

EVERYONE NEEDS *VINAYA*: REFLECTIONS ON BUDDHIST LIFESTYLES

Vinaya is a term well known in Buddhist countries as the discipline or extensive set of rules that monks follow, or are supposed to follow. As with many aspects of mainstream Buddhism, this common sense understanding is neither wrong nor sufficient. It forgets important perspectives found in the Buddha's teachings and consequently diminishes our ability to live out a Dhammic life, whether as lay practitioners or monastics. In this essay, I will explore some of these lesser known aspects of *Vinaya* that I believe will clarify and help fulfill important aspects of modern life for Buddhists in both Asia and the West, lay students as well as monastics or "nunks."¹

In this essay, I will explore the meaning and importance of *Vinaya* more broadly within Buddhist tradition, emphasizing its applicability today within Western societies among "convert Buddhists" coping with modernity and post-modernity, and in traditional Buddhists societies among those who are struggling to come to terms with rapid modernizing change. This discussion will give importance to lay *Vinaya*, a customarily obscure concept. I will begin by looking at the limitations of how *Vinaya* has been understood traditionally, although we don't really know how far back many "traditions" go. Some are less than a hundred years old and others were a response to European imperialism. Very few actually go back to the early centuries of the tradition. Next, I will propose a new way of understanding *Vinaya*, one that is well-grounded in original Buddhism and the Pali Sutta teachings. This opens up the possibility that we must out grow some "traditions" in order to return to "the tradition."²

Then, I will suggest guidelines for how this perspective on *Vinaya* can be put into practice by both lay trainees and nunks. A central part of this essay will discuss the areas of our lives with which a comprehensive *Vinaya* must deal. To demonstrate the suggested perspectives and approach, I will expand on one of these areas, that concerning modern digital technology. Due to space constraints, I won't be able to explore the other areas in any depth. Some criteria for evaluating the efficacy of this approach will also be given.

The main thesis of this paper is that *Vinaya* is necessary, for the Dhamma requires its protection, support, and structure. This applies to everyone, not just monastics. I am hopeful that lay Buddhists will accept the challenges posed by lay *Vinaya* and that nunks will update their understanding and reform their practice of monastic *Vinaya*. Below, I will not indulge in telling other Buddhists how to live and what to do. There is far too much diversity for anybody to do that. We must work this out with our families, colleagues, and fellow practitioners according to the circumstances of our lives. These reflections may aid us in doing so. As I hope to expand on this essay at a later date, readers are invited to consider the ideas and

¹ "Nunks" is a playful gender-inclusive neologism. Below, I will write of "monks" when discussing the traditional contexts in which nuns (bhikkhunis) have largely been left out of developments and most of the official record. When writing of alternatives for our times, I use "nunks" to refer to all fully ordained Buddhist monastics, that is, bhikkhunis and bhikkhus equally. Here, I won't directly discuss the ambiguous forms, such as *Maechi* in Siam, to which women have been limited in most Buddhist countries.

² Here, while writing of tradition, my personal background is relevant. I am a bhikkhu ordained within Thai Theravāda Buddhism. Most of what I write is based on my experiences within Siam and is most applicable there and in other Theravāda countries. However, I have many contacts with Buddhists from other countries and hope that most of these comments are generally applicable in them as well. As I am involved in the foundation of a new gender-inclusive, non-sectarian monastic community in the United States, the applicability of *Vinaya* in the West and for lay practitioners is now an important personal concern.

perspectives found here to be evolving. Your active participation, comments, suggestions, and references will be most welcome.

Some “Traditional” Limitations

Originally, there was no need to spell out a “Disciplinary Code” (*Vinaya-paññati*) because the first batches of monks were highly motivated to follow the wandering spiritual life honestly, maturely, and simply. Many attained realization quickly. When some senior monks suggested that the Buddha lay down rules, he first refused. It wasn’t until the monastic Sangha grew in quantity and geographical spread that the quality of monks began to deteriorate. As some riff-raff got in and were soon misbehaving — for example, the infamous gang of six — the Buddha started to spell out “rules” (literally, “trainings,” *sikkhāpada*). These trainings have an important place in the lives of sincere practitioners, especially for the less settled and mature, but is this all there is to Vinaya?

Understanding Vinaya as merely a set of rules, some of them legalistic or out-of-date, if not downright sexist, is again not quite right. While the individual trainings (*sikkhāpada*) can be seen as rules that monks must follow, they are always expressions of deeper principles. And this is the point that is so often missed. Blindly following “rules” can never be the Buddha’s liberating way and can even put one into conflict with the Dhamma, for it is merely *sīlappatāpāramāsa* (foolish fondling of precepts and practices), one of the Ten Fetters that bind us to cyclic existence. We all need a Vinaya that expresses the deeper principles coherent with Dhamma.

