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Buddhist Performing Arts: Thematizing Gender and Developing a New Pedagogy in Modern Thai Buddhism

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Abstract

This article sets out to describe and reflect on the development, execution, and impact of two devised theatre performances that the authors of this paper designed as an

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innovative and effective way of engaging audiences with Buddhist teachings and gender issues in Thai Buddhism. Based on long-term research into the biographies, soteriological practice and teaching, and veneration of historical Thai female Buddhist practitioners, each of these two plays was staged publicly twice in or near Bangkok in 2018 and 2019 respectively.

We will discuss how the educational potential of performing arts can be harnessed to change understandings of audiences and performers or, at least, prompt their curiosity in the study of Buddhism, both as a doctrinal system and in terms of aspects of current religious practices, understandings, and perceptions.

From the Editors' Introduction to "Theatre of a Dhammic Conversation"

"We have decided to publish a book that explains the *Dhamma* in the format of question and answer [*pucchāvissajjanā*] in order to facilitate our readers' study of the *Dhamma* . . . We hope that the readers will actually derive enjoyment too, similar to watching a play."

Introduction

This article⁴ sets out to describe and reflect on the development, execution, and impact of two devised theatre performances⁵ that the authors⁶ of this paper designed as an innovative and effective way of engaging audiences with Buddhist teachings and gender issues in Thai Buddhism. Based on long-term research into the biographies, soteriological practice and teaching, and veneration of historical Thai female Buddhist practitioners,⁷ each of these two plays was staged publicly twice in or near Bangkok in 2018 and 2019 respectively (henceforth, we will refer to these performances as the “2018 performance” and the “2019 performance,”

⁴ The authors of this article would like to thank the Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives, Saowanee (Meiy) Vongjinda, the music band Abhivata, and Sukanya Cha-roenwerakul for their help with the organization and execution of the performances discussed in this article and/or comments on previous versions of this article. We would also like to thank our performers and all those who made the performances possible. The performances described here were also submitted as part of an REF Impact Case Study in 2021 (<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/54aafd8b-45d4-4399-af8e-da49ad6e4bac?page=1> ; accessed 22 June 2023). The research for this study was approved by the Arts and PVAC (PVAR) Faculty Research Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds (PVAR11-071) and AHC Research Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds (FAHC 20-091).

⁵ Our methodology and understanding of the creation of devised theatre performance can be encapsulated in the words of Alison Oddey (1): “Devising is a process of making theatre that enables a group of performers to be physically and practically creative in the sharing and shaping of an original product that directly emanates from assembling, editing, and re-shaping individuals’ . . . experiences of the world. There is a freedom of possibilities for all those involved to discover; an emphasis on a way of working that supports intuition, spontaneity, and an accumulation of ideas.”

⁶ For the second performance, which was conceived and executed in 2019, Seeger and Naris Charaschanyawong collaborated not with Apirak Chaipanha, who directed the 2018 performance, but with Saowanee Vongjinda, the director of the 2019 rendition.

⁷ See Seeger *Changing, Theravāda, Against, Reversal, Orality, Gender, Fragmentary*; Seeger and Naris *rueangrau, Phutthamamika, Sammajarini, Chiwaprawat, Nangsue*.

respectively).⁸ The intellectual spur for the development of these Buddhist art performances had been the short passage in the introductory quote above. This passage stems from the May 1939 issue of the quarterly journal *Buddhasāsanā*, which was first published in 1933 by the influential Thai Buddhist monk Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) and the Dhammādāna Group.⁹ It introduces “Theatre of Dhammic Conversation” (*lakhon thamma-sakatcha*),¹⁰ a close adaptation of some chapters of *Hat Tham*, a remarkable text of modern Thai Buddhist literature and scholarship. As will be discussed below, *Hat Tham* served as a major source text and stimulus for the dramaturgical development of the first of the two performances that this article is concerned with.

We will discuss how the educational potential of performing arts can be harnessed to change understandings of audiences and performers or, at least, prompt their curiosity in the study of Buddhism, both as a doctrinal system and in terms of aspects of current religious practices, understandings, and perceptions. Specifically, this means that we will describe and reflect on how, through a series of impact activities, we have been trying to challenge traditional assumptions about the contributions of women to religious teaching and practice in modern Thai Buddhism. Here, our focus will be on the creative and productive process that led to two public performances of what we call here “Buddhist performing arts.” We

⁸ Videos of both plays are available on YouTube: the 2018 can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRNyphN86HM>; see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQKcd47uvl0&t=1s>). The 2019 performance can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jshLQPeIq7g&t=1s>. These videos have also been disseminated via Facebook where they have received many more views than they have on YouTube.

⁹ For more on this journal and its impact see Ito *Modern* 43-52.

¹⁰ In the August issue of 1939 and the May issue of 1941 other parts of “Theatre of Dhammic Conversation” were published.

will discuss how these performances emerged from, were based on and were nourished by long-term research on the historical role of female practitioners, women's contributions to Thai Buddhist literature and female monasticism in Thai Buddhism; we will explain how we used poetic texts composed by the female Thai Buddhist author and practitioner Khunying Damrongthammasan (1882-1944) and a female-centered Thai Buddhist text to develop devised theatre performances as an innovative way of engaging both audiences and performers not only with a number of fundamental Buddhist teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths, Not-Self (*anattā*), and the Six Senses. Importantly, the two performances also addressed gender issues in contemporary Thai Buddhism, particularly concerning the roles and contributions of Thai female monastics, who are frequently portrayed as a marginalized group and face significant disadvantages in comparison to their male counterparts.

