

Monastic Economy and Interactions with Society: the Case of Buddhist Nuns in Burma / Myanmar

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In Burma/Myanmar, daily interactions that take place between the monastic community and wider society provide the foundation for people's religious activities and Buddhist worship. Especially, 'going for alms' is a symbolic religious act, which is considered essential in cultivating a sense of responsibility on the part of monastic members, and dedication and commitment on the part of laity. In comparison with monks, however, nuns have an ambiguous religious standing in the monastic community. They are monastic in terms of the other-worldly values they hold and their communal affiliation, but they manifest worldly features when it comes to monetary transactions with their lay donors. In this respect, they are more vulnerable to the secular implications of receiving donations. After the socialist government that kept the country in isolation for 26 years, the military regime (State Law & Order Restoration Council, later State Peace & Development Council since 1997) introduced policies to open up its economy following the social upheaval in 1988 caused by the suppression of the democracy movement. Following an attempt by the regime to invite foreign capital and develop the economy, there has been a noticeable transformation in urban and semi-urban areas, especially since the mid-1990s. These areas are rapidly moving away from the traditional milieu of interdependence to a non-personal market oriented economy, and although eighty percent of the population is still confined to rural villages, there are signs that suggest nuns are increasingly becoming affected by the more materialistic transactions emerging in society.

1. Between This-Worldly and Other-Worldly

Empirical study of the Buddhist transactions and monastic economy has been relatively scarce, and much of what has been written were historical or focused on the macro; in examining the economic and political relationships monasteries or such institutions have had with society.¹ However, there has been little research on the agents involved, encompassing the details of a relationship between the lay benefactors and monastic beneficiaries. This theme is more relevant for the nuns since whilst the monks, constrained by the legal provisions of the Vinaya, have distanced themselves from economic transactions, nuns have performed a significant role in keeping the monastic economy viable. This has been possible due to their Eight Precept status, which the majority of Burmese nuns have, and that has placed them in a unique pivotal position between the this-worldly and the other-worldly.

In their everyday context, Burmese people commonly apply the conceptual distinction between *lāwki* (Pāli: *laukika*) and *lāwkoktara* (Pāli: *lokottara*) in their usage of religious honorifics towards monastic members to identify the difference between their lifestyle and that of the monastic community. The term *lāwkoktara* in this case is used to refer to the lifestyle of both monks and nuns who are 'unproductive' by the nature of their monastic profession. They may be beyond the level of worldly concerns, but are dependent on *lāwki*; productive members of society, who take on the responsibility of sustaining the *lāwkoktara*. Members of both realms are distinguished by their distinct values, world views, and

fundamental outlook. Members of *lāṃkōktara*; especially monks, are believed to provide a supreme ‘field of merit’ so that lay benefactors can ‘plant’ their good deeds and subsequently ‘reap’ the result of their improved karmic states. For that purpose, it is said that an “unblemished Sangha and virtuous monks were necessary, and the distinction between monk and layman ... came to be preserved.” (Tambiah 1970: 68).² The interlocking of two worlds acts as a prerequisite for all Buddhist activities, providing a complementary system of worship in ritual and religious transactions. Scholars have observed that these two separate realms work together as ‘an integrated whole’,³ albeit this relationship in practice is far more complex than what is suspected in principle, and actual transactions reveal an intricate and multi-faceted social reality that does not manifest in a neat symmetry.

Buddhist monasteries, contrary to the impression we may have of closed ‘cloisters’, have acted as important venues for meeting people as well as circulating information and mediating these distinct worlds. Young boys from Buddhist families become monks for a temporary period, and nowadays it is becoming more commonplace for young, urban women to spend their holidays in nunneries and train as temporary novices. In addition to ceremonial services and education, monks offer a safe sanctuary for people to talk freely, away from the pressures of a sensitive political situation. The monastic and lay worlds may interact on every occasion. However, interactions that are overtly intimate are potentially dangerous and some can have a detrimental effect on the training of monastic members. The temptations of sex are especially seen as a strong distraction especially for young monks, and they are reminded on every occasion of the threat of karmic retribution if it is breached. Furthermore, the danger they encounter nowadays is no longer limited to sexual temptation; as the country becomes increasingly exposed to the outside world, consumerism and global materialism have started to infiltrate the monasteries, and an increasing number of monks can be seen to be wearing expensive watches and sunglasses, and at times listening to i-pods. And yet, the religious position of monks is ultimately sanctioned and protected by the legal provisions of the Vinaya.

By contrast, the absence of a Sangha for nuns is fundamentally disadvantageous, as they do not have a similar legal provision to fall back on when customary codes of conduct are breached. Nuns are fully aware of the negative effects that could result from having intimate interactions with society. They make extra efforts to minimize damaging consequences in their relationships, as they are more heavily penalized when straying from conventional norms.

2. Spectrum of Interactions

Monks and nuns in the Theravāda tradition do not earn a living and they are completely dependent on the goodwill of their lay congregation. The formation of such dependency, however, is a serious business for both monastic beneficiary and benefactor, and various types of relationships or ‘dependencies’ can be discerned between monastic members and their supporters. The relationship nuns have with their benefactors tends to be fundamentally different from that of monks, but there are also individual cases that do not fit into stereotypes since each monastic may have different qualities that appeal to the laity in different ways.

In fact, the interactions observed are quite varied and these are affected by many factors, which could include a nun’s academic qualifications, her social and religious standing, her personality, a kin distance between a nun and her benefactor(s), the length and intimacy of their relationship, the level of piety of her lay patron, and so on. The type of transactions: in the form of donations, we see here could involve the offering of genuine gifts in which the expectation of any sort of material return on the part of the lay donor would be

unseemly; a donation which expects karmically uplifting spiritual return as well as social reward in terms of good reputation as a benefactor; a transaction akin to barter that involves an exchange of gifts and favours; and the parasitic unilateral dependency otherwise known as begging. The first type of ‘pure gift’ is almost non-existent in reality, and the majority of monastic transactions converge on the middle range of the spectrum, representing a type of religious exchange in which social conventions “stipulate returns of commensurate worth or utility within a finite and a narrow period.” (Bloch & Parry 1989: 23).

