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Research Article

Female Leadership and Lay Moral Agency in Thai Buddhism: The Knowing Buddha Organization and Soteriological Inclusivity

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While laypeople have historically held supportive roles in Thai Buddhism, the authority to interpret Dhamma and represent spiritual attainment has traditionally resided with ordained monks. Wider recognition of Thai female practitioners and public veneration of their spiritual claims has been limited. This study analyzes a contemporary female lay leader, Acharavadee Wongsakon, founder of the Knowing Buddha Organization (KBO), who publicly proclaimed her spiritual awakening, reconceptualizing lay spiritual attainment and articulating new models of religious authority. This paper aims to examine the pathways through which religious authority is established and re-articulated by a contemporary female lay leader in Thai Buddhism. Through documentary analysis of KBO's publications, *5000s Magazine*, and online content (2014–2025), this research explores Acharavadee's construction of moral agency through media activism. Drawing on Alan Sponberg's concept of soteriological inclusiveness, it traces her transformation into a meditation teacher. Amid concerns over Buddhist decline, KBO mobilizes lay networks to protect Buddhism.

Keywords: female leadership; lay moral agency; soteriological inclusiveness; Thai Buddhism; religious media; Knowing Buddha Organization

In contemporary Thai Buddhism, interpretive and preservative authority remains concentrated within the monastic Sangha, particularly among ordained men. Thailand's Buddhist infrastructure is vast, serving a population of nearly 70 million—an estimated 93 percent of whom identify as Buddhist (Schedneck 2023: 15). It is supported by approximately 245,000 fully ordained Thai Theravada Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*) across 44,000 temples.[1] This institutional configuration reflects what Alan Sponberg (1992: 13) terms "institutional androcentrism," whereby religious authority and the prerogative to teach are structurally embedded in male-dominated hierarchies. This concentration of authority creates a significant gender imbalance: while male monastics are widely revered for their perceived attainment of arahantship, equivalent recognition for female practitioners remains exceedingly rare (Seeger 2013: 1490; 2018: 18). Consequently, women are often relegated to the role of supporters. This neglect underscores the profound impact of androcentric biases; it also fuels a growing hope among contemporary women who seek to reclaim the "soteriological inclusiveness" originally offered by the faith. According to Sponberg (1992: 8–9), early Buddhism affirmed women's equal spiritual potential, recording instances when the Buddha himself acknowledged their potential for awakening and offered a path that was open to all. He underscores his point by noting that most contemporary Asian

[1] See the official statistics of the Thai National Office of Buddhism, accessed on February 27, 2026. https://www.onab.go.th/th/ebook/category/detail/id/4/iid/304

Buddhists feel that women have equal access to the Dhamma. Nevertheless, although doctrine proclaims liberation accessible to all regardless of gender, historical institutional arrangements have treated sexual difference as religiously significant, creating a gap between canonical inclusivity and lived exclusion.

Contemporary Thai Buddhist discourse continues to be shaped by a deeply ingrained patriarchal undertone, epitomized by the rhetoric of certain monastic circles in Bangkok. As documented by Prapapornpipat (2005: 37–38) and Seeger (2010: 559), a monk from a Bangkok temple explicitly propagates the view that "Women are the gender with little merit: they cannot be ordained and are not able to attain awakening … they have to make a vow so that they can be reborn as a man in their next life." This quotation contradicts the words of the Buddha, which affirm equal spiritual potential regardless of gender (Pennell 2025: 8–9). By analyzing these systemic biases, it becomes evident that the struggle of Thai women is a direct reflection of being suppressed by a pervasive patriarchal system and persistent negative attitudes. This combined religious and social marginalization creates a formidable burden for women, positioning them in a state of spiritual and social inferiority that remains resistant to change despite modern global movements toward equality.

In the Thai context, women who aspire to a life of renunciation are not formally prohibited from religious practice but encounter structural disadvantages that distinguish their experience from that of men. Their spiritual pathways are notably narrower and often marked by institutional ambiguity. As Seeger et al. (2024: 163–64) observe, Thai Buddhist women commonly pursue three main routes: seeking full Theravada *bhikkhunī* ordination abroad, receiving ordination in a non-Theravada Buddhist tradition (such as Mahayana), and becoming a *mae chi* in Thailand. Unlike fully ordained *bhikkhus*, Thai *mae chi*s do not enjoy comparable recognition or institutional support, leaving their religious status uncertain. Consequently, even with a strong commitment to spiritual discipline, women must navigate challenges largely absent from the male monastic experience. It is within this space of limitation that lay Buddhism has emerged as a sphere in which women, moving beyond conventional supportive roles, are instead able to articulate interpretive, organizational, and moral authority.

Global modernization has reshaped Buddhist identities and practices. Lay practitioners increasingly act as agents of Buddhist modernity, reinterpreting the Dhamma for contemporary challenges (Samuels, McDaniel, and Rowe 2016: 6–8). The growing visibility of lay-centered Buddhist initiatives in Thailand signals not only a shift away from exclusive clerical authority but also underscores what scholars have argued to be a defining feature of Thai Buddhism: despite its dominance, it is marked by a plurality rooted in the declining effectiveness of the state-regulated Sangha as the religion's official representative (Keyes 1982: 149–80; Satha-Anand 1990: 395–408). The Sangha's eroding moral authority and its failure to interpret teachings with contemporary relevance have diminished its capacity to embody tradition, creating a vacuum for new actors to supplement or even substitute for official Buddhism. As Pattana Kitiarsa (2005: 465) notes, the Sangha has ceased to be the sole authoritative force in Buddhist affairs since the 1990s. This institutional decline is further evidenced by Paisal Visālo (2009: 236–39), who criticizes the Sangha's failure to act as a moral compass, noting that the conduct of monks is increasingly questioned amid a pervasive moral decay within the temples themselves.

Women have created alternative roles; since the late nineteenth century, the growth of meditation centers has made vipassana a key route to leadership (Schedneck 2023: 113). Many women have carved spaces of religious agency, showing that leadership and spiritual attainment are not reserved for the ordained. As demonstrated by Martin Seeger, "in Thai Buddhism there were more women rigorously engaged in soteriological practice and teaching—and they were more influential—than is often assumed" (Seeger 2018: 252). As confidence in the Sangha wanes, laywomen assume diverse roles and sometimes bypass the male-dominated administrative structures of Thai Buddhism to establish their own spiritual legitimacy, advancing alternative legitimacies that challenge Buddhism's gendered boundaries. By promoting the idea that laypersons can attain and remain in a

state of awakening to teach others, they open new possibilities for female religious authority outside formal ordination. This paper examines changes occurring in the status and position of women in Thai Buddhist practice, focusing on one of the first widely acknowledged female saints of modern Thai Buddhism: Ajarn Acharavadee Wongsakon.[2] While Kumpha (2024: 169–76) notes that the rise of such leaders functions as a "prophetic" movement within the contemporary Buddhist middle class, this study extends that analysis by investigating how such authority is constructed through perceived meditative mastery.

This article examines how female lay leadership within the Knowing Buddha Organization (KBO),[3] founded by Acharavadee, challenges traditional Buddhist authority through two interrelated research questions (RQs):

> RQ1: How does Acharavadee's autobiographical narrative of awakening publicly enact soteriological inclusiveness?
>
> RQ2: How does KBO mobilize media activism to cultivate moral discipline and protect Buddhism in contemporary Thailand?

The study analyzes Acharavadee's writings and media presence, focusing on her spiritual testimony, teachings, and campaigns to protect Buddhist values. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative single-case design by combining documentary and media analysis. The primary sources consist of books authored by Acharavadee that narrate and justify her claim to have achieved awakening, together with KBO's media materials. Particular attention is given to three widely reprinted books examined in this study: *Techo Vipassana: Pued Pratu Nibban* (*Techo Vipassana: Opening the Door to Nirvana*, 2010); *Thot Rahat: Kharawat Banlutham* (*Laity Enlightenment*, 2016); *Kharawat Banlutham* Vol. 2 (*Laity Enlightenment II*, 2017) (Figure 1). Additional material is drawn from sources such as the follower-compiled *12 Years 8 Months Ajarn Acharavadee Wongsakon* (2023a), which collects her sayings and narrative accounts.

These works detail Acharavadee's spiritual experiences and are central to how her followers understand her spiritual authority. In examining them, we seek to reconstruct Acharavadee's perspective as presented in these sources while situating it within its broader religious and social context. In addition to these texts, we analyze the organization's media, particularly the bilingual *5000s Magazine* (published from 2014 to August 2025) and its official social media channels. Further material is drawn from blogs, YouTube videos, and websites through which Acharavadee's leadership is articulated and sustained. As we show, female lay agency and media activism model a form of religious leadership that contests institutional gender hierarchies. By investigating Acharavadee's influence on the Thai middle class, we argue that processes of global modernization have reshaped contemporary Buddhist identities by enabling lay leaders to carve out autonomous spaces of religious authority.

