

## **Living Vinaya**

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We are using this vassa for recollecting the focal point for our community, which is to live in accordance with the Dhamma-Vinaya. The Vinaya needs to be constantly refreshed, because its vitality depends upon it being exercised by a living Sangha of people who practice it. We have these meetings in order to consider wisely how to use the frames of reference, the rules, the regulations and the observances in accordance with the spirit and the aims of the Buddha's teachings. Using this training, the Sangha has been able to keep going for two and a half millennia after the Parinibbana. The Vinaya and the Sangha support each other if the teaching is practiced in the right spirit.

Much of the way that we live is not purely defined by the Patimokkha-discipline, the training precepts which we recite. There are a lot of small points in the day-to-day occurrences where clarity is needed. Besides, the Patimokkha-precepts often relate to particular situations that do not happen in this time, so a lot of the training in Dhamma-Vinaya is to understand how one can reflect on these training-rules. We can also refer to the accounts in the books of the Vinaya and the commentaries to see what are the standards which form the basis of the training rules.

The Buddha said in the Mahaparinibbana-Sutta that the Dhamma-Vinaya would be the guide after his decease, and the interpretation of Dhamma-Vinaya should be by reference to four authorities: the authority of the Buddha's word, the authority of the Sangha, the authority of a Thera-council for the community, or the authority of a single Thera. One should refer to these in times of uncertainty. Also one can use 'Great Standards' (mahapadesa), which say that if something that did not exist at the time of the Buddha resembles something which did, we can regard it in the same way.

So there are those things which agree with what the Buddha allowed, although they were not around at the time of the Buddha. Many of our foods or medicines agree with things that were used at the time of the Buddha; so we can use them. The cloth that we use in our robes is not that which was specified by the Lord Buddha, but agrees with the standards established; so we can use those.

Then there are things which were not available but which agree with things which were forbidden. For example, in the Lord Buddha's time people had alcohol, which he forbade; so, quite clearly, narcotics should not be used. These are fairly obvious and easy examples, but many are not quite so easy. So we have to discuss and make decisions as to what things are allowable and what things are not.

In considering matters of our discipline in this day and age it's good to recollect the Lord Buddha's reasons for establishing the Patimokkha at all. He gave ten reasons:

for the excellence of the Sangha;  
for the well-being of the Sangha;

for the control of the ill-controlled bhikkhus;  
for the comfort of well-behaved bhikkhus;  
for the restraint of the asavas (the biases, the fundamental hindrances in this present life);  
for protection against the asavas in the future;  
to give confidence to those of little faith;  
to allow the firm establishment of those who have faith;  
to establish the true Dhamma;  
to support the Vinaya.

Notice that they allow a Sangha to be equipped to live long; and they aim to support the faith of newcomers and give faith to those who have not yet had faith in the Buddha-Dhamma. So when lay people come into contact with a well-trained Sangha, they see people who are trying to live a life of composure, clarity, and benevolence; who are trying to live as manifestations of Dhamma. This gives them confidence.

Then we also use these training rules so that the true Dhamma and the Vinaya itself, the way out of delusion, is constantly kept strong. For example, using the Patimokkha-training rules and the obligations at this time gives us a clear role in our society. It would be quite easy, I think, for us - just acting with good intentions - to handle money, to take up jobs or work, to involve ourselves in social causes, without feeling that what we were doing was grossly wrong. But it's not what we are about.

Something, say, as simple as not being able to handle or store one's own food (which doesn't seem to be a moral issue), has a far-reaching effect. If that training was abandoned we'd no longer be dependent on alms, we'd no longer have to go out, we'd no longer need to relate to lay-people. This is one of the great differences between Buddhist and Christian monasticism, where one may become more and more isolated from lay-people (as a hermit), or not much different from one (as a teacher). The relationship is not so well-defined.

Something else to consider is a question raised by the elder Ananda about the survival of the Order after the Parinibbana. The elder Ananda commented that after the decease of the Niganatha Nataputta - the leader of the Jains - all the Jains began quarrelling and wrangling and arguing amongst each other, with the result that the laity were disgusted and disaffected. Naturally he was concerned whether this would happen after the decease of the Buddha:

'It occurs to me revered Sir, that we should take care that lest after the Lord's passing dispute arises in the Order, dispute for the woe of the manyfolk, for the grief of the manyfolk, for the misfortune of the populace, for the woe and the sorrow of devas and mankind.'

The Buddha pointed out that at that time, of course, everybody would agree on the practice of Dhamma: the four applications of mindfulness, the four right efforts, and so on. But he went on to say:

'That dispute which concerns either the mode of living or the obligations is a trifle, Ananda. But, Ananda, if there should arise in the order a dispute either concerning the Way or concerning the course, this dispute would be for the woe of the manyfolk, the grief of the manyfolk, the misfortune of the populace, the sorrow of the devas and mankind.'

So the Buddha felt that the most important principle was to keep the Way out of suffering and the practice (of eliminating the asavas) firmly in mind. And then he went on to talk about the different ways in which the Sangha can have internal dispute and how this can be settled by what are called the adhikarana-dhamma, the 'means of settling disputes and quarrels.'

So the Lord Buddha himself seemed to take into account the fact that, human nature being what it is and rules what they are - there is no rule that can cover every possible circumstance - that there were bound to be certain slight differences of opinion about interpretations, and over what the Buddha actually had said. He took that into account; so such differences of opinion are not a problem, provided that the Sangha would always get together and come to harmonious agreement. He laid down six different causes for disputes:

'A monk is angry and bears ill-will, ...a monk is harsh and unmerciful, ... envious and grudging, ...crafty and deceitful,...of evil desires and wrong view, ...infected with worldliness, is obstinate and stubborn, he lives without deference and respect towards the teacher; he lives without deference and respect towards Dhamma; he lives without deference and respect towards the Order and he does not complete the training.'

