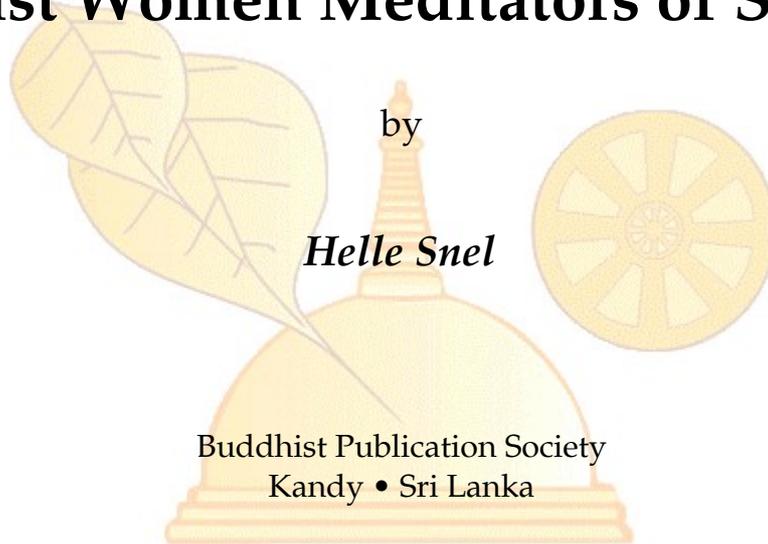


Buddhist Women Meditators of Sri Lanka



by

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Introduction

“There is a great quest for meditation these days. In all religions, they have eventually found out that mind matters. Kings, queens, presidents ... all human beings suffer. And they all, ultimately, have the same questions relating to life and death. They have also found out that nobody can do it for you, that you are alone in it – living and dying. And that is why meditation has become important, because by meditating one turns inward to one’s own mind. We all come to realise, sooner or later, that all the outward things – like going to the temple to make offerings, or going to Mecca on a pilgrimage – will not do. It is the mind that matters. Even Christians and Muslims recognise the value of meditation now. You don’t have to be a Buddhist to meditate. And – equally important to notice – meditation today is a layman thing. No church needed. There sure is a quest for meditation these days.”

Female lay meditator

In this booklet a handful of Sri Lankan women open their hearts and share with us what it means to them to meditate daily. In the interviews that follow they talk openly about their lives and the problems they experience living in this modern world, and they tell us freely how meditation helps them overcome all kinds of difficulties. As they are all mature women, their thoughts about life and meditation are based on experience and reflect a long life.

It is not very often that the experiences and reflections of Sri Lankan women are revealed to the public. What women think and feel usually goes on silently. Even though the president of the country is a woman, most women in Sri Lanka live a background existence in families; males do most of the talking to the outside world. To a Western observer, Sri Lankan women live their lives and do their duties in a very humble and unnoticed way, as if “there is nothing worth talking about, really.” But there *is* something to talk about, as these interviews show.

My own deeply felt interest in female existence in this culture was a major motivational factor behind these interviews. In the interviews the women talk about their personal lives. Each and every life story is unique, they all acquire a face and a personality, and so it is my hope that this book opens a window upon the variety and complexity of female existence in a Buddhist culture. I have often thought of these sixteen women as a bouquet of flowers, a bouquet that I feel only too happy to have had the opportunity to collect. And I feel genuinely grateful that they so openly shared their experiences and reflections with me.

After a short presentation by me, every woman tells her meditation story in her own words. In that way, each meditation practice is portrayed against the background of an individual life history. Precisely because each interview presents a very personal portrait and comes close to many problems of modern life, the total collection of interviews sheds light on the many different ways in which meditation and mindfulness can be integrated into daily life.

The interviewed women are all Buddhist, they are all Sinhala, and they are all, except one who renounced late in life, lay practitioners of meditation. In the interviews they discuss the religious meaning of meditation in their lives. Lay meditation and female religiosity in Sri Lanka is, like female existence in general, another area that is seldom highlighted in the literature on Theravada Buddhism. Martine Batchelor discusses Buddhist women and meditation in her book *Walking on Lotus Flowers*, but no women from Sri Lanka are included. Tessa Bartholomeusz, in *Women Under the Bo Tree*, deals with Sri Lankan nuns, but not with lay meditators. The present collection of interviews deals with a variety of ways in which the deeply religious nature of these female lay meditators manifests in daily life and thus helps shed some light on the complex interrelationship between femininity, culture, and religiosity.

Vipassana meditation

A few words about Vipassana may be necessary. Vipassana is the distinctive Theravada form of meditation. The Pali word *vipassanā* means seeing clearly, that is, insight. Vipassana meditation is closely

connected to the practice of *sati*: mindfulness, awareness. In Vipassana, insight is developed through the practice of mindfulness. There are four foundations of mindfulness: the body, sensations, states of mind, and mental objects. Vipassana teaching is based on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta which prescribes specific ways to meditate on each of these four foundations as they arise and disappear in the present moment.

In Vipassana, the meditator learns to be mindful of every thought and action without identifying with them, i.e. dispassionate awareness. The effect of this is that the meditator experiences directly (1) the truth of impermanence, (2) the truth of *dukkha* (suffering), and (3) the truth of no-self. The result of the effort is also threefold: with regular practice the meditator first acquires intimate knowledge of the workings of the mind, secondly learns to shape the mind, so that, finally, the mind can be liberated (see e.g. Hart on the techniques of Vipassana meditation). The promise in Vipassana is that liberation, or enlightenment, can be attained through one's own personal effort and in this very life.

Meditation is not new in Buddhist Sri Lanka, but it is a new thing that lay persons meditate daily, and it is certainly new that lay women seriously take to meditation. Most Sri Lankan monks do not have time for meditation. They are scholar-monks and have as their primary task to serve the religious needs of the laity. Only so-called forest monks have an age-old tradition of spending their lives meditating in small forest hermitages.

Vipassana meditation among the laity is thus a quite recent phenomenon. It was introduced, or maybe re-introduced, by Burmese monks in the 1950's. It has since become popular mainly among lay persons belonging to the Western educated, urban middle classes (see e.g. Gombrich & Obeyesekere and Bond). But its popularity is ever increasing and there is evidence that it is presently spreading into rural communities, too.

There are a few important differences between Vipassana and traditional Sri Lankan Theravada. According to traditional teaching, the Golden Age, the age when many became Arahants (enlightened) by simply listening to the Buddha's teachings, lies far in the past. In the present age, the Wheel of Samsara turns very slowly, and Nibbana is a thousand lives away. In the traditional teaching, there is thus a basic pessimism about the potential for rapid individual improvement. Furthermore, traditional teaching holds that lay persons can only proceed up to a certain stage on the path to Enlightenment, and that renouncing the world is a necessity for further advancement.

Accordingly, most Sri Lankan monks as well as many lay persons hold the view that ordinary people neither desire nor expect to become enlightened and attain Nibbana in this life. There is the widespread view both in the Sangha and among the laity that meditation is too difficult for ordinary people. They may go to the temple on Poya days and practise short meditations, but this type of meditation occupies a different place in the ritual system than intensive Vipassana. The temple meditation is a devotional exercise and is part of the merit-making system. Vipassana, on the other hand, constitutes the path itself. As one woman says: "My mother goes to the temple on Poya days and meditates, but she forgets about it again. Mother still sometimes gets upset. I don't, and that is the difference between my own and my mother's meditation."

Among the practitioners of Vipassana there is a very clear optimism about the human potential for sustaining great spiritual achievement, and they hold that Nibbana is attainable in this very life.

What modern teachers of Vipassana say can be summarised in four propositions: (1) lay persons have both the opportunity and the responsibility for their own liberation, (2) lay persons have at least as good, perhaps a better, chance than monks of attaining the goal in this life, (3) the path is open to everyone; one does not have to renounce the world, (4) it requires personal effort to live according to this ideal in the modern world. As Bond explains in his study *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, these propositions entail a positive and at the same time demanding interpretation of the Dhamma. It places a personal responsibility on the individual, and it leaves no doubt as to the individual effort that is demanded of the person who is seriously involved in Vipassana. Lay practitioners of Vipassana tend to lose interest in temple activities and rituals, as meditation is a strictly individual matter – even if it may be sometimes done in a group. Some writers, including Bond, perceive a clear connection between this emphasis on individual effort and the demands of the modern world.

It is obvious that the pursuit of liberation from Samsara through meditation takes on a different value and meaning when the goal is considered nearby rather than “a thousand lives away.” So, for Vipassana practitioners, meditation is not something you do once a month on Poya days. Meditation is a “24 hour a day job,” as one woman puts it. In other words, Vipassana practitioners understand the path in pragmatic, this-worldly terms. Instead of explaining the human and spiritual condition of modern life in terms of bad rebirths and bad kamma, they turn the reasoning around and explain a person’s dedication to meditation in terms of that person’s good kamma and as the result of a fortunate rebirth: *because of* good kamma and *because of* good progress along the path in previous lives, some people have a fortunate birth and become interested in meditation.

The practitioners of Vipassana meditation often point to the Dhamma as their source of inspiration. But they stress experience over scholasticism, and they hold that extensive study of the Dhamma is not necessary before going into meditation, which is the traditional view. Instead, they insist that meditation is a precondition for understanding the Dhamma correctly. There may be various stages and viewpoints, but they are all interrelated, for the Dhamma is one. Like the Bible, the Dhamma allows for multiple interpretations and many options, and it contains teachings appropriate for people at diverse existential and spiritual levels. As one of the interviewed women stated: “Since childhood I have been taught that my religion, Buddhism, has an answer for each and every existential problem.”

The interview population

The sixteen women interviewed can in no way be considered representative of the Sinhala Buddhist population as a whole. All, except one, classify themselves as middle class; all, except two, have received higher education and have had a professional life; and all, except one, now live in urban areas. Six women live in the Colombo area, another six in the area around Kandy; two live in Gampaha, one in Bandarawela, and one in a village in the Dambulla area. Some know each other through their meditation activities or from neighbour relationships. Five of the women are members of the same organisation, the Society of the Friends of the Dhamma (Sadaham Mituru Samuluwa).

Seven of the women are married, one is unmarried, three are divorced or separated, four are widows, while one, the nun, left her husband upon renouncing late in life. At the time of the interviews, the youngest woman was 38, the oldest 80. Most (nine) were in their sixties, and thirteen of the sixteen are retired. With all sixteen women the interview was conducted in English without the aid of an interpreter.

Reflections on language, age, and religion

Once I had started interviewing in the English language, this became a criterion for selection of interviewees. That English was the interviewing language largely explains why this group of women belongs to the older segment of the population. There are indeed younger women who meditate, but their command of English was simply not sufficient for doing the interview. The interview questions have now been translated into Sinhala, but expansion of the range of women to younger ones and to women with a village background is something that has yet to be done.

I was amazed to discover that there exists in Sri Lanka an age-group the members of which speak English better than their own language, and I started to take an active interest in the language question as something that deserved a special note. I began to ask the interviewed women which language they were most at home with. Five of the sixteen declared English their better language, while five said that they knew English and Sinhala equally well. These women speak English to their husbands, friends, and children, and Sinhala in the shops and to the maid. They often said they preferred to read newspapers and books in English. One preferred to read books on Buddhism and meditation in English, and quite a few said that English was the easier language for the communication of more sophisticated thoughts. But there was also one who held the opposite view and said that Sinhala had a different and more authentic tone for speaking about Buddhism and meditation.

The observations on language are interesting because they connect to questions about the impact of colonisation, Westernisation, and Anglification on specific groups and layers in Sinhalese society, not only with respect to language proficiency but also regarding the transformation of Buddhism. These are very big, profound, and interesting questions that inspire much reflection. To deal extensively with these questions lies outside my powers, and also outside the scope of this book. I must be content with a few observations.

The very reason why these women were so fluent in their command of English is their middle class background and their age. They were all born and grew up while Ceylon was still a British colony. Middle class, English-oriented Sinhalese parents had ambitions on behalf of their daughters and wanted to give them the best education. Ten of the interviewed women said that they had gone to schools where English was the teaching medium, five said that they were both English and Sinhala educated, while only one said that she had been Sinhala educated. Five of the English educated women were even sent to Catholic schools because these schools were considered better than Buddhist schools at that time. Fourteen of the sixteen have received additional education and have had a professional life at a time when this was still not very common for women. Six have been teachers of English. After Independence in 1948 many things changed and women under fifty have gone through a school system that uses Sinhala as the teaching medium. This explains why they are not as proficient in English as these older women.

As to the question whether the interpretation of Buddhism among the interviewed women has also become westernised, this is an extremely delicate matter. Quite a few scholars have observed that westernised Sri Lankans prefer the path of meditation over the path of devotion. This certainly holds for Western renunciants – both males and females – who have resided in Sri Lanka. Western monks and nuns have historically eschewed the path of devotion in favour of the contemplative life, while most Sri Lankan nuns follow the path of devotion which includes merit-making activities such as pujas. Westerners' interpretations of Buddhism have usually leaned towards its philosophical side, and Buddhists of Western origin usually involve themselves deeply in meditation. In many ways, this reflects a "Protestant Buddhist" orientation in which religion is privatised and internalised: the truly significant is less what takes place in a public celebration or in a ritual than what happens inside one's own mind. Puja and other outward expressions of piety are considered less significant; rather, the more "rational" aspects of Buddhism such as meditation are considered the useful practice for salvation. Some Westerners approach the religion as a rational philosophy.

Vipassana appeals differently to Westerners, most of whom have a Christian background, than to Sri Lankans with a Buddhist background. Meditation in the West is associated with Buddhism, but many Westerners practise meditation without being Buddhists or even knowing about Buddhism. To them, meditation is mainly a this-worldly activity, useful when it comes to coping with stress and other problems of modern life. Buddhist cosmology and Buddhist notions about rebirth and liberation from Samsara in this or in future lives are either completely missing or much weaker. In Buddhist Sri Lanka, however, and certainly among these interviewed women, meditation is practised in this world – and even in daily life while engaged in ordinary activities – but the very practice of meditation is understood within Buddhist cosmology and perceived as an activity connected to past lives and with a strong bearing on future lives.

The distinction between religion and culture is a difficult one. What is religion and what is shaped by cultural background? Instead of answering this question theoretically, I shall point to the concrete interviews with these female meditators and express as my conviction – being a Westerner myself with a Protestant Christian background – that these interviews would have been very different if the women interviewed had been Westerners.

The interviews

The aim of the interview study was primarily to see how and why these women have got into meditation, to learn how they practise, to find out to what extent meditation has led them to change their domestic and religious lives, and to explore the insights and benefits they have acquired through meditation. To

that end they were all asked to respond to the same questions. In the following paragraphs I discuss and summarise the answers given.