A nun’s lay benefactors may range from close family members and relatives, to friends and regular patrons, to those who are known donors but distant in terms of intimacy, and to donors who are total strangers who are dealt with careful deference. Ideally, a nun would prefer to depend as little as possible on her immediate family members so as not to burden them, and the less family support she needs if she could enhance her monastic reputation with age and experience, and cultivate good contacts with outside society. If she is publicly acknowledged as an accomplished scholar or a principal of a well-known nunnery institution, that sustains her, and she can attract non-relation donors from a wide social base. Generally speaking, it is difficult for a nun to find a good donor, and even if she succeeded in obtaining one, this does not always develop into a regular benefactor-beneficiary relationship as it would often with a monk.

In dealing with benefactors with whom she is not related, a nun engages in a spectrum of relationships, in which some may appear open and unconstrained, whilst in most cases the relationship tends to become exclusive and closed. In other words, once established, a relationship between a nun and her non-relation donor tends to become much more binding on the part of a nun beneficiary than it would for a monk. In many situations, a nun finds herself confined to an exclusive relationship with one or two non-relation sponsors on whom she becomes totally dependent materially, and sometimes morally, although this is not a situation that she had initially set out to achieve.

The various types of transaction that a nun engages in can be described according to where she stands in relation to her benefactors, which can be understood by reference to something akin to kin connections. Here the relationship can be defined and understood in terms of what Sahlins called the ‘kin distance’ (1972). That is, at one end of this spectrum lie religious offerings given by those who are her ‘blood’ - family and kin - with which she can receive freely and without coming under any moral obligation to reciprocate.⁴ At the other end, there are offerings from non-relation donors who are basically strangers, and by receiving these, she becomes morally obligated. In the context of such a non-kin relationship, most nuns I interviewed expressed their discomfort at being full-time recipients since the offerings from these donors could not be reciprocated in their capacity as mendicants. The further one moves away from the safe territory of kinship, which also includes ‘fictitious’ kinship operating at an intimate person-to-person level,⁵ to an open domain of the anonymous general public, a mounting pressure to reciprocate seems to form, and the notion of ‘indebtedness’ becomes increasingly felt on the part of the nun recipient. In theory, a special religious offering such as *dāna* should not be reciprocated.⁶ However, from a nun’s point of view as has been explained to me by one, receiving donations and offerings end up forming a weighty sense of moral obligation, and manifests at times in a sense of worthlessness expressed that her religious standing has become compromised. Subsequently, she may end up being bound to a relationship of exclusive servility, in which she feels obligated to provide service to her sponsor(s), and which is probably done unconsciously to compensate for all the things she has already received.

3. Marking the Boundary

In order to introduce another dimension to the discussion, I will introduce the Burmese concept of *à na-thi*, which is an expression courteously communicated to mark a distance with others in their daily interactions. This expression is not by any means used only by the laity, as monastic members also use the phrase whenever they feel bad for having to receive something too lavish from their benefactors. The concept is commonly used in situations that involve others who are not the speaker's kin or intimate friends, and uttered whenever an individual is reluctant to receive whatever is offered in the form of goods or favours. In an everyday context, a Burmese person would frequently say '*à na-thi*', simply to imply, 'I feel bad'. It also communicates implicit meanings such as, 'I am sorry but I cannot accept it', or 'I am not keen to become obligated to you'. That is, it is a way of communicating one's unwillingness to become locked into a reciprocal relationship, and simultaneously showing a reluctance to "cause any inconvenience to another".⁷ In other words, it is an expression of hesitation or even refusal to become forced into a kind of patron-client relationship with any other social groups to whom the recipient (client) will subsequently become subordinated. Hence, the concept of *à na-thi* can be described as a kind of social marker to define and communicate where one stands in relation to others in Burmese society.

It also demarcates a conceptual boundary between those who are inside and who are not; between the inner circle of people who are *mìthàzú* (family) from whom one can receive freely, and those outside it with whom one has to maintain a calculated relationship of reciprocal balance.⁸ Therefore, it draws a line between the kin territory of non-reciprocity and the outer area of social reciprocity. If a Burmese individual cannot or does not reciprocate whatever is given from someone who is non-kin, social pressure builds over a period of time, and if ignored, one subsequently loses face. In order to avoid bad reputation and inconvenience in an interdependent society, every individual, eager to minimize subsequent conflicts, lubricates the conversation by saying *à na-thi*; a polite way of saying 'sorry, I cannot become obligated to you', unless the receiving is absolutely necessary.

We can point out that monks and nuns whose survival depends solely on the material support of devotees and benefactors, should be theoretically exempted from social norms of reciprocity. Perhaps monks are, but nuns, due to their ambiguous position, are influenced by such social conventions. As a general practice, nuns customarily recite the blessing chants to their benefactor(s) after having received offerings; "may you be prosperous, may you be happy and healthy, and may you attain enlightenment....".⁹ By having such ritual interaction, their goodwill and meritorious deed are acknowledged by the monastic recipient. Thus the weight of being so should have been offset. However, it seems difficult for nuns to relish their dependent state and allow others to offer them donations when their religious position is insecure. Hence nuns continue to express the notion of *à na-thi* ('I feel bad') when dealing with non-relation benefactors, and on many occasions, I have witnessed them behave in a deferential or servile manner towards those who have given them offerings.

In actual life, many nuns who cannot seek reconciliation between their material dependence and monastic requirements; between their spiritual ideals and the social implication of a religious gift, remain dependent on their families and kin. This is problematic, since if they confined themselves to a limited support base as such, they remain a heavy burden on the people closest to them. This also leaves them with little chance to break free of personal bonds and extend their network of devotees in wider society. And yet if they tried to be independent, there is a danger of losing any financial support whatsoever.

This again points to a fundamental difference between the standing of a monk and nun. Whilst a monk whose official status gives him the kind of integrity to maintain multiple dependencies with a large number of benefactors without succumbing to their influence, a

nun cannot deal with a state of dependency without coming under the influence of her benefactors. Such a relationship seems to gradually override her sense of spiritual autonomy and subsequently, she becomes confined to few exclusive relationships with her sponsor donors. A monk can remain relatively unaffected by the interests of his sponsors and is capable of maintaining a good distance with them without any one of them wielding much influence over him. Moreover, the more respected or charismatic he is, he can command his authority and maintain a sphere of total autonomy, which brings an even greater sense of spiritual worth. In contrast, a nun, unless she has special qualities or qualifications that grant her such status, succumbs to the influence of her few sponsor donors.

4. The Notion of *Hpòn*

Following the previous section, it can be said that a charismatic monk is someone who can maintain a centripetal position in relation to a multitude of devotees and sponsors without compromising his spiritual autonomy. His position is pivotal in society in terms of his distance and impartiality, but he can command a strong grip on others whilst exerting his overall influence on everyone. Such a monk can appropriate his dependent situation to his religious advantage without succumbing to his benefactors' self-motivated interests. The number of followers and devotees that a popular monk can sustain is also an important indication of his spiritual worth, although this does not mean that every monk is equipped with such qualities.

