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Scholars of contemporary Theravāda Buddhism in South and South East Asia have noted the significant changes in lay beliefs and practices as well as monastic reforms that have taken place since the late 19th century. Yet, within their studies of this modern Theravāda reformation very little attention has been paid to the growth in prestige and numbers of Theravāda Buddhist renunciant women. The growth of orders of these robe clad, shaven headed women known as dasasilmattawa, mae chi and thela shin respectively in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma reflect the changes in Theravāda Buddhism and provide an important piece of the puzzle for understanding this reformation. This is particularly true of the dasasilmattawa movement of Sri Lanka, the youngest and most rapidly growing and changing of these movements of Buddhist female renunciants.

Initially, this study will document the history of the dasasilmattawa movement from its beginnings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to its impressive growth in the 1950's. Focusing on three key dasasilmattawas (=dsms), Sisters Sudharmachari, Mawichari and Sudharma, this history shows how this movement has affinities and differences with “Protestant Buddhism” and relates to both the vipassanā meditation movement and the growth of the forest dwelling monastaries. After providing a history of this movement the study turns to an assessment of the contemporary status of the dsms as seen from the points of view of the members of this movement as well as from monk and lay perspectives. It will be suggested that the laity’s respect for a more renunciant style of life than that of the village or
city monks and the increasing popularity of vipassanā meditation accounts for the growing prestige of the dsms.

I. History of the dasasil-mattawa movement

In his book published in 1892 R. S. Copleston describes men and women in white who have taken the ten precepts or dasasil. He reports:

...there are few men of this profession, but a considerable number of women, generally old, are to be seen about the temples, especially in Kandy, or on the way to Adam's peak. They carry bowls as if for begging, and their shaven heads and dirty dresses give them a pathetic appearance, and one who had read the books would naturally suppose them to be nuns. Female mendicants they are, but they have not been admitted to the Community, and therefore are not called 'bhikkhuṇīs,' but only 'upādikās.' (lay women)

It is difficult to know the exact origins of such elderly women. Reports and stories suggest that a number of these women upāsikās wandered in Sri Lanka in the early 1800s and it is probable that women mendicants were a part of the Sri Lankan scene before that time, perhaps dating back to the collapse of the bhikkhuṇī order in the 12th or 13th centuries. Their numbers may have increased due to the revival of Buddhism in the late 1800s, especially because of the poya campaigns which encouraged laity to take the eight precepts (aṭasīl) and wear white on full moon days, and because of the example of such figures as Anagārika Dhammapāla who took the ten precepts (dasasil) permanently.

A small number of aged and seemingly destitute women like those Copleston described can still be seen today congregating at the Sri Mahābodhi in Anuradhapura or at other important Buddhist pilgrimage centers. However, some of these women now wear yellow robes, having taken dasasil, and are accompanied by one or two women in white who have taken aṭasīl. The aṭasīls in white can handle money and care for the dasasils in yellow. Often lacking shelter, these women beg for food and money or subsist on the food prepared by Buddhist charity
organizations. Only the yellow robes of a few differentiate these women from those that Copleston described.

However, today there are many dsms, approximately 2500 wearing the yellow robe, who make every effort to disassociate themselves from the few poor older women such as those who beg near the Sri Mahābodhi. Most of these modern dsms live in ārāmayas (monastic institutions) with more than three companion dsms, were initiated under the tutelage of a teacher in a line of succession of other dsms, and about half were given the ten precepts before their twenty-fifth birthday. These yellow clad dsms are coming to see a close connection between themselves and the bhikkhunīs of ancient Sri Lanka. The link between the women in white of whom Copleston speaks and the modern day dsms in part is provided by Sister Sudharmachari, once Catherine deAlvis.

Catherine deAlvis was the daughter of David deAlvis Coonatillika, Mudaliyar of Raigama Korale, and Leisa deAlvis who was the sister of the famous scholar James deAlvis. Catherine was thus related to some of the most important coastal families of Sri Lanka including that of Sir Don Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, the chief Sri Lankan advisor of the British. It appears that Catherine's mother died early in her daughter's life and that her father then remarried. He too died before his daughter was 25 and subsequently she converted from Anglican Christianity to Buddhism and journeyed to Burma where she took on the robes of a dasasil before returning to Sri Lanka.

There are a number of stories about Catherine's conversion to Buddhism. A version repeated in several articles on Sister Sudharmachari credits Koswathie Nilame, an Ayurvedic physician of her father, with acquainting her with Buddhist texts. One story, perhaps apocryphal, relates that seven days after her father's death, Catherine invited Buddhist monks to a dāna (almsgiving). The chief monk would not accept the dāna until someone in the family took the five precepts. Catherine took the precepts despite the objections of her Christian relatives. Soon after her father's death Catherine settled in Kandy to continue her study of Buddhism. In Kandy she met a large delegation of Burmese renunciant women (thela shin), led by the ex-Burmese Queen Sein don, who were on pilgrimage to the Temple of the Tooth. It appears that Catherine and her
servant accompanied the *thela shin* when they returned to Burma. Here she was initiated by Queen Sein don and studied Burmese and Pāli. Catherine remained in Burma until 1905 when she returned to Sri Lanka as Sister Sudharmachari.¹⁰

Without a first-hand account of Catherine deAlvis’ conversion to Buddhism any statement concerning her reasons for this change remains speculative. However, it can be recalled that her uncle, James deAlvis, while an Anglican, felt the prejudice of the British and called upon Sinhalese to rediscover their heritage.¹¹ Moreover, the 1880s and 1890s was a time of Buddhist resurgence as well as contact with Burmese monks, especially by the low country nikāyas (schools of the sangha). A number of Christian families especially in the Panadura area were returning to Buddhism while many of the Sinhalese Buddhist elite were beginning to assert and reform their tradition under the catalytic leadership of Colonel Olcott.¹² These conditions no doubt proved a favorable environment for her conversion.

