

The First Ten-Precept Nun of Sri Lanka and the Burmese Thila-Shin Connection

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The Bhikkhuni Order was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 3rd c. BCE, by Arhant Sanghamitta, daughter of King Asoka, and sister of Arhant Mahinda, son, who introduced Buddhism, and the Bhikkhu Order, to Sri Lanka (see Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies, # 5 for some details). Queen Anula becoming the first Sinhala Bhikkhuni, the Bhikkhuni Order continued to thrive for fifteen centuries, under benevolent Buddhist rulers, until both the male and the female Orders came to be brought to an end by the Hindu South Indian invaders in the 11th c. (for a treatment see K M, de Silva, 1981, A History of Sri Lanka, Oxford University Press). While the Bhikkhuni Order has now (since late 1990's) come to be revived, filling the vacuum created by the demise of the Bhikkhuni Order in the 11th c., there had emerged, beginning in the 19th c., a precursor - the Ten-Precept Nuns (dasasil mātā). In this issue, we present the personal story of the very first of them, Sister Sudharmācārī. The genesis of the Dasasil Mātā Community that we see today in Sri Lanka, however, can be traced to the Thila-Shin nuns' movement in Burma. During the reign of King Mindon (1853-78), there was a resurgence of Buddhism. The Thila-Shin Order arose during this period. Part II is that story.

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PART I

Sister Sudharmācārī—The First Dasasil Mātā of Sri Lanka

Abstract:

Sister Sudharmācārī was the first Dasasil Mātā (DSM) ‘ten precept nun’ of Sri Lanka. Born in 1855, she was baptized Catherine de Alwis, the Sinhala elite under British colonialism embracing Christianity towards upward mobility. She was first introduced to the Buddhist faith through her personal ayah named Wimala. She died at the age of 84, in 1939. Part I of this article is her story.

Introduction

Sister Sudharmācārī’s maiden name was Catherine de Alwis.¹ Her Mother, Leisa de Alwis, died when she was quite young and the father re-married. Her father was David de Alwis Gunatilleka, Mudliyar of Raigam Korale² at the time of her birth, which was probably in 1855. Her great grandfather was a Christian missionary school teacher³ at Bentota and professed the Anglican faith. She was brought up in the Anglican faith in the very lap of luxury as she was the only child. Catherine had the fortune to be well educated in both the English and Sinhala languages.

Catherine is a relation of the famous scholar James de Alwis, whose wife Florence Dias Bandaranaike is a sister of Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike. Thus she is connected to the Bandaranaike’s (Sir Solomon’s only son was S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and his wife is Sirimavo.⁴ Catherine is also connected to Helena Wijewardene of Kelaniya⁵ and therefore has some relationship to the Hon. President of Sri Lanka Mr. J.R. Jayewardene.

Catherine Converts to Buddhism⁶

Catherine’s first introductions to the Buddhist faith came through her personal ayah named Wimala.⁷ The turning point in her life came when her former servant who was a Catholic left her services and her father employed Wimala, a Buddhist woman, who was willing to work for a lesser pay

provided she was permitted to engage in her religious activities and observe Sil on Poya Days.⁸ The woman was in the habit of borrowing books on Buddhism, such as *Pujavaliya* and *Saddharmalankaraya*, from the Bhikkhu in the neighbouring temple and reading them during her spare time. This influenced Catherine and initiated her into reading Buddhist books at a tender age.

It appears that one day Catherine asked her ayah to take her to the temple, without the knowledge of her father. This was refused by the ayah for fear of losing her job. But it seems that she really went to the temple sometime later with Wimala. The Bhikkhu had admonished Wimala for bringing Catherine and said, "Eventually I will be chased out of the temple". Catherine asked the Bhikkhu, "Are we prohibited from visiting the temple?", and the Bhikkhu answered "Any man or woman can visit the temple, but my fear is your father's intimidation". It appears that later on, Catherine obtained her father's permission and regularly visited the temple to elicit answers to various questions on the Dhamma. She had even asked the Bhikkhu to ordain her but he had refused.

Sometime later, a family friend by the name of Koswatte Nilame from Matale, a renowned Ayurvedic Physician,⁹ visited the Alwis Walawwa to treat the Mudliyar who had some eye affliction. He was a Buddhist scholar and brought with him some Buddhist texts which were given to the Mudliyar.

As mentioned,¹⁰ it was during this period that, after four hundred years of Christian Missionary rule, a revival of Buddhism was taking place, and Westerners such as Col. Olcott and Madame Baversky, publicly embracing Buddhism.¹¹ It is no surprise that Catherine and her father both became interested in Buddhism. But the father, who was a Mudliyar serving the British Government, did not profess his faith in Buddhism openly, but it has been revealed that he was not a convert at heart [but] had even expressed a wish that there should be a 'seventh day alms giving', to Bhikkhus after his death as is the widespread custom of Buddhists.