At the planning stage for the two plays, there was some concern regarding potential unease among the audience due to the inclusion of some innovative elements in the performance. For this reason, we tried to develop the artistic content of our performances within the parameters of how the esteemed Thai scholar monk Phra Payutto (born 1939)¹¹ defined the "skillful" application of music, literature, and art. Discussing "the things that humans tend to depend on in order to gain comfort," Phra Payutto differentiates between five different kinds of what he calls "soothing things" (*sing klom*). Whereas some "soothing things," such as alcohol and gambling, are "bad" (*rai*); others may be "risky soothing things," and when used incorrectly or unskillfully, cause harm and lead to attachment, inertness, and carelessness. When used skillfully though, "soothing things," such as music, forms of entertainment, literature, and art, can become tools of training and creativity: "music, art, literature and so forth

¹¹ Since 2016, Phra Payutto has carried the ecclesiastical title "Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya."

which can help to gain enjoyment on a refined level, can be very beneficial, if used skillfully and in moderation,” argues Phra Payutto (*Jarikbun* 311-2, 319). Thus, laypeople who keep the Five Precepts can “fully” use music, art, and sports in a way of “self-development in order to increase righteousness” (*Jarikbun* 320). This argument can be corroborated by a religious practice mentioned in the Pali commentaries: “*sādhukīlana*” or “*sādhukīlita*,” which can be translated as a festive play, a sacred festivity.¹² The commentarial texts mention festive plays that were held for seven days in connection with the veneration not only of the relics of the Buddha (*satta divase sādhukīlitaṃ kīlanti*) but also of other fully awakened monks after their death (*parinibbāna*). Phra Payutto explains that:

an important characteristic of *sādhukīlana* is that it does not aim at personal enjoyment and entertainment but at the benefit for others and is not in conflict with spiritual welfare [*samparāyikattha*] (which is beneficial for the mind and the [creation of] wisdom). The objective is to engender a substantial degree of wholesomeness; it may for example include singing [*gīta*] of songs that stimulate to consider the realities of life and thus motivate one to urgently and prudently create goodness whilst also pay homage [*sakkāra/pūjā*] to those who have achieved *parinibbāna*. (*Photjanukrom* 438-9)

During the production process and post-show panel discussions with directors, scholars, Buddhist monastics, and attending audiences, we also engaged in discussions regarding Phra Payutto’s framework of “skillful” integration of music, literature, and art within our Buddhist plays.

¹² *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (Commentary on the *Dīgha-nikāya*), II.610. See also An 208.

The Research Background

Unlike men, women have not had the opportunity to become an officially recognized fully ordained monastic (*bhikkhuni*) in Thailand's Theravāda Buddhism.¹³ Because of the historical absence of *bhikkhunīs*,¹⁴ other forms of female renunciation have developed in Thailand. The most well-known form of female renunciation is that of the *mae chis*.¹⁵ Even though *mae chis* have existed for at least 400 years in Thailand,¹⁶ they are still not consistently legally recognized as “ordained persons” (*nak buat*). Most significantly, unlike *bhikkhus* or *bhikkhunīs*, *mae chis* have not been considered nor treated as fully ordained. They are often depicted as a marginalized group and are significantly disadvantaged in many ways when compared to monks. There exists a significant amount of academic literature, both in the Thai and Western languages, that discusses the hardships they have had to endure and the obstacles *mae chis* have had to face because of their gender.¹⁷ Despite these many inequities, there have been numerous individual female renunciants who have made important contributions to Thai Buddhist teaching, practice, and monasticism. However, these contributions have not yet widely been recognized in Thai Buddhism, although there are some notable exceptions (see, e.g., Seeger *Gender*).

¹³ The official argument against female ordination to a fully ordained Theravada nun (*bhikkhuni*) is that the once existing ordination lineage for nuns was interrupted, probably some 1,000 years ago, and cannot be legitimately reinstated in accordance with the principles of Theravada Buddhist canonical law (*Vinaya*). For more on this see Seeger *bhikkhuni* and Ito *Questions*.

¹⁴ Since 2001 an increasing number of Thai women have been ordained as Theravada *bhikkhunīs*. However, in Thailand they are not officially recognized as fully ordained Theravada nuns.

¹⁵ For more on Thai *mae chis*, see, e.g., Lindberg Falk; Cook *Position*; Cook *Meditation*; Seeger *Fragmentary*; Battaglia; Seeger *Gender*.

¹⁶ See Skilling; Seeger *Fragmentary*.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Lindberg Falk 113, 117, 175; Barnes 267-68; Sanitsuda Ekachai 291.

Over the course of the last fifteen years or so, through textual and ethnographic research, two of the three authors of this paper (Martin Seeger and Naris Charaschanyawong) have examined the biographies of, the religious impact of, and texts authored by Thai female Buddhist renunciants who lived during the time period from the second half of the Nineteenth century until the present. Relevant for this paper is that, over the course of their research, they were able to overturn the incorrect authorship attribution of a key Buddhist treatise that has been published numerous times and under various titles, the probably most widely known of which is *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* (“Practice in Perfect Conformity with the *Dhamma*”).¹⁸ For reasons and in circumstances that are not entirely clear at the moment, authorship of the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts was attributed to the forest monk Luang Pu Man Bhūridatto (1870-1949). This wrong authorship attribution must have happened some thirty years ago, if not earlier, but almost certainly after Luang Pu Man’s death in 1949. A towering figure in the Thai Forest Tradition, Luang Pu Man has been one of Thailand’s most famous and influential monks; he has been revered by many Thai Buddhists as a fully awakened saint (*arahant*). Once the *Dhammānu-dhammapaṭipatti* texts were attributed to Luang Pu Man, they became considerably more popular, were widely reprinted, and often distributed for free (also more recently as eBooks).

¹⁸The five chapters of this text, which were composed in the form of questions and answers (*pucchāvissajjanā*; see below), were originally published as five separate books between 1932 and 1934. For reasons that are not entirely clear, neither these original editions nor most later publications revealed their author’s name (Seeger *(Dis)appearance*). There is at least one early edition of one of the five texts in which Khunying Damrongthammasan is referred to as the author of the texts. There are also some editions, published after her death in 1944, in which she is also named as author. However, these particular editions seem to have been published with a rather low number of copies and are now difficult to find. Crucially, these editions had not been able to prevent the wrong authorship attribution.

