

Unravelling the webs

Deconstruction of identity in a Thai
nunnery

Carry Maria klein Gunnewiek

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Introduction

In this thesis I will provide an alternative to the Western academic view on identity. In scientific discourse, identity construction is considered as something inherent to human beings. It is seen as a necessary trait. This does not coincide with what I discovered during my research to be the view of the women of Nirodharam, a Buddhist nunnery in Thailand. Here, the women aim to let go of any sense of self. This Buddhist principle is called 'the practice of non-self'. The final absence of a sense of 'self' is their ultimate aim: it signifies reaching or gaining Nirvana. To be able to describe the practice of these women in relation to the view of a construction of identity, I have decided to call this process 'the deconstruction of identity'.

In this introductory chapter I will lay down the question of how and why renowned early and recent works on (the construction of) identity leave out the possibility of 'deconstruction of identity' as an alternative model. This leads to an elaboration on what my further objectives will be. I will also place some initial remarks on methods used for research and writing.

At the moment 'identity' is one of the 'hottest' themes in the social sciences. There are interdisciplinary scientific journals being raised on the issue of identity and self, and on consciousness. Debates on 'social identity' versus 'individual identity,' cultural and political identity, multiple selves (eg. Ewing 1998), the dialogical self (eg. Hermans 2002), the embodied self (eg. Strathern 1996, Csordas 1990, Lock 1993) are held around the clock. Many anthropologists even stopped referring to the concept of identity at all because it has taken on such a broad range of meanings that it has according to them become an ambiguous and obscure ground to work from.

With 'identity' is automatically meant 'the construction of identity,' the self as a (cultural) construct. This constructing of a self-image or identity is usually regarded as a human necessity. According to most social scientists, every person needs a clear frame of identity in order to feel 'whole'. Even within the concept of shifting selves and dialogical selves in which is believed that there are many co-existing selves which

appear to the use of the moment, it is still considered necessary to have the roles that one 'plays' defined.

It is probably not a coincidence that the focus of many debates has been shifting this way. The increasingly individualizing society brings about a scientific focus at the perceiving of oneself as a solitary unique person. To stress individuality and independence, people try to express their uniqueness. We choose our own friends, dress in clothes that fit the image we want others to have of us and present ourselves preceded by a subtle process of a defining of who we think we are or want to be. This (overtly Western) focus on the construction of identity has naturally permeated the social sciences today.

I talked to several social scientists who place interest in the concept of identity. They are interested in themes as consuming identities, networking and the defining of identity by people who are 'different' and on the borders of society, such as gays, gender reversals, second generation immigrants etcetera. They usually write about how their subjects cope with their "differenceness" and how they use strategies like stereotyping in their fight for the acknowledgment of their identity. When I tried to say something to these scholars about the deconstruction of identity as the theme of my thesis, they looked at me frowning. A short remark like 'the question is whether such a concept exists, but anyway... you should talk to ..', was placed – probably accompanying the thought that I was just a student and not yet acquainted with the topic. It raised questions for me on where my research would fit in anyway. I knew I did not want to and could not talk about identity in the usual way when the women in my research said they were trying to detach from a self. Where could I relate their reality of the world to our social science?

I decided to read some more and found out that in general, only some anthropologists seem to consider the deconstruction of identity as something that can be desired and therefore as an important issue. But most of them still focus on deconstruction in favour of a new constructing of identity. In other words, for them deconstruction of identity still seems problematical and is never seen as an aim in itself. They say for example that this deconstruction is situated within the realm that lies between two identity-states of rite-de-passages (following Victor Turner and Arnold Van Gennep). Or they look at the way deconstruction of identity is experienced by someone who fell 'between two states' undesired. Such as – as said before – immigrants

that feel 'between cultures' or people that experience a culture shock. A good example is an article on the experience of a culture shock that examines the deconstruction of identity thoroughly. This is Kondo's *Dissolution and Reconstitution of Self: Implications for Anthropological Epistemology* (1986) in which she examines her own collapse of identity during and after a fieldwork experience in Japan. She was born as a third generation Japanese American, but her identification and her way of thinking were largely American (1986: 75). During her fieldwork experience she 'lost' her old identity (the independent female American scientist) and became another self (the submissive Japanese family member) instead. She calls this 'participation to the point of identification' (ibid: 79). Her informants were participators in this process, willing to mould Kondo into something they knew. 'It helped them to preserve their own senses of identity' (ibid: 80), she adds. This moment of her 'collapse of identity' as she calls it herself, was followed by her by a distancing process and a reconstitution of the American self. Kondo's assertion that participation in the field 'is a necessary step in the process of understanding., but it also produced a threat to the self' (ibid: 82) is definitely true to my concern. She writes in order to make understood that it is necessary to open oneself fully to what she calls 'Otherness,' with the willingness to change one's perceptions (ibid). But when looking back, she considers constructing a new identity (which she calls 'self-reconstruction,' ibid: 82) necessary to feel whole again and being able to take meaning from the experience.

So, the idea of deconstruction of identity is not consistent with a modern Western view of the world. It also does not go along well with conventional science as it cannot be explained with Descartes or Popper in mind. Post-modern ideas on rationality, agency, shifting selves, subjectivity and embodiment have produced some entrances for the idea. But as will become clear in this thesis, by the use of the concept 'deconstruction of identity' I go further than this by trying to explain a rationality other than our own.

Describing another rationality is possible now more and more anthropologists start to acknowledge the existence of many different rationalities. An important figure in the social sciences who has given an entrance to this idea is the sociologist / philosopher Michael Foucault. Foucault's work is especially important for post-modernists in his description of how Western claims of knowledge (ideas on Reason in particular), which are generally held as timeless and universal, are in fact just the outcome of contingent

historical forces (1969). This means that there are many rationalities about the truth and the Western (academic) one is just one of them. Our way of knowing in the West has been held for centuries as the only possible rational way of knowing, based on logic and not on 'myths' or 'irrational beliefs'. But knowing for example that Descartes' idea of 'Cogito Ergo Sum' is also a product of its time, opens our eyes to the possibility of other 'truthful' ways of knowing. This idea is the point of departure for the writing of this thesis.

The area and amount of people where the Western epistemology reigns over other ways of knowing is huge, but this might not be because it gives a better explanation about the nature of the world. Power and politics had a big hand in this hegemonic spread of Western epistemology (which includes traces from Judaeo-Christian influences). Current ideas on identity are part of this Western heritage. I consider it important therefore, to look at another epistemology by taking it just as serious as our own.

The research

I conducted my research in the North of Thailand in a place called *Nirodharam*. Nirodharam is a residence where people can study and practise Buddhism. It is established for ordained female practitioners of Buddhism, called *Maechi* in Thailand. This paragraph gives an insight into the position these female Buddhist practitioners hold in Thai and worldly society. However, when taking these women seriously in their quest for the truth, the 'who they are and where they come from' is less important than what they believe or hold to be the truth. For these women their very epistemology explains the truth about the whole world, so for them their approach is just as true for a Kwakiutl chief in Northern America, an Aboriginal in Australia or a European social scientist. It is important for us to be aware of that. We cannot downplay this other rationality by assuming that it is just the truth as seen by a mere eighteen women in some small temple far away in the North of Thailand.

But I think it is important to provide a background for my story here. That will help understand that the way my informants practise Buddhism is also dependent on many contingent historical forces. The Maechi, moreover, do not think that their truth is just a

coincidental relative truth. Their truth is a very old one, such as described by the person who, according to the Maechi, was enlightened and therefore was in a position to know the real truth of the world. Although the Maechi try to follow the texts of the Buddha in a way as pure as possible, it is of course still a matter of interpretation (while the words of the texts also depend on those chosen by the people who translated and rewrote the teachings). The Maechi agree that interpretation could prove problematical. They try to keep their practice as close as possible to the Buddha's ideas and way of life. And through experience in practice, they say, one gains the proof that it is actually the only real truth.

The official name for a Thai Buddhist temple is *Wat*. But within the Thai clerical organisation, the *Sangha*, Maechi are not officially acknowledged as full Buddhist nuns and cannot therefore call the residence they build for their practice a *Wat**

The concept of residences for female Buddhist practitioners only is not new in Thailand, but in the last decades the amount of 'nunneries' did rise from a few towards twenty-three registered ones* today. This seems in line with the modernization in Thai society and with it the expansion of an autonomous middle-class of intellectuals and professionals. These changes have resulted in the growth of different kinds of Buddhist reform movements since the 1960's within and outside the Thai clerical order (Taylor 1990, 1993, O'Connor 1993, Zehner 1990). This reform includes the foundation of nunneries and calls for the reinstatement of female nuns, Bhiksuni.

Although every movement has its own ways of implying religious change, the central tendency of the reform is directed towards the purification of Thai Theravada Buddhism of all superstitious beliefs. Jim Taylor (1993) called this practice 'reformist religious rationalism' (64). This description seems particularly adequate for the practice of the Maechi in my research. While many traditions in Thailand incorporate what Terwiel in his book about ceremonies in a Thai monastery (1994) calls 'magico-animism,' the Maechi of Nirodharam distance themselves from any 'non-rational' practice, not because

* I will therefore use the word 'temple' in this thesis instead of 'Wat,' which in my opinion is a good word for the Maechi's religious practice area.

* To get information on statistics on Maechi in Thailand, I went to the Thai Nuns Institute which is located at the Mahamakut Buddhist University in Bangkok.

there is no truth in it** , but because it brings you away from the path of truth, they say. The head Maechi of Nirodharam, Maechi Nandajani, studied natural science at Chiangmai University. She set up the Maechi residence eight years ago in order to build a place for females who have the serious wish to become a 'nak buat' (an ordained one). Her aim is to practise Buddhism in as pure a way as possible, by reading the Tripitaka (the canons of the Buddhist teachings) meticulously by herself. At the same time she is inspired by other (reformist) monks and nuns, such as the famous monk-scientist Bhuddhadasa Bhikkhu. This does not mean she automatically adopts what these monks and nuns say. She runs her own course of practice by experiencing what works for her and the other Maechi. The Maechi of the temple do follow her lead, but are also encouraged to read the Dhamma from the Tripitaka themselves. Eight of the seventeen Maechi that stayed here with her during the time I conducted my research are young women and, except for one of them, have had an academic education. They told me the way Buddhism is conveyed by Maechi Nandajani, gives them a better instrument to know the truth about nature than any that has been made available by science before. Simultaneously, it shows them the way out of worldly dissatisfaction and suffering.

Before ordaining, the world of these eight young Maechi was one focused on attaining high grades, on dressing up and making money to buy material things like a house and a car. You could say that constructing their identity was an important issue for them until they got to Nirodharam. In Nirodharam it became their task to study the true nature of the world, as taught by Siddharta Guatama (the Buddha) 2500 years ago, which means studying and practicing (by way of meditation) 'non-self'. This meant a huge change in orientation for them. From that moment on the Maechi tried to follow 'the path' (as they called it): the path of the Buddha towards Nirvana. This is the ultimate state where one has to completely let go of any sense of self.

During my research my main question became 'What does 'to follow the path' mean?' And when I examined the difficult task of writing about this way of life in Nirodharam, another important question raised: 'How can I explain this process towards the total letting go of self to a Western audience that is not familiar with Buddhist epistemology and has (maybe) never practised meditation before?' My invention of the concept of 'the

** The Maechi believe (as the Buddha has told) that there are many worlds other than ours. Spirits and heavenly creatures thus exist for them. But they also say that the Buddha claims it is not something to dwell on: it would only distract you from the right path to wisdom.

deconstruction of identity' in this thesis was a way for me to handle these questions. The deconstruction of identity is therefore a concept and a method: it implies a process. In chapter one, I will explain how I got to this concept and why I felt as if it was the only one way to get through to their way of knowing and subsequently to communicate it to the Western reader.

The methods of research will be drawn up throughout this thesis, which is the reason why I will not go into them thoroughly here. I can say that what I have done is 'participant observation'. But that does not say anything about how far I went into their lives and how much I became a Maechi myself. I can say that I have conducted a domain analysis and carried out open life story interviews. But it does not say how much of the domains I found seem useful and correct to me now. It also does not give an indication about what made life history interviews such a strange method for this research in the end. I can even say that I used myself and my feelings as an instrument for research. But this means nothing yet, because after all, every researcher does so.