Catherine remained unmarried and when she was about twenty five years old, her father died. She, it appears, summoned the Bhikkhus to her home on the seventh day to offer alms, as was the father's wish. The Bhikkhus wanted to administer the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts prior to accepting alms as is the custom, but there was none present among the relatives to respond to the Bhikkhu's request. Thereupon the Bhikkhus

refused to partake of the alms and were preparing to depart. When, to the amazement of everybody present, the sorrow-stricken daughter Catherine prostrated herself before the Bhikkhus and repeated the Precepts. This was her formal acceptance of Buddhism.

Thereafter, her relations appear to have abandoned her and she became thus doubly grieved, having lost her parents as well as relations. Consequently, because of her knowledge of the Dhamma which gave her a beckoning call, she left her ancestral home in Bentota¹² and came to live with some friends in Kandy. Here she had the opportunity of associating with the Kandyan Buddhist aristocracy, probably under the influence of her father's revered friend, Koswatte Nilame. She found great consolation in her Buddhist friends, but she continued to come to her Colombo residence occasionally. Both in Colombo and Kandy, she had many opportunities to meet Burmese Buddhists and particularly the Burmese Thila-Shin¹³ who visited the island in large numbers to worship the Tooth Relic.¹⁴

There was great enthusiasm engendered among the elite of Colombo for these Burmese Thila-Shin, especially the rich coastal families who supported the Sri Lankan monastic Order of Burmese origin, the *Ramañña Nikāya*. They often hosted Burmese pilgrims in their mansions in Colombo. The visiting Burmese Thila-Shin did not find their counterparts among the Buddhist women of Sri Lanka of that time. Particularly for this reason, those Burmese Thila-Shin who were pious and learned were greatly revered and adored by the rich ladies. Mrs. Brenda Bastian (mother of Anura Bastian, Member of Parliament) recalled, when we interviewed her, how her grandmother, Mrs. Theodora Fernando, built a huge Rest House for the visiting Thila-Shin in Colombo, at the present Eye hospital premises, at Lipton Circle. Mrs. Brenda Bastian is a daughter of William Pedris, a well known businessman and landowner of the time. She remembered how, when she was a little child, the Burmese Thila-Shin stayed with them in their ancestral home as guests. She informed us that the grateful Thila-Shin presented her grandmother with a beautiful Buddha statue which she in turn presented to the Isipatanārāma Temple. (This is found at this temple even to the present day.)

It transpires that Catherine had developed a friendship with some of these Burmese pilgrims and no doubt there would have been, in her a natural attraction to the Thila-Shin, particularly because they were yellow clad and well versed in the higher ethics of the Dhamma and meditation. Eventually, together with the devoted *ayah*, Wimala, she quietly accompanied these

pilgrims and took a steamer to Burma probably in 1894. Her relations were unaware of her journey. In any case, it is likely that she relinquished ownership of her ancestral properties and lost contact with her relations during her eleven years stay in Burma. Her relations who continued to profess Christianity probably may have taken Catherine's conversion into Buddhism as an insult and disloyalty to their family prestige and faith. This became obvious when in our subsequent inquiries we found that there was hardly anyone among those of her relations whom we met who acknowledged any relationships with her or had any record of her life. In most instances, it was we who pointed out Catherine's relationship to them and described her contribution to Buddhism. The Christian relations whom we met were disinterested; most of them living in 19th century mansions, in and around Colombo, while some of the Buddhist relations listened to us with surprise.

Having been admitted to the ranks of the Thila-Shin in Burma¹⁵ Catherine arrived in Sri Lanka in 1905, shaven headed and yellow robed to become the pioneer of the Sri Lankan Dasasil Mātā¹⁶ Community. She became known as Sister Sudharmacārī but many called her '*Hāmu Maeniyō*'¹⁷ by virtue of her aristocratic ancestry. She wore a white long sleeved blouse to bring out the distinction from Bhikkhus. Many who had seen Sister Sudharmacārī (this includes the author's mother as well) observed that Sister Sudharmacārī had a very imposing personality, being well built and regal in her bearing. She was patronized by the rich and the elite.

She was well received by the Governor of Ceylon, Sir Henry Blake.¹⁸ The Kandyan aristocracy, e.g., William Dunuwille Disawa and Mrs. L. V. Nugawela, invited her to a reception at Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, which was attended by the Governor and Lady Blake and Mrs. A. Coomaraswamy. Don Solomon Dias Bandaranaike is reported to have been present at the party. Her *ārāma* at Katukele Kandy was known as Lady Blake *Ārāma*.

Sister Sudharmacārī had the advantage of being a convert from the Christian faith. This gave her the added qualification of knowing Christianity and as such of serving as a link between some sections of the Christian aristocracy and the Buddhist aristocracy at a crucial time in the history of the island when large numbers of coastal families who were Christians for many generations, notably the family of Anagarika Dharmapala, were returning to Buddhism.

