

## Ratnasuri

### Her Life

Ratnasuri was born on 1 April 1923, in Norwich, one of triplets. She and one sister survived - after a difficult start; they were so small they had to be fed by their parents with a dropper from a fountain pen. They joined a family that included a brother and another sister. Their father was a tailor. He made the family's clothes and they were always smartly dressed. Having such a talented father is perhaps where Ratnasuri's love of art and design started. At thirteen, she went to junior art school and enjoyed drawing, painting, dress design and poster design. At sixteen, she did an apprenticeship as a window dresser in a very smart Norwich department store, but any dreams of progression were abruptly halted by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. In 1942, at nineteen, she decided to join the war effort. She said later, "I really wanted to defeat Hitler!" Her boss at the department store was furious, but Ratnasuri had bigger concerns.

All who experienced the war witnessed the fragility of life, but perhaps especially those who saw conflict directly. Ratnasuri worked in the anti-aircraft battery guiding the guns and the men firing them. One night in Antwerp, after a frightening overhead air-raid, she set off to meet a boyfriend and found out he had been killed in a direct hit.

Ratnasuri was already looking for some deeper meaning to her life, but like many women she ended up getting married and settling down. Her marriage wasn't a happy one, but she did have two sons, Kevin and Peter, who she loved and cherished. She found employment doing quality control in a chocolate factory and as a lab technician for the Milk Marketing Board. The years passed and the children grew up.

In her mid-fifties, having left home, Ratnasuri took up yoga with Sona. Through him she started to read books about Buddhism. She also came across the magazine *Mitrata*, which was produced in Norwich by Srimala. Ratnasuri started attending classes at the Norwich Buddhist Centre. Typically, she threw herself into the sangha with youthful verve, even though, being in her fifties, she was regarded as 'old' by younger members. Eventually she was going to every class the centre offered! She worked with Aloka and other Order Members in the wholefood café, Rainbow, latterly Oranges. She had been involved for two years when she became a mitra. It was five years after first coming along to the Norwich Centre when, in 1983, she was ordained, alongside Ratnavandana and Ratnadakini. She was given the name Ratnasuri, which means 'Heroine of the Three Jewels'. At sixty, most people are thinking about retirement. Ratnasuri was just getting started!

After ordination, she lived and worked around the Croydon Buddhist Centre for a

year. Then, in 1983, the women members of the Western Buddhist Order decided to hold a month-long intensive retreat on the Isle of Muck. There were just twenty women Order members at the time and they joked on the journey that if the ferry went down on the way to Muck, that would be it for the women's wing of the Order! Fortunately, it didn't. On the retreat Sanghadevi announced that she wanted to set up the FWBO's first women's retreat centre and wanted someone to go with her. Guess who put up their hand and volunteered?

So at sixty-two years old, Ratnasuri found herself going down the long, bumpy track to Cornhill Farm, Shropshire, now known as Taraloka. There were four women who were the founder members of the Taraloka community: Sanghadevi and Ratnasuri and the mitras who would become Karunasri and Kulanandi. The fifth member was Ratnasuri's cat, Tansy. It wasn't easy; they were pioneers, and pioneers in boiler suits and hard hats as well, having to undertake much of the restoration work on the old farm themselves. Ratnasuri cooked valiantly for everyone on a camping gas stove, frequently with bits of ceiling falling in the food! She also co-led many of the meditation retreats with Sanghadevi.

Not long after moving to Taraloka, Ratnasuri became an 'anagarika'. This meant following the example of the Buddha by committing oneself to a simple life where one does not pick and choose; and also taking vows of celibacy. At her ceremony she wore the orange robes that symbolically connect with the Buddha and his early followers, a tradition stretching back over 2,500 years.