I will spend some time belaboring this point for the following reasons:

- ☞ I have heard monastic Vinaya most often spoken of as “rules to be followed,” though actually following them is often downplayed.
- ☞ Oftentimes, Vinaya is taken seriously only when the “rules” are enforced by social pressures and sanctioned by withholding of approval and material support. When, for example, monks live in foreign countries and the usual contexts for keeping these rules is absent, they tend to fall away, unless the principles and rationale behind the trainings are internalized by each monk.
- ☞ Conversely, society can use these “rules” to control monks and use them for un-Dhammic purposes, such as, to legitimize corrupt regimes and launder (“bless”) ill-gotten gains.
- ☞ Having more rules is one of the most common justifications for the superiority of monks over lay people, an attitude more suited to the feudal societies of the past than modern democratic societies.³
- ☞ The Vinaya as rules perspective generally leaves out lay practitioners, implying they have neither Vinaya nor the need.
- ☞ When following rules causes stress or suffering, they are often abandoned. Then, the baby is thrown out with the bath water.
- ☞ When the necessary supportive structure is abandoned, forgotten, or ignored, the more subtle Dhamma practice is weaker and more difficult to sustain.
- ☞ Whenever Dhamma and Vinaya are weakened, Buddhist training struggles and more suffering persists.

The situation summarized here is an important aspect of the deterioration of Buddhist monasticism in almost every traditional Buddhist society. As Buddhist monasticism is only just beginning to put down

³ Interestingly, the fact that the bhikkhunis (in Theravāda) have 311 trainings while bhikkhus have only 227 is generally ignored. Wouldn’t want the nuns to be superior to the monks, it seems.

roots in the West, such a situation has yet to develop there. Yet, the cultural soil there is different from that of when Buddhism first entered Southeast Asia, China, and Tibet. The West no longer has the village centered cultures, agrarian economies, and feudal politics that nurtured Asian Buddhism since its inception. Nowadays, educated lay people have more overt teaching and leadership roles within Buddhist groups, yet generally lack the unwritten Vinaya of Asian Buddhist tradition. What they do have is often drawn more from Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions. Monks, with less influence, often find themselves sticking out like sore thumbs in a culture that doesn't yet, if ever, know what to do with them. For their well-being of both, a suitable understanding and practice of Vinaya is essential.

Understanding what has previously occurred in Asia is necessary for Western Buddhists seeking their ways through modernity. On the hand, Asian Buddhists need to understand how Vinaya has been trivialized (superficialized) so that this can be corrected in order to better adapt the ancient Vinaya tradition to the complicated changes that are transforming all Asian societies and the Buddhist institutions within them, even when the monkish hierarchies try to stick their heads in the sands of the past.

Vinaya and Dhamma Inter-Exist

In order to reappraise the meaning, purpose, and value of Vinaya, especially in modern and post-modern times, it is worth recalling that the Buddha himself spoke more often of “this Dhamma-Vinaya” than of “this or my *sāsanā* (message, teaching, religion).” While we have come to see this tradition as customs, institutions, hierarchies, monastics buildings, beliefs, and the other common constituents of “religion,” the Buddha did not emphasize them and there are good reasons to believe he discouraged many of them. Rather, he encouraged a way of looking into life and consequently living life that he claimed, from his own experience, leads to the quenching of suffering. A life centered in Dhamma.

The wonderful word “Dhamma” is untranslatable. For a start, we can understand it in terms of four primary aspects. Dhamma as “Nature” includes everything created and uncreated. It is the natural reality in which we live and simultaneously are. Dhamma as “Natural Law” is the natural principles discovered through exploration of our minds, relationships with others, and that natural world. This is the fundamental truth that is always available to us and which governs all of Nature. Dhamma as “Natural Duty” is the corresponding principles and guidelines for living our lives in harmony with these realities and their natural laws. Fundamentally, this is the duty of living without suffering. Finally, Dhamma is the “Natural Fruits” of how that duty is lived out. When lived out wisely and unselfishly, the result is inner peace and pervasive happiness. When they are lived out foolishly or sloppily, the result is inner conflict, tension, sorrow, and emotional affliction.⁴

Dhamma can be compared to the flesh of a sweet, naturally ripened mango. It is very rich and succulent, delightful and delicious, refreshing and nutritious. Yet, no mango would produce its sweet inner flesh without a skin. The skin provides protection for the growing seed and flesh, and structure that helps them take shape. The role of the mango's skin is akin to the role Vinaya plays in relation to Dhamma. Just as no sweet mango flesh develops without the requisite skin, the Dhamma cannot flourish without an appropriate Vinaya. And just as a mango skin without flesh inside is neither appetizing or nourishing, Vinaya without Dhamma is not Buddhism.

Much More than Mere Rules

While translating Vinaya as “discipline” may be acceptable in certain respects, something vital is lost. Ajarn Buddhādāsa pointed out that there is a corresponding verb cognate, *vinayye*, meaning “to remove or

⁴ The “four meanings of Dhamma” summarized in this paragraph were frequently discussed by my root teacher, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu. English translations are available on tape and in transcripts, but have not yet been published.

lead out from.” In fact, this verb has an important place in a number of important Suttas.⁵ In the Sutta on Ānāpānasati (mindfulness with breathing) and both of the Suttas on the Satipaṭṭhāna (foundations of mindfulness), which together contain the Buddha’s most important meditation teachings, the clause “removing covetousness and grief regarding the world” appears regarding each foundation of mindfulness. It is also found in many other Sutta passages concerning mindfulness of the body and the four foundations. This clause could also be rendered “leading out from positiveness and negativeness towards the world.”⁶

From this textual fact, Ajarn Buddhādāsa concluded that the ultimate meaning and purpose of Vinaya is to lead us out from under or remove (*vineyya*) the power of negativity and positivity, that is, the power of ignorance, craving, clinging, and their resultant greed, anger, and delusion. Following rules, especially external ones, even more so imposed rules, can never accomplish such a sublime goal. Consequently, Vinaya must be about something more than rules if it is to be a necessary partner with Dhamma.

