Ajaan Sujin, a prominent Thai lay teacher of Theravada Buddhism, interprets abhidhammic theory in a manner that, in my view, approaches the teachings of Emptiness as presented in the Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtras and in the Madhyamaka-kārikā. This paper presents an overview of Ajaan Sujin’s teachings and compares them with Emptiness as expressed in the Diamond Sūtra, the Heart Sūtra, and the Madhyamaka-kārikā, as well as from a few well-known secondary sources. Core distinctions between the two theories do remain, primarily that for Ajaan Sujin dhammas do have characteristics and nibbāna is distinct from samsāra; thus I have termed Ajaan Sujin’s teachings ‘Theravada Emptiness’. While it may seem that these distinctions are too great to overcome in bridging the gap between abhidhammic theory and Emptiness, a direct comparison between the wording of certain sections and the overall correspondence of vocabulary, practice, and other conceptions, serves to narrow the divide created by these distinctions.

Having studied Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar, I was exposed to heavy doses of abhidhammic teachings as the abhidhamma-pitaka is quite popular there. Now, nearly seven years later and just as the last remnants of rūpas and kalāpas, of cittas and cetasikas and all their various combinations, were fading from my memory, I was invited by a few of my students to attend a teaching session given by a Thai Abhidhamma teacher, Ajaan¹ Sujin Boriharnwanaket—founder of The Dhamma Study and Support Foundation (DSSF). Notably, Ajaan Sujin is a woman.

I assumed that I would be dealing with the same type of abhidhammic theory presented in Myanmar. I must state that although I fancy myself a scholar of the Theravada tradition, the Abhidhamma has never been a focus of my studies. I do know the general theory and, as I said, at one time I knew quite a bit of the details. I thought I would use this visit as an opportunity to refresh my memory and to ask a few general questions on the Abhidhamma. The morning was spent listening to the weekly Dhamma talk in Thai given by Ajaan Sujin and some of her
top students. My Thai at that point was so elementary that I understood almost nothing. In the afternoon a teaching and discussion session was held in English. The English-language group consisted of about 20 people, mostly non-Thais, who have been studying under Ajahn Suwin for between one year and 30 years. I thought that the session would consist of my listening to some of their ideas and of my posing a few questions. However, it began with Ajahn Suwin, followed by her senior students, asking me question after question on what I know of the Dhamma and how I interpret what I know. I quickly found myself on the defensive in a somewhat heated debate as they rejected all the 'traditional' answers that I gave.

So who is Ajahn Suwin Boriharnwanakhet and what is the DSSF? Ajahn Suwin’s teachings are based primarily on the Theravada Abhidhamma-pitaka. She emphasizes the practice of being aware of the present moment's ultimate reality (paramattha dhamma) as the means to nibbāna. She has been guiding monks, nuns and laypeople for over 40 years. Ajahn Suwin maintains a well-established, modern Dhamma center in the Bangkok area and presents daily radio talks on over 20 radio stations. She has been granted an honorary degree from a top Buddhist university and Ajahn Suwin has been honored by the King of Thailand for the positive effects that her work and Dhamma center have had on many Thai people. She also has created some controversy. The controversy around her stems from her being a woman teaching the Dhamma, including teaching to bhikkhus, and from her interpretation of abhidhammic teachings and its often unorthodox effect on more traditional interpretations of the Sutta and Vinaya pitakas. An interpretation that I think pushes abhidhammic theory into a near expression of Mahayana Emptiness.

Although Ajaan Suwin speaks English quite well, much of her teachings are know to the English-speaking world through one of her longest associates, Nina Van Gorkom. Nearly all of the printed material in English has been translated or written by Ms Van Gorkom. Thus, her work provided the majority of the written sources I consulted. The senior student's command of Pali abhidhammic vocabulary is quite good. And in the case of Ajaan Suwin and Ms Van Gorkom, and perhaps others, their knowledge of the workings of the Abhidhammic theory is excellent.