Upon her return to Sri Lanka, Sister Sudharmachari used her connections to develop support among the most prestigious low country families such as that of Don Solomon Dias Bandaranaike who seems to have introduced her to Lady Edith Blake, wife of the British Governor Henry Blake. Moreover, her conversion to Buddhism endeared her to many prominent up country families. At a tea party in the Peradeniya gardens in 1906 reported in the *Ceylon Observer*, Sister Sudharmachari, Lady Blake, D. S. Dias Bandaranaike, William Dunawilla Disawa, Mrs. L. B. Nugawela and Mrs. A. Coomaraswamy attended.¹³ With the financial aid of these families Sister Sudharmachari formed the Sudharmadhara Society and built an upāsikā ārāmaya in Katukāle on the Kandy-Peradeniya road. This nunnery was officially opened in 1907 by Lady Blake and bore her name.

With the building of Lady Blake’s Ārāmaya, Sister Sudharmachari took homeless girls under her care and began to educate them. The Sister also took into her ārāmaya a number of aged, destitute, and blind women who became dsms.¹⁴ In fact, the ārāmaya fast became a home for elderly dsms. It appears that Sister Sudharmachari had been warned by her teacher in Burma not to ordain women under 40 years of age since the dsma tradition was not well established in Sri Lanka and ordaining younger women might prove a disciplinary problem. The name board
in front of Lady Blake's Nunnery thus read "Home for elderly upāsikās". In the 1920s this advice was nullified when Sister Sudharmachari needed younger sisters to take care of the older dsms that she had initiated.\textsuperscript{15}

In her lifetime, Sister Sudharmachari, who also built an ārāmaya near the Thūpārāmaya in Anuradhapura, came to be called Hamumāniyo or Hāmupāsikā due to her aristocratic connections and bearing. Wearing a white blouse and a yellow robe to differentiate herself on the one hand from bhikkhunīs and, on the other hand, from the uninitiated, undisciplined women in white of which Copleston spoke, she was regularly visited by dignitaries from Burma and members of the lay Buddhist elite of Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{16} She died in 1939.

Sister Sudharmachari's example and that of her initiates, coupled with growing Buddhist education and sil campaigns directed to the youth stimulated a modest growth of the dsm movement from the 1905 through 1935. At least three ārāmayas in Panadura were opened between 1910 and 1924 by students of Sister Sudharmachari.\textsuperscript{17} However, despite this growth and a tendency to take younger members, upāsikā continued to be a term associated with older lay women and was used as a term of derision toward younger girls who took sil. One informant related that parents of girls from nearby High School would not allow their daughters to walk past Lady Blake's Ārāmaya for fear that they might be influenced to join the order and not fulfill their proper female role as housewife and mother.\textsuperscript{18} Such prejudices began to change in the 1930s through 1950s due in part to the influence of Sister Mawichari.

Born in North Burma in 1897, Mawichari became distressed when she witnessed her sister's miscarriage. She cut her own hair in 1912 and her parents put her in the charge of an ārāmaya near Sagain Rock where she was initiated as a thela shin, learned meditation and became an expert in abhidhamma. In 1928 she came with 90 other nuns from Burma to worship at the Temple of the Tooth. In 1929 she returned to Sri Lanka and under the prompting of Vinayalanka Thero, a Burmese monk at Makutārāmaya, decided to stay and initiate dsms in Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{19}

Sister Mawichari created a sensation among the Buddhist women in Colombo and many came to see her and take her blessing. One laywoman, Piyaseeli Jayewardene, a qualified teacher educated at Museaus College was initiated as Sister
Seelawati and by 1958 they had initiated over 50 women, most of them in their teens or early 20s. A home often frequented by this pair of *dsms* was “Yamuna” owned by H. Sri Nissanka, who was to play a most important part in the growth of the *dsm* movement.

H. Sri Nissanka, a noted criminal lawyer and Buddhist nationalist, was a key figure in Buddhist affairs in Sri Lanka in the 1930s and 1940s. He was not only instrumental in making the *dsm* movement respectable among the urban elite but in bringing *vipassana* meditation practice to Sri Lanka and popularizing this among the laity. Born in 1899, he was educated first in Ananda College and then transferred to Royal College where he was involved in the YMBA. At 19 he travelled to Burma and was ordained a Buddhist monk. He thereby hoped to set an example for all Sri Lankan Buddhist laymen to become monks for a brief period in their early years. Soon afterward he returned to Sri Lanka to take care of his ailing father and subsequently went to England to train for a law degree. When he returned to Sri Lanka he continued to work for Buddhist causes and became the President of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress in 1931.

In the early 1930s, influenced by the discipline and learning of the Burmese Sister Mawichari, coupled with a personal experience in which he visited a Buddhist monk in a hospital and was distressed that the monk was nursed by Catholic nuns, H. Sri Nissanka began to galvanize support for an *ārāmaya* for *dsms*. Quoting the verse, *yo gilānan upatthāti, sō upatthāti man iti,* “whoever nurses the sick, nurses me,” he hoped to set up an *ārāmaya* which would educate and discipline the *dsms*, many of whom had taken on the yellow robes of Sister Sudharmachari but were self-initiated and homeless. In addition, H. Sri Nissanka hoped to train these *dsms* to be useful members of society. Theirs was to be a life of both renunciation and service.