Anyway, being a Maechi myself, recording data, recording a diary and trying to describe and interpret every aspect of Maechi life in Nirodharam provided important lessons to me and helped me get into this understanding. I wanted to learn what being a Maechi meant, so I became one. The methods I used were altered highly by a change in focus during the research period. The standard field work methods that I learned at university sometimes proved to be insufficient, inadequate. Each and every time that happened brought important data to me. My thesis is the story of methodology in itself, as methodology is central to the process of deconstruction of identity in the lives of the Maechi as well. It became my challenge to relate the methods of the fieldworker to the methods used by the Maechi to get to their truth.

Writing the thesis

I had a difficult time thinking about how to write this thesis. At university I had practiced conducting research several times before going onto my 'real' field trip. When I wrote essays I started by a brief introduction of the topic and my motivations. Next came the paragraph with the research goal and research question with the description of important concepts. After that, there was what always seemed to be a clear description of the methods used, and then before presenting my findings, I laid down a theoretical background where my research related to.

But this time, I noticed when I reread my material and looked at my analyses after the research that I did not want to 'write down' the results of my carefully made inductions as I had done so many times before. When I tried to decide on what it was that I really wanted to explain, I found that it was something else that I had found that really mattered in the temple. Something that I could draw only indirectly from my field notes. Even though I could not lay a finger on what it was, immediately, the idea began to take shape over time. By thinking and rethinking about it, I slowly recognized the temptation to take my findings into the theoretical debates on the fundamental principals of anthropology. I wanted to present an alternative to the conventional scientific thinking about identity. For starters, in the introduction of my thesis, it seemed most important to write about this reflection about identity at the moment. After that, I decided that I, when I wanted to explain another epistemology, I had to explain how I got to it. This is why chapter one became a chapter on how my research focus changed and how I eventually came to the idea of deconstruction of identity. In the next chapters I got into it deeper and deeper, by describing my experiences with this alternate view and illustrating its positionality with regard to anthropological theory on identity and rationality.

The structure of this thesis is therefore subjugated to my attempt to explain, instead of following the conventional ways. Besides the structure, the use of my own experiences as an anthropologist and a westerner met similar ends. I found that when I tried to explain an idea that is totally new to the Western audience I had to use different techniques than usual. Deconstruction of identity is something that is hard to explain, because it is not only a theoretical framework; it involves practice. It happens inside the mind and body of a person and can therefore not be described through reports on

observed behavior. Me being a Western scholar experiencing the 'Eastern' path of getting rid of self, lays out a good basis for translating the process to a Western academic public. I acknowledge that four months of practice is not much, but it is enough to get introduced to the difficulties and benefits of living this other rationality.

After the first chapter on the change of orientation I enter, in chapter two, the realm of the deconstruction of identity by introducing some important lines of thinking and practicing within the nunnery. The third chapter will go into the problems that I faced by wanting to integrate their view myself in order to understand. Chapter four will give deeper information on how the deconstruction of identity works. And in chapter five, I will explain how this practice brought about some kind of deeper happiness. I will draw on the consequences that my account of deconstruction of identity might have for anthropology in the concluding chapter.

It is important to bear in mind when reading this thesis that it is my aim in general to guide you through the possibility of deconstruction of identity. Although this possibility can easily be fought against by strict empiricists and pure rationalists, I believe this thesis will provide a solid ground to understand the other (and ourselves) from. It is up to you as the reader and interpreter of this text to choose to decide whether deconstruction of identity is a real possibility to you as well.

The Researcher's Path

When I first came to the temple, I didn't know anything about the importance of the idea of 'non-self' in the lives of the Maechi there. Before leaving I had attended two Buddhist courses at university. During these lessons I had heard of many Buddhist laws and rules. This had made me believe that the Buddhist theories were highly complicated matter. It made me anxious to know what living this theory meant in reality. Would life be just as complex?

The first time I spoke to Maechi Nandhajani, the head Maechi of Nirodharam, she told me that I had come with the right intention. My desire to be ordained and live with them as a Maechi was the only way that could make someone really understand, she said. She then explained that 'Nirodharam,' the name of the temple, was called after the third noble truth of Buddhism, the cessation of suffering. This sounded reassuringly familiar to me. I had memorized the four noble truths by heart before. It was the central point of focus during my Buddhist classes. The first noble truth of Buddhism claims that everything in the world is suffering or dissatisfaction. The origin of this suffering is craving, says the second. The third noble truth - *Nirodha* (literal meaning: 'the cessation of suffering') - is the claim that there is a way out of this worldly suffering. The fourth noble truth shows the way to achieve this: the 'Path'. Maechi Nandajani explained further that the aim of the temple was to create the right conditions for people to live according to this third truth: the way out of suffering. In the eight years this temple had existed, it had evolved towards about twenty Maechi dedicating their lives to live there with her continually in accordance with this truth.

A week and a half later, I was kneeling in front of five monks and recited the vowels of the ordaining Maechi. I promised to keep the eight precepts of a Maechi: no killing (not even insects), no stealing, no sexual activity, no lying, no consuming of intoxicating drinks or drugs, no eating after noon, no singing, dancing, music, visiting shows or wearing jewellery or perfume, and no sleeping on high and luxurious beds. The thing I remember best from that day is the shaving of my hair and eyebrows before ordination. I had known for months that this would happen and was very excited. I was curious about how I would react to the first sight of my face without my hair decorating it.

Would I still feel like Carry or would I be staring at a stranger? Would I feel ugly or awkward? Some Maechi told me then that being bald was meant to show that 'beauty' is only a deception of human thinking. I had to see that the nature of the body is something that is not beautiful. To see the body 'as it really is' or to see the ugliness of it is a way to detach oneself from it. At that time I did not understand what they meant by these statements. I was only excited by this interesting thing that would happen to me, which would reveal the secret of the Maechi: what it was like to be a bald woman.

After the ceremony the daily life of the participating field researcher became concrete. Every morning I woke up at half past three for meditation in the main hall of the temple. After meditation which lasted until about half past five, Maechi Nandajani used to 'speak Dhamma'. 'Speaking Dhamma' meant that she would talk about the Buddhist principles and would give examples of living after them in daily life. After that everyone had a task to perform, such as sweeping the pathways of the temple ground or cooking for everyone. At about eight, we would eat the only meal of the day, which lasted for over an hour. After that, everyone did something of their own, like washing clothes or studying for the state exams about the Buddha and his teachings. Before noon, we would drink some soy milk or rice milk. At one, the Maechi practised the chanting of texts out of the Buddhist scriptures and at two o'clock we meditated again, until four o'clock. After that, everyone had a shower at their *kuti* (room/hut) and drank some fruit juice near the dining hall. At six we went chanting and meditating into the main hall again, as in the morning. This lasted until eight, or later when Maechi Nandajani decided to 'speak Dhamma' again. In the first month I went to bed straight after making some last notes back at my *kuti*. I was tired and worried much about getting enough sleep. Some Maechi told me it wasn't necessary, because according to the Buddha, we do not need that much sleep. Sometimes when I was laying in bed I would hear the Maechi who used to be a doctor in an aids clinic, in the neighbouring *kuti* studying until about eleven or twelve o'clock. She woke up again at three or a quarter past three in the morning, before the bell rang. But, raised with the standard of the ideal eight hours of sleep, I wasn't convinced.

My research objective then was to find out why these women choose to live their lives as Maechi. This question seemed even more of importance to me when I found out that eight of the seventeen Maechi that lived in Nirodharam at that time were aged between

25 and 35 and had all except one studied in university before. It meant that they were part of the newly developing middle class in Thailand that I had read much about before in order to target my research. They confirmed this by telling me that in Thailand not many young people were as privileged as them to be able to keep studying after high school. This made it even harder for me to understand why these young women gave up their chance to have a good well-paid job, to have a family of their own and to earn a respected status in society (Maechi are not highly regarded in Thailand in general) - all of the things that are highly valued by the middle-class society in Thailand. I decided to focus on these eight women.

I split my research question into two separate parts. First, I had to find out what it was that attracted them this much in the life of Nirodharam. And second, I had to see which factors in their previous life had made them think about leaving it. The first question seemed to get answered immediately. Almost everyone I had talked to (Maechi and laypeople alike) told me that they came to hear Maechi Nandajani 'speak Dhamma'. They told me that it was the first time someone had spoken to them about Buddhism in a way that was easy to understand. She used to give examples from daily life without using many difficult terms. It made them understand life and themselves in it better. I decided to find out by myself what this impact of Maechi Nandajani meant and see what else in the life that was offered kept the Maechi here. I especially wanted to find out how the way of living in itself made Nirodharam special.

The other question on the past of the Maechi was harder to grasp. When I asked the Maechi to tell me more about their life before Nirodharam, they often fell into generalities like 'I found out that life was *thuk* (suffering / dissatisfaction)' and started to explain this Buddhist principle to me. Even from carrying out life story interviews, I didn't really feel I learned much about this part of my research question. Everyone of the Maechi had experienced some difficulties in life, but these did not seem to be different than the ones of any other young person. Apart from the one Maechi who lost both her parents in a car accident just before going to university, there did not seem to be any special reasons that had turned the lives of the young women upside down before ordination. Besides this, I noticed that the Maechi were reluctant to talk about the past too much. I was alarmed: when there is something they don't want to talk about, it's probably exactly the point you want to focus on: that is where the answer often hides. I soon got an indication of the matter when the Maechi told me that it was their aim to

concentrate on the present only. This explanation didn't satisfy me enough and I still had my doubts. I left the conundrum of the past to rest for a while and focussed on observations and normal conversations.

After a first round of analysis on my data I found different themes that were at the basis of temple life. I began to see that social relations which were based on the Buddhist principle of *Metta*, loving-kindness, made the temple a friendly place for people to live in. I had evidence of how the status of Maechi, which was low in the eyes of most Thai people, was quite high in the eyes of the people in the villages around and the lay people that came to the temple to be taught. I started to understand what factors made Maechi Nandajani as the teacher and regulator of the temple so central in the lives of these women. For me, these themes provided some answers to the question about the reasons why the young women wanted to be a Maechi at Nirodharam. I extracted more and more related topics which seemed to give a positive image of life in the temple, but, at the same time, I still had many things that I didn't understand. I felt as if missing the point somewhere.

One of the major themes that I was focussing on was individuality versus uniformity. Before I went to Thailand I had already pinpointed this duality as one of my fields of interest. What did it mean to live somewhere, looking like every one else? In the temple I soon found this question even more interesting, because the women not only did look alike, but also performed the same tasks and seemed hampered in any way by the rules of the temple to do things their own way. The strangest thing I came across was that every Maechi even seemed to talk the same way. They all used the same quotations from the Buddhist texts (straight from the text or borrowed from Maechi Nandajani, who repeated them over and over again). They did not express their own unique opinions, as if they did not have any. They did not gossip as they were not allowed to have any 'small talk' at all. The matter became even more confusing to me when I started writing down the exceptions: the few times in one month that a Maechi talked a little bit accusingly about another.. the one time that I saw someone with a white bag instead of a brown one... the acknowledgement of the difference in intelligence between the Maechi... I even wrote down how the hierarchy in the temple (based on years of ordination, age and wisdom acquired) made each Maechi unique and different. But in the end I still couldn't get it: it didn't look as if they were trying to be unique at all. On the other hand, in a way

it seemed they already were. Every Maechi looked very independent and self-confident. It seemed as if they didn't need any ones help. I was puzzled.

In the meantime I had a conversation by E-mail with an anthropologist* who had conducted research in a Maechi residence as well. She had read my research proposal and gave me some advice now and again. She told me that what she had missed in my proposal was 'religious identity' and an explanation of it. I thought about it and re-read my proposal with all its questions on how the women perceived Maechi life. By reflecting on what I was doing exactly, I decided that it was the only thing I was looking at all the time. Without using these abstract concepts, 'religious identity' was central to my research all along.

