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Monks' Lives Shaped by Food: A Case Study in Myanmar

Theravāda Buddhist monks are strictly limited by the Vinaya (monks' rules) with regard to their way of acquiring, owning, and consuming food. The most important principle for them is to live as beggars, and to depend on *dāna* (religious gifts) given by lay people. In Theravāda Buddhism, this way of life is thought to be the optimum approach, though not the only one, to achieve *nibbāna* (the doctrinal ideal of Theravāda Buddhism). Monks, however, cannot live without any food. This is an enormous dilemma for monks.

How do monks deal with this food problem? How does this problem influence the religious practice of monks? In this paper, I adopt an anthropological approach that is characterized by fieldwork and that aims to reveal processes of trial and error in the monks' lives, taking Myanmar as an example. By doing this, I try to clarify one side of the religious practice of monks—for example, the reason why they become monks, the way their lives develop, the way a monastery is organized, and so on. These facts cannot be adequately discussed if we are particular about the distinction between the words “religion” and “secular,” which are ideas of modern European origin.

KEYWORDS: Theravāda Buddhism—Myanmar—monks—monasteries—Vinaya—religion—secular

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HOW DO Theravāda Buddhist monks deal with the problem of acquiring food? How does this problem influence the religious practice of monks? In this paper, I undertake an anthropological fieldwork approach that aims to reveal the processes of trial and error in the lives of monks, taking Myanmar as an example.

Within religious studies, little research has been done to explore the importance of food. One of the main reasons for this is that many religious researchers tend to consider the concepts of “religion” and “secular” as binary constructs. As Talal Asad has described, the modern European word “religion” has been conceptualized in a metaphysical manner, differentiating our ordinary lives as “secular” (ASAD 1993; 2003). Therefore, the word “religious practices” tends to indicate sacred rituals and trainings, which are conducted at auspicious times and in special spaces.

However, in the messy reality of human life, it is difficult to distinguish religious practices from secular actions. This holds true for world religions with established canons, such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Even if the ideal of the religion is extremely lofty, we must live in this “secular” world and eat, while aiming to achieve an ideal. Therefore, unless we reveal the way believers deal with the subject of food, we cannot truly understand their religious practices. In this sense, the study of the “food problem” should be considered as one of the main themes in religious studies. At the same time, it will be helpful to rethink modern European religious concepts.

Based on such interests, this paper examines the religious practices of Theravāda Buddhist monks. Theravāda monks, who try to renounce society, are considered to live one of the holiest existences in the world. However, this characteristic makes the secular problem worse rather than better. That is, a monk’s life is paradoxical. How do monks deal with secular problems, in particular the food problem? This paper describes the reality of monks’ lives, taking Myanmar as an example, and aims to reveal a part of the monks’ religious practices.

Before starting the discussion, I would like to give the doctrinal definition of a Theravāda Buddhist monk. Theravāda (literally “school of the elder monks” in Pāli) is a branch of Buddhism that uses the Buddha’s teaching preserved in the Pāli canon as its doctrinal core. The ultimate goal is to escape from greed and to achieve nonattachment. We have many desires, such as to eat delicious food, to live in comfortable houses, to live long, to live with those we love, to win public

recognition, to get what we want, and so on. These desires provide us with a good deal of motivation for our lives.

However, Theravāda doctrine says that there is no use in pursuing desires because we cannot fulfill our desires completely. The four inevitable aspects of human life (birth, aging, sickness, and death) show that we cannot control this world and our lives as we hope. Therefore, the Theravāda doctrine compels us to try and escape from desires and seek *nibbāna* (inner peace). Such freedom from desires is said to be achievable by understanding non-self (*anattā*), suffering (*dukkha*), and impermanence (*anicca*) through practicing the Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya aṭṭhangika magga*).

Monks, who are considered to have devoted themselves to Buddhist practices, are required to live in a manner that suppresses desires as much as possible. In particular, most important in everyday life is the problem of how to deal with the two major desires, that is, the desire for sexuality and cupidity. Therefore, most of the rules of the Vinaya (the set of rules for monks) prohibit behaviors and actions that are impelled by the two major desires. However, the ways in which sexuality and cupidity are dealt with are different simply because we can live without sexual activity but we cannot survive without food. This makes the “food problem,” more broadly categorized as “an acquisition of goods problem,” the most basic and ultimate challenge of a monk’s life.

