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**WALKING IN**  
*The Sunshine Of The*  
**BHIKKHUNIS**

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A Biography of Ranjani de Silva  
The Woman Behind the Bhikkhuni Revival

# WALKING IN *The Sunshine Of The* BHIKKHUNIS

A Biography of Ranjani de Silva  
The Woman Behind the Bhikkhuni Revival

By. Suvira Bhikkhuni

*with forewords by*

Ven. Chuehmen

Ven. Dhammananda

*afterword by*

Ven. Tathaloka

*“I could not put this book down...*

*a **must read** for  
anyone interested in women  
and Buddhism.*

*–Sharon A. Suh, Ph.D.*



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Mme. Ranjani de Silva  
Photo credit: Ayyā Suvīrā and Max Milne 2021.

“In 1987, we met at the hallowed precincts of Buddha Gaya and vowed to resurrect the Bhikkhuni Order, and we can be happy that our vision is now a reality. May you have even greater strength to complete the task of resurrecting Bhikkhunis in our mother land Sri Lanka. May you and your family go from strength to strength in Dhamma. With loving wishes—your dear friend and Kalyana mitta.”

Pup-Sung: Bhikkhuni Kusuma. 16.12.96, Varanasi.

*Ayyā Kusumā’s 1996 personal thank you note to Ranjani de Silva. Reprinted with permission.*

“Ranjani de Silva’s work from 1993 helped to empower the *sīla mātās*. Through the 1996 Sarnath ordination, she helped usher in a new era for nuns. I am very happy to see what she has accomplished.”

—**K. Wimalajothi Thero, founder, Buddhist Cultural Center, Sri Lanka**

“I was present at the 1996 high ordination in Sarnath. Ranjani brought 10 samaneri from Sri Lanka. I met her again in North America in 1998, at the Buddhist Women's Conference in LA, where her talk on the bhikkhuni revival was impressive and spread awareness of the revival. It was time for these ordinations to happen. I am very happy to see this courageous woman's biography being published. Suvira Bhikkhuni has done a great job writing about this.”

—**Aggamaha Panditha Ven. Dr. Walpola Piyananda, Chief Sangha Nayaka of America**

“Ranjani de Silva had the guts to make the breakthrough for women to live life as *sāmaṇerīs* and to eventually become bhikkhunīs. She is an important person who helped in the bhikkhunī revival.”

—**Santinī Mahātherī, bhikkhunī preceptor and abbess, Wisma Kusalayani Women’s Hermitage, Indonesia**

“We welcome this timely biography of Ranjani de Silva—a remarkable and heroic woman who has worked tirelessly for many years to re-introduce the higher bhikkhuni ordination back into Sri Lanka—and by extension into Thailand also. This historic undertaking was carried out with Ranjani’s characteristic quiet determination and her faith in the rightness of what she was doing, which allowed her to overcome all opposition and obstacles without rancor and with a smiling face. What an example for us all! Her fearless vision and

resolve reminds us what can be attained by a single person who holds to what they know to be right and never gives up. We thank Ayyā Suvīrā for compiling this account of a wonderful life that has benefit and inspired thousands.”

—**Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, founder, Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery. Author of *Reflections on a Mountain Lake and Into the Heart of Life***

"An inspiring and beautifully crafted biography of one of the most dedicated protagonists of the global bhikkhunī revival, Ranjani de Silva."

—**Bhikṣuṇī Jampa Tsedroen (Dr. Carola Roloff), Permanent Visiting Professor for Buddhism and Dialogue in Modern Societies at the Academy of World Religions, University of Hamburg**

"What a wonderful gem of a biography detailing the incredible efforts of Ranjani de Silva to revive the bhikkhunī order in Sri Lanka and beyond. Ayyā Suvīrā's book offers an intimate portrait of Ranjani de Silva's lifetime of work as a socially engaged Buddhist transformer who always found a way to make a "yes" out of many a "no." At the same time, this biography provides a remarkably detailed living archive of the establishment of sāmaṇerī and bhikkhunī ordination in Sri Lanka and the early history and development of the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women that includes a veritable who's who of all who contributed to elevating the status of Buddhist women. Through meticulous attention to the details of Ranjani de Silva's daily life, we are also privy to the everyday experiences of lay Buddhist women in Sri Lanka which are often overlooked in official documents. The biography thus artfully weaves together her early life history and offers a glimpse into the Buddhist worldview that shaped

and planted the seeds for Ranjani de Silva’s incredible accomplishments. What a delight to read! I could not put this book down and devoured it with great admiration as I learned so much about the early history of the bhikkhunī revival. Ayyā Suvīrā’s biography of Ranjani de Silva is a must read for anyone interested in women and Buddhism and bhikkhunī ordination.”

**—Sharon A. Suh, Ph.D., Professor of Buddhism, Seattle University and President of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women**

“The revival of the Bhikkhunī order is one of the great modern Theravāda reforms. With this biography of Ranjani de Silva, Suvīrā Bhikkhunī provides a compelling account of a key player in the Bhikkhunī movement. Based in large part on oral history interviews conducted in Newbury Buddhist Monastery, it gives an intimate insight into one woman's determination to re-establish the higher ordination of Theravāda women, while also speaking to the broader international cooperation of an emerging global Buddhist ecumene that enabled the reform. It's a remarkable story preserving a unique Buddhist voice.”

**—Dr Adam Bowles, The University of Queensland**



## Excerpts from Lovada Sangarāva (Towards a Better World)

By Venerable Vidagama Maitreya Mahāthera (15<sup>th</sup> cent)  
Translated by Ven. Kaṭukurundē Ñāṇānanda

*To those who have faith, who do not like the suffering in existence there is no better opportunity than this (Buddha-age).  
If beings only knew the value of charity and morality,  
even an hour is worth a thousand years.*

*Today—even today—Death might come. How can you rest assured that Death will not come tomorrow? When will Māra with his mighty army be your guarantor?  
Why are you so lazy in doing skillful deeds ?*

\*\*\*

*The teachings of the Buddhas are never false.  
The body is unstable—have no doubt about it.  
Life is like the dew—drop on the tip of a blade of grass.  
Merit is something to be done without delay.*

## Forewords

I came to know Madam Ranjani in June 1997 when I first visited Sri Lanka with my Dharma sister to seek senior monks' support for giving *upasampadā* to the Lankan nuns, in Bodhgaya. That time, it was our local contact Ven. P. Somalankāra Nāyaka Thero who brought us around visiting the senior monks, so I only heard briefly about her great support for the *silmātāvā*.

It was year 2000 *upasampadā* in Taiwan, that I had direct contact with Mme Ranjani to arrange all visiting documentation for the twenty-two Lankan nuns coming to Taiwan: twenty to take the *upasampadā* and two bhikkhunīs to help around. The *upasampadā* in Taiwan was also certified by twelve Theravādan bhikkhus including the Most Ven. Attudavē Rahula Mahāthera, *mahānāyaka* of the Rohana Sect; and the Most Ven. Dr. Henepola Guṇaratana Mahāthera, chief *sanghanāyaka* of the Malvattu Sect in America. Unfortunately, due to certain temple problems, Most Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka Mahāthera was unable to come to the ceremony in Taiwan.

After the Taiwan *upasampadā*, I came to Sri Lanka several times and stayed at the Sakyadhita Training and Meditation Center, whereby I came to know Ranjani better. I find that she is not only concerned for the nuns' *bhikkhunī* status, but their education and livelihood too! In the earlier days, there was no *dāna* at the Center, so when there were nuns training at the Center, Ranjani has to go marketing herself—I have followed her to get rations. From the several working relationships with Ranjani, I would address her as “mother to the Lankan nuns.”

Ven. Chuehmen  
Fo Guang Shan South Asia Coordinator  
Battaramulla, Sri Lanka  
March 10th, 2021.

It is my great pleasure to write about Ranjani. As I recall, it was in 1991 when I first met Ranjani. She came to participate at the first International Buddhist Women's conference (later this conference came to be known as the second Sakyadhita conference) held at Thammasat University in Thailand. On the third day of the conference, the participants were taken out for a local tour which included a visit at Songdhammakalyani Temple, the first temple for bhikkhunīs in Thailand.

Mrs. Ranjani de Silva had, for the first time, been exposed to the possibility to do something similar for her own nuns in Sri Lanka. She approached Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo and myself—at that time I was still Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a lay person. She proposed that she could play the role of a host for the third Sakyadhita conference in Sri Lanka. Eventually this happened in 1993. Under her able hand, the conference was a success. For the first time the whole island woke up to see bhikkhunīs coming from many countries and realized that bhikkhunīs still exist. This was because the opening ceremony was organized at the main national hall where the president himself came to grace the opening session. Thus, the news went to all the local Sri Lankans in the island. Someone having seen the news came forward to offer the land, and this led to starting Sakyadhita Meditation Center in Colombo.

On a personal note, I came to attend Sakyadhita in Sri Lanka as the president of Sakyadhita International still as a layperson. I did not have the faintest idea that it was paving the way for my own ordination which happened in 2001. I was shaved under the *nāg* tree in Sakyadhita Center, and the ordination took place at Tapodanārāmaya in Mt. Lavinia.

Ranjani became my only *dāyikā*, who made all the arrangements for my first ordination as *sāmaṇerī* (2001), my full ordination as *bhikkhunī* (2003) and my second confirmation (2005). All were arranged under her able hand. She was the one who found a *pavattinī* (*bhikkhunī* teacher) for me, she accompanied me to various points of interest during my many trips to Sri Lanka.

For me to become Dhammānandā, the first fully ordained *bhikkhunī* in Thailand, was all in the hands of Ranjani. By helping me to be fully established in monastic life, Ranjani actually was the key person to help establish *bhikkhunī* sangha in Thailand.

When I write to her, I remind her of this long passage we shared, and told her to always *anumodāna* and share with me in all the wholesome acts in my life as *bhikkhunī*, and in shaping the *bhikkhunī* sangha not only in Thailand but around the world.

She has done her full duty as the best *dāyikā*, in the role of *upāsikā*. It is my great honor to write a foreword to her biography, a story needs to be preserved in Buddhist history in Sri Lanka and also for the Buddhist world.

Dhammānandā Bhikkhunī  
Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Thailand  
February 9, 2021.

# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
About Transliteration and Titles.....	6
c. 1946: Descendants of Ranjani’s Paternal Grandmother.....	8
1937–1952: Under the Shadow of the Coconut Palms.....	9
Introducing Mirissa.....	9
Ranjani—(Almost) the Youngest Sibling.....	15
Ranjani’s Father, Juanes de Silva Jayasekera (1895–1960).....	17
Ranjani’s Mother, Nelliet Jayasekera (1910–1985).....	19
Ranjani Recollects Village Life.....	25
1942 Japanese Air Raids on Colombo.....	29
“Aunty Lay Disciple”.....	32
“Cousin-Monk”: Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri (1910–1969).....	33
Attending Mirissa Government Bilingual School and Mātara Sujāta Vidyālaya.....	42
The Matchmaker.....	45
1948 Sri Lankan Independence.....	46
Coming of Age and South Asian New Year.....	47
1952–1961 A Lucky House in Colombo.....	50
Moving to Colombo and Attending Mt. Lavinia Girl’s High School.....	50
1950s Early Recollections of Sīla Mātās.....	54
1960 Ranjani’s First Job at the Milk Board, the Death of Ranjani’s Father and Marriage to B.S. de Silva.....	58
1962–1969 Waiting for Maitreya Buddha.....	62
1961 Joining Sri Lanka Saukya Dana Movement.....	62
1962 Employment with the State Engineering Corporation (1962–1985).....	63
1964 Birth of Daughter Rukmal.....	70
1969 The State Engineering Corporation Moves to a New Building.....	73
Late 1960s: Waiting for Maitreya Buddha.....	75
1969 Death of Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri.....	76

1970–1979: On the Hospital Committee.....	77
1970–1971 The First Computer in Sri Lanka and Ranjani Learns to Drive.....	79
1978 Ranjani Goes to Europe and Works at the UN Interna- tional Telecommunications Union.....	81
1980–1986: On the Prisoner’s Welfare Committee.....	85
1982–1983: “We’re from the South!”—the Black July Riots and the Beverley Traders.....	86
1984 First Retreat with Ven. Khemā in Kandy.....	89
1985 Death of Ranjani’s Mother.....	91
1986 Giving up Work.....	92
1987–1995: Empowering the Sīla Mātās.....	95
1987 International Conference on Buddhist Nuns in Bodh Gaya.....	95
1987–1989 Organizing Nuns’ Training.....	103
1990–1991 First Goenka Retreat and International Buddhist Women’s Conference, Thailand.....	109
1992 Ministry of the Buddhaśāsana Blocks Sakyadhita In- ternational Buddhist Women’s Conference.....	114
1993 The Inception of the Revival—the Sakyadhita Interna- tional Conference Sri Lanka.....	121
1994 A Small Hall in Ratnamalana.....	138
1995 Making a Vow under the Bodhi Tree and Meeting Ven. Māpalagama Vipulasāra.....	141
1996–2000: The Dawn of the Bhikkhunī Revival.....	148
1996 A Luminous Bhikṣunī Ordination in the Sarnath Miga- daya Vajra Sīma.....	148
1997 Talking about Bhikkhunīs.....	183
1998 The Bodh Gaya International Ordination.....	187
1999 First Round of Nuns’ Training and Building the Sakyadhita Center Sri Lanka.....	202
2000 Taiwan Bhikkhunī Ordination.....	207
2001–2004: The Nuns’ Lineage is Planted in Thailand.....	219
2001 The Seed of the Nuns’ Order is Planted in Thailand	219

2002 “Don’t Take the Sāmaṇerīs Out on the Road” .....	222
2003 Standing at Anulā Therī’s Windswept <i>Stūpa</i> .....	229
2004 UN International Women’s Day Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards.....	241
2005–2009: After the Wave Hit—Tsunami Aid.....	250
2005 Tsunami Work in Pereliya.....	250
2005–2006 Living between Two Countries and Re-ordina- tion of Ven. Dhammānandā.....	260
2007 International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Sangha.....	265
2009 Bhikkhunī Ordinations in India and Australia.....	271
2010–2020: Recognition for the Services of Bhikkhunīs.....	275
2010 One Hundredth Birthday of Nelliet Jayasekera.....	275
2011 Some former <i>Sīladhārās</i> Become Bhikkhunīs.....	276
2012–2013 More Ordinations and Publications.....	278
2014–2015 A Door Closes in Thailand; A Window Opens in Sri Lanka.....	281
2017 Bringing Dhamma to the Family: Services of Bhikkhunīs. Thirty Years of Sakyadhita International.....	282
2018–2019 The Sri Lankan Government Funds Bhikkhunī Education.....	291
Conclusion.....	295
Afterword.....	301
Epilogue: Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī.....	303
Asks for Forgiveness from the Buddha.....	303
Selected Timeline.....	304
Bibliography.....	308
Glossary.....	328
The Author.....	347

## Introduction

*“Women want virtue. We should give it to them.”*

*—Ven. Balangoda Ānanda Maitreya*

In the twentieth century, something remarkable happened in Theravāda Buddhism. Against all odds, the Theravāda Buddhist nuns’ order—which had been in recession for over a thousand years—was successfully restored with international co-operation. This occurred in two famous ordinations of 1996 with the co-operation of Korean Buddhist leaders and 1998 with the co-operation of Fo Guang Shan. Due to her work in organizing the 1996 ordination and other accomplishments, Ranjani de Silva has been described as the “person most responsible for the Theravāda bhikkhunī revival,”<sup>1</sup> and “*the* prime mover in the re-establishment of the bhikkhunī sangha in Sri Lanka.”<sup>2</sup> Yet her full story—including her account of the revival—had never been told. Her work from 1987 onward, including the Sri Lanka 1993 Sakyadhita Conference, had been crucial in laying the foundations for the modern Theravāda bhikkhunī order. As president of Sakyadhita International Buddhist Womens’ Organization 1995–2000, her presidency spanned the pivotal years of the bhikkhunī revival in Sri Lanka. Together with luminaries like Ven. Khemā, Ven. Kusumā (first modern Theravāda bhikkhunī in Sri Lanka) and Ven. Dhammānandā (first modern Theravāda bhikkhunī in Thailand), she has directly or indirectly paved the way for over one thousand women to ordain

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1 C. Sudhammā, 2003b.

2 Fenn 2013, 263–264.



as bhikkhunīs globally. It had been Ranjani herself who donated the alms-bowls of both Ven. Kusumā and Ven. Dhammānandā.

In addition to being present at nearly every key moment of the revival, Ranjani was also instrumental in developing a Sakyadhita Center Sri Lanka policy of handover and ongoing connection between East Asian and local Theravāda bhikkhunī preceptors, whereby Korean and Taiwanese preceptors continued to support Sri Lankan bhikkhunīs in giving ordinations, with Ven. Kusumā acting as bhikkhunī preceptor for the first time in 2004. In 2004, Ranjani also received a UN International Women’s Day Outstanding Women in Buddhism Award in recognition of her work.

In total, Ranjani has worked for more than thirty years on behalf of bhikkhunīs. Ranjani herself said, “Between 1987 and 2007, I did only nuns!” She worked tirelessly as a Buddhist practitioner who is mindful of impermanence, the inevitability of death, and the precious opportunity that our lives offer us to do good.

Ranjani has been resident at my former monastery, Newbury Buddhist Monastery (NBM), since 2018. At the request of my bhikkhunī mentor, Ven. Upekkhā, while resident at NBM, I began conducting extensive oral interviews with Ranjani, with the aim of writing her biography. Ven. Upekkhā had been fully aware that participants in 1996 were getting older and that the time to write a history was now. Ven. Kusumā herself sadly passed away while research was still being undertaken for this book: she will be remembered with awe for her contributions.

While researching the book, several facts came to light which were surprising. The foremost surprise to me was the use of the Dharmaguptaka commentarial ordination format in the 1996 ordination, even after dual sangha ordination had been re-established in Korea in 1982. As this book will likely be the first

publication to discuss this particular aspect of 1996, I hope that we can build upon our collective knowledge of this under-documented ordination format in the future.

The Theravāda bhikkhunī revival was a massive event for Buddhism, involving the creation of new transnational networks, including Sakyadhita International. Given the newness of these concepts, it may be most helpful for the purpose of this book to think of an evolving collective body of knowledge and procedures around bhikkhunī ordination from the 1980s onward. One of the noteworthy features of the 1996–1998 ordinations is how many members of the senior sangha internationally united to publicly support them. The participation of multiple international Buddhist organizations, including the World Buddhist Sangha Council and Korean Sangha Council in 1996, shows sangha harmony. The exhortations of the ordination certificates from 1996 themselves convey the message of spiritual upliftment that the ceremony was intended to convey; I have been very happy to update subsequent positive outcomes for the 1996 group. Nothing in this book is intended to indicate a vinaya judgment. The most important thing to me in writing this book is the wonder and joy of Ranjani’s contributions to the transmission of the lineage. With increasing public support, we see the tribulations of the early years flowering as Sri Lankan government funding (from 2019) and increased acknowledgment of Sri Lankan bhikkhunīs (through roles and titles) in recent years.

Ranjani’s contributions, both personally and through the Sakyadhita Center, to the revival and subsequent global spread of the Theravāda bhikkhunī order, are historical on a grand scale. The countries in which there are now Theravāda bhikkhunīs due to Ranjani’s work include Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Thailand, USA, Germany, Indonesia, Vietnam, New Zealand, Bangladesh, China, and Taiwan, among other countries.

On a smaller, personal, scale, it is worth noting the importance of Ranjani in my own journey towards ordination. In the early 2000s, when I first became interested in bhikkhunī ordination, I only knew that the Sri Lankan Theravāda bhikkhunī revival was afoot due to an article of Ranjani's on the internet. It was Ranjani who first gave me the courage to know that higher ordination was possible, even prior to the first Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination in Australia in 2009.

Ranjani herself provided copious print materials, newspaper articles, photos, and copies of her speeches. Ranjani was also very generous in answering my questions via oral interview, and in proof-reading drafts.

Many thanks go to the ordained mothers of the Sri Lankan and Thai bhikkhunī revivals respectively, the late Ven. Kolonnavē Kusumā and Ven. Dhammānandā, who were generous in allowing me to interview them for this book (also to Ven. Kusumā's assistant, Sohani Hettiarachi). I am indebted to Gayathri Wijesinghe for her help in typing the interview transcripts. Ven. Jampa Tsedroen provided invaluable advice and suggestions in relation to the 2007 International Conference on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha, as well as photographs. Ven. Chuehmen provided details about the April 2000 Taiwan ordination. Ven. Charlotte Sudhammā was helpful in providing further information and photographs. Ven. Peliyagoda Sudarśanā provided photographs of the 1996 ordination group. Ven. Sujato shared a memorable story with Ranjani. Ven. Serī helped with some questions about Ven. Vāyāmā in Sri Lanka. Tyler Lehrer provided archival material. Tomomi Ito corresponded about her research, as did Dr. Hyangsoon Yi. Many thanks also to Ranjani's grand-daughter, Sachini for providing some comments, and to Ven. Madullē Vijitānandā for clarifying some dates in

communication with Ranjani. Thanks as well to Ven. Santussikā for fact-checking relevant sections. Ven. Vijitā and Ven. Dharmadarśikā provided a copy of a 1996 ordination certificate. Ven. Valpola Piyānanda kindly answered a question. Max Milne deserves praise as the book’s talented volunteer photographer. John Kelly contributed partial proofreading. At Newbury Buddhist Monastery, Ven. Upekkhā and our other residents also put up with me while I had my face to the computer screen, with commendable patience—my deep gratitude to the Newbury community. Many thanks as well to the Metta Centre and supporters of Mettārāma Nuns’ Monastery in Sydney, where the book was finalized for print.

Extraordinary thanks are due to Ven. Tathālokā, who gave extensive feedback via correspondence around this book. I was completely impressed by her dedication to bhikkhunī history. Many details only came to light as a result of Ven. Tathālokā’s love and care for this topic, in conjunction with her own research on bhikkhunī preceptors. In collaboration with the assistance of Jun Hyun-ja (writer for Modern Buddhism magazine), Ven. Sucittā, Prof. Cho Eun-su (co-president, Sakyadhita Korea), Ven. Yu-jeong (foreign affairs coordinator, Korean Jogye Order) and Ven. Sang Won, we were able to obtain much needed details around Korean participation in 1996. While every attempt has been made at fact-checking (a daunting task given the scope of the book), all remaining errors are my own.

With gratitude,  
Suvīrā Bhikkhunī  
Mettārāma Nuns’ Monastery  
2564 BE (2021).

## About Transliteration and Titles

Throughout this book, academic transliteration has been used wherever possible. This enables a single, logical scheme to be used more-or-less consistently for terms in Sinhalese, Hindi, Pāli and Sanskrit. However, some terms may therefore appear in ways which are phonetically accurate, but do not represent common English spelling. For example, Væligama represents Weligama, Malvattu represents Malwattu, Æhæliyagoḍa represents Eheliyagoda, etc. In my opinion, the small effort required to learn this scheme is preferable to the confusion resulting from using two mutually inconsistent schemes to represent Sinhalese, Hindi and Pāli/Sanskrit. The Sinhala “ya” ending on temple names has been removed: *ārāma* as opposed to *ārāmaya*.

Pinyin has been preferred for Chinese Romanization where possible, although this has not been applied consistently to Taiwanese place and personal names where the Wade Giles is already established, for example, Ven. Hsing Yun.

The Revised Romanization of Korean system has been used for all Korean transliteration in so far as possible. This may lead to some slight differences in the transliteration of place names to the records from the 1990s: for example, revised Bomyeong vs Bomyung. Korean temple names have been given with the suffix “sa” (meaning “temple”) removed; Bomyeong Temple as opposed to Bomyeongsa Temple.

Monastic titles have been standardized as “Venerable.” One exception is for *sīladhārās*, as I have been informed that Sister or Ajahn is the preferred title within the Amaravati tradition. Another exception is for Burmese monastic names where I

suspect the name is a place rather than a personal name, signifying the “teacher of place X.” I understand this to already be a very formal and respectful way of referring to a teacher.

Most of the senior monastics in this book have additional respect titles, which are not particularly consistent across traditions and countries. As it is impossible to use these additional titles consistently for all monastics, I have opted not to include them. The same is true of additional academic degrees, *nāyaka* titles etc, which have not been listed (even where they appear in the original source).

Where an individual’s preferred transliteration of their personal name is known, this has been retained.

## c. 1946: Descendants of Ranjani's Paternal Grandmother



*Taken in the yard of the Sri Sundārāma Temple.*

*Ranjani's paternal grandmother is in the center of the photo. These are her descendants and their families. Ranjani's father stands to her right. Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri (front left), Aunty Upāsika is standing one to the left behind him. The other monk is Ven. Hemalankāra, another of Ranjani's cousins. Ranjani's mother is pregnant with sister Ira on the LHS of the photo.*

*Ranjani is on the far right of the front row. She would have been eight or nine when this photo was taken. The book in the middle is an ola-leaf manuscript from the piriveṇa, which has been placed with some relics.*

## 1937–1952: Under the Shadow of the Coconut Palms

### Introducing Mirissa

Ranjani de Silva (*née* Jayasekera) was born on the twelfth of August, 1937, to Nelliet Jayasekera and Juanes de Silva Jayasekera, a food importer. Her full name is Kunihennedige Neetha Ranjani. She was born at home, during the daytime. One day, out of the blue, Ranjani pulled out two compact rolls of *ola* leaves and some lace-making bobbins to show me. The *ola* leaves were her horoscope, inscribed with delicate lines of Sinhalese script and arcane geometric astrological diagrams. I had regarded the circular spirals of palm-leaves as precious museum pieces and had laid them out carefully on white paper to photograph them. Ranjani inspected the scroll, and found that the “7” of “1937” had faded. With quotidian disregard, she took a blue biro and traced over the place where the text had been lost. I had asked her if there were any highlights of the horoscope—she said, “Lucky in spiritual things, but not so lucky in material things!” In my opinion, this isn’t a bad horoscope, for a Buddhist.

In due course, Ranjani grew up in the village of Mirissa, near Mātara (Sri Lanka’s southern point), in British Ceylon. Today, Mirissa, Ranjani’s home village, consists of five thousand people, and is a tourist hotspot. It is located about seven miles from the larger city of Mātara and approximately ninety-three miles from Colombo. The first tourist bungalows appeared from the 1980s onward, and by the 1990s, it had become a popular tourist destination. Locations like Parrot Rock and the aptly-named Coconut Hill—named after its



uncountable coconut palms—can attract crowds. The village was impacted by the 2004 tsunami—a disaster in paradise.

From her comfortable seat by the fireplace at our Newbury monastery in Australia, in her eighties but still full of life, dressed all in white, and with her hair done with coconut oil, Ranjani is playing tourist guide: “You must go see Galle Fort!” (Galle Fort is a sixteenth century Portuguese-Dutch fort about an hour’s drive away from Mirissa in Galle.) “Don’t wait too long to visit Sri Lanka!” Ranjani has been living at my former monastery, Newbury Buddhist Monastery, observing eight precepts, since 2018. It seems like a suitable place for her to be, with the nuns. But our thoughts turn to Mirissa.

These days, if you were to visit Sri Lanka and take a leisurely walk along the Sunandārāma Road to the location of Ranjani’s former Dhamma school, the Śrī Praghaloka Daham Pāsala at Śrī Sunandārāma temple, you would see hotels, tuk tuks, and an overwhelming plenitude of tropical greenery: frangipanis, bananas and coconuts, the occasional papaya, bamboo or hibiscus (“shoe-flower” in Sri Lankan English), areca palm and jackfruit, all neatly restrained by white brick walls or well-woven thatch, or a bamboo palisade. The atmosphere is tropical. In places, the jungle encroaches on the village: the vines bedecking the power-lines. From time to time, you might pass a small roadside cemetery. The hotels have intriguing names: “Calm Palace,” “Resort of Happiness.” A hotel website carries a grim warning for tourists: *beware falling coconuts*. Maybe you could stop at a café and drink a refreshingly bright orange king coconut through a straw, or have some *roṭi* or *kottu*, or international cuisine (or even a more “modern” Fanta or coke). Some of the pedestrians and people on bicycles and scooters are locals, the men dressed in *sarama* (Sri Lankan sarong) or jeans, the

women stylishly attired in *osarīa*, the “Kandyan saree” or blouses and skirts. Others of them are tanned, back-packed tourists from Europe, Australia and America, in sweaty singlets and board-shorts, or retirees from East Asia with regulation-issue visors and cameras, all following the handwritten signs to Secret Beach (not a secret anymore). Maybe later they will go whale-watching (actual whale-sighting not guaranteed), or gaze out upon the Indian ocean from a hillside lookout, Instragramming endless photos of coconut palms in the sunset. Here and there: a contented stray dog. The children wave and say hello to everyone who looks foreign. But Mirissa already feels like home.

Parallel to the Sunanda Road is the tiny Guṇasiri Mahimi Road near Secret Beach. Ven. Agga Mahā Paṇḍita Mirissē Guṇasiri, for whom the street was named, was Ranjani’s cousin. Ranjani found an old recording of his sermon preaching for radio—I found her next to the fireplace one day listening to it with a noticeable sense of nostalgia. She proudly refers to Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri as her “cousin-monk.” Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri’s obituary, written by Dr. P. G. Punchihewa, enthusiastically describes him as Mirissa’s international claim to fame prior to tourism. He was an erudite Abhidhamma scholar of the Rāmañña Nikāya who was the religious teacher of the family. It had been Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri who chose the name “Ranjani,” an Indian girl’s name meaning “pleasing.” By the 1930s, Indian names were in vogue as the pendulum of public opinion swung away from English and Portuguese names.

The street was renamed in his honor after he passed away in 1969, near the Śrī Sunandārāma temple where he was the head monk. “There were many good monks from Mātara,” Ranjani opines. We may recognize some other prominent religious

personalities from Mātara, such as Anagārika Dhammapāla (1864–1933) or Malaysia-based Ven. Kirindē Śrī Dhammānanda (1919–2006). After all, this is the former kingdom of Ruhūṇu—the unconquered Southern heartland of Sinhala Buddhism, where the yellow robe shines like a banner. Ranjani was keen to let me know that Mirissa had produced eminent personalities, including a chief justice and many civil servants and government administrators. The former Chief Justice of Sri Lanka, G.P.A. de Silva (served 1991–1999) had been a relative of Ranjani’s on her father’s side of the family.

Two hours’ drive from Mirissa, in the Southern coastal town of Kirinda, at the Kirinda Vihāramāhadevī Vihāra, Queen Vihāramāhadevī’s gleaming white statue gazes out from the rocky hilltop towards the Indian Ocean. In the past, when the sea had risen in Kelaniya and had flooded the area, people had believed it was an act of punishment by the gods for an earlier misdeed of the king. The princess Vihāramāhadevī had been sacrificed to the sea god by the king in an act of atonement. She was set adrift in a decorated boat that bore the words, “Daughter of a King,” and had floated in a boat all the way to a place called Doreva in Kirinda. King Kavantissa, the ruler of Ruhūṇu, had welcomed and married her, and she later gave birth to two sons, Prince Duṭuḡaemuṇu and Prince Saddhātissa. An inscription at the same location commemorates the conversion of Prince Mahānāga, the founder of the Ruhūṇu kingdom, to Buddhism. An observer of Sinhalese culture could be forgiven for thinking that this historic event of had happened yesterday—the narratives of the Sinhalese epics, the fifth century Mahāvamsa and third-to-fourth-century Dīpavamsa—permeate Sinhalese consciousness. The name Mirissa itself has an origin-story: when Queen Vihāramāhadevī was suffering from pregnancy cravings, she was

brought honey. The place where the honey dropped was called Mirissa, meaning *mīya rissa*, the “nectar from the honeycomb.”

Ranjani’s Mirissa childhood was long before the hotels and the tourists, before the tsunami, in the 1940s, in the ration days of the Second World War, before radio, before the eradication of malaria (Ranjani herself contracted measles at age eleven), by the light of a petrol lamp, with charcoal for toothpaste and firewood for cooking. It was a time of innocence in a Sinhalese Buddhist village environment. Many other houses in the villages in those days were thatch—although Ranjani’s parents’ house was tiled. It was a nice, solid house, in the Dutch style with a spacious veranda supported by wide columns, a little back from the main road, about a hundred meters away from the harbor beach, with a big yard. They lived by the Væligama Bay, by what is now the Mirissa fisheries harbor. The roads have changed (“That was over sixty years ago—how do you expect it to be the same?” said Ranjani), and the beach road they used to walk along has since succumbed to erosion. However, Ranjani identified that their house was on Harbour Road. Their relations from Colombo said it was like going to a hotel. Later, part of the veranda was enclosed. After the house was sold, it was demolished—“It’s probably a hotel now,” said Ranjani. But you can still see many houses in Mirissa in a similar style. Their fan was the breeze from the sea. I can imagine the kitchen and garden scattered with discarded coconut shells; the flesh well-scraped by the prong of the coconut scraper. The women would sit on the low wooden, bench-like portion of the scraper, and use the toothed metal prong to scrape out the flesh. At school, Ranjani had been set the essay topic: “All parts of the coconut can be used.” From the shell, a coconut-shell spoon can be made, from the husk—a coir rope, from the mid-rib of the leaf—a broom, from the oil—lotion, until only the smell of the coconut remains.

From the 1940s Mirissa shoreline, remote in time like a faded sepia photograph, the men cry “*odi, helē, helēya*”—the fishing nets are being drawn in! Sometimes, the fishermen would repair the nets in the large yard of Ranjani’s family—every afternoon, the nets must be untangled for the next day of fishing and the holes must be repaired. These days, you are more likely to hear thumping loud late-night music from the beach cafes *hey-boom-hey-boom-hey-oh-yeah*. Traveling back in time, a laughing, plump girl with a profusion of curly hair combed with coconut oil throws a tennis ball: rounders! Whack! Round and around the coconut trees, as fast as you can until you’re out of breath—the children’s game of Ranjani’s Mirissa youth. When they couldn’t find a tennis ball, they made one out of paper. Ranjani said, “We didn’t miss anything.” They had everything they needed—singing songs together at home, going on picnics, and never going to sleep without saying a *gāthā* (Buddhist verse). They habitually went to temple with their mother to inquire after the needs of the monks and supply them with what was required.

The family lived in Mirissa until Ranjani was fourteen or fifteen. Ranjani’s first experience of a house with electricity was after moving to Colombo in 1952. After Ranjani married and got a house in Colombo, one day, the electricity failed and the water was cut. Her husband was anxious. Ranjani said to him, “Remember, did you have lights and water when you grew up?” Her feeling is that even her own grand-daughter, Sachini, won’t be able to understand the way they lived in the village—her grand-daughter likes her life in Australia. It might be difficult for even modern Sri Lankan-raised young people to understand the Mirissa of Ranjani’s childhood and early adolescence—to imagine the matchmaker, in his coat and sarong, stick in hand, well-thumbed address book ready, prepared to match horoscopes and lives. Many features of Sri Lankan society in the 1940s and

1950s have already become old-fashioned. The wooden bench-like coconut-scraper, with its metal prong, has already become the mechanical coconut scraper. The traditional broom, made from the spines of countless palm-fronds, has been replaced with plastic. I heard that these days, some families will even go to the beach, and not temple, on full-moon day. Impermanence flows like a river, or more dramatically, hits like a tsunami—recently, Ranjani often stops me to ask where these things all are now, saying “*anicca*.”

Ranjani had a sense of being lucky. When she was four or five years old, her mother told her she had the sense that she was lucky. She dreamt of flying, taking off in her dreams and landing somewhere. Even until recently, she says, she dreams of flying.

## Ranjani—(Almost) the Youngest Sibling

Ranjani was one of seven siblings, the third of which passed away as an infant. There were six sisters and one brother. Ranjani was born fifth child but became the fourth because the third passed away. Only after the fifth girl, did her mother give birth to a boy, one of a pair of twins. Ranjani’s mother said, “You brought the boy!” Ranjani’s siblings Dr. Dhananjaya Jayasekera and his twin sister Khanti have become well known to us through their support for nuns. Many of our friends will also know Ranjani’s sister Irangani (“Ira”). When Ranjani’s sister Chitra de Silva passed away in 2016, her obituary by Srima Warusawithana was published in *The Island*. The obituary notes that the children were “nurtured in the highest traditions of Buddhist atmosphere.”<sup>3</sup> Ranjani said, “Our parents were very Buddhist and practicing.”

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<sup>3</sup> Warusawithana 2016.

Other than going to school, they spent most of their time at temple. At home, their mother used to make up songs for them. There were six girls, with names like a rhyme: Indrani, Chitra, Nandini, Ranjani, Khanti, Irangani—the neighbor lady would clap them like a song. They used to get into two rows in the evening with three on each side. In Sinhala, they would say: “Let’s go, go, go pluck flowers!” The other side would ask: “Whose garden are you going to pluck flowers?” Then they would call the name of the girl. “We’re going to pluck the flowers of the little one’s garden!”

Ranjani’s second sister, Chitra, had moved to Africa. Ranjani’s cousin George had lived in Mombasa, in Kenya. Her father had reluctantly given in to Ranjani’s sister’s request to go to Kenya, where she spent three or four years before they moved to Colombo. George brought them gifts made of ivory and elephant-hair bracelets.

Ranjani was close to her third sister, Nandini. She had been the closest to Ranjani in age, being three years older than her. When there were no lights, she would take a lamp to take Ranjani to the toilet. Ranjani said, “By nature, she is kind and helpful.” She is still in Sri Lanka.

Ranjani was the youngest until her brother was born seven years later. There was a big gap and she had enjoyed being the youngest. Whenever her father came back with gifts and chocolate from Colombo, he would put some in her hand.

Ranjani lost a little of the attention after her brother came. Sometimes, Ranjani would run away from home to go to places where she got attention. There was a family with all boys and one girl. The girl was Ranjani’s age and Ranjani made friends with her. Ranjani’s name was Neetha Ranjani, and the girl’s name was Anula Ranjani. She became Ranjani’s close friend, and they went to Sunday school and to observe eight precepts together. Like

many devout Theravāda Buddhists, they observed the eight precepts on holy days, undertaking a degree of renunciation on top of the normal Buddhist five precepts—giving up dinner, among other things.

One time, they had a fight over some beads, and Ranjani ripped a few pages from her textbook. Small indiscretions aside, I gather that they were otherwise good friends. They talked together at night until they fell asleep under the table. Anula's family liked Ranjani, the chubby little girl with curly hair. They would carry her and give her sweets, so she would go to their house all the time.

The children would go to the beach and the Væligama Bay. It was a nice spot to visit when the weather was nice, but sometimes they weren't allowed to go alone. Some areas were dirty after the fisherman had been there. On moonlit nights, the young girls and the servants, who were treated like family members, would take buckets and go to the beach and collect coral. The garden was always full of coral, like chalk, all white. When the fishermen came and brought the fish from the sea, the children would look for the ones that weren't dead yet. Sometimes they would see the little ones moving, so they would take them back to the sea, the little fish still wriggling with hope—*save a life!* Imagine the joy for the fish that were re-united with the ocean! The joy of the Væligama Bay!

Ranjani's Father, Juanes de Silva Jayasekera (1895–1960)

Ranjani's father, Juanes de Silva Jayasekera (he used to sign as K.H.J. de Silva), was a businessman. He had studied at St.



Thomas' College. His father was also a businessman. In time, Juanes' father wanted him to take over his business, so he became the heir. Juanes' father's business was importing food from India. During the British colonial period, the British tea plantations in Sri Lanka had employed Indian labor, which had created a demand for Indian food products in Sri Lanka. Juanes was normally based in Colombo for work and he only visited the family once a month. He had felt that it was best to raise the children in a simpler village environment than allow the girls to become sophisticated in Colombo. He would purchase supplies and gifts in Colombo to send back to Mirissa.

One day, Juanes was a hundred miles from home. Nobody knew he was coming. Ranjani said, "Today my father is coming." She hadn't been informed and no-one knew when her father knocked on the door. Her mother said, "This one is a predictor."

They went to school by bus, getting off at the Mirissa Post Office on what is now Mātara Road and walking down Harbour Road to home. Ranjani remembers her father sending a telegram of one hundred rupees for expenses. Even though it was less than a dollar, it was enough. He sent provisions. Their relations would find out what had arrived and Ranjani's mother would distribute them to everybody. They were never short of food and they were well-fed.

Ranjani's father was very honest and would say, "Don't lie." He would ask Ranjani, "What color is a lie?" They were very scared. They had a cement floor with no tiles. So, if there was a crack in the floor, the children would think that they might fall through into the hell-fire. Whenever they saw a crack on the floor, they would think, "Don't tell a lie!" Actually, they didn't do that, and even when the children communicated with each other, they would remind each other not to lie. They were scared of wrong-doing and the fruit of

karma. Their parents had observed the Buddhist five precepts continually for their whole lives.

Ranjani's mother and father weren't greedy for wealth. They didn't want to buy more land. When Juanes inherited a house, he gave it to his brother. The house became the Mirissa Post Office on Mātara Road, and Juanes' brother became the post master.

Ranjani remembers her father's mother, but she was already quite old and not able to do much. She wore a Portuguese-style long jacket and blouse with a bodice, complete with lace. Ranjani didn't have other living grandparents—her mother's parents had already died when her mother was young.

### Ranjani's Mother, Nelliet Jayasekera (1910–1985)

Ranjani showed me a photo of her mother, Nelliet Jayasekera, on her cell phone. In the photo, Ranjani's mother has a carefree, happy expression. Nelliet's parents had died when she was young, leaving her in the care of her relatives. At fourteen, she was given by her uncles and aunt in marriage to her husband, who was around twenty-nine or thirty and supposed to be a good businessman. As a married housewife, she was sociable and popular, good at handicrafts, and was free to pursue volunteering activities in the village. She became the president of the local Buddhist women's association under Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri and also set up a weaving center to give employment to women.

Ranjani's mother used to say that when she was married, she was innocent and playful and she liked to enjoy life. Nelliet was well-known and smart, and Ranjani was proud that she was her mother, identifying herself by saying, "My mother is so-and-so." I asked a silly question—did Nelliet have a career? "She was married at fourteen, darling!" Ranjani burst my ignorance.

The name “Nelliet” is a bit of a mystery. “Very uncommon, even in Sri Lanka,” says Ranjani. She had a brother called Ilty. On the strangeness of the names, Ranjani remarked, “I used to say, how your parents chose this name?” Ranjani had never heard of another Nelliet or Ilty.

Juanes’ sisters were old enough to be Nelliet’s mother. He was already fifteen years older than her. His sisters used to say, “They’ve brought a doll to play!” Juanes was looking after his family with his business and his sisters must have felt a bit taken aback when they received less attention after the marriage. Yet, in many ways, the teenage Nelliet *was* like a doll. She had studied in the convent school and could play songs. She liked to crochet and make handicrafts to a high standard. She made all the dresses for the girls in the English style, with frills, from good cotton material that Juanes sent from Colombo.

“She was married, but she didn’t know anything,” said Ranjani. Nelliet was very naïve. She had her first child at seventeen or eighteen. When she walked with the six girls, all dressed up, some of her daughters quite big already, Nelliet and Ranjani’s oldest sister looked like sisters. Ranjani’s eldest sister, Indrani, was very responsible and she was like another mother. If her mother was late back home, Indrani would wait at the door and send messages to ask her to come back.

Indrani was ten years older than Ranjani and used to sew her nice dresses. She would do Ranjani’s hair. It would never stay in one place, so she would get a bowl of water to comb her curls. By the time Ranjani was in kindergarten, Indrani was in Grade Ten already. At ten o’clock, their mother would send a servant girl with a flask of milk tea for the recess period. Indrani would pour the milk tea for her.

Everyone liked Nelliet. Even the school principal remarked about how nice she was when she dressed up. Everyone who came to visit—the government inspectors who came to the school and the sanitary inspectors who came to the village, all ended up as her friends. She was fashionable. Nelliet liked to see the British ladies arrive on the ship as it docked in Colombo. She was interested in their hats and dresses. So Juanes took her and the children to see the ships arrive. “We were interested to see the ship,” said Ranjani. All international arrivals in those days came by ship.

In Mirissa, Nelliet would make cutlets<sup>4</sup> and yellow rice and sometimes they would all go for picnics at Parrot Rock or Red Cliff. They jumped from rock to rock. There was a bungalow at Red Cliff, which was referred to as the “white man’s bungalow” because it was occupied by Europeans. When it was vacant, they used to go there for picnics. The security guard let them in, so that was how Ranjani saw her first Western-style toilet.

Nelliet didn’t cook herself unless it was for a *dāna*. The concept of *dāna*, or “giving,” is so important in Sri Lankan Buddhism that she felt the need to cook herself. At other times, she would sit on a small chair, and the women would prepare food. There was no gas—only firewood. Every house had a kitchen in the back with a chimney to take the smoke out. There were places for baking made out of brick. They had a big kitchen with a fire. “So natural,” says Ranjani. Gas is expensive even today in Sri Lanka, and the use of firewood for cooking is still common in the villages.

I wondered whether it had been difficult for Ranjani’s mother to have Ranjani’s father away all the time. Ranjani assured me that her mother was very confident and capable in her husband’s

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4 What are called “cutlets” in Sri Lanka would be typically called savory croquettes in other countries.

absence and enjoyed the constant support of neighbors, friends and servants. If anyone was sick, her mother would go and look after the sick person. If anyone was getting married, she would dress the bride. Her life was colorful.

There was a photo, which Ranjani no longer has, showing a big gathering, the Buddhist women's association. Ranjani was there as a baby. Their project was providing herbal medicine for malaria victims. Nelliet would boil pots and pots of coriander and serve and help the malaria victims. Coriander is a popular Sri Lankan herbal remedy, which is still widely used in Sri Lankan ayurvedic preparations. They didn't have a hospital or doctors. They only had a government dispensary where they used to go. Nelliet was a volunteer worker and she coordinated other volunteers, getting people to help. People in the village weren't aware that there were government hospitals only seven miles away in Mātara. Nelliet took the very first patients to the hospital to introduce them to taking medicine from the hospital. Malaria was finally eradicated in Sri Lanka in 2012.

Ranjani describes her mother as a “leader, counselor and a manager.” She had started a weaving center to give employment to the young women in the village, so they could earn some money. They rented a big house, and called it the “Indrani Weaving Center,” where they manufactured woven straw mats. Grass was collected from the paddy fields to make the mats. They had about five or six machines with two girls for each machine. Describing how to use the weaving machine, Ranjani explained, “They put once the stick in that and the reed goes there and put another straw like that.” Later, textile weaving was introduced as well. The weaver at the loom made the sound, *chack, chack, chack*, with the bobbin and the pedal. They made towels and other items. There were teachers at the weaving center, sent by the government small industry department. They boarded with

Ranjani's family. She couldn't believe it—they wanted a room for each one! At the time, they had one big bed, with three of them sleeping in the same bed, with their sisters. In total, including the teachers and one or two servants, there were ten to twelve people in the house. Ranjani says, "How we lived, I don't know! We were so happy! Food was on the table!"

Ranjani said that the textile manufacturing was like the sixteen-year-old weaver-girl who came to the Buddha. She had been practicing the recollection of death for three years, and the Buddha had seen that the time was ready for her awakening. The Buddha and the girl had the following conversation:

"My girl, where have you come from?"

"I do not know, reverend sir."

"Where will you go?"

"I do not know, reverend sir."

"Do you not know?"

"I know, reverend sir."

"Do you know?"

"I do not know, reverend sir."<sup>5</sup>

People shamed her for her reply, thinking that she should have simply said that she had come from the weaver's house, and was going to the weaver's workshop. However, there was a deep meaning to her answers, and the Buddha silenced the crowd. When she had said that she didn't know where she came from, she had meant that she didn't know where she came from before she was born. When she said that she didn't know where she was going, she meant, she did not know where she would be reborn after death. When she said that she knew, she meant that she

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas, "The Weaver's Daughter," 1913.

knew that she would die. When she said that she didn't know, she meant that she didn't know the time, or whether it would be day or night. The Buddha expressed that the crowd hadn't understood her meaning, and that those who have the eye of wisdom will see. The weaver-girl attained stream-entry.

When Ranjani's father sent things, he would send a big piece of cloth, up to thirty meters. Her mother liked to give gifts of material for jackets. She would measure, fold and cut the jackets for women, measuring using her hand. She knew the dimensions. I imagine Nelliet measuring with the type of complete ease and proficiency which we often see in older Sri Lankan women who grew up before the wide-spread availability of factory-produced clothing. She also made robes for the temple. They had a foot-pedal sewing machine, a Singer. Nelliet was one of the leaders of the Kathiṇa sewing team. Kathiṇa is the annual robe-offering ceremony in Theravāda countries, which is also practiced in a small handful of Mahāyāna temples. The custom of offering cloth to monks who had spent the rainy season at a locality formed an entrenched part of the Buddhist year, with an intimate connection to agricultural and village life. The period after rainy season had formed an ideal time for the Buddha's monks and nuns, who were normally itinerant, to take advantage of their settled rains residence to complete the laborious communal work of sewing a robe. We could compare it to a quilting bee. At Kathiṇa time, Ranjani recalls that the children would pedal the machine, or hold the fabric while it was being stitched. "Big time, Kathiṇa," says Ranjani.

The children worshipped the Buddha and their parents at home. I asked, did you do *pūjā* at home? They always had a Buddha statue and said a *gāthā* every day before going to sleep. They said

the “*Dinē Paṭan Mā Upanna*”*gāthā* in Sinhalese. It goes something like (I am paraphrasing), “From the day I was born, I cannot explain the pains you have taken to look after me. I bow to you, Mother, who made sacrifices for me.” This Sinhalese version of the Pāli *gāthā* was later recorded as a song by Edward Jayakodi and Charitha Priyadarshani Peiris. There is a verse for the father, like the mother, and also a Pāli version.

## Ranjani Recollects Village Life

Ranjani also provided descriptions of the material culture and economic life of the village during her childhood in Mirissa. The women spent a lot of time in the kitchen making rice and curry with coconut milk. There was a lot of coconut but not butter, which was only purchased occasionally and had to be kept in a bowl of water. Her father would sometimes bring jam from Colombo. Ranjani also remembers mung beans and sweet potatoes. Normally they would have *roṭi* (Indian flatbread) for breakfast.

The food in Sri Lanka didn’t feature bread or flour in those days. “American flour” (known to us as plain flour) was introduced after the war. Ranjani remembers watching a demonstration of how to make *roṭi* from flour on a projector—they were introducing how to make bread and buns. Transfixed, Ranjani watched the cooking demonstrations as if they were a movie.

Fishing was an important part of life in the coastal village. Prior to the introduction of steam boats and fishing boats, Ranjani recalls men carrying fish on their shoulders, on a big pole with fish loaded on two sides “Little *panna*,” they called them, “The little round fish.”

A lot of people would go to throw the fishing net into the sea. Once many fish had been caught, the nets would become heavy. The boys around the village would make a noise, “*odi, helē*,



*helēya.*” When they heard the sound of the nets being drawn, people all around would go to help and get their share of fresh fish. The men would bring the fish to their door.

There were no vegetables in their garden due to being close to the sea. Instead, they had coconut and breadfruits growing. Breadfruit is a large fruit with a mild taste, similar in size to a jackfruit. To the unsuspecting Westerner, it might be mistaken for potato when cooked in curry. There was always ample rice, fish, coconut, and *gotu kola*. (The latter is a medicinal herb in the parsley family.) Ranjani loved to eat freshly scraped coconut in her meals.

However, the proximity to the bay had its dangers. One time, when Ranjani was about nine or ten years old, she went with her sisters in a small, flat-bottomed boat out to meet a larger boat. The boat capsized, throwing her out into the deep ocean, and she nearly drowned. A man had to come and save her.

They only had fish because they were near the sea in Mirissa. As Buddhists, they didn’t eat eggs, as they saw chicks coming out and knew the eggs had life in them (this was before farmed eggs in Sri Lanka). Nor did they eat chicken, because to eat chicken, you had to select the bird so they could kill it for you.

Ranjani’s family also owned several plots of land, which were used to grow coconuts. The first bunch of coconuts always went to the temple. When it was time to harvest the coconuts, the man would pluck the tree and they would record it in the exercise book with a pencil when he had plucked ten or fifteen. This was an activity that Ranjani and her sisters did as they got older. Her second sister used to go frequently with her. There were a lot of young coconuts, in big, green bunches. They ate and drank coconut. Sometimes they would even put the coconut water on their legs.

One plot of land that adjoined the temple had a special coconut tree, a Navasi coconut, which Ranjani describes as “better than a king coconut.” (“King Coconut” is Sinhalese *tæmbili*. These are larger and sweeter than ordinary coconuts.) They always plucked a bunch from that tree to give to the temple first. People would collect coconuts in carts for some income—a few cents per coconut. For some of the coconuts, Ranjani’s father wasn’t bothered to find where they were. He was a generous man who wasn’t concerned with accumulating material things. Ranjani said her mother could just leave everything and go any time. She recalled how easily she later left Mirissa to live in Mt. Lavinia.

They didn’t have powdered spices—all spices were ground by hand at home. Nor did they have rice mills. To remove the rice-husk, the women danced on the floor and used poles to remove the husk.

Toilets were outside at home, in the garden. Inside they kept buckets of water, and the servants would go and fill the water. There was a brass bowl for using the toilet. There was a pit system, with a tank. What was passed would go down to a covered pit, so that you couldn’t see anything. It was very clean. They didn’t have someone to empty the tank. In Colombo, Ranjani had seen some women cleaning the buckets. In her opinion, the system in village was cleaner. Most of the people went to the sea—Ranjani reports that sometimes people didn’t want to go in the water due to floating material. For the women who couldn’t go to the sea, at poor houses, they wove a hut out of coconut leaves.

Their laundry was done by a *dhobi*. In Sinhalese, as in Hindi, *dhobi* is the word for a washerman or woman. They never washed their clothes at home—they were collected by the *dhobi*. Their *dhobi* was a poor, elderly woman. The tiny old

woman would carry the big bundle of clothes. There were five or six girls in their family. Traditionally, when the girls come of age, they are given gifts. A gift of a few rupees is also given to the washerwoman. All the washerwomen liked to go to the places where there were girls! Ranjani feels a little bit sorry for how hard they worked. They would say, “I have this uniform, can I please have it cleaned by next week?” They would add starch (sometimes a lot of starch) and add bluing agent. They had uniforms later, with many pleats, which were never washed at home. The ironing was done with an iron filled with coconut charcoal. They burned the coconut shells and put the charcoal into the iron.

Water was from the well in the garden. There was no toothpaste—Ranjani remembers the charcoal. Herbal mouth treatments (Ranjani said, “little herbal things”) were introduced at a later stage. Ayurvedic doctors had introduced herbs for the teeth, which were used by monks. There was a plant they used. The monks chewed betel and used to clean their teeth in public with a stick, spitting into the big brass spittoons.

They didn’t have a gate or a wall around their yard, and their well was shared with several other families. Because they lived near the sea, the water was hard. Ranjani had thick, curly hair, which was difficult to comb. She had to take a piece of lime if she bathed there. The bathing place was a five- or ten-minute walk, and was relatively private, due to being restricted to a few families.

There was another place, a public well with one section for men, which was very popular, on the way to the beach, around fifteen minutes away. There were paddy fields across the road: it looked different to where they lived and it was used as a picnic ground. They would carry towels, buckets, and big brass pots to go bathe: Ranjani said, “Can you imagine, so heavy!” They would lift

the heavy pots: they sat as the servants poured them over their heads. Sri Lanka is a warm country, so they used cold water. There was no hot water unless they were sick. Ranjani remarked, “Here [in Australia], we can’t live without hot water...”

Cottage industries included weaving carpets and making coir ropes. Women also made lace. *Bīralū* is a lace-making craft that is still practiced in Southern Province of Sri Lanka. *Bīralū* derives from the Portuguese word *bilro* (bobbin). It involves manipulating typically twenty to forty bobbins on a pillow or roller pillow according to a pattern which is marked with innumerable pins.

There was also a lace weaving pillow, called *kōṭṭē*. It is still used in the South for visitors and tourists. They had one at home and Ranjani’s mother Nelliet had designed the holes. Ranjani had a small *kōṭṭē* for herself which she used to make lace. A pattern is marked on narrow paper with pins. The design is marked with pinholes and placed on the pillow. As the roller pillow turns, the lace is pinned to make an attractive design.

Women made coir rope out of the coconut husk. To make coir, they would soak the coconut husk by the well for a month to make it soft, and they beat it on a stone until it becomes loose. They are then dried out in the sun, yielding a yellow-color fiber. Then they twist it to make cord. Two cords are twisted to make rope. According to Ranjani, the coconut husk is like a nest, and from that they take a little corner, which is twisted. Eventually, a strong, thick rope is produced. They had a swing made from coir rope in their garden, which never broke. They made everything from coir, including carpets. Later, a machine was introduced.

## 1942 Japanese Air Raids on Colombo

Sri Lanka had joined the Second World War with Britain in 1939. By 1942, Singapore had fallen and many people saw Sri Lanka as

being the next Japanese target. Ranjani's mother's cousin's family had died together in Singapore in a tunnel when they became asphyxiated from smoke after hiding for safety. Their names were published much later, showing the five of them who died together. Ranjani's family worried for their father in Colombo.

A photo from the Australian War Memorial shows a Colombo street in 1942, where rickshaw coolies are standing casually, waiting for a customer under the shade of a white-banded, government-owned, tree.<sup>6</sup> However, on Easter Sunday, April fifth, the street would have been eerily deserted—the coolies would have been warned in advance of enemy planes by the air-raid siren. The raid lasted around half an hour. When the bombing ended, the residents came out from the bomb shelter, crying and shocked. Eighty-five were dead and seventy-seven injured.<sup>7</sup>

Their father was in Colombo and when they heard about the bombing, they were scared. They used to come out from their rooms and sleep in the living room together, wondering if their father was still alive. However, they were safe.

Although Mirissa was not affected, Ranjani prepared for bombing with drills at kindergarten. Ranjani was about four or five years old. They were given earplugs in school. The children were trained to respond to a siren warning. When the siren went off, they had to insert their earplugs and get down and hide under the small kindergarten tables and tiny chairs.

There was an air force base located in the vicinity of Mirissa, at Koggala Airport. As a child, Ranjani was taken aback by the unfamiliar appearance of foreign soldiers in Sri Lanka. They came on big trucks with large guns, smoking and throwing away the butts. They called Sri Lankan women the “two-piece” women, in reference to traditional Indian or Sri Lankan clothing, which

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6 Thomas 2017.

7 Gunawardene 2012.

features a sarong and blouse separated by a gap. “Woman in two-pieces!” the soldiers would call out. These were most likely soldiers from Africa who were present with British forces in Sri Lanka until independence in 1948.

When the children saw the African soldiers, they said, “*kāpiri*, *kāpiri*.” Ranjani didn’t know the meaning of this word.<sup>8</sup> Ranjani saw them on trucks with guns, and even though Ranjani said that they were innocent and not harmful, they were still scared.

The international military presence was highly visible, and a song began to circulate:

*Suddo enavā vīdiyē, dora vahagan nangiyē!*

The white man is coming in the street, sister, close the door!

