

Themes of Going Forth

Renouncing lay life is, for most Thai women, not easily achieved. The ideal Thai woman is a dutiful daughter who is expected to marry and become a caring wife and a self-sacrificing mother. Despite the many difficulties met on the way towards an ordained life, many Thai women wish to become *mae chiis*. Since young women commonly have to struggle for the opportunity to become ordained, their spiritual conviction is usually strong and although some of them describe suffering and misfortune in their lives, their spiritual motives of being ordained should not be downplayed. Young, healthy, unmarried women who want to become *mae chiis* generally have to convince their parents to give their permission. Most of the interviewed *mae chiis*, who had become ordained at a young age, had experienced resistance from their families. They said that their parents would have preferred them to get married instead of ordaining. Ordination is a normal part of Thai men's life since a man is considered to gain maturity through ordination and a son's ordination is believed to transfer merit to the parents and this is of particular value to the mother. Consequently, men's ordination is highly prized, whereas women who leave the lay life deviate from Thai cultural values, which hold that daughters should care for their parents in all ways possible. Women who become *mae chiis* abandon their families and their choice is felt as a loss by some parents.

Gavin Jones (1997) reports that dramatic changes in non-marriage patterns have taken place in Southeast and East Asia. The rates of non-marriage in some of the large cities of the region are among the highest in the world (ibid.: 113). Today, more and more middle-class Thai women choose to stay single and if a woman can acquire social status on her own, marriage is no longer as important as it used to be. Better education and financial opportunities have made it possible for women in Thailand to view marriage as one possible choice in their lives and not an absolute goal. It is possible for well-educated *mae chiis* or those with financial assets to live a single life and most *mae chiis* that I interviewed

had not become ordained in order to escape from marriage. They said that they could have lived a single life even if they had not become ordained.

The idea that lay life entails difficulties, suffering and negative bonds to life through marriage and child-rearing is a major theme in *mae chiis'* stories about their reasons for ordaining. This theme seems to cut across socio-economic circumstances. The lay life is commonly depicted by the *mae chiis* as boring. Poverty, sickness vows, and lack of access to education are popular reasons cited by lay people for why some women choose to become *mae chiis*. These motives could be part of both women's and men's decision to become ordained, but they are seldom the principal reasons. They are too reductionist and do not correspond with the reasons that women themselves proffer for their choice. Being poor is actually a hindrance for ordination since women commonly must pay for electricity, water and personal expenses at the temple; sickness is a disqualifying factor for ordination. The ordained life as a *mae chii* is arduous and it would be very difficult to put up with the demanding life if *mae chiis* were not highly motivated. However, poverty and sickness are by some *mae chiis* interpreted as 'lack of merit' and are in that sense a driving force for some women to become a *mae chii* or a *chii phraam* with the object of improving their *kammic* status. In such cases they usually save up before ordination or find a sponsor, e.g. among relatives. Those who have been ill receive ordination when they have recovered from their sicknesses.

Many of the *mae chiis* who had been ordained at a young age stated that they had previously longed to become *mae chiis* and live a spiritual life. Several of them declared that they had wanted to become ordained as soon as they realised that it was possible for women to live a religious life. Lay life did not attract these women and they usually expressed an absolute lack of interest in getting married. Prior to their ordinations, these young women had often developed a deep faith in Buddhism through listening to Buddhist radio programmes, reading Buddhist books and listening to monks at the temples.

In order to reflect the variety of reasons of seeking a religious life and to look at the *mae chiis'* different backgrounds, I have chosen to relate a number of their stories. Some of these narratives seemingly correspond with the stereotypical picture of why Thai women become *mae chiis*, while others differ radically from the prejudiced views of why women become ordained. Most of the *mae chiis* who appear in this chapter have been in the ordained state for many years and their notions and narratives are of course influenced by their religious lives. Their interpretations may have changed over the years and become woven into the *mae chiis'* discourse concerning why women seek ordination. However, my intention

has been to present *mae chiis'* personal reasons for renouncing the world. I have also met many of their relatives and friends who confirmed their narratives.

REALISING SUFFERING

The principal reasons for seeking ordination were to realise the basic Buddhist truths about suffering (*dukkha*), and to gain the opportunity to attain enlightenment (*nibbana*) through ordained practice. My informants, Mae chii Lek and Mae chii Noy both stated that their main reason for becoming ordained was that the ordained life would provide a way to liberation.

Mae chi Lek became ordained when she was 21, 27 years prior to my meeting with her in 1997. Her life before ordination could be considered as poor and unfortunate a perfect example of the widespread, stereotyped notion of a destitute. However, she looked upon her life as quite ordinary, and considered her childhood happy. The events important for her decision to live an ordained life had to do with encountering different forms of suffering. Mae chi Lek was born in the Northeastern Thailand, in a village close to the Cambodian border. Her mother died when she was born and she was adopted by a foster family when she was three months old. Her family lived under the same circumstances as other families in the village. Like most of the girls, she studied only up to primary school level. After finishing the four years of compulsory education she worked in the fields, herded buffaloes and helped out with various chores at home.

Mae chii Lek considered some events and experiences in her childhood to have had particular importance for her interest in the spiritual side of life. She related a period when she was 13 and had gone with her natal brother and her foster brother to work in the fields in Saraburi province. There is a famous Buddha's footprint in Phra Buddhabat that was close to where they were working. Every half moon there was a pilgrimage festival. Many crippled people went there to play music and seek opportunities to acquire some money. There were also many beggars. Mae chii Lek said that she felt sad when she saw all the suffering people. She and her friend, who was a few years older and worked at the same place, visited the festival every evening. She said that there were so many things to see. There were music, movies, exhibitions and plenty of things to buy. One day when they were at home somebody called her friend's name and said that there had been a car accident on the road. It was a young boy Mae chii Lek's age who had died. She said that the sight of the dead body made a deep impression on her. The boy had been travelling in a tricycle-taxi

(*saamlôô*) when a car hit him. He was already dead when Mae chii Lek and her friend saw him lying on the road. His stomach was torn up and they saw his intestines. His skull was cracked and they could also see his brain. Mae chii Lek said: 'I felt very afraid, very afraid. My friend and I went to the festival every day. We walked to the festival and we used to pass in front of cars and buses and we usually went home by *saamlôô*. I thought that it could have been me lying there dead on the road.'

The Buddha's footprint was located in the middle of the ordination hall of the temple and people went there to pay respect to the footprint and to ring the bell. Mae chii Lek also bowed and showed respect to the footprint and rang the bell when she visited the temple. She recalled that during that time she thought that she had 'thick sin' (*baap naa*).¹ She had met some people whom she called 'Thai people'; they came from Central Thailand, and had said that her mother had died because of her and that she therefore had 'thick sin'. She said:

In my village we only spoke the Khmer language. People never said I had 'thick sin'; on the contrary they said I had merit [*mii bun*]. They said that I was a meritorious person. They said I had merit because I could survive despite my mother's death. They also said I had survived because my real father was richer than my foster family, and therefore they did not mind bringing me up. If I had been born in a poor family I would probably have died. In my village they never blamed me for my mother's death.

Mae chii Lek was concerned about her 'status of merit' and she reflected upon her earlier disobedient behaviour and started to act in ways that would hopefully give her merit. She said that she wanted to repay her mother and father because she was indebted to them. When she came back to her village her foster mother noticed the change in her and was very pleased that she had become so gentle and helpful.