In 2015, Seeger and Naris Charaschanyawong were able to conclusively demonstrate that the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts were in fact not authored by Luang Pu Man but by the hitherto little-known devout Buddhist woman Khunying Damrongthammasan (Yai Wisetsiri, 1882-1944).¹⁹

In 2016, Seeger and Naris edited and published the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts under the real author's name alongside other texts composed by Khunying Damrongthammasan. As wordplay, this book was named *Damrong Tham*.²⁰ Some of the texts published in *Damrong Tham* in tandem with relevant findings of Seeger's and Naris' biographical and literary research served, as will be explained below, as stimuli for the dramaturgical development of the 2019 performance. During their research on the authorship question of the *Dhammānudhammapaṭipatti* texts, Seeger and Naris Charaschanyawong encountered the book *Hat Tham* ("Practicing the *Dhamma*"), which may also have been authored by Khunying Damrongthammasan.²¹

Whilst the performance of 2018 was based on specific chapters of *Hat Tham*, the 2019 performance was developed from two poetic texts by Khunying Damrongthammasan and a dialogical text with the title *Nae Fang Thet* (*How to Listen to a Sermon*), which may have also been composed

¹⁹ Seeger (*Dis*)appearance; see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F50Izhd8SUU> (accessed 3 May 2023). Interestingly, the wrong authorship attribution may actually have helped to preserve the texts. For if they would not have been put into the mouth of Luang Pu Man, these texts may not have been reprinted and thus faded into oblivion (see interview with Phra Paisal Visalo on 9 August 2015). For more on Khunying Damrongthammasan, see Seeger *Inspiring*.

²⁰ "Damrong Tham" forms part of Khunying Damrongthammasan's title of nobility and can be translated as "upholding truth" or "upholding the *Dhamma*."

²¹ So far, no conclusive evidence for her possible authorship has been found (see Seeger and Naris *Hat Tham*).

by her²² (all the texts the 2019 performance was based on were published in the book *Damrong Tham*).

The 2018 Performance: Dramaturgical Source Text and Rehearsals

Hat Tham's forty-one chapters, originally published across nine different publications between 1904 and 1909, constitute allegorical texts presented in the format of questions and answers (*pucchāvissajjanā*).²³ Despite its considerable literary merit and Buddhādāsa's enthusiastic endorsement of its didactic value and attempts to disseminate it more widely in the late 1930s, *Hat Tham* has never gained wider recognition. It was printed in only small numbers and gradually faded into obscurity.²⁴

Hat Tham is an unusual text in the context of Twentieth century Thai Buddhist literature in its focus on women's perspectives on, interpretations of, and experiences with the *Dhamma*. The central characters of *Hat Tham* are all women, female lay-practitioners (*upāsikās*): there are a teacher (*khru*) and eleven students (*nak rian*) of hers. These eleven students are personifications of different characters or/and spiritual aspirations and practices. Thus, we have for example: "Sister Stilling-the-Mind"

²² So far, no conclusive evidence for the identification of the author of *Nae Fang Thet* has been found (Damrongthammasan 279-289).

²³ This format certainly "is not unusual in the Thai context as teaching Buddhist doctrine in the form of questions and answers, *pucchāvissajjanā*, is a widespread and popular didactic method of teaching the *Dhamma* in Thailand. There also exist numerous texts by influential monks of the same (and later) time period that use the method of *pucchāvissajjanā*. In fact, this way of teaching is believed to go back to the Buddha himself, who often used questions and dialogues in order to build up understanding of and confidence (*saddhā*) in his teachings" (Seeger *(Dis)appearance* 506).

²⁴ Seeger and Naris Charaschanyawong edited and published *Hat Tham* in 2018 (Thammikajan). 3,000 copies were produced for this edition, and it has undergone a reprint in 2023, adding an additional 1,000 copies.

(*Mae Yut Jai*), “Sister Hope” (*Mae Wang Jai*), “Sister Serenity” (*Mae Chop Ning*), “Sister Genuine-Knowledge” (*Mae Ru Jing*) and “Sister Memorization” (*Mae Rian Jam*). There are also two *mae chi* teachers who reside in the “Monastery of the White Robes” (*Wat Pha Khao*) and the “Monastery of Comfort” (*Wat Sabai*) respectively. In addition, there is an abbot, called “Abbot Sense-Object” (*Somphan Arom*), whose six novices personify the six senses in Buddhism (*āyatana*), respectively; thus, there are “Novice Eye” (*Nen Ta*), “Novice Ear” (*Nen Hu*), “Novice Nose” (*Nen Jamuk*), “Novice Tongue” (*Nen Lin*), “Novice Body” (*Nen Kai*) and “Novice Mind” (*Nen Jai*). Together with the six novices Abbot Sense-Object lives in the monastery called “*Wat Khan Ha*,” that is the “Monastery of the Five Aggregates” (*Wat of the Five Khandhas*). However, none of these male characters plays a central role in the text. The text centers on the conversations that the teacher and her eleven students have on meditation and specific Buddhist teachings. What is also remarkable about this text, in particular in connection with the text’s unusual gender roles, is that *Hat Tham* includes an interesting sense of humor.

Being deeply fascinated by *Hat Tham* and seeing its potential to prompt and inspire people to rethink gender roles, we used this text as the major source in the process of developing an innovative form of Buddhist pedagogy.²⁵ Traditional Thai Buddhist teaching to lay audiences is typically carried out in the form of sermons, mostly given by monks, while Buddhist performances are predominately reserved for telling stories of the Buddha, in particular about his lifetime when he was reborn as Prince Vessantara. However, with our performances we used devised theatre performance, accompanied by music, in order to explore religious insights, whilst, quite importantly, having female characters at the center of the play. Doing so, we hoped, would enable us to develop an alternative

²⁵ The content of this section is based on notes taken by Seeger during the rehearsals and additional comments by Apirak Chaipanha.

means of encouraging people to engage with Buddhist teachings, particularly for younger Thai Buddhists who may perceive traditional forms of Buddhist pedagogy as of little relevance to their own religious practice and study of Buddhist teachings. More specifically, the aim was to develop an innovative means to prompt Thai Buddhists to engage with specific Buddhist teachings and assumptions of gender roles in modern Thai Buddhism.

