

🌀 The first bhikkhunīs of contemporary Sri Lanka

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Shrī Gothamī Āshrāmaya, Olaboduwa, Sri Lanka

In the Shrī Gothamī Āshrāmaya, located in the small village of Olaboduwa in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, live the two eldest bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka. Both bhikkhunīs have played a crucial role in the reestablishment of the Theravāda bhikkhunī-saṅgha. In what follows I offer some background on the life of these eminent nuns, in the acknowledgement that they have always shunned public exposure, self-promotion and biographical narratives. Therefore, the information supplied here is minimal, honouring the modesty and samaṇa ethics of the two mahātherīs, and is reported with their permission.

🌀 The venerable bhikkhunī Kiriwattuḍuwa Dhamma-Darshikā



Bhikkhunī Darshikā (2023)

The venerable bhikkhunī Dhamma-Darshikā (Dharmadarśikā) was born on June 12th, 1949, in the small village of Kiriwattuḍuwa-Puwakgahawila close to Colombo district. She was the youngest of nine siblings in her family. Her father was a carpenter, her mother stayed at home and took care of the family.

The venerable bhikkhunī Darshikā's decision to enter monastic life arose after she met with the venerable bhikkhunī Wijithā (Vijitā), who visited her home one day. She was very inspired by her and decided to follow in her footsteps.

When the future bhikkhunī Darshikā was twenty-six years old, she decided to take up monastic life and undertook the renunciant life of a dasa silmāta (ten-precept nun) on October 27th, 1976, at the Shrī Saṅghamittā Āyathana Piṭaya in Koralaïma under the tutelage of the venerable nun Swarapola Piliyandala Aruṇā Seelamathashramadī Haththaka Dhammachaṛī. This silmāta strictly adhered to the ten precepts and is highly respected by her students for her good sīla (ethical conduct) and the quality education they have received from her. She is still alive until today (March 2023) and is now 103 years old.

The then silmāta Darshikā went to a pirivena, a Buddhist monastic school and seminar, and completed all her religious studies. She was a very prominent student and finished the prācīna (paṇḍita), the traditional Pali, Sanskrit and Sinhala school, at Kalutara Purwarama Dharma Wijaya Pirivena with the venerable Neluwe Sumanawansa Thero, a well-established Pali teacher and lecturer in Sanskrit at the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka, in Homagama. The venerable bhikkhunī Darshikā studied Pali, Sanskrit, and Sinhala at Maradana Vidyodaya Pirivena for about three years and learned Abhidharma at Pokunuwita Winayalaṅkāramaya from the venerable



Darshikā's renunciation as a silmāta, Koralaïma (1976)



Karuṇā Sevena

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Hengoda Kalyāṇadhmma Thero, a student of the venerable Rerukane Chandawimala Thero, an eminent Srilankan scholar-monk and former Mahānāyaka of the Swejin chapter of the Amarapūra Nikāya.



Darshikā (bottom row, first to the left) and Wijithā (second row, first to the right) silmātas at the Shrī Saṅghamittā Āyatana Piṭaya, Korallaima (late 1970s)

After having undertaken the renunciant life, she went on to practice in Korallaima, where the venerable Wijithā was also staying. Later, the two become very good friends. The venerable Darshikā lived in Korallaima for about twenty-three years. She later taught Pali and Sanskrit at the Korallaima Srī Saṅghamitta Āyathana Piṭaya.

In 1988 a higher ordination (upasampadā) for international nuns was held at the Hsi Lai Temple in Southern California conferred by Taiwanese bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs. As soon as the venerable heard about this opportunity, she applied along with ten other nuns. In line with the present-day Chinese Dharmaguptaka Mahāyāna tradition custom, the preparation and training

for the ordination took a whole month. (This is the same event in which the well-known German nun Ayyā Khemā received higher ordination.)

Because of the physically and mentally demanding training, as well as the different climate and diet, six nuns decided not to complete the ordination and returned to Sri Lanka. However, the silmāta Darshikā went through the ordination process and became a fully ordained nun on December 22nd, 1988. She then returned to Sri Lanka along with five other Srilankan bhikkhunīs.



Bhikkhunī Darshikā's higher ordination (bottom row, fourth on the right), Los Angeles (1988)

Unfortunately, on their return, these newly ordained bhikkhunīs faced much discrimination from the monks as well as other dasa silmāta who disapproved of the higher ordination, and this in turn greatly affected their support from the laity. Therefore, four out of the five nuns decided to return to their life and status as dasa silmāta. Nevertheless, bhikkhunī Darshikā withstood the pressure and external circumstances.

The venerable bhikkhunī Dhamma Darshikā thus became the first known Srilankan woman to have received higher ordination since the time the bhikkhunī-saṅgha disappeared in Sri Lanka due to wars and famine in the period between the 11th and the 14th centuries.

After her higher ordination, the venerable Darshikā became interested in building a new bhikkhunī monastery together with the venerable bhikkhunī Matale Wijithā. Fortunately, in 1998 a local woman, Nandā Nalinī, was eager to donate a piece of land for the use of the two bhikkhunīs in the village of Olaboduwa, in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. The monastery was named Shrī Gothamī Mehenī Āshrāmya, and both bhikkhunīs still live there today.



