

Appreciation for Ven. Ayyā Mie Vimalā

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By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi



On January 3rd, I received an email from Ken and Visakha Kawasaki, an American couple living in Kandy, informing me that my long-time friend, Ven. Ayyā Mie Vimalā, had passed away in a hospital in Kandy. Though she had been suffering from cancer of the pancreas, she had not expected her end to come so soon and had recently arrived in Kandy in quest of a suitable place to live and pursue her Dhamma activities.

I had known Ayyā Vimalā years before her ordination as a *dasa silmata*, a ten-precept nun. I first met her at the Forest Hermitage in Kandy, I think in late 1985, when she had come to visit the German elder, Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera (1901–94), whom she regarded as her teacher. Before her ordination, the name by which I knew her was Michiko Tokue. Her passport designates her by a different name, Mie Margarete Kurbjeweit. She had retained “Mie” in her monastic name, but I had never come across the other two parts of her name until after her death. I can only speculate that “Margarete” is the name her mother gave her and “Michiko” a name she adopted out of respect for her Japanese ancestry.

Ayyā Vimalā was born in the port city of Königsberg, on the Baltic Sea. At the time, the city was in East Prussia, part of Germany, but is now an enclave of Russia under a different name: Kaliningrad. The city is best known as the hometown of Immanuel Kant, the great philosopher of the late eighteenth century. Her father was Japanese and her mother German. She was born on August 17, 1943, two years before the end of World War II. She never discussed her father with me, and I think it likely that her parents separated soon after her birth. It thus seems she grew up solely with her mother in a single-parent home. She never mentioned having any brothers or sisters, so I assume she was an only child.

Growing up in postwar Germany, she suffered from the hunger and poverty that afflicted many Germans before post-war reconstruction revived the German economy. She had told me long ago that on many days in her childhood her mother was unable to provide her with food. Years later, when she reached her young adulthood, she was trained in music and had a professional career as an opera singer. This gave her great happiness, but not complete satisfaction. Despite her professional success, she always felt that something was missing in her life.

In her 30s she developed an interest in Buddhism, which she first pursued through the practice of Zen meditation, perhaps because it corresponded most closely with her Japanese heritage. She made several visits to Japan, and it might have been at a Zen monastery that she was given the dharma name “Mie.” This she retained as part of her monastic name after her Theravada ordination.

Soon after her fortieth birthday, her life underwent a dramatic change. She had read an article about Sri Lanka in a German cultural magazine. The article featured Ven. Nyanaponika and included a photograph of him sitting at his desk in the Forest Hermitage, in the Udawattakele Forest Reserve near the town of Kandy. The article--and especially the photograph of the Mahathera--made a strong impact on her, and she was determined to meet him. Ven. Nyanaponika had lived in Sri Lanka since 1936 and was widely regarded as one of the world's foremost authorities on Theravada Buddhism. Since he was from her home country and had even lived in Königsberg for a time during his youth, she felt a special affinity with him.

She joined a tour group from Germany visiting Sri Lanka during the Christmas holidays of 1983. One day, on a trip to southwest Sri Lanka, she had an irresistible impulse to meet the German elder, and so she broke away from the tour group and set out for the town of Kandy. When she finally arrived at the Forest Hermitage, she felt she had finally come home. She immediately recognized Ven. Nyanaponika as her teacher and asked him to accept her as his student. Over the next few years, she returned to Sri Lanka several times to spend time with Ven. Nyanaponika and to immerse herself more deeply in Sri Lanka's ancient Buddhist heritage.

She would stay for several months at a time, renting a room in the town of Kandy and making frequent visits to the Forest Hermitage. Thereby she drew ever closer to the Dhamma. It was during this period that my friendship with her developed. On one of these visits (most likely the one in 1985, when I first met her), she received from Ven. Nyanaponika the five *brahmacariya* precepts. These are identical with the standard five precepts (*pañcasīla*) of a lay Buddhist, except that the third precept is changed from "abstaining from sexual misconduct" to "abstaining from all sexual activity." Ven. Nyanaponika also gave her the Dhamma name Vimalā.

She arrived back in Sri Lanka in October 1991, this time wearing white robes and with her hair closely cropped. She was planning to stay for close to six months. Toward the end of her stay, I believe, she asked Ven. Nyanaponika if he would ordain her as a ten-precept nun, but he was reluctant to do so, apprehensive that she would meet difficulties observing the ten precepts while living independently in the West. But she was determined to fully embrace the homeless life, so perhaps in late March or early April of 1992 she requested a senior monk of the Malwatta Maha Vihara with whom she was friendly, one Ven. Piyadassi Thera, to ordain her as a ten-precept nun. This must have been toward the very end of her stay in Sri Lanka.

After returning to Europe, Ayyā Vimalā lived as a nun for periods in Germany and the Spanish island of Mallorca, and also spent time in California. However, she felt a strong attraction to Hawaii, which she had visited several times on vacations during her lay life. She intended to become a permanent resident of Hawaii, with the hope of setting up a Theravada vihara in Honolulu. Finally, in 1994 or 1995, she moved to Hawaii, where she became an active and prominent member of Honolulu's Buddhist community, on friendly terms with the Buddhists of all the sects based in Honolulu. She established a small Theravada vihara in her apartment and also conducted meditation courses and gave Dhamma talks in temples belonging to the island's

varied ethnic communities. She was especially friendly with the monks at a Thai temple in Honolulu, stayed for periods at a Chinese nunnery in the city, and participated in events convened by the Jodo Shinshu community. She became a lifetime member of the Mahabodhi Society of India and hoped to establish a branch of the Mahabodhi Society in Honolulu.