The goal of this paper is to establish a parallel between the selflessness (anatta) theory of Ajaan Suwin and the Mahayana emptiness (śūnyatā) theory as expressed in Prajñāpāramitā literature and Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka-kārikā. This will include a look at the components of Emptiness teachings, such as wisdom (prajñā), Two Truths doctrine, theory of causation, mode of practice, samsāra equaling nirvana, and so on, and how these components also figure prominently in the DSSF literature. These components are important as they seem to go hand in hand with Emptiness and serve to draw Ajaan Suwin's teachings and Mahayana Emptiness closer together, creating what I call Theravada Emptiness. I maintain the Theravada for a perfect parallel between Ajaan Suwin's teachings and Mahayana Emptiness cannot be made. I will also use this comparison as a platform to make a few observations and raise a few questions myself. I hope to bring out
not often discussed conclusions that can be drawn from observing this seeming move to Emptiness.

I am not referencing the Theravada Abhidhamma-pitaka directly. The abhidhammic theory presented here comes through the filter of DSSF teachings. No effort has been made to cross reference interpretations of Ajaan Sujin with the Abhidhamma-pitaka, other scholars of abhidhammic theory or to point out apparent differences between her theory and 'standard' abhidhammic theory. The outline of Ajaan Sujin's teachings that follows in this paper stems from my roughly one-and-a-half-hour discussion with the English-language group and Sujin, the notes from my students’ one-hour interview with Sujin (conducted in Thai) and from printed source material in the form of books and Internet articles posted on various websites supporting the work of Ajaan Sujin. This research is admittedly incomplete; however, I am confident enough has been done to carry out a preliminary comparison between the teachings at the DSSF and Mahayana Emptiness.

In presenting Emptiness, I have confined myself to using the Diamond Sūtra, the Heart Sūtra, the Madhyamaka-kārikā and a few well-known secondary sources. This paper is by no means meant to be exhaustive; it is meant to add another twist to the long-running Abhidhamma verses Emptiness debate. No attempt has been made to establish which theory might be more logical or closer to the true words of the Buddha. I am interested in how a contemporary Buddhist teacher can maintain dharmas as ‘entities’ with characteristics, and thus maintain a core difference with Emptiness theory, and yet apparently reach the conclusions and conceptions of Mahayana Emptiness. That this core difference does remain, at least as language describes the ideas, is, as I said, why I choose to call Ajaan Sujin’s teachings Theravada Emptiness.

Ajaan Sujin teaches that ‘wholes’ do not exist; they are concepts (paññatti) and anatta (selfless)—thus, they are conventional truth (sammutti sacca). Likewise, the ultimate realities (paramattha dhammas) of citta (thought), cetasika (mental components), and rūpa (matter-energy) are also said to be anatta as their impermanence overrides the fact that they do have individual characteristics. However, paramattha dhammas as existing things with characteristics can be experienced in spite of their fleeting existence and fundamental anatta essence. Indeed, all our experiences are of paramattha dhammas; we only confuse these dhammas with the ‘wholes’ we perceive, which in fact do not and never have existed. This idea of the dichotomy between conventional truth/reality and ultimate truth/reality is a central teaching of Ajaan Sujin.

Also all dhammas, except the nibbāna dhamma, are conditioned and a preceding dhamma causes the next dhamma in the chain to appear. A citta in combination with cetasikas arise to give us our sense experiences. At the Foundation, it is said that in sentient beings all dharmas arise because of ‘conditions and accumulations’. This is a stock phrase of the DSSF and I heard it again and again in my discussion at the center and have read it many times since in the Foundation’s literature. Everything that happens to us, everything that
we think and feel as a *pañcakkhandha*² happens because of current and past conditions and previous accumulations. Our actions are conditioned by a myriad of factors beyond our control and we have an accumulation of kammic fruits ripening; these two factors combine to produce our every experience and cause our every present action.