Here, we may recall that a Burmese monk is called *hpòn-gyi*, which means 'big *hpòn*' or 'big glory'. A monk is expected to show leadership due to his impartiality as well as his pivotal position in society that makes him well informed and regularly interact with his many devotees from all walks of life. *Hpòn* is often used in combination with *kan* (karma), as *hpòn-(k)gan*, which refers to his 'strong and effective karma'. *Hpòn-gan* is also understood to be one of the moral attributes of an individual, accumulated as a result of meritorious deeds done in one's past existences, endowing the person in the present with good karma and bountiful qualities of charisma. Thus a popular monk with *hpòn-gan* can attract support effortlessly, commands without coercion, and exert a centripetal grip on his followers. He also has an intuitive understanding of social situations and human psychology, and often has a far reaching vision that allows him to co-ordinate people's services and resources to make things actually happen. Thus such a monk not only symbolically epitomizes the quality of charisma, but also his popularity becomes morally justified.

A woman is not excluded from acquiring such quality. Nevertheless, in most cases, she may not find herself in an authoritative position or placed in a social situation where she can exercise the kind of influence and leadership that a male might be expected to exercise. Moreover, a Burmese woman does not have the opportunity to publicly claim the position by simply becoming a monk. Having said that, there are celebrated nuns some of whom are healers, who are referred to as *hpòn-gan shi-tha thiláshin* (a nun endowed with strong karma).¹⁰ Few as they may be, they can attract large amounts of donations, and as evidence of their *hpòn-gan*, their nunneries have seen rapid development within a relatively short span of time. These nuns are normally strong individuals who have the political acumen to develop contacts with powerful people and are often endowed with a vision that has far-reaching consequences. Helped by such qualities, they can capitalize on every opportunity presented to them and make things happen that are normally beyond an individual's bounds.

In reality, however, the majority of nuns are busy with their daily chores, and their concerns and understanding of their social environment are far from any grand vision. The situation is similar for most laymen and women who cannot see beyond the demands of their daily survival, and therefore, are not in a position to exert any influence on others. This also

applies to the majority of ordinary monks who are caught up in their mundane interactions and petty routines, deprived of effective channels or special incentives to exert any kind of influence in initiating change. Therefore, the notion of *hpòn* or *hpòn-gan* may not be gender-specific, but its reference is limited to someone who is truly special in their larger vision and understanding of the outside world.

5. The Notion of Merit

In order to understand the transactions that take place between the monastic and the laity, let me now turn to lay donors, and examine the religious interactions from a benefactor's point of view. The practice of *daná* (Pali: *dāna*) or offering donations, is regarded as one of the fundamental responsibilities for practicing Buddhists. By offering *daná*, people try to offset whatever de-merit accumulated from the past lives and safeguard themselves against future misfortune. The act of generosity may restore their inner balance and a sense of well-being,¹¹ but the worth of *daná* is ultimately believed to depend on the genuine good will behind the act. If the emphasis is placed on good intentions, then donation could be offered to anyone who is willing to receive; to a poor person who is desperately in need or a beggar on the street. Nonetheless, this is not regarded to be proper *daná*, since people believe that such offering has no *achò*; positive religious consequences. Thus, religious donations have to be offered properly and given to the right religious beneficiaries in order to merit *achò*, and the ideal recipient has traditionally been a monk.¹² By offering him, it is believed that there are meritorious returns, and the accumulation of which anticipates better rebirths. However, the act of seeking *kútho* or 'merit' is not a static notion, and a good meritorious outcome can also be subjective according to what the benefactor believes is got out of the act of offering. One lay woman stated, "I would rather give to a nun whom I respect than to any monk whom I don't think much of". In this case, if she truly believes that she is doing a good deed by offering to a nun, it is seen to be meritorious. The notion of obtaining merit, therefore, derives from one's understanding of what is worth offering, and who to. However, if one's decision is made normally according to what is customarily valued and socially acceptable, then a monk is an automatic choice as a worthwhile beneficiary.¹³

In daily situations, the notion of merit is also invoked to make one engage in any type of activity that is regarded to be menial or servile, for example, something that people hesitate to undertake, such as cleaning toilets and engaging in painstaking tasks. By laying emphasis on the meritorious gain, undertakings that are self-giving seem to provide the agent with a sense of satisfaction and a heightened notion of merit. In fact, merit can be acquired in various ways, sometimes through the practice of altruism and service, or by customary religious offerings towards the monastic beneficiaries. Nonetheless, I was also reminded that if one were in any doubt regarding the positive outcome of one's act, the meritorious returns would be offset. In other words, if the act of offering does not automatically invoke a sense of wellbeing for the person involved, then that undermines the beneficial consequences of the deed. It is in this context that we have to understand why a Burmese person is not keen to give to a beggar. This is because the present manifestation of the beggar-state is interpreted as the result of one's inferior karma, and consequently a beggar is seen to be unworthy of generosity. The reasoning we observe here is that it is not as meritorious to give to someone with bad karma as to give to someone with good karma. Hence a monk who is endowed with *kútho kan*, good karma as a result of past meritorious deeds, is regarded most worthy and becomes the focus of their *daná*. Furthermore, the Sangha endows him with the authority that confirms his position as monastic beneficiary and that makes people believe that giving to a monk is the best religious investment.

In comparison, offering to a nun is seen as risky, since without the presence of a female Sangha, her religious worth depends primarily on the endeavour of each individual; what she has achieved as a monastic. Often it is difficult to evaluate a person's spiritual worth, so potential donors are less inclined to commit themselves to a nun whose inner value is only their guess. When people cannot ascertain the amount of spiritual merit they might receive for the offering, they generally look for external criteria that would help them measure the spiritual worth of a monastic beneficiary. Monks, in particular, those who are affiliated with reputable monasteries or have high official positions, are seen as a reliable 'field of merit'. Nevertheless, people do not give to every monk and ordinary monks do not fare any better than ordinary nuns.