Getting into meditation

All the women have their own personal stories of how they got into meditation, and how this was bound up with their personal lives. They were all eager to tell their stories. Quite a few mention that they turned to meditation in order to find answers to practical and existential questions: domestic problems, or problems in relations or in the family. Four women said that they turned to meditation because they went through a difficult period in their lives: "I was unhappy in my marriage," "I suffered a depression," or "it was only after my son died, that I became a stable meditator."

Of those who did not come to meditation through a special event or life crisis, four mentioned that "the sense of meditation came from within," or "it was just life," or "I was just ready for it" – indicating that it is considered quite normal, after retiring, that people turn to more spiritual concerns. "We become old and sick, and we suffer – we want to end this," as one woman put it.

Some became motivated for meditation through the reading of books, through listening to Dhamma-talks on the radio, or through meditating friends, while one became interested in meditation by playing spiritualistic games during which messages from deities appeared.

Almost all the women refer to their Buddhist background when explaining how and why they became interested in meditation "Since early childhood I liked going to the temple," or "as a child I was sent to Buddhist Sunday schools," are common answers, while one woman said that she had wanted to become a nun since she was a child. But quite a few also emphasised that their Buddhist background was "just stereotyped Buddhism" or "being Buddhist by birth," and that turning to serious meditation involved reflection on childhood learning: "When you reach adulthood, it is a duty to go deeper into your religion and find out your own position." These answers indicate that going into serious meditation practice requires an active decision and is perceived as a qualitative change, a turning point in life.

Learning meditation

To this question there is also a variety of answers. Half of the women went to a meditation centre to learn to meditate – Nilambe, Kanduboda, Kundasala, and the Goenka centre at Hindagala are mentioned – while the other eight say that they learned it from their husbands, from a group of spiritual friends, from listening to Dhamma-talks, from books or "mostly by myself." Six of the women have never been to a meditation centre. The majority of the women have had more than one meditation teacher, while six had only one teacher. The teachers most often mentioned are Goenka, Godwin Samararatne, Mr. Ratnakara, and Ayya Khema. Two of these, Goenka and Ayya Khema, are foreigners, while the other two are Sri Lankan lay meditation teachers.

Goenka is an Indian lay meditation master who learned meditation in Burma, and Ayya Khema was a Buddhist nun of German origin. She had been very important for many of the interviewed women in leading them into meditation. At the time of writing, only Goenka is still alive. Ayya Khema died in 1997, and both Godwin and Mr. Ratnakara passed away in the year 2000.

Five of the women who say that they have not been to a meditation centre and have had only one teacher, are members of the Society of the Friends of the Dhamma, of which Mr. Ratnakara was the teacher. The Society organises camps on a regular basis. These camps may fulfil some of the same functions as a retreat in a meditation centre, even though the programme at the camps comprises much more than meditation (see Bond for an extensive description of the Society of the Friends of the Dhamma, pp. 212–40).

Seven women mention Buddhist monks as their first teachers. Of these, three were teachers of Samatha meditation (meditation on concentration), while four taught Vipassana meditation. One of these is an American monk, while only three are Sri Lankan Buddhist monks. This reflects the situation in Sri Lanka quite well. Vipassana meditation is taught mainly outside the Sangha, by lay meditation teachers, often foreigners, and at lay meditation centres.

The practice of meditation

Meditation is often understood as sitting in a specific posture, cross-legged and with the spine erect, and sometimes Western meditators are quite preoccupied with questions about the 'right' posture, the 'right' time, and the 'right' duration of a meditation session. Most of these women, however, have more relaxed attitudes to this. About half of the women do meditate daily, at more or less fixed hours, while the other half emphasise that they don't meditate at fixed times. And even if quite a few answer that they try to sit daily, they all agree that meditation is more than 'sitting', and that there is actually no style for it, and no 'right' posture, because real meditation, mindfulness, is something you practise in all your daily activities. One woman says: "Through Vipassana I don't sit and meditate anymore, because now every moment of my life is meditation." Some even go as far as to warn against sitting – "that sitting thing is the wrong meditation," or "when you sit, you actually try to control and to press your mind. When you press a thing, it comes up. But that is bluff. You might be cheating yourself that way," or "I would rather climb a mountain and see the sun rise than sit."

I think most of the women would agree that it is important to learn to meditate properly, for instance at a meditation centre, and practise regularly and patiently, but when one has done that for years, the sitting practice may be reduced. Then daily life becomes the most important source of inspiration and insight. Herein lies the real transformative potential of Vipassana – that meditation produces a qualitative change in one's daily life. The important thing is not to focus on specific hours or specific postures, but to practise mindfulness in everything you do. This makes meditation a way of life, a continuous guideline to all daily activities. Even going to the toilet, waiting for the bus, or washing the dishes in this way becomes meditation.

When they do practise sitting meditation, most women say that they concentrate on breathing and bodily sensations, and when thoughts and emotions come up in the mind, they go back to the breath. As one woman says, "I don't allow the thoughts to hang around." Watching the breath, thoughts, or sensations in their coming and going produces insight into the impermanence of all things. A sense of detachment from feelings is acquired when you experience the insight that "I am not my anger or my hatred or my likes and dislikes."

Right speech, right understanding, right conduct are moral qualities that are central to the Dhamma, the Buddha's teachings. These qualities are trained through being mindful in all daily activities, and this, too, furnishes the link between the Dhamma and Vipassana. To these women, who understand themselves as good practising Buddhists, the Dhamma is the basis for practising meditation – thinking about life and death and watching how the mind works.

That meditation becomes a way of life embracing all aspects of life is also reflected in the answers these women give to the question which books they prefer to read. "Only books on meditation, no novels"; "books by Burmese teachers"; "Goenka books"; "Sinhala books on moral life"; "only books from the Buddhist Publication Society"; "the religious talks by Mr. Ratnakara," are some of the answers given. In their reading habits – and some stress that they don't read much – these women do not allow secular books or novels any space.

The benefits of meditation

As to short-term benefits of meditation, all the interviewed women tell of the improvements that they experience in matters of daily concern. The answers range from changes in small habits, attitudes or ailments, for instance: "I used to take a sip at night, I don't any more," or "I used to be afraid of snakes," or "I used to have a headache, I don't any more," to deeper changes in their emotional lives: "I have become a better human being," "I am able to control my anger," "I don't have grudges anymore," "I have more self-confidence, knowing that I can take whatever comes." The women all agree that life has become a lot easier, that they are happier and have fewer worries than before they started to meditate.

These short-term benefits may seem both pragmatic and quite instrumental, but they acquire a higher and more religious meaning when we realise that Buddhism teaches that life is suffering (*dukkha*). Becoming happier and more content with this life means that suffering is reduced, and this again means coming closer to Nibbana. Thus it is that overcoming undesirable qualities like anger, impatience, anxiety,

pride, and greed makes the meditator better able to cope with life; but at the same time these accomplishments are taken to be necessary steps on the way to the chief benefits of Vipassana: gaining control of body and mind, acquiring liberation of mind and thereby ultimately liberation from the chain of rebirths. In other words, these Buddhist women meditate not only for 'instrumental' reasons, i.e. to become better in mastering the practical and existential problems of modern life, but also to get closer to Nibbana. Meditation is understood as more than a handy method to solve mundane problems (Western secular meditators often limit their interest in meditation to this aspect). In this Sri Lankan Buddhist context, however, becoming better in solving mundane problems is seen as a necessary step along the path. In other words: there is no contradiction between mundane and supramundane goals. The path is not separate from the goal. As Bond concludes: "Lay meditators have not reduced the supramundane to the mundane, but they have shortened the distance between the two" (p.196).

This observation connects perfectly well with the long-term benefits of Vipassana meditation as perceived by the interviewed women. When asked which are the expected long-term benefits, one woman answers that she doesn't worry about that because "long-term benefits will come automatically if I continue along this path." Three women state that the very expectation of benefits would be the wrong attitude, or that they can't predict the future. But seven women gave clear answers that they want to end Samsara, to attain Nibbana, to become an Arahant, or simply to reduce suffering. Some said that they want the mind to be liberated from all its attachments, to find out that there is no self, to cut down the number of rebirths, or to keep the mind free even at the moment of death.

Changes in religious beliefs and practices

After turning to meditation, changes have occurred in the religious practices among almost all the interviewed women. Only one says that her religious practices have not changed. Most agree that they don't often go to the temple any more: "I'm not so much into rites and rituals anymore," "I don't believe much in offerings anymore," "going to the Bodhi tree and offering flowers, I don't believe in that much anymore," are some of the answers given. As to the question whether meditation has led to changes in religious beliefs, quite a few are very explicit in declaring that meditation has strengthened their religious beliefs: "I have attained more and more faith," "I have grown more confident in the path," or "my religious life has improved."

Some observe that traditional beliefs and practices have taken on new meaning. One woman says: "My beliefs have not been affected, but there is more reality now – knowing of the impermanence of everything. We have been hearing those words from childhood, but now they acquire a different meaning through the meditation experience." Another states: "Earlier I thought that giving *dāna* (alms) to the monks was good. Now I think that helping and giving *dāna* to everyone is good." One woman summarises the changes that have occurred in her religious beliefs very beautifully: "Earlier I believed that the Buddha was out there, but passed away. Now I know that it was the body that passed away and the Buddha is still here. That is the change that has come through Vipassana. Buddha is to me not the body or a statue. Buddha is the wisdom developed in the mind. That wisdom is Dhamma to me. And when I act according to that Dhamma, it is Sangha to me. The Triple Gem, in other words, is in me."

In other words, many of the rituals traditionally employed by the laity have become either meaningless or acquired new meaning to these meditators, a meaning that is now related to meditation. Bodhi-puja, Buddha-puja, offering to the gods, and giving alms to the temples now becomes either irrelevant or becomes "the salt to meditation, not the essence."

Changes in domestic and professional life

All the women agree that domestic life has improved after they took to meditation. "Relations with family members improve a lot," "meditation is very good for family life, even animals can feel the change," or "your relationship to ants, monkeys, spiders, leeches, fellow human beings, and even to trees and plants – everything changes when you do serious insight meditation." Because meditation improves knowledge of oneself, it simultaneously improves one's understanding of what goes on in other human beings. As one woman puts it: "It works both ways: your daily life improves through meditation, and your meditation improves by being mindful in your daily life activities." Quite a few of these older women regret that they

did not start meditating earlier in life because they believe that meditation makes it much easier to cope with difficulties inherent in professional life, like competitiveness and power struggles.

Renunciation

On the question whether they had ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun, nine of the women answered that they had considered this at some point in their lives, but only one actually did so. However, turning to serious meditation is by some considered as equal to renunciation when it comes to commitment and implications. One says: "Meditation is living the Dhamma," while others express as their views that "by being a lay person I can serve people better," "by doing Vipassana one can live in the world, yet withdraw from the ordinary ways of being in the world," or quite frankly "Vipassana itself is renunciation." Some explain not considering renouncing by pointing to the fact that many Sri Lankan nuns are not primarily meditators.

Conclusions

The interviewed women are all very happy with their lives. On the question if they want to improve anything, five answer plain no, while the rest answer that they want to grow in the Dhamma, improve their meditation, improve their spiritual life or the "quality of myself," or "improve my understanding through daily life."

The interviews show the depth of meaning that the practice of Vipassana has for these female meditators. There are certainly differences between the sixteen women interviewed in this study. But they all share the confidence that Vipassana meditation is a path for lay people who do not renounce. Some hold the view that lay persons have a better opportunity than renunciators to achieve success in Vipassana because "by living *in* the world they experience more *dukkha*, suffering, than renunciators and thus they can see life more truly." By extension of this reasoning, quite a few confide that they think that women have a greater advantage than men, "because women in this society experience more *dukkha* than men." They are also confident that it is one's own effort that makes the difference – "I have to do it myself, no one can do it for me" – as one woman said.

The interviewed women all strive to be good Buddhists and live according to Buddhist values in a rapidly changing world, and in so doing they bear witness to living Buddhist culture and religion in Sri Lanka, in all its complexity and variability.

I Used to be Choosy with Food

Miss Chandra

Presentation

Miss Chandra is 38 years old, unmarried, a woman with an easy smile and bright eyes. She radiates joy. She has had ten years of education (Sinhala). She lives with her parents and unmarried sisters and brothers in a Kandyan suburb. She classifies her family as lower middle class. She has no profession, she lives by “helping people,” as she says. Actually, she does a fair amount of social work, serving people to their end without any fuss. The interview took place in a meditation centre near Kandy.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

I don't know how I first heard of meditation, but since I was a child I liked to go to the temple and offer *dāna* (alms). I have five sisters and two brothers, but I am the only one in the family who meditates. I started to meditate when I was 14 years old and now I have been meditating 24 years. What attracted me to meditation was the calm mind. My mother goes to the temple on Poya days and meditates, but she forgets about it again. Mother still sometimes gets upset. I don't, and that is the difference between my own and my mother's meditation.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

I have learned meditation mostly by myself. No, it was not difficult! (big smile). Well, I have been to two meditation centres. When I was in my 20s I stayed for one or two years at Nilambe (a meditation centre in the hills outside Kandy). Once a month I went down to visit my family but I never stayed for the night. I always went back to the centre the same day. My parents were very upset about me going to live in a meditation centre, but I did it anyway.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

I do not practise meditation at fixed hours. To me practice is to try to do all things mindfully, including talking to you now. This I do as often as possible so I can't tell you how long a usual meditation session is. Sometimes I sit – alone or in a group. I also like walking meditation but our house is too small for walking. I do not do standing meditation, but I like “sleeping meditation.” Then I lie down and listen to a tape, in English. But I don't like reading books. When I meditate, I concentrate on breathing. When thoughts, emotions, or bodily sensations arise, I go back to breathing.

Please tell me why you meditate – what are the benefits?

As to long-term benefits from meditating, I don't know about that, but I do experience some immediate benefits. There is more laughter, more happiness, more calmness. I used to be very choosy with food, now I like everything. I do believe that one becomes a better human being by meditating and if more people meditated, I think there would be peace. By meditating one improves mental well being and conditions in this life. As to improving conditions in future lives, I don't know.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

Meditation does affect my domestic life in a positive way. Whenever there is unrest in the house, at home, when my sisters or mother are upset about something, I meditate and that helps me to keep a calm mind.

I don't have any real profession, but I help once a week at a Home for the Aged and Destitute. The sisters there are in mental stress. I am able to help both the sisters and the patients by being calm.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

Practising meditation has changed my religious practices. I don't go to the temple much any more.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

Yes, I considered it once when I was unhappy with my life.

Are you happy with your life now?

Yes! (very big smile).

Is there something you want to improve in your life?

No, I don't think so. I am perfectly happy.

