

## A Brief Analysis on the Term ‘Vinaya’

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### **Introduction**

The term Vinaya has a unique technical meaning in the Pali language. It means the ‘collection of rules and regulations’ as dictated by the Buddha for the practical guidance of the disciples. The term Vinaya is usually translated into English as ‘Discipline’. Etymologically, the word stems from the root nī, (nayati, neti) preceded by the prefix “vi” means ‘leading away’. When defining this term, it is really valuable to study the meanings of the term Vinaya in dictionaries. The Pali English Dictionary provides its primary meanings as ‘driving out’, ‘abolishing’, ‘destruction’, ‘removal’ etc.<sup>1</sup> The Sanskrit English Dictionary describes the term Vinaya, as derived from the root ‘vi + nī which means to lead, to guide, to train etc.<sup>2</sup> The different connotations of the term show the stages of evolution of the ideas attached to it.

### **Definitions of Pre-Buddhist Sanskrit Literature**

However, the term occurs so rarely in Pre-Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, stated in two instances, that it is very difficult to trace the signs of a gradual evolution.<sup>3</sup> The first etymological evidence is furnished by the Rigveda.<sup>4</sup> Brahmanṣpati is called a ‘Sannaya’, ‘Vinaya’ and ‘Purohita’. Sāyana interprets the passage as Brahmanṣpati brings together and ‘leads them away (vividham netā) and puts them asunder or separates them (prithakkartā). This sense is quite different from the idea of moral discipline or guidance; only the crude idea of leading others according to one’s wish is found here.<sup>5</sup> In the Aitareya

Āraṇyaka, another reference is made as, ‘Vinayanti vājinam’<sup>6</sup> which implies the conducting or training of a horse. The idea of discipline expressed here is nearest to the conventional meaning of Vinaya; and it is most probable that the term was first applied to the training of horses; with constant use, its meaning must have been amplified until it came to mean, ‘Moral discipline for men’ and the original significance must have passed into oblivion. Kauṭillya in his Arthasāstra observes that Vinaya (moral discipline) is natural and external.<sup>7</sup>

### Canonical and Commentarial Exegesis

*Buddhaghosa thera* defines the term *Vinaya* as the discipline which by various means controls the body and the speech, and prevents them from erring.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the book of *Vinaya* is known as a compilation of rules, which clearly state what, is wrong, and what is right, what is offence and what is non-offence together with the principle of restraint.<sup>9</sup> These precepts were looked upon as the command of the worthy Buddha.<sup>10</sup> The subject of the *Vinaya* is the moral training known as ‘*Adhisīlasikkhā*’ in Pali.<sup>11</sup>

In illustration, one could cite the statement attributed to the Buddha where he gives his own interpretation of the term *Venayika*. The Buddha stated that it is important to “teach the *Dhamma* for the removal (*vinayāya*) of attachment (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), for the removal of the manifold unwholesome states of the mind.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the sense ‘to remove’, the two verbal forms *Vinayati* and *Vineti* are also used in the senses of ‘to lead’, ‘to instruct’ ‘to guide’, ‘to train’, ‘to educate’, etc.<sup>13</sup>

However, the term *Vinaya* is at present found mentioned only in connection with the code of discipline meant for the

Buddhist *Saṅgha*. But De Gokuldas points out that, there is ample evidence on record to show that in pre-Buddhist days the term connoted simply rules of conduct meant for people in general. In the *Jātaka*, the word *Vinaya* is not used in the sense of a code of discipline for Buddhist *Saṅgha* but in the general sense of rules of conduct means for all people, especially of kings.<sup>14</sup> De Gokuldas further explains the following extract from *Jātaka* which will fully bear out contention.

1. *Vinaya* meaning customs and manners of the people; **“One should not live among unknown people if he cannot understand their customs and manners from their nationality.”**<sup>15</sup>
2. *Vinaya* used in the sense of discipline for common folk; **“He has neither intelligence nor any discipline and walks like wild buffaloes of the forest as many people do. But there are some who are well trained in the *Vinaya* and are looked upon as men of learning and good manners.”**<sup>16</sup>
3. *Vinaya* used in the sense of a royal code of observances; **“Indeed, I cannot like the dragon king interrupt my overlord when he is speaking as that would not be my code of discipline.”**<sup>17</sup>
4. *Vinaya* used in the sense of the law of the land; **“She sat on the stool embroidered with gold on approaching the king of *Videha* who was devoted to the law of the land.”**<sup>18</sup>
5. *Vinaya* used in the sense of a code of discipline meant for the learned; **“A wise man understands the logic and does not take it in a wrong sense. If anything is well said it is well accepted. He knows the *Vinaya* and blissful is his company.”**<sup>19</sup>

Another meaning pointed out in the dictionary is the use of the word to convey the sense of ‘rule’, way of saying’ or ‘judging’, ‘terminology’ etc. for instance, it is used to convey the manner in which a certain term is used in Buddhist terminology. In another sense, the word is used to convey the meaning of ‘conduct’, ‘ethics’, ‘morality’, ‘good behavior. For instance in the statement ‘where faith is established in the ethics of the Noble one’ (*ariyassa vinaye*)<sup>20</sup> the term *Vinaya* is interpreted by the *Jātaka* commentary as good behavior or good conduct. (*ācāra vinaya*)<sup>21</sup> expected from a discerning person but not from a fool. Although many translate the term *Vinaya* as ‘discipline’, the most popular and most widely used sense of the word *Vinaya* in Buddhist literature is its use to denote the rules of discipline of the members of the *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhūṇī*.