Nuns who have succeeded in becoming popular beneficiaries often appeal to public sympathy by attracting attention to their personal struggles and the enormous disadvantages placed on them as women. The hardships they have endured and obstacles they have overcome are emphasized on many occasions to highlight what they have really achieved. Burmese people are also easily impressed by special feats that are beyond normal convention. When asked why they decided to offer a nun their support, some of my informants explained by using the term *chi-nyo-thi* (she is really respectable) or *chi-nyo ló* (..... because I was very impressed by her). That is, they made up their mind because they admired her and saw some kind of special worth in her. The religious worth of a nun, in the eyes of benefactors, derives from a mixture of internal and external qualities that she is equipped with, what Bourdieu has called 'symbolic capital' (1977). This symbolic capital is based on social and religious criteria used by potential donors when deciding on which one to patronise especially on a regular basis. A nun can reverse the situation to her advantage; for instance, if she has done well in the state ecclesiastical exams, she can enhance her religious worth. If a nun is thought to have symbolic appeal, she is regarded as good religious investment, and can overcome the general disadvantage of being a female monastic.

Nuns are also engaged in a multitude of religious transactions and ceremonial exchanges that take place amongst themselves and in relation to the monks. Senior nuns and teachers may receive more donations than they need, but they do not keep them all to themselves, and redistribute them back to their community. Expensive and valuable gifts are re-offered to the monks, and surplus food and necessities are given away down the pecking order to junior nuns who are in need. Principal nuns of nunnery schools and those with rank and status are expected to be generous, and their skill in accepting just the right amount for themselves and judging how and what resources to re-allocate, adds to their reputation as effective leaders. Hence, the notion of merit has to be re-examined in the context of social acceptability and inter-personal relationships in the monastic community. The perceptions and judgments of the general public are also affected by social values, religious trends and other factors that influence how they decide to offer donations. Meanwhile, devotees are constantly on the lookout for worthy monastic beneficiaries, who are endowed with spiritual qualities that may deserve their attention and support. In recent years, more and more nuns have come to be accepted as valuable religious assurance.

6. Relationship with Society

For a regular relationship with a monastic beneficiary to be established, various requirements have to be fulfilled from the viewpoint of the benefactor. It is common for the qualifications of a potential monastic beneficiary to be scrutinized in order to assess if a monk or nun is really worth one's support. Factors such as the reputation of an individual as well as the standing of his/her monastic institution are relevant in deciding on one's support to the beneficiary. However, once a decision is made, the commitment is taken seriously, and

it can develop into a long-term and regular relationship between a monastic and donor. If a monk or nun is a prospective donor's kin, then as we have seen, one is expected to extend every form of material support. Nonetheless, Burmese people are not reluctant to support a monastic who is a complete stranger.

In most benefactor-beneficiary relationships, it is the lay donor who takes the initiative in deciding how the relationship should be conducted. He/she decides on the amount of donations and the frequency of support that is made to the beneficiary. Monastic members are also obliged to receive from whoever is willing to offer even if he is a criminal or an unpleasant character. They also have to accept whatever is given with detached gratitude. If anything is given in kind, they are not expected to express their tastes or preferences in regard to the content of offerings, and do not refuse anything since that would obstruct the benefactor from acquiring merit.¹⁴

Although monastic members are usually on the receiving side, there are religious occasions when they take the initiative and actively take part in fundraising. These occasions are referred to as *ahlu-hkan* (an occasion for asking for donations) and its aim is specified; to raise funds to build a pagoda, to purchase a plot of land, to start a school, to build a communal worship hall, and so on. This type of donation may be similar to what we are more familiar with in the case of charity fundraising. The transactions in *ahlu-hkan* are transparent, whereby both benefactor and monastic beneficiary have a concrete idea as to how much is needed and how the money will be allocated. The procedure is normally businesslike as letters are printed and sent to potential donors explaining the purpose of the fund-raising and the ways in which the funds are administered. Receipts are given to whoever has contributed and a financial report is produced at the end of the project. However, *ahlu-hkan* is not a typical kind of religious transactions that monastic members engage in normally, and it is uncommon for them to ask for donations, since the initiative is expected to come from the laity.

Sometimes a relationship with a monastic beneficiary is formed by mere chance. For instance, a layperson may spontaneously come to like a monk/nun and decide to become his/her regular sponsor. One woman decided to support a young novice monk whom she often saw coming for alms in her neighbourhood. After talking to him, she said, she developed a special interest in his welfare because he reminded her of her deceased younger brother. She justified her attraction to him by referring to the notion of *yeizek*; a 'pre-destined emotional bond', saying that they had already been related in their previous lives.¹⁵ Another woman claimed that she became very fond of a particular nun whilst staying as a visitor in her nunnery. When asked why she decided to become her regular sponsor, she explained that their relationship was simply pre-destined and they were fated to become close. For them, such encounters have a cause, and the formation of a close bond, especially between strangers, is seen as something unusual unless it was destined to happen. So unless it was pre-destined, no meeting would have taken place and the bond could not have developed into something special. Once its formation is justified, there is every reason for such a relationship to develop into a more substantial and long-term bond. That is, when it becomes a moral responsibility on the part of the benefactor to support a monastic beneficiary, the commitment to support him becomes all the more immediate. In order to give further meaning, kin terminology is adopted to refer to each other. This is described in the context of a fictitious kinship; such as my 'brother' or 'sister', referring back to the relationship in their previous lives.

Meanwhile, some benefactors said that they had previously known little about the actual life of nuns, but came to offer support due to the strong feeling of sympathy that was triggered by hearing negative comments about them. Many of these benefactors are women and said that they were drawn to the nuns because they 'felt pity', *thanà ló*. They viewed the

nuns as women who had sacrificed the normal joys of life, and felt sorry because, in their view, they had chosen an extremely harsh life of deprivation. Such a view, in fact reflected general prejudices and prevalent negative stereotypes regarding the nuns, and yet, in some cases, these prejudices attracted women to come to offer them support.

“These girls are missing out so much. They can’t adorn themselves with nice beautiful clothes, put on jewellery and make-up. They cannot enjoy a normal married life like us. Their life is governed by so many strict rules. I feel so sorry for them. That’s why I give them my support.”

However, people’s emotions are often intertwined and mixed. Some mentioned how they admired the nuns because they had made a courageous decision to opt for a harsh religious life that they themselves could not have led. In their conversation, a ‘special quality’ called *parami* (virtue, integrity) was called upon, which explained their inner resolve that allowed them to remain in a testing vocation. “If they could tolerate that kind of hardship”, a laywoman said, “they must have *parami*”. Only special people had *parami*, otherwise, how could their determination and resilience be explained? Many women I spoke to thought nuns were predisposed with such a ‘gift’, and regarded it as the outcome of their accumulated merit that were carried over from their previous lives.¹⁶ The notion of *parami* seems to become all the more relevant when a benefactor finds herself in a situation to provide justification for her material support for a nun. She would say, “I offer donations to a nun because she has *parami* (which I myself don’t have)”, and thereby justify her sponsorship in a social climate that is generally less supportive of them. At times, nuns are projected as a prototype of female martyrs who are equipped with an inner strength to endure much hardship, and whose general struggle seems to allow them to shine through as special people.