The conclusion is drawn that since ‘I’ am only the *pañcakkhandha* and these are selfless ultimate realities, then ‘I’ cannot will or choose to do anything. Cetanā (volition or will) as a cetasika is said to only arise, as with all paramattha dhamma, due to ‘conditions and accumulations’; a person as anatta cannot will another anatta constituent into being. Cetanā simply arises with a citta as one of the seven universal cetasikas found in all thought moments. For example, should a kusala citta arise due to conditions and accumulations, the cetanā acts to direct a ‘person’ to do a kusala deed (Van Gorkom 2006a, para 10). The cetanā does not direct or will a neutral citta to do a kusala deed as a volitional thought action of a being. Cetanā arises only to direct the already composed thought moment it is part of. The citta and cetasikas have arisen due to conditions and accumulations and are anatta, so direction or volition is impossible. ‘There is no self who can force citta to be kusala citta, but conditions can be cultivated so that kusala citta arise more often’ (Van Gorkom 2006a, para 14). This teaching appears to negate kamma as a volitional/willful present action.

This also, then, negates traditional meditation practice; samatha is especially singled out, as one cannot will concentration of any kind. ‘Even mindfulness is anatta, non-self, it cannot be induced just by concentrating or trying to be calm or by sitting quietly. Some people find it difficult to accept that one cannot force sati to arise …’ (Van Gorkom 2006b, para 3).

DSSF practice takes a three-fold form: being mindful of the present moment’s ultimate realities; listening to and studying the Dhamma; and keeping the company of good friends in the Dhamma (*kalyāṇa-mitta*). One strives to be aware of the present ultimate reality currently impinging on one of the sense doors. So, one can be aware of color and form through the eye door, but not of a red pen as ‘pen’ is a concept (*paññatti*), only the color giving form as *paramattha dhhammas* exist. The same can be said for sitting. I cannot be aware of sitting as there is neither ‘I’ nor ‘sitting’, only the feeling hardness, softness, pressure, and so on. One must let wisdom (*paññā*) develop by repeatedly studying and listening to the Dhamma, keeping good friends in the Dhamma, and being aware until that time when one fully realizes anatta and attains nibbāna. Of course, the right conditions and accumulations evolved over time must be present in a person for them to begin to practice.

Paul Williams has stated that for Mahayana thinking abhidhammic theory did not go far enough in its application of anatta. It needed to negate not only the idea of a personal self, but the concept of self in everything including *dhammas* (Williams 1989, 43). It appears that Ajaan Sujin may well have gone that far, establishing what I am calling Theravada Emptiness (*suññatta*), for while Sujin does say that *dhammas* have characteristics and cause each other, it is repeatedly
emphasized that ‘sabbe dhammā anattā’ (all dhammas are completely without self). Still, in Ajaan Sujin’s theory dhammas do have characteristics and are perceived, so a divide with Mahayana Emptiness remains; however, when viewed in a more global context, the similarities between the two systems are striking.

We read in the Diamond Sūtra (in a manner of explanation repeated throughout the sūtra): ‘If, Subhuti, these Bodhisattvas should have a perception of either a dharma, or a no-dharma, they would thereby seize of a self, on a being, on a soul, on a person. […] a Bodhisattva should not seize on either a dharma or a no-dharma’ (Conze 2001, 28). And further, “seizing on a material object” is a matter of linguisitc convention, a verbal expression without factual content. It is not a dharma nor a no-dharma. And yet the foolish common people have seized upon it’ (Conze 2001, 65). Ajaan Sujin teaches that first recognizing wholes as dhammas allows one to stop grasping objects and then recognizing dhammas as anatta allows a practitioner ‘to stop grasping dhammas’ (Van Gorkom 1999, 172). In my discussion with the group, it was explained to me that a sotāpanna has stopped grasping at objects not because he has eliminated desire, but because he has realized that an object is only fleeting, selfless dhammas and thus there is nothing to grasp. Realizing the characteristics of dhammas as fleeting and selfless automatically frees one of clinging.

Edward Conze, in commenting on the Diamond Sūtra, states that the sutra rejects the Abhidhammic concept of a multiplicity of separate dharmas, or ultimate entities. And further that we must remember that this is not a simple negation, emptiness lies somewhere in between ‘is’ and ‘is not’ (Conze 2001, 26). It certainly appears that Sujin’s idea of dhammas express this concept of being between ‘is’ and ‘is not’. After all, dhammas have characteristics and can be perceived but are anatta. We have a something with characteristics that exists, but with no essence underlying these characteristics. Emptiness theory admits that we have experiences, but we are left with a mystery as to what we are experiencing. Sujin’s selfless characteristics offer a solution to the mystery.

