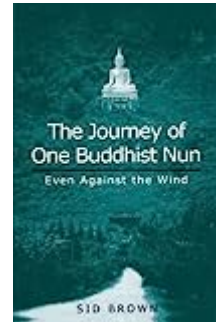


Sid Brown. *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun: Even Against the Wind.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. xi + 180 pp. \$20.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-5096-3.



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The Life of One Buddhist Nun in Contemporary Thailand

Sid Brown depicts, in very rich detail, the life experiences of one contemporary Thai *maechi* or female renouncer, Maechi Wabi. In the introductory chapter, Brown first sets the scene that will later play an important role in Wabi's life: a Buddhist nunnery (*samnak*) in a small village in the province of Ratburi, seventy-five miles southwest of Bangkok. In the first chapter, Brown further sets the stage by exploring the events that contributed to Maechi Wabi's decision to become a nun, from her childhood interest in meditation to the events surrounding her father's decision to become a monk and the oppressive effects that his decision had on Wabi's lay life.

In the second chapter, Brown moves from a more focused examination of Wabi's life to a more general look at the cultural biases surrounding women renouncers in Thailand and how those prejudices affect contemporary *maechi*. Here, Brown assesses the status of women renouncers in comparison to their male counterparts by looking at how certain segments of the Thai population regard and understand women who choose to "go forth." In examining the history of *maechi* in Thailand, Brown turns to the events surrounding the establishment of the

Institute of Thai Maechi which is made up of *maechi* from all over Thailand. In this chapter, Brown considers the relative inability of the Institute to accord *maechi* similar rights as monks as well as the degree to which the "maechi" category may be considered a suitable substitute for the order of fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhuni*).

Chapters 3 through 7 examine Maechi Wabi's early experiences as a renouncer. In chapter 3, for instance, Brown looks at how Wabi became associated with another *maechi* who ran her own *samnak* in rural Thailand, Seni. Of particular interest for Brown is the "crisis of faith" that Wabi undergoes during her early years: from the jealousy expressed toward Wabi by a *maechi* residing in Seni's *samnak* to Wabi's crisis in meditation that occurred when she undertook an intensive retreat. In these chapters, Brown is especially keen in showing how Wabi uses a Buddhist framework (e.g., the doctrine of karma, past lives, and impermanence) to make sense of her experiences as well as the role that meditation plays in allowing her access to her feelings.

Chapters 8 through 10 focus on the ways in which Wabi resolved her "crisis." Examining how Wabi reestab-

lishes her “faith” through her exploration of other ways of living as a *maechi*, Brown focuses on the events surrounding Wabi’s decision to join the Dhammacarini Samnak, the first Buddhist school for girls in Thailand. Dhammacarini, unlike the previous “meditation-oriented” *samnaks* that Wabi had joined, functions to serve society by instilling Buddhist mores and by providing education to women and young girls who have had little access to learning. Brown depicts how it is in her new role as a teacher that Wabi is able to reorient her life and make sense of her previous experiences.

In the last three chapters, Brown explores how Thai *maechi*, such as Wabi and those associated with the Institute of Thai Maechi and centers such as Dhammacarini, are creating new roles for female renunciators by blending the “ascetic” role usually associated with forest monks with the nurturing/mothering role normally associated with Thai women. By combining the role of renouncer and care-giver, *maechi*, according to Brown, are able to “cultivate emotional openness and responsiveness in a way denied to other women who are more enmeshed in human relationships” (p. 116) as well offer other women a safe place to deal with their problems.

A major strength of *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun* is the detailed account Brown gives of one Buddhist nun, Maechi Wabi. While providing a very detailed description of Wabi’s life, it is nonetheless difficult to assess, especially to those less familiar with Thai *maechi*, the degree to which the voice of one *maechi* relates to the collective experiences of Thai *maechi*. While Brown claims, in the introductory chapter, that “coming to understand Maechi Wabi can mean coming to understand *maechi* in modern Thailand” (p. 4), the reader may be

left asking whether or not Maechi Wabi’s story is truly paradigmatic. For instance, in chapter 4 Brown notes how “Maechi Wabi’s lack of worldly experience and her poverty set her apart [from Maechi Seni and Maechi Mina]” (p. 46). If this is indeed the case, then one may nonetheless question whether focusing on the life experiences of Seni and Mina would portray a very different picture of *maechi* in Thailand.

While Brown acknowledges that there is no one entity that is *maechi* (p. 143), she nonetheless argues that finding a case and contextualizing it vigorously is the best way to begin to understand *maechi*. While there are certain benefits of such a narrowly focused study, providing several case studies and contextualizing, even more widely, the lives of Thai *maechi* would provide the reader with the necessary background to assess whether or not the generalizations that Brown draws from Wabi’s life (e.g., pp. 71f.) truly apply to other *maechi*. Perhaps a less narrowly focused study that may even include a brief comparison between Thai *maechi* and nuns in other Theravada countries (such as the *dasa sil matavas* in Sri Lanka) would further add to Brown’s important contribution to our understandings of women’s roles in Buddhism.

Despite some of the problems inherent in Brown’s assumption that the life of one nun speaks much to the lives of other nuns, the rich details that she provides in terms of Maechi Wabi’s experiences is truly commendable. Throughout the book, Wabi’s voice is given ample room to present and express itself. In that regard, Sid Brown does not generally allow particular theoretical filters to color the lens that is so meticulously focused on *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun*.

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