The tension revealed here between belittling and praising nuns as monastic beneficiary reveals a dilemma not only in the benefactor’s relationship with them, but also in the ambiguity that is embedded in the social norms and general attitudes towards them. Their ambiguous standing also presented an uncertainty, in particular for female benefactors who could identify with them as women, but ultimately lived in a different world from nuns as lay people. I witnessed several female patrons behaving in a seemingly patronizing manner towards nuns, at times acting as if they owned them. Some verbally praised their religious worth as monastic women, but in fact treated them as no more than their gift-debtors. There were also others who actively wielded their influence over nuns, which made them act more servile than necessary. One of my nun friends who was more outspoken, should she meet this kind of situation, would come and whisper in my ear, “we are not servants and we are not slaves”. However she would not dare complain in front of her benefactor for fear of offending her and stopping her support. Whilst many lay benefactors searched for a justification for their support, some acted over-deferentially towards nuns, volunteering to cook for them and even taking over their domestic chores whilst staying at the nunnery. This resulted in a similarly awkward situation for nuns, who were mostly uncertain as to where they stood in relation to their lay benefactors. Such conflicting attitudes were an indicator of the heightened tension that derived both from the benefactors’ prejudices towards ‘down-trodden’ women as well as admiration for those who appeared to endure so much hardship. Negative images and social perceptions, nevertheless, were offset whenever there were positive personal encounters, although most nuns remained cautious in their relationship with lay donors, since after all the relationship was dictated by their whim, and was not initiated by the nuns.

7. Monastic Economy

Monastic members in Burma do not own land or property and are completely dependent on society for their daily survival. They are sustained by donations and alms as well as token fees from attending religious functions and ritual. Both monks and nuns are invited to take part in religious ceremonies; however, in regard to the amount of money they receive, there is a wide disparity. In 1986-87, a nun was offered an average fee of between ten and twenty-five *kyat* for attending a function such as a funeral, whilst a monk was offered at least between 100 to 200 *kyat*. Due to monetary devaluations in the late 1980s and inflation in the recent decade, fees offered to a nun in 1997-98 rose tenfold to between 100 and 250 *kyat*, and around 1,000 *kyat* to a monk. Since the dollar exchange rate has also leapt tenfold, the actual value of what they can command for their ceremonial contribution remains more or less the same.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the proportional disparity between a monk and nun does not seem to have changed. What this implies is that whilst a monk can live reasonably well by receiving fees from attending two or three ceremonies a month, a nun, by contrast, has to attend at least ten or more functions in order to make ends meet. Realistically, this is not a possibility since a nun is generally invited to fewer functions than a monk. Hence her monthly expenditure exceeds her donation income, and as inflation is rife, the life of an ordinary nun is not easy to sustain.

As far as actual expenditure for maintenance is concerned, a nun has to pay for general utilities, clothes, and food (two meals a day) in a nunnery.¹⁸ The pattern of expenditure may differ from privately run nunneries, which are the majority, and nunnery schools that are run on communal principles where the principal nun takes responsibility for collecting donations and feeding the students. It also depends on the area and location, since living costs vary and are much cheaper in the countryside. Monks and nuns who live around Minwun and Sagaing Hills have also benefited from the public rice distribution event that takes place twice a year, as for the last hundred and twenty years, Malun San-hlu Association, a privately run organisation in Mandalay, has been collecting and bringing raw rice to the monastic residents.¹⁹ In this area, it cost the equivalent of 100 US dollars monthly in the late 1990s, which may have risen double in 2006-07, to maintain about thirty resident nuns in a communally run nunnery school.²⁰

It is customary for nuns, however, to survive on whatever amount of alms and donations collected, which implies there are good months when they eat well and bad months when they survive on basic staples. They are also given plenty of food during the period of festivities in spring and autumn, and during the harvest season when villagers offer them staple food. By contrast, nuns cut their expenditure and live thriftily during the summer months of Buddhist Lent. Living costs in urban areas like Yangon are expensive, but survival is easier since there are frequent functions and religious events, and people part with cash more easily when they go out to collect alms. Therefore, junior nuns or nuns of no rank tend to drift into big cities to secure their basic survival.

Generally speaking, a mendicant lifestyle for a monk is much easier since the traditional custom is prevalent that offers him cooked food. Devotees get up before sunrise, cook and prepare rice, and await the monks who come on their morning round. It is noteworthy how much Burmese people invest in feeding the monks and looking after their well-being. Stories are often heard about pious donors who cannot move house or even go on holiday lest their monastic beneficiaries go hungry. Even if they had to go away for a few days, they would make arrangements so that 'their monk(s)' would be looked after by someone responsible. If he is old or sickly, people (including the nuns themselves) make sure that he is cared for by taking him food parcels and frequently calling at the monastery. The complete dependence and 'helpless' state of the monk seem to glorify the role of his donors as indispensable. A nun, on the other hand, is expected to be capable of looking after herself,

but her independence ironically makes people less inclined to offer her food and service. Nonetheless, she is truly in need and may try various ways to secure regular benefactors in order to survive, but the more desperate she appears, the more discouraged potential donors seem to become.²¹ A monk may play down the importance of his benefactors as if he was doing them a favour. Subsequently, in his case, the actual need for food becomes glossed over, and instead the religious significance of his receiving role becomes highlighted.

The number of monks and nuns, or monasteries and nunneries, which a person supports as benefactor depends on their time, religious commitment, and material resources. Perhaps it is realistic to say that a middle-class family can afford to support one or two monks or a few nuns at the most, since it involves heavy commitment to supply a steady flow of resources. Donations are normally given both in cash and in kind, according to the nature of the relationship between the benefactor and the monastic beneficiary. However, offering 'gold and silver', in other words cash, traditionally has had an immoral implication since money transactions are seen to be transferring the very source of suffering to the monastic recipient.²² So benefactors, if they are close to the beneficiaries, prefer to give in kind; in the form of food, robes, and daily necessities. Otherwise, they take on the responsibility for providing requirements such as repairing the roof or offering other services. In this way, the benefactor spares the recipient the trouble of purchasing the goods and fulfills his need to offer 'something' to the monastic community.

