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Asceticism, Identity and Pedagogy in Dharma Traditions

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"I consider everybody a Hindu unless they say they are not."
Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, PA.
According to them, the gotra Bhūrbhuvah means the *trimurty*, Brahma, Visnu, and Siva. Avigata does not refer to an ancient sage but, since it literally means “not separated, unceasing,” refers to the Paramātman. Since both the sages Bhṛgu and Kāsyapa preceded the Vedas’ subdivision into four, they both represent the indivisible Brahman (Dazey, 1990, 289).

10 Thus Jyoti Math’s Veda is the Atharva and its *mahāvākya* is *Ayam ātmā brahma*; the Veda of Sringeri Math’s is Yajur and its *mahāvākya* is *Aham brahmaḥ*. In Puri the Govardhana Math’s Veda is Rk and its *mahāvākya* is *Prajñānam brahma*, and in Dvārakā, Sarada Math’s Veda is Sāma and its *mahāvākya* is *Tat tvam asī*.

11 A discussion of the six prerequisites is found in *Vivekacūḍāmani* 22–27 as well as in the much earlier Brhadaranyaka Upanisad 4.4.23. There is an excellent commentary on the *sādhana catustaya* in Candrasekharā Bharati’s commentary on the *Vivekacūḍāmani* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1979), 31–46.

12 For Sankara’s discussion of both *sādhana catustaya* as well as *sravana, manana* and *nididhyasana*, see Sankara’s commentary on Brahma Sutras 1.1.1. and 1.1.2.

Renunciation in Contemporary Buddhist Monasticism

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Celibate monastic practice has been a mainstay of Buddhist societies from the time of the Buddha until the present day. Buddha Śākyamuni specifically rejected the practice of extreme asceticism, but lauded renunciation of the household life. This tradition has continued for two and a half millennia, unchanged in many respects. Robed, shaven-headed, celibate renunciants are found in every Buddhist society even today. The measure of renunciation in contemporary Buddhist monastic practice varies, however, depending on how renunciation is defined. Renunciants are generally thought to live in solitude, apart from society. But it is well known that, except for exceptional individuals and periods of intensive retreat, Buddhist renunciants rarely dwell in seclusion. Even though some monasteries are situated in remote locations, most Buddhist renunciants live in monastic communities and are in frequent contact with the lay community upon whom they depend for food and other necessities. The extent of renunciation among contemporary Buddhist monastics therefore depends on a number of variables, including the nature of the community, the geographical setting, and the personal inclinations of individual monastics, in addition to a closer examination of the word “renunciation.” This paper explores the nature of the renunciant ideal from a Buddhist perspective and reflects on the extent to which this ideal characterizes Buddhist monasticism today.
Renunciation in the Buddhist Context

According to the well-known story, the Buddhadharma was first taught in northern India by Siddhartha Gautama, a wealthy prince who lived around 563–485 B.C.E. At the age of 29, motivated by encounters with the sufferings of sickness, old age, and death, he left his wife, child, and princely inheritance in search of answers to the questions of life. According to Buddhist tradition, for six years Prince Siddhartha pursued religious knowledge and engaged in a variety of spiritual practices with some of the greatest masters of his day. His teachers included distinguished ascetics such as Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmamaputra.

During this period, Siddhartha also engaged in a variety of ascetic practices, but eventually rejected extreme asceticism as counter-productive to spiritual development. According to the story, in the months just before he achieved awakening under the **bodhi** tree, Siddhartha embarked on a regimen of eating just the bare minimum necessary for survival. Eventually, with great determination, he reached a point where he was able to subsist on just one grain of rice per day. On this meager diet, he became so emaciated that his backbone was visible from the front of his body and he became so weak that he was unable to concentrate in his meditation. He realized that torturing the body through ascetic practices was counterproductive, that without proper nourishment, he would be unable to continue his spiritual quest. He reflected on his experiences thus:

> Whatsoever ascetics or brahmins of the past have experienced acute, painful, sharp and piercing sensations, they must have experienced them to such a high degree as this and not beyond.

Whatsoever ascetics or brahmins of the future will experience acute, painful, sharp and piercing sensations, they too will experience them to such a high degree as this and not beyond. Yet by all these bitter and difficult austerities I shall not attain to excellence, worthy of supreme knowledge and insight, transcending those of human states. Might there be another path for enlightenment!

