsa did not take Narin's criticism of laxity in monastic disciplines seriously. In an interview with a disciple he said that Narin published some large books, which contained many pictures of monks who were flouting rules such as the prohibition against touching money. Seeing these pictures, Buddhadāsa perceived that Narin was encouraging people to become critical of monastic misconduct and admonishing monks to take the discipline more strictly. Nevertheless, he commented that most people thought that the examples raised by Narin were 'nothing unusual'.¹⁰ Buddhadāsa seemed to be rather unhappy with Narin,

7 On Narin, see Sakdinā Chatrakun na Ayutthayā, *Chīwit, nāew khīt lae kām-tō-sū khōng 'Narinklung' rū Narin Phāsīt: Khon khwāng lōk* [The life, thought, and struggle of 'Narinklung' or Narin Phāsīt: A man blocks the world] (Bangkok: Matichon, 1993).

8 Ito, 'Buddhist women in *dhmma* practice', pp. 152–3.

9 Dhammadāsa Phānit, interview, Chaiyā, 4 Mar. 1999.

10 Prachā Pasannathammō Bhikku, *Lao wai mua wai sonthayā: Atchīwaprawat khōng Thān Phutthathāt* [Stories told in the twilight years: Autobiography of the Venerable Buddhadāsa] (Bangkok: Mūlanithi Kōmonkhīmthōng, 1992), pp. 121–2; all translations from Thai are the author's.

because in the early 1930s when he started such activities as journal publication, some people mistrusted him, suspecting him and his group of being Narin's disciples.¹¹

In an interview with a disciple Buddhādāsa did not clearly state his opinion about women's ordination, but his view of Narin's attempt was unmistakably negative. Buddhādāsa called Narin 'half-crazy, half-intoxicated', and suspected that he wanted to cultivate a reputation as a reviver of the original four Buddhist groups through his reintroduction of *bhikkunī*.¹² As Dhammadāsa said in my interview with him, Buddhādāsa suspected that Narin might swindle people by requesting contributions for this magnificent project. As a result, Dhammadāsa could not discuss with Buddhādāsa the possibility of formal ordination for women, because he was sure that his brother would not be interested in it. On the other hand, Dhammadāsa thought that Narin had a wonderful idea and because he had served as provincial governor (*chao muang*) of Nakhōn Nāyok, he was already wealthy. However, Dhammadāsa admitted that it was not just his brother, but actually the majority of people who were dissatisfied with Narin.¹³ This seems to have been an opportunity for Buddhādāsa to learn how the *Saṅgha* authorities and the Buddhist public would react to the idea of reintroducing *bhikkunī*, a proposal which could provoke a serious controversy. Whether or not Buddhādāsa perceived the rationale for *bhikkunī* ordination as reasonable, the incident taught him that it would take considerable time before its revival would prove a benefit for women's *dhamma* practice. It is not difficult to imagine that he had no enthusiasm for reviving the Buddhist women's ordination ritual, form and status, because he considered these to be 'outer coverings' of religion, rather than its 'core'.

A question of Buddhist women's titles: Upāsikā Kī Nānāyon

The second incident which raised questions for Buddhādāsa about the status of renunciant women practitioners was a call for his help from *Upāsikā Kī Nānāyon* (1901–78), a serious female practitioner who followed his teachings.¹⁴ Kī was highly respected as a female meditation teacher and was also known for her Buddhist poetry written under the pen name 'Kō. Khaosuanluang'. She often contributed her poems to Buddhādāsa's journal. There is correspondence between Kī and Buddhādāsa from 1939–40 regarding the title of *upāsikā* in the archives of Suan Mōkkh, Buddhādāsa's temple, where his diaries and letters are kept.¹⁵

11 'Lūk lae lān' [Offspring] (probably written by Buddhādāsa on behalf of his siblings), 'Mātubūchā-nuson' [Commemoration of Mother], *Phutthasāsanā* [Buddhism], 16, 3 (1948): 82.

12 Prachā, *Lao wai mua wai sonthayā*, p. 121.

13 Dhammadāsa, interview, 4 Mar. 1999.

14 On Kī's background, see Ito, 'Buddhist women in *dhamma* practice', pp. 166–7.

15 In the Suan Mōkkh archives, I had access to 14 letters between Buddhādāsa and Kī Nānāyon dated 16 Jan. 1939 through 3 Dec. 1940. In Pāli the term '*upāsikā*' literally means 'lay woman'. In the contemporary Thai context, it is used to refer to pious lay women dedicated to Buddhist practices, often indicating renunciant female practitioners, including *māe chī* and those who subscribe to other styles. In Thai this Pāli word is pronounced '*ubāsikā*'. In this article, I use the Pāli transcription in order to be consistent with transcriptions of other words of Pāli-Sanskrit origin, such as '*bhikkhu/bhikṣu*' (Thai *phikkhu/phiksu*) and '*bhikkunī/bhikṣunī*' (*phikkhunī/phiksuni*).

In one of her letters, Kī sought Buddhadāsa's support for the use of the title 'Upāsikā' in certificates for Buddhist doctrinal examinations of successful women candidates, rather than 'Nāng' (used for married women, equivalent to 'Mrs') or 'Nāng Sāo' (used for single women, equivalent to 'Miss'), which are commonly applied to women living in the secular world.¹⁶ It seems that Kī and her group of *upāsikā* thought it inappropriate to apply to women practitioners a form of address indicating marital status, identical to the style of address for ordinary lay women living in a secular world. In fact, female practitioners in Thailand come from various states and experiences of marriage: some may have been married before they fully renounced worldly life, some may have had to shuffle between their family and the temple, and others never married. However, it was thought unnecessary to use forms of address based on marital status, because celibacy is part of ascetic practice. The most comprehensive and respectful form of address for Buddhist women practitioners who may be in various marital states is the use of the title *Upāsikā* before their names. The request from Kī and her group of *upāsikā* should be interpreted as a subtle demand for official recognition of their status as distinct from that of ordinary lay women living in the secular world.¹⁷

Kī appealed to Buddhadāsa concerning this problem, probably because he was one of her most reliable contacts who had sufficient acquaintances among the *Saṅgha* elders.¹⁸ In response to Kī's plea in her letter dated 12 August 1939, Buddhadāsa talked with the Supreme Patriarch (the highest-ranking Thai monk) about this issue. According to Buddhadāsa's reply to Kī, dated 12 September, the Supreme Patriarch said that he agreed with the idea proposed by the group of *upāsikā*. However, Buddhadāsa suggested instead that she bring the issue directly to the head or the deputy head of the ecclesiastical examination bureau, who was actually in charge of certification. He also urged her to hurry to make that contact as it was almost time to dispatch the list of successful candidates. In her letter dated 20 September, Kī sought further support from Buddhadāsa, because her group of *upāsikā* was unable to appeal to higher ecclesiastical authorities. On 18 January 1940 Buddhadāsa replied, saying that it was already too late for that year, but expressing his wish for a possible change in the following year. Subsequently, Kī wrote at least three letters to Buddhadāsa, in which she mentioned her *upāsikā* group's serious endeavours in the area of Buddhist study and practice and renewed her request for his support for the use of the title *Upāsikā*.¹⁹

16 Kī Nānāyon, letter to Buddhadāsa, dated 12 Aug. 1939.

17 In the area surrounding Rāṭchaburī Province, where Kī was based, people usually call renunciant female practitioners *ubāsikā*. They call both *māe chī* who don white robes and those who take other costumes *ubāsikā*, so it was a convenient concept which could comprehensively cover various types of female practitioners. In fact, Kī observed the eight precepts and had her head shaved, just as *māe chī* do, but she did not take the white robes of a *māe chī*, instead wearing a white blouse and a black skirt. In Thai, those who wear an outfit such as Kī's are commonly called *ubāsikā*, not *māe chī*.