Most simply, the fundamental operative principle that gets us to the heart of Vinaya is non-harming (*avihiṃsā*). This principle is inseparable from the natural law of conditionality, interdependence, and inter-relatedness (*idappaccayatā*) that governs all of nature. Because our lives are fundamentally interwoven with the lives of other sentient beings, and because we all seek happiness and avoid suffering, non-harming is the best principle on which to base moral and behavioral standards. Further, *sīla* (morality) is defined in Pali schools in terms of *pakkhati* (natural normalcy), the ultimate aspect of which is Nibbāna. Thus, non-harming is the natural, normal way to live — viewed from the perspective of Dhamma, rather than modern capitalism — and brings us into a stronger relationship with Nibbāna. This congruence between the fundamental Dhamma principle (*idappaccayatā*) and the fundamental Vinaya principle (*avihiṃsā*) is what naturally binds them together harmoniously.

The most common expression of Vinaya is the *pañcasīla* (five precepts). These amount to five fundamental aspects of non-harming that are the minimum required for healthy relationships in this world and any aspiration towards universal kindness and world peace. Further, the various monastic Vinayas all derive from these *pañcasīla* and, ultimately, the single “precept” of non-harming. Understood in this light, Vinaya and *sīla*, whatever the formulation, are expressions of the wisdom that sees the world as it is and the compassion that motivates us to live in it without causing suffering. This is the Vinaya fit to be paired with Dhamma as Dhamma-Vinaya.

Organizing Our Lives for the Sake of Dhamma Practice

Here, I would like to offer an alternative way of describing Vinaya. If we reflect on the examples of monks and nuns in the Buddha’s time, the original Vinaya was unwritten and customary. It was based on the Samana lifestyle that developed in the Ganges valley in the century or two before the Buddha’s Great

⁵ E.g., the Ānāpānasati Sutta (M.118), Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (M. 10), Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (D. 22), Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (D. 16), and Cakkavatti Sutta (D. 26).

⁶ The opening of the Sutta on the Foundations of Mindfulness begins:

There is this singular way, bhikkhus, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for reaching the Noble Path, for the realization of Nibbāna, namely, the four foundations of mindfulness.

What are the four? In this training, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu dwells contemplating **body** in bodies, ardently, clearly comprehending and mindful (*viharati ātāpī sampajāno satimā*), removing covetousness and grief in the world (*vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassam*); he dwells contemplating **feeling** in feelings, ardently, clearly comprehending and mindful, removing covetousness and grief in the world; he dwells contemplating **mind** in minds, ardently, clearly comprehending and mindful, removing covetousness and grief in the world; he dwells contemplating **Dhamma** in dhammas, ardently, clearly comprehending and mindful, removing covetousness and grief in the world.

Awakening. When Prince Siddhatta left home and ordained himself by “going forth” (*pabbajā*) as a bhikkhu, he joined this broad movement, in which a number of lifestyle customs and practices were developed to support the spiritual pursuits of the various groups of ascetics, wanderers, and monks. Further, it is crucial to note that these customs and practices made sense within and were therefore supported by the culture of the Ganges valley.

To these historical facts, we may add the observations described in the sections above, in order to reach another perspective on Vinaya. Let me summarize them as follows:

- ☞ Vinaya is a necessary container for spiritual practice
- ☞ Vinaya is much more profound than mere rules and regulations.
- ☞ Vinaya has a direct connection with the highest spiritual goal and is not something to be left aside on higher levels of practice.
- ☞ Vinaya is derived from the principle of non-harming and applies to all forms of physical and verbal behavior, including those involved with social and ecological relationships.
- ☞ Vinaya may be understood as guidelines for a lifestyle that supports Dhamma study, practice, realization, and sharing.

Now we are ready to re-express the meaning and purpose of Vinaya. My preferred definition of Vinaya:

Vinaya is the Buddhist lifestyle: the way serious Buddhist practitioners arrange, organize, and structure their lives in order to support Dhamma study, practice, realization, and service. This covers all physical and verbal actions. It involves all forms of relationships: interpersonal, social, economic, political, ecological, as well as with one’s own body.⁷

I feel that this “new” expression of Vinaya will make sense to modern Buddhists, and even inspire their practice.

Applicability for Lay Practitioners

One of the merits of expressing Vinaya in this way is that it “status neutral”; it applies equally to all mature students of Buddha-Dhamma: to lays and monastics, men and women, and even can apply to children. This is crucial for those of us who seek a less hierarchical, more egalitarian understanding of Buddhist life and practice. Traditionally, the higher status of monastics — de facto, the monks in most countries — has often been justified in that they follow more rules and therefore are more morally pure. I have heard repeatedly, from lays as well as monks, how monks follow 227 rules while lay people only follow 5 or occasionally 8.⁸ And with Vinaya traditionally understood as all those rules, Vinaya has been that which justifies the monks’ higher status, privileges, etc. If, however, we understand Vinaya in a broader meaning that includes lay practitioners, we can diminish such hierarchical notions. This is necessary if lay practice is to be valued as it deserves. For too long it has been considered lesser practice, partly because its practitioners have usually had “lesser Vinaya.”

