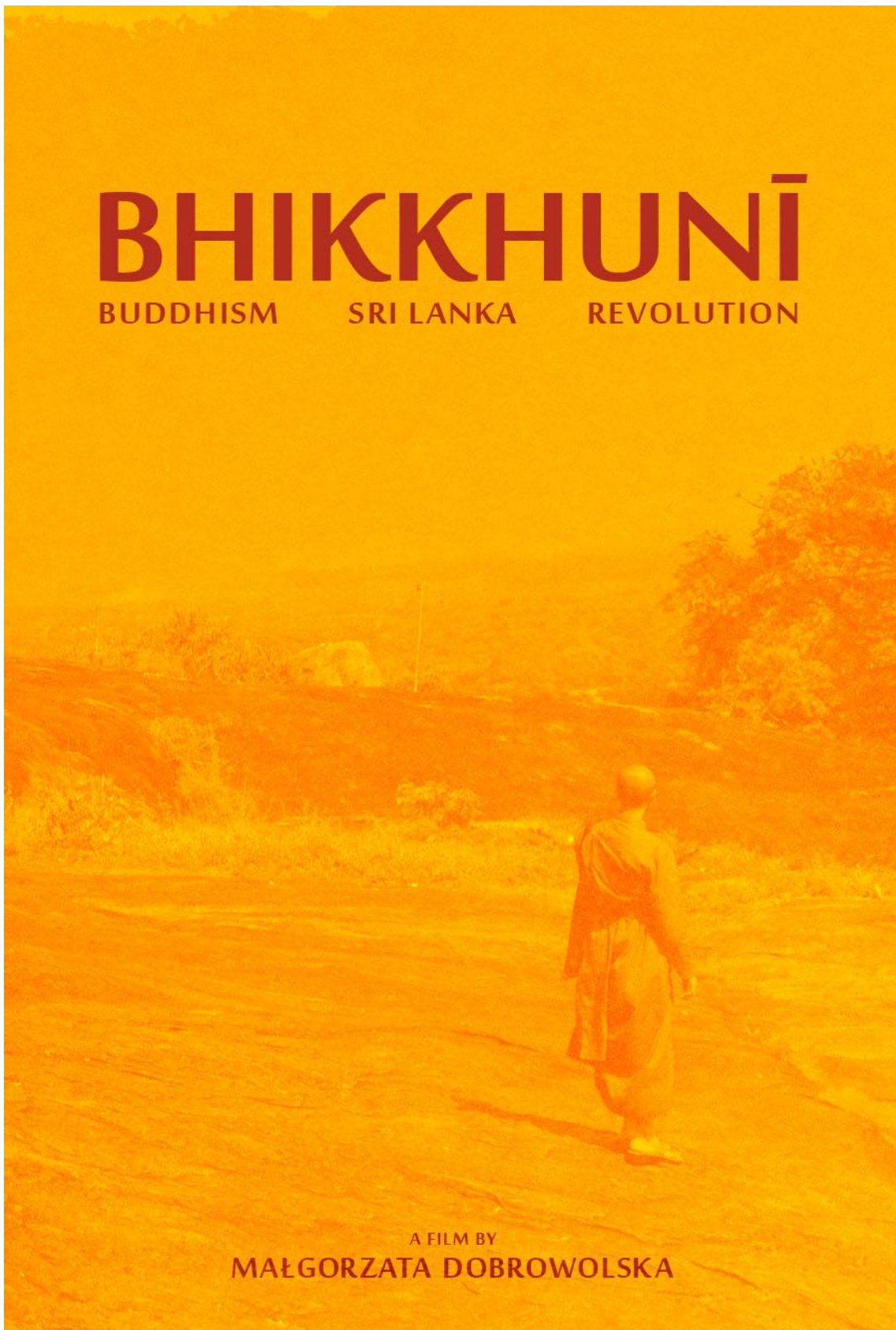


# BHIKKHUNĪ

BUDDHISM    SRI LANKA    REVOLUTION



A FILM BY  
**MAŁGORZATA DOBROWOLSKA**

“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: [bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com](mailto:bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com)

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

“**Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution**” is a documentary film about the revival of women’s ordination in Theravāda Buddhism.

Shortly after Enlightenment, the Buddha said: "I shall not come to my final passing away, until my bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen, have come to be true disciples..." Even though the Buddha established the bhikkhunī monastery, the line of female ordination in the Theravāda tradition died out in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, it is believed that nuns can no longer be ordained.