This plan for the *dsms* as well as a number of H. Sri Nissanka's activities can be interpreted as strategies of the urban elite, who being divorced from the traditional rural framework tried to bridge the gap between this-worldly pursuits and the other-worldly concerns of Buddhism. Confronted with urban secular activity, influenced by the Western understandings and misunderstandings of Buddhism and sometimes better educated
in textual Buddhism than the monks, this group searched for ways to link daily life to the goal of renunciation or at least bring a Buddhist ethic into everyday life. Here the quest of deliverance could be linked to deliverance from social ills and emerging other Buddhist males suggests one such strategy; while his support of vipassanā for the laity is another. In this latter plan the laity take unto themselves a religious virtuosity once the property of the monks. By pushing the dsms toward service, and in fact suggesting that they follow the path of a female anāgārika ("homeless one"), he proposes a third strategy. As Bardwell Smith suggests, these activities show an increase in the relationship between renunciation and present existence, a stress on equanimity that is non-attachment but not non-involvement, and reveal a conviction that Buddhism can speak to the modern world.²⁶

The list of lay supporters that H. Sri Nissanka involved in this effort to build an ārāmaya for educated and disciplined dsms reads like a catalogue of the Colombo Buddhist elite. They agreed with his effort to reform the dsms, "who were seen to be wandering from place to place without guidance and bring them under control and educate them to lead useful lives."²⁷ When the nunnery, named Vihāra MahāDevi Upāṣikā Ārāmaya, was finally built at Biyagama and opened in 1936, under headlines reading "Life of Work and Service" and "Others Before Self," the newspapers reported that, "The society wishes to discourage the idea that this ārāmaya is meant to be an asylum for the aged and the decrepit."²⁸ Rather the dsms will conduct classes for 75 neighborhood girls. Service was emphasized for:

Strange as it may seem even pious Buddhists seem to forget that the Buddha himself after attaining perfection served mankind for 40 long years. Nowadays, while everybody strives to attain self-perfection, the spirit of service is non-existent.²⁹

The report continues that:

The Upāṣikās will in addition to spiritual instruction, be trained in first aid, hygiene and social work. They will be equipped to go out into the neighboring villages on missions of mercy.³⁰

D. S. Senanayaka, the Minister of Agriculture, helped to open
the ārāmaya with these words:

Buddhists who speak so much of Ahimsa had not taken steps to educate women in the art of succoring the sick. Such work is done by Christian Sisters and it is high time women of the country work for the welfare of fellow human beings in a selfless way.\[^{31}\]

The laity were clear in their goals for the inhabitants of this new ārāmaya—renunciation and service. Only in the former were they to achieve success. The laity brought Sisters Mawichari and Seelavathi to the Biyagama Ārāmaya in 1938 and 1939 to teach the dsms meditation, abhidhamma, and discipline.\(^{32}\) While such Buddhist education proved to be successful, in the three yearly reports published in July, 1938, 1939 and 1940, the ḍāyakas, or “donors”, express concern with the lack of public service displayed by the dsms. In 1938, the laity report that while their duty of meditation is being done, no work of value to the residents of the vicinity is completed. In the 1939 report the hopes of the laity begin to rest on a younger dsm, Sister Sudharma, whom they were educating at Musaeus College and who becomes the most important figure in the history of the dsm movement.\(^{33}\)

This important episode reveals a conflict between two strategies for redemption within Buddhism. On the one hand, there is an urban educated elite influenced by the examples of Christian service organizations including Catholic nuns who taught in schools and nursed in hospitals. Attempting to assert their pride in Buddhism these members of the elite, whose predecessors had built Buddhist higher education, started Buddhist Sunday schools, began the YMBA, and supported similar organizations parallel to those of the Christians, continued to assert what has come to be called “Protestant Buddhism”: a Buddhism that stressed an ethic of involvement, a rational and pragmatic interpretation of Buddhist ideals and a this-worldly asceticism. On the other hand there is the dsms drawn mostly from rural backgrounds and steeped in the practice of monks who gave spiritual and ritual gifts to the laity and not social service. Added to the monks' example was the female atasil who gained purity and merit by worship and contemplation on poya days and whose calm behavior was felt to be particularly befitting a woman. Following this example the dsms were willing to practice meditation—and as will be seen below, wholeheartedly ac-
cepted the *vipassanā* techniques brought to Sri Lanka with the help of H. Sri Nissanka—but were unwilling to use the tranquility taught in meditation in social service. Another factor that led to a rejection of the service ethic of the urban laity might have been the class background of the *dsms*. Many seem to have been drawn from the rural small landholding class whose female members realistically only could aspire to becoming teachers in the lower grades in village schools. They had rejected this goal and taken the unpopular step of renouncing the role of housewife when they became *dsms*. Instead of service, they saw their life as one of renunciation.

At first glance Sister Sudharma seems to have realized the service oriented dream of H. Sri Nissanka, as this Sister became a teacher at Museaus College. She also gave numerous talks on the Buddhist Dhamma throughout Sri Lanka as well as radio and newspaper interviews. It is to Sister Sudharma that much of the credit can be given to elevating the status of *dsms* in the eyes of the laity as well as the rapid growth of the movement from the 1950s which marked an upsurge of Buddhist nationalistic feeling, in part due to the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's birth. However, Sister Sudharma has given up her teaching position at Museaus College which she held from 1955 to 1977 and now speaks strongly of the need for a strict renunciation on the part of *dsms*. A brief biography of Sister Sudharma might point to the fact that the life of renunciation and retreat that she now observes was a major factor in her ambition to become a *dsm*. This same motivation characterizes most *dsms* today.

