



Commentaries on Buddhist Doctrines & Precepts Volume 1

**Case of (1) Vegetarian & Non-Vegetarian Buddhist Monks,
(2) Ordination of Female Buddhist Monks, and
(3) Buddhist Monks' Money Receiving and Spending**

1st Edition

by

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Introduction

Buddhism is an ancient religion of the world which has been studied and practiced for more than 2,600 years. In the beginning, Buddhism was established by Lord Gotama Buddha who is the Buddha of the present Buddhist era. Since his enlightenment until passing away, Lord Gotama Buddha had taught the Dhamma which is his doctrine and regulated many precepts for Buddhist monks to observe. Prior to his passing away, Lord Gotama Buddha told his disciples to take the '*Dhamma & Vinaya*' (Buddhist doctrines & precepts) as their religious leader after he passed away.

Doctrines & Precepts as the Religious Leader

According to the issue that Lord Gotama Buddha referred to the Buddhist doctrines and precepts to be his successor instead of nominating a qualified Buddhist monk, it can be perceived in many ways and subjected to various interpretation. When the Buddha was alive, his disciples regularly requested him to explain, clarify, justify, and provide further description over the Buddhist doctrines and precepts whereas the process can be completed easily by the Buddha himself. Therefore, the principle, objective, approach, and methodology exemplified by Lord Gotama Buddha when he was alive should be taken as the role model. Notwithstanding, after Lord Gotama Buddha passed away, when there is a doubt over a doctrine or precept, the consideration and justification by Buddhist monks and/or Buddhist scholars may not be well or widely recognized like the Buddha's. This has caused effects in many levels, and the impact may be strong enough to result the Buddhist monks to be separated into different sects.

Considering the Doctrines and Precepts in Harmony

When it is taken into account that the Buddhist doctrines and precepts are to be recognized as the top priority after Lord Gotama Buddha passed away, we come to realize that when there is any religious issue, it is necessary to consider both the doctrines and the precepts altogether in accord whereas they are

expected to be firmly principled but flexible and applicable in term of practice like the Lord Buddha himself when he was alive. This means that the issue must not be justified or interpreted in such a way that causes more conflicts or problems within the logic system of doctrines and precepts themselves. If we compare the Buddhist doctrines and precepts with a watch movement, the solution to any religious issue should aim to fix the problem and enable the continuation of watch's function instead of impairing or causing the system break down.

Differences in the Doctrines and Precepts

If we have to consider and justify a religious issue in Buddhism which is related to more than one community of Buddhist monk (*Sangha*) or the foreign Buddhist monk community or different Buddhist sect, we have to be aware of the more or less difference in doctrines and precepts observed by such Buddhist monk community. This is because, the similarity and difference of doctrines and precepts that each monastic community or Buddhist sect follows, prolongs, and practices, can result in similarity and difference in various aspects as we can see in the present. Even when Lord Gotama Buddha was alive, he had to amend the regulated precepts for Buddhist monks in a specific territory in order to enable and ease the applicability and practicality of Buddhism depending on necessity.

Direct Role of the Buddhist Monk Community

The strict preserving and prolonging of Buddhist doctrines and precepts in such a way that they will not deviate much from the original as delivered by Lord Gotama Buddha is very significant because the Buddhist monks will rely on them for further interpretation and justification. Thus, the scriptural error made to the doctrines and precepts will cause misperception on the first hand. Normally, it is the duty of Buddhist monks to do their best in preserving and prolonging the Buddhist doctrines and precepts as well as carrying on into practice among the Buddhists at both monastic and secular level. The Buddhist Monk Community is

very important to this role as it has been a tradition since Lord Gotama Buddha's lifetime that the Buddhist monk community has been assigned to perform many religious duties together when the Lord Buddha was not present. The religious duties include providing ordination, punishing monks, identifying and acknowledging the territory of a Buddhist chapel as well as other monastic duties. The key to understand this issue is that Buddhist monk community was given power or authorized by the Lord Buddha to perform or involve in religious duties instead of a trusted and qualified Buddhist monk to do the duties as the representative of the Buddha. The power given to the Buddhist monk community as a whole by Lord Gotama Buddha is clear as he granted the community of monks to be able to amend or revoke minor precepts after he passed away. This means that if the Buddhist monks would do it, they have to do it together as a resolution from the monk community, not from a single senior or qualified Buddhist monk.