Ranjani said the babies were warned that if they cried, Bilāl the *kāpiri* would take them away. (Bilāl is a common African Muslim name.) Needless to say, many such Bilāls played an important role in preventing the Japanese takeover of Sri Lanka.

Ranjani’s family was on rations during the war, and for a long time afterwards. Imported grains were introduced to counter the food shortage. The corporate system came in much later—they had coupons until “very lately.” Even after Ranjani was married, they had rations—“the B-Card.” When she was small, there was no rice, and they weren’t meant to purchase rice. They would stop and check the car to make sure that it wasn’t carrying rice. Ranjani says, “But we never starved.”

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<sup>8</sup> According to Mandy (no date), the word *kāpiri* is actually from Arabic *kafir*, meaning “unbeliever”, via Portuguese *kafre*. This word was used historically with reference to enslaved or colonized Africans in Ceylon. The negative connotations of referring to Africans as “unbelievers” should be obvious to anyone who is familiar with how this word is used in Arabic. While the use of the term *kāpiri* may have passed in British Ceylon in the 1940s, a better term today would be “African” or “African Sri-Lankan.”

They had something called “badgeree.” It was a type of grain that was introduced. Ranjani didn’t identify it, but I gather that it is a type of millet that is fed to budgerigars. Badgeree could be boiled and eaten like a porridge. It had been imported from somewhere to improve nutrition. Ranjani herself had never eaten badgeree.

### “Aunty Lay Disciple”

Juanes de Silva had five sisters and one brother. His younger brother was the postmaster in the Mirissa village. One of his sister’s sons was a monk, the aforementioned Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri. That sister was a pious eight-precept laywoman who was addressed as “*upāsikā*.” (*Upāsikā* means laywoman, especially a devout laywoman. The equivalent male term is *upāsaka*.) *Upāsikā nændā* in Sinhalese is “Aunty *Upāsikā*.” “We got *upāsikā nændā*!” said Ranjani proudly.

Aunty *Upāsikā* observed eight precepts continuously while staying at home. That is to say, in addition to the regular five precepts of a Buddhist lay devotee, she had undertaken a degree of renunciation as a celibate practitioner. They would run to see her on the way to temple. Her house was half-way between the temple and their house. Even though she was quiet, they would always like to see her.

After her husband passed away, she lived by herself in the house with another woman to assist her. It was only later that Ranjani understood that she was “different.” At home, twenty-four-seven, Aunty *Upāsikā* dressed in white and wore a white shoulder shawl. She spent her days by herself and once in a while she would attend temple. Ranjani’s understanding is that she was influenced by her son, Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri, who gave her religious instruction. She led the life of a renunciant.

In their district, they didn't have *sīla mātās*, although there were *sīla mātās* in other districts by this time. Meaning, “mother who upholds virtue,” *Sīla mātā* ordination was a makeshift cultural ordination form that had emerged in the absence of bhikkhunī ordination in Sri Lanka. *Sīla mātās* keep ten-precepts and wear robes (albeit with some differences to monks), but their ordained status is ambiguous. Although they superficially resemble *sāmaṇerīs*—the novice nuns who also keep ten precepts—at least in the era of Ranjani's childhood—they would normally be officially regarded as laywomen. Ranjani's family was always close to the monks and they didn't know any nuns. When they went on pilgrimage to places like Kataragama or Anurādhapura, they would suddenly see a woman walking on the road, wearing light yellow cloth. In their district, they didn't have any respect for these women—they weren't recognized or respected in the village. Ranjani had no idea at all about *sīla mātās*. Ranjani says, “Upāsikā *nandā!* She was the only one. Now I realize why she was in white all the time.” Ranjani does not recollect seeing women wearing yellow at that time. There was nobody in yellow in her village.

Aunty Upāsikā's funeral, held in Ranjani's school days, was huge, “like a *mahānāyaka*.” (A *mahānāyaka* is the head of a monastic fraternity, elected by the sangha council.) There was a big cremation fire and many monks came, as if it were the funeral of a senior monk. There was a lot of respect.

### “Cousin-Monk”: Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri (1910–1969)

Earlier, we had walked by the Śrī Praghaloka Daham Pāsala at the Śrī Sunandārāma Piriven Vihāra in Mirissa. This time, we can stop a little longer to admire its characteristic bodhi tree, white railing (*prākāra*), marble Buddha image and bell. This style is ubiquitous



in Sri Lankan temples, which will typically feature a sandy courtyard. The temple has stood at its present location since the mid-nineteenth century—Ranjani recalls that it had murals. However, certain sections were rebuilt after the tsunami, including, according to Ranjani, the yellow-façaded present building of the Śrī Pragnaloka Daham Pāsala, located on the ground floor below the Mirissē Guṇasiri Mahāhimi Praja Kendriya (Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri Community Center). The *prākāra* was installed in 2010 by Ranjani and her siblings, to mark what would have been their mother’s one hundredth birthday.

The *piriven*, which is a monastic college within the temple complex, was established in 1948 by Ranjani’s “cousin-monk,” Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri. Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri was the chief incumbent of the temple, and the son of Ranjani’s paternal aunt, Auntie Upāsikā. At the back of the temple there are dormitories and a library for novices. It was at this temple that Ranjani attended Sunday school, the Śrī Pragnaloka Daham Pāsala, which was mentioned in the introduction.

Despite Ranjani’s pride in the monks of her district, there were many temples in the region, inhabited by a diversity of monks, and Ranjani remembers one monk who used to read horoscopes. None of these were as important to her as the scholar-monks. Ranjani’s “cousin-monk,” Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri, had been a teacher of Visuddhimagga and Buddhist philosophy, lecturing in university. In Sri Lankan monastic names, the epithet or village name “Mirissē” means, “of Mirissa.” “Guṇasiri” is the Pāli name given at the time of novice ordination.

As no biography has been published of Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri, I have taken the liberty of including a little more information to help the reader understand his life. Much of the information comes from an obituary by Dr. P. G. Punchihewa, “Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri Mahā Thera—Renowned teacher,

excellent preacher and missionary of repute,” published in *The Island*. In the introduction to *Abhidhamma for the Beginner*, Radio Ceylon Buddhist preacher Egerton C. Baptist described him as “learned, genial and kindly.” He clearly made an impression on the young Ranjani. She was “very influenced by him.”

Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri had ordained relatively young, taking novice ordination at thirteen. Prior to ordination, he had studied at the Mirissa Bilingual School, which Ranjani also attended much later. This was where he got his grounding in the English language, which would later aid him as a missionary monk. As a novice, he entered the Vidyodaya Piriveṇa at Maligakanda, Colombo, for further studies. His bhikkhu ordination was in Burma, into the Rāmañña Nikāya. Ranjani recalls that the ordination was “by a river in Burma.”

Vidyodaya Piriveṇa was later renamed as Vidyodaya University. Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri entered the staff of the Vidyodaya Piriveṇa and when the Vidyodaya University was set up in 1957, as one of the first members of the tutorial staff. He didn’t accept payment for his work, sending his salary back to the monastery trust. He also held a BA (hons) from London University, and was a *rājakīya* pandit<sup>9</sup> of Vidyavisārada Ceylon University. Together with other monks, in a delegation led by Ven. Maḍihē Paññāsīha, he had once visited the Nepalese king and they successfully lobbied for the return of deported Nepalese monks to Nepal. During China’s Cultural Revolution, at the request of Chinese Buddhists, he had traveled with a delegation to China to address the concerns of Chinese Buddhists.<sup>10</sup>

On the day Sri Lanka obtained independence—i.e. February 4, 1948—he set up the Mirissē Guṇasiri Śrī Sunandārāma

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9 a royal pandit, an honorary designation.

10 K. Dhammawasa 2009.

Piriveṇa, primarily for the benefit of the novice trainee monks. There had been a temple in that position since the mid-nineteenth century, but establishing the *piriven* would allow the novices to be educated. Later, he became an international Buddhist missionary, traveling by ship to serve as the incumbent of the London Buddhist Vihāra 1955–1956, in addition to contributing to the Burmese Sixth Buddhist council (council ran 1954–1956).

Ranjani said, “He [Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri] knew all the languages and he was a scholar.” An English minister had noted of him, in 1956, “He speaks five and reads in ten European and Eastern languages, and has written several books in English and Sinhalese.”<sup>11</sup> Through her cousin, Ranjani had exposure to the famous monks of her era, such as Ven. Narada and Ven. Piyadassi, who are well known both in Sri Lanka and abroad. They were close to her family. Ven. Piyadassi had visited their home and Ranjani knew him very well. She also met other well-known monks who were associated with the Vajirārāma in Colombo. The Vajirārāma is the head temple of the Amarapūra Nikāya in Sri Lanka and a center of Sri Lankan Buddhist scholasticism.

In addition to the material provided by Ranjani, I was able to obtain recordings of sermon preaching by Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri in Sinhala as well as the foreword he penned for *Abhidhamma for the Beginner*<sup>12</sup> that was published in English. This is in addition to an article on Abhidhamma which was reproduced from the Ceylon Daily News Vesak Annual, 1946. Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri also authored a book, *The Buddha and His Ethics* (1962), and wrote the forward to *The Pen Portraits of Ninety-Three Eminent Disciples of the Buddha*.<sup>13</sup> These materials give us a wider sense of his intellectual character, beyond his immediate and obvious

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11 Williams 1956.

12 By Egerton C. Baptist, 1959

13 By C. de Saram, 1971.

significance to his family members. He had been concerned about the state of Sri Lankan Buddhism. His concerns included a lack of access to print resources, trained teachers of Abhidhamma, and worldliness. He had expressed admiration for his Burmese contemporaries, especially their accomplishments in Abhidhamma. For those of us who are accustomed to easy, online access to Buddhist texts, Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri’s remarks come from another time: in Sri Lanka, he said, not all temples had the Tripiṭaka. In Burma, by contrast, he said, nearly all temples had even the commentaries.

In 1954, Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri traveled by ship to assume the position of incumbent at the London Buddhist Vihāra, making him the third chief monk of that temple after Ven. Paravahera Vajirañāṇa and Ven. Narada. He would remain there for the next three years until 1957. His missionary activities in England attracted an English Buddhist convert, Mrs. Quitner, to visit Ranjani’s family home. Ranjani says, “Many English women became Buddhists there. One, Mrs. Quitner, I remember, one of the English-women who became a disciple, came and visited. Whenever they come, my mother was popular and she was very good at entertaining, so the monk would always send any guests who come to our place to entertain them and give them meals.”

Ranjani also remembers attending Dhamma school and Dhamma examinations at the temple, where Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri was the chief monk. She was taught by Venerable Ampitiyē Rahula and Ven. Dhammasiri. Ven. Dhammasiri taught them Sunday school. He taught them Dhamma, but not the normal Sunday school. She recalls learning the four noble truths, the noble eightfold path, the ten wholesome qualities, and the ten *pāramīs* by heart, at around age ten or eleven.

Ranjani sat for Dhamma exams, including the Dhammapada exam, up to level six. You had to pass level seven to teach

Dhamma school. She remembers receiving the completion certificate—there was a ceremony with photo-taking and flowers. It was a big deal for them.

On full-moon days, they would go to the Dhamma hall. There was a wooden pavilion (*maṇḍapa*) and the monk sat inside that. An upāsaka would sit on the side on the floor, and every time the monk said something, he would say “*ehē, ehē, svāmini*” (“yes, yes, Venerable sir”). The word “*ehē*” belongs to the elevated register of Sinhalese language, which is reserved for monks, who do not eat, sleep, walk or die with the same words as other people. In the congregation, one man would sit at the front to lead the response, and they would sit at the side. These days, they don’t do it that way.

When a stanza of the Dhammapada was being taught, Ranjani would sit next to her aunt and sisters. She wanted to show that she knew the Dhamma, so she would repeat before the monk had a chance: *dāna sīla bhāvanā, paṭipatti, anumodanā; dāna sīla nekkhammā...*

Ranjani describes Ven. Ampitiyē Rahula as her “first *kalyāṇa-mitta*.” When she was about ten or eleven years old, he was invited to spend the *vassa* (rainy season) in Mirissa. He came from Vajirārāma in Colombo and Ranjani doesn’t recall who invited him to Mirissa. He was teaching the Dhamma. Ranjani ran and skipped to the class on Saturday. She would sit near the stage, taking notes. They had a written test. She was happy with the content that he taught: “We had nice verse in Sinhalese and Pāli for the children, about the five precepts, all beautiful and stories.” Ranjani won a prize. It was a book: *Dharmak Nñāyaya*, that is, “Dharma Knowledge.”

She thought that he was unusual because he wore a darker color of robes than what they were used to—she thought he was a Burmese monk or something. He was young and fair, unlike the

other monks. She would tell her mother, “Come, come and see, he’s a nice monk.” He was in his early thirties or so, and Ranjani describes him as “like a statue, very good.” Ranjani wanted her family to meet him, so her family went to visit him. They found out that he was staying near a paddy field, in the village to the north-west, where they had constructed an adobe *kuṭi*, and where he was staying for the rains. Ven. Ampitiyē Rahula was happy to know that Ranjani’s family were related to Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri. After that, many monks from Vajirārāma, including Ven. Maḍihē Paññāsīha and Ven. Piyadassi, came to visit.

Before they came to Mirissa, they would send a postcard to Ranjani’s sisters to say that they were visiting. The monk would be invited for a *dāna* at their place and there would be a Dhamma-talk in their house after the *dāna*. Ranjani says, “We were fortunate to have a good *kalyāṇa-mitta*.”

When they were small, they would play in the Dhamma hall at the temple. There were young boys who were going to be ordained. They were still running around in shorts—they weren’t ordained at the time. Ranjani used to play with them when they went for Sunday school. Ranjani says, “Now they are big, big monks!” They had names like Pavarakitti, Vimalakitti, Vajirakitti and Dhammakitti. They are very senior monks now. Ranjani said, “All the *kitti, kitti, kitti*. Ranjani knows them. We have a great history of the Buddhist temple.” *Kitti* in Sri Lankan Buddhist monastic names means “fame” and is the equivalent of Sanskrit *kīrti*. Ven. Vajirakitti is still there at a temple in Mātara. Some of the others have passed away already.

At home, they observed five precepts at all times and there was never any drinking of alcohol in the house. If anyone drank alcohol, they avoided them. They knew an “uncle” who used to drink. If they as much as saw him on the road, they would run

back home. Ranjani said, “Nobody dared in our household, being all women in the home. What a good life we had!” Seven decades ago, things were peaceful. The temples featured ceiling murals that displayed the punishments, such as burning in boiling oil, which would await any wrong-doers in hell. The ceiling displayed the *paṭīccasamuppāda*, that is, the twelve links of dependent origination.

Ranjani says that’s why they had the fear of being born in hell, even when they were young. She refers to this fear as the *sasara-bhaya*, which I would translate more literally as the fear of *samsāra*. They saw hell on the walls. “If you do this, you will find the boiling. Boiling, burning, oil. Putting someone and someone sitting on this thing, sewing, into here. This is what will happen if you tell a lie, if you steal.”

In addition to the regular five precepts, on Vesak day, everybody in their house, as well as their neighbors, observed the eight precepts. They would go in procession to the temple. Twenty of them would gather at their house dressed in white. They would take milk-rice and put white cloth, “like sealing” under it. It was cooked with cinnamon firewood. The offering of the special milk-rice recalls the offering of Sujāta. The lump of milk-rice was called “*kiri-piṇḍu*.” They took it in a bowl and went, saying, “*sādhu, sādhu, sādhu*.” Ranjani held her hands above her head like she was carrying a bowl.

In their own house, they didn’t offer food as part of *Buddha-pūjā* as is sometimes done, because it would have been difficult to deal with the offered food. They worried that if they started doing it, they would have to do it every day. However, they lit lamps and offered flowers and incense.

When Ranjani was around ten or twelve years old, they had a seven-day all night ceremony in the village to dedicate a new

Buddha image. The ceremony, called *netra pinkama*, means the “painting of the eyes,” and is a ceremony associated with the consecration of the Buddha image. *Pinkama* literally means “meritorious action,” and in popular devotional Theravāda Buddhism, as in Mahāyāna, this type of ceremony would typically be viewed as merit-making, rather than purely ritualistic.

There was a *maṇḍapa* for the monks to sit in. Seven days before the painting of the eyes, she remembers the *maṇḍapa* turning. They had constructed it in such a way that it was a moving *maṇḍapa*, with the chanting monks slowly revolving inside.

On the seventh day, they arranged a young boy to do the invitation of the *devas*. The ceremony is called *dorakaḍa asna* in Sinhalese, referring to “the invitation at the door”, where the *devas* are invited. The boy is called a *devadūtaya*, meaning that he is the messenger to the gods. They treat him like a *deva* and he must eat only vegetarian food. Ranjani says, “No young girl. Only a young boy. No women!” One of Ranjani’s cousins, Mohanlal, had done a *dorakaḍa asna*. He went on to become a doctor in the UK. Now in his eighties, he can still remember the words in Pāli.

The *netra pinkama* went on until morning, and Ranjani said, “Drumming, drumming, drumming the whole place.” They lit 84,000 coconut oil lamps. The lamp itself is a small clay receptacle made from mud. They made wicks at home from material. These days, they can be purchased at the shops.

In those days, they kept all the old pillowcases to make wicks for the lamps. Everyone went in the evening, lighting up the whole garden of the temple. There was a special gazebo for the marble Buddha image. The Buddha’s face gazed serenely at them, and Ranjani thinks of the artist, saying, “How can they make it like that?” Indeed, with its robe folds forming sleek lines and with a certain kind of rounded symmetry, the marble Buddha image of the temple is something of a masterpiece of 1940s



Burmese *style moderne*. I can only think of the values, aspirations, and social milieu of the monk who chose it, as he looked over the narrow horizons of Sri Lankan Buddhism, with its caste-ism and apparent worldliness, to the caste-neutral and thoroughly intellectual environment of Buddhist Burma.

All the ceilings of the temple were decorated with beautiful paintings—“How clever they are!” remarks Ranjani. Every temple in the South has paintings—even the small ones.

## Attending Mirissa Government Bilingual School and Mātara Sujāta Vidyālaya

Ranjani initially attended school in Mirissa, and later, in Mātara, seven miles away. She remembers hopscotch and sports meets. Her teachers chewed betel and had English names.

Mirissa Government Bilingual School was, predictably, bilingual. It had been in the vicinity of the Mirissa Post Office, but there is no longer a school of that name or at that location. Now the school is the Mirissa Mahā Vidyālaya, and it is in another location. Students received an education in English and Sinhala. Sinhala was the primary language, and Ranjani’s family spoke Sinhala at home. Everyone began their schooling there, even if they later continued in Mātara. They had good English teachers. Ranjani was good at math.

Ranjani’s parents knew English but they hardly ever spoke English at home. Her mother had studied in the convent and her father was educated at St. Thomas in Mātara. By Ranjani’s period, her education was all English medium. They learned their ABCs even as young children.

In grade school, at Mirissa Bilingual School, they often played hopscotch. She recalls the King George the Sixth Sports

Meeting, which featured games. They would take a lime on a spoon and balance it as they ran.

She was amused by the English names, saying “Oh, the old English names we had!” Masters Louis and Thomas, the school teachers, chewed betel. She knew Thomas, William, Louis, Peter. English names were still in vogue for the lower class, and the servant girls all had English names. “Lily, Sophie, Maggie, Jane. Jane is the servant girl. Lily, Maggie, Sophie, all servant names! Other classes had introduced Indian names like Visakha and Sujata.” She recalls, “Manel, Mallini, Indrani, Chitra, Nandini, Ranjani, like that.”

In Grade Six, Ranjani was taken for the entrance exam to go to school in Mātara. She recalls that it was difficult, but she was selected. Mātara was a seven-mile daily journey from her village. Previously, she had attended mixed-gender school. However, she commenced at a girl’s school, Mātara Sujāta Vidyālaya, from Grade Six. It was completely English medium, with Sinhala taught as a subject.

There were about five or six classes of Grade Six, and she was put into class A, but she found it difficult. She always wanted to place first, second or third. After moving schools, she didn’t achieve that. She asked the teacher to please be put into the lower class for one more year. The principal was happy. Other children wanted to go up a class. But Ranjani had asked to go down a class.

Ranjani wanted to be aware and to understand. She went from class A to class B and and picked up the work. The next year she moved to A. Her aim was to get the report from the principal at the assembly. Later, she felt that she picked up the content. They learned Pāli in Grade Seven.

Her math teacher at Sujāta Vidyālaya in Mātara had been an Indian, Mrs. Omen. Ranjani liked math and used to give her roses every day. Ranjani’s friend and “cousin-sister,” Anula Ranjani,

also went to the same school. Ranjani passed her house, where there were flowers, little pink roses in the garden. She would always take a sprig of roses for the teacher.

Ranjani did girl guiding at Mātara. However, she found it difficult, because if she stayed for after school activities in Mātara, it would get dark. She wanted to do everything, but she didn't have any brothers or anyone to pick her up. She said, "Can you imagine, seven children, nobody to go after us!" She made her own plans independently and relied on her mother's cousin in Mātara when she stayed late. She had the Mātara girl guiding uniform, which featured white tennis shoes. They put the chalk from the blackboard duster on the tennis shoes to make them whiter.

She enjoyed the guide songs and the campfires. "I enjoyed everything as a child," she said. The others didn't really know what she was up to. At home, she didn't do much housework. She was studious and did her homework without prompting from others. Ranjani remarked, that she did well at school initially, but was affected by changing schools.

## The Matchmaker

Ranjani remembers the matchmaker, known as *kapuva* or *magul kapuva* in Sinhalese, coming to her house to propose to her elder sister. The *kapuva* was a man with a coat and a sarong, who walked with a stick. Women can also be a *kapuva*, but this one was a man. His job was to arrange marriages. The matchmaker's thankless job, according to an article by Andrew Scott, writing about matchmakers in Kandy in the 1950s, was to know "almost everything about every man's sons and daughters," often aided by notes in a soiled dairy, which also contains details of horoscopes.<sup>14</sup> The stick is for fending off dogs.

When her sister passed out of Grade Ten after sitting the exam, the exam-takers names were in the newspaper, "like getting a PhD." Ranjani's sister got a teaching appointment—she wasn't allowed to go to university. Ranjani's parents were looking for partners for her. "So interesting at that time," says Ranjani. The marriage brokers would come when there were young marriageable girls in the family to bring proposals.

They called him "Guru Caronchi Appu." Leaning on his stick or umbrella, he stood looking at the house, which was located along the sea-drive.

Ranjani's older sister was about twenty-one or twenty-two when the *kapuva* came to propose. Having so many girls in the family was a disadvantage. People said, if you marry a family with girls, you have to take responsibility. So, the other girls were locked in a room, and they said, "Don't come out!" The young ones were locked inside and the potential bride's family didn't mention anything about them. Only later would the bridegroom's family find out.

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<sup>14</sup> Scott 2003.

One or two suitors came, and Ranjani waited with the others until they left to eat the nice food and sweets. Ranjani vaguely recalled that one man had been an auditor. He came with a chocolate box or something called “black magic.” Ranjani remembers calling out, “black magic, black magic!” She said, “The black thing with the white line.”

There are not many (if any) *kapuvas* left in Sri Lanka. Nowadays, this role will generally be filled by a go-between.

## 1948 Sri Lankan Independence

Ranjani had been a school child when Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, around nine or ten years old. She remembers the first elections, the formation of the first government, and the presence of leftist parties.

Ranjani’s mother Nelliet was elected as the polling agent for the conservative UNP, the party that later formed government. She came wearing a badge. She had to be present at the booth during voting. Another one of Ranjani’s relatives had founded a leftist party, which Ranjani described as “like the Communist party.” He came over and said, “Aunty, please don’t you stand there, everyone in the village will vote [UNP], when you are wearing [the badge]!” Nelliet was popular. Ranjani recalls the early electoral success of the UNP and also the continued presence of the left.

On voting day, Nelliet organized tea for the staff. Voting was in the school hall. Due to the regulations, Ranjani was stopped at the gate, but she was allowed in with tea for the staff. The government school was a big school, and Ranjani walked and handed out the tea for the staff. Ranjani remarked about her mother’s ingenuity—“On the spot, she will think of this.” There were no canteens or hotels for refreshments.

Ranjani only remembered the 1948 elections. She didn't realize that independence was any different. However, she had noticed that after independence, they changed the sports meet from King George's birthday to Independence Day.

## Coming of Age and South Asian New Year

Ranjani contracted measles when she was around eleven. They had a small room in the house which was used as a sick-bay. They also used that room for girls' coming of age seclusion, according to South Asian custom.

Ranjani participated in traditional Sri Lankan cultural celebrations, such as New Year's and coming of age celebrations. A woman's menarche is a time of celebration in traditional South Asian cultures. Menarche is viewed positively in Indian and a number of other South Asian cultures which value motherhood. ("It was the worst day of my life," said a South Asian nun I know, more cynically.)

I had heard this celebration referred to as *loku vīma*, or a "big girl's party." Ranjani says, however, they didn't have a party, although sometimes even very poor people would have a party. She was shy and she didn't know what menstruation was. Even today, according to some sources, two thirds of Sri Lankan girls don't know what menstruation is when they experience menarche. Sometimes, Ranjani says, the horoscope will be taken to the astrologer to have it read, and they say, "This happened at such and such a time and place..." The astrologer will then say, in the future, you'll be like this, the marriage will be like that. The idea of using menarche to calculate a horoscope seemed to amuse Ranjani—she laughed as she told me this.

When Ranjani came of age, they cooked milk-rice and traditional sweets such as *kævum* (oil cake) and *kokis* (rosette

cookies) for the day of the bathing ceremony. The *dhobi* woman came and Ranjani was bathed, and the *dhobi* woman received gifts of money and rations. Ranjani received presents of jewelry. Although they didn't have a party for Ranjani's coming of age, some family members came with the milk-rice and traditional sweets. She was given a white silk dress to wear and they took a small photo with the neighbors.

After she came of age, she wasn't allowed to go to school for one week. In fact, she was basically locked in the room—they had a small room that was sometimes used for females. She wasn't allowed to see any males and they didn't have any males in the house. For five or six days, she wasn't allowed to eat anything fried in oil. She was given simple food or curry. I asked if it was boring in the room. Ranjani said yes—it was like when she was locked in the room with measles.

Ranjani's family also celebrated Sinhala New Year, normally around April thirteen and fourteen, as a matter-of-course. In Sinhalese astrology, the changeover period between the cycles is unlucky. This inauspicious period is referred to as the *nonagataya* in Sinhalese. There is no cooking, visiting houses or other activities. During the unlucky period, people attend temple and do meritorious deeds to counter the inauspicious time—hence the name, *puññā-kālaya*, meaning, “the time for merit-making.” On New Year's during the *puññā-kālaya*, they stopped working, stopping everything including the fire. They cleaned the house and went to the temple.

After the end of the inauspicious period, the new years' celebration is conducted according to astrologically determined auspicious times, such as for studying, eating, and doing activities. They would go together and cut a tree, so the milk-sap could come out at the auspicious time. After taking milk-rice, gifts were given and Ranjani got money. At the pre-calculated

auspicious time, as they were students, they would get their books to read and start studying.

During the inauspicious period, there is no cooking, so they ate fruits or sweets. At the beginning of the auspicious time, there were crackers everywhere in the village. They always had a pot of water outside the door, and at the correct time, their mother would enter the house carrying the pot of water into the house with some flowers, lighting a coconut oil lamp and placing it beside the pot on the table. This role is reserved for the lady of the house. They lit the fire using firewood and cooked a pot of milk-rice, known as *kiribat*. *Kiribat* is considered as an auspicious food. The next time is the time to eat, about an hour or an hour and a half after entering the house: the table and tablecloth are prepared. Betel is offered: betel leaf plays a special ceremonial role in Sinhalese life. Like every house, they had a betel tray, which was offered to visitors.

At the time for eating, they sat and ate, with the head of the family taking the first serving of milk-rice, followed by everybody else. By this point, the astrologer has already announced the lucky color, such as blue or red. Normally it will be more than one color. The family wore new clothes—Ranjani's mother and servants all had new clothes. At the time for activities, they played games.

As a child, Ranjani and her siblings were waiting to get money. Ranjani's father Juanes had his pockets full of coins wrapped in the betel leaves to give to everybody. They bowed to all the elders, paying their respects. The younger sisters bowed to the elder sisters. Ranjani remarked about her grand-



daughters' ability to bow, even in Australia, saying "Their [the Sri Lankan childrens'] ego is not there much, they can go right down on the knees and bow. They go right down and bow to me. They bow to me before they left. Those are the things you know. Sri Lankan temples are keeping up our culture." Ranjani's family continues to celebrate the South Asian New Year even now they are in Australia.

They were in Mirissa up until Ranjani was aged fourteen or fifteen. "We had a good time," said Ranjani—"People lived in happiness...oh, very nice."

## 1952–1961 A Lucky House in Colombo

### Moving to Colombo and Attending Mt. Lavinia Girl's High School

Later, Ranjani's father decided to move to Colombo. Ranjani's elder sister had requested it. They found a house from some acquaintances and got a seven-year lease. It was a large house with a big garden. Number Seven, William Place, Mt. Lavinia—a lucky house. Not willing to leave Mirissa, Ranjani had said, "I don't want to leave school, I want to stay!" However, her father didn't want to leave anyone behind, and he said, "Now let's all go."

All of Ranjani's relations used to come to the house in Mt. Lavinia. There was no mains water but there was a well. There were fruit trees. Not everything was like how things were in the village, however. After moving to Mt. Lavinia in Colombo, Ranjani encountered the "bucket toilet," which they didn't like very much. In Colombo, the toilets were cleaned by poor untouchable women from India. These women didn't wear

jackets—they just covered the top part of their body with cloth. A lorry would come and take the buckets to empty. This was the system at all the houses, stations, and large houses. Newer houses had a modern system.

The children enjoyed being close to the schools. However, Ranjani felt that the move was a little sudden—the decision was made suddenly at the end of the year.

After arriving in Mt. Lavinia, Ranjani felt that her new school, the girls' high school at Mt. Lavinia, wasn't particularly scholastic. The principal was Burgher. By "Burgher" Ranjani here indicates that she was English and English speaking—Burgher could refer to any Sri Lankan of European descent, including Dutch and Portuguese. Ranjani was a little bit taken back to come straight from the village to mix with English-speakers. But in second year, Ranjani was made a prefect. The prefects were made up of the captains and the vice-captains, and the games captains. There were ten prefects in the school. They had house colors: Garnier, Copperston, Campbell and Horsely. Ranjani did guiding, as she had done in Mātara previously. She was a patrol leader, and her patrol emblem was a kingfisher. She was also made vice-captain of Horsely house. In the year after that, she was made the house captain. She was interested in sports, and took part in many sporting activities. She was the captain of the netball team.

After she came to the school at Mt. Lavinia, she did very well. She came first in class and carried away all the class prizes, especially the math prize. She went on stage six times to take the prizes. She reports being a very clever child, but that school didn't have Grades Eleven and Twelve. She had to move out of

the school. She said her parents also didn't realize that she should have applied to go to a better school. She was sent to another school where the principal was a relative of theirs.

Ranjani reports being very well-behaved at school. She didn't get into trouble. When Ranjani came to Mt. Lavinia, she did her homework, saying, "The students didn't like me because I would remind the teacher about the homework!" She became friendly with her class teacher from Grade Eight onward. Her name was Miss Mallika and they used to live close to her house in Mt. Lavinia. She drove a Morris Minor, which was a little unusual, as not many women drove. All of the younger sisters would walk—her elder sister would walk with the two younger ones. But Ranjani would get a lift in the teacher's car. "What could I do?" she says. "I couldn't take the others. They might think that I'm selfish!"

Ranjani became very close to her teacher, who she describes as being "like family." Miss Mallika's elderly father, who they called "Papa," was in a wheelchair and sometimes Ranjani would push the chair. Ranjani's marks were around "ninety-six or something." Ranjani reported feeling appreciated and valued at Miss Mallika's home for her school results. Her own home, with many siblings, could be busy.

Miss Mallika was unmarried, but very well-read and educated. She liked Ranjani and they used to make buttercake at her house. They were all devout Buddhists. Every Sunday morning at eight am, there was a Buddhist talk on the radio. Ranjani would hurry every Sunday morning to their house to listen to the sermon. The teacher's brother was a doctor. They

would all sit on small, low chairs (as is done when attending temple) with the father to listen to the radio. There was no work at that hour in that house. Ranjani would join them to listen to the sermon. She was about fifteen or sixteen.

Ranjani reports that normally, sermons in that period did not feature meditation. They discussed *gāthās*, the ten *pāramīs* or the ten wholesome qualities, and how to live a good life and the five precepts. Recently, Ranjani heard a monk say that for all these years, Buddhist talks have been on the way to live, not on the way to liberate yourself. “It’s true,” muses Ranjani. “Always the Buddhist way of life it taught. They never thought that you could liberate yourself in this very life at this time.” Her mother and father were “very good,” “but they never had the *vipassanā* or the insight meditation.”

Ranjani’s early Buddhist education did not feature meditation in more than a superficial sense. Even though she had learned the sequence, “hair of the head, hair of the skin, nails, teeth and skin”<sup>15</sup> which is the basic method of meditation on the unattractiveness of the body, she had only memorized the words. She remembers learning *gāthās* and doing chanting, including all-night *pirit* and *sūtras*.

She says, “All this as a child. All those years I write all this, but I didn’t realize what I was doing.”

With the help of Ranjani’s father, Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri also relocated to Colombo. Originally, Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri had been

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15 I.e. the *tacapañcaka*, or five parts of the body ending with *taco*: *kesā*, *lomā*, *nakhā*, *dantā*, *taco*

in Mirissa. As a student, he resided at a temple in Colombo, the Visuddhārāma. When he was staying in Colombo, he didn't have a temple of his own. So, in the 1950s, the trust purchased a piece of land for him with Ranjani's father as a trustee. Ranjani's father had also helped to support Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri's education, so he was very close to their family.

The land which was purchased is now marked on Google Maps as Sri Lankarama on Ratmalana-Mirihana Road, but the name "Mirissē Guṇasiri Dharmāyatana" is still written in Sinhalese script on the gate. Even now, the family sends dāna every month. The Dharmāyatana had been the place that Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri had wanted for his students in Colombo to have a place of their own.

## 1950s Early Recollections of Sīla Mātās

It has been suggested that cultural exposure of Buddhists to bhikkhunīs is greater in Sri Lanka than in other Theravāda countries such as Thailand and Myanmar, which lack memories or stories related to bhikkhunīs in their country. The presence of a cultural memory of bhikkhunīs is largely due to the historical importance of Sanghamittā Therī, who had transmitted Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE, together with her brother Mahinda Thera. Sinhalese Buddhist luminary, Anagārika Dharmapāla, had argued for the reinstatement of the bhikkhunī order as early as 1891,<sup>16</sup> and the Lady Blake Ārāma had been established by Sister Sudhammacārī (Catherine de Alwis) for sīla mātās in 1907. By the 1930s, G.P. Malalasekera was arguing for

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16 Goonatilake 2006, 42.

the restoration of the Theravāda bhikkhunī order through ordination by bhikkhus alone.<sup>17</sup>

I had asked Ranjani about this and she confirmed that Sanghamittā Day celebrations were a part of her life since she was small. However, she noted, this history was presented as history *only*—bhikkhunīs were not mentioned in her Buddhist education. They didn’t say the word “bhikkhunī.” People didn’t really expect women to become sīla mātās, either.

They had Sanghamittā Day on Unduvap full-moon day in December, where a statue of Sanghamittā Therī was paraded on a float. “It’s a common thing,” said Ranjani. In the month of June, they celebrated the Poson full-moon day, when King Aśoka’s son, Mahinda Thera, came to Sri Lanka and the king took refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. Princess Anulā, who was the king’s sister-in-law, became a stream-enterer, attaining the first level of awakening in Theravāda Buddhism, and she wanted to become a bhikkhunī. They sent for Venerable Mahinda’s sister Venerable Sanghamittā, who brought the sapling of the bodhi tree and gave ordination to the first bhikkhunī. “That was there,” said Ranjani. “We always knew about Sanghamittā and Arahant Mahinda. We had Sanghamittārāma everywhere. Sanghamittā, Sanghamittā, the name was very common.”

It was a common name for the sīla mātā monasteries, and there was also a famous girls’ school called Sanghamitta Girls’ College. The sīla mātā monasteries weren’t large monasteries, but sometimes the nuns had a small place and they would call it Sanghamittārāma. Some of the small places were in remote areas. “The name had always been there,” says Ranjani. In Anurādhapura, there are big Sanghamittā statues, always carrying a bowl and the bodhi tree sapling. In the Kelaniya Temple, which has many paintings, there is a famous picture of Sanghamittā

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17 Goonatilake 2003, 2.

arriving by ship. From when she was small, Ranjani saw the paintings in the temple of Sanghamittā, and she saw that the one who brought the Buddha’s tooth relic to Sri Lanka, Princess Hemamālī, was a woman. She had hidden the relic in her hair to take it safely from India to Sri Lanka. “The women’s role in Buddhism is very interesting,” says Ranjani.

All the stories of Sanghamittā Therī and Mahinda Thera were just *history*. They had learned that in the Anurādhapura period, there were many awakened nuns (*arahant therīs*). Ranjani recalled:

That was our history, not in the present moment, not the days we were living. But still the history was there. Our history was there always. The history was always there, the history of our Sri Lankan history, the Anurādhapura era. The Sanghamittā Therī brought bhikkhunis, up to the fourth century [=from the fourth century BCE], we had a lot of *arahant therīs*, thousands of *arahant therīs* had been there, the construction of the big *stūpa*, there’s a book *Thūpavaṃsa*, it describes all the *arahant therīs* and *theras* who were there. You’ve heard the *Dannō budungē*... the Sri Lankan song, how it describes the arahants who were there, in Sri Lanka, in Anurādhapura, that is our history.

Ranjani was correct—I do in fact know the song *Dannō Budungē*, the much-venerated trans-generational classic of Sinhalese music, which is now over one hundred years old. Its lyrics utilize evocative spiritual imagery in praise of the *arahants* of Anurādhapura. The theme is based on the story found in the

thirty-sixth chapter of the Mahāvamsa, where a virtuous king named Sirisanghabo travels with his two friends to the royal city of Anurādhapura to serve the Sinhalese king. Sirisanghabo is accompanied by his two friends Gotabhaya and Sanghatissa. The song is their conversation in praise of Anurādhapura and evokes images of peace and plenty—it was said that during the Anurādhapura period, the island of Lanka was so peaceful that a woman could walk alone from the south to the north with gems in her hands and not be molested. The translation is as follows:

Sanghatissa: Behold in this mansion-like town  
Many monks adhering to the precepts  
Destroying their defilements  
And abiding by Buddha’s Dharma teachings

Sirisanghabo: Like heaven on earth!  
The shade of the many monks  
Who travel by air  
Destroys hot sun rays

Gotabhaya: I see flocks of ducks wading  
In deep ponds, where stems of  
Lotus and lily flowers  
Rise to the top<sup>18</sup>

There is a post-script to the story of their friendship. Eventually, Gotabhaya conspires against Sirisanghabo, whose Buddhist devotion led him to retire to live the life of a hermit in Attanagalla to avoid shedding blood in battle against Gotabhaya. For Ranjani,

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18 Gonsalkorale 2019.



bhikkhunīs were something that belonged to the world of this song, in the romantic, distant past in the Anurādhapura of the Sri Lankan chronicles, with its “thousands of *arahant therīs*.” They were just a vague cultural memory. At Dhamma school, there wasn’t much talk about bhikkhunīs in Sri Lankan history. They didn’t think much about bhikkhunīs or women. It was enough to know that there were bhikkhunīs in history.

When Ranjani was about fourteen or fifteen and in school, she heard of an educated graduate who became a *sīla mātā*, Sister Sudharmā. All of Ranjani’s elder sisters were talking about how they would like to go see her. It was the first time that they had heard that an educated woman in the city had become a *sīla mātā*. Sister Sudharmā was based in the vicinity of Kelaniya. One day, during Ranjani’s discussions with her teacher Miss Mallika, the topic of nuns came up. Ranjani said something about wanting to become a nun, or was talking about nuns. Her sister commented, “You’ll be a nun with another man’s son!”

Ranjani thought it was witty, but I didn’t quite understand the punchline. Ranjani explained: if a girl wants to become a nun, the family “solves the problem” by arranging to get her married.

## 1960 Ranjani’s First Job at the Milk Board, the Death of Ranjani’s Father and Marriage to B.S. de Silva

Ranjani did well at the girls’ high school at Mt. Lavinia and received the class prize. She excelled in mathematics and also did botany. However, she had to discontinue those subjects as a result of a lack of teachers. After that, she had no choice except to take

history, which included the history of Ceylon and European history as double history, for her higher high school certificate.

Ranjani wasn't interested in those subjects at all. She was sent to another school where the higher classes were available. When she sat for the university entrance exams, she hadn't completed the required syllabus. They said, "You can try next time." She was unable to enter university that year and she was very disappointed. The next year, she received her higher school certificate. In the same year, when Ranjani was in Grade Twelve, her father was paralyzed. She didn't go to school after that. Ranjani didn't take her leaving certificate—the school sent messages—Ranjani is a girl who should go to university, she should come back.

After that, Ranjani began applying for jobs. When Ranjani first started applying for jobs, she applied for Air Lanka, which at the time, was Air Ceylon. She was selected but her family said, "Don't go, you would be an air hostess, you're too young." They didn't like that type of job.

One day, Ranjani saw an advertisement in the newspaper and applied. She sat the written exam and was selected to work for the Milk Board. The Milk Board had been newly opened for the production of milk and butter. It was her first job, in 1960. Ranjani worked for two years between ages twenty to twenty-two. She was put into administration, where they were happy with her work and gave her more responsibility.

When Ranjani worked at the Milk Board, Ranjani's mother warned her not to talk to boys too much. They were all girls, a mother with daughters, and their brother was still young. They were afraid of mixing with men. Ranjani remembers walking from work to the bus-stand, when she was still Miss Jayasekera. They had been working over-time and the office had closed. She could hear someone walking behind her, there were footsteps, and he was walking faster than her. She walked faster and faster,

saying, “*Itipi so bhagavā...*” From childhood, any time they were scared of anything, whether it be a dog or a drunk man, Ranjani and her siblings would say, “*Itipi so bhagavā...*” For Theravāda Buddhists, these words, meaning, “I have heard this of the Blessed One...” which begin the Buddhist’s affirmation of faith, have an apotropaic potency. Later, Ranjani got used to the people and was very happy, and made many friends.

A colleague who was an accountant became interested in her. He was ethnically Tamil. Ranjani was nervous—her family would never approve an inter-racial relationship. Ranjani felt sorry for him—she knew it would never work out.

In 1960, Ranjani’s father passed away. It was a dark period for the family. Her first sister, Indrani, and her third sister Nandini were married, and her second sister Chitra was working. There were still another brother and two sisters who were younger, and her mother had the responsibility for them. Ranjani recalls that things were a little depressing for them, as well as for herself personally. After Ranjani’s father passed away, their friends and relatives advised her mother that with so many girls in the family, she should arrange to have them married to ease the burden on herself. Her second sister Chitra had always had boyfriends and wasn’t interested. She was adventurous and was always going out. She was the one who had been to Africa. Ranjani remembers other people calling her a “tomboy.”

Her third sister, Nandini, had already been married when she was aged about eighteen or nineteen. Her mother arranged for the other girls’ horoscopes to be matched. Ranjani’s horoscope was matched, so they suggested that she get married as well. Her family proposed that she should marry B.S., a thirty-eight-year-old journalist with an English-language newspaper. Ranjani was twenty-three.

Ranjani confided in B.S. about her concerns regarding her Tamil colleague’s feelings. She said, “I can’t get married, I have this problem, I need more time.” In time, Ranjani’s family found out about this, and Ranjani’s life was shattered as she was put under virtual house arrest by her family. Ranjani called it a “disaster.” Her family took her keys and handbag, and didn’t allow her to go to work. Ranjani was upset and she cried and cried. B.S. intervened, saying, “Don’t harass her, I’m the one who’s marrying her.” It had been a depressing time for Ranjani, and she said it was the “worst experience in my life,” but B.S. became like a big brother to her because of it.

They had the three-month *dāna* after Ranjani’s father passed away and by April 1960, Ranjani was married to B.S. Ranjani said, “I was so innocent, I didn’t know his age or to compare even. I felt more secure with him and he was like an elder brother as well. He was very good.”

Ranjani’s father had built a house when she was young. It had previously been rented to an engineer, but it had fallen vacant. Ranjani’s husband said that he was always in Colombo for work and that he was boarding in a Colombo room. He had wanted to move to a big house, and this one had four big bedrooms. He offered to pay rent and for them to move to the house.

Ranjani didn’t have a big wedding. They signed the register at home. They registered the name and signed, and after that, their family came. Ranjani’s two elder sisters had big weddings in the hall, but Ranjani didn’t have one. Her husband had said that they didn’t need anything. He didn’t believe in having anything. So there wasn’t anything—no wedding veil, no *Jayamangala gāthā*.

His family came and they had lunch with Ranjani's immediate family, within a few weeks of the New Year. Ranjani started taking an interest in selecting and buying things for the house, picking out the saucepans and a kettle. They started their married life there.

## 1962–1969 Waiting for Maitreya Buddha

### 1961 Joining Sri Lanka Saukya Dana Movement

As early as 1961, even before she joined the State Engineering Corporation, Ranjani joined the Sri Lanka Saukya Dana Movement, which was a free medical aid movement, as a volunteer. It had been founded two years previously by Dr. Vajiranath Lakshman de Silva, who was a relative of Ranjani's. *Saukyadāna* means a "freely given gift of health to the public."

Saukya Dana had been started by a team of doctors in the 1960 as doctors' medical aid. They had seen pilgrims everywhere, such as at Adam's Peak, with no first aid available. People fell and injured themselves, or choked and died, at popular pilgrimage locations in the pilgrimage season. Although there were doctors, they didn't have medicine with them. So the idea arose to create a medical aid society.

Every pilgrimage season, a team of doctors, nurses and volunteers would attend at major locations. Thousands of people flocked to places such as Anurādhapura, but there were no toilets. The pilgrims came in buses and slept under trees. The pilgrims would fall sick, sometimes vomiting. The Saukya Dana volunteers slept nearby in tents. Ranjani's mother and sisters had gone as volunteers, taking medicine with them. Ranjani continued as a volunteer and founder-member for forty-five years. Eventually, she

joined the board of directors as the treasurer and as a trustee. She was the treasurer for ten years. Ranjani remarks that her daughter Rukmal, who was fifty-four years old at the time of interviewing, hadn't even been born when she joined Saukya Dana.

There was a Saukya Dana office in Colombo with units in different regions. They would train young people in first aid. They would then take the trained volunteers, doctors, nurses and administrators to the major pilgrimage locations. In June, they went to Anurādhapura. In August, they went to Kataragama. They went to Adam's Peak in the Adam's Peak season and also to Kandy for the parade. All major sites were covered, including Mahiyangaṇaya, which is claimed as the first site the Buddha visited in Sri Lanka. A lecturer was brought in to train the nurses for the pilgrimage locations. Later, the same lecturer, Rajakaruna, would train bhikkhunīs, before he passed away.

## 1962 Employment with the State Engineering Corporation (1962–1985)

Ranjani was bored staying at home after her marriage and wanted to return to work. She found her home, which was about ten miles away from Colombo, was getting a bit lonely. After Ranjani got married, her mother gave up keeping house. It was a big house and her unmarried sister and her mother came to live with them. The younger siblings stayed with the married sisters, so Ranjani's mother was free.

B.S. de Silva was working at the Lakehouse, the headquarters of the government-owned Associated Newspapers of Ceylon. Early in the morning, a car would come to pick him

up to go to work. Her mother would get a lift to observe eight precepts on the full moon day and would be dropped off early by car at the Vajirārāma in Colombo.

They had stayed there for about one or two years and Ranjani wanted to go back to work. One day, B.S. brought an advertisement for the State Engineering Corporation, in about 1962. At that time, Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the prime minister. They had started to create state corporations. Previously, there had only been the private sector.

Many state corporations were founded in her era and the State Engineering Corporation was among the first, to address the need for construction. Ranjani was one of the first to apply and be selected. She was initially given administrative work. She put a lot of effort into her work and she received frequent promotions. She worked in all fields, doing administration, supplies and salaries.

In the early days of the State Engineering Corporation, they were a small group of people. However, later it expanded to 13,000 or 14,000 employees, consisting of both skilled and unskilled workers. They had about a hundred qualified engineers. It was the largest of the state corporations and Ranjani continued to work with the expansion and was promoted. She was sent for a diploma and further training and was moved to human resources administration. The remainder of her career was in human resources.

At that time, it wasn't so common for married women to re-enter the workforce. Later, more women would continue in the workforce after marriage. The majority of working women were teachers. "Men did the leadership, ladies were teachers," said

Ranjani. However, her husband was very understanding of her wish to return to work. Ranjani describes him as “quite mature.” He wasn’t possessive and gave Ranjani a lot of independence. She feels that she owes a lot to the independence he gave her. She was able to do whatever she wanted to do. She could invite anybody she liked to have dinner. B.S. encouraged her and would get friendly with her guests. Ranjani felt very free. She felt that B.S. was more experienced and understood the world, helping her out with advice any time there was a problem in the office. “I felt that was what made me feel secure with him,” said Ranjani.

Ranjani describes B.S. as sociable. If there was any cake to finish, he would call people over to help finish it, saying “Come, come, we have cake.” Ranjani would say, “Where is the cake? The food is over.” He loved the family and enjoyed inviting people over for parties.

Ranjani said she was respected at work. She said, “I think I proved that women can work.” They were happy with her and she said, “I was above the men, to tell you the truth.” The boss was a world-famous engineer at that time. But Ranjani was also on the receiving end of a little envy.

She continued to join in sports activities, becoming the table-tennis and carrom champion of the Engineering Corporation sports club. Carrom is a table-top game which originated in India. It involves flicking disks.

In Ranjani’s first year at the Engineering Corporation, they wanted to have a ceremony with all-night *pirit* chanting in the office. There was a big temple, the Gangārāma, in front of their office and they asked Ranjani to organize it. Ranjani was



expecting her daughter at the time. She organized a dāna and *pirit* chanting and everything went well. The board members who were present for the ceremony were impressed, asking, “Who organized this?” Ranjani hadn’t been aware of their appreciation and admiration. “Actually, I was expecting nothing. I just went on doing things expecting nothing in return,” says Ranjani.

Ranjani organized the staff trip to Bentota Beach, with all the engineers and their wives. “Mrs. Silva,” they asked, “when are you organizing the next one?” At the time, there were no hotels at Bentota Beach, but now it has hotels and is a popular tourist destination.

Ranjani was originally employed at clerical level. Later, they advertised for a welfare officer and Ranjani was asked to apply. She was a little unsure, and she was interviewed with a few others. All of her work on the office’s social and religious events later became qualifications—she was selected for the position. The chairman himself told the other board members, “She’s the one who did this and did that, she’s quite capable, she’s in charge of the salaries of the employees and she’s doing a great job.” Ranjani was promoted to a personnel officer (welfare) position. Ranjani had first joined in the 1960s, and the number of employees was increasing every day.

In those days, the safety standards weren’t high. The workers didn’t use helmets while climbing or face protection while welding. There were many workplace accidents, including falls and deaths on the sites, which were reported to Ranjani by the engineers. Ranjani began a death donation scheme which is still

in place at the Engineering Corporation. With her husband's help, she drafted the paperwork for the scheme.

Under the death donation scheme, twenty-five cents were deducted from the salary of each laborer, and one rupee from the salaries of officers. The salaries were low and even for qualified engineers, salaries were only at about six hundred rupees (about five dollars). New graduates received around three dollars. Ranjani visited the families of workers who had died to counsel them and the money was given to the families of the deceased. She also recalls another occasion where there was a family where a sixteen-year-old boy was the family's sole breadwinner. Ranjani assisted the son to get training in skilled carpentry work. He was given an allowance and was later employed. All of these activities were initiated by Ranjani.

At the Engineering Corporation, there was a Buddhist society. They invited monks once a month for a Buddhist talk. Ranjani also organized blood donation almost annually. A lot of workers from the site donated blood. Ranjani remarked that the high rankers didn't want to give blood, and yet the poor and unskilled workers would still give blood. Ranjani enticed them with a packet of milk powder, sandwiches, and transport. She maintained the record of the blood groups which was sent from the blood bank. This came in use during emergencies. One time, a lady who was a staff member had given birth and needed a transfusion urgently. Ranjani looked at the list to find a match, and they organized for the blood to be donated.

The blood donation program was so successful that the blood bank invited Ranjani to be interviewed on radio by the

Broadcasting Corporation. She was interviewed about running a successful blood donation scheme. Ranjani wasn't nervous to go on the radio. She was taken to a room and then she was called into the recording studio. B.S. was very proud. He had the interview recorded and replayed it all the time. "It's a big thing, you know, to speak on the radio!" said Ranjani. In Colombo, there was radio diffusion, called "redifusion" at every corner, all the time, and music in all the shops. A radio system was very cheap to set up and they had radio everywhere. At eighty-two, she recalled having been on the radio two or three times.

When Ranjani was attending school, they had a battery-operated radio that her father had bought. Ranjani bought her first radio after she got married. They had initially moved to the house that Juanes had built, but eventually they moved to an annex in Colombo because it was easier for them to commute to work. The owner of the annex was the former Minister of Justice, a senator who was a connection of the family. They had seen it advertised and were given the annex. It was close to Colombo city. Once, he went to Singapore and brought a small radio. His wife wanted to sell it and Ranjani said, "I'll buy it!" She paid in installments of fifty rupees. Ranjani kept the radio for a long time.

After moving to the city, Ranjani took the bus to work. When she was in school, her teacher drove, and Ranjani would sit in the front seat. She had always wanted to learn driving and had an idea that once she got married, she would buy a small car...even if it was just a Bug Fiat. "Do you know what a Bug Fiat is like? A

little car with the hood open. It was only a little car, and it was the cheapest, and I couldn't buy that," said Ranjani.

Ranjani's husband worked odd hours for the newspaper and they sent the car from the office. To print the morning paper, they worked at night. He would leave home at five pm and come back at midnight. Other times, he would leave at five thirty am and be back for lunch. Once, B.S. took Ranjani to the Lakehouse where the printing took place. She recalls seeing the process of printing and editing, and the huge print reels. It had been the day of the beauty pageant judging, and Ranjani was enthralled as the prints of the winners were printed. The print house was called the "Lakehouse" due to being by the lake, and it was a well-known, old office. Later, there were many private newspapers, but B.S. worked for two newspapers, the Daily News and the Observer, as a news editor. The Observer also ran the Evening Observer and the Sunday Observer.

B.S. was also the editor of the Ceylon News, which was a weekly international newspaper which was sent to other countries, including Australia. Finally, he became the deputy editor of the Daily News—a leading newspaper. Ranjani remarked that he would have liked to have worked longer, but after thirty years as a journalist, he became frustrated with political interference. In the early days, says Ranjani, the journalists were free and enjoyed their work. She recalls that phone calls came from political leaders later. However, they couldn't bribe B.S.

For example, if the president and the prime minister were in an article, the call would come later—why was the prime minister’s photo put on top? Even though B.S. was popular and influential, journalists still had to be careful with the politics. The government would come after the newspaper people. “The big people want the publicity,” remarked Ranjani.

Having a newspaper editor as a husband had also helped Ranjani more than once. One time, the government had changed, and many big projects were coming through, including the Mahāvæli River Polgolla Barrage hydroelectricity project. A decision had to be made about whether to give the project to the private or the public sector. The state corporation engineers knew that Ranjani’s husband was at the Lakehouse. The engineers came to Ranjani’s house and had a meeting. In the end, with B.S.’s support, the newspaper backed the project going to the public sector, and the State Engineering Corporation got the job.

## 1964 Birth of Daughter Rukmal

Ranjani’s daughter, Rukmal, was born in 1964, two years after she began working at the State Engineering Corporation. After she conceived, her mother and elder sister had wanted her closer, so she moved to a room in her elder sister’s large house with her husband. She rented a car to go to work. Her colleagues and workers from the site sent her a stock of sour things, such as olives and sour oranges, and there was always some salt in her drawer. Sri Lankan people have sympathy for pregnancy cravings and will always try to send something sour for a pregnant mother. The Sinhalese term for pregnancy cravings, *dōla-duka*, may have

an etymology from having the “sufferings of two hearts.” It is an important trope in Sinhalese literature. Ranjani doesn’t remember having any particular cravings, but she ate the olives all the time because she was given them.

During the pregnancy, Ranjani frequently recited the *Angulimāla paritta* to herself. This protective chant begins, *Yato’ham bhaginī...*, and has its roots in the former-murderer Angulimāla’s declaration of harmlessness after his life-changing encounter with the Buddha. Ranjani recalled that the normal custom is to take a pregnant mother to the temple for it to be chanted just before the birth. They said, “Don’t do it now, do it before the delivery!” However, Ranjani believes that it can be chanted from the time of conception. Ranjani also went for *pirit* chanting.

Ranjani’s mother was with her from the time she was admitted to the private hospital to the delivery. Although Ranjani says the birth wasn’t easy, it was a normal birth without cesarean section. She was in pain and was given something to inhale, so she wasn’t conscious for the birth itself. She remembers people remarking about her nice daughter and her husband’s excitement. Ranjani remarked that B.S. was also a little nervous and protective—he wanted the best for his daughter. They didn’t have a car so they got a taxi back.

As soon as they left the hospital, they went to the temple on the way home. So Rukmal went to the temple before she even went home. Sachini, Ranjani’s grand-daughter, was also taken to the temple and placed in front of the Buddha. I asked Ranjani why taking the child to the temple was such a high priority. “Because we have so much faith in the Buddha! It’s the best we can do for the child. The best we can give is the Buddha’s blessings!” I feel that this feeling can only be summed up as

*śraddhā*, or “faith” in Sanskritized Sinhala—a word that is hugely important for the emotional vocabulary of Sinhalese Buddhism.

There were only three or six months available for maternity leave, so Ranjani quickly returned to work, employing an *ayah*, Maggi, to look after Rukmal. In Sri Lanka at the time, they couldn’t even get materials to make a baby shirt. They had to stand in a queue to get the material at the co-operative. “Like getting rations,” says Ranjani. When queuing, Ranjani didn’t know whether she was expecting a girl or a boy. But she was attracted to the pink material. She thought that she would like to have a daughter. They had girls in their family and Ranjani believed that girls could look after the family. So Ranjani was naturally happy to give birth to a daughter.

Ranjani’s older sister had three boys. They continued to live at her house, and Rukmal must have felt that she had three brothers. They were there until just before Rukmal turned two. Ranjani and B.S. had purchased a block of land when they were living in the annex in Colombo. After that, they started to build the house. B.S. came to Ranjani and said that the housing department was giving loans of 20,000 rupees (about two-hundred dollars in those days). They got a loan and started to build the house after Rukmal was born. They moved there when she was one year and ten months old.