The documentary, “**Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution**”, presents the story of women, who in order to implement the Buddha's teachings, however against the opinion of the monks' Saṅgha, have become fully ordained bhikkhunīs - Buddhist nuns in the Theravāda tradition. The film’s protagonists are **Bhikkhunī Kusuma** (ordained in 1996), **Bhikkhunī Dhammananda** (ordained in 2003) and **Bhikkhunī Gautami** (ordained in 2016) - the first women in their countries' modern history to become fully ordained nuns.



*International Theravada bhikkhuni ordination at the Sakyadhita Training and Meditation Center.*

“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com



## AWARDS

- AFC Global Fest, Kolkata, India – **Best international documentary**
- Viva Film Festival, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina – **First prize in the religious movie category (v. 24)**

## CREDITS

**Genre:** documentary

**Time:** 70 min.

**Script, director, cinematography, editing, production:** Małgorzata Dobrowolska

**Consultations:** Piotr Jagodziński

**Cast:** Bhikkhunī Kusuma, Bhikkhunī Dhammananda, Bhikkhunī Gautami, Ellen Posman, Kirama Wimalajothi Thero, Bhikkhu Sujato, Bhikkhunī Vijithananda

**Music:** Kalina Światnicka, Hubert Jabłoński (ethnic flutes: Wojtek Sakowicz)

**Translation:** Piotr Jagodziński, Anna Kamińska

**Sound edition:** Krzysztof Horn

**Production:** Poland (2017)

**Founding:** Khyentse Foundation, Wonderwoods Film Foundation

**Distribution:** Wonderwoods Film Foundation (Fundacja Filmowa Wonderwoods)

**Trailer:** <https://youtu.be/BDb0RT-rAq8>

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/mistrzynie](http://www.facebook.com/mistrzynie)

**Polish title:** Mistrzynie życia duchowego. Buddyzm, Sri Lanka, rewolucja

“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com

## **DIRECTOR**



**Małgorzata Dobrowolska** – was born in Warsaw, Poland. Małgorzata is an activist and documentary filmmaker who focuses on stories of women. She travels the world to document situations of women in main religions and other spiritual movements. She deeply believes that the key to reach world peace is to restore balance between the energy of men and women and bring about a change on a spiritual level.

President of [Wonderwoods Film Foundation](#).

Małgorzata Dobrowolska holds a degree in Psychology and Multi-media and has participated in many filmmaking courses such as a reportage workshop, Norwegian-Polish documentary workshops, Video Clip School and a screenwriting course at the Historical Film Academy.

## **DIRECTOR - ABOUT THE FILM**

### **Motivation - from a child's question to a lifetime project**

As a child, I wondered why women cannot be ordained. I was surprised what an insignificant role women play in the Catholic Church and the fact that only men are allowed to preach and make important decisions. Later, I realised that this same inequality is present in all major religions and is aimed at preserving the patriarchal order of the world. This started my search for women who challenge stereotypes.

In February of 2015, on the outskirts of Bangkok, I discovered a Buddhist monastery for women. There, I met 12 wonderful women who despite the difficulties involved (the official Thai Saṅgha does not recognize ordination of women) became the first contemporary bhikkhunīs - fully ordained nuns. The ordination ceremony took place in Sri Lanka. I was left with a strong impression after visiting the monastery and learning about the power of these women. I found their story very important as it shows that changes are possible, even in such rigid structures as religious ones. I decided to tell their story with the help of a documentary. In such a way, my childhood question led me to Sri Lanka, an island also called the Tear Drop.

“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com



### Work on the film - ups and downs

My first step in my work was a crowdfunding campaign that ended in failure. However, due to the fact that the **topic aroused great interest**, I decided to go to Sri Lanka anyway. With my camera in hand, for a period of two months I travelled to many Buddhist monasteries. I was very lucky as during the trip I met **the first three fully ordained Buddhist nuns in the Theravada Tradition**, who were from three different countries – the **Ven. Bhikkhunī Kusuma** from Sri Lanka, **Ven. Bhikkhunī Dhammananda** from Thailand and **Ven. Bhikkhunī Gautami** from Bangladesh. They were to become the main characters of the documentary.