Inauguration of the First *Ārāma* for DSM

Upon her return, Sister Sudharmacārī, with the help of her Kandyan friends formed a Society by the name of 'Sudharmadhara Samitiya', and established the first *ārāma* for DSMs. William Dunuwile Disawa and Margris Fernando were mainly responsible for the buying of the land which cost Rs.3,700/=. Among the other supporters, the Anagarika had made a significant contribution, as is evident from the following entry in the Diary of 1906-p.53. "I shall contribute Rs.3,000/= for the *upasikārāmaya* in Kandy". The *ārāma* was officially opened in 1907 by Lady Blake, and bears her name.

Sister Sudharmacārī at the beginning initiated only elderly women as DSMs. People who had actually seen the original name board said that it was called '*Vruddha Upāsikārāmaya*' (institution for elderly upasikas). The social climate in Sri Lanka was not quite right at that time for younger women to enter an *ārāma*. Dhammika Maeniyo from *Dhammikārāma* at Anuradhapura said she used to go to school past the *ārāma* with her grandmother and she would plead with the grandmother to take her inside. She was never allowed to enter the *ārāma* for fear of being attracted to the life of a DSM. Dhammika Maeniyo recalled that her grandmother said that only girls who had gone wrong lived in an *ārāma* in order to avoid social prejudice, and she was taken by a circuitous route to school to avoid passing the *ārāma*.

Sumana Maeniyo at Visakhārāma, Wadduwa and Anula Maeniyo of Randombe said that they were initiated at Lady Blake's. They described the daily schedule of the *ārāma*. The rising gong went at 3.45 a.m. and a strenuous programme followed, with long hours devoted to meditation and learning Dhamma. In the morning, the DSM set out to collect raw food and provisions for the *ārāma* from the various generous Buddhists in Kandy, and in the evening they went again to collect provisions for soft drinks. They had to return before 5.30 p.m. at which time the gates were closed. We asked them what would happen if they came in later than 5.30 p.m. They answered that in that case, by way of punishment, the provisions collected were not accepted and were in fact thrown into an abandoned well outside the gates.

It appears that Sister Sudharmacārī had been warned by her teacher in Burma not to ordain women under 40 as ordaining younger women may pose various problems. She took this advice and continued for nearly twenty

years to take in only older women. A.K. Somawathie Maeniyō, aged 91, whom we met several times and is now lying ill at Matale with a broken hip, said that she was the first of the young women who came to be ordained by Hamu Maeniyō. At that time (1922 May 10) there was a need for young DSMs to be admitted to the institution for the purpose of looking after the elderly ones who were by that time mostly deaf and blind and old, and needed much attention. A.K. Somawathie Maeniyō recalled how she tended the aged DSMs by day and night devotedly for several years.¹⁹

In her life time Sister Sudharmacārī set up two other ārāmas, one at Anuradhapura near Thupārāma called Sanghamittārāma, and another at Negombo called Pajāpati Gotamī Ārāma, and initiated many women into the movement. These are going concerns even now. But Lady Blake's ārāma lies in a state of pathetic ruin under the present management.

Establishment of Ārāmas

Many ārāmas were set up for Sister Sudharmacārī's pupils between 1910 and 1924, and by 1924 the movement was well established. At least three ārāmas came up in Panadura, during this period – Siri Nanda Upāsikārāma, Tantirimulla Ārāma and Seelawathi Ārāma.

Rich landowners and businessmen in Colombo set up many ārāmas, Pilgrims Rests and Temples during this time. A Notable ārāma is the one at Anuradhapura called Mallikārāma, which was built by D.D. Pedris, and took his wife's name Mallika. It was built in memory of their son Edward Henry Pedris, who died a hero's death during the Sinhalese-Muslim riots of 1915. I remember Somawathi Maeniyō, who was residing there, telling my mother how the desperate parents offered the weight of the boy in gold to the British Governor, begging for his release, but it proved futile, whereupon the money was spent in his memory in the erection of Mallikārāma for DSMs, a Pilgrim's Rest in Polonnaruwa, and a Temple for Bhikkhus. Mallikārāma was offered to a Burmese Thila-Shin by the name of Daw Chandra, who lived there till her death. The tomb enshrining her ashes can be seen in the premises, with the name engraved upon it. According to some sources, Thila-Shin Daw Chandra was the teacher of Sister Sudharmacārī.²⁰ There is no conclusive evidence for this, but it is clear that they knew each other intimately. Sister Sudharmacārī being conversant in the Burmese language and the Thila-Shin of Burma would have been familiar with Daw Chandra.

Establishment of a Girls' School

According to many sources, Sister Sudharmacārī had founded a Girls' School in Kandy. She had taken in small children from the neighbourhood and it had become a successful venture by 1912.

Bella Sydney Woolf (Mrs. W. T. Southern), in her book entitled *'How to see Ceylon'* published in 1914, refers to this Girls' School. She writes as follows:

Sister Sudharmacārī has been the means of rescuing many children from undesirable surroundings, for instance from begging at the Temple of the Tooth or in the streets. She takes in children of all denominations and gives them a practical education.