⁷ Please note that physical and verbal actions, along with livelihood, are covered by the three *sīla* factors of the noble eightfold path. Some Buddhists may be used to thinking of *sīla* as Dhamma, and it is, as everything is Dhamma; yet, *sīla* better corresponds with Vinaya. Thus, we can observe that the noble eightfold path, the three trainings (*sikkhā*), and the Middle Way are equivalent to Dhamma-Vinaya. We again see that Vinaya is necessary for the quenching of dukkha, liberation, and true happiness.

⁸ They conveniently overlook that bhikkhunis have more rules than bhikkhus, but bhikkhunis have been suppressed in most Buddhist countries so this contradiction was seldom faced. They also overlook that most monks ignore the majority of the 227 rules.

At the same time, this perspective challenges lay practitioners to consider their lifestyle choices in ways that have often been overlooked in the West. In traditional Buddhist communities, lay Buddhists had a Vinaya lifestyle that was developed through the local culture and passed along through custom and community sanctions. In individualistic, modern societies, this aspect tends to be weak or missing. I believe this challenge will be met creatively by Western Dhamma students. Otherwise, Buddhism will never mature in the West. In Asia, this perspective is needed among lay practitioners if Asian Buddhism is to reverse its decline and stagnation.

In order to fulfill the egalitarian vision that appeals to many modern Buddhists, all practitioners must adhere to an equally high standard. We don't want first and second class Buddhists; therefore, we can't have first and second class standards. If Dhamma-Vinaya is an inseparable whole, access to higher teachings and practices previously limited to monastics requires parallel commitment to higher Vinaya standards. Such standards need not mimic those of monastics in their details, but must uphold the same high standards. In fact, I have known many Thai laywomen and men who have lived according to impeccable standards. Otherwise, sloppiness around money, sex, and power, plus other areas delineated below, will corrupt those teachings and practices. Everyone involved will be harmed, not least those who are careless about this requirement. Higher practices such as Vipassanā, Dzogchen, and Tantra will become hollow without the protection of suitable Vinaya. This ancient principle still applies no matter how post-modern we become.

Further, we can better see Vinaya as a partnership among all Buddhists. In modern societies, in which lifestyle choices are multifarious and taken for granted, it is necessary to understand Vinaya in a way that encompasses a diversity of lifestyles. Rather, than taking the monastics as the benchmark and considering lay practitioners as watered down or inferior versions, we can ask all Buddhists to consider their lifestyle needs in light of Dhamma practice and realization. Then, we can offer different flavors of the core Dhamma-Vinaya to a grand Buddha-Dhamma buffet. We must learn from each other, especially in today's complex societies in which lay people usually have much more hands on experience with the economic, political, and technological systems.

This also gives us a powerful tool of social critique. Rather than follow the mainstream of consumer self-indulgence, rat-race work, and indebtedness, Buddhist practitioners live out an alternative based on their aspiration for spiritual liberation and the "natural discipline" that this aspiration calls forth. Such a critique will be flexible rather than doctrinaire in order to serve the many living and working situations in which modern Buddhists find themselves. Yet, it can provide concrete standards with which to challenge society in order to flesh out the abstract virtues that Buddhists espouse.

Applicability for Monastics

Monastics, especially the monks, can no longer take for granted that they have more knowledge, practice more deeply, or live more purely. The day-to-day reality of monastic Sanghas in Siam and elsewhere belies this sad fact and screams for a reform of Dhamma-Vinaya education and practice. The respect earned by past generations of dedicated monastic practitioners has largely be spent in most Asian societies and has not yet been accumulated in Western cultures. We can only reclaim such "merit" the old fashioned way: by what the Buddha called "right living (*sammā-vihāra*)." The perspectives offered in this essay can help insure that such reforms are relevant and effective, not mere ritualism or window-dressing. I hope that they will help convince my fellow monks that serious reforms are called for, the first step that has yet to be taken by the majority.

Further, this reevaluation of Vinaya can help monastics to re-examine the Vinaya they purportedly follow. Are they merely following rules and losing out on the deeper spirit of Vinaya? Are they on "purity trips" based on superstition and ritualism? Do they accommodate so much to the modern consumer society

that they lose track of Vinaya altogether, merely following rules to the degree social convention requires them to? How can they find a Vinaya that is more harmonious with both their spiritual needs and the reality of the society in which they live? Can they relax their higher status and function as partners with lay people in democratic societies?⁹

When we speak of “monks,” “monastics,” or “Sangha” collectively, we often overlook or forget the diversity found among the individuals, communities, and temples designated by these terms. In fact, a broad range of lifestyles can be observed, just as with our lay friends. This diversity appears to be a consistent fact of modern life; it may increase as post-modernity creeps in. Rather than asserting — not very accurately — that we all hold the same Vinaya, I suggest that it would be useful to recognize and take account of the many different lifestyles that Buddhists monks and nuns are actually living. Some of these are:

- ◆ Student monks in the cities
- ◆ Village based monks mainly occupied with rituals and preserving local customs
- ◆ Administration monks
- ◆ Those who keep the rules strictly
- ◆ Those who barely know what the rules are
- ◆ Nuns who live as cooks and janitors for monks
- ◆ Nuns who stay out of the public eye in order to be left alone so that they can practice seriously
- ◆ Development and ecology monks
- ◆ Forest dwelling monks
- ◆ Bhikkhunis in Taiwan who out number the bhikkhus seven-to-one.
- ◆ Bhikkhunis elsewhere who are struggling with sexism, discrimination, substandard facilities, and lack of support.