Mae chii Lek also referred to events that happened in her village as important for awakening her interest in developing her mind. One day when we were sitting and talking in her room she said: 'Today I shall tell you why I started to meditate. It was because of a ghost.' She recounted that she was about 15 years old and she had been at home almost a year when the rainy season came with unusually heavy rains. The area became flooded and the men had to build a temporary bridge over the river. On one occasion they were transporting seedlings of rice on a cart, which was pulled by a bull. The current was very strong and several people helped to push the cart. A young woman, seven or eight months' pregnant, was also helping transport the seedlings. When they

were at the middle of the bridge, the bridge broke down, and the pregnant woman fell into the water. The current carried her away and the villagers could not find her. The whole village searched without finding her body. Mae chii Lek remembered that the villagers were terrified because some people reported seeing the dead woman's naked ghost. Finally a monk, who was skilled in meditation, was invited to the village. He told them where to look and the woman's body was found. The monk later said that she had drowned in the river because she had poisoned a lot of fish in a previous lifetime. Her body was brought back to the village. They had a ceremony and cremated her. The funeral was conducted in the conventional manner. Mae chii Lek said: 'Everyone came to the funeral and showed their respect. However, we did something wrong. She had died a violent death and was not in peace.'

After the funeral several unexpected deaths took place in the village. One man who had an extramarital affair was shot and beaten to death by the woman's husband. Mae chii Lek herded buffaloes close to the place where the killing took place. She said that she heard the man scream and the killing made her terribly afraid. The murdered man's body was also cremated according to the village custom. Mae chii Lek said that it was very difficult to cremate him and the villagers told her that it was always difficult to cremate a person who had much 'sin' (*baap*). However, the deaths did not stop: shortly afterwards two young boys died. One drowned in a pool and the other one in the river. Mae chii Lek's close friend's mother also died unexpectedly. She had given birth to a baby, and when the baby was one month old, Mae chii Lek said the ghost passed behind her friend's mother. She became severely ill and died soon afterwards. Then there was a young boy who went missing. The villagers searched for him and finally found him drowned in a well.

Mae chii Lek said that the whole village was terrified by all the deaths. They knew that they had to do something, but they did not know what they could do to prevent the ghost from haunting. Finally, they invited seven monks to the village. They built several shrines and the monks surrounded the village with thread. The monks stayed for seven days and chanted every morning and evening and walked around the village and sprinkled water. They conducted ceremonies and performed the daily chanting. After that the deaths ceased. However, her friend who had lost her mother was inconsolable. She cried constantly. Mae chii Lek said that everybody felt pity for her. At her mother's funeral there was a person who used to be a monk and had later become a lay meditation teacher. He volunteered to teach her to meditate. Later, Mae chii Lek's friend told her that she had seen her mother in her mind when she

meditated. Her friend had called her mother ‘*mae, mae*’, but her mother was not interested in her, and did not even look at her. Mae chii Lek said that after her friend had ‘met her mother’ she could ‘let it go’ and her friend was not that sad anymore. She said that her friend became calm and she looked very bright after she had begun meditating. Mae chii Lek was impressed by her appearance and decided to start practising meditation as well. She talked with her friend’s meditation teacher and he suggested that she should go to the temple and ask for meditation instruction from the monks, which she did.

Mae chii Noy is 20 years younger than Mae chii Lek. They are both from Isaan, the Northeastern part of Thailand, but from different provinces. When Mae chii Noy was a child she used to go to the temple. She liked to be there, helping out with different chores and listening to the monks giving talks about the Buddha, his former lives, and about what life is all about. The temple was not far away from her home and she went there almost every day. She said that it was *rôn*, (‘hot’) at home and sometimes she felt that she could not stand being there, and she even went to sleep in the temple’s *saalaa*.² Mae chii Noy said that she did not understand why they had to suffer so much. When she asked her mother, she used to answer that suffering is *thammadaa* (common, normal), that suffering is part of life, but Mae chii Noy said when she was a child she could not understand what her mother meant.

Mae chii Noy related much of the suffering that she experienced as a child to her family’s difficult situation. Her father had left them when she was four. Her mother had been married once before and Mae chii Noy had three older siblings. Their father had died and her mother got remarried to Mae chii Noy’s father. Mae chii Noy looked sad when she told that her father had three stepchildren and three children of his own when he left them to live with another woman, a second wife (*mia nôôy*). Mae chii Noy’s family did not hear from him for many years. He did not send any money or letters. Her mother had a very hard time supporting and taking care of her six children. One day he came back without warning. He just appeared outside their house where Mae chii Noy and her younger brother were playing. They did not recognise their father and ran away, hiding from what they thought was a stranger. Mae chii Noy said that her father cried when they ran away from him. He was hurt that they had forgotten that he was their father.

Her father moved in with them again and a year later Mae chii Noy had a new sister. She said that she watched her mother giving birth and she thought that it was terrible. The delivery took place in the kitchen area. She saw her mother

squat on a low table, holding onto a towel that hung from a roof beam and she heard her mother crying and crying. After the baby was born she said there was blood everywhere. The experience frightened her greatly. She said: 'Hearing my mother having so much pain was as if I had been cut by a knife. It was terrible.' Later when her sister gave birth, she could not bear to stay at home and hear her screaming. She found it too painful and she went to the temple and stayed there. Mae chii Noy said that when she was a child she often pondered over why women had to give birth while men did not. She said that she thought that it was *naakliat* (ugly, despicable). She decided early that she did not want to give birth and have a family and she did not want to live a lay life which consisted only of problems and suffering. This was in sharp contrast with the calm and peaceful life in the temple. She strove to achieve a peaceful life like that.

When Mae chii Noy's father moved in to live with them he promised that he would not leave with another woman again. If he left it would be to become a monk. The family stayed together for a couple of years, but it did not work out. With permission from his wife, he received ordination as a monk. Before he left the house, Mae chii Noy heard him accusing her mother of things that she knew were not true. Mae chii Noy said that after what she had seen, she felt that most men seemed to escape responsibility if they could. When her father left home, she said that she did not understand why he should abandon them again. She thought that he did not like them anymore. She said: 'I was so disappointed in him and I wanted to become ordained to see what he had chosen over us. But that was just a thought. I did not know then that it was possible for women to become ordained. I had never seen a *mae chii*.'

THE WAY TO FREEDOM

To be free (*isara*) and not restricted by being locked up in a marriage were motives that *mae chiis* offered for receiving ordination. They saw marriage as a hindrance to achieving the ultimate goal and they often referred to experiences of lay life as empty and boring.

Mae chii Noy said that she wanted a peaceful life, without all the troubles of married life. She had seen her mother, her sisters and other women struggle alone with raising children, always short of money. She said that she never dreamt of having a family of her own and ending up with a life like that of her mother's. She said, too, that she was bored with just eating, working, sleeping, eating, working, sleeping. When Mae chii Noy's father left for the monkhood, she had completed primary school and wanted to continue at secondary school,

but her mother could not afford it. Instead she had to both work and take care of her siblings. She helped her mother to run a grocery store and for four years she also sold fried food from a vehicle at different places in the village. When she was about 15, her responsibilities for her family grew because her older siblings had established their own families, leaving her to care for the younger ones. Later she also took care of her older siblings' two children.