Born in 1919 into a farming family with small plantation ownings, Sister Sudharma became a nun when she was 13 years and 4 months of age in 1933. The motivations for such a step can never be fathomed adequately but a number of reasons are readily recalled by Sister Sudharma. As a very young girl she was upset by the graphic portrayals of the numerous Buddhist hells at the temple at Botale and vowed to follow a path that would preclude such an end. Thinking of the numerous Buddhist hells, she was told the story of a man who heard the words of the Buddha and decided to observe the ten precepts despite the fact that he was starving. Due to his weakened condition when he began to observe the precepts, he died and became a
tree deity. Thinking that such a divine state was obtained by only half a day of observing ten precepts Sister Sudharma vowed to take the precepts as often as she could. She took the five precepts every night and when she did not she dreamed of punishments. The taking of the precepts also came to be linked with good health. When she began to suffer from malaria with frequent chills, her mother advised her to take the eight precepts daily at the temple. She followed this advice from July through November of 1932 and she subsequently lost the symptoms. After this experience she asked her uncles to build her a very small shrine and meditation room where she spent more and more of her time. Here she worshipped the Buddha and, while not formally taught meditation, she reflected on the 32 impurities of the body. Once while contemplating the impurities her austerities brought her a sense of tranquility that lasted for a number of days.

This youthful piety led Sister Sudharma to a decision to become a bhikkhuni. While she had never seen a nun she had studied about the arrival of the bhikkhuni order in Sri Lanka and appeared to believe it still existed. When she was 10 or 11 she did see a dsm and in the next several years she cut her hair a number of times and took on yellow robes, much to the dismay of her family. Finally, a dsm came to her village to learn Pāli from a local pundit and she slipped away to her, donned the robes and returned to her family for their blessing. After difficult negotiations, her family gave into her request with the promise that she would stay in the village. Even though her preceptor moved from the village in several months, Sister Sudharma stayed with her family for three years and then heard of the opening of the Biyagama Ārāmaya by H. Sri Nissanka. Taking a servant she went to the house of H. Sri Nissanka and he promised to negotiate with her family and gain their approval for her entrance into the new ārāmaya. After entering the ārāmaya at Biyagama she was chosen by Mrs. J. R. Jayewardene to be educated at Museaus. Subsequently, she went on to Colombo University, from which she graduated in 1951. Under the urging of Professor G. P. Malalasekera she then travelled to Penang to teach the dhamma, but returned when her mother fell ill. She then taught at a girls school in Ambalangoda until
she was asked to come to Museaus in 1955. At the same time she began to run the ārāmaya at Biyagama and to establish other nunneries. After quitting Museaus in 1977 Sister Sudharma retired to the forest where she remained for some five years at Kutumbigala under Ven. Jinavamsa Ānandasiri. She is now the head of a group of 13 ārāmayas and is supervising the building of a nursing home for aged nuns.

In reflecting on her life, Sister Sudharma tends to depreciate the service period suggesting that very few can have such a worldly position and remain dedicated to renunciation. She sees her teaching as a debt owed to her sponsors, but now dedicates her life to renunciation. She soon hopes to return to the forest where she expects to remain until death or sickness ends this career. The disciplined and meditative life is certainly what she expects of her students. All novices that she accepts at her nunneries must spend at least three months at the vipassanā meditation center at Kunduboda. The blending of veneration and emulation of the forest monks, the training in vipassanā meditation and the renunciation of the worldly affairs that marks Sister Sudharma’s present practice is characteristic of the hopes of the majority of the dsms today and accounts for the growing prestige of this movement, as will be shown below.36

The dsms movement which Sisters Sudharmachari, Mawichari and Sudharma have helped to stimulate now numbers approximately 2500 and is growing rapidly. The dsms in yellow who live in ārāmayas and are initiated only after a period of novicehood, far outnumber the women of which Copleston spoke or those wandering upāsikās whom H. Sri Nissanka wished to reform and put into social service. These dsms are beginning to gain the respect of the laity and the attention of the monks. We turn now to an analysis of where the new dsms place themselves in the Buddhist sāsana (religion) and how the laity and monks characterize the life-style of the dsms.

II. Views of the Dsm Movement

A. The Dsms’ View of Themselves: Between Lay and Bhikkhuṇī Status
The majority of dsms today are attempting to make a place for themselves between lay and bhikkhuni status. Sister Sudharma, for instance, suggests that the dsm movement is not a part of the sangha. Yet, it is not a lay order. She explains that according to Ven. Kadavadduvê Jinavamśa, who heads a number of forest hermitages in Sri Lanka, there are three ways of taking the ten precepts. The lay person can take dasasil for a day, when sil is administered by a monk, who uses the word gahapati ("householder"). The dsm begs for the dasasil without the use of this term, thus rejecting the lay or upāsikā status, while the novice monk takes pabbajjā dasasil, which collapses the ten precepts into one rule and prepares the way for full ordination into the sangha (upasampada). The fact that the word for householder is not used during the initiation places the dsm at a mid-point between the laity and sangha. Other dsms who are leaders of important dsm organizations were unable to explain their place so fully but noted that the dsms are in a special category, and one said that definitely the dsms were sāmaneri: female novices but not officially a part of the sangha. As further evidence that the dsms do not consider themselves a lay order, the dsms call Sanghamitra who brought the Sri Mahābodhi to Sri Lanka and established the bhikkhuni order, their mother. They also read the Therīgāthā which contains life histories of early bhikkhunīs as an important reference for the reasons a woman might wish to become a dsm. Also of interest in pointing to the position of the dsms in their own eyes is the answer to the question as to whether they would soon pass away if they were to attain arahantship. According to the Buddhist canon if they were lay Buddhists who did not join the sangha immediately after attaining arahantship, they would die in a short time. Unanimously, the dsms asserted that as they were not a lay order and had renounced the household they would continue to live after attaining arahantship. Another clue to the fact that they do not see themselves as upāsikās is, of course, the "yellow robe," in various shades from almost red to brown, the dsms have adopted. This is in contrast to the white of the atāsil and the white and yellow of the first dsm, Sister Sudharmachari. It should be noted that their dress is not technically a robe which must be made according to strict Vinaya rules and which only the monks can wear, but this difference is not often cited by the dsms and
certainly is not understood by most laity as will be shown below. This view of their own status between the laity and monk is also affirmed by the response of the majority of dsms to the possibility of upasampadā or full ordination into the sangha. This question of full ordination of women into the sangha is often debated in the contemporary Sri Lankan press. The possibility of such an ordination is suggested by the fact that Sri Lankan bhikkhunīs travelled to China in the fifth century A.D. to ordain Chinese women. It is argued that if the line of nuns still exists in China, these nuns could reintroduce the bhikkhunī order into Sri Lanka. However, while there are some outspoken dsms on both sides of this issue, most dsms say that if upasampadā were possible—which they doubted due to the Mahāyāna character of the Chinese bhikkhunī order—they would not accept this ordination. A number suggested that ordination would limit their freedom from the monks and that the close relationship between bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs might bring the downfall of a sangha which they view as in decline.