The article develops its argument in four stages. First, we establish the background of the KBO and its founder, Ajarn Acharavadee. Crucially, the KBO's mission of "protecting Buddhism" focuses on proselytizing and Buddha image protection campaigns to show how this lay-led activism functions as a foundation of spiritual authority. Second, we examine how the intersection of female leadership and soteriological inclusiveness serve as a vehicle for the public communication of awakening. Third, we analyze the representation of female leadership as a form of lay moral agency, investigating how Acharavadee and the KBO utilize media activism to expand the

[2] In accordance with Thai naming practices and existing studies (see, e.g., Jerryson 2016: 35–38), we refer to her as "Acharavadee" or, as she is widely known, "Ajarn Acharavadee," throughout this article.

[3] The organization has referred to itself publicly as the Knowing Buddha Organization (KBO), or simply "Knowing Buddha," since its establishment in 2012. Although it was later formally registered as the Knowing Buddha Foundation to facilitate public donations, it continues to use KBO in its public self-representation. It also appears not to employ a Thai organizational name, instead using the English designation "Knowing Buddha," a practice that may reflect its orientation toward international audiences, global visibility, and educated middle-class Buddhist publics.

role of the laity in defending the faith. Finally, we discuss the implications of this movement and its Buddhist identity for wider Thai Buddhism.

Background

Ajarn Acharavadee, a lay practitioner and meditation master, was born in 1965 to a middle-class family in Bangkok. After earning a degree in business administration, she pursued a successful business career while maintaining a strong interest in Buddhism and meditation. She later sought deeper meaning through intensive vipassana practice in the Goenka tradition. This period of disciplined training and profound meditative experience, prior to her founding of the KBO, deepened her commitment to Buddhist practice and culminated in what she describes as a spiritual awakening. Embracing an engaged Buddhism that combines spiritual cultivation with public moral advocacy, she established the KBO as a lay-led movement dedicated to safeguarding Buddhist values and fostering moral responsibility among the Thai middle class. Central to the KBO's mission is the conviction that laypeople can and should take an active role in sustaining Buddhism and preserving Buddhist teachings through contemplative practice and public action.

The KBO's institutional development began with the 2011 Techo Vipassana Meditation Retreat in Saraburi, which later developed into the Bodhidhammayan Retreat. Techo Vipassana refers to the meditation method that Acharavadee presents as a direct path toward advanced spiritual attainment through "burning away the kilesa." According to her account, the method derives from vipassana techniques transmitted to her through a mind-to-mind encounter with a deceased, well-known Thai Buddhist abbot, who instructed her to cultivate Techo Vipassana. KBO meditation courses continue to follow this method, offering one-, four-, and seven-day programs, alongside youth-oriented Buddhist activities through the Dhammawaisai Project (Wongsakon 2025: 68–75).

The KBO grew through middle-class mobilization, including educational outreach, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and temple exhibitions during major Buddhist observances. Officially registered as the Knowing Buddha Foundation in 2014 to facilitate public donations, the KBO advances a fourfold mission: disseminating the Dhamma, protecting sacred Buddhist symbols, cultivating moral consciousness, and building alliances. Its activities include public awareness campaigns, social media outreach, Dhamma walks, and educational exhibitions during important Buddhist observances. The KBO approaches "protecting Buddhism" as a structured form of lay moral protectionism. This mission is driven by its conviction that modern misappropriation of Buddhist symbols, such as the decorative use of sacred imagery in secular spaces or as tattoos, represents a profound moral crisis and a form of global ignorance that accelerates Buddhism's decline. Unlike traditional monastic strategies of defending doctrine, the KBO assumes the role of a proactive, transnational guardian of Buddhist culture. As Jerryson (2016: 35–38) observes, Acharavadee frames this protection as a nonviolent yet assertive struggle for the ethical treatment of Buddhism's sacred objects and imagery, effectively shifting religious guardianship from the ordained Sangha to a disciplined lay leadership.

The KBO operates through eight volunteer units staffed by lay supporters from more than twenty countries, who organize meditation programs, educational exhibitions, public campaigns, and digital outreach. Drawing on Acharavadee's entrepreneurial experience and established business networks, these activities have attracted support from followers as well as local and national business communities. Funded exclusively through voluntary donations, the KBO presents itself as an autonomous model of lay Buddhist activism sustained by the commitment and financial contributions of its supporters. Domestically, these alliances extend to Acharavadee's advocacy for recognizing Buddhism as Thailand's national religion and the KBO's cooperation with state agencies to discourage the commercialization and misuse of Buddha images. Such collaboration

enables the organization to participate in state-supported Buddhist initiatives while reinforcing its public identity as a lay movement committed to safeguarding Buddhist values and symbols.

The organization's activism includes international efforts to prevent misuse of the Buddha image. At the movement's heart lies a guiding cosmological vision: ensuring the Buddha's dispensation endures for 5,000 years, with the present age understood as a critical midpoint requiring urgency, devotion, and moral discipline among followers. Framing itself as a lay "Dhamma Army," [4] the KBO pursues lay pathways to liberation while protecting the *sāsana*. It thus offers a non-monastic model of Buddhist preservation: a lay-centered framework that merges conservative ethics with modern outreach and reconfigures Buddhist agency as disciplined, media-literate, morally focused, and globally engaged.

Female Leadership and Soteriological Inclusiveness in Thai Buddhism

Historically constrained within patriarchal Buddhist institutions, Thai women have long been relegated to marginal roles like the *mae chi*. These women have faced systemic disadvantages and challenges not experienced by their male counterparts (Seeger et al. 2024: 18–20). Despite such obstacles, many have pursued deep meditative practice and moral discipline, carving out spaces for female spiritual agency. This challenges the assumption that enlightenment is reserved for ordained monks and highlights the long-standing yet overlooked participation of women in Buddhist practice. Figures such as Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem (1895–1964), Khunying Damrongthammasan (Yai Wisetsiri, 1882–1944), and Mae Chi Kaew Sianglam (1901–1991), regarded by their followers as having attained awakening, demonstrate how liberation has been pursued quietly within female-centered communities (Seeger 2022: 6–8), as some *mae chi*s chose to do by hiding themselves away to practice meditation. This context helps explain the posthumous proliferation of hagiographical literature, such as that surrounding Mae Chi Kaew (Seeger 2018: 57). Their accomplishments, however, have largely been confined to oral recognition and spiritual circles rather than being widely formalized through autobiographical or doctrinal texts. As a result, public veneration for such women remains modest, with limited visibility beyond local or devotional circles.

In the history of Thai Buddhism, records documenting women's meditative practice and realization are exceedingly scarce, rendering this subject difficult to access and analyze. Martin Seeger's research has been pivotal in challenging this absence. Through the study of multiple cases of female renunciants and lay practitioners, he demonstrates that women in Thai Buddhism have engaged in a long history of rigorous practice and teaching, exercising greater influence than has commonly been assumed (Seeger 2018: 252). Exploring female religious lives not only opens new scholarly terrain but also reshapes assumptions about the transmission and interpretation of the Dhamma.

The Pali canon affirms this view through figures like *Somā*, who, when challenged by *Māra*'s words that "it is hard to get to the place that sages want to reach and which is not possible for a woman," replied:

> "What does being a woman have to do with it? What counts is that the heart is settled, and that one sees what really is. What you take as pleasures are not for me, the mass of mental darkness is split open. Know this, evil one, you are defeated, you are finished" (Hallisey 2015; Schedneck 2023: 93–94).

This canonical episode underscores the doctrinal precedent for rejecting gender as a barrier to liberation. Early Buddhist sources affirm women's capacity for awakening, recording female disciples who realized multiple stages, including arahantship. Thus, Buddhist teachings did not exclude them from religious practice or the

[4] The term "Dhamma Army" (*Kong Thap Tham*) is utilized on the Bodhi Dhammayan Retreat homepage to describe the collective of over 10,000 practitioners trained by Master Acharavadee since 2011. This cohort is envisioned as a spiritual force tasked with sustaining Buddhism for 5,000 years by balancing worldly responsibilities with intensive spiritual practice.

attainment of *nibbāna* (Sponberg 1992: 24–25). The crucial point, as Sponberg (1992: 27) emphasizes, is not that sex and gender differences are denied, but rather that such differences are soteriologically insignificant and irrelevant to the attainment of liberation.