This thought brought about substantial changes in my thinking of my research goal. Before, I thought that I wanted to find out why these 'students,' 'daughters,' 'sisters,' 'friends,' 'employees-to-be', and 'relatives' gave up all these social roles in order to be a 'nun,' which is not officially respected in Thai society. Now I understood that I needed to look into this question in another way. While 'identity' had been my core focus, I had never questioned my own assumptions on identity. I had never taken their assumptions of it as a starting point for looking at my data. I asked myself: 'What if I am wrong about my wish to find out what 'being a Maechi' means for this women in the sense of giving them a new positive 'identity'? And what if I would try to see what it really means for the Maechi to say that their aim is not to focus on the past, but to live in the present? What if I would start to find out what they experience by their attempt to see their body as not beautiful? What if what they told me about not wanting to talk about useless things, is true?' Then I knew I had been looking through the wrong glasses. Of course I could conduct a research on the status of Maechi as seen by themselves and the people that visit the temple as opposed to the general idea of many Thai that Maechi are old, lazy and poor. I could write down all the positive sides of the life in Nirodharam. If I pushed hard, I could even elaborate on the problems which young women experience in Thai society before making the choice of ordination. But what I really wanted to know is what the Maechi were busy doing all the time in Nirodharam: not intending to label themselves anew as 'a Maechi', but somehow to get rid of any sense of 'self'.

* This was Monica Lindberg-Falk, who has eg. written *Making Fields of Merit, Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Orders in Thailand*, which will be published by October 2005.

Emics and etics of identity

Slowly I began to notice how this new way of looking at my research question deepened my understanding of their practice. I realized how many times I had been feeling incapable of getting to what really mattered in the temple. Now I found a better way to solve the many problems discussed above and I tried to make my new focus on how the Maechi 'try to get rid of self' manageable to work with. In order to do this, I changed my thinking about using the concept of identity.

I had become more aware of the fact that identity, which I had not intended to define at all, was elaborately defined by my informants. The Buddhist scriptures talked about the principle of 'non-self' as the opposite to the attachment to a false 'self'. This 'self' seemed to range from attachment to status, appearance, etcetera to the most general idea of you as being a person or an "I". This gave a strange awareness of the ambiguous situation I was in. I had learned at university to be concrete and not to indulge in theoretical discussions that did not bring us very far. There was a good reason for not wanting to use the words 'identity' or 'self,' because if I did I would be obliged to define them. I would have to create a defined cadre which might constrict me in my research. At the same time, the women constantly used the concept of 'self' (or 'non-self') as a guide of lesson for themselves. After a long time of hesitating to even think about 'identity,' I came up with what seemed to be the only right solution. The problem reminded me of the Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok (1979) who pleaded for 'sensitizing' concepts* (In Dutch: *attenderende concepten*). By using a concept as a guide to what I wanted to know, I would be able to use the concept without having to define it in terms of earlier western social science. Seeing my data in this light opened the way for me to the reality of the Maechi and at the same time to my own ideas concerning identity.

Months after returning to the Netherlands, I decided to name the 'practice of non-self' in Nirodharam and everything this implied 'deconstruction of identity,' in order to position this view on 'self' along the classical way of looking at 'identity,' which for me had become known as 'construction of identity'. By using the concept of 'identity' instead of 'self,' I tried to avoid the confusing aspect of a concept as 'self,' which in our daily

* He borrowed this concept from Herbert Blumer (1954).

usage is closely bound to the idea of a permanent I. The concept of 'identity' is in its Western use more linked to 'construction' already, and as it is the Maechi's aim to see through the false construction of what they call 'self,' it seemed clearer. Deconstruction of identity signifies an alternative view of life and a way to live life differently from our western ones as described by social sciences. Moreover, by using the word 'deconstruction' I intend to indicate a process: a process of alteration. The Maechi say that their aim is to 'get rid of self' and thus reach Nirvana. They believe that the Buddhist path is a process of development towards ultimate wisdom and non-self.

By turning my gaze towards 'the deconstruction of identity,' I then fully admitted to take their reality as being as serious as my own. I went into their reality and let it stand side by side with the reality that I was brought up with: the western one, the scientific educational one. Instead of aiming to find out how the Maechi of Nirodharam construct their personal identity, I chose to be sensitive to the way that these women view the world. I decided to explain their practice of non-self in terms of the manageable concept of deconstruction of self. That is why I call it a bridging concept: it provides a bridge between our view of identity (and our living with it) and theirs.

Seeing the truth

‘Do you like it? Do you like it?’ ‘I like it very much!’, I replied eagerly. All of the Maechi around me smiled and laughed pleasantly. ‘You are blind!’ ‘You are a blind one!’ they mocked.

- Field notes, October 7, 2004

Since my arrival I had tried to show my gratitude and friendliness to the Maechi by saying ‘I like it very much’ about everything in the temple. The food? I like it very much. My kuti? I like it a lot. Life in the temple? I like it very much. Every time they had laughed about me saying this, but I did not understand until then. Apparently they had been laughing all the time because it was very clear that, to them, I was blind. I couldn’t see.

The Maechi explained to me that to say that I like something a lot, means that I get attached to this object (or person). My ‘not-seeing’* of this fact caused me to suffer from it. Being blind meant that I was not aware, I didn’t see the truth. But for all I knew, I had already learned a way to see the truth. At university I had been taught the methods of observation and induction by analysis. These methods would at least lead me to hypotheses about the Maechi’s life, which was information that would help science elaborate its knowledge. Of course I also understood the difficulty to attribute to ‘the truth,’ as more and more social scientists proclaim in this post-modern era that there is not such a thing as ‘one reality’ or ‘one universal truth’. But, although I was raised in this new tradition of relativism, I still felt that I had the tool to contribute to a scientific discourse on the truth about the world, by elaborating ‘valid’ field notes of observations and literally transcribed discourse and interviews and, subsequently, thorough objective analysis. By making inductions about the Maechi from empirically obtained data, I would eventually be able to add my discoveries to general theories of human behaviour. So seeing the truth for me meant looking with the participating observer’s wide angle lens and explicit awareness. Every little object, movement or saying in the field that looked unimportant at the moment might give me the right answers later. Observing everything

* In the Buddhist canon, this ‘not-seeing’ is called ‘ignorance’ (*avijja*): ‘the unknowing with regard to the Four Noble Truths’. (Harvey 1990: 56) It is one of the three fires which have to be extinguished: the fires of attachment, hatred and delusion (ignorance) that everyone is burning from (*Vin.I.34 –5*).

meticulously was my way to seeing their truth. But now these women said that I was blind.

They told me that ‘the truth’ was something to be discovered by becoming aware of the true nature of things. And this true nature of things, they said, was something that had been explained by the Buddha, who saw the truth in total clarity. He explained about the three facts of life, about the hindrances which kept people from seeing, and about the goal of seeing: to extinguish the fires of attachment, hatred and delusion, and also the fires of birth, ageing and death. He explained much more in his sermons which are transcribed in the Tripitaka. But reading or listening to the teachings of the Buddha (*Dhamma*) was not enough to see the truth for yourself, the Maechi told me.

To get insight in the nature of the world, the Buddha’s teachings had to be practised in daily life, in every moment, they said. And it could only be reached by looking at yourself in your surroundings without any judgement. So the only way to get to the truth was by the constant practice of mindfulness (Pali: *sati*) and to try to understand the different teachings by this practising. In this chapter I will explain how ‘seeing the truth’ works according to the Maechi of Nirodharam. The aim of this chapter is to provide only a short introduction of their truth about the world and the way of life that they gain from that. I will start with an overview of the method that lays at the foundation of every day practice in Nirodharam: mindfulness. The chapter further includes a selected amount of techniques chosen by them from the Dhamma to see the truth – the techniques most used during the four months of my stay.

Mindfulness

Reading. Moving your eyes from one sign to the next. Knowing the rules of grammar. Knowing what a space means, knowing that the signs that are connected form a word. More of them a sentence ending at the full stop. Interpreting. Understanding.
Feeling
neutral, happy or unhappy. What is the posture of your body at the moment?
Are you sitting up straight? With bended back? A while ago you made a choice to sit down with this thesis and read it. Now your attention has moved to the interpretation
of these words, thinking about them.

The constant observation of what you are doing, thinking or feeling is called 'mindfulness' or 'present moment awareness' in the Buddhist's vocabulary. A moment ago you were unaware of the action you were performing. It was encoded behavior. By looking at it and observing this behaviour 'from a distance,' it is possible to see things more clearly. This is what the Maechi in Nirodharam meant by seeing the truth. The becoming aware of things that seem 'normal' to us. The method of mindfulness therefore opens a way to see the world in a new light.

For me, this was relatively new. I had always –privately and professionally- strived to understand things that seemed strange to me at first. That explained my interest in cultural anthropology. Although anthropology always comes down to people's motives and understanding, which highlight the sameness of people's thoughts, feelings and behavior, this sameness was only caught in a round way. So to find out about the world, I had learned to look around. To see everything else as data, which I could rationally turn to 'real' knowledge. But in the temple, the women were trying to catch the truth by looking inside, instead of looking around. By looking to the (apparent) familiar, instead of the strange.

They told me that the 'normal' of daily life was not what it seemed. My perceptions of the world around me were false images of it, according to them. This reminded me of how many anthropologists through the years have regarded fieldwork abroad in second instance as an anthropology of the West. By going away from their own culture, they started seeing the culture and meanings which they had been used to for so long in a new light. Some anthropologists even wrote a reflexive ethnography on their own culture, because they had seen aspects of it in a different light when in contact with other habits and other meanings of the world (eg. Miner's ironic article on the Nacirema, 1956). The Maechi seemed to be doing the same thing, but then by looking at themselves and the world around them in every moment instead of looking at their own society from a distance by methods of analysis. They observed their own bodily movements, their feelings, their states of mind and special *dhammas*, which I will explain later in this chapter. They looked in every moment to all the aspects that comprise a personality, whether in themselves or in others. The 'normal' of the self in its surroundings was objectified and looked at with fresh awareness.

This way, life in the temple was all about consciousness-raising. Not just in speeches and other explicit ways, but in every activity - in behaviour, speech *and* thoughts - of

daily life. The Maechi would walk with mindfulness, talk with mindfulness and eat with mindfulness. And this concentration would be at a maximum when meditating. In the hours of meditation every day, every feeling and every thought was observed and acknowledged.

The meditation method which Maechi Nandajani practised was based on the method of the late famous Burmese monk, Phra Si Sayadaw. His method implied taking breathing as the point of focus and from there acknowledging the feelings, thoughts, sensations and so on, which arise and fall away again. By concentrating on the breath, a neutral bodily movement, one can look at the objects of personality without attachment. Maechi Nandajani explained to me:

“Breathing is like the mind: it is neutral. You imagine breathing as being like water: it has no colour, it is transparent. When a mind object like a feeling comes, it is like a colour, like a pigment. It colours the water, but it is not the water itself”.

The aim of this meditation is to see the feeling as it is, acknowledge it (by naming it for example) which allows it to pass away. Sitting upright with mindfulness, every time a feeling comes up and is recognized, your attention goes back to the point of focus, which is the breath. The conscious acknowledgment of the mind objects is important, because it keeps you from staying with, for example, the feeling. By naming it as it is, you create a certain distance, or objectivity to it. The Maechi told me that normally a person tends to cling to a feeling, when conceiving it as their own (which usually causes the feeling to grow). Or people ignore the feeling, which also does not make it go away. In meditation you train to watch a continuing process of rising and falling of feelings etcetera without judgement. When people stop identifying with their feelings, their body, their thoughts or perceptions, and just let them arise and fall, the mind will become calm and clear like water, Maechi Nandajani told me. In chapter four and five, I will go further into the subject of meditation and its consequences.

When the Maechi were not practising sitting meditation, the same neutrality that the focus on the breath offered, was linked to another movement of the body. Sitting for a long period would be exhausting, especially physically. That is why the Maechi also practised walking meditation. Here the focus of mindfulness would be the movement of the feet: ‘heel up’ .. ‘lifting’ ... ‘putting’ .. and so on. When not meditating one would concentrate on the movement of the legs when walking from the *kuti* to the dining hall, thinking ‘left, right, left, right...’ when sweeping a floor and being aware of ‘chewing’,

'chewing', 'chewing' when eating the meal. Meanwhile they kept observing moods, thoughts, sensations etcetera. Mindfulness seemed a constant struggle to stay in the present moment on that point of focus with all the distractions that occur as the objects of experimental observation.

