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Going beyond their religious duties

By Dhananjani Silva

The Bhikkhunis at Sakyadhita Centre, established in 1993, bring solace to hundreds of women and children through their social work

View(s):

Reaching out to women in need, are the 'daughters of Buddha' at Sakyadhita Sri Lanka monastery. Set in the tranquil environs overlooking the Bolgoda Lake, this monastery shelters five residential Bhikkhunis in addition to the visiting nuns from time to time. Over the years, the Bhikkhunis in the monastery have been a great source of comfort to hundreds of women, both in the village and outside, who are emotionally scarred due to various problems they face in life. The Sakyadhita Training and Meditation Centre Sri Lanka situated in Dhammananda Mawatha, Gorakana, Pandura has been a place frequented by many such helpless women to relieve their minds of many burdens that have given them enormous psychological pain.



A young Bhikkhuni at the centre. Pix by Susantha Liyanawatte

In earlier times, the role played by the Buddhist nuns was restricted to religious activities, but the Bhikkhunis at the Sakyadhita Centre have taken a step beyond their conventional role by getting involved in social work. They devote much of their time to assisting women and children by various means, says Madulle Vijithananda Bhikkhuni, Head of Sakyadhita Sri Lanka.

The Sakyadhita Centre was established in 1993, by Ranjini De Silva following the historic Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Colombo. Being a main Centre for Bhikkhunis of higher ordination in Sri Lanka, it functions as a focal point in training and nurturing an educated set of Buddhist nuns to empower them to serve society.

"I was among the second batch of nuns to have come for training at this centre in 2003. At the conclusion of the training, I was asked to take over the centre as the Head Nun. During the training, we were taught how to work closely with the villagers, to look after their welfare and assist them in their problems. Our objective is to first attend to the problems of the laymen before preaching the religion to them. There is no point in preaching to those who are starved, burdened with family problems or financial difficulties, says Bhikkhuni Vijithananda adding that their assistance is freely given to everyone, regardless of religion, caste or ethnicity.

Counselling grief stricken women is one of their main activities.

"There are lots of mothers, wives and daughters who come to us to talk about their problems at home. We have even had those who have approached the centre after seeing the Sakyadhita name board on top of the lane, while they are just wandering on the streets, not

wanting to go home. We have plenty of time to spare for such people; to sit with them and carefully listen to them. After we gain a good understanding of the problem,



Bhikkhuni Vijithananda (left) with another Bhikkhuni at the centre

we start counselling them on how they could approach a possible solution,” says Bhikkhuni Vijithananda who has been in robes for 32 years.

Sakyadhita Bikkhunis also conduct a special programme for pregnant women on the second Saturday of each month. “The expectant mother’s psychological condition has a great impact on the baby. Therefore, our effort is to give them that much needed peace of mind as much as possible. We educate them on ways to keep the mind calm, without being disturbed by everyday hassles. We get them involved in meditation, bodhi pooja and sil programmes for their spiritual upliftment. “

They also conduct special programmes for youth from child rehabilitation centres and meditation programmes for the elderly. On Sunday evenings, a workshop on good social values titled ‘Saradarma Wedamuluwa’ is held and for village children who cannot afford to go for tuition, evening classes are held free of charge in subjects such as Mathematics, English and Sinhala.

Bhikkhuni Vijithananda says they also respond immediately when there are crises such as natural disasters in the country. After the tsunami, they assisted the displaced in temporary shelters in the vicinity and together with the villagers collected dry rations, clothes and medicine. Similar efforts were carried out during a land slide in Walapane and during the floods in Ratnapura last year.

While they allocate much of their time for social service work, one week of the month, they concentrate on meditation restricting themselves to the centre.