

Refraining from Possessing the Treasure

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It has been more than 2,500 years after our Lord Buddha's great passing away, the world is now developed into a modern world with high technologies. It certainly has a great impact on the lifestyles of the Sangha community (monk and nun) and Buddhist deities. It is a good time that the significance of the rules of Vinaya should be reviewed and discussed in order to maintain the Buddha's teachings and instructions, and establish some new rules which will strengthen our Buddhist Sangha and individual monk or nun as a whole. This is a significant key to protect and maintain our Buddhism much longer in the modern and high technological environments and be firm with our Teacher. The part of a rule of Vinaya on refraining from possessing the treasure will be discussed in terms of Sangha and individual monk properties, the aspects of the laity donor and how the Sangha and individual monk can manage to cope with it.

The name the Buddha gave to the spiritual path was "Dhammavinaya" – suggesting an integration of wisdom and ethical training. The Vinaya is an essential foundation of the Buddha's teachings, together with the Dhamma. When the Buddha first established the Sangha, the community initially lived in harmony without any codified rules of conduct. As the Sangha gradually grew in number and evolved into a more complex society, occasions inevitably arose when a member would act in an unskillful way. Whenever one of these cases was brought to the Buddha's attention, he would lay down a rule establishing a suitable punishment for the offense, as a deterrent to future misconduct.

The Dhamma-Vinaya is the discipline which the Buddha laid down as our Teacher after he was gone. He formulated the rules after stating his reasons when bhikkhu (monk) and bhikkhuni (female monk) misbehaved. They fall into three main types. The first two are external: (1) to ensure peace and well-being within the Sangha community, (2) to encourage and protect good faith among the laity, upon whom the bhikkhus depend on their support – the origin stories of the various rules depict the laity as generalizing quickly. They complain when one bhikkhu misbehaves

“How can the bhikkhu do that? The third is internal: the rule is to help restrain and prevent mental affluent within any individual bhikkhu. Thus the rules aim not only at the external well-being of the community, but also at the internal well-being of the individual. The latter reason of Vinaya becomes apparent to anyone who seriously tries to keep to the rules, for they encourage mindfulness and circumspection in one’s actions, qualities that lead into the training of the mind.

Since the Vinaya rules were laid down and instructed by our Lord Buddha, we need to be very conscious to alter any of His established rules. A complete attention on this significant issue needs careful consideration whether they are genuine minor rules which our Teacher had allowed to be altered after His passing away. This certainly requires an explicit interpretation of the rules in Vinaya which govern the life of Theravada bhikkhu and bhikkhuni.

The actual lifestyle of the present Sangha community has been changed drastically due to today’s diversified culture as well as practicing them strictly. Anything which can or may deteriorate the teaching of our Buddha is detriment to maintaining the Buddha’s religion as the consequence will affect the stability of Buddhism. We, the Buddhist devotees, are responsible to protect our Buddha-sasana. Furthermore, the rules of Vinaya are also the procedures and convention of etiquette that support harmonious relations, both among the monastics themselves, and between the monastics and their lay supporters, on whom they depend for all material needs. Concerning material needs, for the [art of refraining from possessing the Treasure] the significance of the Vinaya Rule in the modern day context can be taken into as follows:

Firstly, the treasure should be interpreted explicitly under “Sanghika Property” in Vinaya as Lahubhandha (light articles) – not high value and Garubhanda (heavy articles) include some other valuable property, expensive things, non-movable property. A monk may only have rights to have a personal possession of eight kinds, Atthaparikkhara (extra possession or extra property). The rest belong to the Sangha community including twenty five kinds of Garubhanda.

In general sense, it could be understood that individual monk might have his own possessed property. Actually, he is the owner of those things in the sense that he is a member of community. Even though, the property might belong to individuals, an individual should announce his possession to the community in order to use and keep them, the allowance should be given by Sangha authority to the individual for the

personal use. So, there is the only way for any monk being able to use light and heavy articles should be with the agreement of Sangha order.