18 An evidence of the high credit given to Buddhadāsa was the then Acting Supreme Patriarch's visit to his forest temple in southern Thailand in 1937. Buddhadāsa was only 31 years old and had no ecclesiastical title, but his intellectual prowess was widely recognised by both monastic and lay Buddhist intellectuals who read his tri-monthly Buddhist journal *Phutthasāsanā*, launched in 1933. See details in Ito, 'Discussions in the Buddhist public sphere', ch. 1.

19 Kī Nānāyon, letters to Buddhadāsa, dated 23 Jan. 1940, 19 May 1940 and 17 July 1941.

Still unable to offer concrete support for this issue, in the end Buddhādāsa encouraged Kī as follows:

Regarding the change of title for *upāsikā*, it is still in my mind, but now we have to stop working on it for a while. The reason is that we have no other way to do it but through a new law which guarantees the change. The bill for the new law has to be passed by Parliament and needs someone to submit the bill. In fact, there should be someone who supports this idea, so there would be a possibility of success, as you wish. However, it should not be during hard times such as war or emergency, as at present. If there is anyone who goes against this current and proposes such a thing in Parliament, that person can only receive a disappointing result, because there are many other urgent matters. We should wait until the war ends and then discuss this issue; then people would listen to us wholeheartedly, have sufficient time to think about it, and become compassionate to us. Even the same issue proposed with different timing can make a lot of difference, so we should wait for a while. A waiting period like now is the best opportunity for *upāsikā* who wish for reform to make themselves fully useful so that politicians will feel impressed with them. It will be a way for politicians to become sympathetic, pick up the point, and examine it with a respectful attitude. If those *māe chī* wearing white robes do not do anything except begging and chanting unclearly, they are simply a burden to people. So, they may not speak to each other to be more compassionate about the point that you raise. People may consider it as unimportant whether or not they have *māe chī*; and when *māe chī* do not have a lot of practical roles, people think that they should not demand many rights and cause trouble. ... However, who knows, in the future *upāsikā* will become a remarkable group, if there is someone to lead a revolution for improving their way of living through developing their knowledge and ability and being at the forefront of their era [*than samai*]. If the majority of people in the world still think that *māe chī* are nothing but cooks for temples, or consider their sort of renunciation as just a tradition of an unnecessary fashion, and they can simply chant with beautiful [female] voices, I am sure that no politician would be willing to waste his time on this matter. I wish for a revolution among *māe chī* and hope that a strong leader can demonstrate their usefulness very soon. This is much more important than the female Buddhist title that you want. For such a change, one should have firmness and think of preparing for the distant future, just as Martin Luther did for the Christian world.²⁰

It seems that Buddhādāsa and the *Sanḡha* elders found the appeal by Kī and her *upāsikā* group reasonable, but they did not offer to make an effort help bring the issue to the appropriate administrative section of either the religious or civil authorities. For Buddhādāsa, who was a highly successful monk despite being still in his early thirties, it may have been quite difficult to urge the elder monks to make a political decision when they were initially unenthusiastic. The best he could do was to advise Kī, a serious practitioner, to shift her focus to the development of women's capabilities in Buddhist teaching and practice. He did not turn to political authorities to make any changes in

20 Buddhādāsa, letter to Kī Nānāyon, dated 3 Dec. 1940.

women's position; rather, he preferred to overcome social inequalities through spiritual development, which would have the strongest religious appeal.

In the Suan Mōkkh archives there is no response from Kī to this advice from Buddhadāsa. As one of his most responsive followers and co-workers, she may have taken his message to heart, and she eventually became one of the most respected female practitioners in Thailand. Yet, since she was a woman practitioner who had to face the difficulties surrounding lack of societal recognition, her aspiration had little in common with Buddhadāsa's. In fact, her attitude toward Narin's movement for *bhikkunī* restoration was radically different from that of Buddhadāsa. She once visited Narin's ordained daughters and accepted their visit to her shop in Phetchaburī, where she used to run a business. Unlike Buddhadāsa, Kī did not consider the attempt of Narin and his daughters as simply the pursuit of fame; rather, she respected and gave moral support to their campaign for the restoration of female ordination.²¹ In tandem with her conscientious endeavour towards ascetic practice, which Buddhadāsa recognised, there is evidence that she was seeking a concrete social reform to elevate the status of women practitioners in Buddhism.²²

Probably few of Buddhadāsa's followers would disagree with his basic tenets: the overwhelming importance of religion's 'essential core' rather than its 'outer shells'; and a universalism that disregarded one's gender, ordained status, nationality and religion in assessing the achievement of religious goals. However, the meaning accorded such 'outer shells' of religion as monastic costumes and status would have particular weight with the socially underprivileged. The limitations of such a formulaic view are well illustrated by the following episode. Paññānanda Bhikkhu (1911–), one of Buddhadāsa's contemporaries and a highly respected preaching monk in contemporary Thailand, was once questioned by Sāra Rongkhasuan about the possibility of reintroducing *bhikkunī*. Sāra, Narin Phānit's elder daughter, was a *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkunī* in the late 1920s and early 1930s; she later disrobed and married to have children. Paññānanda answered that it was not necessary to become a *bhikkunī* because ordination is a state of mind. He said that monks were in the same situation; they did not necessarily have to become ordained as monks, because being a monk meant simply having a renunciant state of mind. Sāra responded that she would invite him to disrobe so that he could learn whether lay people and those who are in the monastic form were actually the same or not.²³

After relating this story, one of Buddhadāsa's disciples, Dutsadī Methangkurō Bhikkhu, insisted that monks should not say that 'ordination is not necessary; it is only a matter of one's state of mind', because they had more appropriate and convenient forms for *dhamma* practice. Referring to Buddhadāsa's words, Dutsadī said:

21 Ito, 'Buddhist women in *dhamma* practice', p. 175 note 48.

22 Buddhadāsa expressed appreciation for Kī's religious pursuit and practice in an interview with his disciple monk (Prachā, *Lao wai mua wai sonthayā*, pp. 398–9).

23 Ranchuan Inthrakamhāeng, *Sitthi satrī, withī Phut: Ranchuan Inthrakamhāeng pāthakātha* [Women's rights, Buddhist methods: lecture by Ranchuan Inthrakamhāeng], ed. Sompōng Phrōmpiam (Nonthaburī: Gender Press, 1994), p. 65. Although in the comment by Dutsadī Methangkurō Bhikkhu in this book, the names of the monk and the woman are not specified, the same story was told as a dialogue between Bhikkhu Paññānanda and Sāra by one of Sāra's daughters (Utsā Rongkhasuan, interview, Bangkok, Jan. 1999).

If there are many precepts, religion can last long, but only a few people could reach the *dhamma*. We should examine whether we have a way for more women to reach the *dhamma* without holding on to a form of *bhikkunī*. Otherwise, we would cling to the struggle demanding the *bhikkunī* ordination and may end up losing the [real] point or dissolving the essential part. It may turn into a conflict; it's just a frustrating matter.²⁴

The turning point for Buddhadāsa: The illness of his sister

It appears that for a long time Buddhadāsa, grounded in his focus on philosophy, had little interest in helping women practitioners. This basic attitude is also reflected in the policy followed in his temple, Suan Mōkkh. Initially he did not even allow any *māe chī* to live there, because 'generally speaking they say that when women or *māe chī* are staying together, there would be trouble; it is an ancient saying'.²⁵ Later, Suan Mōkkh began to accept women residents for cooking assistance. As the number of monks and novices increased, the work and cost of food preparation and delivery became a serious burden for the local villagers, and so Buddhadāsa allowed a woman volunteer to live on the temple premises in order to cook for the monastic members.