While living an active outward life, Ayya Vimala also pursued her inner life as a meditator, a diligent student of the Buddhist texts, and a writer. One of her hidden talents was poetry, and she privately published a small book of poems, to which I wrote the foreword. In the foreword, I wrote: “To her task of writing poetry, she brings not only her deep commitment and engagement with Buddhism, but a sensitive mind shaped by her meditation practice, a love of nature expressive of her Japanese heritage, and a sensitive ear formed by her professional background as a singer.”

She also published two books on the recollection of death, one privately (*Crossing the Realm of Death*, 2008) and the other through the Sri Lankan publisher, Vijita Yapa (*Maraṇānussati*, 2018). During her stay in Hawaii, she became fascinated by the story of Mary Foster, the Hawaiian Buddhist woman who generously supported the work of the Sri Lankan Buddhist revivalist, Anagarika Dharmapala. Her research into the life and work of Mary Foster resulted in a book published in Sri Lanka by Vijita Yapa, *Mary Mikahala Foster, The Noble Hawaiian Lady*. She also organized a memorial service for Mary Foster in collaboration with the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii.

In more recent years, she was preparing a book on German scholars in the field of Pali Buddhism and Sanskrit Indology. For this she had received help from Ken and Visakha Kawasaki, who were polishing her English. Together, they had completed the formatting of the book but had not done the final proofreading. She had returned to Kandy on Christmas Day in order to accomplish this task. She dedicated the book to the memory of Nyanaponika Mahathera and his teacher, the pioneering German monk Nyanatiloka Mahathera (1878–1957).

In April 2021, she returned to Sri Lanka, where she decided she would spend her final years. Each year, Ayyā Vimalā and I would exchange cards or email messages on our respective birthdays. This past year, as usual, she sent me a birthday greeting by email, wishing me good health and long life. At the end she said she would be sending me another email in two days.

The email actually came four days later, on December 14th. In this message, she said that she had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In November, she had taken a blood test and the figure indicative of cancer had risen “100 percent.” On many days, she wrote, she could not eat at all and had lost 10 kilos: “I’m just like a skeleton, extremely weak, and it takes me a lot of time to get up from the chair.” Her skin had turned yellow, and her doctor had prescribed a new, very expensive medication for her to help her body better absorb the nutrition from her food.

She was not entirely pessimistic about her future, for she wrote, “let’s see how it will be in a month.” And she said that toward the end of December, she would be moving back to Kandy. I

had suggested to her that she give up the idea of going to Kandy. Instead, I proposed that she go stay at a home for elders established by our mutual friend, Raimund Beyerlein, or accept Mr. Beyerlein's offer to provide her with a ticket back to Germany and oversee her medical care. But she was determined to remain in Sri Lanka and headed on up to Kandy.

She wrote back to me on December 30th, 2022, telling me that she arrived in Kandy and was staying at the Queens Hotel. In my earlier email, I had quoted the Buddha's advice to Nakulapita: "Even if my body is ill, my mind shall not be ill." In her response she said: "Since a very long time, I have had the realization, 'This body is not mine.'" She continued: "I have to deal with the situation, at present not good. Everything is extremely exhausting. I'm shivering even while writing this email." She ended this message by wishing me a happy new year.

I wrote back the same day, reminding her of Mr. Beyerlein's proposal that she could stay at the care center near Aluthgama or accept his offer to have her flown back to Germany, where he would have arranged for her medical care. I did not hear from her again in response to this suggestion.

I also wished her a happy and healthy new year. But she did not endure long beyond new year's day. On January 3rd, 2023, I received a message from Ken Kawasaki announcing the sad news: "It is with deep sorrow that we inform you that this morning we received a call from Queens Hotel that Ayyā Vimalā passed away in a hospital in Kandy."

With this, the end came to the life of a brave woman who had fully dedicated her life to the Buddha's teachings. She had lived through the difficult ordeal of a childhood spent in post-war Germany, where she had faced poverty and hunger. In her young adult years, she enjoyed professional success as an opera singer but had also felt an underlying discontent that she could not quell through worldly achievements. And then, almost by chance, she had discovered a deep inner spiritual connection with the Theravada Buddhist heritage of Sri Lanka, especially as embodied in the person of the German monk Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera, whom she took as her teacher and guide.

Despite all the challenges she knew lay ahead of her, her strong faith in the Dhamma and devotion to the monastic ideal led her to renounce the lay life and embrace the discipline of a ten-precept nun. In her endeavors, she was sustained by the "good friendship" (*kalyāṇamittatā*) she formed with other monastics she met in the course of her journey, especially with Sri Lankan monks around the world. Having taken on the ochre robes, she pursued her monastic life through study, writing, meditation, and efforts to make the Dhamma known to others. And like all of us, her body (though not her spirit) had to succumb to the inexorable law of impermanence.

May Ayyā Mie Vimalā attain the supreme goal, Nibbāna.