Invoking soteriological inclusiveness is crucial for understanding how modern female lay leaders redefine spiritual authority. By asserting that enlightenment is possible without ordination, they reclaim doctrinal legitimacy while challenging the monastic monopoly on spiritual authority, opening new spaces for lay and female participation in shaping contemporary Buddhism. Acharavadee is a prominent contemporary example. As an *upāsikā*, she advances a public and declarative form of lay authority. Through autobiographical testimonies, books, public talks, and digital media, she invites lay practitioners to pursue awakening outside monastic oversight. By grounding legitimacy in her claimed realization rather than clerical endorsement, her case broadens the parameters of who may attain and transmit the Dhamma. This reframing participates in wider debates about access to liberation across gendered and institutional boundaries. The KBO presents curated narratives and biographies of lay and female enlightenment to spread the message of soteriological inclusiveness, presenting awakening as a disciplined, repeatable path. In Acharavadee's case, this is not merely a doctrinal claim but a strategic resource: it allows a female lay practitioner to appropriate canonical legitimacy while simultaneously displacing the monastic monopoly on spiritual authority.

As Crosby (2014: 221) cautions, acknowledging women's equal soteriological potential is not the same as advocating gender equality. In contemporary Thailand, this distinction remains important: androcentric norms and institutional regulations continue to subordinate *mae chis* to monks, even where women's capacity for awakening is doctrinally recognized. *Mae chis*' self-understandings may depart from Western liberal feminist frameworks, and some women choose to forego *mae chi* ordination in favor of intensive lay practice outside monastic hierarchies.

Within this broader landscape of contested female religious authority, critics question Acharavadee's public claim of spiritual attainment, arguing that its emphasis on lay enlightenment challenges the necessity of ordination and established hierarchies (Thairath Online 2018). Some view the KBO as overly progressive, elevating laypeople above the Sangha or undermining monastic institutions, while others critique its conservative defense of Buddhist symbols (Duangkaew 2018). Together, these responses highlight a central tension: Acharavadee's movement relocates spiritual authority beyond the monastic sphere while simultaneously upholding a conservative vision of Buddhist moral order.

Suwanna Satha-Anand (2018), identifies a deep-seated gendered bias in the backlash against Acharavadee, noting that Thai Buddhist tradition typically relegates women to the role of religious "supporters" rather than recognizing them as legitimate spiritual authorities. This reception suggests that contemporary Thai Buddhism is at a crossroads, struggling to reconcile its long-standing institutional hierarchies with an emerging, individualized form of enlightenment that no longer adheres to traditional monastic boundaries. Meanwhile, Acharavadee remains a flashpoint of significant controversy, particularly regarding her assertions of "superhuman states" (*uttarimanussadhamma*). These actions were often interpreted as a subversion of traditional hierarchical relations that became especially visible during the 2018 controversy (Thai PBS 2018) involving images of monks raising their hands to her. However, Acharavadee leveraged the "spotlight" of negative press, clarifying that these monks were her former lay disciples. The KBO's strength lies in its ability to navigate such crises through strategic media presence, transforming public resistance into a platform for growth.

The rise of Acharavadee and the KBO should be situated within the history of Thailand's contemporary Buddhist middle class, as analyzed by Asa Kumpha (2024: 176–94). He argues that Thai Buddhism has undergone a

significant shift toward individualization, fueling a "shopping for teachers" trend that has flourished over the past 20 years, in which lay meditation masters utilize sophisticated media marketing to offer alternative paths to enlightenment. Acharavadee exemplifies the contemporary "Buddhist celebrity," simultaneously critiquing the Sangha while anchoring her authority in conservative moral nationalism. She is simultaneously conservative in her defense of Buddhist images and progressive in the proclamation of her own awakening, attracting a middle-class demographic that seeks "laypersons' attainment of Dhamma" while remaining deeply tethered to conservative identities and nationalistic ideals. Ultimately, this paradox serves to bridge the gap between tradition and personal agency; by anchoring her progressive spiritual claims within a conservative framework, she makes the radical idea of lay awakening feel safe and legitimate for a demographic that yearns for transformation without wanting to abandon their cultural roots.

Autobiographical Writings and the Public Communication of Awakening

In Thai Buddhist narrative traditions, biography and hagiography have largely centered on male monastics, and accounts of charismatic monks are widely popular. Charles Keyes (1982: 149–80) notes that although oral biographical traditions long predate print, Thai written biographies developed only in the early twentieth century. Seeger (2018: 52–53) observes that fears of being seen as "self-promoting" discouraged practitioners from writing about themselves; consequently, hagiographies of female practitioners are rare, and biographical literature on accomplished women emerged significantly later than that on male monastics. Although women were not explicitly barred from narrating their experiences, social conventions afforded little space for self-disclosure within a patriarchal religious sphere. As Seeger highlights, Mae Chi Phimpha Wongsa-udom (1912–2010) hesitated to write and did so only with permission from senior monks. Recent decades have shown some improvement in print, but Seeger (2018: 55) notes that life stories of *mae chis* remain relatively marginal. Biographical genres in Thai Buddhism thus continue to marginalize women's experiences of awakening, even as emerging accounts invite renewed scholarly engagement with female authority and religious life.

The negotiation of spiritual authority within the female laity underscores a pivotal shift in Thailand's contemporary religious landscape. As Joanna Cook (2009: 349–50) aptly observes, hagiographic narratives are not intrinsically gendered. The deployment of such narratives constitutes a strategy that is both communicative and constitutive. This process simultaneously serves as a platform where questions of social and gendered hierarchies, judgment, and duty are negotiated and redefined. The principles of renunciatory self-fashioning are evident in Acharavadee's narrative, in which she offers a performance of Buddhist morality characteristic of an accomplished and charismatic teacher. Examining these narratives reveals how Acharavadee's autobiographical writings challenge long-standing institutional monopolies over spiritual attainment.

According to her biographical accounts on the Bodhidhammayan Retreat's website, Acharavadee began her career as a successful media entrepreneur and jewelry designer before transitioning into spiritual leadership. This shift gained momentum with the establishment of the School of Life Foundation in 2006 and culminated in what she presents as a significant spiritual breakthrough. She claims to have received spiritual transmissions from the renowned *keji ajarn* ("magic monk") Venerable Somdet Phra Puttachan To Phromrangsri (1788–1872), through which she developed a specialized vipassana method based on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, marking the beginning of the Bodhidhammayan lineage. In her account, this method employs the fire element to burn away *kilesa*, or mental impurities, while cultivating consciousness and equanimity. Presenting herself as a Buddhist laywoman who attained awakening, she teaches meditation as a path to lay attainment. Her transition into public religious leadership was further institutionalized through the founding of the KBO in 2012 and the launch of *5000s Magazine* in 2014, both of which promote the protection of Buddhist symbols and

the dissemination of Buddhist teachings. Her influence extends through more than ten books published in Thai and English, as well as a substantial digital presence. As of February 19, 2026, her primary Thai Facebook page had approximately 250,000 followers, while the KBO's retreat centers and international activities suggest an expanding audience that reaches beyond Thailand.

The following section examines Acharavadee's written accounts of her spiritual experiences. In her writings since 2005, she has presented herself as an awakened *upāsikā*. She has authored numerous best-sellers on meditation and transformation. This study focuses on three key volumes. While not her earliest works, these texts offer a profound exploration of lay attainment, moving beyond general doctrine into life-telling and direct spiritual narrative. These specific titles have garnered widespread attention in Thailand and remain the primary basis for her public recognition. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, we examine the following books, which detail Acharavadee's spiritual experiences (Figure 1). We have conscientiously sought to represent her perspective, ensuring that her intent remains unobscured.

Figure 1: Acharavadee's writings *Thot Rahat: Kharawat Banlutham (Laity Enlightenment)* (left), *Kharawat Banlutham Vol. 2* (*Laity Enlightenment II* [5]) (Middle) and *Techo Vipassana* [6] : *Pued Pratu Nibban* (*Opening the Door to Nirvana*) (right); photo by Pattaradhorn Sanpinit.

Acharavadee's autobiographical writings cast her as a modern female lay leader, an awakened *upāsikā*, who claims spiritual authority through soteriological inclusiveness. In *Kharawat Banlutham* (Wongsakon 2016, 2017a), she connects individualized realization to the "mid-point of the Buddhist era," offering both a warning and providing practical advice. In her books and other writings, she creates a public position in which laywomen can claim pedagogical legitimacy. Connecting her personal narrative with the prophetic 5,000-year cycle, she mobilizes urgency to call upon the laity to participate in the defense of the *sāsana*. This middle-class lay path of Buddhist propagation in Thailand might seem to conflict with orthodox forms but is more accurately viewed as an alternative modality within contemporary Thai Buddhism.