Thai girls are taught that virginity is of crucial importance and for 'good' Thai women, monogamy is the only acceptable practice. Mae chii Noy said that she was impressed by the Buddhist teaching that taught that if one wants to be free from defilement one needs to live in celibacy. Further, she stated that it is only through celibacy that one can gain freedom from birth, old age, sickness and death. There is no restriction for women who have been married to receive ordination as *mae chiis*. However most *mae chiis* that I interviewed expressed the importance of virginity (that was the same as never been married). Virgin *mae chiis* treasured the fact that their bodies were intact and their lack of experience of married life seemed to give them an informal higher status. They stated that they wanted to be *borisut* (clean, innocent) and to live a 'clean life'. When a longstanding *mae chii* was about to go abroad to study, she told me that she was not concerned about the studies, language difficulties or things like that. She worried about her virginity and she was afraid of being raped.

From an early age, Mae chii Noy kept away from any contact with males. When her schoolmates talked about marrying and having boyfriends Mae chii Noy had other aspirations for life and thought that her friends would not understand if she told them and she was therefore silent. She did not look at boys, and in order not to encourage young men to speak with her she avoided answering those who tried to chat with her. There were some young men who were interested in marrying her, but she told her mother that she would run away if her mother tried to make her marry.

Mae chii Noy turned her attention towards the temple. She had learnt to meditate in the temple and she practised walking meditation early every morning. When she was 15, she took up the practice of wearing white and observing the eight precepts, first on holy days and later permanently. The eight precepts (see pp. XX) contain the five lay precepts, which are to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxicants, together with being celibate, taking no meal after noon, not beautifying oneself, not listening to music and not sleeping on thick mattresses. Mae chii Noy followed an even stricter regime of eating only once a day. She also made a shrine at home where she led evening chanting with her family and friends. Also, on the Buddhist holy day (*wan phra*) people came

to their house and Mae chii Noy led the chanting. She said that her brothers and other people asked her teasingly why she did not seek ordination at a temple since she was not interested in getting married. Seeking ordination was what she wished to do and when she was 17, she told her mother that she wanted to become ordained. Although her mother was a devout Buddhist, she cried initially and said that she wanted her to stay at home and help her instead. At the same time she understood her desire and finally gave her consent.

Mae chii Lek too was more interested in seeking harmony in the temple than getting married. She did not, however, express the same aversion for lay life as Mae chii Noy did, but she said that she had always been more interested in developing spiritually than living a lay life. She told that there had been a young man who had proposed to her when she was about 18 years old. He was a couple of years older than she was, and was a monk at the temple where she went every day to donate food. Mae chii Lek was not aware of his affection until he left the monkhood and his relatives came and asked Mae chii Lek's mother for permission for him to marry her. At first, her mother agreed to the proposition, but when she understood that her daughter was terrified she left the decision to Mae chii Lek herself. Mae chii Lek said: 'At first I was not fond of him, and I certainly did not like him following me. However, gradually my mind became weak and I felt that I liked him.' But she was not sure if she wanted to get married. She broke up with him when she had to go to another province and take care of her mother who had fallen ill there. The young man went back to the temple and received ordination again. When she returned to the village, he left the monkhood. He was persistent and once again he came to her house and proposed to her. Mae chii Lek said: 'I did not marry him because I was not certain about marriage. Always when I thought about being married my mind became troubled.' Later, when she received *mae chii* ordination, he was ordained for a third time. He started to study and went to high school. When he had finished his education, he left the monkhood and took a job with Bangkok Bank. He married and had three children. Mae chii Lek said with a smile: 'If we had married when he proposed to me, we would certainly have been farmers. He would not have had the possibility to study. So, because of me he has a good life now. He is rich.'

GLIMPSES OF TRANQUILLITY

In Thailand, the practice of meditation is considered appropriate for *mae chiis* and the temples offer meditation instruction to both the laity and the clergy.

Meditation constitutes a lay-oriented and a less prestigious activity. Further, the practice of meditation is seen as a personal vocation necessary for gaining Buddhist insights but divorced from the knowledge achieved through books. It is considered easier to practise meditation than to study Buddhism (*dhamma*) through books, and the latter is therefore regarded as suitable for monks.

Many *mae chiis* told me that they had become inspired to meditate and live a pure life in celibacy by reading and listening to famous monks' teachings. They felt that these teachings transcended gender differences, and they were therefore encouraged to seek ordination in spite of the fact that they were women. Mae chii Noy said that she was about 10 or 11 years old when she saw a *mae chii* for the first time. It was in her village. The *mae chii* got off the bus. Mae chii Noy did not speak with her, but she said that she became extremely happy when she saw her in her white dress because she understood it was possible for women to become ordained. She was 16 when she went to a temple together with her mother to receive lay ordination for one week. They received ordination as what is today commonly called *chii phraam*, a form of temporary ordination that does not include shaving the head. Mae chii Noy related that during those seven days that she spent in the temple, she felt real happiness for the first time. She said she had wanted her heart to be cool (*jen*) because caring for children made her heart unpleasantly hot (*rôôn*). At the temple, she found peace and became cool. The place where they stayed was a quiet and serious meditation temple. She explained that at temples, the clergy carry out similar tasks to those that people do outside the temple, but they do these differently, mindfully. Monks and *mae chiis* train their minds while working. Before she became ordained, she had listened to sermons about the way to be free from suffering, but she had been in doubt as to whether it was true or not. She said that the seven days at the temple confirmed that this was the way and she became confident that the practice would free her from suffering.

Life at temples and *samnak chiis* is highly determined and repetitive. Following the training rules enables monks and *mae chiis* to concentrate on developing their consciousness. The objective is to discover the three fundamental features of life: suffering, impermanence, and egolessness (*dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatta*). Practising, working, walking, eating, standing, etc. are done in silence and very slowly in order to develop mindfulness. As Mae chii Noy noted above, life in the temple is not a suspension of everyday life; it is to go deeper into it, to reveal the conditions of human existence – 'everyday life is heightened'. The practitioners try to understand and extinguish suffering, and accept impermanence and egolessness as traits of human life.

PARENTS' REACTIONS TO DAUGHTERS' ORDINATION

In the temple, Mae chii Noy learned to be much calmer and when she returned home she felt good. She said that her suffering was reduced; it had left her heart and also her body. Something had changed. She thought that if she had good merit (*mii bun*), that if she was virtuous, she would probably be granted the chance to become ordained again. She continued to work hard, and after some time she started to feel 'hot' as before. The coolness did not last, and she was not content. She said that she went to temples and donated some money and that satisfied her sometimes. She talked with her mother about her wish to become ordained. Her mother cried and said that she would be alone with all the work if she left. But Mae chii Noy said she could not live there any more. Her mother told her that it was possible to reach *niphaan* directly (*trong*) if a person did enough good deeds.³ Mae chii Noy said she was not interested in that. She had listened to the monks and they said that it was necessary to exterminate *kilet* (moral defilement) first.⁴ Finally her mother gave her permission and she went to visit her father at the temple for his permission and advice.

Mae chii Lek, too, had a close relative who was a monk and supported her *mae chii* ordination. Her elder brother had been a monk since he was young and Mae chii Lek used to tell her mother that if her brother would come and fetch her elder sister for ordination, Mae chii Lek would go with them. Mae chii Lek wanted to become a *mae chii*, but when she asked her mother's permission, she answered: 'Then you have to cut yourself into two parts: one part for me and one part for your brother.' Her mother did not give her consent. Mae chii Lek felt that it was useless trying to persuade her.