The following year I spent editing the film. It was a very difficult task as the amount of material was huge, and the matter of nun ordination is complicated. I had many dilemmas in which direction to lead the story, how to maintain the right balance between the way I see the issue and how the nuns themselves perceive it, as well as what to talk about and which issues should I omit. In the meantime, I received a grant from the Buddhist Khyentse Foundation.

The Asian premiere of **“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution”** (Polish title *Mistrzynie życia duchowego*) took place in India at AFC Global Fest, where it **won first prize** in the International Documentary category!

“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com



**Viva Film Festival, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina – “Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” won first prize in the religious movie category.**

**MONASTERIES PRESENTED IN THE DOCUMENTARY:**

- **Ayya Khema International Buddhist Meditation Center**  
<http://www.bhikkhunikusuma.info/meditation-center.html>
- **Sakyadhita Training and Meditation Centre**  
<http://www.sakyadhita-srilanka.org/>
- **Bhikkhuni Training Centre Dekanduwala**  
<http://www.bhikkunicentre.org/>

**International ordination presented in the film:**

- <http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org/eng2014/OrdinationSriLanka.html>



“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com

## LONG SYNOPSIS

### History – the Buddha's teachings vs patriarchal tradition

The “**Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution**” documentary presents the story of women, who in order to implement the Buddha's teachings, against the opinion of the monks' Saṅgha, have been fully ordained to become bhikkhunīs, Buddhist nuns in the Theravāda tradition. They became the first fully ordained nuns in their countries' modern history. Shortly after the Enlightenment, the Buddha said: "I shall not come to my final passing away, until my bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen, have come to be true disciples..." From these words, it is clear that the Buddha's intention was to establish a bhikkhunī order. The number of communities (Saṅgha) of Buddhist nuns have never reached those of monks. Following the Theravāda tradition, one of the three main contemporary Buddhist schools which derives their teaching from the Buddha's Dharma, female monasticism has reached only as far as Sri Lanka. The line dates back to the 3rd century BC, when Bhikkhunī Saṅghamitta, a daughter of Aśoka, the ruler of the Maurya Empire, established the order on the island. The line of female ordination was discontinued in the 11th century due to wars and insufficient social support.

Traditionally, in order for a woman to become a bhikkhunī, the ordination needs to be carried out by a congregation of both nuns and monks. Therefore, since discontinuation of the line, it is argued that women cannot be ordained as there is no bhikkhunī to perform the ceremony.

Currently, one may observe vast changes in Theravāda Buddhism. After thousands of years, women are regaining the right to be nuns. It is comparative to women being able to become priests in the Catholic religion. The issue of women's ordination stirs many controversies. Its opponents believe ordination of women is not only against the Vinaya, the regulatory framework for nuns and monks, but also threatens the purity of the ordination lineage. Supporters refer to the words of Buddha, in which he aimed at creating four pillars of society: bhikkhu, bhikkhuni and laypeople - men and women.

“In Thailand the movement to become Bhikkhunī started as early as 1928, but it was not successful. The women who were ordained at that time, were even put into prison. They could not wear the robe. They pull the robe from her body” – says Bhikkhunī Dhammananda in the film.

Taking off robes or being sent to prison are only few of the obstacles that nuns ordained in the Theravāda tradition had to face. The documentary, “**Bhikkhunī -** “Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com

**"Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution"** asks the question: to what extent does such an attitude towards bhikkhunis come from concern about Buddhist rules and to what extent does it stem from fear of women and the desire to secure a privileged position?

"It's very helpful to make a distinction between what is Dhamma – the truth, the reality that the Buddha was teaching about and what is Buddhism - what is actually practiced in Buddhist cultures. In Christian cultures there are many things going on, which Jesus would probably be horrified at. In the same way, in Buddhist cultures there are many things happening which the Buddha did not teach and which are quite contrary to the Buddha's teachings." – Bhikkhu Sujato, **"Bhikkhuni - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution"**.

The **"Bhikkhuni - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution"** documentary, reveals a very important matter. Namely, the distinction between the Buddha's teachings and the cultural influences generated by the patriarchal society.