Siddhartha’s experience with austerities convinced him that mortification of the flesh was futile in the quest for spiritual realization. He concluded that a moderate approach to physical sustenance was preferable, an insight known as the “middle way” between extreme asceticism and indulgence. On the basis of this practical insight, he decided to eat moderately again and accepted an offering of milk rice from a woman named Sujata (identified in some texts as Radha). The five young aristocrats who had accompanied him during his six-year spiritual journey became disillusioned when they saw him begin to take food again. They assumed that he had abandoned his determination to achieve the ultimate spiritual goal and especially criticized the fact that he accepted food from a woman.

Even though his five companions initially deserted him, Siddhartha continued on his spiritual quest. Having regained his physical strength, he crossed the Nairajānā River, sat down beneath a tree, and made a firm resolution to continue his meditation practice until he achieved the final goal. Despite the assaults of Māra, a personification of temptation, he advanced quickly through successive stages of meditative attainment. Dispelling all ignorance and eradicating all mental defilements,
one morning at dawn, he achieved the perfect awakening of a Buddha.

In his first "turning of the Dharma wheel" or teaching in Sarnath, the newly awakened Buddha identified a link between desire and suffering. The Buddha said that the basic human problem was duhkha, the unsatisfying and unsatisfactory nature of human existence. In addition to the obvious sufferings that living beings endure, such as physical and mental pain, he spoke about the duhkha that arises from changing circumstances, and the all-pervasive duhkha of being trapped within the vicious cycle of cyclic existence. Renunciation was defined, not as the eschewing of food and shelter, as in previous ascetic practices, but as the renunciation of samsāra and all the things that keep sentient beings trapped within the cycle of repeated rebirth and suffering.

Although the Buddhist monastic tradition includes a number of practices that may be deemed ascetic, the primary purpose was not to mortify the flesh, but to cultivate the mind toward the goal of liberation. Buddhist guidelines for ethical conduct, such as the Noble Eightfold Path, the ten nonvirtuous actions, and precepts for monastics and laypeople, can therefore be understood as a methodology to implement the renunciation of samsāra. Toward this end, the renunciation of household life is viewed as a useful, but not essential, step. Householders are fully capable of practicing ethics (śīla), meditation (samādhi), and wisdom (prajñā), although their household responsibilities make finding time for contemplative practice more challenging. Through their practice of ethical conduct, a practice of restraint, it can be argued householders are also on a path of renunciation, albeit a slower path.

The Buddha identified the cause of duhkha as craving, rooted in ignorance, and taught that duhkha could be ended by following the Noble Eightfold Path that enjoins right thought, right intention, right speech, right action, right effort, right livelihood, right mindfulness, and right concentration. His earlier five companions, recognizing his newfound attainments, paid their respects and asked to become his disciples. According to legend, as the Buddha enunciated the words, "Come here," they miraculously became shaven-headed and clad in robes. These five young noblemen thus became the first five members of the Bhiksu Sangha, the assembly of Buddhist monks. Thousands of young men from all walks of life are said to have flocked to the new order. Some five or six years later, at the request of Mahāprajāpati, the Buddha’s stepmother and aunt, women were also admitted to the order, thus establishing the Bhikṣunī Sangha.

Like monks and nuns of other religious orders, Buddhist monks and nuns renounce sexual activity, marriage, and household life. As renunciants, they voluntarily make a commitment to abide by a given number of precepts, or rules of training. To regulate their involvement with the affairs of the world, they agree to accept a subsistence standard of food, shelter, clothing, and medicine. The lay community provides these requisites to the renunciants; in return, the renunciants provide teachings, advice, and a model of discipline and contentment.

Among Buddhists, renunciation is highly valued. Prince Siddhartha’s decision to leave his wife, child, and inheritance to seek the meaning of life is known as “the great renunciation.” In Theravāda societies, the act of renouncing lay life is reenacted each time a young boy takes monastic precepts. In this ritual, the boy initially dresses in the white clothes of a lay person and a
crown symbolic of Siddhartha's, then mounts a horse and rides away from his family toward the monastery, then eventually changes into the robes of a monk and receives the precepts, or rules of training. The movement away from the family, ritually enacted by young male novices, is the foundation of Buddhist monasticism. Renunciation does not simply mean to renounce food, clothing, or worldly pleasures, however; it means to renounce rebirth in *samsāra*, or cyclic existence. As we have seen, after six years of intense ascetic exercises, Siddhartha concluded that abstaining from food and the other necessities of life was not conducive to liberation. Based on his own experience, he advocated striking a “middle way” between extreme self-denial and decadent self-indulgence. From this perspective, it can be argued that renunciation in Buddhism is not life denying, but is life affirming in that it acknowledges the basic requirements of life and does not reject human needs and experience. In fact, human existence is regarded as precious, because it is the very foundation for spiritual attainment. Not only is liberation attainable only in a human body, but the activities of everyday life are also opportunities for Buddhist practice, equally as important as meditation.