According to the Vinaya, how should monks deal with goods? Three main points arise. First, with regard to acquiring goods, since monks are prohibited from involving themselves in any economic or productive activities, they have to depend on *dāna* (religious gifts) offered by lay people. “*Bhikkhu*,” the official name for monks, means, “beggar.”

Second, with respect to owning goods, monks are not prohibited from ownership of goods, but there are various limitations on what, how much, and how long they can own specific items. For example, they must not store any food other than medicines. They also must not have more robes and begging bowls than necessary.

Third, monks are prohibited from receiving and using money, since money is said to be the universal means of exchange and it unavoidably amplifies the desire for goods. It is also said that the rejection of money is necessary to avoid the public’s criticism of monks, who should live on *dāna* by lay people (SASAKI 1999, 169).

In this way, the rules of the Vinaya severely restrict a monk’s ability to acquire, own, and consume goods. In Theravāda Buddhism, this kind of life for a monk is thought to be the optimum approach, although not the only one, to achieve *nibbāna*. Monks, however, cannot live without any food, so this poses an enormous dilemma in a monk’s life—monks have to live according to the Vinaya, but the Vinaya requires monks not to cling to goods, so if monks strictly observe the Vinaya, they might not be able to sustain themselves.

How, then, do monks deal with this food problem? How do they acquire, own, and consume food? How does this problem influence their religious practices? This paper analyzes this problem, taking Myanmar as an example. For this purpose, I focus my attention on a monastic unit, which is a livelihood cooperative society formed by a *sīma* (a place where monastic rituals are observed), because monks live together with others in monasteries rather than on their own. How do monks in Myanmar acquire, own, and consume food in units of the monastery? This is the key question of this paper.

Field surveys in Myanmar were carried out intermittently, for a total of one year and eight months, between July 2006 and September 2009. During this period, I had the opportunity to live as a monk in a monastery located near Yangon (referred to as X monastery in this paper). The description in this paper is based on the data obtained during this fieldwork.

Method for Acquiring Food

THE ENVIRONMENT SURROUNDING MONASTERIES

In Myanmar, which has a population of about 51 million people (2014), there are 535,327 monks (282,365 *bhikkhus*, 252,962 *sāmaneras*) and 62,649 monasteries (MRA 2015).¹ A *bhikkhu* is a fully-ordained monk over twenty years of age and a *sāmanera* is a novice monk under twenty.

If we calculate based on the above figures, one monk is supported by about one hundred people, and one monastery is supported by about one thousand people. However, in reality the actual situation is not so simple, because *dāna* given by lay people is not distributed in a homogeneous, fixed, or stable way. Lay people donate for a variety of motives, and are free to select where they donate. The relationship between monasteries and lay people in Myanmar is quite different from that of the Japanese *danka* system, in which lay people have to support their temple financially in return for services, such as conducting funerals, maintaining graves, and so on.

Of course, in the rural areas of Myanmar, there is often only one monastery in one village and, as a result of this, the relationship between a village monastery and the villagers looks reciprocal, like the Japanese *danka* system. However, *dāna* for villagers is not an obligation and it is also usual that villagers build more than one monastery if they can afford it. In these situations, the environment surrounding monasteries inevitably becomes competitive, like markets.

1. This number indicates the number of those who spend at least three months as a monk during the rainy season. Other than this, there are many temporary monks every year, most of them *sāmaneras*. These temporary monks are not included in the list.

Number of Monks	1–10	11–21	21–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	61–70
Number of Monasteries	1,381	550	216	97	25	65	53
Number of Monks	71–80	81–90	91–100	101–110	111–120	121–130	131–140
Number of Monasteries	39	26	10	15	16	9	7
Number of Monks	141–150	151–200	201–300	301–400	457	660	1,205
Number of Monasteries	7	10	10	3	1	1	1

Table 1. Distribution of monasteries in Yangon according to size (data: 2,542 monasteries). Source: MRA (2003).

This trend can be seen more conspicuously in urban areas where there are a large number of monasteries in certain localities, and each monastery has to acquire food in competitive market environments. We will consider this below, taking Myanmar's largest city Yangon as a case study.

Popular Monks Who Draw Dāna

As of 2009, there were 2,940 monasteries in Yangon, housing 53,776 monks (31,423 *bhikkhus*, 22,353 *sāmaneras*) (MRA 2009). However, the monasteries vary in terms of scale. Table 1 shows the distribution of monasteries in Yangon according to the number of monks in residence. Overall, 85 percent of the monasteries had thirty or fewer monks in residence. Most of the monasteries with more than thirty monks in residence are scholarly monasteries, called *sathindait* in Burmese.