The continuing investigation of the truth as it is through mindfulness, made the temple ground look like a kind of confined laboratory. Everything the Maechi did was useful to them to practise their mindfulness. No distractions of any kind, like books (other than study books on Buddhism or the Pali language), were allowed. The Maechi even tried to keep their mindfulness in their sleep (which is possible as I found out later). Maechi Panhapali taught me to lie down in a certain specified position (on the right side, with the right hand next to your head and the other arm resting on your left side, with the knees up). When you did this with mindfulness - watching the movements that are needed to get into this position – and continued to concentrate on lying, the position of the body or on the breath, you would in the end be able to stop losing control of the mind when asleep (in Western psychology this is called 'lucid dreaming')*.

Keeping the concentration for twenty-four hours a day on the true nature of things was not just meant to create knowledge. The laboratory of Nirodharam was different from the scientific one in one important aspect: it was built with the ultimate aim of the cessation of suffering for the participants themselves. To see everything as it really is, by the neutral way of mindfulness, implied a way for the Maechi to get out of the suffering and dissatisfaction of the normal world. According to them, once a person is no longer blinded by false images of the world, he or she experiences total wisdom, total clarity and total happiness. In Nirodharam this seemed already present in the calm, peaceful and simple way of life, in contrast with the world outside. The calm was present in the beautiful surroundings of the temple ground, but also in the conversations that were held and even in the appearance of the Maechi. They often told me about the 'good life' they experienced in the temple (after a bit more difficult beginning period in which they had to give up the many attachments of nice food, clothes, entertainment, sleeping long time and so on). Seeing the truth made the mind calm and happy, they said.

* 'Lucid dreams' are dreams in which the dreamer is aware of everything that happens with the knowledge that he or she is dreaming (with the ability to manipulate the dreams) In science efforts are made to link it to meditation and other altered states of consciousness (Gackenbach & Bosveld 1989; LaBerge 1985). According to Maechi Nandajani, it is possible to stop dreaming, because there is nothing you need to re-experience or come to terms with (the aim of dreams), when you have acknowledged every feeling and thought during the day.

So, according to the Maechi, not seeing the truth by their way of mindfulness, was the cause of all suffering and dissatisfaction. My blindness to this had caused me to say 'I like it very much'. In the life story interview that I held with Maechi Nandajani, she told me about her youth. As a child she had liked playing 'too much'. She had liked laughing 'too much'. And she liked eating 'too much'. At the time I thought it was a mistake in her English that made her say 'too much' all the time instead of 'very much'. Now I think this was not an accident. The Maechi had told me that if you do not see the truth, you attach to the feeling of liking. If you like something 'too much', you want to hold on to it. You suffer because it passes (because nothing will stay forever). Making it stay is beyond your control, so it cannot be called yours. Even your 'own' feelings and moods cannot be controlled, as I explained before. So if I say that I like something very much, I do not see it as it is. I can not see the 'facts of life', which are impermanence, suffering and non-self.

Seeing 'the facts'

The three characteristics of nature, 'impermanence,' 'suffering,' and 'non-self,' were repeated again and again in speeches, conversations and in the heads of the Maechi. They were referred to by every one as 'the facts'. Impermanence, suffering and non-self were inherent to all things of the conditioned ('normal') world and cannot be seen separated from each other. So to see impermanence means that you are beginning to see 'suffering' and 'non-self' as well. Maechi Nandajani often used the example of consuming tasty food. If you see that eating this food is impermanent, it can never give you true happiness (which is lasting). The food cannot be considered 'mine' because it will not stay and therefore it does not give you lasting satisfaction. When being mindful, the Maechi tried to recognize these shared features of the objects of mindfulness. They helped each other by commenting on them every time someone failed 'to see'. Someone would, for example, say 'pen thuk' (this/it is suffering), when I said that I loved the beautiful trees and flowers in the temple. Or 'maj thiang' (not permanent) or 'anatta' (non-self) when someone's body became ill*. The facts were a guide that showed what to look for, but also the aim in itself: real understanding of the facts meant reaching the

* In chapter four I will go into the five factors that make up a person and especially the body in mindfulness practice.

ultimate truth of Nirvana. So by continuing practice, the facts could be understood from 'within'. This was called 'insight wisdom'.

Other techniques and special circumstances

Observing the three facts of life was an important method to use as a focus for mindfulness practice, but not the only one. And besides by the technique of mindfulness in ordinary daily life, consciousness-raising was also performed by creating special circumstances. I will first go into the different techniques that are used in daily life within the method of mindfulness.

During my stay, the Maechi used many techniques to see the truth, all taken by Maechi Nandajani from the teachings of the Buddha. She knew most of the Tripitaka (the Buddhist teachings) by heart and decided what *dhammas* would be good to practise upon. She would talk about these in dhamma speeches and give examples that the Maechi could relate to. She was the one who placed 'the facts' as a standard method to make it easier. Other things to concentrate on could be the five aggregates that make up a person (see chapter four), the three 'fires' of attachment, hate and delusion, the three 'thirsts' (craving for existence, wanting to have, non-existence), and the difference between absolute truths and supposed truths. All of these objects of mindfulness could be used to experience the deconstruction of identity (but not all of them were much practised on during the four months of my stay). One could watch a feeling like jealousy enter the mind and see it as impermanent, but one could also see it as a 'wanting to have' (one of the three thirsts). In the end the different methods served the same purpose: to detach from the state of mind because it is non-self and let it fade away. In the next chapters I will get back to such methods when I think it necessary.

Special circumstances were for example visiting a person that was ill. Or showing a video about women who were in labour in order to show the pain involved by having children. Hanging up posters of the anatomical body with its internal organs to show the reality of it as not beautiful and thus making it less desirable to cling to it as part of your own consistent self. Going to watch autopsies at the universities hospital in Chiangmai. Making visualisations about the body as flesh, blood and bones wrapped together in a piece of skin.

Creating these possibilities to see pain, ugliness, sickness, ageing and death was according to the Maechi necessary to see the truth of life which is often denied in the 'normal' world. People often do not want to face the realities of life. Maechi Nandajani explained that these methods were important to erase the attempt to shield oneself from the truth of, for example, the imperfection of the body. Impermanence, suffering and non-self were made explicit by creating special circumstances to 'see'.

Conclusion

In anthropology a lot has been written about the blindness faced by a scholar who conducts research in his or her own culture. It has been debated much upon in scholar circles, with the extreme opinion that one can never escape from this blindness completely. One is embedded in one's own culture and it is almost impossible, according to most, to look objectively at it. The Maechi, though, acknowledge this blindness as a fact, but say that this blindness can be totally cured by the method of mindfulness. Their objective is total concentration on the closest aspects of one's own body and mind, without any judgment-making about them. And by doing so, one attains total insight and lasting happiness. By becoming aware of the nature of the 'normal' by looking at it anew in a detached mode, they say, one cures his or her blindness. This chapter I introduced several important techniques that the Maechi used in order to see the truth. In the next chapter I will go into my personal and professional struggle to 'see the truth'.

Seeing through faith

By directing my gaze towards the idea of deconstruction of identity as I named the way to the goal of freeing oneself from any sense of self as pursued by the women of Nirodharam, my data began to make sense at last. I began to record data on their truth about the self, the body, the world. And it made me feel like if I could finally be morally honest, because the wish to get rid of my blindness opened myself to their truth. I had told the Maechi that I wanted to understand from the inside what it meant to be a Maechi. Now I could live up to that intention. There was only one major problem for me: how could I be a good Maechi when I did not want to become a 'believer'?

When I started to understand that the Maechi used specified methods to see the truth, as I explained in the previous chapter, I was relieved. Instead of a straight belief (which I had become allergic to since my catholic childhood), I could integrate certain techniques that seemed honest and rational for the period of research in order to get a better understanding on what they were doing in Nirodharam. I was interested in the way mindfulness would lead me to new ways of experiencing the world and myself. Very soon, I felt as if I had been given a new precise and empirically valid instrument to observe for myself how things work. I noticed that - because of the neutral acknowledgment of every feeling, thought or perception - it was possible to look at what happened in my mind honestly. It seemed worthwhile to find out what the fruit of mindfulness and meditation practice would be for me. It seemed to me that I could be a good Maechi and a social scientist at the same time. But opening up for the 'new truth' did not turn out as easy as it seemed at first.

Looking back on the field work period, I realize that I was afraid of being 'converted' from the first moment I got there. I felt the danger of living intensely with these women for months and taking in everything they said without being able to get away for a weekend for a break to rehabilitate and remain with a clear look on who I was and what I wanted. This fear also came from the fact that I knew that I was overwhelmed a bit by the enormous interest I had in Buddhist thinking suddenly. Hearing the head nun speak Dhamma and practising meditation immediately raised my interest and a wish to

understand. But, I found out that the fear of 'losing myself' took on a different meaning when I allowed it to happen.

Struggling scepticism

Besides the curiosity, I was very sceptical as well. I had never thought of life in this way and did not understand much of 'the facts'. I saw them as another possibility of philosophical thought about the world. In a way I was interested in Buddhism, but only as another explanation of life – nice to philosophise about but not to let it influence my way of living in any way. But with the idea of wanting to understand these women thoroughly, I took a big step into the Buddhist way of living. That is why the initial excitement vanished a bit when I found myself emotionally combating the views within the temple.

It had not been very hard for me to adjust to the rules of the temple and all the other externalities. I was proud of the ease in which I had come to live on only one meal a day, living bald-headed and bare-footed and getting up at half past three every morning. My efforts were praised by the other Maechi and it helped me to gain their trust. But this did not keep me from feeling incapable of living up to my wish to understand what it was that these women were doing. I tried to be a dedicated listener, a diligent student and a proper anticipator of everything that was said. But my fear of believing (which I held as 'healthy scepticism') made it impossible for me to raise the conditions to gain real understanding and 'see the truth'. As easy and safe as the 'scientific locus' of mindfulness might have sounded, it did not seem that way when I started practising. In order to sit and walk for hours without letting my mind slip to my natural condition of thinking elaborately, I needed proof in advance that it was worth it (which, of course, was impossible). I needed to know why I would put myself into the danger of the un-known world of my inner feelings and fears. And sitting for hours was also at times very boring (although this boredom disappeared later on). Acknowledging this boredom, anger and irritation seemed also stupid, which rounded the circle. Why was I doing this? I needed more confidence in the methods.

I began to understand that being a Maechi would really include exposing myself to this different world view and letting it become a part of me. This scared me. I didn't

know whether I wanted to or not. I only knew that I wanted it very much out of curiosity on the matter itself. The Maechi seemed to have learned a lot over the years and they had an air of independence, peacefulness and wisdom that I longed for. And who was I to say that my way of seeing the truth was the best way, when I knew that it was also context-dependent?

I gained some extra reassurance on the matter when the Maechi told me what the Buddha had said about believing. He said that every person needed to prove by him- or herself whether his teachings were right or not. Buddhism wasn't at all dogmatic and the teachings of the Buddha were only a guide to help a person on the Path. But the Buddha also explained what I had already noticed: observation in the temple did not mean starting from nothing (as it does in Western science), but could only work on the condition of 'faith'. This seemed contradictory to everything I had learned at university (and Dutch society) before. While the Buddha rejected blind faith, he also claimed that some initial faith or 'trustful confidence' (as translated by Harvey, 1990: 31) was necessary to get started with. Being curious was not enough to get the right effort to sit down for hours to meditate, or to remain mindful all the time. I had to believe and trust at least a bit of what the Buddha said, which meant letting go some of my own beliefs. I would be obliged to set aside my 'healthy' skepticism and to let go of attachments to scientific ways of observing the world. I can see now that my desire to understand marked the first step in the deconstruction of my identity. But my counter-desire to 'stay me' caused it not to be a gradual start of the process at all.

Staying me or letting go?

So at first I had gained understanding by some trust that was based on curiosity. But it seemed like the more I started to see and experience what the Maechi meant, the more I struggled against it. This internal struggle became clear to me when I observed my data. In the beginning I made notes of data based on 'classical empiricism' and separate from them diary-notes on what I perceived to be my 'personal process'. But soon I found them interrelate more and more until I reluctantly accepted them to mingle.