The Buddha rejected extreme austerities, declaring that the greatest practice of asceticism is not to torture the body, but to subdue the mind. Like monks and nuns of other monastic orders, Buddhist monks and nuns renounce sex, marriage, and the responsibilities of household life. When they join the Sangha, they make a voluntary commitment to abide a specific number of precepts, or rules of training. As if to test their determination to live a renunciant lifestyle, candidates are asked whether they agree to four changes of lifestyle: to live on alms for food, to use trees for shelter, to wear rags for clothing, and to use cow urine and dung for medicine. In the course of time, they were allowed to accept invitations to lunch, invitations to stay in homes, donations of robes, and other substances for medicine. The lay community provides members of the Sangha with the requisites they need to live; in return, the monastics provide Dharma teachings, counsel, and a model of ethical conduct. The example of the contented renunciant serves as an inspiration to others, just as it did to the young Prince Siddhartha.

### The Precepts of the Vinaya

Buddhist monastic life is regulated according to the Vinaya, the texts that set forth the monastic discipline. Although, these texts no doubt developed over many centuries, the precepts are framed as if they had been formulated by the Buddha himself, during his own lifetime, in response to problems that arose in the Sangha community. The precepts included in the Vinaya fall into three general categories. The first category of precepts consists in moral proscriptions, for example, not to kill, steal, lie, or engage in sexual activity. The second category of precepts was formulated in response to problems that arose among the renunciants, and seem designed to maintain harmonious relationships in the monasteries. The Sangha community included people from different areas, social backgrounds, language backgrounds, and economic strata. These precepts helped regulate communal behavior to minimize conflicts, in a setting where princes lived alongside *brahmans* and cobbler in sparse conditions. The third category of precepts was formulated in response to problems that arose between individual monastics and the lay community. Because the monastics depended on the laity for their food and other requisites, it behooved them to maintain harmonious relationships with their
donors. These precepts delineated certain standards of deportment in an effort to ensure the lay community’s respect and continued material support for the monks and nuns.

To illustrate, one of the precepts of Buddhist renunciants is to refrain from taking untimely food, which is generally interpreted to mean that no solid food should be consumed after noon until dawn of the next day. This precept was originally formulated after a monk, going for alms at dusk, rounded the corner of a house and frightened a pregnant woman, causing her to miscarry. Restricting the intake of food to the morning hours reduced the economic burden on the lay community and helped reduce greed in the renunciants. Consequently, especially in the Theravadin orders, novices as young as eight and fully ordained Sangha members as old as one hundred are expected to observe an 18-hour fast daily as a central feature of monastic life. This tradition of abstaining from solid food from noon to dawn the next day would certainly be interpreted as ascetic by many observers. Although members of some monastic communities, especially in the Mahayana tradition, may take tea with milk after noon, others take only clear tea or water. Boiled sweets are permitted in many communities and it is said that dark chocolate is also permitted at Chithurst, a Theravadin monastery in England. In the Theravadin monasteries of Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, the proscription to refrain from untimely food is quite strictly observed up to the present day, with exceptions made only for those who are ill. In the Mahayana monasteries of China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Taiwan, Tibet, and Vietnam, this proscription is less strictly observed; exceptions are made for Sangha members who are ill, traveling, or find that this limited diet disturbs their meditation. The dietary restrictions of the monastics are reflected in ritual practices among the laity. Many lay Buddhists in Sri Lanka, for example, observe the practice of refraining from untimely food on new moon and full moon days, and when attending meditation courses.