According to the estimation of the author, there were 200 girls on roll at that time. Woolf also confirms the fact that Sister Sudharmacārī had admitted many aged, deaf and blind women into her ārama (p.91-92).

Anagarika Dharmapala has again helped her as is evident from his 1907 diary entry (p.6). It goes as follows: "I thought of the backward nature of the Ceylonese girls and resolved to help the Kandyan girls' school. Wrote letters to Lady Blake offering Rs. 1,000/- for the proposed girls' school and to Nugawela on the same subject." Anagarika's 1913 diary entry also refers to this school. It goes as follows. "Went to Katukelle Upasikārāma with C. Dharmawikrema and talked about founding a girls' school for Kandyan girls."

1913, p. 23 entry - "sent a cheque for Rs. 200/- to Sister Sudharmacārī for the convent, from the Foster Fund". The same Year, p. 87 entry states, "The Kandy girls' school is to be opened. It was decided to buy the property at Kandy at Rs. 25,000/-. The amount is to be lent from the Foster Fund at 8% interest."

Thus Sister Sudharmacārī pioneered the establishment of a Girls' school in Kandy. The school was called Lady Blake's Institution. There had been a women's organization by the name of "Sri Sudharma Kulangana Samitiya" to help her with the running of the ārama and the Girls' School. The girls' school and the two āramas in Kandy and Anuradhapura had been flourishing till 1929. The management of the school was handed over to the

Buddhist Theosophical Society²¹ when Sir Baron Jayatilleke was its President, in the year 1929.

Large numbers of Sinhalese women were ordained by Sister Sudharmacārī. N. Somawathi Maeniyo, who was personally known to me from my infancy as she was a regular visitor at home, informed me that she was a pupil of Saddhawathi Maeniyo of Dodanduwa, who was in turn a pupil of Sister Sudharmacārī. She thus claimed to be of the 3rd generation in the lineage. At present she is the chief DSM at Mallikārāma. She said that she, too, went to Burma in 1918 along with Seelawathi Maeniyo. A Burmese Thila-Shin at Makutārāma, the Burmese temple at Maradana, had ordained Seelawathi Maeniyo under the tutelage of Vinayalankara Thero, a Burmese Bhikkhu. While in Burma, these two DSMs had also been staying at the Naradi Temple at Sagaying hills, and Somawathi Maeniyo, recalling her stay at Sagaying hills, said that there were about 500 Thila-Shin residing there at that time.

Dhammadinna Maeniyo, who is the Chief DSM of Sanghamittārāma, said that Sister Sudharmacārī spent her last years in that ārāma. Dhammadinna Maeniyo was a pupil of Sister Sudharmacārī and she came to inherit the ārāma. She was wearing a white blouse and mud coloured robes. When we saw her, we asked her why she was wearing a white blouse and she replied that she was following the pattern set out by Hamu Maeniyo.

A.K. Somawati Maeniyo, a pupil of Sister Sudharmacārī, said that she and Seelawati Maeniyo were ordained at Lady Blake's on 10th May, 1922. She said that the two of them went to Burma in 1925 and stayed ten years in Burma, also at Naradi Paya Temple at Sagaying hills. She spoke of the times when she met Anagarika Dharmapala in India and assisted him to raise funds for the Mahabodhi Society. She said that she had lost contact with Seelawati Maeniyo and presumed that she was dead. From the clues that we got from her, we went around searching for Seelawati Maeniyo in order to corroborate her evidence. After months of search we felt greatly rewarded to find her still alive at Wekada, Panadura. She, in turn, was very excited to hear that her dear old friend Somawati Maeniyo, with whom she went to Burma and later served the Anagarika, was still alive. She confirmed the evidence of Somawathi Maeniyo. Seelawathi Maeniyo related to us how her rich aunt Mariza Zoysa changed her name to Seelawathi (The name Seelawathi occurring many times created quite a confusion in our minds) and then went to India and stayed with the Anagarika's mother for a long time.

Sister Sudharmacārī, the pioneer of the DSM movement in Sri Lanka, left Lady Blake's ārāma in 1932, at the age of 76 years, wishing for a quiet retirement and lived at Sanghamittārāma for about seven years during which time it appears that she realized the ultimate aim of her life of renunciation. The ārāma is situated in close proximity to Thūpārāma.

This reminds me of the inauguration of the Bhikkhuni Sasana in Sri Lanka [in the 3rd c. BCE]. The Ven. Sanghamitta Therī established the Bhikkhuni Order, and having accomplished her mission, went into seclusion to the Hatthalhaka Upassaya in Anuradhapura overlooking the Thūpārāma.²² Apparently Sister Sudharmacārī also chose the same vicinity of Thūpārāma.

Sister Sudharmacārī was ailing for a few years prior to her death, but those who saw her said that she continued to maintain her usual dignity, piety and strength of character. They even said that she had a perfect set of teeth. She, the Noble Lady, passed away at the age of 84 years, on Monday the 27th, October, 1939 at 3.30 p.m. Her remains were cremated at Mahaiyawa, Kandy, on Thursday 30th in the presence of a large gathering.

