# Upasika Kee Nanayon
# and the
# Social Dynamic of Theravadin Buddhist Practice

by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

From the Introduction to the book
"An Unentangled Knowing: The Teachings of a Thai Buddhist Lay Woman"

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Upasika Kee Nanayon, also known by her penname, K. Khao-suan-luang, was arguably the foremost woman Dhamma teacher in twentieth-century Thailand. Born in 1901 to a Chinese merchant family in Rajburi, a town to the west of Bangkok, she was the eldest of five children -- or, counting her father's children by a second wife, the eldest of eight. Her mother was a very religious woman and taught her the rudiments of Buddhist practice, such as nightly chants and the observance of the precepts, from an early age. In later life she described how, at the age of six, she became so filled with fear and loathing at the miseries her mother went through in being pregnant and giving birth to a younger sibling that, on seeing the newborn child for the first time -- "sleeping quietly, a little red thing with black, black hair" -- she ran away from home for three days. This experience, plus the anguish she must have felt when her parents separated, probably lay behind her decision, made when she was still quite young, never to submit to what she saw as the slavery of marriage.

During her teens she devoted her spare time to Dhamma books and to meditation, and her working hours to a small business to support her father in his old age. Her meditation progressed well enough that she was able to teach him meditation, with fairly good results, in the last year of his life. After his death she continued her business

with the thought of saving up enough money to enable herself to live the remainder of her life in a secluded place and give herself fully to the practice. Her aunt and uncle, who were also interested in Dhamma practice, had a small home near a forested hill, Khao Suan Luang (RoyalPark Mountain), outside of Rajburi, where she often went to practice. In 1945, as life disrupted by World War II had begun to return to normal, she gave up her business, joined her aunt and uncle in moving to the hill, and there the three of them began a life devoted entirely to meditation. The small retreat they made for themselves in an abandoned monastic dwelling eventually grew to become the nucleus of a women's practice center that has flourished to this day.

Life at the retreat was frugal, in line with the fact that outside support was minimal in the early years. However, even now that the center has become well-known and well-established, the same frugal style has been maintained for its benefits in subduing greed, pride, and other mental defilements, as well as for the pleasure it offers in unburdening the heart. The women practicing at the center are all vegetarian and abstain from such stimulants as tobacco, coffee, tea, and betel nut. They meet daily for chanting, group meditation, and discussion of the practice. In the years when Upasika Kee's health was still strong, she would hold special meetings at which the members would report on their practice, after which she would give a talk touching on any important issues that had been brought up. It was during such sessions that most of the talks recorded in this volume were given.

In the center's early years, small groups of friends and relatives would visit on occasion to give support and to listen to Upasika Kee's Dhamma talks. As word spread of the high standard of her teachings and practice, larger and larger groups came to visit, and more women began to join the community. When tape recording was introduced to Thailand in the mid-1950's, friends began recording her talks and, in 1956, a group of them printed a small volume of her transcribed talks for Distribution. By the mid-1960's, the stream of free Dhamma literature from Khao Suan Luang -- Upasika Kee's poetry as well as her talks -- had grown to a flood. This attracted even more people to her center and established her as one of the best-known Dhamma teachers, male or female, in Thailand.

Upasika Kee was something of an autodidact. Although she picked up the rudiments of meditation during her frequent visits to monasteries in her youth, she practiced mostly on her own without any formal study under a meditation teacher. Most of her instruction came from books -- the Pali Canon and the works of contemporary teachers -- and was tested in the crucible of her own relentless honesty. Her later teachings show the influence of the writings of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, although she transformed his concepts in ways that made them entirely her own.

In the later years of her life she developed cataracts that eventually left her blind, but she still continued a rigorous schedule of meditating and receiving visitors interested in the Dhamma. She passed away quietly in 1978 after entrusting the center to a committee she appointed from among its members. Her younger sister, Upasika Wan, who up to that point had played a major role as supporter and facilitator for the center, joined the community within a few months of Upasika Kee's death and soon became its leader, a position she held until her death in 1993. Now the center is once again being run by committee and has grown to accommodate 60 members.

Much has been written recently on the role of women in Buddhism, but

it is interesting to note that, for all of Upasika Kee's accomplishments in her own personal Dhamma practice and in providing opportunities for other women to practice as well, socio-historical books on Thai women in Buddhism make no mention of her name or of the community she founded. This underscores the distinction between Buddhism as practice and mainstream Buddhism as a socio-historical phenomenon, a distinction that is important to bear in mind when issues related to the place of women in Buddhism are discussed.