Mae chii Lek said that performing good deeds and creating religious merit was most important for her. She had shaved her head one time before she received ordination. She was in her early teens when she took a vow that consisted of shaving. She did this privately and did not receive *mae chii* ordination at the temple. It was fulfilment of the vow that she had made to the Buddha and she said she had felt shy having a shaved head but that she had had to do it because she had vowed to.⁵

Mae chii Lek was 21 when she decided to go to Bangkok to find a job. At that time, her elder brother was a monk at a temple in Bangkok. When he learnt that his sister was looking for a job in Bangkok, he volunteered to introduce her to what he said was 'the best work you could get'. He knew that she used to be a keen meditator and he brought her to a temple with a large *mae chii* section in order to seek ordination as a *mae chii*. That was not the kind of work she had had in mind when she went to Bangkok. However, she appreciated meditation

and she decided to follow her brother's suggestion and became a *mae chii*. She did not ask for her mother's permission. Mae chii Lek was not ordained at the same temple as her brother, but he had arranged for a longstanding *mae chii* to be his sister's guardian.

Some of the *mae chiis* who appear in this chapter have foster backgrounds. Foster children in Thailand are not reported as being treated badly by their foster parents. The *mae chiis* who had been fostered did not complain or say that their foster parents had mistreated them. They told me that the fact that they had lost their parents had had an impact on how they at times had interpreted their lives. One said that she did not feel the same obligations to her foster parents as she would have felt to her biological parents. Those *mae chiis* said that when they were young they had thought about their *kammic* status and wondered whether being without parents was a sign of a non-meritorious state. However, it had not been easier for foster children to get their foster parents' consent for ordination, and some foster parents viewed their foster daughter's ordination as a failure personal as parents.

Many of the *mae chiis* that I have met reported that their parents had only reluctantly given their consent for the ordination. There are also *mae chiis* whose parents did not approve of their daughters' ordination. *Mae chiis* find many different strategies for dealing with their families' rejections. Mae chii Maalii said she had a strong desire to live a spiritual life. She was 25 years old when I met her and she lived in a *sammak chii* in Isaan. Her parents had not given their consent to her ordination and she told me how she had accomplished her wish to become a *mae chii* despite her family's refusal. Mae chii Maalii had become ordained in Chiang Mai province in the Northern part of Thailand when she was 17 years old (1990) and had been a *mae chii* for eight years when I met her. Before ordination, she lived with her parents and younger brother in a province in Isaan. She said she began reading Buddhist books because she wanted to understand *dhamma*. She went regularly to the temple and a highly revered monk at her village temple, whom she referred to as Luang Phôô, said to her that it was only by taking the precepts and practice that a person could understand *dhamma*. She knew no *mae chii* before she became ordained herself. She had seen some old *mae chiis* though and, despite her young age, she said that she wanted to be like them. She said that married life seemed to be so unhappy and she had no desire to get married.

However, Mae chii Maalii's parents did not grant their permission and the head monk of the temple would not ordain her without her parents' consent. She told me that eight years earlier she went with her aunt to visit some relatives

in Lampang province in Northern Thailand. Her aunt returned home, but Mae chii Maalii did not go with her. She saw her chance to receive ordination and travelled alone to a famous monk's temple in Chiang Mai and asked for ordination there. The monk wanted to know if her parents had given their permission. She said that she lied and answered that they had, although her parents in fact knew nothing. After three months, some people from Lampang came to visit the temple in Chiang Mai where she was staying. They asked her where she came from, and it turned out that they knew her relatives in Lampang. When they returned home they contacted her relatives who called her parents. Mae chii Maalii's parents travelled immediately to Chiang Mai. She said they cried and wanted her to go back home with them. She explained that she did not want to go back to lay life, and later they gave their permission for her to stay in the temple for two years and then return home. However, she did not go back home. Mae chii Maalii was firm in her decision. She explained that since she had made the decision to become ordained with great care, she had no intention of changing her mind and living a lay life.

Becoming ordained without the consent of one's parents, husband or wife violates the prescribed rules for both monks and *mae chiis*. A *mae chii* from Central Thailand, who was 21 years old when I met her and had been ordained for six years, said she had initially obeyed her parents when they refused to give their permission for her ordination. She said that when she was a young girl she had had two main interests: playing and meditating. She started to meditate when she was ten years old and she said she enjoyed the calm feeling. She did not study Buddhism at school but often went with her family to the temple and learned about Buddhism by listening to the monks. She said that she used to give food to the monks every day and she often walked to the temple without her family. One day, a monk asked her if she wanted to become a *nak buat* (become ordained). When she told her parents, they said: 'If you do this we will not come and visit you, you will not be our relative any more.' She said she did not understand why her parents were against it or why they said this. Her parents' refusal implied that she could not become ordained right away, as she would have preferred. She stayed in the temple and instead of receiving *mae chii* ordination, she received temporary lay ordination as a *chii phraam*, which her parents accepted.

Her parents never gave their approval. She did not want to go against her family and her solution to the dilemma was to leave the decision about ordination to the head monk. The head monk talked with her parents, but they did not change their minds. However, later she was ordained in the temple without the parents' consent. By letting the head monk take responsibility for

her ordination, despite the fact that her parents had not given their approval, she said that she overcame the feeling of having violated her parents' decision. She said: 'Still, I think my family has not fully accepted that I have chosen this life. Right now I do not want to change my life, I do not want to marry, I want to continue my life as a *mae chii*.'

For many Thai women it is unthinkable to go against their parents' decisions. A *mae chii* who was 63 years old when I met her at a temple in Isaan decided to do her duty as a daughter as long as her parents were alive. She waited until they had died before seeking ordination and by this time she was 51 years old. She never married, but worked as a dressmaker and took care of her parents. She said that her parents would never have accepted her ordination. She felt she was free when they had passed away and she could finally live the life she wanted. However, it cost her the relationship with her brothers and sisters. She almost lost contact with them because they disapproved of her ordination and did not understand the religious life she had chosen.

A 36-year-old *mae chii* who was a former teacher at a college decided to become ordained after being a lay follower and meditation practitioner at a temple. She said that the reason why she started to meditate many years previously was that she was concerned about her father's *winjaan* (spirit). She wanted to be able to connect with this. Although she never succeeded in communicating with her dead father, meditation calmed her and she felt happier. She continued to meditate every day and she also started to stay in the temple overnight. On weekdays she went to work at 8 o'clock every morning and she lived like that for eight months. She wanted to extinguish suffering, to cut worldly ties; she wanted to become ordained.

She went to stay in a *samnak chii* for a short period of intense meditation practice. After staying there only three days, she asked the leading *mae chii* for ordination. The leading *mae chii* considered this as being too hasty and refused her request. At the same time another young woman, who also wanted to become ordained, had come to the *samnak chii* and they decided to go together and see the head monk at the nearby temple and ask him for ordination. He agreed and took the initiative to meet with her relatives and talk with them. At first her mother did not give her permission. Nor did her siblings approve. Nevertheless, she had made up her mind and she had started to cut her hair before she resigned from her job as a teacher. She said: 'Cutting my hair was an unambiguous sign that I was serious in my intentions. My mother fainted when she saw my short hair. Finally they gave their permission, and I became ordained.'