Being Compassionate Even to Ants

Mrs. Agnes Abeysekera

Presentation

Mrs. A.A. is a lively 80 year old woman, a retired English teacher. She used to teach at a secondary school and a few children still come to her house for private tuition. Her husband is about the same age and retired from government service. The couple lives in a nice part of Colombo with many small, English-style bungalows, surrounded by neat and well-kept gardens. She considers her family "lower middle class." To me, however, the home is plain middle class. They have no children. Mrs. A.A. tells me that she was 35 before she got married. She was the youngest of 10 children, 3 brothers and 6 sisters, and had to wait her turn to marry. It was her father and her husband's parents who decided on and arranged the marriage. "We are very obedient to parents, you know," she adds.

She was born in Kegalle to a middle class family. Her father was in government service and in charge of the district. Her mother died when she was very young. She went to school at the convent (Catholic school): "They have very good schools, you know." She says that she speaks better English than Sinhala: "English is the better language when it comes to expressing thoughts." She also prefers to read books in English: "Then I understand everything, I don't understand everything in Sinhala texts." She says that she was brought up that way – with English as her mother tongue. She speaks English with her husband and Sinhala to the maid.

Every Saturday Mrs. A.A. teaches English at a temple in the neighbourhood together with two other female English teachers. One other teacher is also about 80 years old, the third one is younger. "I like to do this. I feel there is a purpose with my life. We teach twenty children each, from grade 3 to grade 10. The parents have asked for this as they realise that there is no future for their children if they don't know English. But their English is very, very poor. I and the other two ladies sometimes wonder what the kids learn at school. Teaching must be very bad."

Mrs. A.A. is a member of a group of mostly elderly women (60–80 years) who meet two hours every week to treat some subject of religious and/or moral importance, a sutta (discourse of the Buddha) for instance, under the leadership of a teacher. The regular teacher of this group of 30–40 ladies is an 81 year old woman, a retired teacher, but sometimes the teacher is a monk: "Then we take off our shoes." Poya days Mrs. A.A. spends meditating all day together with two women friends in the house of one of the three.

The interview took place at her home in Colombo. The husband left the room when the interview started.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

I got interested in meditation at the age of 55. That is 25 years ago now and I was still rather frivolous. There was no particular reason for me getting interested. I guess it was just life. Upon retiring there was enough time and I read a lot of books. Some Sri Lankan monks were teaching meditation. But Sister Khema (a German Buddhist nun) gave a lot of help. She arranged courses close by when she put up Nuns' Island (a meditation centre for women). I and my two friends went to these courses. Sister Khema was a very good organiser.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

I did not go to a meditation centre to learn meditation. I followed Sister Khema's courses. My teacher was first a Sri Lankan monk (Samatha-meditation) and later Sister Khema (Vipassana-meditation). I don't think their teachings were very different. I did not find meditation difficult. I could sit crosslegged on the floor for an hour and a half without feeling tired. Now I can't do that any more, but I try. Meditation has helped me to take things as they come.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

I practise meditation by trying to be mindful during the day. I have a mind that keeps wandering – past, future – I try to bring it back to breathing. In the morning, first thing, at 3 or 4 o'clock, I meditate. I take a glass of water and then I sit on the stool for *mettā* a half-hour or an hour in my bedroom. I take the five precepts whenever I sit on the stool. First I do then the *mettā-bhāvanā* (meditation on loving kindness) – being compassionate even to ants – then I think: what is it that I call "me"? Then I think of my body. I do no standing or lying meditation, but sometimes in the evening I do walking meditation – I do a lot of gardening. Happiness is very important. At night, before I go to sleep, I think, "If I don't wake up again, I must at least be happy now."

I concentrate on breathing and bodily sensations – not on thoughts and emotions. When thoughts and emotions come, I notice them and then I go to the present. But I wish I had a good instructor.

I like to read something more deep now, straight from the suttas for instance. And *The Seven Stages of Purification* by Ven. Nyanarama. But my eyes are weak now.

Please tell my why you meditate – what are the benefits?

If you ask me what my goals with meditation are, my goal is Nibbana, to end Samsara. I wish to end this. I know my weaknesses. The only way to do that is to progress spiritually.

The immediate benefit of meditation is that my mind gets lighter, my thoughts get lighter, my outlook on life gets lighter. Signs of progress in meditation? ... I don't know. Some people say they see lights when they meditate, also the monks say that they see lights going by, but I don't experience such things. I learn a lot from small daily things. For instance, I mentioned the ants. It is very difficult to be compassionate to ants. When I go to the kitchen table because I am hungry and it is full of ants, then it is difficult to be compassionate to them. But then I stop and think that they are on the kitchen table for the same reason as I am there – in search of food. That helps. So, progress shows in my daily reactions – I am not as impulsive as I used to be. I am not shaken very much by anything that happens.

A more long-term benefit is that one gets more accepting. I do believe that one becomes a better human being by meditating because one gets to know oneself and one's reactions. If more people meditated, it would end conflicts and arguments.

I have not thought of the path of meditation as being subdivided into stages, so I really can't tell. Liberation to me means ending Samsara and reaching Nibbana.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

Meditation affects my domestic life in that it makes me calmer, it makes the mind more stable, it gives direction to the mind. It helps me to think things through and find solutions in a more practical and sober way.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

I don't think that meditation has changed my religious beliefs, but it has changed my religious practices. I used to think that going to the temple was very important, I don't anymore. One can just as well have a Buddha-picture at home. My neighbour loves to give *dāna*, I don't anymore. When I go to the temple now, it is more for peace and quiet.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

In this life I can't consider renouncing lay life and becoming a nun because of obligations to my husband, but I wish to renounce in my next life.

Are you happy with your life? Do you want to improve something in your life?

If I am happy with my life? ... I think so, but I would want to improve my meditation.

***We Are Used to Noticing the Movement –
Not the Stillness***

Mrs. Myra Ariyaratne

Presentation

Mrs. Myra is a fascinating lady. Intelligent, with a beautiful face and a beautiful smile. She has clear eyes and a very clear mind. She has a winning and listening personality and she radiates peace and groundedness.

She is 65 years old, married, but separated from her husband. There are no children. When they separated, she sold the house which had been her dowry upon marriage. Instead she bought a small house in a village outside Kandy where she now lives alone with a maid.

She was brought up in a village where both of her middle class parents were working as teachers. She was English educated and later studied to become a medical doctor at the Medical College of Colombo. Her husband was also a medical doctor and they both used to work in a hospital in Kandy.

Once a week, on Sundays, she is the leader and teacher of a group of mostly women at a meditation centre in Kandy. There is group meditation and she leads discussions on the Dhamma. She also sometimes takes over from the teacher of meditation at Nilambe and conducts the weekly meditation class at the Buddhist Publication Society when he is away. We meet at the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy for the interview.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

It is a very long story and a very long process. I was married for 22 years but my marriage was never happy. Because of the bad marriage I gradually became ever more depressed. I only had negative thoughts. I was my own doctor and I knew exactly what was wrong with me – I suffered from a reactive depression. It was not endemic – and I decided not to take medicines. I then discovered that by listening to Dhamma talks on the radio or on tapes I could overcome my dark thoughts. That was my "medicine" for six or seven years. At some point, however, my depression was so bad that I was unable to work. On Poya days there is *pirit* chanting on the radio all through the night. I discovered that by listening to the

pirit chanting I could keep my thoughts away from all the negative stuff from the past and reach one-pointedness of mind.

All this time I did not do actual meditation, but I guess that what I did functioned as meditation. I was still married and unhappy, but I could talk to nobody about my situation. I could only talk with a couple of girlfriends and that gave some relief. In Sri Lanka one does not talk to others about one's personal problems. And certainly not about unhappiness in marriage. One just stays in the marriage. Also, in Sri Lanka, one loses status by getting a divorce. To separate is more acceptable. But now this is changing, too. Now everybody knows that bad marriages happen. They are like headaches – they come and go.

I took leave from my job and went to Australia for six months to consider my situation. I hoped that things would get better in the marriage, but they actually became worse. While in Australia I decided not to resume my work as a doctor. I felt freer to work with myself without having a job. I gave the marriage another chance but it did not work. So I sold the house and bought a smaller one in a different place and started a new life. I had often thought of meditation, but never done anything about it. I did not know much about it either, had never been to a meditation centre. Again some years passed by and then, in 1986, I went to Nilambe for the first time. I was 56 years old then. The next couple of years I stayed up there – on and off. I would be there for three weeks and then go down for a week every month.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

In Nilambe I learned to meditate. Godwin was my teacher. I did not find it difficult. Mindfulness with breathing.

Please tell me how and why you became a teacher of meditation

In 1988, after a couple of years in Nilambe, on a full moon day when there were lots of locals up there and the usual meditation teacher for locals was away, Godwin suddenly without warning asked me to do a two-day meditation course with the local people. Of course, I was nervous. I did not feel prepared at all. But Godwin helped me a lot. Since then I have been a substitute for Godwin several times, both at Nilambe and here in Kandy at the weekly meditation classes.

When I teach, I concentrate my teaching around three notions: (1) mindfulness of breathing, (2) choiceless awareness, and (3) loving kindness. I hardly use any texts; meditation is based on practice and practice gives experimental knowledge. Sources of inspiration for my teaching have been, besides Godwin, the late Ven. Nyanarama – he wrote *The Seven Stages of Purification* – and Ven. Nyanananda from Mitirigala Meditation Centre.

I used to teach on Saturdays, now it is Sundays, from 9 am to 3 pm at Visakha Meditation Centre in Kandy. The teaching is open to anybody, but mostly women come. Sometimes some men come, too, but they only stay a while and then leave again. The group typically consists of 20–50 women, all Buddhist, all Sinhalese, between 15 and 85 years of age, mostly middle class, but also some lower class. My teaching is in the Sinhala language. I like better to teach in Sinhala than in English. It can never be the same in the English language. Sinhala has another mood, another understanding.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

I learned it one way, and Godwin has long been my teacher. But my practice has changed quite a lot since I started to listen to a Buddhist monk from Anuradhapura, Ven. Umbalgama Nyanarama. Now I go up to Anuradhapura twice a month to listen to him. He is about 45 years old. His teaching is different from the teaching at Nilambe. He also concentrates on breathing, but he has a different language. His teaching is mostly in pictures and he focuses on the spaciousness, the emptiness – everywhere around us – and teaches how to stay in touch with the space.

There is a difference in focus here which is new to me. It is hard to explain. For instance, it is usual to operate with breathing and emptiness. But this monk focuses on the space – that which is always there – instead of focusing on that which disturbs the space. So, in breathing there is often focus on the column of air which goes in and out of your nose, the movement, but inside you there is space, too. Or, take another picture: there is empty space, a bird flies through the space. The eyes (the mind) are used to see the bird

that flies through the space, but not the space it flies through. But the space is there, both before and after the bird flew through it. The space is the stable factor. But we are used to noticing the movement, not the stillness. Likewise with sounds and hearing. There are two places involved: where the sound is produced and where the sound is registered (= the ears), but in between there is space. This space is the real thing.

Also to this monk, the real technique is “not doing.” And he focuses a great deal on ear-consciousness – for instance when hearing sounds while meditating, you just label it “hearing, hearing” – and then go back to emptiness, back to the empty space. It is very easy, you just push the disturbance out by labelling it. It goes further and is more effective than anything else I have learned.

I like to relate everything that happens in my life to my meditation. I’ll give you an example. I was on this bus to Anuradhapura, and Sri Lankan men sometimes behave rather funny when they are on buses, especially intercity buses. They get “tired” and fall asleep. And then they lean over – always to my side, never to the other side (she laughs). They go outside their space. So, this man was sticking out his elbow so that it was leaning against my arm. I felt the irritation grow. At some point I turned my face and I looked at him. I didn’t say anything, I just looked at him until he withdrew his elbow and remained inside his space. Then I felt the irritation fade away until it was gone completely. I watched that happen, and it was a learning experience. Watching this energy of irritation coming and going, and then vanishing completely. Later, I could have talked to this man. It was all gone.

I like to discuss such experiences with others. It is inspiring for me to hear others tell about their experiences. That is also why I like this interview. I tell you about my experiences with meditation in daily life. People who are interested in meditation will be interested in reading your book.

Please tell my why you meditate

My goal with meditation is emancipation from suffering. The immediate benefit is that I become very peaceful. Not doing anything is the best. Being in the moment itself. Then the mind is free. A long-term benefit would be to keep the mind free at the moment of death – that is what I want to attain. As signs of progress along the path of meditation I take: feeling happy, to be able to remove suffering, and feeling less attachment to all these worldly things, knowing that they are responsible for all the suffering. Yes, I believe that one becomes a better human being by meditating – provided that one does it correctly. It would be good if more people meditated because your relationship with everything in this life changes. People who meditate never want to destroy. Meditation leads to liberation and to me liberation means liberation of the mind.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

Meditation affects my domestic life in a positive way. My needs are very simple, I don’t need much money.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

I have grown more confident in the path. I am not so much into rites and rituals any more.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

Yes, I have considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun, but I decided no. I am not happy with the state of affairs. Sri Lankan nuns do not meditate. In this status, as a lay woman, I can practise better. I am more free.

Are you happy with your life? Is there anything you want to improve in your life?

Yes, I am very happy with my life. I don’t want to improve anything, I am satisfied.

Now There Is Peacefulness in the Family

Mrs. Kamala de Silva

Presentation

Mrs. de Silva is a married woman of 63 years, her husband is 11 years older. The couple lives in a village in the Dambulla area, approximately two hours from Kandy. Some years ago, her husband suffered from a stroke, and he needs a lot of attention. There is one son, 41 years old and married, who lives and works in Kandy.

Mrs. K.S. appears quite worried about the health of her husband and about the future. Both she and her husband are Buddhists, but they were educated in Catholic schools because those were the best schools. The teaching languages were English and Sinhala – and Tamil – as she grew up in Jaffna. Sinhala is the better language of the three, she says.

Her father was a middle class jeweller in Jaffna. Her husband used to be an engineer, but is now retired. She herself was a kindergarten teacher until she got married. She considers herself and her family to be middle class.

The interview with Mrs. K.S. took place at the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

I used to go to the temple on Poya days and observe Ñsil' (morality, abstaining from physical and vocal actions that cause harm to others), but I did not do meditation. My husband already did meditation and he read many books. We used to listen to talks on the radio, given by the head monk of Kanduboda Meditation Centre. That was very nice. It made me feel relaxed.

There has been so much misery in my life – trouble with my brothers and sisters and with my in-laws. Because my father did not settle the property. He died when I was just married. And thereafter there was only trouble about inheritance.

I am the oldest of quite a lot of brothers and sisters. My youngest sister is only one year older than my son. She had just been born when my father died. My mother suffered a lot. It was a hard time for her to be alone with all those small children. Mother was only 15 when she was married to father. When our son was born, we decided to have no more children. Because my own experience is that brothers and sisters only give a lot of trouble. Besides, we wanted to give our son the best education and that is expensive. My husband said: "We can't afford more children." So, we had only one. But now my son blames us for being the only child, without brothers and sisters.