However, the scale of a monastery is not in simple proportion to the amount of *dāna* it receives. That is, it does not mean that a monastery that acquires a lot of *dāna* is large. Of course, large monasteries, most of which are scholarly monasteries, need a lot of money for maintenance. But there are many small monasteries that receive a lot of *dāna*. The size of monasteries depends on their activities.

As mentioned earlier, there are currently about 3,000 monasteries in Yangon, a city of 5.14 million people. The population is large, but the number of monasteries is also big. In other words, it can be said that a fierce market environment surrounds the monasteries in Yangon. How, then, do these monasteries acquire food? In considering this issue, it should be mentioned that each monastery is

TYPE OF MONK	EXAMPLES
1. Charismatic monks	Elderly monks, talented meditators, or scholars
2. Instructors of meditation	Instructors in meditation centers
3. Buddhist lecturers	Lecturers via sermons, writings, classes, and so on
4. Worldly service providers	Fortune tellers, prophets
5. Welfare service providers	Educators of poor children

Table 2. Types of popular monks in Yangon.

different in terms of its potential fundraising capacity, which is affected a lot by the features of monks in residence, in particular the abbots of the monastery. In Japan, some monasteries have a variety of attractions, such as Buddha statues, historical buildings, gardens, and so on. That is why such monasteries attract a lot of tourists. On the other hand, in Myanmar it is rare for monasteries to have something particularly attractive about them (other than the monks), because such attractions are concentrated in Pagodas, Buddhist towers, or stupas. Which brings us to the following questions: what kind of monks are popular in urban areas? In other words, what kinds of monks have a high market value? Table 2 displays the data concerning this subject.

In Myanmar, there is a traditional distinction between *lokuttara* (super mundane) and *lokiya* (mundane). Monks of types 1, 2, and 3 are popular because they are *lokuttara* monks. On the contrary, type 4 and type 5 monks are popular because they are *lokiya* monks. This separation seems to reflect the diversified needs of people living in cities.

In any case, if abbots are monks with characteristics as shown here, the monasteries they belong to tend to have potentially higher fundraising capacities. When urban people want to give *dāna* at various events—such as monastic ceremonies like *waso* robes-offering ceremonies, *kathina* robe-offering ceremonies, or rites of passage like ordination ceremonies, coming of age celebrations for girls, marriage ceremonies, funerals, and so on, they tend to choose these monks and monasteries.

However, this does not mean that the monasteries automatically acquire the necessary and sufficient *dāna*. Even such popular monasteries need to conduct a variety of fundraising activities to ensure *Āmisa*, the four material requisites for monks, that is, robes, alms-bowls, monastic dwellings, and medicines. In the following scenario, let us take a look at how each monastery actually acquires food.

Food Acquiring Activities of Urban Monasteries

Generally, the acquisition of food can be distinguished in three ways. The first is begging, or *sunkhan*. It means that monks with alms-bowls walk through villages and towns and receive cooked dishes. The second is to cook in monasteries using money and ingredients given by lay people. The last is an invitation for food donations known as *sunkat* or *sunsapin*. This means that when lay people want to offer *dāna* to monks at various opportunities such as weddings, funerals, birthdays, or anniversaries, they invite monks and treat them to meals. Lay people invite monks to their houses or they go to monasteries themselves. The number of monks who are invited can range from several monks to an entire monastery.

However, in order to cook in the monastery, it is necessary to buy ingredients, and begging therefore has an important significance for monks, as it is the only means of acquiring food proactively. Moreover, begging is also important to build relationships with city residents—monks can have contact with urban residents and deepen the relationship through begging. In this context, an elder monk in his fifties and an abbot of a scholarly monastery stated:

Monks may not obtain adequate meals even though they go begging. But it is no good changing the location where they go begging. If monks continue begging every day, lay people may change their mind to prepare meals for monks. Begging progresses gradually. For example, even if lay people refuse *dāna* initially, [the] layperson might come to donate one spoonful of white rice after ten days. More time would make lay people add side dishes and they might be willing to invite monks to [their] homes. In addition, they might be willing to support what monks need in addition to meals. Begging requires *virīya* (effort).

There are various ways to beg: in groups (*tan sun*), individually (*daba sun*), in visits to houses which have promised in advance to offer food to monks (*tain sun*), or stopping in front of houses and waiting to see whether lay people will offer food or not (*yat sun*). In some cases, an abbot organizes begging systematically, in other cases he does not, and each monk goes begging by himself. In addition, the times at which monks go begging is also different; some go before breakfast, and some go after. At this point I would like to introduce one monastery where the begging initiative is going well.