Publishing her meditation experiences marked the turning point, after which she has emphasized accounts of meditative attainments, visionary episodes, and encounters with awakened beings. As early as 2010, she began referring to herself as "Master," [7] signaling a new role as a meditation instructor to the public. In the preface to

[5] The English title follows the book's official spelling.
[6] The title appears as "Techo Vipassana" in the original publication, and we retain this spelling to reflect the form used in the book.

her 2016 book, she states that her aim was to reveal the truth and guide individuals toward a path of inner development that leads to the attainment of awakening (Wongsakon 2016: 6–7), framing lay enlightenment as possible yet obscured by misconceptions. She uses autobiographical narratives to awaken readers' moral awareness and encourage them toward liberation. Much of her legitimacy derives from the persuasive nature of her spiritual narrative.

> Awakening is not something impossible for laypeople; rather, because we do not practice seriously, we think it is impossible.... If one practices vipassana, maintains unwavering effort, and keeps up continuous practice, liberation can occur.... As for me, I had to practice for over ten thousand hours with an unflagging mind before I attained an experience of inspiration.... Awake, Buddhists who have lost your way; set out on the journey toward awakening (Wongsakon 2016: 316–21).

Although she does not specify the degree of her realization, the narrative structure invites readers to infer a full awakening. Her texts chart her progression from household life to intensive vipassana, asserting the possibility of lay awakening without ordination. Accounts of personal realization, karmic memory, and encounters with monks provide a model of disciplined practice and moral integrity in lay life. Her readers' report, disseminated via Facebook, renewed moral clarity and the accessibility of realization for laypeople, challenging monk-centered authority (Wongsakon 2017b).[8]

Regarding the specific nature of her awakening, Acharavadee navigates a complex boundary between spiritual reticence and pedagogical disclosure. Responding to accusations of "boasting of superhuman attainments" (*uttarimanussadhammaṃ samudācarati*), she argues that her autobiographical accounts are intended to inspire practitioners rather than to promote herself (Wongsakon 2016: 7). Central to this presentation is her Techo Vipassana method to "burn away the kilesa," or mental defilements (Wongsakon 2010: 190–92). She further characterizes this transformative process as the uprooting of repugnance (*paṭigha*), employing the metaphor of removing a weed by its roots. Although she never explicitly claims the attainment of the *anāgāmī* (non-returner), the third of the four canonical stages of awakening, this language implicitly evokes that level, since the complete abandonment of *paṭigha* is traditionally associated with non-returnership. She also recounts a pivotal meditative breakthrough marked by an internal sound resembling an earthquake and a profound flash of light in her mind. Rather than presenting this simply as a visionary experience, she frames it as a significant spiritual milestone, implicitly drawing a parallel with Luang Ta Maha Bua's description of the "world-element collapsing" (*lokadhātu khwam*) at the moment of enlightenment. While carefully noting that she has "not yet reached that level," she nevertheless suggests that the experience convinced her she was approaching nibbāna. By framing her experiences within this established ascetic vocabulary, she implicitly claims a degree of spiritual legitimacy that transcends her lay status while presenting her attainment as something that, in canonical terms, is "to be known individually by the wise" (*paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi*).

The tension between canonical Pali perspectives and Thai interpretive traditions is epitomized in the myth that a layperson reaching arahantship must either ordain or die within seven days—a belief rooted not in the *Tipiṭaka* but in the influential a post-canonical text such as the *Milindapañhā*, which characterizes the lay status as "too weak" to sustain the weight of full awakening and asserting that a lay arahant must either renounce immediately or die on the same day (Milindapañhā: 6.2.2.). She explicitly confronts this theological dilemma in her 2016 work, *Banlu Tham Laew Tong Tai Nai 7 Wan? (After Attaining Dhamma, Must One Die within*

[7] The term "Master" is used by Ajarn Acharavadee in her English-language media. In Thai, she refers to herself as "Ajarn," a term loaned from the *pāli* word "*ācariya*," meaning "teacher" or "instructor," which appeared as early as 2010 in *Techo Vipassana*. The title conveys her self-presentation as an authority who teaches vipassana meditation in the Techo Vipassana tradition, in the text she also uses "teacher/master" when referring to herself.

[8] A compilation video on the Master Acharavadee TH page gathers brief testimonials from readers of *Kharawat Banlutham* Vol. 2, many of whom describe renewed moral clarity, stricter precepts-keeping, and confidence that realization is attainable for laypeople.

Seven Days?), in which she refutes the necessity of death and asserts that survival as an enlightened laywoman is entirely possible. Drawing on her own experience, she insists that while the unsettled mind collapses, one grounded in Dhamma endures (Wongsakon 2016: 310–15). This reinterpretation shifts the debate from doctrinal inevitability to mental composure, softening the tension within post-canonical Theravada thought. This stance is profoundly subversive in Thailand, where the absence of a recognized *bhikkhunī* lineage leaves women with no institutional path to ultimate liberation. By choosing to remain a lay teacher rather than seeking a debated ordination, she uses her own survival and the flourishing of her community to challenge the monastic monopoly on enlightenment. Her narrative deconstructs the gendered and institutional constraints of Thai Buddhism. However, this subversion functions as a double-edged sword. While it empowers laywomen by reclaiming the female body as a site of sanctity, it simultaneously risks establishing a new, self-authorized locus of power that bypasses traditional oversight. By framing her survival as a unique spiritual victory, she successfully dismantles clerical gatekeeping but, in doing so, constructs an alternative form of charismatic authority that is equally centralized and difficult to critique within her own community.

This self-authorized charismatic authority is further legitimated through the narrative forms by which Acharavadee explains her spiritual power. She recounts intensive training with both monastic and lay teachers undertaken to relieve suffering, while her autobiographical narratives include claims of *abhiññā*, celestial communications, encounters with Māra, and recollections of past lives (*pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa*). She also recalls a former life during the reign of King Taksin (1734–1782), in which an unjust execution allegedly gave rise to enduring dispositions such as anger and resentment. She links these traits to the fetter of repugnance (*paṭigha*), which she later claims to have overcome through meditative practice.

Such interpretations reflect broader patterns within Thai middle-class lay Buddhism, where the law of karma often serves as a practical framework for understanding personal suffering and spiritual progress. Among Acharavadee's followers, vipassanā is presented as a pragmatic means of transforming one's life and escaping saṃsāra, while knowledge of past karmic actions is valued as a way of identifying and addressing the roots of present difficulties. As Asa Kumpha (2024: 7–8) observes, such understandings are characteristic of "popular Buddhism." Despite her modernizing agenda, Acharavadee remains firmly grounded in traditional Thai Buddhist conceptions of karma inherited through family upbringing and monastic teaching. This creates an important tension: while she adopts the language identified by McMahan (2008: 65–66), presenting the Buddha as a "freethinking empiricist" and distancing her teachings from "superstition," she simultaneously employs this modernist framework to reaffirm traditional karmic causality. Her form of lay modernity thus functions as a strategic accommodation in which rationalism and traditional karmic certainty coexist within a hybrid model of religious authority.

A second strategy through which Acharavadee legitimizes her authority is the claim to direct communication with the Buddha, through which private realization is converted into public pedagogy by the language of reason and science. In *Kharawat Banlutham* (2016), she presents human birth as a rare opportunity to "decode" the cosmic currents that bind consciousness across lifetimes, casting humanity as the pivotal link to liberation. She identifies the Buddha as the person who first decoded and taught the path to the cessation of rebirth, while presenting Techo Vipassana as the method by which she realized it (Wongsakon 2016: 173–79). To warrant this soteriology, she claims direct communication with the Buddha: "What I will share now is not something mystical like 'talking to God', and it's not a wordplay. I really communicated with the Buddha who passed away over 2,500 years ago" (Wongsakon 2023b: 16). She presents her book as a response to that mandate. She thus folds the Buddha into her life narrative, claiming a chosen role as an overtly hagiographic tactic. She reframes enlightenment as compatible with natural science to broaden acceptance, converting private realization into public pedagogy that authorizes lay teaching and strengthens modern lay agency. Her self-legitimation thus

avoids monastic endorsement and favors a straightforward explanation that is open to public scrutiny, fusing revelatory charisma with rationalist legitimation and recalibrating the epistemic standards of Thai Buddhism while exposing the tensions between experiential claims and communal review. In his study of religious rebranding in Indonesia, James Hoesterey (2016: 73–82) argues that such leaders use scientific discourse not to replace religion, but to strengthen its legitimacy—transforming traditional doctrine into a rational, technical, and objective path that appeals to the educated middle class.