These are the six sources of dispute, and they are all based on corruptions in the heart, rather than flaws in the Dhamma-Vinaya.

Then there are various legal questions arising due to a dispute or because a monk has been accused of wrong-doing; or because there is uncertainty over what constitutes an offence; or over what constitutes a monk's proper duties. There are seven rules for working with these, all of which require the presence of the community, the Sangha - which doesn't mean every single monk in the world, but all the Sangha dwelling within what is called the sima or 'boundary, the area of one monastery. All of the bhikkhus dwelling within the area where a dispute arose should gather together.

Firstly, the verdict must be given 'in the presence of', so if there's a dispute about a bhikkhu he himself must be there. Then, a 'verdict of innocence' may be given, which means that someone is recognised of being of such a moral standard that it would be impossible for him to have committed that offence: if someone is an arahant, then just by recognising that, the whole issue can be quashed. Or, a 'verdict of past insanity' may be given, which means that if somebody was mad at the time they would not be held responsible for their actions. Or a verdict may be carried out on his 'acknowledgement of what occurred'; the very presence of the Sangha will often make a person own up to where he was going wrong or to say, 'well, actually I think I was wrong, I am sorry about

that' or, 'Yes, that was an offence'. The Sangha reflects the aspiration and the direction of the Lord Buddha's teaching; so in the presence of the Sangha, people will generally do what is most honourable.

There are some issues which can be decided by majority; for example; whether we should build some buildings. And the 'decision for specific depravity', means the Sangha can formally censure a monk who has done particularly foolish or blameworthy things. 'Covering up with grass' is a way of making amends: say, if one monk has fallen out with another monk, and they start arguing. Then the friends of monk A side with him, and the friends of monk B side with him, and then they all start quarrelling. 'Covering up with grass' means that one of the members of the group A would get up, and say to all the bhikkhus of group B, 'Venerable sirs, for whatever offences our party has caused, we want to confess that, we want to acknowledge that.' Then somebody of group B does the same and the whole matter is dropped, rather than getting into mutual recriminations.

Lord Buddha felt that these guidelines would be adequate for sustaining the true practice of the Dhamma-Vinaya even when, from time to time, there might be a dispute over the exact interpretation of the letter of the law. Such legal procedures can only be carried out when people are acting with right intentions, clarity and peacefulness. So the critical factor is the Sangha's aspiration to live in purity, and to interpret the meaning of the rule with wisdom.

Now compassion is a major aspect of that wisdom. The Buddha continues: 'And furthermore, six things are to be remembered: A monk should offer his fellow Brahma-farers a friendly act of body, both in public and in private; he should offer a friendly act of speech, a friendly act of thought.

'And whatever are those lawful acquisitions, lawfully acquired (this means whatever he has received on almsround) if they be even but what is put into his begging-bowl - a monk should be one to enjoy sharing such acquisitions, to enjoy them in common with his virtuous fellow Brahma-farers.

'And whatever are those moral habits that are faultless without flaws, spotless without blemish, freeing, praised by wise men, untarnished, conducive to concentration, a monk should dwell united in moral habits such as these with his fellow Brahma-farers, both in public and in private.

'Whatever view is ariyan, leading onwards, leading him who acts according to it to the complete destruction of anguish - a monk should dwell in such a view as this with his fellow Brahma-farers.

'These are the six things to be remembered, making for affection, making for harmony, which conduce to concord, to lack of contention, to harmony and unity. If you, Ananda, should undertake these six things to be remembered, should practice them, would you, Ananda, see any way speech, subtle or gross, that you could not endure?'

'No, revered sir.'

'Wherefore, Ananda, undertaking these six things to be remembered, practice them; for a long time it will be for your welfare and happiness.'

This is from the Samagama-Sutta in the Majjhima-Nikaya. The Buddha referred to 'Dhamma-Vinaya' and he also said, according to the Mahaparinibbana-Sutta, 'that the standards should be placed against what was written in the Suttas and the Vinaya'. If everything agreed, then you could be confident that this was what the teaching was.

It seems that after the Buddha's Parinibbana there was a tendency to divide the Dhamma and the Vinaya into separate pitakas - but this was formulated after the Buddha's decease. One can, of course, take Dhamma without Vinaya - 'Just follow the way of the spirit, follow the heart, conventions are just trouble, picking and fiddling around ....We just need to meditate' - that attitude. Or one can take the Vinaya without Dhamma, which produces a legalistic attitude about the training-rules, whereby one can end up using the training without reflecting on it. Sometimes, when one looks at some of the commentaries on the Vinaya, one does feel that they have extended the principle of logic beyond the bounds of what is reasonable.

But Sangha practice is to put Dhamma and Vinaya together. One of the fundamental principles that determines what are called offences or transgressions is the quality of intention. With the most serious offences (parajika), intention is very important: they all entail intention, effort and completion of that act. This word, 'intention', is something to consider and get in touch with. Of course, a mind that's completely full of thought doesn't know intention; intention is a much deeper mainspring of mental volition than just a surface burbling of the chattering mind - and certainly we can have all kinds of foolish thoughts. But to get in touch with intention, to understand Vinaya from that standpoint, you have to practice meditation and understand Dhamma. So Dhamma and Vinaya support and deepen each other. It is this that makes the Buddha's teaching so alive and dependent on the effort of those who practice it.