A further proscription for Buddhist monastics was to avoid handling silver and gold. An orthodox interpretation of this precept is to refrain from handling money or any financial instruments, such as checks or credit cards. Traditionally, Buddhist renunciants live on alms, receiving food in their alms bowl daily, a new set of robes after the rainy season retreat (vassa) annually, and whatever other necessities the laypeople might offer occasionally. In exchange, the monks and nuns provide chants of protection and blessing (paritta), teachings, advice, and an opportunity for laypeople to accumulate merit through the practice of generosity. As long as their needs are supplied by lay adherents, the renunciants have no need to handle silver, gold, or money. Living on alms and not being allowed to handle money, and therefore amass wealth, forces monastics to live on the edge, removes financial security blankets, and thus fosters mindfulness and detachment. Abhayagiri, a Theravadin community in Mendocino Country, California, provides an environment where monks and nuns can observe the precept to avoid handling silver and gold. Elsewhere in the western world, it is virtually impossible.

The symbiotic relationship between the Sangha and the laity continues today, especially in Theravadin societies, but is threatened by consumerism and other aspects of modern life. Consumerism and increased material values pose a threat to spiritual values, both among laypeople and monastics. As consumer products beckon, promising happiness and even sexual fulfillment on the television screen, on magazine covers at the supermarket checkout counter, and even to captive audiences
aboard public transportation, human beings gradually internalize material values and expectations. Consumerism may affect Buddhist monastics in several ways. Some laypeople may divert their energies to economic pursuits rather than religion and offer less support the Sangha. With less material support, fewer people may be attracted to enter monastic life and/or the quality of new entrants may decline. Other laypeople may extend their consumer values to the religious sphere, vying to offer more and more luxurious gifts to the Sangha (primarily to monks). Influenced by the values of consumer culture and/or spoiled by luxury goods, some monastics may decide to leave the Sangha to pursue a worldly career and obtain more material goods for themselves. In contemporary society, it is difficult to escape being influenced by the images that confront us. The images projected by the media to sell their products also convey a message that we cannot be happy without sex and other sense pleasures. These messages are at odds with the Buddha’s teaching that desire leads to dissatisfaction.

Renunciation and Sexual Desire

A central proscription for Buddhist monastics is to refrain from sexual activity. Whereas Buddhist laymen (upāsaka) and laywomen (upāsikā) take a precept to refrain from sexual misconduct, monks and nuns take a precept to refrain from all sexual activity whatsoever, whether with someone of the opposite sex, the same sex, with oneself, or “even with an animal.” Celibacy is a fundamental requirement for members of the Sangha; therefore the term “married monk” is an oxymoron in the Buddhist lexicon. The rationale underlying the injunction to live a celibate lifestyle is not framed in terms of conserving the vital energies of the body, as in prevailing yoga systems, though this benefit may have been simply assumed. In the Buddhist view, the benefits of celibacy are most frequently framed in terms of limiting desire and time resource management. Without access to the more reliable methods of birth control available today, children were the predictable outcome of sexual activity. Responsible parenting is a time-consuming endeavor and the responsibilities entailed in supporting a family leave little time for formal Buddhist practice. The Buddha departed from the prevailing practice of renouncing household life during the fourth quadrant of life; instead, he exhorted those of his followers who were serious about achieving liberation from samsāra to renounce family life at once, even during their youth. He also departed from the cultural norms of his society in admitting women to the Sangha, providing them with an alternative to marriage, childrearing, and widowhood. His decision to allow women to leave their husbands and children stirred widespread controversy, but opened up a new era in religious practice for women.

The Buddha fully realized the power and ramifications of sexuality for human beings. He explicitly described sexual activity as a source of emotional entanglement and attachments that lead to suffering. Although sexual desire is a very basic human instinct, human instincts are not necessarily constructive. Sexual desire may be harmless, enjoyable, and useful for reproduction, but it can also be a source of conflict, jealousy, and other emotional afflictions. In the early Buddhist texts, sex is described as a shackle, a source of bondage, and a distraction from the spiritual pursuit. In one sūtra, the Buddha says, “Monks, I see no other single form so enticing, so desirable, so intoxicating, so binding, so distracting, such a hindrance to winning the unsurpassed peace from effort, that is to say, monks, as a woman’s form.” In another, he says, “Monks, I know of no single form, sound, smell, savor and touch by which a
woman's heart is so enslaved as it is by the form, sound, scent, savor and touch of a man." Although both comments are addressed to an audience of monks, it is clear that men and women alike are vulnerable to sexual desire and infatuation.