I also started to feel uneasy with the other Maechi. The more I grew to respect the easy way of teaching of Maechi Nandajani, the more I rebelled against it. I felt anger at

her for 'making me believe things,' which made me angry with myself for feeling this way about her. It was hard to stick with the practice of trying to 'see every state of mind as it is,' as non-self, because I just did not believe it was (and I did not want to). It threatened me for example to think that there was no permanent 'me' that 'owns' the moods and states of mind. On the other hand, the moods came without my permission, and I could not control them. So why would I embrace them as being 'mine'? Often I felt confused and could not see clearly what I could and could not believe anymore.

Especially in the free hours in the morning after 'breakfast,' it was difficult. These were the hours that I was confronted with myself harshly. The reason for this, I felt, was the lack of distraction. It was quiet during these hours and I could not read something in a book, grab a newspaper or chat with people. All of this was not allowed, because it would take me from being mindful. It was during these hours that I noticed how much I had always leaned on entertainment at home. During these morning hours I often broke down in a kind of rage of crying and wanting to express anger. I felt sorry for myself, I missed my family and my boyfriend enormously (which I also did not want to acknowledge, trying to keep my self-image as the strong independent female anthropologist) and I felt frightened of what was happening to me. Every worry and every fear I had became bigger than life.

But weeks of continual practice of mindfulness and the six hours of meditation practice every day started to pay off at last. My moods became less and less after a while and I felt calmer and calmer during these hours. Slowly I began to see what these women meant by 'everything is impermanent'. It sounded easy when reading about it: 'everything is impermanent, because nothing lasts', but when I saw for example anger come up in the mind and going away again just by the recognition of it, it hit me. I started to realize that I would normally have enabled this anger to grow big in my head, while by just acknowledging it, it just vanished right away. The Maechi told me that suffering comes when you see anger as more permanent and therefore identify with it. Then you think 'I am angry' or 'I am an angry person now' instead of seeing 'anger' as an impermanent state of mind that does not belong to anyone special. When I saw this happening again and again in meditation, it became real to me.

The accumulating 'proof' made me feel calm again. It no longer felt like the ground under my feet was gone. This way of living seemed to make a lot of sense. It could be another valid way of science, based on empirical observation and introspection. By

meditating and mindfulness, I had learned another way of observing the world. Instead of looking at other people, the world and its processes around, I went studying my own inside reactions meticulously. From one moment to another I observed me being happy, unhappy, envious, impatient, thinking, irritated, angry, harsh, pitiful, loving, sad, and so on. I thought about the difference and concluded that I was making objective observations by becoming aware and trying to be neutral towards my own feelings, thoughts, body etcetera. 'Seeing everything as it is' seemed to mean practising a kind of 'subjective objectivity'. It seemed like I had overcome the greatest obstacle of western science: the heritage of Descartes: the long held unreliability of human perception. When even the mind can be objectified by a subject him or herself, then there is no reason to fear subjectivity.

I felt like the new looking at things was stripping me of all my attached ideas and made me standing there more and more naked. But instead of scaring me, I felt a kind of freedom. It became more and more clear to me that slowly surrendering myself to trusting the Buddha's teachings (of which I got proof every time) was the only way to open up to understand the truth of the Maechi. But the real turning point came when I went on a twenty-six day meditation retreat after two months of living in the temple. There, I got the evidence that made me apologize after the retreat to Maechi Nandajani about all the times I had thought bad about her. During these days of continuous meditation, I had experienced many moments of 'direct insight'. At these moments I felt like I suddenly understood everything about the world. The sudden 'experience' of the impermanence of everything would suddenly hit me. Or the nature of 'nothing' would enter my mind. It is impossible to describe afterwards what happens when you meditate. I felt obliged to write everything down, but the Maechi that helped me there told me not to. It would stay in my heart, she said. To write it down would mean to dismantle the process. It would be like opening a washing machine while it was still running. I feel now that in some way I know I will feel again this way some day. But I cannot reach the same feeling of understanding now. I only remember the feeling of enormous gratitude that I felt when I left that retreat. The days after the retreat I felt more quiet inside than ever, and as if I saw everything in a new, much clearer way. It was as if I was 'washed through' in that retreat, as if I had cleaned myself from the inside.

I knew then that it was not the end of all struggles, because some scepticism is healthy, but I had overcome the biggest fear that had kept me from understanding: the fear of losing myself and losing my grip of reality.

Remaining a student

Being an anthropologist means that you are willing to learn from your guest society. One of the things the Buddha said was that it is wise to remain a student. To remain a learner, humble by heart. In the first year of anthropology I learned that the way to address your informants in the field, is by acting as a student to a teacher. You want to be educated and try to leave all your prejudices behind. According to my professors, this was the only way you could keep yourself from researching only what you expected in advance.

In Nirodharam I found out that this method of 'learner' not only requires gaining new facts and unexpected knowledge, but also, if you want to know what their life is really like, learning the feelings and beliefs of the people that you live with as a researcher. To understand them from the inside, you need get to their ways of looking at the world and their moving in it by your own experience. It is not done by merely acting as a student and then interpret as a so-called 'culture expert'. You have to stay humble to your informants throughout the whole ethnographic research cycle. While interpreting my data and now by writing down their reality of the world, I still feel like learning from my contact with the Maechi of Nirodharam and their truth. It seems a never-ending process of learning which causes me to see the world anew all the time.

By being a humble and dedicated student of another 'truth', the safe distance of being an researcher of 'the Other' is gone. You need to be willing to sacrifice* your 'self'. I have learned that 'self-sacrifice' can mean giving up things that you might want to hold on to, because they make you feel confident. It can be a struggle, but nonetheless it also makes you freer – letting go of the attachment to one truth - to understand others, yourself and the world you live in. In the next chapters, I will say more about how the truth of deconstruction of identity works for the women in Nirodharam.

* With 'self-sacrifice' I do not mean the word as it is used in the Christian sense as performing 'selfless acts'. Letting go of self is done in order to get out of suffering, and not for the sake of helping someone else.

Disenchantment

By subjecting my 'self' more and more to the teachings of the Buddha, I learned what the process of deconstruction of identity really meant. Even the struggle itself was part of the process. I had been fighting to let go of my attachments to the 'safe' and known methods of experiencing the world through a defined self image. Despite that, to see the 'self' as culturally and socially defined was something that was not new to me at all, because it was something described by many cultural anthropological studies on the self and identity. The well-known work of Csordas (1990) on the embodiment paradigm is a good example. Csordas overthrows in his article the long-held (Cartesian) dichotomy between body and mind, and shows that even the (appearance of the) body is a consequence of the coloured look of the person on him- or herself and the world around.* But there is a big difference between the learning about the self as culturally and socially defined and the real experiencing of the self as a merely imagined idea.

Experiencing the false self means that you believe in this construction of self and try to become conscious of this constructing process all the time. Then it can not continue as it always has. According to Buddhists, the constructing of self takes place when a person is ignorant of the truth. When a person becomes aware of it and acknowledges it as it is, the constructing process will no longer have the conditions to go on. Because the total realization usually takes many lifetimes, I call it the process of deconstruction of identity, although it is theoretically possible to gain instant enlightenment.

To go into the process of deconstruction more deeply, I will use this chapter to explain how detachment of the world in general, and the body and mind in particular takes place by a disenchantment with it. I will start by explaining the practice of detachment with the body. Subsequently, I will give an overview of the 'science' of the *khanha*, the five aggregates that make up a person. Finally, I will subscribe to my belief that the practice of mindfulness allows the Maechi to unravel and dissolve the webs of

* I will not go into the deeper discussion on the ideas of habitus and the pre-objective as taken up by Csordas. My reason for not doing so is that the Maechi have again another look on perception and the self and it is my aim to describe theirs (and use Western anthropological theory only to illustrate and facilitate understanding) and not to compare metaphysics. When you are interested in the debate on the overthrow of the Cartesian scheme and embodiment theory, I suggest reading Csordas (1990) and Strathern (1996) on the latter, and Friessen (1991) and Hobart (2002) on the rationality debate.

significance that a person according to Geertz (and many other social scientists and philosophers) is unavoidably tied to.

Disenchantment of the body

Since the Maechi had said that I was blind, I had tried to understand everything in the temple as not nice, not delicious and not beautiful. Maechi Nandajani said that it was the easiest to focus on the body, as the body is very concrete matter to practise on. We had to look at the body and detach from it by seeing the true nature of it: just a composition of soil, air, fire (temperature) and water. On many instances we were confronted with the body in its unbeautiful ways. Maechi Nandajani would for example tell us a story about a boy that sees a beautiful girl. What would he think if the girl would take an eye out of her face or strip herself of her skin so he could see the flesh, blood and bones beneath it? Some of the Maechi meditated on 'matters-out-of-place,' as the things on the borders of the body are called in anthropology: nails, excrement, blood, pus, spit, urine etcetera. There were collages made of pictures of people in car accidents on the walls of one of the halls. One of the Maechi had a picture of her father in his death coffin, all yellow from a liver disease.

The focus on the body and its non-beauty* became of fascination to me. I thought this focus on the dead, ugly and sick body very strange and shocking, but really interesting. For example, after three weeks in my *kuti*, I woke up one night and saw some radiation from the corner of my cabin. I got up and walked there. It frightened me when I saw the cause of the strange light: it was a glow-in-the-dark skeleton lying on the shell. I had never noticed it before and it was scary to see it there in my *kuti* where I had slept for so long without knowing about it. Feeling very awkward and still a bit scared, I went back to sleep that night. The following days I still didn't feel like touching it or doing anything with it. But after a while, I became fascinated with my fearing something that is so natural. I hung the skeleton at eyesight near my sleeping mat and I roamed about it, proud to be seeing it more and more without fear and disgust. I also started studying the poster on my wall, which was a biomedical poster on the intestines of a human being.

* The Maechi all the time said that this or that was 'not beautiful'. In the end they meant that the body is neither beautiful nor ugly, so in other words 'neutral'. But in practice 'ugliness' was used in order to stop attachment to and identifying with the body.

And when the Maechi told me once that they drank their urine as a medicine (like the Buddha did) when they were ill, I decided to try it as well. For three days, I drank my morning urine to see whether I could do it and whether I would start to see it as it is: just a kind of water (as opposed to the culturally imposed idea that everything that comes out of your body is distasteful and revolting). I fought against my abhorrence of the act, and was proud of my succeeding to do it. And later, when the Maechi told me that it was normal for a Maechi to go and see autopsies in the University Hospital, I was the first to ask when we could go. A fragment from the fieldwork report of that day serves to give a brief impression:

‘The new body on the middle table belonged to a man with a very big head. He was full of scratches and his eyelids were yellow. It was a strange sight. He was wearing his pants, but no top. He was skinny. The doctor plucked a bit at the skin of the body, which looked very strange. Like an elastic little skin or a diving suit. He looked unreal, as a doll. ... An incision was made at the top of the head of the man and the hide of the head with the hair was pulled in whole over the face of the man, so the only thing that was still visible was a little pluck of hair on the chin and the rest was the red inside of the head skin. The skull was sawed through and the brains were taken from the head...’

The experience of seeing the autopsies of five bodies of people that died only a day before, was not so much horrifying to me as it was fascinating. One of the bodies was a yet unidentified white backpacker. Because I had been a backpacker myself four years before, it felt like it was someone I could have known very easily. I wrote in my diary:

‘What did it mean to me to see this?

I didn’t expect it to be like this. That I would be impressed much at all. But I was. For one, it is real what people say: that you sometimes realize that life can end suddenly (especially when seeing the body of the foreigner lying there). And second, it was very strange to see the bodies like this: without any life force, like dolls. Hopping up and down when the doctors pulled it. Very strange. It is hard to explain. Just the skin that holds all the things inside of it together. Of course I knew all this, but it is very strange to see that it is all just functional. Before going there, I knew that you were meant to realize by seeing the intestines, that the body is not beautiful. But I actually found that seeing the outside (the skin cut open, the strange ‘inhumanlike’ movements that the bodies made by what the doctors did etcetera), but than dead, giving me a degree of detachment. Seeing and feeling this was really impressive. Afterwards, I couldn’t refrain from seeing everybody outside the hospital in that way: very strange: all those people just walk around, thinking that their body means something. But it is only a strange tool, a thing, a something.’