B monastery in Dagon Township is a new monastery, founded in 2005. When I visited the monastery, there were six *bhikkhus* and eight *sāmaneras*. Three *bhikkhus* were Buddhist teachers, providing basic Buddhist education to *sāmaneras*. The abbot declared that in the future he wants to make this monastery a large scholarly monastery. Monks other than the abbot go begging every day in the *tan sun* style, and each time they obtain a meal for more than one hundred people.

Of course, they cannot carry this in their small alms-bowls, so they go begging with carts. Surplus food is given to the monastery in the neighborhood, which also serves as an orphanage and needs a lot of food. The abbot explains the reason why begging is going well in the monastery:

We are changing the route for begging each day of the week. It is hard for lay people to prepare food every day, but they can prepare easily if we go begging once a week. In addition, we try to go begging at a predetermined time. Some monasteries do not go begging in the rainy season or when they have an invitation for food. However, lay people will no longer want to prepare food if it is unclear whether monks will come or not.

There is a knack to successful begging. However, quite a few monasteries have difficulty with their begging activities. For example, if they are located in poverty-stricken areas or in areas with many monasteries, it is necessary to go to considerably distant places by bus to look for locations for begging. Furthermore, the recent development of apartments has made begging more difficult than before. The scale of a monastery also affects the outcome. As in the case of scholarly monasteries, the more monks a monastery has, the more difficult it becomes to secure food. This issue of ensuring food has various effects on the life course of monks. Let us take a look at this situation in the following paragraphs.

Monks' Life Course Formed by Food

In Myanmar, many monks who are ordained before the age of twenty and will spend the majority of their lives in the monastic order are from rural areas. They become monks because of fewer educational opportunities and poverty. The most common age at which they renounce secular life is ten, which is the age of graduation from elementary school in Myanmar. That is, most monks choose the vocation not because they are interested in Buddhism, but because it is one of the most sustainable ways to live.

Young monks concentrate on scriptural studies called *pariyatti* in their teens and early twenties. They learn Buddhist teachings contained within the Pāli canon. The goal of these studies is to pass the annual monastic examinations administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs that rank and qualify Myanmar's community of Buddhist monks. In the past, studying the Pāli canon did not necessitate taking the monastic examinations; therefore, elder monks who excelled at *pariyatti* in their youth are sometimes uncertified. However, certification is now mandatory to live as an independent monk, so young monks devote themselves to studying for the exam.

The educational institution for this is called a *sathindait*, a scholarly monastery. A scholarly monastery is a type of boarding school that provides young monks with opportunities to study Buddhism and the Pāli language. Although

any monastery more or less imparts Buddhist education to young monks, scholarly monasteries are different from other common monasteries in that they have special education curriculums and well-equipped environments for students to concentrate on their studies. In this way, young monks' lives are characterized by *pariyatti*. After finishing their basic studies, monks are free to pursue their interests, and if the opportunity arises, establish their own monastery to educate young monks.

One of the most important features of young monks' lives is their frequent movement. In this case the movement does not mean short-term movement, such as visits to their homes and travel—it means changing monasteries, as young monks tend to move from rural to urban areas. This pattern emerges because the distribution of scholarly monasteries is biased in favor of urban locations. Scholarly monasteries, which have a large number of students, incur heavy expenses and so tend to be located in urban areas. Therefore, young monks move from village to town to study Buddhist scriptures.

However, this is not a one-off move. Monks move frequently in their teens and twenties. Table 3 shows the results of a survey of fifty students at Yangon Buddhist University (Naingando Pariyatti Thathana Tetkatho). These students are expected to move between monasteries every few years until they enter university.

The reason why young monks move so frequently is because they are in search of suitable scholarly monasteries. Each scholarly monastery is unique with respect to the level of education, specialty, and living environment. For example, an important criterion is whether the monastery can provide food or not. As mentioned earlier, most of the larger monasteries, which accommodate more than thirty monks, are scholarly monasteries, and some of them even accommodate more than one hundred monks (there were 280 of these monasteries across the country in 2007). Such large monasteries are divided into two types: those that provide food to monks and those that do not. The former are common in

Average age of questionee	24.8 years old
Average age when they became a monk	12.1 years old
Average number of monasteries they have stayed at	4.3 monasteries
Average no. of years staying at a monastery	3.3 years

Table 3. Questionnaire on monks' movements (50 monks from Yangon Buddhist University, March 2007).

