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Vinaya in Buddhist Monasticism



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became more thoroughly formulated over time, it might have lent itself to being interpreted in the common acceptance of “teachings and discipline” (Carter, 1978, p. 69). In the context of legal literature, the compound designates the actual body of monastic rules and regulations (Bechert, 1997, p. 61).

Synonyms

[Monastic discipline](#); [Monastic law](#)

Definition

“*Vinaya*” designates the body of teachings and texts pertaining to monastic discipline whose promulgation is attributed to the historical Buddha.

Vinaya

The term *Vinaya* features in the Pāli compound *dhamma-vinaya* (Sanskrit: *dharma-vinaya*) employed in the early Buddhist discourses to identify the entirety of the religious instructions of a particular teacher, be it the Buddha or others (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 162). In this sense, it usually translates as “teaching and discipline.” It has also been suggested that initially its meaning could have been that of “training in the teaching” and subsequently, as the monastic discipline

Saṅgha

Vinaya observance is incumbent upon the *saṅgha* (Pāli and Sanskrit) comprising fully ordained monks and nuns (Pāli: *bhikkhu*, *bhikkhunī*; Sanskrit: *bhikṣu*, *bhikṣuṇī*). Technically the *saṅgha* is the monastic order subject to *Vinaya* jurisprudence; more specifically, a circumscribed group within a given territory marked by an established boundary (Pāli and Sanskrit: *sīmā*), where this group carries out its legal acts (Pāli: *kamma*; Sanskrit: *karma*). The minimum quorum to qualify as such a *saṅgha* is four individual monks or else nuns. The *Vinaya* also regulates the conduct of female trainees, male and female novices (Pāli: *sikkhamānā*, *sāmaṇera*, *sāmaṇerī*; Sanskrit: *śiṅsamānā*, *śrāmaṇera*, *śrāmaṇerikā*), who have as yet not received full ordination.

The first monks were the Buddha’s five former companions in asceticism. The order’s female branch was established later at the instigation of the Buddha’s foster-mother who became the first nun (Anālayo, 2016). The statement ascribed to the Buddha that effected the first monks’

ordination commands to live the mendicant, celibate life (Pāli: *brahmacariya*; Sanskrit: *brahmacarya*) in order to make an end of *dukkha* (Sanskrit: *duḥkha*) through the attainment of Nirvana (Horner, 1951, p. 18), on the understanding that the going forth of a monastic disciple aims at the lifelong pursuit of the path to liberation.

The *saṅgha* is an intentional community: membership, granted to qualified applicants, can be terminated at any time by any individual monastic. Whereas other infractions (Pāli and Sanskrit: *āpatti*) can be atoned through acknowledgement, confession, and rehabilitation, a monk's instantaneous, permanent loss of communion with the order occurs de facto by dint of four grave offences (Pāli and Sanskrit: *pārājika*) concerning breaches of celibacy, murder, theft, and intentional lying about one's spiritual attainments (with four additional transgressions in the case of nuns). The *Vinaya* discipline allows for no exceptions or exemptions on account of seniority in the order or spiritual standing.

Structure, Rules, and Regulations

The *Vinaya* deals with both rules and procedural regulations in that it establishes the proper behavior of monastics on the individual level, and it governs their actions communally as a corporate unity. These two domains are reflected in the twofold main subdivision of the textual corpus between a part called “explanation of the *Vinaya*” (Pāli and Sanskrit: *Vinayavibhaṅga*) and a part arranged in thematic “chapters” (Pāli: *khandhaka*; Sanskrit: *vastu*) (Clarke, 2015, p. 60). The “explanation of the *Vinaya*” is also known as “explanation of the [*Pātimokkha*]-*sutta*” (Sanskrit: [*Prātimokṣa*]-*sūtra*), a title denoting a text containing a sequence of rules for recitation purposes. These are without an accompanying explanation, which is instead provided by the relevant “explanation” in the form of canonical commentary. Both divisions include the legal history behind the formulation, amendments, and terms of applicability of their stipulations; narratives and casuistry serve both normative and didactic purposes.

The texts report that the promulgation of the *Vinaya* took place gradually. In the beginning there were fewer rules; with the growth of the order and the appearance of signs of decline their number increased (Ñānamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 548). Notably, those who were responsible for an inappropriate behavior leading to the first issuing of a certain rule were not sanctionable on its account. The rules or training guidelines (Pāli: *sikkhāpada*; Sanskrit: *śikṣāpada*) alongside their recitation were established on the ground of ten interrelated reasons ranging from the well-being of all monastics, to purification from the influxes, the gaining or increasing of confidence, and the preservation of the teachings and of the *Vinaya* itself (Horner, 1942, p. 39; Bodhi, 2012, p. 1387).

The received *Vinaya* is in fact a plurality of *Vinayas*, chronologically layered and reorganized written collections existing in independently transmitted recensions that originated from incremental variation during oral transmission. Only six seemingly complete *Vinayas* survive alongside some materials from other traditions (Clarke, 2015).

Although the Buddha is the sole agent having legislative power and therefore the canonical *Vinaya* represents itself as constitutionally unmodifiable after his demise (with only the executive and judiciary powers resting with the *saṅgha*), the Buddhist communities generated school-specific commentaries and administrative structures with a significant normative impact. *Vinaya* as a religio-historical construct also comprises these acts of negotiation between the rules and the actual living by the rules (e.g., Bianchi and Campo, 2023): here the *Vinaya* “uses the authority of (apparent) conformity to established tradition to promote innovation and adaptation” (Bodiford, 2005, p. 7).

Mindfulness

Discipline and mindfulness appear one after the other in a set of recommendations to the *saṅgha* that newcomers should be encouraged in the restraint of the *pātimokkha*, seeing danger in

minute faults, and in the restraint of the sense faculties, taking mindfulness as protector of their minds (Bodhi, 2012, p. 737).

Daily monastic routine activities such as wearing robes and carrying the alms-bowl appear in instructions on clear discernment placed under the rubric of contemplation of the body, the first of the four establishments of mindfulness (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 147). Mindfulness enables awareness of the task at hand and by performing it knowingly the monastic's deportment becomes inspirational externally.

The *Vinaya* assigns moral and legal relevance to the recognition of intentionality and demands surveying the ethical quality of one's behaviors in each situation: here mindfulness plays a crucial role in enabling the required discernment, assessment, and response to internal and external conditions in line with the very rationale underlying the establishment of the *Vinaya* itself as a multi-purpose soteriologically-informed code of training, namely, purification of bodily, verbal, and mental conduct.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Clear Discernment in Early Buddhist Meditation](#)
- ▶ [Dukkha in Early Buddhism](#)

- ▶ [Ethics in Buddhism](#)
- ▶ [Gotama Buddha](#)
- ▶ [Influx in Early Buddhist Thought](#)
- ▶ [Middle-Period Indian Buddhism](#)

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