Subsequently more women built their own huts in Suan Mōkkh, so Buddhadāsa built a road to separate the women's residential area from the monastic compounds. He called the women's zone the 'Upāsikā Area' (*Khēt Ubāsikā*), but never considered it to be a formal *samnak chī* (a residence for *māe chī* to practise *dhamma*). He would not even agree to become a preceptor to help women to become *māe chī*, nor would he allow any women to join the daily monastic activities, such as chanting, in the same place as the monks. He only accepted women whom he could trust not to make trouble as *māe chī* and other types of female practitioners to live in the 'Upāsikā Area'. Among them were both women from humble backgrounds and those who had successful careers in education and the professions.²⁶ Even though Buddhadāsa offered capable women practitioners such as Ranchuan Inthrakamhāeng (1921–) moral support equal to that given to monks, he seems to have been determined that male monastic members' practice must not be hindered by the presence of females.²⁷

The last and most important incident that pushed Buddhadāsa to become seriously concerned about women's *dhamma* practice was the illness of his younger sister Kimsōi (1911–89). As their family was a reputable, well-to-do family (what the Thai would call '*thāna dī*', literally of 'good status') in the southern town of Chaiyā (Surāt Thānī province), Kimsōi married into another good business family, the

24 Ibid., p. 65.

25 Prachā, *Lao wai mua wai sonthayā*, pp. 279–80.

26 Ibid., pp. 279–80, 367–8.

27 Ranchuan said that when she lived in Suan Mōkkh, Buddhadāsa made her forget her gender, because he gave her the same opportunities as monks for studying, practising and asking him questions about *dhamma*. He recognised her ability to teach, so he let her take on the task of teaching other practitioners without considering her gender. She said that such wise teachers as Buddhadāsa hardly made women feel inferior (Ranchuan, *Sitthi satrī*, pp. 16–17). Regarding her background, see Ito, 'Buddhist women in *dhamma* practice', p. 167; and *Chīwit lōk, chīwit tham: Prawat chīwit thammadā khōng Ranchuan Inthrakamhāeng* [Secular life and *dhamma* life: Biography of Ranchuan Inthrakamhāeng] (Bangkok: Kōng-thun Thamma Sawatdī, 2004).

Hēmākūn, who had a large stationery store called Thai Watthanā in the nearby town of Bān Dōn.²⁸ According to Mēttā Phānit, Buddhadāsa's nephew and Dhammadāsa's youngest son, after the death of her husband Kimsōi worried about her five children and how to divide the family fortune. She eventually developed insomnia and lost both her mental and physical health.²⁹

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Buddhadāsa told Kimsōi many times that she should stay at Suan Mōkkh in order to overcome her suffering through *dhamma* practice. She did go to the temple a number of times, but only stayed there for a few days each time; her children took her back home before she could benefit from religious practice and health improvement. Later Kimsōi became paralysed and was taken care of by her children in Bangkok for many years. She died in 1989, only four years before Buddhadāsa's passing. Mēttā said that because Buddhadāsa could provide only a little help for his own sister's problem, his concern about women's practice deepened.³⁰ He would have had no doubt that the right practice of *dhamma* would lead to the overcoming of suffering, and this would have forced him to look at the social conditions which prevented women from seriously committing themselves to ascetic practice at temples.

According to Mēttā, Buddhadāsa started talking about *dhammamātā* as female renunciants constituting an alternative to *bhikkunī* when land was purchased some time in the early 1980s for the expansion of Suan Mōkkh. In 1986–87 the facilities built on the newly purchased land were opened as Suan Mōkkh International, one of the government-approved projects celebrating the fifth-cycle (60th) birthday of King Rāma IX.³¹ Dividing the premises of Suan Mōkkh International into three, Buddhadāsa proposed three projects: the International Dhamma Hermitage (about 9.6 hectares), the Dhamma Missionary Training Community (about 16 hectares), and the Dhammamātā Hermitage (about 6.4 hectares).³² The International Dhamma Hermitage offers both English and Thai retreat programmes every month to 80 to 100 people from foreign countries and 40 to 80 people from Thailand.³³ The Dhamma Missionary Training Community was planned by Buddhadāsa as a place for the training of non-Thai monks and for the international propagation of *dhamma*. Santikaro Bhikkhu, an American disciple of Buddhadāsa who has translated some of his works into English, was the first resident.³⁴

28 *Wattu-anuson 100 wan mōrana. Nāng Kimsōi Hēmākūn* [Commemoration of the 100th day after passing: Mrs Kimsōi Hēmākūn] (Chaiyā: Suan Mōkkhabalārāma, 14 Oct. 1989).

29 Mēttā Phānit, interviews, Suan Mōkkh, 5 Mar. 1999 and 9 May 2005. According to Mēttā, Kimsōi had had six children, but one of them died very young.

30 Mēttā, interview, 5 Mar. 1999.

31 *Ibid.* In his book of 'legacies to be bequeathed', Buddhadāsa's eighth legacy was as follows: 'Suan Mōkkh International is particularly for friends of different nations and different languages to be illuminated in their spirituality. I came to this idea when they were struggling to search for their true self (*Mōradok*, p. 3).

32 In the Thai standard measurement of area, the three plots of land are respectively 60 *rai*, 100 *rai* and 40 *rai*. One *rai* is equivalent to 1,600 square metres.

33 *Upāsikā* Dr Sōemsap Damrongrat (a teacher at the Dhammamātā Hermitage), interview, Suan Mōkkh, 8 May 2005.

34 Santikaro was a monk when he stayed at the Dhamma Missionary Training Community. He later moved to the United States. Although presently no longer a monk, Santikaro still uses his ordained name and teaches Buddhism (Santikaro, email correspondence, 15 Dec. 2005).

The Dhammamātā Hermitage was the place that Buddhadāsa reserved particularly for women in order to offer them ideal conditions for their *dhamma* practice. Unfortunately, Buddhadāsa passed away in 1993 and could not do much for the Hermitage. It was only in December 1999, six years after his death, that the Hermitage was opened to run a four-month retreat programme for women entitled ‘Self-Training Programme for a Chaste Life of Untainted Beauty’ (*Khrōngkān Fuk-oprom ton phua Khwām-mī Chīwit Phrommachan thī Mot-choṭ Ngot-ngām*) led by Ranchuan and other female disciples.

Although Buddhadāsa was seldom directly involved in these three projects at Suan Mōkkh International, he specifically wanted his disciples to carry on the work to provide access to ideal spirituality. Of the three, his vision of women at the Dhammamātā Hermitage was quite different from that of the *Upāsikā* Area. He intended the Hermitage to be a demonstration of his full support for improving conditions for women’s *dhamma* practice.

Buddhadāsa’s notions of dhammamātā and motherhood

The main source from which we can gain insight into Buddhadāsa’s thoughts about *dhammamātā* is his handwritten notes in his private diaries. After his death, among his diaries his disciples found four short notes – each comprising a list of items on a piece of paper or a page in his diary – regarding his thoughts on *dhammamātā*. All four were printed in the handbook for the Dhammamātā Hermitage.³⁵ In contrast to his earlier disinterest in the social disadvantages of women practitioners, these notes on *dhammamātā* were filled with respect for their great potential to achieve the goal of Buddhism. In other words, the *dhammamātā* notes indicate a significant change in Buddhadāsa’s attitude towards women’s practice.

The main points of Buddhadāsa’s *dhammamātā* notes are well summarised by Ranchuan, who after the former’s passing studied his thoughts in order to launch an actual project in the Dhammamātā Hermitage. In the handbook for the Hermitage, she wrote:

[The main points of Buddhadāsa’s notes were] to give people of the mother gender full opportunities for studying and practising *dhamma* so that they could best propagate and inherit the Buddhist traditions as female *dhammadūta* [that is, a *dhamma* missionary] who would fill the vacant post of the group of *bhikkunī* who are still lost.³⁶

Working from an image of *dhammamātā* as female practitioners and reading through Buddhadāsa’s notes, however, we could not find any details about their rules and styles, which tend to develop along the lines of monastic tradition. Buddhadāsa never specified in any of his notes whether they should shave their heads or not, what types of costume they should wear or what sort of ceremony they should go through for their initiation. He did not even mention whether they should observe the 311 precepts (like the ancient *bhikkunī* of the Buddha’s time) or only the eight precepts commonly observed by *māe chī* in contemporary Thailand. Since there is no mention

35 *Thammāsom Thammamātā* [Dhammamātā Hermitage] (Chaiyā: Dhammadāna Foundation, 2001).