Although I had been educated during high school biology classes with the idea of the body as an object, in real life I had attached meaning to it. I identified with it and had judgements about it that affected my thinking about myself. But my seeing my body as mine, for example, became a bit different when I saw these bodies detached from any humanity. Also the ideas that I attached to the body regarding beauty (the backpacker was someone that I would normally regard as 'handsome' in my own cultural definition of it), were taken away for a moment.

My fascination of the dead, disgusting and ugly became so big that at the end of my stay, when I went to meditate in a wood for a few days with some Maechi, I started looking by myself to things that had, for me, a taboo resting on them. One of them was that I, every time after defecating in one of the bushes around, started looking with interest at my excrement. I tried to see (and smell) that it was not something that I had to avoid or think of with disgust. Later on, I read an article by Henriette Moore (1999) on biological and cultural meaning-giving of the body, in which she cites the artist Franko B.: 'I was brought up to be ashamed of my body. I use blood, urine and shit as a metaphor because this is what I am' (ibid, pp 162). My fascination with the things that I was 'ashamed of', resembles his act of art. But later on, I found out that my fascination with these things, was not of interest to the Maechi. The fascination provided again a new meaning to the body and its products. The excitement about the abnormal was only a different kind of 'beauty'. Although it did give me the experience of perceiving my body no longer as the producer of dirt and filth, it still caused me to think of it as extraordinary and unique. The true aim of the Maechi was to become disenchanted with the body, to see it without any attachment to its possible meanings.

The act of disenchantment of the body meant to see the body as it is. Looking at it this way is meant to make someone experience that there is not any ground to build a 'self' on. The body cannot be held as being an I, but neither can the non-material part of the person*. To explain this more profound, I want to dedicate the next paragraph to the 'science' of the person as studied from the dhamma by the Maechi.

* In her article, Henriette Moore gives a similar remark by saying that the imperfectness of the body is the reason why someone cannot build his or her identity only on the body. According to her, the 'body art' and 'body modification' that she speaks about in her article imply both stabilisation and destabilisation of the personal identity (ibid, pp 162).

The science of the person

“ Eyes, ears, nose, tongue, liver, kidney, intestine, lung, blood, lymph, skin, sinew, bone and so on... We usually don't call each part like this, it's too long. Instead we agree to call them a “body”. The Buddha explained that body is a kind of conventional truth. The translation of the word “body” in Thai is “the composition of soil, water, fire and air,” can you imagine? Because of soil, water, fire and air, there is a body. Although it is a thing that we suppose exists, it's actually nothing but a large picture of another conventional truth such as a car. It actually doesn't have an existence. Supposing you grind a car into pieces, eventually there is no car. You cannot see whether it a Mercedes Benz or another brand. So is there any human? If you decompose a man, eventually there is no man...”

[From a speech by Maechi Nandajani]

When I started to see the results of my continuous practice in Nirodharam, I wanted to meditate more. When I told Maechi Nandajani that I wanted to do a meditation retreat in the forest**, she told me that I had to learn about the ‘five aggregates’ first. She said that the meditation method of the Burmese monk that was practised in Nirodharam was based on seeing the appearing and disappearing of the five aggregates that a person is composed of. On the ground floor of the meditation hall there was a big wall with a painting of a schedule of the five aggregates and its possible ways of appearance (see the appendix for my copy of it).

The five aggregates were ‘matter’ (the four elements of fire, water, soil and air including the body and its sense organs), feeling (happy, neutral and unhappy), thinking (from jealousy to hatred), and perception (which includes all kinds of memories). The fifth one is a bit difficult for us to understand, because this is ‘(discriminative) consciousness’ or ‘citta’. While we – since Descartes - segregate the person in ‘body’ and ‘mind’ without a good idea how interaction between the two is possible, the Buddhist teachings say ‘citta’ is the intermediary where it all manifests. Citta is sometimes also translated as ‘mind’, ‘heart’ or ‘thought’. It is of six types according to whether it is conditioned by the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind-organ. Maechi Nandajani explains in one of her speeches about this topic:

** All the Maechi retreat once in a while. It is done in a forest nearby or on the silent side of the temple. It means meditating from waking until sleeping, with only a break when taking a shower or eating. It can take from one week up till several months. My twenty-six-day retreat was in a nearby monastery (Wat Ram Peung, Chiang Mai), because there was an English speaking monk who I could talk to about my problems and progress everyday.

'The definition of *citta* is that *citta* can not arise alone, it must always arise along with feeling, perception, thought. *Citta* can sense only one object in every moment.

Briefly speaking, the characteristic of *citta* is, first, to sense the object. Second, it arises and falls away immediately without intervention. Third, *citta* cannot arise alone, but must arise along with the other three *namas* [states of mind]: feeling, perception and thought.

So the aggregates: *citta*, feeling, perception and thought are interconnected and arise together in extremely fast process. And *citta* depends on inner sensations, which are eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body. These inner sensations are contacted by outer sensations, which are light, colour, sound, smell and taste. When there is a kind of contact, consciousness arises. When there is consciousness, feeling, perception and thought will arise along with consciousness. Therefore, if you're listening to the dhamma, *citta* (or consciousness) arises at your ears. You memorise and think about the dhamma and you might have neutral or happy feeling.

This explains why the Maechi think that they should observe everything within themselves and outside as mere states of the conditioned world, without judgement or attachment. The stream of consciousness that we experience as a 'permanent state of I' is, according to the Maechi, merely a stream of *citta*'s, one after another rising and falling away every moment. Every *citta* comes with a particular set of a kind of feeling, a kind of thought and a kind of memory or perception. Maechi Nandajani compares this stream with a television screen where the dots blink so quickly that we perceive it wrongly as a continuing image. A person therefore could never be considered as having a permanent 'I', because it is composed of five components which change all the time. The only thing that holds some kind of continuum is the stream of *citta* that follow upon each other by the law of karma (action and result). According to the Maechi, the only way to free ourselves from the conditioned world of action and result, is by dismantling this process, so there is no longer a result. Maechi Nandajani had explained this to me when she told me about the mind as being neutral like the colour of water:

'When you see that the colours come and go, you start seeing that every time there is a 'an extinguishing with nothing left'. If you see this often enough, you see the true nature of the mind and you know you can throw it away.

Then you see Nirvana: neutrality with wisdom. Happiness.'

When I went in the meditation retreat for twenty-six days, this was what we practised on: to see the 'extinguishing with nothing left'. As the days went by, my concentration was better and better until little escaped my continuing observance. Then the head monk of the temple gave me the assignment to count the occurrences of losing consciousness. I did not understand at first, but when practising and staying with the

moment, I got repeated experiences of a kind of physical shock. I recognized this experience from times at home when I was very tired and lay in bed and suddenly felt like I was falling for a brief moment. But this time I was wide awake and it happened when my mind was very clear and concentrated. The monk of the retreat said that when your concentration is at a maximum that it is possible to make the brief moment of falling into a long interval of no citta. I did not succeed but there were people there that would extent it to an hour or more of 'non-being'*.

The idea of the five aggregates had big implications on the way the Maechi experienced the world. With the idea of the five aggregates, not anything is worth attaching to any longer. A person does not own material things or other people. Cars, clothes, houses, money are in the disenchanted way just seen as 'matter,' just as the body. Family and friends are also just matter, feeling, thinking, remembering and consciousness and can therefore no longer be considered as 'mine' or 'his'. A Maechi once came to me and said that she had seen me walking and smiling, and she corrected herself when thinking 'Oh, Carry is happy!'. She tried to see that 'there is a happy feeling occurring' instead. So for the Maechi, in order to practise non-self, one has to see the reality that there is no 'person' who 'owns' something.

In university, I had attended a course on the subject of identity, in which we discussed how consumer goods were seen by people as parts of their 'extended selves' (eg. Belk 1988). People think the car they own is theirs to the degree that they are emotionally attached to it. In the temple, this idea was affirmed and classified as another false way of seeing things in the world. To make themselves see the reality of things, they tried to observe the attachments that you have to your self-image, also seen in your relating to things and people around as yours and finally to you as a person (when you are actually five different factors).

The idea of citta comes close to a well-known idea of the founder of modern psychology, William James (1890: 176). He wrote about the self-aware 'I,' the observing agent, as opposed to the 'Me', the observed. The Me changes constantly, but the I remains constant. He calls I and Me discriminative aspects instead of separate things,

* Experiencing this 'shock' is of course not the ultimate aim of meditation. The experience of seeing and observing everything 'as it is' was. The 'shock'-experience of no-consciousness was at the moment a gauge to measure the amount of concentration accumulated.

because they are bound to each other. The Me, 'the Self as known' or 'the empirical self,' is 'sum total of all that he can call his'. He explains that the Me is not only his body and his psychic powers, but also 'his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his land and horses and yacht and back-account.' (ibid: 177). The 'I' is called the knower, the pure ego, the Thinker, the Soul, the transcendental Ego, or the Spirit (ibid: 195-196). It is clear that James' idea of 'the I as the knower' is quite similar to the Buddhist notion of citta. But his conclusion that psychology should leave the I to the metaphysics and focus on the Me, leaves out the possibility to research that Maechi live to get rid of the Me, and by this, tend to stop the continuing stream of 'I'.

Unravelling the webs of significance

Anthropologists have written about the meanings that people attach to different aspects in life as being pure or impure, beautiful and ugly, normal or strange and so on. By looking at adding meaning to the biological (or, as in the embodiment-paradigm, showing the integration of the biological with the cultural), most anthropologists presume a consistent existence of meaning-giving. This idea is foremost imbedded in the thought that a person's life starts with a coloured perception (Csordas, Bourdieu, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault), and that this is an experience that is determined to human nature. Thinking this way, many social scientists leave out the possibility of differing degrees of attachment and the possibility of freeing oneself from this supposed 'humanly' deterministic trait.

Buddhism agrees, that a person is 'coloured' from birth, but says that it is because birth is not the beginning. It is the consequence of the life before this one, of which the consequences of many attachments remained (the stream of citta's). The Buddha has called this philosophy 'conditioned arising'. Only when a person is totally free of meanings (by recognition of them), doesn't he or she have to be reborn again. They have reached the state of Nirvana, which is 'beyond mind-and-body,' it is 'without any support .. on which it depends, and is without any mental "object" (Harvey 1990: 62)'.

When Geertz said that he believes that man is an animal suspended in the webs of significance he himself has spun, he only remarked that he takes culture to be those

webs and that we, as anthropologists should therefore analyse these webs (1973: 5). I believe that, after my experiences, it is not enough to look at the webs when the man hanging in them is trying to become aware of those webs as well and is doing something with these webs. If the webs of significance are spun by man him- or herself, it might also be possible to stop and undo the spinning-process. Empowered by the insight knowledge that these webs are maintained by ourselves through meaning-giving attachments to the conditioned world, it is no longer necessary to stay with them. Deconstruction of identity is thus a slowly (or sometimes quickly) becoming aware of all the threads of the webs and releasing oneself from them by acknowledgment and letting go*.

Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' might also be helpful to explain this point of view. Bourdieu shows with this concept how people acquire 'durable and transposable dispositions' through conditioning to the institutional landscape of social settings. These dispositions are according to him incorporated into the body until they have 'all appearances of objective necessity.' (Bourdieu, in Wolf 1999: 10). In order to get to the truth, the Maechi would claim, one has to see these dispositions as they are, as void of real necessity.

Meanings, culture, embodied beliefs and dispositions, which are the things that lay at the core focus of anthropologists' scrutiny, are taken by the Maechi as 'supposed truths' or 'conventional truths' (as examples Maechi Nandajani takes a car, a person, the colour yellow etcetera). According to them, by way of mindfulness and concentration on the real truths (the four elements, the three states of mind, citta and Nirvana), one can see through these falsities and gain insight wisdom. Would it help us to understand them when we only take account of the webs that remain for them to unravel? I think not.