The choice to employ devised theatre as the creative approach for our Buddhist theatre performance was made by the director of the 2018 production, Apirak Chaipanha. Apirak Chaipanha possesses extensive experience in the creation of devised theatre, both within an academic context and as a practitioner.²⁶ Based on his previous involvement in devised theatre performances that focused on non-religious social issues, he was convinced that devised theatre would be an effective medium for probing our source text's potential relevance to contemporary Buddhists, including both the performers and audiences. In Thailand, devised theatre had not previously been utilized in this manner, making our performance a pioneering experiment to engage modern audiences with this more than 100-year-old, female-centered Buddhist text and assess its pertinence to present-day Buddhists. By adopting devised theatre, which eschews a top-down directorial approach to allow each performer to contribute their personal experience, analysis, and exploration to the creative process, we aspired to uncover unanticipated insights into our source text and its significance for contemporary Thai Buddhist audiences.

Together with eight academics from the Thai University Burapha, two professional actors and some twenty BA students of performing arts and music from Burapha University, the authors of this paper developed the production and direction for the performance in a series of workshops

²⁶ See Apirak Chaipanha *Director, Bot Lakhon, M>A=D*; Apirak Chaipanha and Surapon Wirunrak.

and rehearsals in April 2018. We used devised theatre as a collaborative process to develop our performance on how the female teacher and her eleven female pupils discuss aspects of the Buddhist teaching. Devised theatre involves performers directly in the production process, taking into account their responses to the texts and building their experiences into the performance. In the words of Alison Oddey, who is a pioneer in the academic study of devised theatre:

Participants make sense of themselves within their own cultural and social context, investigating, integrating, and transforming their personal experiences, dreams, research, improvisation, and experimentation. Devising is about thinking, conceiving, and forming ideas, being imaginative and spontaneous, as well as planning. It is about inventing, adapting, and creating what you do as a group. (1)

Thus, we started the five-day rehearsals for this performance with a workshop during which we introduced the project and its objectives; we also asked our performers to read specific chapters of *Hat Tham* on their own; we read out loud one chapter together before discussing our performer's interpretations and what they perceived to be difficult passages. The director (Apirak Chaipanha) asked the performers to reflect as part of a group discussion on their individual personal experiences with Buddhism and, where applicable, of practicing meditation (*patibat tham/nang samathi*), and how these have informed their understanding of what Buddhism means for them.

Following this discussion, our performers were prompted to express their personal experiences with Buddhist practice physically: some of them, e.g., stood still for a while, before they began to walk slowly, seemingly practicing walking meditation; one performer started to pretend to sweep the floor (perhaps imagining to help to clean the floor of a monastic space), whereas another repeated hand and arm movements in

a certain pattern, whilst sitting, probably applying the meditation technique taught by the famous Thai meditation master Luang Pho Thian Cittasubho (1911-1988).²⁷ An increasingly incomprehensible cacophony of voices followed, as our actors simultaneously articulated their emotions and experiences. One performer started to chant with a louder and louder voice but was ultimately unable to compete with the cacophony of the other voices.

When asked to introduce themselves and explain their interest in Buddhism, our performers recounted their personal experiences with Buddhism, which included, e.g., an account of how the loss of a close family member prompted the practice of meditation. Some performers said that they had only “superficial” knowledge of Buddhism but were keen to study it by combining their skills in performing arts with the practice of meditation. Being asked to demonstrate again and explain the different meditation techniques which some of them had expressed physically, our actors referred to a wide range of meditation practices that all are well-established in Thailand.

At this point in the rehearsal, the chapters of *Hat Tham* that had been selected for the performance through a vote by the actors (chapters 9-21) became now more and more important in the rehearsals, and the director began to increasingly intervene and direct in order to make performers consider timing and the space and perspectives in relation to an imagined audience. Actors were encouraged to interpret the source texts both verbally and physically, with facial expressions, gesture, and dance. Performers were given the improvisatory freedom to deviate from the original text in order to personalize the texts by adding their own interpretations or rewording the original text and bringing in their own skills and interests. Thus, some performers contributed to the actual performance by singing Thai songs, practicing walking meditation or dance

²⁷ Sometimes also spelled as “Luang Pho Teean Cittasubho.”

movements (seemingly borrowed from contemporary dance). When necessary, we would discuss difficult passages, words, concepts of Buddhist teachings or grammatical and semantic issues of the Thai language (as *Hat Tham* was composed more than 100 years ago, some of its linguistic aspects can be quite challenging for a current reader not familiar with this kind of language and Buddhist terminology).

Over the course of the five-day rehearsal period, improvised music produced with the Thai traditional music instruments *khong wong yai*, which is a circle with gongs, *saw duang* (two-stringed instrument) and *ching* (small cup-shaped cymbals) was gradually integrated into the performance. Even though the musical components of the eventual performance were only intermittently used, they were not only to enhance the aesthetic experience of the audience and convey a sense of calmness; they also played an important role in accentuating key movements, moments or phrases and thus helping the performers to convey emotions.

The 2018 Performance: The Artistic Content

The first actual public performance took place in the evening of the last day of the rehearsal period at Burapha University. The audience comprised approximately 150 students and university teachers of Performing Arts, Philosophy, and Religious Studies. The following day (7 April 2018), the play was re-staged at the prestigious Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives in Bangkok, attracting an audience of approximately 200 individuals.²⁸ The thirty-minute performance took place against the backdrop of a bare stage and was intermittently accompanied by traditional Thai music

²⁸ In order to reach a wider audience, the 2018 and 2019 performances given at the Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives were also recorded, the recordings were edited, English subtitles were added and then made available on YouTube and Facebook (see footnote 8).

played on the Thai traditional instruments *ching*, *saw duang* and *khong wong yai*.