About 10 years ago, a Sinhalese couple living in Britain started to send me books, preliminary things for meditators. They go on 10-day meditation retreats. They always bring me books on meditation when they come here. In that way I started to get interested in meditation. But I have only practised for one or two years. To me English is the best language in which to render the teachings of Lord Buddha. The words and the meaning cannot be rendered in Sinhala – there are no words for these phenomena. English is the better language when it comes to expressing the teachings of Lord Buddha and the true meditation techniques. English books and English-speaking meditation teachers are the best.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

My husband and these friends from Britain, when they are here, have taught me a little, but I have not had a real teacher. I have not gone to a meditation centre to learn to meditate. I don't think it is difficult but it would be nice to have a teacher.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

Now I practise meditation daily, more or less at fixed hours. Every morning I meditate. At 4 or 5 am, when I get up, I first spend 15 minutes clearing my mind, then 15 minutes of *mettā* (loving kindness), and then 30 minutes of concentration on breathing. I also meditate before going to sleep at night and

whenever my husband is resting. I do not meditate in my bedroom but I go to a special room. I meditate alone and have never tried to meditate in a group. A usual meditation session is half to one hour. I do sitting meditation and also walking meditation when I get pain in my legs from sitting. No standing or lying meditation. I concentrate on breathing, not so much on thoughts and emotions. When thoughts and emotions come up in daily life, I try to be mindful of them – and that is a difficult thing. Now my friends send me books that say one should be mindful even while washing dishes. That is very difficult because the mind travels. That is why I think I should have a teacher. But I am not free. I have to look after my husband.

Please tell me why you meditate

There are some immediate benefits. I used to have a drink at night, I don't anymore. And I think it is true that body pains go when you meditate. I also think that there are long-term benefits from meditating. You get rid of anger and you have no fear. I used to be afraid of snakes, I am not anymore. And I think that I can overcome the difficulty of living alone if my husband dies. The five precepts are a must. But at certain moments when I meditate, my breathing stops. And then I get frightened. I need a teacher to talk to about that.

I think that the path of meditation is subdivided into stages. I have read so, but I have not experienced it. And I think that this world would be a better place to live if more people meditated. I believe that meditating leads to liberation, and to me liberation means not being born again and the end of suffering. I have experienced enough suffering. When you meditate, you improve conditions in this life because you can be satisfied with what you have. You stop craving for things. Travelling by bus is also meditation for me. I can see all the crazy things people do and all the crazy things they spend their money on.

Meditation not only improves your mental well-being but also your physical well-being. I used to have a constant headache, now I don't. I had a stomach disorder, now I don't. And now there is peace in the family. By meditating we learn to accept things as they come.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

I want to stress the importance of taking things as they come. That is so important in domestic life. Don't quarrel, but accept. I have learned that from meditation. My husband can be very demanding, he wants me to stay around all the time. So I can't easily go anywhere. That is sometimes very difficult. But if I want to keep peace of mind, I will just have to accept things the way they are.

I will give you another example from domestic life. My son who is an animal lover. Not just dogs and cats, but his love for animals even extends to snakes and ants. When he is at our place, he helps them to build nests by feeding them sugar. I discovered that when I was cleaning his room. Under some books he had built a kind of shelter, and there was sugar and ants carrying eggs everywhere. While cleaning I happened to disturb them. My son then got very angry with me and we had an argument. He told me that I should mind my own business. By meditating on loving kindness I could see that in a way he was right. That whole ant business is his concern. It should not be my problem. Now I am not annoyed by it anymore. I can even laugh about it. One must learn throughout life.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

My religious practices have changed through meditation. Going to the Bodhi tree and offering flowers – I don't believe in that much anymore. It is good for clearing your mind, but now I often think of all the time people waste on things like that. Also going to the temple and offering *puja*. I don't do that much anymore. It was alright when I was a child, but now I think that there are better things I can do with my time, e.g. meditate. And I would rather – if I had money – give it to needy people.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

Yes, I have considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun. If my husband dies. But I am afraid that I am too old and that I have too many weaknesses. There is a family disposition for arthritis and I often ask

myself, “Who will take care of me if I get ill?” I don’t want to be a burden to anybody, but if necessary, I would rather be cared for by family – people I know – than by strangers.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

Yes, I am happy with my life. I don’t want to improve material things like buying dresses and other outside things. But my spiritual life, yes, I would like to improve that. I’d like to find a teacher and to go on retreats, but then again I don’t have the freedom to go because my husband needs me. Luckily there are good teachers on the radio.

Wearing a Robe is not the Important Thing

Mrs. Nanda Wanasinghe

Presentation

Mrs. N.W. is a married woman of 61 years, her husband is 67. The couple lives in a nice, quite spacious bungalow surrounded by a lush garden in a village outside Kandy. Both are retired government servants; she used to work at the post office. They both come from middle class families in small rural towns. They were educated both in Sinhala and English language schools.

The couple has three sons, aged 35, 34, and 28. All three are married. The eldest son lives with his family in New Zealand, the other two in Colombo. In the sitting room there are big pictures of the weddings of all three sons.

The 97-year old mother of the husband lives in their home and is taken care of by them. Mrs. N.W., who is a warm and considerate woman, tells me that she is proud and happy that her old mother-in-law wants to end her life in her home. Mrs. N.W. also does social work.

The interview took place in the home. The husband was present almost all the time.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

When I was 15 years old, I became interested in religion. Then it was more the Dhamma than meditation that interested me. Then, at 40, I started to meditate. Some friends were doing meditation and we discussed things. I wanted to have a smooth family life and wondered what qualities of mind it took. It was not due to my parents that I went into meditation; actually they didn’t know what real meditation was. They were more into merit-making, giving *dāna* and going to the temple.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

I learned meditation by reading books and listening to lay meditators and Buddhist monks. I have had several teachers but most important was this group of spiritual friends. We were about 15, who used to meet every afternoon at 5 pm in one place and discuss the Dhamma, do group meditation, and chant *pirit*. This went on for years. When it was our turn to house the group – one week every 2–3 months – we used to clear the room of furniture, so that we could all sit on the floor. They were all people from this area. Now that we have grandchildren there really is not much time for that. Having grandchildren gives one a lot of new duties.

I have not been to a meditation centre to learn to meditate. As a mother you can’t stay away from home for long. But throughout my life I have tried to do things consciously.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

Meditation to me is not something you do once a day. It is concentrating on what you do all through the day, developing mindfulness and awareness. Meditation gives direction to your life, it is a guardian of mind. Daily life actually gives more challenge to your senses than living in a meditation centre. You only have meditators there, and it is in an isolated place. It is easy to concentrate in a meditation centre. It is

much more difficult to maintain the habit at home. A meditation centre is good for the initial training, but it is a different world.

I do not sit and meditate any more. When you sit, you actually try to control and to press your mind. When you press a thing, it comes up. But that is bluff. You might be cheating yourself that way.

It is daily life that is the real challenge. How you treat your maid, for instance. Our maid has been with us for 35 years, ever since our oldest son was born. This is her home, and I want her to know that and I treat her well. Some people treat their servants like animals.

When I go to bed, I review my day – the good things and the bad things I have done, in a self-correcting way. If I am satisfied with what I have got, if I'm not greedy and not jealous, it is good. I always try to live according to the five precepts and to be in control of the five senses, to be moderate and follow the middle path. My brothers are very wealthy, but I'm not jealous – I just think that is their kamma.

If I do sometimes lose my temper, if I get angry, for instance, I first stop to realise that I am in an angry position. Then I ask myself – why should I get angry? And then, finally, I realise that this anger is only a state of mind, it is not “me.” If you don't eat my sweets, for instance, I think that you must have your reasons – a stomachache or something. I don't take it personally. That position gives peace of mind.

I do read books, all in Sinhala. I read a lot of Sinhala Buddhist books on moral life, etc. Books from the Buddhist Publication Society.

Please tell me why you meditate – what are the benefits?

I meditate to have a peaceful mind. When the mind is peaceful, it makes life happy. When I am happy in this life, it continues into my next birth. It is a good chain to Nibbana, a place with eternal happiness. So, meditation is a way to cut down the number of rebirths.

I believe that the path of meditation is subdivided in stages, and when I live peacefully and solve the problems that come, I take it as a sign of progress along the path. If more people meditated and had peace in their minds, there would be world peace. Peace moves from the individual to the family, to the village, to the country, and finally to the world.

Yes, I believe that meditation leads to liberation. Liberation to me is being free of sorrow, free from anger and hate.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

Meditation improves your relationships to other family members, first of all to your husband and children. By looking at us, the children will follow our example.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

I think that giving something to a Buddha statue is not Buddhism. When I didn't know what Buddhism really was, I used to go to the temple and all that. Most go to church or temple because their parents took them. But that is being Buddhist by birth – that is not thinking. When you reach adulthood, it is a duty to go deeper into your religion and study other religions as well and find out your own position in that. I think that our mind is more advanced than that of our parents.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

No, I have never considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun (her husband laughs at this question). Because I think that by being a lay person, I can serve people better. Social service is possible when you are a lay person. Nuns are only occupied with religion; they don't do social service and they don't meditate. Wearing a robe is not the important thing.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

Oh yes, I am happy with my life. I would like to improve something regarding the Dhamma, I also would like to do a little more advanced meditation. And I would like to have more time for devotion and to listen more to the teachers.

The Main Thing is that There is No Stress Anymore

Mrs. Maria Dissanayaka

Presentation

Mrs. M.D. is a 52 year old, divorced woman who lives alone with four dogs and a cat in a small town in the mountains of the Uva Province. From her bungalow there is a marvellous view of parts of the town below and all around there are green mountainsides, nearby and far away. Her father is a Catholic, her mother a Buddhist, but she was mainly influenced by her father's family and raised as a Catholic. She was sent to Catholic English-speaking schools and educated by Catholic nuns. "But in my heart and in my mind I was always a Buddhist," she says, " I could never accept killing animals." Her marriage to a Muslim man was never successful. It lasted 13 years. There were no children. "I don't believe in horoscopes, but my horoscope said that I would have a life like this," she says.

Her father was a businessman who had his own company in Colombo, and she classifies her family of birth as upper middle class. Herself she will not classify, but to my observation her house and her lifestyle are middle class. English is her better language.

She was educated as a teacher of Western music and she teaches singing at the international school of the town. She has this dream of building a meditation hall, a library, and a small *kuti* (meditation hut) for herself on a small piece of land on the slopes behind her house. The interview took place in her home.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

Even as a child I did a lot of thinking. I was not interested in dressing up like other girls, but thought about the universe and things like that. I went through a lot of pressure at school: the Catholic nuns pressed me to go to church and to do this and that. I did not like that. I have always had an independent mind, and I did not like being bullied. I suppose I was a stubborn child. It was sort of an inner revolt. Even then I saw the difference between Buddhism and Catholicism. I saw that Buddhist people were more calm. I could see that even as a child. After finishing school, my parents wanted me to do science or law, but I wanted to do music.

When my marriage was breaking up, I started to read books from the Buddhist Publication Society. Books on Buddhism and meditation. What attracted me was the serenity, the simplicity, the emphasis on the experience of truth, the whole mind-culture. Buddhism has to do with the mind. And no segregation. Buddhism does not separate things, it doesn't perceive in black and white, but stresses that all is one. That is one of the most beautiful things about Buddhism. I discovered that I could find a solution to everything in Buddhism. It was a gradual process. But I felt very relaxed. What attracted me was also that there was no stress-factor in meditation.

Turning to Buddhism and meditation also had to do with my independent mind. Having confidence in my mind was strengthened through meditation. It was in meditation that I came across the value of character building. If you look at a Buddha statue, you see a lot of character, but no ego.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

There was this monk – I have forgotten his name – he was my first teacher. Every Poya day he gave classes in the hall close to an old temple. In his teaching he concentrated first on *mettā*, then breathing. The Theravadin way, I would say. It was not Vipassana. His teaching was in Sinhala.

Later, in 1982–83, I went to one of Sister Khema’s 10-day retreats in Lewella. That might have been Vipassana. It was deeper meditation. That course was in English.

Please tell me how you meditate

Now I meditate very little. I don’t practise daily, and I don’t sit. But I try to be aware. The main thing is that there is no stress any more. And, believe me, I know what stress is. I used to have a home in a perfect shape, but I killed myself by that – now that is all gone. My home now is reasonably clean and tidy, and that is acceptable to me. I do it now at my convenience. But I used to be a perfectionist. Also, some people sit for hours and do not meditate at all. I’d rather sit little, but be aware about the things I do. When I sit, I sometimes concentrate on breathing. But mostly there are many thoughts. The mind wanders anywhere. When I become aware of that, I try to trace back to how it all started. That is interesting. Also emotions – I take anything that comes. It all depends on what hits my mind. I do welcome new thoughts as they suddenly come. When thoughts and emotions come uninvited, I watch them and see how futile they are.

I have lots of books from the Buddhist Publication Society, but now I have only a little time to read. What little I read, I want to absorb.

Please tell me why you meditate

I have had enough of this world (she laughs). If there is a Nibbana, I want to reach it. My main aim in this life is to become a stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*). I can’t remember if Sister Khema taught about that or whether that is part of traditional Buddhism. I do experience immediate benefits from meditating all the time. I am happy, there is no stress factor. I feel strong enough to overcome any problem. I accept people and I feel more kindness to them. Long-term benefits? Oh, yes, I would have been a wreck if I were still a Catholic. I don’t expect anything now.

It is very difficult to explain which experiences are a sign of progress, but suddenly something strikes you, for instance knowing how connected everything is.

Whether the path of meditation is subdivided into stages? For convenience you say that, but it is a stream, there are no set breaks. The usual stages are: (1) when you feel sure that the Buddha and the Dhamma exist, (2) when your “I” is reduced – it does not disappear, but it is reduced, (3) when you stop going to gods – you don’t need that anymore, and (4) ... I have forgotten.

I do think that more people should meditate because meditation helps. It is not a religion, it is a mental process. People from all religions can do it. Meditating leads to liberation, yes, it is difficult to explain in words what that is. You have your experiences with meditation to tell you what liberation means. Perfect peace, maybe.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life.

Meditation has affected my domestic life for the better. It is not easy for a woman to live alone, you know. In this country, women are either married or they are nuns. People sometimes find it difficult to associate with me because I am different. I would like to meditate more, but I am lazy.

Meditation does not affect my professional life in any negative way.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

Meditation has very much changed my religious beliefs. I turned from being a Catholic into being a Buddhist. It has also greatly changed my religious practices – I used to go to church. I don’t anymore.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

I have considered renouncing lay life, but I have not considered becoming a nun. The attitude to nuns is very narrow in this country. But renouncing and going into meditation as a lay person, that would be a much easier life.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

I am very happy, indeed, with my life now. I do have the fear and the uncertainty about getting old, but meditation helps. I want to improve my life along the same path.