This strategy of legitimation also extends into modern scientific and therapeutic discourse. A comparable dynamic can be seen in the case of Acharavadee and the KBO. She integrates psychological and self-help discourse with Dhamma, grounding health in what she describes as its true source—the mind. In her interview in *Top Doctor Magazine* under the theme "Heal at the Core" ("Meditation Master Acharavadee Wongsakon" 2025: 1–51), she asserts that "the mind is the body, and the body is the mind," arguing that without addressing the mind, medical professionals cannot fully heal patients. Meditation is presented as a practical discipline open to scientific examination, positioning her movement within global—particularly Western—efforts to bridge medicine and spirituality through spiritual awakening. Through initiatives such as "Journey to Enlightenment," which feature testimonials from international followers, she situates her authority within transnational regimes of credibility linking Buddhism, health science, and natural self-care.

In her writings, Acharavadee describes having completed more than 30,000 hours of meditation practice, which inspired her to document and share her own journey. Another pivotal moment was the supposed telepathic guidance of the famous historical monk, Somdet To. Acharavadee (2010: 7–9) invokes Somdet To as a spiritual teacher who transmitted to her the practice leading to liberation. Her claims of communicating with him are repeatedly emphasized, especially in the book in which she first declared her awakening. This invocation gains force from Somdet To's enduring reputation as one of Thailand's most venerated monks (McDaniel 2011), ensuring that her claim resonates with his established networks of lay devotees. She claims that Somdet To guided her spiritually in developing Techo Vipassana (Figure 2). In the introduction to her first book (2010), she described it as a direct shortcut to *nibbāna* consistent with the Buddha's teaching. She linked the practice to the *Magga-vibhaṅga Sutta* on the Noble Eightfold Path, citing the Pali phrase *ātāpī sampajāno satimā*—ardent in burning defilements (Wongsakon 2010: 167–70), with the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of body (*kāyā*), mindfulness of feelings (*vedanā*), mindfulness of mind/heart (*citta*), and mindfulness of qualities (*dhamma*).

Here, Acharavadee emphasizes Somdet To's status as a rational ascetic whose transmitted teachings enable lay enlightenment, thereby operationalizing soteriological inclusiveness through her own example:

> *Techo Vipassana* is the burning away of defilements through the practice of vipassana meditation.... When I witnessed the power of Techo Vipassana, I recalled the great virtue of Somdet To. I bowed to him and vowed in my heart to take him as my teacher. This knowledge was received from him across different dimensions of time (intuitive insight), through the spirit of Somdet To, even though he had passed away more than 140 years ago (Wongsakon 2010: 16–17).

Acharavadee thus constructs a teacher-disciple relationship with Somdet To through telepathic communication, positioning him as a timeless spiritual mentor and source of religious legitimation. This connection invokes a recognizable pattern in Thai hagiography, in which practitioners frequently appeal to revered monks as sources of spiritual transmission or validation. As Seeger (2018: 51–56) observes, such references carry particular significance in women's religious biographies in Thailand, where the endorsement of prominent male monastics can help counterbalance gendered skepticism and provide a socially accepted lineage through which female attainment appears more credible. Acharavadee's autobiographical accounts do not rely primarily on scholastic

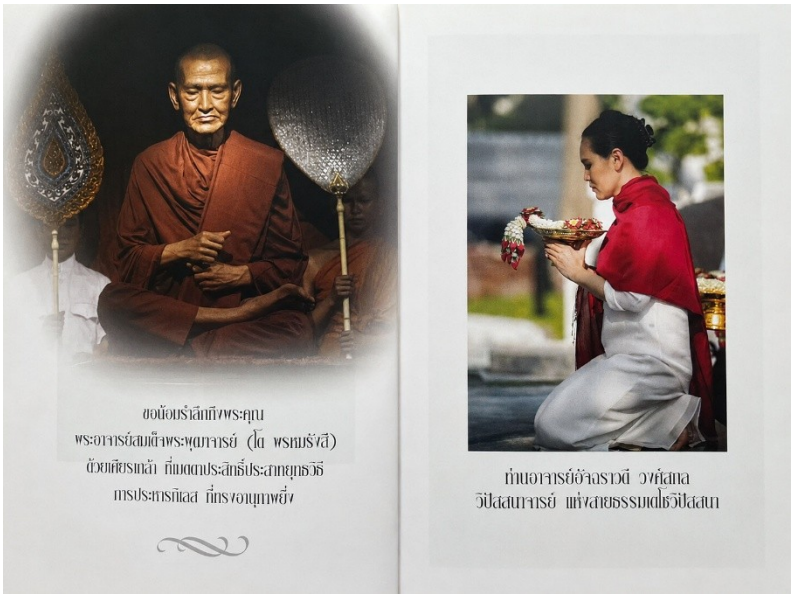

Figure 2: A photograph in the book *Laity Enlightenment II* shows Somdet To (left) with a caption that reads, "In grateful remembrance of Venerable Teacher Somdet To, who taught the method for eradicating the *kilesas*," and Ajarn Acharavadee Wongsakon (right), identified by name as the vipassana master of the Techo Vipassana lineage; photo by Pattaradhorn Sanpinit.

authority but instead foreground lived experience, narrating her struggles, breakthroughs, and spiritual insights while deliberately maintaining ambiguity about the precise nature of her enlightenment. By framing her continued lay status as a conscious sacrifice for the benefit of others, she constructs a model of spiritual leadership that is both accessible and symbolically elevated yet still situated within a conservative framework that links female authority to sanctified male figures. This dynamic illustrates the continuing embeddedness of gender hierarchies in contemporary Thai Buddhist processes of religious legitimation, even in contexts that outwardly appear supportive of lay religious revivalism.

A significant tension arises in Acharavadee's positioning of Somdet To as a rationalist ascetic. While she frames his teachings as a pragmatic, technical path to lay enlightenment—aligning with the rationalizing and experiential tendencies of "Buddhist Modernism" described by McMahan (2008: 63–67)—her claim that these teachings were transmitted through "intuitive insight" from a disembodied master introduces a mystical dimension that complicates this rationalist framing. However, this tension reveals what Justin McDaniel (2011: 54–55) identifies as the inherent hybridity of Thai religion. McDaniel notes that Somdet To functions as a central figure of "national protection" with an explicitly jingoistic undertone. Acharavadee strategically taps into this by reviving the *Jinapañjara Gāthā*, a protective chant historically empowered to safeguard the nation during crises. While she presents the chant as a tool for spiritual clearing and clearing obstacles (Wongsakon 2017a: 298–306), its recurring use in collective KBO rituals during national tensions betrays a deeper ideological alignment. Ultimately, this fusion of telepathic revelation and institutional ritual enables Acharavadee to bypass monastic mediation. By grounding her "rational" meditation in the mystical persona of a national protector, this alignment suggests a form of spiritualized nationalism in which karmic purification and national protection become symbolically intertwined.

Her later works reiterate the claim of Somdet To's continuing guidance while increasingly foregrounding the testimonies of her own disciples (see, e.g., Wongsakon 2017a). Many of these followers previously pursued successful professional careers and describe significant progress in meditation practice through Acharavadee's methods and teachings, experiences of spiritual realization, and a subsequent commitment to volunteer within

the organization to protect Buddhism. Their narratives suggest that worldly success and professional expertise can be redirected toward the Dhamma and a more meaningful religious life. Since 2016, *5000s Magazine* has regularly serialized these accounts, routinizing Acharavadee's charisma in a Weberian sense by embedding her authority within disciples' testimonies, organizational media, and volunteer practice. In doing so, the magazine consolidates her authority by transforming individual experiences of practice and devotion into repeatable organizational narratives.

This mode of self-representation positions her as both exemplar and guide, supplies a template through which laypeople can envision realization, and reframes Thai Buddhist leadership as lay moral agency. The work is characterized by a hybrid genre, merging autobiographical narrative with a "how-to" format. Evidently, the texts employ a hagiographic narrative that cannot be disentangled from the characteristic belief system of the Thai middle-class Buddhists. They cater to two main aspirations: (1) providing a training manual for practitioners aiming for attainment of Dhamma and (2) meeting the expectations of being a "good Buddhist" by integrating Dhamma into daily life. As will be shown below, the KBO community has set up a structure for managing and reinforcing her organization, which continuously disseminates selected teachings and content tailored for contemporary Thai middle-class Buddhists. Through this public narrativization of awakening, moral agency shifts from monastic certification to media circulation. Authority is no longer conferred solely through ordination but through persuasive spiritual self-disclosure.