During the first part of the performance, the twelve female performers, all clad in white, enter the stage with slow movements reminiscent of walking meditation. Some of them engage in vocalizing singing, while others murmur largely unintelligible words. The performers break their meditative state by introducing themselves, revealing their real name, occupation, and age. Amidst the deliberate slow pacing of the walking actors, one performer stands out—a dancer who moves wildly, seemingly embodying an unsettled and agitated mind. The dramatic effect of her accelerating movements is amplified by the increasing speed and intensity with which the *saw duang* is played. However, her physical agitation subsides when she is approached and gently touched by the teacher, at which point she introduces herself. Following this, a narrator provides a brief history of the book *Hat Tham*, mentioning the potential authorship by Khunying Damrongthammasan. The narrative then shifts to the actors, who assume fictional roles representing various Buddhist ideals, practices and aspirations. For instance, Sister Firm-Faith (*Mae Chuea Nae*) tells the audience that “By having faith in Buddhism, suffering is reduced;” Sister Verve (*Mae Tham Pai*) says “Aspiring to perform virtuous deeds;” Sister Serenity says: “The mind must be peaceful.” Subsequently, the teacher encourages her ten students to start a discussion about their understanding of the Buddhist doctrine, whilst also outlining basic rules for respectful dialogue. The teacher interviews Sister Firm-Faith in order to learn more about her spiritual aspirations. This triggers a discussion among all the students who challenge the explanations regarding the role of faith in Buddhist practice as presented by Sister Firm Faith. Subsequently, Sister Self explains the relationship between the teaching of not-self, the Five Aggregates (*khandha*), and conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca*) and how these teachings relate to and can be practically implemented in daily life situations. Through these discussions, the students eventually reach a

consensus on their understanding of Buddhist core teachings and the workings of the mind. The teacher occasionally intervenes during the discussions and ultimately summarizes their collective insights. Throughout the “dhammic discussions” (*dhammasākacchā*), the musical instruments—the *saw duang* and *ching*—highlight specific words and phrases.

In the second half of the play, the teacher together with her students visits the “Monastery of the Five *Khandhas*” where they engage in a conversation with Abbot Sense-Object. Central to this scene are six novices (portrayed by the same young boy), each personifying one of the six senses in Buddhism (*āyatana*). Observing the seemingly healthy appearance of Novice Ear, Novice Eye, Novice Nose, Novice Tongue, and Novice Body, the teacher and her students are informed by the abbot that these novices actually experience various illnesses. However, due to their lack of awareness, the novices need constant reminders of their condition. Even the abbot acknowledges occasional forgetfulness in reminding the novices of their suffering. Moreover, Novice Eye, so the Abbot explains, “likes to run off to watch women, taking along Novice Mind,” who then returns stricken with fever. The Abbot emphasizes the necessity of constant reminding, for “If I forget, Novice Eye leads Novice Mind astray each time.”

In the subsequent conversation with the abbot, the teacher compares the novices Eye, Ear, Nose, Tongue, and Body with the First Noble Truth of Suffering. Similarly, Novice Mind corresponds with the Second Noble Truth (the Origin of Suffering), while the abbot’s instructions align with the Noble Path—the Fourth Noble Truth. As only the Third Noble Truth is absent, the teacher proposes to engage in a conversation about *nirodha* (Cessation of Suffering)—the Third Noble Truth. During this discussion, one of her students poses a complex question related to *nibbāna*. Surprisingly, neither the abbot nor his novices can provide an immediate answer. The abbot requests that the teacher submit the question in

written form as he must now turn his attention to studying his sermon book, diligently preparing for the sermon he is scheduled to deliver in the afternoon of that day. Notably, certain scenes involving the novices occasionally elicit hearty laughter from the audience.

The final scene, as the performers exit the stage, starkly contrasts with the opening scene of the play. Through verbal expression and bodily movement and underscored by music, the performers now exude a sense of contentment and calmness.

The 2019 Performance: Protection Texts: Dramaturgical Source Texts and Rehearsals

Encouraged by the positive audience feedback for the 2018 performance (see below), Seeger and Naris Charaschanyawong decided to develop another Buddhist play that aimed to further thematize the role of women in modern Thai Buddhism.²⁹ This time they worked together with another director (Saowanee Vongjinda). Devised theatre served again as the basic approach in the dramaturgical development, and specific texts from the book *Damrong Tham* were used as stimuli for the collaborative, improvisatory rehearsals. However, unlike for the 2018 performance, we used a prior script this time. Even though ideas for the play were developed in brainstorming sessions with the director, Seeger, and Naris Charaschanyawong, the final script was largely based on the director's own religious experience and observations in Thai Buddhism. In particular, her recent participation in a meditation retreat inspired her in the writing process of the script, which in its final version included the following elements: 1. two Buddhist poems by Khunying Damrongthammasan; 2. the musical

²⁹ The content of this section is based on notes taken by Seeger and on an interview with Saowanee Vongjinda, carried out by Apirak Chaipanha on 23 June 2023.

performance of three well-known *paritta* (protection) texts³⁰ in the Pali language (see below); 3. the dialogical text “How to Listen to a Sermon”; and 4. the well-known story from the influential Fifth century Theravāda manual *Visuddhimagga* about how a frog was inadvertently killed whilst listening to a sermon given by the Buddha, and was, as a result of having “grasped the [special] quality in the Buddha’s voice,” instantly reborn in a heaven.³¹ In the performance, these four texts were merged, partially overlapping each other.

Whilst the play’s script served as an outline, the actors and musicians were encouraged to experiment with their specific artistic skills and experiences to express their own understanding of the texts chosen for enactment. One of the play’s major objectives was to explicitly celebrate Khunying Damrongthammasan as an accomplished author of Buddhist texts who “made profound and valuable contributions” to Thai Buddhist literature.