Nāgārjuna says ‘it is dependent origination [pratītyasamutpāda] that we call emptiness [sūnyatā]’ […] ‘it is because entities originate in dependence on causes and conditions that they lack inherent existence, they are empty’ (Williams 1989, 61). Sujin comes very close to the exact same expression in saying that all dhammas arise due to conditions and accumulations and, in part, due to this they are anatta. Ajann Sujin’s momentary, selfless, yet existing dhammas can easily be described by the final stanzas in the Diamond Sūtra. Dhammas and dharmas are:

As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp,
A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble,
A dream, a lighting flash, or a cloud,
So should one view what is conditioned. (Conze 2001, 69)

Peter Harvey says that Emptiness describes the world as ‘a web of fluxing, inter-dependant, baseless phenomena’ (1995, 99). In describing dhammas, the Abhidhamma, Mahayana Emptiness and Sujin all focus on the specifics
of individual dhamma interaction, but I think if we pull back and see all of samsāra in Sujin's context, it too appears to be very much 'a web of fluxing, interdependent, baseless phenomena'. Indeed, she expresses samsāric existence nearly in Mahayana terms of māyā—that all around us is simply illusion—when she states 'The wrong view that takes dhammas for self, a being or a person, has been compared to the perception of a mirage' (Boriharnwanakhet 2005, 17). As we have seen with the sotāpanna when one realizes anatta 'objects' disappear and their true nature of fleeting, selfless dhammas appears. We can say that the object itself never really existed for it was merely a concept (paññatti) created by our clinging mind, while the dhammas themselves are seen as nothing but selfless characteristics.

This introduces the idea of conceptual, discursive thought as the grounds for our mistaken perceptions of reality and hence the 'existence' of samsāra. For Mahayana the interdependence of things, Emptiness, rules out the possibility of dualities such as hot and cold, big and small, and so on. It is precisely this discursive thinking of language that must be stopped for liberation to occur. As Harvey explains 'Thus Nirvana is not attained by the eradication of anything real, namely defilements, but by the non-construction of the conditioned world of samsara ...'—reality can be seen by either spiritual ignorance, thus samsāra, or true knowledge, thus nirvana (1995, 103). For the DSSF the characteristics of hot and cold, and so forth, exist and we can perceive them, but again, they are impermanent, selfless characteristics. By focusing on them we eliminate our clinging to wholes and realize there is nothing to grasp in dhammas either. 'Desire can be eradicated by developing paññā, wisdom, until the characteristics of the arising and falling away of citta, cetasika and rūpa have been penetrated' (Boriharnwanakhet 2005, 35). So here, too, realization of the truth offers liberation, not eradication of defilements as something real. It can easily be argued that it is discursive thought that causes people to take the selfless characteristic of dhammas as substantial. By focusing on one single characteristic in isolation as Sujin teaches, say hot, it of course loses its meaning in relation to other things and thus is empty of any real meaning or existence. It is only when the mind pulls back from this non-dual awareness and takes two characteristics in relation to one another that samsāra is built. Viewing dhammas independently or interactively, as in the 'net' just spoken of, shows characteristics as empty; and yet, at the same time, the characteristics of dhammas allow us to have our experiences and for dhammas to be construed as 'essentially existing things' by the ignorant mind.