However, not all parents are against their daughters' wishes to become ordained. I met a few *mae chii*s who told me that their parents had actually suggested that they should become ordained. One *mae chii* from a province close to Bangkok said that by becoming ordained she had fulfilled her father's wish. She never married but became ordained when she was 22 years old. She was 47 when I met her. She came from a middle-class family in the Bangkok area and was the third child in a family of six sisters. Her family had property, and she also had some income from her family's business. Her financial situation had made it possible for her to study, and she had recently completed a university degree. She became ordained at a temple, and lived periodically at *samnak chii*s. Her sisters became *chii phraam* now and then, but she was the only *mae chii*. She said it was her father who told her to become a *mae chii*. He had deep faith in Buddhism and not having any sons, asked her to become a *mae chii*. Her father passed away two years before I met her. He became ordained late in life and stayed 11 years in the monkhood. Her mother was still alive, but the *mae chii* said she had always been closer to her father.

CUTTING FAMILY TIES

Earlier in this chapter I gave examples that showed how young women are not usually subjected to a demand to become ordained and are not expected to renounce the world. Women who become *mae chii*s abandon their families and the expectations laid upon them as women. Female ordination deviates from Thai cultural values, which hold that daughters should care for their parents in all ways possible, and in this sense women's ordination violates society's sense of order and young girls are generally discouraged by their families from becoming *mae chii*s. Today it is common, especially in the urban areas, for well-educated women who earn their own living to choose to live a single life. They are not considered to violate the prescribed gender rules by not marrying as long as they take care of and support their families when needed. This is one important difference between lay unmarried women and *mae chii*s.

In several cases ordained relatives played an important role in young women's lives when they wanted to become ordained. A 29-year-old *mae chii* at Ratburi Samnak Chii who was ordained at the *samnak chii* when she was only 13 years old is one example of someone introduced to religious life by a close relative. This *mae chii* was doing her 16th *phansaa* (rain retreat as ordained) when I met her. She was born in the province in which the *samnak chii* is located, had finished primary school in the provincial capital and had studied

at secondary level at the *samnak chii*. In the city she had gone to primary school at a monastery. She said the school was located at the temple but was run by lay people and was open to both boys and girls. Girls are not allowed to go to temple schools, and the *mae chii* explained that the school had been a temple school but was turned into a public school run by lay people.

Her grandmother was a longstanding *mae chii*, who had moved to stay at Ratburi Samnak Chii. In the holidays, her grandmother invited her to come and stay with her. She said she experienced the atmosphere at the *samnak chii* as quiet, and she liked it. She helped with the construction work there and with the plantations. When the holiday was over her parents came and asked her to come home and continue studying, but she did not want to leave the *samnak chii*. Her mother was not against the idea that she should become ordained, but she thought she was too young and said that she could be a *mae chii* later, after she had finished school. But she liked living at the *samnak chii* and wanted to stay. Her grandmother approved and finally her parents agreed to let her live at the *samnak chii* and become ordained. The *mae chii* said her grandmother taught her everything: the Pali language, meditation, how to do the walking meditation, etc. She said that she had never wanted a married life and she recalled some neighbours who were always arguing. She did not like that. Her own family was quite harmonious before her ordination, but afterwards her father took a second wife (*mia nôôy*).

The problem with the irresponsibility of husbands and of their having more than one wife was often brought up in discussions with lay women and *mae chiis*. Despite Thai women's strong position in the family, patriarchal values dominate legal codes. For example, until recently it was not illegal for a man to have more than one wife, adultery is a ground for divorce only for the husband and rape is legally defined as a crime only committed by a man against a woman other than his wife (Klausner 1997).

Temples function as refuges for both women and men. The deaths of her husband and some family members preceded one woman's ordination. She was 68 years old when I met her at a big temple in Isaan. She had become ordained when she was 34, together with her 14-year-old daughter. It is unusual for both mother and daughter to receive ordination at the same time. They still lived at the same place and the mother was now the head of the *mae chii* section. Before their ordination they lived about 2 kilometres from the temple. They used to visit the temple and the mother knew the teaching monk and she had faith in Buddhism.

The family had gone through many difficulties and before they received ordination several close relatives had died. The mother told me that she had had

a son who died when he was a year old. Her parents, her sister and her husband died within a short period of time. Finally, she said: 'It was only my daughter and myself left.' She used to go to the temple and listen to the head monk teaching. She said that he explained about life and death and the uncertainty of when a person's life is over. She started to study Buddhism at the temple and said that she reflected deeply over the three characteristics of life, *dukkha*, *anicca*, *anatta*.⁶ She realised that everything has to be born and that nothing is permanent. Suffering is *thammadaa*, which means that it is normal and a common part of life. She explained to me that we should strive to become detached and thereby avoid grief or illness. Her faith in Buddhism and desire to meditate and learn about the realities of life made her life easier to bear. Since she was poor and lacked family, staying in the temple gave her a form of social security that would have been difficult for her to obtain in lay life.

One of the most distinguished, longstanding *mae chiis* at Ratburi Samnak Chii was Mae chii Ning, a 55-year-old originally from Isaan. She had studied at the university and had been a teacher for many years. Besides other subjects she also taught the Pali language. She became ordained when she was 24. She considered her father's death, when she was 9 years old, to be one of the most important events in her life. She was the youngest child in the family. She had one older brother who was a monk and vice-abbot at a large temple in Bangkok. He had died five years prior to my meeting with Mae chii Ning. She said that she was not very close to her brother. He was much older than she and became more like a father who felt responsibility for her. Mae chii Ning finished primary school in Isaan and after her father's death her mother remarried, and when she was 11 years old she was sent to live with a family in Bangkok. In Bangkok, she lived with her foster mother and her children and she also went to school there. She finished secondary school but had no chance to continue studying immediately after that. The family chose instead to support her brother's continued education. Her foster mother was a pharmacist and went to work every weekday and Mae chii Ning took care of the household duties. In the mornings, she had to cook and send the children to school. Then she had to cook food for her brother who was a monk. She said that she was doing the same thing every day and she found it tremendously boring.

Her foster mother got married, when Mae chii Ning was 16 and Mae chii Ning had then started to work at home with sewing. During this period she studied English at the YMCA in Bangkok. Mae chii Ning said that she suggested that she should do some kind of domestic work, but her brother did not think

that it was safe for her and was afraid that something bad would happen to her. Then she wanted to study dressmaking, but her foster mother did not allow her to. Instead, her foster mother bought fabrics and clothes that she could copy so she could learn by herself. Mae chii Ning said: 'One day when I was sitting sewing I saw a bird fall dead down from the ceiling. I thought, I will become like that. I am going to die like the bird that had died. I felt that my life was meaningless and I had to do something.' She made up her mind and told her foster mother that she wanted to be a *mae chii*. Her foster mother said she felt very sad about her request. Luang phi, her brother, asked her foster mother to give her permission since he thought that she would never manage to remain a *mae chii* for long – she liked to eat, roam around and spend money. Mae chii Ning said: 'My brother did not know my mind. I felt sad when the children told me what my brother had said to my foster mother about me.' Marriage was never a choice that she considered attractive and she never aspired to have a life like her mother's. Mae chii Ning said that her mother had so many children and when Mae chii Ning had moved to Bangkok she did not miss home at all. In six years, she only went home once. She recalled that her real mother tried to arrange a marriage for her just before she was ordained. Her mother had a Chinese friend who had two children, a daughter and a son, and they wanted Mae chii Ning to marry the son. Mae chii Ning turned down the proposition and became ordained instead and has now been a *mae chii* for 31 years.