*International Theravada bhikkhuni ordination at the Sakyadhita Training and Meditation Center.*



## The main characters - rebels or good students of Buddha?

The three main protagonists are pioneers in the revival of the tradition to ordain women to become Buddhist nuns - bhikkhunīs. The one who initiated the revolution was **Bhikkhuni Kusuma**. She is the first woman to be ordained as a Buddhist nun after thousands of years' break from the tradition (ordination in 1996, India). **Bhikkhuni Dhammananda** is the first Buddhist nun from Thailand (ordination: 2003, Sri Lanka). **Bhikkhuni Gautami** is the first Buddhist nun from Bangladesh (ordination: 2016, Sri Lanka).

All the protagonists were faced with the dilemma of whether to follow the Buddha's teachings, risking loss of acceptance and being subject to criticism, or live according to the cultural norms and resign from the life directed by the Blessed One's teachings. Entering a new uncharted area, all three women, being teachers in their countries, were aware that at the same time they set an example and could open possibilities for many other women. All three have chosen to be the first, representing a breakthrough in the process of revival of the four-pillar society set by the Buddha. Although they have similar goals, the protagonists differ greatly from each other.

**Bhikkhuni Kusuma**, the oldest, was 87 when the film was made. She is well aware of her role in the process of re-establishing the women's ordination. She describes the circumstances leading to the first ordination of a woman after over thousands of years' break, how much work it required and what was the attitude amongst the society towards such a breakthrough event.



*Bhikkhuni Kusuma*

“Bhikkhuni - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com

In her secular life, Bhikkhunī Kusuma was an academic. In order to restore women's ordination, she did thorough research into dasa-sila-mata in Sri Lanka (dasa-sila-mata – women lay followers living in accordance to the Ten Precepts. They are commonly miscalled “nuns”, yet they are not acknowledged as a part of Saṅgha.) She spent three months in Korea, studying women's ordination in the Mahāyāna tradition and found that Mahāyāna and Theravāda Vinaya to be almost the same. The first ordination took place in Sarnath, India on 8<sup>th</sup> of December, 1996. Dr Kolonnawe Kusuma led ten candidates and was ordained first, therefore becoming the first fully ordained nun in the Theravāda tradition after over a thousand year break. The event caused an uproar. For their own safety, the nuns decided to stay in India for two years, until the controversy calmed down.

According to people who are opposed to women's ordination, the bhikkhunīs were ordained with the help of a female order from Korea. The opponents believe that, due to the fact that the nuns were ordained by Mahāyāna nuns, the procedure is not valid and the women need to wait for Maitreya Buddha (a future Buddha) to become rightful bhikkhunīs.

Currently, the Venerable Kusuma focuses mainly on meditation, discussions on Dhamma and on her family matters. She runs a Meditation Centre named after Ayya Khema, which is visited mainly by foreign guests. The “**Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution**” documentary presents everyday life in the monastery and the relation between Bhikkhunī Kusuma and those closest to her. During her secular life, the ordination pioneer had a husband and six children. We participate in an important family event, watching a religious parade from the roof of a tower block. We learn from Kusuma's daughter how difficult the ordination of her mother is for her and her brothers. We also participate in dāna (giving alms of food to members of Buddhist order) in honour of Bhikkhunī Kusuma's husband who died two months before.



Bhikkhunī Kusuma

“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com

**Bhikkhunī Dhammananda** is actively involved in the process of re-instituting the tradition of women's ordination. Together with the Network of Theravada Asian Bhikkhunī, she co-organises multinational ordinations in the Sākyadhitā monastery in Sri Lanka. There, women who cannot be ordained in their own countries can come and receive ordinations. Three candidates from Thailand, three from Vietnam and five from Bangladesh arrive at the island. When the ordination is finished, the Venerable Dhammananda runs a course for the novices and provides solid arguments proving the rightfulness of women's ordination, presenting many proofs from source texts. She is aware that a reliable education is the basis for revival of strong Bhikkhunī Sangha. Dhammananda sets out different reasons for reinstatement of women's ordination of Kusuma. She cites the Buddha's words, according to which women can be ordained by monks themselves. While giving a lecture, she says: **“In a country where there are no Bhikkhunīs, can the Bhikkhu give ordination? Yes! Where to find this in the text? You go to Cūḷavagga. The Buddha gives permission to the Bhikkhus: »Bhikkhus, I allow you, to give ordination to Bhikkhunīs« But the Bhikkhus are not reading the Vinaya properly and they always find an excuse not to give ordination because there are no Bhikkhunīs. That is a very easy way out.”** In an example of this event, we can see what the expansion of Bhikkhunī Sangha looks like.