Considering the Time

Besides the doctrines, the precepts, and the Buddhist monk community, we have to consider the time which affects the issue. Although we adhere to the principle that the doctrines and precepts are to be preserved, prolonged, and carried on by the Buddhist monks with minimum deviation, the Lord Gotama Buddha already predicted that as time flew by, there would certainly be various changes to Buddhism in the future. For example, the Buddhist monks in the 'recession generation' of Buddhism who observe few of Buddhist doctrines and precepts will have a small piece of saffron robe on their sleeve, and they will be considered to be the Buddhist monks. However, this is acceptable to that generation, but it is prohibited if individuals are still capable of complete ordination and Buddhist monastic practices which are still available. So, the issue of 'exception when and where applicable' is another aspect that we have to take into account.

Other Contributing Factors

Presently, the considering and justifying related to the Buddhist doctrines and precepts for the purpose of preserving, prolonging, and practicing, are still be mainly carried on by the Buddhist monk community. However, in some country or governing territory, there may be laws, requirement, and regulation that allow qualified lay devotees to participate in the process and/or procedure. In addition, there are other contributing factors which affect the consideration and justification over the issue of doctrines and precepts such as law, creed, tradition, conduct, culture, and the society. Regarding the commentaries given in this article, the commentator wishes to provide descriptive explanation on 3 issues which may be beneficial to the Buddhist monk community and lay devotees for further consideration and justification to cease conflicts in Buddhism.

Buddhist Monks & Vegetarian Foods

This issue has been raised as a concern over the Buddhist monks' consumption of vegetarian foods. In general, the Mahayana Buddhists support the idea that Buddhist monks are required to eat vegetarian foods whereas the Theravadian Buddhist monks claim that Lord Gotama Buddha did not regulate the precept that enforces Buddhist monks to be vegetarians. Indeed, the complication is caused by the different versions of doctrines and precepts which they observe. Thus, it is difficult to justify who is right or wrong.

According to the Theravadian Buddhist scripture, the concern over the vegetarian food was formally brought to Lord Gotama Buddha's attention for the first time by Devadatta, a Buddhist monk from a royal family and a kin to the Lord Buddha, who wished to replace the Lord Buddha in governing the Buddhist monk community. Devadatta asked the Lord Buddha amidst the Buddhist disciples to regulate a precept that required Buddhist monks to eat vegetarian foods because he wished to express his superior idea and conduct. However, the

Lord Buddha declined, but the Buddha did not prohibit the Buddhist monks from being vegetarians because he wished the monks not to cause difficulty to lay devotees who donated foods to them.

Therefore, if the lay devotees offer vegetarian foods to the monks, the monks will have to consume them without refusing. Likewise, if foods cooked from meat are offered to the monks, they should consume the foods without discrimination. Both kinds of food yield different benefits. If Buddhist monks consume vegetarian foods, it helps to lessen the demand for meat. Thus, there will be less animals being killed for foods. The quantity of livestock will be decreased accordingly. The sin that will occur to those who raise and kill livestock will be lessened. The lay devotees who cook vegetarian foods and offer them to Buddhist monks or consume by themselves will earn merit from having kindness and compassion, wishing the animals to have less suffering, revenge, and harm. Their mind will be meritorious whereas the revengeful mind of animals who are killed for foods will be minimized.