It is generally considered that a Burmese family should be spending about a quarter of their total income on religious donations, half on daily maintenance, and the rest for savings and emergencies. Even a poor family would try to set aside the cash monthly or an amount of rice that is an equivalent of a few dollars to offer to monks who come on daily rounds. A well-to-do family may spend a few hundred dollars a month or as much as a few thousand dollars for important religious occasions.²³ This is a lot of money in a country where the average wages of a civil servant is between five to ten dollars a month.²⁴ A university professor may earn a little more, between ten and fifteen dollars a month, which is about the same amount someone like a brick-layer earns. But this is far from sufficient, and people generally have side jobs and the whole family work in order to make ends meet.²⁵ However, there is a general awareness that one's financial standing should not disadvantage one's moral position for future rebirth, and ultimately, support for the Sangha should be within one's means. In this respect, when it comes to gaining a desirable rebirth, the poor and rich are seen to stand an equal chance of improving their lot. Burmese Buddhists say a daily offering of a morsel of rice to a monk is more meritorious than a sporadic act of lavish offering. The emphasis is placed on the long-term commitment and heavy responsibility one undertakes in relation to the monastic beneficiaries.

Nonetheless, once a relationship is established, Burmese benefactors are loyal and conscientious; it is uncommon to see them withdraw support unless they actually fall short of their own means. When a relationship is formed with a monastery as an institution rather than with a specific monk, support is extended to all its resident monks. At times the relationship may continue beyond the demise of the residing abbot.²⁶ Monks and nun beneficiaries also develop an affinity with their sponsors they have known for a long time. When undergoing serious life crises, illness, or divorce, they find solace in consulting a close monastic beneficiary, and at the time of the patron's death, the family most certainly will turn to a monastic beneficiary for moral support. I have come across a case in which nuns cared for their former patroness who had a stroke and became paralyzed, and was then abandoned by her husband. They cared for her for several years until she eventually died. I also know of a monk who took in his former patron who had lost everything in gambling and gave him a caretaker role in his monastery. Some lay helpers in monasteries may have been offered that kind of support after having encountered personal crises in life. In this respect, the

relationship between benefactors and monastic beneficiaries entails much more than material transactions, and reveals their mutual acknowledgement of interdependence and a realization of the transitory nature of life. Therefore, offering support to the monastic community can bring immediate returns in this life before the meritorious returns in the next, which may appeal to many benefactors as a form of life assurance or a kind of security.

8. *Going for Alms*

Amongst their religious duties, the practice of alms-collecting is regarded as one of the most important and symbolic for monastic members in relation to wider society. Every morning, monks and novices go walking barefoot, carrying a black lacquer bowl, on their way to collect alms in the locality. Such transactions are often routinized; the monks keeping regular rounds and donors knowing who their beneficiaries are.²⁷ Hence, a stable and regular relationship between a benefactor and a monastic beneficiary precedes the daily round of alms.

The relationships nuns have with their benefactors vary between rural villages and busy urban centres. People in rural villages are more sympathetic towards monastic members where there is a strong sense of responsibility to support those who are generally recruited from within their community. In urban centres, however, people tend to have a more impersonal and distant relationship; they are either far less inclined to offer anything unless monastic beneficiaries can show some indication of their religious worth, otherwise they offer a small amount of cash to fulfill their momentary sense of duty. Moreover, we notice signs of growing materialism and a change in the social climate in contemporary Burmese cities that is affecting the nature of religious transactions to the detriment of nuns who are more vulnerable in their standing than the monks. In recent years, transactions with society have become increasingly deprived of their original religious importance, and even for monastic recipients, the emphasis has increasingly become focused on the material gain. Having said that, the relationships nuns have with lay benefactors in the local town of Sagaing and the transactions that take place in Mandalay, the second largest city with a population of 10 million people, present a sharp contrast.

Sagaing is a medium-sized provincial town that developed historically in relationship to the monastic community clustered around the hill ranges. The town population is pious and people are generally sympathetic towards monks and nuns; many of them have maintained close relationships with monasteries and nunneries for generations. People know the monastic residents, about their teachers and names of senior members, and the scholarly standards of these monastic institutions. If a new initiate comes for alms, the donor will firstly inquire about her monastic affiliation in order to evaluate her standing. In turn, the nuns are aware of the local residents, especially in terms of their willingness or unwillingness to offer alms. Details in regard to who patronizes which monastery or nunnery are open knowledge, as well as their occupation, wealth and even the personalities of their family members. On their weekly rounds, lay benefactors invite the nuns in for tea, and they chat and exchange news and gossip. Raw rice is offered in generous quantities into their bowls and in return nuns suffuse them with gratitude by reciting blessing chants. At weekends or in the evenings, people from the town casually drop into nunneries to discuss their problems or simply to have a conversation. Such transactions are friendly and personal, based on familiarity and goodwill.

The environment of alms gathering in urban centre is completely different from that in the local town. Mandalay is about an hour drive by public transport from Sagaing and nuns go alms gathering riding pick-up buses once or twice a month. Nuns say they can collect more money on their rounds, but gathering alms in a big city is not only exhausting, but often

humiliating. In their hope to maximize income, nuns frequent busy market places and trading areas, and call on as many households as possible regardless of whether they know the people or not. Their chanting for donations becomes almost incessant as they tour the centre and stand on people's doorsteps to ask for alms. Increasingly, the transactions are becoming impersonal and deprived of any religious value. Many households seem to accept the nuns and offer them cash without even considering who they are or where they come from. Sometimes, they do not even know whether they are proper nuns or not, and yet many give a small spoonful of raw rice to fulfill their sense of duty. At times, they give a small amount of cash, not necessarily out of genuine goodwill, but to get rid of nuns who chant insistently outside their gates. Recently, I have noticed that several households leave a large bowl of raw rice outside their house or by the door with a sign that says, 'self-service'. Under such circumstances, there is no longer any personal interaction between the lay benefactor and the monastic beneficiary that implies religious meaning. If the nuns cannot meet their benefactor face-to-face, there is hardly any chance of bestowing on them blessing and reciprocating with a gesture of symbolic gratitude. Thus religious significance in contemporary transactions is becoming increasingly diminished, and in the absence of any personal exchange, all the nuns can do is to chant blessings to an invisible benefactor in the hope that he/she would accrue some meritorious return. After a soulless day, they take the raw rice they have collected to the market and exchange them for cash and return exhausted to their nunneries in the evening.