36 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

of *māe chī* in Buddhadāsa's notes, we cannot tell whether he thought *dhammamātā*, who 'substitute for the *bhikkunī*', should resemble *māe chī* or not. Whatever the ordination status or styles of practice he had in mind for *dhammamātā*, the objective was to offer women practitioners who were pursuing the ultimate religious goal an essential benefit, namely the opportunity to cultivate their own spirituality and that of others.

Buddhadāsa's notes on *dhammamātā* can be read as his solution to the dilemma of the universality of religion's 'essential core', which is supposed to be accessible to any group of people and able to solve any kind of problem in any particular set of mundane conditions, depending on which one's access to the 'core' could be either facilitated or hindered. His confidence in women's abilities in Buddhist practice was reaffirmed by a Pāli phrase which he quoted in one of his *dhammamātā* notes: '*na hi sabbesuṭhānesu puriso hoti paṇḍita/ itthipi paṇḍita hoti tattha tattha vicakkhanā* (A man is not wise on all occasions; a woman is also wise, being skilful here and there).³⁷

At the same time, aware of the gender inequalities in society, Buddhadāsa clearly outlined how women should be treated. For instance, he wrote of 'women's rights, which should be equal to men's', and of 'fully giving human rights to those who belong to the mother gender'.³⁸ Among the many disadvantages faced by women in Buddhism, Buddhadāsa focused on their lack of opportunity for such religious activities as studying, practising and propagating *dhamma* – opportunities that men take for granted when they ordain as *bhikkhu*. By establishing the Dhammamātā Hermitage, Buddhadāsa intended to provide women with substantial support equal to that enjoyed by *bhikkhu* – and by *bhikkunī* if their ordination lineages had continued to the present. Yet, he wrote that through introducing *dhammamātā* it was possible to 'provide the best benefit to people belonging to the mother gender, not necessarily through ordaining as *bhikkunī*'.³⁹ His compensation for women was not an opportunity for ordination equal to that of *bhikkunī*. In other words, in line with his philosophy, he did not choose ceremonies and forms such as *bhikkunī* as a solution to gender inequalities in Buddhism. Instead, he urged the endowment of actual benefits that could support women's spiritual development.

The next question is what Buddhadāsa thought would be the actual benefits for women practitioners. His notes on *dhammamātā* suggest that there are at least three groups of people whose practices inspired him to work on conceiving an ideal picture of women practitioners. First, it seems that he wanted his female disciples to follow his path, doing just what he did as a *bhikkhu*. Speaking metaphorically, he wrote in his notes that the Dhammamātā Hermitage should be created as if it contained a deep forest, a university, a sacred hall and a radio station, which represent an ideal environment for ascetic practice, doctrinal study, realisation of religiosity and *dhamma* propagation respectively.⁴⁰ Buddhadāsa envisioned the Hermitage as having a natural environment similar to that of his temple Suan Mōkkh, and as being a place for women

37 I am grateful to Dr Mark Allon at the University of Sydney for suggesting this English translation.

38 Quotations from Buddhadāsa, 'Thammāsom Thammamātā' (first note) and 'Thammamātā' (third note) in *ibid.*

39 'Thammamātā' (third note) in *ibid.*

40 Buddhadāsa, 'Āsom thammamātā' (fourth note) in *ibid.*

practitioners to pursue the highest doctrinal studies, ascetic practice and realisation of the *dhamma*. He also wrote that, if possible, the Hermitage should ‘publish its own journal’, just as he published his *Phutthasāsanā*, ‘to lead the world’.⁴¹ Furthermore, he promoted ‘international and inter-religious activities’ in the Dhammamātā Hermitage, just as he had been doing in his own work. He set ‘no restriction on nationality’ for those who would receive training there, but he expected members to have ‘knowledge of Thai and at least one more foreign language’ as well as ‘general knowledge of academics and Buddhism’.⁴² He may have expected that these abilities would facilitate discussion about ‘the essence of all religions’ with those from other linguistic and religious backgrounds.

The second group of people from whom Buddhādāsa gained inspiration was other religious believers fully dedicated to their religious practices. One of his notes says that practitioners in the Dhammamātā Hermitage would be ‘equivalent to cloistered Christian nuns, which Buddhism does not yet have’. He also wrote that as a principle of practice women practitioners at the Hermitage should ‘praise virtues [*phra khun*] at least five times a day’, just as Muslim people do in their daily prayers.⁴³ In order to concentrate on prayers and contemplation, cloistered Catholic nuns seclude themselves in convents, thus limiting their contacts with secular society, while Muslims are taught to make religion their central concern by praying five times a day.

By contrast, only a small number of contemporary Buddhist women practitioners in Thailand have benefited from equivalent opportunities for ascetic practice. Especially when women live in a temple under the authority of a male abbot, their expected roles revolve around rather secular aspects of monastic life such as grocery shopping, food preparation, selling flowers and other offering items to temple visitors, and soliciting donations for temple projects. Even when women seek instruction for their religious practice, the frequent contact with monk teachers can incite vulgar gossip, hinting at possible sexual attraction. Although there are places dedicated exclusively for women practitioners, the number of such places is small and the public is less aware of female head teachers’ abilities than of monks’. The religious traditions in Christianity and Islam appear to have served as a model for Buddhādāsa to provide an independent place where Buddhist women could teach each other and engage in intensive ascetic practices together as good teachers and friends following the same religious path.⁴⁴

Mothers were the third and the most important group who contributed to Buddhādāsa’s conception of *dhammamātā*. Women as mothers inspired him to work toward the full realisation of their capabilities in religious practice and teaching, which are often forgotten. In his notes Buddhādāsa repeated many times that mothers should

41 Buddhādāsa, ‘Āsom thammamātā’ (second note) in *ibid.*

42 Buddhādāsa, ‘Āsom thammamātā’ (fourth note) in *ibid.*

43 Buddhādāsa, ‘Āsom thammamātā’ (second note) in *ibid.* Although in his note Buddhādāsa did not mention Muslim prayers, *Upāsikā* Sōemsap Damrongrat said (interview, 8 May 2005) that he was inspired by Muslim prayers.

44 Buddhādāsa wrote in one of his *dhammamātā* notes, ‘It is better, more appropriate and more convenient for women to teach women with each other, so we should have *dhammamātā*’ (‘Thammamātā’ [the third note], in *ibid.*).

be rewarded with gratitude, and opportunities for the mother gender to practise *dhamma* should be facilitated. One of his notes says, 'As a show of loyalty and repayment of obligations to the mother gender – give equivalent [things] to their tired and difficult [contributions as mothers]' (*pen kān-katanyū katawēthī tōp-thāen phēt mandā hai som kap khwām-net-nuai yāk-lambāk*).⁴⁵ His emphasis on repayment of debts to mothers implies that everybody has been spiritually nurtured by his or her mother's fundamental teaching during childhood, but many people are not grateful enough to their mothers and do not support women's spiritual practice.