Then, we can acknowledge that these different lifestyles to some degree require that we keep Vinaya in rather different ways. I believe this will provide a basis for thinking more carefully about how we as communities and individuals keep Vinaya, rather than leaving something so crucial to personal discretion, custom, habit, or, as is often the case, lowest common denominators.

Dimensions of Vinaya

In my own reflections on these issues, I continually go back to the *bhikkhu-pāṭimokhā*. While this is natural to me as a monk, I think it can provide lessons for non-monastics, also. After all, the monks’ Vinaya code is an elaboration upon the five precepts. Further, as I liberate my own thinking from the rule following approach, I wish to suggest another way of thinking about both monastic and lay lifestyles. I will do so by summarizing the lifestyle issues covered by the monastic Vinaya and wondering how they apply to modern life.

In sketching out the areas that any complete Vinaya approach must cover, I have no intention to stipulate rules or even specifics for those who lead a different lifestyle than mine (celibate monastic). My purpose is to provide a framework for all of us to think about our lifestyles and how we can arrange them to better support our Dhamma practice and the realization of genuine happiness and purpose in life. As a monastic, I hope that aspects of our lifestyle can inspire and creatively challenge others. Thus, this attempt to make clear some of its inner principles.

⁹ That is, when there is such high status to relax. Though taken for granted in some Buddhist countries, Buddhists monastics in China and elsewhere have often been subject to persecution. Nowadays, the political situations in many countries — most blatantly Myanmar and Tibet — both manipulate and threaten monastics, though there may be some trappings of status.

Although these various dimensions overlap to some extent — just as the path is woven of many factors, so too Vinaya — we can distinguish ten areas or dimensions.

1. *Sex, Sexuality, & Gender:*

Recognizing and respecting this powerful instinct — all those hormones! — we set clear boundaries concerning gender, sexual, and physical relationships. Acknowledging sexuality but not indulging it, accepting that we are sexual beings without expressing it manipulatively, we ask how we can foster healthy relationships in the physical, emotional, and spiritual areas of our lives. We are mindful of gender so that it doesn't become a basis for misunderstanding, prejudice, or oppression. How can we use our sexuality wisely and kindly? What do we need to be aware of to avoid using it in a way that harms others physically or emotionally? This discussion covers not only the “opposite sex,” but all the sexual preferences and expressions we come into contact with nowadays. It also concerns the many media images used to titillate and seduce.

2. *Power, Authority, Status, & Violence:*

Whether or not we are in “positions of power” or have truly given up political, economic, sexual, and other forms of power as in the original bhikkhu ideal, we do not escape power and authority. Recognizing and respecting how these prop up the ego's illusions of security and strength in yet other ways, and again noting the violence that so often comes out of this defensiveness, we relinquish political and social control over others. Honestly observing that most institutions, including religious, create their own hierarchies of privilege and power, we disavow such corruption and share whatever authority is given to us. We strive to live according to the principles of non-violence, non-harming, and non-abuse, that is, kindness, compassion, and mutual support. We realize, however, that certain hierarchies may occur naturally and need not cause suffering. For example, our study and practice may give us a certain amount of authority among our co-practitioners and students, so we do what we can to exercise this authority honestly, openly, and Dhammically. The same applies to any moral authority that our lifestyle earns.

Each person has a variety of different positions in life. We need to learn how to use the authority of each position wisely. It's not that leaders have power and followers don't. Leaders are in debt to followers and are somewhat controlled by them. Everyone has some power; there are different kinds of power possessed by the various parties in each situation. Our purpose is to use whatever authority we have wisely and kindly. We may distinguish here between “power” as something held over or against others and “authority” as something freely given by others. The first is coercive and fundamentally violent, while the latter is not. So we ask if our influence is used to control and take advantage of others? Or to nurture their beneficial learning and growth without coercion?

3. *Basic Human Needs (4 Requisites):*

Recognizing that we all have basic material needs, we resolve to satisfy them without putting loathsome burdens on the planet or society. We are mindful of how our own accumulation can work to deprive others. We practice sharing of the resources that come our way and cultivate a spirit of *dāna* (generosity). Especially in societies that hold personal property to be sacred, we vow to acknowledge that it all belongs to Dhamma and we are merely stewards.

Monastics make themselves vulnerable by depending on alms, that is, the generosity of others. In return, they try to share as much of their material gains as they can realistically do, in addition to the fruits of their spiritual study and practice. The situation is not so different for laics as is generally assumed. Though food and other requisites may be purchased with cash or plastic, they were produced by farmers and workers, packaged and shipped by others, and retailed by shopkeepers and supermarket employees.

Nothing comes to us without the benevolence of others. Dhamma students should be regularly reflect on this and act accordingly.

4. *Property & Possessions:*

In addition to basic human needs, we seek and acquire things in order to achieve and proclaim status, generate comfort and luxury, entertain and distract ourselves, cover up loneliness, and seek to gratify other emotions having nothing to do with the material object involved. Nowadays, consumer capitalism — the engine of globalization — is based on these unhealthy non-necessities or false needs. They increasingly provide the meaning and purpose of our lives, thus determining “who” we are. It is very hard to live without lots of “stuff” if we live in the affluent segments of the world; things come with birthdays and other passages of life. Noting how much fighting goes on in the world, throughout human history, over limited material resources, we explore a life of simplicity wherein we are very careful about what we own and tend towards less rather than more. How to we keep them from cluttering up our lives and minds? What purposes ought they to serve? How do we take responsibility for them without owning or being owned by them?