***The Tighter You Hold On,
The Worse You Feel***

Mrs. Violet

Presentation

Mrs. Violet is a married woman of 64 with a friendly, calm, and confident appearance. She lives with her husband (69) in a nice little bungalow above the lake in Kandy. Mrs. Violet was English educated at the Mahamaya School in Kandy, a private Buddhist school for girls. Then English was the teaching medium. However, she thinks Sinhala is her better language. Later she became an English-trained teacher at that same school and ended up as the principal of the primary girls' school, Mahamaya. She says that she comes from neither village nor urban background, because she lived in a hostel in Kandy while schooling. She had five brothers and no sisters. She retired when she was 50. From 50 to 60 she ran a little Montessori school at her home.

Her husband comes from a village background. He was a clerk in the Agriculture Department and ended up at the Commission of Agrarian Services. She calls their economic state middle class.

Mrs. Violet does a lot of social service. Her husband does that, too. She is mostly into caring for the sick, the aged, female prisoners, and orphans. Mrs. Violet explains: "The Buddha has taught – 'If you want to pay respect to me, then look after the sick. That is the best offering you can give.' Normally people bring food when they go to the hospital. They bring food as *dāna*, like bringing food to the temple. When I come to the hospital, I start by saying: 'I didn't bring you food, but I brought some food for your thoughts.' Then the patients smile and say: 'That is good. That is the only food we don't get here.'"

The couple has two children; both are married. Their son is 39, and lives with his family in England. Their daughter is 35. She lives with her family in a house close by. This year she is in Japan on a scholarship, alone. They keep in touch via e-mail. Mrs. Violet, as a grandmother, keeps an eye on the children.

The interview took place at her home. During the latter part of the interview, the husband was present. He participated in our vivid conversation once in a while with comments and viewpoints.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

As a child I was interested in religion. I was not interested in getting married; I wanted to become a nun. When I was 20 and had finished school, I sent an application to Sister Sudharma, the head nun of Biyagama, close to Colombo. She replied that permission from my parents was needed. However, my parents would not give me permission. My mother's brother then suggested that the family should get together and arrange for me to be married. That's how I found my husband. Our marriage was arranged. I was 21, he was 25 when we got married. It has been a good marriage. From when I was 20 until I was 49, I always listened to the radio Dhamma talks twice a week.

It was my principal at school who first told me about meditation and Sister Khema. We both sent in an application and went to her 14-day retreat in Kundasala. That was in 1981. She was a very good teacher, calm and kind. From 1981 until 1984 we went on one retreat every year.

There was no particular reason for me to turn to meditation. We were doing this for our own benefit. I guess I was just ready for it. There was this happy incident: I could concentrate, my principal could not, but we respected each other. We were full of respect for each other. We call that feeling *muditā* – when you are able to enjoy another person's happiness. This is a Buddhist feature, but not very common. It is a parents' feeling. It is not very usual in other relationships.

I think that what attracted me in meditation were three things: (1) In my innermost feeling I want to be calm. (2) If someone got angry with me as a child, I could not sleep. My father, for instance, was the shouting type, mostly to my brothers, but also sometimes to me. I was very afflicted by that. I wanted to get rid of that. And (3) I was always very honest with myself, even as a schoolchild. I wanted to stay in touch with that honesty.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

Sister Khema was my first teacher. In her teaching she first did *mettā* (loving kindness), then concentration on breathing. She told me I had good kamma. Later some monk also gave a 17-day retreat in Kundasala. Six years ago this monk was of the opinion that I should get into robes. But how to combine being a mother and a grandmother with this religious thing? Instead we had a small *kuti* built where I can go for silence and be myself.

Sarath Senanayake is my teacher now. He is a lay person. He is the ex-director of education and knows Pali (the language in which the teachings of the Buddha were recorded). Every Thursday I go with a girlfriend to listen to him. There is no sitting meditation, only discussion and explanation of the suttas.

When I read for inspiration, I prefer to read about dependent origination – the main teaching of the Buddha.

Please tell me how and why you became a teacher of meditation

Yes, I teach meditation now, but I am not a regular teacher. Meditation is not a thing where you have to go somewhere, for instance to a meditation centre. It is a day-to-day thing. I once taught at Nilambe, 40–60 Canadians were there and Godwin was away.

I teach about the ego-sense. Ego is not in the body, ego is in the mind. The mind is automatic. If something arouses the mind, the mind gets aroused – that is cause and effect – and it subsides. And as you go on to realise that, you come to realise that there is no person there. That it is ever-changing and impermanent. As you come to understand impermanence, you go to different levels. This is a provoking idea to Westerners. When I taught the Canadians at Nilambe, the way they questioned was like a fight. They did not know how to curb their anger. We are trying to crystallise things. The more we try, the more we are affected. The tighter you hold on, the worse you feel. The more you realise about impermanence and egolessness, the freer you feel.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

I used to meditate every morning for half an hour, before going to work at school. I made it a point to calm down and start the day in a good frame of mind. Later I found out that sitting thing is the wrong meditation.

There are two ways of meditation: Samatha and Vipassana. Samatha (concentration) is what the monks teach. Vipassana (insight) is what the Buddha taught. It is a philosophy. You have to understand and see your mind. You cannot read about your mind. The Dhamma is not a thing to study. The Dhamma is about life itself. The Dhamma is not something outside you, the Dhamma is inside. What you call yourself is Dhamma. Vipassana is the Dhamma-way. Through Vipassana, I don't sit and meditate because now every moment of my life is meditation. So, there is no style for it. There is no posture.

Please tell me why you meditate

I firmly believe that if you improve the quality of your mind, you will achieve good results. And I believe that you are being reborn every single moment of your life. Every moment is a little life. Experiencing every day like that, is being free. Meditation is like an immunisation: when you meditate, you can exist anywhere, but you don't get yourself involved. Like because you have to eat, you eat.

I always had a strong belief in duty. Doing your duty is a good thing. Not demanding your rights, but doing your duties – that will give you your rights. Once you do your duties, your rights come automatically. You don't have to fight for them. I feel that this is living Dhamma. And this is what

Vipassana has done to me. Vipassana is knowing the mind through the mind – not through the five senses. The senses distort. Feelings don't count. That leads to "right seeing" (*sammā ditṭhi*), the first step of the Noble Eightfold Path. And then the other steps follow automatically.

To me talking and teaching is also meditation – it leads to right thinking and right speech. I used to think that I was a good Buddhist. Now I know that I am only learning to become a Buddhist – by living the Dhamma.

I am not worried about long-term benefits of meditating. That would be expectation, and expectations are no good. Experiencing happiness, being free, not being pulled down by anything – these I take as signs of progression along the path of meditation. However, clinging to the feeling of happiness is not the sort of happiness I am seeking.

Yes, I believe that the path is subdivided in stages. I know that what I experienced with Sister Khema was a stage. There I learned not to react, but to respond. And yes, I think more people should be meditating. Not only Samatha, but Vipassana. Some meditation can lead to the wrong attitude. When I did Samatha, it made my ego grow. Also, in Nilambe, I felt that being a teacher, people worship you. That is not good.

Yes, I believe there will be future lives, many future lives. But the chain of lives could be shortened by living the Dhamma in this life. What is being reborn, is the force of the mind – the karmic force. When the body is dead, the four elements leave the body, and the karmic force is being reborn.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

My domestic life has changed a lot. I used to hold grudges. I don't anymore. I'll tell you one situation when I really experienced how mindfulness in daily life gives a lot of strength – both in the body and in the mind. One year ago my husband fell and broke his leg in a most unfortunate way. An operation was necessary to make it right, but at the same time dangerous as my husband suffers from high blood pressure. A choice was necessary – it was the leg or the life. So, my husband asked my opinion about what to do. He himself wanted the operation, but I was the one who had to sign and agree. Usually, when people in this country are faced with situations like this, they go to some god and do Bodhi-puja in the temple or they make vows. I told my husband that I would think about it, and the next day I told him my idea about what to do: "In this country bulls are slaughtered to make beef curry. Let's buy one of those bulls and give it back to life."

So we did. I collected money from friends and family members, gave also a lot myself. In the end we had Rs.10,000, enough to buy one of those bulls. We did that on Wesak Day (the full moon day in May). By then the operation had been long done and it was successful. But my husband was confined to bed with a plastered leg for six months and it was a difficult time. Friends helped a lot and that was nice. But being calm inside helped me the most to get through all this. It gave me so much strength.

My husband changed through this experience. He used to eat meat and I had to prepare two kinds of food, as I am strictly vegetarian. While he was bedridden, I did the shopping, and I never bought beef and he never asked for it. Now he can do the shopping again, but he never buys beef anymore. Now he just eats what I make for him. That is easy (she laughs).

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

Earlier I believed that the Buddha was out there, but passed away. Now I know that it was the body that passed away and the Buddha is still here. That is the change that has come about through Vipassana. Buddha to me is not the body or a statue. Buddha is the wisdom developed in the mind. That wisdom is Dhamma to me. And when I act according to that Dhamma, it is Sangha to me. The Triple Gem, in other words, is in me.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

Yes, I did consider becoming a nun when I was still a young girl, as I told you, but now I have changed my mind. But I do wear white.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something that you want to improve in your life?

I am happy with my life. I don't want to improve anything. I have everything I want.

Enlightenment is a Sudden Explosion

Mrs. Theodora Munasinghe

Presentation

Mrs. T.M. is a 74-year old retired medical doctor who lives in a suburb of Colombo. She is short-haired and talks easily. She is a widow; her husband, who was an accountant and one of the directors of Lake House Newspapers, died in 1978. The couple had three sons. One lives in Fiji, another in Colombo. Both are married. A third son, the youngest, died in a motorcycle accident in the U.S.A. in 1991. Mrs. T.M. comes from an urban background. Her grandfather was the biggest jeweller in Colombo who counted even Queen Victoria among his customers, but her father wasted all her grandfather's wealth. Her background is definitely upper class, she says. She was educated in English-speaking schools and English is her better language.

When her husband was still alive, the family lived in a mansion on the land side of Galle Road. The house she now lives in is sort of an island in a small but lush garden concealed behind walls in between screaming traders, shops, and the ever ongoing traffic hell of Galle Road. The house is dark and the sitting room is stuffed with antique furniture. Two couches covered with sheets to protect against the dust, chairs, tables, solid cupboards, and things everywhere, big, dark paintings on the walls, and a grand piano covered in photographs. "My husband's collection," she explains.

Mrs. T.M. is eager to show me her shrine room, which is an astonishing gallery of mystics and spiritual masters – Sai Baba, Jesus, a crucifix, the photo of Lord Buddha from Bodhgaya, pictures of Theosophical masters, Bhagwan Rajneesh, Colonel Olcott with Madame Blavatsky, Krishnamurti, Vimala Thakar, and photographs of her husband and deceased son. There are, however, no pictures of the gods.

Mrs. T.M., as a retired medical doctor, is a voluntary medical officer for the Dehiwala Catholic Church Medical Clinic and also for the Mallikarama Temple whose medical team travels to Homagama and Matara on a regular basis. The interview takes place in her home.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

I was brought up as a Buddhist and my mother exposed us children to Buddhist sermons every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. But that was a useless business – listening to these repetitive and boring sermons every weekend for many years caused my brain to atrophy. The monks never spoke of meditation, and my mother did not know the meaning of meditation. Then I came upon Krishnamurti's books many years ago. I always thought that there must be something different from this mundane world. I wanted to learn meditation. But my husband was very much against everything concerning the spiritual life and meditation. Then, in 1977, I organised a holiday for my husband and went with my sister on a 10-day retreat in Kandy given by Ven. Akasa, an American monk. I liked the course very much, but my husband got very angry. That is when I started to meditate, but I could not do it steadily then. Only after my son died in 1991 did I become a steady meditator.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

Well, I learned it from Ven. Akasa. It was not difficult, but I got this funny reaction in my brain when I meditated, like topspinning. I even have it now. The teachers have no explanation. After my husband

died, I was free to pursue my spiritual interests and I made full use of my freedom. I went on many retreats and courses: there was Goenka, and Joseph Goldstein in Nilambe, and Jack Kornfield, and also Reverend Kasyapa of Rockhill Hermitage, Gampola, and Vimala Thakar when she was in Lewella.

When the Theosophical Society in 1975 had its hundredth anniversary in Madras, India, I went there. There were Theosophists from all countries, and a person from each country was asked to make a speech. I was the only one from Sri Lanka and so I was asked to speak on behalf of my country. But I was completely unprepared. I felt shy, empty, and nervous. Then I went into a liberal church in Adyar and prayed: "God, I don't know what to say!" All of a sudden I got some inspiration and I made a much complimented speech on the significance of Colonel Olcott for Buddhism in Sri Lanka, especially regarding the rise of Buddhist schools.

In 1979 I went to Bodhgaya in India and on my return trip I met Krishnamurti in Adyar where I was able to pay personal homage to him. I also went to Poona to Rajneesh's ashram and spent seven days there. I got Sannyasa. I didn't like the Goenka course because it was not my line of meditation. I was not even allowed to take notes, and I always take notes. Goenka likes his food and has a healthy appetite. But the Bhagwan's teaching was simple and convincing. Bhagwan Rajneesh said: "Don't be frustrated about the flow of your thoughts," and he talked about the three p's: patience, persistence, perseverance as the only three essentials for meditation. There is of course all this talk about sex in connection with the Bhagwan, but there is nothing wrong with sex. Sex is a natural biological urge like thirst, desire for food, and defecating. It is only through meditation that we can transcend sex. Furthermore, his books are beautiful. Meditate first, morality comes later – Krishnamurti says. This is different from the traditional teaching where they say that you need a basis of morality before turning to meditation.

So, you see, I went on many meditation retreats. Now I have stopped. Lao Tzu says you need not go outside your own room to seek the godhead within you.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

I meditate four hours daily. At night, I usually wake up at 2 o'clock, then I meditate for two hours in my bedroom. In the evening from 7 to 9 pm I meditate in my shrine room. All sitting meditation. I sometimes try lying meditation, but I don't do walking or standing meditation. I prefer to meditate alone. I never concentrate on breathing. I just sit and watch my thoughts. Thoughts have their own independent existence. They have their own momentum and you have absolutely no control of their movement. Thoughts come and go. When you go on watching them, the thoughts stop on their own. Rajneesh says that thoughts are the one and only barrier to truth.

I read a lot. Ultimately I prefer Krishnamurti and the Bhagwan and Vimala Thakar. But Krishnamurti gets lost in words. Rajneesh's books are fascinating par excellence.

Please tell my why you meditate

I feel there is a purpose with our lives. We are all living corpses unless we meditate and seek the divinity within us. That is what Christ meant when he said: "The deaf shall hear, the blind shall see, the dead shall arise." This is the only planet where there are human beings with a highly developed consciousness. I would like to cross over to another dimension and see what is behind the veil of thoughts. I am not ambitious, though, in my meditation and I have no experiences. There are so many fringe benefits when you meditate. You are not depressed, you can take things as they come and I believe that there are long-term benefits. There is no reversal once you have started the path. I don't think that the path is subdivided into stages. I think Enlightenment is a sudden explosion.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

Meditation is my spiritual life. Meditation is my way of life – the only way out. The most tragic thing about humanity is how it ignores the most essential. No wonder Lord Buddha said: "Human stupidity is boundless. All worldlings are mad."