Yangon and the latter are common in Mandalay. Mandalay has flourished as a center of Buddhist study from the Konbaung dynasty period (1752–1886).

If a scholarly monastery does not provide food to monks who stay there, there are two ways for monks to acquire food. The first is for each monk to search for food by himself. In that case, monks need to find lay people or lay Buddhist organizations that will donate meals regularly. For example, in the early mornings, monks aim to visit places where they can see steam rising as it indicates that someone is cooking. Searching for food themselves is tough work and often monks cannot obtain sufficient meals. Many monks look back at their student days in Mandalay as the hardest time in their lives.

The second way is for monks to search for food as a dormitory unit, whereby large scholarly monasteries split into groups, and the dormitories transform into autonomous monasteries and the unity of the whole monastery is gradually lost. If monks go begging as a dormitory unit, each dormitory obtains lay followers who want to support not an entire monastery but a specific dormitory. When the abbot dies and it is time to choose a new abbot, each dormitory clamors to be independent because they can live by themselves and do not want to be governed by a new abbot. As a result, a large scholarly monastery comprised of several dormitories becomes a group of monasteries, consisting of several individual monasteries. In Burmese, such a monastic group is called a *kyaundait* (a large monastery), and each monastery in the monastic group is called *kyaun* (a dormitory). Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between a monastic group and a large monastery (Figure 1). This tendency is particularly noticeable in Mandalay where there are a lot of large and old scholarly monasteries.

The Method for Owning and Consuming Food

THE PROBLEM OF OWNING AND CONSUMING FOOD

As has been discussed so far, how can monks acquire food? There is still another consideration—the question of how monks own and consume food. In a monk's

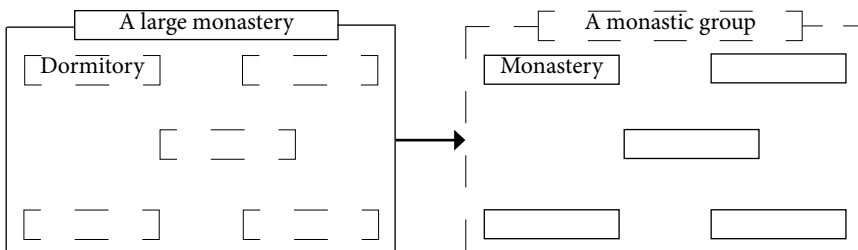


Figure 1. Dissolution of a large monastery.

life, which aims to reduce desire, it is meaningless if food itself becomes the subject of desire for monks. In Theravāda Buddhism, it is said that the reason why monks take food is just to maintain their bodies and to promote Buddhist training. In the monastery where I was staying, monks chanted the following sutra before meals:

With proper meditative introspection and attention, I partake of the food not to play, not to be mad with strength, not to beautify my physical structure, not to decorate my body, I take just to sustain the vitality of this body, to appease hunger, to support the noble religious practices and that former diseases may be dispelled and that new diseases may not arise; that my diet may be well-balanced, that I may have few inconveniences, and that I may live comfortably.²

Based on this principle, the Vinaya stipulates detailed rules of how monks should own and consume food. First, as for owning food, there are various limitations for what, how much, and how long they can own food. For example, they must not store any foods other than medicines, they must not have more robes and begging bowls than necessary, and so on. If someone donates a meal, they have to consume it on that day. Second, as for consuming food, they are prohibited from eating food that is not donated. They must also not eat solid food in the afternoon (drinking is allowed), must not cook, and must not eat at the same table with lay people. There are also many provisions relating to manners: they must not make a noise while eating, must not look to the side, and so on. However, restrictions on their meals themselves are not so strict, though they are often misunderstood, and Theravāda Buddhist monks can eat whatever lay people donate. Monks can even eat meat, unless the animals were deliberately killed for *dāna*.³

It should be emphasized that these constraints make it difficult for monks to deal with practical problems. How then should monks own and consume food in actuality? This appears to be a problem of how to organize the structure of a monastery, that is, how to adjust the relationship between monks or between monks and lay people. Therefore, here I would like to consider how monks own and consume food by analyzing the organization of a monastery.

The Structure of a Monastery

As explained earlier, a monastery can be defined as a livelihood cooperative society that is formed by a *sīma*, and it typically consists of an abbot and ordinary monks. In large monasteries, there are occasionally some governing monks

2. This translation is quoted from SAO Htun Hmat Win (1986, 46).

3. For more information, see HAYASHI (2014).



Figure 2. Donating ritual to a *bhikkhu* (center) in the X monastery. Photo by the author.

other than the abbot. Within this structure there exists a kind of division of labor in which an abbot takes care of ordinary monks while they do the chores for the monastery.