Even though many seem to not know about this brave bhikkhunī, we should give her credit and much respect for being the pioneer for many of us. The bhikkhunī order has been growing since the time of her higher ordination. At present, there are approximately four thousand bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka.

🕉️ *The venerable bhikkhunī Matale Wijithā*

The future bhikkhunī Matale Wijithā (Vijitā) was born on December 28th, 1942, in Matale Harasgama. She had 11 siblings, and she was the fourth oldest child. Her father was a businessman. At the age of 23, she decided to take up monastic life and on October 6th, 1965 became a dasa silmāta. This took place in Matale at Kohombiliwele Pradīpaloka

Bahūda Balikā under the auspices of the venerable Hikkaḍuwe Sunīta, who was taking care of an orphanage and was involved in many social activities.



Wijithā's renunciation as a silmāta, Matale (1965)

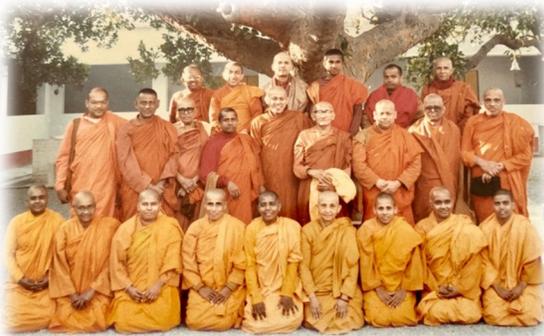


Bhikkhunī Wijithā (2023)

Since childhood, Wijithā had always wanted to be a nun. Her family was not happy about her decision to go forth and tried to convince her not to take such a step. However, later – also inspired by her – a younger brother, two of her sisters, a niece, and a nephew, all ordained as well. The bhikkhunī's own mother became a nun when she was 96 and lived to be 102 years old. All of them are well educated. The venerable's other siblings also received a good education and achieved good social standing.

In 1974, the silmāta Wijithā went to live at the Koralaima nunnery (Shrī Saṅghamittā Āyatana Piṭaya), together with her sister, who is now the chief nun of the monastery. Then, the venerable Wijithā attended the Kalutara Dharma Wijaya Pirivena (monastic college) and studied there till the end of the prācina studies under the supervision of the venerable Neluwe Sumanawansa Thero. For about three years, she learned Pali, Sanskrit and Sinhala at the Maradana Vidyodya

Pirivena. She also studied Abhidharma at the Pokunuwita Winayalankaramaya from the venerable Hengoda Kalyanadhamma Thero.



Bhikkhunī Wijithā's higher ordination (bottom row, fifth from the left), Sarnath (1988)

In 1996, along with 10 other Sri Lankan nuns, the venerable Wijithā travelled to Sarnath, India, to receive higher ordination (*upasampadā*). Three months before the ordination, the venerable had gone along with other nuns to Korea, to stay at the Bo Myunsa temple in Seoul. There she studied the Vinaya and ordination procedure with the venerable bhikṣuṇī Bang Joo Suk, who organized the ordination and was her preceptor. On December 8th of the same



year, the venerable received the *upasampadā* in Sarnath via a dual ordination conferred by the Korean bhikṣu- and bhikṣuṇī-saṅghas. The support of Theravāda monks from the Mahābodhi Society and other eminent Srilankan monks was pivotal to the event. This is the same ordination in which Kolannuwe Kusumā – often referred to as ‘the first Srilankan bhikkhunī’ as she was placed first in the ordination candidates line – became a bhikkhunī. After her full ordination, the venerable stayed on in India for another three and half years for monastic training and to study the Vinaya under the guidance of the venerable Adhawala Dewasiri and other Srilankan Theravāda monks.

The 1996 Sarnath ordination is considered to have been a turning point in the revival of the Theravāda bhikkhunī-saṅgha. The bhikkhunīs who emerged from that event have been instrumental in the further re-establishment of the bhikkhunī order in Sri Lanka and other countries. Since then, the bhikkhunī-saṅgha has continued to flourish worldwide. The venerable bhikkhunīs Matale Wijithā and Dhamma Darshikā have ordained and trained countless nuns throughout the island as well as overseas. (Amongst them is also the present writer, who lived at the Srī Gothamī Āshrāmaya and trained there with the venerable bhikkhunī Wijithā as her teacher from the end of 2003 until 2007.)



Bhikkhunīs Darshikā, Wijithā and Visuddhi with a lay resident at the Srī Gothamī Āshrāmaya, Olaboduwa (2023)



Bhikkhunīs Darshikā and Wijithā at the Srī Gothamī Āshrāmaya, Olaboduwa (2023)

The venerable bhikkhunī Matale Vijithā has also received an award – as a bhikkhunī – from the Amarapūra nikāya’s mahānāyaka for her services, which was conferred by the venerable Madihe Paññāsīha.

Both nuns deserve our respect and reverence for their dedication, perseverance, and service to the Dhammavinaya and the Buddha-sāsana at large.

☞ All photographs courtesy Bhikkhunī Visuddhi with the permission of the venerable bhikkhunīs Darshikā and Wijithā.

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☞ The at times inconsistent spellings of Sinhala proper names as well as of Pali and Sanskrit loanwords in Sinhala reflect the local usage and have been intentionally left in not-standardized form.