Representation of Female Leadership as Lay Moral Agency

Substantial evidence points to an ongoing reconfiguration of religious authority in Thai Buddhism that translates doctrine into repeatable lay practice, thereby legitimizing lay authority without monastic status. At the center of this process is what we term lay moral agency. Lay actors are not merely supporters of the Sangha; they actively evaluate, defend, and intervene in defining the moral boundaries of Buddhism itself. In this sense, "media activism" describes the strategic deployment of communication platforms, while "lay-centered spiritual movement" and "lay moral agency" together capture a reconfiguration of religious authority in which lay practitioners assume an assertive and self-conscious role in producing protective discourse within contemporary Thai Buddhism. In this context, moral agency is defined as the capacity of an individual to exercise ethical leadership and initiate collective moral action independent of traditional institutional mandates. As documented in her book *12 Years 8 Months* (Wongsakon 2023a: 14–15), this agency is fueled by a dedicated group of lay followers striving for Dhamma attainment. These followers are represented as moved by a profound sense of indebtedness to the Buddha and the *Sāsana*, and her movement redirects this energy toward organized, worldly engagement. Unlike the traditional Theravada ideal of solitary liberation, her approach emphasizes collective social involvement. In her view, only an awakened mind can embark on the bodhisattva path to assist all sentient beings (Wongsakon 2017a: 380–84). These principles strategically blend Theravada elements with Mahayana ideals, effectively repositioning lay practitioners from subordinate supporters to directive agents. By claiming this authority, she transforms the lay status into a primary vehicle for preserving and transmitting Dhamma.

Acharavadee embodies this by positioning herself as a central moral arbiter, leading the KBO as a hub for ethical promotion and social consciousness. She publicly presents herself as an *upāsikā*, wearing white robes akin to a *mae chi* without shaving her head, often adorned with a red shawl, which serves as a distinct visual marker differentiating her from traditional monastics. As a socially engaged leader, she institutionalizes her authority through diverse initiatives, from Buddhist-inspired community projects to moral-education programs. Through actively promoting Buddhist virtues in her leadership, she creates a socio-religious organization that recognizes

women's moral agency and helps normalize lay authority, thereby challenging the monastic monopoly on spiritual guidance.

Her pedagogy places lived experience at the center: she narrates a forthright path to full awakening as inspiration and affirms that laypeople can realize the Dhamma while living ordinary lives, offering "what should/should not be done" rather than instant techniques. Building on this stance, she outlines a path for laypeople based on five principles: (1) strict observance of the Five Precepts with faith in the Triple Gem; (2) disciplined practice of meditation and vipassana; (3) detachment from sensual desires (*nandi*) by renouncing the five sense pleasures (*kāmaguṇa*) and avoiding the six ruinous distractions (*apāyamukha*); (4) rejection of harmful occupations; and (5) refusal of superstitions and non-Buddhist rituals. This framework reframes enlightenment as attainable for laypeople regardless of gender or status, contingent on moral discipline (*sīla*), effort (*vīriya*), and proper guidance (*kalyāṇamitta*). This focus on prescriptions and proscriptions places her teaching firmly within ethical and moral dimensions. The selected doctrines are employed as criteria for evaluating the "good Buddhist" and their readiness for *nibbāna*.

Her writings consistently foreground the School of Life and the Bodhi-Dhammayan Retreat as enduring sites of moral cultivation, framing leadership not as a struggle for equality but as a redirection of hierarchy toward care and responsibility. Her children's meditation school and the donation of all book proceeds to the School of Life Foundation exemplify this ethic, illustrating how women's engagements with Buddhism can serve to reconfigure symbolic virtues into resources for women's spiritual authority (Crosby 2014: 253–54).

In 2021, she introduced "Dhamma for Youth" (or *Dhamma waisai*), weekend courses that integrate Buddhist values with family life. While these programs bear some resemblance to *Dhammakāya*'s V-Star youth initiatives (see, e.g., Scott 2021: 230–305), they are distinctively lay and family-oriented, emphasizing ethics through the lens of Thai national identity—specifically loyalty to the Nation, Religion, and Monarchy. These courses foster family bonds by actively involving parents in the training process, a strategy that serves as a subtle gateway into the KBO; by appealing to familial values and patriotic sentiment, she progressively integrates participants into her broader organizational framework. Following her youth-focused pilot project, she extended her teachings to lay seekers. Situated within the KBO, these initiatives exemplify an ethic of care that links spiritual attainment with social responsibility while remaining gender-neutral. This trajectory aligns with Schedneck's (2023: 113–19) research on lay religious authority, which often consolidates through education, social welfare, and compassionate service. By coupling personal realization with institution-building, she advances a typology of the lay renunciant as a realized practitioner, educator, and religious entrepreneur.

Media Activism and the Expanding Lay Role in Preserving and Protecting Buddhism

The shift of religious authority into the lay domain is reinforced through Acharavadee's media activism, which expands the role of lay actors in the protection and transmission of Buddhism. Through multi-platform strategies—ranging from print publications such as *5000s Magazine* to curated public exhibitions and social media platforms including Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram—she has cultivated an alternative arena for Dhamma transmission that functions alongside, rather than in direct opposition to, the traditional Sangha. We interpret this development as a form of "lay-centered spiritual movement," drawing analytical inspiration from Hoesterey's (2016) study of religious rebranding in Indonesia, which demonstrates how contemporary religious authority increasingly depends upon media charisma and entrepreneurial forms of piety. In the Thai Buddhist context, this dynamic operates through the KBO's use of media as a primary arena for cultivating religious attention, moral discipline, and public participation. Rather than relying exclusively on textual or scholastic authority, religious legitimacy is increasingly produced through mediated authority: the strategic management of images, narratives, platforms, and campaigns. Across social media, public exhibitions, and

5000s Magazine, the KBO's media activities function as a form of public moral entrepreneurship that presents Buddhist symbols and teachings in an accessible and affective form for contemporary middle-class publics. In this sense, media activism advances the KBO's broader mission of preserving Buddhist values while protecting Buddhism from acts perceived as disrespectful toward Buddha images and other sacred symbols, guided by its principle that "Respect is common sense."

Acharavadee's movement exhibits a similar shift toward mediated authority and strategic self-positioning. Yet the Thai Buddhist context introduces important differences. Lay religious authority cannot easily detach itself from temple-based structures, as popular religiosity remains deeply embedded in the institutional Sangha. Open rejection of monastic authority would therefore be difficult to sustain socially. Rather than repudiating the monastic institution, Acharavadee adopts a selective approach: she supports monks within her own network while publicly criticizing those she perceives as violating the Vinaya, contributing to moral decline, or holding positions she regards as harmful to Buddhism. These disagreements unfold primarily through media platforms, which become important arenas for public debate and the negotiation of religious legitimacy.

This process of media-based negotiation also shapes the KBO's organizational practice. Acharavadee's leadership is supported by a lay network capable of translating her religious vision into public communication. Volunteers and administrators with backgrounds in media, business, and communications organize campaigns, exhibitions, social media content, and public outreach. At the same time, cooperation with temples, local government agencies, and state agencies these activities to remain connected to established religious and public institutions while simultaneously elevating concerns over the misuse of Buddha images and Buddhist symbols to broader public attention.

The trajectory of Acharavadee's autobiographical works laid the groundwork for subsequent media initiatives such as *5000s Magazine* (Figure 3), which integrated her teachings with Dhamma instruction, meditation practice, and moral guidance. Her movement thus exemplifies a form of media mobilization, whereby religious actors strategically employ diverse media to assemble publics, circulate moral authority, and coordinate collective projects. Drawing on Hoover's (2006: 26–44) understanding of media as both social practices and resources for constructing religious meaning, we argue that the recognition of Acharavadee's spiritual authority was accompanied by organizational consolidation and the systematic expansion of media strategies. The KBO's lay movement relies on diverse media not only to cultivate followers and legitimacy but also to amplify collective action within the Buddhist public sphere. In this configuration, Acharavadee's claim to awakening authorizes an active lay role in "protecting Buddhism" rather than withdrawal from worldly affairs. Testimonies in *5000s Magazine*, media-based pedagogy, and campaigns promoting reverence for Buddha images translate spiritual authority into public activism and create space for lay leadership. More specifically, *5000s Magazine* functions as a sustained vehicle for cultivating moral sensibilities and commitment to the KBO's mission (Figure 3), while Facebook and other social media platforms maintain daily engagement and promote meditation courses, Buddhist holiday exhibitions, and campaigns such as "Buddha is not for decoration." Through activities staged in temples, public venues, and partner spaces, the KBO transforms its moral message into a recurring form of public Buddhist activism.