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

No, I think it is stupid. I believe that all the challenges in daily life are love letters from God. You have to find truth amidst the challenges. Victory is to be found amidst the battlefield of challenges.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

I am blessing this existence. I am thankful for this human birth which is very rare. But there must be something more. I have everything, but life is incomplete unless I realise my oneness with the universe. I sometimes feel like a blind turtle in the deep ocean trying to creep through a solitary rubber ring. I want to improve my meditation. That is the only thing I want to improve. It is only with human birth that we can realise the godhead within us.

Real Meditation Is A 24-Hour Job

Mrs. Chandrika

Presentation

Mrs. Chandrika is a slim, well-dressed, short-haired, and modern looking woman of 70. Three years ago her husband died. She has one son, 31 years old.

She has an urban background, grew up in Colombo, and was English educated. Her father was a postmaster in Colombo. She married a dental surgeon, and she herself became a teacher at an agricultural college. She lives in Colombo and describes herself as middle class.

The interview takes place at Goenka's meditation centre, Dhamma Kuta Vipassana Meditation Centre, situated in Hindagala on a steep hillside about 10 miles outside Kandy.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

My mother was a meditator, I have a Buddhist background. In 1980 – I was 51 years then – I was looking for a teacher of meditation. Then I read somewhere that Goenka was to arrive in Sri Lanka for the first time to give a 10-day course in Colombo. I followed that course and after that there was no turning back. In the following years I followed three or four courses with Goenka, as well as one in India and one in Britain.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

Goenka was and is my teacher, but also Mr. and Mrs. Ratwatte. To learn to meditate one must go to a meditation centre and follow intensive training. That is necessary. Meditation is not easy, it is hard work. But after the first course I already felt very happy. All Goenka's students are asked to practise at least two hours of meditation every day, one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. I have done so for 19 years now.

Please tell me how and why you became a teacher of meditation

I am now an assistant teacher of meditation at courses like this. Today after lunch this very advanced course is starting. There will be six assistant teachers following that course, four women and two men. Teachings are based on Goenka's tapes. I also sometimes use the suttas, the discourses of the Buddha. The suttas are much more meaningful once you have meditated.

Teachings and courses are open to anybody, but you have to fill in an application form and answer some questions before you are admitted. For instance, you have to promise to abstain from drugs, tobacco, and alcohol two weeks before a course.

At this advanced course there will be eight women and eight men. All Goenka's instructions are there on tapes. Our courses are scientifically organised – there is a completely structured programme with precise instructions for every day. And they are in English. We have now translated the beginners' course

into Sinhala. Three times a year we offer a beginners' course in Sinhala now, usually over the holidays. They have had a very good response. More and more young people come – happily.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

I practise meditation daily, one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening, at fixed hours. In the mornings I get out of bed, drink a glass of water, and then meditate. I have a shrine room in my home. This is where I meditate. I prefer to meditate in a group, like here for instance. There are very good vibrations. At home, there are often distractions. I do only sitting meditation, no standing, walking, or lying meditation. But real meditation is a 24-hour job!

When thoughts or emotions come, I just watch them, how they come and go. In that way you learn to know your mind. That is Goenka's technique: learning to watch emotions and bodily sensations. Learning to respond, but not react.

Please tell me why you meditate

The immediate benefit of meditation is that your relations with others improve. Meditation makes you feel like helping other people. You discover that you can live in harmony with others. Life gets more peaceful, as doing good things becomes a habit. Generosity becomes a habit, abiding by the five precepts every day becomes a habit. Along with the practice, you get rid of your judgmental mind and your mind becomes more balanced. If more people meditated, there would be no war. War starts in the mind.

I certainly believe that one becomes a better human being by meditating. By purifying oneself and liberating oneself. It is achievable and it can be done. I have met people who have liberated themselves. Liberation to me is not having to go through all this suffering. I feel that I go in the correct direction.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life.

When you meditate, your domestic life becomes a lot easier. My husband died three years ago, but relations with my son have improved. Relations with my brothers and sisters have also improved. There are not so many arguments any more.

As for my professional life, I wish I had started meditation earlier. I only started seriously after I had retired. I did not realise what a valuable gem I was missing. Now I realise that it is the person that matters, not their religion, country, or race.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

My religious beliefs have been strengthened through meditation. As to religious practices, I perhaps did more ritual when I was younger. On Poya days I take the eight precepts. I used to go to the temple on Poya days, but if one has to follow the temple's programme on those days, one can't meditate.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

Yes, long ago I considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun. But my husband did not like the idea. And now it is too late. Besides, as a lay woman I feel I can do good.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

I am happy with my life now. What I want is to grow in the Dhamma.

Suffering Is Born Out Of Our Longing For Things To Be Perfect

Mrs. Srimathie Ratnakara

Presentation

Mrs. Srimathie is a bright and brilliant woman of 65 years with a winning, strong, and beautiful smile. She is an eye-catcher. She has that quality of movement and speech that makes her noticed wherever she appears.

She is married and has four children aged between 30 and 48. She married when she was only 16 and had her first son at 17. Three of her children are married; one lives abroad. One married daughter, son-in-law, and their two children live in the same house, as does her unmarried son.

Mrs. Srimathie was English educated in Catholic schools from kindergarten. Her father was a medical doctor and a vaccinator which meant that the family was transferred every two or three years. She describes both her family of orientation and her own family as middle class.

Her husband, Mr. Ratnakara, 73-years old and a retired lecturer at the teachers' training college in Peradeniya, was present at the beginning of my visit when discussion was general, but extremely vivid about family life in Sri Lanka and Denmark and differences in the division of labour between the sexes in the two countries. Mr. R. left for his little meditation *kuti* when the interview with his wife was to begin. But before he left, he conveyed to me that he was also a meditator. Upon my asking who had been *his* teachers of meditation, he answered: "The deities were my teachers. The deities revealed themselves to me and summoned me to establish a society. And the deities transmitted the true Dhamma to me by providing mental contact with gurus in the Himalaya, disciples of the Buddha."

Mr. and Mrs. Ratnakara are the founders and leaders of the Sadaham Mithuru Samuluwa (SMS) – Society of the Friends of the Dhamma – and have been so since its very beginning. This year the couple went to the United States and Canada where they guided retreats and met with groups, of which some members possessed similar powers of connecting to deities. The interview took place in their home in a village outside Kandy.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

How I got into meditation is a long story. My husband and I often played games in the evening when the children had gone to bed. This is long ago when the children were still very small. We played spiritualistic games, you know, we would hold a plate of glass with a small wineglass between us and ask questions to the spirits of dead persons. On the four sides of the mirror was the alphabet and in the corners were four possible answers: yes, no, goddess, and god. When there was contact with a spirit, the glass would move all of itself on the plate and point to an answer to our questions. We also used to play that game with friends.

Then, in 1957, ten years after we had been married, for three evenings in a row a certain goddess appeared. It was the same goddess every evening. Her name is Una. Then suddenly it was no game anymore, but very serious. Later more goddesses appeared, but no gods.

Una summoned us to establish a society and teach the genuine Buddhadhamma. We did so. There were fifteen members of the Society in the beginning. We travelled around to find a suitable place to build a centre for our society to meet. That is how Nilambe came into being and there we gathered and had our camps in the beginning. But later, when Godwin became the permanent teacher in Nilambe and the place became very popular with foreigners, we established another centre for our society in the jungle outside Gampaha. Now the Society has 350 members, people of all strands of life, although most are urban middle class. There are quite a few families from the Colombo area. They, too, come to our camps.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

My husband was my teacher. He taught me that you have to go through meditation to understand the Buddhadhamma. And the true Dhamma was communicated to us through the deities. The deities are integrated in our understanding of meditation. It is only by meditating that the deities can be really helpful. Meditation is the key to the powers of the deities. And it is also only through meditation that the real meaning of Buddhist stories, rites, and rituals can be understood. We don't need monks for that.

By meditating you learn to understand the mind and how the mind works. That is called Vipassana, and that is what the Buddha taught. We have to accept that our mind is such that we want things to be perfect. Suffering is born out of our longing for things to be perfect.

Please tell me how and why you became a teacher of meditation

I am only a teacher when we have our camps, usually four times a year, every school vacation. Then all the families come together at our centre. My husband is much more of a teacher of meditation than I am. My youngest son also teaches meditation now. In a way I have 350 students, all members of our society. I do a lot of counselling on family life and how to be a good citizen. We have quite a lot of younger families as members, and young families have a lot of questions about bringing up children, nutrition, hygiene, health, and economy. I do counselling on all that. I have also established a ladies' society within the Society because women have specific problems and in the ladies' group we discuss them.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

I do not practise sitting meditation daily; actually I don't sit anymore at all. I have practised regular meditation with concentration on breathing for 15 years, now I have no need to do that anymore. It is important to learn meditation the right way and practise it with great patience, but I am past that stage now. Now it is better to practise mindfulness in daily activities. If you do Vipassana clearly, you see your life. You see the Dhamma through your daily life. You have to see it for what it is, not getting caught in frustration, but see it as it really is. Daily life is a most significant source of insight – it works both ways: your daily life improves through meditation, and your meditation improves by being mindful in your daily life activities.

Please tell me why you meditate – what are the benefits?

The goal is to attain this ability to see things as they really are, to see and understand others' minds, too. There is this test: if you don't feel agony, frustration, or anger with that which is, then you have done something right. The long-term benefit is of course to become an Arahant. If you reach that, there will not be another birth. Meditation is the path. I believe the path is subdivided into stages, and you will know when you are improving. You become a better human being when meditating because you use your intellectual power better. If more people meditated, the world would be a happier place, there would be no war, no drugs. And I believe that meditation leads to liberation – being free from frustration, feeling happy. I have not come to that point myself yet.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic life

Family life improves when you meditate. Even the dog and the cat get a better life when people meditate. The animals feel that there is Right Understanding.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

My religious practices have changed through meditation. I go to the temple less often. I do practise daily observances of religion, I have a domestic shrine and I light the oil lamp, but I feel more relaxed about it. Meditation has made me less nervous about all that, I feel no anguish if the oil lamp is not lit some days. Also my beliefs have changed. I have not rejected almsgiving, taking precepts, and all that, but these things only acquire the right meaning through meditation.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

No. I don't want that. I think that as a lay woman I have more opportunity to understand life than as a nun. And I find it easy to understand the Dhamma through lay life.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

Yes, I am happy with my life. I want to improve my ability to understand more and more through my daily life. I think I have learned something, but I still have some way to go.

Enlightenment Through Lay Life

Mrs. Nandani Jayamaha

Presentation

Mrs. N.J. is a young looking, slim woman of 43 with a strong and independent appearance. She lives alone in an annex to a bungalow surrounded by a nice garden in a village outside Kandy. She married when she was 24; it was a "love-marriage," i.e. not arranged by the parents. The marriage lasted for ten years; it was not very happy. When things started to go wrong in the marriage, her family did not want to get involved. She had to deal with the problems all by herself. Since 1990 she has been divorced. There are no children.

Mrs. N.J. was born and raised in a village outside Colombo, educated both in Sinhala and English, but she says that English is her better language. Her father died when she was 16; he was a lecturer at a teachers' training college. Her mother works as a designer in textiles. Both father and mother were English educated.

Mrs. N.J. works as an assistant manager in a financial institute in Kandy and considers herself middle class. The interview took place in her home.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

When I was about 30, I had to face up to my problems in my marriage. Since childhood I have been taught that my religion, Buddhism, has an answer for each and every existential problem. So, I started to look for an answer to my problems in Buddhism. I first tried to do the traditional things, going to the temple, etc., but I didn't get what I was looking for. I also went to some friends' house to meditate the old way, but it did not really give a solution to my problems. I tried everything, I had my horoscope read, I even went to church and prayed. Nothing worked. Then I decided that I had to go away. I left home with only a bag containing some clothes and found a job in Kandy. In Kandy I met Godwin. That was in 1990 and I was 34. I went to his meditation class in Kandy on Tuesdays, and that was different. That brought a change in my life because he teaches you to look into your own mind right from the beginning. After two Tuesdays I had peace in my mind and after six months I was happy. But, I was still a married woman and, you know, Sinhalese marriages ... So I thought that I would give it another chance. I wrote to my husband and explained that I was now in Kandy and that he could come up here and find a job. He never answered.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

Godwin was my teacher in Kandy, and on Poya days I used to go to Nilambe with a girlfriend. I also organised camps there. In January 1991 we had a seven-day camp at Nilambe. We were a crowd. We all slept in the big meditation hall. The foreigners had to gather for meditation in the small meditation hall whenever we were there. At that time there were not so many foreigners in Nilambe. Now there are many foreigners and there is no room anymore for our camps so we have moved to another place, in the jungle near Gampaha.

Godwin is also patron of our society, so one day he suggested that I should become a member. That was in 1990, and then it was different from now. Then only members could participate in events and there

was a tryout-time of three months to become a member. In that period one had to go to the lectures every first Sunday in the month and camps three days or longer. Now the Society is open to anyone. In April, August, and December the Society organises get-together camps. Then we have a programme with sermons twice a day, we do yoga and relaxation, we have discussions on nutrition and family life, and there are short sessions (half an hour) of silence and meditation two times every morning and evening. The members of the Society have the same interests. That keeps us together. We believe in Enlightenment through lay life. Our teachers teach us how to lead that lay life.

The teachers of our society connect to gods or deities. To some people this is not Buddhism. They are a different kind of Buddhists. There is no worship in Buddhism, the Buddha said, but tradition in Sri Lanka has it different. I believe that god Kataragama exists, but I will not go to him and ask him for this and that. The deities that our teachers connect to are different. Deities are on a higher level of intelligence, they exist on a higher level.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

Meditation, mindfulness in daily activities, has now become a way of life. I feel that this is always going to be my life. What do I do when I get upset and angry? I do three things: first I do nothing, I just wait. It is difficult, but I wait. Next I concentrate on my mind and think: OK, this is an emotion, don't get caught in it. And then, thirdly, I try to think: tomorrow all is different.

When I read, I prefer to read what Lord Buddha has taught, but those texts are in Pali and I am not satisfied with the translations. I would like to learn Pali. N.N., who is also a member of the Society, knows Pali. And Vimala Thakar has written some very good books that I like to read.

Please tell me why you meditate – what are the benefits?