Apart from his notes on *dhammamātā*, there were several sermons in his later life in which Buddhādāsa emphasised the importance of mothers in transmitting the most fundamental teachings and building children's basic personalities. According to Buddhādāsa:

The mother is the creator of the children's spirit [*phū-sāng-winyān hai kae lūk*] more than the father. The mother contributes more than the father to the creation of children's sensitivity and extensive knowledge of their intellectuality, mentality, and spirituality. Because she teaches children to behave well from birth, she should transmit her personality to them. She teaches whatever fundamental things are required for children to be clever, modest, careful, patient, and diligent. A mother gives these things to children more than a father.⁴⁶

In one of his sermons, by questioning why in Pāli one always says '*mātā pitā*' ('mother and father') instead of 'father and mother', Buddhādāsa suggested mothers' devotion and intimacy with their children:

With what do children grow? They are brought up with the blood from their mother's breasts. Mother's milk is blood in her breasts. Blood in a mother's breasts transforms itself into milk in order to bring up her children. Children can actually grow with the blood in mother's breasts. A mother undergoes much pain at the time of childbearing and raising of children. Because of these experiences, a mother feels even more fatigue and pain than a father. Therefore, in Pāli the word 'mother' comes before 'father'. ... Children stay with their mother for a long period of time until they can be apart from each other. [Even in the case where] the father separates from the children when they are still young, they have their mother's milk, sleep with their mother, and stay with their mother. So, they receive lots of valuable things from the mother, even more than the father.⁴⁷

45 Buddhādāsa, 'Āsom thammamātā' (third note), in *ibid*.

46 Phra Thammakōsāchān (Phutthathāt Phikkhu) [Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu], 'Māe thī than yang mai rū-chak: Lōk ca mī santhiphāp, thā rū-chak māe thī thāe ching' [Motherhood that you have not yet known: The world will have peace, if it knows the true mother], in Phutthathāt Phikkhu and Panyānantha Phikku [Paññānanda Bhikku], *Māe phra nai bān: Phra thamma-thētsanā phisēt* [Mother is a monk at home: Special *dhamma* sermons] (Bangkok: Thammasaphā, n.d.), p. 49.

47 Phutthathāt Phikkhu [Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu], *Phra-khun khōng māe khū santhiphāp khōng lōk* [Mothers' virtues are world peace] (Bangkok: Atammayō, n.d.), p. 4; the original sermon was delivered on 12 Aug. 1989. The analogy of mother's milk as her blood seems to be common in Thailand. Jane Hanks, based on her research in Central Thailand, quoted a saying that '[mother's] blood was purified to a white colour to become the milk of the breast'; Hanks, *Maternity and its rituals in Bāng Chan* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Data Paper, 1963), p. 72.

Taking his own childhood as an example, Buddhadāsa recalled that his mother taught him to be thrifty. While cooking together in the kitchen, she often said to him, ‘if we don’t know how to use firewood [properly], we’ll be slaves to firewood; if we don’t know how to use water [properly], we’ll be slaves to water’. She told him to use things economically in order to eliminate excess efforts acquiring them – the same with money. She also taught him how to shred coconut meat. If they did it with all their strength, they would hurt their hands but would not squeeze out much milk; but if they used moderate strength, the shredded meat would be soft and could produce more milk. This was a teaching of moderation (*phō dī*, literally ‘just enough’).⁴⁸

In another example, Buddhadāsa’s mother often said while they were gardening, ‘if a bird eats [fruit or vegetables in the garden], think that we are receiving merit. If someone steals them, think that we are making an offering.’⁴⁹ Buddhadāsa learned generosity from his mother’s teaching; he related its significance as follows:

let me be a bit proud of myself: no matter how and what I can do today, as my body and self, better than other people, it is all because Mother taught me to become like this. Therefore, whoever has received any useful things from me, please thank my mother as well, because she built my life to be the way it is. In a [Pāli] text entitled *Pubbācariya* [An ancient teacher], it is said that the mother is the first teacher in the world and created individuals in this way. What should I call this? When we see things in this way, how can we be disloyal to our parents?⁵⁰

Buddhadāsa’s emphasis on repayment of one’s obligation to one’s mother appears to have been rooted in the gratitude which he could not sufficiently express to his own. He said he regretted that his knowledge of *dhamma* was not deep enough when his mother was alive. She was ‘very interested in *dhamma*’ (*sonchai thamma lua pramān*), so soon after his ordination he sent her small notebooks in which he had written what he had just learned from the ecclesiastical examination books. However, according to Buddhadāsa, his was ‘only a childish knowledge of *dhamma*’. He said, ‘if at that time I had as much knowledge as I have now, I could have helped my mother and given her great contentment through learning the *dhamma*. But, she died before I became able to teach the *dhamma* in depth. This fact always makes me feel desolate and the feeling never disappears.’ Mētā, his nephew, observed that this feeling of regret seems to have motivated him to work to support women’s spiritual development.⁵¹

By using the metaphor of mothers nurturing children’s spirituality, Buddhadāsa did not just assign women to be in charge of basic teaching; he also found motherly virtues (*phra-khun khōng mae*) to be equivalent to the Buddhist paths for transcendence. In a sermon entitled ‘*Dhammamātā*’, while not mentioning the

48 Phutthathāt, *Phra khun khōng mae*, p. 14. According to a friend, if we use too much strength in shredding coconut meat, the meat will crumble into big pieces which cannot be properly shredded and are unsuitable for squeezing out milk.

49 *Mae sōn wai: Ruap-ruam kham-sōn khōng mae Phutthathāt Phikkhu* [Mother taught: A collection of teachings by the mother of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu], ed. Phot Yangphōnkhan (Bangkok: Sukkaphāp Chai, 2002), pp. 19–20, 37.

50 Phutthathāt, *Phra khun khōng mae*, p. 18.

51 Mētā, interview, 9 May 2005. The quotation is from *ibid.*, pp. 18–19. A similar story appears in Buddhadāsa’s sermon ‘*Mae thī than yang mai rū-chak*’, p. 45.

Hermitage or the ideal female practitioners to whom he gave that name, he talked of mothers, whose minds are motivated by *dhamma dhammamātā*. He affirmed mothers' and women's ability to achieve *dhamma* as follows:

Mothers' virtues are supreme *dhamma* [*borommatham*]. They are the highest [virtues/teachings] for children. If they make the best effort, even your mothers can become achievers of *dhamma* [*phū-banlu-tham*]. There is a Pāli saying, '*itthipi paṇḍita hoti tattha tattha vicakkhanā*' [A woman is also wise, being skilful here and there]. If she has deep insight [*wichak*], meaning that she has a clear understanding in her mind, even a woman can become a learned person [*bandit*]; not only men can do this. Now, we praise our mothers, maternal virtues, as they can become learned people. People often say that when [men] become ordained as monks, they forget and never think about the virtues of their mothers. This is inappropriate and not right, as it is equivalent to saying that women cannot do anything much. Now let me clearly indicate that a woman can also become a learned person, if she has a clear understanding of *dhamma* in mind.⁵²

Buddhadāsa compared mothers' virtues to the three aspects of essential doctrine in Buddhism: *pariyatti* (textual study), *paṭipatti* (practice), and *paṭivedha* (realisable or attainable aspect).⁵³ Among these three, the practical aspect is most striking.⁵⁴ He explained the practical aspect of mother's virtues as '*navārahaguṇa*', which means the nine virtues of an *arahant* (an accomplished one, who is at the final stage of realisation). The *navārahaguṇa* are also known as '*buddhaguṇa*', the Buddha's virtues, which Thai Buddhists commonly recite as part of their morning chanting. The nine virtues of an *arahant* or Buddha include: *araham* (away from the cycle of causes and effects)⁵⁵; *sammāsambuddho* (fully self-enlightened); *vijjācarana-sampanno* (perfect in theory and conduct); *sugato* (going along the right path); *lokavidū* (knower of the world); *anuttaro purisadammasārathi* (incomparable leader of human beings to be tamed); *satthā devamanussānam* (the teacher of both higher and lower standards of

52 Phutthathāt Phikkhu [Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu], 'Thammamātā' [*Dhammamātā*], in *Anuson ngān phra-rātchathān phlōeng sop Nāng Phitsamai Kamalamēn (Im'udom)* (Cremation volume for Mrs Phitsamai Kamalamēn [Im'udom]), 1994, p. 44. On the other hand, in his notes on the Dhammamātā Hermitage, Buddhadāsa metaphorically described women practitioners as mothers who have *dhamma*.