Therefore, Buddhist monks should be contented on foods offered by lay devotees whether they receive meat or vegetarian foods as they are not supposed to enjoy themselves with sensual pleasure from consuming either meat or vegetarian foods. The monks should be satisfied with whatever is offered to them. If lay devotees wish to offer foods made from meat, the benefit is that they will not have difficulty in cooking foods. If the lay devotees are not vegetarian, they may have to cook separate dishes of foods for monks if monks are required to be vegetarians. This will be inconvenient and cause more expenditure to the lay devotees. In addition, if the lay devotees wish to offer the foods made from meat that they like with an aim for the fruit of merit that allows them to karmically get what they like in return, they will enjoy this benefit. By the way, considering the issue of lay devotees' convenience in offering foods to the Buddhist monks, it will not be an important issue to the Mahayana monks because they can cook vegetarian foods for their own consumption. This is

different from the Theravadian monks whose precept disallows them to cook. Thus, Theravadian monks mainly rely on donated foods. If the lay devotees wish them to eat vegetarian foods regularly, it is possible that the lay devotees have to cook vegetarian foods and offer to the monks everyday, and there is no prohibition.

To conclude, we can say that the monks' consumption of vegetarian foods and non-vegetarian foods are both beneficial. However, whether the Theravadian monks would consume vegetarian foods or not, the main principle in consuming foods is to keep up with the contentment by being satisfied with whatever is donated to them and never over-enjoying themselves with foods, either vegetarian or non-vegetarian. Presently, there are also other additional factors to be considered by Buddhist monks over their consumption of foods such as hygiene, safety, disease, and health. Thus, the Buddhist monks may have to be more careful in selecting what to eat. They may even have to buy foods to eat due to health problems. Lay devotees have to consider these additional factors when they cook foods, either vegetarian or non-vegetarian, and offer to Buddhist monks.

Beside regular and daily food consumption of Buddhist monks, they should follow the practice of the majority Buddhists in a country or at a monastery where the community of monks eat vegetarian foods in order to comply to the Buddhist practice of such monastery or country and to reassure that foods will not be taken as a big concern, but rather be treated as the elements that provide necessary energy and nutrients which sustain the functioning of one's body.

Ordination of Female Buddhist Monks (*Bhikkhuni*)

The ordination of female Buddhist monks is also a disputable issue among Buddhists in the present whether it complies to the original requirements made by the Lord Buddha or not. To consider this issue, we trace back to the situation

when the Lord Buddha granted ordination to the first female Buddhist monk, the Lord Buddha's stepmother. By that time, Venerable Ananda who was the Lord Buddha's attendant requested the Buddha to grant ordination to women. Lord Gotama Buddha pointed out to Venerable Ananda that female Buddhist monks may weaken the religion, but the Buddha finally granted the ordination and set up many requirements to female ordainees to follow as a prevention of possible problems. After numerous women were ordained to be female Buddhist monks, the Lord Buddha had regulated hundreds of precepts to maintain good discipline of the female Buddhist monk community. These requirements and precepts eventually make it difficult for women to get ordained and remain in the monastic community. If the female Buddhist monks are not really committed to the wholesome religious practice with good dedication, they will find it difficult or inconvenient to continue their monkhood. We may say that even though the Lord Buddha granted ordination to women, the requirements and hundreds of precepts were quite discouraging. However, when considering the religion of other Lord Buddhas, we find that female Buddhist monks or Bhikkhuni are commonly available as the earlier Lord Buddhas usually gave predictions to the Buddha-to-be persons or Bodhisatta(s) by providing names of the future Buddhas' leading male disciple monks and leading female disciple monks. To conclude, we may state that the female Buddhist monks were destined to exist although Lord Gotama Buddha did not directly encourage them.