Whichever way is chosen to explain their mid-position, the dsms often imply that their position is based on their sil. They explain that if their sil or the moral purity of their conduct and thought is good, the laity will see their status as close to the sangha. They quietly assert that with exceptions, their sil, based on careful observation of the rules, is purer than that of the village or city monks, leading to the conclusion that they are indeed worthy of the respect often given the monks. The dsms decry the monks' involvement in politics, their luxuries and their education in coed institutions as not living up to the monastic rules. As a number of dsms remark, it is better to follow 10 rules well, than 227 rules poorly. In contrast the dsms note that their education is exclusively in the dhamma and within the confines of an āramaya. In criticizing the behavior of village and city monks the dsms are echoing the opinion of most laity and they are placing themselves in close relationship with the forest dwelling monks who like the dsms stress renunciation of daily life and meditation.

Contemporary dsms see their chief task as that of attaining arahantship. Unlike the monks interviewed by Richard Gombrich who doubted arahantship was a possibility in this degraded age, the dsms believe that they might attain such a state. In this
effort they continue worship and recitations of the dhamma in addition to various types of meditation. The meditation technique that is gaining attention is vipassanā. Many of the younger dsms have taken some training in vipassanā in one of the vipassanā meditation centers, a number are skilled teachers of this technique and some have set up their own vipassanā training centers.41 Perhaps this technique and the teaching surrounding it, taught by Burmese monks who are used to the help of their thela shin, has helped to lead to the belief in the possibility of arahantship.42 In addition to the ārāmaya being places of meditation, worship and renunciation for the dsms, they have become places of retreat and help to lay women. Many of the dsms with whom I spoke mentioned that they allow lay women with family problems to stay at the ārāmaya and try to counsel the wife and husband or daughter in actions that might heal the difficulties.43

The relationship which the dsms wish to have with monks is best summarized by one Sister who suggested that the monks are, like chancellors of universities, only to be called in for formal events such as an initiation.44 When Sister Sudharma was asked when monks were needed other than at times of initiation, she recalled only one instance, in which the parents of a novice who believed their daughter should be initiated after a normal two-year novicehood protested when Sister Sudharma told them that their daughter was not yet ready. Sister Sudharma then called for the help of a monk from Kelaniya who is on the ārāmaya committee to speak with the family. A leader of one of the largest organizations of dsms, Sister Khemachari, suggested that the ten precepts should be given by monks once or twice a month, but was very unwilling to appeal to monks concerning the running of her nunneries other than in rare cases. This was particularly interesting as Sister Khemachari belongs to an organization of dsms begun by a monk who carried out the desire of his preceptor to start an order of dsms. In this endeavor the monk—considered by the laity to be a forest dweller—advertised in a newspaper for a dsm to initiate a number of pious women. Mawichari responded, taught Khemachari and others and then withdrew. Subsequently, this organization has grown with the help of one particularly generous dāyaka, who echoes H. Sri Nissanka’s belief that Buddhist dsms should be as well cared for
as the Catholic nuns, but believes their task should be meditation and not social service. This perspective reveals a shift of the lay view of the dsm which will be shown below. Despite this growth of her order and the decisions involved, Sister Khemachari, now the head of 14 ārāmaya, rarely seeks the advice of the head monk of the dsm organization. The rule seems to be to honor the monks and supply dāna and robes for them on occasion but not to allow them to become too involved in the running of the ārāmaya.

Dsms of the more financially secure institutions tend to distrust the government interference. Many of those interviewed, in fact, have not returned a government questionnaire that would have led to the issuing of dsm identity cards. This action seems to be due to a general distrust of urban lay involvement in ārāmaya affairs and the fear of being pressed into social service. However, there are many ārāmayas which are suffering from insufficient funds. Here, supported by their own family or a few dāyakas, the dsms' attempt to live disciplined lives is less than successful. In responses to questionnaires sent out by the Commissioner of Buddhist affairs, many of these dsms hoped that the government could intervene and supply funds for reconstruction. Moreover, the dsms do not often benefit from traditional ownership of property which the monks possess and in some circumstances this leads to their eviction from their ārāmayas. They hoped the government could help to solve this problem.