53 Ibid., p. 37. See Phra Thēpwēthī [Prayut Payuttō Bhikkhu, now known as Phra Phrōmkhunāphōn], *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Bangkok: Mahā-chulālongkōn Rātcha-witthayālai, 1992), p. 125.

54 Buddhadāsa explained each of the three by means of nine attributes. Concerning textual study, he quoted *navaṅga-satthusāsana* (the Teacher's nine-factored dispensation), including *sutta* (discourses), *geyya* (discourses mixed with verses), *veyyākaraṇa* (prose expositions), and others (Phutthathāt, 'Thammamātā', pp. 37–9; Phra Thēpwēthī, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, pp. 261–2). These nine seem to be composite styles of teaching. Regarding the realisable or attainable aspect, or realisation aspect, he said that it corresponds with the nine *lokuttara dhamma*, consisting of four *magga* (paths), four *phala* (results), and one *nibbāna*. However, in this sermon he did not give precise details about the realisable aspect (Phutthathāt, 'Thammamātā', pp. 41–2).

55 The cycle of causes and effects is called *saṃsāra* in Pāli. Buddhadāsa explained that because of the transcendence from the cycle, an *araham* is the one who should be paid respect and who has no secrets to hide; Phra Thēpwēthī, *Dictionary of Buddhism* translates '*araham*' as 'holy; worthy; accomplished' (p. 262). In the Thai translation of the morning chant, Buddhadāsa translated it as 'the prospered one who is away from defilements'; *Tham wat chāo yen lae suat mon phisēt bāng bot plāe Thai khōng Samnak Suan Mōkphalārām Chaiyā* [Morning and evening chants and some special chants, Thai translation, by Suan Mōkkhālarāma, Chaiyā], p. 2.

people); *buddho* (the knower, awakened and delighted one); and *bhagavā* (the distributor, who distributes *dhamma* for other people to know).⁵⁶

Most temple residents and lay Buddhists who frequently visit temples can recite all nine virtues from memory. They also memorise the meaning of each Pāli word, because many temples in Thailand use the daily Pāli chanting combined with Buddhādāsa's Thai translation.⁵⁷ It seems to have been his strategy to remind people of mothers' virtues by equating them to those of the Buddha, the enlightened one. In this way he appealed to people to pay more respect and show more gratitude to mothers and those who belonged to the 'mother gender' – who were in many cases old women remaining in the countryside, less educated than their children. He concluded the sermon by stating:

In the end, I would say that I have spoken [in this sermon] about mothers' virtues by way of suggesting that our mothers have the elements [of transcendence]. Considering the nine steps as steps together with virtues, textual studies, practices and realisations, our mothers would advance further and attain [*nibbāna*]. They are already composed of the elements [of transcendence]. When mothers advance, they will attain [*nibbāna*]. Mothers are already composed of those virtues. They are *dhammamātā* composed of the three parts: the nine Buddha virtues, the nine *lokuttara dhamma*, and *navaṅga-satthusāsana*.⁵⁸

In summary, Buddhādāsa had no doubt that women – the mother gender – can accomplish the transcendent path of Buddhism, as they demonstrate the virtues of the Buddha and *arahant* when they play their maternal role. He expected female practitioners, *dhammamātā*, to perform as 'mothers of the world' by fully demonstrating the virtues that they already possessed and by guiding people's spiritual development. Motherhood was a strong metaphor for him in his work to recognise the potential of women's pursuit of spirituality and to remind people of its significance.

Motherhood: Social appeal and a question of gender roles

Although the fact tends not to be stressed much in Thailand, one of the strategies often employed for raising the status of women is to advocate the equalisation of women's and men's rights. For centuries women's movements around the world have appealed to the public about the unfairness of sex-based discrimination and certain gender role expectations, such as men functioning as breadwinners versus women as domestic caretakers. Because of those efforts, many institutional inequalities have been eradicated and many people now understand more about women's rights, but it was a long time before such notions gained general acceptance by society. Not only men but women as well often perceived a sudden change of values as overly radical, even if they felt the unfairness of gender inequality in their everyday lives. In contemporary

56 Phra Thēpwēthī, *Dictionary of Buddhism* translates the last three terms respectively as 'teacher of gods and men', 'awakened' and 'blessed; analyst' (p. 262). In Buddhādāsa's Thai translation of the morning chants, '*bhagavā*' is rendered as 'the prosperous one who distributes *dhamma* to teach living beings' (*Tham wat chāo yen*, p. 3).

57 Ibid.

58 Phutthathāt, 'Thammamātā', p. 47.

Thailand, where people respect the hierarchical social order and prefer modest attitudes to those perceived as aggressive, many Buddhist women feel it is difficult to claim a higher social status for their own benefit. So, rather than committing themselves to a movement for social change, many of them struggle towards religious goals under the existing disadvantages, because their access to the ultimate goal of Buddhism is theoretically guaranteed.⁵⁹

Buddhadāsa may have been one of those who felt it difficult to eradicate traditional notions of gender roles, but he did understand that the current situation was unfair for women practitioners. The aim of his *dhammamātā* proposal may not have been exactly the same as the aim of other Buddhist women's movements, but there are many commonalities in terms of giving women practitioners appropriate social conditions for their ascetic practices and making use of their achievements for the benefit of society. In order to reach this goal, Buddhadāsa gave up the reintroduction of *bhikkunī* ordination, as it would no doubt have invited social controversy and suspicion that he was seeking fame, as was the case in the Thai public's reaction to Narin's movement. Instead, Buddhadāsa used the notion of motherhood, which had more social appeal and would provoke less conflict. In fact, many senior *māe chī* and other types of female practitioners are called 'khun māe' or 'māe' (both mean 'mother', the first being more polite), terms which convey a sense of respect for, and intimacy towards, older women. When the notion of motherhood is applied to the new model of female practitioners, *dhammamātā*, the Pāli term 'mātā' is combined with *dhamma*; this evokes a deeper impression than the colloquial term 'māe'.

What is more, the sense of reverence conveyed by *dhammamātā* is something that can be accepted as 'natural' and 'appropriate' but which hardly connotes aggressiveness or challenge to superiors in the traditional hierarchy. Buddhadāsa's intention in proposing *dhammamātā* as an alternative to *bhikkunī* seems to have been to avoid unnecessary conflict with the existing authorities of *bhikkhu* and the Thai *Saṅgha*, which would likely be unavoidable in the case of an attempt to restore *bhikkunī* ordination, and which could even reduce the benefits for women. It was by use of the notion of motherhood that he could expect women practitioners to obtain the most benefit and to be granted a role equivalent to that of the ancient *bhikkunī*.

Traditionally motherhood is one of the resources through which Thai women can acquire prestige.⁶⁰ By giving birth, a woman in rural Thailand assumes the title of 'mother' and becomes responsible for feeding her family members. As a mother she nurtures her children by providing nutrition during her pregnancy, gives them milk after childbirth and prepares food for them when they grow up. Because of the matrilineal tendency and high male mobility in traditional Thailand, mothers take more responsibility than fathers for the family's economic and social life. Thus, Thai people tend to feel more indebted to their mothers than to their fathers. Schoolchildren assert

59 I have written about Buddhist women's opinions on movements to raise their status in Ito, 'Buddhist women in *dhamma* practice' and Tomomi Ito, 'Ordained women in yellow robes: An unfamiliar "tradition" in contemporary Thailand', in *Out of the shadows: Socially engaged Buddhist women*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publication, 2006), pp. 168–71.