The total experience of 'seeing things as they are' and cumulating disenchantment with everything inside and outside of the person does not make the Maechi nihilistic, as I had first feared it might when a person starts to see things as 'meaning-less'. In the next chapter I will go into the consequences of the deconstruction of identity process for life and overall feeling.

* Geertz claims that the image of the Enlightenment Period of a constant human nature independent of time, place and circumstances probably is illusory, that what man is may be so entangled with where he is, who is is, and what he believes that is inseparable from them. Thus, man is always performing (1973: 35,36). I do not disagree with this view, because in the end, the deconstruction of identity leads to the deconstruction of man (one *is* no longer). In the Buddhist view, in the end it becomes clear that even the man in the webs did not exist all along (only the five factors existed).

Chapter five:

Toward Unconditioned Happiness

I remember every morning of October filling cups with water for the students. Every cup I would watch getting from empty to full. Every time I tried to see it as the only thing that existed on earth: the filling of this cup. I didn't look at the ones that were filled already or at the ones that were still empty. No, I stuck with this one cup which, from moment to moment, was empty, contained a little water, was half-full and was completely filled. Then the next one. Now that one was the centre of my focus. It was everything in the world now... It was my favourite job, filling the cups like this. I loved practising mindfulness this way. It made me quiet inside, happy. No thoughts on my mind were important anymore. For about ten minutes only the filling of a cup was on my mind. It was simple, and it felt like containing so much truth. There was nothing more I needed at that moment. Nothing more to expect, desire or worry about. This peace that I felt when I stayed with the 'present moment' of that cup, seemed the most worthwhile way of life, in its simplicity. Calmness, rest.

- Diary, three months after returning.

Letting go of my own stubborn secure truths by opening up to the normal through the truth of the every day within myself, changed things inside of me. Still calling myself Carry and knowing that people would identify me by the labels of 'anthropologist,' 'young,' 'woman,' 'student,' 'daughter' and / or 'stranger,' I felt that I had become somewhat detached from these labels during my stay in Nirodharam. These labels were not that important anymore. I had seen that I could live in perfect happiness with the world around without needing to be anything.

Happiness is something that is normally not talked about much in social science. It is probably denied as a useful domain of interest, because, as a feeling, it cannot be measured. But in a certain way there lies an assumption that happiness runs parallel to the degree of integration into the society. When you know how to play the rules of the community, you thrive well and you are probably a happy person. People that adapt well are better off than people who do not. It is for example considered a good thing to be a mother in many societies. If someone is not able to have children, she will probably be less happy than her female peers because she cannot live up to the rules of her community. When we, as anthropologists, look at societies in this way, we create our own presumptions. We trace the lines of hidden cultural codes and therefore see that

inability to adjust to society creates unhappiness (the wish to be otherwise). But we can not see if the person A with children is really happier in the many moments of everyday life than person B without them. We take it for granted that it is most important to have (multiple) identities in order to cope with situations and in order to feel good. In this chapter I want to show that this only counts to the degree that people personally want meaning and acknowledgment from the outside world, as is considered by the Maechi. The more people start to see things as they really are (become wiser), the less their happiness is dependent on outward acknowledgement or power over externalities and even on the keeping in mind of a certain identity. The feeling of seeing the sun setting or hearing a beautiful piece of music: the feeling that everything is perfect, just as it is: this is the feeling that I experienced more and more in my process of deconstruction of identity, without the need for this kind of circumstances. Nothing was needed anymore to bring about this deeper happy feeling: it just was. I will tell how deconstruction of identity brings forth this deep kind of happiness, as seen in the abilities of equanimity, loving-kindness and compassion.

Equanimity

Even if I had wanted to, it would have been unwise for me to avoid the topic of happiness in this thesis. From the first moment I came to Nirodharam until now, the issue of real happiness as opposed to a false sense of happiness that stems from attachment to the self has been pierced through every day life. The Maechi asked me again and again whether I experienced the difference between the calm and happy life inside the temple and the craziness, headspinning, unsatisfactoriness on the outside. They had many words to describe the calm, happy and peacefulness of temple life. With them they did not only mean the outer circumstances of the temple, but especially the peacefulness that grew inside the mind, by acknowledging everything as it is. This became clear to me directly when, in October, the temple was constantly packed with students who came to listen to Dhamma and meditate at the temple. It was a new government policy to do something about the increasing criminality due to the new capitalism in the cities of Thailand. To bring young people in contact with a more substantive way of life could be a solution to problems of the modernizing Thai society,

the government claimed. Group after group of more than seventy youngsters a time were living with us at the temple in that month. I had been in Nirodharam for only one month, and I had become very attached to the quietness and peacefulness of the temple ground. When the students came, I had many problems to adjust to the noise and the chaos resulting from their presence. I asked some of the Maechi, thinking that they would have the same problems (living for eleven months of silence a year). They told me that they understood my difficulties, because they had felt the same when they just arrived, but at present they were quiet inside and it did not cause disturbance to them anymore.

This balance of mind resulting from enduring practise of dhamma is called *upekkha*, equanimity. Seeing the colours of the feelings and thoughts go by without attaching meaning to it makes a person's mind calm. Impressions of the outside world (such as the noise from the students) would come into their mind, but would not cause reactions (such as anger or anxiety) anymore. The more they practised, the less things could disturb them: there was no self that could be totally affected by some noise, feeling or thought. They told me again and again how much they achieved an inner peace and quietness, which was ground for a sound deep and lasting happiness.

To describe how the method of acknowledgement of feelings and thought in the moment makes the resulting equanimity arise, I want to tell my own story of it: from my fight against emotions and my attachment to emotions to the acknowledgment and letting go of emotions.

My personal path

In the years before going to Thailand, I had changed a lot. In high school and after that I went to do all the things that I was afraid of as a child. I didn't want to be a shy insecure girl anymore, so I jumped into nightlife and tried to be everything that was considered 'cool' at the time. After high school I went to college and enjoyed the status of being 'independent' by moving out of my parents' house and joining the life of a genuine student. When I found out I did not like the studies that I was doing, I went to work and travel in Israel for half a year. I was proud most when I dared to visit Cairo by myself,

something that everyone warned against. After these experiences, I started to study anthropology in Nijmegen, because of my interest in 'the other'. In the meantime, I still tried to prove myself all the time. I bought a guitar and made sure that everyone in Nijmegen's nightlife knew me. This lasted until Christmas 2001, when I went to South-Africa for a month. I considered myself very cool whilst travelling alone through this country on the other half of the earth. But at the same time I suddenly noticed an empty feeling beneath. At one moment I stood at a beautiful spot on the stretched landscape of South Africa. Kings of nature – two beautiful lions - were laying only ten metres from me. The sun was setting, which made the perfect moment to feel true happiness.

But.. I didn't feel happy. I couldn't feel the beauty of mother nature. The lions didn't mean anything to me. The sunset didn't move me at all. I realized I didn't feel anything. When I returned to Holland, I became more worried. Showing the most amazing pictures of South Africa to people and hearing their Aw's and Oh's, made me more and more aware of my incapability to feel. I realized I had felt some emptiness inside for a long time, but had never allowed myself to think too much about it. Now I decided I had to. I went for help, which started an amazing process on how to feel again. I started to re-experience happiness and sadness and it changed my whole perspective on the world. I could feel compassion again, real anger, real pain. I started to feel love again and could enjoy the small things in life which I was not able to in years. And when I went to Thailand, for the first time in my life I had a serious relationship with someone!

These happenings had made me realize that a person is an agent in dealing with feelings and thoughts. I had seen that someone can push feelings aside when he or she does not want them. I did not want to feel fear, so I did not allow myself to feel it. I did not want to be too enthusiastic, so I did not allow myself to become too happy. I wanted control, so I could do whatever I wanted. This control allowed me to see things as I wanted, but stopped me from seeing how things were in real. I did not want to see reality, because I was afraid of it. I was afraid of my feelings and emotions: life would be much harder if I would feel insecure again for example. It threatened the stable emotional life that I then had.

When I started the process of feeling again, by simply allowing feelings to be there, I started to like them. I attached to happy feelings and wanted to hold on to them. I even tried to hold on to the sad feelings, because I felt so much more alive when I did. This made it hard for me to see things clearly, because I attached to the experience of feeling

now, as I had attached to not-feeling before. By holding on to my feelings, I still wanted control. I started living in a misty world of emotions. When I had a row with my boyfriend for example, I would feel the tearing pain of never wanting him to leave me. I treasured that pain, because I held it to be real love. When a scent brought memories of a distant past, I would throw myself into this memory and cling to the sadness of not being there anymore. I did not want the normal, the non-magical, the truth of the moment.

In the temple, I learned to let go. I found the 'middle way'. To see the feelings and also the thoughts realistically: passing symptoms of an empty I. And I found out that it did not make me feel nihilistic, which I feared for, but the opposite. I felt grateful, I felt an underlying, always existing happiness. A peaceful acceptance and gratitude to life.

Living with the moment made life simple. I used to drink my milk mindfully in the morning. Very slowly I would walk over the grounds of the temple, looking a few steps in front and only focussing on the movements my legs made. Step.. Step.. Step.. Step.. or 'Left', 'Right', 'Left', 'Right'. When I reached the table, I would take a cup, and fill it slowly with my other hand, watching my movements closely. Then I would carefully sit down, feeling this downward movements from the inside. The raising, raising, raising of my hand with the cup.. bringing it to my mouth. Then I concentrated on drinking: taking one sip trying to feel the cup touching my mouth and the fluid warm soy milk touching my tongue and then my throat when I swallowed. Then I took another sip: my hand going up, the cup against my lips, and the feeling of liquid on my tongue and down my mouth. And then another sip, and so on until my cup was empty. This peacefulness integrated every moment of daily life. When I felt lonely, I accepted this feeling and did not break down and put this feeling of loneliness to invade my whole being. When I felt sad, I accepted the sadness, and let it pass by. I would not reject it and I would not grasp it. The world became more clear, and feelings and thoughts in a way less important. I felt balanced and strong.

My own story and the life stories of the Maechi have a lot of similarities. They all tell me about their former way of dealing with their feelings, thoughts, surroundings etcetera. Maechi Kitchawatani for example, told me how she would have big bursts of anger in her youth, which she made to disappear in the temple. The accumulating independence from impulses from the inside and outside world had a big impact on the attitude of the

Maechi and me towards others. This is where, as logical companions of equanimity, loving-kindness and compassion come in.

Metta and Karuna

‘Where there are expectations, there is suffering.’ To experience the ultimate freedom that is known by Buddhists as Nirvana, one has to let go of attachment, greed and hatred towards objects and persons, which are inherent to the attachment to a self. In this paragraph I will introduce the abilities of *metta* (loving-kindness) and *karuna* (compassion), which are induced by the practice of non-self. I will try to explain them in accordance with Mauss’ *The Gift* (1970). I take this well-known work as being a good example of the determined look of anthropology on how culture is embedded in people’s lives. Once again, I am not attacking this ethnography or anthropology as a whole. I only want to explain what possibilities might be left out by the anthropological gaze at foremost the webs of significance (and with it, identity construction).

As I said earlier, although they all look the same, talk the same and believe the same, the Maechi appear very independent and self-confident. They told me that, although they lived together, they were very much on their own. They only shared their experiences with each other when there was something that they could not figure out by themselves. In the meantime, it seemed to me that they were always happy to help each other, and to share their wisdom. If, before I went to Thailand, I thought that living only for yourself as a nun and without the foremost intention to help others, might be somewhat egoistic, this changed when I was there. The Maechi claim that it is only their job to help themselves. But as a result, their potential of loving-kindness and compassion for others seemed to become bigger.

When we read a book like *The Gift* by Mauss, it is easy to believe that interdependence is a human law. In the case of giving and taking, we know that ‘we must always return more [or the same] than we receive’ (1970: 63) and that ‘Invitations have to be offered and have to be accepted’ (ibid: 64) etcetera. The ‘social contract’ and the system of ‘total prestation’ (a system of permanent contracts between (groups of)

people) are inherent to life in a community. At least, this is what we see when we search for cultural codes. When we look at the independence that the Maechi create for themselves, we see that it is possible that giving and receiving take on a different meaning.