The better run organizations of the dsms remain quite parochial in their attitude toward the dsms in trouble and toward other groups of dsms in general. This attitude seems to arise from the character of the chief dsms, who joined the order when it was very unpopular and had to fight long battles with their families. The strength of character that allowed them to persevere, has led them to a rather uncompromising view of how their ārāmayas should be administered and their novices taught. This lack of cooperation between dsms and their organizations might soon disappear. The women who are now entering the order are having a somewhat less difficult time convincing their families to allow them to be initiated. At the established ārāmayas the family can be assured of the protection of their daughters and the purity of the dsms' sil. Moreover, the reasons for joining
the order now seem to echo those given by young monks. The young dsms often state that they took a liking to the robe: to the calm demeanor of the Sisters. Perhaps, with the growing acceptability of this way of life, the Sisters will have to struggle less to preserve their identity and more easily will join together. Sister Khemachari, age 44, who joined the order in 1958, for instance, seems willing to associate with dsms from other organizations and contemplate an all Sri Lankan association of dsms if it is led by the dsms themselves and not the laity.48

B. The Monastic View of the Dsms: A Need for Discipline

Many monks began their assessment of the dsm movement by pointing out that the bhikkhus have no responsibility for the dsms since these women do not belong to the bhikkhuni order. A number went on to say that there is no bhikkhuni order in Theravāda Buddhism, that there cannot be such an order and that the laity are wrong in their acceptance of the dsms as bhikkhus. Some suggested that in actuality these women were masquerading as part of the sangha. In several conversations the initial refusal of the Buddha to ordain women was mentioned, as well as the canonical statement that due to their ordination the sangha would not endure as long as it would have if women were not ordained. Lessons that were to be learned from this are that women are physically and mentally weaker than men and cannot endure crisis, and that problems of discipline arise when the sexes are mixed too closely.49

These initial responses of the majority were most often followed by assertions that the dsms should be trained by the government and put to some useful social service. Health care for village women, staffing hospitals and teaching the dhamma to women and children were mentioned as possibilities.

A minority of monks believed that the bhikkhunī order could be reestablished and were prepared to work for this possibility. They stated that if an unbroken line of ordination in China from Sri Lanka could be proved they would propose that selected dsms be given upasampadā. However, they acknowledge that the majority of monks would not support this move. They believed that upasampadā would assure disciplined and educated women
to carry on the Buddha's word. The aim of upasampadā seems, therefore, little different from the aim of the majority of monks: to assure that these women undergo training and discipline.

C. The Lay View of the Dsms: A Search for Purity in Motivation, Discipline and Renunciation

In a survey of laity taken in various areas of Sri Lanka, it was found that an overwhelming number knew about the dsm movement and almost all could name a dsm or an ārāmaya in their area. More than half of those interviewed had helped the dsms at one time and ten percent regularly supplied food or money to the dsm movement. While there was mention of the dsms who wander and beg, the respondents still said they must respect these women because of the robe. Many made a differentiation between the wandering dsms and those associated with ārāmaya. When asked how they would characterize the life of the dsms, most responded that the dsms' life was full of sil or very pious, silavanta. They were also felt by many to be good meditators. While these views were held by men and women alike, a number of women added that the dsms understood their problems and they went to them for advice.

In comparing the life of a dsm with that of a monk, a few laity mentioned that the dsms were not bhikkhunīs, but agreed with the vast majority of respondents that the life of the dsms is more disciplined and less pompous than that of the monks. In fact, there was some sense that women are more disciplined in religious matters than men and that when they take the robe this difference continues. Again and again the laity readily criticized the monks' life as too luxurious or having too many material comforts. This was contrasted to the austere life of the dsms who do not have the traditional supports that the monks have come to expect. A number of laity went on to explain that the motives for becoming a dsm are more pure than those for becoming a monk. The monks, it was explained, might join the order due to family pressure or the promise of prestige, the possibility of education or a comfortable life. The dsms could not expect such supports nor would their families give approval to such a move. A number of laity remarked that a woman only
has a home and when she has given this up she has given up everything, implying that a man has opportunities outside the home. Some remarked that the dsms had more discipline and that they never heard of a dsm giving up the robes but this was a frequent occurrence among monks. Some laity, when pressed added that, of course, there were very good monks in the forest.

While more research needs to be completed on lay attitudes, the questionnaires suggest some interesting factors in the lay views of the dsms and the monks. The laity seem ready to accept the dsms as part of the sangha. Even those who recognized that the dsms were not strictly bhikkhunis said that they still needed to respect the robe. Moreover, the laity showed an impressive tolerance of even the most undisciplined dsms in this regard. The almost desperate situation of some dsms and the lack of traditional and governmental supports for these women, helps the laity to see the dsms on a higher level than the ordinary monks. The majority of monks who receive far more lay support and have a much more secure position than the dsms are disparaged. The purity of their life-style and motivations are questioned. Often willing to downgrade those they support financially and praise those they don't, some laity seem ready to place the dsms on a level of sil, meditation and discipline above the village monks and below the forest monks. In this hierarchy the laity is searching for a group that meets its very high standard of purity of motives and renunciation.

In addition to the laity's acknowledgement of the purity of dsms' discipline and renunciation another important element that is leading to a growing prestige of the dsms is the support they have received from the middle and upper class laity who are interested in meditation. Many of the dsms have studied vipassanā meditation techniques, some taking a leading role in centers of such meditation and others teaching this type of meditation at their āramayas. This meditation, apparently brought to Sri Lanka by H. Sri Nissanka, while wide-spread in appeal has sparked particular interest among the women of the upper and middle class of Colombo. Here it provides the elite with a method of religious virtuosity: a way of taking to themselves the renunciation at one time seen as the prerequisite of the monks. It also enables the meditators to accept their daily life in the light of the Buddhist doctrine of transitoriness. Into this situation has
stepped a German-born American dsm, Sister Khema, who is having a significant impact on the status of the dsms at least among the educated elite.