The house is still there now. Ranjani was working for the State Engineering Corporation when it was built. She got a draftsman to draw what she wanted, so she enjoyed getting the rooms done the way they wanted. “Put a window here,” she requested. The architect said that they didn’t have a large block of land, so it might be good to have a second story. But Ranjani already had joint pain in her knee and she wasn’t interested in having rooms upstairs. Unlike the toilet-bucket system of Ranjani’s adolescence, when she got her own house

built in Katubedda, they had a bathroom. They had three or four rooms built, with the idea that they could make an annex. They used the whole house until they closed up one side with a separate entrance and rented it to a couple.

It was a simple, practical house. They kept two main rooms with an attached bathroom for themselves.

## 1969 The State Engineering Corporation Moves to a New Building

As the State Engineering Corporation grew, it was moved to a ten-story building. They moved to the new location after the first two stories were built, with building still going on. The Corporation chairman, Dr. A.N.S. Kulasinghe, had the patent for the pre-stress concrete system, and it was built without columns using big concrete beams—the first building of its type in Sri Lanka. Dr. A.N.S. Kulasinghe was famous and his wife had become friendly with Ranjani. They appreciated her work and B.S.’s journalism and they became close to Ranjani’s family. Some people were envious that Ranjani was friendly with them.

When it came time to open the new building, Ranjani had the auspicious time read by an astrologer, including when they should enter, and which way to face. In Sinhalese Buddhist culture, a house-warming will normally include blessing chanting and the lighting of a lamp at the auspicious time. However, when they were moving in the furniture, a worker fell off a temporary structure and died. The workers’ unions were incensed—they didn’t want the opening ceremony to go ahead after the death. But the arrangements were already



underway, with the furniture already moved. Even though they didn't have a big ceremony, they continued with the opening.

Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri Thero was in Colombo. Ranjani invited him for the opening ceremony. The monks were invited to do chanting. Ranjani remembers taking a plate of milk-rice, flowers, and a pot of water for the ceremony. She prepared everything. There was no staircase, so they had a temporary set of steps, like a ladder. Ranjani wasn't aware that the ceremony was being covered by the press and that the journalists had been watching, or how much pressure had been building. The workers were furious on the ground, saying, "A man has died, you can't have this!"

Ranjani walked up with the lamp and the milk-rice. A man came and threatened the chairman before being removed by security. Later, they told Ranjani's husband, "Your wife is great! She was so brave, she went up with nothing, she just did her job." Actually, Ranjani didn't know that people were fuming downstairs. She was just interested in the building opening, which had already been organized.

Later, on more than one occasion, there was talk about closing the office, and the Engineering Corporation said, "We have no money to pay the salaries, the office will have to close down." Ranjani said, "I was the one who got the opening time, it will never be closed!" The office is still functional.

Ranjani describes herself as popular. She "did everything." Later, she organized Vesak programs, not only for the engineering corporation, but also for all departments under the ministry. They had a meeting at the ministry and everyone

agreed to take different roles in organizing the events, which were attended by the minister. A sermon by Ven. Na Uyanē Ariyadhamma was organized at the public library in Colombo. At the prime minister’s residence, a Buddhist sermon was organized for Vesak day, so everyone under the ministry went by bus to the temple, the president’s, and the prime minister’s house. The sermon was televised. The day after Vesak, there were also devotional songs, known as *bhakti gīta*.

Charitable activities also formed part of the Vesak celebrations. Ranjani always chose to do the *gilanpasa* dāna, or aid for the sick. They had decorations and *bhakti gīta*, and later, they had songs in aged care facilities. Ranjani would go to the children’s wards and make a list of things that they need, such as medical equipment, mattresses and other necessities. All the other departments had collected money, so Ranjani would make a list of the donations and purchases. The day after the full moon, they went to the children’s hospital to make the donations. They gave fruits to the children and talked to the parents. “A lot of things I have done,” said Ranjani.

### Late 1960s: Waiting for Maitreya Buddha

Before the Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri Dharmāyatana was ready sometime later in the 1960s, while Rukmal was still young, Ranjani had attended eight-precept programs at the Mallikārāma in Ratmalana, Colombo, under Ven. Væligama Ñāṇaratana. She said that they had a good program there and that the temple was reputable. The temple’s own website currently states, “The Mallikārāma Temple is well known as

one of the Buddhist temples which uphold those traditional practices which have molded our nation.” Through attending this temple, Ranjani heard Ven. Væligama Ñāṇaratana really criticizing nuns. She had heard negative remarks before by laypeople, but never direct religious condemnation of nuns from a bhikkhu. Ven. Væligama Ñāṇaratana had said that it was improper for women to wear yellow (as *sīla mātās*), and they must wear white and practice at home. In the symbolic vocabulary of Theravāda Buddhism, the meaning is quite clear: white means, “at home”, “yellow” means “renounced.” If they wanted to ordain, they should wait for Maitreya Buddha. Ranjani also said, “I have listened to monks, quite lately, who tell them that until the Maitreya Buddha comes they can never become nuns...I listened to that much later in my life.”

Comments like this helped Ranjani to make sense of why her Auntly Upāsikā had chosen to live the pious life she did, practicing at home. “Waiting for Maitreya Buddha” would later become a recurring theme in Ranjani’s remarks around bhikkhunī ordination.

At home, B.S.’s morning and night shifts meant that he spent more time with Rukmal than Ranjani during the day. He read her Shakespeare.

## 1969 Death of Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri

At the age of sixty, on March thirty-one, 1969, Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri suddenly fell ill and passed away overnight. He had been the head monk at the Colombo Vipassanā Center and had been teaching Visuddhimagga for many, including Sirimavo Bandaranaike’s family, also completing the Kathiṇa ceremony there. Later, he moved to a simpler place, “a little shed-like

thing,” at the Mirissē Guṇasiri Dharmāyatana. People had warned him that it would be hot in the shed. He said, “I’ll grow a *peepul* tree and keep cool.” Ranjani praised his characteristic simplicity in not accepting money or a car. He had said to her, “When you get a car, could you give me a lift?” The Governor General had visited Dharmāyatana and was surprised, saying that he didn’t think that such a great monk would be living in such a simple place. Eventually, he passed away there at the age of fifty-nine. Ranjani said that Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri’s last words were “*vayadhammā sankhārā...*” Compounded things are impermanent.

Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri’s chief disciple, Ven. Mirissē Dhammasiri took over the Śrī Sunandārāma in Mirissa and the Mirissē Guṇasiri Dharmāyatana (now Lankārāma) in Ratmalana after Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri passed away. She comments, “The monks are good, they don’t get involved in any politics, they don’t go to vote even. They don’t go to the public and announce and get involved.” She had felt that it was good for them to have the place in Colombo.

## 1970–1979: On the Hospital Committee

While still working, Ranjani was appointed by government gazette to the Colombo South hospital committee. She held this position for three to five years during the late seventies and early eighties. The doctors had appointed her to review shortcomings in the hospital system. The committee met once a fortnight. She would go to the hospital, inspect the kitchen, and make recommendations. The medical superintendent was called Dr.

Weerasiri. He was pleased with Ranjani, saying, “Ranjani, if we had ten people like you in this country, it would be a different world!”

As this was a government position, Ranjani was able to get leave to attend meetings during office hours. At the time, Hema Boteju was also on the committee. She was the sister of our late monastery supporter, Dr. Metta. The hospital committee was very active. Now, since being upgraded in 1995, the Colombo South Teaching Hospital is a first-grade teaching hospital, but at the time there were still things that needed improving. For example, there was no place for the patients to recover after surgery in the theater. They were taken to the ward. The medical superintendent was very supportive and keen to get things done. He said, “We’ll do this! We’ll get a room done!” The committee was behind him.

At that time, the hospital also didn’t have a cardiac unit. Ranjani also donated the first bed for a small cardiac room. The superintendent had approached the minister of health to arrange trained nurses to handle the new cardiac unit. There were two beds: one donated by Ranjani and another donated by a relative of hers.

A nurse in a remote hospital had attempted suicide by overdosing on medicine. She was rescued and put in the bed and recovered. When the first patient was rescued, the superintendent sent Ranjani a letter, “You saved one life!”

Even in the burns section, there were issues. The flies came into the burns section. Ranjani became involved and put up mesh around the beds. She sourced fans from family and friends and donated them. Then the toilets didn’t work. The light-bulbs had gone. “[At] that time the conditions were not so good. My husband was supportive...he was encouraging,” said Ranjani. These were things that Ranjani had noticed, no-one had requested her to do the work.

In the kitchen, they had employed some casual attendants.<sup>19</sup> Ranjani reports that the politics was bad, and every time the government changed, there were issues. The patients were meant to be given a certain amount of protein, such as fish, for their diets. It was cooked at lunch time. Some of the casual attendants would bring tiffin carriers and take the patient’s food, without giving them their portion.

The congee was bad. The grains of rice in it were raw. It smelt funny. The food services tender was very old, the regulations were old, and there had never been any changes. There was no incentive for anyone to change anything. They just followed the instructions from the registrar’s office.

Ranjani went to the registrar and said, “Why can’t you get some nice rice for the congee?” They said, “We can’t change the order, this is the type of rice according to the tender.” The tenders were ten- or twenty-years-old already, but they still followed them to the letter. “That was very bad,” said Ranjani. She said, “I’ll bring rice from home, you better not cook this rice for congee for the patients.”

“I have made so many changes,” said Ranjani.

## 1970–1971 The First Computer in Sri Lanka and Ranjani Learns to Drive

After the State Engineering Corporation moved to the new building in 1969, in the early 1970s, the corporation got the first

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<sup>19</sup> In Sri Lanka, a “casual attendant” is a paid employee who is still below the “staff.” Not all employees are referred to as “staff” in Sri Lanka. The “staff” are typically higher up the pay-scale.

computer in Sri Lanka. It was an ICL computer. They had four systems' analysts. To get the computer to start, information had to be fed into the system.

At that time, Ranjani was in charge of the salaries and administration for the corporation. They did job interviews, appointments, and incremental wage raises. They didn't have a legal office. Later, Ranjani handled legal inquiries as well. They also had a few other human resources assistants to help. There were a lot of problems arising with the workers and retired senior government officers were also hired for the labor inquiries.

In 1971, Ranjani started driving. They didn't have a car. When she wanted to buy a car, severe import restrictions in Sri Lanka meant that new vehicles weren't available. Only old vehicles were on the market. B.S. said, "Don't get your nose into buying old cars." In one week, Ranjani had learned to drive. But she wasn't taught how to reverse—you had to make another payment to learn how to reverse! She only knew how to steer. One of the Engineering Corporation engineers was selling a Morris Tourer for only 12,000 rupees. Ranjani had an account where she had saved the money from her salary.

After they got married, they didn't have much money—only the money from B.S.'s salary. Although he held a good job, in the past, he had taken loans when his parents were sick and was still making repayments. So Ranjani also started working and they built their assets up from scratch.

Ranjani says she managed to be thrifty and saved without being stingy. After she learned driving, she said, "I'll buy the car." She bought the car and then had to drive it home. Her friend was sitting in the front. Ranjani said, "I can drive straight now, I can't reverse." They were still talking about it at her eightieth

birthday. Ranjani’s younger sister’s husband was technically-minded, so before going home, Ranjani drove to their house.

Her sister Ira said, “My sister is coming driving, my devil sister,<sup>20</sup> driving a car.” Ranjani said, “Now, I’ve come, and I don’t know how to reverse!” Ranjani’s brother-in-law worked in the railway department, and they had a railway bungalow in a quiet area. They drove around and around and Ranjani learned how to reverse.

All of Ranjani’s friends in the office commented on the fact that Ranjani drove and her husband didn’t want to drive. Ranjani said, “He’s only a journalist, he only buys the newspaper and cigarettes, nothing else.” Ranjani did all the other shopping and driving. Even if he was sitting in the car and Ranjani went to buy something, he would ask to be dropped home first.

## 1978 Ranjani Goes to Europe and Works at the UN International Telecommunications Union

In 1978, while still working for the State Engineering Corporation, Ranjani applied for and was granted six months’ unpaid leave. She had never traveled before, but her brother Dhananjaya was in England and her mother and sister were in Australia. She sold the car for fifteen-thousand rupees. Under the previous government, the economic restrictions had been strict, and it had only been possible to receive three pounds in foreign exchange. The new government allowed five hundred pounds. With the money, Ranjani traveled to England in March 1978.

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<sup>20</sup> Sinhalese: *yakāgē akka*.



Ranjani was in England with her brother, and she had hoped to find short-term employment to recover the cost of the ticket and to pay for a new car. However, she wasn't eligible to work in the UK. Her ticket was London-Geneva-Colombo. So she traveled on to Geneva, where her cousins were at the Sri Lankan mission. They had been inviting her to come for a long time. After staying two or three months in England, they called her, and she said, "I can't work and I'm not very happy." It was the first time that she had left her husband and daughter to travel. There was no possibility of making an international call and of course, there was no email. "So you feel very away from them," said Ranjani.

Her childhood friend and "cousin-sister," Anula Ranjani, was now based in Geneva. She had said to Ranjani, "You come here, you can find some work." So Ranjani decided to go to Geneva. Her brother dropped her off at Wales—it was "like an adventure" for her. She crossed the English Channel by sea-link ship and then caught the train. The train passed Paris, to Lausanne and then Geneva. Anula Ranjani received her at the station and she went to stay with her. In the meanwhile, she was looking for work. There was a dinner party for the Sri Lankan ambassador, who was retiring, at the United Nations, and Ranjani was invited. She met up with friends at the UN who knew her husband. They told her to make an application to the UN.

There was a form to apply for short term work. In the vicinity of the main conference hall in Geneva, there were many organizations, such as the WHO, ILO and UNICEF, as well as the ITU. She didn't really know what they were all for, but she handed in applications to those places. Within a few days, she

received a call, asking her to come. They did a short interview, saying that she had a good reference, and they would call when there was short-term work. Ranjani didn't mind even if it was filling in for a week or two for someone on vacation.

Eventually, Ranjani was invited to do some short-term work for the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). She was asked to go to the fifth floor, where she met an English lady. Ranjani didn't know any French or other language, which was something that would have normally been expected. She asked Ranjani a few questions, and Ranjani explained that she was a personnel manager, but she would take any type of office work. They asked, "Can you type?" Ranjani said that she could type, although not at speed, as she wasn't a typist. They asked her to start work from Monday.

Her cousins were amazed. They said, "We have been here for so many years, but we never got a place even to sweep at the UN. Ranjani is lucky to get a job!" Ranjani was happy. Every day, she worked at the typewriter. The first thing she did was typing a letter to her husband, which she posted. It read, "I'm happy I got a little work in the office." In her group, there were six people: Canadian, Spanish, English, German, Irish and French. The telecommunication union's work was divided into five sections by regional area, such as Asia and Europe. Ranjani did some budgeting work in the international division. There were a lot of figures.

After one week, they were happy with Ranjani's work and invited her for another two or three weeks. They opened a Swiss

account for her to receive her salary. The Swiss francs were a lot of money for her to help her buy a car and save.

Her brother from England traveled overland with his wife and one-and-a-half-year-old daughter. They drove to Switzerland with another doctor. They wanted to take Ranjani around Europe. Ranjani was asked to stay on even longer in Geneva, and they signed her contract and gave her the employee card. Even though they didn't have work in that department, they offered to find her other work in the UN. However, Ranjani's husband and family were still in Sri Lanka, and B.S. didn't want to travel. Ranjani's six-months' unpaid leave at the State Engineering Corporation was also coming to an end. It was already August, and they had sent her a letter asking her to report back if she wanted to stay on. So Ranjani had to give up the idea of working at the UN.

With her brother, she went on a tour of Europe, going to Germany, Austria, Italy, and Belgium. In Italy, they went to Venice, where Ranjani celebrated her birthday. It was the first time that she had pizza. They went on the gondola, which was all lit up. After that, her brother dropped her somewhere in Belgium and went back to England. She took the train herself back to Geneva. When she realized that the train wasn't going to Geneva, she had to quickly change stations at Bonne.

At the time, the import rules in Sri Lanka were just being relaxed to allow the importation of foreign electrical goods and cars. It was now possible to use money from foreign exchange if you could prove that you had earned it. Ranjani got everything signed, and got copies of statements from the bank to prove that she earned the money. She sent the money

to her brother’s account and he bought what she requested, including a Fiat car, a boiler, a toaster, a Russell Hobbes kettle and a Beling cooker with four burners. Ranjani said, “Even now I still have the copper-bottom based saucepan set, all little things and everything.” They also still have the cooker, although only one burner is still working on the oven. Everybody was surprised, saying, “My gosh, Ranjani can do these things.” Her brother shipped everything to Sri Lanka.

“I couldn’t believe,” said Ranjani, “New car, Fiat car, Fiat 28, when everybody had all old cars, when I was driving in that.” Ranjani’s husband joked, “Couldn’t you have gotten a driver with the car?” But it was still a big achievement for Ranjani. The car was a light green “tender-leaf color,” and she still remembers the number-plate, 5253. “I remember numbers,” said Ranjani.

## 1980–1986: On the Prisoner’s Welfare Committee

Ranjani was recommended for another government appointment, this time to the prisoners’ welfare committee. She was a part of that committee from the early 1980s to the 1990s, and retained the post during the early days of working with nuns. The post was in addition to her office work. The prisoners’ welfare committee did a lot of work in the women’s section throughout the late seventies and eighties.

Ranjani describes some of the stories from the women’s prison. A woman would be imprisoned for drug crime. The man would give the drugs, and the woman would go to hand over the drugs, and the woman would get caught. “I always found that the women are in trouble because of the men,” said Ranjani.

Sometimes they would deliver their babies in prison. They were allowed to bring their children who were under six years old with them. They couldn't leave them at home, so they had to bring them. There was a nursery section for the children and a baby section for the newborns. The committee arranged new beds and cots. The committee also arranged for a woman to be put on a salary to come and give milk to the children.

“There were a lot of women in prison,” said Ranjani.

## 1982–1983: “We’re from the South!”—the Black July Riots and the Beverley Traders

In 1982, television was beginning to emerge in Sri Lanka. When Ranjani received an award for twenty years of outstanding service to the State Engineering Corporation, the ceremony was televised. The whole of Sri Lanka saw Sri Lanka's president, Ranasinghe Premadasa, giving her the award, and lot of people wanted to talk to her about it. She imagines that she must have been one of the first people on television in Sri Lanka.

One day in 1983, Ranjani was driving to the office. On her way, she visited the Colombo South Hospital in connection with her position on the hospital committee. She met a skin specialist doctor there. He asked, “Ranjani, are you going to Colombo? Don't go there, there is some trouble in Colombo. You had better go back home if you are going to Colombo.”

Ranjani drove back to the main road from the hospital. She didn't see anything out of the ordinary. All the cars were still going to Colombo. She continued to the office and parked her car—the new car. She parked it inside, not out on the road. She went up to the tenth floor of the ten-story State Engineering Corporation

Building. Looking out over Colombo, there were fires appearing. Within an hour or two, the whole of Colombo was on fire.

Ranjani’s explanation was that many army personnel had been killed by terrorists and their bodies had been brought to Colombo, where they were attempting to cremate them. The government had wished to suppress the news, thinking that it might cause civil unrest. However, the opposition parties found out, inflaming emotions. Then the looting began, leading to the 1983 riots.

Ranjani’s husband called and came to the State Engineering Corporation office. Ranjani said, “We can’t take the car, we’re going in the bus.” There was an office bus which Ranjani had organized for the State Engineering workers.

There was fire and confusion everywhere. Everyone had gotten in the bus. But at a certain point, the riot mob came and stopped the bus. They were looking for Tamil people. Ranjani said, “Actually, we had no Tamil people, all Sinhalese people were there. But they don’t even care, the mob, they don’t care, boys sometimes they had no idea what they are doing, they are just throwing petrol and setting fire and attacking everything. They won’t listen to anything.”

The riot mob obstructed the free passage of the bus. The bus wasn’t like an ordinary bus—it was blue and it belonged to the local government ministry. They banged on the bus, saying, “The minister’s secretary is Tamil! Paskaralingam! Tamil name!” They forcefully entered the bus and dragged one of the engineers outside. He was not Tamil.

Ranjani’s husband yelled at the mob, but Ranjani said during the interview, “You can’t scream and stop the mob, you know.” They needed another approach. Ranjani opened the shutters of the bus and yelled, “We’re all from the South.” This audacious line won freedom for the bus where her husband’s “screaming” had failed. The driver was allowed to take control of the vehicle.

Ranjani wouldn't have known about the full impact of the riots until afterwards. I hate to think what would have happened if Ranjani hadn't been "from the South."

Ranjani got off the bus. On their lane, there was a factory which was owned by Tamils. She saw someone come by with long, bushy hair on a bicycle, carrying a petrol can, which he used to set the factory on fire. It burned for two weeks. In the aftermath, Tamils were moved to refugee camps in Jaffna and other locations. "A lot of damage was done unnecessarily," said Ranjani. The Tamil officers of the State Engineering Corporation could not come to work, but the corporation gave them fully-paid leave.

Ranjani was aware of the property losses of Tamil people who were living in refugee camps. She described Tamil women stuffing their gold jewelry into the tops of their saree blouses before heading to the camp. She was also proud of their protection of their own Tamil officers. They didn't have many Tamil officers, but Ranjani recalled that they were protected and carefully sent home.

There was an engineer and his wife who were also there, and they had said to Ranjani later, "Mrs. Silva, you saved us, everyone was scared." Later, due to her riot-mob line, her co-workers joked that Ranjani was like Queen Vihāra Mahādevī, who was from Ruhunu in the South. They said that Ranjani was her niece. Ranjani said, "They call me Mrs. Silva-Vihāra-Mahādevī."

Ranjani said, "The whole world was talking about the '83 riots." Many people migrated from Sri Lanka to countries like Canada, Germany, Australia and England in the aftermath. She had expressed the opinion that ethnic division was "all politics." Ranjani has many Tamil friends, including a close friend of over fifty years. She recalls the actions of ordinary Sinhalese people to protect Tamils. She had personally taken fish buns to Tamil houses after the riots.

After the riots, many factories had closed down, and there had been looting. Together with her cousin, Dr. Laxman, and his wife, Ranjani had wanted to do something to help address the resulting unemployment. They decided to manufacture maternity clothing. Dr. Laxman had an extra house, so they used it for the sewers. They employed someone to do the designing and cutting, and arranged five or six women with sewing machines to sew maternity shirts, pillowcases and other baby items. They sent them to the shop Bangbang, a well-known Muslim-run fashion outlet. They received a commission and Bangbang sold the goods for them, and they were able to pay the worker’s salaries.

Bangbang had been popular, but after it went bankrupt, they sold the goods themselves. They acquired their own shop to sell the products, naming it “Beverly Traders.” They continued to pay the salaries for the women to continue working. Later, Dr. Laxman and his wife became busy with their daughter. So Ranjani did the work.

## 1984 First Retreat with Ven. Khemā in Kandy

Ranjani says that her interest in nuns started with Ven. Khemā, whom she met in 1984. Ranjani said, “She was the one who inspired me.” Ven. Khemā is well-known as a founding mother of Australian Buddhism, having been involved with Wat Buddha Dhamma from its inception in 1978. Ven. Khemā had become a nun under Ven. Narada at Vajirārāma in Colombo in 1979. In 1983, a return trip to Sri Lanka led her to meet her teacher, Ven. Mātara Śrī Nāṇarāma of Nissaraṇa Vanaya, who encouraged her to teach *jhāna* meditation. In 1984, Ranjani had heard about Ven. Khemā through an office colleague of hers, and that there was a retreat taking place in Kandy. Her



colleague was from Kandy, and Ranjani said that she would like to join him for the retreat. It was Ranjani's first experience of a ten-day retreat. They packed all of their own things and bedding. The retreat was held at a school in Kuṇḍasālē, which is a suburb of Kandy, before the nuns' island was set up.

Kandy was a long way away, but Ranjani was determined to join her friends to attend the retreat. She was grateful for her colleague who took her there. During the retreat, Ranjani didn't talk: she just followed the instructions that were given by Ven. Khemā and learned breathing meditation (*ānāpānasati*) and also a form of body contemplation (*kāyānupassanā*) which involved following sensations. She was very happy.

On the retreat, Ranjani heard about the Parappudūva Nuns' Island, which was under construction at the time. It was located near to the monks' island at Polgasdūva, which had been founded by the famous German scholar-monk, Ven. Ñāṇatiloka. The nuns' island opened a few months after Ranjani's retreat. After it was opened in 1985, Ranjani went for another retreat there. She would complete several retreats at the nuns' island. There were a few international residents—including Ven. Vāyāmā. She had come to the nuns' island to meditate when she was still wearing white. Ranjani attended several ten-day retreats with her, as well as the retreat with the Saukya Dana girl volunteers.

Ven. Khemā gave meditation instructions in English, and she was assisted by a nun who interpreted into Sinhala. People would bring simple cooked alms-food, but not in large quantities. As the nuns lived on an island, they had to get to the island by a little boat. There were a few islands in the area, including a monks' island, where Ven. Ñāṇatiloka and Ven. Ñāṇaponika had stayed.

Ven. Khemā had been attracted to an island, which was close to the monks' island. There was nobody living on that particular island. There were a few islands where a number of families

lived. Ranjani was impressed that she had made it into a nuns’ island, saying “I don’t think any other person could do that.” The island had formerly been a desolate place where they released cobras and other snakes after catching them. At considerable expense (every brick had to be ferried across the water) Ven. Khemā had a hall and a library built. There was no electricity and no running water—they had a well to pump water by hand.

Ranjani recalls Ven. Vāyāmā going to pump water by hand so that they had water for the toilets and the bathrooms. Ranjani had also met Elisabeth Gorski (later ordained with name Ven. Nirodhā)—a pioneering Australian Buddhist laywoman.

Ranjani had also mentioned the island boatman to me. The boatman’s name was Gilman—he was an elderly man who was a friend of Ven. Khemā. She would get on the boat to go visit the families who offered dāna at their homes. When Gilman came, everyone would get on the boat. Ranjani says that she can imagine Ven. Khemā on the boat, in a yellow robe, going on alms-round to the island houses, from one island to another. Ranjani said, “She is so creative, so wonderful, very strong.”

## 1985 Death of Ranjani’s Mother

Ranjani looked after her mother in her house for the last year of her mother’s life. She felt that she was very lucky to get the opportunity—there were six daughters in the family, and their mother was “such a nice lady.” She had been in Australia with Ranjani’s younger sister Ira for three years before returning to Sri Lanka. Even though she wasn’t that old, at seventy-five, she had diabetes. Of her own accord, she decided to stay in Ranjani’s house. Ranjani gave her mother insulin injections before heading to work. “So, I had that opportunity to keep the mother,” said Ranjani. Nelliet would sit in the porch in a chair, nicely dressed,

waiting for Ranjani to arrive back from work. She was happy when Ranjani bathed her. All of Ranjani's relations and sisters came to see their mother there. They remarked that it was like "coming to a temple," because people did meditation there. Ranjani's mother had never seen the Sakyadhita work, as she had passed away before that. However, when she saw Ranjani active and doing things, she commented, "You do things the way I do."

Ranjani's mother passed away in February 1985, just one month before her seventy-fifth birthday. The funeral was held in Ranjani's house.

## 1986 Giving up Work

Ranjani gave up work at the age of forty-seven or forty-eight, giving the cause for her early retirement as "political interference." They were retrenching people and Ranjani was in charge of personnel. She felt it was very unfair—the funds of the corporation had been siphoned off for political reasons. They said there was no money to pay salaries and they were retrenching people. As human resources manager, Ranjani didn't approve, and took the side of the workers. She said, "I was a threat to management, standing for social justice. Overnight, they abolished my post and replaced me with the legal officer. Can you imagine? After more than twenty-four years of work, overnight they say your post is abolished?" She had been disappointed with the management, and was happy to leave. The former chairman of the corporation at the time was the president's secretary. He asked Ranjani, "What was your salary? You should come and see me to find a job." However, Ranjani said that she didn't want to work anymore.

At that point, after doing her first retreat in 1984, Ranjani was becoming more interested in Dhamma and didn't mind the

opportunity to give up work. She had worked for the State Engineering Corporation for twenty-five years.

In January 1986, Ranjani had quit work and she was free. In February 1986, she was given an offer to travel the world. Ranjani’s husband’s brother manufactured silver jewelry in the south of Sri Lanka, but their sales were limited to tourists. B.S. suggested to Ranjani to help them to export them. He had done all the documentation and had communicated with Gemcorp. At that stage, B.S. had also given up working at Lakehouse newspapers. He had also been pleased with Ven. Khemā.

The Sri Lankan government had set up a promotional export development board. They had arranged to promote Sri Lankan jewelers internationally, including diamond jewelry. B.S. did the documentation and they were able to export under his name. An offer came for the silver jewelry and there was a demand. B.S. wasn’t interested in going anywhere, and his brother was only doing manufacturing, so Ranjani was asked to go. She took some photos and some samples and went around the world—to the UK, New York, Los Angeles, the Pacific, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore and Colombo.

Ranjani couldn’t believe that this was what would happen after she decided to give up work. Ranjani feels fortunate that she had the opportunity to travel, sometimes not at her own expense. She also continued to run the Beverly Traders shop. She employed her former stenographer from the Engineering Corporation, who had also lost her job, to work in the shop.

However, Ranjani also wanted to concentrate more on her meditation. During interview for this book, she remarked, (of

her experiences), “They are all *anicca*, all gone. The past is all gone. See what we have gone through...What have we gained? Nothing. Just passing. These are the things we have gone through, just like a stream.”

Ranjani said of that period in her life, “We used to have everything, when I want to do something, they everybody support and we get it done somehow.” She organized many Buddhist activities and was an active participant in Saukya Dana. Saukya Dana had trained many girls and boys from the village to do first aid volunteering. One time, in 1986, Ranjani took a unit of girl volunteers for meditation retreat on Ven. Khemā’s nuns’ island.

Together with her eldest sister, Indrani, Ranjani had taken ten girls from the village for the retreat. They had to travel by boat to reach the nun’s island. Ven. Khemā said that she was very happy to see the volunteers. As before, Ven. Khemā taught in English, with a darker-complexioned Sri Lankan nun who was good in English doing the interpretation.

On this retreat, Ranjani was sitting with the volunteers in the open hall on the island. Normally, Ranjani sat at the front, but this time, she was sitting at the back. Ven. Khemā had introduced *kāyānupassanā*. It was the second day of the retreat, and Ranjani was engaged with the sensation and had become calm. At the time, Ven. Khemā saw her meditating, and commented, “Well, if Ranjani can do it...” This comment and apparent approval from Ven. Khemā meant a lot to Ranjani. After that, Ranjani became Ven. Khemā’s example. Ranjani said, “Ayyā Khemā had confidence in me.”

“These young girls were getting into good form,” said Ranjani. Ven. Khemā had given many retreats and the best groups were the young ones. Some of the foreigners and the Westerners who came didn’t have a lot of interest in meditation and were just there to spend the time. Ven. Khemā said this was the first time that she had seen such an interested group. However, the girls from the village were very hungry without dinner on the retreat. At home, they would normally get a big plate of rice! “I remember that, they were starving,” said Ranjani.

## 1987–1995: Empowering the Sīla Mātās

### 1987 International Conference on Buddhist Nuns in Bodh Gaya

Ranjani didn’t stay on long-term at the nuns’ island. However, she attended multiple ten-day retreats, attending retreats in ’84, ’85, ’86, and ’87. In 1987, the first International Conference on Buddhist Nuns was held in Bodh Gaya. Ven. Khemā had been organizing the conference with Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Dr. Chatusmarn Kabilsingh. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was a professor of Religion and Eastern Philosophy at Thammasat University in Bangkok. Ranjani didn’t know Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo at that time, who was on staff at the Buddhist School of Dialectics in McLeod Ganj, India. Three of them had been planning the nuns’ conference behind the scenes. Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo wrote about the experience of planning the conference in the Summer 2007 Sakyadhita International twentieth anniversary newsletter, which must have

been remarkable in its own right.<sup>21</sup> The idea of a Buddhist women's conference was still radical at the time. Ranjani said "We were innocent! We still didn't know the nuns."

Ven. Khemā said, "We're going to India in February in 1987, would you like to join?" She had asked about ten of them who were meditating with her to join them. Ranjani and the others hadn't gone for pilgrimage in India, and they were very happy to join. Most practicing Buddhists would like to visit the "four places;" namely, Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Shravasti, and Kushinagar in Nepal and India at least once in their lives. These places are significant due to the fact that the Buddha was born, awakened, began teaching and entered *parinibbāna* at each of these places respectively. Ranjani's elder sister, Indrani, who had been doing retreats with her also joined, as well as her second sister, Chitra, who was interested in going to India. So, the three sisters went, sharing one room.

It was a life-changing experience for Ranjani. "That made my eyes open. That is changing my life altogether, attending the conference. We had no idea nuns' conference anything, nothing. Only going to India for the pilgrimage." Ranjani had prepared for pilgrimage, taking a big suitcase of things to offer, including *atāpirikara* (the "eight-requisites" offering), and a sequined ceremonial umbrella. There were medicines and tea in her suitcase as well. Everyone helped her to bring the things for offering. The umbrella was oversize, and its length caused Ranjani difficulties on the plane.

There was another lady called Violet from Kandy who came on the trip. She addressed Ranjani as her younger sister—as is commonly done in Sri Lanka. She said, "Little sis, when we saw you going with the umbrella, [we thought that] you are going to do a big job."

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21 Tsomo 2007, 16:1 2–6.

At that time, Sri Lankan ladies were crazy about buying sarees in India. “We were mad, a new saree every day,” said Ranjani. However, Ranjani wasn’t too interested in buying things for herself. She had collected a stash of things to offer, including Siddhalepa products and soap that she had heard that people would like in India and that she could offer to monks and nuns. After the conference, they called her suitcase “Ranjani’s Store”—always full of things to offer.

Then came time for the International Conference on Buddhist Nuns. His Holiness the Dalai Lama inaugurated the conference, which was held at the Kalachakra Temple in Bodh Gaya, and ran from February 11–17, 1987. The opening day drew a large audience, with up to a thousand attendees. Ranjani saw nuns from all traditions and nationalities for the first time. “That was the best thing,” said Ranjani. She had never seen nuns “from Taiwan, Korea, China [and] the West.” Nuns and laywomen from twenty-four countries had been in attendance.<sup>22</sup> Ranjani had the idea—they could invite these international people to Sri Lanka. But she forgot about it until ’91.<sup>23</sup>

Ven. Jampa Tsedroen was there and she played a big role. Dr. Friedgard Lottermoser, a Burmese educated Pāli scholar, was also there. Ven. Karuṇā Dharmā from Los Angeles in the U.S. was also there. She had a stroke which left her partially paralyzed, but she still faithfully attended the conferences, with a helper. She visited Sri Lanka a few times after that, but she has now passed away. The Sri Lankan commissioner for the *Buddhaśāsana*, Mr. Abeya Weerakoon, was also there with his wife as a representative of the Sri Lankan government. *Buddhaśāsana* means, “the Buddhist religion.” The Ministry for the

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22 Kabilsingh 1987, 386.

23 Buddhist Society of Victoria 2017.



Buddhaśāsana is responsible for the government administration of Buddhist affairs in Sri Lanka.

At the conference, many presenters gave papers. There were various experiences presented from all traditions, and there was discussion about the challenges of monastic life. Topics included “The Status of Nuns in Various Countries,” “The Livelihood of the Sangha,” “The Possibility of an International Bhikshuni Sangha” and “The International Buddhist Women’s Association.” There was also discussion about how Sanghamittā Therī had introduced the bhikkhunī order into Sri Lanka, from where it had spread globally. Ranjani thought, “I felt...we have such a nice [history]...everybody talking about Sri Lanka and the bhikkhunī, the *arahant therī*. But we are now doing nothing. That was the thing that gave me the encouragement to do something.”

At the end of the conference, on the last day after the papers had been collected, Ven. Khemā and the participants decided to form an international Buddhist women’s organization, which could have branches in each country. Someone proposed Sanghamitrā—“as usually,” said Ranjani. (Sanghamittā is a very common name for nunneries, etc, in Sri Lanka.) The group said “no” because it would be too common. Dr. Lottermoser proposed Sakyadhita. They had never heard of “Sakyadhita” either. Someone said that “Sakyadhita” sounded a lot like *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. *Sakkāya-diṭṭhi* means personality view—one of the ten fetters in Buddhism. In the end, they settled on Sakyadhita, which means the “daughters of the Buddha.” They discussed incorporation. Ven. Karuṇā Dharmā drafted the aims and objectives.

Ranjani said, she was just there as a participant, and she wasn't there to play a big role. However, Ven. Khemā called on Ranjani by name, pointing to her and saying, “Ranjani, when you go back to Sri Lanka, you have to help the sīla mātās” Ranjani said, “She must have seen something that she told me to do that.” Ranjani just took a copy of the aims and objectives and went back home after the conference. Item number thirteen of the aims was to “Introduce Sramanerika, Sikhamana [=Sikkhamana], Bhikkhuni ordinations where they currently do not exist.”<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Kusuma Devendra had also joined their group. She was traveling with two nuns—Ranjani said that she was always close to the sīla mātā. She remembers one evening in the dormitory at the Mahābodhi society, when Kusuma made *gilanpasa* (allowable afternoon refreshments for sick or tired Buddhist monks and nuns) to take to the nuns in the evening. Ranjani respected Kusuma Devendra from the very first day that she saw her. Her sister and some ladies made noise while going to the toilet. Ranjani said to them, “Don't make noise, Kusuma is sleeping!” Kusuma had been researching Sri Lankan nuns since 1982.<sup>25</sup> She had been interested in the topic, but had found that not much information was available. Later, she traveled with an international researcher, the sociologist Professor Bloss, to find where the nuns were in Sri Lanka.<sup>26</sup> Professor Bloss taught her how to compile data. This is how she got the data on nuns for her own PhD thesis. That was the beginning of her career studying nuns.

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24 Kabilsingh 1987, 388

25 Buddhist Society of Victoria 2017.

26 Ibid.

Ranjani has a slight nerve problem down one side of her face. She said, “I think it was from the cold at the nuns’ island.” It started with a little pain and swelling at Bodh Gaya, when Ranjani had to start covering her ears. At Bodh Gaya, they would run at five am in the morning to get the bodhi tree leaves. One day, Ranjani went with Kusuma and a nun who came with her, and the three of them sat under the bodhi tree, doing chanting. They had taken flowers, which they offered to the Buddha by placing them at the bodhi tree shrine. Casually, in conversation, they began talking about nuns. Ranjani describes that *sīla mātā* as being a “very good nun.”

After the conference was over, they completed a seven-day pilgrimage, going to Rajgir, Sarnath, Lumbini, Kushinagar, and Shravasti.<sup>27</sup> Ranjani recalls the large stūpa at the place of the Buddha’s cremation at Kushinagar. One nun screamed, making a big *heee* noise. She said she had seen the Buddha’s corpse. That’s why she screamed. Ranjani told Ven. Khemā that she could smell incense everywhere. There was no incense to be seen. Ranjani said, “This was where Buddha was cremated with the sandalwood, you know.” Others didn’t have such a strong reaction to the site.

They went around the Parinibbāna Cetiya. Ranjani took the sequined umbrella and they walked around with a lit lamp. Everyone was crying, “Because we had been living with the Buddha. We really felt that we were with the Buddha and the Buddha was passing away.” After circumambulation with the umbrella, they left it as an offering. Everybody had been

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<sup>27</sup> Kabilsingh 1987, 386.

moved to see the *parinibbāna* statue. “That time, *saddhā* [faith] was so much,” said Ranjani.

After Ranjani went back to Sri Lanka, she began looking out for sīla mātās. She said, “Whenever I see one, it was now in a different angle. I would go and talk to them and ask, why did you become a sīla mātā?” She had come to see them in a new light.

Ranjani began taking a real interest in the conditions of the sīla mātās. She recalls that their lives were difficult and they lacked respect in society. She told me in interview about their lives, which were sometimes peripatetic and marginalized, without a real place to live—Ranjani had seen women with a little bundle at pilgrimage sites such as Anurādhapura and Kiri Vehera at Kataragama. Alternatively, they lived in remote areas. They lacked organized training or support systems. Ranjani said:

People thought the sīla mātā were the bad women, who were poor or had nobody. They had a very poor image, sīla mātās were at a very low ebb in society. Anybody who wanted to become a sīla mātā, they had no future, their parents don’t allow them to join. They stay at home and they force them to be married. They stay at their own houses. That time, what we have seen the sīla mātās, when you go on a pilgrimage to Anurādhapura or Kataragama, they sit at the bodhi tree and somebody put some money so they can buy whatever they want. They have a little bundle. They have no real place to live sometimes. Some may have had it, we don’t know.

Some people who had a little land in the remote areas, they put a little cottage and they live separately, maybe. But then there are no rules or vinaya to teach them. Some will cook and eat; some will beg and eat. Some will go alms-round, we never know. The family supports. That was the lifetime of *sīla mātās* before. There had been a few here and there, educated *sīla mātās*, not in the public but keeping to themselves. When I came back, I got *saddhā* to help the *sīla mātā*...on my own, without any committee nothing.

As a result of going to India, Ranjani came to know Kusuma very closely. Although they had both known Ven. Khemā separately, they only met through the conference. Ven. Kusumā's autobiography details her own work throughout the 1980s to try to gain recognition for *sīla mātās* through the Sri Lankan Ministry for the Buddhaśāsana, before bhikkhunī ordination.

Kusuma had seen the conditions in which the *sīla mātās* lived during her work with Professor Bloss. As a result, she had been motivated to ask the government to give them recognition. Ranjani says, "Not talking about bhikkhunī, but to give some concessions." Indeed, after fifty years without recognition by the Sri Lankan government, a *sīla mātā* association was formed for the first time in 1986.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, university access was opened up for *sīla mātās* in areas previously restricted to bhikkhus.

Chatsumarn Kabil Singh had been at the conference with Ranjani, but they did not know each other at that time and Dr. Kabil Singh (now Ven. Dhammānandā) doesn't recall seeing her.

In the same year, 1987, Kusuma spent three months studying the bhikkhunī *pātimokkha* in Germany with Dr. Lottermoser

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28 Sobhanā, 2008.

(Ven. Akincaṇā). She wrote her book, the "Code of Conduct for Buddhist Nuns", based on this study.<sup>29</sup>

## 1987–1989 Organizing Nuns' Training

On her own, from 1987–1989, Ranjani started to organize things for the nuns. She had been interviewing sīla mātās and found a group of nuns to train for hospital service. As mentioned previously, Ranjani had been a volunteer in the Saukya Dana first aid movement, and had access to a training officer. She asked the Saukya Dana people, "Could you train some nuns?"

Ranjani traveled to the far away Badulla district. She asked Clara, who had also attended the '87 Sakyadhita Conference, for help. She said, "Clara, there are many sīla mātās in the Badulla district. Can you organize the meals for them and I will organize the training?" They ran training for hospital service and for first aid. Ranjani was working by herself at that point without an association, just through her own contacts. She would bring the typewriter, and do up the report for the Sakyadhita newsletter, saying, "This day I did this..." Ranjani said that Clara had always supported her in her work. Clara has now passed away.

Ranjani also organized a meditation retreat at Kelaniya. She put a notice in the Budu Saraṇa newspaper, and arranged for various lay and monastic teachers to teach meditation, including Mother Ramani (who was later ordained as Bhikkhunī Gotamī). Nuns also attended, and Kusuma was also there. Ranjani said, "My resource person was Kusuma." Ranjani had wanted to do something for Sakyadhita, and to train women.

The temple at Kelaniya was famous, due to being the site of one of the Buddha's legendary visits to Sri Lanka. It had a large

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29 This information was shared by Ven. Akincaṇā during the Sakyadhita International Ayya Kusuma Memorial, Sept 12, 2021

*stūpa* and famous paintings, as well as a big new hall, with toilets and basement located on an underground level. They also had space for accommodation. Ranjani had been there before the retreat, so she knew there was a place they could use. She met the chief monk and he said ok to her proposal.

Ranjani organized the retreat, and she arranged donors for one hundred lunch packs. Some of the women who came continued to learn meditation, and they became nuns later. They said to Ranjani, “In the beginning, madam, you were the one who gave us the first start.” Other ladies also became interested in meditation as a result of the retreat, and had a chance to meet teachers.

In 1988, Ranjani organized a two-day meditation retreat with Ven. Khemā at her house. Australian Buddhist practitioner Ven. Vāyāmā had attended. She had received ten precepts previously in 1985 and had been Ven. Khemā’s assistant and helper. Ranjani invited all of her friends and teachers. The retreatants collected money for a book, which was published under the title *Little Dust in Our Eyes* (1988). It consisted of twelve talks given at the nuns’ island, and was later republished by the Buddhist Publication Society in 2006 under the title *Within Our Own Hearts*. Ranjani’s name is near the top of the list of sponsors at the front of the book, and the other names are mainly her acquaintances. Ven. Khemā expressed that Ranjani’s dāna of the book was “very nice.”

Ranjani’s daughter Rukmal was married in the same year. Both Rukmal and Ranjani had been supporting the Mirissē Guṇasiri Dharmāyatana. The Dharmāyatana was ten miles out of Colombo and not far from Ranjani’s home, close to Ranjani’s daughter Rukmal’s house in Ratnamalana. Ranjani remarked that any time the temple didn’t have dāna, Rukmal would send dāna to the

temple. Even though she can't come now, she did a lot of *dāna* in the past. “She’s good,” says Ranjani.

Later, at the beginning of *vassa* 1988, Ranjani and her eldest sister Indrani invited monks to spend the rainy season at Mirissē Guṇasiri Dharmāyatana at the traditional entry to the rainy season ceremony. In doing so, they agreed to look after the needs of the monks for the rainy season.

However, when Ranjani visited the Dharmāyatana, it was raining, and she saw a monk outside in the rain with a pot on two bricks trying to light a fire even just to boil some water. She wondered what could be done about it—she had offered to support the monks and she didn’t want to see them living like that. She approached the committee, which included some wealthy people, to inquire whether it would be possible to build a kitchen and a *dāna* hall. They had said, “building a kitchen and a hall is difficult...” Ranjani was not dissuaded, saying “I’ll help with the timber, could you please contribute with other building materials?” As Ranjani’s son-in-law, Anura, had a sawmill, so getting the timber was something that she could help with.

Ranjani offered the Kathiṇa robe that year. The Kathiṇa robe or cloth is traditionally offered to monks and nuns after the rainy season residence, as a token of gratitude to the monks or nuns who stayed in a particular locale that year. Ranjani also offered the *kapruka*. The *kapruka* is a wishing tree—often seen at Kathiṇa ceremonies, where it is offered symbolically. They made the *kapruka* from a mango branch stuck in a bucket of sand, and offered it together with requisites tied or placed below the tree. Ranjani said that they didn’t pin money, as I had seen in the Thai tradition. She also offered all of the items for the kitchen—she had thought of everything. Her elder sister contributed financially. Ven. Mirissē Dhammasiri gave a talk of gratitude in terms of Abhidhamma. He explained the superiority of an



unprompted act of generosity, and that Ranjani had this quality as she took the initiative to do good without being asked to do so.

In December 1988, Ven. Khemā and German Ven. Dhammā traveled from Sri Lanka to receive higher ordination as bhikkhunīs at an international ceremony at Hsi Lai temple, a Chinese temple under Fo Guang Shan in the US. They were accompanied by eleven Sri Lankan sīla mātās, five of whom took higher ordination, including Ven. Kiriantuduvē Dharmadarśikā, Ven. Horana Vishākhā Dhammasīlā, Ven. Elpitiyē Priyadharmā, Ven. Haburugala Dhammasīlā, and a fifth who is untraceable.<sup>30</sup> This ceremony had been preceded by a bhikkhu-only recitation in Pāli by Theravāda monks, led by Ven. Havanpola Ratanasāra, and also attended by Ven. Valpola Piyānanda and Ven. Pannila Ānanda. This was one of the early ceremonies that predated the ordinations of 1996 and 1998. Further details can be found in her autobiography, “I Give You My Life” (1998).

However, Ranjani wasn’t aware of the ordination at all. She didn’t think that *anybody* knew, although US-based Sri Lankan monks, including Ven. Valpola Piyānanda and Ven. Pannila Ānanda, had been present among a group of five monks who gave training to the candidates.<sup>31</sup> All she had heard was that some sīla mātās went to the US and came back. Bhikkhunīs from the 1988 group are still living in Sri Lanka and internationally.

In 1989, Ven. Khemā left the nuns’ island, after having been there for around five years. The JVP insurgency—centered in the South—had emerged as a threat to the continued existence of the nuns’ island. The JVP (*Janatā Vimukti Peramuṇa*) was a communist party which was engaging in a violent attempt to

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30 Tathālokā 2017, 42-43, n90.

31 Tathālokā 2017, 12.

overthrow the government between 1987 and 1989. Ranjani recalls that in the villages, even young boys were used as guerrillas. Some boys were kidnapped—the children would be out playing, and they would take them away. Ranjani’s sister sent her son to Australia—they were scared to keep young boys in Sri Lanka. Innocent people were taken and massacred. In the estates, rebel fighters would just enter a house and start shooting. People were scared—even if a bicycle went past, they were scared. Notices came out: don’t open the shop, don’t put the lights on. Sometimes they would forget and turn on the lights. If it hadn’t been for the increase in terrorist activities in 1988 and 1989, Ranjani said that Ven. Khemā would have continued at the nuns’ island. After leaving, Ven. Khemā went on to establish Buddha Haus in Germany in the same year.

In my conversations with Ranjani, I didn’t get the sense that she was particularly aware of or involved in activity to promote the bhikkhunī revival that was already afoot in Sri Lanka by the end of the eighties. From 1983, when the Department of Buddhist Affairs had begun the first campaigns to promote sīla mātā training, there had been a steady uptake in the interest around higher ordination. In 1984, again, at the request of the Ministry of the Buddhaśāsana, Sri Lanka’s sīla mātā population was surveyed for the first time. Already, Dr. Hema Goonatilake (another prominent lay advocate of bhikkhunī ordination, who Ranjani hadn’t met at this point) had been pouring her effort into the area of bhikkhunī research. In 1984, Dr. Hema Goonatilake led a study tour to China for the purposes of doing comparative vinaya study. In 1985, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs led a delegation to China to explore the possibility of restoring the higher ordination, although the report was never published. Ranjani additionally did not mention any of the journals or newspaper articles that were already promoting

higher ordination by the late eighties.<sup>32</sup> Nor was she aware that *sāmaṇerī* ordinations had already commenced in the US from 1987.<sup>33</sup> Her focus at the time was oriented towards *sīla mātā* training. We should take her claims that in 1987 she was “innocent” and “did not know the nuns” seriously.

Ranjani had been on the prisoner’s welfare committee since the early eighties. Because Ranjani happened to be on the welfare committee, she was inspired to bring the *sīla mātās* to the women’s section. Ranjani had also gone with Kusuma Devendra, when she was still wearing white, to give a talk at the prison.

When she went with the *sīla mātās*, she would drive and get two nuns to come. Within the prison premises was a bodhi tree and a small temple. Sometimes women would pray there. Sometimes they would be there with a small fine and no-one to bail them out. After terrorism emerged in Sri Lanka, there were also Tamil women who had been convicted for terror-related offenses. The office, the guards, and the jail staff were very savvy about everything that went on inside the facility.

Ranjani also recalls some women who, in her words, “got themselves into trouble.” There was a woman whose husband took up with another woman, and neglected their child. Ranjani said she was previously a nice woman, who wouldn’t harm a worm. But then one day she lost it and took an ax and killed the man. The woman couldn’t get over it.

She pleaded guilty and was imprisoned. But because of her good behavior, she was allowed to come out, and she helped in the office. She cried and cried. Ranjani used to read the *Angulimāla* story with her.

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32 Goonatilake 2014, 33-36.

33 For further details, please see Tathālokā 2014, 30.

The nuns explained to the women about the five precepts, and that being imprisoned was the consequence of not keeping the five precepts. The nuns said to them, “From today, don’t do this.”

The women were frequently very happy to see the nuns, and often cried. Sometimes, Ranjani said, they weren’t really guilty—they were just there for “some reason.” She felt sad about it. Other times, said Ranjani, a decent woman had killed another woman, and she was imprisoned. An inmate had said to Ranjani, “I’m thinking of future births, what I have to pay for this crime. How am I going to get out of this?” They asked her not to think like that, as even Angulimāla, who was a serial killer, had become an arahant and become liberated. They encouraged her to only think about doing good from then onward.

Later, Ranjani saw her very sad and with deteriorating health. Even though Ranjani said that she had a lot of virtue in her, she couldn’t stop regretting what had happened. There was also a woman who had been found on the road shouting insults at people and annoying the public. Ranjani felt sorry for her and spoke to her. She was insane.

## 1990–1991 First Goenka Retreat and International Buddhist Women’s Conference, Thailand

In October 1990, four years after the 1987 Sakyadhita Conference, it was announced that Thailand would hold the 1991 Sakyadhita conference at Thammasat University. It was organized by Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh.

There had been some discussion prior to the conference in 1991 about the best name for the conference. Ven. Dhammānandā (to use Chatsumarn Kabilsingh’s later, ordained name) told me in interview that she had already suggested to Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsono that it should be “Buddhist women,” because “Buddhist

nuns” wasn’t inclusive enough. It was Ven. Khemā who decided the matter in favor of “Buddhist nuns.” Hence the conference underwent a name change between ’87 and ’91.

Ranjani had been very interested in hosting the conference in Sri Lanka, but no-one was interested. Kusuma was also not interested at all, but finally she agreed. Once the Thailand conference was announced, Ranjani said, “Let’s go, let’s go!” Kusuma, Clara, a few nuns, and a new couple came. “They came just to go to Bangkok,” said Ranjani. They managed to get a group together to attend the conference.

In May 1991, prior to the 1991 International Buddhist Women’s Conference in October, Ranjani attended her first ten-day Goenka *vipassanā* retreat. *Vipassanā* means “seeing clearly,” and this label has been applied to a modern twentieth century meditation form which was popularized by Goenka. Ranjani benefited a lot from the retreat and calls “Goenka-ji” her teacher of *vipassanā satipaṭṭhāna*. They were giving out the talks on cassettes. Dhammaruwan had been in charge of the AV and allowed her to get a copy of the video. He gave Ranjani the day five video. She was delighted.

“You know, the first three to five days at the Goenka retreat, was all the pains, and *ānāpana*,” said Ranjani. They had no center at the time so the retreat was in a hotel. It had been organized by the Mahābodhi Society. On the fifth day, when Goenka discussed *paticca samuppāda*, Ranjani felt like something opened inside of her. “So much *paññā* came to me on the fifth day,” she said. Every time Ranjani took a rest, her blouse was wet with sweat. Goenka had said, “Eradicate *sankhārā*,” and heat came out of Ranjani’s body—all the time, she experienced heat moving upwards in her body. She felt very light at the end of the retreat. In her meditation, she had

seen all the people she liked and admired fading away. “Going with a walking stick, old, young people, who I had been admiring. I saw them fading away at this retreat.”

Not many people knew about Goenka at that time and he wasn’t widely accepted. She didn’t even tell people about the retreat, and Kusuma wasn’t following Goenka either. Ranjani said she wouldn’t have known whether to accept Goenka or not—she lacked any knowledge to compare what she was doing to the books. She just went and had an experience, saying that she benefited from a lack of knowledge, which meant that she didn’t have the means to analyze or compare. “I just did what he asked me to do, to observe and be silent and observe your breath. That helped me.” Somebody had said, what’s the use of having a sharp knife if you don’t know how to cut? “He taught us how to cut as well, to see *anicca*.”

Some months later, in October that year, as planned, Ranjani attended the International Buddhist Women’s Conference in Thailand. She remembers that there were concrete buildings at Thammasat University and they had to walk to the large hall where the conference was held. Dr. Kabilsingh was very busy. Her mother was a bhikkhunī, Ven. Voramai Kabilsingh, who had been given a Mahāyāna bhikṣuṇī ordination. Dr. Kabilsingh organized a tour, and they went to her large temple, where she organized lunch for all of the participants one day. They went on the last day of the conference. Dr. Kabilsingh later wrote about her recollections of Ranjani during the 1991 conference. They had met, but they didn’t get a chance to know each other better until the 1993 conference. After having met Ven. Voramai Kabilsingh and seen the exhibition about her, Ranjani had approached Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh with tears in her eyes. It had given her inspiration that Sri Lankan women

could accomplish something similar to what Ven. Voramai Kabilsingh had accomplished.<sup>34</sup>

Ven. Dhammānandā had also mentioned that a historic photo was taken at the conference, with Ranjani and herself sitting on the floor in front of the senior bhikkhunīs, who were on chairs. Ven. Dhammānandā said, “There was my mother, then there was the president of Korean bhikkhunī, [Ven.] Hyecheon Seok,<sup>35</sup> her name is Hye-cheon Seok.<sup>36</sup> Then there was the Venerable Xiaoyun Fashi from Taiwan. And Venerable Khemā, German...” She said, “Ranjani and I are on the floor, sitting with them. It is like a prediction, that after the senior bhikkhunīs are gone, it will be the two of us working for the ordination issue.” She had felt that Ranjani and herself had continued the work of the previous generation. Ven. Xiaoyun from the photo (who is better known by her Cantonese name, Hiu Wan) is another legend of Taiwanese Buddhist bhikkhunī education who had participated in the conference.

Something had prompted Ranjani to get up and speak at the conference. Kusuma hadn’t come, she was in the room. Clara was next to Ranjani, and Ranjani said, “I want to speak.” Ven. Khemā had been looking at her and giving recognition for her work. Ranjani got up and said, “I invite you to hold the next conference in Sri Lanka.” They were looking for a venue and despite the rise of terrorism in Sri Lanka, Ven. Khemā was very keen.

Ranjani had said, “Our country is a Buddhist country, but at the moment it is under flame and fire. Young children are being murdered. Mothers are running to meditation centers. [It’s a] very bad situation. As mothers, we’ve got to do something. We have

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34 Kabilsingh 1994, 12.

35 Romanized as Hye-Chun Suk in early Sakyadhita materials.

36 I.e., she was the first head of the then-newly-formed National Korean Bhikkhunī Association (*Cheon-Guk Piguni Hwe*). Many thanks to Ven. Tathālokā for providing the full name of this association.

these nuns...we should make use of the nuns and help this situation. I invite you to hold the conference in Sri Lanka.”

They were very happy with Ranjani’s proposal. Ranjani said, “I had nothing, no association, not a cent with me. But I was organizing the conference all the time. If everybody is paying for their food and accommodation, no problem. I was planning all the time, no problem, no problem, can do it, can do it, can do it. So I had the confidence and I stood up and said ‘come’.”

One day, Kusuma was sitting next to Ranjani, and Ranjani started laughing. Kusuma asked why. Ranjani said, “They don’t know what we’ve discussed.” Kusuma said, “We’re going to have it.” She was already planning the food.

Ranjani returned to Sri Lanka after the conference in October 1991. Again, in around November 1991, she offered the Kathiṇa robe at the Dharmāyatana. In December, she visited Australia for the first time, to see her sister’s family. She took a copy of the Goenka retreat video with her to show to people.

