RAI Film Webinar: Keepers of the Faith: The Buddhist Nuns of Sagaing Hills (1996)

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Keepers of the Faith: The Buddhist Nuns of Sagaing Hills (1996) 51 minutes

With Prof Hiroko Kawanami (Lancaster University) and Rachelle Saruya (University of Toronto)

As part of ongoing efforts to preserve and upgrade our archival film holdings, this seminar is based around a newly digitised version of a remarkable film directed by Hiroko Kawanami (Professor of Buddhism and Society, Lancaster University, UK). It is now available to be seen on the RAI Film Player via video on demand (VOD).

In 1986 the filmmaker lived for 15 months as a nun in the Thameikdaw Gaung nunnery in the Sagaing Hills of Upper Myanmar, which is twelve miles west across the Irrawaddy River from the ancient capital Mandalay. In the early 1990s she returned for another visit to see what has changed. The film was made during this second visit to the nunnery, where in a purely rural setting, nuns who had access for foreigners, go about their lives. The film an intimate journey into the religious practices and everyday lives of people in Myanmar through the eyes of Buddhist nuns.

The film is part of an impressive body of widely published scholarship and ongoing research on the religious and social standing of women in Myanmar and that Professor Kawanami has pursued over the last 30 years. With an emphasis on the empowerment of women and an analysis of gender relations within Myanmar's monastic communities, Professor Kawanami has shown how nuns stand in-between the religious and the secular and play a vital role in mediating the two worlds. Her most recent monographs are The Culture of Giving in Myanmar (2020 Bloomsbury) and Renunciation and Empowerment of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar-Burma (2013 Brill).

This webinar will provide an opportunity for Professor Kawanami to introduce the film to new audiences as well as look back and consider the impact the film has made over the last 3 decades. We will be joined by scholar Rachelle Saruya, a PhD student at the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. Her ethnographic research looks at the educational practices of the Myanmar-Burmese Buddhist nuns at Sagaing, Myanmar.