In making a resume of the life of Sister Sudharmacārī, we recognize her unique contribution to the Buddhist dispensation in establishing the DSM order in Sri Lanka. The yawning gap that was created by the disappearance of the Bhikkhuni Sasana ten centuries ago, was somewhat bridged by the arising of the Yellow Clad 'monastic' order of DSMs; and today, we find about 3,000 DSMs, some of them striving hard, amidst great handicaps, to reach the heights that were accomplished by Bhikkhunis. Though full ordination is not possible as Bhikkhunis,²³ the renunciation and virtue required of the Bhikkhunis could be attained by these DSMs, culminating even in the perfection in sainthood, in the present time.

The DSM order that represents a tradition of celibate Theravada nuns is gathering momentum, having scope for a global dimension, today. Sri Lanka is the land traditionally held as the repository of the original Pali teachings of the Buddha. We find many women all over the world, focusing attention on the Sri Lankan DSMs for leadership and direction to return to virtue and celibacy, in a world of turmoil and vice.

Thus Sister Sudharmacārī has made herself a niche in the religious history of the island. In assessing her character, we find that she was born into nobility and received state patronage. Her learning and status assured

her a very successful marriage which she forsook, for a remarkable course of action in breaking away from the western culture and the Christian faith, and emerging as a leader of the DSMs in particular and women in general. We see her seeking solace in Buddhism, not getting answers to life's problems from Christianity, for, she lost her mother, in her childhood, and did not appreciate the life of luxury of the rich women of the 19th century. Her penchant for tending old and sick women seems to be a sublimation of her own deprivation in childhood, of maternal love. Her desire to discipline and mould little children to live exemplary lives seems to have been compensated for the lack of children of her own.

There is no doubt that the indomitable spirit in her kindled by the various circumstances of her life was only waiting for an avenue to forge ahead and the era of resurgence of Buddhism just breaking out was the right time for her purpose. She was eminently suited to answer the contemporary call for the emancipation of women, in the highest sense of the word.

(This is a segment of Chapter 7, titled “The Pioneers of the Dasasil Mata Movement...” in *The Dasasil Nun* by Bhikkhuni Kusuma, 2010.)

PART II

The Nuns' Thila-Shin Movement in Burma

That there was a flourishing Ten Precept Nuns' tradition in Burma during this period becomes evident when we go into the history of the Burmese Thila-Shin movement. During the reign of King Mindon (1853-78), there was a resurgence of Buddhism. The Thila-Shin Order arose during this period.

According to Burmese history, there had been a Bhikkhuni Order till the 500 Burmese era (1600 AD). It is said that the religious mission sent by Emperor Asoka, led by Yonaka-Dhammarakkhita Thero, arrived in Sunaparanta (Aparanta) state which is believed to be in the present Minbu township of Burma: "1000 men and 6000 women from the blue blood were ordained after the Thera delivered the discourse of *Aggikkhandopama Sutta*."²⁴ In 309 BCE, Sona and Uttara Theras went to Suwanna Bhumi, identified as present Thaton, lower Burma and "there were 1500 Bhikkhunis at that time" (p.115). The Bhikkhuni Order flourished during the Pagan period. Some names of the nuns in stone inscriptions of Pagan period are (1) O Si Taw, (2) I Kyan Pin Thin, (3) Sanghadhipati O Kyan Thin, (4) I Ti Thin (p.152). The Bhikkhuni Order ceased in the 500 Burmese era (1600 AD) (p.117).

The Ten Precept "nuns" were seen in the Ava period and were called Thidinthon (pp.22, 162). It is said that the Thera named Sagyothomyat had to be accompanied by 300 Thidinthons to appease the Mon King Rajadirit (1385-1423) who marched to upper Burma to capture the Ava Kingdom (p.161).

The present order of Thila-Shin arose later. The first identified Thila-Shin was Mai Kin (p.15). She was born in Manipura in 1814 AD. Prince Dvaravadi, son of King Bagyidaw (1819-1873), seized Manipura and brought captive Mai Kin and a large number of citizens of Manipura to Burma. Mai Kin was adopted by a Minister named Thonpa Mingi (p.10). She was initiated as the first Thila-Shin by Thutkhaung Sayadaw (1798-1880) (pp.12, 14). Her elder brother was later ordained and was well known as Shantalay Kyun Sayadaw. She learnt Pali and the commentaries under the guidance of Thutkhaung Sayadaw. (p.192). She lived and taught Pali to her

pupils at Gotalone Gyaung in the Sagaying range. King Mindon (1853-1878) began to build the new city, Mandalay, in 1856 and invited Maikin to stay in Mandalay (p.203).

This evidence is corroborated in the *History of Burmese Literature* (Translated Stories and Amusing Poems by Bamo Sayadaw). Chapter 1 entitled "the story of Bamo Sayadaw and the nuns" refers to two nuns of Burma who lived in the reign of King Mindon (1855-78). They are Chara-Kan and Mai Kin. They were persons of great repute, being very famous scholars and authors. They are said to be the first Thila-Shin in Burma, who pioneered the tradition in that country.

