

While there is considerable variation in the details of the surviving Vinayas, there is a fundamental agreement in structure and core content.

Ordination and the Buddhist monastic ideal

According to tradition, becoming a Buddhist monk could initially be accomplished without much ceremony; 'going forth' (*pravrajyā/pabbajjā*)—from the household life into homelessness—and 'ordination' (*upasampadā*) involved only a request to the Buddha and its acceptance by him with the words, 'Come, monk. Well taught is the Dharma. Live the spiritual life for the complete ending of suffering.'⁵ Subsequently 'going forth' and ordination proper were distinguished as two distinct ceremonies; by undergoing the former ceremony of *pravrajyā* one becomes a 'novice' (*śrāmaṇera/sāmaṇera*), while the latter ceremony of *upasampadā* renders one a *bhikṣu* proper.⁶ The ordination and discipline of the Buddhist nun (*bhikṣuṇī/bhikkhūṇī*) follows essentially the same pattern.

The Theravādin Vinaya specifies that the candidate for *pravrajyā* must be old enough to scare crows away, usually taken as meaning 7 or 8.⁷ Going forth involves formally requesting that a monk of at least ten years' standing becomes one's preceptor (*upadhyāya/upajjhāya*) and teacher (*ācārya/ācariya*). The novice's head is shaved, and he puts on ochre robes. He then recites the formula of going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, and takes the ten precepts or 'rules of training' (*śikṣā-/sikkhā-pada*): (1) to refrain from harming living creatures, (2) to refrain from taking what is not given, (3) to refrain from all sexual activity, (4) to refrain from false speech, (5) to refrain from intoxicants that cause heedlessness, (6) to refrain from eating after midday, (7) to refrain from attending entertainments, (8) to refrain from wearing jewellery or using perfumes, (9) to refrain from sleeping on luxurious beds, (10) to refrain from handling gold and silver.⁸

One becomes a candidate for full ordination at the age of 20.⁹ The *upasampadā* ceremony requires the participation of at least five properly ordained *bhikṣus* of at least ten years' standing. For

someone over the age of 20 the *pravrajyā* and the *upasampadā* may be performed together at one occasion.

At the end of his ordination ceremony a Buddhist monk is informed that the four basic 'resources' (*niśraya/nissaya*) that he can count on for the four 'requisites' (*pariṣkāra/parikkhāra*) of food, clothing, lodging, and medicine are food offered to him as alms, robes made of discarded rags, the foot of a tree, and fermented urine respectively. Another list of requisites allows the monk eight items as his personal possessions: three robes, an alms-bowl, a razor, a needle, a belt, and a water-strainer.

The ideal of the Buddhist monk then is of one who steps out from ordinary society: his appearance is different (his head is shaved and he wears monastic robes); he renounces the ordinary household life of wife, children, and family and takes a vow of complete sexual abstinence; in adopting the way of life of the monk he abandons any profession or means of livelihood; his personal possessions are minimal and for the little he can expect in the way of creature comforts he is dependent on the generosity of others.

While in the course of the Saṅgha's long history in India and beyond there has been some adaptation and local variations have developed, the basic pattern of ordination set out in the Vinaya remains relevant to the monastic traditions of Theravāda Buddhism, East Asian Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁰ The most visible variation is that Theravādin monks wear orange or brown robes, while the monks of East Asia wear grey or black robes, and the monks of Tibet wear maroon robes. In Tibet (and sometimes in China) there has been a tendency for a considerable proportion of the Saṅgha to remain as *śrāmaṇeras* and never take full ordination.¹¹ In China *pravrajyā* ordination has been extended by separating initial tonsure, sometimes by many years, from formal taking of the ten precepts, while higher ordination has usually involved, in addition to the rules of the *prātimokṣa*, taking the fifty-eight 'bodhisattva vows' set out in the Chinese 'Brahma's Net' sūtra (*Fan-Wang-Ching*).¹² In South-East Asia temporary ordination as a monk for a year or even just a few months has become widespread.

After *upasampadā* one becomes a *bhikṣu*—a Buddhist monk proper—and as such one's life is governed by the complete set of rules which constitute the *prātimokṣa*. The precise number of rules that make up the monk's *prātimokṣa* varies; for the Theravāda there are 227 rules, for the Mūlasarvāstivāda (followed by the Tibetans) there are 258, for the Dharmaguptakas (followed in East Asia) there are 250, but the basic structure of the rules and the individual rules involving serious offences are held in common. In principle the rules simply elaborate a way of life based on keeping the ten precepts of the novice, distinguishing between serious and less serious breaches of these precepts. In this way the rules fall into eight categories. Four offences involve 'defeat' (*pārājika*), i.e. expulsion from the saṅgha: sexual intercourse, taking what is not given, killing another human being, and falsely laying claim to spiritual attainments of any sort.¹³ These four *pārājika* offences map out the theoretical basis of the monastic way of life: celibacy and reliance on the generosity of lay support. The failure to keep his vow of celibacy undermines one of the defining characteristics of the Buddhist monk: he has renounced the ordinary 'household' life of wife, children, and family; furthermore sexual abstinence is associated with channelling one's energies towards spiritual attainments. To seek to solve the problem of suffering by killing other human beings is the grossest manifestation of greed, hatred, and delusion. To take from society what is not freely given betrays the fundamental relationship of trust between the monk, who undertakes to live the life of the ascetic wanderer, and those who in good faith offer their material support. Since any monk thought to be spiritually accomplished is likely to become the object of lay admiration and even devotion, to lie about spiritual attainments equally betrays the trust of lay supporters.