Contrary to popular opinion, sex and procreation are not necessities of life, however. Nuns and monks of various religious orders have demonstrated over many centuries that life without sex and procreation is not only possible, but can be both personally fulfilling and an effective means of achieving spiritual goals. By renouncing the pleasures of the senses, renunciants are able to devote the majority of their time and energy to religious practice without the distractions inherent in romance and family concerns. It may be inferred that sexual energies can be transmuted and redirected to spiritual pursuits, but even on a mundane level, there is little doubt that renouncing the household life frees one from the time constraints and financial concerns of making a living to support a family and care for them on a daily basis.

On a soteriological level, the Buddha explained that desire, specifically sexual desire, leads to repeated rebirth and suffering in the cycle of existence, and prevents the achievement of liberation. Consequently, to become free from rebirth and suffering, it is necessary to eliminate desire. Following desires plants seeds for further desires; if sex were ultimately fulfilling, people would not desire to continue experiencing it. Ordinary human beings have endless desires, and can only break out of the cycle by cutting through desire. For this reason, the Buddha recommended the celibate life if one is serious about achieving liberation. Without renouncing sexual desire and other worldly attachments, hopes for enlightenment and liberation are pure fantasy.

The Buddha taught a path to enlightenment that was accessible to all, but his primary audience consisted of celibate practitioners who followed a path of renunciation. Like many other renunciant traditions in India, the Buddha endorsed celibacy (brahmācārya, "the pure life"), a fairly radical step in a society that valued the family as the bedrock of society. To his renunciant disciples, the Buddha consistently reiterated that family life constitutes an impediment to Dharma practice and that a celibate lifestyle was the best working basis for achieving enlightenment. As Kathryn Blackstone has pointed out, "those who fail to appreciate the benefits of the monastic lifestyle are unanimously denounced...as ‘fools.’" Exhortations like this were clearly addressed to monks with the aim of affirming their renunciant vocation.

The Future of Renunciation in Buddhist Monastic Life

How relevant the renunciant vocation is in the twenty-first century? The practice of celibacy was clearly exalted in the early Buddhist texts and was considered the most conducive state for liberation, but life was simpler in those days and spiritual practice was highly valued. Now that life has become far more complicated, with so many more life choices, it is uncertain how many people will be drawn to celibate monastic practice. Even though a woman dies of the complications of pregnancy and childbirth every minute and HIV/AIDS continues to spread, sexual freedom seems to be preferred to celibacy by a landslide. Only a few of those who are interested in the spiritual dimension of life will choose a celibate monastic lifestyle today, and there is no question that such a lifestyle requires strong commitment, good guidance, a supportive environment, and great personal honesty.
Yet, in a stress-filled, consumption-crazed, war-torn world, the renunciant ideal the Buddha advocated may be more relevant today than ever before.

In rejecting extreme austerities and casting liberation as freedom from the defilements of one’s own mind, it may be argued that the Buddha redefined renunciation in South Asia. In the 2500 years since his death, this renunciant ideal has been re-articulated and implemented in diverse cultural environments throughout the Buddhist world, where it continues to exert a powerful influence in the lives of monastics and laity alike. The adaptation of monastic discipline in response to circumstances is not something new, but is a process that began even as the Buddhist Sangha was being founded. The adaptation of Buddhist monastic discipline in the modern world is simply the latest phase in a continuous process of evolutionary development.

Many books on Buddhism make it seem as if renunciation is an orthodox Theravadin phenomenon, but renunciation is also a pillar of enlightenment in the Mahāyāna tradition, including the Vajrayāna branch. When the renowned Indian scholar Atisa revitalized Buddhism in Tibet in the eleventh-century, he taught the “three principles of the path”—renunciation, the enlightened attitude (bodhicitta), and direct insight into emptiness (śūnyatā)—as fundamental to the union of sūtra and tantra. In Buddhist communities around the world today, the core issue is still how strictly monastics should adhere to the Pratimoksa precepts, just as it was the core issue that lead to a split between the Sthaviravada and the Mahāsangha at the Second Council, held at Vaiśāli roughly sixty years after the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa.

Today, as in the time of the Buddha and at the Council at Vaiśāli, debates generally revolve around how strictly or flexibly the precepts should be interpreted. In the present-day western context, this raises questions about how lax is too lax and how strict is too strict. Since rigorous spiritual discipline is not a notable feature of contemporary western society, the tendency is often to see leniency in interpreting the precepts as a skillful way to accord with current social mores and reach out to people of vastly different cultural backgrounds. Traditionally, however, laxity in observing the precepts has been regarded as undesirable and an indicator of the decline of the Buddhadharma. Given western social realities, though, rigidity in observing the precepts may likewise precipitate a decline. The challenge is to find a middle way between careful observance of the precepts and flexibility that would accurately reflect the Buddha’s injunction to avoid both extreme self-denial and indulgence.