In the present, one party gives a reason that the female Buddhist monk lineage had already ceased, and it is not possible for them to continue the lineage righteously per the Lord Buddha's requirement since a Buddhist female monk is required to be ordained by both the female Buddhist monk community and male Buddhist monk community. The another party objects that it is still possible to ordain a female Buddhist monk by the male Buddhist monk community. This is because although the original requirements were not fulfilled, but there is no rule that prohibit the male Buddhist monk community from doing so. Notwithstanding, the eligibility of male Buddhist monk community to ordain a

female Buddhist monk is based on various contributing and surrounding factors which differ from country to country. The male Buddhist monk community can perform their religious duties within the extent allowed by laws, society, culture, tradition, creed, and belief of each governing territory. Thus, the Sangha or male Buddhist monk community can take appropriate actions per the aforesaid contributing and surrounding factors that enable them to do so whereas they adhere to the doctrines and precepts of their sect. As a result, they can righteously make the resolution whether they will permit an ordination to a female Buddhist monk or not.

In considering and justifying an issue of the doctrines and precepts by taking into account of the surrounding factors, we may compare and contrast with another comparable issue to gain better knowledge and understanding. For example, the issue of ordaining a female Buddhist monk is crucially concerned. If we justify that the lineage of female Buddhist monk community already ceased and cannot be correctly continued or ordained by the male Buddhist monk community alone, we may make a parallel study on the appointment of the Buddhist supreme patriarch or *Sangha Raja* in each Buddhist nation that there is no doctrine or precept which enables the appointment of a supreme patriarch, but there is no prohibition from doing so. Therefore, it is the surrounding factors of each country that enable or disable the appointment of a supreme patriarch, especially the governing laws of such territory. In many countries, the law plays an important role in giving or limiting power, specifying duties, responsibilities, extent of power and authority, that allow a Buddhist monk or community of monks to do their religious works. It is necessary for the monks to comply to the laws even though they may have to be deviated from the original doctrines and precepts. This principle is vital for Buddhist monks who live in Western countries that some precepts have to be overridden to ease the monks' living and doing their religious duties within the extent permitted by laws and acceptable to the society who may not be familiar with Buddhism. As a result, some countries

have the Buddhist supreme patriarch whereas some other countries don't. This is similar to the case of female Buddhist monk or Bhikkhuni.

From the aforesaid issue, we can see that the community of monks or *Sangha* in each lineage and/or country has different power, authority, duty, responsibility, and surrounding factors, more or less. The resolution made by the community of Buddhist monks in one country toward an issue may differ from the resolution of communities of Buddhist monks in other countries. However, each community has to respect in each other's resolution by being aware of the aforesaid surrounding factors which differ from country to country.

Therefore, when a female Buddhist monk or *Bhikkhuni* who is ordained and recognized by a Buddhist monk community in one country goes to the governing territory of other Buddhist monk communities whose resolutions disallow the ordination of female Buddhist monk, such female Buddhist monk is deemed to be a female Buddhist monk of foreign Buddhist monk community only. But she is not recognized to be a female Buddhist monk for the objecting Buddhist monk communities. By the way, there are also other factors which may contribute to the recognition of a female Buddhist monk or *Bhikkhuni* such as the governing laws, creed, tradition, culture, society, and belief. For example, a *Bhikkhuni* who is not legally recognized may be acceptable to the society and vice versa.

Buddhist Monks' Money Receiving & Spending

The third issue to be considered in this article is Buddhist monks' money receiving and spending. The Lord Buddha regulated the precept that disallows Buddhist monks to receive and spend money, and this issue is doubtful if most of the Buddhist monks in the present days intentionally violate this precept. Indeed, this issue is a little more complicated than interpreting the precept alone. To consider this issue, we trace back to the Lord Buddha's lifetime when it was an agricultural society where people did farming, hunting, and trading. The

exchange of produces was partially made possible with currency or money as a medium for exchange. However, during the Lord Buddha's lifetime, money did not have an important role as in the present. So, we question if an individual can live appropriately in the society without spending money at all where almost everything has monetary value and money is commonly used as the medium for exchange of resources. The answer is that living without money is still somehow possible in remote areas and forests where money spending is not demanding. However, for the urban or city society where materialism is dominant, the spending of money as a medium for exchange for goods and services is almost a must and common. However, problems occur as Buddhist monks receive and spend money in inappropriate ways such as for entertainment or encouragement of sensual pleasure. These consequently ruin the faith of Buddhists upon the Buddhist monks and Buddhism as a whole.

