

# Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Winter 2011

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The 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day

If You Honor Me, Honor My Mother Gotami ■ The 1st Annual International  
Bhikkhuni Day ■ Honoring and Celebrating Bhikkhunis and Laywomen  
New Turns Toward Ancient Paths: The Ordinations in California  
Bhikkhuni Education Today: Seeing Challenges as Opportunities  
Venerable Kusuma and the Power of Literacy Education  
Turning Back Towards Freedom  
Wearing White in the West ■ Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta



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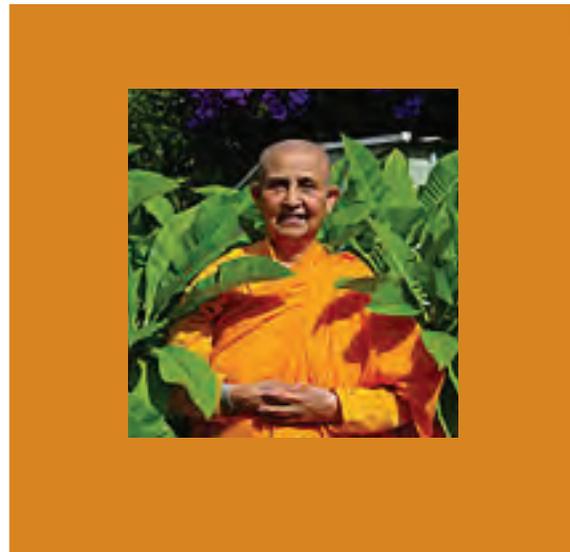
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# Venerable Kusuma and the Power of Literacy Education

By Janice Tolman

**When I met Venerable Bhikkhuni Kusuma in 2010, she was traveling around America and Europe to gather support for the Ayya Khema International Hostel for Nuns and Women slated to be built in Colombo. The project includes a residential training center designed specifically for nuns that is near a new training facility for monks.**



The curriculum of the center is designed to include Buddhist education, meditation, social service, environmental education, and English language education. How appropriate that Ven. Kusuma, a woman who became a bridge spanning East and West through use of her language skills, should be advocating for a training center that teaches these skills. She is fostering in the nuns the education they will need to serve their communities and promote a global Buddhism in the twenty-first century.

Throughout her career, Ven. Kusuma has been applying her knowledge, not only of Buddhism and meditation but also of languages—Sinhalese and English. Her cross-cultural education in languages has been applied generously for the betterment of others. She gained her skills early in life and has continued to develop them over a lifetime of living and working among local and international communities. She learned to navigate the social structures of academics, monastics, and politicians. Although these skills were gained through many years of experience, her education began at the feet of her mother and grandmother.

Ven. Kusuma was born in October 1929 and grew up during the last two decades of the colonial period in British Ceylon, which ended with Sri Lankan independence in 1948.

Her parents were well-educated and devout Buddhists who gave their daughter a strong foundation in Buddhist practices and sent her to the highest quality schools. She describes her parents as progressives who gave her a great deal of freedom to experiment. The young Ven. Kusuma learned to chant in Pali as a very young child and was encouraged to speak truthfully and practice kindness. She remembers being nearby as her Grandmother engaged in devotional practices. Her mother taught Buddhism to children and participated in regular full-moon retreats.

Literacy is a traditional value in Sri Lankan society and Buddhist monastics have long had government support and access to literacy. The Pali Canon (Tipitaka), began as an oral tradition then was committed to writing in Sri Lanka around 30 B.C.E. Because of its location on the maritime Silk Routes, the island nation participated in a vigorous economic and cultural life for centuries. Since its independence from England, Sri Lanka has had free secondary and tertiary public education. Now Sri Lanka has one of the highest literacy rates (92%) among the developing nations. Ven. Kusuma's parents and grandparents must have held these traditional values and applied them to their daughters as well as their sons.

Ven. Kusuma's father was an engineer who was employed by the British. Their lives were disrupted by WWII and the family evacuated to a rubber plantation for the duration of the war. These years of freedom from school she remembers with pleasure. She recalls a childhood activity—picking the seedpods of the rubber plant on the plantation. This may have



Rubber Plant and its Seedpods

been when she began to ask questions about the origin of life, questions that she carried through her scientific and then her Buddhist training.

When she returned to school in 1941, she attended the prestigious Ananda College, a boys' school that admitted girls and young women during those years. The school was founded in the 1880s by the Buddhist Theosophical Society to educate Buddhist youth in the English language and in order to foster cultural exchange and economic development. At Ananda College, Ven. Kusuma studied in the English medium and continued learning Buddhism, Pali and the hard sciences including physics. Though she excelled in languages, she anticipated a career in medicine. Years later she won a scholarship to study microbiology in the US, but needing to return to her family, she did not complete her degree despite outstanding grades. By that time she was married and had several young children. She was directed towards science education instead of medicine. Ven. Kusuma married a man

who became the Director of Education and principal of the teacher training college. During her formative years, Ven. Kusuma studied Sinhala, Pali, and English literature and received distinction in these subjects. This background in language and literature probably enabled her most significant contributions to Buddhist women.

Throughout Ven. Kusuma's early education, she was surrounded by a legacy of cross-cultural communication. In fact, Sri Lanka had been the home of socially engaged nineteenth century orientalists like Mr. T. W. Rhys Davids. He resisted the authority of Christian missionaries by studying Sinhalese language, literature, and Buddhism. He studied with renowned scholar monks of the period. Rhys Davids and other British officials promoted the literary and spiritual values of Buddhism upon their return to the West. New translations of Pali texts spurred a revival of interest in Buddhist scholarship, East and West.

