

VINAYA

Monks and Money

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This is the second article in the series about the Vinaya, the body of monastic rules and traditions binding on every Buddhist monk and nun. In this article I will be concerned with the controversial issue of a monk's or nun's dealings with money.

The issue has been controversial for over 2,000 years. Around 200 years after the Buddha's final passing away, there arose a great quarrel in which "both endless disputations arose and of not one speech was the meaning clear" [1]. This dispute arose because a large community of monks were accepting money in defiance of the Vinaya. The proceedings of the dispute became known as the Second Council and it sowed the seed of the first great schism in the Buddhist world, which happened soon after.

Then, as now, there is no excuse for uncertainty on this point, for the Buddha's own words make it plain...

On Monks and Money

Buddhist monks (bhikkhus) and nuns (bhikkhunis) are not allowed to accept money for themselves. Nor are they allowed to tell a trustworthy layperson to receive it on their behalf and keep it for them (e.g. keeping a personal bank account). Such practices are explicitly prohibited in the 18th rule of the section of Vinaya called Nissaggiya Pacittiya.

Nor may monks or nuns buy and sell things for themselves using money. This is prohibited by the 19th rule in the Nissaggiya Pacittiya.

Some people argue that these two rules refer only to gold and silver but such a view is indefensible. The Vinaya specifically states that these rules cover "whatever is used in business" [2], i.e. any medium of exchange.

Other people try to get around this rule by saying that it is only a minor rule, inapplicable to monastic life today. Indeed, the Buddha once did say that the Sangha may abolish the "lesser and minor" rules.

But is this rule a minor one?...

'Monks, there are these four stains because of which the sun and moon glow not, shine not, blaze not. What are these four? Rain clouds... snow clouds... smoke and dust... and an eclipse. Even so, monks, there are these four stains because of which monks and priests glow not, shine not, blaze not. What are these four? Drinking alcohol... indulging in sexual intercourse... accepting gold or money... obtaining one's requisites through a wrong mode of livelihood. These are the four stains, monks, because of which monks and priests glow not, shine not, blaze not.' [3]

Obviously, the Buddha thought that the rule prohibiting the acceptance of gold or money was, indeed, a very important rule.

The non-acceptance of money has always been one of the fundamental observances of those who have left the world. Money is the measure of wealth and to most people material wealth is the goal of life. In the renunciation of money by monks and nuns, they emphatically demonstrate their complete rejection of worldly pursuits. At one stroke they set themselves significantly apart from the vast majority of people and thus become a constant reminder to all that a life based on the struggle to accumulate money is not the only way to live. Through giving up money they give up much of their power to manipulate the world and to satisfy their desires. Thus, as the Buddha once said when asked whether money was permissible to the monks and nuns:

'Whoever agrees to gold or money, headman, also agrees to the five strands of sensual pleasure, and whoever agrees to the five strands of sensual pleasure, headman, you may take it for certain that this is not the way of a recluse, that this is not the way of a Buddhist monk.'[4]

References

- [1] *Book of the Discipline*, volume 5, page 424.
- [2] *Book of the Discipline*, volume 2, page 102.
- [3] *Anguttara Nikaya*, volume 2, page 53. (my translation)
- [4] *Samyutta Nikaya*, volume 4, page 326. (my translation)

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