But Ratnasuri's heroism didn't stop there. In 1987, while on retreat at Taraloka, Ratnasuri received a phone call from Srimala. She told her that Sangharakshita's mother was ill so he couldn't go to India to conduct ordinations as planned. Now he wanted to ask if Ratnasuri would go with her, Srimala, to India to conduct the first ordinations of Indian women along with Padmasuri, who was living there. Ratnasuri was startled, but she couldn't mention it to anyone. A retreatant commented to her, "Something happened to you on that retreat!" and she thought, "If only you knew!" Having never been to India before she was scared by the prospect and wondered how she would cope with speaking in front of so many people. But she told herself, "I get nervous speaking in front of five people, what difference does it make if there's five hundred?" So, aged sixty-four, she went to India to conduct the public ordinations of Jnanasuri and Vimalasuri. As an anagarika, she wore her orange robes for the ceremony, which would have been a powerful visual symbol about women's spiritual potential for the Indian community.

The ordinations of the women in India were conducted 'on behalf of' Sangharakshita. Two years later he asked three senior women Order members to perform ordinations acting now 'on their own responsibility' - a very significant development for the Order. Srimala, Sanghadevi and Ratnasuri were the first women private preceptors acting in this way. But it was Ratnasuri who was asked to perform the public ordinations. In summer

1989, on a retreat at Taraloka, she received into the Order Cittaprabha from Sydney. A few weeks later, on 11 September, another six women received their ordinations. These were historic events, not only for the Western Buddhist Order, but for the whole Buddhist world where full ordination of women - a lineage started by the Buddha himself - had long since largely died out. Because Sangharakshita was able to entrust her with this responsibility, and she was willing to take it on, Ratnasuri opened the door for a new ordination lineage of women ordaining women to come into being. She went on to ordain many more women into the Triratna Buddhist Order. As a preceptor she privately and publicly ordained 45 women in total, as well as being a *kalyana mitra* or friend to countless others.

Ratnasuri was a lover of meditation and as well as living in the community at Taraloka, she took part in many retreats held there. She was frequently the oldest in community situations, but her *joie-de-vivre* and youthful spirits belied that. During all this time, she maintained her love and inspiration for the arts. She was a poet and a photographer. She loved relaxing to classical music in her reclining chair. And she was a print-maker, making prints from her own woodcuts. As well as her passion for creativity, meditation and friendship, she was a lover of technology and could be seen at the Genius Bar of an Apple Store whenever she got a chance!

At the end of 2005, Ratnasuri had a huge shock. She was celebrating a birthday in the Taraloka community when she had a phone call to say that her son, Peter, had died. His death was a great loss to Ratnasuri. Previously, she had been suffering with anaemia and later confided that had she still been anaemic, the shock might have killed her. Characteristically she responded to old age and anaemia by taking up the Vajrayogini meditation practice because “I needed more blood” and to “let go more”. She could be seen frequently at Order events manifesting the *dakini* energy on her pedal scooter!

In 2014, she made the decision to leave Taraloka, her home of nearly thirty years, and move into sheltered accommodation in nearby Wrexham. A retreat centre is a busy place to live and, aged ninety-one, she was ready for a quieter, more reflective life. She also relished the idea of shopping and cooking for herself, going about town, having adventures. Unfortunately, her eyesight was deteriorating quite rapidly due to macular degeneration, so she couldn't be as independent as she would have liked. One of the hardest things about sight loss, she said, was not being able to see the faces of her friends.

In 2019, it became clear that independent living was no longer viable for Ratnasuri, even though her friends, carers and the Taraloka community had helped considerably. With their help, she moved into a residential home in Wrexham with her beloved budgies, who gave her so much joy.

'Ratna' means jewel and Ratnasuri was a kind, generous, creative and multi-faceted person. 'Suri,' means heroine: she broke down barriers of what it means to be a woman Buddhist in the west and what it means to practise the Dharma in mid to old age.

She leaves behind an Order with a flourishing women's wing, and a lineage of women's ordinations that she helped inaugurate. She leaves behind many devoted friends and admirers, and her son Kevin. She will be sadly missed.

*Dharmacharini Kamalagita*

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