Sister Khema, who has been interested in meditation since 1963 and studied vipassanā at a training center in Rangoon, has travelled extensively in South and Southeast Asia, established a Buddhist monastery and lay community in Australia and requested Khantipalo Thera to be an abbot there in 1978. She was ordained as a dsm in 1979 by Narada Thera at Vajirarama temple in Colombo and started travelling world wide to teach the dhamma and meditation. In 1981 she returned to Sri Lanka to attempt to build an International Buddhist Women’s Center where women from all over the world might come to meditate and learn the dhamma. This hope was mentioned in a news report and she was subsequently contacted by Mrs. Irene Nanayakkara who was then president of a group which had established the Sri Lanka Buddhist Nuns Association in hopes of training and educating dsms and forming all the dsms in the country into a coherent organization. Mrs. Nanayakkara’s society had acquired a small plot of land in Madiwala-Kotte and had begun to build an ārāmaya in hopes that dsms could receive education there and subsequently return to their respective ārāmayas to teach their fellow dsms. Mrs. Nanayakkara convinced Sister Khema that this land could also house the International Women’s Buddhist Center and Sister Khema has been raising funds for this center ever since.

Sister Khema has created quite a stir among the English speaking elite of Colombo and she has made the growth and education of the dsms a cause for many of the women of this class. Preaching in halls and on television and holding vipassanā meditation retreats, she lends prestige to the dsm movement in the eyes of the elite. Her importance is evidenced by the fact that an Island on Rajgama Lake near Dodunduwa has been readied for her and other female meditators by the laity in that area. This site has long been used by learned forest dwelling monks and as the center for the European monks.

Sister Khema, however, remains an outsider to the dsm movement of Sri Lanka. She is willing to consider upasampadā for the dsms. This is partially to guarantee reform of the wandering dsms, but more importantly she hopes that this would give
the dsms status equal to that of the monks. This thinking is not supported by most dsms, who seem to enjoy the freedom from monks and monastic rules that their present in-between status guarantees. The dsms also seem to realize that such a move would not be supported by the monks and they might lose the support they receive from some monks they now have as advisors. Moreover, Sister Khema seems eager to sponsor an all Sri Lanka organization of dsms led by laity. Such an organization is feared by most dsms who believe that they might be forced into social service by some of the urban elite. In fact, Sister Khema speaks of dsms as taking part in development of the country: as holding dhamma classes for women and children and providing classes in hygiene. She says "Do not eat the rice of the country in vain." Certainly, recalling the hopes of H. Sri Nissanka, the push among some laity for dsms dedicated to social service continues but this is now tempered by the growing acceptance of the dsms' role in vipassanā meditation.

III. Conclusion

We have seen a gradual growth of the dsm movement. The growth can be said to be symbolized by the change of colors of the robe from white, to white and yellow, to all yellow. It is doubtful that the wandering women in white of whom Copleston spoke in the 1890s were held in high respect. They were mainly older women stimulated by piety to spend their last years in worship. Certainly such action on the part of a young woman would not have gained wide acceptance. Into this situation came the first modern dsm, Sister Sudharmachari with her white blouse and yellow robe. This signified that she was not a member of the sangha but neither was she a wandering, undisciplined and uneducated dsm. Nevertheless, her rule of initiating only women over 40 continued the characterization of dsms as elderly lay women. In the 1930s and 1940s with the influence of Sister Mawichari and Sister Sudharma, who initiated young women, the yellow robe began to be seen by the dsms as a sign of a new status. They began to break away from the upāsikā label and to see themselves and to be seen by others as occupying a level between the laity and bhikkhunīs.
The dsms have gradually gained the respect of the Buddhist laity of Sri Lanka. This elevation of status is due to a number of factors. The dsms benefit from the ambivalent attitude of the laity toward the village and city monks. Unlike monks who are often faulted for participating in secular affairs and being surrounded by worldly goods, the dsms are seen as truly renouncing society. The traditional piety of women coupled with the fairly poor circumstances of most of the dsms have reinforced the laity's view of their piety. Moreover, the dsms who have rejected the avenue of social service and stressed renunciation, have increasingly related themselves to the forest dwelling monks and thus tapped into the prestige which the laity attribute to this group. Furthermore, the dsms have embraced vipassanā meditation as practitioners and teachers more than have the Sri Lankan monks. This has further elevated this meditation as a method which allows the laity to perceive the transitoriness of their day to day existence with calm Buddhist understanding. Finally, the dsms have offered to women in difficult situations a place of retreat and advice, as well as providing many other women with a hope of recapturing in contemporary Buddhism the elevated place of the female renunciate in ancient Sri Lanka. While tapping these sources of prestige, the dsms have remained conservative. They have not challenged the existing sangha nor do they see themselves as a reform movement. Rather, they have quietly begun to fit into the Sri Lanka Buddhist scene.

There are, however, some important stumbling blocks to the continued slow growth of prestige of the dsm movement among the laity. Upasampada is becoming an emotional issue for a few dsm and for many urban lay women. This issue could cause a confrontation between the dsm movement and the sangha. Most recently, as the result of the efforts of Sister Khema and some Colombo Buddhist women, a number of moves that might raise this issue have been made. Responding to a letter written by Mrs. Devendra, a close associate to Sister Khema and a leading Buddhist lay woman, Mrs. J. R. Jayewardene has created a separate dsm division under the Commission of Buddhist Affairs. This unit continues to try to issue identity cards to the dsms as well as providing minimum food and shelter to destitute dsms. The Colombo Buddhist elite have also asked the Education Department to establish a training center for dsms.
similar to the parivenas for monks. Finally, it has been suggested that the dsms be given the pabbajja dasasi administrator to novice monks and that the Vinaya rules for sāmaneris be formally accepted.\textsuperscript{57} This could be viewed as bringing the dsms closer to full ordination in the sangha and might bring about a confrontation between the monks—the majority of whose views are conservative on the subject of upasampada for dsms—and the supporters of the dsms. However good intentioned the hopes of the urban elite supporters of full ordination for the dsms, this will certainly test the gradual rise of prestige of the dsms movement. The dsms movement successfully fought the attempt of the urban Buddhist elite to place them into social service positions; the drive for upasampada forecasts another struggle between the majority of dsms and the laity.

