

Sveriges Buddhistiska Samarbetsråd brief for Kulturminister 3 april 2019

We wish to draw the Minister's attention to a policy issue which poses a serious threat to the well-being of Buddhist communities. Until late last year, all Christian and Buddhist monks and nuns were covered by a tax policy which has existed at least since the 1950s. Here is the policy in Skatteverket's own words (to the Skatterättsnämnden in 2011): "...beskattas inte fritt vivre och fickpengar som uppbärs av personer som lever i klosterliknande förhållanden och som endast utför sådant arbete som klosterlivet för med sig."

The Catholic Church confirms that its nuns continue to benefit from this policy today, but Skatteverket appears to believe that Buddhist monks should no longer do so. We understand that it is inappropriate for a minister to become involved in an individual case, and are providing details of one case simply by way of illustration.

In late 2018, Skatteverket issued a demand to a Thai monastery in Brunflo for tax on the room and board of its monks. It relied on some judgments against a Jehovah's Witnesses community, where tax on the room and board of the residents was payable. But in those cases, the community was held not to be klosterliknande. (The quote above is from the main case in that series of judgments.)

At the Thai monastery, the lay people make offerings of food and money to the monks (not to the monastery) in a traditional ceremony. They make the offerings out of devotion to the monks and in the hope of accumulating merit through practicing the Buddhist virtue of generosity. The monks eat the food and gift the money onwards to the monastery, which uses it among other things to provide the monks with somewhere to live. Skatteverket has interpreted this as the förening providing taxable benefits to the monks equal to the commercial value of the room and board.

The Thai monastery cannot afford the tax and has been thrown into a state of great uncertainty about its future. It faces a long and expensive court process. It has already been forced by economic necessity to send some of its monks away until the situation is resolved, which could take years. This is just one example of the problem.

Monasticism is crucial to the survival of Buddhist communities in Sweden and remains important in some Christian traditions also. For the people who have a monastic vocation, it is their only lifestyle option.

We understand that when the same issue arose in Norway recently, the government replaced the informal exemption which was under threat with a policy which allowed monks and nuns to receive room, board and pocket money tax free. We suggest that a government/stakeholder group be established to do something similar here.

In Sweden, there is precedent for policy changes to help a desirable cultural activity to thrive. In 2004, a change to the law was made so that sports associations could provide modest benefits to sports coaches free of tax. Monastics live in poverty and the value of what they receive is well below the lowest full-time salary. It would be relatively simple to set a tax-free income level for them which would have little impact on tax revenue while allowing monks and nuns the freedom to follow their vocations and their lay communities to thrive.