In considering this problem, it should be pointed out that what monks can do depends on whether they are *bhikkhus* or *sāmaneras*. The most important difference between a *bhikkhu* and a *sāmanera* is that a *bhikkhu* is fully ordained by the ritual called *upasampadā* and needs to live based on the rules of the Vinaya, while a *sāmanera* is just a novice and the Vinaya rules do not apply to them.⁴ However, this difference affects a lot of monastic life. For example, a *bhikkhu* must not cook and must not even touch foods that are not donated. Therefore, it is *sāmanera* and lay people who cook in monasteries and it is necessary for *bhikkhus* to donate a meal before eating the food cooked by *sāmaneras* and lay people (Figure 2).

Here, I would like to introduce X monastery near Yangon in which I stayed as a monk. X monastery is a scholarly monastery, which belongs to Shwegyin Gaing (a monastic group). It had 182 monks (42 *bhikkhus* and 140 *sāmaneras*) at the time. Governing monks consisted of an abbot, an adviser (the oldest monk in the monastery), seven lecturers, and monks who manage alms, water, cooking, the dining

4. A *sāmanera* keeps the Ten Precepts as their code of behavior and devotes themselves to religious life. They must refrain from 1) killing living things, 2) stealing, 3) unchastely conduct, 4) lying, 5) taking intoxicants, 6) eating in the afternoon, 7) singing, dancing, playing music, or attending entertainment performances, 8) wearing perfume, cosmetics, and garlands, 9) sleeping on luxurious, soft beds, and 10) accepting money.

	GROUP FOR BEGGING	GROUP FOR COOKING
2:00		Cook rice [two <i>sāmaneras</i>]
4:00	Wake up	Wake up
4:30–5:00	Meditate	Prepare for breakfast
5:30–6:00	Breakfast	Breakfast
6:00–6:30	Clean up	Wash dishes
6:30–7:45	Classes	Classes
8:00–9:30	Beg	Prepare for lunch
10:00–11:00	Bathe	Prepare for lunch
11:00–12:00	Lunch	Lunch and wash dishes
12:00–13:00	Break	Break
13:00–17:00	Classes	Classes
17:00–18:00	Chores	Prepare juice and breakfast
18:30–19:00	Chant	Chant
19:30–20:30	Classes	Classes
21:00–22:00	Meditate	Meditate
22:00	Go to bed	Go to bed

Table 4. Daily routine of ordinary monks in X monastery.

room, and shopping respectively. The rest were ordinary monks. These ordinary monks are classified into two groups. One group begs, comprising four teams because they go begging to four places every day, and the other group cooks, and comprises one team. Each team changes its charge alternately every week. Table 4 shows the daily routine of ordinary monks. Because it is a scholarly monastery, there are many classes and self-study time and monks carry out begging or cooking duties in between these times. Of course, it is *sāmaneras* who are engaged

in cooking and the preparation of dishes, because *bhikkhus* are prohibited from cooking. In such situations, *bhikkhus* are in charge of organizing *sāmaneras*.

However, the organization of the monastery would be inefficient if it only consisted of monks. Because *sāmaneras*, like *bhikkhus*, are also prohibited from storing foodstuff and touching money, they cannot receive monetary donations nor buy provisions that are necessary for the monastery. Therefore lay people, who are in charge of miscellaneous duties for monks, are indispensable to a monastery. In Myanmar, such a layperson is called a *weiyawitsa* (a chore person). They may live in the monastery or come to the monastery when the monastery needs some help. In a broader sense, they are also members of the monastery. In some monasteries, there are also *pho thudo*, lay people who live in the monastery dressed in white who help with the various chores of the monastery. While old people used to be in charge of *pho thudo*, these days it is boys who are in charge of these duties. These boys live in the monastery in the pre-stages of *sāmanera* life, adhering to five precepts of lay people.⁵

Chore people engage in various activities to support the lives of monks, such as cooking, cleaning, looking for *dāna*, farming, and so on. However, the most important role is that of *kappiyakāraka*, a trustee to manage goods in the monastery on behalf of monks. For example, if there is extra food, trustees store it on the grounds of the monastery. Lay people and *sāmaneras* cook the stored foodstuff and donate it to *bhikkhus*. The same is also true for a variety of goods other than food, such as robes and bowls. Extra robes and bowls are deposited to trustees and they donate them to monks when needed. In this way, monks can own goods without actually owning them themselves. Figure 3 shows the spatial structure of X monastery. The shaded portions refer to lay people from which X monastery can always receive *dāna*.