The 2019 Performance: The Artistic Content

Following a week of rehearsals, the thirty-minute performances was staged in public twice: at the Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives in front of an audience of some 100 people and the next day at Thammasat University (Tha Phra Chan Campus) in front of an audience of some sixty people.

Like in the two 2018 public performances, the performers (in this case four actors and five musicians) were donning white clothes, signifying to the audience that their characters were keeping the Buddhist

³⁰ We used the *Abhaya-paritta*, *Mora-paritta*, and the *Jaya-paritta*. For more on *paritta* texts, see, e.g., Samuels; Mettiko.

³¹ *bhagavato sare nimittaṃ aggahesi* (Vsm.208-9). This translation is following that of Steven Collins (45n35).

Precepts for laypeople. Our four white-clad actors would enact the texts' content through speech, singing, and bodily movement but also "freeze" in strategic moments to enhance dramatic effect. In comparison with the 2018 performance, we experimented this time with more pronounced musical elements. Using the musical instruments cello, violin, bells, big drums, chimes, electric piano, and singing, the Thai music group Abhivata contributed their musical interpretations of *paritta* texts which were woven into segments throughout the performance. Here, it should be noted that *paritta* texts are typically chanted by monks either in a monastic setting as part of their daily communal chanting, or for lay-people who may believe in the apotropaic efficacy of the *paritta* texts. Therefore, for most audience members this musicalization and singing of the *paritta* texts would have been a rather unusual performance and novel experience of these texts, as it is likely that they had not witnessed such a musical performance of these sacred texts before.³²

The theatrical performance commences with the recitation of a two-stanza poem authored by Khunying Damrongthammasan in the traditional *khlóng si supháp* form.³³ This poetic composition centers on the theme of female renunciation—specifically, the act of leaving one's home to embrace the monastic life of a *mae chi* in order to attain liberation from suffering. To heighten the emotional impact of the recitation and encourage thoughtful reflection on the poem's content, the actors echo the reciter's delivery. The recitation seamlessly transitions into the singing of a *paritta* text in the original Pali language, accompanied by musical instruments. Although the Thai audience would be familiar with the popular *paritta* texts, they may not necessarily comprehend the content of these texts when sung in the original language Pali. During the *paritta* singing, the performers convey through bodily movements not only various forms

³² This has been confirmed by many comments made in the post-show questionnaires.

³³ For *khlóng si supháp* see Cooke.

of suffering, sadness and mental confusion but also their attempts to pursue spiritual practice.

The following scenes oscillate between conversations among the two female actors on effective and accurate listening to the Buddha's teaching, closely following the dramaturgical source text *How to Listen to a Sermon*. Occasionally, these dialogues overlap with the two male performers enacting attentive listening to a sermon, vividly recounting the story of the frog as told in the *Visuddhimagga*. Interwoven within these parallel narrative flows are the musical performances of *paritta* texts and the recitation of passages from some Pali *suttas* related to listening to and contemplating the Buddha's teachings, along with their translation into the Thai language. At a pivotal moment, one of the male performers recites another *khlong si suphap* poem by Khunying Damrongthammasan, employing the traditional sonorous singing style known as "*thamnong sano*." This two-stanza poem, entitled "The Radiance of the Buddha is Unsurpassed" (Damrongthammasan 222), praises the Buddha as "the best light" and is probably a poetic rendition of the *Pajjota-sutta* in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* (S.I.15). The play concludes with a succinct historical account of Khunying Damrongthammasan's literary work, accompanied by praise for its significance. Similar to the 2018 performance, in notable contrast to the opening scene, the actors now smile, conveying contentment, calmness, and happiness.

Reflections on the Two Performances.

Both the 2018 and the 2019 performance tell a story of transformation. At the beginning of the two plays the actors display characteristics of the unsatisfactoriness of (ordinary) life (*dukkha*). However, as a result of having engaged in the study of the Buddhist *Dhamma* through debate, they are radiating happiness when exiting the stage at the plays' conclusion.

However, in terms of artistic content, there exist significant differences between the 2018 and 2019 performances. Unlike the 2018 performance, there was no laughter from the audience during the 2019 performance and, overall, a more contemplative mood prevailed, fostered by the specific musical interpretations. The extensive use of Pali texts may have also contributed to this heightened serious atmosphere. The laughter both from the performers and audience during many scenes of the 2018 performance enhanced its cheerful mood. A further contrast to the 2018 performance was the 2019 performance's incorporation of a more diverse range of artistic features, blending both modern and traditional elements. This diversity was particularly evident in the musical rendition of the *paritta* texts. Also, whereas the 2018 performance adhered to a linear narrative structure, the 2019 performance incorporated parallel, overlapping narrative flows. This all increased the complexity of the performance and its content, presenting a greater challenge for the audience (which is confirmed by some audience member responses in our post-show questionnaire; see below).

Another major difference is that the 2018 performance incorporate extensive use of allegorical narrative to convey complex Buddhist teachings and how these can be applied in daily life situations. Whilst this specific kind of allegorical narrative, in which female characters symbolically represent Buddhist ideals, practices, and aspirations, is certainly a novel didactic approach in the context of Thai Buddhism, the symbolic and didactic quality of allegory is not: according to the Pali canonical texts the Buddha frequently employed similes and metaphors as a didactic tool to make abstract ideas and concepts more accessible and engaging for his audiences. In fact, according to Hecker, "the richest similes in world literature, comprehensively covering all aspects of theory and practice, are those in the discourse of the Buddha" (3). Hecker counted approximately a thousand similes in the entire Pali canon. The audience responses of the 2018 performances (see below) confirm that finding hidden meanings in

allegorical narrative can be both an enjoyable and effective intellectual exercise at the same time.

The Performances' Impact and Audience Reception

The impact of the four public performances on the audiences was ascertained after each performance through post-show questionnaires, interviews with individual audience members, and panel discussions with the directors, scholars, Buddhist monastics, and the audiences attending the performances. Our post-show questionnaire was used to gain both statistical and qualitative data. Particularly insightful are the comments, opinions, and experiences that many respondents added to the questionnaire.