1991 also marked another turning point in Ranjani’s life. This was when she met a charismatic female Buddhist lay teacher known as Mother Ramani. She had been introduced to Mother Ramani by Kusuma when she was facing a small personal problem. Ranjani had been supporting an aunt of hers, who had then died. But after she died, Ranjani heard the aunt in her sleep, still asking Ranjani to do things for her. Kusuma had suggested that she see Mother Ramani.

Mother Ramani had been a disciple of Ven. Amatagavesi. He was a former police officer, and had been the first monk to really open residential retreat facilities for women. There were about twenty residential places for women at his Daham



Madura center. Additionally, about one thousand women came on full-moon day to observe eight precepts.

Ven. Amatagavesi told the women, “What are you doing scraping coconut and looking after your husband? Come and get enlightened.” Kusuma was staying there and Ranjani visited often. Mother Ramani also became well known, and many people came to see her. Ranjani claimed that she had healing powers and could see past lives. She had arranged for her to teach meditation in Kelaniya. Mother Ramani later gained an international following in Singapore and Malaysia. Ranjani had liked to see the “spiritual power of women.” But she also remarked that Ven. Amatagavesi had been possessive of her. Ranjani said, “Women’s liberation? [What we really need is] liberation of Ramani Maniyo!”

## 1992 Ministry of the Buddhaśāsana Blocks Sakyadhita International Buddhist Women’s Conference

Ranjani returned to Sri Lanka in March 1992, after about three months in Australia. Ayyā Khemā really wanted the conference, and she believed in and trusted Ranjani. She gave her a five-hundred-dollar contribution to start organizing, saying, “You can invite the president of the Mahābodhi Society.” Ven. Khemā knew many Buddhist leaders in Sri Lanka. She gave Ranjani ideas and was very keen to support her.

After that, Ven. Khemā fell ill with cancer and was unable to come to the conferences. The last time that Ranjani saw her was in Thailand in ’91. In ’92, Ranjani had heard that she was too sick to come for the ’93 conference in Sri Lanka. “That was sad,” said Ranjani.

The conference was scheduled for October 1993, two years after the last conference. Ranjani went to the office of the

Commissioner for the Buddhaśāsana to apply for permission to hold the conference.

They said, “You can’t do this!” Ranjani said, “No, no, I will do this, can I call for a meeting?” Her request for a meeting was refused. Ranjani said, “We’ll write letters to the first participants who went to the Sakyadhita conference in 1987 and ask them to come. I have the addresses, I will invite them, I want to have a meeting. I will call them to your office.” The request for a meeting was approved.

The former conference participants were all glad to see each other after the ’87 conference. Some of the participants hadn’t seen each other since then. They were happy to get a chance to travel and do something together. They were enthusiastic about the proposed ’93 conference.

No matter what Ranjani did, in her head, she was always thinking about the conference. She visited the ministry after returning from Australia—had there been any correspondence regarding the conference?

Ranjani remembers the women from the minister’s office.

When I went to the Ministry of the Buddhaśāsana, I looked like a fool. There are officers there, different titles, different posts and all that. They think I’m a silly woman coming and talking things that you can never do. I still remember, I climbing up stairs, driving all the way to Colombo, going up and down, up and down. Finally, I tell the girls there, “women should be strong” and they laugh. The secretary girls are there and they got friendly. I said, we are women, we can’t allow this, male domination this and that. They can’t stop like that. They laughed. They know I’m coming with all these ideas.

Ranjani returned again to the commissioner’s office. The commissioner was not there—just the female secretary, who was the stenographer, with the type-writer. Ranjani said, “Miss...there was a letter [which was replied to]. Can I see it?” The secretary retrieved the file, reading aloud, “It is not possible to hold such a conference in Sri Lanka. This is exactly the sentence that must go everywhere.” Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, who was the president of Sakyadhita International, had inquired independently of the minister, Mr. Abeya Weerakoon, whether it was possible to hold the conference in Sri Lanka. He had replied “It is not possible to hold such a conference in Sri Lanka...it is in the file.”

Ranjani said, “How can he say this?! I’m the one who is organizing, why he do like this? [He said] ‘No, no, no, no, no Ranjani—it’s not easy. Here they don’t approve these things.’” He had said that the Ministry would not approve such a conference—Ranjani said, “What? Buddhist women can’t come here? The whole world is talking about Buddhist women in Sri Lanka!” Ranjani remarked that they weren’t even talking about bhikkhunīs at that time—only Buddhist women. Ranjani had felt that the commissioner, despite being a “good man,” was scared, and lacked strength to talk about the issues.

He had explained, despite Ranjani’s protests, that the Ministry had a board of directors. The board of directors has chief monks from all three Nikāyas: known as the *uttari-maṇḍala*, the supreme council. This council was made up of the three *mahānāyakas* of the three *nikāyas*: the Siam, Amarapūra and Rāmañña.<sup>37</sup> There was a single *sīla mātā* on the council, who held the position despite not being ordained. As a result of Dr. Kusuma Devendra’s work, they called her the “Karavita Maniyo” (the mother from Karavita), addressing her as the senior *sīla mātā*. Ranjani later

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37 Buddhist Society of Victoria 2017.

invited her to speak at the conference. There were also some professors on the supreme council.

Mr. Weerakoon showed Ranjani a magazine cover and said, “See—the sīla mātā, what they are doing!” The cover image depicted a nun emerging from a bodhi tree leaf, ripping it as she emerged. The cover was in response to Ven. Ambala Śrī Ñāṇasīla, a sīla mātā who was an outspoken advocate of bhikkhunī ordination. Ranjani didn’t see the story inside, but the message was clear—the ministry had no intention to promote sīla mātā or give them any power or recognition.

Mr. Weerakoon had attended the 1987 conference, and he knew the aims and objectives. Ranjani couldn’t accept his decision. He said to her, “Then you better go talk to the board members, you can include them and explain what you want to do.” In the meantime, Ranjani had formed a committee and contacted the All Ceylon Buddhist Women’s Association to announce that they would be hosting an international conference of Buddhist women. The committee was elected and an association was formed, Sakyadhita Sri Lanka. Hema Boteju was appointed as treasurer, and Kusuma as president. Ranjani was appointed as the secretary.

Hema Boteju was a business woman. “It’s good to get a rich person to be the treasurer,” said Ranjani. When Ranjani started Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, she said to Kusuma, “You become the president, and I’ll do the work.” Kusuma had a public profile, and Ranjani had wanted her to be president. For herself, she retained the position of secretary, and handled the conference organization.

By that time, Kusuma had been dressing exclusively in white. She had been going to meditation centers and spent time with nuns—her aunt had been a sīla mātā. She had been staying at a meditation hall called *Daham Madura* under where women

meditated together in a house under Ven. Amatagavesi. After the meditation hall closed, Kusuma went to stay with Ranjani.

She stayed at Ranjani's house for two years 1992–1994. "That was the best time," said Ranjani. B.S. was very happy to have her stay, and they got along well. There was an extra room in Ranjani's house with two beds. Ranjani lived with her in the house and sometimes they would continue talking until eleven pm or twelve am at night.

Ranjani recalled fond memories with Kusuma. Ranjani enjoyed being around Kusuma and missed her even when she went out somewhere, looking and waiting at the gate for her to return. At dinner time, B.S. had pushed the beans to Kusuma, and had joked, "May all 'beans' be happy." He didn't like beans.

Ranjani said:

She's wonderful. She was very grateful to us and we loved her. She was very pleasant. Things happen, I needed her at that time. I did all the work in my mind, but she was the biggest supporter, the person who is saying, good good, go ahead, it gives you the push, you know. She knows all the book things.

I'm only the practical part of it. I said even in my speech at the conference, I respect her, my kalyāṇamitta. I did the work, but she was appreciative and I needed her. Though I did the work, I had an idea, but it was a big support for me to have her, a person like her.

Even after Kusuma left Ranjani's house, she continued to come on the weekends so that she could give Dhamma talks for the neighbors. She was good at giving talks and the weekend event became popular. The participants came with tape-recorders to record. Ranjani's husband was the first to set up the place for the

program. He would remove the chairs, and then sit in a corner, instructing Ranjani’s maid to place the mats and cushions. Sometimes one of Kusuma’s sons would come to take her out, together with his two young boys.

Ranjani was still urgently concerned about the approval of the conference. Ranjani went with a few committee members to meet the *mahānāyaka*, Ven. Maḍihē Paññāsīha, who was the chief monk of the Vajirārāma—the headquarters of the Amarapūra Nikāya in Sri Lanka. Ranjani had known him as a child, and he knew her father and mother. She said, “Bhante, we would like to have this...”

She told him the history of the conferences from 1987 onward, in Sri Lanka and Thailand, which had previously focused on sīla mātās with no focus on bhikkhunīs. About bhikkhunī ordination, Ranjani had told me, “Actually, we didn’t have any intention for all that. My intention was to empower and bring awareness. To train them and make use of them to take the Dhamma to the family and the community. I told that we can train them and make use of them, they are neglected.”

Ven. Maḍihē Paññāsīha wasn’t opposed and mentioned that Prof. Malalasekera, “a good Buddhist leader,” who had passed away, had also wanted to raise similar issues. He said, “You can do all of that, but only that. You do it in writing. Put it in writing, and make a request and state that you won’t bring it [the bhikkhunī issue] up for the conference.” He had said not to discuss bhikkhunī ordination or to raise it up.

Ranjani had replied that they would be discussing training sīla mātās and taking Dhamma to the family. Ven. Paññāsīha said, “All that is good as long as you don’t bring these things [bhikkhunī ordination] up.” Ranjani said it wasn’t on their agenda. He replied, in that case, to put it in writing and apply.

When Ranjani reported this to the committee, some of the members decried it as a violation of human rights. Meanwhile, Ranjani went to the office and began drafting a letter with the commissioner, who was now helping her to get the conference past the board.

It was Kataragama festival at that time—around July or August 1992. Ranjani went to Kataragama for medical aid service as a volunteer. They had tents, and the State Engineering Corporation had a circuit bungalow. Ranjani was in charge of the bungalow. Even though she had left the office by then, she still had some connection with the place. She called the office to see whether she could get a room there. They said, “Mrs. Silva, you can go, but the only thing is, Mr. Wijedasa, who is the president’s secretary, is there, and for security reasons, we don’t allow anybody else to stay. But if you call, Mr. Wijedasa might say yes.” Mr. Wijedasa had been Ranjani’s former boss, and Ranjani regarded him as “a very clever officer and civil servant.” Mr. Wijedasa and his wife welcomed her to stay in the bungalow.

Ranjani took all the Sakyadhita papers and correspondence with her to the volunteer service, expecting to meet the president’s secretary. At that time, the Ministry of the Buddhaśāsana was still rejecting the conference for approval—“sitting on the approval,” to quote Ranjani. It was an international conference, and they wouldn’t be able to get visas without government approval. All the while, Ranjani was drafting letters. She booked the Sri Lanka Foundation hall—they had to have accommodation for sixty people and an auditorium for workshops. She had to get the government approval!

At Kataragama, after the *pūjā*, they all went to relax, and Ranjani had dinner with Mr. Wijedasa and his wife. She told them the whole story—all the events from the ’87 conference to ’91. Mr. Wijedasa had been the chairman of the corporation when

Ranjani was the human resources manager—he knew the type of work she did and he respected it.

He said, “Alright, you send me the letter.” Ranjani said, “I’m nobody to do this, but I want to do it...this has to be done.” She recalls that Mr. Wijedasa’s wife had said, “You’re nobody, but when you do it, you’ll be somebody, go ahead.”

After returning home, Ranjani received a letter—after one week, she had received the approval from the president’s office.

### 1993 The Inception of the Revival—the Sakyadhita International Conference Sri Lanka

When Ranjani wanted to invite the sīla mātā to the conference, she didn’t have the names. Mr. Abeya Weerakoon’s office had the names of the sīla mātās in each district, due to previous efforts to organize the sīla mātās by that time, including the work of Kusuma. Because of that, Ranjani was able to get the names and addresses of the sīla mātās for each district. She didn’t know them personally—they came by buses. She invited them district by district.

There was some recognition there of the sīla mātās—Ranjani had argued that they were a marginalized community of women, as they neither belonged to the clergy or the laity. They could be trained and empowered to bring Dhamma to the family. She said:

That was my main motive, not the bhikkhunī ordination, to empower them. Yes. Accept them in the society, give them the four requisites, they have not become nuns just for nothing. We are Buddhist, we know in our cycle of birth that is their *pāramitā*, to be a nun, that’s why they renounce. They also have their parents and relatives, their senses, they have renounced and



come because there is some *pāramī*, that's what they've wished for. Because they are women, we can't just ignore them. We have to give them the rights and recognition and accept them. That was my main ambition in the conference, not to ask for anything.

At that time, they didn't have any money. Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo had said that Ranjani should translate the first conference book from Sakyadhita into Sinhalese. Kusuma was staying in Ranjani's house, so Ranjani asked Kusuma to do the translation, opting to organize the printing herself. So Kusuma worked at Ranjani's home to do the translation. "I was happy to sit in the passenger seat," said Kusuma.

There was a lot of work involved. Ranjani organized food and accommodation, and sent a person to each embassy to collect flags, and arranged the tour. She displayed the flags of the countries of the international participants at the conference hall. The papers came, and the translations were done. They were printed into nice files. The themes and invitations to speakers were done by Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo from Sakyadhita International. Ranjani didn't have a computer, only a big typewriter. She wrote long letters, and sent them to Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Ven. Khemā, in blue airmail envelopes. It took about one week for the letters to arrive.

The first participant to register was Jampa Wurst from Germany. The receipt was issued for Jampa Wurst, fifty dollars. "That's how I did it, every time," said Ranjani. This was now early '93 and the conference had received approval. However, the hall was not large enough for the opening ceremony. They had made inquiries about the Bandaranaike Hall, but it would be expensive.

Ranjani approached the Seylan Bank for sponsorship. They were a little unconvinced, but Ranjani talked the bank around, arguing that the conference would bring foreign exchange to the bank and international promotion. So the Seylan Bank agreed to sponsor for fifty thousand rupees, with the caption, “Bankers to the Conference.” In the end, they also opened a foreign exchange counter at the conference for the convenience of the participants.

With the help of the Tourism Board, Ranjani also secured the sponsorship of Cathay Pacific, which they used to cover Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo’s flight.

In the meantime, something else had happened: Ven. Bellanvila Dhammaratana, who was based in Singapore, came to Sri Lanka, together with a supporter, Mihal Armstrong. Ven. Dhammaratana’s brother, Ven. Bellanvila Vimalaratana, was chief monk at the Bellanvila Rājamahā Vihāra. The Bellanvila Rājamahā Vihāra is one of Sri Lanka’s most venerated temples, well known for its Esala parade, which is held annually in August or September. Ven. Dhammaratana came to Bellanvila and wanted to meet Ranjani.

He had heard that the letter had come out from the ministry that it is not possible to hold such a conference in Sri Lanka. Mihal Armstrong had thought of the idea to find another way to hold a Buddhist women’s conference in Sri Lanka, under another name. Ranjani had communicated with Ven. Dhammaratana that conference preparations were already under way and a lot of work had already been done by the committee. They were going ahead. Ranjani said, “This is where I am, I’m not prepared to do the conference in any other name, under the Sakyadhita, this is Ayyā Khemā’s wish and all that was done with my communication with Ayyā Khemā.”

So Ven. Dhammaratana gave up the idea of holding the conference under another name. However, before he arrived, he

had made appointments to see the *mahānāyakas* and the Minister for Women's Affairs and many high profile people. He had also organized gifts and *aṭapirikara* sets for the *mahānāyakas*. Ranjani wasn't going to change anything, so he asked Mihal Armstrong to go with her, to keep the appointments. So Ranjani had the opportunity to use the appointments made by Ven. Dhammaratana to promote the conference. She recalled:

So he gave all the gifts. And Bellanvila monk's car, and the driver, and this lady, I think Kusuma was also there, two of us must have gone in the car with her, went to Kandy everywhere, ministry everywhere, and wherever I go, they are silent, they don't know what... I'm talking—talking and saying, this is what we're going to do, it was a good chance for me to meet them. I'm telling, "Yes, this is what we're doing, this is what has to be done, this is why we're doing all kinds of things." *Sīla mātā* stories from '87, '91, all the story, background, my intentions, all I expressed to everybody. I remember, the minister of women's affairs, she became immediately a member, she was happy.

Ven. Dhammaratana had become convinced about the potential of the conference, and offered to sponsor the costs for the hall for the opening ceremony. He came to Ranjani's house and gave a donation of half the booking costs—the total costs were around 60,000 rupees, which he paid. Mihal Armstrong also made donations: an initial donation of 5,000 rupees and another donation of 10,000 rupees—they opened the Sakyadhita Sri Lanka account with that money. She was happy, and she stayed in Ranjani's house. They went traveling together.

They had approached the owner of the Mt. Lavinia hotel to ask if he could cater for the opening day. There was free tea for everyone, and meals would be provided for the monks. Between three hundred and four hundred sīla mātās had been invited. They could eat nearby at the Buddhist Women’s Association hall, where dāna had been offered by the devotees. Everything was organized, with accommodation and food provided.

Ranjani had organized accommodation for the international participants with the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute. The Sri Lanka Foundation Institute is located in Colombo Seven, in the best part of the main city, next to Independence Square. It had been built in the seventies through a joint collaboration between the Sri Lankan and German government. The foundation featured a landscaped garden and would provide comfortable accommodation for the international attendees. For the locals, Ranjani was able to arrange food from a nearby kitchen within walking distance from the conference hall. “Things fell into line,” said Ranjani. They got the printing done and organized a souvenir. A volunteer was appointed to collect money to cover the cost of the souvenir.

Around the same time, the chairman of the Lakehouse newspapers offered them a free four-page supplement for the newspapers. Ranjani also collected the message from the Dalai Lama that Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo arranged for her, and messages from all three *mahānāyikas*, as well as Kusuma’s message and her message, which were printed as a supplement in the Daily News, and also in the Budusaraṇa newspaper. On the opening day of the conference, the papers were delivered on everyone’s chair. Ranjani said, “Can you imagine, bundles and bundles of papers the Lakehouse is sending for us!” Ranjani expressed her gratitude to Lakehouse chairman, Mr. Sunil Rodrigo.

The conference was planned for October. On the first of May 1993, the president of Sri Lanka, Ranasinghe Premadasa, was killed along with seventeen others by an LTTE suicide bomber during an UNP May Day rally in Colombo. Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo wrote to Ranjani with her concerns. She wrote, “How can you hold the conference in Sri Lanka when your country is like this?” Ranjani replied, “Nothing will happen, we will be safe and I’m going ahead.” That was final.

Actually, Ranjani had been asked to meet the president’s wife, who Ranjani had been warned was a serious socialite who would bring her into the limelight. But after Premadasa’s assassination, it didn’t eventuate. Although they were upset by the assassination, in a sense, Ranjani was glad that the “limelight” never happened for them—it might have caused the conference to go down a different route. After the president’s death, his wife moved out of the picture.

Dingiri Banda Wijetunga was elected by parliament to complete the remainder of Premadasa’s term, and Ranjani secured an appointment to see him a few days before the conference. She went to see him with Hema Boteju. Kusuma was not available for some reason. So the two of them when to the president’s office and invited him to the conference. He said, “I wish you good luck, I’ll be coming!” He accepted the invitation.

At home, Ranjani’s husband was very happy, talking everyday about the conference, and he helped Ranjani with her speech. He added a sentence—“May they bloom like lotuses.” B.S. said that she should praise the president in her speech. Ranjani said, “I’m not going to praise the president, I’m going to talk about nuns!” B.S. was always supportive, and had reminded Ranjani about Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s miracles in the Therī Apadāna.

In the Gotamī Apadāna of the Therī Apadāna, the Buddha is attributed as saying the following:

There are fools who doubt that women  
too gain dhamma-penetration.  
To dispel that wrong view of theirs,  
display miracles, Gotamī.

Then bowing to the Sambuddha,  
and rising up into the sky,  
with Buddha’s assent, Gotamī  
displayed various miracles.<sup>38</sup>

While alone by herself, Gotamī conjures up a “boundless group of Buddhist nuns,” and then makes them disappear again. The astonished multitudes pressed their palms together and said, “Venerable, you have great prowess, at supernormal miracles.”<sup>39</sup>

Many people had come to know about the conference. There were participants from over twenty-seven countries. Ranjani’s house was like a big office and she was getting calls all the time. People were coming, the committee came, and there were many invitations to write. Some committee members and other women said, “Did you tell this monk, you have to invite this monk!” Ranjani said, “Don’t tell me now any of these things. We’re not inviting any monks. The monk who helped me, I have invited.”

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh had arrived on the twenty-third, two days before the conference. Ranjani’s daughter Rukmal was doing well at the time, so they had a vehicle and driver available to pick her up, and Ranjani went to receive her at the airport.

<sup>38</sup> Walters, *Gotamī*, in “Legends of the Theris,” vv. 79–80. For ease of reading, I have removed Walters’ bracketing.

<sup>39</sup> Edited from *ibid*, v.94.

Chatsumarn asked Ranjani about different things on the way to the conference. She remarked that Ranjani was like a computer, as all of her plans were in her head, with nothing written down on paper. In 2020, Ven. Dhammānandā (formerly Chatsumarn Kabilsingh) told me during interview:

You know, this is very funny. I did not know the way she worked. The way she worked is just opposite to me. I always take down notes, I work on paper. But Ranjani works...everything is in her head. There was not one sheet of paper. She picked me up from the airport and I wanted to know about organizing this conference, and she was telling me everything from her memory and I was wondering whether it would work at that time.

Ven. Dhammānandā recalled that she was impressed with everything that Ranjani had done to make the conference work, including organizing the accounts and getting bags printed. The last big meeting at Ranjani's house was on the twenty-third of October, which by now had become the conference headquarters.<sup>40</sup>

The day before the conference, they held the press conference. The photo shows Kusuma, Chatsumarn, Ranjani, her husband B.S., and another male attendee on the press conference panel. During the press conference, the Seylan Bank handed over the sponsorship check of 50,000 rupees for the conference.

The night of the twenty-fourth, Ranjani had stayed with the conference participants at the Sri Lanka Foundation. There was rain for the whole night prior to the opening, to the point of minor flooding. Ranjani felt that the rain was like a symbolic cleansing: by morning, there was no rain.

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40 Neilson 1994, 3.

In her dream that night, she had seen Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri. He had appeared on the stage hall and vanished without a word. “He blessed the stage hall and disappeared. I never had that in mind, he must have been watching and glad that I was doing it.” Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri had passed away long ago in 1969.

The opening ceremony was at the Bandaranaike Hall on the twenty-fifth of October, 1993. Over 1500 people attended, including more than three hundred Sri Lankan sīla mātās.<sup>41</sup> In the end, many leaders in Sri Lankan Buddhism attended the conference. The Mahābodhi Society President Gamani Jayasooriya came, the Minister of Women’s Affairs came. Ven. Dhammaratana and Ven. K. Vimalajoti were in attendance. The Sri Lankan president himself, D.B. Wijetunga, attended the opening.

In the end, the American scholar-monk, Ven. Bodhi also came. Ranjani hadn’t expected him to come, but she saw him sitting and promptly invited him to the stage with Ven. Dhammaratana and Ven. K. Vimalajoti. So there were a total of only three monks in attendance.

Ranjani had known Ven. K. Vimalajoti previously. He had been a disciple of Ven. K. Śrī Dhammānanda. He had a center, and after Ven. Amatagavesi’s *Daham Madura* center closed, some of the nuns stayed on with Ven. K. Vimalajoti. He was supportive of nuns’ practice and had some rooms. When they were running short of conference accommodation, she approached him and told him that they had eighty applicants but accommodation for only sixty, now that the Bangladeshi ladies were coming. He had helped them out. On the opening day, Ranjani invited him to give the five precepts.

The president of the Korean bhikkhunī association, the eighty-three-year-old Ven. Hye-cheon Seok, was also in

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41 Ibid, 4.



attendance in a wheelchair. Korea has flourishing bhikkhunī orders, so her attendance was significant.

Bhikkhunī Miao Kwang Sudharmā had written, “I was very impressed by all of the dedication and long hours of hard work that had been done by Mrs. Ranjani de Silva and all the other Sakyadhita Sri Lanka. Everything was beautifully planned down to the finest details! I felt a thrill to see more than three hundred yellow-robed silmatas entered the Bandaranaike Memorial Hall as I had never seen so many of them in one place.”<sup>42</sup>

At the opening day, Ven. Jampa Tsedroen was very keen to see the bhikkhunīs. Some monks had come to the conference without an invitation. Ranjani was not particularly impressed with them, saying, “Some university monks who have hair and looking not at all good...” Out of respect, they asked them to sit in front. Then the government officials came and also sat in front. Ven. Jampa Tsedroen reminded Ranjani that the bhikkhunīs should be in the front row. Ranjani organized ushering. On one side, the bhikkhus and the sīla mātās were seated, and the guests who came were seated behind them. So everything was well-organized and official. The galleries were all full. She had arranged for the parliamentary interpreters to do simultaneous interpretation, with the headsets for those who didn’t speak English.

The hall was so packed that Clara, Violet and their Sakyadhita committee members had to sit on the floor. The conference participants were housed not far from the hall, and Ranjani had to arrange buses to bring them in and out. There was a band, and drummers for the president’s arrival—all held in the square. The nuns came in groups—Ranjani said, “So the beautiful nuns coming, getting all of the nuns coming, coming in group, coming coming.” The international participants came in the buses. It was covered in the Sri Lankan newspapers.

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42 M.K. Sudharma 1994, 7.

They waited. When the international group came, suddenly Ranjani got an idea, and arranged the drummers who were going to receive the president. Ranjani said, “Start drumming!” She ushered the foreign delegates into the hall to the sound of drums.

The president arrived and the ceremonial lamp was lit. The setup was complete, including a Buddhist flag. Kusuma gave the welcome address as president of Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, and there were a number of other short addresses, including from Ranjani as conference convener and secretary of Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, and by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh as president of Sakyadhita International. Sakyadhita co-founder Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo also spoke. Ranjani recalled that Chatsumarn wore a suit, “not like now.” The president also gave his speech and blessing for the conference.

The opening ceremony was over by lunch hour. After the morning session and the dāna, they moved on to the workshops. Topics included themes such as “Challenges of Monastic Life Today” by Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “The Order of Buddhist Nuns: Its Revival Arguments For and Against” by Mr. Senarat Wiyassundara of the University of Colombo, and “Maintaining Human Values in a Time of Rapid Change” by Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, among others.<sup>43</sup> The news of the conference had spread like wildfire. The conference was every-where in the papers, on the television and in the news: the press was coming after them to know about the sīla mātās. For the duration of the conference, Ranjani and Kusuma shared a room with the participants at the German Foundation.

Ranjani’s eldest sister Indrani was helping out, and she had returned from Australia to Sri Lanka for the conference. She stayed with Ranjani and answered the phones. One day, she noticed something under her arm—the doctors said it was cancer

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43 Neilson 1994, 4.

and she needed surgery. She watched the conference from the hospital room. The committee and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh went to see her in the hospital to give her a blessing for her recovery.

She said, “My little sister, I’m happy to see the heroine, the hero-work of my younger sister.” She was keen and she was discharged after one week. She came straight to the conference from the hospital without going home and joined the group photos.

Importantly to Ranjani, Ven. Khemā was there. It had been Ven. Khemā who inspired her and gave her the courage to go ahead, right up until the ’91 conference in Thailand.

Each day of the conference began at six am with a meditation led by a nun or nuns from different traditions before breakfast. After the opening day, there were workshops where bhikkhunīs from other traditions led groups. The three hundred nuns who came for the opening didn’t stay, but the chief nuns participated in the workshops. Each day, with the conclusion of the plenary talk, they met in small groups to discuss the papers and talk about issues of importance. Bryce Neilsen reported that her group had contained eleven Sri Lankan nuns. For the nuns, it was the first opportunity that they had ever had to discuss the problems that they faced, which included a lack of access to higher education.<sup>44</sup> Afternoon events included a visit to the International Buddhist Library and the Kelaniya Rāja Mahā Vihāra. The Kelaniya Rāja Mahā Vihāra features a famous mural of Sanghamittā Therī arriving with the bodhi tree sapling in Sri Lanka, as well as a mural of Princess Anulā.

Ranjani reports that the nuns were excited to hear the word “bhikkhunī.” Even though the word was not in the agenda, they talked about bhikkhunīs twenty-four-seven. Ranjani remarked, “Even now they say, Madam, we didn’t know there were bhikkhunīs...” Ranjani remarked that it would have been

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44 Ibid.

impossible not to talk about bhikkhunīs, as the international nuns, were, in fact, bhikkhunīs.

Ranjani recalled that Chatsumarn had teared up during her speech on the opening day of the conference. The conference had been an amazing success. Ranjani said:

She cried, actually. She read the speech and couldn't believe. I told you, I am nobody. It is Dhamma, not me. This happened, the biggest hall, and the president coming. Oh my gosh. So beautiful. First the Tibetan nuns came, then the Korean bhikkhunīs, the chief bhikkhunī in Korea also came. So the word "bhikkhunī" came now, that's the best part! Our nuns had not heard "bhikkhunī."

Ranjani had recalled many "colorful nuns" from "all traditions, East and West."

Reflecting back on the 1993 Sakyadhita Conference, Chatsumarn wrote about Ranjani with an article titled "That Computerised Woman" in the January–March 1994 Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's activities. She also spoke about Ranjani's daughter, Rukmal, in positive terms, describing her as a "quiet, refined young lady." Actually, Chatsumarn did not initially have full faith in Ranjani, as she was worried that she would be inexperienced. However, after seeing the conference run smoothly, she had to admit that Ranjani had a "computerised brain" that got things "clear, precise and never wrong."<sup>45</sup>

When I spoke to Ven. Dhammānandā about it, she had felt that the conference had been an "awakening" for Sri Lankan

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45 Kabilsingh 1994, 12.

nuns, who saw bhikkhunīs for the first time. Reflecting back on the conference, she told me during interview:

For the first time—maybe—the *dasa sīla mātā*, the local nuns in Sri Lanka, maybe for the first time for them to actually see international bhikkhunīs who came to attend the conference. It was very moving. And, because of this, national ministers came to attend, and the local nuns themselves were kind of awakened, to realize that in many other countries, they have bhikkhunīs.

Ven. Dhammānandā said that her friendship with Ranjani had developed as a result of the conference. She remarked, “The two of us worked with the same mentality, the friendship grew much deeper from Sri Lanka onwards, from 1993 onwards.” She described the way that Ranjani moved around, seeing to everything while wearing a white saree:

She always in her white saree, moving around very quickly in spite of the fact that’s she’s a little plump, moving around doing this and that. Actually, I was very grateful. She did a great job to organize the Sakyadhita conference in Sri Lanka.

There was a lot of enthusiasm in the women and nuns about ordination and some wanted to receive the *sāmaṇerī pabbajjā*. Internationally, some monks had already given *pabbajjā* to ordain *sāmaṇerīs*. Bhante Ratanasāra and Bhante Guṇaratana, leading Sri Lankan monks in USA, had begun giving *sāmaṇerī pabbajjā* already from 1987, with several *sāmaṇerī pabbajjās* given from

1987 to 1989. However, this hadn't happened yet—at least not publicly—in Sri Lanka.

Some people suggested that they could give the *sāmaṇerī* ordination there at the conference and they were trying to organize it. Ranjani asked them to wait—she felt it was the time to go ahead with their other work of training *sīla mātās*. In retrospect, she said that she felt it was a very wise decision *not* to pursue *sāmaṇerī* ordinations at that time. If there had been a stir, it would have been the end of discussions around *bhikkhunī* ordination. “Because we did not want to do anything, I said, no, have patience, don't do this now. We went on with the workshops and brought awareness. My main idea was to train these *sīla mātās* and make them a useful community of women who can do so much service, and to empower them and educate them.”

Nonetheless, a Thai woman, former president of the Women Lawyer's Association of Thailand, Kanitha Wichiencharoen, decided to undertake a less controversial *maechi* dedication ceremony. She retained her honorific title, *Khunying*, even after the ceremony, and is often referred to as “*Khunying Kanitha*.” Her hair was clipped by Ven. Hye-cheon Seok and shaved by Sisters Siripaññā and Upekkhā from Amaravati in the UK. On the afternoon of the twenty-seventh, the *maechi* dedication ceremony was held at Śrī Dhamma Vihāra in Dehivala with precepts given by Sri Lankan monk Ven. K. Vimalajoti.<sup>46</sup> She continued to be involved with Sakyadhita and was influential in drafting proposed Thai legislation to promote the status of *maechis* before she passed away in 2000. She never took higher ordination.

After the conference, there was a two-day tour for the international participants.<sup>47</sup> The buses were packed and ready to

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46 Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities 1994, 10.

47 M.K. Sudharma 1994, 8–9.

go by six am on the thirtieth of October. The first site was Kandy, where they visited the Temple of the Sacred Tooth. They were welcomed by the mayor, and by a procession began with three splendid elephants, dressed up to the nines in colorfully decorated elephant-attire. They raised the Sakyadhita banner and were joined by members of the local Young Women’s Buddhist Association (YWBA) and Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA). Some foreign tourists joined them, and they proceeded to the much-revered Temple of the Sacred Tooth. They participated in the *pūjā*. They were welcomed with a meal hosted by the local YWBA, and proceeded to Anurādhapura. In Anurādhapura, they saw the Śrī Mahā Bodhi tree, which grew from the sapling brought by Sanghamittā Therī from Bodh Gaya. It was full-moon, and the feeling as the coconut oil lamps were lit around the tree must have been magical. They sparkled around the tree’s golden enclosure. Participants gave *pūjās* from their own tradition of Buddhism. Naturally, they also went to the other historic sites in Anurādhapura, such as the Ruvanvæli Great Stūpa and the Isurumuṇiya Temple, where a pair of lovers are carved into the rock. While this is not clear from the carving itself, the lovers have been rumored to represent King Duṭṭhagāmuṇu’s son Saliya, and Aśokamālā, the low-caste woman he loved. He gave up the throne to be with her.

After the conference, Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, the founder of Sarvodaya said, “The president was there, you should have asked for something!” His idea was that she should have asked for land or something for the association. Ranjani said she never had the idea of material benefit—she was only asking for acceptance for the *sīla mātās*.

Ranjani’s goal was to make *sīla mātās* an accepted community in Sri Lanka. With publicity already building around Sakyadhita,

she received offers of land and houses. However, the land that was offered was far away—“I didn’t know how to have them,” said Ranjani. After the conference, she had wanted to train sīla mātās from each district, but they still lacked appropriate facilities.

The omission of the discussion of bhikkhunīs from the conference agenda—for a conference which in fact, appeared to do nothing *but* discuss bhikkhunīs—did not go unnoticed by the general public. A letter to the editor by Amarasiri Weeraratne, an intellectual who was otherwise unknown to Ranjani, blamed sexism, caste-ism and reactionary politics for the lack of freedom around the conference. As an outsider, how this silencing on the bhikkhunī issue happened was an “inexplicable mystery” to Weeraratne.<sup>48</sup> By publishing Ranjani’s account of the gag-order on the conference, I hope that this mystery should become clearer.

After going to the Goenka retreat in 1991, Ranjani felt that she was unable to continue with the Beverly Traders shop. She said, “I couldn’t continue, because to run a business, sometimes you can’t be a hundred per cent honest. You have to make a profit. Meditating and running a business are two different things...I realized, it is not a thing for me to do.” Earlier, Beverly Traders had been service-oriented, but by that time, she was running it for profit. She gradually wound-down the shop, and donated the items to the maternity ward. She was glad to be rid of it. During the ’93 conference, she still had the shop, but it wasn’t running. She used to park the car at the shop and go meet Mother Ramani.

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48 Weeraratne 1993.



## 1994 A Small Hall in Ratnamalana

In 1994, an entire edition of the Buddhist annual publication of the Sri Lankan Government Printing Department called “*Nivan Maga*” (the Way to Nibbāna) was devoted to women’s liberation. The cover photo was a nun entering a shrine room with a bowl of flowers. Monks, *sīla-mātās*, laymen and laywomen, all wrote articles in support of the revival of bhikkhunīs.<sup>49</sup>

Ranjani met with Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, the president of Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. Sarvodaya was a large volunteer movement based on Buddhist principles, and Ariyaratane had wanted to see her after the conference. He was very happy. Ranjani told him that people had come forward with offers, and Ariyaratne’s advice was to pursue incorporation for Sakyadhita. He said, “You need to incorporate it.”

Later, the Sakyadhita committee had a meeting and went to see a house and land in Kandy. They didn’t have a bhikkhunī or *sīla mātā* to lead the place—the owner of the house didn’t want to hand things over without a nun, and Ranjani had wished to retain control of the direction.

Another lady had a block of land. She had a good home for the family, but she also had an additional block of land where she had put a *kuṭi* for a monk. The rest of the land had a small hall where she spent her day gardening and meditating. They had heard about this block of land while Kusuma was staying with Ranjani, in ’94. She had commenced her PhD on the bhikkhunī vinaya and she was traveling daily to the Buddhist library to study from Ranjani’s house. She moved to the new place, and they began to have classes with the *sīla mātās*.

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49 Goonatilake 2014, 36.

Ranjani placed an advertisement in the Budusaraṇa newspaper for sīla mātās who would like to request training.

Ranjani received a few applications. The first one to attend was Ven. Dhammaśāntī, who was a young sīla mātā. However, her “guru-teacher,” her nun-teacher, didn’t want to let her go. She was disappointed with her and she scolded Ven. Dhammaśāntī. She gave Ranjani calls and scolded Ranjani as well. The nun-teacher said that Ven. Dhammaśāntī was disobedient, that she didn’t listen to her teacher, and that Ranjani shouldn’t take her. However, Ven. Dhammaśāntī was determined to stay on. They called her “Śāntī sīla mātā.”

Ven.s Dhammaśāntī, Anurādhā and Halpandeniya Supēśalā were the first three nuns who came. Kusumā—who was still Kusuma Devendra, before her ordination—was also willing to stay on at the center. The facilities were bare, so Ranjani organized a better bathroom from the Sakyadhita fund. There were no beds—so whenever relatives or guests visited Ranjani, she asked if they could donate a folding mattress. She collected about ten mattresses.

Another ten nuns were invited in addition to the three original nuns. They arranged for sīla mātās to come from each district to teach Dhamma, Pāli and English. Ranjani depended a lot on Kusuma, and also received help from Mr. and Mrs. Jayawardena who attended the first Sakyadhita conference. Mr. and Mrs. Jayawardena had been disciples of Ven. Khemā and her meditation students. They had supported Ranjani from the beginning. They would cook lunch, and Ranjani would drive and take it to the center, where they also taught English.

The ten nuns were accommodated in the residential facilities. At the end of the ten-day program, they cried and made verses and poems for Ranjani, saying that she was like Visākhā and a mother, they were so happy. They ran the same program for two sets of ten nuns.

On the August 22, 1994, together with Kusuma, Ranjani wrote to the president of Sri Lanka, D.B. Wijetunga, to request funding for *sīla mātās*. The letter outlined the lack of government sponsored training outside of the *piriveṇas*, gaps in registration of the *sīla mātās* and issues around funding cuts to district-based *sīla mātā* associations. With this in mind, they had requested funds to establish a Sakyadhita Center in Colombo to help the Sakyadhita Sri Lanka organization reach its objectives. I note that “countering proselytization” was part of the description of the social reach of the proposed dhamma counseling program—perhaps Buddhist nuns could be a tool in countering the perceived threat of other missionary religions.

I have spent my whole life in Australia, so it was initially quite difficult for me to understand why Ranjani’s reaction to the civil war might be to choose to strengthen the nuns’ order (and that this seemed to be something that made sense as well to the people around her). I only comprehended later that there is a broader narrative, where Sinhalese Buddhism is fragile, and that Sinhalese Buddhists are prone to being converted by other religions. Presumably, women would be an easier target for conversion. This narrative wasn’t always at the forefront of Ranjani’s work, which tended to have a more personal, spiritual tone. The 1994 letter, co-signed with Kusuma, is probably the only occasion in the whole of Ranjani’s twenty-years’ work for nuns where we see a (threatened) sense of Sinhalese Buddhist identity being foregrounded. This reminds us that even in a rapidly globalizing Buddhist environment, local concerns could still be important. It was these local concerns that Kusuma and Ranjani apparently expected the president to share.

Meanwhile, according to the report of Ven. Piyānanda and the publications of the International Buddhist Meditation Center (IBMC), the first bhikkhunī ordination of a Theravāda bhikkhunī at the IBMC in Los Angeles occurred on the tenth of December 1994.<sup>50</sup> The bhikkhu side of the ordination was led by Ven. Ratanasāra and Ven. Ahangama Dhammarāma. Ranjani was, of course, unaware of the events in the US—the 1994 ordination is not particularly well-known and was mixed tradition. However, according to Ven. Valpola Piyānanda, this ordination gave Ven. Vipulasāra the idea to ordain bhikkhunīs.<sup>51</sup>

## 1995 Making a Vow under the Bodhi Tree and Meeting Ven. Māpalagama Vipulasāra

The fourth Sakyadhita International Conference was held in Ladakh from August 1–7, 1995. The keynote speech was by Rani Sarla, Queen of Ladakh. The theme of the conference was “Women and the Power of Compassion: Survival in the Twenty-First Century.”

There had been no hot water in Ladakh. It was hard to breathe. After they landed, everybody fell ill. They had to take tablets and be rested for two days. Ranjani had heard that it was the highest airport in the world.

Ven. Sanghasena Bhikkhu was their host at the Ladakh Mahābodhi Meditation Center. The facilities were very bare and they had the conference under a tent—Ranjani describes it as “adventurous.” In addition to the tent, there was a small building, with toilets. At that time, the conditions for the Ladakh nuns were

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<sup>50</sup> I have been unable to identify the Vietnamese-American candidate.

<sup>51</sup> Ven. Tathālokā, personal correspondence (2021).

very poor and Ranjani felt sad. After the Ladakh conference, there was a ground-breaking ceremony for a nuns' center.

Ven. Dhammānandā further described the difficulties that they faced in Ladakh, including when the tent was blown away:

So, 1995, Sakyadhita was held in Ladakh, Ranjani, again brought her group to Ladakh. That was a difficult trip, because many of the Sri Lankan elderly ladies in her group got sick because of the high altitude. Sakyadhita Conference in Ladakh was not easy. I remembered the tent. The tent was kind of blown up...we had to hold onto the posts to hold it down. Ladakh is the place where they have very little water. It so happened that all the water that should come for the whole year came for the conference. That was the difficult part.

And Ranjani was there with me.

In Ladakh, Ranjani met Ven. Olandē [Holland] Ānanda. He spoke many languages, including good Sinhalese, and was supportive of bhikkhunīs. He was happy to join the Sri Lankan group.

After the '93 conference, Ranjani's name had already been proposed for the committee. People had been happy with her work. But the proposal was a surprise to Ranjani—she had only been interested in getting the conference planned and wasn't aware that there was a committee with positions. She rejected the idea—but the committee had nominated her as vice-president. Professor Chatsumarn Kabilsingh continued as president. In 1995, however, Ranjani was elected as president of Sakyadhita International.

When she was elected president, Ranjani emphasized that she wasn't a scholar.

I said I am no scholar, I am no professor, I don't want to because they are all this and that big people there, they come and give talks and papers, but then what am I? But they say no, you nobody has done it, nobody has been active as you. Anyway, that was something, daily I remember they were interviewing me and had in papers here and there. So many, I can't remember what happened. *Om maṇi padme hūm*, that's all I know of, beautiful most adventurous place I know was Ladakh.

Maybe Ranjani was correct—after all, there had been others who had been researching nuns since the early '80s, and who probably had more academic credentials. However, when we think about people who had been doing the work on the ground, Ranjani's own hard work was her credentials. Ranjani had accepted the president position—not for herself, but because of the work she wanted to accomplish. Ranjani said, “But finally, the president position helped me to achieve.”

After the conference, Ranjani felt fortunate to be able to do the tour of the Himalayas. Ranjani recalled, “Oh Himalayas! Beautiful. I had done some good kamma to travel and see these places. Monasteries in the mountains. Himalayas. Tibetan. Can't believe! How they built these monasteries.” I can imagine the monasteries, clinging onto the cliff-face for dear life. Ranjani took a photo with Khunying Kanitha which shows the mountains in the background.

They saw Jesus' tomb at Hemis, which is on the way to Srinagar in Kashmir. However, they didn't go to Kashmir itself—the army was present and the regulations were strict.

After the conference, they traveled to India and had a tour around Bodh Gaya.

In the evening, Ranjani went with Clara and Kusuma who were staying with her in one guest house and told them about the flag. She wanted to offer it at the bodhi tree. At that time, there was no fence. Ranjani asked Clara and Kusuma to hold the flag so she could tie it. Ranjani felt as if she was in a trance—she hadn't prepared for the flag offering. She said:

In Bodh Gaya I tied the flag “*Meheni Sasna udā vēvā*,” [may] the bhikkhunīs' ordination *sāsana* be restored, “*Meheni Sasna udā vēvā*.” I am not a person to stitch but I did it in a robe-colored one, I finished it by sitting at the site near the bodhi tree.

Ranjani made a vow of truth. “If it is the truth that the Buddha was enlightened under in this place, if it is the truth that the Buddha established the fourfold bhikkhu, bhikkhunī, upāsaka, upāsikā—the fourfold community—may by the strength of that truth the bhikkhunīs be restored.” That was Ranjani's wish—she felt that it came from inside her heart, not like an ordinary wish—unexpectedly, almost as if she was in a trance.

A Ladakh bhikkhu who was in charge of the bodhi tree was watching. He was the brother of Ven. Sanghasena who had been their host in Ladakh. Nearby, another group was saying, “*sādhu sādhu*.” The monk said, “You can say those things here, but you can't say them in Sri Lanka...” Ranjani said, “I'm going to say it in Sri Lanka.” He said, “It will take a long time.” Ranjani said, “No! It's coming soon.”

It was dark by the time they started heading back to the guesthouse. They were looking for a rickshaw and coming out of

the gate of the Mahābodhi temple complex at Bodh Gaya, they met a bhikkhu. Ranjani only knows his name—Ven. Bodhipāla. She hadn't met him before and she doesn't know where he lives. He knew that they had come after the conference. He asked them where they were staying—would it be possible to meet them? Ranjani apologized—they were leaving tomorrow morning and didn't have time. He asked for her address.

Later, Ranjani received a letter via airmail. She kept it for a long time. It said, “It's a good thing that I met you. There are three kinds of people in the world. One kind of people say, ‘This has to be done’. The second kind of people say, ‘How can you do this?’ The third type is the type that does it. You are type number three!” He didn't know her from anywhere.

Actually, it wasn't that difficult to find information on Ven. Bodhipāla on the internet—originally from Tamil Nadu, he was a samaṇera at the time he met Ranjani and he took full ordination in 1997 with Ven. Dr. Raṣṭrapāla Mahāthera in Bodh Gaya. He has since taught Buddhism and meditation internationally.

The Ladakh conference had been in August. Articles appeared in Sri Lankan newspapers that Ranjani had been elected president.

In 1995, Ranjani also made her second visit to Germany, for the Conference on Buddhist Women at Frankfurt University. She had visited Germany previously in 1978 on tour with her brother. She was interviewed by Ven. Jampa Tsedroen in connection with the visit.

In December of the same year, Ranjani was invited to give the Sanghamittā Day talk by the All Ceylon Buddhist Women's Congress. The women of the association attended her talk, all in white sarees. She remembers it as being near the Avukana Buddha statue replica, opposite the Bandaranaike hall.



By late 1995, Ven. Māpalagama Vipulasāra had come to know of the Sakyadhita Center’s work. He was an artist and a sculptor—his Buddha images feature at many locations. He had held exhibitions in China and Soviet Russia in the 1960’s. In 1972, he designed the national emblem of Sri Lanka, with its intricate lion, Dhamma-wheel, lotus, auspicious pot, and sun and moon design. At the time of the conference, he was the Chief Secretary of World Buddhist Sangha Congress (a position he held from 1980 until his passing). Additionally, he was the President of the Mahābodhi Society of India as well as being the chief monk of the Parama Dhamma Cetiya Piriveṇa in Ratmalana. It was a big temple—over one hundred years old—with a long history of training bhikkhus. The temple had a bhikkhu training center on site. He was very capable, with an office and many telephones. As the head monk, he had the freedom to help nuns without fear of reprisal. As chief secretary of the World Buddhist Sangha Council, he traveled a lot to Japan, and also to Korea, and was respected by the Korean and Japanese sanghas. Ranjani states that he held a position on the Korean Sangha Council as well. His international connections, both through the World Sangha Council and through the Parama Dhamma Cetiya, were a strength: a Korean bhikkhunī student of the Parama Dhamma Cetiya, Ven. Sang Won, would later be instrumental in Ven. Vipulasāra’s work for nuns. He developed a connection with her temple, Bomyeong Temple, and they set aside a room for him to stay there.

Ranjani also stated that he was very generous and helped the needy. Ven. Prof. Ittademaliyē Indasāra Thera had written about Ven. Vipulasāra Thera, in an article “Tribute to an Artist Monk.”

His famous phrase was “No Problem!” It was this pos-

itive attitude that encouraged the thousands of monks who received training in the pirivena system in Sri Lanka, which he re-developed and put into motion.<sup>52</sup>

Ven. K. Vimalajoti had mentioned to Ven. Vipulasāra after the conference that these two ladies, Ranjani and Kusuma, were doing “big jobs.”

He was aware of their work for the sīla mātās due to the publicity around the Sakyadhita Conference. He said, “What are you doing with these sīla mātās? It’s a good idea. We have the Mahābodhi in India, where a lot of Sri Lankans come on pilgrimage in January. We need some monks to explain and take them around, but we are very short of monks. Maybe we can send some sīla mātās to India to serve in the Mahābodhi?” Although she wasn’t aware at the time, being contacted by Ven. Vipulasāra was the beginning of Ranjani’s real involvement in the bhikkhunī ordination issue. Previously, she had only been interested in nuns’ training. However, she felt it was nonetheless the natural outcome of the kind of discussions that they had been having.

By this point Ranjani had come to know about Ven. Khemā’s earlier 1988 bhikkhunī ordination in the US with the support of Ven. Ratanasāra.

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52 I. Indasara, 2010.

## 1996–2000: The Dawn of the Bhikkhunī Revival

### 1996 A Luminous Bhikṣunī Ordination in the Sarnath Migadaya Vajra Sīma

*Keep the precepts and purify your body and mouth. Keep your mind with righteous thought. Frequent listening sermon and finding real enlightenment are from the foundation of precepts. The precepts are marvelous treasure house and also the seven treasures. The precepts are the great ship that proficiently crosses over the sea of life and death. The precepts are a refreshing pond that cleans all agony. The precepts are tactics with no fear that dissipate the evil sea of the poison. The precepts are ultimate companion who can easily pass through a dangerous way. The precepts are the gate of Amṛta all sages arose from this. The mind with precepts is not arrogant, it is solely pure without dissoluteness, it does not harm to righteous precepts and also has no evil mind. This is called the pure precepts that every Buddha praised. Therefore keep them with rejoicing. This is a pure Sila Body.*

*—exhortation written on bhikkhunī ordination leaflet, December 8, Sarnath, 1996.*

*The Dharma, the essential nature, transmuted by Lord Buddha, the Sage of the Universe, is now as brilliant as the sun. Now, that the noble meaning given through*

*the bhikshuni precepts is given to you, may you keep it with due consideration to its importance.*

*—exhortation written on bhikkhunī ordination certificate, December 8, Sarnath, 1996.*

In early 1996, after the land for the Sakyadhita Center was finalized, the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF) invited Ranjani for a seminar in Chiang Mai. Ranjani was invited to the “Women and Religion” Symposium in Chiang Mai on account of being the president of Sakyadhita International. She met Dr. Hema Goonatilake properly for the first time at the seminar.

At that time, Ranjani was pre-occupied with thinking about the center and planning for nuns’ training. Ranjani had invited an elderly nun, Ven. Pānadura Vajirā, to accompany her to Chiang Mai, because she had strong English.

The head of the Asia desk of the Heinrich Böll Foundation was a Zen Buddhist, Roshan Dhunjiboy. She had been supportive and presided at the partner meetings. Roshan would go on to be a key contact for Ranjani’s work for nuns.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation had encouraged Ranjani to send a proposal outlining the work of the Sakyadhita Center. So Ranjani had the plan in her head already for when the nuns came. She met with Mr. Thilakaratne and had the costing done. Ranjani communicated with Hema Goonatilake, who wrote an introduction about *sīla mātās* for the proposal. Ranjani emphasized that the Heinrich Böll Foundation does not fund religious activities—the proposal was an application for women’s development money.

The proposal was submitted to the head office in Berlin. Every year since that, the Foundation had invited Ranjani to attend their “Women in Religion” symposium. Ranjani said the

symposium was an “interesting group,” comprising of diverse religions, including Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists. The talks were printed later as a book. On hearing diverse female scholars talk about religion, Ranjani felt that women had been discriminated against everywhere, and not only in Buddhism. There were interesting stories from women in every area. Ranjani felt that there had been great women leaders in many religions and that the symposium was interesting.

The next time, the foundation wished to hold the symposium in Sri Lanka, and Ranjani organized it for them. They didn't know much about working in Sri Lanka. Ranjani suggested Mt. Lavinia hotel, and introduced one of their secretaries, Ms. Syama Jasam, to the facilities. She stayed Ranjani's house. They were happy with the place and the seminar was held there in '97. The seminars continued every year: from Chiang Mai, to Sri Lanka, Turkey and the Philippines. Ranjani can't remember the order, but she also went to Lahore and Karachi in Pakistan. She visited the museums and saw many Buddhist artifacts.

Ranjani was very appreciative of the HBF staff. She described HBF Asia-desk head Roshan Dhunjiboy as “talented” and “an animal lover.” Roshan had been a documentary film-maker and journalist on television in Germany in the 1960s. She had dogs and had been planning to set up an elephant foundation in Chiang Mai. Roshan had liked Ranjani's work and had sent her gifts of sarees. “She was very kind. Even when she comes to Sri Lanka, the stray dogs everywhere, she will stop to clean the eyes, everything, such a dog lover.” When she traveled abroad, someone at the office had to report back to her about her dogs. They were “like her babies.”

After attending the Chiang Mai seminar, Ranjani was invited to Khunying Kanitha's center in Thailand, where she met Princess Soamsawali. The princess is the former wife and first cousin of the current Thai monarch, King Vajiralongkorn. She was the patron of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (APSW). The princess said to Ranjani, "It's so nice to see you!" Khunying Kanitha had been a founder of the APSW.

In Thailand, from the seventies onward, the Thai Nuns' Institute has been influential in providing guidance on Thai *maechi* affairs. Ranjani attended the AGM of the Thai *maechi* association at the invitation of Khunying Kanitha.

In 1996, Ven. Vipulasāra had said to Ranjani that they could now select some *sīla mātās* to send to India. Ranjani emphasized this, saying, "He was the one who called for applications—not me, the monks." In June or July 1996, they called for *sīla mātās* to come for interview and about one hundred came. Kusuma and Ranjani also attended the nuns' interviews. They interviewed the *sīla mātās* about their background, and asked them to give a small talk on the Dhammapada and speak some English. They selected twenty-four of them. The Mahābodhi India secretary, Ven. Dodangoda Revata, also came. It was organized on a large scale with the senior monks coming for the interviews. He told the interviewees, "Don't expect the facilities that you have here in India. No-one's going to serve you. The weather is difficult: the winter is very cold, and the dust comes in the other season, the dust and the wind and the heat. The food won't be what you are used to. There is no-one to respect you like here or bow to you. If you go, you can't go back to Sri Lanka for three years."

Nobody wanted to go. They were senior and settled *sīla mātās* who had established themselves well in remote villages. The challenge was to find ten junior ones who would be interested.

Ranjani had a lot of experience with some of them and she felt that they were not all up to standard. They had to drop some of the nuns. At that time, Kusuma was still wearing white and hadn't decided to become a nun yet. Ven. Vipulasāra gave the OK for the interviewees that they selected.

If I could think of a defining image from Ranjani's contribution to the revival, it is a photo from circa early 1996, in the lead up to the landmark ordinations of 1996. Dressed in her characteristic saree, Ranjani stands at the microphone. Ranjani is *always* at the microphone. The orange-robed monks surround the table. The bespectacled Mahābodhi Society President, Venerable Māpalagama Vipulasāra leans on his left hand, listening intently. Mahābodhi Society secretary, Venerable Dodangoda Revata holds his chin in his right hand, also listening. Together, they would interview over one hundred nuns as candidates for training in the lead up to the ground-breaking 1996 ordinations. It was the 1996 ordinations where, together with others, Ven. Kolonnave Kusumā became Sri Lanka's "first bhikkhunī" in modern times. The sense of history is palpable—if we stand in 1996 looking forward, we can get a sense of the drama, the uncertainty, suspense, and simultaneous deep faith of the protagonists, as they plunged headlong into unknown path for Buddhist women.

Their small place couldn't accommodate the ten nuns who had been selected—it was just a little meditation place ten minutes from the temple. One day, Ven. Vipulasāra talked to Ranjani—he gave her a set of keys and said, "This is for the bhikkhu training college." They were not using it at that time. He gave her the keys and said, "You can use this, this is the principal's. You can have this room and this big hall kitchen, everything here, bathroom, big room, number of rooms." Ranjani hadn't even noticed that the

facilities were there at the Parama Dhamma Cetiya due to them being obscured by foliage. The training hall and residential facilities were located in large garden, under a tree. It was the same large garden that had the Dhamma hall, a Buddha-house, a *cetiya*, and a large temple.

Later, Ven. Vipulasāra was questioned by other monks, “Why did you give the bhikkhu training college to the *sīla mātās*?” When the senior monks found out, he got a scolding, but he said, “We’re using it for a good purpose.” The place had been full of cobwebs when they moved in, and Ranjani went back home to collect sanitizer and a mop. One of her neighbors, Wijitha, happened to be there, and Ranjani said, “You have to come with me if you’re free.” She went with Ranjani and helped clean. Ranjani felt that it wasn’t good to leave the young nuns at the same premises at the monks’ temple, and had hoped that an *upāsikā* could be there to support them. Wijitha said that she could stay. She ended up staying for six or seven years to help the nuns, even after they moved to the Sakyadhita Center, until her in-laws became upset. Ranjani said, “She did a lot of good karma.”

At that time, they invited another retired school principal who was a Pāli scholar. She came to teach Pāli for the *sīla mātās* at the temple. They also had English classes and Ven. Vipulasāra arranged for someone to teach the nuns Hindi. Ven. Silānanda taught *sutta*. Ranjani drove to the temple every day to see to the requisites of the nuns.

Training the nuns had presented challenges. When they were training, the nuns were given shared rooms. Ranjani remarked that one nun, Ven. Dhammapālikā from Bandaravela, had been a good nun, but she left due to being sick of her room-mate. Later



she received ordination in Daṃbulla. Ranjani had been very sad to receive the note when she left.

Ven. Vipulasāra said it was “like catching frogs.” He began to raise concerns. He had felt that the nuns needed leadership. At that stage, Kusuma was feeling ready to renounce and would be a good leadership candidate. Ranjani felt that being older and having previously been an *anagārinī* would give her more leadership potential. She had been wearing white since living in the meditation center—after she moved out of the center, she lived in the small hall at the laywoman’s house.