Similarly, through the intervention of a trustee, it becomes possible for monks to handle money. As described previously, monks are forbidden to receive and use money. However, it is no problem for a trustee to receive, manage, and use money. In this way, the presence of lay people in a monastery loosens the constraints of the Vinaya that is imposed on monks. Monks cannot possess and consume food efficiently without lay people.

The Problem of the Organization of a Monastery

However, such a system does not always function effectively. For example, if a monk is not willing to obey the rules of the Vinaya, he would not utilize such

5. These five precepts are 1) to abstain from taking life, 2) to abstain from taking what is not given, 3) to abstain from sensuous misconduct, 4) to abstain from false speech, and 5) to abstain from intoxicants as tending to cloud the mind.

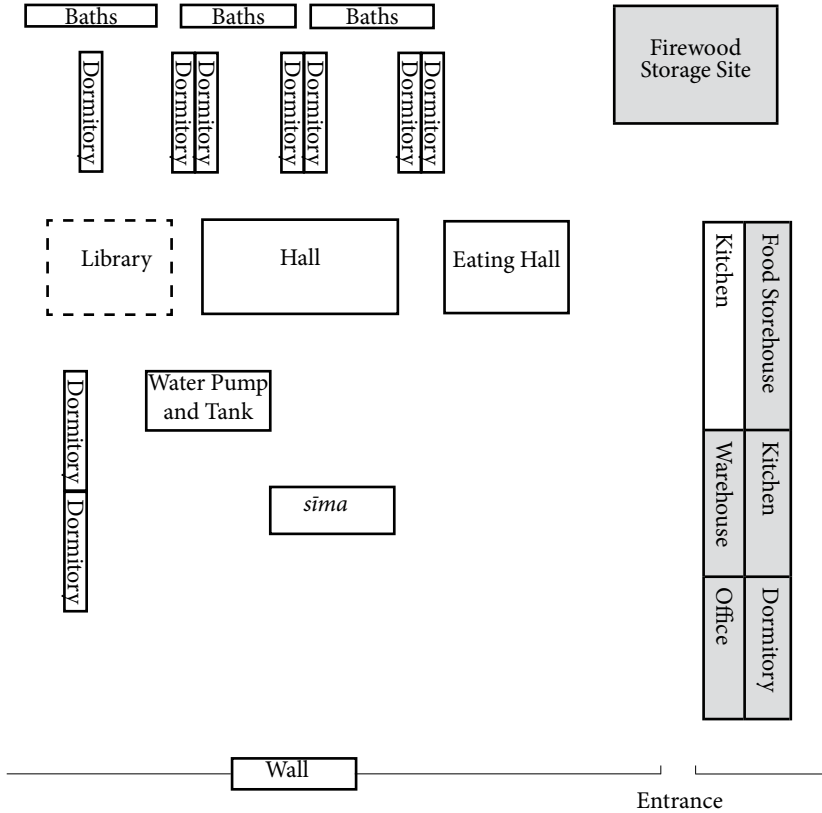


Figure 3. The spatial structure of Monastery X.

a troublesome method of interposing lay people. On the other hand, the lack of lay people (both in quantity and quality) often causes monks to violate the Vinaya, even though it is against their desires. It can be said that a monk's life is inevitably conditional on the existence of lay people.

First, and particularly in the monasteries in the urban areas, there are insufficient numbers of people to carry out chores. What is important in considering this issue is that the help of such lay people is a kind of *dāna* of labor too. Therefore, whether monks can obtain sufficient *dāna* is also uncertain. In the current situation in Yangon, it is common for the parents and relatives of an abbot, or people who come from a rural area to the city for school enrollment and employment, to play the role of chore people. They often come from the same hometown or the same ethnic group as the abbot of the monastery. However, it is necessary

to provide at least food and a place to sleep and to pay salaries to such lay people. If monks cannot afford such things, they have to manage their monastery without chore people.

Second, there is a problem in that it is not unusual for trustees, who manage the monastery property, to abscond with the money. Monasteries may become environments prone to fraud. In the past, it was believed that to steal the possessions of monks was a fatal sin that would send a criminal to hell. However, such ideas have waned in recent years. Therefore, monks, who are afraid of being caught up in such troubles, do not want to trust their property to lay people. There is also the problem that lay people lack an understanding of the life of a monk, and they often do not know what kind of rules monks have to obey or how lay people should connect with them.