But what precisely is happening in the universe of Mahayana or Theravada Emptiness? In a sense these empty/selfless dhammas and their interactions exist in a universe of causeless cause and effect. We can now address the Madhyamaka critique of Abhidhammic causation and its applicability to Ajahn Sujin's teachings. That I know of, the DSSF has not developed a theory of how one dhamma can cause another.3

It seems, however, that not having a fundamental theory of causation, rather than maintaining a separation with Emptiness, in fact brings the DSSF
teachings and Emptiness together as Prajñā-pāramitā literature and Madhyamaka have no coherent theory of causation either. The critique of abhidhamma causation offered by Nāgārjuna and other Mahayana critics stands on an unproven postulate of what it means for something to exist or have an inherent existence. What Nāgārjuna and others have done is to state a postulate for what they think inherent existence is and then logically deconstruct causation from that postulate. But no more tangible proof, no more evidence as to what an inherent characteristic would behave like is offered than abhidhammic theory offers on how dhammas can cause each other. Stating that it is precisely because things are empty that causation can occur is an unsupported and unproven statement. Both the DSSF and Emptiness theory purport to explain the fundamental basis of ‘existence’ as it is linked to liberation; however, both systems rely on unproven postulates as a basis of their theories. That causation is difficult to explain in DSSF literature or in Emptiness teaching is no surprise as in the end nothing existentially real seems to be happening in either conception of the universe.

This brings us to the Emptiness principle of no actor, no action, and nothing acted upon; no sight, no seeing and nothing seen; no giver, no gift, and no receiver; we find this concept expressed throughout Mahayana literature. This is exactly what we find in Sujin’s abhidhammic theory as a person has been negated by being nothing but the selfless pañcakkhandha, so no giver and no receiver, and the gift has been negated by it too being composed of impermanent and selfless dhammas. Van Gorkom says that we must make ‘... an effort to [be aware of] what appears now, but at the same time realizing that there is no self who can make an effort’ (1999, 174). Contained within this concept is the negation of kamma as a volitional activity. Chapter 17 of the Madhyamaka-kārikā deconstructs karma, while, as seen above, DSSF literature negates cetanā as true volition. This leads the Madhyamaka-kārikā to state ‘Afflictions, actions and bodies and agents and fruits are like a city of gandharvas, a mirage, a dream’ (Batchelor 2000, section 17, #30, #33). Everything is māyā, ‘things’ seem to happen, but essentially nothing really is happening. There is a bit more concreteness to the DSSF outlook of cause and effect with the selfless characteristics of dhammas, but the result appears the same.

The above paragraph creates what seems to be another point that unites Sujin with Emptiness. Despite that fact that both systems present us with no one doing anything to anything, they both insist, nonetheless, that something is happening. But just what is happening? Does, selflessness of both subject and object negate true sentiency? It seems both systems describe a mechanical, determined or even stagnant theory of samsāra and release from it. The lack of an agent and of kamma/cetanā as a chosen action, and for DSSF, the insistence on conditions and accumulations as exclusive factors in action creates a mechanical predetermined system. During the group discussion, I asked whether this teaching was not teaching mechanical predetermination as we apparently started at some point in the past and now simply move through time until we chance on the right conditions and accumulations to set us free. I reminded them of the theory
proposed by the Buddha’s contemporaries the Ājivakas, where our time in samsāra simply unwinds like a ball of string no matter what actions we ‘think’ we are taking. Our actions are pointless as they are not our actions at all. I was told that there are too many factors for one to know how the future will play out, so it is not determined. But this only suggests that we do not have enough information to predict the future, and in no way rules out that sentience functions mechanically. The other possibility is that the ‘universe’ is ultimately stagnant. The idea of stagnancy seems quite applicable to the theory of Emptiness and is born out in the expression that, as the Heart Sūtra says, ‘There is no cognition, no attainment and no non-attainment’ (Conze 2001, 97; emphasis added). With stagnant existence it should come as no surprise that eventually Mahayana thought would develop the ideas of an adi-buddha, tathāgata-garbha, buddha-dhatu and the like, and practices such as zazen and dzog-chan. We are already enlightened, there is nothing to do and nothing to change, and we thus need only to sit and realize it. The three modes of practice in DSSF teachings also point in this direction.