They were together in Ven. Vipulasāra’s room. Dr. Hema Goonatilake—the advocate of bhikkhunīs whose extensive research had been mentioned previously—was also there. Ranjani went to Kusuma’s feet and bowed to her, saying “Now you can become a nun!” She said, “I don’t mind, I’m free. But I have a son and my daughter-in-law is expecting a baby in a few months time in August...I’ll finish all that and come.” Ranjani said that Ven. Vipulasāra was eager to make progress—he just wanted a yes or no, and could she come? By that point, Ven. Vipulasāra had already contacted Ven. Sang Won, the former student of Parama Dhamma Cetiya who was now chief bhikkhunī of Bomyeong Temple.

In addition to having been the founder of the Bomyeong Temple, which was in the Seonhakwon school, Ven. Sang Won had a long-standing connection with Sri Lanka. She had traveled to Sri Lanka in 1982, to the Parama Dhamma Cetiya Buddhist Institute, to study Pāli and Sanskrit. In 1987, she had founded the Korea-Sri Lanka Culture Exchange Society. Later, she was awarded with a Buddha Śāsana Viśva Kīrti title in Sri Lanka for her contributions.<sup>53</sup>

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53 International Buddhist Womens’ Meditation Centre, 2005.

Her involvement secured Korean support for the ordination.<sup>54</sup> Ranjani recalls that Ven. Vipulasāra took the phone and was immediately in touch with the Korean sangha who were filling the ordination quorum. He told Ranjani, “Ask her [Kusuma,] when is the baby coming?” Ranjani told Ven. Vipulasāra, “She can come...” He told Ranjani to get ready to go to Korea.

Korea has its own history of interruption and persistence of ordination lineages. Kim Yungmi has stated that from the sixth century until the fourteenth century Korean nuns were ordained as bhikshunis under both sanghas.<sup>55</sup> In the opinion of Hyangsoon Yi on the basis of the “sweet nectar ritual” paintings and oral interviews with surviving nuns of this generation, the single sangha ordination method for bhikkhunīs (ordination by bhikkhus only) was likely already in use during the late Joseon dynasty (1392-1910 CE), in which Buddhism was repressed under state Confucianism, despite having been present in earlier times.<sup>56</sup> World War II and Japanese occupation further disrupted Korean monasticism.

By 1982, dual sangha ordination was considered as being restored within the Korean sangha.<sup>57</sup> This restoration had occurred with the support of the vinaya master Ven. Ja Un.<sup>58</sup> However, the full implementation of this was slow, and even by 1988, it had not been systematically established.<sup>59</sup>

It is noteworthy fact of the twentieth century restoration of Korean ordination lineages, that the preeminent Korean Vinaya master Ven. Ja Un had re-ordained in Sri Lanka, before widely

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54 K. Kusuma 2012, 113.

55 As quoted in Sung, 2011, 102.

56 Yi, Hyangsoon. Personal correspondence, August 22, 2021 on basis of unpublished Korean language paper, *gamlodo-e natanan joseon-ui biguniseung-ga*.

57 Ito 2012, 75.

58 Sung, 2011, 104.

59 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, August 14, 2021.

serving as preceptor for the revival of the Korean monastic sangha in the twentieth century.<sup>60</sup>

By the 1990s, the Korean Jogye order was flourishing, with 10,000 or more bhikkhunī members, and slightly less than 10,000 bhikkhu members<sup>61</sup> So the choice to look to Korean bhikkhunīs for legitimation would have been very natural, especially given Ven. Vipulasāra’s connection to Korea via the World Buddhist Sangha Council and Korean Sangha Council.

Ven. Sang Won herself would later describe the fact that the bhikkhunī lineage had originally come to Korea via China from Sri Lanka as a motivating factor in participating in the ordinations.<sup>62</sup>

The Sarnath ordinations occurred towards the very end of 1996. Three months before her ordination, in August 1996, Kusuma was sent to Korea, Seoul, to Bomyeong Temple to study vinaya with Ven. Sang Won, the head bhikkhunī of Bomyeong Temple, which was organizing the ordination.

Ranjani accompanied Kusuma to Korea. They both went to Bomyeong Temple in Seoul—but Ranjani returned after a few weeks, while Kusuma stayed for three months. “Ordination took place with the training like that here and there, we just managed,” remarked Ranjani. Kusuma studied the Dharmagupta Vinaya<sup>63</sup> ordination procedure and was relieved to find it very close to the Pāli procedure. She was convinced of the fundamental similarity of the Dharmaguptaka and Theravāda Vinayas. She told us during interview, “Then, I found that Dharmagupta Vinaya is identical with the Theravāda Vinaya as far as the ordination procedure is

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60 Tathālokā, *Biography of Venerable Tathālokā Mahātherī*, nd.

61 as of the early 1990s. Personal correspondence, July 2021.

62 Sang Won, nd.

63 i.e., the Dharmagupta Vinaya with Four Parts, Korean *sabunyal*.

concerned. They are identical, because the Vinaya never changed. Only the *sūtra* changed.”

Many scholars have noted the textual closeness of the Dharmaguptaka and Theravāda vinayas. A number of scholars have also noted their differences; and the Dharmaguptaka and Theravāda vinayas do not actually agree completely on issues such as the ordination quorum, and other points. Additionally, the Dharmaguptaka commentarial tradition as typified by the Nanshan (Korean=Namsan) school has a sophisticated approach to ordinations which goes beyond the range of topics considered by the Theravāda tradition in general, including the use of material from multiple schools. However, understandably, it had been the fundamental similarity which Ven. Kusumā had sought to convey.

Korea had been difficult for Kusuma. She wasn't used to the food, it was bitterly cold, and she couldn't speak Korean. The Korean bhikkhunīs were excited to organize two sets of Korean-style robes each for the candidates—at considerable expense. In addition to the support of Bomyeong Temple, the Korean Bomun bhikkhunī order had co-sponsored.<sup>64</sup>

However, Ranjani was concerned. There was a lot of opposition to the ordination, and what if people saw the candidates coming out in Korean robes? Ranjani approached Ven. Vipulasāra, saying “Bhante, now what is going to happen, what is the robe they are giving?” That is the only time Ranjani had ever heard Ven. Vipulasāra raise his voice. He said, “Do you want it or not? You'll take it the way it's given! Otherwise, don't take it at all! After that, they can wear anything and go home.” He said “*Chēthayak*, wear a cloth and they can go home.” The sense was that they should just put some cloth on themselves and go home.

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64 Ven. Tathālokā, personal correspondence, July 24, 2021.

*Chēēthe* is printed cloth—typically with floral print—which is worn in ladies’ sarongs (as distinct from the Sri Lankan male sarong, the *sarama*). “They can go home with anything,” he said.

Robe issues aside, Kusuma still had to become a *sīla mātā* before the bhikkhunī ordination. Ranjani returned to organize the ordination. She went to Kelaniya Rāja Mahā Vihāraya temple and made the arrangements with Ven. Kollupitiyē Mahinda, as well as informing Kusuma’s family. Kusuma was still in Korea and had not had time to inform her family personally. In Sri Lanka, there was a lot of talk, as well as a lot of opposition. Ven. Vipulasāra had gone to Japan.

Ranjani received a call from Ven. Vipulasāra, who was in Japan. He was not impressed, and said, “What is this Kusuma...” Kusuma had said something about wanting to withdraw. He was short with Kusuma on the phone, saying, “I have no support from anybody. Either you become a bhikkhunī and take the leadership or I cancel this.” Ven. Kusumā reported saying, “Please don’t cancel this as it will never be possible to start the bhikkhunī order again, and even at the risk of my life I will become a bhikkhunī.”<sup>65</sup>

Ranjani remarked about Ven. Vipulasāra, saying, “It was funny, he never says his name, always just saying ‘*mama*’ [‘me’].” On the phone, he said “It’s me speaking...,” “It’s me, what is this...” Ranjani said, “I’ve already organized her ordination, we’re training these ten nuns, we’re not going to give up: we’re going ahead.” That was the end of the story for Ranjani.

Kusuma’s *sīla mātā* ordination, which had been organized by Ranjani, occurred after she returned from Korea. The photos were at the Kelaniya temple, where Kusuma was given a large

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65 K. Kusumā, personal correspondence, July 2021.

sīla mātā ordination ceremony by Ven. K. Mahinda, the chief monk of the temple.

Ranjani’s husband was very concerned about the ten sīla mātās who were going to India. Ranjani said, “I remember when I was training those ten sīla mātās he was very conscious about it. He said, ‘Now what do they get to eat, how are you teaching them?’”

B.S. did a dāna with Ranjani for the nuns before they left for India. Ranjani invited the ten sīla mātās to her house, and he prepared five hundred rupees cash each for them, saying “Go buy yourselves some ice cream.” He was happy. So, the sīla mātās said “Master told us [to go get ice cream], you saw how good he is.” At that time, five hundred rupees was quite a bit of money.

The sīla mātās had been trained to answer questions about the ordination, but Ven. Vipulasāra said not to talk about it or to give it publicity. They knew why at this time—the nuns weren’t just going to the Mahābodhi temple to do service work: they were going for bhikkhunī ordination. The sangha had been preparing robes and everything, and they knew the ordination was coming. By that time, Ranjani was getting threats.

A member of the Buddhist men’s association told Ranjani, “Madam, a person like you doing things like this is against the Vinaya and Dhamma, did you speak to the monk?” Ranjani replied:

I said, these are the things you have been saying for the last thousand years, scaring the women not to do this. He told me, you are doing things against the Vinaya and Dhamma, huh? I said, these are the stories you have been telling and not allowing the

women to go ahead, all these thousand years you have stopped us, you can't stop it now. He said, can you go speak to this Na Uyana Ariyadhamma Thera. I said, I have my great respect for them, please leave them alone. If the Buddha is there only I will ask him. Nobody besides of Buddha I have no doubts about, I am going ahead. I remember that very well.

They were scaring us, all those thousand years, not allowing us to go ahead. I used to get telephone calls, scolding me. And my own family sisters said you are doing things against the *mahānāyakas*' wishes, they are like Buddha for them. They aren't Buddha, the *mahānāyakas*. They are respected monks. My elder sister, Chitra, she never stepped in to the Sakyadhita Center. One day she happened to come in the car, she did not come, she waited outside the gate, she did not enter the premises even. They were so, thinking I was doing something wrong because the monks were all threatening. She has passed away now.

The committee members of Sakyadhita Sri Lanka all “fell off.” They were happy to participate in the international conference, but after she started working only with nuns, Ranjani recalls that she was alone. Even though the committee members were educated, most of them left. When they had a meeting, nobody came. When Ranjani wanted to start building, she couldn't find a treasurer to sign the checks. “I can't do everything, no? I have nobody. Nobody was willing to do because they were scared. They sent messages, ‘No, our monks don't like [it].’”

They were threatening, you are going to hell, you are making schism with the bhikkhus, they had so much

fear that we are doing something against the Vinaya-Dhamma. That was the time, I went to the famous temple, the Bellanvila, we normally go there, there is a Buddha-room there always with the Viṣṇu, the god Viṣṇu who is supposed to be protecting the *sāsana*. So I took myself, [and said], if I am doing this, if I am doing anything against the *sāsana*, may it not happen, it should not happen. I remember I go and [recited] ‘*Ākāsaṭṭhā ca bhummaṭṭhā*’ [inviting the terrestrial and celestial *devas* to participate in merits]. Nobody knows what I went through.

Finally, Malini Mahipala agreed to be the treasurer. Additionally, Mr. Jayawardena and his wife Chandrani had stood by her since day one, supporting her. They had joined Ven. Khemā in the Sri Lankan delegation to the 1987 International Conference on Buddhist Nuns.

Ven. Vipulasāra had organized everything for the ten nuns—he had arranged the tickets. In December, Ranjani had to travel with the ten *sīlā mātās* and Ven. Kusumā, who by then had been a *sīlā mātā* for a few months and was awaiting bhikkhunī ordination. They felt that it wasn’t necessary for her to go through with two years’ training as a *sāmaṇerī* as she had been an *anagārinī* for over five years, she was well-versed in Dhamma and Pāli, and she had been a teacher and a mother. She was suitable to lead the team, so she was ordained first.

Ranjani was the only laywoman accompanying the ten nuns. The Korean bhikkhunī sangha had sponsored everything, bearing all the expenses. They flew to Madras (Chennai)—Ven. Vipulasāra had arranged for some friends to pick them up and put them on the train the next day. They stayed at Ven. Vipulasāra’s Hindu friends’



large house. After that, they caught the train to Sarnath from Madras. Ranjani recalls the train trip as being one or two days.

They all had copies of the *Pātimokkha*, and they read the *Pātimokkha* on the train. Ven. *Vipulasāra* had gone ahead of them to organize the rooms in Sarnath. It was winter time and it was cold—but everything was arranged already—the blankets and the heating were done by the time they got there. The first room was given to Ven. *Kusumā* and Ranjani, who shared. Even though Ven. *Kusumā* was already in robes, she shared a room with Ranjani, with two beds.

In the meanwhile, Sri Lankan *sīla mātās* had come to know the *bhikkhunī* ordination would be happening in Sarnath on *Sanghamittā Day*, on the December full moon. The most senior *sīla mātās* had arrived ahead of them, to see what was happening. They had been there for the *Sanghamittā Day* celebrations. They were not happy that Ranjani had recruited junior nuns “from here and there.” Out of the ten, the youngest one, Ven. *Sudarśanā*, was twenty-eight years old. She had ordained as a *sīla mātā* at sixteen, and had been a government teacher. She held a bachelor’s and a masters’ degree in education already by this point.<sup>66</sup> Some monks told her that she was a fool to give up her job to get ordained. She had been the youngest—the eldest was *Kusuma*. They had arranged the order of the candidates according to age.

Ranjani had problems in Sarnath to even get the nuns in a line. She felt that they were nuns and everyone was watching, so they should walk in a line. But one would stop while the other one continued moving ahead. One day Ranjani ran to get them in line, she had a fall and injured her leg badly and had to go to the doctor—she recalls looking around the shanty town

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66 Moore, 2007.

for one. The person concerned with the fall incident hadn't been waiting for the others in line.

The senior *sīlā mātās* were very interested in the group—they didn't want to see the ordination go ahead. When the senior *sīlā mātās* came, Ven. Vipulasāra told Ranjani to please see that the candidates walk in line. He felt that nuns should walk beautifully and not all over the place.

When they were in Isipatana, there was daily chanting of the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta in the evening in the hall. The monks got on the stage to do the chanting and the others sat on the floor. When the group went there, Ven. Vipulasāra said, "Bring those ten *sīlā mātās* to the stage." Ranjani felt that he was very good and was always trying to promote the status of the *sīlā mātās*. He had arranged for ten seats for them so that they could come to the stage. The senior *sīlā mātās*, who were sitting on the floor, watched the ten ordination candidates go to the stage. They were furious. That was the first day.

They went for *dāna* in the morning. Ven. Vipulasāra had arranged the monks on one side of the *dāna* hall, and for the nuns to be seated on the other side. The senior *sīlā mātā* had the expectation of being seated in front—they had been seated in order of seniority. However, Ven. Vipulasāra said to bring the ten ordination candidates in front of them. "He doesn't care," said Ranjani.

The senior *sīlā mātā* stared. She was very angry and they pushed the chairs up against each other. Ranjani wondered what was happening. She went to the other *sīlā mātā* involved, saying, "Don't get upset, have some patience." She had to calm them down.

The next day, the *pūjā* started at six am, in the place where they kept a Dhammacakka and Buddha statue with five ascetics. Everyone was seated there, but the senior *sīlā mātās*

couldn't be seen. They didn't want to see the junior nuns on the stage and they didn't come.

The day before the ordination, Koreans came in large numbers. Ranjani recalls "around one hundred." According to Ven. Kusumā, in "How I became a bhikkhuni," one hundred and fifty Koreans had come, including many monks and nuns, and devotees. Ito Tomomi, quoting a 2006 interview with Ven. Sang Won, states that 108 Korean sangha members attended.<sup>67</sup> The devotees came with gifts in a procession with ceremonial umbrellas. They were very happy to be there.

By that time, Ven. Kusumā had translated the ordination procedure from English to Sinhalese. The ceremony was conducted in Korean. Ranjani couldn't speak Korean so she wasn't fully aware of what was happening.

The ordination was on December eighth. A banner welcomed the procession to the International Mahāyāna Ordination ceremony. They approached the red-carpeted platform in a parade. A raised golden Buddha statue presided over the platform. Another banner in Sino-Korean characters welcomed the representatives of Korean Buddhism. Ven. Devasiri gave the sāmanerī ordination immediately prior to the bhikkhunī ordination.<sup>68</sup>

Ven. Kusumā described the ordination procedure during our interview. She had struggled to kneel for the long ceremony and her knees bled, but was inspired by recalling Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. Ven. Kusumā recalled:

So, it is the dual ordination tradition. First, we had to go before the nuns, and get ordination, then the same day, we had to go before the monks and get

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<sup>67</sup> Ito, personal correspondence, 2021.

<sup>68</sup> V. Piyānanda, personal correspondence, September 28, 2021.

their confirmation. So that is called...an *aṭṭhavācīkā upasampadā*, or, “eight-times.” That is, four times with the monks. Nuns: four times with the nuns.

That was the day I was ordained, eighth December...then, we had a big ceremony, six hours, no, twelve hours. We were not allowed to leave the *sīma* for twelve hours—we don’t drink water—we are not allowing you to leave the premises, very strict. Then I was...we had to stand on our knees and then it was hard rock, that was the place where the Buddha gave the first sermon in Benares, at Varanasi is Benares, *Isipatane Migadāye*, that is where the first sermon, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta was first proclaimed to the five ascetics.

That is the venue of our ordination place. So, we had to be there twelve hours and on our knees we have to stand. My knees were bleeding. I couldn’t stand any more, it was hard rock. And then, I thought never mind, Mahāprajāpatī had to walk hundreds of miles to get ordination, this is not that bad, so I had to stay and go through it. There were nine others. Now, the language problem was there. They gave the ordination in Korean language. They had brought their own interpreter, and their interpreter translate into English language. Then I translated that into Sinhala language for our nuns.

So, the whole procedure was known to the nuns, because I had made a script in Korea, Sinhala script and everyone had a copy of the script of the ordination. So they all knew what they were doing. When they asked questions, they had to say “yes” in Korean language. They prompted us, and the whole procedure went

without any problem, first with the nuns, and then second with the monks. And then, after twelve hours, we were allowed...we were wearing the robes of the Korean, but the same color like this [i.e., the orange-colored robe that Ven. Kusumā was wearing].

Then, we were, we had another audience with the Sinhala monks, Sri Lankan monks. They also gave us their blessings...The ceremony was a perfect success—we had no problem at all.

“Dual ordination tradition” was the phrase used by Ven. Kusumā, and there were undoubtedly both bhikkhunīs and bhikkhus present and participating at the ordination. The ordination diagram and certificate provided by Ven. Sang Won, however, does not appear to record a dual ordination. I had sought Ven. Kusumā’s comment on this, but she had passed away before she could answer. This is one of the complicated aspects of 1996. It seems that the certificate records the bhikkhu sanghakamma only.

There were no bodhisattva precepts. About bodhisattva precepts, Ranjani said, “It was only the bhikkhunī ordination.” The robes the candidates wore had been orange, Korean style robes.

Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo came, and Hema Goonatilake also came to see what was happening. The senior Theravāda monks who were in attendance included Ven. Devasiri who lived at the Mahābodhi temple. He called the nuns to the Anagārika Dhammapāla Sīma Malaka and gave the *anusāvanā* (instruction) to them after the ordination was over. In Ranjani’s words, he “read them the *pārājikas*.” Ranjani remarked that of course, the Koreans had previously done the reading of the *pārājikas*.

They were given Korean names. Ranjani still has copies of the names given to them in her diary. They were also given Korean robes. When Ranjani was in Korea, the Korean bhikkhunīs had spent thousands of dollars getting the robes made. They made two sets for each participant. Ranjani said, “Don’t make two sets, they are not going to wear [them]. Just one set is enough.” However, the Koreans insisted on making two sets of robes—the bowls, umbrellas and bags had been bought.

Ven. Valpola Piyānanda Thero had also come from Los Angeles. In the evening before the day of the ordination, Ven. Valpola Piyānanda gave nine sets of Theravāda robes to Ranjani and one set to Ven. Kusumā, saying, “Now you go and give these to the nuns and ask them to change into these robes.” “So that’s how we started,” said Ranjani. Ven. Valpola Piyānanda also spoke on the occasion of the ordination, and a section of his speech is recorded in *The Bodhi Tree Grows in L.A.: Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America*. He urged the candidates to practice humbly and avoid politics.<sup>69</sup>

The names of the ten bhikkhunīs of Sri Lanka who received ordination were as follows. The Korean names are in brackets.

- 1) Ven. Kolonnavē Kusumā (Pop-sung)
- 2) Ven. Habarana Chinta Chandradassī (?)
- 3) Ven. Matalē Vijitā (Pop-kwang)
- 4) Ven. Galle Subhadrā (?)
- 5) Ven. Bandaravela Sudhammikā (Pop-thung)
- 6) Ven. Peliyagoda Sudarśanā (Pop-hang)
- 7) Ven. Pānadura-Vekada Bhadrā (Pop-chin)
- 8) Ven. Passara Samā (Pop-sang)

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69 W. Piyānanda, 2008, 140–142.

Walking in the Sunshine of the Bhikkhunis

9) Ven. Kurunegala Subhadrā (?)

10) Ven. Kurunegala Hemapālī (?)<sup>70</sup>

Some reports have erroneously stated eleven participants, however, Ranjani has clarified that if the photos appear to show eleven, it should be understood that the eleventh person is her.

The names of the participating Korean sangha included the bhikkhu meditation master and eighth patriarch of the Korean Jogye Order, Ven. Seo Am as the bhikkhu upādhyāya, and bhikkhunī Ven. Sang Won of Bomyeong Temple.<sup>71</sup> The names were a “who’s who” of Korean Buddhism.

The Head of the Jogye Order (National Master), the National Jogye Order Vinaya Master, the Jogye Order General Secretary; and the General Secretaries of the five main orders of Korean Buddhism had united together in harmony to offer this groundbreaking ordination.

The names of the ordaining Korean bhikkhus were led by the top three great leading bhikkhu masters:

Sīla Upādhyāya: Bhikkhu Head of the Jogye Order

Ven. Seo Am

Karma Ācārya: the late Jogye Order General Secretary;

Ven. Eui Hyeon;

Instructing Ācārya and the Protecting Precepts

Department Chief Bhikkhu, Ven. Bong Ju

The Seven Witness Master Bhikkhus were:

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Ven. Hye Eun Sunim ,  
Ven. Sa Yo Sunim, and  
Ven. Hyun Cheol Sunim of the Jogye Order;  
Kwan Um Order General Secretary Ven. Hong P'a,  
Cheon Tae Order General Secretary Ven. Un Deok;  
Won Yung Order General Secretary Ven. Il Gong;  
and General Secretary of the Chong Hwa Order Ven. Nam  
Jeong.<sup>72</sup>

[Bhikkhu] *Anusaka* [sic, =*anusāsaka*]: Ven. Bub Ki  
*Anusaka*: Ven. Dae Woul

The ordaining bhikkhunīs were:

*Pavattinī*<sup>73</sup>: Bhikkhunī Ven. Sang Won of Bomyeong  
Temple; of the Seonhakwon school in partnership  
affiliation with the Korean Jogye order  
[*Mūla*]*dhamma-ācārini*<sup>74</sup>: Ven. Beop Jong,<sup>75</sup> chief  
bhikkhunī of the Bomun Order<sup>76</sup> in partnership affiliation  
with the Korean Jogye order

The first page of the ordination certificate states, “Sila  
Upadhyaya: Hong Gun SEO AM, W.B.S.C. Korea Center,”<sup>77</sup> and  
the names are contained on another page of the leaflet.

The form of the ordination recorded, with fourteen bhikkhus and  
two bhikkhunīs on the certificate, seems to have its origin in the

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72 Ji Eun, 2020, 142. Thanks to Ven. Dhamma Sobhā of Korea and Ven. Tathālokā for alerting me to this and providing English translation.

73 Korean: *eunsa*, English given only as “teacher” on the ordination leaflet.

74 Korean: *beopsa*, English given only as “teacher” on the ordination leaflet.

75 *Gyedanmyeongsa pyo*, Ceremony Construction Table, no author, no date. Provided by Ven. Sang Won.

76 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, July 24, 2021.

77 W.B.S.C.=World Buddhist Sangha Council.



Dharmaguptaka commentarial tradition, as opposed to the Dharmaguptaka vinaya itself. It records the sanghakamma of the bhikkhu sangha in line with the pre-1982 Korean format. After Ven. Tathālokā had suggested the possibility of a commentarial source, I was able to identify the textual origins of this format in the Mahīśāsaka school. Vinaya Master Daoxuan had written in the Jie Mo Shu, “In the past, the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya was used. It says that ten bhikkhus and one bhikkhuni are needed for ordination.” (Taisho v22, p186a).<sup>78</sup>

Ranjani stated: “The bhikkhus were more important,” and “I remember there being more bhikkhus.” Ranjani recalls “about twenty” total bhikkhunīs being present, which can be cross-referenced with the over twenty bhikkhunīs visible in the video and pilgrimage logs, where their robe colors mark school identification.<sup>79</sup> Bhikkhunīs of the Seonhakwon, Bomun and Jogye orders wore grey and brown robes.

The following reflects identified names at the time of publication, with the help of Ven. Tathālokā working in conjunction with Ven. Yu-jeong and Prof. Cho Eun-su.

Confirmed names include two senior disciples of Ven. Sang Won:

Ven. Gyeong-jin and  
Ven. Bo-rim,

These two bhikkhunīs acted as a guard of honor for the bhikkhunī candidates.

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<sup>78</sup> Ben Yin, 2008.

<sup>79</sup> Tathālokā, personal correspondence, August 11, 2021.

Additional two bhikkhunīs from the Bomun Order (unidentified)

Five bhikkhunīs of the Jogye order as follows:

Ven. Ji-Hyeong, Jogye Order National Bhikkhunī Ordination Master (appointed 1980, twelve times), abbess of Jijang Temple

Ven. Gyeong-Jin

Ven. Hye-Moon, abbess of Shirae Temple

Ven. Bo-Rim and

Ven. Do-Un

Bhikkhunīs of the Kwanum Order (grey and gold robes) as follows:

Ven. Gyeong Cheol: president of the Kwanum Order Bhikkhunī Association

Ven. Gyeong Weon: vice-president of the Korean National Kwanum Order Bhikkhunī Association.<sup>80</sup>

Total ten bhikkhunīs of the Kwanum Order participated.<sup>81</sup>

Along with Ven. Beop Jong, the president of the Bomun Order, Ven. Gyeong Cheol and Ven. Gyeong Weon of the Kwanum Order gave hands-on assistance to the Sri Lankan bhikkhunī candidates in their ceremonial preparations in areas like bowing.

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80 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, July 24, 2021.

81 Thirteen bhikkhus of the Kwanum Order also participated. Tathālokā, personal correspondence, July 24, 2021.

Additionally, bhikkhunīs Ven Karma Lekshe Tsomo of Sakyadhita International (ordained in Korea in 1983), and Ven Dhammavijāyā of Nepal (ordained with Fo Guang Shan at Hsi Lai in California in 1988) were present outside the sīmā.<sup>82</sup> There were also Tibetan/Himalayan tradition bhikkhus present outside the sīmā.

The Theravāda bhikkhus who approved the ordination (not necessarily present at Sarnath) were:

- 1) Ven. Kamburupitiya Nandarātana, Sri Lanka.
- 2) Ven. Talallē Dhammaloka, Sri Lanka.
- 3) Ven. Valpola Piyānanda, USA.
- 4) Ven. Kakkapalliyē Anuruddha, Hong Kong.
- 5) Ven. Kahavattē Siri Sumedha, India.
- 6) Ven. Dodangoda Revata, India.
- 7) Ven. Dediyaḷa Vimala, India.
- 8) Ven. Medagama Vajirañāṇa, UK.
- 9) Ven. Kirindē Dhammaloka, Malaysia.
- 10) Ven. Kamburugamuvē Vajira, Sri Lanka

Some notable points about the names are as follows. Ven. Valpola Piyānanda had been present at 1988; Ven. Dodangoda Revata was Mahābodhi Secretary. Ven. Talallē Dhammaloka would go to to be a great supporter of further ordinations via the Sakyadhita Centre.

Ven. Kakkapalliyē Anuruddha was the the first-ever Vice Chancellor of the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka. Ven. Kamburugamuvē Vajira also served as Vice Chancellor of the Pali and Buddhist University.

Ven. Andavēla Devasiri was teacher to the newly ordained ten bhikkhunīs. For two years, the training of bhikkhunīs was held in the library of Anagarika Dharmapala in Varanasi, Mahābodhi India.<sup>83</sup>

82 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, July 24, 2021.  
83 Daily Mirror Online, 2016.

The Korean bhikkhunīs maintained an interest in the group and stayed in contact after the ordination. Ranjani recalls Ven. Sang Won calling her “bodhisattva, bodhisattva” and asking the nuns to look after her [Ranjani] when she was old. She sent presents. Later, Ranjani reports that Ven. Sang Won was impressed with the Sakyadhita Center.

There was a reception in India, with elephants and horses. It was organized by the Mahābodhi Society. Even though the ordination was secretive due to opposition in Sri Lanka, the newly ordained nuns were given what Ven. Kusumā described as “right royal welcome” by the India Mahābodhi Society.

After the ordinations. Ranjani had been challenged by a nun—she declined to mention the name—who had seen how the ordination was being done. The nun wasn’t sure whether what Ranjani was doing was right or wrong and thought that Ranjani had uncritically taken whatever the Koreans had given. Eventually, she asked Ranjani— “Are you prepared to take even a dead corpse?” Ranjani said “Yes, if I can make use of it, I will take it!” Ranjani hadn’t actually expected her to make this type of comment. Ven. Vipulasāra had said to Ranjani, “If you want, you take it the way they give it.” Ranjani had further commented, “Which is correct, that’s what I said, when we are like beggars, we have no choice, you know, we can’t be selective, we really want it, we take it the way they give it to us.”

Talking to me on the phone on August 13, 2021, Ranjani stated that she had no expectation that the ordination would happen in a particular way, whether dual platform or otherwise, only that it would happen. They took what they were given. She had realized that the ordination was given by the monks. She also saw the bhikkhunīs present, but as she wasn’t in the *śīmā*, she

didn't know their role. She saw that the Theravāda bhikkhus had accepted the ordination at the time, and had expressed to me that 1996 was an important turning point, and that Ven. Kusumā had never given up her original ordination.

Ranjani had wanted to go to Bodh Gaya after the ordination, but the nuns were asked not to move from Sarnath. In the end, seven of the nuns remained in Sarnath to receive two years' training.

As the nuns were staying on in Sarnath, Ven. Vipulasāra organized for Ranjani to go in a group to Bodh Gaya—she joined the group alone. In Bodh Gaya, she heard people scolding Ānanda. The pilgrims who had been staying at the Sri Lankan Mahābodhi Society were discussing the ordination, how they considered it a mistake. They blamed Ānanda for first asking for ordination for bhikkhunīs—the Buddha himself wouldn't have ordained them. “As if the Buddha would make a mistake just because of Ānanda!” On the last night, she said to them, “Do you think the Buddha did things just because somebody asked him to?!”

Ranjani recounts her gratitude to Ven. Vipulasāra:

My gosh, all that goes to Vipulasāra Thero. My gratitude. If he did not do that, nothing would have happened. He was so good; I am really happy he did it. How can we do it without the monks? And for a monk to take that step, and he said go ahead, and he said so much of criticism for him, he said if something is correct, he will do it whatever it is. He was so badly criticized but he didn't care and I had a lot of strength because of them now. But I was only coordinating running up and down to do things coordinate. But I have no strength to give ordination. It was the bhikkhus.

The international environment, nonetheless, had already been primed for bhikkhunī ordination. Ven. Vipulasāra had visited the US, and was also among the monks who were supportive of bhikkhunī ordination there. The earlier 1988 and 1994 ordinations must have been an encouragement. Ven. Tathālokā had remarked that Ven. Piyānanda had told her about his connection to Ven. Vipulasāra. She recalled that according to Ven. Piyānanda, “He and Bhante Piyānanda were great moral supporters of one another in this.”<sup>84</sup> Ranjani stressed that 1996 was the first ordination which had occurred with the support of Sri Lankan (i.e. resident in Sri Lanka) bhikkhus. It was also the first ordination to receive open publicity in Sri Lankan media.

There were many successes of the 1996 ordination. This ordination was both early and ground-breaking, and Ranjani has recounted her difficulties with characteristic humor and honesty. Her struggles through adversity and the tribulations that are inherent in any new project seem to have paid off. With such a high retention rate, the 1996 ordination can be considered an overall success. Ven. Kusumā went on to teach internationally, becoming a visible and prominent leader of the global bhikkhunī revival, and later developed the Ayya Khema International Buddhist Meditation Center. Of the remainder of the 1996 Sarnath ordination group, before long, Ven. Matalē Vijiṭā was offered land, where she had her own *ārāma*. The

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<sup>84</sup> Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

*ārāma*, Gotamī Ārāma, is in Olaboduva on Horana Road, and is now a large center with many bhikkhunīs, near what is now the Ayya Khema Center. Ven. Kusumā had stayed there for a while before the Ayya Khema Center was developed. Ven. Vijitā later received an award from the Amarapūra nikāya *mahānāyaka* for her services. Ven. Bandaravela Sudhammikā remained in India, learned Hindi and continues to serve at the Indian Mahābodhi society. Even though Ven. Pānadura-Vekada Bhadrā had returned before end of training due to family issues, she joined the Daṁbulla group later. Ven. Passara Samā later returned to India to support Indian bhikkhunīs as a missionary, and subsequently led further bhikkhunī training and ordination programs, including organizing the 2009 Bodh Gaya bhikkhunī ordination.<sup>85</sup>

Ven. Peliyagoda Sudarśanā became a US resident. She obtained her green card after becoming a bhikkhunī. She completed a second masters at the Buddhist and Pāli University, and later, a PhD. Ven. Sudarśanā's other later accomplishments included founding the Samadhi Buddhist Meditation Center in Florida. She became the first Sri Lankan bhikkhunī preceptor in America, serving as bhikkhunī preceptor for numerous bhikkhunī ordinations in USA together with Ven. Valpola Piyānanda since 2010.<sup>86</sup> “She never gave up,” said Ranjani. Ven. Sudarśanā said, “It’s been given to us, I have taken it, that’s the end of it.” Ranjani remarked that she kept to that line and she was very strong.

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85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

However, two of the group, Ven. Kurunegala Subhadrā and Ven. Kurunegala Hemapālī hadn't continued with the training, and returned to living as *sīla mātās*.<sup>87</sup>

After the 1996 ordinations, Ven. Porogamuvē Somalankāra attended an international conference on bhikkhunī ordination in late 1996 or 1997 that was organized by Fo Guang Shan. In addition to being Chief Secretary of the Sarvodaya Bhikkhu Congress, Sri Lanka, he was already close to Fo Guang Shan and supportive of bhikkhunīs. Ranjani said, “Ven. Somalankāra brought the message and started it.” After that, together with Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala, they commenced the training of *sīla mātās* for ordination. Ranjani expressed her gratitude for Master Hsing Yun, the head of Fo Guang Shan International, and the Fo Guang Shan International Buddhist Progress Society, of which Ven. Chuehmen (Sakya Vimuttī) was the director general. She would eventually organize the ordination. Having already had experience with a Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination in 1988, the Fo Guang Shan organization would prove to be an invaluable ally for Ranjani in restoring the Theravāda nuns' lineage.

By then, Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Śrī Sumangala, of Daṃbulla temple, the leading co-ordinator of the '98 ordinations, had entered the picture. He was already known by the point as being progressive due to his promotion of ordination for low-caste monks in the Siam Nikāya of Sri Lanka, which had already caused some tensions with the Asgiriya branch of the Siam Nikāya, which only allows ordination for high-caste men. This had led to Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Śrī Sumangala forming a breakaway group in 1985. Due to being a prominent cultural and tourist site, his Daṃbulla

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87 This is not to comment on whether they are still bhikkhunīs from a vinaya perspective.



temple was nonetheless wealthy and influential. He had already broken with tradition once, and was in a good position to do it again. Ranjani was grateful to him for his support.

Back in Sri Lanka, the 1996 Sarnath ordination had made it into the newspapers. Ranjani's husband had retired from journalism but he still had contacts. It was front-page news, and there was a photo showing the new bhikkhunīs wearing what Ranjani described as "yellow and gold" Korean-style robes. The Sinhalese headline read, "*Bhikkhunī upasampadā śāsanaṃ nāvata udā vū bavayī*": the bhikkhunī *upasampadā śāsana* has been restored. But the ensuing split between criticism and support led to factionalism in the Amarapūra Nikāya, with Ven. Maḍihē Paññāsīha, Ven. Væligama Ñāṇaratana of the Amarapūra Dharmaraksīta faction opposing, and Ven. Talallē Dhammaloka of the Amarapūra Mulava faction supporting.<sup>88</sup> Ven. Maḍihē Paññāsīha had previously written an article for the '93 Sakyadhita Conference newspaper lift-out with the title, "The Buddha Gave a Place to Women" which noted the high achievements of women and praised the work of Sakyadhita,<sup>89</sup> but now the ordinations had happened, he made his opposition clear. Of the mixed reactions, Ranjani said:

You know very strong language; it has been restored. Bhikkhunī. In television news. So this, then only everybody got upset. The books were written against it and controversy in everyday papers, articles going for and against all that. So, then that is the time Talallē Dhammaloka, you have to remember him, Bhikkhu Talallē Dhammaloka he was the *upajjhāya* through-

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88 Weeraratne 2005.

89 M. Paññāsīha, 1993.

out, supporting all the bhikkhunīs till he passed away. He was an *anunāyaka* deputy chief of the Amarapūra Nikāya, but the same nikāya, the other monk is writing books against him. He is writing and answering the book. Very interesting.

Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka was in his seventies and senior, and was abbot of an old temple, the Tapodanārāma at the very end of the tiny Tapodanārāma Road lane-way, just off the shop-lined Colombo-Galle Main Road in Mount Lavinia. He sat on the wooden veranda of his old building and he would pull out a small chair for Ranjani, saying, “Come, come, Ranjani Madam...” so that he could show her the newspaper cuttings. Ranjani said:

So, he said he has a library, he had a library upstairs, he said, “I went to the library Ranjani *Nōnā*, I didn’t know, I just take a book.” He says without any intention when you take a book, “I get the correct book I want.” So, you know things happen like that. He said. He told me that. It is very strange. Before I look for the book, when I touch the book, I get the book. And I read the Vinaya three times,” he said. He read the Vinaya Piṭaka to see whether there is anything wrong and then a lot of interviews and lot of questions, he had a relative who was a professor from the university, he used to come.

Actually, he was writing this story. He was collecting all the paper cuttings and trying to write a book. He said he read three times to see whether there is anything against the Vinaya or Dhamma, said nothing. So, he wrote to all the newspapers about each and said “If anyone can show me if this is wrong, show

me the chapter and the verse. Up to now, nobody has ever shown me where it is wrong. This is only in their mind. Traditionally they cannot accept giving the ordination to women.”

Ven. Væligama Ñāṇaratana, a monk of the Amarapūra Nikāya, had been opposed to the ordinations the whole time. He had also attended the Burmese Sixth Council and was a well-known and greatly respected monk. Ranjani had known him (and his absolute opposition to nuns) since the 1960s, due to attending his services at the Mallikārāma previously. He had been the one who said that they should wear white and wait for Maitreya Buddha. When Ranjani went to see Ven. Dhammaloka, he would say that he hadn't studied or known about it before, but the articles had stirred up controversy. That was how Ven. Dhammaloka became interested. Ranjani said, “No-one ever thought that this was important. The Pātimokkha and Vinaya, bhikkhunī Vinaya nobody was interested.” Ven. Dhammaloka said that nobody had read it.

One day, Ranjani picked up a small, saffron-colored book at the Buddhist Cultural Center. It was a dual Pātimokkha booklet. She read the forward by the editor, which stated, that as there were no bhikkhunīs, the Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha will never be needed in the future. From her discussions with Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka, Ranjani wished to challenge what was written in the forward, saying, “How can you say this? How do you know if in the future it will be needed or not?” Even though the opinion of the editor was the general opinion, Ranjani didn't accept it, and her discussions had given Ranjani the courage to fight for nuns. She didn't yet understand fully what the booklet was about. She thought the *devas* must have put the idea into her head.

Articles ran in the newspapers for weeks on end, for and against. Intellectuals like D. Amarasiri Weeraratne had written in support of bhikkhunī ordination, in newspapers such as *The Island*. However, Ranjani felt that he had gone too far in accusing the bhikkhus of male chauvinism, as well as casteism and probably other things. People had taken his work out of context and used it to agitate the bhikkhus. Ranjani said, “So I have to go and always undo all the damage done by the other people and explain, but I feel that was good, I didn’t get angry with him.” Actually, I had read a lot of Weeraratne’s articles in the research process for this book—he was among the most consistent contributors to the English language discussion on bhikkhunī ordination in the nineties. In one 1993 article, republished in ’94 in a Buddhist women’s newsletter, he described opposing the revival as a “crime against the Buddha.”<sup>90</sup> I can see how sometimes his rhetoric might be perceived as going too far, as he goes on to describe a lack of compassion as being endemic to Theravāda Buddhism. While the tone of the rhetoric around the bhikkhunī revival from the mid-eighties onward has, understandably, sometimes been heated, Ranjani still has a deeply Buddhist respect for decorum and civility and that she might have been taken aback at Weeraratne. She worked consistently for the revival and was herself sidelined by most *mahānāyakas* and the government, but I have never once heard her criticizing her detractors.

One day, in a full-moon day sermon, Ven. Væligama Ñāṇaratana had said he was very angry that day, to see women in yellow and not in white. Ranjani said, “I have heard that [a] long time before we started working.” One day, Ranjani was called on the telephone by a woman that they called Auntie Alice, who has since passed away. Auntie Alice didn’t normally call Ranjani, but

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90 Weeraratne 1994, 17-18.

she asked, “Daughter, what are you doing with the *poṭṭani gaenu*?” “What are you doing with the bag-ladies?”<sup>91</sup> Ranjani explained, “That is like street women, like walking on the street.” Ranjani herself sees the term “bag-ladies” as inappropriate.

This lady asked me “what are you doing with these women on the street like.” Just walking women, when walking on the street. I said, don’t talk like that Aunty, you don’t know they are not like that. Then she said, ‘Can you show me?’, I said I can’t show you, if you want I can take you to them. You can go and see them. I said, “If you want, I can take.” That is the end of that story. Terrible. That is the low ebb you know.

Ranjani recalls another case where a monk used the word “street women,” saying “Don’t allow your daughter to go and join the street women.” Another lady had confided in Ranjani that she had wanted to be a nun at the age of fifteen. Her mother went to consult a senior monk. The monk said, “Madam, don’t send your daughter to join the street women.” The woman had cried as she confided in Ranjani. She was happy to come to the Sakyadhita Center. She had planted some trees there. She was just another case of a woman who had experienced discrimination first hand.

Ranjani expressed that she felt disappointed when the laypeople were out the front. The *sīla mātās* were often sweeping or doing something out the back of the temple and had no opportunity to come to the front [of the temple]. She felt that training bhikkhunis, and taking them to the villages as leaders, had helped to trigger change. “It’s such a big change, a social change, we have done a social change,” said Ranjani. “The

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91 Ranjani used the term *poṭṭani gaenu*, lit. “women carrying bundles.” “Bag-ladies” is my translation.

training of bhikkhunīs...brought everything. They became change agents in society.”

Even though people were surprised and shocked and nobody was expecting it to really happen, Ranjani was pleased with the ordinations. Vipulasāra Thero had said, “When I see something is right, I do whatever is [necessary].” Ranjani hadn’t been waiting for everybody to say it was ok. Ranjani had expressed that even though there was a lot of opposition, her idea was that “Once someone takes a decision with good intentions, it will go ahead and happen.”

Ranjani had felt that by 1996, the sīla mātās had been qualified to receive ordination. Before that, they may not have been ready, but Ranjani felt that it was the right time. Sīla mātās had commented to Ranjani on their ordination saying, “Madam, you did this.” Ranjani replied, “No, it was because you were there, facing difficulties and objections and continuing in the yellow robe.” Even though sometimes they didn’t refer to what they were wearing as a “robe,” they continued, although the sīla mātās were not truly recognized within the Buddhist community. Ranjani said:

I said, “You were ready, all ready, just to come up [and] “bloom.” So, I was fortunate enough to sprinkle a little water on you, just to bloom. I said “You are ready. If you are not there what can I do?” Don’t thank me, I should thank you because you were there, I was able to do it.

## 1997 Talking about Bhikkhunīs

In February 1997, Ranjani spoke at the International Symposium on Women in Buddhism at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University

in Frankfurt. The symposium ran February 7–9. Ranjani’s speech topic was, “How Women in Buddhism Could Influence the Society Today.” Her speech touched on the difficulties that Sri Lanka’s four thousand Buddhist nuns face in obtaining support.<sup>92</sup>

On April 5, 1997, Ranjani spoke at the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress in Colombo. An audience of two hundred, including members of the bhikkhu sangha, listened to the progress of the bhikkhunī revival. The session was convened by Ms. Indrani Iriyagolle to inform the public about the need for the revival. Other speakers included Prof. Chandima Wijayabandara, Prof. Lily de Silva, D. Amarasiri Weeraratne and Dr. Hema Goonatilake.<sup>93</sup> Ven. Tathālokā noted that this meeting was significant in inspiring Ven. Ratanasāra, Ven Pannila Ānanda and Ven. Valpola Piyānanda to offer the November 1997 Bhikkhunī Ordination at the International Meditation Center in Los Angeles, California, at which herself and bhikkhunīs from India and Nepal were ordained.

In September 1997, the Heinrich Böll Foundation held their project partner meeting in Mt. Lavinia. Ranjani attended the meeting as their project co-ordinator for Sri Lanka. She organized the venue, a hotel in Mt. Lavinia. The HBF staff came. Ranjani spoke on the topic of the higher ordination of nuns.<sup>94</sup> Afterwards, Ranjani invited the staff members for dinner at her house. They were very touched by her hospitality, as Ranjani felt that the Germans wouldn’t have thought to have made such an invitation. “I have a very good relationship with the Heinrich Böll Foundation staff,” said Ranjani.

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92 de Silva 1997a.

93 Sakyadhita International Newsletter 1997b, 8:2.

94 de Silva 1997b.

Ven. Khemā had been a key transformative influence on Ranjani's life, as it had been Ven. Khemā who had asked Ranjani to help nuns. Some time before she passed away, she had written Ranjani a card, which read, "Ranjani, may you walk in sunshine for helping the nuns." The card arrived after she passed away from cancer, on November 2, 1997.<sup>95</sup>

From December 29, '97–January 4, '98, the Sakyadhita International Conference was held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. By then, the Sakyadhita Conference was in its tenth year of operation, and the conference attracted two hundred participants from over twenty-six countries. The theme was, "Women in Buddhism: Unity and Diversity." The opening ceremony on December 29 was a large event, held at the Devavinicchaya building in the Royal Palace, under the patronage of Her Majesty Norodom Monineath Sihanouk, the Queen of the Kingdom of Cambodia. King Sihanouk of Cambodia had kindly made a donation towards the conference expenses.<sup>96</sup> The conference was organized by Dr. Hema Goonatilake in collaboration with the Association of Nuns and Laywomen of Cambodia (ANLWC). The association had been founded, with patronage from the queen mother, in conjunction with the Sakyadhita Conference.

Ranjani was still the Sakyadhita International president after being elected in Ladakh. Dressed in a saree, Ranjani gave the inaugural conference address, in the royal palace in front of the queen of Cambodia. She gave a brief history of the Sakyadhita conferences and noted the passing of Sakyadhita International co-founder, Ven. Khemā, in her speech.<sup>97</sup> She felt it was very "sacred" to be allowed into that place without too many guards.

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95 de Silva 2007.

96 de Silva & Kawanami 1998a, 9:1.

97 de Silva 1997c.



The remainder of the conference was held at Wat Onaloum, which was a royal wat and the queen's own retreat center.

Dr. Hema Goonatilake, who Ranjani had met in 1996 in Chiang Mai, appeared on the scene at Sakyadhita at the Cambodian conference. She was based in Cambodia doing work for the Heinrich Böll Foundation, so she organized the conference. Hema was happy to see another Sri Lankan, and her husband was also proud of Ranjani as the Sakyadhita International President. Hema had sent her paper on *sīla mātās* for the '87 conference, but had not presented in person, so Ranjani didn't have a chance to get to know her better earlier. Ven. Kusumā and Ven. Sudarśanā came out from their two-years' post ordination training to attend the conference.

Gabriele Küstermann, who attended the Colombo conference in 1993, had become Ranjani's friend. She was Ranjani's roommate in the hotel. Actually, she was Ranjani's roommate at every occasion: before Ranjani knew it, she had already put her name down to share with Ranjani.

The Cambodian international *sangharāja*, the Venerable Mahā Ghosānanda, was also present. He had gained a reputation as the "Gandhi of Cambodia" for his peace work. He had been present at the International Nuns' Conference in 1987, and had been a supporter of Sakyadhita from the beginning. His speech addressed the topic of creating peace in the world. Later, together with Cambodian Mahānikāya *sangharāja* Ven. Tep Vong, he would go on to be a supporter of the subsequent 1998 bhikkhunī ordination in Bodh Gaya.

There were Sri Lankan bhikkhus as well, who had been studying or doing Buddhist work in Cambodia. Ranjani recalled that various speakers including Mother Mahāvīro (a female lay meditation teacher in the '90s) spoke at the

conference.<sup>98</sup> Ranjani had wanted Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo to take over as president, and there was some discussion. But it transpired that Ranjani was re-elected as president. Plans were made for the next conference to be in 2000 in Nepal.

They had visited Cambodia after the end of Pol Pot’s regime. There were skulls of people everywhere and many widows. Ranjani felt that there was a sadder side to Buddhism in Cambodia—many people didn’t know about the five precepts, and she noted the sexual exploitation of girls. She was therefore grateful that the conference could be held there. After every conference, they had a tour, and in Cambodia, they saw Angkor Wat, and Siem Riep “on an air-conditioned boat,” as well as a rehabilitation center for girls who had been trafficked.

## 1998 The Bodh Gaya International Ordination

However, back in Sri Lanka, Ranjani’s husband was sick. From bed, he had written a small notice on his pad, detailing Ranjani’s re-election as Sakyadhita International president. Ranjani recalled:

In the meantime, my husband was quite sick...we had the conference in December–January, and when I returned, it was the same month, end of January, he was admitted to hospital. He was so proud. I still have the last thing he wrote. “Ranjani de Silva re-elected as president of Sakyadhita International,” that’s what he was writing. I said, “Don’t put it in the papers.” But there was a little short notice in the paper that I was re-elected as president of Sakyad-

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98 A full list of the conference presenters can be found in the Sakyadhita Newsletter, 1998 (9), no. 1 <https://sakyadhita.org/docs/resources/newsletters/9.1.1998.pdf>

Walking in the Sunshine of the Bhikkhunis

hita International Buddhist Womens' Organization,  
written by another journalist.

B.S.'s notice was never printed, but the newspapers nonetheless carried the story of Ranjani's re-election. Many journalists contacted her.

By early 1998, plans for a second international ordination in Bodh Gaya were well underway. Due to the Sakyadhita International Conference which had been held in the previous year, the ordinations were now proceeding with the additional support of Cambodian International Sangharāja Somdech Preah Maha Ghosānanda, and the patronage of "domestic" Sangharāja of the Cambodian Mahānikāya, Somdech Tep Vong.<sup>99</sup>

Everything had been arranged for Ranjani to attend the 1998 ordination in India, but in the end, she wasn't able to attend due to her husband's illness.

The organizers of the 1998 ordination were:

Sarvodaya Bhikkhu Congress, Moratuva, Sri Lanka  
All India Bhikkhu Congress, India  
The Mahā Bodhi Society of India  
Daṃbulla Rock Temple, Daṃbulla, Sri Lanka  
Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order, Kaohsiung, Taiwan<sup>100</sup>

The Bodh Gaya International Full Ordination Committee included:

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<sup>99</sup> Tathālokā, personal correspondence 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Hsi Lai Temple, 2002.

Patrons

*Cambodia*

Venerable Tep Vong—Supreme Patriarch of Mahā  
Nikāya, Cambodia

*Sri Lanka*

Ven. Talallē Dhammaloka—Chief High Priest of Jus-  
tice (Adhikaraṇa Nāyaka) for Western Province,

Deputy Prelate of the Amarapūra Sect

Ven. Kumburugamavē Vajira—Vice Chancellor of  
Pāli and Buddhist University, Sri Lanka

Ven. Kamburupitiyē Nandaratana—Chief High Priest  
of Western Province

Ven. Varagoda Pematana—Vice Chancellor, Bud-  
dhaśravaka Bhikkhu University Anuradhapura

Ven. Porogamuvē Somalankāra—Deputy Sangha  
Nāyaka Thera of Southern Province, Chief Secretary,  
Sarvodaya Bhikkhu Congress

Ven. Mahagalkadavala Puññasāra—Principal of Nuns  
Education Center, Daṃbulla

Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala—Chief Secretary of Ran-  
giri Daṃbulla Sangha Chapter

*India*

Ven. Māpalagama Vipulasāra—President, The Mahā  
Bodhi Society of India

Ven. Rāṣṭrapāla—Founder, President-Cum-Medita-  
tion teacher of International Meditation Center, Bod-  
hgaya

Ven. Dharmapāla—President of All India Bhikkhu

Walking in the Sunshine of the Bhikkhunis

Congress

Ven. Nyanainda—Abbot of the Burmese Temple,  
Bodhgaya

Ven. Sanghasena—President of Mahābodhi Interna-  
tional Meditation Center, Ladakh, India

*Taiwan*

Venerable Master Hsing Yun—Founder of Fo Guang  
Shan Buddhist Order, Taiwan

Venerable Ching Hsin—President of Chinese Bud-  
dhist Association, Taiwan

*Malaysia*

Venerable Ching Ming—Ex-President of Malaysia  
Buddhist Association, Malaysia

Venerable Chi Huang—President of Malaysia Bud-  
dhist Association

Venerable Dr. Kirindē Dhammānanda—Chief Prelate  
of Malaysia

*Korea*

Venerable Wol Ha—Supreme Patriarch, Korea Bud-  
dhist Jogye Order

Venerable Ka San Seak—Chancellor of Korean Bud-  
dhist University

Venerable Tong Joo Won Myuong—Sila Committee  
of Korean Chau-See School<sup>101</sup>

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101 Ibid.

By the time that the international ordination took place in '98, there were about thirty to forty *sīlā mātās* under training at Daṃbulla. Ranjani reported that the most senior twenty were sent to the ordination in Bodh Gaya from February 14–23. Ten of them were selected and had training from Kalundava in Daṃbulla, and another ten of them were selected through Ven. Somalankāra.<sup>102</sup> The names were:

- Ven. Panāgoḍa Mitṛā Ñāṇissari
- Ven. Rahatungoḍa Saddhā Sumanā
- Ven. Pānadurē [=Padukka] Sumitrā
- Ven. Hantagoḍa Bhadrā Kapilāni
- Ven. Piṭipana Sumindā Devasārā
- Ven. Kotmalē Cālā Siri Sumedhā
- Ven. Oggamuvē Sumedhā Dhammapālī
- Ven. Velagedara Dharma Śrī
- Ven. Kirivællævē Suguṇapālī
- Ven. Dapanē Bhadrā Dharmarakṣiṇī
- Ven. Ratnapurē Saddhāśīlī
- Ven. Telesgamuvē Sumedhā
- Ven. Valagala Bhadrā
- Ven. Dapanā Dharmā Sumanapālī
- Ven. Æhæliyagoḍa Bēmā
- Ven. Orutōṭa Damayantī
- Ven. Devamullē Rucinandā
- Ven. Māvāla Sunetrā
- Ven. Aṭakalampannē Supēkṣalā
- Ven. Kōlōnnē Susimā Dharmapālī<sup>103</sup>

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102 Yasodhara, 2008.

103 A. Śrī Ñāṇasīla, 2012, 226–227.

Twenty nuns from Sri Lanka went for the ordination, and with twenty-six bhikkhunīs ordained from India and ten from Nepalese Theravāda traditions. Many more came from other countries. The gap between the Sarnath ordinations in December, 1996 and the ordinations in February, 1998, was only one year and two months. In the intervening time, the IBMC bhikkhunī ordination with Ven. Havanpola Ratanasāra as preceptor had already happened in the US, officiated by the Sri Lankan Theravāda bhikkhu sangha.

The candidates had been asked to come before the ordination to complete some training in India. In addition to Sri Lankan candidates, there were nuns from other traditions who came and received higher ordination at the same time. In total, there were around a hundred and fifty international and Indian participants, with sixty-three from Theravāda traditions (as per the commemorative booklet published by Fo Guang Shan).

Ven. Sucintā, who had stayed at both the Nuns' Island in Sri Lanka with Ven. Khemā, and our previous nuns' residence, Sanghamittārāma in Melbourne, Australia, was one of them. The first group of twenty had been sent out of the thirty to forty Sri Lankan sīlā mātās who had been trained. Ven. Sumangala Thero had said they would ordain the others after the first group returned.

As previously mentioned, the ordination had been organized in co-operation with Fo Guang Shan's International Buddhist Progress Society, under Ven. Chuehmen. However, after the ordination, the Sri Lankan senior bhikkhus took the Sri Lankan group, "all thirty-three of them together"<sup>104</sup> with Ven. Kusumā at their head, and gave what Ranjani described

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104 I have been unable to ascertain who precisely the thirty-three were, I have left this number as quoted by Ven. Kusumā. I would have followed this up with Ven. Kusumā had she not passed away.

as “another ordination” with a separate *sīmā*.<sup>105</sup> The *sīmā* was the Anagārika Dhammapāla *sīmā*, which had been established and consecrated by the Sri Lankan Theravāda bhikkhu sangha.<sup>106</sup> Ven. Kusuma expressed that this re-established the Theravāda bhikkhunī sangha.<sup>107</sup> This ordination was done in the presence of ten bhikkhus.<sup>108</sup>

This act was later described (in 2013) by Ven. Anālayo as being a *daḷhīkamma*.<sup>109</sup> A *daḷhīkamma* is a “strengthening act,” a supplementary legal act of the sangha (often to “correct” perceived errors in an earlier act, most often an ordination). During interview in 2020, Ranjani commented that she felt that this ordination by bhikkhus should satisfy the ordination validity for those who had opposed Mahāyāna dual ordination. She had read Ven. Anālayo’s book<sup>110</sup> and had felt that bhikkhu-only ordination should be valid. The Mahāyāna bhikkhunīs had been brought in, according to Ranjani, because of the proven reluctance of bhikkhus to give a bhikkhu-only ordination.