Bhikkhunī Dhammananda takes the group of newly ordained nuns to Dambulla, to meet Bhante Inamaluwe Sumangala Thera, who was the first monk in the Theravāda tradition to support the nuns. On the way, the Venerable Dhammananda takes us to the monastery where she had prepared for her ordination in the past.



*Bhikkhunī Dhammananda*

The most difficult situation is experienced by **Bhikkhunī Gautami** who comes from Bangladesh. She has been discriminated against in her country for two reasons - first for being a Buddhist in a Muslim country and second for being a nun in a Buddhist community. Regardless of her troubles, she has been following the chosen path for twenty years now. Her efforts are rewarded on 30 January 2016 in the Sākyadhītā monastery in Sri Lanka. She is ordained during an international ordination organised by the Network of Theravāda Asian Bhikkhunī and by Bhikkhunī Dhammananda. After the ceremony, she expresses her immense happiness: **“Now, when I am a Bhikkhunī, I feel stronger. When Shila and others were ordained my eyes filled with tears of joy that I am included in the Sangha. Now, I have to work in such a way that the Sangha becomes more prominent.”**.



*Bhikkhunī Gautami*

**Everyday life of the Buddhist nuns**  
**– legal problems and symbiosis with the local community**

“The lay people have accepted Bhikkhunī, they provide them with temples and food, they come to them for blessings, and they may respect them, sometimes they respect them as much, or more than the monks, because the ones who are here are very strict in their practice and very simple in their living, whereas some of the Monks in Sri Lanka have been accused of being a little more lavish and a little more political. So Bhikkhunī are very much accepted by the lay people in Sri Lanka. But they still have some legal issues, such as not being able to get permits to open a temple or not being able to get ID cards, which means not being able to take exams in Buddhism studies and things like that, and not being able to receive official support from the government for Buddhism education” says Ellen Posman in the “**Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution**” documentary. Ellen is an associate professor at the University of Baldwin Wallace.

The example of the Sākyadhītā monastery shows the symbiosis of the Buddhist nuns with the local community. The nuns teach children, run meditation courses and help support people from the neighbourhood. Hosting bhikkhunī in their home or giving them alms is a very important event for the villagers. Being a Buddhist nun does not only mean working with the local community, but above all requires demanding meditation training and detailed study of Buddha's teachings. Together with the director, we visit the Bhikkhuni Training Centre Dekanduwala, where we find 45 girls and women (the youngest being 9) studying the words of the Buddha. “Now, after two thousand years has passed I decided to make a center for Bhikkhunīs, only for Bhikkhunīs, where of course there are now some classes for the ladies. Beside that we invited other nuns, young nuns, from other Temples so they can come here and stay and learn and gain knowledge, **because there is not any other teaching center for Bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka, there are so many centers for monks, but not for nuns.**” – said the Venerable Kirama Wimalajhoti Thera, the head of the monastery.



*Bhikkhuni Training Centre Dekanduwala*

The **“Bhikkhunī. Buddhism. Sri Lanka, revolution”** documentary combines popular scientific information about the women's ordination with bits and pieces from the life of the nuns. The film's protagonists are heroic, despite the difficulties they contributed to the revival of the tradition of women's ordination. Their stories are supplemented by Prof. Ellen Posman's explanations, clarifying those more complicated issues connected with the women's ordination.

The documentary concludes with Bhikkhunī Kusuma saying: “So the world must know that there is some hope for the world from these nuns who can be a guiding example for women in the world - that there is a way out of their suffering and that it is an ancient tradition that remained during the Buddha's time where women were equal to men. There were Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunīs, they were equal and now it is not the same and the sooner we get this Bhikkhunī order to be equal to the Bhikkhu order, then the women can also contribute so much to the good and noble life. If now the women have no leadership, they can't have the facility to practice and become enlightened and give their knowledge to the upcoming generation. (..) that there will be teachers, that there is a way out, that this is a highly involved way of live, that there is a very important way that people can leave and get enlightenment in this very life”.

The Asian premiere of **“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution”** (Polish title ***Mistrzynie życia duchowego***) took place in India at the AFC Global Fest. The film was awarded first prize in the International Documentaries category.

“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com



“Bhikkhunī - Buddhism, Sri Lanka, Revolution” Małgorzata Dobrowolska  
email: bhikkhuni.doc@gmail.com