

# Bhikkhuni Kusuma opens first training centre for Lankan Bhikkhunis

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Ven. Kolonnawe Bhikkhuni Kusuma, Chief Incumbent of the Ayya (Arrya) Khema Meditation Retreat Centre in Olaboduwa, opened the Ayya Khema Bhikkhuni Training Centre in Colombo - a training centre for Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis - on Sunday.



Before entering the Bhikkhuni order, Kusuma Gunawardene (birth name) worked as a science teacher for 12 years at a school in Maharagama, and an English lecturer for 20 years at the Sri Jayawardenepura University. In Bhikkhuni Kusuma's autobiography 'Braving the Unknown Summit' she tells the story of a daughter, a wife and a mother who became a teacher, a scholar and ended up as a Bhikkhuni.

Daily Mirror met with this unconventional Bhikkhuni, widely known in our society as Bhikkhuni Kusuma for an interview.

**Q: Tell us a bit about the Ayya Khema Bikkhuni Training Centre.**

At this centre we plan to teach science and technology, health and hygiene, environmental awareness, management of devotees and other such subjects to Buddhist nuns by qualified lecturers and resource persons. And since the centre is in Colombo the Bhikkhunis are able to access libraries and other resources easily. The centre has eight rooms, 16 beds and four toilets. It also has a kitchen, a pantry and a sitting area.

**Q: How did you come up with the idea of opening a training centre for Bhikkhuni's in Sri Lanka?**

When I was a resident at Sadaham Sewana in Colombo I always noticed Ven. Athuraliye Rathana Thera training monks. So I asked the Venerable Thera why he was not training Buddhist nuns and limiting the training only to monks. Then he suggested to me to take a building in Sadaham Sewana and construct a meditation centre to train Bikkunis. At the time of the Buddha, Bikkhus, Bikkhunis, Upasikas and Upasikawos all lived in the same premises and supported each other. So there were large numbers, therefore they were not able to resort to misconduct: they could only stray when they were alone. That is why the Buddha made it that way. It is not something we say.

“ There is an advisory board to the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and this advisory board doesn't recognise the Bikkhuni order in Sri Lanka. Therefore state support doesn't come to Bikkhunis. Monks have no say in this at all ”



**Q:** So why isn't this practiced in Sri Lanka today; in other words why are Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis living separately?

You should ask that question from the monks.

**Q:** The Bhikkhuni order in Sri Lanka is not as widespread as the order of Bhikkhus in Sri Lanka. What do you think is the reason behind this?

There is an advisory board to the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and this advisory board doesn't recognise the Bikkhuni order in Sri Lanka. Therefore state support doesn't come to Bikkhunis. Monks have no say in this at all. A lot of the monks are supportive, but they can't do anything about it.



**Q:** Our school Buddhism textbooks say regardless of the experience of a Bhikkhuni in the order, if a novice monk crosses her path, she has to pay her respects to him (even if he is a newly-ordained Samanera). As a Bhikkhuni how do you personally feel about this?

You have to treat the monks and the nuns according to the 'Vinaya' rules. Proper conduct for monks and nuns towards each other and society are explained in those rules. However those rules you mentioned belong to the 8th Garu Dharma and they were not laid out by the Buddha. So they do not belong to the Vinaya Prakthi Moksha (set of rules for nuns and monks) laid down by the Buddha.

**Q:** Today some people claim that there is no Bhikkhuni order in Sri Lanka. Do you agree with this statement?

The Bhikkhuni Order was brought to Sri Lanka by Ven. Sangamittha Therani. It flourished for about ten centuries.

Then just as the Bikkhuni order, the Bhikkhu order also died down. However the Bhikkhu order was resurrected in Thailand and Burma about 150 years ago, during the British period. But unfortunately there was no Bhikkhuni order in Thailand or in Burma. So the Bhikkhuni order was not resurrected. But before all this took place, historical records show that the Bhikkhuni order was taken to China in ancient times by Sri Lanka, and still that lineage can be identified in China, Taiwan, Korea and in many other countries. However recently we got the lineage back from Korea and Taiwan. But they still follow the same procedure of 'dual ordination' which is followed even now. But we do not know the Chinese language or their practice. So in Sri Lanka we practice according to the Pali tradition. And today there are about 1500 Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka. So there is a Bhikkhuni order in our country.



**Bikkuni Kusuma addressing the gathering**

**“ At this centre we plan to teach science and technology, health and hygiene, environmental awareness, management of devotees and other such subjects to Buddhist nuns by qualified lecturers and resource persons ”**

**Q: Were you always interested in entering the Bhikkhuni order?**

I was not interested in entering the Bhikkhuni order at all. But since there was no one else to takeover the leadership, I was invited to join the order, and I decided to take it.

**Q: How did your family react to this decision?**

I was doing my research in Korea on Dhamma Guptha Vinaya when I was offered membership in the Bhikkhuni order, and I did not get a chance to ask anyone. I had to say yes. But my family understood.

**Q: Did you ever regret your decision?**

No never. I feel so ennobled that I am wearing the robe today. I'm happy to say that I am 85 years old and that I can die in robes.



Ayya Khema Bikkuni Training Centre



Meditating at the Ayya (Arnya) Khema Meditation Retreat Centre



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