On February 26, 1998, Ranjani met the bhikkhunīs at the airport after they arrived back in Sri Lanka from India. The attendant at the hospital had said, “Master is feeling bad.” Ranjani did not wait. Ranjani recalls that Mother Ramani had said to her husband, when he was sick, “Master, your wife is doing all this, wait till the bhikkhunīs come.” He passed away exactly one day after the bhikkhunīs landed in Sri Lanka, on February 27, 1998.

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105 Kusuma, 2020, 35.

106 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

107 Kusuma, 2020, 35.

108 Yasodhara, 2008.

109 Anālayo, 2013, 324

110 I am not sure which one.



Ranjani recalled the support her husband had offered for the nuns, and his characteristic sense of humor and generosity. She said:

Anyway, he was supportive of the nuns. He try to do justice. He was a person who, he knew that what I was doing was right, I think. That was a great thing that he was supportive.

Meanwhile, the feeling of excitement surrounding the ordination continued. The newly ordained bhikkhunīs were brought in a big procession to the Daṃbulla temple. Reception ceremonies had been organized for them after the ordination where they were received by senior monks and members of parliament. There was a one-page supplement in a national Sri Lankan newspaper. Almost all of the major Sri Lankan newspapers covered the ordination.

The impacts of this ordination were felt globally, as participants included candidates from Theravāda traditions of Sri Lanka, India and Nepal, thus leading to the revival of the Theravāda bhikkhunī lineage in India.<sup>111</sup> However, Ranjani recalled the Nepalese bhikkhunīs, including Ven. Dhammavatī, continued to wear pink *thīlashin* robes after the higher ordination. She remarked, “They can sit on the high chair and everything [i.e., like a bhikkhu], but still not the robes...”

The first bhikkhunī ordination on Sri Lankan soil occurred in the same year, not long after the Bodh Gaya International ordinations. On March 12, '98, on Medin full-moon day, twenty-

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111 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

two nuns ordained as bhikkhunīs at the Sīma Mālaka (Chapter House) at Daṃbulla Rāja Mahā Vihāra.<sup>112</sup>

The ordination was led by Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala Nāyaka Thera, Ven. Talallē Dhammaloka Thera and other senior monks, with the co-operation of nuns who ordained in the earlier ceremony.<sup>113</sup> Bhikkhunī Panāgoda Ñāṇissari and Bhikkhunī Rahatungoḍa Saddhā Sumanā acted as bhikkhunī *upajjhāyās* and another eight bhikkhunīs as *kammavācācarinīs*. Ven. Padukka Sumitrā was also appointed as an *upajjhāyā* at this time.<sup>114</sup>

Actually, the first nuns ordained in '98 didn't have twelve *vassas* suitable for appointment as *pavattinī*. A *pavattinī* ordaining candidates with less than twelve *vassa* would ordinarily be required to confess a *pācittiya*. They were only ordained for less than two months during the period February 26 to March 12, but they had been *sīlā mātās* for thirty to forty years and they were already senior. So the *upajjhāyā* (*pavattinī*) and *kammavācācarinī* appointments were given to the nuns who were ordained in '98 to ordain other nuns. They had been given a month-long course intensive course in bhikkhunī *sanghakammas* by senior monks on their return.<sup>115</sup> Ranjani felt that they had been trained well by the senior monks.

Ranjani watched from outside of the *sīmā* as the bhikkhunīs knelt and requested ordination. She felt that it was “very sacred” and a beautiful ceremony, with drumming and recitations. The nuns were taken in batches to be ordained.

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112 full list of names available in A. Śrī Ñāṇasīla, 2012, 228–229.

113 de Silva 1998b, 9:1.

114 Yasodhara, 2008.

115 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

The response was a mixture of praise and criticism. Nonetheless, throughout the world, there was great interest in the ordinations. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had become interested—how did they do the ordination in Sri Lanka with Theravāda bhikkhunīs who did not yet have twelve *vassa*? Ranjani replied, “Our senior monks considered the number of years the *sīla mātās* had been living like bhikkhunīs in the absence of the... [*upasampadā/vuṭṭhāpana*], we had to go on...”

Some of the most strident criticism had come from the ten-precept nuns. Ranjani had commented that the *sīla mātās* had wished to retain government support, and had taken advantage of the situation to oppose the bhikkhunīs. Ranjani recalled that the government had appointed *sīla mātās* to regional administrative positions. The bhikkhunīs had to go to the *sīla mātās* to get their forms signed and to apply for a passport. When the bhikkhunīs came, the *sīla mātās* wouldn’t sign the forms, saying, “For me to sign the form, you have to be a *sīla mātā*.” It was a bad situation for the bhikkhunīs.

According to Ranjani, some *sīla mātās* were reluctant to ordain as bhikkhunīs, because they were afraid that they couldn’t keep the rules. Others had elderly teachers, and didn’t want to take bhikkhunī ordination out of respect for their teachers who were *sīla mātās*.

Ranjani wasn’t dissuaded. When Ranjani started looking for land for the Sakyadhita Center from ’94 onward, she received news from Ven. Kusumā that a certain Mr. Gunasena had inherited land from his uncle and was looking to give it to charity. He had been Ven. Kusumā’s physics teacher. Ranjani asked her to get the address so they could go have a look. It was about fifteen miles south of Colombo, in Pānadura, by the Bolgoda Lake. There was

no road access, so it was difficult even to get there. And no-one knew what Sakyadhita was—Ranjani had to convince people about what they were doing. They had a large area and Ranjani suggested that it wouldn't be right to ask for the “whole cake,” instead only asking for a “piece of the cake.” It was near the lake, with a buildable area a little away from the lake. Ranjani had asked for an elevated block of land that wasn't marshy.

Mr. Gunasena wasn't fully sure, but he used to bring Ven. Kusumā bananas and fruits from his garden. He was a practicing Buddhist, so he was sympathetic to Ranjani and Ven. Kusumā and was happy to help. It was the land that he was a little unsure about, and in the meantime, they got to know each other. Eventually, he offered the larger portion of the land to Sahanaya, which was a foundation for individuals with mental illnesses, organized by a famous psychiatrist and supported by many doctors. *Sahanaya* means “relief” or “peace.” Ranjani felt that Sahanaya was well-established, but that Sakyadhita was a small, new group with unfamiliar names. The Sakyadhita Center was offered the smaller portion of the land, at the end of the block. Ranjani had hoped for at least forty perches to be able to build a small center. But in the end, the block they were given was narrow, with a small buildable area.

The Bolgoda Lake was a popular holiday location which now has many hotels and guesthouses. Ranjani was disheartened about what she could possibly do with the small marshy area, covered in rubbish with no road access, and she kept on looking at it. A nun had heard that the bulk of the land was going to be given to Sahanaya, and she said, “Mad people. We don't want to stay with the mad people.” This type of comment would later get that nun into trouble, as presumably, people had assumed that a Buddhist nun would be more tolerant and accommodating.

The nun told Mr. Gunasena that she no longer wished to stay near the mad people, and he in turn told the doctors' committee that a nun had said that. Ranjani was stuck in the middle and had to try to smooth things over. Even though the land was completely unappealing, she wasn't going to give up. She could see a *nā* tree with long pink leaves growing on the block of land. The *nā* tree had been the sacred tree of previous buddhas in the same manner as the bodhi tree is sacred to our Lord Buddha. They would sometimes decorate that sort of tree while chanting.

The image of the tree, with its long, hanging pink leaves, and the lake water in the distance, "like the sea," was attractive. Even though it was narrow and muddy and not accessible beyond twenty feet, it was the land that they had. There was an ancient stone pillar on the way to the lake, Ranjani felt it must have some historical significance. Ven. Vipulasāra Thero was not well at that time, but Ranjani had wanted him to see the land. He looked from the car, saying "If we are getting it from this side it is ok. [But the other side...] no, we don't want that." He wasn't interested in the land. He wasn't happy with the offer and wasn't prepared to go ahead.

Ranjani, like always, wasn't prepared to give up. But she was still worried that the land may not be enough area to build. She called Mr. Gunasena, saying "Mr. Gunasena, it is not enough, at least give another twenty perches more." Ranjani said that they would have been happy to take twenty if it was given from the other side, but they couldn't build on their twenty which was just like a narrow path—could they make it a bit wider?

Ranjani was staying six miles away from the block of land. Mr. Gunasena said to wait for the Sahanaya doctor, Nalaka, who would be coming from Colombo shortly. He had all the plans ready—Ranjani hadn't been aware. She also hadn't been aware that he and Mr. Gunasena were having a

meeting about the land and the plans. Ranjani called Nalaka, who picked her up in the car and they went to Mr. Gunasena's house. Mr. Gunasena told Nalaka, "Ranjani is asking a little more." The doctor replied, "Women are always greedy." He said that the Sakyadhita Center wouldn't be doing anything anyway and they already had some land.

Ranjani didn't get angry. She bowed to everyone. Nonetheless, Mr. Gunasena realised that there was some sense in what she was saying—it wouldn't be possible to build on such a narrow block of land. He extended the block to sixty perches. After that, they went to the lawyers.

However, there was still no road access. There was a footpath only from the community hall that was associated with a temple. Mr. Gunasena wouldn't have been able to sell the land anyway—hence his decision to offer it for charity so that someone could make use of it. He was not short of money. Additionally, it would have been a lot of work to apply for a roadway. Because the access-way belonged to the temple, Ranjani was instructed to go speak to the monk before going to council. She was referred back to the Ministry of the Buddhaśāsana to give the ok to have access for their block on the road. They approved the access to the block.

Ranjani had consulted an architect who charged the full fee. They began to look for someone who could do the plans free of charge. She was recommended to a certain Mr. Thilakarathne, who did the plans without charging. Ranjani met with him daily. He did the drawing, the supervision of the buildings, organized the contractor, and did everything for the center without charging a cent. Although Ranjani says he wasn't perfect, he was a draftsman whose favorite thing to do was drawing *stūpas*. She would pick him up in the car when he would come to visit. He has since passed away.

Ranjani had gone to council to get the project proposal approved. The registrar was a Muslim man, but the word had already spread to him that Buddhist nuns would be constructing a temple.

Ranjani called the committee to start on the project. She organized cakes and traditional sweets, and the construction started on the foundation. The Sahanaya people were also having their committee meeting on the same day, with doctors and “eminent people.” They saw that Ranjani had started working immediately—by the time the deeds were signed, the proposal was already approved. Ranjani invited them for tea. They were shocked that she had already started building, saying, “The greedy women didn’t do anything and still got the land.”

The nun’s comments about mad people had left a bad impression on the Sahanaya people. Again, someone asked what type of a nun could say things like that, as they don’t consider depressed people as being mad. Ranjani felt that she had already apologized and that it wasn’t right of the Sahanaya people to continue to raise the issue. Ranjani said, “I told [him], I said sorry to him. She said it, it’s true, but once I’ve said sorry, it’s over, now don’t talk about it. That shut him down after that. That is the [story of the] foundation of the center.”

In June 1998, Ranjani traveled to the Claremont College in the U.S for a special session of Sakyadhita, the North American Buddhist Women’s Conference, which ran from June 3–7. It had been organized by Norma Pratt. The aim of the conference had been to connect traditional Buddhism and feminist ideas. It had been held at the Pitzer College near Los Angeles, California, and co-sponsored by Sakyadhita USA and the Center for Educational Studies at Claremont University.<sup>116</sup> It was after the ’98

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116 Sakyadhita International Newsletter 1997a, 8:2.

ordinations and Ranjani discussed how the ordinations were conducted, presenting her paper about them. Ven. Sucintā was introduced to Ranjani by Ven. Valpola Piyānanda.

Ranjani reports that people were very interested, and approached her later for interview. Her paper was edited by Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo and published as *Reclaiming the Robe: Reviving the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka* in “Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements,” which was published by SUNY Press (2004). Ranjani returned to Sri Lanka in June, just before the birth of her grand-daughter, Sachini.

Later that year, Ranjani was invited to speak at the HBF Women in Religion Symposium in Turkey, held in Istanbul from November 12–15, where she represented Buddhist women. The topic was Buddhist perspectives on violence. She referred to the influence of women on the family as mother, wife daughter or sister. She spoke about her belief that with the purity of individuals, countries could be purified.<sup>117</sup> A Catholic woman from Austria who had been an invited representative approached Ranjani after the speech. She said, “I heard your speech and now I would like to become Buddhist.”

The Heinrich Böll Foundation suggested that she extend her visit and come to Berlin to sign the sponsorship contract. She flew to Berlin after the conference, and to the Heinrich Böll Foundation office, where her proposal was approved at a board meeting. Ranjani recalls it must have been at the end of the year, because it was cold in Germany. Her EU visa was issued for November 17 to December 7, 1998, so we can put the contract signing around this time.

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117 de Silva, 1998d.



Gabriele Küstermann, a German lady, had been Ranjani's good friend since the '93 Sakyadhita Conference in Sri Lanka. She had been supportive of Ranjani's work. She witnessed the signing of the contract. They received the money—Ranjani recalls the strictness of the German accounting standards, saying, "So many rules!" Every three months they had to fill out the forms. She doesn't know how she managed to keep up. Staff from the foundation visited her at her home many times. Later, an auditor came as well to audit the accounts.

Every three months, Ranjani wrote a progress report and sent the accounts form to the HBF head office. Every cent had to be accounted for. She arranged a female assistant to help her with the accounts. When there was no receipt for the bus fare, they pasted the ticket and sent it. "How we handled the German standards was incredible," remarked Ranjani. The HBF was happy with their project. She attributed the availability of funding to things falling in line due to the Dhamma. Ranjani began to attend HBF project partner meetings as project co-ordinator annually.

## 1999 First Round of Nuns' Training and Building the Sakyadhita Center Sri Lanka

Until about 2001 or 2002, even after the opening of the Sakyadhita Center, Sakyadhita Sri Lanka continued to operate from an annex in Ranjani's house. Her husband had used it as his office before he passed away. In a corner, there was a place to meditate. There were two tables and a typewriter. Ranjani had a cupboard and a drawer to keep her files in. It faced the gate. The area had originally been intended as a garage, so it had a large four-piece door.

One time, Ranjani had dreamed that her house was empty. There was no furniture or items inside. Her husband was putting up a flag on the gate. It was a Buddhist flag, on which someone had written, *Sakyadhita Budu Madura*—Sakyadhita Buddhist Temple. Ranjani had always hoped to turn her house into a meditation center. Many nuns from international countries, including New Zealand, the US and the UK stayed in her house before their ordination. By that time, Ranjani’s husband had passed away already.

The sponsorship by the HBF had already been approved for nuns’ training programs and buildings, so they got to work immediately. The proposal had included the Sakyadhita center buildings. Ranjani was asked to provide details of the building expenses for the center and give plans. She provided the plans for a lecture hall for training—a large hall with a Buddha statue. The Sakyadhita Center statue was cast by Ven. Vipulasāra Thera, who was a sculptor and an artist. There is the same one, also done by Ven. Vipulasāra Thera, at the Buddhist Society of Victoria Buddhāloka Center in Melbourne.

The architect, Mr. Thilakaratne, had hoped to replicate the style of ancient temples, which feature a double roof. He had placed columns to support the roof in the center of the hall. It was Sri Lankan New Year’s time, in April, and the builders had stopped work. Ranjani had been coming every day to check on the progress of the center. When she saw the columns, she knew it wasn’t what she had hoped, but she was scared to raise it with Mr. Thilakaratana, because he was so humble and he was doing it for free. In the morning, Ranjani finally said, “Mr. Thilakaratne, now what can we do...I think that hall, I like to have it without any [columns], free without those columns—what can we do?” He agreed to stop work. Ranjani had the columns broken down to make additional space in the hall. She also had a wall removed to

make more space. The design was also changed so that the external concrete staircase to the library became an internal wooden staircase. Ranjani said:

I said, can we stop work now? He's very humble, he said ok, he stopped the work. I had to break all those concrete columns, because it's going to be a hall, we need space. I remember in those old temples, they have columns and we used to lean on them when we were seated for the Dhamma talk, everywhere columns. In the hall. There were so many columns in the middle of the hall—please avoid that in the structure, I said. It is going to be our lecture hall for training the nuns, and other purposes.

There were two rooms for teachers. Ranjani had hoped that Ven. Kusumā would come, and had planned a room with an ensuite bathroom for her. The dining areas and kitchen were also completed. The marshiness of the land was still an issue. Water was seeping through, but somehow, the buildings were completed.

The other half of the HBF sponsorship had been to train nuns. The center was not ready, so Ranjani had to hire a place where they paid rent. The rent was paid for by the HBF. The costs of the nuns' travel were covered, as well as their residential cost. Professional lecturers were brought in from the National Institute of Social Development (NISD) to conduct professional training. Through HBF, they were able to pay the lecturers and cover their transport. The HBF officers had been in Mt. Lavinia for the project partner meeting, so the HBF officers attended the launch.

The nuns were very interested in the project. They went to the villages, and after that, an assignment was given. Training was

given in social development work, counseling, leadership, first aid, and mother and child. In “mother and child,” topics such as pregnancy and the mother-child relationship were addressed. The Sakyadhita Center continues to provide counseling for pregnant women. Ranjani said, “That training was...that leadership means [that] they became the social agents. That very word was used—they became the social change agents. Social change. Changing the society. We did the social change in the society.” The term “social change agent” seemed quite important to Ranjani.

They went to very remote areas, sometimes traveling long distances over paddy fields, and through rural and mountainous areas. The HBF had given a vehicle and a driver, so that Ranjani could attend to her work as project coordinator. They traveled with the lecturers. Sometimes they would stay a night in the village. They had the money to pay expenses if they needed to eat at a restaurant. They stayed in the village and sometimes they slept on mats and cushions. Some of the lecturers just had to rough it out! At night-time, they had to go to the well to wash. Ranjani said, “So much fun. So...I can’t imagine.” Occasionally, the nuns would have contacts and arrange a house where their supporters had offered accommodation. “It was adventurous,” said Ranjani.

They had appointments in the village, sometimes in more than one location. They went from place-to-place in the village and with traffic, they could easily run late. Ranjani recalls that one day, they were traveling to another village. It was already dark and the moon was rising. There was a flat, rocky area. When they arrived, the whole village had come to greet them. They had been informed that the nuns had been trained in the areas listed and that they would be coming to the village.

In the presence of the community, they introduced the nuns and the lecturers to the villagers. The lecturers would introduce the nuns, outlining their training and leadership roles. They

became community leaders, giving advice in matters as diverse as policing, drunkenness, and the building of public wells. Many interesting stories came from the villages.

Even though the *sīla mātā* had been at a low ebb, rural *sīla mātās* still maintained a visible connection with the community, although often they stayed alone with few resources. The villagers commented that sometimes the monks lacked attention to the needs of the devotees. If they took a *dāna* to a monk-temple, sometimes a boy would take the food and just return the containers. However, with the *sīla mātā*, even small donations or Buddha-*pūjā* would often be welcomed with a Dhamma talk and an *anumodāna*. This led them to have faith in the *sīla mātās* who showed concern for the devotees.

Everywhere they went, the program had been planned, and people would be there. However, one time, there were just two or three people. Ranjani was wondering where the participants were, until the nun rang the bell and people began coming. They had been working in the field, but when the *sīla-mātā* rang the bell from the temple, they came. Ranjani thought that it was interesting.

In a 1999 Guardian Newspaper article “Nuns at the Center of an Unholy Dispute,” Ranjani was quoted as describing the benefits of ordained nuns. She said, “They have many advantages over the monks; they are easily approachable, they can handle disputes between husbands and wives and even go inside the family home.” The impact of nuns on the family had been important to Ranjani.<sup>118</sup>

In the same year, Ranjani was contacted by the German embassy in Sri Lanka. They knew about the HBF partner project, and they were concerned about the lack of government approval for bhikkhunīs in respect of the HBF

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118 Price 1999.

project. Ranjani laughed and said, “Why do you want government approval to take the precepts?”

Ranjani was interviewed by BBC Radio. She spoke about the nuns in Sri Lanka. They asked her to do some chanting, which was then broadcast.

## 2000 Taiwan Bhikkhunī Ordination

On February 1–7, 2000, Ranjani attended the Sixth International Sakyadhita Conference, held at the Mahāpajāpatī Monastery in Lumbini, Nepal. Four Nepalese Theravāda nuns had been ordained as bhikkhunīs earlier in 1988, however, they were still afraid to wear the bhikkhunī robe. Of the four, Ranjani knew Ven. Dhammatī. The theme was “Women as Peacemakers: Self, Family, Community, World.” At the conference, Ranjani also met the Australian woman who would later ordain as Sudhīrā Bhikkhunī, while she was still a layperson. She had the intention of becoming a nun.

Following a resolution of the Sakyadhita conference, Ranjani wrote a letter as President of Sakyadhita International to the Sri Lankan Government requesting official recognition of bhikkhunīs. The letter is in Ranjani’s personal archives. Nothing seems to have come of it.

After the conference, Ranjani retired as president and Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo was elected for the next term. Ranjani expressed her gratitude and admiration for Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo: she considered her to be a strong person who had helped Sakyadhita to survive. Because of her work, Sakyadhita International was able to continue to expand successfully, bringing Buddhist women together from around the world.

Ranjani had taken a Sri Lankan bhikkhunī—one of the first generation of Daṃbulla preceptors—Ven. Rahatungoḍa Saddhā Sumanā—to the conference. Ven. Sudhīrā, then a layperson, was introduced to Ranjani and they discussed about her becoming a nun. She would later go to stay with Venerable Rahatungoḍa Saddhā Sumanā at Æhæliyagoḍa.

After the conference, on June twelfth, 2000, Ranjani was invited to speak at the Buddha Dhamma Expo organized by Sylvia Wetzel in Germany. As former president of Sakyadhita International, she spoke on the topic of “Bhikkhuni Sangha Revived after 1000 years.” In her speech, she told the audience that now there were nearly two hundred bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka.<sup>119</sup>

Ranjani’s work had already been noted internationally. In a book chapter published in *Women's Buddhism, Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal* in that year, Rotraut (Jampa) Wurst wrote the following of Ranjani:

For the first steps in establishing bhikṣuṇī ordination, we have to thank Ranjani de Silva, president of Sakyadhita International, who made it possible at the end of 1996 for ten women to receive bhikṣuṇī ordination from Korean bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs.<sup>120</sup>

In the period March 1998–December 1999, higher ordination ceremonies continued to take place in Sri Lanka.<sup>121</sup> Around the same time, there was another group associated with the Nævgala Yogāśrāma, hereafter referred to as the Nævgala group, which approached Ranjani. The Nævgala group was under Ven.

119 de Silva, 2000a.

120 Wurst 2000, 100.

121 de Silva, 2000b.

Batagama Medhānanda. His Galigamuva monastery was “like an arañña.” An arañña is a wilderness or forest monastery. This one had a cave! The name “Nævgala” itself, meaning “rocky ship”, refers to the mountain, where the telecommunications towers give the appearance of it being a ship. Ven. Medhānanda was skinny and lived in the cave. Ranjani recalls supporters climbing up to the cave to give him congee. He has now passed away.

He had been supporting sīlā mātās for a long time and he had twenty-six sīlā mātā monasteries under him, mostly in the Kandy and Kegalle district. According to Ven. V. Suvimalī’s post on Facebook, entitled, “Ape Loku Hamuduruwo: A Classic Patriarchal figure on Naugala Hill,” the first nuns had ordained with him in 1958, as part of the Samastha Lanka Sasanaloka Silmata Sangamaya group. As he had been ordaining sīlā mātās for the previous forty to fifty years, the sīlā mātās were extremely loyal to him. Ranjani thought he was in a Burmese tradition as many of the names, like Khemacārī or Dhammacārī, sounded Burmese.

In the beginning, Ranjani didn’t know about Nævgala. However, she received a request from the youngest nun, Ven. Sudarśanā, who was educated. She said that the sīlā mātās from Nævgala were good, but they didn’t want to go to Daṃbulla to ordain as bhikkhunīs due to a previous dispute. Additionally, they had been under the Nævgala monk for a long time. Also, they were practicing meditation and were more oriented towards the forest tradition. She had asked, “Would it be possible to arrange another ordination for this group of nuns, who had been practicing for a long time?”

Meanwhile, Fo Guang Shan had advertised for an international ordination to occur in Taiwan in April 2000—the third great Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination by Fo Guang Shan, which also marked the two-thousand-year anniversary of



Buddhism in China.<sup>122</sup> Ven. Porogamuvē Somalankāra Thero had been involved. Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala had insisted that only Daṃbulla could do the ordinations. He was keen to promote Daṃbulla, and he started training groups and doing ordinations.

Ranjani had not met this group of *sīlā mātās* before, but she entered into communications with Fo Guang Shan about ordination. Two senior bhikkhunīs from Fo Guang Shan came to interview them. Two nuns who were trained by the Sakyadhita Center, Ven. Dhammaśāntī and Ven. Supeśalā, also received bhikkhunī ordination in Taiwan.

Ranjani invited the group of nuns to Parama Dhamma Cetiya, where Ven. Vipulasāra had the facilities and office. At that time, Ven.s Santinī and Sīlavatī of Indonesia, and two other Indonesian nuns, had been looking for an opportunity to ordain. The news had spread about the '98 ordinations, and they came to Sri Lanka to find an opportunity to become bhikkhunīs. Somebody had referred them to Ranjani.

Ranjani finally met them. She said, “You’re very lucky, come today, we are having an interview for *sīlā mātās*. Ranjani gave them the application form, and got them to fill it in and to go for interview with the Fo Guang Shan bhikkhunīs. They had written to her, “Please see that we get the same as the Sri Lankan Theravāda way.” The group of three were very keen. Ranjani had asked that they be included with the Sri Lankan group—she did the work on their behalf. It was a lot of work—she recalled that she had to go to the Sri Lankan immigration office get visas and arrange passports for twenty-one nuns who had never traveled abroad before. Ranjani was running back and forth to the immigration office and couriering the passports. “I don’t know how I did it,” said Ranjani. Another Sri Lankan nun joined the

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122 Tathālokā 2014, 41.

ceremony independently, bringing the total number of Sri Lankan ordainees to twenty-two.

In the end, they went. Ven. Kusumā also attended the Taiwan ceremony as an interpreter, just as Ven. Kusumā was also present in the *sīmā* for the '98 ordination. Ranjani remarks that Ven. Kusumā had said the Daṃbulla group wouldn't accept her as a bhikkhunī: “She said that they don't accept her as bhikkhunī but then how she was invited to the *sīmā* when bhikkhus gave ordination?” Ranjani said:

So, now that is why, she is raising that point. They say, Kusumā Bhikkhunī is not a bhikkhunī. We don't care, Bhikkhunī Kusumā has joked. Somebody had told about her and Sumangala Thero was very angry because he wanted to say that his one was the first one, because the Korean sangha gave the bhikkhunī ordination to Kusumā, so he never accepted Kusumā as a bhikkhunī. He had said “Kusuma is Ranjani's *gola* [pupil].” Bhikkhunī Kusumā only told me.

While these criticisms don't seem to have affected Ranjani, she had remarked to me that she felt it was a shame that the bhikkhunīs had been split like that.

Ven.s Attadvē Rahula and Henepola Guṇaratana, and Nævgala founding father, Ven. Batagama Medhānanda, among others, had certified the 2000 Taiwan bhikkhunī group. There, the four Indonesian bhikkhunīs were ordained together with twenty-one other bhikkhunīs from the Nævgala group, as well as one Sri Lankan candidate who had organized her participation independently. In the end, Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka was unfortunately unable to travel to the ceremony due to an urgent

matter at his temple. Ranjani said, “Our monks traveled to Taiwan to give ordination. They were given in the Theravāda way. Though it was done at the Fo Guang Shan, it was in the Theravāda way. They were given the Theravāda robe.”

The ordination took place at Fo Guang Shan, Kaohsiung, on April 15. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh had observed the ordination in Taiwan, but had not wanted to ordain at that time.

Ranjani received the nuns at the airport after they returned from Taiwan. Some of them were elderly and had not traveled before. Ranjani said, “They are coming one by one, with the trolleys and they look so beautiful! They are so...so happy they were, and I am so happy and I am trying to bow, and they feel like bowing to me.” It was a lot of work to get the inexperienced nuns through the airport, and Ranjani said, “I think that was the biggest job I think getting to the airport and running up and down, I was able to do, I don’t know how I did. But anyway, it happened.”

After that time, ordinations were held in Sri Lanka. The Sakyadhita Center was still being built at that time, so all the ordinations were at Ven. Talallē Dhammaloka’s monastery, the Tapodanārāma in Mt. Lavinia. He took the applications and approved them. It was also Ven. Talallē Dhammaloka who invited the monks and organized the certificate which listed the names of the attending monks with their signature. Ranjani arranged for the chief bhikkhunīs from Mahāyāna traditions to attend. In 2002, Ven. Sang Won and Ven. Chuehmen served as bhikkhunī co-upajjhāyas. Ven. K. Kusumā and Ven. P. Sudarśanā served as chief and deputy *kammavācācarinīs* offering the Pāli-text examination and *upasampadā sanghakammas*.<sup>123</sup>

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123 As per ordination certificate and personal correspondence with Ven. Tathālokā, 2021, on the basis of interviews with bhikkhunīs involved.

Ranjani had commented that Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala was cross because they had sent the twenty-one nuns to Taiwan. She recalls him calling her on the phone and scolding her for “about an hour.” He had some personal conflict with the Nævgala group of nuns and had objected that they should have gone to him. He had asked their senior *kammācariyā* and *upajjhāyā* not to ordain their group. It had gone on like that for some time—Ven. Sumangala insisted, no, they couldn’t have the ordination, their *kammācariyā* and *upajjhāyā* will not come. So there was a minor split between the Daṃbulla and the Nævgala group. “Later, some of them decided it doesn’t matter,” said Ranjani. Ranjani felt that the monks had sects, but nuns shouldn’t have them. She wanted them to unite for strength. In the end, Ranjani felt that the candidates were happy to receive their ordination at Fo Guang Shan. She again expressed her gratitude for Fo Guang Shan’s Master Hsing Yun. She also mentioned Ven. Chuehmen’s continued assistance for the Sri Lanka bhikkhunīs. “My connection with Fo Guang Shan is still there,” said Ranjani. The most senior Fo Guang Shan bhikkhunī had visited her home, and she had felt privileged.

Ven. Padukka Sumitrā had been from the 1998 group, and even though Ven. Sumangala objected, she accepted the invitation to give ordinations at the Sakyadhita Center since 2001. Ranjani said, “I was happy to mix the two groups as much as possible to avoid any division.” Ven. Padukka Sumitrā had already proved her dedication to bhikkhunī education by this point in setting up a training center for twenty-five bhikkhunīs in Millaniya from 2000. All of her efforts to have the school registered with the government went nowhere, and she had to rely solely on private donations.<sup>124</sup>

Nonetheless, the problem of the ordinations being perceived as being Mahāyāna stayed with Ranjani. She recalled:

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124 Samara, 2007.

So, everywhere they popped up now. Ah! They were telling that I am bringing Mahāyāna, so I just say without thinking, I say “No you can’t blame me, you wait and see, they will come, Mahāyāna nuns will come to Theravāda. I just say without having any background knowledge about anything. I just say it.

Actually, Theravāda opened and then that is how everything—they start flowing in, that is a big gate that was open.

By that time, in addition to the Sakyadhita Center at Pānadura, three other bhikkhunī training centers emerged at the aforementioned Nævgala (Kegalle), Millaniya (Horana-Kalutara) under Ven. Padukka Sumitrā, and Æhæliyagoḍa under Ven. Saddhā Sumanā.<sup>125</sup>

After 2000, there were ordinations every year. Bhikkhunis who ordained in Daṃbulla or Nævgala were invited to train via Sakyadhita Sri Lanka in batches of forty at a time. Ranjani had received many individual applications from diverse countries, including the US, the UK, Canada, Malaysia and Nepal. She saw the opportunity for womens’ higher ordination as attracting international candidates to Theravāda Buddhism, and mentioned the name of at least one senior bhikkhunī who took a Mahāyāna ordination simply because Theravāda ordination hadn’t been available earlier. There were probably more than one.

Ranjani maintained a friendly relationship with Ven. Sumangala, despite his criticism. She said, “There are no divisions for me with Ven. Sumangala.” She had worked closely with the 1998 group, and had even given Ven. Sumangala a copy

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125 Welabada, 2004.

of their training syllabus—a valuable document. Ven. Sumangala was happy that training could be given to participants in the 1998 group via the Sakyadhita Sri Lanka nuns’ training project from 1999 onward.

When the buildings were completed in the year 2000, May, Ranjani invited Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka Thero to come for the opening day of the Sakyadhita Meditation and Training Center on May 10. The goals of Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, as per their website, accessed 2020, included working in harmony with all Buddhist traditions; creating a network of communication for Buddhist women; providing guidance and assistance to Buddhist women and those aspiring for ordination; supporting nuns’ university study; encouraging meditation, spiritual growth and the Dhamma way of life; empowering nuns to be teachers and community leaders and serving as change agents in society; training in social development work especially for women and children; training in health and environmental education especially for rural nuns; and promoting peace and harmony among all living beings.

Ranjani described the opening day dāna, saying, “Opening day we had a great dāna. So happy, we all shared dāna.” The dāna was given to the bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs, the invitees, and the neighbors. Rukmal contributed a lot, and had donated all the crockery and cutlery for the training center.

Ranjani’s grand-daughter Sachini was not even two years old when the Sakyadhita Center opened, she walked in procession on opening day waving a lotus flower. “She had a close connection,” said Ranjani.

Rukmal—Ranjani’s daughter—was less keen. She would have taken Sachini to McDonald’s or something, but Sachini didn’t want to go. Sachini didn’t talk much and was late to

speak. She used to pull on Ranjani's skirt to go the center. Ranjani brought her to an annual general meeting. The bhikkhunīs were very happy, saying, "One day, Madam, Sachini has to take over your work!"

Sachini told me in interview:

I was maybe around two or so when she opened up the Sakyadhita Training Center in Sri Lanka. So when she opened that up I was there on the opening day, and she told me, the nuns told me as well that I was running around outside holding a lotus flower, running around on the opening day. For her, tugging on her skirt and wanting to go into all the different rooms, the meditation hall. She really felt that from a young age, she really felt that I, myself, was really connected to her. It's hard to explain. We've just always had such a spiritual connection. It's really hard to explain. I just really support her and she knows that. From when I can remember, she's always been with me.

However, as an adult, Sachini feels that a commitment to Buddhism is a choice that she would have to make for herself.

Another ordination ceremony in Sri Lanka took place in June 2000. By that time, there were at least two hundred fully ordained bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka.<sup>126</sup>

At Vesak time, the young nuns at the Sakyadhita Center made lanterns. There were some Burmese nuns visiting the center, who had come with Ven. Tenzin Palmo's tour group. Ranjani had taken them around to see Sri Lanka, including to Anurādhapura.

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126 Ibid.

Ranjani recalled that Ven. Chandrā, who ordained at the Sakyadhita Center at the age of eighty, was an educated lady who had been the first private secretary of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world’s first female prime minister. Her lay name had been Chandra Alagiyawanna. She had wanted to be a nun from the age of fifteen, but her parents had organized an arranged marriage for her. She was a former president of the women’s group of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress.<sup>127</sup> Her husband had been the Sri Lankan ambassador to Malaysia, and as a laywoman, she had taken prominent Malaysia-based Sri Lankan monk Ven. K. Śrī Dhammānanda as her teacher. At eighty, Ven. Chandrā was still in good health. She was the first woman to take sāmaṇerī ordination at the Sakyadhita Center. She was already elderly, so Ranjani gave her the room at the center until she passed away. She spent fourteen years there, from age eighty to ninety-four. She was the author of a number of books and poems, and she wrote some Sinhalese verses on the Buddha’s parinibbāna. Ranjani said, “She is such a great lady, she was so humble.”

Ven. Kusumā went to stay at the Ayyā Khemā Center. In the end, she never stayed at the Sakyadhita Center. Ranjani said, “Because she has her own way, it’s understandable, the nuns’ training, she’d not into that, she’s qualified and she like to write and travel and all that. So she had her own way.”

When the world’s first female prime minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike passed away on October 10, 2000, Ven. Chandra had already ordained, and Ranjani went with her and some other nuns to see the body. She walked with the nuns and the bhikkhunī were there. Ranjani was interviewed by journalists at the funeral. Ranjani said, “She [Mrs. Bandaranaike] would have been happy

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127 Welabada 2004.



to see the bhikkhunīs.” After all, her private secretary had ordained as a bhikkhunī.

Ven. Māpalagama Vipulasāra passed away at age seventy-five, from diabetes, on October 29 in the same year. Ven. P. Sudarśanā, who was based in America, gave a talk, saying “Vipulasāra Thero was our Maitreya Buddha.” Everyone had told them to wait for the next Buddha to come to ordain, but Ven. Vipulasāra had helped them in their real, immediate lives and problems. Like the coming of Maitreya Buddha, he had solved the bhikkhunī problem for them.

Ranjani recalls another story from around the early 2000s, involving the head monk of the Kelaniya temple. It had been a bhikkhunī Kathiṇa ceremony. Normally, at Kathiṇa, they would bring the relics from the temple in procession, where they are carried on the head of a male supporter. It was always a male to carry the relics. However, the head monk had said, “Something is missing. It’s a bhikkhunī ceremony. We should have a woman to carry the relics!” Ranjani recalled that. After-all, it had been Hemamālī, a woman, who had carried the Buddha’s tooth relic in her hair to Sri Lanka. Ranjani couldn’t believe that the monk had really said this: would other monks question him later on? Ranjani was inspired that the monk had made this comment.

## 2001–2004: The Nuns’ Lineage is Planted in Thailand

### 2001 The Seed of the Nuns’ Order is Planted in Thailand

February sixth, 2001 marked the *sāmaṇerī* ordination of Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh as Ven. Dhammānandā of Thailand, who had decided to follow in her mother, Ven. Voramai Kabilsingh’s footsteps and ordain as a nun. After thirty years of academic research and seven years on television, Ven. Dhammānandā was already well known in Thai society. Her retirement from Thammasat University in 2000 had left her free to ordain. Chatsumarn came to Ranjani’s house and had dinner before the ordination. The hair-shaving was done at the Sakyadhita Center, and the ordination was done by a Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*, Ven. Rahatungoḍa Saddhā Sumanā. Although he was a monk of the Amarapūra Nikāya, Ven. Talallē Dhammaloka was flexible, and arranged for Siam Nikāya monks to come for the ordination. As she was Thai, Chatsumarn was very keen to see the presence of the Siam Nikāya, which was originally from Thailand.

Ven. Dhammānandā had spoken about her choice to leave the university and ordain in Sri Lanka. She had written letters previously, inquiring about ordination in Sri Lanka, but she didn’t receive any response. It had been Ranjani who responded to her and passed on news about the situation in Sri Lanka. They had known each other since ’91 and had become friends. Ven. Dhammānandā said:

The ordination that is recognized as Theravāda, bhikkhunī lineage happened in 1998. And I followed the ordination news through Ranjani. Other connection, they don't write, they don't answer, they don't respond to you, you know. Ranjani was my only hope to hear whatever changes is happening in Sri Lanka. During that time, 1998 to 2000, 2001, 2002. This is the time: it was very crucial for the movement of the bhikkhunī ordination. But we could not get anyone to respond to us from Sri Lanka. It was only through Ranjani that we learned about the movement. It was very important to me because I was already considering ordination, considering leaving the university. But I left it until I made sure of the lineage, that the lineage is correct.

It had been important to Chatsumarn that she was ordained into the Siam Nikāya, which had originally come to Sri Lanka from Thailand. The Sri Lankan Siam Nikāya is historically the same group as the Thai Mahānikāya. Ven. Dhammānandā said more about Ranjani's role in her ordination:

But it is Ranjani who helped me get in touch, you know, so my own ordination in 2001, everything was in the hand of Ranjani. Ranjani was the one who contacted Ven. Dhammaloka, the abbot of the temple where I was ordained. This is a senior monk; he was among the very few senior monk of Sri Lanka who supported bhikkhunī ordination during that time. It's very important to note this. He belonged to Amara-pūra. Whereas the ordination in 1998, the person behind it was Ven. Śrī Sumangalo, the Mahānāyaka of

Daṃbulla. That one belonged to *Siamvaṃsa*. Ven. Dhammaloka, even though he belonged to Amara-pūra, nevertheless, he was well-received, he was well-respected.

When the bhikkhus in Daṃbulla organized ordination, they also invited Ven. Dhammaloka. So my ordination, I tried to be in touch with Daṃbulla, and I wanted to be ordained there. That was my first choice. But I could not...I wrote, but he did not reply.

Chatsumarn had traveled to Sri Lanka alone after corresponding with Ranjani—she had described Ranjani as her “only *dāyikā*.” It had been Ranjani who offered Chatsumarn her almsbowl at her *sāmaṇerī* ordination. She had remarked that Ranjani was not only “behind” the ordination, but “in front” of it, as it had been Ranjani who had gone ahead to organize things. Ven. Dhammānandā said:

Finally, it was Ranjani who organized my ordination in 2001, at the Tapodaṇārāmaya, Mt. Lavinia. The beginning of the bhikkhunī lineage in Thailand, Ranjani was the one who was behind. She was not only the one behind it, she was the one also in front, because during my ordination, she was the one who organized everything. I went to Sri Lanka, alone, can you imagine, I went alone, and she was my *dāyikā*, my only *dāyikā*, organizing ordination. I just put cash in her hand and ask her to spend whatever need to spend, please spend on my behalf. She was the one who offered me the bowl, the *pātra*. My *pātra* was given by Ranjani. This is a big footstep to record the history

of Theravāda bhikkhunīs spreading from Sri Lanka to Thailand. The one who is behind it is Ranjani.

The back cover of the Sakyadhita Newsletter May 2002 shows Ranjani alongside the newly ordained Ven. Dhammānandā, talking with Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka. Another photo shows Ven. Dhammānandā bowing to Ven. Rahatungoḍa Saddhā Sumanā.<sup>128</sup> It was clearly a historic occasion—and Ranjani, like always, was there with the candidate. The Sinhalese newsletter headline of the Sakyadhita Center read, “*tayilantayē meheṇi sasnaṭa mula pirayi*,” “The Seed of the Nuns’ Order is Planted in Thailand.” After the ordination, a swarm of discussion arose in Thailand, in and out of the newspapers. As before, reactions were mixed.

Ranjani took out a visa for the Philippines for July to October 2001 to attend the HBF Women and Religion Seminar. In August the same year, she had also traveled to Indonesia. Ranjani was interested in seeing Ven. Santinī and the others who had ordained in Taiwan, and she traveled to Indonesia to see them. Ranjani saw that she was very well established and very happy. Ven. Santinī sent Ranjani to Borobudur with Ven. Sīlavatī. Ranjani recalls going to an Indonesian *vipassanā* center where they were practicing *satipaṭṭhāna*. Ranjani said that although Indonesia is not a Buddhist country, the Buddhist groups are very strong.

## 2002 “Don’t Take the Sāmaṇerīs Out on the Road”

The NISD training continued in batches. The second round of NISD Training commenced in December 2001 and continued into

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128 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, 2002.

2002.<sup>129</sup> The first round of training was in a rented place. By the time of the second round of training in December 2001, the Sakyadhita center was ready, so Ranjani had the kitchen done up in advance. After the training, they again took the lecturers and the nuns to the villages, where the lecturers introduced the nuns and they had a chance to discuss their training and experience. The program review session is discussed further in the Sakyadhita Sri Lanka Newsletter, May 2003, in the article, “A Program in Health Education and in Social Work.”<sup>130</sup>

Ranjani was very interested in the assignments that the nuns had for training. She said, “Some have saved lives of committing suicide like that you know, so many things with assignments and the police, some intervention, how they have intervened and settled disputes. All kinds of experiences with names and places.” In a Buddhist culture, the role of the local monk or nun is that of a respected leader, and naturally, there is also social leverage which comes with this role in relation to village and family problems.

Ranjani continued to report to the HBF every three months. She worked late into the night, typing the progress reports according to the HBF form.

Ranjani felt the the training was successful, and they met many nuns that way. Ven. Madullē Vijitānandā, who now runs the Sakyadhita Center, had been a participant who came for the second round of training. Ranjani was interested in her assignment. When they arrived at their destination, Ven. Vijitānandā was waiting at the top of the road to show them the directions. Ranjani recalled how she was waiting with a bottle of coconut water and cups. She had expected that they had traveled a long

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129 I am grateful to Ven. Vijitānandā for clarifying this detail via personal correspondence with Ranjani, August 2020.

130 Sakyadhitha Sri Lanka 2003.

way. She had organized a hall and invited monks for a presentation on the assignment that she had done.

The village where Ven. Vijitānandā stayed was low-caste and had been neglected. She spoke to women in the village and saw that they didn't even do dāna there or visit temple. Her project had been to make community connections with low-caste villagers. Ranjani said:

She did a lot of inspiring work. That was the great assignment I thought, going and doing that. Include them into the community connection... I didn't know there was so much caste-difference, low-caste.

After the presentation, they had tea together with Ven. Vijitānandā, with the monks and the villagers. Ranjani hadn't been aware of the issues involved with caste discrimination. The local monk was very happy with the work. The low-caste villagers were allowed to have Dhamma classes where they were treated like any other person. Ven. Vijitānandā herself came from a humble family of devout Buddhists. Her elder brother had become a bhikkhu, and her sister was a bhikkhunī. Ven. Vijitānandā had wanted to be a nun so badly that after Grade Two she had refused to attend school. Later, at the age of fifteen, she became a sīla mātā and resumed her education. Prior to that, she had been on strike, as she had wanted to be a nun.

Some time after the village project, a young man approached Ven. Vijitānandā. He bowed to her and thanked her for helping their community. He had been one of the low-caste children from the Sunday Dhamma class the day that Ranjani had gone to the village. He had gone onto university and was now holding a good job. Ranjani was pleased. She felt that that nuns' work was like Dr. Ambedkar in India, saying "Ambedkar.

What he had be doing. Something similar to that, changing the society. For the underclass.”

Before Ven. Vijitānandā came, in addition to Ven. Chandrā, there were three nuns, Ven. Dhammāsāntī, Ven. Supeśalā, and Ven. Anurādhā in the Sakyadhita Center. In March 2002, Ven. Vijitānandā and Ven. Chandrā followed in the path of the other Sakyadhita nuns and took higher ordination at the Tapodanārāma, together in the same group with prominent Vietnamese bhikkhunī, Ven. Liễu Pháp Veditadhammā. Ranjani had invited Ven. Sang Won to return to Sri Lanka to once more act as preceptor together with Korean Ven. Jong Oh; bhikkhunīs from Fo Guang Shan, Ven. Chueh Men, Ven. Yi-Hang and Ven. Man Kwang also participated. Ranjani preferred for more senior East Asian nuns to act as preceptor rather than Sri Lankan nuns with fewer *vassas*. Ven. K. Kusumā and Ven. P. Sudarsanā were the *kammavācācarinīs*.<sup>131</sup>

Ven.s Sudinnā and Sucintā had also stayed at the center. Sri Lankan Ven. Sudinnā<sup>132</sup> and Vietnamese Ven. Dhammanandī<sup>133</sup> also received bhikkhunī ordination at Tapodanārāma that year.

The Sakyadhita Center had a number of particularly memorable success stories, one of which was told to me by Ranjani. One of the neighbors used to drink, and they could hear him scream and fight with his wife. At the center, the nuns used to lock themselves inside, because they were scared. After the training, the nuns opened an invitation for counseling with the wife, who came and explained the situation. She was asked to be patient with her husband. Later, the husband also came and was given counseling. As a result, he stopped drinking, and the family became supporters of the center.

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131 as per ordination certificate.

132 Sudinna, nd.

133 International Women’s Meditation Center, 2004.



That man even installed an additional light at the front of their house on the way to the center, so that attendees could see the way more easily. His children later went to work in the Middle East, and they sent him back some money. With that money, he installed a large bell at the temple.

On February 10, 2002, a *sāmaṇerī* ordination occurred in Thailand. Ranjani had gone to Thailand for the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) Conference with Ven. Rahatungoḍa Saddhā Sumanā. Together with Ven. Dhammānandā, Ranjani had taken the opportunity to organize a *sāmaṇerī* ordination. Ranjani said, “It was [Ven.] Dhammānandā who organized it, so we both did it together.” While they were in Thailand, Ven. Rahatungoḍa Saddhā Sumanā gave *sāmaṇerī* ordination to some *maechis*. A Thai monk was also present.

The INEB conference organizers were concerned, and told them not to take the *sāmaṇerīs* “out on the road.” Ranjani stayed with the *sāmaṇerīs* inside. She ran errands for Ven. Rahantugoda Saddhā Sumanā while she couldn’t go out. Ranjani recalls buying her a bag. The media followed them with cameras—they couldn’t go out even to go to the temple. The Thai newspapers carried headlines, “bald-headed women from Sri Lanka.” The *sāmaṇerīs*’ confinement ended when they were able to fly them back to Sri Lanka.

While Ranjani had been doing social development work in Anurādhapura, a nun had shown her a small block of land near to the sacred precinct, on a road named “Sanghamittā Road.” It was close to Sanghamittā Therī’s *stūpa* and a five-to-ten-minute walk to the Great *Stūpa* and Śrī Mahābodhi. After carrying out her cremation at the place that Sanghamittā Therī had herself pointed out, King Uttiya erected a *stūpa* over Sanghamittā Therī’s ashes.

The structure, which dates from the third century BCE, was only excavated in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Ranjani wasn’t originally interested in buying anything, but after she realized that it was very significant for Sanghamittā Therī, she felt that it was too sacred of a location to pass over. She purchased it thinking that it could be used for bhikkhunī accommodation for nuns visiting Anurādhapura. Later, she donated it to the nuns of Sakyadhita Sri Lanka. Ranjani had saved some money, prepared the plans and found donors, and together with Ven. Śāntānandā, they laid the foundation stone. However, in conversation with the authorities, Ranjani discovered that the Archaeological Department had banned any construction due to the archaeological value of the area. Ranjani had been hoping to name it Sanghamittā Memorial Kuṭi. She still hopes that one day, it can happen.

In July 2002, Ranjani’s attended the seventh Sakyadhita International Conference in Taipei, Taiwan, on the topic of “Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices Across Generations.”

In October 2002, Ranjani traveled to Burma. Ranjani had also organized tours of nunneries with Sakyadhita International previously. A group of about eight of them went to visit nuns in Burma, including Ranjani’s friend Gabriele and Elizabeth Harris. Elizabeth Harris was a British woman who had completed a doctor of philosophy degree in Buddhist Studies at the University of Kelaniya.

Dr. Hiroko “Koko” Kawanami, who worked at Lancaster University in England, was the vice-president of Sakyadhita International. She had done a doctor of philosophy degree in Burma and was very close to the nuns. Additionally, she was married to a Burmese man. There was a nunnery under the name

Sakyadhita in Burma, in Sagai, with a few hundred nuns (*thīlashin* in Burmese). The international Sakyadhita group had visited them on tour.

Koko organized things from the Burmese end, arranging two buses with the little nuns. Children from ages ten to fourteen had become nuns in Burma. Ranjani was amazed by how well they lived together, saying “It’s a great thing that they know how to live with each other.” To bathe, the Burmese nuns took a canful of water, and about five or six bathed from the tank at the same time. They visited various locations in two big buses, and when they parked at a place, they drank Burmese tea from big flasks and snacked on peanuts. There were peanuts constantly.

After visiting the Sakyadhita Center in Burma, they traveled on to the Shan state, where they were introduced to Konlon Sayadaw, a practitioner of *samatha*-meditation who had a reputation as an *arahant*. He was in a wheelchair, and there is a photo of Ranjani with him by Gabriele Küstermann that was published in a journal article by Hiroko Kawanami.<sup>134</sup> They paid their respects. When he heard that Ranjani was from Sri Lanka, his face lit up. Konlon Sayadaw passed away three months later in January 2003.

Another time, Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo visited Sri Lanka, and Ranjani took her to meet *sīlā mātās*. Ranjani said, “[In] one case, they are good *sīlā mātās*, but they did not become *bhikkhunīs*.” At that place, there were about twenty Burmese nuns studying at the center. Somebody had arranged for them to go to Sri Lanka. She saw girls who were ten to twelve years old, with pink robes. They lived in the dormitories. They asked the young nuns what they wanted to do when they grew up. One young nun said, “I want to be a tour guide!” Ranjani thought that they must have found some monks to train them in Sri Lanka.

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134 Kawanami, 2009.

She thought it was a good idea—the Burmese environment was very strict, and largely focused on Pāli language. Of Burmese Buddhism, Ranjani said, “*Buddham saranam gacchāmi, Paṭṭhāna.*” The Paṭṭhāna is the most complex book of the Abhidhamma, which deals with conditional relations (although a shorter version is recited as a *pūjā* ceremony). This was Ranjani’s four-word summary of Burmese Buddhism.

### 2003 Standing at Anulā Therī’s Windswept *Stūpa*

In 2003, Ven. Dhammānandā came to Sri Lanka for ordination alone. She was still a sāmaṇerī at that time. Ranjani had arranged for her to ordain with Ven. Talallē Dhammaloka as *upajjhāya*. The bhikkhunī *upajjhāya* was Ven. Khemacārī of Nævgala. Ven. K. Kusuma and Ven. P. Sudarśanā served as first and second *kammavācācarinīs*.<sup>135</sup>

The ordination was conducted at the Tapodanārāma on February 28, 2003.<sup>136</sup> Ven. Olandē [Holland] Ānanda, who Ranjani had met previously in Ladakh in 1995, also participated in the ordaining bhikkhu quorum.<sup>137</sup>

Thus Ranjani was responsible for organizing the ordination of one of the most influential women in Thai Buddhism, Ven. Dhammānandā. Ven. Dhammānandā had made the following comments during interview:

When I record my own biography about my ordination, Ranjani is the person I have to talk about. When

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135 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021. As per ordination certificate.

136 Dhammānandā, 2003.

137 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, July 2021.

I came back for my full ordination as bhikkhunī in 2003, again, she was the one who organized it, and it happened in the same place, Tapodanārāmaya, by Venerable Dhammaloka. She was the one who got me in touch with my *pavattinī*, my bhikkhunī teacher, Ven. Saddhā Sumanā. Ven. Saddhā Sumanā appeared—came into my existence—for my ordained life because of Ranjani. Ranjani was the one who found her for me, so to say. I was in touch with my teacher since 2001, and again, 2003, Ven. Saddhā Sumanā, the bhikkhunī, did not join because there was some disagreement from Daṁbulla. So she did not join. I was ordained in Tapodanārāmaya. That year, 2003, Ven. Dhammaloka, when I asked for ordination, he said wait until next year, because 2004 he was organizing an international bhikkhunī ordination.

I said, I could not wait. For some reason, you know, I was kind of insistent that because I had already completed two years as a sāmaṇerī, so I insisted that my full ordination should be done in 2003, not realizing that Venerable Dhammaloka passed away at the end of the year 2003. My own mother passed away the same year, 2003, only two months after my full ordination. The timing was very right—that I insisted on the ordination. All this happened because of Ranjani, Ranjani was the one who organized it to happen for me. I'm very grateful. I told her that in my ordained life, whatever *kusalā* that I have made, that she must share with me. More than a *dāyikā*, she is more than a *dāyikā* for me, because I feel that she is my spiritual

partner who would benefit from all my *kusalā* acts since my ordination.

Ven. Charlotte Sudhammā, a former lawyer from the U.S., was also present in Sri Lanka for her bhikkhunī ordination in the same group. She had been the first American woman to ordain in Sri Lanka. The group of four nuns included Ven. Guṇasārī, a Burmese woman and retired anesthesiologist from the U.S., and Ven. Saccavādī, a younger Burmese woman who was famously accomplished in Pāli. Ven. Guṇasārī had been recommended and brought to Sri Lanka by her teacher, Ven. Valpola Piyānanda, for the higher ordination. Ven. Henepola Guṇaratana, Ven. Sudhammā’s teacher, sent his blessings from America.

Ven. Sudhammā recalled the support which Ranjani had shown her warmly:

She arranged for all my care and transportation for the five months that I stayed in Sri Lanka in 2002–2003, and she was fully responsible for having arranged the Sangha to do my *upasampada*, and attended to all the nitty gritty logistics right down to giving us safety pins to hold our bowls in place. I have never forgotten the extraordinary kindnesses she has shown to me.<sup>138</sup>

While she had a number of international guests in Sri Lanka, including Ven. Dhammānandā who was there for ordination, Ranjani arranged an all-night chanting session, conducted by bhikkhunīs, at her house. The session marked both the ordination and the fifth death anniversary of her husband, B.S.

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138 C. Sudhammā, personal correspondence, 2020.

de Silva. The event was conducted in a traditional manner, with a special *maṇḍapa* constructed of paper cut into lacy designs, in which the nuns sat to chant. The devotees sat on mats outside of the *maṇḍapa*. There were decorations of coconut flowers and oil lamps in vases, and the *maṇḍapa* itself was decorated with betel and *nā* leaves.<sup>139</sup>

Ranjani outlined the process for inviting monks (or nuns) for all-night chanting, including the *yugala* (“duelling”) pair of monks who take turns with the chanting. The chanting follows a set format, which is outlined in the *Mahā Pirit Pota*:

All night chanting was done by the bhikkhunīs. When we have all night chanting, we have to arrange...if there is a closeby temple, the monks come, we have to arrange transport to bring them, you know. First sermon, they go to...you know the the system, they do all the three sūtras, *tun-sūtra*, and then the *Mahākaruṇā*...and all the blessings those things and all the drumming all that, it goes on. Then two at a time, *yugala*, they call the *yugala*. They swap. Then others move away. Then you have to transport them back to the temple, then every time they do some section of the *paritrāṇa*....then they have to bring the others, when they sit the others, we don't keep the *maṇḍapa* empty, we bring monks to come and then they bring another two monks to go.

In the meantime, someone has to look after the hot water, or the tea or whatever it is. We keep the lamps burning all night, we have the *pun-kalasa* [auspicious

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139 C. Sudhammā, 2003b.

pot]. Earlier, it was very common. Now the monks are lazy to do the chanting. People have dinner or something. Also, people don’t come and sit...monks are chanting, they don’t sit and listen, they do other things, cooking and talking there. Those days it was very sacred, everybody sit until morning, with their books open, sometimes they follow the *sūtras*. I think the bhikkhunīs did very good chanting.

Like the monks, even more devoted than the monks, *devārāghanā* [inviting the *devas*] first one, they are very nice, you should really follow. The first one, the *anusāsana* [instruction]. Then they give the *pañcasīla* [five precepts]. Then the one who is...they know who is good voices and all that, they give very good, very forceful *arāghanā* inviting the *devas*. Then they do in groups, they say, *evam me sutam...ekam samayam bhagavā sāvattiyam* [Thus have I heard, one time the Buddha was in Sāvattihī].

The chanting went on until just before dawn. At midnight, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the Buddha’s first sermon, was chanted. Whenever each deva world was recited, the drummers started drumming on the cue of “...*sum*”.