5. *Wealthy, Money, & Finances:*

We recognize and respect how the accumulation of property, money, and wealth seems to provide the security the ego craves. In addition to everything mentioned in 3 and 4 above, we are mindful of how these bits of paper, metal, and plastic, as well as numbers on a screen, symbolize success, prestige, power, and all the other worldly values that ordinary folks aspire to. We even use it to measure the value of human beings. The illusory power of money easily cultivates the arrogance that overlooks how much we depend on the kindness of others. Given the power of this strange, symbolic — supposedly neutral — stuff, how can it be handled mindfully? What is right investment? Which Dhamma related services can be charged for legitimately and which not? What is the real meaning of “*dāna*”?

6. *Language, Communications, & Truth:*

As human beings we live in a world of language, symbols, and culture. Without them we can neither think nor dream. Communication binds us together with others culturally, politically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Yet, language is such tricky business. It deceives us by its very nature even when we are trying to be truthful. In the world, language is used to trick, con, seduce, insult, and hurt, as well as to love, help, advise, teach, console, encourage, and inspire. Formulating our experiences and insights into words, we easily fall into the trap of clinging to views, even when the original insight was profoundly true. Over beliefs and opinions we create countless disputes. There are so many teachings in this area that serious Dhamma practitioners wish to radically alter the way we communicate to be as close to Buddha Speech as we can manage. We strive to practice silence when we are unable to use speech in healing ways. We mindfully endeavor to convey the truth, both in letter and connotation. And we foster communities of right speech around us.

7. *Technology:*

Tools are one of the things that make us human.¹⁰ We often measure our “development” in terms of the supposedly “can’t turn back the clock” advance of technological wonders. We are awed by these gadgets and correspondingly honor the scientists, engineers, and other techno-priests who produce them.¹¹ With the harnessing of coal and steam, petroleum fuels, nukes, and electronics, we have become mighty indeed.

¹⁰ Of course, no dividing line is sacrosanct. Some chimps are known to use tools, e.g., a branch stripped of leaves can be inserted into an ants or termites nest to retrieve succulent morsels.

¹¹ I highly recommend David Noble’s *The Religion of Technology* (Penguin).

Other species and pristine ecosystems have vanished consequently. Human life has been hugely transformed. Liberated from the natural rhythms of the seasons and the sun's daily cycle, we have increasingly less free time. Even if we don't have more stress than in the ancient past, we surely have new forms of stress that our biology was not evolved to handle. Increasingly, technology has become an interface between ourselves and others (e.g., telephone), and between our own bodies and minds (e.g., medical scanning equipment). It comes into play with all the topics discussed here: power, wealth, communications, and even sex. How can we use these wonderful tools without being used by them? How do we insure that they serve spiritual needs, rather than merely economic or political ends?¹²

8. *Entertainment:*

Ajarn Buddhādāsa speaks of “spiritual entertainment” as the fifth requisite. At Suan Mokkh, the Theater of Spiritual Entertainment was built to fulfill this most important human need and in so doing show that Dhamma study-practice need not be humorless or joyless. Yet, most of society humors itself with less meaningful entertainment. A good laugh now and again, mirth, creativity, and the like can be used to support our practice and realization, or to hinder them. What do we do when we want to be entertained or to entertain? How much do we depend on technology for this? How much do we let the content of our entertainment shape our values and behaviors in conscious or unconscious ways? By seeking entertainment to “relax,” do we become more tense by internalizing negative values and behaviors we observe in the entertainment? What really makes us relaxed? Do we neglect our families or the people we live with because we're too caught up in entertainment?

9. *Relationships, Harmony, Cooperation, & Community:*

A few moments' reflection reminds us of the importance of our relationships with others. Whether the parents and family who nurture us, friends who accompany us, or teachers and mentors who shape us, life would be empty without them all. All that we receive is a free flowing of kindness, love, care, intelligence, and sharing that is naturally reciprocated when we are wise and unselfish. This takes place when we manage the relationships so that obstructions to the free flow are dealt with skillfully and don't last long. This applies to relationships both at workplace and in living situations, as well as shared community life in all forms. Below, I will say more about how all Vinaya is community based. Here, we note that community is itself an area for Vinaya and lifestyle choice and responsibility.

10. *Ecology:*

The above perspective expands to embrace all life forms, that is, all sentient beings. The rapid expansion of human populations has forced us into awareness of how we perturb other species and the inability of our technological wonders to free us from dependence on the rest of the natural world. Slowly, we are re-learning — after centuries of scientific hubris — how to fit in with other life forms within healthy ecosystems. Buddhist should not be surprised as the principle of non-harming applies directly here. Yet, the lifestyle choices implied by this awareness are profound. Only a true commitment to the welfare of all beings will empower us to make the necessary changes. If the Buddha were alive today, based on the complaints of concerned lay people, he would set up monastic precepts regarding recycling, reducing consumption, carpooling, taking public transport, etc. Many people may consider themselves ecologically concerned when it comes to the acts of multinational corporations, but hesitate when it comes to cutting back in their own lives.