Secondly, according to laity's mind and attitude the valuable donation offered by them primarily meant to benefit the Sangha community for the well-being of the Sangha and Buddhism as they represent the Buddha's religion, to propagate His teachings and maintain His teachings. The laity normally regards bhikkhu or bhikkhuni as one who has renounced the world and followed the Buddha's Dhamma and Vinaya which are free from laity's lifestyle, especially the possession of treasure. The bhikkhu has sacrificed to live according to the rules of Vinaya when he took the ordination which gains respect and good faith of the laity. Therefore it is very sensitive issue that any weakness of laity's faith will lead to the weakness of support. This is a critical issue, that of insufficient support, which in turn leads to the deterioration and gradual disappearance of Buddhism. However, if any new established rules within the Sangha community can gain more respect and more faith of the laity which based on harmonious and peaceful means, they will eventually lead to the growth and prosperity of Buddhism in the present and also in the future.

The donors are encouraged to offer properties to the Sangha rather than to the individual monks. Once, Mahapajapati Gotami (the step-mother of Prince Siddhattha Gotama) came to the Buddha in order to offer a new pair of robes, the Buddha told her: "Give it to the Sangha, Gotami. When you give it to the Sangha, Both, I and the Sangha, will be honored." To this he added further, saying to Ananda Thera: "In the future times, Ananda, there will be members of the clan who are 'yellow-necked, immoral, of bad character. People will give gifts to those immoral persons for the sake of the Sangha. Even then, I say, an offering made to the Sangha is incalculable, immeasurable. And I say that in no way is a gift to a person, individually, ever more fruitful than an offering made to the Sangha.'" (MN, Sutta 142 – Dakkhinavibhanga)

According to this point of view, we can admit that whatever was offered by lay devotee to a member of the Sangha, if it was offered with good intention, and with devotion and for the sake of the Sangha, it will be a great benefit to the Sangha and the laity's life.

The person who receives might be of different level of virtue, and the person who makes an offering might be of different level of virtue too. So, the importance in here is the intention, the donor gives with to a person – it is intended to be offered to a community of bhikkhus or Bhikkhuni (Sangha). In this case, the benefits will be there no matter what kind of receiver there would be.

Thirdly, after an explicit interpretation regarding the “Sanghika Property” an effective system to handle and cope with the possession of property and treasure of Sangha community and individual monk needs to be well established in order to abide by the rules of Vinaya smoothly and conveniently. This will help bhikkhu and bhikkhuni to live and successfully deal with the *modern day* without tampering with our Buddha’s teachings and instructions.

As Vinaya rules clearly had mentioned on matters dealing with properties, it should be understood that under no circumstances, monks can receive money or valuable things like precious stone, and coins or modern currencies. But in the era of modern tech developments and changes, monks too, are subject to these changes. Thus there are members of the community of monks, who due to the needs of the community would engage in the use of modern technologies, due to the inconvenience or proper travels – monks had started to become involved with the use of properties. These kinds of things are unavoidable matters – in the world today. Only if monks use these properties in the sense of communal belongings and without indulging in leisure, then usage of newer technology probably would be: proper and helpful.

With reference to Anguttara-Nikaya 7.80 - Upali Thera said to the Blessed One: “It would be good, Lord, if the Blessed One would teach me the Dhamma in brief such that, having heard the Dhamma from the Blessed One, I might dwell alone, secluded, heedful, ardent and resolute.”

“Upali,, the qualities of which you may know, ‘these qualities do not lead to utter disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, nor to unbinding.’ You may definitely hold, ‘This is not the Dhamma, this is not the Vinaya, this is not the Teacher’s instruction.’”

“As for the qualities, of which you may know, ‘These qualities lead to utter disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.’ You may definitely hold, “this is Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher’s instruction.”

In order to alter any rules of Vinaya, an explicitly precise interpretation is essentially required as it certainly affects our Buddha’s teachings and instructions and has great impact on our Buddha-sasana in the long-run, as time goes by. Perhaps it is necessary to involve, not only the Sangha’s views, but also the views from trustworthy Buddhist devotees. With the effective trustworthy opinions of both Sangha and lay-devotees for the benefit of Buddhism, as a whole, there should be some ways to overcome inconveniences from the modern-lifestyles of the Sangha.