They, it appears, relentlessly competed with each other (even to the extent of using vulgar language "gamma dosa") and became the famous teachers of Thila-Shin in Burma. Chara-Kan was well versed in Kaccayana's grammar, *Abhidhammattha Sangaha*, *Atthasalini (Tika-kyo)* and *Sammoha Vinodini*, and expert in rightly recitations (*ana-va*) and the commentaries.

Mai-Kin became a Thila-Shin as a child and lived apart from the lay people, in the Sagaying hills, in a cave monastery and studied with Thut Khon-Charato Bhikkhus. She taught other student Thila-Shin and lay people. King Mindon (Man-tun) paid great respect to the Thila-Shin in Sagaying hills, and invited these nuns to the royal palace. They, it appears, were reluctant to leave the caves, but consented under three conditions:

- (1) They would not be invited to live in a monastery with a tiered roof such as were reserved for monks.
- (2) They would not accept any honorary titles.
- (3) They would not accept regular food from the royal kitchen.

These conditions having been accepted, they went to stay in the royal palace. They taught the queens, the princesses and the royal ladies in-waiting. Charakan became famous both inside and outside the palace, and is said to have aspired to Buddhahood. There is a famous exchange of letters preserved in Burmese, supposed to have been written by Chara-Kan²⁵ to a Bhikkhu by the name of Ban-mo-charato who naturally detested anyone praying for royal favours. The story goes that she sent him a delicious papaw fruit and expressed a desire to win Buddhahood, as a result of the merit of the gift for which the prompt reply came, "You would have to become a man first."

The above story, reported to us by Dr. Fridgard Lottermoser,²⁶ indicates the deep religious feelings of Thila-Shin of the Sagayin hills during the period under consideration.

The Buddhist, 1891 (Vol. III June, July) refers to the religious fervour among the Burmese people during the contemporary period, when Sister Sudharmācārī received her training.

Every boy and girl is made to learn the Dhamma, the former in *pansala* (monk's temple) and the latter in a convent (Thila-Shin nunnery). Usually at the age of 14, a boy is robed, and remains for a number of years, all the time learning the rules of the life of a Bhikkhu and the principles of Buddhism. If he wishes, he may continue or leave the Order at any time. Every boy must enter monkhood. This is the test of respectability. The *Upasikas* who observe the *Dasasīla* ['Ten Precepts' (Ed.)] are greatly respected by the laymen for the purity of life and the knowledge of the Dhamma. It is an edifying spectacle to behold in the pavements and courtyards of the temples these revered women with pure white robes²⁷ and shaven head slowly walking up and down, rosary in hand, and their thoughts concentrated on some ennobling subject. Some of these *Upasikas* are quite young, but as a rule they enter the Order when they are over forty. It would astonish the ordinary spectator to see these gentle souls passing month after month, nay, year after year, in seclusion and contemplation.

The writer goes on to compare western women of the day.

What a contrast to the worried and wearied life of the Western busybody; politics, pleasure, parties, primrose leagues are the soul absorbing subjects which occupy the mind of the Western educated women, but in Buddhist countries it is not so. A life of seclusion, meditation and benevolence, renouncing everything that binds men to the world is their ideal. The Burmese *upasika* had a philosophical turn of mind. She knows the Abhidhamma, and some of the elderly nuns are experts in this sublime philosophy.

Sister Sudharmācārī, who underwent training in Burma during the time that the writer alludes to, would have absorbed the learning and practice of the Burmese nuns, and having come to Sri Lanka, implanted these values in local DSMs who entered the movement in large numbers under her tutelage.

She received the support from the Governor of Sri Lanka and the aristocratic Kandyans, as is evident from her life story. The rapid growth of the movement during the formative years is an index of the appreciation and acceptance of these DSMs by [the Sinhala] lay society.

The Women of Burma

In Burma, too, we find that a pious lay society had supported the Thila-Shin. The women in Burma in particular have been very pious and devoted to the Buddhist faith, and as such, they gave generously to the Sangha and Thila-Shin. They had a philosophical attitude towards life, having studied Dhamma, and particularly the higher metaphysics, Abhidhamma, that Burma is renowned for.

Referring to the lay women, the writer gives a vivid description of the habits and aspirations of lay women of Burma who for the most part supported the nuns in contemporary society.

The ordinary women observe *ashtāṅga sīla* ['Eight Precepts' (Ed.)] which requires no renunciation of family ties. These gay handsome women in their beautiful costumes, their hair adorned with jasmines and roses are a sight to see. Laughing, chatting, smoking, these rich women pass their time in perfect ease. Loyalty to religion is the one peculiar thing that you find in Burmese women. She would give up anything and everything for the Tathagata's religion. If she has not the money to give, she would even give her jewellery. I know women who have denied themselves luxuries and saved money for the purpose of buying an image or building a small *kyoung* (cell) ...The struggle for existence and the struggle for happiness, the wise man thinks as beneath his dignity; he rather struggles for knowledge and peace. Where will you find but in a Buddhist country that healthy joyousness among women? Decked in their best apparel they visit the temple carrying light refreshment for pilgrims.

