

Research Brief: Buddhist Monks, Money, and the Ancient Monastic Code

For Immediate Release / Background for Press Agencies

Date: June 27, 2025

Contact: [Your Organization/Contact Name]

Executive Summary

This research brief examines the ancient monastic code of conduct (Vinaya) regarding the ownership and use of money by Buddhist monks. It asserts that, according to the Pāli Vinaya, the foundational text for monastic discipline, monks are explicitly prohibited from handling, storing, or soliciting money (gold, silver, or currency). This prohibition is not merely a historical relic but a core principle designed to foster spiritual purity, detachment, and maintain the Sangha's integrity. The widespread practice of individuals impersonating Buddhist monks and soliciting funds, often in exchange for amulets, represents a serious transgression of this ancient code and gravely misrepresents the Buddhist tradition. This document aims to provide clarity on the authentic monastic rules to assist press agencies in informing the public and addressing this growing concern in Malaysia.

1. Introduction: The Integrity of the Sangha

Buddhism, one of the world's oldest spiritual traditions, is sustained by three jewels: the Buddha (the Awakened One), the Dhamma (his teachings), and the Sangha (the community of ordained monks and nuns). The Sangha plays a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the Dhamma. To ensure the purity and effectiveness of the Sangha, the Buddha established a comprehensive code of conduct known as the Vinaya. This discipline governs all aspects of monastic life, from personal conduct to communal harmony, and importantly, addresses the relationship between monastics and material possessions, including money.

The issue of individuals dressed as monks begging for money, especially in exchange for items like amulets, has become a significant concern in many urban centers, including major cities in Malaysia. Such practices not only exploit the public's generosity but also undermine the authentic image and profound spiritual purpose of genuine Buddhist monastics. This brief provides a detailed examination of the Vinaya's strictures against monks owning or handling money, shedding light on the authentic tradition.

2. The Vinaya: Foundation of Monastic Discipline

The Vinaya is the monastic rulebook, meticulously compiled from the Buddha's own words and rulings. It was established not arbitrarily, but in response to specific incidents and to guide monastics towards the ultimate goal of liberation from suffering (Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa). The rules are categorised based on the severity of the offense. For Theravāda Buddhism, the primary source is the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka, specifically the *Pātimokkha* (the fundamental code of 227 rules for monks and 311 for nuns), which is recited fortnightly by the Sangha.

The prohibitions regarding money fall under a category known as **Nissaggiya Pācittiya** (Pāli: *nissaggiya pācittiya*), meaning "offenses entailing forfeiture and expiation." These are serious offenses that require the offending monk to forfeit the illicit gain and confess the transgression to another monk to restore purity.

3. Explicit Prohibitions on Money in the Vinaya

The Pāli Vinaya contains clear and unambiguous rules forbidding monks from handling, soliciting, or storing money. The key rules are found in the Nissaggiya Pācittiya section of the Pātimokkha:

Nissaggiya Pācittiya 18: Prohibition on Accepting Gold and Silver

"Should any bhikkhu accept gold and silver or have it accepted for himself, or consent to its being deposited, it is an offense entailing forfeiture and expiation."

(Yaṃ kho pana kiñci hiraññasuvaṇṇaṃ uggaṇḥeyya vā uggaṇhāpeyya vā, vāpi santike nikkhattaṃ sādiyeyya, nissaggiyaṃ pācittiyaṃ.)

This rule is foundational and comprehensive. "Gold and silver" (Pāli: *hiraññasuvaṇṇa*) refers not only to precious metals in their raw form but also, by extension and common interpretation throughout Buddhist history, to any form of currency or monetary equivalent. The rule explicitly prohibits:

- **Accepting:** Directly receiving money.
- **Having it accepted for oneself:** Instructing someone else to receive money on one's behalf.
- **Consenting to its being deposited:** Knowing that money is being stored for one's use or benefit and not rejecting it.

Nissaggiya Pācittiya 19: Prohibition on Engaging in Transactions

"Should any bhikkhu engage in various transactions (buying and selling) using gold and silver, it is an offense entailing forfeiture and expiation."

(Yo pana bhikkhu nānappakāraṃ hiraññasuvaṇṇavohāraṃ samāpajjeyya, nissaggiyaṃ pācittiyaṃ.)

This rule reinforces NP 18 by forbidding monks from engaging in any commercial activity involving money. It emphasizes that a monk's role is not to accumulate wealth or participate in economic exchange.

Nissaggiya Pācittiya 20: Prohibition on Buying and Selling

"Should any bhikkhu engage in buying and selling, it is an offense entailing forfeiture and expiation."

(Yo pana bhikkhu nānappakāraṃ kayavikkayaṃ samāpajjeyya, nissaggiyaṃ pācittiyaṃ.)

While NP 19 specifically mentions gold and silver, NP 20 broadly prohibits any form of commercial buying and selling. This further distances monks from activities associated with worldly livelihood and economic gain.

Commentary and Interpretation

Traditional commentaries and the practice of genuine monastic lineages consistently uphold these rules strictly. The spirit of these rules is that a monk should live a life of voluntary simplicity and dependence on the generosity of lay supporters, thereby fostering humility and reducing attachment to worldly possessions. The Sangha is meant to be a field of merit for lay devotees, not a source of personal enrichment for its members.