In the urban setting, it seems to me that the religious significance of alms collecting has become increasingly subordinated to the material need for food and sustenance, in which the emphasis on religious interaction has become replaced by material gain.²⁸ On an average alms day, nuns collect a few bags of raw rice, which is an equivalent of about a few dollars for a day's work. The amount of donations they collect in Mandalay is far more lucrative, perhaps fifty percent more than they collect in Sagaing town. But the impersonal nature of transactions in a large city appears to have broken the traditional relationship that existed between the lay benefactor and the nun beneficiary. As the process of 'commodification' continues, her religious standing could be further affected since if the relationship between a donor and a nun becomes further deprived of human contact and religious value, that relationship will eventually turn into something akin to 'commodity exchange', in which she has no commodity to return. This situation will further place her in a position of dependency, and if it continues to flow in that direction, a nun will not be able to maintain her religious integrity for much longer. Some of the junior nuns said that the experience of alms collecting in the city made them feel as if they had descended to the level of mere beggars. As more and more nuns are seen to be collecting alms at congested city centres and tourist sites in the hope of maximizing their takings, this urban phenomenon already seems to suggest that they not only face the possibility of losing the respect of society, but also of losing their role in the transactional process in which laity has acquired merit in return for alms.

In contrast to the alienation emerging in the urban areas, relationships with their benefactors in rural villages have remained personal and interdependent. The agricultural population has provided a field of recruitment as well as material support, and a deeply ingrained attitude of respect towards the monastic community remains prevalent in rural areas. There still exists a custom in Upper Burma to ask a nun to adopt an infant symbolically so that his/her healthy growth will be safeguarded and she acts as guardian for the child for his/her formative years. During the few months of harvest season between December to February, and continuing into early March, nuns visit villages for a couple of weeks, and sometimes stay for as long as a month. During their stay, they are invited to countless meals offered by their local supporters who provide them with plenty of staple items: rice, onions, garlic, oil, lentils, chilli, tomatoes and so on, which are arranged to be taken back to their

nunneries.²⁹ Young monks also return to their villages to spend time with families, usually after the annual ecclesiastical exams, and before and after the rains retreat, but it is neither essential nor customary for them to collect large quantities of foodstuffs like the nuns do.

In return for the generosity of rural people, nuns give consultations and assurances, and listen to people's problems and settle disputes, and villagers wait to receive moral advice about almost everything in life. Nuns travel extensively so they also bring important news from other regions in a country where media activities are limited: about the latest regulations, the weather, harvest, price of commodities, news of epidemics and calamities, and minor gossip about births, marriages and deaths. Such information is especially valuable for the rural population whose movements are restricted and confined to the locality, and many women find the nuns a convenient outlet for gossiping and discussing their problems (and villagers do not necessarily expect the nuns to be tight-lipped about their confessions). Another essential type of information brought by nuns involves merit-making opportunities in the monastic community. Villagers are informed about forthcoming ceremonies and religious events, and news is provided about other donors: who held a special ceremony, how many monks were invited, how much was spent, and so on. Additionally, villagers learn which monk is ill, which monastery needs repair, which novice has received an award, so that they can make decisions with regards to their religious expenditure for the following year. In this role, nuns are essential as religious intermediaries in securing continued support from wider society, and they foster an active relationship between the monastic community and its rural benefactors.

9. Conclusion

The interactions between lay benefactor and nun beneficiary have been observed in a wide spectrum of relationships in society; from a more traditional context in which both parties know each other and appreciate each other's role in their mutual quest for meritorious returns, to a pattern of impersonal and distant interactions that are emerging in the urban areas. The contemporary trend can be seen to be shifting in a direction to maximize material gain on the part of some beneficiaries and a half-hearted sense of charity on the part of the laity. However, this is alarming, since history has shown that the lack of material support from society and the resultant economic difficulties have triggered the downfall of *bhikkhunis* once before, which eventually led to their disappearance then.³⁰

It seems to me that the contemporary cash transactions in religious contexts shown in this paper are increasingly propelling the parties concerned to move away from the moral sphere of religious transactions to an economic sphere where the transactions are "inherently impersonal, transitory, amoral and calculating" (Bloch & Parry 1989: 9). In other words, cash offering is making a religious act of *dāna* shift in value, from a moral and spiritual arena to an anonymous territory preoccupied with profit and gain. If the influx of global consumerist values and growing secularism continues in Burma, visible signs of which are already emerging, it is foreseeable that nuns will be the first to suffer as monastic beneficiaries. In the worst scenario, a situation may come when they can no longer rely on donations and good will of people, which may ultimately force them to seek other ways of generating income.³¹ This is not an option they seek, and the present situation in Burma at least indicates that nuns are still regarded as integral part of the 'field for merit' alongside monks.

Meanwhile, nuns continue to cultivate their religious worth in order to secure their monastic position and minimize the danger of being pushed out of religious transactions taking place with society. Therefore, the rising standards of their monastic education and success in state ecclesiastical exams have become essential for their survival. These symbolic assets have increased their donation income and contributed to the lifting of both their religious status and a sense of inner worth, as they strive to become more respected in the eyes of their benefactors.

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¹ The works of Grimshaw (1992) in Ladakh, and more recently Gutschow (2004) in Zangskar in North-west India, are probably the only few that have examined the intricacies of monastic economy in regard to Buddhist nuns, exploring their economic activities in their inter-relationship with monks and with wider society. For Chinese Buddhist monasteries, see Kieschnick (2003).

² Visuddhimagga stipulates that the Sangha is "worthy of offerings, of oblations, of gifts, and worthy of reverential salutation," that is, the monks are an incomparable field for merit in the world (*The Path of Purity* 1975: 252). Obviously, not all monks are worthy; and those who are have to be well practised, upright, righteous, and law-abiding (ibid.). In regard

to the contents of donations, Buddhaghosa states that a 'gift' is an epithet for the 'four requisites', which are robe, alms food, dwelling and medicine (ibid., p.29).

³ Perera (1979: 79-80)

⁴ Burmese people do not express any inhibitions or problems in offering to their relatives who are monks or nuns. Quite the opposite, many of them seem obliged to offer if the recipient is a member of the family. In this respect, their norm is quite different from the description that is given about the Newar Buddhists (Gellner 1992: 123).

⁵ Fictitious kinship is formed as the result of friendship or a strong sense of affinity felt towards each other. In such relationship, they refer to each other in kinship terms. People explain the strength of such commitment to be the result of kinship ties that they have already enjoyed in their previous lives.