Study after study has shown that mainstream Buddhism, both lay and monastic, has adapted itself thoroughly to the various societies into which it has been introduced -- so thoroughly that the original teachings seem in some cases to have been completely distorted. From the earliest centuries of the tradition on up to the present, groups who feel inspired by the Buddha's teachings, but who prefer to adapt those teachings to their own ends rather than adapting themselves to the teachings, have engaged in creating what might be called designer Buddhism. This accounts for the wide differences we find when we compare, say, Japanese Buddhism, Tibetan, and Thai, and for the variety of social roles to which many women Buddhists in different countries have found themselves relegated.

The true practice of Buddhism, though, has always been counter-cultural, even in nominally Buddhist societies. Society's main aim, no matter where, is its own perpetuation. Its cultural values are designed to keep its members useful and productive -- either directly or indirectly -- in the on-going economy. Most religions allow themselves to become domesticated to these values by stressing altruism as the highest religious impulse, and mainstream Buddhism is no different. Wherever it has spread, it has become domesticated to the extent that the vast majority of monastics as well as lay followers devote themselves to social services of one form or another, measuring their personal spiritual worth in terms of how well they have loved and served others.

However, the actual practice enjoined by the Buddha does not place such a high value on altruism at all. In fact, he gave higher praise to those who work exclusively for their own spiritual welfare than to those who sacrifice their spiritual welfare for the the welfare of others (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Fours, Sutta 95) -- a teaching that the mainstream, especially in Mahayana traditions, has tended to suppress. The true path of practice pursues happiness through social withdrawal, the goal being an undying happiness found exclusively within, totally transcending the world, and not necessarily expressed in any social function. People who have attained the goal may teach the path of practice to others, or they may not. Those who do are considered superior to those who don't, but those who don't are in turn said to be superior to those who teach without having attained the goal themselves. Thus individual attainment, rather than social function, is the true measure of a person's worth.

Mainstream Buddhism, because it can become so domesticated, often seems to act at cross-purposes to the actual practice of Buddhism. Women sense this primarily in the fact that they do not have the same opportunities for ordination that men do, and that they tend to be discouraged from pursuing the opportunities that are available to them. The Theravadin Bhikkhuni Sangha, the nuns' order founded by the Buddha, died out because of war and famine almost a millennium ago, and the Buddha provided no mechanism for its revival. (The same holds true for the Bhikkhu Sangha, or monks' order. If it ever dies out, there is no way it can be revived.) Thus the only ordination opportunities open to women in Theravadin countries are as lay nuns, observing eight or ten precepts.

Because there is no formal organization for the lay nuns, their status and opportunities for practice vary widely from location to location. In Thailand, the situation is most favorable in Rajburi and the neighboring province of Phetburi, both of which -- perhaps because of the influence of Mon culture in the area -- have a long tradition of highly-respected independent nunneries. Even there, though, the quality of instruction varies widely with the nunnery, and many women find that they prefer the opportunities for practice offered in nuns' communities affiliated with monasteries, which is the basic pattern in other parts of Thailand.

The opportunities that monasteries offer for lay nuns to practice -- in terms of available free time and the quality of the instruction given -- again vary widely from place to place. One major drawback to nuns' communities affiliated with monasteries is that the nuns are relegated to a status clearly secondary to that of the monks, but in the better monasteries this is alleviated to some extent by the Buddhist teachings on hierarchy: that it is a mere social convention, designed to streamline the decision-making process in the community, and based on morally neutral criteria so that one's place in the hierarchy is not an indication of one's worth as a person.

Of course there are sexist monks who mistake the privileged position of men as an indication of supposed male superiority, but fortunately nuns do not take vows of obedience and are free to change communities if they find the atmosphere oppressive. In the better monasteries, nuns who have advanced far in the practice are publicly recognized by the abbots and can develop large personal followings. At present, for instance, one of the most active Dhamma teachers in Bangkok is a woman, Amara Malila, who abandoned her career as a medical doctor for a life in a nun's community connected with one of the meditation monasteries in the Northeast. After several years of practice she began teaching, with the blessings of the abbot, and now has a healthy shelf of books to her name. Such individuals, though, are a rarity, and many lay nuns find themselves relegated to a celibate version of a housewife's life -- considerably freer in their eyes than the life of an actual housewife, but still far from conducive to the full-time practice of the Buddhist path.