When I wanted to give Maechi Nandajani money for the temple when I left, she did not want to take it if I did this to help them. And also, I could not give it as a payment for the months that I had stayed there (this would imply that they had 'earned' something). I could only give the money because of my own *bun*. *Bun* means 'merit'. This indicates that when a person does something that is good for him or herself, something good will come from that. To give the money was a way for me to 'do Metta,' to do something for myself and because I wanted to out of a love and compassion for the world. It was not meant to create a dependence. Of course, from looking through Mauss' gaze, the Maechi did benefit from the money I gave. They would lead a different life if it wasn't for the gifts from the many people to the temple. But, one, they would live anyway. In Nirodharam they practised living outside, sleeping on the bare ground with only a mosquito-net. They chose not to use money and they had a garden that provided for some of the food. And second, the main theme in contact with others was that they did not attach to receiving. So at another level than the material they were independent anyway (the more developed and wise, the less a Maechi needed it). A good example of this is that in some Buddhist temples monks have to live for seven years wearing robes made out of rags. After that they are allowed to accept the most beautiful pieces of garment offered to them. This is possible for a monk then because he has become detached of clothing and appearances. The Maechi could receive therefore, without being dependent physically and mentally (at least, this skill is improved during the process of deconstruction of identity).

Dependence creates suffering. So according to the Maechi, a person should not give anything out of pity or for the sake of a return gift. This would only lead to suffering, because of the expectations that might not be met. So the Maechi did not want any kind of 'contract,' apart from the one that meant that you would receive good by doing good (and the best thing a person could do was to practise meditation). Everything in the temple was considered this way: you give (work, possessions or information (Dhamma)) in order to help yourself, and through you, the world. And by helping

yourself, you develop more independence, which would lead again to a deeper loving-kindness and compassion for the world. And more wisdom to share.

When we pull Mauss' idea on giving into the open, we could generate that it is considered a good thing in many societies to have goods, to have many friends and relatives and to help each other in need and expect others to help you. In Nirodharam it is considered good not to have any goods or friends that you consider 'yours' and to help yourself first (although nothing is considered 'good': they just see that it is the reality and live up to it). The other Maechi are your 'accomplices on the path,' but you do not attach to them. Maechi Nandajani once told me that you detach from your attachment to helping people by seeing yourself as a nurse. A good nurse does not feel pity, but compassion. She does not cry with the patient, but she gives advice. She is not disturbed by the pain of the patient but feels an unconditioned concern. Another Maechi told me that when we feel compassion, it means that we wish a person to move away from suffering. When we feel loving-kindness, we are happy for a person that he or she is doing well. Loving-kindness and compassion and the experience of giving that comes from these two, stem from your own happiness and true understanding. They are not products of giving false meaning to things or the wish to create relationships. The deeper this unbounded happiness is felt by the seeing of the truth of non-self, the more loving-kindness and compassion is felt.

True happiness

'Carry, suppose you are climbing a mountain. You are climbing and climbing and become very thirsty. It is very hot and you have had a long climb, but you have nothing to drink. Then, when you reach the top of the mountain, a woman comes to you with a cup of nice, fresh, cold soda. She tells you that you can drink this, but that it contains poison. It is only a little drop of poison, but it will make you grow old and sick sooner in future and you will die earlier. Would you drink it?'

Maechi Nandajani asked me this when I had just come to Nirodharam. By that, she explained that you can choose short-term joy and satisfaction if you want to, but that that will cause suffering in the long run. 'Clinging to nice things, to people or to a young body now makes one suffer in the future, when these things go away, people die and the

young body becomes ill, fragile and dies.’ Happiness that comes from attachments is according to her different from happiness experienced from learning the truth. Being happy with the money you have, with the upcoming expectation of a new job, with your youthful body, with the present that someone gives you, with the love of your husband, wife, children, friends or parents.. all of these according to the Maechi cause suffering in the long run when you attach to them. By not seeing the truth of them as impermanent and non-self, you create dependence. True happiness that comes from true understanding is not conditioned by any factor. The Maechi try to stop identifying with things in order to make them ‘theirs’. The equanimity, loving-kindness and compassion that the Maechi obtain through this, are therefore features that do not depend on anything inside or outside the person.

In a way, the Maechi do what anthropologists do: they are observers of culture in order to raise understanding about the world. The difference is that they do not only think and write of a possible truth: they live their truth. To believe that there are two forms of happiness: the short-term happiness that depends on ‘the webs of significance’ and the permanent happiness which is inherent to the other reality of Nirvana, means to see that cultural anthropology has generated information on the former, and missed out on the latter for already addressed reasons. In the last chapter I will go into the consequences that the idea of ‘deconstruction of identity’ may have.

Conclusion

Before I went to Thailand I had never meditated and I did not know much about Buddhism apart from the course in university. I was attracted to it only because it seemed strange and exotic. I had never been in Asia before and I wanted to see something different. My interest in identity had been there for a long time, though. Two years before I went to Thailand, I had conducted an interview with my mother's aunt, Sister Cecilia (Klein Gunnewiek 2003). She had been a catholic missionary and I wrote about her individual identity. As a young naïve adolescent she was sent to Aruba (in the Caribbean). On her own she set up a primary and a high school on the island. During the interview she told me she had then felt what a woman was really capable of. She grew to become an adult and independent woman who could make her own choices. At the end of the interview, she told me that for God she had given up her name, her hobbies, her friends and the chance to marry and have children. Now, at the end of her life (she died when I was in Thailand), all she tried to do was come closer to God by giving up the only things she still owned: her opinions and her will. In the article I asserted that she had taken on some sort of deeper identity by subverting more superficial forms of identity (appearance, consumption etcetera). While she wanted to sacrifice her 'self' for the sake of God and Others, she seemed to assume a stronger individual identity. I concluded the article by saying that self-sacrifice and self-development do not have to be contradictory: they can go together and even bring about each other.

I (as well as my professors) was quite content with my conclusions, but when I mailed the specific journal with my article to my mother's aunt, something felt awkward. Somehow I knew that she would not really be able to identify herself with my writing and that there had to be something that I had overlooked. I had the feeling that I missed out on something, but I could not lay the finger on what it was.

When I was in Thailand, I often thought about this strange feeling of missing something. But this time I decided to do away with my presumptions for a moment in order to open myself to the ideas of my informants on identity. Every time I did this, it felt like I was being honest to my informants, and to myself. By writing about their reality and making it mine as well, I did come into a danger zone: the zone of conversion. But if we say that our view of the world is just as much only one rationality, based on

historical coincidences (as Foucault has claimed), I consider it a privilege to get to know another from the inside.

For me, deconstruction of identity became a reality, a worthwhile way of living and a way of investigating what I conceive might be true. In the time of research I was becoming aware of my 'self' which I always thought existed. I saw the things I had always identified myself with more clearly: my family, experiences of the past, my genetic character, and the culture I was brought up in. I saw the subjectivity of my world more than ever. When I came back I wanted to keep seeing it: the impermanence, the suffering and the non-self of everything in and around us. At the same time I wanted to crawl back into the safe world of not knowing. Crawl back into my webs of significance which I had spun so readily during my life(s).

While Kondo (see introduction) wrote that she needed to reconstitute her identity when moving away from the field, I would like to claim that I let some of my identity go in Thailand. I agree with her that it was necessary to go back to some western rolls in order to write this thesis. But I feel that I have nonetheless proceeded on the 'path of wisdom,' and believe that this is due to a certain increased detachment from my 'self' *.

At present, I still try to let go of my attachments to identity-grasping. I do not meditate a lot, but I am more conscious than before of all of my learned behaviour and thoughts. But I think that this 'partiality' did not keep me from writing a good thesis. By being honest about how my trust in this practice came into being, I think it has given me the opportunity to show what these women are really doing in their temple. I could not have done this by writing about how identity is constituted in a Thai nunnery.

Relative rationalities

* Although I have been focussing on wisdom (insight knowledge) as the general aim in the life of Maechi, maybe every anthropologist recognizes this experience somehow in the form of 'richness,' 'life-experience,' or the 'becoming more wise'. Wisdom is unfortunately an 'elusive and of forgotten end of scholarship' (Stoller 2004: 200). By acknowledging this we can try to start answering the question whether wisdom has a universal aspect or not (I think it does) and, subsequently, in what ways scientific knowledge is able to trigger personal wisdom.

Important questions for social science can be drawn from this thesis. Should we categorize the deconstruction of identity as another case of reinstating a new identity or can we conclude from this thesis that deconstruction of identity is indeed a credible possibility? The latter would mean that we reject some aspects of Western epistemology in favor of a Buddhist epistemology. How can we describe experiences that are 'lived from' this other rationality that places 'knowing' as happening by practice instead of learning out of theory? Could there be a future in researching different societies from the stance of different epistemologies and is it possible to fuse the many rationalities into one multi-rational new science? It is important for us to ask ourselves these questions in order to keep searching for the boundaries of today's science and see if it is necessary to adjust them.

Hobart said about the current rationality debate in England: 'Crudely, the issue is about whether human beliefs and actions are necessarily and sufficiently explained by universal criteria of reason or whether differences in culture and context are irreducible or incommensurable enough to vitiate such a sweeping claim' (1992: 2). The focus on the status of reason shows that the debate is still a Western one. It embraces questions of logic and practical reason, and the seemingly only alternative view is the one of relativism. As I have tried to show, the Buddhist epistemology known by the Maechi of Nirodharam states that their assertions and methods can lead to absolute knowledge about the world (although it can only be known by the individual in the form of wisdom, accumulated by enduring practise). Thus while Foucault states that there are many truths about the one absolute truth, which can never be known by the historically embedded subject, the Maechi believe that it is in fact possible to become known to the one that follows the path of Buddha. To the person that practises in order to unravel the webs of significance, to grow out of these historically embeddings that blind us and attach us to the never-satisfying world.

As Western discourse which is centred around logic and 'the rationalists' penchant for dichotomous thinking' (Hobart 1992: 29) has not (yet) proven to be able to give a sufficient explanation of the world, it might be worthwhile to look at other ways of knowing. They will probably seem irrational to us at first, given that we have long integrated in ourselves narrowly defined conditions on what is and what is not rational.

It is time to set aside our scepticism (which we think of as natural, but which in fact is also defined by cultural-dependent factors*), and intend to take our host's beliefs and practices as serious possibilities. Maybe there is more to the world than can be seen (empiricism) or reasoned (rationalism). Let us test these other realities and find out how 'rational' these seem in second instance.

I have tried to do this, and by this inquiry to represent the experience by using the concept of 'deconstruction of identity'. It is important to find bridging ideas like this in order to create a basis for understanding. But in the case of Nirodharam, where practice is more important than theory, it is the experience itself which holds the key to the truth. In a Wittgensteinian mode therefore, it might be impossible to write down all knowledge as we have tried for so long in Western science. The reader can only catch a glimpse of what the practise of non-self means for the person him- or herself. It is as one of the nuns told me in the temple once after she had, after years of practice, a sudden 'experience of insight': 'Oh Carry, it is as if you have heard people talk about a city for years, describing everything about it. But when getting there for the first time yourself, it appears to be totally different from what you could have imagined!' Keeping this in the back of our minds, we can at least try to get to some level of explanation, and leave it to the reader to integrate some of it into their lives.

As an anthropologist we know that we are no 'tabula rasa'. We always start with concepts of who we are and what we should be. It is an interesting thought that it is possible to develop oneself beyond these concepts. Deconstruction of identity is another way to look at the world and it might be untrue, just as the idea that construction of identity is standard of all time and all places and that we are necessarily bound to it, might not be true. It might be worthwhile looking for other 'proof' of deconstruction of identity in other circumstances. The idea, that I have described as a unique concept to understand the interpretation of identity in the Thai nunnery, might for example be compared with Foucault's idea (in his last work) of the aesthetics of existence (1984) or the 'growing to God' of the catholic missionary nun. Although we will face many difficulties by having to let go of our 'self'-concepts and by trying to find a way to explain what we have found, we should not close our gates to lock different rationalities like these ones out of the scientific debate any longer.

* Interesting to read in this regard is Geertz' essay *Common sense as a Cultural System* (1983: 73-93)

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