In spite of the different shades of meaning in the use of the term *Vinaya* as shown above, Buddhist scholiasts have generally accepted it as a term of reference to the code of monastic rules of the *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhūṇī*. As it governs the life and existence of the *Saṅgha*, the *Vinaya* code has been accorded, especially in the *Theravāda* tradition, a primary place of importance in the *Tipiṭaka* literature. Thus, the commentator *Buddhaghosa*, in the opening verses of the *Samantapāsādikā*, the *Vinaya* commentary, says that *Vinaya* is the very life of the dispensation. “Placing reliance in the greatness of the teachers of yore, I shall expound the uncontaminated code of discipline by the survival of which is assured the mainstay of the dispensation of the sage of great stability, though he exists no more.”<sup>22</sup> This idea on for the importance of *Vinaya* by *Buddhaghosa* is further confirmed by the comment on *Vinaya* he attributes to the members of the first Buddhist council.<sup>23</sup>

To explain the purpose of the use of the term *Vinaya*, *Buddhaghosa* makes the following statement. “Because it

contains manifold distinctive modes of practices (*naya*) and restrains both bodily and verbally, the *Vinaya* is called so, by those who are adepts in the purpose of the discipline.<sup>24</sup> Analyzing this statement further, the commentator says that the word ‘manifold’ (*vividha*) refers to divisions such as the injunctions of the fivefold *Pātimokkha* recital,<sup>25</sup> the seven classes of the offences beginning with the *Pārājikā*, the *Mātikā* and the *Vibhaṅga*. Of the items underlined as distinctive (*visesa*) the commentator states that they become so on account of the application of corollaries which serve the purpose of relaxing rigid rules. As it prohibits physical and verbal transgression, it regulates body and speech.<sup>26</sup> This idea of prohibiting physical and verbal transgression regulating body and speech brings *Vinaya* in with *Sīla*, ‘moral discipline’<sup>27</sup>, which is defined in canonical discourses as “wholesome bodily acts, wholesome verbal acts and purity in livelihood.”<sup>28</sup>

Another analysis of the concept of *Vinaya* is found in the *Sutta Nipāta* commentary. Commenting here on the word *Vineti* in the *Uruga Sutta*, the commentator gives a twofold analysis of the term *Vinaya* as discipline or training through restraint (*Samvara Vinaya*) and discipline through elimination. (*Pahāna Vinaya*).<sup>29</sup>

This analysis of *Vinaya* in *Sutta Nipāta* commentary is quite significant. Unlike the *Vinaya Piṭaka* commentary where only the injunction of that *Piṭaka* are taken into account, here the explanation of the term has gone beyond the *Vinaya* injunction, to include both the *Vinaya* and the *Dhamma*. In the five constituents of ‘discipline through restraint’ only *Sīla samvara* could clearly be included within the traditional interpretation of *Vinaya Piṭaka* injunctions. Here the full course of spiritual development has been interpreted in terms of self-disciplining or self-training. In fact, the whole teaching of the Buddha could be included under the term *Vinaya*, where the unwholesome factors are gradually

extricated and the wholesome factors are cultivated and made to increase.

### Scholastic Views

Pali scholars of the older generation such as Oldenberg, who edited the *Vinaya Piṭaka* for the Pali text society and I.B. Horner, who translated the same into English, have taken *Vinaya*, in the sense of traditional *Vinaya* Commentary, as a set of rules regulating the external conduct of the members of the *Saṅgha*. Thus, in the opinion of Oldenberg, “we may define it as a collection of rules regulating the outward conduct of the *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhuniīs*.” He goes on explaining that *Vinaya* does not deal with purely ethical questions except so far as they affect the outward conduct, not in a general sense, but only so far as it is concerned with that of the *Saṅgha*. The *Dhamma* according to him has an account of the inward process by which release is accomplished, whereas *Vinaya* treats only of the outward conduct of the life that is still struggling to ward it.<sup>30</sup> In Miss Horner’s opinion, while the *Dhamma* concerns the inner life of the disciples of the Buddha and their conscience, mental training and outlook, the *Vinaya* was the discipline governing and regulating the outward life of the *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhuniīs* who had entered the monastic order. “*Dhamma* may indeed be said to be all that *Vinaya* is not” adds I.B. Horner.<sup>31</sup> One could however, compare these sentiments with those shown above as coming from the *Sutta Nipāta* commentary.