This description gives an inkling of the extent to which the women of Burma were committed to support the Buddhist recluse. The reference to 'pilgrims' reveals the large numbers of lay people that daily attend the temple. It also reveals the fact that the pilgrims who visit the temple came from long distances, and that they needed refreshments. Unlike now when swift modes of transport are available, in the year referred to in "The Buddhist" - 1891, it

would have been tedious for pilgrims to reach these temples, which were remotely placed, specially the Sagaying hills of Mandalay.

Marie Benzeville Byles²⁸ who had made an extensive survey of Burmese temples reporting of the reciprocal attitudes of lay people and nuns says: "...if it rained, it would be disastrous for crops. This would simply mean the farmers would have a little less money with which to build pagodas."

She goes on to describe how the nuns impressed her:

The nuns were charming and humble and alive with love and kindness and taught the lesson of bottomless love, merely by their example. They are poor and people don't trespass on their generosity. So they can afford to be generous.

She describes how the nuns look after the pilgrims who daily visit the temple. "The pilgrims sometimes bring their own food and cook for themselves, but if they so desire, the nuns will provide the food and cook for them."

Marie Benzeville confirms the sentiments expressed in "The Buddhist". Complimenting the meditating Burmese recluse, she says, "The idea of seeking self-salvation is one of the hardest things about Southern Buddhism; the fact remains that I have never lived among people so completely devoid of all selfishness and thoughts of self" (Byles, p.33).

The Burmese Bhikkhu

The Bhikkhus of Burma undoubtedly contributed towards the moulding of the character of the Thila-Shin in particular and the lay people in general. Therefore it is important to consider their leadership in the religious life.

The 1900 Diary of Anagarika Dhammapala refers to the fervour of the Bhikkhus, residing in the Sagaying hills of Burma:

Went in the morning to Sagaying caves where those who practice Kammathanas reside. The hill is full of beautiful caves. There is a society of seventy members who practice Kammathanas and those noble people spend to get these caves excavated... I wish the

Sinhalese Buddhist has this devotion. Buddhism is a ‘living religion in Burma’.

The Anagarika’s observation has crucial implications, because it was during this time that Sister Sudharmācārī received her training at Sagaying hills. Another noteworthy connection with Sri Lankan Buddhist history is that the Island’s foremost Vipassana centre at Kanduboda was founded by a Sri Lankan Bhikkhu of the Shwegin Nikaya of Burma, Ven. Kahatapitiye Sumatpala Thero, who was the first Sri Lankan Kammathanacari who received his training at the caves of Sagaying hills.

The writer to *The Buddhist* also describes the life of the ascetic Bhikkhus of the contemporary period in Burma (p.640):

The Buddhists in Ceylon have much to learn from Burmese Bhikkhus. They certainly lead a stricter ascetic life than in Ceylon. Sharp at 4.00 a.m., the echo of the bell [is heard] and they sit in their respective places for meditation. Learned in Abhidhamma, they try higher meditation [*Jhāna* and *Vipassanā*]. Schopenhauer’s and E. Von Hartman’s philosophies are milk for babes before these thoughtful and gentle, kind, ascetic, Bhikkhus. ‘Well,’ he would say to missionaries, ‘I believe not in one God, but in innumerable Gods, not in one heaven, but in many and the Gods today may become a man tomorrow. I care not for your God. My goal is Nibbana.’

It is apparent from the foregoing that the Bhikkhus of Burma, during the period under consideration, were of an excellent calibre, and Sister Sudharmācārī came directly under the benign influence of these Bhikkhus, Thila-Shin, and lay Buddhists, during the eleven years of her training as the first Sri Lankan DSM. She returned to Sri Lanka in 1905, an eminently educated personality.

Several DSMs whom we interviewed referred to these hills and caves. Quite a number of them had visited Burma subsequently and actually lived at Sagaying hills. A.K. Somawati Maniyo and Seelawati Maniyo said that they stayed at the Naradi Temple where Sister Sudharmācārī was trained, for a period of eight years. The Sagaying hills still continue to function as the centre of Buddhist monasticism in Burma.

(This is Chapter 6 in Bhikkhuni Kusuma, *The Dasasil Nun*.)

NOTES

* In order to help the reader who might not be familiar with some of the background relating to Sri Lanka, the Editor has taken the liberty to add footnotes when it is deemed relevant, and identified so.

¹ Corroborative evidence [is provided by] the following pupils who claimed to have been initiated by Sister Sudharmācārī's pupils:

1. Kotmale Sudharma Maeniyo, Lady Blake's Arama, Kandy.
2. N. Somawati Maeniyo, Mallikarama, Anuradhapura.
3. A. K. Somawati Maeniyo, Aluviharaa, Matale.
4. W. H. Seelawati Maeniyo, Wekada, Panadura.
5. Ampitiye Anula Maeniyo

² Genealogy Chart preserved by a descendent of Sister Sudharmācārī, Mrs. A Giragama of Boralessgamuwa, 130 A, 130 B.