There are great immediate benefits from meditation. That is so because problems are always in the mind. Meditation helps to find the correct solution to any problem. Anyone who takes to serious meditation follows the five precepts. That, too, changes your attitude to life. I don't know about long-term benefits. To me it is all in the immediate benefits. Feeling freer, happier, more self-confident, knowing that one can solve problems as they come along, beginning to say things the correct way – these to me are all signs of progress in meditation. I don't know if the path of meditation is subdivided into stages; that is what they say in the books. Of course one important step is to choose this path. I definitely believe that one becomes a better human being by meditating, because one understands so much more. It is like a lifelong education. I do think that more people should meditate, life would be so much easier to live. Now there is so often a lack of understanding. I believe that meditation leads to liberation. Liberation to me is knowing that whatever comes, I will be able to take it without emotion, without suffering. I am so happy now, owning nothing. I feel so free. When I was married, I had everything – material comfort, chairs, tables, linen, kitchen utensils, etc., but I was unhappy. Now I own nothing and I feel happy and free. Happiness is also an emotion, but this happiness is another kind of happiness. This happiness will not change.

Yes, I believe that there will be future lives. We have so much unfinished business in us. So, when the body is gone, we will go on somewhere.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

Meditation helps your domestic life, it gives direction to your daily life. You are not caught up in emotions. As for my professional life, it is a difficult thing. Everybody at work is motivated by power and greed. But when you understand why they are doing what they are doing, you can deal with it without getting caught up in it. Yes, I think that you can do a better job, you can work better if you avoid being caught up in this power game.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

Meditation has changed my beliefs because earlier I thought that animals were lower than us and gods were higher. Now that is different. I am differently related to ants and other animals – they are all part of a whole. Trees, too, when trees are being cut down, I feel it as if it were happening to me.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

No, I don't consider renouncing lay life and becoming a nun. I used to have dreams, recurrent dreams at night about renouncing everything, but the place was lonely, lonely, lonely – so, I'll never become a nun.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

Yes, I am contented with my life now. There is nothing that I desire. I used to be a fighter, now I am just contented. But there is definitely something that I want to improve – the quality of myself, becoming better at observing myself. But that will come automatically if I continue along this path.

In the Present Situation I can Proceed

Mrs. Sriya Gunawardene

Presentation

Mrs. S.G. is a small, elderly woman, 69 years old, with very friendly, smiling eyes and a warm welcoming appearance. We meet at the Spiritual Centre near Gampaha where a group of women, all members of the Society, has gathered with the main purpose of making ayurvedic medicine according to recipes that were handed down from the deities to Mrs. Ratnakara while she was in deep meditation.

Mrs. S.G. is a widow. Her husband, who was a clerk at an education office, died five years ago. She married when she was 24, and the couple had three sons, now 40, 35, and 33 years old. They are all married. The eldest son lives in Australia.

She was born in Matara in the South where her father was a public notary. She was educated in both Sinhala and English and became an English trained teacher. She taught for 30 years at 15 different primary schools. She explains that she wanted to move around and asked to be transferred often. In 1983 she retired and since then she has not used her English much. Since her husband died, she has lived in a one-room rented annex. She considers herself middle class, but now after her pension and widow state, she thinks she is lower middle class.

The interview takes place at the Spiritual Centre of the Society of the Friends of the Dhamma. When we are finished, she tells me that she was very happy with my questions. "These were very nice questions for me. They made me think of my situation and my own thoughts."

Please tell me how you got into meditation

I was born a Buddhist, and my parents were religious, they observed the five precepts. From birth I had a leaning towards religion. As a child I learned all kinds of good qualities and good manners, like being friendly, smiling and helping people. I also learned that it was good manners to entertain foreigners. But good qualities are not enough. One must meditate. There was no particular reason for me to turn to meditation – only we become old and sick and we suffer. We want to end this – and we believe in rebirth.

Eight years ago I met Mrs. Ratnakara. She came to our school to teach religion and hold spiritual seminars. I became a member of the Society. After 1993 I took to serious meditation; then all the children had married and my husband had died. The Society has local groups in many places that meet frequently. The Gampaha group and the Kandy group are big groups. In Badulla, Kegalle, and other places there are small local groups of the Society.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

Mr. Ratnakara was my teacher after I joined the Society. Before that I just went to the temple and observed the precepts. Here at the Gampaha centre we learn to do our own things and to live a simple life and to help others. This kind of meditation is very simple; we learn to control our sensual pleasures and to follow the Middle Path. I don't find meditation difficult.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

I practise meditation daily. As soon as I get up, I meditate – even today when we had to get up so early, I rose about midnight to meditate. I also do some yoga exercises. But normally, I get up around 4.30 in the morning, and I do some yoga, then I worship Lord Buddha, and finally I meditate about 45 minutes, altogether about one hour. After morning meditation I do my domestic work, only thinking of what I do at that moment – that is also meditation. Whatever I do, I do with concentration. Also in the evening I meditate, one hour at least, and I think of a religious topic, for instance how to get rid of egoism, and about the mind-body relation. The whole thing is done by the mind.

I also do walking, standing, and lying meditation. When I come to the spiritual centre, I like to meditate in a group. Otherwise I prefer to meditate alone, then I do not get distracted.

I start with concentrating on breathing, then thoughts come, then I think of them as only thoughts. There are two kinds of feelings – good feelings, they are OK, they lead to Nibbana – and bad feelings, from the past for instance. Those feelings don't build you up, so when they come, I go back to breathing.

When I read, I prefer to read the religious talks of Mr. Ratnakara. They have all been gathered into a book.

Please tell me why you meditate – what are the benefits?

When I meditate, I experience some immediate benefits. I don't get angry anymore – even when somebody scolds me – and I am not worried. Earlier, I had a lot of worries, now I think first and find a solution to the problem. The long-term benefit from meditating is attaining Nibbana in this life itself.

I believe that the path of meditation is subdivided into stages. There are four stages. The first is Sotapatti (entering the stream), second is Sakagami (once-returner), third is Anagami (non-returner), and fourth is Arahant (enlightenment, Nibbana). When a person enters a stage, there are some internal changes in that person, only the person herself realises that. Once you enter the first stage, you are a stream-enterer and you will definitely become an Arahant, within at the most seven births. This is ordinary Buddhism.

Yes, I think that one becomes a better human being by meditating. It is better to become a good person with kind manners, so more people should be meditating. Liberation to me is final liberation from Samsara and then, afterwards, there will be the intention to help others also to reach that stage.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

I believe that practising meditation affects my domestic life in a positive way.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

Practising meditation has changed my religious beliefs and practices. Now I don't go to the temple as much as in the old days when I thought that giving *dāna* to the monks was good. Now I think that helping and giving *dāna* to everyone is good.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

In those days when I had many difficulties, I did consider renouncing lay life and becoming a nun. But now I think that leading a life like this is better than living as a nun. Nuns and monks are confined to the temple. But I can go anywhere, make my own food, have money, and even spend it.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

I am happy with my life now. When the children were small and I had a husband who was drinking, there was a lot of work and worries, troubles and suffering, and I was not so happy. But now I think that I'm alright. In the present situation I can proceed.

The Key to Freedom is to Know Oneself

Mrs. Kalyani Rajapaksha

Presentation

Mrs. K.R. is a 63-year old woman, married, with two children. Her daughter is 33 and works as an engineer in Australia. Her son, 31, is a medical doctor in Gampaha.

Mrs. K.R. grew up as the fifth of seven children in suburban Colombo where her father was a middle class businessman. She was English educated and went to Catholic schools but her family was Buddhist. She graduated as a teacher and entered University College. English is her better language, but she is also good at Sinhala. Her husband graduated from London University in mathematics, Pali, and English. He became a teacher, too, later the principal of a college, and finally director of education. She considers the family middle class. They live in Gampaha.

Mrs. K.R. is a member of the Society. The interview takes place at the Spiritual Centre of the Society outside Gampaha.

Her first name means "pleasing" and she starts out by telling me that she always wanted to be good and obedient – like her name.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

There was no particular reason for me to turn to meditation. My parents were not meditators, but they were religiously inclined. I was a good Buddhist, but it was only the stereotypical Buddhism that I knew. I used to observe the five precepts daily, from heredity almost. I am from a family of good people, very honest people. I often used to wonder, why do good people create so much tension when they get together? Now I know that it is because everybody is attached to his or her own ideas. That is why things go wrong.

My husband was a member of the Society long before I became a member. I also had some longstanding friends who were members. Earlier it was a very closed society. More Dhamma was given then at very regular sessions. In the 1970s I started to meditate and I became a member of the Society. Then I was about 35. Joining the Society has been one of the culminating points of my life. The Society showed me what was wrong, and it showed me that the key to freedom is to know yourself. I did not know that when things went wrong, it was my own fault. Usually difficulties come when you get married. I blamed my husband for all that went wrong. In the Society I learned that it is always your own reaction. My husband is a very good man. He is more bent on Dhamma and religion than I am. He was president of the Society for 15 years. Actually, I reformed myself – it was a reformation. Life is easy now and light.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

Mr. Ratnakara was my teacher. He gave most sermons. Mrs. Ratnakara is more like a personal example. I did not go to a meditation centre to learn to meditate. Sitting meditation is not very interesting for me. I cannot sit longer than 45 minutes. But for more than 25 years now I have practised being aware of all things that I do. Being aware of what I am doing is what I practise. This I developed mainly after I retired. Relaxed living is necessary. That gives happiness. And relaxed living is actually possible after retirement.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

Meditation for me is a way of life. It is not sitting in certain postures, but mindfulness. I do no sitting – I would rather climb a mountain and watch the sun rise than sit. I did some sitting meditation in the beginning. There is a special room in my house, a shrine room where I say my prayers, offer flowers, and where I used to sit in the beginning. I started with the breath, concentrating on the breath. Now I concentrate on thoughts, I try to be aware of my thoughts. If I feel pain, then I go into that pain. If I feel a cool breeze, then I go into enjoying that.

I do not read much. I only read yogini Vimala Thakar's books. She, I believe, must have reached a certain stage, and her books are very close to the teachings of Mr. Ratnakara. Some members of our society have gone to meet her at her place in India.

Please tell me why you meditate – what are the benefits?

When I meditate, I experience some immediate benefits: peace of mind and peaceful coexistence with others. I believe that if the short-term benefits accrue, the long-term benefits will follow. I don't worry about that. Peace of mind I take as a sign that I am proceeding along the path of meditation. Maybe that path is subdivided into stages, I don't know.

I believe that one becomes a better human being by meditating because it helps one to know oneself. I don't know if more people should be meditating, but more people should be made to realise the importance of knowing themselves – their assets and their drawbacks. That, I believe, is the blessing of human beings – that they are able to know themselves. I believe that meditation leads to liberation – liberating the mind from all its attachments.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

That is very important. The Society helped me as to how to keep a nice kitchen, how to manage the family, how to manage with money – it taught me how I could manage better. We could discuss problems, too. As for my professional life, meditation helped me a lot. I taught literature and that is also about life and man. After practising meditation I had more insight into life and man.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

This new experience of meditation and joining the Society brought no conflict in me because I did not know much about Buddhism before. Others in the Society who knew more about Buddhism would experience more conflicts with previous beliefs and practices. Ordinary Buddhism is based mainly on ritual whereas here we concentrate on practical life.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

No, I never considered that.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

Yes, now I am happy with my life. I consider myself blessed in many ways. I don't think I want to improve anything in my life. I am happy, and I am happy that I know that I am happy and light-hearted.

My Main Aim is to Find that there is No Self

Mrs. Sunetra Gunaratna

Presentation

Mrs. S.G. is a smiling, easy-going woman of 58. She is married, her husband is 62. They have one child, a son of 20, who lives at home. They live in a small but pretty bungalow in a suburb of Colombo.

She was English educated and was an English teacher until two years ago when she retired. Sinhala is her better language. Both she and her husband are from urban backgrounds. Her middle class father was a forest officer in Galle. Her husband, educated in political science, ended his teaching career as the principal of one of the most famous boys' colleges in the country, a school with 5000 students. She classifies her present family as middle class.

She explains that when her husband was a principal, they had a spacious house, cars, a driver, and four servants at their disposal. All that came with the job. Now they have only two bedrooms, one for their son and one for themselves. All her life she has been very busy. As the wife of a principal she has had many representative functions. The interview took place in her home.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

It is a long story. I was brought up with a Buddhist background. From when I was five until I was 19, I went to Sunday school every Sunday from 9 am to 12 noon. Later, friends introduced us to meditation. My husband and Godwin had been classmates since early childhood. And my husband and Mr. Ratnakara were friends and colleagues at the teachers' training college where they both first worked.

Some 20 years ago we both joined the Society, but I am now more interested in meditation than my husband. We were co-founders of Nilambe Meditation Centre, but that place became ever more a place for foreigners. We would often go there after Godwin became the permanent teacher, but we now prefer Gampaha. Godwin is still an ordinary member of our society. When we have our camps, he often comes and stays a day or two.

They are quite different teachers, Mr. Ratnakara and Godwin. Godwin is very lively and jovial in his teaching; he tells jokes, laughs, and invites discussion. Mr. Ratnakara is more of the serious type. He can go on for hours. Their presentations are different, but the Dhamma they teach is the same.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

Mr. Ratnakara was my teacher ... and also his brother. There were monthly meetings of the Society and his brother, who was a medium, always came to the camps. Camps were often convened during holidays and they were frequently held at our place for the first number of years. The hostel, where the boys stay during school times, was usually vacant during holidays, but the cooks were still there. That was perfect for camps. In the beginning I found meditation difficult. I could not concentrate well, but with the guidance of Mr. Ratnakara I managed better. Now I don't think it is difficult. I have been doing it for 20 years.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

I do sitting meditation, one hour in the morning. I get up at 5.30 am and cook breakfast and lunch for my son. This I consider a duty, not a burden. I usually meditate from 7 to 8 am. Once my son has left for school, I meditate in a corner of his bedroom. When I still worked, I did only evening meditation, from 6 to 7 pm. There was not time enough in the morning. I like meditating alone best, not in a group. I also do walking meditation, usually 30 minutes in the evening after sitting. And sometimes when I have a rest after lunch and before going to sleep at night, I do lying meditation. But what I most try to do is to be mindful. That meditation goes on through the whole day. I only sleep from midnight till 5.30. I don't like to sleep before midnight – what is the use of sleeping your time away? I read from 10 to 12 every night. I only read books on meditation, no novels. My sister lives in Britain, she sends me books.

When I meditate, I first concentrate on breathing. And after that, when I have the concentration, I concentrate on thoughts or some question that arises. I also go through my whole body, all my bones, and the four elements. And when my body is in pain, I meditate on that. The four elements are water, heat, air, and solidity. They are in the body, as they are in anything – trees, plants, animals. This the Buddha taught and that is good teaching to get a sense of impersonality.

When thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations come, I just watch them. I watch their coming and going, their rising and falling. Then I understand that they are not *my* thoughts – unless I cling to them – they just come and go. They are just like the body – impermanent.