The theme of no attainment and no non-attainment brings us back to the theme of realization verses elimination as the trigger to enlightenment, and opens the comparison of samsāra versus nirvana. Nirvana and samsāra are equated in Mahayana by the inference that the unconditioned nirvana depends on the conditioned samsāra for reference, thus giving an empty nature to both. Nāgārjuna states flatly that ‘Samsara does not have the slightest distinction from Nirvana. Nirvana does not have the slightest distinction from Samsara’ (Bachelor 2000, section 25, #19). Here we do find a separation between DSSF and Emptiness theory, for in DSSF thinking nibbāna is the unconditioned and is an ultimate reality. Ajaan Suñjin describes the nibbāna paramattha dhamma as having three characterizes: suññatta (voidness), animitta (signlessness), and appanihita (desirelessness) (Boriharnwanaket 2005, 37). It is these characteristics that distinguish nibbāna from the ‘samsāric’ dhammas. Emptiness would apply these characteristics equally to all dhammas. The equating of nirvana and samsāra allows Buddhas in the Mahayana system to continue to interact with samsāric beings as there is no real distinction between the two. In DSSF literature, the parinibbāna of the historical Buddha has caused a separation from samsāra and contact with the Buddha is no longer possible. ‘From then on [the parinibbāna of the Buddha], the living beings within this world no longer had an opportunity to hear the teaching of the dhamma directly from the Buddha himself’ (Boriharnwanaket 2005, 10).

By maintaining the distinction and non-interaction between samsāra and nirvana, the DSSF effectively rules out the Mahayana concept of ‘celestial’ Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. And indeed, there is no mention of anything like the bodhisattva path in DSSF literature. The goal of the practitioner, as in general Theravada practice, remains becoming an arahant. As with the stress on dhammas actually having characteristics, the separation of samsāra and nibbāna and the lack of a bodhisattva-yāna serve to keep Suñjin’s teachings grounded in the Theravada camp and distinguish it from Mahayana thought.
However, on the level of the experience of nirvana we find a similarity. Nâgârjuna says 'The characteristic of reality (tattva) is to be not dependent on another, calm, not differentiated by verbal differentiations, beyond discursive thought, without diversity' (Williams 1989, 68). We find in a Survey of Paramattha Dhammas, a strikingly similar statement: 'Whenever sati arises paññā can at that moment understand realities clearly, and then there is inward peace, because there are no people, beings or things. Whereas, when there are many people, many conceptions in one's life, there is no peace' (Boriharnwanaket 2005, 389).

A conception of Emptiness in general Mahayana teachings apparently brings with it a number of other constitutes, such as, specific concepts, vocabulary, practice, and so forth, and these are mirrored in Ajaan Sujin's teachings and the DSSF literature.

Signaled by the titles of the numerous Prajñāpâramitâ-sûtras, praññā (wisdom) is a key component in Mahayana teaching and practice. In the DSSF literature, the use and importance of the word and concept paññā (translated at the DSSF as 'wisdom') surpasses that of the Pali Canon. The DSSF literature constantly stresses that one must develop wisdom. The use of the term paññā is of such paramount importance that amoha (non-ignorance or non-delusion) is equated with and replaced by the term paññā (Van Gorkom 1989, 77). The list of the three roots (tihetu) of a wholesome action (kusalakamma) thus becomes: alobha, adosa and paññā (Boriharnwanaket 2005, 436; Van Gorkom 1989, 118).

The significance of praññā in Mahayana Buddhism is summed up by the Heart Sutra: 'All those who appear as Buddhas in the three periods of time fully awake to the utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment [do so] because they have relied on the perfection of wisdom' (Conze 2001, 108). Perfecting wisdom one attains nirvana. For the DSSF the paññā citta is what realizes nibbâna. Wisdom in both teachings is synonymous with enlightenment. Paul Williams notes the distinction between intellectually knowing something and the true praññā of deep, meditative analysis and direct experience (1989, 43). Van Gorkom states that 'Theoretical understanding of conditions is not the same as paññā which discerns the conditions of the nāma and rūpa as they appear' (1999, 48).