³ Corroborative evidence of genealogy (vide 'Historical Sketch'), Ref. T. Wimalananda: one of the four schoolmasters mentioned is Don Louis de Alwis, son of Don Phillip de Alwis Mundhadiram, p. 111.

⁴ Mr. S W R D Bandaranaike is the Oxford-educated contemporary of Sir Anthony Eden, Prime Minister of England, who himself became the Prime Minister of (then) Ceylon in 1956 on a populist platform which had come to be supported by the Marxist Parties. Upon his assassination, his wife Sirimavo became the world's first Woman Prime Minister. (Ed.).

⁵ Sister Sudharmācārī's funeral expenses were borne by relatives of Helena Wijewardene, according to a document preserved at Lady Blaks's Arama.

⁶ The life story of Catherine was corroborated by DSMs named in note 1 [of this chapter], as well as numerous others who related various episodes of her life.

⁷ Wimala later became a DSM under Sister Sudharmācārī.

⁸ The reference is to the Full Moon Days (Ed.).

⁹ *Āyurveda*, literally, 'Science of Life', is the eastern medical system, and pre-dates the Buddha (Ed.).

¹⁰ The reference is to Chapter VI of this same publication (Ed.).

¹¹ See Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 1981, Shambala (Ed.).

¹² It was suggested by a number of DSMs that she left the ancestral home after the death of her father, because he stepmother, being of Christian faith, did not give her the religious solace she needed.

¹³ This is the equivalent of the Dasasil Mata in Burma, which was the original source for the Ten Precept female ordination in Sri Lanka, following the demise of the Bhikkhuni Ordination in Sri Lanka (see Part II next—Ed.).

¹⁴ The reference here is to the Tooth Relic of the Buddha in Kandy, revered by Buddhists. Additionally, however, much like the sceptre in western parliaments, it served for the Sinhala rulers as the authority to rule (Ed.).

¹⁵ See the next section on the Burmese Connection in this same issue (Ed.).

¹⁶ Speaking as a linguist, we may note with interest the term ‘mother’ that has come to be used in the context of women taking to higher Precepts (ten). This may show how the Sinhala language responds to the ethics of the culture, which assigns respectability to the position of women who seek a higher spiritual life even when, and perhaps particularly because, the Bhikkhuni Ordination had disappeared from the Sinhala Buddhist spiritual landscape in the face of Indian / Hindu (11th century) and Christian / Western (16th to 20th centuries) colonization.

¹⁷ ‘*Hāmu*’ in Sinhala is a term of respect, possibly derived, through back formation, from *Hāmuduruwo*, a term used to refer to an ordained Bhikkhu. ‘*Maeniyo*’ (in *Hāmu Maeniyo*) is a respectful term meaning ‘mother’. So *Hāmu Maeniyo* means ‘Respectful Mother’ (Ed.).

¹⁸ *Ceylon Observer*, Tuesday Sept. 25th, 1906. A reclining statue of the Buddha said to be a gift to Sister Sudharmācārī from Governor Minto, Viceroy of India, 1905, which she brought along with her when she arrived in Ceylon, was seen by me [the author] at Lady Blake’s Arama, Kandy.

¹⁹ The nursing of the sick was much admired by the Buddha under ‘ten meritorious deeds’ (*dasa pin*) (*Veyyavacca*).

²⁰ Karunatileke, H N S, *Life and Times of Edward Henry Pedris*, Ganyodagedera, Colombo, p. 9. This evidence was corroborated by (a) Mrs. Brenda Bastian, (b) Mrs Robin Wijesekaran and (c) N. Somawati Maeniyo of Anuradhapura.

²¹ *Sinhala Baudhdhaya* (newspaper) of Dec. 16th, 1939, Letter to the Editor, signed M J Aponsu of Dehiwala, Resident Nun at Lady Blake’s. Other respondents confirmed this information.

²² Ibid.

²³ Since this was written, the Bhikkhuni Order has been restored in Sri Lanka, the author of this article herself being the very first (Ed.).

²⁴ Yaway Tun, 1978, *Bhikkhuni Sasana and the Story of Nuns* (in Burmese Language, p. 101.

²⁵ Yawe Tun, *Bhikshuni Sasana and the History of Nuns*, March, 1978.

²⁶ Dr. Lottermoser studied in Burma for eight years for MA on the *Patthana* (*Abhidhamma Pitaka*), and later secured a PhD on *The Commentaries of Buddhaghosa*. She had herself been ordained as a Thila-Shin for a short period, and is fully conversant in the Burmese tradition.

²⁷ Nuns wore white robes at the beginning.

²⁸ Byles, Marie Benzville *Journey into Burmese Silence* (London: Allen Unwin, 1965), 109.