As mentioned above, major objectives of the performances were to challenge preconceived ideas of gender within Thai Buddhism and to disseminate research findings on the mistaken and correct authorship of the major texts in *Damrong Tham*. After all, the presumed author of the *Dhammānudhammapaṭṭipatti* texts, Luang Pu Man, has been widely considered and revered in Thailand as a fully awakened being (*arahant*). Thus, Khunying Damrongthammasan, her spiritual practice, her amazing knowledge of Buddhist scriptures, her outstanding literary skills, and her biography have provided inspiration and motivation for women today to practice towards the same spiritual achievements and goals. This has been confirmed through feedback we gained after the performances. A *mae chi* and meditation teacher, having viewed one of the performances, commented: "Discovering that this text [*Dhammānudhammapaṭṭipatti* texts] was really written by a woman has filled my heart with motivation and joy. The more I read about the biography of Khunying Yai [Damrongthammasan], the more impressed I became, and the more it inspired my own spiritual practice." A leading nun and committee member of the national Thai Mae Chi Institute remarked that the discovery about the real authorship

of the texts falsely attributed to Luang Pu Man “has been very important and impactful for us *mae chis*” who “have become deeply inspired . . . and encouraged in their work for society and want to follow the footsteps of Khunying Damrongthammasan.” One respondent to our post-show questionnaire noted that “having watched today’s play ... I believe that practicing the *Dhamma* following the teachings of women can equally lead to the realization of the Buddhist soteriological goal [*koet mak phon*].” Another audience member opined that “women too can teach the Buddha’s teaching on equally profound level as men; however, society does not yet give the adequate importance and recognition to women.”

Furthermore, the statistical results of the questionnaires that we distributed to the audiences and asked them to fill in showed that some 60% of the altogether 234 respondents felt that their understanding of gender in Buddhism had changed, as a result of watching the performance.

A female audience member commented that “I am now more interested in women’s practice of the *Dhamma*, also from a historical perspective;” another audience member wrote “it has filled me with sheer joy to see a play made up of women, who communicated the teachings very clearly.” A young female audience member remarked that the play “enabled me to learn that there have been skilled women whose [achievements] have been acknowledged in the Buddhist community; this is [a source] of motivation in the practice of the *Dhamma*.” Another female respondent explained that “women can play significant roles in Buddhism and the study of the Buddhist teaching does not necessarily have to take place in a monastery.”

The success of our innovative approach of Buddhist pedagogy is evidenced by the responses we gained from the audiences. Of the 234 respondents, 220 (94%) strongly agreed that the performing arts was an effective tool for teaching Buddhist doctrine. Thus, we received comments

such as the following: the play helped “to understand Buddhism in a new, positive way,” was “very applicable to the modern era” and inspired to read about and study Buddhism further. One audience member wrote: “I never thought the Buddha’s teaching could be taught through a play. Thank you for showing me that plays can be an effective tool in spreading the *Dhamma*,” another remarked that the play demonstrated that “Buddhist teaching can take many forms and one does not necessarily have to [learn Buddhist teaching] by only listening to monks or going to a monastery.” One respondent noted about the musicalization of the *paritta* texts in the 2019 performance that “the *Jaya-paritta* is normally difficult to chant and not pleasing to listen to; however, when musicalized, I like it a lot, it is melodious and makes the memorization of it easy. When chanted the mind becomes calm. I am very impressed.”

A considerable number of audience members mentioned that using a play to teach or reflect on Buddhist teachings facilitates understanding; several audience members argued that a play is “more effective in building understanding than textual studies.” The play “enabled me to gain knowledge of Buddhist principles in an enjoyable way, demonstrating that the *Dhamma* is not something tedious.”

One audience member of the 2018 performance pointed out the didactic value of using allegorical narrative writing that “watching the play enabled me to memorize more easily and precisely Buddhist teachings, e.g., when dhammic principles were personified in the play and thus one was able to learn through the senses of hearing, seeing and the mind.”

In the questionnaires, it was repeatedly pointed out that this form of disseminating the Buddha’s teaching “is effective” in making younger generations interested in the study of Buddhism. The play “creates faith [*saddhā*] and curiosity to engage in textual studies.” It was also suggested that a Buddhist play may be effective in reaching a wider audience.

What was also interesting to observe is that several audience members mentioned a profound emotional impact that the musical components of the play generated. One audience member wrote, e.g., that “seeing a play that incorporates music to enable the communication of meaning clearly, I felt joy [*pīti*].” Similarly, another audience member commented: “a performance that incorporates music has a strong [positive] emotional impact and, when listening, one can even watch one’s breathing in accordance with [the practice of] mindfulness of breathing [*ānāpānasati*].” Another respondent reported that “I broadened my world view today: combining theatre with music can beautifully teach the Buddha’s teaching; the entire performance was fascinating, and I cried from the opening scene.”³⁴

However, the plays had profound impact not only on the audiences but also on those actively involved in the production process, as evidenced by the comments made by the directors of the two plays. The director (Apirak Chaipanha) of the 2018 performance, e.g., observed that the performers’ creative engagement “changed their understanding of and developed a more positive view on Buddhism.” Saowanee Vongjinda, the director of the 2019 performance, commented that the process of putting together the play, combined with her recent spiritual practice, was “the best learning of the *Dhamma* in [her] entire life.” These comments underscore the multifaceted impact of our Buddhist theatrical productions on both artistic practitioners and their audiences.

³⁴ Although the vast majority of comments made in post-show questionnaires were positive, a small number of comments also included critical feedback. One respondent noted a lack of coherence in the 2019 performance in terms of content. Several audience members made an intriguing suggestion: they proposed that performers should don colorful attire instead of only white. As one respondent explained: this change of dress would enhance the performance’s appeal and entertainment value while also establishing a connection between the Buddha’s teachings and everyday life scenarios.