OVERCOMING SICKNESS

For some women ordination provides a way to overcome sickness, or change an unwholesome lifestyle. Health problems were one of the factors motivating the following two *mae chiis* to become ordained. However, temples and *samnak chiis* do not normally serve as a refuge for sick people. The monastic rules in fact prohibit people with mental or physical disorders from seeking ordination. These two *mae chiis* had recovered from their sicknesses when I met them, and were in good health. They had their permanent residence at temples, and were visiting *mae chiis* at Ratburi Samnak Chii while they were studying. The younger was Mae chii Yupin. She was 24 years old and had been ordained since she was 14. The other, Mae chii Amara, was almost 20 years older and had only been a *mae chii* for five years. They were both from Northeastern Thailand, but not from the same province. Each had five brothers and sisters and neither of them had any close relatives who were ordained.

Mae chii Yupin became ordained after finishing primary school. She said that she told her mother that she wanted to become ordained and her mother had no objection to her daughter's suggestion and went with her to the famous monk Luang Phôô Thet. Luang Phôô accepted her, but before she received formal ordination she had to stay in the monastery for a probation period of two months. During that period she shaved her hair and wore a black skirt and white blouse. She enjoyed the monastic life from the very beginning. She liked to be shaved since it made her feel clean. Mae chii Yupin had been severely ill before she became ordained. It was an illness that resembled malaria and she said that she thought she was going to die. She said that her main reason for becoming ordained was that she wanted to accumulate merit. While she was sick and nearly dying she was concerned about her lack of merit and worried about what would happen to her with no stores of merit. When she recovered from her illness, she felt depressed and she thought that ordination would help her state of mind. After a short time at the monastery she said she felt happier and stronger and became more energetic.

A lay devotee, an *upasika*, who cooked food for Luang Phôô at the monastery, castigated Mae chii Yupin for becoming ordained without having any financial assets. The *upasika* considered that it would have been better if she had waited until she had worked and saved money for ordained life. However, Mae chii Yupin said that she still felt happy that she had been ordained early in life and now she even had the chance to study in order to deepen her practice. She said that she never had thoughts of marrying and having children because she assumed that that kind of life would be unsatisfactory. She explained to me that through marriage one becomes attached and when one has children the attachment is even greater. Mae chii Yupin speculated that it was probably all the suffering in her own family that made her turn away from that kind of life. She claimed that she was bored by all the problems of lay life. Her family had once had the economic capacity to secure a good life for its members. They had a small business, fields and cows. But her mother had to close the business when Mae chii Yupin's older brother stole money from the firm. Her father also liked to drink and gamble and he eventually destroyed the family's financial stability. She said she felt sorry for both her mother and her father. She also told me that her father had many wives and this further undermined good family life. Before he married Mae chii Yupin's mother he had taken a Vietnamese wife and they had five children. After marrying her mother, he had several mistresses. Her father had died four years prior to our meeting of a liver disease caused by his drinking. At the end of his life, Mae chii Yupin went home and took care of

him. She played Buddhist tapes for him and taught him how to meditate. He told her that if he survived his illness he would like to be a *phao khaow* (a pious lay person, who follows the eight precepts and dresses in white). Every morning he asked his wife to prepare offerings to the monks. Mae chii Yupin thought that the status of his mind improved during the last period of his life.

Mae chii Amara decided to become ordained when she was 36 years old. She had completed only four years of primary education before she became a *mae chii*. After finishing primary school, she worked in farming (*tham rai*) and after that she worked as an unskilled labourer in many different occupations. When she lived in her home province she stayed with her father as long as he was alive and later she stayed with her older sister. Mae chii Amara did not go to the temple often when she was young. She said she sometimes went there to play. Her knowledge of Buddhism was very vague and she said she became a *mae chii* because her father had told her to do good things.

Mae chii Amara went to Bangkok to work when she was 26. It was a long way from home, but she said that her parents never worried about her because she had always been like a man and they were confident that she could manage and take care of herself. She did not get involved with men and she only had female friends. Before she went to the capital, she met some Chinese people from Bangkok whom she liked and admired for their diligence and capacity to work hard. When she arrived in the city they employed her to sell grilled ducks and pork and to work with groceries and vegetables. However, despite her hard work she had nothing left. It was just a question of eating and spending and there was nothing left in the end.

Mae chii Amara recalled that long ago when she was young she went to work in Rayong province. An agent had come to her province in Isaan to recruit people to work. Mae chii Amara was taken on to work with sugarcanes, which was a very heavy work and she received only 35 baht a day. No food was provided so they also had to pay for their meals. Something that made a deep impression on her during this period was a group of *mae chiis* who used to stand on a hill at 4 o'clock in the morning reciting *metta* (loving kindness). She heard the recitation and she said she was deeply affected by it: it went straight to her heart. Mae chii Amara said that this experience returned to her later in life.

Like most of the *mae chiis* whom I interviewed, Mae chii Amara was of the opinion that marriage and children were constraining. She wanted freedom and she wanted to be independent. However, before she became ordained she abused alcohol. She started to drink when she was a teenager. Finally, her body

could take no more drinking and she had to stop. It was her sister who begged her to stop, but Mae chii Amara told her it was impossible for her to quit though, with great determination, she finally managed. She also used to smoke and had similar difficulties in stopping. Mae chii Amara said that before she became ordained she used to listen to a song about *dhamma*, and said to herself: 'I cannot be a monk, but at least I can be a *mae chii*. My sister helped me to the temple, and introduced me to Khun Mae, the head *chii*, who accepted me.'

FULFILLING VOWS

Reasons such as vow fulfilment or making merit for family members or relatives are also among the motives that *mae chiis* give for their ordination. Today, it is quite rare for women to become *mae chiis* in order to fulfil a vow and it is more common that they become ordained temporarily, staying at the temple as *chii phraam*. Nevertheless, there are some women who fulfil vows by becoming ordained, and they usually decide beforehand how long they will remain in the ordained state. A 37-year-old woman came to Ratburi Samnak Chii in February 1998 in order to become ordained and stay at the *samnak chii* for about three weeks. She was married and had two children, a girl who was ten and a boy who was seven years old. She came from a nearby province and both her husband and she worked with growing fruits and vegetables. Almost 20 years earlier, when she was 17, she had made a vow to a venerated monk that she would become ordained if she was cured from an fever-illness that made her life miserable. Before going to the temple she had consulted a doctor but had felt no improvement. She therefore turned to the temple and made a vow to the old monk. She said: 'I folded my hands and said: "If I become well from my sickness I shall become ordained."' She was cured, but she did not fulfil her vow. In January 1998 she became sick in the same way again. 'One night I dreamt about a crocodile, which came to my house. I asked some old people what the dream meant. They said the crocodile had come to remind me about the vow.' Their house was at the *klong* (canal) and she dreamt that the crocodile came swimming there. She decided immediately to become ordained and went to visit a monk at the village temple for advice about where to do it. He told her that Ratburi Samnak Chii was a good place. She said: 'I could have been a *chii phraam*, but when I made the vow there was no such thing as temporary *mae chiis*, there were no *chii phraam*. When I made the vow I said that I would become ordained, and shave and do everything if I got better.'