Among these initiatives, *5000s Magazine* serves as the KBO's flagship medium for moral pedagogy. Its recurring opening message, "There's no need to choose because Dhamma and lifestyle are the same thing," presents worldly life and Buddhist practice as mutually compatible. The pairing of this slogan with idealized images of Thai femininity and reverence before Buddha images gives the message a distinctive cultural form, linking lay access to the Dhamma with moral refinement, Thai identity, and Buddhist respectability. The magazine's Buddhist section centers on Acharavadee's teaching voice through short lessons on meditation and doctrine, question-and-answer columns addressing everyday applications of the Dhamma, and guidance on meditation,

lay roles, safeguarding Buddhism, and the Buddha's teachings concerning lay practice and liberation from suffering. Alongside this teacher-led material, the magazine curates testimonies from middle-class laypeople to demonstrate lived Buddhist practice and renewed engagement with Buddhism, often featuring recognizable professionals whose participation enhances the publication's credibility and signals tacit affiliation with the KBO. A second stream of content situates Acharavadee within a sanctified lineage through serialized accounts of Somdet To and other renowned monks, paired with lay testimonies of practice under her guidance, thereby stitching authority, lineage, and contemporary experience into a unified didactic framework.

Figure 3: Selected Issues of 5000s Magazine; photo by Pattaradhorn Sanpinit.

The KBO mobilizes exemplarity as a communicative strategy through *5000s Magazine*, curating parallel narratives across lay and monastic spheres. One recurring column, "Laypersons Who Persevere to the Other Shore" (*Kharawat Phu Phian Kham Fang*), presents the experiences of Acharavadee's followers who have attended her meditation courses, report gradual progress in vipassana practice, and express gratitude to Acharavadee—culminating in invitations for readers to attend and "try for themselves," a form of a media pedagogy that normalizes lay practice as a credible path to awakening. A second column, "Dhamma from Extraordinary People" (*Thamma Chak Phu Mai Thammada*), introduces the lives and spiritual paths of exemplary Buddhist figures from the past, including monks, *mae chi*s, and lay practitioners remembered for their moral conduct or spiritual attainment. Representative examples include Mae Chi Kaew (1901–1991), the revered practitioner associated with Huai Sai Abbey (KBO 2024: 69–71); the lay practitioner Uncle Wheet Buaphuan (1949–2010), who is presented as having attained enlightenment (KBO 2025: 71–73); and Mae Chan Dee Lohitdee (1944–2013), the sister of Luangta Maha Bua, who is widely believed to have attained arahantship. The magazine also features forest-monastic narratives that include accounts of spiritual realization prior to ordination. Collectively, these selections construct a shared field of Buddhist exemplarity in which lay and monastic models of practice reinforce one another, helping normalizing lay attainment as a disciplined and morally grounded path while aligning contemporary aspirations with established Buddhist precedents.

5000s Magazine also features a column format that blends Dhamma teaching with lifestyle features—travel, everyday living, and aspirational narratives—to broaden its reach. It simultaneously preserves four stable core pillars: the centrality of lay leadership embodied by Acharavadee and her organization, coverage of organizational activities and the elevation of followers who become staff or editors (introduced as her "disciples"), normative messaging that insists on ethical clarity, and reverence for Buddhist symbols while rejecting religious consumerism. Critically, this configuration functions as a strategic instrument for public image-crafting and coalition-building: it packages the movement's grand aims in personal stories, uses contemporary design and an invitational tone to create credibility and affective "absorption," and leverages media mobilization to convert readers into participants. By cultivating parasocial bonds and routinizing engagement, the magazine manufactures moral legitimacy and makes affiliation with the KBO appear as a natural choice for contemporary lay Buddhists.

In this context, *5000s Magazine* functions as a key platform for defending Buddhism while framing this mission as integral to the ideal of being a "good Buddhist" in contemporary society. The magazine articulates the KBO's mission to protect Buddhist symbols and promote lay revivalism by presenting veneration of the Buddha image not merely as devotion but as a moral duty. Its objectives include encouraging respectful conduct, raising awareness of symbolic desecration, and mobilizing collective action in partnership with Buddhist institutions and state authorities. Central to this effort is the promotion of gratitude as a civic-religious virtue. The KBO advances a non-confrontational educational style to assert that reverence for the Buddha transcends religious identity. As Jerryson (2016: 38) observes, the KBO thus represents a distinctive model of lay-led moral activism rooted in nonviolence, ethical discipline, and symbolic guardianship. The magazine frames the protection of Buddhism as the duty of every Buddhist while also linking it directly to a Thai national identity. It thus frames Buddhism and Thailand as inseparable symbols within the KBO's moral-national imaginary.

The launch of *5000s Magazine* in 2014 marked a significant milestone in the KBO's media activism strategy, consolidating a multi-platform repertoire—print columns such as "What's Happened" and "Do and Don't on Buddha," short films, and coordinated social media campaigns—to monitor, publicize, and censure what it deems desecration and disrespectful uses of Buddhist imagery (Figure 4). Framed by the slogan "The Buddha is our (Buddhist) father," this configuration recasts reverence as both filial duty and collective responsibility, turning lay piety into a program of public vigilance. Recurring features identify perceived violations (e.g., Buddha tattoos, the decorative use of holy images, exploitative entertainment backdrops) (Figure 5). At the same time, KBO publicizes successful cases through its magazine and online media, while emphasizing that these remain limited in comparison with the wider number of disrespectful cases. Its media therefore also functions as a reporting network, encouraging supporters and the wider public to notify KBO of disrespectful uses of Buddha images and Buddhist symbols through email or direct messages on Facebook. Videos and posts on the KBO's YouTube channel and the "Knowing Buddha by Master Acharavadee" page convert incidents into mobilizing narratives that invite reporting and participation. Critically, this media-centered guardianship seeks to shape the norms of public comportment around sacred symbols while applying pressure across multiple audiences, including Thai lay Buddhists (as duty-bearers), tourists and entertainment industries (as targets of correction), and state and temple actors (as expected enforcers). In effect, the sustained emphasis on "protection" fuses religious sentiment with cultural nationalism, equating Buddhist propriety with Thai authenticity and positioning the KBO as an arbiter of acceptable visibility for Buddhist icons in modern life.

To this end, *5000s Magazine* delineates five principal forms of inappropriate use of Buddhist imagery: (1) commercial commodification (sacred symbols printed on merchandise or fashion for sale and decorated furniture); (2) secular appropriation (temples and Buddha statues used as entertainment or lifestyle backdrops in unsuitable venues); (3) disrespectful physical engagement (touristic posing, touching, or handling images

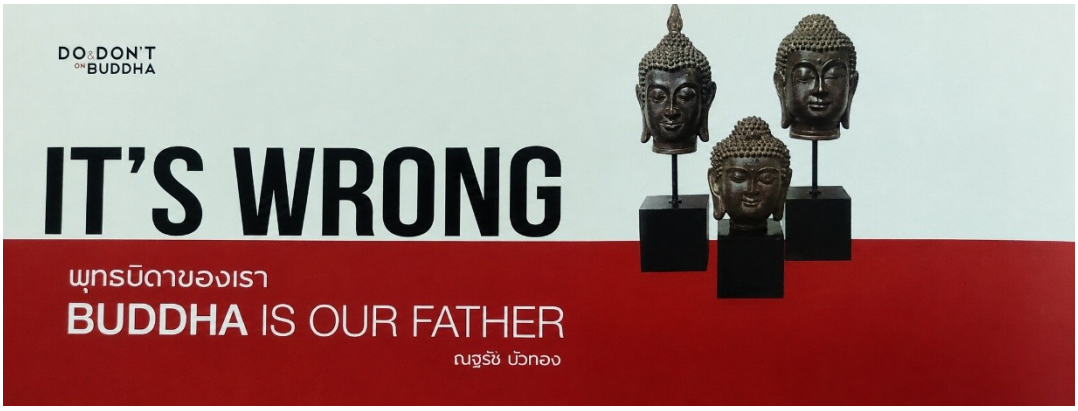

Figure 4: "Do & Don't on Buddha" column, a regular feature since the magazine's inception, exemplifies the campaign against the desecration of Buddhist symbols (*5000s Magazine*, KBO 2015: 64); photo by Pattaradhorn Sanpinit.

without reverence); (4) cultural misrepresentation (films, music videos, memes, viral clips, graphic novels, and filters that detach imagery from doctrine); and (5) iconographic tattoos. Within this rubric, "Buddha Watch"—a KBO initiative featured in the magazine—coordinates monitoring and reporting, while short films and social-media campaigns amplify a consistent message: "Buddha is not for commercial art, not for decoration; the Buddha statue must be placed in an appropriate position." Additionally, parodies and appropriative fashion (including costumes that mimic or mock the Buddha) are improper. Readers are invited to practice shared vigilance and report violations. The KBO's media-centered guardianship exemplifies a lay Buddhist activism that seeks to censure and deter practices judged injurious to Buddhist sensibilities, using coordinated media to translate doctrinal reverence into public norms. In its inaugural issue, *5000s Magazine* proclaimed: If we all give a hand with strength and courage, no matter the obstacles, we can truly make a change and build righteousness to show great gratitude to the Lord Buddha and to protect Buddhism, the way to enlightenment for all mankind (KBO 2014: 25).