The late 19th and the 20th centuries have brought many changes to Sri Lankan Buddhism. The history and contemporary status of the dsms supplies one more piece to the puzzle of this complex reformation. Since it relates to the growth of the numbers of monks who have retreated to the forest, the questions concerning the purity of the village and city monks among the laity, the laity’s appropriation of the traditional roles of these monks, the popularity of vipassanā meditation, the growing role of women, and the response to their needs within a Buddhist context, the study of the dsms movement provides clues to major changes in Sri Lankan Buddhism, and it should be an interesting tool for analysis of the continuities and changes of Sri Lankan Buddhism in the future.

NOTES

1. This study is based on field research in Sri Lanka completed in 1982–83 and the summer of 1984 under a Fulbright-Hays grant and a Mellon Foundation grant administered by Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Special thanks go to Mrs. Kusuma Devendra who is completing her PhD dissertation on the dsms. We travelled many miles together seeking dsms to interview and she proved a wonderful translator and research companion. Walter Perera of Peradeniya University also translated many documents pertaining to the dsms movement and Ms. Lakmali Gunawardena conducted interviews on lay attitudes at the Temple of the Tooth.

2. R. S. Copleston, Buddhism: Primitive and Present in Magadha and in

4. A person taking the Three Refuges in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha and the Five Precepts is considered a Buddhist. The Five Precepts (pansil) include not taking life, not stealing, abstaining from wrong sexual practices, not telling lies and abstaining from intoxicants. An atasil takes three more precepts: not to take solid foods after noon, not dancing and adorning oneself, and not using comfortable beds and chairs. For dasasil the seventh precept is broken into two and the tenth precept involves not touching gold or silver. This precept is often interpreted as not holding money.

5. Interviews conducted June, 1983.

6. Analysis of questionnaires of dsms from the Commissioner of Buddhist Affairs, Colombo.

7. Personal communication of the genealogy of the Duwewatta Walawwa family. I would like to thank Mr. K. Dharmawickrama of Kandy for pointing out Catherine deAlvis’ relationship to James deAlvis.


9. Interview with Sister Ampitiye Anula, a student of Sister Sudharmachari.

10. Ibid. Chaung Oo Manug Sandar, “The Monastery of Queen Seindon,” Ngwe-dar-ji (1980). This article was translated by Dr. U Kyaw Than who with Director Htun Hmat Win of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Burma and his Deputy Director, Daw Khin Khin Su was of immense help in developing material on the thela shin.


15. Interviews with Sisters A. K. Somawathi and W. M. Seelawathi, two of the first of the younger dsms to be ordained by Sister Sudharmachari.


18. Interview with Sister Nawala Dhammika of Anuradhapura.

19. Interview with Sister Kotmale Sudharma to whom Sister Mawichari had given her biography. “Ma” and “Daw” are terms of respect designating age in Burma. These terms were grafted to the names of the Sisters by the Sri Lankans.

20. Interview with Sister Khemachari of Badalgama.


23. Personal communication from Professor George Bond.
27. I would like to thank President J. R. Jayewardene for allowing the use of the Presidential Archives where I found much of the following information on the founding of the Biyagama Ārāmaya. *Report on the Vihāra MahāDevi Samitiya*. (1936).
34. Interview with Sister Sudharma.
35. Interview with Sister Sudharma and a letter from her grade school teacher, Mrs. M. Kulasekere.
36. Interview with Sister Sudharma.
37. Interview with Sister Sudharma. The material in this section comes from interviews with *dsms* throughout the Sinhalese areas of Sri Lanka. As a rule interviews were held with the head of the nunneries and as these women tended to be the most educated and most orthodox in their beliefs, the study is slanted toward their understandings of the present situation. A fine study of the *dsms* primarily in the Anuradhapura region but having implications for the *dsm* movement as a whole has just been completed by E. Nissan. "Recovering Practice: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka," *South Asian Research*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (May, 1984), pp. 32–49.
38. Interview with Sister N. Dhammika.
41. Interview with Sister Shantilata who was the head *dsm* at Kundupoda and letters from Sisters Mahgoda Sumedha and Maitree of Nugegoda.
43. The *dsms* reported that they are often called upon by women who are experiencing family problems. They did not hesitate to confront the husband when they felt this was necessary.
44. Interview with Sister N. Dhammika.
45. Interview and correspondence with Sister Khemachari.
46. This is similar to the view of monks mentioned below.
47. Questionnaires returned to the Commissioner of Buddhist Affairs.
48. Interviews with Sisters Khemachari, Sudharma and Dhammika.
49. The material in this section is based on interviews with leading monks and 15 responses to a questionnaire sent to 49 Mahânâyakas in various parts of Sri Lanka.
50. In addition to speaking to many early lay supporters of the dsms movement, I surveyed lay attitudes at three sacred complexes: the Sri Mahâbodhi at Anuradhapura, the Temple of the Tooth at Kandy, and the shrine at Bellanewila.
51. M. Ames, "Ideological and Social Change in Ceylon," Human Organization, Vol. 33. No. 1. (Spring, 1963) pp. 49–53 mentions that vipassanâ was believed to bring health and happiness to the meditator.
52. Interview with Sister Khema and biographical note supplied by Sister Khema.
53. Interviews with Mrs. Irene Nanayakkara.
54. Sister Khema was invited to speak at the Island Hermitage but was prevented by the chief monk of the nikâya. She spoke to the laity on the mainland instead and they donated an island to her cause.
55. See Daily News, Saturday, Oct. 2, 1982, p. 9. In another article in the Daily News, Sister Khema calls for a women's peace corps in Sri Lanka while speaking to the dsms at Madiwala. She goes on to say that the dsms must be trained in teaching, social service and hospital work.