Monks' rule on money receiving and spending has been loosened from time to time similar to many other regulations or precepts which have been observed less and less until finally ignored over time. In term of practice, the governing body of Buddhist monks who rule monks in each territory or country may not have a formal order to eliminate any rule or precept, but they are informally ignored in practice whereas some other new rules are regulated, emphasized, brought into attention, and enforced either in accordance with the laws or without the laws. So, in the case of monks' money receiving and spending, the Buddhist monk community and the governing body of monks neither officially rule to abandon the precept nor strictly enforce it, but it is informally known to the monks that they can receive and spend money as it deems appropriate. For example, presently, monks have to spend money on construction of religious buildings, paying tuition fees, buying books, paying for medical treatment, paying for transportation, and buying Dhamma media.

The problems of monks' money receiving and spending are that they lack good discipline and have recklessness. Thus, they pay for goods and services in

inappropriate ways such as buying movie VCDs or an expensive smartphone. These worsen the faith of Buddhists as well as non-Buddhists. Moreover, many people foresee the personal gains from receiving and spend donated money, so they become Buddhist monks with an aim to make profit. As a result, Buddhism is weakened. There are still some monks who wish to remain strict in observing this precept, so they refuse to receive or spend money, and possible problems from money are consequently eliminated.

It will be beneficial if the Buddhist monks can have trustable treasurers who look after and manage money and personal properties for the monks. Then, when the monks wish to spend money, they can inform the treasurer to withdraw money and make a purchase or payment on the monks' behalf. This may cause inconvenience and delay, but it can lessen many problems from receiving and spending money as well as other form of personal properties. There should be further study and resolution for this issue to allow the monks to have trustable and honest treasurers who will keep and manage money, assets, and properties which belong to an individual monk or community of monks.

Other than the monks' personal treasurer, there should also be effective and systematic measures to monitor and supervise the monks' personal money receiving and spending. Considering the original precept which disallows the Buddhist monks from receiving and spending money, the governing body of Buddhist monks has become less strict to this precept, and the monks are practically allowed to receive and spend money to ease their livings. However, there are many problems arising from monks' disobeying of the precepts. The new measures may require the monks to keep and submit their accounting journal of income and expense whereas details are completely provided to keep up with transparency, good governance, righteousness, and justification. The monks' accounting journal and report should be, thus, audited by the qualified monks or lay devotees who are authorized to do so. These will help to lessen

corruption, money laundering, inappropriate spending and illegal actions committed by monks.

Conclusion

Lastly, it should be emphasized that the above commentaries on principles, guidelines, and approaches in considering, reasoning, and justifying the doctrines and precepts in Buddhism as well as the three sample issues are made by the commentator as a stakeholder of Buddhism. This article points out the necessity in studying and taking into account of the backgrounds dated back to the Lord Buddha's lifetime in order to investigate how Lord Gotama Buddha expressed his opinions and took actions which can be analyzed as objectives, goals, perspective, procedure, and approach.

Throughout the above commentaries, the priority is given to the Lord Buddha as the first jewel of the Triple Gem, the most important bodies of Buddhism. Then, we harmoniously consider the *Dhamma & Vinaya* or Buddhist doctrines and precepts altogether as the second jewel. Finally, the third jewel explained is the *Sangha* or community of Buddhist monks who has important roles in preserving, prolonging, and practicing the doctrines and precepts as well as Buddhism further per their attitude, power, authority, responsibility, duty, and other influential surrounding factors, more or less, within the extent authorized or allowed by the governing laws of their territory.

All of the above were taken into account, interpreted, and justified based on the principle that promotes harmony and mutual benefits to all Buddhists, Buddhism and human society as a whole.