Please tell me why you meditate

My main aim is to find that there is no self. I want to really understand that there is no self, I want to experience that through my body and mind. Yes, there are immediate benefits from meditation: I get an answer to questions I pose, and there is this calmness. I become steady and calm after meditation, I don't get excited, and I can face all kinds of situations with a steady mind.

Whether I believe in long-term benefits? In the future? How can I tell about the future? But I do think that it would be a sign of progress along the path of meditation when I really come to understand that there is no self. And that would be a stage, too, I think.

It would be good if more people meditated. They would find that all their problems would disappear and there would be peace in the country. Meditation is liberation – liberation from the self. The problem is that we cling to ourselves. If you cling to your self, Samsara goes on. As long as you cling to the self, there will be future lives. Clinging to one's self is what makes the process go on. That is the main thing in Buddhism, you find it in no other religion – the teaching of Anatta, no self.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

Practising meditation affects your domestic life a lot. You don't get angry – now I can feel anger coming and I can stop it. I have become a lot better at looking at things from other persons' point of view. Doing *Ñmettā'* (meditation on loving kindness) is very good for domestic life – learning to always forgive others. Meditation was also very helpful in my professional life. I was able to handle all kinds of problems with all kinds of people better. Meditation helps you to understand other people better.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

To me there is no difference between Vipassana and religious life, and there is also no difference between Vipassana and daily life. Vipassana *is* the Buddha's teaching. My religious life has improved, I think, with meditation. When I started meditating, I had this ambition of reaching something. Now I just let go. Buddhism has something to do with the mind. I still go to the temple, there is not much changed as to that. But my mother had the ambition to be reborn in a heaven and stay there until the next Buddha comes. I don't.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

No, I have never considered that. It would not be nice to leave my husband and son as long as they are dependent on me.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

Yes, I am happy with my life. I want to improve my meditation. I want to finish this off and let everything go – all the clinging. Still my mind clings to this and that. I want to finish that, too. In this very life.

Don't Expect Anything – Only Observe

Mrs. Ranjani de Silva

Presentation

Mrs. de Silva is a small, slim, and busy woman of 61. She lives in a bungalow in a village close to Colombo. Her husband died less than a year ago. She has one married daughter who lives close by and a baby granddaughter. Her husband used to be a journalist, and she was the personnel manager in a large state corporation, a construction firm with 10,000 employees. Now she is retired. She speaks English and Sinhala equally well. She rates herself as middle class.

She was born in a town on the South Coast. Her father had his business in Colombo and used to come home once every two weeks. When she was eleven, the family moved to a southern suburb of Colombo.

Mrs. de Silva is very much the organisational woman. As the chairman of the international organisation “Sakya Dhita – Daughters of the Buddha” she is highly involved in all kinds of international organisational work. Her e-mail is very busy. Every two years the “Sakya Dhita” holds an international conference. In 1993 she organised this international conference in Sri Lanka with permission of the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs.

She and her organisation work with fervour to have the nuns’ lineage re-established in Sri Lanka. One of the main aims of this work is to establish closer links to Buddhist Sri Lankan women. There is often a gap between the monks and the community, she says. There are lots of problems women cannot discuss with monks because they are males, and also there are lots of inhibitions for monks as to which subjects may and may not be discussed with females – the inhibitions work both ways. Mrs. R.S. and her organisation want the Buddhist nuns to contribute more to social service and to be closer to the community than the monks’ Sangha can be.

To that end, a big programme is starting in February, a six months’ course, where training in social service is an important part of the programme for the nuns-to-be. The Ministry of Buddhist Affairs has shown its interest. Mrs. R.S. is proud to say that they have engaged professional teachers for this part. Some of the future nuns are meditators, she says, but not all.

Mrs. R.S. shows me the drawings for a meditation and teaching centre in which she is also very much involved. The foundation ceremony is going to be in January – on an auspicious date for which an astrologer has been consulted. There will be room for about 20 women, a few big rooms with three beds and a few smaller rooms with two beds, a teaching hall and a meditation hall, a kitchen and a nice garden bordering the river.

Mrs. de Silva shows me her shrine room – fresh flowers, oil lamp, ever burning electric bulb, incense sticks, and meditation pillows all ready. There is a statue of the Buddha and a photograph of the meditating Buddha in Bodhgaya to which there is a peculiar story: A foreigner at Bodhgaya had taken a whole lot of pictures, but when the film was developed, all the pictures showed the traits of a meditating Buddha – mudra, long ears, sitting position. The newspapers wrote a lot about it. In her shrine room there are also big photos of the participants in the Sri Lankan international conference that she organised and one photo of the organisational board.

The interview took place in her home outside Colombo.

Please tell me how you got into meditation and how you learned it

In 1984 I went for my first meditation course. Ayya Khema was the teacher. Then again I followed another course with her at Nuns’ Island, and I once organised a retreat with her here at my home. After Ayya Khema left the island, around 1990, I wanted a teacher. Then luckily Goenka came. That was in 1991, and I was able to attend his 10-day course. The real understanding and experience came with Goenka. It was a very strict course. The base was there already after the courses with Ayya Khema, but Goenka has his own unique technique. I really learned: don’t expect anything, only observe! The first few days he focuses on concentration, then he introduces you to Vipassana. All get the same instructions. We are called senior students of Goenka now, so I am ready for a *satipaṭṭhāna* course now (*satipaṭṭhāna* = the establishing of awareness).

There was no particular reason for me to turn to meditation. It came from within. From my youth I used to go to the temple on Poya days and Sunday school – that was my background. From a friend in Kandy I heard about Ayya Khema. My friend was a medical doctor. On the fifth day of the meditation course I felt ill. Then I realised it was not a sickness, but I was feeling my body in a new way. I felt like – you know, we believe in previous lives – I felt that it was my previous lives that influenced me this way.

So, I have been practising meditation for 15 years now. I don’t think it is difficult if you are interested in it.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

I try to practise daily. It is better to practise regularly. I normally practise twice a day, one hour sitting. But when in a queue or waiting for the doctor you can meditate, too. Normally I try to do it at fixed hours; that is the best, but it is not always possible. At Goenka's centre you start at 4.30, but that is too early when at home. I meditate in my shrine room. I prefer to meditate alone, but in a group is also good. There is inspiration. That atmosphere is good.

I start with concentration on breathing, but when you are experienced, you quickly notice the changes that take place within yourself. That is experience – you can't explain that to other people. When thoughts and emotions come, I recognise them for what they are. I don't allow the thoughts to hang around.

The books and texts that I prefer to read are those by Goenka. I only read things on meditation, on Vipassana. I don't read much. *The Path of Purification* – translated from Pali by Bhikkhu Nyanamoli (an English monk) – is a good book if you have questions. But Goenka says: "Don't talk to others about reading. Don't compare with other students and don't discuss."

Please tell me why you meditate

I meditate because I have a liking for it. I don't have any wish to be reborn. I realise the impermanence of everything, the suffering, the bodily needs, all that waste – by watching my inside. Goenka's technique is focused on sensations, bodily sensations, but feelings are sensations, too. There are so many meditation techniques. Not all people accept this one. But that is the way of nature.

The immediate benefit of meditation is that your health improves a lot. So many illnesses can be avoided. I had a problem with my left eye. The doctor said that the nerve was damaged. It improved with meditation. Meditation is like scanning your whole body. It purifies your blood, pain can be controlled. Attitudes to other people are also improved. I have found that I can achieve many things with good intentions. I don't expect anything, but if I have good intentions, solutions will come.

Many women are very interested in meditation – often they have their reasons. Many are suffering from loss of sons due to the ethnic war and terrorism. That gives a lot of tension. I called attention to this problem at the conference in Thailand in 1991.

I believe that meditation leads to liberation. Maybe not in this life. We don't know about that. But I don't want to be reborn. How true that is. The Buddha saw this – this wonderful thing.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

Meditation affects my domestic life because it gives me greater understanding of my family. There is much less irritation. When awful things happen, I know that soon everything will be sorted out. We are only human, and we are our own witnesses. Misery is often doubled by thinking of it. When you do meditation, you learn to watch your thoughts and practise mindfulness. When you do that, you immediately understand what happens in your mind.

As to professional life – meditation gives you a much better concentration. In some factories, in Japan I think, they start with meditation. They have found out that it gives higher productivity.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

My religious beliefs have not been affected, they are the same all the time. But there is more reality now – knowing of the impermanence of everything. We have been hearing those words from childhood, but now they acquire a different meaning through the meditation experience. It is easier for women than for men to know *dukkha* (suffering), therefore more women than men meditate. Earlier in Sri Lanka we had the extended family and a peaceful society. Not anymore, now it is different. Now our children live alone in their own houses.

Have you ever considered renouncing lay life and becoming a nun?

No, I have never considered becoming a nun. Unless I am really prepared for it, I don't want to do it. You can never know how it will be when your final days arrive, but at the moment I am so involved in this work – to help other women who have renounced.

Are you happy with your life? Is there something you want to improve in your life?

Yes, I am very happy with my life because I took up meditation practice. I used to be a happy person, but now I am happier. If I should want to improve something, it would be my meditation. It opens you up more and more. It gives you more and more strength. I know that I am on the correct path, but I myself have to practise. Nobody else can do it for me.

If the Ego is Still Big, Meditation can be like a Weapon

Venerable Kusuma Devendra

Presentation

Ven. Kusuma is a small woman of 69 with a mild and very friendly face. She has warm, dark eyes. Her head is shaved and she is wearing a dark orange robe. She lives in a temple about 15 km south of Colombo. Three months ago she returned to Sri Lanka from India where she received higher ordination as a bhikkhuni (nun).

She comes from a middle class urban background. Her father was an engineer in the Colombo area and her mother a Buddhist Sunday school teacher. She went to English-speaking schools and English is the easier language. She studied biology and Buddhism at universities both in Sri Lanka and the U.S.A., taught biology for 12 years, and ended up as a lecturer in English and Buddhism at the University of Colombo. Before she took on robes, she was married and had six children. Her husband was a director of education and the principal of a teachers' training college. "He is alive and very well," she says. One of her daughters and a son died of cancer. Her other four children are all married.

The interview took place at Pirivena Temple where she lives.

Please tell me how you got into meditation

I have a Buddhist background and already as a child I often went to the temple. My grandmother took me. I liked that. My mother was very religious and a Sunday school teacher. But she was very strict, she had her own methods. She used Buddhism as a threat. I didn't like that. She sometimes wanted me to stay awake and chant all night. Then she would say: "If you fall asleep, robbers will come and take your Ñsil' (your morality)."

When I was 49 I started to meditate regularly. I have been meditating for 20 years now.

Please tell me how you learned to meditate

I learned to meditate at Kanduboda Meditation Centre. My teacher was Ven. Sumatipala Maha Thera, a Sri Lankan monk who was educated in Burma. I often went there. The children were also interested in meditation, so I took them with me whenever possible. All six of them also took to meditation.

When I retired from my job at the university at the age of 55, I started to lead a more religious life and I also spent more time meditating. My family got used to my being away from home – I went in and out and followed courses in meditation. When I was 60, I left home completely and went to stay in a private meditation centre in Ratmalana. I stayed there for five years.

Why did I become a nun? Actually, it was not my idea. But Ven. M. Vipulasara, the head monk at Pirivena Temple, who is the one who took the initiative to have the bhikkhuni order of nuns re-established in Sri Lanka, put it as a condition that I joined the programme. Otherwise he would not go

into the whole thing. You know, most Sri Lankan monks are against it. Ven. Vipulasara was worried about the educational standard of the nuns; that is why he wanted me to join. Then I said yes and took on robes. Two years ago I and nine other Sri Lankan nuns went to Sarnath in India for a training programme for higher ordination. We studied Hindi and Pali. A Sri Lankan monk, Pandita Bhante, was our teacher; he is a lovely teacher. He is the president of the Mahabodhi Society in India.

We were ten nuns, the average age was 40. The other nine knew little English. Some had been nuns since the age of nine or ten. Only one other woman had been married, like me. Two of them are still in India, the rest have returned to their old villages. They often come here to visit me at the temple.

It is important to have some learning next to meditation. I studied Buddhist philosophy at the university for my MA degree. Scholarship alone is not enough, meditation alone is not enough, either – at least not if you are a teacher of meditation.

Please tell me how and why you became a teacher of meditation

When I had given up my family, I stayed at the meditation centre in Ratmalana. I was in charge of that centre, counselled people, and taught meditation on a weekly basis. A group of 15–20 people used to come, mostly women – there were only two men. Most were retired people, well educated older people, quite a few female medical doctors. I taught one whole day in the weekends, on Poya days, and any time they needed me. I am still a meditation teacher. Most students are still retired people. In Sri Lanka the younger crowd doesn't come yet.

Please tell me how you practise meditation

To me a usual meditation session is one hour. I want to sit for at least an hour, but I must say that I practise meditation any time during the day, whenever possible. I do both types of meditation, both Samatha (tranquillity, concentration) and Vipassana (insight). The perfect balance between the two must be sought. When thoughts and emotions come, I just watch them and let them go, knowing that they are impermanent.

For inspiration I read books by Burmese teachers and by Ven. Nyanaponika (a German Buddhist monk). Those books are like handbooks for me. I know them by heart. It is sometimes said that books are not good for your meditation. Up to a point that is true. But how can you be a teacher without books?

Please tell me why you meditate – what are the benefits?

I meditate because I want to lead a peaceful life. When I meditate, I become happy with myself – self-contained, self-reliant, and peaceful. Meditation gives immediate benefits for living this life. And it is the road to sainthood. You know that you are on the road to sainthood when you become more and more peaceful, wise, and enlightened. Signs of progress are also that I don't get angry, that others cannot hurt me anymore, that I don't think in terms of "me" and "my," and that the self becomes less and less. Maybe the path is subdivided into stages, but you proceed gradually, step by step. You may go faster, you may go slowly – that depends on your practice and effort, knowledge, wisdom, etc. I definitely believe that one becomes a better human being by meditating – the right meditation, that is. Meditation can go wrong. If it goes wrong, if the ego is still big, meditation can be like a weapon. You can cut other people because you have this supreme knowledge.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your domestic and/or professional life

Now I sometimes wonder how I ever lived without meditation. But life went very smoothly for me. I have had both – both domestic life and a professional life. And now I have the life of a nun. A scientific background is very useful for Buddhism. The higher Dhamma of meditation is a scientific investigation into thoughts, body, nature, everything. Analysis of the aggregates requires scientific thinking.

Please tell me how practising meditation relates to your religious and spiritual life

Practising meditation has affected my religious beliefs in so far as I have attained more and more faith, but I do not engage much in ritual any more.

Are you happy with your life?

Yes, I am very happy with my life. It has been a rich life. I have had it all. I have lived in the world – I have experienced being a mother, caring for my husband and children, and having a job and an income. While I was still at the university I wrote two theses, each 400 pages. I was happy in my secular life, and now I am happy in my religious life.

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