60 Marjorie A. Muecke, 'Make money not babies: Changing status makers of Northern Thai women', *Asian Survey*, 24, 4 (1984): 461–2.

that the person they love the most is their mother, and many women express their satisfaction with their maternal role, saying that they want to be reborn as women.⁶¹

The 'milk price' (*khā nom*) which Thai people owe to their mothers is repeatedly emphasised in life transition rituals such as weddings, pre-ordinations and tonsures.⁶² In particular, at a pre-ordination ceremony called *tham khwan nāk* (strengthening the spirit essence of the *nāga*), a traditional singer is hired to perform a song praising maternal virtues. Because it is believed that a mother can receive great merit by her son's entrance into the monkhood, ordination constitutes his repayment of his indebtedness to his mother. Singers are expected to sing movingly so that the ordination candidates and other members of the audiences will be reminded of their debt to their mothers and begin to cry. Singers who can make people cry are popular and highly paid.⁶³

One of the songs for the *tham khwan nāk* ceremony praises maternal virtues as follows:

[The preceptor] accomplishes the ordination ceremony, so the candidate can become a sprout of a victorious ascetic and holy sage, and he can thus dedicate his heart of loyalty to repay his obligation to his parents who gave him birth. No merits that have been accumulated could be compared to this great status of ordination. Despite the greatest virtues of a mother, nowadays people tend to look down on the mother's virtues as only twelve, while they weigh the father's as twenty. Such a saying does not agree with Buddha's words. In the *Maṅgaladīpanī* [text] the Buddha appropriately said that a mother's virtue is unlimited. Even with the whole universe, her virtue is incomparably large. Even if we allot mother sixteen, which is equivalent to the half of the great universe, her virtue is still much heavier. For this reason, the Lord Buddha went up to the *Tāvātimsa* heaven of the Thirty-three Gods and said that he would show his gratitude for his mother's virtues, so his insight is fully inserted in all the Three Baskets of the *Tipiṭaka* [the Buddhist scriptures]. When picking up the virtues of both the *Suttapiṭaka* ['the Basket of Discourses', collections of Buddha's sermons] and the *Vinayapiṭaka* ['the Basket of Discipline', comprising the corpus of rules governing monastic discipline], they are still lighter than the virtue of the Lord Buddha's mother, but the virtue of the *Abhidhammapiṭaka* ['the Basket of Higher Doctrine', containing

61 Marjorie A. Muecke, 'Thai conjugal family relationships and the Hsu hypothesis', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 71, 1–2 (1983): 25–41; A. Thomas Kirsch, 'Development and mobility among the Phu Thai of Northeast Thailand', *Asian Survey*, 6, 7 (1966): 370–8; Hanks, *Maternity and its rituals*, pp. 72–3; Charles F. Keyes, 'Mother or mistress but never a monk: Buddhist notions of female gender in rural Thailand', *American Ethnologist*, 11, 2 (1984): 229; and Penny Van Esterik, 'Nurturance and reciprocity in Thai studies', in *State power and culture in Thailand*, ed. E. Paul Durrenberger (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies Monograph, 1996), pp. 24–5. On the schoolchildren's and women's views, see Muecke, 'Thai conjugal family relationships', p. 32 and Hanks, *Maternity and its rituals*, pp. 76–7.

62 Van Esterik, 'Nurturance and reciprocity', p. 27. Jane Hanks cited mothers' virtues sung in tonsure-chants (*Maternity and its rituals*, p. 32). Ms Chintanā Sandiland, a Thai lecturer at the Australian National University, mentioned that the bride price paid by the groom to the bride's mother is called *khā nam nom* ('milk price') (personal communication, 3 Feb. 2006).

63 Chintāna, personal communication, 3 Feb. 2006. On the *tham khwan nāk* ceremony, see Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the spirit cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 105; the term '*nāga*' (*nāk*) in this context designates the candidate for ordination. Tambiah's discussion uses the term '*sū khwan*', which replaces '*tham khwan*' in northeastern Thailand and Laos.

philosophical and psychological matters] is equivalent to it. Therefore, the Buddha taught the *Abhidhamma* of the absolute truth and extremely pleased both his mother and the celestials. With this teaching, the Lord Buddha could repay his debt to his mother. So candidate, fully consider by your brilliance how much virtue your mother had. When you ordain as an ascetic *bhikkhu*, a son in Buddhism, you deserve to have it said that you are repaying an obligation to your mother once, but it is still not equivalent to her virtues. Nevertheless, whenever you have a mind seriously venerated by your diligence and study topics in the *Tiṭṭaka* seriously, you can pick up something from it to explain to your mother so that she could understand clearly and be pleased blissfully. Stay on the Noble Eightfold Path by following the holy tradition, then you will repay your debt to your mother.⁶⁴

The legend in the *Abhidhammapiṭaka* about the Buddha's ascension to the *Tāvātimsa* heaven to preach to his deceased mother is often referred to as an exemplary model for monks to follow. They are encouraged to study and practise *dhamma* diligently so that they can teach their mothers and please them with tastes of the *dhamma* – which is also considered as a repayment of their indebtedness as sons. After listening to this story repeatedly, few people can deny the significance of motherly virtues. Buddhādāsa's notion of *dhammamātā* was derived from such a cultural context, and it appealed to people's traditional sentiment towards mothers.

Nevertheless, the concept of *dhammamātā* was not simply a repetition of the commonplace idea of motherhood. Motherhood pre-eminently conveys an image of life-giver and nurturer.⁶⁵ By extending mothers' image as nurturers, women are often portrayed as 'mothers' who feed their ordained sons daily and as important supporters of the *Sanḅha*.⁶⁶ The work of providing material support for monks is often considered particularly important for women. Barbara Andaya has argued that because of the traditional respect for women's nurturing role, through which they can acquire merit to improve their future state of existence, Southeast Asian women, who are said to

64 Than Wat Thanontaeng (probably an abbot of Wat Thanontaeng), 'Tham khwan nāk choei sak' [Ceremony for strengthening the spirit essence for an ordination candidate], in Kasēm Bunsī, *Phraphēnī tham bun nai Phutthasāsanā* [Merit-making customs in Buddhism] (Bangkok: Khurusaphā, 1961), pp. 137–8.

65 In Thai this image appears as the title 'Mother' in the names of goddesses, such as the Earth (*Māe Thōranī*) and Rice (*Māe Phōsop*) Goddesses. See Jane Hanks, 'Reflections on the ontology of rice', in *Culture in history: Essays in honor of Paul Radin*, ed. Stanley Diamond (New York: Octagon Press, 1981), pp. 298–301; and John P. Ferguson, 'The Great Goddess today in Burma and Thailand: An exploration of her symbolic relevance to monastic and female roles', in *Mother worship: Theme and variations*, ed. James J. Preston (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 283–303. Lucien and Jane Hanks quoted a ceremonial dialogue between two monks about the Rice Goddess, in which one monk asked the other why we do not call her 'Father'. The response was, 'Mother means one who is our benefactor, but father means a person who has power. Things having power, influence and hardness are supposed to be masculine. Rice has no power or influence. On the contrary, it feeds all creatures in the world and lengthens their lives; so it is placed on the side of female.' See Lucien M. Hanks and Jane Richardson Hanks, 'Thailand: Equality between the sexes', in *Women in the new Asia: The changing social roles of men and women in South and South-East Asia*, ed. Barbara E. Ward (Paris: UNESCO, 1963), pp. 439–40.

66 Keyes, 'Mother or mistress', p. 233; Barbara Andaya, 'Localising the universal: Women, motherhood and the appeal of early Theravāda Buddhism', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 33, 1 (2002): 1–30; and Penny Van Esterik, 'Feeding their faith: Recipe knowledge among Thai Buddhist women', *Food and foodways*, 1 (1986): 197–215.

enjoy a relatively high social status, have accepted Theravāda Buddhism even though it assigns them a low status.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, with women's role stereotyped as a supporting one, there will be little advancement of their image as renunciants practising *dhamma*. Such images of women and mothers are based on the premise that they are just lay people remaining in household life and only pursuing merit accumulation as their Buddhist practice. In contrast, Buddhādāsa, by highlighting the mothers' role as children's first teachers of *dhamma*, set forth a new image of women as religious teachers. This is the very image and role that Buddhist women practitioners have wanted; by proposing the notion of *dhammamātā*, Buddhādāsa conferred it on them while avoiding conflict with the dominant conception of women in Thai society.