The ordination itself took place later at the Tapodanārāma. Rajani hinted to Ven. Sudhammā that she had “organized something special.”<sup>140</sup> There was a procession of about one-and-a-half-miles, and nuns, women and children carrying flowers and flags. The parade was led by several professional dancing drummers in traditional costume, who had been hired by Ranjani to make the

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140 C. Sudhammā, 2003b.



day even more special. A reception was held at the Sakyadhita Center. Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka presided at the reception. Professor Ariyapala Perera of the Buddhist and Pāli University of Jayawardanapura and Ven. Kusumā gave speeches.<sup>141</sup> Ven. Sudhammā wrote, “I finally received my *upasampada* bhikkhuni ordination—through the great efforts of the Buddhist activist and great *dhayaka* [*dāyakā*] of Sakyadhita, Madame Ranjani de Silva.”<sup>142</sup> A group of Ven. Dhammānandā’s students and disciples came to meet her in Sri Lanka after the ordination.

As before, debate emerged in Thailand around Ven. Dhammānandā’s ordination. However, Ven. Dhammānandā won some friends with her heroic actions for Buddhism, and a Thai senate committee recommended that the ordination be upheld. On 11th March 2003, Senator Rabiaprat Phongphanit spoke in Thai Parliament for one hour in defence of the ordination.<sup>143</sup> Bhikkhunī ordination is still not, however, legally recognized in Thailand.

In the same year, around Vesak, Ratnapura in Sri Lanka was hit by the worst floods in sixty years. As the soil was already saturated from rain, the flooding led to landslides. There were between one hundred to two hundred deaths, and many thousands of people were displaced. The nuns at the Sakyadhita Center heard about this, and, like many other people, they were moved. Headed by Ven. Vijitānandā, the nuns walked through the neighborhood, door-knocking to collect supplies for the affected people. After they walked as far as they could, they took a van to reach more remote houses. The Sakyadhita Center shrine room floor was covered in donated supplies, including food, clothes,

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141 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, 2003a.

142 C. Sudhammā. 2003a.

143 Weeraratne, 2003.

medicines and household goods. The nuns themselves donated extra towels and toothbrushes from the monastery.

Ranjani collected rice and supplies at the Sakyadhita Center and went with Ven. Sudhammā and other nuns to affected areas. They went in a caravan of about half a dozen cars, together with a large truck carrying the supplies, with a large Buddhist banner on the top of the truck. People along the roads cheered to see the banner of Buddhist nuns bringing flood relief.

The convoy traveled to an under-serviced location in Ratnapura that was not easily accessible from Colombo. According to Ranjani, the flood waters had reached up the lamp-posts there. There was mud everywhere. Ven. Sudhammā was astonished at the damage—she saw the river as a “cruel burglar” that had robbed homes in the night, replacing people’s comfort with mud and debris. They went to the ruined village of Elavella, in Kalavana, a poor village in the forest close to a tea plantation. Some of the homes still had walls, but most had turned to rubble. When they arrived, the waterways were still swollen, and Ranjani narrowly avoided falling in. The affected families that they spoke to had lost everything, even down to the kitchen pots. Ranjani arranged kitchen supplies for them. When the nuns gave out the donated items, the photos Ranjani provided show the crowd reaching out their arms in desperation—for essential supplies, for a stuffed animal for the kids.

After Elavella, they drove to a nearby village of Udakaravita and distributed items in five locations. The nuns and volunteers from Sakyadhita got home after two am in the morning.

Social service and training activities continued at the Sakyadhita Center throughout 2003, including educational and health training programs at multiple locations.<sup>144</sup> Health training continued with

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144 B. Mettani, 2003.

the assistance of Mr. Lesley Rajakaruna of Saukya Dana Movement, and social work training continued with the support of Mr. Ridly Jayasinghe and other staff of the NISD. Laywomen and nuns participated, and topics included first aid, health, nutrition, and child nutrition.<sup>145</sup> In conjunction with a technician from the eye hospital, Mr. Anil Kahawale, an eye clinic was held at the Sakyadhita Center.<sup>146</sup> Ven. Sudhammā recalled her participation in a service activity in the Sakyadhita Sri Lanka newsletter article. She wrote:

Yesterday I attended one such act of service; Sakyadhita had worked with the bhikkhunis of an isolated village to bring an expert (a former principle of a nurse's training school) to teach maternal/child healthcare and first aid to the villagers at their temple. About forty local women listened closely to the doctor's advice and also got the opportunity to ask him question about their problems. I noticed the tremendous love and respect these villagers showed towards their bhikkhunis.<sup>147</sup>

Earlier the same year, four nuns had successfully been supported for M.A. degrees in Pāli and Buddhist Studies.<sup>148</sup> The May 2003 newsletter recorded that the student nuns were given a stipend (although according to their website, the Sakyadhita Center Sri Lanka has now moved towards providing directly for the material needs of nuns).

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145 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, 2003b and 2003c.

146 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, 2003d.

147 C. Sudhamma, 2003a.

148 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, 2003e.

Ranjani recalled that many nuns from other countries had come to stay at the Sakyadhita Center, where they had the opportunity to study at the Pāli Buddhist University. The local nuns helped them to organize visas. The ones who were attending university packed their lunches in the morning and went to class. There was a library at the top of the spiral staircase, which the student nuns were able to use. The Sakyadhita Community was also happy to have some international nuns come.

One of the professors from the University of Moratuva, Dr. Fernando, had joined the committee as treasurer some time prior. He had visited the center looking for a place to do a vegetarian dāna and was impressed. Ranjani said, “Dr. Fernando was so devoted. So it was a strength for me to have someone like that on the board and to support me in my work.”

International nuns from many countries, including Bangladesh, also came to visit the Sakyadhita Center. In the December 2003 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka Newsletter, German nun Ven. Sucintā wrote warmly about her few months staying at the center. She described the opportunity to go on *pindapāta* (almsround) and recite the *pātimokkha*. Even though she took higher ordination in 1998, for her, it was the first time experiencing a group of four Theravāda bhikkhunīs reciting the *pātimokkha* in Pāli. She wondered when she would get the chance to do this in a Western country.<sup>149</sup>

Outside of interview, Ranjani had spoken to me about the presence of historical bhikkhunī sites in Sri Lanka. She had mentioned a little-known ancient site at a place called Diggaltalava off the Jaffna Highway heading north from Mihintale, near Anurādhapura. Diggaltalava means, “long, flat, rock.” It is apparently in the middle of nowhere, in a field of

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149 Sucinta, 2003a.

grass. The site was originally shown to them by Mother Ramani, who had been shown the location by army officers.

A signboard has since been placed by the Sri Lankan archaeology department, and now identifies this site as Anulādevī Cetiya. At the site, there was a stūpa which was believed to have contained the relics of Ven. Anulā. Additionally, there were ponds which were believed to be dedicated bathing places for the ancient Sri Lankan bhikkhunīs. The location of the stūpa is rocky and remote. The stūpa itself—like many archaeological sites—just appears to be a hillock covered in trees. Nearby, an ancient water canal has been carved into the rock. Ranjani had recalled the golden age of Anurādhapura as a history lesson from her youth, with its many thousands of bhikkhunīs in its distant past.

It was said that Ven. Anulā Therī and seven hundred *arahant* bhikkhunīs had resided there. Princess Anulā and her retinue had been the first Sri Lankan women to ordain as bhikkhunīs in about 308 B.C., when she became Ven. Anulā. Ven. Anulā Therī is therefore a respected figure in Sri Lankan Buddhism. At the site, there is a large rock edict, which had been photographed by Ven. Tathālokā and shared on her Facebook, which Ven. Sudhammā reports as reading, “This is the place the five hundred ladies with Queen Anulā became bhikkhunīs.”<sup>150</sup> On Facebook, Ven. Tathālokā had also noted that the signboard at the site links the site to Vihāramahādevī. The Sakyadhitha Sri Lanka Newsletter December 2003<sup>151</sup> further contains a brief write up of this site.<sup>152</sup> It was also covered in the Yasodhara magazine.<sup>153</sup> The memory of

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150 C. Sudhammā, 2018.

151 I have not normalized the spelling of Sakyadhitha here, as this is how it appears on the newsletter itself.

152 Sucinta 2003b.

153 Yasodhara, 2003. 20(75), 5.

thriving bhikkhunī sangha in Sri Lanka is clearly inspiring to Ranjani. In the distance, a gleaming white stūpa, the Mihintale stūpa, is visible.

At that time, the local villagers didn’t know the value of the historical site, but Mother Ramani purchased land nearby and built some accommodation for nuns. Together with thirty-to-forty other participants, Ranjani did a three-day retreat with Mother Ramani at the block of land, and they put up temporary sheds. The villagers provided dāna for the retreatants.

From July 21–25, Ranjani attended the 2003 Conference of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), held in Korea. INEB founder Sulak Sivaraksa had been a long-term supporter of the bhikkhunīs. Ranjani presented on the topic of “Roles and Responsibility of Women in Buddhism.” She participated in a peacewalk in the DMZ at Imjingak, on the border between North and South Korea, where they placed green flags on the fence. They visited the famous Unmunsa Temple, which is well known as a center of bhikkhunī learning and teaching in Korea.<sup>154</sup> There Ranjani met the newly-appointed president of the National Korean Bhikkhunī Association, the head of the Council of Elder Bhikkhunīs and Rector of the Bhikkhunī Sangha College, Ven. Myeong Seong, paving the way for the next Sakyadhita International Conference in Korea. Ranjani also met Ven. Tathālokā for the first time, while she was teaching in the sangha college and undertaking research in the bhikkhunī graduate school. Ven. Myeong Seong, with the support of Ven. Tathālokā as English language foreign secretary, together with Ven. Bong Gak, the president of Sakyadhita Korea, were driving forces behind the conference. The conference gave a chance for

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154 Supamanta, 2003. 19(3), 13-14.

the 1996-ordained and other bhikkhunīs to visit Korea.<sup>155</sup>

Back in Sri Lanka, in 2003, the *sīmamālaka* (chapter house) of the Sakyadhita Center was consecrated. It is a small building, built as if floating on the Bolgoda Lake, for the purpose of nuns' sangha acts such as ordination. Ven. Dhammānandā described the Sakyadhita Center Sīma Mālaka:

As it is, Venerable Vijiṭānandā runs the center. We discuss about ordination, to make sure that ordination could take place there. You see the water *sīmā*, she had the *sīmā* in the water. This *sīmā* is not connected to the land, even the wiring system can be disconnected, so that the actual *sanghakkamma* is going on, it is completely according to the vinaya, which means that the *sīmā* is disconnected from another building. She was very particular about following according to the vinaya. That little house—the little gazebo—that actually worked as a water *sīma* for all the ordination that we would later engage for this, organize for this ordination. We would usually go through Sakyadhita Center for this.

On the way back from a religious conference in Indonesia in late 2003, Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka passed away. His obituary was written by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, the daughter of former prime-minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. She noted Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka's work in warm terms, including his work for bhikkhunīs.<sup>156</sup> Ranjani attended the funeral together

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155 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

156 Kumaratunga, 2004.

with Gabriele, Koko, and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, and a group of Burmese nuns. There were over one hundred bhikkhunīs in attendance at the funeral. The Burmese nuns were careful not to be seen with the bhikkhunīs. Koko, who was sensitive to Burmese expectations, ushered them to sit separately, so they wouldn’t be seen in the photos. Being seen in the photos could have caused very serious problems for the Burmese nuns with their own sangha authorities.

After the death of Ven. Dhammaloka, Ven. Kalupahana Piyaratana became preceptor for the Sakyadhita Center, allowing the higher ordinations to continue. He also continued to advise Ven. Vajitānāda.

## 2004 UN International Women’s Day Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards

From January 2004, the Sakyadhita Center had sent five Sri Lankan bhikkhunīs to study at Fo Guang Shan in Taiwan for six months.<sup>157</sup>

In that year, Ranjani visited Australia for the second time, for her nephew’s wedding. She attended a seminar on Buddhism in Melbourne with many monks, although she is now vague on the details. I was able to fill them in via the conference reports—the conference had been the Australian Buddhist General Conference, which ran February 20–22, 2004.<sup>158</sup> The conference was held at Victoria University, Melbourne, where she met British-Australian monk, Ven. Brahmavaṃso (maybe she had seen him at Kelaniya previously). Ven. Brahmavaṃso had heard

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157 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka 2004c.

158 White 2004, 14:2.



about the ordinations and said to Ranjani, “Why don’t you invite Ayyā Vāyāmā?” Ven. Brahmavaṃso respected Ven. Vāyāmā, who was the founding abbot of Dhammasara Nuns’ Monastery and one of the very first Australian women to ordain. She had previously visited Ranjani’s house while staying on Parappudūwa Nuns’ Island with Ven. Khemā in 1988. Ven. Havanpola Ratanasāra— who by then had been appointed the chief Sangha Nāyaka of the Western Hemisphere for Sri Lankan Buddhism— was also at the seminar. He was keen on the idea of ordination, and said, “It’s easy, it can be arranged, we’ll do it US style!”<sup>159</sup>

On International Women’s Day on March 8, 2004, Ranjani was honored for her work with an UN International Women’s Day Outstanding Women in Buddhism award. She traveled from her nephew’s wedding in Australia in February 2004 to the ceremony on March fourth in Bangkok. Dressed in a vivid orange saree, she gave a speech about her work at the United Nations Assembly Hall in Bangkok. Other recipients in her group included Ven. Dhammānandā and “Mahā Upasikā” Dr. Bongkut Sitthipol, both from Thailand. The awards themselves had been co-organized by Thai Ven. Rattanavālī and American bhikkhunī Ven. Dr. Lee. Ven. Rattanavālī had taken sāmaṇerī ordination in Sri Lanka around the time of the awards. Together, Ven. Rattanavālī and Ven. Dr. Lee went on to found the International Womens’

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159 Ven. Tathālokā had the following comment re Ven. Havanpola Ratanasāra: “Later in 2004, he went on to play a leading role as Bhikkhu Upajjhāyā for the first “Grand Ordination” to be hosted by the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles, with which he was affiliated. That ordination followed on the 1998 ordination in Bodhgaya, in offering bhikkhunī upasampadā to all three yānas, including a significant number of international nuns of Tibetan traditions, and per both the commemorative book and Ven. Walpola Piyananda’s memory, to one Theravāda bhikkhunī.” Personal correspondence, 2021.

Meditation Center in Thailand. Since 2006, it has served as a second venue for Thai women’s bhikkhunī ordinations.<sup>160</sup>

In Sri Lanka, the media coverage continued. Lakmal Welabada wrote in the April 2004 Sunday Observer article, “A New Home for the ‘Daughters of the Buddha’”:

Much credit for triumphing over the disapprovals, disagreements and turmoil against giving 'Upasam-pada' status (higher ordination) to 'Dasa Sil Matha', should be given to Ranjani De Silva.<sup>161</sup>

In the article, Ranjani was quoted as saying:

A thought that came to my mind was the poor state and the low recognition of the Dasa Sil Matas in our country. They have not even got the bhikkhuni status. Instead they were sometime treated as “mad women” or a symbol of misery. I compared them with the well versed and well recognised bhikkhunis I met from other countries. Also in the Buddha's sasana there were four groups of followers, bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen. Though other countries still follow the same rituals and status, we, the Sri Lankans discriminate against Buddhist nuns by not giving the due higher ordination, the bhikkhuni status which they are entitled to. Suddenly, I felt I should take the initiative to uplift the state of our women who devoted their lives to the dhamma.<sup>162</sup>

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160 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

161 Welabada 2004.

162 Welabada, 2004.

Later, Ranjani commented, “Of course Ayyā Khemā had inspired me at the start.”

The Eighth International Sakyadhita Conference that year occurred in Joong Ang Sangha University, Seoul, Korea, from June 27–July 2, 2004. The conference was sponsored and supported by Unmunsa and the National Korean Bhikkhunī Association with Ven. Myeong Seong as its president. According to the Sakyadhita Newsletter December 2004, Ranjani traveled with five nuns and three other members of Sakyadhita Sri Lanka.<sup>163</sup> She presented on the training and education of nuns in Sri Lanka. She mentioned the successes of bhikkhunīs outlined in the Sri Lankan historical chronicle, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, where nuns took on prominent roles as teachers. It is easy for us to forget just how prominent these nun-teachers had been, but the *Dīpavaṃsa* reminds us of our ignorance. Hema Goonatilake had written about the first generation of the Sri Lankan nuns as described in the *Dīpavaṃsa*:

Among the nuns who received ordination in the early phase in Sri Lanka, the nuns Dhamma, Dhammapala and Naramitta were experts in *vinaya* (*vinayavisarada*). Sata, Kali and Uttara were skilled instructors to nuns (*theriyovadakusala*). Sumana was an expert on Buddhist history (*saddhammavamsakovidā*). Mahila was a practitioner of strict observances (*dhutavada*). Sata was versed in the exhortations of the Theris, and two of the nuns, Mahila and Sanha, were endowed with Abhinna (supernatural powers).<sup>164</sup>

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163 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka 2004a, 2.

164 Goonatilake, 2007.

Naturally, there were also nuns who had mastered different sections of the Tripiṭaka, including sutta and abhidhamma. It had been Princess Anulā and her five hundred attendants who had been the first to attain to any level of awakening in Sri Lanka, having attained *sotāpatti* after listening to the preaching of Ven. Mahinda. In fact, she was the first of *any* Sri Lankans to become an arahant, whether male or female.<sup>165</sup> It was significant that Ranjani, Ven. Kusumā, and Hema Goonatilake had presented on this topic in Korea, leading to a deepened sense of Korean nuns’ awareness of their own ancient Sri Lankan heritage.

At the conference, Ranjani met with Korean bhikkhunīs, Ven. Bon Gak, who was a professor, and Ven. Seokdam. Ven. Bon Gak had invited Ranjani to stay at a bhikkhunī monastery. In addition to being the president of Sakyadhita Korea, Ven. Bon Gak was a professor at the host university, Joong Ang Sangha Daehak, which was Korea’s first academically accredited Sangha university.<sup>166</sup>

Back in Sri Lanka, another higher ordination ceremony was held at Anurādhapura on the sixteenth and seventeenth of July 2004. The Newsletter on International Buddhist Womens’ Activities, published on the first of July 2004, stated, “Ranjani de Silva, our Sri Lankan dhamma sister, is active in getting things read for the ordination in Anuradhapura...”<sup>167</sup> The ordination was held at the Śrī Vijaya Vidarśana Piriveṇa in Anurādhapura.<sup>168</sup> The bhikkhu *upajjhāyas* were Ven. Kamburugamuvē Vajira of the Buddhist and Pāli University, and Ven. Porogamuvē Somalankāra. The

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165 Many thanks to Ven. Tathālokā for pointing this out, on the basis of Ven. Piyānanda’s earlier observation. Personal correspondence (2021).

166 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

167 Newsletter on International Buddhist Women’s Activities 2004, 5–6.

168 Siriwardana 2016, 108.

Sakyadhita newsletter gave the names of the bhikkhunī *upajjhāyās* as Ven. Chuehmen, Ven. Yi-Hang, Ven. Man Kwang of Taiwan and Ven. Kolonnavē Kusumā of Sri Lanka. Ven. Chuehmen served as senior supervising bhikkhunī preceptor, together with the assistance of Ven. Yihang and Ven. Man Kwang. Ven. Kusumā served as junior bhikkhunī preceptor. The *kammāvācācārinīs* were Ven. Talavatugoda Dhammadīpanī and Ven. Badalgama Dhammanandanī of Nævgala.<sup>169</sup> This appears to be the first time that Ven. K. Kusumā has acted in the preceptor role for an ordination. The strategy of supervision by more senior preceptors from Fo Guang Shan had paved the way for this role to be transferred to her while still lacking twelve years' seniority. On the ordination certificate, Ven. Chuehmen and others were listed as "senior bhikkhunīs from abroad".<sup>170</sup>

More than one hundred bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs gathered under the same roof for the occasion.<sup>171</sup> Successful ordination candidates included one Sri Lankan—Ven. Kotikavattē Gotamī (formerly Mother Ramani) of the Pajāpati Meditation Center in Meegoda; a Vietnamese bhikkhunī, Ven. Dhammānandā, who stayed at our former nuns' residence, Sanghamittārāma in Australia, and a Czech nun, Ven. Vajirā of Ayukusula Assama, Hokandara.

Ven. Kotikavattē Gotamī (formerly Mother Ramani) certainly had the most charismatic reputation of any of the ordination candidates, as discussed when Ranjani met her in 1991. Her *sāmaṇerī* ordination had been held two years previously, at the Pajāpati Meditation Center under Ven. Kolonnavē Kusumā and with the support of Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka and Ven.

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169 In addition to the material from the Sakyadhita newsletter, Ven. Tathālokā has clarified a number of details here. Personal correspondence, 2021.

170 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

171 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka 2004b, 5-6.

Porogamuvē Somalankāra Thera. One day Ranjani handed me a translation of her biography by Denagama Siriwardana (2016). When I say “charismatic,” what I mean is that this group was known for the public claims of its leaders to have achieved arahantship. Nonetheless, as a result of Ven. Kotikavattē Gotamī’s ordination, another group of nuns came to be ordained as bhikkhunīs—the biography gives a list of twenty names.

In September, there was another higher ordination at the Sakyadhita center. Ven. Ransagoda Dhammasumanā, who was ordained as a sāmaṇerī in the ceremony, remarked, “... Sakyadhita offered to help me reach my goal. This brilliant organization, under the chairmanship of Ranjani de Silva, not only picks up the suitable women but also organizes and executes in a beautiful way.” She had been ordained as a sīla mātā previously but she had found that the level of renunciation was not enough.<sup>172</sup> The same edition of the Sakyadhita Sri Lanka Newsletter remarks that when a nun, Ven. Sudinnā, was in hospital, Ranjani arranged a rubber cushion for her so that she wouldn’t get bedsores.<sup>173</sup> The level of care and attentiveness to detail in Ranjani’s work was high.

In the same year that Ranjani received the UN International Women’s Day Outstanding Women in Buddhism award for her work for bhikkhunīs, in a reactionary move, in 2004, the Sri Lankan government decided to cease issuing identity cards to Sri Lankan bhikkhunīs after a brief window of issuing them.<sup>174</sup> To this day, this remains an issue for Sri Lankan bhikkhunīs.

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172 R. Dhammasumana 2004.

173 Sudinna 2004.

174 Pathirana 2019. I was unfortunately unable to trace the Sinhalese for this.

In August–September 2004, Ranjani again traveled to Taiwan. In Taiwan, she attended a Fo Guang Shan international monastic seminar, representing Sri Lanka together with monks and a Sri Lankan *sāmaṇerī*, Ven. Vaskaduvē Suvimalī.<sup>175</sup> Ven. Suvimalī is highly educated and would have been a good choice to represent Sri Lanka. She had been former lecturer and Director, Department of Post Graduate Studies, Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy, Pallekælē, Kuṇḍasālē, Kandy. She had also formerly been a member of the research staff of the Sri Lanka Government’s Department of Buddhist Encyclopedia.

In October, the Mātālē Buddhist women’s association opened their new two-story building. The bhikkhunīs of Nævgala participated in an all-night *paritta* chanting session on October first, followed by a traditional *dāna*. It was the first time that they had done overnight *paritta* by bhikkhunīs—a service which had previously been considered the domain of bhikkhus. At the inauguration, Ranjani spoke about the services rendered by the bhikkhunīs of the past and of today. She called for wider recognition for the bhikkhunīs and their services.<sup>176</sup>

Meanwhile, in Thailand, Ven. Dhammānandā was feeling the loss of her monk-teacher, Ven. Dhammaloka. In our interview, she had stated that she had felt the needed to be affiliated with a larger group, and her choice was Daṃbulla. She returned to Sri Lanka, and accompanied by Ven. Saddhā Sumanā, Ranjani took them to see Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala. However, Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala said that she would need to re-ordain. Re-ordination is not unusual in Asia, especially when the first ordination has been perceived as being somehow deficient or less

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175 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka 2004d, 12.

176 Sakyadhita Sri Lanka 2004e, 13.

pure. Ven. Dhammānandā was enthusiastic and happily agreed to ordain again. She said:

Now, again, because I lost Ven. Dhammaloka, I lost my monk-teacher, I was looking for another monk teacher to fill in, and I wanted to be associated with Daṁbulla. I came back in the year 2004. I was already fully-ordained. Ranjani took me to Daṁbulla to meet with the *mahānāyaka*, Śrī Sumangalo. This time I also had Ven. Bhikkhunī Saddhā Sumanā with me. So I spoke to the senior monk, to the *mahānāyaka*, and I asked that I would like to be affiliated with his temple. At that time, I was the only bhikkhunī in Thailand.<sup>177</sup> I need to be associated, I need to be affiliated, I need to have a senior monk as my teacher. When Dhammaloka dies, I have to look for someone else. It was right that I should go to Daṁbulla, because Daṁbulla actually had this *Siamvaṁsa* lineage. Very important. Again, Ranjani was organizing this for me, and as I told him, he answered in Sinhalese, and he was talking to Ven. Saddhā Sumanā. I did not understand. It was polite not to ask then. But when we came back to the van, Ven. Saddhā Sumanā told me, he asked, would I be willing to be ordained again with him? I said, “yes.”

Ranjani left Sri Lanka in early December 2004 to move to Australia. The tsunami hit on Boxing Day of the same month.

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<sup>177</sup> I.e., the only Thai bhikkhunī in Thailand, not counting Ven. Dr. Lee from the US, or Ven. Tathālokā, as Ven. Tathālokā has pointed out. Personal correspondence with Ven. Tathālokā, July 2021.



## 2005–2009: After the Wave Hit—Tsunami Aid

### 2005 Tsunami Work in Pereliya

Ranjani returned to Sri Lanka in early 2005, three months after the tsunami. She contacted her friend Gabriele, who was involved in a Buddhist women's organization in Germany. She wanted to take some nuns and do counseling for the depressed people after the tsunami. Many people were in shock after the sudden loss of a house or loved ones. Even Dr. Jayasekera, Ranjani's brother had said to Ranjani, "Now's the time to help, better go and do some work."

The worst affected area was south of Colombo, along the coastline. Ranjani's brother-in-law had been swept away by the wave. He clung onto an advertisement post while fallen trees lined the roadside. He survived. However, one of her cousins had taken the whole family in the car to see their mother, south of Colombo. There were two daughters and the mother and the father in the car. All of them died. Another cousin's children had come from America and had done some touring in Yāla. They lost the daughter and the son, both of whom were swept away and perished.

It was like that everywhere. Then Ranjani went to Pereliya on Sri Lanka's south-west coast, fifty-three miles south of Colombo. It had been the site of the infamous train incident. When the wave came, people were trying to save their life, so they got into the train. Everybody was drowned. The train toppled down, water submerged the train and they were washed off. "Very few must have been saved," said Ranjani. There was a school there. There was also a temple that was collecting donations, where the monk had been active in helping the local area. B.S.'s father had been from that area.

Ranjani first went to the temple, where she offered school uniform material. They said they had enough, and that she should go to the school. The temple gave her the list of items required and sent her to the local school, the Pereliya Mahāvidyālaya. She went there, and the principal, Sarath, said that they had shirt material and shirts, and that people were making and donating shirts for the school children. “A lot of people were helping, irrespective of race or religion, in Sri Lanka everybody was helping each other,” said Ranjani. She said, “In a time like that, all races and religions worked together.”

By the time Ranjani visited the school, it was already about three months after the tsunami. The principal of the school told Ranjani, that even though the children were attending school, some of the parents in the region had become depressed. He recommended that Ranjani go to speak to the families. Ranjani found the families, and later took the nuns to see them. She was told harrowing stories. There was a case where the mother and father survived. The mother had gone with the son to the open market to buy vegetables that day, leaving the ten-year-old daughter with the father and his elderly mother. When the water came, the mother and son managed to climb onto a roof somewhere.

Back at home, their grandmother had been swept away. The father had climbed onto the roof with his daughter. The daughter was also swept away and they couldn’t find the body. All they found was her dress, hanging on a coconut tree. After that, the mother fell into depression. Her younger sister, the girl’s aunt, was there with her. The aunt had been working in Kuwait.

The mother would sometimes say to people, “That girl seemed to be smart, very intelligent. The boy should have gotten washed away and left my daughter.” This was reported by the school-master to Ranjani. The son, in turn, was becoming

depressed. The mother didn't really know what she was saying. She didn't cook anything at home and there was no food. The mother's sister said to Ranjani, "You can imagine my mother, Madam—like you—good looking. She got washed away like this..." She described how intelligent her niece was, saying "My sister daughter so smart, only last year we sent her to a good school, a secondary school, and we got jeans and all that." She had been quite impressed with her niece. Then she said, "Can you imagine, when I was working in the Middle East, after my mother I was working, we collected all the stuff you know, buying electrical gadgets." None of what she had worked for remained after the tsunami. Ranjani said:

They saw the real *anicca*. This woman told me, our cupboards were full of things, so much of cutlery, crockery, glass things. Electrical things which we never used and we never gave it to anybody. We couldn't even open the door, everything fall out, it was so full. She said. In a minute it got washed off like that. She said, after that...the way she told me, she really saw the *anicca*. All the years, my mother had been working in the Middle East and I had worked there too.

What you all collected was like this. We built the house like this. We lived in a good manner. We had everything, now in a minute, like this, everything got washed out. This is what it is. After that, we saw the nature, feelings, see this, all the nature what things, how it changed in a minute, she told me. This is how things are. Now I have no nothing.

There had been no chair left even for the nuns or Ranjani to sit on. The second time that they visited, someone had donated a plastic chair. Ranjani was informed that books from the school library had been destroyed, and the children wanted books. She gave the schoolmaster the money that had been raised by Gabriele's group, the Buddhist Academy in Berlin (Buddhistische Akademie Berlin Brandenburg). Ranjani told the schoolmaster to buy whatever he wanted from the bookshop with the money.

After that, he said to Ranjani, "Madam, I don't feel like telling you, but there's a big problem. The children do not have their meals, they do not cook in their home, they are starving, they are very hungry. Their midday meal...if you could provide for the primary classes even the midday meal..."

Ranjani agreed to organize a meal for the whole school. There were only about two hundred children. There had been about eight hundred children before the tsunami, but now the numbers were lower. Ranjani said, "Never mind, all the children, we'll do that, we'll do up a plan and do it."

She wrote a check for 10,000 rupees to start immediately. There was no refrigeration, so they had to get things that would keep and the children would like, like fish buns and sweet buns. She arranged a supplier to make chickpeas and noodles. Ranjani said, "Whatever you use, give me a bill, I have to account for what you spend and the number of children. The number of children who you fed, the date, and what you spend and what you gave."

Ranjani continued to feed the whole school a school lunch for between one and a half to two years with the money which was organized by Gabriele to be sent from the Buddhist Academy in Germany. She reported back to Gabriele in Germany. Ranjani said that Gabriele had confidence in her.

Ranjani returned to Australia at the end of the year. In Australia, she collected McDonald's toys from Happy Meals, pens and other items to send to the tsunami-affected children. When she arrived at the school with the gifts for the year one and two children, she didn't know how to distribute them, so she put everything on the table and told the children to take what they wanted. The whole class had gifts.

There had been a woman who was delivering the meals and serving, but the school had requested that Ranjani come in and give by hand. The school teachers mentioned to her that there was a band in the school that had been among the best in the district. They had lost all of their equipment in the tsunami. The teachers had thought that replacing the equipment might help to lift the childrens' spirits. Ranjani was provided with a list of the equipment required, which she supplied.

Ranjani told Gabriele, and she sent some money. She passed the receipts back to Gabriele. It was a lot of work, but Ranjani felt that she co-ordinated it well. The children were happy. The school suggested that they take the children for an excursion to help to get them out of their depression and back to normal. Ranjani also arranged funding for an excursion. The Italian government also provided funding for the new school buildings.

The school principal bowed at Ranjani's feet, saying "Madam, nobody had done to this school like the way you have done!" Ranjani said he was thankful because she looked for where the real problem was and helped. "Some people give things and don't know where it goes and to whom it goes. But I first ask for the requirements and then I did it the way...it was very fruitful." When Ranjani had first met the principal, she had to introduce herself as a stranger. Although her husband was from Pereliya, the principal didn't know him as he had been living in Colombo. Ranjani mentioned that her brother-in-law's factory

was destroyed by the tsunami as well, and that her brother-in-law's name was Amaradas.

The principal thought a little, and brought out a magazine from the office to show her. B.A. de Silva, B.S. de Silva's father and Ranjani's father-in-law, had been the one who originally gave the land for the school many years ago. For the centenary celebrations, they had printed a magazine with details of the original donors. So Ranjani was glad to have that connection.

Down the road, there was another temple where many people had been observing eight precepts on a full-moon day when the water came. It was about a mile inside, away from the sea. The water had reached even that far inland.

There was a small shrine room. The monk showed Ranjani what had happened. The water had risen to a point on the stūpa, leaving a mark on the stūpa. People were running away. Without entering the shrine room, the water swirled and went into a hole. Ranjani explained, "By nature, the water that was going there did not go into the shrine room, the earth sucked the water and saved the shrine room." Ranjani also saw something that she had never seen before at that temple—a reclining Buddha statue made out of sea coral.

There were two monks at that temple. They were carrying women to safety as the waves came in, climbing the stūpa. Even when Ranjani went there, he was working hard without his full robe on. People were living in tents and camping in the premises. There were a lot of people living at that temple, where they had a hall. Ranjani approached the monk and he said that they needed furniture for the classroom. Ranjani purchased good quality hardwood and had benches and tables made for the Sunday school.

After that, Ranjani continued to work with the nuns. She went with two or three nuns to villages in the south. Ranjani said:

In a small way, I did what I can. I had the transport and the vehicle and the driver, wherever I want I take the nuns, use the nuns for counseling work. We had trained nuns, specially trained for counseling. We send some of the nuns for special training for counseling, we paid some fees and got them trained. Also, they were taken to do counseling for the army officers as well. So those are a few things I have [done].

However, after that, Ranjani stopped visiting families. She had gotten a fever. The stories had impacted her more than she expected. Ranjani felt that there were too many spirits in the tsunami areas. She said:

You know...after that I couldn't go, I was visiting a few houses...maybe so many dead people around these areas, they were...the bodies were buried. Big number, they were just covered, so sad. Maybe, whatever it is, the *bhūta* and all that, I was falling sick, later I didn't want to go too much later. I had been going too much to those houses and sharing their feelings.

Another young mother had lost all four children. Her husband was a tailor. Her children were in school, and the principal had asked Ranjani to go talk to her, as she was depressed. Ranjani said that she would light a lamp and pray for them to come back to her womb. Ranjani said, "You're still young,

still you can have them.” Ven. Dhammānandā had also seen her with a Thai group and gave a donation.

All of her children had been together in a tree, which they held onto until they fell off and their mother saw them get swept away. Later, Ranjani arranged a sewing machine so that her husband could resume tailoring work.

Closer to Ranjani’s house, her son-in-law, Anura, had a large timber warehouse just outside of Colombo. The warehouse was vacant and many houses had been lost in the tsunami. While there weren’t as many lives lost as in other locations, there were still people who lacked a place to live. The army had arranged for forty families to move into her son-in-law’s timber warehouse. That was the year after they moved to Australia, in 2005, but the security guard was still there. Screens of sarees had been erected in the warehouse to give the families some privacy. Ven. Chuehmen from Fo Guang Shan in Taiwan had helped to send some funds. She had been living in Sri Lanka permanently to help the disadvantaged, travelling with the bhikkhunīs to remote areas.

Even though Ranjani was away in Australia, she was happy to hear that so many people were being housed at her son-in-law’s business. They had a well and toilets for the workers there—the displaced children bathed at the well and made use of the bathroom. There was also an office for the security guard. Ranjani saw a woman give birth to a child in that room. Ranjani was pleased that she had been sheltered there. The families were very grateful. Ranjani went every day to the warehouse to help out. The younger nuns also taught classes for the children in the camp.

With the money from Fo Guang Shan, Ranjani organized sewing machines to give the women some work. There were also many carpenters who had lost their homes, as a village of



carpenters had been affected. Ranjani bought tools and equipment for them. Later, Ranjani found that there were racks and wooden items being kept on the road: they had been able to sell them to passers-by to make some money.

Ranjani said, “Without my knowing, I have done something good. When you have the intention to help somebody, things fall in line. Not with my money. I get the idea and then I get something, the idea comes and somebody offers me.” The families were there for two years before they were given facilities by the government. However, they weren’t happy with the government facilities—they still used to come back to the warehouse to get a better shower.

Ranjani traveled in the South to a few locations with bhikkhunīs. They stayed overnight, and Ranjani organized accommodation for the nuns. They also went to Mirissa, where they stayed at a tourist hotel that belonged to one of Ranjani’s relatives. They traveled the whole coastline, where the displaced people lived in camps.

People, especially women, were happy to see the nuns. It wasn’t the same as seeing a volunteer from a non-governmental organization. “When they see the robe, the nuns, there is so, so much of a difference,” said Ranjani.

During the civil war, Ranjani had previously taken the nuns to see army personnel who had been injured in the conflict, sometimes losing legs or limbs. Ranjani said:

Very sad. Twenty years, twenty-one years boys.  
Only with one leg, or no legs, like that. What a  
lot...we forget these things, but when you think of  
it, what we had gone through.

People go and talk to them, give things and go. But when they see the nuns and they do a blessing and they say, *sabbītiyo vivajjantu, sabbarogo vinassatu* [May all distresses be averted. May every disease be destroyed,] and give a blessing, they are so happy. What a difference in the robe, I saw the difference in the robe. Buddha gave this robe, it is such a consolation for them, when they are so helpless...so many people go and cart oranges there and everything, they don't look at them even. But they [the nuns] go and do *pirit-nūla* [ritual string], they tie a *pirit-nūla* and they do a chanting, it's a big difference.

Even though no-one had requested Ranjani to do tsunami work, she had the Sakyadhita driver and vehicle, so she did it without a lot of advance planning. The amount of money that Gabriele sent wasn't huge, but it was enough. Ranjani accounted for the money to the cent. "So the time went on like that, passed. So I have not wasted my life. Yes, I have not wasted my human life, being a human being," said Ranjani.

Coverage of the bhikkhunī revival continued in Sri Lanka, through the publication of a Sinhalese-language book, published in 2006, *Sirilaka Meheṇi Udāva*, by Ven. Ambala Śrī Ñāṇasīla (Sri Gnanaseela). This book gave a comprehensive and detailed description of sub-*nikāyas* and individual monks involved in supporting and opposing the bhikkhunī revival, as well as a complete list of bhikkhunī names for 1998.

However, overseas in Burma, things were heading in a bad direction for bhikkhunīs. The story of Ven. Saccavādī, who ordained in 2003 in the group with Ven. Dhammānandā, is probably one of the saddest stories for bhikkhunīs post-2000. She

had regularly topped Burmese monastic exams and had been promising. There had been issues from the time that Ven. Saccavādī undertook *sāmaṇerī* ordination in Sri Lanka. Later, when she returned to Burma as a bhikkhunī in early 2005, she was arrested because of her ordination in what proved to be a traumatic episode.<sup>178</sup> After her higher ordination, the Burmese Embassy had contacted Ranjani, wanting to know details of her ordination. Ranjani said what happened, but she felt that she herself hadn't done anything wrong, saying, "I'm innocent, who cares?"

As a result of the Asokan missions of the Elders Sona and Uttara, there had previously been bhikkhunīs, known as *rahanma*, in Suvannabhūmi, located in what the Burmese say is now modern Burma, but their order had faded by the thirteenth century. Most Burmese Buddhists would not be aware of this history.<sup>179</sup>

### 2005–2006 Living between Two Countries and Re-ordination of Ven. Dhammānandā

In 2004, Ranjani's daughter Rukmal migrated to Melbourne, Australia. Many of Ranjani's family had also migrated to Melbourne in Australia—Melbourne has the world's largest Sri Lankan community outside of Sri Lanka. Ranjani visited Australia for three months from March 2005 and stayed with her daughter Rukmal. Ranjani commenced living between two countries, spending six months in Australia and six months in Sri Lanka.

Ranjani was influential in her grand-daughter Sachini's teen years—Sachini credits Ranjani—who she calls *attamā* (grandma)—with teaching her "unconditional love." Sachini told me during interview:

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178 Sujato, 2010.

179 Guṇasārī 2007, 2–3.

She [Ranjani] is into Buddhism and she is very caring as you know, loving person, very down to earth. Even though she has all of those qualities, I enjoy being with her because she has a bossy personality. She has a strong personality, you can put her into any situation, she'll put her hand up first and go for it and just do it. She just kind of has a positive attitude about anything.

That's why it was really good having her, especially during my teen years. I could tell her anything and it was nice to be able to know that I could talk to her about anything and not feel judged. I think from her was where I learned what unconditional love is. She also taught me not to be attached. She taught me a different side to love, how you can love without attachment and just enjoy being with a person, without thinking what happens if they're not here, I miss them so much, without overthinking it, just loving the person and caring for the person without being attached.

Due to being in Australia, Ranjani felt it was time to hand over things at the Sakyadhita Center Sri Lanka. The Sakyadhita vehicle had been registered in her name, and she felt that she was doing ninety-nine percent of the work for the center. After she left, the project money was over. The center couldn't afford a driver, so they decided to sell the car. It would be cheaper for them to hire a vehicle than maintaining a car and paying petrol and a driver. They sold the car for double the price they paid, after having used it for ten years. There were import restrictions on foreign cars at the time, so it was possible to make a profit. The money was invested in the bank, and the center continues to take interest from the money. After the '93

conference, Ranjani had saved 300,000 rupees, which she put in a fixed deposit account for the center. More recently, Ranjani had her name removed as a signatory for checks, and handed things over to the treasurer and secretary. She is still president of the Sakyadhita Board.

Ranjani said it was difficult to find educated people who could comply with the requirements of running an incorporated association, such as notifying changes in board members, and an annual audit. Ranjani said, “When I think sometimes, it worries me, but I just let go and allow the Dhamma to work.” Ranjani continued to attend the Sakyadhita Center AGM in Sri Lanka annually.<sup>180</sup>

The Sakyadhita Center had benefited substantially from the contributions of the HBF. Ranjani continued to attend partner meetings, in locations like Lahore, Nepal, Cambodia and other countries. The first funding was given for three years from 1999–2001. The HBF was happy, and Ranjani was given another three years, 2002–2004. When the next three years expired, the project officer came, and Ranjani signed an agreement for fifteen years, with a clause for full release after that. The center had been built with their funds and the HBF was keen to see that it was still being used for the original purpose. So Ranjani continued to report back with photos. Ranjani said, “I feel that must be the best project they would ever have.”

Roshan Dhunjiboy had visited the Sakyadhita Center many times. The HBF team visited the out-stations and did an assessment. They passed.

In 2005, Ven. Dhammānandā returned to Sri Lanka to re-ordain. The ceremony itself was on July fifteen.<sup>181</sup> Ven. Dhammānandā

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180 In 2020, Ranjani was unable to travel to Sri Lanka due to coronavirus.

181 Yasodhara, 2005.

had been in Sri Lanka with a group that did tsunami work, and she visited Sri Lanka for a second time for the ordination. Ranjani said that Ven. Dhammānandā looked “feeble” before her re-ordination. The food and sanitation in Sri Lanka had not agreed with her. Ven. Dhammānandā said:

That’s why in the year 2005, I went back again. Again, it was Ranjani who organized my second *up-asampadā*, my second bhikkhunī ordination, this time under Daṃbulla, under Ven. Śrī Sumangalo. My whole monastic life started with Ranjani, she was always by my side. The success of the bhikkhunīs in Thailand...the lineage, later on, they also came to Sri Lanka to ordain. I don’t know whether they realize how important that Ranjani, the work that Ranjani did in things happening, helping me to set up the bhikkhunī lineage in Thailand. I’m very grateful that you’re recording this.

Ven. Dhammānandā wondered whether those who followed her would realize how instrumental Ranjani had been in “planting” the Thai bhikkhunī lineage. Ranjani had been in attendance for Ven. Dhammānandā’s second ordination. She recalls supporters coming with vitamins for her.

Meanwhile also in 2005, the flow-on effects of the 2003 ordination and earlier ordinations were being felt in the USA. Ven. Peliyagoda Sudarśanā, Ven. Tathālokā, Ven. Sucintā, Ven. Charlotte Sudhammā, Ven. Saccavādi and Ven. Guṇasārī had all returned to the US, and the North American Bhikkhunī Association<sup>182</sup> was founded, with the blessings of eminent senior bhikkhus such as

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182 now TBANA, the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Association of North America

Ven. Guṇaratana, Ven. Piyaṇanda, and Ven. Bodhi. Ven. Sudarśanā founded the Samadhi Buddhist Meditation Center in Florida, Ven. Sudhammā was invited to take up residency as chief incumbent at the Carolina Buddhist Vihāra, Ven. Tathālokā participated in the founding of the Dhammadharini Support Foundation and with Ven. Sucittā co-founded the first bhikkhunī vihāra in the western United States. Suddenly there were Theravāda bhikkhunīs in America, from both the east and west.<sup>183</sup>

On the eighth of November 2006, Ven. Mirissē Guṇasiri's chief disciple, Ven. Mirissē Dhammasiri passed away at the age of eight-two. He had continued the work of his teacher, who had passed away forty years previously. Ranjani had been impressed with him and was keen to tell me about him. He had completed further education in oriental languages with a Tamil language specialty before joining the tutorial staff at the Śrī Sunandārāma Piriveṇa. She noted his excellent knowledge of the vinaya and his appointment as an arbitrator for the Rāmañña Nikāya. She also mentioned that another historical vihāra, the Yatala Manik Vihāraya at Tissa, had been entrusted to his care, including a stūpa from the third century BC—the oldest stūpa in Ruhunū. Ranjani also recalled his contributions to the Budu Saraṇa newspaper advice column under the penname “Dhammika,” which were later published as a book. These facts were further referenced in his obituary by Dr. P. G. Punchihewa.<sup>184</sup> His body was displayed in state at the Śrī Sunandārāma, before being cremated in the grounds of the Mirissa Mahā Vidyālaya. As an adult, Ven. Mirissē Dhammasiri had referred to Ranjani as “the bright pupil of the Śrī Pragnaloka Daham Pāsala.” Ranjani

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183 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

184 Punchihewa 2006.

had been equally impressed with Ven. Dhammasiri. She attended his funeral in Mirissa.

## 2007 International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha

In 2007, there was a conference in Hamburg to promote bhikkhunī ordination in the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition. The conference was titled, “International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha, Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages.” It ran from July 18-20, 2007, in cooperation with the University’s Asia-Africa Institute. It had been organized by Ven. Jampa Tsedroen from the University of Hamburg and Dr. Thea Mohr from the University of Frankfurt. Ranjani had expressed a feeling of closeness to Dr. Jampa Tsedroen. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was there at the conference. Ranjani recalls many speakers at the conference, including Ven. Sujato, Ven. Bodhi and Ven. Anālayo. Invited Theravāda bhikkhunīs included a delegation from the newly formed North American Bhikkhunī Association including Ven. Tathālokā, Ven. Charlotte Sudhammā, Ven. Guṇasārī, and Ven. Iowa Sobhanā and Ven. Satimā, who were ordained at Daṃbulla. Ven. Tathāloka and Ven. Dhammānandā from Thailand also spoke. More than sixty-five speakers were in attendance, and some of the talks were run simultaneously in more than one location.<sup>185</sup> The chief bhikkhus from Asgiri and Malvattu chapter of the Siam Nikāya in Sri Lanka had been invited. From the eighteenth century onward, the heads of this sects, based in Kandy, have traditionally held a prominent place in Sri Lankan Buddhism due to their joint

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185 The full list of speakers is available online at "International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages": <https://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/>



control of the tooth relic and many landed monasteries. The Mahānāyakas themselves didn't come—they had sent a delegate. They were opposed to ordination.

Of the representative from the Asgiri and Malvattu chapters of the Siam Nikāya, Ranjani said:

They were listening, I don't think they spoke. Nothing to talk, they can't talk, because everybody was supporting the bhikkhunīs and they were silent. After the thing, I was talking to Sri Lankan senior monks, and I said, now, did you hear what they said? And they were...they never made any comment, even after they returned, they were silent, they didn't say no, they didn't say yes, they were just silent. They couldn't say it's wrong, or now go ahead.

Professor Jotiya Dhirasekera, who had ordained as a bhikkhu under the name Ven. Dhammavīhāri, was there from Sri Lanka. He was a disciple of Ven. Maḍihē Paññāsīha, and he is well-known for his writing on vinaya. However, he had taken a different direction from his teacher to support bhikkhunī ordination.<sup>186</sup> *Sīladhārās* from Amaravati were also there, including Sister Ānandabodhī. Senior bhikkhus who were in attendance included the abbots of Amaravati and Chithurst monasteries.

There had already been Western bhikkhunīs practicing in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition who received higher ordination, such as Ven. Tenzin Palmo, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Jampa Tsedroen. Ven. Tenzin Palmo was fully ordained in Hong Kong in 1973. Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo took full ordination in Korea in 1982 (dual ordination), and Ven. Jampa Tsedroen

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186 Bodhi 2012, 14.

received full ordination in Taiwan in 1985 (by bhikṣus alone).<sup>187</sup> Ranjani said, “They are very great bhikkhunīs in the Tibetan tradition. So they call them bhikkhunīs, they accept them as leaders of the Tibetan bhikkhunīs.”

Although the Dalai Lama had already stated the unequivocal acceptance of those nuns practicing Tibetan Buddhism who had received a Dharmaguptaka bhikṣuṇī ordination as an integral part of Tibetan Buddhism,<sup>188</sup> the main issue of the conference had been the possibility of ordination for nuns within the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya tradition.

Ranjani’s impression was that the conference talked around and around the same things, going back to the same points, without going anywhere. His Holiness didn’t object, but Ranjani reports he had turned to the Tibetan nuns, asking them what they thought. Ranjani felt that the Tibetan nuns were scared of their lamas, “So they don’t want...even if they want it inside, they don’t want to come out, they are so scared. That would have been the same if we had asked our sīla mātās at that time. But somebody has to take the lead and do it.”

Ven. Jampa Tsedroen had stated, “Unfortunately most of the Tibetan nuns are indeed scared or not interested to take this direction [of Dharmaguptaka ordination]. They want the same Vinaya lineage as the Tibetan monks have.”<sup>189</sup> Ven. Jampa Tsedroen had sent Ranjani the report after the Hamburg conference.<sup>190</sup> She had been based at Sarnath University, doing

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187 For their detailed biographies see the website of the "Committee for Western Bhikṣuṇīs in the Tibetan tradition" under CBO members:

[https://www.bhiksuniordination.org/about\\_history.html](https://www.bhiksuniordination.org/about_history.html)

188 International Conference for Buddhist Womens Role in the Sangha, 2007.

189 Jampa Tsedroen, personal correspondence, 2021.

190 A large part of the proceedings of the International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha has been published by Wisdom Publications in May 2010 as the book *Dignity and Discipline*. For details see [www.wisdompubs.org](http://www.wisdompubs.org). The remaining papers are available online at <https://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/150.0->

research work. Ranjani felt sorry for how hard she had worked, saying, “Still I hope that she will see the results one of these days.”

As a result of presentations on Korean ordination lineages at the 2007 International Congress on Women’s Role in the Sangha in Hamburg, Ranjani had also become aware of the historical use of bhikkhu-only single sangha ordination for bhikkhunīs in Korea. She said that this was like a “light-bulb” for her own retrospective understanding of the 1996 Sarnath ordination.

In Germany, Ranjani had stayed with her friend Gabriele. They visited Hamburg University from her place. After the conference, the Dalai Lama had an event in Hamburg, “like a festival.” It was expensive to get tickets, but Gabriele took Ranjani along for a few days. Ranjani was interested to listen to the Dhamma talks. She found that the topics—like the thirty-seven factors of awakening—were similar to what she had experienced in Theravāda Buddhism. She was really paying attention to the Dhamma contained in the talk. She had seen Tibetan nuns debating, chanting and giving talks previously, and relished the chance to listen to a Tibetan Dhamma talk.

Ranjani remembers the “singing nun,” Ani Choying. There was a stall selling CDs. There were stalls for Tibetan nuns and for Sakyadhita Europe, which was organized by Gabriele. Ranjani was at the stall with Gabriele and they sold things from Nepal and other things for fundraising. Ani Choying and Ranjani both stayed at Gabriele’s house. Ranjani enjoyed Ani Choying’s CDs.

From there, Ranjani went from Germany to the UK, where she had booked to stay at Amaravati. Amaravati had long been the shining star of the overseas Ajahn Chah tradition in the UK, and visiting Amaravati had been a dream for Ranjani. They gave her a

room and a bed. The nuns were excited to see Ranjani and talk about bhikkhunī ordination. They had been *sīladhārās* at that time.

There was a retreat by Ajahn Sumedho in progress. Ranjani felt that Amaravati was a pleasant place, saying, “So there is good Dhamma going on, it’s very nice spiritual place. Beautiful nuns there...everybody comes with dāna, so nice. I thought it was shining.” The *sīladhārās* were the main attraction for Ranjani.

She recalls that the Amaravati nuns included Sisters Ānandabodhī, Santacittā, and Mettā. Sister Mettā afterwards came to Sri Lanka, and Ranjani took her to Anurādhapura and the Kandy *perahera* (parade). There was also an *anagārikā*, Santussikā. According to Ranjani, she was organizing at the back of her mind what could be done for higher ordination.

Ranjani recalls Sisters Mettā and Santacittā being there at the time. They had tea, and invited Ranjani to talk with all the nuns. Ranjani recalled:

They wanted me to talk about this, they were asking me how we did [it], and I was just normally, I was telling how, they were so, you know, they were so interested. They said, they wanted to...they were so interested to hear more and more. They themselves were sort of motivated to get more details. They were planning that time in their heart and I said, “You can still do it.” With all due respect to your teacher, their problem is that Ajahn Sumedho had been their teacher. They don’t want to...because he’s not doing it for them, they want to do it, but at the same time, they don’t want to go against him.

That was a bit of an inside struggle for them at that time.

Ranjani hadn't been aware that the Amaravati nuns knew about her. Two nuns from Amaravati, Sister Siripaṇṇā and Sister Upekkhā, had come as early as '93 for the Sri Lanka conference. They had been popular. Ranjani said that everybody was after them to take them out or do a dāna.

After Amaravati, Ranjani spent a few days in Cambridge, where she had a good friend. Her grand-nephew, her sister's grandson, was in Cambridge University. He took her to all the colleges and they went punting on the river. She saw the people on bicycles in all the small villages. Her niece Kalika—Ranjani's brother's daughter who lived in London—took her to the Albert Hall where they attended an orchestra performance. It was the tenth anniversary of the death of Princess Diana, and the palace had been opened to visitors. Ranjani took advantage of the opportunity to visit the palace. They also saw Shakespeare's village, where Ranjani noted the similarity of the toilets to those of her village childhood.

2007 was the year that Ranjani earned a place in the encyclopedia of Buddhism (which was later reprinted). The article, written by Mavis L. Fenn, described her as “the prime mover in the re-establishment of the bhikkhunī sangha in Sri Lanka.” The article further stated:

Now their [the bhikkhunīs'] ordination is greeted with celebration. They go on almsround and become respected leaders within their communities. This change, is caused, in large part, by Ranjani de Silva.<sup>191</sup>

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191 Fenn 2013, 263–264.

In Melbourne, Ranjani also had a connection with Sanghamittārāma Nuns' Monastery founding abbess, Ven. Sucintā, who had stayed at the Sakyadhita Center in Sri Lanka. She had been introduced to her by Ven. Valpola Piyānanda in LA. Sanghamittārāma Nuns' Monastery was founded in 2007 and supported by Ranjani's family. It was here that the Pāli bhikkhunī pātimokkha was recited in Australia for the first time in 2008, fulfilling Ven. Sucintā's earlier wish to hear it in a Western country.<sup>192</sup> Sanghamittārāma later went on to become Newbury Buddhist Monastery.

## 2009 Bhikkhunī Ordinations in India and Australia

From January 9 to 15, 2009, another Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination for Indian candidates in India was held in Nagpur, India, with the co-operation of the All India Bhikkhunī Sangha and Fo Guang Shan, with bhikkhunīs Ven. Chuehmen and Ven. P. Sumitrā as organizers and senior bhikkhunī patrons.<sup>193</sup> The *kammavacācarinīs* brought by Ven Chuehmen with Ven. Sumitrā were also Sri Lankan. The bhikkhu preceptor was Ven. Sanghānanda of the All India Bhikkhu Sangha.<sup>194</sup> As before, through partnerships forged by her between Fo Guang Shan and Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, Ranjani had been a key link in making this ordination happen for the Ambedkarite Buddhist women of India. When I asked her about it, however, she no longer remembered details, saying “I have done so much...”

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192 Cheal, 2008, 14.

193 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

194 Chueh Men, 2009.

Even though Ranjani was no longer clear on details, Ven. Tathālokā had kindly shared a reflection about Ranjani’s contribution to this ordination via personal correspondence (2021). She shared her experience with what she described as Ranjani’s “organizational powerhouse and manifestational *pāramī*”:

Sponsorship for meals, robes, requisites, flights?— I was quickly recommended to Ranjani, who I knew from Sakyadhita Korea, and who seemed to be generally considered and agreed upon as *the* one to contact to conceptualize and organize such an affair. “If anyone can do it, she can,” I was told at the Mahābodhi Society. My bhikkhunī companion Ayyā Guṇasārī gratefully agreed, remembering how Ranjani had seemingly miraculously masterminded and organized bhikkhunī ordination for herself and her fellow countrywoman from Myanmar, Bhikkhunī Sāccavādī, in Sri Lanka five years earlier in 2003, even under very tough circumstances. Ayyā Sātimā agreed that Ranjani was known as a capable woman.

Sure enough, very quickly upon contacting Ranjani, there was multifarious response on all fronts: support for the meals and requisites for the *vassa* training through the Mahābodhi Society, contact and connection with Ven. Dharma Master Chuehmen of the Theravāda Outreach Department of Foguangshan who had organized the 1998 bhikkhunī ordination in Bodhgaya for FGS support of a followup ordination for Indian bhikkhunīs in Nagpur, brainstorming of the Sri Lankan bhikkhunī preceptor and teachers who would come, new sets

of robes for all those who undertook the training and those to be ordained, plans for sending, training and educating initial Indian *sāmaṇerīs* in Sri Lanka, sponsoring Indian *bhikkhunīs* to join the next Sakyadhita International Conference and meet the worldwide community of women in Buddhism, etc.

Like a small whirlwind of good energy stirring up blessed and supportive conditions and bringing *kusala kammās* to rise up and manifest, with just a few emails and one phone call, plans all quickly came together conceptually in manifold aspects. All was followed up, confirmed and set into motion when we could—surprise!—meet Ranjani together in person just one month later, at Sanghamittārāma in Melbourne. By way of explaining her ready and energetic support, Ranjani said, “We *must* do it, as we got it from them!—Arahat Bhikkhunī Sanghamittā, all of those *bhikkhunīs*—they came from India; we got all of it: our Buddhism, our culture, our enlightened *bhikkhunīs*—from them!” In the next six months and then over the next two years, everything aforementioned in this multifaceted plan came to be just as said, with Ranjani and her partners in *kusala kamma’s* remarkable and amazing facilitation.