¹² Below, in the next section, I will explore certain aspects of digital technology in greater detail.

A Case Study: Email, Internet, & Computer Technology

As an example of how the approach advocated in this essay can be applied, I would like to take a look at one specific area that is both very modern and has a huge impact in many of our lives. Many people bemoan the amount of time taken up by these new technologies. At the same time, we marvel at things they allow us to do. Both their *assadā* (delicious charm or bait) and the *adīnavā* (nasty penalty or punishment) are strong and pervasive. If we are to manage a healthy Vinaya in these times, surely we must be able to do so regarding computer technology, the internet, and email.

First, we need an analysis of what is going on with these gadgets and the systems that produce and control them. The chief potential harm of over-using computers, the Internet, and the media in general is distraction. We risk getting overwhelmed with information, thus confusing our minds, lessening our discriminative abilities, increasing attachment and anger, wasting time that could be used more productively, and making us unnecessarily tired through too much sensory stimulation. Some folks trawl the net for amusement, others for information, some for both together — “infotainment.” Information can provide security, power over others, or simply be a way of avoiding unpleasantness in the physical reality outside the room where one is staring at the monitor. It often masquerades as knowledge.

Computer technology, including email and the Internet, can be a useful tool for our Dharma study and work, whether researching relevant topics, producing books and other teaching media, or communicating with mentors, peers, and students. At the same time, they provide access to vast and practically limitless worlds of data, entertainment, distraction, and delusion. Some of us may choose to do without such technology altogether, partly to show that happiness is still possible in this life without an Internet hookup.

Most of this technology was developed originally for military applications, offensive as much as defensive. It then trickled down to other scientists and the business world. By the time it gets to consumers, it is driven more by the profit motive than the fighting instinct. Nonetheless, both are highly aggressive. Do we know who or what controls these hugely complex systems? Can we know who or what is monitoring our use? Is it the fabled “market place,” corporate boardrooms, or some cabal of military bureaucrats? I suspect we can only guess until each generation of technology is so old as to be deemed safe by whatever mechanisms declare this or that “Top Secret.” I believe it is important to ask what it means to be at the tail end — as “end users” — of this technological pipeline with little control over it, especially if we seek to use it for Dhammic purposes. To what degree is it possible to use this technology in service of Dhamma? What are lines beyond which greed, hatred, and delusion are too much in the drivers’ seat? We can’t just wave a few “Oh Mani Padme Hums” over our keyboard to make the whole system clean.

Next, we can apply guide questions to help us reflect on our own use of this technology. Those who choose to use such technology should reflect on the following points each time they use it:

- ☞ Is what I’m doing important for my Dharma practice or the benefit of others’?
- ☞ Have I fulfilled my daily responsibilities towards the Triple Gem, or have I distracted myself and dispersed energy with this technology?
- ☞ Have I fulfilled my commitments to Sangha and others, or has this technology taken precedence once again?
- ☞ What is my motivation for relating with this media?
- ☞ Is this increasing my ignorance, anger, and attachment by exposing me to objects that stimulate them?
- ☞ What am I giving up or missing by using this technology? What gets supplanted by it?
- ☞ Is my physical health in any ways harmed by use of this technology?

☞ Do the benefits accrued by using this technology justify the psychological, financial, and environmental costs?

Lastly, after reflecting on the technology itself and its social contexts, then considering the above questions, we will begin to formulate guidelines, ideally with friends, for our interactions with these tools. Here are some examples of reminders to myself gleaned from my own experience:

☞ Don't turn on the computer until after doing morning meditation, prayers, stretching, and other necessary personal duties. If for some reason you get up late, still take care of the above before turning on the computer. Repeat this with afternoon and evening practices. If something is so urgent as to make you skip a basic duty, make up for it later.

☞ When you are getting sleepy and having trouble staying awake staring at the screen, turn it off and go to sleep. Or take a walk, do yoga, breathe ... Do something healthy rather than imbibe more caffeine or indulge in a game.

☞ You need not reply to every email message. Sort out what is important and emphasize quality in communication rather than speed.

☞ Budget computer time among its various uses: writing, reading, record keeping, email, and net browsing (mainly news). Keep track of how much time you spend on each and keep a balance.

☞ Budget the time spent on emails so that other forms of reading and writing, especially non-digital, aren't displaced.

☞ Go back to paper pen for letters, outlines, notes, drafts, etc., at least sometimes.

☞ Take the notebook out onto the porch or work under a tree. At least, open the window to let in some of the natural world, maybe even a few bugs ☺

☞ Use email for its strengths and avoid its weaknesses. Use it for exchanging information and documents, planning events, and sending reminders. Find better means for expressing feelings, building community, mending wounded friendships, and teaching Dhamma.

☞ Every time you boot, think of the oil spills, salmon kills in hydroelectric dams, and other costs of all the electricity coursing through these global systems.

☞ Whenever the urge to upgrade strikes, remember the piles of junk plastic, silicon, chips, monitors, cords, and CDs that accumulate with each new upgrade.

It goes without saying that this approach will only work with sincere, honest, committed students. We've already considered the drawbacks of rules. When there is no easy solution, we fall back on the only one that works — practice and skillful means. If somebody is visiting porn sites or spending hours browsing inanelly, something unhappy is at work in him or her. The solution isn't just to say, "Don't look at porn" or "Don't waste your time." The person must understand what's going on inside her or his mind.