Figure 5: An example of promoting 5000s.org in the magazine's first issue. (*5000s Magazine*, KBO 2014: 48); photo by Pattaradhorn Sanpinit.

This discourse frames the protection of Buddhism as a moral obligation that defines legitimate lay identity. In *5000s Magazine*, gratitude, courage, and sacrifice are presented as conditions of belonging, effectively recasting activism as a form of spiritual practice. The 2014 "Meditation for Buddhism and Thailand" campaign is an example of how group chanting and meditation can be seen as both devotion to the Buddha and loyalty to the country, blurring the lines between religious practice and civic duty. Through such mobilizations, Acharavadee's Techo Vipassana network transforms lay practice from a private path of realization into a public project of guardianship. During moments of religious scandal or political tension, the KBO strategically mobilizes its followers, transforming social anxiety into calls for moral intervention. In this way, the defense of Buddhist symbols becomes a site where religious authority, national belonging, and female moral leadership are simultaneously asserted and contested. These practices remain active: on June 7, 2025, the Bodhidhammayan Retreat hosted a collective meditation event, documented (Wongsakon 2025: 72–73) and widely shared through the KBO's official Facebook page, demonstrating the sustained transmediation in contemporary Thai Buddhism.[9] It is noteworthy that the KBO avoids a fixed schedule, instead rallying followers strategically during religious scandals or political shifts.

The KBO has evolved from a loosely structured advocacy group into a formal foundation, reflecting the deliberate institutionalization of its mission under the guise of public service. This transformation aligns with broader trends in Thai lay Buddhist revivalism, in which charismatic authority is both personified in the leader and embedded in the organizational structure. As a registered foundation, the KBO publicly emphasizes its contributions to society through campaigns, publications, and exhibitions that highlight its achievements regarding moral reform, mindfulness, and cultural preservation. These efforts mark the emergence of a socially engaged form of lay Buddhism that integrates spiritual practice with civic action in what might be considered a form of Buddhist development activism. Essentially, the foundation's activities maintain continuity with its original mission of protecting Buddhism, particularly the symbolic integrity of the Buddha image. Public campaigns, such as the "Walk to Stop Disrespecting Buddha Images" (Figure 6) and subsequent processions to major temples in Bangkok, are framed as moral awakenings for Thais and foreigners alike.

This highlights the movement's core ethos: within this discourse, Buddhists are entrusted not only with the practice leading to liberation but also with the guardianship of Buddhism as an expression of loyalty and gratitude. With the goal of countering what the KBO regards as misguided knowledge and the erosion of respect for the Enlightened One, they strive to restore the core of the Buddha's teachings and to revive Buddhism's status as the "Religion of Awakening." Acharavadee herself emphasizes this commitment, declaring: "This is an era where the layman should support Buddhism in every aspect. If the assembly of Buddhists had fulfilled their responsibility properly, Buddhism would not have come to this point" (Wongsakon 2017a: 34). Ultimately, we observe a striking paradox in her mission: while the path to *nibbāna* traditionally dictates a renunciation of worldly concerns, her movement aggressively pursues social and political engagement. This shift from solitary liberation to organized activism creates a fundamental tension, as bridging transcendental goals with worldly influence inevitably invites institutional friction and social repercussions.

Conclusion

The major finding of this study is that the KBO under Acharavadee has reconfigured lay authority by translating her autobiographical journey into publicly performed legitimacy across books, *5000s Magazine*, social media, and coordinated campaigns. In Campbell's (2010: 63–69) terms, media operate as a religious-social hybrid,

[9] These updates are promoted in the 5000s Magazine and on KBO's official social media pages. KBO also stages recurrent exhibitions called "Spiritual Life Exhibition" during the entire week of *Māgha Pūjā*, *Visākha Pūjā*, and *Āsaḷha Pūjā* days at the selected temple, instructing foreign and Thai visitors on proper etiquette toward Buddhist sites and iconography through a short video about basic meditation and the proper acts toward the Buddha. In doing so, KBO publicizes its leadership in defending Buddhism and cultivating lay moral discipline, positioning this public pedagogy as sustained lay guardianship within temple spaces.

Figure 6: Photograph at the Spiritual Life Exhibition at Mansikarn Hall, Saraburi, showing the KBO procession under the campaign "Walk to Stop Disrespecting Buddha Images."; photo by Pattaradhorn Sanpinit.

shaping arenas that produce norms and moral publics rather than being neutral conduits. As forms of narrative legitimation, these curated life stories and routinized testimonies use private experience to create public authority, rendering the lay awakening process both thinkable and repeatable for middle-class publics. In the KBO's media activism, print/digital platforms and campaign logics invite the public to participate in doctrinally framed practice, cultivating parasocial bonds and regulate reverence for Buddhist symbols. Institutionalization, leadership, organizational roles, and rule-guided pedagogy stabilize these energies in durable organizational forms beyond the monastery. The KBO operationalizes soteriological inclusiveness in a contemporary, gendered lay register: it affirms that laywomen can realize and communicate paths to awakening to fellow laypersons, aligning spiritual practice with lay activism oriented toward safeguarding Buddhism rather than world-renunciation. Consequently, narrative legitimation, media activism, and institutional design converge in what this article has described as lay-led soteriological entrepreneurship, reshapes Thai Buddhist propriety while expanding who may legitimately preserve and transmit the Dhamma.

The transformation of Acharavadee's private experiences into published doctrine represents a sophisticated process of textual authority construction that reveals distinctive characteristics rarely documented in scholarship on female Buddhist leadership. Her approach demonstrates soteriological entrepreneurship as the intentional, strategic conversion of personal meditative attainment into doctrinal, institutional, and pedagogical authority, a process that blends charismatic claims with planned dissemination. She exhibits an unprecedented self-proclaimed enlightenment through detailed autobiographical documentation of her intensive meditation practice and claimed supernatural experiences, with her publications cultivating a dedicated community of lay practitioners who validate her spiritual achievements.

The organization's media strategy and institutional structure do more than just spread a message; they effectively cultivate a counterpublic (Warner 2002: 413–25)—a semi-autonomous community formed through a self-organized discursive formation brought into being by the circulation of an alternative discourse that establishes its own moral norms and spiritual benchmarks. By operating within this parallel space, the KBO strategically anchors religious symbols to national identity, reframing "Buddhist protection" as an urgent civic duty. Leveraging their secular status, these lay actors move into political territories where monks are forbidden to tread, effectively transforming traditional piety into active, high-stakes public lobbying. This shift marks a significant redistribution of religious authority, moving it away from the quietude of traditional temples and into the hands of media-savvy citizens. In modern Thailand, these individuals influence the moral outlook of certain segments of society. The synergy of narrative legitimation, media activism, and institutional design gives rise to a unique form of female-led soteriological entrepreneurship, one that contributes to widening the horizon of who can credibly preserve and transmit the Dhamma, suggesting that in the modern world, the "guardianship" of the faith is becoming less of an exclusive monastic domain.

This framework of lay guardianship is strategic, utilizing the principle of soteriological inclusiveness while aligning with Thailand's powerful nation–Buddhism–monarchy triad. This transforms laypeople from mere supporters into active custodians who determine public moral norms. Acharavadee's leadership operationalizes this via media-enabled pedagogy, significantly expanding women's organizational and pedagogical authority. Academically, this offers a vital case study for gender studies in religion, challenging traditional, male-centric Theravada leadership models. However, this new alignment risks constricting religious plurality through moral nationalism by recentering authority around a single figure, even as it champions gender inclusion. This religious diversification reflects a broader shift toward individualized religious authority, even as it remains entangled with conservative moral nationalism.

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