Although the opportunities for women to practice in Thailand are far from ideal, it should also be noted that mainstream Buddhism often discourages men from practicing as well. Opportunities for ordination are widely available to men, but it is a rare monk who finds himself encouraged to devote himself entirely to the practice. In village monasteries, monks have long been pressured to study medicine so that they can act as the village doctors or to study astrology to become personal counselors. Both of these activities are forbidden by the disciplinary rules, but are very popular with the laity -- so popular that until recent times a village monk who did not take up either of these vocations was regarded as shirking his duties. Scholarly monks in the cities have long been told that the path to //nibbana// is no longer open, that full-time practice would be futile, and that a life devoted to administrative duties, with perhaps a little meditation on the side, is the most profitable use of one's monastic career.

On top of this, parents who encourage their sons from early childhood to take temporary ordination often pressure them to disrobe soon after ordination if they show any inclination to stay in the monkhood permanently and abandon the family business. Even families who are happy to have their sons stay in the monkhood often discourage them from enduring the hardships of a meditator's life in the forest.

In some cases the state of mainstream Buddhism has become so detrimental to the practice that institutional reforms have been attempted. In the Theravada tradition, such reforms have succeeded only if introduced from the top down, when senior monks have received the support of the political powers that be. The Canonical example for this pattern is the First Council, called with royal patronage in the first year after the Buddha's passing away, for the express purpose of standardizing the record of the Buddha's teachings for posterity. During the days of absolute monarchy, reforms that followed this pattern could be quite thorough-going and on occasion were nothing short of draconian. In more recent years, though, they have been much more limited in scope, gaining a measure of success only when presented not as impositions but as opportunities: access to more reliable texts, improved standards and facilities for education, and greater support for stricter observance of the disciplinary rules. And, of course, however such reforms may be carried out, they are largely limited to externals, because the attainment of the Deathless is not something that can be decreed by legislative fiat.

A modern example of such a reform movement is the Lay Nun Association of Thailand, an attempt to provide an organizational structure for all lay nuns throughout the country, sponsored by Her Majesty the Queen and senior monks in the national hierarchy. This has succeeded chiefly in providing improved educational opportunities for a relatively small number of nuns, while its organizational aims have been something of a failure. Even though the association is run by highly educated nuns, most of the nuns I know personally have avoided joining it because they do not find the leaders personally inspiring and because they feel they would be sacrificing their independence for no perceivable benefit. This view may be based on a common attitude in the outlying areas of Thailand: the less contact with the bureaucratic powers at the center, the better.

As for confrontational reforms introduced from the bottom up, these have never been sanctioned by the tradition, and Theravadin history has no record of their ever succeeding. The only such reform mentioned in the Canon was Devadatta's attempted schism, introduced as a reform to tighten up the disciplinary rules. The Canon treats his attempt in such strongly negative terms that its memory is still very much alive in the Theravada mind set, making the vast majority of Buddhists reluctant to take up with confrontational reforms no matter how reasonable they might seem. And with good reason: Anyone who has to fight to have his/her ideas accepted inevitably loses touch with the qualities of dispassion, self-effacement, unentanglement with others, contentment with little, and seclusion -- qualities the Buddha set forth as the litmus test for gauging whether or not a proposed course of action, and the person proposing it, were in accordance with the Dhamma.

In addition, there have been striking instances where people have proposed religious reforms as a camouflage for their political ambitions, leaving their followers in a lurch when their ambitions are thwarted. And even in cases where a confrontational reformer seems basically altruistic at heart, he or she tends to play up the social benefits to be gained from the proposed reform in the effort to win support, thus compromising the relationship of the reform to true practice. Experiences with cases such as this have tended to make Theravadin Buddhists in general leery of confrontational reforms.

Thus, given the limited opportunities for institutional reform, the only course left open to those few men and women prepared to break the bonds of mainstream Buddhism in their determination to practice is to

follow the example of the Buddha himself by engaging in what might be called personal or independent reform: to reject the general values of society, go off on their own, put up with society's disapproval and the hardships of living on the frontier, and search for whatever reliable meditation teachers may be living and practicing outside of the mainstream. If no such teachers exist, individuals intent on practice must strike out on their own, adhering as closely as they can to the teachings in the texts -- to keep themselves from being led astray by their own defilements -- and taking refuge in the example of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha in a radical way.