Before becoming ordained, she went together with her husband to Ratburi Samnak Chii to consult Khun Mae about her ordination. She praised her husband and said that he was a fine man (*khun dii*) who always spoke nicely, never quarrelled and was never rude. He had once been ordained for two years and would have stayed in the monkhood but had to disrobe because his parents were indebted and he had to work and help them out financially. She discussed the matter with her husband and decided not to become ordained close to their home because their children would come and see her and she did not think that was a good idea. She said: 'For example, as a *mae chii* I cannot touch my son. He is only seven years old, and that would be difficult for him to understand.' She had selected Ratburi Samnak Chii over some other places because of the standard of practice. She had heard of other places where the *mae chiis* did not chant and did not practise alms rounds and she appreciated that Ratburi Samnak Chii upheld strict monastic conduct.

I did not meet many *mae chiis* at *samnak chiis* who had become ordained in order to fulfil vows. However, at a temple in Isaan I met one 55-year-old *mae chii* who had become ordained because she had made a vow to the Buddha. She told me that she had been working in Israel for 18 years when her relatives in Thailand informed her that her father was seriously ill, probably dying. She phoned her father every evening and talked with him. She said: 'I was so concerned about his health, I took a vow to the Buddha, and promised to become ordained and become a *mae chii* for one year if my father survived.' Her father recovered and when I met her he was 85 years old. She planned to go back to Israel and continue working when she had completed her year as a *mae chii*.

ACCESS TO STUDY

To gain access to education is a common reason why young men seek ordination. However, the *sangha* has never offered women education. Today, a few *samnak chiis* offer girls free secondary education but it is not necessary for the girls to become ordained. Some of the resident *mae chiis* at Ratburi Samnak Chii mentioned education as one of several reasons for their ordination. They often stressed a desire to live a peaceful life without the suffering and difficulties they perceived in lay life. Mae chii Siriporn and I lived in the same building at the *samnak chii*. She had studied up to secondary level at the *samnak chii* and was now studying at the Open University. She was 33 years old and had become ordained at Ratburi Samnak Chii eight years earlier. She said that she had always wanted to study but when she was 12 and finished primary school it

was not possible for her to continue. Instead she stayed at home and helped her mother. She explained that she had six younger brothers and sisters and there was so much work to do at home. So she helped her mother in the kitchen, took care of her siblings and helped her father with work in the garden. She said: 'I would have liked to continue studying, but my family could not afford it. I did not want to disturb my parents with my education. I always thought of my parents and siblings first, and not of myself. My parents were not in good health and I felt that I had to help them. If I had not become a *mae chii* I would not have had the chance to continue studying.' Mae chii Siriporn came from the province in which Ratburi Samnak Chii was located. Her parents worked with gardening and pig breeding. She said that she had never aspired to marry and have children. She knew how hard lay life could be and she said she was bored with taking care of her five younger siblings.

Several of Mae chii Siriporn's family members had experiences of ordained life. Her father had been a monk before he married and a brother was ordained for the second time though he had recently decided to leave the monkhood. Her mother had been a *chii phraam* once in order to fulfil a vow she had made when she was ill. Mae chii Siriporn did not know about Ratburi Samnak Chii until her father told her about it. Her father's sister had been ordained at Ratburi Samnak Chii and when Mae chii Siriporn learnt of this she went to see her. Before her ordination, Mae chii Siriporn practised meditation and visited temples that arranged retreats. She participated in several seven- and ten-day retreats at temples with intensive Buddhist practice. She also read books about meditation and listened to Buddhist radio programmes and followed the monk's meditation instructions over the radio. She said: 'At that time I only knew about sitting meditation. When I came here the first time I took the precepts and stayed just one day. I was introduced to a type of meditation that I had not practised before, and I learnt how to practise walking meditation, which was new to me. I was very impressed by the *mae chiis* and this place, and I was surprised that the *samnak chii* also offered meditation instructions. I had not expected that.'

RELEASED FROM FAMILY DUTIES

I have interviewed numbers of *mae chiis* who were well educated, had secure incomes and good health before they became ordained. Even these *mae chiis*, who had been well-to-do before ordination, had been discontented with secular life. As with most of the *mae chiis* I talked to, they mentioned a desire to be free

and not locked up in a marriage as one of their motives for seeking ordination. They also said they had experienced lay life as empty and boring and referred to basic Buddhist truths about the conditions of life, such as suffering (*dukkha*) and their wish to attain enlightenment (*nibbana*), as the principal reasons for seeking ordination.

At a *samnak chii* in which about 12 *mae chiis* resided, I met a 38-year-old *mae chii* who had been ordained for six years. She had graduated from a university in Bangkok, spoke English and had a well-paid job in Bangkok before she was ordained. Her family was Sino-Thai and she had nine brothers and sisters. However, when she was born her parents gave her away to an aunt who only had one son and she said she had suffered much from that. She had never discussed this with her family, but she had always wondered why they had given her away, and why they could not keep her when they kept all the other nine children. She said she loved her foster parents and when her foster father died she missed him very much. After her foster father's death her brother went to America, and later her foster mother followed him. She had tried to persuade her foster mother to come back to Thailand, but she preferred to stay with her son. The *mae chii* explained that it was when her brother said that the mother was his and that she could not take her away from him, that she felt as if a chain was broken. She said:

I was not connected anymore. I felt *isara* (freedom). Now I could do what I wanted. You know, here in Thailand we have to take care of our parents, we have to look after them – I was free. I had done my best. It took a very long time for me, I was nearly 30 years old, until I understood: *tham cai* – follow your heart. Suddenly when I was meditating in the forest in the Chiang Mai area in the mountains of Doi Inthanon, I realised: ‘Do your duty.’ I was doing my duty. I did not have to do their duties. I have always believed that it is best to be single. You know when a man is interested in a woman, he takes the woman's hand and looks at her lines in her palm, and then he takes all of her, and she is not free anymore.

She had previously been a businesswoman at an export company working seven days a week, often long hours. She said she liked it, but after five years she started to ask herself why she was working so hard. It was not for money and not for a position and she felt that something was lacking. A friend gave her a book written by the famous monk Buddhadasa. She started to read, but did not understand it. However, she became interested in Buddhadasa's teaching and went to see him at his place, Suan Mokh, in Southern Thailand. She followed

the meditation sessions and listened to the teachings. 'There were so many words I did not understand. I had hundreds of words on my list that were new to me. I talked with Buddhadasa and he asked what kind of suffering I had. I said I had suffering inside. Outside things were OK. But inside I had suffering. After this first weekend at Suan Mokh I had to go back to Bangkok to work. Buddhadasa gave me lots of books and I read and read. Gradually I became more convinced that I wanted to live my life as a *mae chii*.'

Another well-educated and wealthy *mae chii* became ordained when she was 49 and had been ordained for six years when I met her. She was from Bangkok and had been a professor at one of the large universities in the capital. She had also written a couple of books about Buddhism. Her attitudes towards *mae chiis* had earlier been negative, and she said that she looked upon their lives as tragic. However, she had practised Buddhism since childhood and before becoming ordained she was a lay follower of a Buddhist monk in the Mahayana tradition, whom she also supported financially. A turning point for her was when she discovered that he did not follow the monastic precepts. That disappointment drove her to study Buddhism more independently, which also led her into contact with *mae chiis*.

She was born during the Second World War and had two sisters. The family lived in Southern Bangkok; the mother had a shop and the father was a doctor (pharmacist). Her parents considered education important for their daughters and the three sisters completed university studies. They travelled abroad and the *mae chii* had lived in the United States.

