

A General View of Vinaya

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The Vinaya, or monastic rules, nowadays observed by monks in the Theravada tradition, were first formulated, with help of the elder Upali, during the meeting of the First Council that was held shortly after the death of the Buddha.

The Vinaya, as we now have it, was not something that the Buddha imposed all at once upon an unsuspecting Sangha, but rather a set of rules and guidelines that evolved only very gradually, and one which the Buddha was always happy to modify whenever one or more monks pointed out some difficulty they were experiencing when trying to follow a particular rule, or else found it for some other reason impractical.

Although Ananda informed the First Council that the Buddha had told him, shortly before his death, that the Sangha could, should it so wish, abandon the more minor and more trivial rules following his passing, it was nonetheless decided at that meeting that, since Ananda had failed to ask the Buddha which rules he had had in mind, they should err on the side of caution and preserve all of the rules intact.

The Buddha once told Upali (A V 70) that there were ten reasons for his laying down the Vinaya rules

1. For the excellence of the Sangha
2. For the comfort of the Sangha
3. For restraint of wavering individuals
4. For the living in comfort of well-behaved monks
5. For restraint of any asavas belonging to these seen conditions
6. For warding off any asavas belonging to the hereafter
7. For devotion on the part of those not (yet) devout
8. For the betterment of those already devout
9. For the persistence of the true Dhamma
10. For assisting the Vinaya

As such, the rules formed the bedrock of the rest of the Buddha's teachings and of all practice where his monks were concerned, since they would guarantee that a monk's morality would not become impaired and thereby pave the way for the successful attainment of concentration and, finally, insight and liberation.

Despite the fact that it was decided at the First Council to observe all of the rules intact, it has nonetheless come to pass that many of the activities monks need to engage in the modern world are simply not covered by the Vinaya formulated in the time of the Buddha. Indeed, we find that the rules that were once set in stone at the First Council appear, in the modern day, to have become ossified.

Moreover, we may note that, despite the ostensible universality of the rules, minor differences in their interpretation, and enforcement, have nonetheless crept in at the local level.

In Thailand, the Sangha Act of 1962 gives the Sangha Council, which is led by the Sangharaja, the “power and duty to duly govern the Sangha, and to this purpose is empowered to enact, issue and prescribe enforceable degrees, regulations, rules and orders not in conflict or inconsistent with laws and the Vinaya”. The Act stipulates ecclesiastical punishments, including the enforced disrobing, within twenty-four hours, of any monk found guilty of any of the four parajika offences, and any monk refusing to comply will be liable to a maximum sentence of six months’ imprisonment. The act further allows the Sangha Council to take legal action against any disrobed monk who continues to dress as a monk, as well as the civil authorities to disrobe any monk arrested and found guilty of a criminal offence.

In some Theravada countries, a monk is able to receive an offering from a women directly into his own hand, but, in Thailand, the traditional practice is that a women first places her offering on a piece of cloth, after which the monk draws that cloth towards him and then picks up the offering.

Yet whilst every monk tries to adhere to both the letter and the spirit of the Vinaya, it has to be acknowledged that life at the onset of this new millennium bears little resemblance with conditions that once pertained in the day of the Buddha. The various rules formulated at the First Council were those best suited to life in northern India in, and around, the fifth century BC. There is, for instance, little evidence that money was in use at the time – so the rule against acceptance of gold and silver may not necessarily embrace the money that everyone uses to function effectively in the modern world. And what are we to say of plastic credit cards ? They are certainly not gold or silver, nor even money, at least from one point of view, yet they are part and parcel of everyday life and, in some situations in which a monk may find himself, a necessity. By the same token, I have also known monks, within the Theravada tradition, who refuse to handle money. This practice is obviously to be applauded, at least until one happens to notice the extraordinary, and unnecessary burden that this practice places on those others who have to handle monetary affairs on their behalf.

Then again, in the fifth century BC, everyone, including the Buddha, traveled around on foot – though it should be admitted that his contemporary brahmins did tend to ride around in horse-drawn chariots, a practice over which the Buddha frequently voiced his disapproval, whereas these days monks travel around either on public transport – in: buses, boats and airplanes, all of which charge for tickets – or else in more private means of transport, such as cars, which further raises the question as to whether monks should be allowed to drive a car themselves, rather than placing the burden on some lay person, and whether, in doing so driving, they might be violating some distant Vinaya rule. In his commentary on the Dighanikaya, Buddhaghosa gives a lengthy definition of the term *yana*, or ‘vehicle’, listing in the course of his discussion most of the types of vehicle known in his day, including the sandal, which he concludes is the only type of vehicle appropriate for the monk. If that remains as the interpretation, I would not be with you here today.

Mention of travel on airplanes, of course, raises even further causes for deliberation, since the monks of the Theravada tradition, at least, have to observe the Vinaya rule about not eating after midday which, though normally taken to mean “noon”, is more technically the moment at which the sun reaches its zenith in the overhead sky. It should also be borne in mind that it is held that this rule has been infringed, even if such infringement is merely accidental, or as a result of ignorance. So monks in the Theravada have yet a new hurdle to overcome: as they are passing through multiple time zones when flying on airplanes, say from Bangkok to New York, how are they to determine when it is really “noon”, at least as intended by the Vinaya?

And what of mobile phones? Are these to be deemed sanctioned by the Vinaya, simply by virtue of the fact that the Vinaya is silent on the issue of the possession, and use, of mobile phones, or are we to not possess them, since they do not feature amongst the eight requisites the monk is traditionally allowed?

I should point out that these matters represent only the tip of an iceberg of apparent incompatibilities between monastic life in the modern – day world and monastic rules formulated under totally different social conditions centuries ago. So what is to be done? Especially when a monk has to regulate his life in such a way that he is able to make himself available to assist and teach lay people, yet at the same time not infringe, however minutely, one or more of a set of Vinaya rules more relevant to a distant age?

I have already remarked that the Vinaya rules formulated by the Buddha were not formulated overnight, and that rather the process was a slow one, during the course of which the Buddha never failed to revise a rule, should there be some unexpected external change

of circumstance necessitating a rule's modification or, as we might say these days, in this age of computers, that rule's "update".

I have also mentioned that the Buddha once gave the elder Upali in account of his ten reasons for introducing the Vinaya rules, which seem ultimately to involve bringing about comfort, both mental and physical, for the members of his Sangha. I am not sure how each of the individual issues that confront us at different times might best be resolved, despite the fact that all of these matters are clearly ones to which we, as members of the modern-day Sangha, should give a great deal of thought and, hopefully, be able to resolve in such a way that the traditional rules can be maintained as possible, yet at the same time always conscious of the fact that, had the Buddha been with us today, he would almost certainly have modified the Vinaya in such a way that would suit the changed circumstances in which we now find ourselves. I think that if we try at all times to remain conscious, firstly, of the Buddha's own intentions, as explained to Upali, in advancing the Vinaya rules and, secondly, of the overriding need to try to adhere to the spirit, rather than the letter, of those rules, then we may not go far wrong. And that spirit is clearly that of *cetana*, which is, as everyone knows, all-important in determining the moral consequences of any action. If we can abide by these two principles, then we should be able to modify the Vinaya rules, albeit as little as possible, then we should be able to modify the Vinaya rules, albeit as little as possible, so as to bring them more into line with life in the modern world, yet at the same time preserve the main objectives the Buddha had in mind when first formulating them.