

Vinaya

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To whom serves the vinaya?

The vinaya allows benefiting from the best possible conditions to train in reducing attachments. This is what gives the bhikkhu the means to follow the Middle Path and remain on it. It forces the bhikkhu to remain aware of each of his actions at all times, because it is only through it that it is possible to avoid any lapses. It prevents him from squandering time and energy in futile things by focusing on what is wholesome and beneficial. The vinaya allows the bhikkhus to be irreproachable in any situation, and to offer the laity who support them an example of purity, balance and wisdom. Besides, the only visible criterion defining the quality of a bhikkhu is his capacity to observe the vinaya.

The vinaya is a collection of guidelines permitting the bhikkhu to cultivate the best possible sīla in the best possible manner. Since sīla is the basis of all action within the dhamma, the bhikkhu who neglects the vinaya is an opportunist. The danger is that he risks to parasite on the community that he represents, because his negligent attitude could draw a lot of people to the wrong path. Therefore, it is very important to train correctly in the vinaya. As long as this is not put in practice seriously, its inestimable benefits cannot be understood. In the same way that a profession could have been studied for years, but it is only through practice that it can truly be known. With regard to profession, one could say that the bhikkhu is, among other things, a professional in conduct.

The concept of bhikkhu is defined as much by detachment as by conduct. Besides, disregard for rules of conduct is essentially due to problems related to attachment. Simultaneously, the fact of respecting these rules contributes to detachment.

The vinaya also permits the **preservation** of the Buddha's teachings. Without the vinaya, it is impossible to have a saṅgha. Without the saṅgha, the teaching of the dhamma could not be transmitted, because only a community organised by and composed of beings who have fully realised the dhamma – nibbāna – is capable of preserving this intact. The Buddha said if his teaching disappeared, it would be exclusively the bhikkhus' fault; because of their lack of respect for the vinaya.

The ten benefits of the vinaya

1. Approval of the rules of the vinaya by the members of the saṅgha: the various points of the vinaya are established so as to preserve all forms of respect from one to others.
2. Harmony and serenity for the members of the saṅgha: the vinaya foresees all methods of solving problems of discord or conflicts.
3. Possibility of expelling those bhikkhus of reckless conduct: with the vinaya as authority, the saṅgha can banish any bhikkhus who trouble the community.

4. Security for the bhikkhus who have great respect for the rules of the vinaya: people always prefer to help more those who show great virtue.
5. Protection against great dangers in the present existence: the adoption of a right life conduct – including numerous abstinences – reduces considerably the opportunities propitious to dangerous situations.
6. Protection against great dangers in the next existence: the cultivation of great virtue contributes to develop merit so as to benefit from favourable conditions in the next existence.
7. Interest in the dhamma by persons who are not yet interested: Those beings who have an exemplary life discipline naturally inspire a lot of confidence, attention and interest.
8. Increased interest in the dhamma by persons who are already interested: (for the same reason).
9. Stability and durability of the teachings of Buddha: so that a teaching remains intact, it is imperative that those who transmit it are in perfect agreement. This can only be achieved within a community organised around a common code of conduct.
10. Give rise to consideration and worth towards one's own conduct: the vinaya serves as a reference allowing to validate at any time the quality of one's conduct.

Respect of the vinaya

Respect towards the laity

Lay people are very devoted to the saṅgha. They generally show a lot of respect towards bhikkhus and support them generously. They deserve to have a saṅgha worthy of this name. It would be shameful to profit from this generosity in order to enjoy a comfortable existence. The bhikkhus have the duty to offer the laity an irreproachable community.

One must not forget that they represent the example to be followed. It is therefore imperative that the bhikkhus train relentlessly to excel in moral discipline, patience, the practice of detachment, etc. In striving for this, they must follow the teachings of the dhamma, the instructions and advice from the ancients.

A bhikkhu should constantly concern himself to follow correctly the rules of the vinaya. For this reason, a bhikkhu must make efforts to know all the rules of conduct (pātimokkha). Whenever he is unsure or misunderstands a rule, he must refer to another bhikkhu who knows and understands it.

Adaptation

It is essential not to neglect aspects of the vinaya under the pretext of "adapting" to the situation. Nothing in the vinaya is left to chance, it is perfectly valid at any epoch and place. Anyone who delights in adopting right conduct will not encounter problems. On the contrary, he obtains for his needs with great ease. It is all persons and all things that

naturally adapt to him, not the reverse. This is how it works in reality. Anyone who makes the effort to practice right conduct can verify this. A bhikkhu's conduct must never be influenced by any culture, nor by any bad habits that bhikkhus around him may have.

However, in conditions likely to cause danger, the bhikkhus are allowed to adapt in consequence. For example, in a very cold country, a bhikkhu will not be at fault if he wears a hat and shoes. The Buddha rejected all extremes. Moreover, this is why the vinaya is relatively flexible concerning bhikkhus who are ill.

The law first of all

The Buddha told the bhikkhus that they had to abide by all the laws of the State where they were, even if some of these are contrary to the vinaya (in which case there would be no offence). In the same way, a bhikkhu is obliged to follow all the rules of the monastery where he lives. If a law or rule constrains to commit a negative action or adopt unwholesome behaviour, this means that the area is not suitable for a bhikkhu.

Common sense

It is inestimable good fortune that Buddha delivered the method for perfect virtue. Therefore, each bhikkhu should appeal to his common sense in training in discipline, and not to submit blindly to the established rules. When a bhikkhu has a doubt, being uncertain as to whether such or such action is an offence or not, he must abstain from it. Thus, he is certain of not being at fault.