The problems listed above relate to the entire monastery. Turning our attention to each individual monk, the problem becomes more complicated. Even in monasteries in which there is a lot of help from lay people, it is rare that such help reaches individual monks. In order to live in conformity with the Vinaya, monks themselves need to ask lay people to take on the role of trustees. In these cases, however, they have to pay some kind of return and bear the extra cost. For example, monks have to pay for a trustee's ticket when they want to travel somewhere by bus or train. For this reason, monks often say, "I want to observe the rules, but I cannot," or "only wealthy elder monks can observe the Vinaya."

We can easily find these problems in the scholarly monasteries of the city, as it is common for monks to violate the Vinaya, in particular the precepts that forbid them from receiving and using money. For example, as seen earlier, in scholarly monasteries in Mandalay, which are the centers of Buddhist study, each monk must acquire food by himself because there are too many monks in monasteries and it is impossible to provide a meal for all monks. Many students purchase food instead of begging because they are too busy with learning. However, it is rare for students to have a private trustee, so they almost inevitably violate the Vinaya.

Although scholarly monasteries in Yangon usually offer food to students, students still need to purchase stationery, books, and household goods, and pay for moving expenses by themselves. When I asked some students of a scholarly monastery about these costs in 2007, they said that it costs about 70,000 to 100,000 *kyat* (roughly 50 to 73 USD) per year and their parents or masters, who have ordained them, usually support such expenses. However, most students do not have private trustees who will manage such money matters for them. Thus, they handle money on their own.

The violation of the rules for money leads to further violations. For young monks who are in their teens and twenties and come from rural areas, the city is an exciting place. Therefore, if young monks have money in such a place, it is

easy for them to give in to temptation to do various activities that are forbidden by the Vinaya, such as watching movies, listening to music, and so on. Cities also offer a high degree of anonymity, thus sparing them the shame of not observing the Vinaya. These factors promote the violation of the law by students of scholarly monasteries.

On the other hand, many scholarly monasteries do not take any measures to address this situation. The more students that pass the Buddhist examinations, the more student numbers increase. The more students a scholarly monastery has, the more *dāna* it will gain. In this way, many scholarly monasteries tend to give priority to Buddhist examinations and this leads to reduced management of students. However, this is not only a problem for scholarly monasteries.

As we saw earlier, scholarly monasteries are the cornerstones of Myanmar Buddhism. Young monks study Buddhism in scholarly monasteries in urban areas, but life in scholarly monasteries demands that monks deal with money on their own, and this induces various violations of the Vinaya. In addition, since these violations are not strictly governed, monks gradually become familiar with these violations. In this way, scholarly monasteries in urban areas have become the production bases of learned monks. Since such monks who disregard the Vinaya come to lead monasteries in various places around Myanmar, the tendency to violate the laws spreads as a result. Therefore, the problems in scholarly monasteries relate to the quality of Buddhism in the entire country of Myanmar.

Conclusion

The problem of food is one of the most important problems in monks' lives. The question that arises is, how do the believers of each religion deal with this food problem? How do they acquire, own, and consume food? This paper has used Theravāda Buddhist monks of Myanmar as an example. As we have seen, food problems in religious practices show a complex situation between the concepts of "religion" and "secular." Theravāda Buddhism has designed the lifestyle of monks as a means of leading to *nibbāna*, and the most important doctrine for monks' life is the Vinaya. However, the reality of a monk's life is not only defined by metaphysical teachings, such as those classified as "religious." Monks are also flesh and blood human beings and this fact has a significant impact on the reality of their lives.

As we have seen in this paper, the food problem, which has been neglected in religious studies as a "secular" issue, affects more than one aspect of the religious practice of monks. For example, the reason why they become monks, the way their life course develops, the way the monastery is organized, and so on. Of course, such "secular" factors should not be overestimated as well. We cannot capture the true essence of the real lives of monks if we are particular about

the distinction between the words “religion” and “secular,” which are ideas of modern European origin. What is important is to describe carefully how believers deal with the actual problems in which various factors, such as the doctrinal ideal, economic issues, the institutional position of the religion, the social environment, and so on are interconnected.

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Translated by Kuramoto Ryōsuke

[Originally published in Japanese as: 「食」が形づくる出家生活—ミャンマーを事例として—. 『宗教研究』90巻2号, 2016, 29–54.]

DOI: https://doi.org/10.20716/rsjars.90.2_29