Vinaya is Part of Community

For all of us, whether lay or monastic practitioners, Vinaya, our lifestyle choices and ethical guidelines, need to be worked out in community, especially the immediate communities in which we live, work, and practice. To individualistic modern minds, it might seem possible to work out these complex issues on one's own. After all, a central part of modernity is an emphasis on private persons, personal religion, and individual moral responsibility. Yet, another lesson we can draw from the monastic Vinaya is that lifestyles are worked out in community. We are members of communities just as much as we are individuals; we are individuals imbedded within relationships and community. Religion is always received to some degree, and therefore collective. Even the anti-religions of modernity have important collective aspects. Morality and responsibility can never be removed from their social contexts and relationships.

In fact, the Buddha included reasons of clearly collective and social benefit when he first agreed to spell out the Vinaya trainings. These are:

- ☞ for the overall excellence, beauty, and unity of the monastic Sanghas
- ☞ for the well-being of and harmonious living within the monastic Sanghas
- ☞ for controlling the disruptions caused by wayward (“shameless”) monks
- ☞ for encouraging faith in those who lack it and increasing it in those who already have confidence and trust in the Triple Gem
- ☞ for the long establishment of the Good Dhamma (true teaching)
- ☞ for the support of the Vinaya.¹³

Obviously, our lifestyles bring us into contact with others. Thus, they have some right to comment upon our lifestyles to the degree that we perturb them. More importantly, Buddhists who share a body of teachings, values, principles, aspirations, and practices already thus share vital elements of a common lifestyle. We further strengthen our communities, as well as personal practices, when we work out the Vinaya together.

For lay and monastic practitioners, this will include discussions about the contexts and complications of our lives. Serious Dhamma students will need to observe and analyze the forces in their lives that can obstruct Dhamma practice. As things are so complex these days, everyone can benefit from the experiences, insights, and perspectives of other Dhamma students. As the obstacles become clearer, lifestyle choices can be found to neutralize each obstacle. Some lifestyle practices will help with more than one problem. This will involve experimentation which, again, is better done with the help of others. There will be ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Finally, group support will help us stick to the choices we have made, even in the face of the mainstream culture’s materialism, individualism, and self-indulgence.

A Pali term that fits my point here is *sīlasamaññutā* (shared understanding of moral principles and practices). This is the fifth in a series of six dhammas or virtues necessary for living together in harmony. In our freedom loving age, we may overlook the importance of shared moral principles and practices. There is a middle way between moral laxity and individualistic self-indulgence, on one hand, and moralistic imposition of one group’s moral beliefs onto others without their full participation in the formulation and monitoring. The other five dhammas in this set are kindness towards each other in body, speech, and mind; sharing material gains; and shared understanding of what constitutes right view.

Evaluating What Works

As with Dhamma, Vinaya is essentially a matter of practice and realization. To insure that the approach discussed here will be practical, we must ask questions of its results. We can then observe what fruits this approach bears and make the appropriate adjustments. This is especially import in times of transition when experimentation is necessary. We can’t just figure these things out intellectually, they must be tested in real life. Dhamma-Vinaya is always a dialogue between the texts that we cherish and our daily practice of what they teach, as well as between tradition and present reality.

To support practical evaluation, here are some questions for reflection:

- ☞ What is the effect on one’s own health?
- ☞ What is the effect on one’s family and loved ones?
- ☞ What is the effect on one’s work and work place?

¹³ Note that the setting forth of specific trainings is explicitly for the support of the Vinaya. Thus, the Vinaya is more than these trainings or “rules.”

- ☞ What is the effect on one's community, neighborhood, and social groups?
- ☞ What is the effect on one's eco-systems — local, bioregional, national, and global?
- ☞ What is the effect on one's Dhamma practice?
 - ◆ concentration and calmness
 - ◆ emotions
 - ◆ behavior
 - ◆ thinking and beliefs
 - ◆ clinging to “me” and “mine”

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to raise questions and suggest some approaches through which we can find relevant, effective, and realistic answers to those questions, even as they remain provisional. I have no interest in telling others how they should live. For those who have taken refuge in the Buddha's teaching and way of life, there is an important place for Vinaya and *sīla*. These have become overly formulaic over the years and are now confronted with rapid social, ecological, and technological change. The need for rethinking is great. I hope that this essay contributes something to the necessary hard, creative work that lies before us and for many generations to come.

As noted earlier, I hope to develop this essay further. Thus, readers are encouraged to consider the ideas and perspectives found here to be open ended, evolving, and in need of your active participation. Please send comments, suggestions, and references that will add flesh, heart, and bones to these ideas and reflections. We especially hope to expand on the sections concerning concrete application of the main principles. Any practical additions based on personal experience will be most helpful.¹⁴

¹⁴ A number of the ideas and perspectives expressed in this essay grew out of discussions — in person, by phone, and through email — between myself and Ven. Thubten Chodron. Not only did these discussions contribute some of the material found here, they helped with a major shift in my understanding. They have a very concrete weight for both of us because we endeavor to co-found a new monastic community in which nuns and monks are equal and hierarchy is minimized. For more information about this new community, please visit: <http://www.liberationpark.org>. Thanks also to the Faris family of Weston, Missouri, for food, lodging, friendship, and natural surroundings while this was being written.

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