Williams also says '... praññā is said to be a state of consciousness which understands emptiness (sûnyatâ), the absence of self or essence even in dharmas' (1989, 43). The DSSF defines paññā as knowing and experiencing both the conditioned (paññâtta) and ultimate realities (paramattha dhhammas) as dyukkha, anicca and anatta (Boriharnwanaket 2000, 42; 2005, 346–7; Van Gorkom 1989, 246). It must be said that wisdom in the DSSF context does arise in part through knowing and experiencing the nearly instantaneous arising and falling away of dhammas. Mahayana would reject that there is a dhamma to perceive. However, that dhammas can be perceived by their characteristics is, as noted above, one condition why I call Sujin's emptiness Theravada Emptiness. Even given this, the essence of the praññâ and paññâ realization is remarkably similar. Of course, Emptiness is empty as is praññâ. Van Gorkom says paññâ arises when the conditions are right for it, paññâ is not self (1999, 172).
DSSF and Madhyamaka schools emphasize the Two Truths doctrine of conventional truth (Pali sammutti-sacca; Sanskrit samvr̥ti-satyā) and ultimate truth (paramattha-sacca, paramārtha-satyā). The DSSF usually expresses conventional truth, sammutti, by using the term paññatti, concept, so we find the juxtaposing is between concepts and ultimate realities. In both Madhyamaka and DSSF it is the ultimate truth that makes conventional truth conventional. The conventional truth is the illusion caused by discursive thought and grasping. A degree of difference in the conception of the paramattha of DSSF and Madhyamaka thinking appears to lie in the DSSF stating that ultimate truth is knowing that dhammas, despite having inherent characteristics, are dukkha, anicca, and anatta, while Madhyamaka holds that perceiving dhammas is part of conventional truth as their emptiness makes them ultimately unperceivable; the ultimate truth being the full realization of emptiness. But the DSSF certainly hints at the Madhyamaka concept of ultimate truth as, again, it must be asked, what is the quality or essence of a characteristic that is impermanent and selfless?

The DSSF practice of studying and pondering the Dhamma in the company of good friends in the Dhamma resembles the Madhyamaka practice of using logic and discussion as a key means to nirvana. We also find the revaluation of the laity in both Sujin’s and Mahayana teachings. At the DSSF, the position of the laity is upgraded as it is said that a layperson can perform the three modes of practice as efficiently as a monk. Lay practitioners are considered on a par with their monastic counterparts.

Finally, has the DSSF developed the bodhisattva sense of compassion despite the fact that it has not adopted the bodhisattva path? Compassion is not a theme that one finds overtly expressed in the DSSF literature. We do find it, however, in the members’ actions. One of the main books I used as a reference is a collection of some of the many letters Ms Van Gorkom has written to people over the years to help them understand DSSF teachings. There is the ideal of and emphasis on kalyāna-mitta and how one should behave towards others, which is reflected in the congenial atmosphere of the DSSF center and, perhaps most importantly, is that the Foundation has had such a positive effect (stopping addictions, developing a sense of worth and community, etc.) on the lives of many Thai people that the King of Thailand granted Ajann Sujin recognition for her work.

If there was a final step to be taken in order to make the Pali Canon’s abhidhammic theory into a theory of Emptiness, Ajaan Sujin appears to have taken it. She and her associates have done this in a manner that maintains the key concepts of Theravada abhidhammic theory: dhammas have individual characteristics and a separation exists between samsāra and nibbāna. These two concepts keep the DSSF firmly in a Theravadin context. Nevertheless, the strong emphasis on the anatta character of dhammas and the paralleling of other components of Emptiness pushes dhammas toward a Mahayana conception of Emptiness. Ajaan Sujin dispossesses dhammas of their essence while maintaining their characteristics. She has elaborated a true theory of Theravada Emptiness.
complete with all the constituent concepts and practices that follow with a conception of Emptiness.

NOTES

1. 'Ajaan' is the Thai word for 'teacher' or 'professor' and is derived from the Pali/Sanskrit 'ācariya'.
2. The five aggregates that make up a sentient being are the physical component and the four mental components of feelings, perceptions, kammic formations and thoughts.
3. In an e-mail I asked some specific questions concerning their teachings including this one on causation. I received no reply to my e-mail.

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Matthew Kosuta. Mahidol University, College of Religious Studies, Salaya, Puthamonthon 4, Nakhon Pathom, 73170, Thailand; E-mail: matt_kosuta@hotmail.com