In a sense, there is a sort of folk wisdom to this arrangement. Anyone who would take on the practice only when assured of comfortable material support, status, and praise -- which the Buddha called the baits of the world -- would probably not be up to the sacrifices and self-discipline the practice inherently entails.

Thus from the perspective of the practice, mainstream Buddhism serves the function of inspiring individuals truly intent on the practice to leave the mainstream and to go into the forest, which was where the religion was originally discovered. As for those who prefer to stay in society, the mainstream meets their social/religious needs while at the same time making them inclined to view those who leave society in search of the Dhamma with some measure of awe and respect, rather than viewing them simply as drop-outs.

What this has meant historically is that the true practice of Buddhism has hovered about the edges of society and history -- or, from another perspective, that the history of Buddhism has hovered about the edges of the practice. When we look at the historical record after the first generation of the Buddha's disciples, we find only a few anecdotal references to practicing monks or nuns. The only teachers recorded were scholarly monks, participants in controversies, and missionaries. Some people at present have taken the silence on the nuns as an indication that there were no prominent nun teachers after the first generation of disciples. However, inscriptions at the Theravada stupa at Sanci in India list nuns among the prominent donors to its construction, and this would have been possible only if the nuns had large personal followings. Thus it seems fair to assume that there were prominent nun teachers, but that they were devoted to meditation rather than scholarship, and that -- like the monks devoted to meditation -- their names and teachings slipped through the cracks in the historical record inasmuch as true success at meditation is something that historians are in no position to judge.

So, for the period from Canonical up to modern times, one can only make conjectures about the opportunities for practice open to men and women at any particular time. Still, based on observations of the situation in Thailand before Western influences made themselves strongly felt, the following dynamic seems likely: Meditation traditions tend to last only two or three generations at most. They are started by charismatic pioneers willing to put up with the hardships of clearing the Buddhist path. Because the integrity of their efforts takes years to be tested -- not all pioneers are free from delusion and dishonesty -- their role requires great sacrifices. In fact, if large-scale support comes too early, it may abort the movement. If, over time, the pioneers do embody the practice faithfully, then as word of their teachings and practices spread, they begin to attract a following of students and supporters. With the arrival of support, the hardships become less demanding; and as life softens, so does the practice, and within a generation or two it has deteriorated to the extent that it no longer inspires support and eventually dies out, together with any memory of the founder's

teachings.

In some cases, before the tradition dies out, its example may have a reforming influence at large, shaming or inspiring the mainstream at least temporarily into becoming more favorable to true practice. In other cases, the practice tradition may influence only a limited circle and then disappear without a ripple. For those who benefit from it, of course, the question of its historical repercussions is of no real consequence. Even if only one person has benefited by realizing the Deathless, the tradition is a success.

At present in Thailand we are watching this process work itself out in several strands, with the major difference being that modern media have given us a record of the teachings and practices of many figures in the various meditation traditions. Among the monks, the most influential practice tradition is the Forest Tradition, which was started against great odds at the end of the last century by Phra Ajaan Sao Kantasilo and Phra Ajaan Mun Bhuridatto, sons of peasants, at a time when the central Thai bureaucracy was very active in stamping out independent movements of any sort, political or religious. We have no direct record of Ajaan Sao's teachings, only a booklet or two of Ajaan Mun's, but volume upon volume of their students' teachings. Among women, the major practice tradition is Upasika Kee Nanayon's. Although she herself has passed away, the women at her center still listen to her tapes nightly and keep her teachings alive throughout society by printing and reprinting books of her talks for Distribution.

Both traditions are fragile: The Forest Tradition is showing signs that its very popularity may soon lead to its demise, and the women at Khao Suan Luang are faced with the problem of seeing how long they can maintain their standard of practice without charismatic leadership. On top of this, the arrival of the mass media -- and especially television with its tendency to make image more consequential than substance, and personality more important than character -- is sure to change the dynamic of Buddhist mainstream and the practice, not necessarily for the better. Still, both traditions have at least left a record -- part of which is presented in this book -- to inspire future generations and to show how the Buddhist path of practice may be reopened by anyone, male or female, no matter what forms of designer Buddhism may take over the mainstream and inevitably lead it astray.

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