The second category of rules comprises thirteen *saṃghāvaśeṣa* (Pali *saṃghādisesa*) offences which are punishable by a period of probation involving loss of full status as a member of the Saṅgha; these involve sexual impropriety of various sorts, as well as the building of certain types of dwelling, making false accusations, promoting schism in the Saṅgha, refusing to accept the

admonishments of the Saṅgha, and corrupting families. The thirteen *saṃghāvaśeṣas* are followed by two further rules concerning charges of possible sexual impropriety whose penalty is not fixed but must be determined by the Saṅgha according to circumstances. Next come thirty *niḥsargika* (Pali *nissaggiya*) rules which mostly concern inappropriate use of robes, rugs, money, bowls, and medicines; the offence should be confessed and the item given up. A further ninety or ninety-two minor *pāyantika* (Pali *pācittiya*) rules prohibit various kinds of lying, physical violence, and abusive speech, as well as further regulating the use of the monk's requisites, and his conduct in a monastery or in the presence of women; breach of these rules only requires confession. A further four miscellaneous offences merely require confession (*prātideśanīya/pāṭidesaniya*). The category of minor rules of training (*śaikṣa/sekhiya*) varies from 66 to 113, depending on the recension of the Vinaya, and covers the general decorum and manners of a monk as he eats, walks, dresses, and so forth. The *bhikṣu's* *prātimokṣa* concludes with seven rules concerned with the settling of disputes. Traditionally all members of the Saṅgha in a given locality gather on the fortnightly *poṣadha* (Pali *uposatha*) days—the days of the new and full moon—to recite the rules that make up the *prātimokṣa* and to confess any breaches.

A note on Buddhist nuns

Tradition relates how the nuns' or *bhikṣuṇīs'* order was founded after a request to the Buddha from Ānanda on behalf of women wanting to take up the spiritual life.¹⁴ On that occasion the Buddha explained his reluctance to ordain women not because he regarded them as incapable of attaining arhatship, but because their ordination would hasten the decline of the Dharma. This attitude has often been interpreted as betraying a negative view of women, although in part it might be read simply as reflecting a realistic view of what happens when men and women who have undertaken the celibate life live in close proximity. None the less, the Buddha is represented as laying down eight special rules (*garudhamma*) subordinating the nuns' order to that of the monks.

However, it has been argued on the grounds of inconsistencies in the nuns' Vinaya that these eight rules represent a later interpolation.¹⁵ Otherwise the *prātimokṣa* of Buddhist nuns is similar in broad outline to that of the monks, although in all recensions it comprises rather more rules.

The Buddhist canon contains a whole collection of verses, the *Therīgāthā*, attributed to female arhats as well as numerous examples of accomplished female religious teachers. At the same time, while allowing that women may become arhats, a canonical tradition represents the Buddha as denying that it was possible that a woman could be a buddha; the same passage also denies the possibility of a woman's being Māra.¹⁶ Of course, such an understanding assumes also the reality of rebirth; the status of Māra or Buddha is thus not denied finally to any being since a being born as a woman—or a Brahmā (who is strictly without sex)—in one life may be born as a man in another. Inscriptional evidence from the early centuries CE points to the active role of both Buddhist nuns and lay women.¹⁷

At some point the Theravāda order of nuns died out, perhaps as early as the eleventh century in Sri Lanka, while the full nun's ordination lineage may never even have been established in Tibet. This means that fully ordained Buddhist nuns are only found today within East Asian Buddhism. Nevertheless, in the Theravāda and Tibetan traditions a significant number of women still effectively live as nuns by permanently keeping the ten precepts of the novice nun or the eight precepts of the committed female lay disciple; some continue to be regarded as respected teachers of meditation.¹⁸ There is a movement to re-establish the *bhikkhunī* ordination lineage in Theravāda Buddhism, although the attitude of some 'nuns' towards this is ambivalent, since full ordination as a *bhikkhunī* brings with it the eight special rules mentioned above.

The underlying concerns of the Vinaya

It is possible, I think, to identify four particular concerns in the Buddhist monastic rule as set out in Vinaya: (1) the unity and

cohesion of the Saṅgha, (2) the spiritual life, (3) the dependence of the Saṅgha upon the wider community, and (4) the appearance of the Saṅgha in the eyes of that community. These require some elaboration.