Conclusions

The pedagogical innovations introduced in our 2018 and/or 2019 performance were threefold: (1) The implementation of allegorical Buddhist theatre that portrays Thai women as creative agents within the ambit of Buddhist soteriological practice and teaching; (2) the incorporation of Western musical instruments in the musical rendition of *paritta* texts, as component of a theatrical performance, which provided a novel auditory experience for many audience members; and (3) the use of devised theatre not only as a platform to explore gender issues in contemporary Buddhism but also as a means to interactively engage with Buddhist teachings.

We drew upon texts from the books *Hat Tham* and *Damrong Tham* as stimuli to encourage our actors, actresses and musicians to explore, experiment with, and express their individual ideas and experiences not only in relation to gender in Buddhism and traditional Buddhist pedagogy but also in terms of Buddhist teachings and language which are often believed to be difficult or even inaccessible for laypeople. Thus, our performers and musicians expressed their ideas in dance, singing, body language, and with the help of musical instruments. We have found that this process of integrating interdisciplinary forms of art to express one's life experiences is a very powerful, but at the same time enjoyable and insightful, way of engaging with Buddhist texts. As put by Anthony Jackson,

at its best, theatre that aims to educate or influence can *only* truly do so if it values entertainment, the artistry, and craftsmanship that are associated with resonant, powerful theatre, and the aesthetic qualities that—by definition—will appeal to our senses. (106)

Thus, our performances aimed at integrating entertainment with Buddhist teaching, whilst also thematizing gender roles and the problems

thereof in contemporary (Thai) Buddhism. Doing so, our endeavor was to operate within the boundaries delineated for a “skillful” application of music, literature, and art, as provided by Phra Payutto and discussed in the Introduction section of this paper.

What was interesting to observe, both in the process of making and the actual performances, was that allegorical narrative can be an effective tool for engaging individuals with Buddhist doctrines. Allegorical narrative can make the study of Buddhist teachings enjoyable and interactive, maybe very unlike the textual study of a dry Buddhist textbook. It became clear that using allegory and the personification of religious ideas, ideals, and aspirations can facilitate the acquisition of knowledge of what may often be perceived as abstruse concepts. Through allegorical theatre performances, complex teachings and concepts become concrete and visual, thereby fostering greater interest, increased accessibility, and easier understanding. For example, in one of the scenes, the rather complex Buddhist teachings on the six senses (*āyatana*) and the core Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths (*ariyasacca*) have become more accessible. From laughter in the audience during the scenes when Abbot Sense-Object interacted with his “six senses” novices, it was clear that the onlookers found great joy in the performance.

Moreover, the 2018 performance demonstrated that humor can serve as an effective pedagogical element, simultaneously entertaining and educating. There are many examples that show that using humor is not a new element in Thai Buddhist sermons and pedagogy. For instance, Thai monks have long incorporated humorous elements into their performances of the *Vessantara-Jātaka*. Another example is the famous monk Phra Phayom Kalyāṇo (born 1949), who is well-known for his combination of humor and *Dhamma* teaching.³⁵ However, there are also numerous examples that highlight the tensions and complexities between the use of

³⁵ See ,e.g., Soraj Hongladarom 36-41; Kamala Tiyavanich 276-278.

humor and Buddhist pedagogy. For example, Thai King Rama I (r. 1782-1809) issued a monastic law during the first year of this reign, forbidding

to give and listen to sermons that are in poetic form and presented in a comic fashion and constitute play with laughter in mutual appreciation and is thus so careless that it is in conflict with the *Vinaya* [Pali canonical monastic regulations]. (Wirat Thiraphanmethi and Thongbai Thiranthangkun 476)

A more recent example that further illustrates the complicated relationship between humor and Buddhist pedagogy occurred in 2021, when the two popular monks Phra Maha Phraiwān Varavaṇṇo and Phra Maha Sompong Tālaputto were accused of acting in conflict with the monastic code and standards by “teaching the *Dhamma* as a humorous matter” in their successful online program.³⁶

In addition, our two performances also demonstrated that the dramatization and aestheticization of Buddhist texts can serve as an effective tool not only for disseminating research findings but also eliciting additional data and sources in the investigation of Thai Buddhism.³⁷ The statistical results of and the comments made in the post-show questionnaires, together with the interviews with individual audience members and the post-show panel discussions strongly suggest that our live

³⁶ See, e.g., https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_2924294#google_vignette; <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/lifestyle/958571> (accessed 1 July 2024). Both Phra Maha Phraiwān and Phra Maha Sompong have disrobed in the meantime. The use of humor in Thai Buddhist sermons is certainly very interesting but understudied and thus deserves more scholarly attention (however, see Bowie).

³⁷ The two performances facilitated the discovery of new textual sources for our research and the establishment of new networks among numerous Buddhist monastics and laypersons. These connections played an important role in advancing our ongoing research on Buddhist women in Thai Buddhism.

performances have had a strong impact on our audiences' understanding of Buddhist soteriological teaching and practice of Thai female practitioners. Our observations during the rehearsals, interviews with directors and performers, the post-show panel discussions and the responses in the post-show questionnaires also show that devised theatre can be a powerful tool to encourage performers, directors and audiences to analyze and reflect on their own personal beliefs and understanding of issues in contemporary Thai Buddhism. It can offer an effective way of helping performers and audiences to revise their understanding of Thai Buddhist ideas, beliefs, and practices and women's contributions to them.

Not trying to mask the "institutional androcentrism" in Thai Buddhism and the many gendered obstacles female Thai Buddhist practitioners have had to face, we understand our Buddhist performing arts impact activities as a way to highlight and encourage what the Buddhist Studies scholar Alan Sponberg called "soteriological inclusiveness." Thus, by thematizing how Thai Buddhist female practitioners have perceived themselves and how they have navigated gendered Thai Buddhist hierarchies, we have shown Thai Buddhist women, historical and fictional, as active and creative agents and thus provided religious inspiration for female practitioners of contemporary Thai Buddhism.

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