Although the notion of *dhammamātā* is an interesting attempt to enhance women's status and opportunities in ascetic Buddhist practice based on local tradition, a possible limitation should also be noted. From a feminist point of view, the notion of motherhood always places women in a dilemma. In a study based on American society, Evelyn Nakano Glenn indicated that on the one hand, some consider the function of biological reproduction as the first division of labour and the original source of women's subordination. They argue that the physical task of childbearing led to the restriction of women's mobility and to the expectation that they do domestic work. On the other hand, some women are reluctant to give up their particular experience of becoming mothers, as motherhood is a powerful bodily experience that induces an emotional link with the infant as well as creativity and insight. Furthermore, in some societies women can gain status when they produce heirs; therefore, motherhood is a source of status and privilege. However, at the same time this status and privilege serve to strengthen the ideology of their subordination. Thus, motherhood is a paradoxical subject for feminists: Should they perceive women indiscriminately as human beings or claim special identities and positions as women? The latter perspective tends to be romanticised and used to justify assigning them to subordinate roles.⁶⁸

Dhammamātā who live as celibate renunciants may not be much troubled by their biological reproduction function or subordination to the patriarchal family system, yet some of Buddhādāsa's statements about mothers' duties may require careful reading. He occasionally said that mothers' nurturing role in teaching children fundamental religious notions should not disappear:

67 Andaya writes, 'Despite inherent contradictions between the alleged "high status" of women in Southeast Asia and their ambiguous position in Theravāda traditions, "female agency" has never been an issue in the region's religious historiography. ... Moving into Southeast Asia at a time when its basic receptivity to lay involvement had been enhanced, Theravāda Buddhism offered continuing opportunities for all women to acquire merit through gift-giving and thereby counter their relegation to an inferior position' ('Localising the universal', p. 29). For discussions of women's status in Southeast Asia, see, for instance: Hanks and Hanks, 'Thailand: Equality between the sexes'; Ferguson, 'Great Goddess today', p. 295; Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce 1450–1680, vol. 1: The lands below the winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 146; Penny Van Esterik, 'Introduction', in *Women of Southeast Asia*, ed. Penny Van Esterik (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University, Center for Southeast Asian Studies Occasional Paper, 1982), pp. 1–15; Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); and *Women's studies in Thailand: Power, knowledge and justice*, ed. Suwanna Satha-Anand (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 2004).

68 Evelyn Nakano Glenn, 'Social constructions of mothering: a thematic overview', in *Mothering: Ideology, experience, and agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–29.

Women's duties and rights are true and thought to exist. These are for human beings' mastery of the world; they are not for rights equal and identical to men's. Instead, women's duties and rights are to accept the duties to discipline their children so that they can obtain true and perfect humanity. Women do not have to scramble for the duties that fathers perform as people often do. If they did, the world would lose the mothers.⁶⁹

Although Buddhadāsa expressed his support for women's rights in several places, including his notes on *dhammamātā*, he did not seem to deny traditional gender roles. I have not found in his sermon any suggestion that fathers should take more responsibility for the nurturing of children. He may have taken it for granted that mothers' roles had to be played by mothers, not by fathers. In that case, his notion of motherhood may bind women primarily to maternal roles and limit their opportunities to take up other alternatives in society outside the home. It is a task for both female and male disciples of Buddhadāsa to take best advantage of his proposal of *dhammamātā* for practical benefit. He did not instruct his disciples to rigorously follow any teaching or tradition; they are allowed to develop alternative interpretations about his notion of motherhood.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The Dhammamātā Hermitage has been offering retreat sessions to female practitioners since December 1999, but as yet no one has declared herself a *dhammamātā*. In order to become one, a person is required to have good qualifications and confidence in herself as an exemplary model of a renunciant female practitioner and *dhamma* teacher who well represents the late Buddhadāsa's conception. Most women can become mothers, but *dhammamātā* who embody the ideal maternal virtues that he described would probably be charismatic individuals. In Thailand – and perhaps elsewhere as well – individual practitioners' actualisations of spirituality are the most potent resources for change. The presence of capable female renunciant teachers and their demonstration of admirable spirituality can establish people's faith in female renunciants and further expand women's opportunities for *dhamma* practice.

It is clear, however, that *dhammamātā* would have less social impact than *bhikkunī* who don the same yellow robes as *bhikkhu* and follow almost the same monastic rules.⁷¹ No matter how much the notion of mother can influence people to pay more respect to women in society, Thais will never place ordained individuals lower than their mothers. Buddhadāsa grounded his reluctance concerning the restoration of *bhikkunī* ordination in his philosophy, but in his teaching we can also find some ideas which could support the project. For instance, although the lineage of *bhikkunī* precept transmission was disrupted in the Theravāda tradition, the possibility of applying the

69 Phutthathāt phikkhu [Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu], 'Mōradok thī 158' [Legacy number 158], in *Mōradok thī khō fāk wai*, p. 42. For another statement on women's rights and duties, see Phutthathāt, 'Māe thī than yang mai rū-chak', pp. 48–9.

70 Buddhadāsa often referred to the ten principles of the *Kālāma Sutta*; Phutthathāt, 'Mōradok thī 35' [Legacy number 35], in *Mōradok thī khō fāk wai*, p. 10.

71 Social responses toward those recently ordained as either *bhikkunī* or *samaṇerī* (female Buddhist novices) are discussed in Ito, 'Ordained women in yellow robes'.

precedent of the first *bhikkunī* ordination by the Buddha could be considered and supported by Buddhādāsa's favourite reference to *Kālāma Sutta* and the original Buddhism in the Buddha's time.⁷² Just as Buddhādāsa insisted, in the contemporary debate on *bhikkunī* restoration many people who are opposed to *bhikkunī* ordination also refer to the universal access to *nibbāna* without regard to gender or ordained status, arguing that it is unnecessary for women to become ordained as *bhikkunī*. Buddhādāsa was compassionate to women practitioners in difficulty, therefore he developed his thoughts on *dhammamātā*; yet we have to conclude that as far as the issue of women's ordination rights were concerned, he was not radical enough to confront the *status quo* in present Thai Buddhism.

However, we may argue that Buddhādāsa's proposal of *dhammamātā* was significant because it led to the establishment of the Dhammamātā Hermitage, one of the few places in Thailand where women can receive full support for their doctrinal study, ascetic practices and realisation of spiritual virtues. It should be noted that when one can embody overwhelming spirituality, Thai Buddhists do recognise it and pay true respect to that person, regardless of ordained status or gender. Coming to this point, Buddhādāsa and other conservative monks and *māe chī* who oppose *bhikkunī* ordination are right: worldly status and gender difference have no meaning, as spiritual qualities of an individual transcend these matters. It is a chicken-and-egg question: Which should we look at first, social conditions for ascetic practice or spiritual excellence which overwhelms any worldly circumstances? Some may argue that appropriate social conditions for ascetic practice are significant factors leading practitioners to enlightenment, while others may insist that individual religiosities which develop through ascetic practice are the most significant factor in overcoming mundane difficulties. Both are true; it is only a matter of how individuals, society, religious and civil authorities recognise the value of spirituality and how they offer support to renunciant practitioners. What Buddhādāsa offered was *dhammamātā* status and Dhammamātā Hermitage as an alternative to *bhikkunī* ordination.

72 In the *Kālāma*, the Buddha taught: 'Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher". Kalamas, when you yourselves know [that] "These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness", enter on and abide in them.' *Kālāma Sutta: The Buddha's charter of free inquiry*, tr. Soma Thera (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1981).