The Buddhist monastic community is the prerequisite for the existence of Buddhism in a given society. As we saw in Chapter 2, in a traditional Buddhist society it is only through contact with the monastic community that laity can have any knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. The Saṅgha lives the teaching, preserves the teaching as scriptures, and teaches the wider community. Without the Saṅgha there is no Buddhism. The Vinaya thus attempts to provide a framework which renders the Saṅgha a stable and viable institution, showing considerable concern for unity and the settling of disputes. The Saṅgha's constitution as set out in the Vinaya provides for no formal head or leader; authority rests in the agreement and consensus of bodies of senior monks. The formal hierarchy of the Saṅgha is based on seniority calculated from the time and date of one's ordination. The existence and survival of the Saṅgha for well over two millennia in diverse cultures is a measure of the Vinaya's success in establishing a structure that is tight enough to prevent disintegration of the community, but flexible enough to allow for adaptation to particular circumstances.

If the life as a monk is fundamental to the Buddhist vision of the spiritual life, then it follows that one of the Vinaya's prime concerns must be to regulate a way of life that conduces to the realization of the Buddhist path. The Vinaya's success in this respect is perhaps harder to gauge; there are, alas, no statistics for the number of realized 'saints'—bodhisattvas, stream-attainers, once-returners, never-returners, and arhats—it has fostered. Yet the widespread view that, for example, the Thai monk Acharn Mun who died in 1949 was an arhat indicates that 'enlightenment' is still regarded by some as a realistic aspiration for the Buddhist monk, even if the prevalent attitude in some circles is that arhatship is no longer possible.¹⁹ The sanctity, or otherwise, of past and present members of the Saṅgha is hardly a matter to be determined by academic enquiry; nevertheless the

Vinaya's concern with the minutiae of a monk's handling of the requisites exhibits an awareness of human foibles as well as of the mind's ingenuity and even deviousness in the face of rules and regulations designed to curb greed, aversion, and delusion. Anyone genuinely attempting to put this way of life into practice is very soon likely to be made aware of the multifarious ways in which his or her greed, aversion, and delusion work. Furthermore the number of minor rules concerning more general behaviour seem intended to make for a certain alertness or mindfulness, one of the mental qualities to be cultivated in meditation.

The final two concerns of the Vinaya—the dependence of the Saṅgha upon the wider community, and the appearance of the Saṅgha in the eyes of that community—are interlinked. The Buddhist monk may be one who renounces society, but the genius of the Vinaya is that having invited the monk to give up society it then requires him to live in dependence upon it, thereby forcing him back into a relationship with it. It has sometimes been suggested that the Buddha originally intended to institute only a movement of committed ascetics removed from society; these are the true and original Buddhists. From this perspective the involvement of lay followers represents something of an afterthought on the part of the Buddha. If the basic conception of the Vinaya is attributable to the Buddha himself, then such an interpretation is hardly sustainable, for the interaction of the monastic and lay communities is integral to the way of life set out by the Vinaya.

Many of the rules of the Vinaya concerned with food, for example, are clearly designed to force members of the Saṅgha to be dependent on lay support. That is, if the Vinaya was intended to regulate the life of a self-sufficient community of ascetics who had no contact with society at large, it could have been structured differently. Instead it specifies that a monk should not handle money;²⁰ he should not eat food that he has not received from someone else;²¹ he should not dig the ground or have it dug, and so is effectively prohibited from farming;²² strictly he should not store food unless sick, and then only for

seven days;²³ finally he is discouraged from cooking.²⁴ If called on to preach or attend to a lay supporter in various ways, then the community of monks should provide someone.²⁵ All these rules have the effect of drawing the Buddhist monk into a relationship with society, and balancing any tendency towards becoming a movement of eremitic ascetics.

The lifestyle of the Buddhist monk is thus founded on a relationship of trust between himself and his supporters. In accepting lay support in the form of robes, food, and lodgings, the monk enters into a kind of social contract; it becomes his responsibility to live in a certain way, namely to live the holy or spiritual life (*brahmacarya*) to the best of his ability. If Buddhism is unthinkable without the Saṅgha, then it is also true that the Saṅgha is unthinkable without lay support. The texts are thus at pains to point out that certain kinds of behaviour become inappropriate in the light of this contract; to spend one's time playing games or at entertainments; to spend one's time practising astrology and various kinds of divining. The concern here seems not so much to condemn these practices as such but merely to reinforce the principle that as a Buddhist monk one accepts lay support in order to practise the spiritual life. As a Buddhist monk one is deserving of lay support to the extent one attempts to put into practice the teachings of the Buddha, and *not* because of one's skills as an astrologer or doctor. Thus to lie about one's spiritual attainments is, as we have seen, undermining of this relationship of trust. Yet if the responsibility resting on the shoulders of the Buddhist monk should appear too heavy, the Buddha is recorded as reassuring them that if one dwells for even a finger-snap absorbed in meditation on loving kindness, then one has not eaten the country's alms food in vain.²⁶

Other Vinaya rules are concerned to make sure that a monk avoids behaviour that might be misconstrued by the laity; his conduct should be in all respects beyond reproach. Thus talking in private with a woman or spending the night in the same house as a woman are prohibited.²⁷ The monk should also avoid behaviour that might be considered bad manners or give offence in some other way.