The *mae chii* said she did not know any *mae chiis* before she became ordained. Many years ago one of her sisters shaved her head and she really thought her sister had gone mad. She felt ashamed of her and did not want to speak with her. Then she decided to shave her own head because she said that she wanted to experience how she would react when people looked down upon her, but to her surprise that never happened. No one treated her with contempt. People respected her even as a *mae chii*. She recalled that her colleagues, friends and people around her advised her not to shave because of the low status *mae chiis* have and they could not understand why she wanted to do it. She mentioned an additional important reason why she had sought ordination and that was the traffic in Bangkok combined with being afraid of death. Her health was weak and she had become ill. She tried various ways to overcome her fear. However, she said it was superficial, she was only clinging onto something.

Finally, she decided that she wanted to live at a *samnak chii* and her sister and she made a list of 28 *samnaks* (both independent *samnak chiis* and *mae chiis*' departments at temples) that they would visit in order to choose one place for her to live in. They had visited 18 places when they came to a forest *samnak chii* located in Isaan. At that time there was no road to the *samnak chii* and its location was difficult to approach. The *samnak chii* consisted of only a few buildings, meditation huts (*kutis*) and the *saalaa*. She remembered that when they arrived, Luang Mae, the head *mae chii*, came quickly to greet them. They talked and when her sister asked which place she wanted to see next, she told her that she had found the place where she wanted to live. However, first she had to build a house to live in and they went back to Bangkok and contacted an architect who made the drawings for the *kuti*. She said it took three months to build it. They phoned her when the *kuti* was ready, and she left Bangkok. She had now been at the *samnak chii* for six years and despite her being a Bangkokian with no experience of the forest, she found it surprisingly easy to adjust to life as a *mae chii*.

Mae chii Khunying Kanitha, who was mentioned in Chapter 1, became ordained in October 1993 when she was 73. She said that she had had this idea of becoming a *mae chii* for 50 years. When she was a child she studied in a Catholic convent school in Bangkok and she was very impressed by the Catholic nuns. She said that her mother was a good, religious person and always took her to the Buddhist temple. She grew accustomed to the temple, but she did not really study Buddhism. She remembered seeing the *mae chiis* cooking and doing domestic chores in the temple and compared them to the Catholic nuns in the convent who had access to higher education. She thought that the *mae chiis* should have the same opportunity. After she graduated from the Catholic school, she studied law for five years. Then she went abroad and studied three more years before she went back to Thailand and started her career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She met her husband, married, and had three children. Mae chii Khunying Kanitha said: 'I had warned my husband before we married that one day, when I had fulfilled my duties, I would enter religious life as a *mae chii*.'

Mae chii Khunying Kanitha said that her mother had inspired her to become a *mae chii* and they had actually planned that they should be *mae chiis* together in a monastery. However, when her mother was old she went alone to live in a temple. Unfortunately, she had a fall in the temple and had to be brought back home and never had a second chance to receive ordination. Mae chii Khunying Kanitha had a busy life with many assignments; but when she was 72, she

told her husband and children that the time had come for her ordination. Her husband was understanding and had no objections, but her children resisted the idea. Therefore she postponed the ordination one year. In 1993, she was ordained in Sri Lanka. She said that she discussed the International Women's Buddhist conference to be held in Sri Lanka with Acaan Chatsumarn who suggested that she could be ordained there, which she did.

Mae chiis who become ordained late in life usually after fulfilling their duties to their families commonly describe lay life as unsatisfying. Before becoming ordained, most of those that I spoke to had supported the Buddhist clergy for a long time. One *mae chii* from Northeastern Thailand, who had been married and had five children, became ordained when she was over 50 and had been a *mae chii* for almost 20 years when I met her. She said she had taken care of her children alone since her husband died when her youngest was six years old. She had long owned a factory, which one of her sons was now taking care of. She said: 'Before I became ordained, my daily life was working, eating, working, working, sleeping. Eating, eating and getting fat.' She said she did not know anything about Buddhism at that time. She went to the *wat* (temple) to make *tham bun* (meritorious offerings). She said she felt bored and over two and a half years she donated a lot of money. Her goal was to reach *nibbana*, although she said she did not understand anything about *nibbana*. Before ordination, she viewed *mae chiis* as beggars. After ordination she said: 'I should be a good monk. *Mae chiis* can do the same things as monks. However, *thudong* practice is very dangerous for women. In that case women must practice in groups. My goal is to reach *niphaan*.'

In order to broaden the stereotypical picture of contemporary *mae chiis* and their lives before ordination, I have related a number of *mae chiis*' stories, where they reveal their reasons for seeking a life in celibacy. Men's motives for becoming monks are generally not questioned. Their ordination is highly desirable, and young men are expected to become monks for at least a few months before they marry. Women's motives for becoming *mae chiis* are, contrary to those of men, often doubted and reduced to signs of misfortune. These conceptions reflect the reluctance to accept women as ordained persons, and these stereotypical notions have been perpetuated even by Western scholars.

To live in accordance with the strict monastic regime of fasting and hard work that many *mae chiis* perform requires stamina and deep faith in the spiritual goal. My findings do not support the simplified picture of Thai women as seeking ordination as 'old and poor' or 'young and sick' that Van Esterik

gives in the oft cited article: 'Lay women in Theravada Buddhism' (P. Van Esterik 1996: 49, 57). There are usually combinations of reasons why women wish to live an ordained life. Economic circumstances must also be favourable to enable a Thai woman to live an ordained life. Several of my informants stated that they wanted to pursue a pure and spiritual life, and that marriage would be an obstacle to this goal. Most of the *mae chiis* describe married life as one filled with suffering. Marriage is frequently portrayed as spiritually unproductive, and it does not meet the *mae chiis'* aspirations in life. There are unfavourable socio-economic factors that may account for the fact that some Thai women choose to become *mae chiis*. However, there are numerous *mae chiis* who have no such difficulties, who are well educated and well-off and could no doubt have managed quite well fending for themselves as lay women.

Most of my informants maintained that their ordination was motivated by the suffering inherent in lay life, and their preference for living a spiritual life. One might ask what in fact constitutes a 'pure' motivation for becoming a monk or a *mae chii*. Most of the *mae chiis* mentioned in this chapter could have chosen alternative ways of life. However, for them it was highly meaningful to become a *mae chii* in order to embark on the path to *nibbana*.

NOTES

- 1 *Baap* signifies demerit.
- 2 In Thai 'hot' is a negative expression describing something unharmonious, filled with the aggressive temper and anxiety that upset the mind and make life unpleasant. At that temple the *saalaa* was a building on stilts without walls where the monks were presented with their meals, held ceremonies and gave speeches to the laity.
- 3 *Niphaan* is the Thai term for *nibbana* (Pali) which means the permanent extinction of suffering.
- 4 Moral defilements, *kilet*, such as greed and attachment.
- 5 Becoming a *mae chii* in fulfilment of a vow is called *buat kaebun*. The reason for the vow might be to overcome some difficulty such as one's or one's relative's illness, an examination and so on.
- 6 *Dukkha* (Pali) means suffering, dissatisfaction of conditioned existence, stress, conflict, pain. *Anicca* (Pali) means impermanency of things which is the rising, passing and changing of things or the disappearance of things that have become arisen.
- 7 *Anatta* (Pali) means 'not-self', non-ego, egolessness, impersonality.