4. Rationale Behind the Prohibition

The prohibition on handling money is deeply rooted in the core principles of Buddhist monasticism:

- **Detachment and Non-Attachment (Virāga):** The Buddha taught that attachment to material things, including wealth, is a source of suffering. For monastics, who dedicate their lives to eradicating suffering, detachment from worldly possessions is paramount. Owning or handling money fosters attachment and deflects attention from spiritual goals.
- **Renunciation (Nekkhamā):** Monks undertake a life of renunciation, giving up the householder's life and its attendant responsibilities, including earning a living. The acceptance of money would contradict this fundamental act of renunciation.
- **Focus on Spiritual Practice:** Dealing with money involves concerns about profit, loss, security, and transactions, which can easily distract a monk from meditation, study, and teaching the Dhamma. It shifts the focus from spiritual development to material management.
- **Maintaining the Integrity of the Sangha:** The Sangha's moral authority and respect from the lay community depend on its members upholding high ethical standards. If monks are seen handling money, it can lead to accusations of corruption, greed, and a blurring of the lines between monastic and lay life, eroding public trust.
- **Preventing Exploitation and Misuse:** The rule serves as a safeguard against potential abuse of the Sangha's revered status for personal gain. It prevents monks from becoming involved in financial schemes or being tempted by worldly comforts.

5. Interpretations and Modern Practices: The Role of the "Kappiya"

While the core prohibition remains, its practical application in modern society requires careful consideration. Different Buddhist traditions may have varying approaches, but the underlying principle of not personally owning or handling money generally remains.

- **Theravāda Tradition:** This tradition, prevalent in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, maintains a strict adherence to the Vinaya rules regarding money. Monks are generally forbidden from touching money. When donations are made, they are typically given to the temple or a lay steward, not directly to the monk for personal use.
- **Mahayana and Vajrayana Traditions:** While the fundamental principles are similar, some Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, particularly in East Asia (China, Korea, Japan) and Tibet, have adapted practices over centuries due to different cultural and socio-economic contexts. However, the ideal of non-attachment to money remains, and any funds received are generally for the upkeep of the monastery or for the benefit of the Sangha as

a whole, not for personal ownership by individual monks. Even in these traditions, personal accumulation of wealth by individual monastics is not condoned.

The Role of the *Kappiya-kāraka* (Lay Steward)

In traditions that strictly adhere to the Vinaya, such as Theravāda, the role of the *kappiya-kāraka* (Pāli: 'one who makes things allowable' or 'steward') is crucial. A lay steward or trusted lay supporter handles financial matters for the temple or for the collective needs of the Sangha. If a donation of money is offered to a monk, the monk directs the donor to a *kappiya* who then manages the funds on behalf of the Sangha, ensuring the monks' needs (robes, alms food, lodging, medicine) are met without the monks themselves directly touching money. This system allows the Sangha to function in a modern economy while upholding the Vinaya.

6. Addressing the Issue of Bogus Monks in Malaysia

The presence of individuals impersonating Buddhist monks and engaging in monetary solicitations, often with the sale of amulets, is a serious affront to the integrity of Buddhism. These actions are in direct violation of the fundamental Vinaya rules outlined above.

Distinguishing Legitimate Practice from Fraudulent Behavior:

- **Authentic Monastics:** Genuine Buddhist monks are dedicated to spiritual practice, live a life of simplicity, and adhere to the Vinaya. They do not solicit money for personal gain. When they receive alms (food, robes, medicine, lodging), it is through the spontaneous generosity of lay supporters, and these offerings are for their sustenance and the continuation of their spiritual life. They do not engage in commercial transactions or sell items.
- **Bogus Monks:** Individuals who demand money, offer "blessings" for a fee, or sell amulets are highly likely to be fraudulent. Their actions contradict the core tenets of monastic discipline.

The Harm Caused by Bogus Monks:

- **Erosion of Public Faith:** Such practices can lead the public to distrust all monks and view Buddhism as a corrupt religion focused on financial gain, rather than spiritual development.
- **Misrepresentation of the Dhamma:** The core teachings of detachment, generosity (without expectation of return), and liberation are obscured when money becomes the primary focus.
- **Exploitation of Devotees:** Vulnerable individuals, seeking spiritual solace or merit, may be preyed upon by these imposters.
- **Damage to the Reputation of Genuine Monastics:** The actions of a few can tarnish the reputation of the entire Sangha, who are diligently striving to uphold the Dhamma-Vinaya.

7. Conclusion: Upholding the Vinaya for a Pure

Sangha

The ancient monastic code of the Vinaya unequivocally prohibits Buddhist monks from owning, handling, or soliciting money. This prohibition is a cornerstone of monastic discipline, essential for fostering detachment, maintaining spiritual focus, and preserving the integrity and purity of the Sangha.

The current issue of bogus monks engaging in monetary solicitations in Malaysia is a clear violation of this sacred code. It is imperative that the public be educated on the authentic Vinaya rules to distinguish genuine monastics from imposters. By understanding and upholding these ancient principles, we can collectively safeguard the integrity of the Buddhist Sangha and ensure that the Dhamma continues to be propagated in its pristine form, free from corruption and misrepresentation.

Disclaimer: This document is based on the Pāli Vinaya, which is the monastic code followed predominantly in Theravāda Buddhism and is widely respected across various Buddhist traditions for its historical depth. While interpretations and practical applications may vary across different schools of Buddhism, the fundamental principle of non-ownership and non-handling of money by individual monastics for personal gain remains a core tenet.