Not long after the Indian ordinations, on October 22, 2009, four *bhikkhunīs* were ordained near Perth, Australia. This was the first Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination in Australia. Ven. Tathālokā was *pavattinī*. Ven. Sucintā and Ven. Sobhanā served as the *kammavācācarinīs*. Ven. Brahmavaṃso and Ven. Sujato were *bhikkhu kammavācācariyas*. The *bhikkhunīs* who received ordination were Ven.s Vāyāmā, Nirodhā, Serī and Hasapaññā.



Ranjani had met Ven. Vāyāmā and Nirodhā in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, a the nuns' island.

This was also the first bhikkhunī ordination to take place with a strong connection to the largely conservative Ajahn Chah tradition, which has been influential in spreading Theravāda Buddhism internationally and in the West. While the numbers of bhikkhunīs in Western countries is small compared to the number of bhikkhunīs in Asia, and bhikkhunī ordination was already being given in the West since 1988, this ordination was significant due to the controversy which followed it. As a result, Ven. Brahmavaṃso was delisted from the Wat Pah Pong group. Ven. Brahmavaṃso was also barred from speaking at the UN Day of Vesak in Thailand in 2010, but Ven. Tathālokā, a bhikkhunī, was not canceled. In 2014, Ven. Brahmavaṃso was further barred from speaking at a United Nations Day of Vesak event in Vietnam due to the controversy.

Ranjani expressed that the ordinations were possible because by 2009, ordinations had been happening for a long time already in Sri Lanka and internationally. A short time later, the first dual sangha Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination ceremony was conducted in the United States in 2010, also with Ven. Tathālokā as bhikkhunī *pavattinī-upajjhāyā*.

I sense that Ranjani has a deep feeling of camaraderie with Ven. Brahmavaṃso and Ven. Sujato due to shared experiences throughout the bhikkhunī revival. It is difficult to describe the extent of the sacrifices of both the bhikkhu and bhikkhunī pioneers of the bhikkhunī revival, and their committed lay supporters.

From December 28, 2009–January 3, 2010, Ranjani participated in the eleventh Sakyadhita International Conference, titled "Eminent Buddhist Women" in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. There she met

Sister Sundarā, “the tall one,” who is and was a senior nun at Amaravati. When she saw Ranjani, she said, “All the big work you had done, I had expected you to be a big woman!”

## 2010–2020: Recognition for the Services of Bhikkhunīs

### 2010 One Hundredth Birthday of Nelliet Jayasekera

For Nelliet’s one hundredth birthday anniversary in 2010, Ranjani went with a sister of hers to do a dāna on her behalf. They spoke to a monk at the Śrī Sunandārāma temple—what could be done? The monk told them that people had been riding bicycles around the bodhi tree—could they build a *prākāra*? Ranjani and her siblings had a small wall, lights and plaque installed at that temple—dedicated to their parents. All of the renovations are still there.

Recently, Ranjani gave a dāna at our monastery for Nelliet’s death anniversary. Ranjani said that she recently had a dream where she saw her mother wearing only white clothing down to her wrists and a shawl as if she were observing eight precepts. Ranjani said, “I’m doing the dāna because it’s our duty to remember our parents. I don’t worry about where she is reborn.” I close my eyes and I can easily imagine Nelliet Jayasekera all in white, shining, glowing with the memory of her good deeds.

In 2010, Ranjani received Australian permanent residence. She recalled some other memories during her time in Australia. One occasion was when she hospitalized in Frankston in Melbourne due to a gland problem. She was scheduled for minor surgery, but she felt joyful. While she was waiting in the hospital, she saw something on the wall which caught her eye—a vision—

some colors, a picture of a *deva* world, then a Buddhist flag. She heard the sound of nuns chanting, and some other conversation going on in English in the background. Ranjani listened for about an hour. She was annoyed at the nurses, who were talking, so she couldn't fully catch the words.

Later, she brought it up in conversation with Ven. Vijitānandā, who said on that day, they had been chanting for her. Ven. Vijitānandā had made a heartfelt wish that Ranjani could recover without surgery. Ranjani asked, "But what was the English conversation?" Ven. Vijitānandā explained that they had Thai bhikkhunīs visiting, and that they had been with Ven. Śāntānandā, who was explaining what was going on to them in English. Ranjani was still a little unsure about her vision at the hospital. Normally their chanting was at six pm, and what she had heard would have been at four-thirty pm Sri Lanka time. "That day, we had the chanting early," explained Ven. Vijitānandā. Ranjani remarked, "I didn't know that that sort of thing was possible. But it is true experience."

In 2010, Ven. Bodagama Chandima, who was the *sanghanāyaka* of Taiwan, opened the Buddhaśrāvīkā Education Center and Nagānanda Buddhist University. He had participated in the 2000 Taiwan ordination previously. The Education Center included a residential training facility for bhikkhunīs. Ven. Vijitānandā took on a leadership role in bhikkhunī training. Ranjani recalled three higher ordinations being held at the center. She was very keen to share the successes of this group.

## 2011 Some former *Śīladhārās* Become Bhikkhunīs

The twelfth Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women was held in Bangkok from June 12–18, 2011. The

conference's theme was “Leading to Liberation.” The conference was held at Sathira-Dhammasathan, a learning community founded in central Bangkok in 1987 by Maechi Sansanee Sthirasuta. Ranjani presented on “Teaching Dhamma in Prison,” and her paper was included in the conference papers.

Ranjani had a connection with Amaravati nuns since '93. She had stayed at Amaravati in 2007. She was naturally very happy to see the ordinations of Ven.s Ānandabodhī and Santacittā at Spirit Rock, California USA on October 17, 2011. Ven. Tathālokā was preceptor. Ranjani said:

Now I said, you become bhikkhunīs one day, very soon you will become bhikkhunīs. All the Amaravati nuns coming down in the robe, you know. I get all these visions of the bhikkhunīs all the time, bhikkhunīs from Amaravati. So that's very...that's something that I [was] really satisfied [with], I thought it was a great achievement for the Amaravati nuns to become bhikkhunīs, such great respect they had. They were already being good bhikkhunīs, only they didn't have the ordination. So that was a great achievement for the Amaravati nuns to become bhikkhunīs.

They had someone supporting them. In California, they were planning some, I think Ayyā Santuṣṭikā [Santussikā], who was an anagārinī [i.e., at the time when Ranjani met her at Amaravati], she was very positive, she was the one who said about finding a place and doing some research work in California. Maybe she knew somebody, trying to get a place. After a year or two, they became bhikkhunīs.

Ven. Ānandabodhī and Ven. Santacittā sent photos and cards to Ranjani, sharing the merit. They appreciated her work.

Ranjani had sought out Ven. Brahmavaṃso as a meditation teacher and attended his meditation retreat at Jhāna Grove in Perth in 2011, where she reconnected with Ven. Sudhammā and Ven. Nirodhā. She recalls that Ven. Brahmavaṃso had told her during a recent meditation interview that she had done the work, and now she just needed to sit back and wait for the pay packet.

During the Friday of the retreat, some bhikkhunīs were present, including Ven. Nirodhā, Ven. Sudhammā, and Ven. Satimā. They had been asked to do a Q&A session. Ranjani said that they answered well, and she was pleased that they were so capable of performing in the role of bhikkhunīs. Ven. Satimā had pulled her robe and said, “If not for Ranjani, I wouldn’t be able to wear this robe.” Ranjani was so overjoyed to see the nuns’ success that she didn’t sleep that night.

One day, HBF Asia desk head and long-term advocate of Ranjani’s projects, Roshan Dhunjiboy tried to stop a stray dog attacking her pet dog in Chiang Mai in Thailand and was bitten. She was already in her eighties. She passed away on April 28, 2011 due to the bite. Hema Goonatilake informed Ranjani that Roshan had died unexpectedly as a result of the bite. Ranjani said, “See finally, this saṃsāra. How she had to die, by the... So that was very sad when I came to hear that.” The HBF published her obituary online.<sup>195</sup> Ranjani also remarked that Roshan had been “very close to me,” and “a good Buddhist.”

## 2012–2013 More Ordinations and Publications

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<sup>195</sup> Unmüßig, Petersen and Pachaly, 2011.

Ven.s Ānandabodhī and Santacittā were followed by other nuns and members of the Amaravati community who later chose to ordain in the U.S. Ven. Santussikā, who Ranjani had met in 2007, received higher ordination in 2012 at Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihāra in Los Angeles, with Ven. Valpola Piyānanda as her bhikkhu preceptor, and Ven. Peliyagoda Sudarśanā of the 1996 Sarnath ordination group as her bhikkhunī preceptor.

In 2012, Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo published the compilation, *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*. Ranjani contributed a chapter, “Reclaiming the Robe: Reviving the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka” on the revival of the bhikkhunī lineage in Sri Lanka.

Inter-community relations deteriorated in Sri Lanka after 2012, with a new wave of anti-Muslim violence. Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala again attracted media attention in that year, this time in relation to an attack at a disputed mosque which had stood in the vicinity of the Daṁbulla temple (he was accused of inciting it). As a general comment, with reference to Ven. Sumangala’s reputation, Ranjani remarked that Ven. Sumangala had always been controversial. She said, “Ven. Sumangala was opposing everything: the hotel, the cricket pitch...” In the 1980s and 1990s, Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala was not, however, associated with religious exclusivity and Buddhist chauvinism, and had even been sighted participating in the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and the Anti-War Front.<sup>196</sup> His actions for caste and gender equality had made him popular with progressives in those decades, and Ranjani said, “If he hadn’t been controversial, he wouldn’t have gotten involved with the nuns.” Ranjani commented that any differences they had with the Ven.

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196 Harris 2018, 9.

Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala in respect of nuns had been ironed out, and that the bhikkhunīs were now united and working in harmony. She had felt that his character had been a blessing for the bhikkhunīs, as he had the “guts” to help them. I didn’t have the heart to raise the mosque attack directly with Ranjani, especially since she had left Sri Lanka in 2005. Ranjani had not been in contact with Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala after she left Sri Lanka.

The leading monk of the Horana bhikkhunī center, Ven. K. Vimalajoti, had co-founded, and then resigned from Bodu Bāla Sena in 2012 and 2014 respectively. He cited increased violence against Muslims as the reason for his resignation.<sup>197</sup> Ven. Vimalajoti had wished to use Bodu Bāla Sena to strengthen Sinhalese Buddhism through education, non-sectarianism and bhikkhunī ordination, but later resigned when the actions of the co-founding leaders of the group moved in a different direction toward extremism.<sup>198</sup> Ven. Bellanvila Vimalaratana Thera, who we met earlier in the lead up to the ’93 Sakyadhita Conference, had stated, “In any community, there are those who hold extremist views. But a majority of Sinhala Buddhists look at this issue in a far more balanced way,” and “We don’t use our fists to solve problems, we use our brains.”<sup>199</sup>

Ranjani’s work continued to attract academic attention. Lehrer (2013) commented that Ranjani’s strategy of legitimization drew on her “individual, interior, experience as a Lankan Buddhist woman”.<sup>200</sup> I couldn’t have said it better myself. Ranjani’s Buddhism is heartfelt and emotive. She has faith (*śraddhā*). It’s *spiritual* for her.

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197 Asian Mirror, 2014.

198 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

199 Daily FT, 2013.

200 Lehrer 2013, 74.

## 2014–2015 A Door Closes in Thailand; A Window Opens in Sri Lanka

In November 29, 2014, Ven. Dhammānandā of Thailand participated in a bhikkhunī ordination at Thippayasatthandhamma Bhikkhunī Ārāma. At twelve years' monastic seniority, Ven. Dhammānandā also received her appointment as Thailand's first bhikkhunī preceptor in modern times.<sup>201</sup> On 11 December, 2014, in response to the November bhikkhunī ordination, the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand released a statement that forbade monks from ordaining women. The statement further required that foreign monks secure permission from the government before holding ordinations in Thailand. It stated that the bhikkhunī lineage in Sri Lanka was broken and unrecognized by both countries. According to the statement, ordaining bhikkhunīs in Thailand with the help of bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs from East Asia would also be invalid.<sup>202</sup> The 1928 Rule of the Supreme Sangha Council forbidding bhikkhus of the Mahānikāya or Dhammayutika Nikāya giving sāmaṇerī going forth, sikkhamānā training, or bhikkhunī upasampadā to women was republished and reaffirmed. Thus, the Thai bhikkhunīs were left without an avenue to organize ordinations in their own country.<sup>203</sup>

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, following the position of the Vietnamese Department of Buddhism, under the leadership of Theravāda monks, there were still hurdles for bhikkhunīs. It is still only possible to register as a eight or ten-precept nun. No Vietnamese monk had dared to give bhikkhunī ordination. Through the

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201 [thaibhikkhunis.org](http://thaibhikkhunis.org), 2016.

202 [Buddhistdoor](http://Buddhistdoor.com), 2015.

203 Ven. Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.



ASEAN Bhikkhunī Association, and a pact to support bhikkhunī networks in Asia, Ven Dhammānandā of Thailand and Vietnamese Ven. Veditadhammā, together with Ven. Vījitānandā in Sri Lanka, were able to unite to bring their students together for bhikkhunī ordination at Sakyadhita Centre Pānadura nearly annually from 2015 onwards (with a 2019 ordination being held in Bodh Gaya).

In 2015, Ranjani attended the Sakyadhita International conference in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The conference ran June 23–30. She had spoken with Ven. Sujato, who had been a *kammavācācariya* of the 2009 Perth bhikkhunī ordination ceremony. Ranjani had confided with Ven. Sujato that she had been told that she was going to hell on account of the bhikkhunī revival. Ven. Sujato had replied that if Ranjani was going to hell, that they would be in hell together.

On December 28, 2015, Ranjani attended an ordination of three Thai bhikkhunīs from Thippayasatthandhamma Bhikkhunī Ārāma at the Sakyadhita Center, with Ven. Padukkē Sumitrā as preceptor. Just a little after a year on from the ban, Thai bhikkhunīs had already shown their resilience, as the ordination of Thai bhikkhunīs continued in Sri Lanka. Another Thai, Vietnamese and Bangladeshi group ordained on January 30, 2016, also at the Sakyadhita Center, which included the first group of Bangladeshi bhikkhunīs to receive higher ordination. This ordination marked another important milestone, as it included the appointment of the first Vietnamese Theravāda bhikkhunī preceptor, Ven. Liễu Pháp Veditadhammā.<sup>204</sup>

2017 Bringing Dhamma to the Family: Services of Bhikkhunīs. Thirty Years of Sakyadhita International

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204 Thaibhikkhunis.org, 2016.

Ranjani is incredibly proud of the accomplishments of the Sakyadhita Center. She was happy to see that women’s development had made an impact on families and children. Ranjani reports that even educated couples had come all the way from Colombo for counseling. They would come to discuss personal problems. After their problems were settled, they would be happy, and become supporters, visiting again and again. Ranjani remarked, “The Sakyadhita Center, they are almost [=still] there, they are achieving. We are so proud, our nuns in the Sakyadhita center doing such a marvellous service to the community, the whole village is coming to Dhamma.”

The center also ran children's programs for children under sixteen. Ven. Śāntānandā, who passed away from Dengue fever in June 2017 at the age of thirty-seven, had been particularly outstanding in her community service and work for under sixteens. Ranjani describes her as the “right-hand” of Ven. Vijitānandā, who served at the center for ten years. She had many invitations and she participated in the ordination and training of nuns. Ranjani described her passing as a “big loss for us at Sakyadhita.” She dedicates merit to her.

There were a large group of boys and girls who participated in the children’s activities. The children who came were all dressed in white and were very happy. Ven. Śāntānandā asked Ranjani for pencils and markers from Australia. She had a large whiteboard which she used for the class. On the walls, she had hung posters with social messages, like “Don’t waste food.” They were extremely careful not to waste food at the Sakyadhita Center.

Ranjani had mentioned to me that her original motive in training nuns was to use the *sīla mātā* to “bring Dhamma to the family.” She was therefore very happy to see the services of the nuns at the center, saying:

[It was] the greatest thing. That was my first motive to use the *sīla mātā*, to train them, and empower them, and make use of them to take Dhamma to the family. Especially I...in 1989, 91, when I invited to have the conference in Sri Lanka, I was telling that as mothers, we have to help the younger children. I think that was the first intention, one hundred percent more than that, I'm very happy that it's being completed, it's achieved.

Because that village was not much into Dhamma...it was...in the beginning, [when] we got the land. Even the donor said, that's not so good, I said, even the Buddha did go [went] to places like that. We had better bring the Dhamma to the place. Monks have commented it's like a lamppost...a lamppost to the village, to give light to the village. The children, most of them became vegetarian, they don't go without bowing to their parents, they are so obedient, they keep to the five precepts, they come and do all the *Jātaka* stories and do paintings and learn.

They allowed the children (both male and female) to sit in the *maṇḍapa* and do chanting. They trained a group. The whole group, male and female, ate only vegetarian food for one week in preparation. In late 2017, Ranjani mentioned the children's group doing chanting in the *maṇḍapa*, saying "That's my nuns' work. She has organized." We can recall that the *devadūta*, the boy who did the chanting during Ranjani's childhood after only eating vegetarian food, was always male.

The center also organized ten-day retreats. The women, called *sīla-upāsikās*, wear a yellow shawl over their left shoulder. Conventionally, this shawl would be white, but they had started

giving them yellow. The retreat participants meditate for ten days without talking in the downstairs hall. The construction of an additional hall had allowed the center to run both upstairs and downstairs programs.

The nuns also helped the poor children with tuition. The literacy rate in Sri Lanka is very high, with even the poorest children attending school. However, there was a lot of competition, and the classes at school were inadequate. The children had wanted to learn more English and math. The nuns taught primary school tuition class for free. “That was a help for the parents,” said Ranjani. Education (at least for boys) has been part of the traditional role of South and Southeast Asian monks.

The Sakyadhita Center also did chanting of Pāli *suttas*. Ranjani has many pictures. On Sanghamittā Day, the supporters in the community made donations of decorations, lights and speakers. They gave a vehicle for the procession and put the big statue of Sanghamittā Therī on the top of a float. They had received the Sanghamittā statue from Taiwan. Before that, they used something that they made at home. “But now we got this very nice one,” said Ranjani.

The statue of Sanghamittā Therī stood in the shrine room the whole year round, next to the Buddha, with the bodhi tree. It was labeled as the lecture room, because it was the room they used for teaching and training. However, everything was done in the hall. Getting the statue onto the vehicle was a big job, and everybody came to help. They had to carry it together and put it in the float. The float was decorated with lights. They also put benches and seats on the float so that the nuns could sit there.

The *Ratana Sutta* was broadcast from the float as it may its way through the street. For weeks, the nuns had been consecrating *pirit*-water and lots of thread (*pirit-nūla*). The thread was cut to

size, for tying around the wrists of the devotees, in advance. The nuns sat on another float and the *Ratana Sutta* was chanted repeatedly for two or three hours. The people rushed to the float.

Navigating the float presented some difficulty, as there were wires across the light-posts. Because the Sanghamittā statue was so high, people had to run ahead to prop up the wires with sticks so that it could pass.

All the villagers wanted a blessing, even in the small hamlets. There were old women in chairs who couldn't walk. They were elderly, but they had prepared cups and mugs to receive the *pirit*-water and the thread. Slowly, the float moved along, pouring water and giving thread to the whole village, bringing the whole village the blessing of Sanghamittā Therī. The nuns had organized children to carry flags and do drumming. According to the commentary, the *Ratana Sutta* was recited in Vaiśālī as the result of an epidemic, so it is considered protective. "It's good for the village," said Ranjani.

After Ranjani moved to Australia, the nuns continued to organize community service events. People were able to get their blood pressure checked for free. Ranjani had organized similar events previously. There were several pregnant women in the area, and they visited once a fortnight or once a month for antenatal counseling. "They are so happy, happy baby, Dhamma baby," said Ranjani. When the child is born, the families typically requested *pirit*-water and thread. Ranjani said, "So much of faith and confidence. After that, when the children are born like that, they grow in the Dhamma. Neighbors' children are very happy, like going to a playground, they come running to the center." The children were able to grow up seeing the nuns in the center.

Ranjani was happy that the Sahanaya foundation were their neighbors. The depressed patients would come to the balcony and

look at the bodhi tree, listen to the chanting and see the lights at the Sakyadhita center. She said, “It’s not that the mad people are next to us, that we are next to them. We are giving [to] them.” Even though the Sahanaya center was not fully functional in the early years, it later became operational, so anyone who can afford about four–five hundred dollars a month is given full accommodation and treatment there for depression. Having the foundation as neighbors was additional security for the Sakyadhita Center, as there was a security person present at Sahanaya twenty-four-seven.

Ranjani felt that the positive energy from the Sakyadhita Center would be good for the depressed people next door. She said:

People bring the flowers made into a garland [and offer them] around the bodhi tree, so that goes on. Inviting the *devas* and giving merit. That is really a whole energy, the good energy in that village. Bhikkhunīs feel stronger and stronger. It’s a very...can’t believe that muddy block of land turn into such a peaceful *puññā bhūmi* of the bhikkhunīs.

I hadn’t heard the term *puññā bhūmi* before, and as I understand, is it not a common term. However, in many ways, we can see it as the perfect term which shows the spirit of Ranjani’s work. *Puññā* means, “merit” and *bhūmi* means “ground.” We can see the Sakyadhita Center—like other bhikkhunī centers globally—as a place which when nourished, will be capable of producing merit.

Someone had told Ranjani that the location had a long history. Ranjani was always interested in places that could in any way be possibly be related to ancient bhikkhunīs. She said:

I feel there must have been *arahat therīs* around the places, an ancient temple. There is some landmark also where we turn to our block, something very special I feel that place. From day one, I said, this is the place for the nuns to get enlightened. May the *arahat therīs* come from this place. Recently, also. Now the bhikkhunīs feeling very stronger and getting more and more confident. She [Ven. Vijiṭānandā] said, “Madam, I don’t know when I teach now, I get...” Dhamma is coming out of her, and teaching, everybody.

A nun had said to Ranjani, “They are all going to be liberated, everyone going to nibbāna.” She said, “Madam, that is because of you, we are having these facilities.” The nuns invoked Ranjani’s name frequently, to the point where a man told Ranjani, “I don’t think, Madam, even the president is getting so much blessings, every day your name is being mentioned.”

Eventually, Ranjani left for Australia, and the Sakyadhita Center continued on the basis of its own community support. They had added facilities for males as well. They had proper bathrooms. When the water bills started coming in, Ranjani had decided to install a well. She got someone to do it, and she said it was “a nice one,” like a pond. Ranjani’s use of the Sinhalese term *pokuna* made me imagine the ancient square bathing tanks of Sri Lanka. So they were able to use the well. They could draw their water from the well and do their washing and bathing there. They had put up a wall for privacy so that the nuns could bathe as well. Additionally, they had installed toilets for the lay devotees.

Ranjani felt that the nuns had proved themselves by their service at the Sakyadhita Center, even more so than if they had

argued their case in parliament like Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Sumangala had wanted. She had wanted to “empower the nuns and make use of them” to bring the Dhamma to the younger generation. “Educate them, now they are MA, PhD, a few, I hope so. But they are doing Buddhist philosophy.” Ranjani had a negative impression of some monks who had attended university, saying, “They were sent to universities with the laypeople, the respect is not...the younger girls, they call like sister, brother. They mix, then they give up robes after they get their degrees. We have lost so many monks because of this system of education.” She felt some nostalgia for the traditional system of education, saying:

All these great monks in our country, who are great authors you read sometimes, they have been in the temple from their small days, you know. They read the horoscope and they send them to the temple, they say, send them to the temple. Their child-son there. First they learn...we had a spittoon, all our monks had a spittoon all the time because they chew betel and spit into the...out of brass.

Those boys, when they are young, they had to clean those things. *Æbhitteya*, we call the word. The *æbhitteya* is the word we used for the boys who work in the temple. Finally they become a great scholar. That’s how they start. They do things and helping do things for the temple, and respect the teachers, the elders and the vinaya. There was so much contentment in the people. When we were children, we had so much of contentment. We never thought we want anything more than what we had. That was the life.



The contentment of her village childhood had been important to Ranjani. There were some aspects of university education for monastics that Ranjani didn't seem fully comfortable with, such as the study of secular subjects. Nonetheless, she was proud of the educational achievements of the Sakyadhita nuns who had attended the Buddhist Pāli University.

In 2017, led by Ven. Tissarā, a group of Taiwanese Theravāda bhikkhunis had been trained and fully ordained at the Sakyadhita Center with Ven. Vijiṭānandā, spreading the Theravāda bhikkhunī transmission to Taiwan.

In the same year, in 2017, Ranjani was recorded at the Buddhist Society of Victoria's Buddhāloka Center in Melbourne with Ven. Kusumā, where she talked about the bhikkhunī revival. We get a feeling of Ven. Kusumā and Ranjani's relationship from the interview: Ven. Kusumā is consistent and scholarly. Ranjani, by contrast, talks from the depths of her practical contributions. It was a "good combination," according to Ranjani.

2017 also marked thirty years of Sakyadhita International. As a past president, Ranjani gave a speech on the last day of the conference. She said, "I am now eighty years [old] and I am retiring. For thirty years they had been working, the bhikkhunis are now [grown]. I didn't plan it, it just came to [me]...it has grown to a big tree, it's rooted and has branches, nobody can take it off."

Sachini had accompanied Ranjani to the Hong Kong Conference. She felt fortunate to attend a conference that had been such a huge part of her *attamā*'s life.

Ranjani announced her intention not to travel for any further conferences. However, people said, "If you aren't coming, we

will take Sakyadhita to Australia.” The conference was held in Australia in the Blue Mountains in 2019—Ranjani did, in fact, attend.

## 2018–2019 The Sri Lankan Government Funds Bhikkhunī Education

In the first half of 2018, there was a reunion of Ranjani’s family in Melbourne. I had heard that there were forty-five people there, and I had asked Ranjani’s grand-daughter, Sachini about it. I was impressed that so many people could come—but this shouldn’t be surprising given that Ranjani was one of seven children. There were specially made T-shirts. Sachini described the event:

Yeah, about forty plus of us including children. That was just some relatives that lived here. A few of them flew from Sri Lanka just for the event. One of her sisters are still in Sri Lanka, so her and two of her daughter’s couldn’t make it. All in all, about fifty. Close to sixty of us in total in the family, and that’s immediate family. My grandma’s siblings, she has seven siblings in total including herself. Them and then her families, my cousins. Including everyone, that’s about sixty.

In September–October 2018, Ranjani attended Ven. Brahmavaṃso’s retreat at Jhāna Grove. Ranjani recalled that Ven. Sujato had introduced her to others as the “mother of the bhikkhunīs.” Ven. Sujato recalled a memorable story from this trip. They had gone to visit Ven. Vāyāmā together with Ranjani.

Although Ven. Vāyāmā was unable to move or speak, she still had her sense of humor.

Back in Sri Lanka, the Sakyadhita Center had grown in popularity. One bhikkhunī contacted Ranjani in 2018. Ven. Madullē Vijitānandā, the head nun of the center, had been awarded a certificate for outstanding service by the *mahānāyaka* of the Amarapūra Nikāya, the late Ven. Kotugoda Dhammavāsa (d.2020). Ranjani had been impressed with Ven. Vijitānandā's work from 2000, when she saw her work with the low-caste villagers. Ven. Vijitānandā's certificate read, "For services rendered by the Sakyadhita Center." It had the word "bhikkhunī" with her name. She was given a long title which is normally given to *mahānāyakas* for outstanding service, Ranjani said, "kīrti viśva..the whole, big big title."<sup>205</sup>

There had been an article in the newspapers on the full-moon day. Ven. Vijitānandā had remarked on the importance of the acceptance of the bhikkhunī order. They couldn't believe the award. Ven. Vijitānandā was deeply appreciative of Ranjani, mentioning her all the time in the the merit dedication, saying, "because of you."

Ranjani again voiced her dissatisfaction with fighting over the bhikkhunī issue and attempts to bring the matter to parliament, saying "We proved ourselves." Official approval had never been particularly important to Ranjani. She had told the nuns to go ahead and practice as they are. The Sakyadhita center bhikkhunīs had told Ranjani that the award service would be televised on the news. Ranjani said, "The newspapers also had gone, given the certificate and the declaration, now we have to accept the bhikkhunīs." Ranjani had always believed in "grassroots

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205 *kīrti viśva dharma viśva kīrti garu dharmasangaṇī śāstrapati rājākīya paṇḍita gauru namaya*, i.e. the *rājākīya* pandit title, an honorary designation.

support,” and we can see that quite often, as in Thailand, the Sri Lankan media has also generally taken the side of the bhikkhunīs. About Ven. Vijitānandā’s award, Ranjani said, “The name bhikkhunī was stressed and in the news it was mentioned, bhikkhunī, bhikkhunī, two, three times on the news.” Ranjani saw this as a kind of proof of the inevitability of official acceptance:

That is...I think the climax of the bhikkhunī thing, for the moment, acceptance of the bhikkhunīs, official acceptance. Bhikkhunīs are accepted by the community from the first day, but the official acceptance will come soon, it’s there already when they make a declaration like that.

Due to Ven. Vijitānandā’s education under the sīla mātās, she had gone on to complete education up to Grade Ten. Ranjani had arranged sponsorship for her to study for an undergraduate and masters’ degree. Ranjani said that she was clever. She studied and received a degree in Pāli, and then a masters. The work of the Sakyadhita center included educating nuns, as well as training. When nuns from remote areas wanted to study, they sent money for travel and registration.

Sakyadhita Sri Lanka also set up training facilities in rural areas. In the rural areas, Ranjani arranged training for the senior nuns and for other nuns in the area. In many places, there were not proper toilets, so Ranjani arranged for toilets to be installed. One time, Ranjani went to give first aid training, and there wasn’t even a proper place for the lecturer to go to the toilet. She arranged for new toilets there. That center always writes to Ranjani to thank her, inviting her to come and see the improvements. The center now has an upstairs room and toilets that they didn’t have previously. They put Ranjani’s

name on the corridor wall. The rural centers wouldn't have had enough money to have paid for accredited teachers without Ranjani's involvement. Ranjani organized the stipend for the teachers and the visiting nuns, who had to travel to a rural location to teach, to make it possible.

Ranjani recalled a young nun she had met at the center. She had been nine years old when Ranjani began assisting with nuns' training at their center. She went on to study and received first class honors. She had since been appointed as a university lecturer. Ranjani was proud that she received this appointment in her twenties. She had also done her studies in English. There was also another *śīla mātā* who became a university lecturer. Ranjani said:

That shows that we had sewn the correct seed and it's really the fruits and the flowers that are coming up now, I told the *bhikkhunī* that [it] was our achievement that makes me so happy. I think we can close there with the *bhikkhunī* thing.

In 2019, Sri Lankan government approved funding for *bhikkhunī piriveṇa* education. Ven. *Supeśālā* was appointed as deputy director of the All-Island Nuns *Piriveṇa* office for the Department of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. She had told Ranjani that she was the only nun, among eighty monks, to become a director. *Bhikkhunī piriveṇas* are now able to register with the government and are provided with teachers and stipends. Ranjani was glad about this positive step for Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs*, noting that there are now at least eleven *bhikkhunī* training centers in Sri Lanka. One of them is *Dekanduvala* nuns' training center in Horana, of which Ven. *Dhammaśāntī* is now the head nun. Both Ven. *Supeśālā* and Ven. *Dhammaśāntī* had been among the first nuns to go for

training organized by Ranjani in 1994, and had been part of the 2000 Taiwan ordination group.

Also in 2019, the first group of Theravāda bhikkhunīs from mainland China ordained at Bodh Gaya, establishing (or re-establishing) the Chinese Theravāda bhikkhunī sangha. Hailing from the Original Buddhism Society, which was founded by Ven. Vūpasama, these bhikkhunīs were led by Ven. Tissarā, named in gratitude after the leading Sri Lankan bhikkhunī (also known as Devasāra or Aryasāra) who traveled from Sri Lanka to China in the fifth century CE to give ordination in China. This time Tissara and her company traveled from China to Sri Lanka. Before ordination, the Chinese candidates had trained at the Sakyadhita Center with Ven. Vijitānandā.<sup>206</sup> Ven. Vijitānandā of the Sakyadhita Center served as the bhikkhunī preceptor for the Chinese candidates and for some of the Vietnamese candidates. Venerable Liểu Pháp Viditadhammā and Venerable Dhammānandā also served as preceptors for candidates from their respective countries at this ordination.<sup>207</sup> In offering this ordination at the Mahābodhi Society in India, Ven. P. Sīvali can be seen to be taking over the legacy of Ven. Vipulasāra.<sup>208</sup>

## Conclusion

In her life, Ranjani has visited over twenty countries. She went to Germany five times and England three times, Switzerland twice, the US twice, as well as many other countries. She has worked tirelessly for bhikkhunīs for over thirty years, ushering in the most

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206 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

207 Tathālokā, 2019.

208 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

significant event in Theravāda Buddhism in living memory—the bhikkhunī revival. She has traveled and spoken at lectures and seminars across the world, helping women from countries including Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan, Australia, Canada, USA, Germany and the United Kingdom to ordain. In 2019, Ranjani estimated that there were nearly one thousand five hundred bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka, in addition to other groups of bhikkhunīs in other countries throughout the world.<sup>209</sup> Ven. Dhammānandā of Thailand further credits Ranjani with providing the opportunity for the bhikkhunī revival in Thailand. Ven. Tathālokā noted that Ranjani can also be credited with the appearance of active bhikkhunī sanghas in Australia and the USA, as bhikkhunīs who ordained with Ranjani’s help participated in early ordinations and institution-building in both countries.<sup>210</sup> Ranjani said, “That’s my life. Planning, plotting, conspiring and inspiring. For a good cause, it’s ok.”

Ranjani noted the decision of the Sri Lankan government in recent years to fund bhikkhunī *piriveṇas* in positive terms—this is an important act of acknowledgment, if not yet full embrace, of bhikkhunīs.

Ranjani was grateful for the freedom her husband, B.S. de Silva, gave her to travel and do what she wanted to do. She said, “He let me do anything, so I took the chance and did everything.” She was amazed to think at the number of people in her life who had contributed something. However, on some level, Ranjani is still slightly amazed by the outcome of the bhikkhunī revival—it had

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209 While other estimates exist and finding precise numbers is difficult, I understand this to be generally accurate. Ven. B. Chandima had invited 1,000 bhikkhunīs for a *dāna* in 2010. Reference: Theravada Samadhi Education Association, nd.

210 Tathālokā, personal correspondence, 2021.

almost been an unintentional result of simply desiring to help the nuns. Her grand-daughter Sachini commented:

She told me about all of her stories, how Sakyadhita formed. Through her experiences, I found that it connected me more with Buddhism. She, even now, when she tells me stories about her past, she...kind of amazes her as well. In that moment, she was just doing it because that was what had to be done. She didn't do it for attention. She did it for good intentions. When she's looking back on it now, she's like, then this happened. Kind of doing something unintentionally.

Ven. Kusumā also remarked of her time with Ranjani that she hadn't previously been aware that what they were doing would lead to them spearheading the bhikkhunī ordinations. She said:

She became a world-figure, she was chosen as the president of the International Sakyadhita conference. She came in the limelight because of Sakyadhita, and then she built a big monastery here called Sakyadhita in Sri Lanka.<sup>211</sup>

...She started a very good center, now, that is working. That is about fifteen–twenty kilometres away from Colombo in Pānadura. At the beginning, after that, she migrated to Australia. So she and I were really spear-heading this whole event. I even didn't know what I was doing.

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211 Ranjani has asked me to point out that the full name of the monastery is "Sakyadhita Meditation and Training Center."



Up until very recently, Ven. Dhammānandā continued to organize ordinations for the nuns at her center in Thailand, Wat Songdhammakalyani, via the Sakyadhita Center. Ven. Dhammānandā remarked:

The last time we ordained was in 2019, we organized an international conference in Bodh Gaya. But before that, all the Theravāda bhikkhunī ordinations, usually we would go back to Sakyadhita center to organize the ordination there. And this is all because of Ranjani.

Ranjani expresses her gratitude in particular to the monks who supported her through her early bhikkhunī work: the late Ven. Māpalagama Vipulasāra, Ven. Porogamuvē Somalankāra, Ven. Tallālē Dhammaloka, and Ven. Batagama Medhānanda, all of whom have since passed away.

From 2018, Ranjani moved in to our monastery at Newbury. Many people are attracted by her lively personality and rich experience of Sri Lankan Buddhism. She feels grateful to our senior bhikkhunī, Ven. Upekkhā, as well as to all the monks, nuns, and residents and Newbury, for their kindness and care.

Some years ago, our nuns attended an alms-giving in Melbourne where Ranjani was also present. I also attended the dāna. The monk recited, *imaṃ bhikkhaṃ bhikkhu-bhikkhunī sanghassa dema*, modifying the traditional formula of offering to the bhikkhus to instruct the devotees to dedicate the alms to both the bhikkhu and bhikkhunī sanghas. Ranjani was overjoyed in the car on the way back to the monastery. It was very beautiful for us to hear those small words of recognition, both for our ordained

status and for Ranjani's work. Our supporters from Newbury Buddhist Monastery are already used to inviting both *sanghas* for important religious functions, or accepting either a bhikkhu or a bhikkhunī. It seems normal now.

The Sakyadhita Center nuns think often of Ranjani. She said, "For my birthday, The Sakyadhita nuns did an offering of milk-rice, offering of medicinal drinks, and bodhi *pūjā* in the evening, wishing me long life." We can imagine the beauty of the bodhi tree in the center courtyard. Sri Lanka is still a part of Ranjani's life. Even as this book was going to print, Ranjani was collecting money and supplies to aid Sri Lankan nuns as they face COVID and other challenges.

Ven. Dhammānandā said, "She works behind the scenes, she talks a lot, but she does not boast about her work. If you know her, she talks all the time. Like a big sister, you know...but it's talking from a pure heart."

I have never seen any bitterness at all in Ranjani about the struggles she has faced on behalf of nuns. I have never heard her unfairly criticize her detractors or somehow paint them as villains. I have however, heard Ranjani take monks to task for their lack of action on the bhikkhunī issue, when more timid people would have been content to merely nod along with the crowd. I am very proud of Ranjani for that. We typically see her smiling and full of life. Our smile is her smile, and her smile is our smile. I am reminded of the words of the Theragātha: "be energetic, don't be hard-hearted." I regret that the whole world wasn't on her side earlier, with all of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and

Suvira Bhikkhuni

in five Theravāda countries cheering for her as she raised the standard of the bhikkhunīs. But those of us with pure intentions aren't waiting for the applause of others.

May she always walk in sunshine for helping the nuns.

## Afterword

With *kattaññu* at heart—

For years people said I should go to Sri Lanka—Ranjani among them!—and finally in 2017, when I was offered a ticket to go see a traditional medical doctor I'd been referred to several times who charitably offered his services to the monastic Sangha, I did. At one point my traveling companion Ven. Bhikkhunī Kārunikā and I were lodged by our hosts in a small retreat/conference center where Mīthirigalē Bhante Dhammajīva had led mindfulness retreats for teens in Moratuva on the Bolgoda Ganga river, which flows into Bolgoda Lake. When we were in touch, Ven. Bhikkhunī Halpandeniye Supesālā told me that the Sakyadhita Center was nearby in Pānadura—on Bolgoda Lake!—and I was of course very much interested in visiting this famous and trailblazing, her-storical place, to which I felt close at heart from years of encouraging photos and news through the international bhikkhunī grapevine.

But at first there was no reply to my emails or phone calls. It seemed all efforts might be in vain, even having come from so far away to so very nearby. Ven. Supesālā and Ven. Charlotte Sudhammā said I must be in touch with Ranjani, although she was retired and away in Australia with family in Melbourne. I was so wonderfully surprised when Ranjani herself replied right away to my email, so kindly, quickly and cheerfully. I felt her wonderful and sincere heart and bright and loving character, and how much she cared for the nuns, even after her retirement. Even though she was far away, she encouraged my visit to the Sakyadhita Center in Pānadura and even called ahead for me, after which the connection was made, and I was able to be in touch with chief bhikkhunī Ven. Vījitānandā and her right hand nun, the late, and ever so dearly much appreciated, Ven.

Suvira Bhikkhuni

Bhikkhunī Śāntānandā, who passed away suddenly from dengue the following year.

Although we stopped in on our way back from the traditional medical oil treatment with robes covered in medical oils, they, together with the international bhikkhunīs and sāmaṇerīs in residence, so warmly welcomed us. I cannot tell you what a joy and gladness it was to be there. In Sri Lanka we had enjoyed special opportunities to visit amazing sacred places long ago frequented by the great arahants, to meditate close to great collections of the Buddha’s bodily relics and the Jaya Śrī Mahā Bodhi tree brought by Sanghamittā Therī, and to meet such outstanding great lay people and world-renowned senior monk teachers and ascetics. However, it was our first visit to a bhikkhunī centre in Sri Lanka. I never felt quite so comfortably welcome as when entering this space of profoundly shared dedication to bhikkhunīs, to the bhikkhunīs’ revival and flourishing, “a truly bhikkhunīs’ place,” as at the Sakyadhita Centre, with the smiles and warm welcome of so many of my fellow international women *samaṇas* (*samaṇīs*), and the kind care of Ven. Vījitānandā and Ven. Śāntānandā, with ambiance thoroughly imbued with and pervaded with “Ranjani Madame”’s bright loving and caring heart, even though her body was on a different continent thousands of miles away.

Ven. (Ayyā) Tathālokā Therī  
Founding abbess and preceptor,  
Dhammadharini Bhikkhuni Sangha

Aranya Bodhi Forest Hermitage,  
Sonoma Coast, Northern California  
International Women’s Week, March 2021.

## Epilogue: Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī Asks for Forgiveness from the Buddha

### *GOTAMI*

“Chief of the World, it is believed  
that women make every error.  
If there’s any error in me,  
forgive it, Mine of Compassion.

I begged you, over and again,  
for ordination of women.  
If I was in error in that,  
forgive it, O Bull Among Men.

O Hero, with your permission,  
I instructed the Buddhist nuns.  
If I gave bad advice in that,  
forgive it, Lord of Forgiveness.”

### *THE BUDDHA*

“What’s not forgiven to forgive  
in one who’s adorned with virtue?  
What more am I to say to you  
when you’re going to nirvana?<sup>212</sup>

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212 Walters, “Legends of the Theris,” vv. 44–47.

## Selected Timeline

1891: Anagārika Dhammapāla calls for the revival of the bhikkhunī order

1903: Sri Lankan Ven. Sudhammacārī (Catherine de Alwis) receives ten-precept ordination in Burma.

### 1930s

1932: G.P. Malalasekera argues for Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination by bhikkhus

1937: Ranjani born.

### 1940s

1949: Ven. Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw of Burma calls for ordination of bhikkhunīs by bhikkhus in his Pāli language commentary to the Milindapañha

### 1980s

1983: First Sri Lankan Government initiatives to train sīla mātās

1984: Dr. Hema Goonatilake leads study tour to China on bhikkhunī lineages

1985: Ministry of Cultural Affairs bhikkhunī lineages study tour

1986: Sri Lankan sīla mātā association is formed, university access granted for sīla mātās.

1987: First international nuns' conference in Bodh Gaya

1987: Senior Sri Lankan bhikkhu Ven. Havanpola Ratanasāra begins to give sāmaṇerī going forth ordinations in the US

1988: Hsi Lai temple bhikkhunī ordinations (Fo Guang Shang, USA). Group includes two Germans coming from Sri Lanka, together with five Sri Lankan sīla mātās. Theravāda nuns from

Nepal, Burma and the USA are also fully ordained.

### **1990s**

1993: Sakyadhita Conference in Sri Lanka

1994: International Buddhist Meditation Center bhikkhunī ordination first Theravāda bhikkhuni ordained with Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara as bhikkhu preceptor (candidate name not identified).

1995–97: Ranjani is elected President of Sakyadhita International in Ladakh

1996: Sarnath Ordination organized by Ven. Māpalagama Vipulasāra and Venerable Dodangoda Revata Mahāthera of Mahābodhi Society, India and organized by Ven. Sang Won of Korean sangha. Higher ordination of Ven. Kusumā of Sri Lanka and nine other bhikkhunīs.

1997–2000: Ranjani is elected Sakyadhita International president for a second term in Cambodia.

Late 1996 or 1997: Ven. Porogamuvē Somalankāra of Sarvodaya Bhikkhu Congress attends Fo Guang Shan conference

1997: Bhikkhunī ordination in California by Sri Lankan and Thai bhikkhu sanghas with Ven. Havanpola Ratanasāra as bhikkhu preceptor. Organized by IBMC abbess Ven. Karuṇa Dharma.

1998: Bodh Gaya International Ordination—organized by Ven. Ināmaḷuvē Śrī Sumangala, *mahānāyaka* head monk of the Daṃbulla Rāja Mahā Vihāra. Conducted by Fo Guang Shan



Suvira Bhikkhuni

bhikkhu and bhikkhunī sanghas and with subsequent *dalḥikamma* by Sri Lankan monks.

1998, March: First bhikkhunī ordination on Sri Lankan soil. First Sri Lankan bhikkhunī preceptors.

*More ordinations in Sri Lanka in 1998–2000 period.  
Ordinations continue via Daṁbulla.*

### **2000s**

April 2000: Taiwan ordinations (Fo Guang Shan bhikkhu and bhikkhunī sanghas, followed by *dalḥikamma* with Theravāda bhikkhu sangha

2001: novice ordination of Ven. Dhammānandā of Thailand in Sri Lanka

2002: First International Bhikkhunī Ordination in Sri Lanka at Tapodanārāma, Mt Lavinia

2002: sāmaṇerī ordination in Thailand with Ven. Rahatungoḍa Saddhā Sumanā

2003: International Bhikkhunī Ordination at Tapodanārāma. Higher ordination of Ven. Dhammānandā of Thailand.

2004: Anurādhapura bhikkhunī ordination. Ven. Kolonnave Kusumā acts as bhikkhunī preceptor for the first time.

*Ordinations take place via the Sakyadhita Center annually from this point.*

2005: Ranjani commences living in two countries—Australia and Sri Lanka. Re-ordination of Ven. Dhammānandā of Thailand (Daṁbulla).

2006: first bhikkhu-sangha only bhikkhunī ordination in Thailand

2006: first dual bhikkhunī ordinations held privately in Thailand in Ayutthaya, organized by International Buddhist Women's Meditation Center with international bhikkhunīs and Khmer bhikkhus.

2009: Bhikkhunī ordination in Nagpur, India, and first Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination in Australia

2010: First all-Theravāda dual sangha ordination in the USA at Aranya Bodhi. Led by Ven. Tathālokā and Ven. H Guṇaratana

### **2010s**

2012: ordination of former sīladhārās in US at Spirit Rock

2014: ban on bhikkhunī ordinations in Thailand is re-affirmed

2019: Sri Lankan government recognizes and funds bhikkhunī educational and training centers

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## Glossary

*H: Hindi*

*P: Pāli*

*Skt: Sanskrit*

*Sin: Sinhalese*

*B: Burmese*

*Th: Thai*

*Cam: Cambodian*

<i>Æbhitteya (Sin)</i>	A temple assistant
<i>Amarapūra Nikāya</i>	A Sri Lankan monastic fraternity originally from Burma
<i>Andana (Sin)</i>	A Buddhist monk or nun's inner (lower) robe
<i>Anagārinī/anagārikā (P, fem)</i>	A nineteenth and twentieth century Pāli neologism meaning a “homeless one”, typically wearing white and living a semi-monastic lifestyle.
<i>Anumodāna (P)</i>	Lit., rejoicing along with the donors. A blessing giving after the meal.
<i>Anunāyaka (P)</i>	Second to the <i>mahānāyaka</i> ; a deputy high level sangha chief
<i>Anusāsaka (P)</i>	teacher of the examination; i.e. in an ordination ceremony
<i>Anusāsana (P)</i>	Instruction
<i>Arahant (P)</i>	An awakened saint
<i>Arādhanā,</i>	Inviting the devas (to participate in a

<i>devārādhana</i> (P)	chanting session, etc).
<i>Aṭṭapirikara</i> (Sin); <i>aṭṭhaparikkhara</i> (P)	The “eight requisites” include three robes, an almsbowl, a razor, a needle, a water strainer, and a belt.
<i>Aṭṭhavācika</i> <i>upasampadā</i> (P)	The higher ordination of a nun by eight statements
<i>Ānāpānasati</i> (P)	Breathing meditation
<i>Bhikkhunī</i> (P); <i>bhikṣuṇī</i> (Skt)	A fully ordained Buddhist nun by “eight statements,” i.e., a motion and three announcements by both the <i>bhikkhunī</i> and <i>bhikkhu</i> sanghas
<i>Bīralū</i> (Sin)	From Portuguese <i>bilro</i> , a bobbin. A type of lace.
<i>Buddha-pūjā</i> (P & Skt)	Ritual worship of the Buddha
<i>Bulat-hurulla</i> (Sin)	Betel leaf bundle
<i>Cetiya</i> (P)	A stūpa, i.e. a Buddhist reliquary dome
<i>Cīvara</i> (P)	A Buddhist monk or nun’s robe
<i>Daḥhikamma</i>	A “strengthening act,” a supplementary legal act of the sangha (often to “correct” perceived errors in an earlier act, most often an ordination).
<i>Dāna</i> (P & Skt)	donation



<i>Dāyaka</i> (m.), <i>dāyikā</i> (f.) (P)	A supporter (for a monk or nun)
<i>Deva</i> (P & Skt)	A god or goddess
<i>Devadūta</i> (P)	A messenger of the gods/goddesses (a child who plays a ceremonial role in inviting the gods/goddesses)
<i>Dhobi</i> (Sin & H)	A washerman or woman
<i>Donchi</i> (Cam)	Cambodian eight or ten-precept lay-nun
<i>Dorakaḍa asna</i> (Sin)	The ritual invitation of devas “at the door” in Sri Lankan Buddhism
<i>Gilanpasa</i> (Sin)	Allowable evening refreshments for monks and nuns, and Buddhist laity when fasting after midday.
<i>Kamma</i> (P)	Karma, lit. “action,” especially that with a morally charged result, often in the context of multiple lifetimes
<i>Kammavācācariya</i> (m.)/ <i>Kammavācārini</i> (f.) (P)	The reader of the authorized act ( <i>kammavācā</i> ) in a higher ordination
<i>Kapruka</i> (Sin), <i>kappa-Rukkha</i> (P)	A wishing tree (lit., the tree which appears at the beginning of the eon).
<i>Kapuva</i> , <i>magul kapuva</i> (Sin)	Marriage broker
<i>Kathiṇa</i> (P)	The <i>kathiṇa</i> robe-offering ceremony

<i>Kāpiriyō (pl.) (Sin)</i>	Sri Lankan <i>kaffirs</i> . Africans in Sri Lanka.
<i>Kiribat (Sin)</i>	Milk-rice
<i>Kōṭṭē (Sin)</i>	A lace-weaving pillow
<i>Kottu (Sin)</i>	Chopped roṭi, a popular Sri Lankan dish
<i>Kuṭi (P)</i>	A monastic hut
<i>Kusala (P)</i>	wholesome
<i>Loku-meheninvahanse (Sin)</i>	The senior nun
<i>Maechi (Th)</i>	A Thai lay-nun
<i>Mahāyāna (P &amp; Skt)</i>	The “Great Vehicle” of Buddhism, one of two main Buddhist schools, which emphasizes the bodhisattva path
<i>Mahā pirit pota (Sin)</i>	The Great Book of Protection, i.e. the <i>catubhāṇavāra pāli</i>
<i>Mahānāyaka (P)</i>	A high-level sangha chief in the Sri Lankan clerical hierarchy. There is one for each fraternity.
<i>Maṇḍapa (Sin)</i>	A pavilion for religious ceremonies.
<i>Nāyaka (P)</i>	A sangha chief in the the Sri Lankan clerical hierarchy
<i>Netra pinkama (Sin)</i>	The ritual painting of the eyes

	e.g. of a Buddha image
<i>Nikāya (P)</i>	1 A monastic fraternity 2 A collection of Buddhist discourses
<i>Nōnā (Sin)</i>	Nonna, Donna (via Portuguese). “Madam”. Polite term for a woman (Ranjani’s usual Sinhalese title).
<i>Ola-leaf (Sin, Eng)</i>	A palm leaf
<i>Osarīa (Sin)</i>	Kandyan saree
<i>Pañcasīla (P)</i>	The five precepts
<i>Paññā (P)</i>	Wisdom
<i>Pāramī (P &amp; Skt)</i>	A quality which was possessed by the bodhisatta in his journey towards awakening (based on the Jātakas, etc).
<i>Perahera</i>	Parade
<i>Pirit (Sin); paritta (P); paritrāṇa (Skt)</i>	Protective chanting
<i>Pirit-nūla (Sin)</i>	Ritual string (lit. protective string)
<i>Piriven (Sin); piriveṇa (P)</i>	A monastic college
<i>Pun-kalasa (Sin)</i>	Auspicious pot
<i>Prākāra (Sin &amp; Skt)</i>	An enclosure, typically for a temple
<i>Rājakīya paṇḍit (Sin)</i>	A royal scholar

<i>Rāmañña Nikāya</i>	A Sri Lankan monastic fraternity originally from Burma
<i>Roṭi (Sin)</i>	a simple Indian and Sri Lankan flatbread usually made from wheat flour
<i>Saddhā (P); śraddhā (Skt)</i>	faith
<i>Samaṇa (P); f. samaṇī</i>	A Buddhist monk or nun, lit. “one who strives”
<i>Sankhāra (P)</i>	activity (i.e. of the body, speech and mind).
<i>Sanghakkamma</i>	An official legal act of the sangha
<i>Sangharāja (P &amp; Skt)</i>	“King” of the sangha (Thailand and Cambodia)
<i>Sarama (Sin)</i>	sarong
<i>Satipaṭṭhāna (P)</i>	The foundations of mindfulness (in relation to Buddhist meditation)
<i>Śāsana (Skt); sāsaṇa (P)</i>	The Buddhist religion
<i>Siam Nikāya</i>	A Sri Lankan monastic fraternity originally from Thailand
<i>Sīladhārā (P: United Kingdom)</i>	Ten-precept nuns within the UK-based Ajahn Chah tradition under Ajahn Sumedho
<i>Sīmā (P)</i>	A monastic boundary

<i>Sūtra (Sin); sutta (P)</i>	A Buddhist scriptural text
<i>Sotāpatti (P)</i>	The fruit of stream entry, the first level of awakening
<i>Tæṃbili (Sin)</i>	A king coconut
<i>Thera &amp; thero (m.), therī (f.) (P)</i>	A senior monk or nun.
<i>Theravāda (P)</i>	The “doctrine of the elders”, typically used in reference to the Pāli language Buddhism which is predominant in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.
<i>Thīlashin (B)</i>	A Burmese lay-nun,=(P) <i>sīlācāriyā</i>
<i>Upasampadā/ vuṭṭhāpana (P)</i>	Higher ordination/establishment [of nun]
<i>Upajjhāyā/pavattinī (P)</i>	Female preceptor/female nominator
<i>Vipassanā (P)</i>	Insight meditation, “seeing clearly”
<i>Yakkha (P); yakṣa (Skt)</i>	A monster
<i>Yugala (Sin)</i>	“duelling”. Two monks sit opposite each other, and take turns to recite pirit in an all-night chanting session.

Walking in the Sunshine of the Bhikkhunis



Upper left: Ranjani's Dutch-style family home in Mirissa, where she lived 1937-1952.

Upper right: 1950s: As a teenager. Photo says, "Ranjani Jayasekera."

Lower left: 1940s: Ranjani does Girl-Guiding



Upper left: Ranjani marries B.S. de Silva in 1961. Ranjani is 23. B.S. is 38.

Upper right: Ranjani with car in 30s.

Lower left: 1987: Sri Lankan delegation to the International Buddhist Nuns' Conference





Upper left: 1993, Ranjani with President of Sri Lanka, D.B. Wijetunga and Dr. Kusuma Devendra at Sakyadhita Conference Opening

Upper right: 1993 Sakyadhita Conference Press Conference  
Left to right: Dr. Kusuma Devendra, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Ranjani de Silva, B.S. de Silva, unknown.

Lower left: 1993 Sīla Mātās at the Sakyadhita Conference, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Lower right: After the 1993 Sakyadhita Conference. Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh on left Ranjani and Dr. Kusuma Devendra hold bulat-hurulla (betel leaf bundles). Kusuma is kissing Ranjani. Customary gifts of betel-leaves express cordiality and friendship in Sri Lanka.





Upper left: After the 1993 Sakyadhita Conference. Left to right: Ranjani, her daughter Rukmal, and Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Upper right: 1995 Sanghamittā Day speech for All Ceylon Buddhist Womens' Congress

Lower left: Ranjani's acceptance speech of Sakyadhita International Presidency in '95 in Ladakh.



Ranjani with the interview panel for the 1996 ordinations. Far left: the late Ven. M. Vipulasāra and center (leaning on hand), Ven. D. Revata



Some of the new bhikkhunīs after the 1996 ordination left to right: Ven. M.Vipulasāra, Ven. H.Chandradassī, Ven. P. Sudarśanā, Ven. K. Kusumā, Ven. G. Subhadrā, Ven. B. Sudhamikā, Ven. M. Vijitā. Photo provided by Ven. P. Sudarśanā.



Upper left: 1990s-2000s, first aid training for nuns via Saukya Dana. Ranjani is at the back with the box.

Upper right: Approx 1999, Ranjani hands out certificates to participants in the NISD nuns' training.

Below: 2000, With Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka at the Sakyadhita Center. Ven. Tallalē Dhammaloka is seated center. Ranjani is on the far right.





Ranjani with nuns sponsored for higher education and training.



2003: Flood Relief in Ratnapura

Suvira Bhikkhuni



*Upper left: 2003 At Anulādevī Cetiya. The stone inscription recording the ordination of the first bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka (inscription is under the sand). Photo courtesy of Ven. Sudhammā.*



**2003: Bhikkhunī pirit organized by Ranjani**



c. 2004–2005. Ranjani with Ven. Rahatungoḍa Saddhā Sumanā and Ven. Dhammānandā, Thai supporters on tour in Sri Lanka



2004: UN International Women's Day Outstanding Women in Buddhism Award



2005: Ranjani with Ven. Chuehmen and recipients of post-tsunami back-to-work aid.



2007: International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha. Left: Ranjani. Right: Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi.





Jayasekera family reunion, 2018. Ranjani is center. Rukmal is behind Ranjani on left. Grand-daughter Sachini is second on front row left.



2018: Ranjani with Newbury Buddhist Monastery Community. Women: (left to right) Ven. Sankappā, Ven. Selā, Ven. Suvīrā (the author), Ven. Upekkhā, Ranjani, Mun-syn Low (later ordained as Ven. Suññatā), Joanne Chu (later ordained as Ven. Santā). Men: Ajahn Nissaraṇo, Ven. Araṇavihāri, Ven. Cunda, Ven. Bodhidhaja, Ven. Cittapālo, Richard Combe, Chin Look Tan, Jilo.



## **GRATITUDE**

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More information about Newbury Buddhist Monastery is available at [nbm.org.au](http://nbm.org.au).

## The Author



Photo credit: Max Milne, 2021.

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