When explaining her motivation to study Buddhism, Ven. Kusuma speaks of Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids' translation of the *Therigatha*. As a young girl, Ven. Kusuma was charmed by stories of early Buddhist nuns and the English prose. This is also the text that first motivated her. She describes how, while reading the *Therigatha*, tears began streaming down her face. This strong connection made her want to study nuns. This is also evidence that Ven. Kusuma had become a true bilingual. It was Mrs. Rhys Davids' English translation that had this affect on her. Thanks to her early educational opportunities and access to texts in English, she developed a deep appreciation for the power of language in a globalizing world. Later she studied Pali, the *lingua franca* and literary language of early Buddhism, but the evidence suggests that she frequently relied on her knowledge of English in her Buddhist studies. She went on to make good use of English to aid in international exchange across language barriers in Asia and to help many Westerners including professors of religion and proponents of the bhikkhuni movement.

Ven. Kusuma left science education to teach English, which she did for 20 years. The period of drudgery ended, she says, when she began disciplined meditation practice in the 1960s. When dhamma entered her daily life more fundamentally, she says that she was able to conserve time, money, and energy and give the best to her family. Also during the 1960s, Sri Lankans chose Sirimavo Bandaranaike, as their Prime Minister. She was the world's first female head of government in post-colonial Asia. Years later, Bandara-

## THEN SHE SAW FIRSTHAND THE DIFFICULT CONDITIONS FOR FEMALE RENUNCIATES. THEY HAD NO FORMAL RECOGNITION FROM THE GOVERNMENT, THE MONKS, OR THE BUDDHIST COMMUNITY.

naike's daughter was president until 2005. These women must have served as powerful role models during Ven. Kusuma's professional life. For 19 years, Ven. Kusuma worked as a radio panelist for a regular evening program on Buddhist philosophy and aspects of practice. Ven. Kusuma is now a highly qualified teacher to local and international students of Buddhism, and holds regular meditation classes.

In the 1980s, Ven. Kusuma returned to the University of Sri Jayewardenepura for post-graduate work, this time in Buddhism. She worked on a dual research project with the American professor of religion, Lowell Bloss, interpreting for him as they collected data in nuneries.

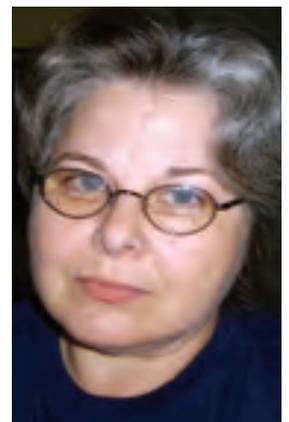
When she had the opportunity to speak to President J. R. Jayewardene, she was ready to present her argument in favor of the female renunciates. Working with the president, the president's wife, the Minister of Cultural Affairs and finally, the Commissioner of Buddhist Affairs, she was instrumental in establishing a special section for the education and security of the nuns. The work on their behalf took over five years and was hampered by the fact that the nuns were not fully ordained bhikkhunis and had lacked resources for years. She knew that she was working for posterity and compelled her government to work with her. She must have used her rhetorical powers and her personal dedication to accomplish her task. These are the potent effects of a good education.

Throughout the ensuing years of increasing interest in bhikkhuni ordination, Ven. Kusuma worked as a laywoman. She did not at first intend to ordain, as she prepared the nuns for ordination. She continued to facilitate international support and interpreted the Vinaya in Sri Lanka, India and Germany. Then she was sent to Korea to evaluate the ordination process. In Korea, she relied on a single nun's use of English as an international language. Along with nine other women, Ven. Kusuma received full ordination in Saranath, India in

1996. She attended the second ordination in Bodhgaya the next year. In 1999, she received her doctorate in Buddhism. Her dissertation on the Vinaya is considered a handbook for Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka. Bhikkhunis in that country now number over a thousand. Due to improved educational opportunities, the bhikkhunis are engaged in higher education and community projects for the betterment of women.

Ven. Bhikkhuni Kusuma has been a pioneer of the reestablishment of the Theravada Female Buddhist Order, and she was the first woman in modern times to wear the robes of a bhikkhuni in Sri Lanka. She continues to travel and speak publicly in Europe and the US though she is over 80 years old. She is an outstanding member of a generation of international women who educated themselves and others with a global perspective: as a bhikkhuni who works for the strength and furtherance of the female order, as a Buddhist scholar and educator, and as a visionary, builder, public speaker, writer, and translator. Her many accomplishments and her current work as a founder of meditation and training centers for laywomen and nuns is worthy of a full biography. Here I have only begun to look at Ven. Kusuma's early life and consider how it has motivated and enabled her pioneering work. This brief examination of her early education is given in the spirit of cross-cultural education for the understanding and betterment of Buddhist women. The work of our time is truly the work of generations who first learn and then enlighten others.

Janice Tolman is a teacher and writer living in Berkeley, California. She has been teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and writing curricular materials for immigrant adults in the US since the 1980s. Her Buddhist background is in Rinzai Zen, and she has practiced in the US, Japan, and Korea. Her teaching expertise includes literature and creative writing, academic literacy, and environmental education. She has a teaching credential, graduate studies in linguistics and literacy education, and an M.A. in English Literature from the University of California. She has been publishing in academic and non-academic presses in the areas of language education and women in Buddhism.



To learn more and find ways to support the project go to <http://www.bhikkhunikusuma.info/trainingcenter.html>

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