⁶ See Parry (1986), Michaels (1997). It seems to me that Mauss (1925) is right in stating that the gift in 'primitive' societies is never disinterested, but it assumes a reciprocal relationship on the part of both giver and receiver.

⁷ Nash says *à-nà-de* is a feeling of "shame, yielding, melting, disturbance and inferiority". "It prevents, or obviates, except for intimate equals, a sharply defined emotional situation, a blazing argument, a direct contradiction, a clash of persons, and the clean and definite statement of what one feels and thinks" (1970: 268-9). Bekker has described this concept from a Western perspective, and views it as "an inability to express self-assertive needs", signifying that it is a negative emotion of reluctance to become an inconvenience to others, or fear of aggression and so on. She even expressed her hope that this expression would eventually be 'stamped out' as the process of national development takes place (1981: 36).

⁸ The term *mīthazú*, which signifies 'family', literally means 'mother and children coming together'. *Hswei-myò* or *áyin* is the term for 'blood relations'.

⁹ Despite Spiro's observation that a "monk does not express gratitude to his benefactors" (1970: 410), I have observed on many occasions monks reciting blessing chants to express gratitude to benefactors in return for their offerings. In this respect, they appear to be involved in reciprocity nonetheless.

¹⁰ Spiro is misleading in claiming that *hpòn* is uniquely a male quality possessed by man and not by woman (1977: 236 & 259).

¹¹ People resort to offering donations to the Sangha when confronted with life crises such as terminal illnesses, accidents, business losses and family problems, or anything they consider inauspicious.

¹² This point has been made by Spiro that "the merit deriving from *dāna* is proportional to the spiritual quality of the recipient rather than that of the donor." "The donor may be a terrible person...but he receives much merit by giving to pious monks." (1970: 107). However, an informant said that if the donated item, for example a computer, was given to a monk or nun who did not know how to operate it, the donation would be *alaga* (a waste). He said that an ideal donation would be something suitable for the recipient, which can be used and truly appreciated.

¹³ In Burmese Buddhism, charity (*danā* / Pāli: *dāna*), morality (*thilā* / Pāli: *sīla*) and meditation (*bawana* / Pāli: *bhāvanā*) are prescribed as the three essential paths in acquiring spiritual merit. Upholding good intentions (*seidana* / Pāli: *cetanā*) and sending compassion (*myitta* / Pāli: *mettā*) are also stressed as fundamental dispositions for devout Buddhists. Of all deeds, however, the act of *danā* is said to hold most importance in people's daily lives.

¹⁴ It may be remembered how Burmese monks covered their alms bowls and refused to accept food offering from the soldiers during the uprising in 1988. For their act of defiance, many were arrested and forced to disrobe.

¹⁵ It is believed that any close relationship that is formed in the present life is the consequence of having made religious offerings conjointly in past existences.

¹⁶ If a monk or nun disrobes, people commonly say, *parami kon ló*, meaning 'the person must have used up all ones store of *parami*'. The sense of failure is replaced by the notion of 'having to come down' the spiritual ladder in order to become a secular person.

¹⁷ One dollar in the black market was exchanged for thirty *kyat* in 1986-87 (officially six *kyat* at that time), which rose dramatically to 1,000 *kyat* in the early 2000s.

¹⁸ If a nunnery does not have gas, which is the situation for the majority of nunneries in the Sagaing Hill area, wood has to be purchased for cooking. Before the water pipes were installed, they also had to buy drinking water from vendors.

¹⁹ Malun San-hlu Association (the Rice Donors Association), founded in 1886 in Mandalay, collects raw rice from all over the country to be distributed to the monastic community in the Sagaing region. The Burmese government now provides monastic members with a basic supply of raw rice, oil and salt.

²⁰ This includes items such as food, clothes, and utilities, but did not include important expenditure such as diesel for the generator, flowers and candles for the altar, books and stationery, and other necessities.

²¹ Ten Precept nuns who do not handle money are the least in need, but ironically they seem to receive the most support from society.

²² It is noteworthy that frequent demonetizations and soaring costs in recent decades have added to the general mistrust of domestic banknotes in Burma. People no longer seem to have confidence in them as a reliable store of value. Subsequently, there is an accelerated enthusiasm to give cash away or at least make them useful by offering donations. As a result, religious donations have become more lavish especially in cities and more emphasis has come to be laid on the social implications; although the act of giving donations has always been tied to the notions of prestige, status, and this-worldly values.

²³ Some wealthy families I interviewed in 1989 said that they spent between 20,000 to 40,000 *kyat* (equivalent to 600 to 1200 dollars in those days) annually for religious expenditure.

²⁴ This amount buys only about two bags of rice to feed a family of five

²⁵ A highly skilled carpenter makes a better living and can earn a few dollars a day for his labour.

²⁶ Responsibility to look after monasteries inherited from previous generations of family members can be especially heavy under the crippling inflation that affects Burmese economy. Yet many Burmese strive to make money so that they can continue with their family tradition. I know of a woman who runs a large cheroot business who spends most of the income

donating to monasteries that used to be patronized by her father in order to keep his reputation, however, she is often left with no money to spend on her domestic use.

²⁷ It is considered bad manners for a monk to visit on the spur of the moment or go begging at anyone's door or divert from his daily route (although hungry novices occasionally do this). I have witnessed on several occasions people refusing to offer food to novices whom they were not familiar with, by simply saying, *kadaw ba hpayà* (excuse me my lord... but I cannot give you food).

²⁸ The story of the Buddha, who was a son of a king but became a mendicant who went around with a begging bowl, was frequently narrated to young nuns to teach the importance of going for alms that provided even the poorest person with a chance to acquire merit. Some nuns said they were not aware of its religious implication, and that they were providing the laity with a chance of gaining merit.

²⁹ On such occasions, people's generosity can become overwhelming at times and the practice of fasting in the afternoon comes to be much appreciated. Young nuns who have yet to build up a network of contacts may undergo some hardship like camping out, bathing in the river, and cooking their own food whilst traveling, but people in rural areas are remarkably hospitable and it is unlikely that they will go hungry.

³⁰ See Falk (1980) about their disappearance.

³¹ In Thailand, I witnessed several situations in which nuns had to resort to private economic means. Some of them sold fruit and vegetables to middlemen in order to generate income. This was the case at Samutsongkhram Nunnery in Phetchaburi District in Bangkok. However, their independence meant that they were no longer interacting with society in their capacity as religious mendicants. In the case of Burmese nuns, such cases of self-subsistence are almost unheard of.