The Buddha’s Second Noble Truth identifies the root of human suffering as desire, rooted in ignorance. Human beings’ desires are endless and we cannot possibly fulfill them all, which leads to disappointment and dissatisfaction. This pattern of human beings setting themselves up for disappointment is especially vivid in a consumer society, where one desire leads to another and yet the hunger for goods and services continues unabated. Understanding this cycle of desire and dissatisfaction, Buddhist renunciants choose to limit desires through living a simple, disciplined life.

The concept of renunciation may seem anachronistic in a world where consumerism and indulgence exert a strong influence on contemporary lifestyles and social discourse, yet for that very reason, the inquiry is both timely and necessary. The public is
inundated with images of happiness that derive from the tireless consumption of sex, food, cosmetics, tropical holidays, and the latest technologies. Meanwhile, divorce rates, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, domestic violence, credit card debt, and suicide continue to soar. From a Buddhist perspective, the correlation between increased desires and increased unhappiness is obvious. If the media is to be trusted and happiness is sure to follow from the continual flow of new consumer products, then how do we account for the prevalence of depression, stress, and gnawing dissatisfaction that people experience, even in affluent societies today?

Speaking from my own experience, I conjecture that the future of the renunciant ideal will proceed one of two ways. Human beings may become so seduced by material pleasures that they abandon the spiritual pursuit altogether. On the contrary, they may become so sated with indulgences that they gain some level of realization of the futility of sense pleasures and begin to think deeply about the meaning of life. In my case, growing up in Malibu and seeing the lives of the rich and famous up close demonstrated very vividly that worldly pleasures did not bring lasting satisfaction and this lead me to explore the spiritual dimension of life. Others of my generation have pursued life’s pleasures with a vengeance and, although they may privately question their choices, their paths have not yet led to the monastery. Because human beings are endowed with free choice, they may go the way of the world or the way of the Dharma. Perhaps there is a way in-between, but to practice the Dharma while living a worldly life is a difficult path to liberation.

Conventionally, then, renunciation means living a simple, disciplined lifestyle as a key to subduing the body, speech, and mind. Ultimately, it means rejecting samsāra and all it entails as a key to achieving awakening. Limiting desires is said to engender contentment and satisfaction with the simplest things, here and now, while disciplining one’s body, speech, and mind leads to higher spiritual attainments.

The symbiotic relationship between renunciants and laity in western countries may not resemble the early morning alms rounds of monks in Thailand, but my experience leads me to believe that Buddhist monastic practice will survive, taking new forms of social interaction and material support in modern societies. Today it may be difficult to travel outside a monastery without handling money, for example, but it is possible to use money for necessities without generating attachment. It may be inconvenient for renunciants to arrange lunch before 12 o’clock noon, but it may be possible to understand the value of refraining from untimely food. As renunciants swim again the stream of modern society and exemplify an unencumbered way of being in the world, some will surely appreciate the contribution they make to the world. If monastics today are able to create lifestyles that preserve the spirit of Buddhist renunciation, modeling an alternative to consumer madness, respect for the renunciant ideal is likely to grow.

Endnotes

2 Nuns were eventually exempted from the requisite to use trees for shelter, because they were vulnerable to sexual assault.
3 Examples of permitted medicines are “ghee, oil, butter, honey, and sugar.” See Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Sisters in Solitude: Two


In Japan, the lineage of full ordination for nuns was never established and the lineage full ordination for monks is close to extinction. As a result, the observance of the Vinaya precepts is largely a matter of custom and individual discretion, rather than obligation. Under these circumstances, it is noteworthy that the nuns voluntarily live a celibate lifestyle, whereas males generally marry and therefore may more properly be termed priests than monks.

The issue of tradition and adaptation has been considered in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “The History of Buddhist Monasticism and Its Western Adaptation,” Blossoms of the Dharma: Living as a Buddhist Nun, ed. Thubten Chodron (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1999), pp. 3–16.

Anguttara Nikāya, III.67.

Anguttara Nikāya, I.2.


I.e., the enlightened attitude of resolving to become a perfectly awakened Buddha in order to alleviate the sufferings of all sentient beings.