However, Jhone C. Holt a more recent writer on the Buddhist *Vinaya* has set out a much broader view on the subject.<sup>32</sup> While admitting “discipline” as the common translation of the term *Vinaya*, he prefers to go into a more analytical consideration of the etymology of the word. Taking the etymological meaning of the word,<sup>33</sup> he arrives at the rendering’ “that which separate”

or “that which removes” as a better form. Edward Conze, according to him, has taken the word *Vinaya* to mean “that which leads away from the world”<sup>34</sup>. Not completely rejecting Conze’s view he, however, states his preference to the rendering “that which removes” as a more accurate reflection of what is involved in the Buddhist understanding of discipline. Trying to figure out what has to be removed, he states that it should be the “wrong states of mind, the conditions of grasping, desiring and ignorance which stem from the delusion that we have a ‘self’ to be satisfied.” The discipline of the *Vinaya* according to him is a means of overcoming the sense of I-ness, (*ahamkāra*) as a result of a conscious effort. But once this *ahamkāra* is removed the perfected external behavior and expression need not anymore be a conscious effort of disciplining one’s mind. They should then become outward reflections of one’s calmed inward dispositions which could best be called detachment (*Virāga*). Thus, the path of discipline advocate in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* leads to a condition of detachment of existence that generates *ahamkāra*. This “disciplined behavior” is none other than the characterization of the behavioral expression of a perfected being (*arahant*). It is the hallmark of one in whom all grasping has ceased. This is a much broader interpretation given to the rules of discipline of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*.

It is worth noting that the ideas expressed by both these writers are reflected in certain statements studied above, attributed to the Buddha. Removal (*Vinaya*) of unwholesome states of the mind (*akusala*), attachment, hatred and delusion etc. are given in them as the aim of his teaching. In another statement “that removal of the ‘conceit I am’ (*asmimāna*) is called the bliss supreme which in fact, is a term of expression for *Nibbāna*.”<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

According to the above analysis, while *Vinaya* leads to the highest positive achievement envisaged in Buddhism, it becomes, in the *arahant*, the outward expression of his / her inner tranquility. Thus on the basis of the above definitions, *Vinaya* regulates the external conduct of *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhuni*s, and such conduct refers to the acts of the body and speech. In order to regulate such conduct *Vinaya* rules have been prescribe. If a *Bhikkhu* controls the actions done by his body and speech, then invariably there is discipline in him. The actions of the body and word, could be seen and head. Therefore, such actions form the external conduct of a person. However, all actions are the result of thoughts arising in the mind.<sup>36</sup>

## End Notes

1. Rhys Davids, T.W., William Stede, (1994). The Pali English Dictionary. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. p. 623.
2. Monier Williams, (1899), The Sanskrit English Dictionary, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 945.
3. Bhagavant, Durga, N. (1940). Early Buddhist Jurisprudence, Poona: The oriental Book Agency. p. 41.
4. Rigveda, II, 24, 9.
5. Ibid.
6. Aitareya Āranyaka, I, 2, 1, 9.
7. ‘Kritaksh svābhavikashca vinayah’ Arthasāstra, I, 5.
8. ‘Vividha visesanayattā vinayato ceva kaya vacanānam, vinayatthavidhūhi ayam vinayo vinayoti akkāto’ Samantapāsādikā I, p. 19. Atthasālinī, p. 19.
9. ‘vinayakathā nāma kappiyākappiya-āpātānānapatti samara-mahānapati samyutta-kathā.’ Samantapāsādikā IV, p. 760.



10. Atthasālinī, p. 21.
11. Atthasālinī, p. 21.
12. “Venayiko bhavaṃ gotamo”ti? “Atthi khvesa, brāhmaṇa, pariyāyo ena maṃ pariyāyena sammā vadamāno vadeyya – ‘venayiko samaṇo tamo’ti. Ahañhi, brāhmaṇa, vinayāya dhammaṃ desemi rāgassa dosassa mohassa. Anekavihitānaṃ pāpakānaṃ akusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ vinayāya dhammaṃ desemi. Ayaṃ kho, brāhmaṇa, pariyāyo yena maṃ pariyāyena sammā vadamāno vadeyya – ‘venayiko samaṇo gotamo’ti, no ca kho yaṃ tvaṃ sandhāya vadesī”ti. Vinaya Pitaka I, p. 235.
13. Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Vol. VIII, 2007, p. 643.
14. De Gokuldas, (1955). Democracy in Early Buddhist Saṅgha, Calcutta: Calcutta University Press. p.1.
15. “Yattha posaṃ na jānanti jātiyā ‘vinayena’ vā – natattha vāsaṃ kayirātha vasaṃ aññatake jane” Jātakapāli III, (304 Jātaka tale) p. 17.
16. “No ce assa sakā vuddhi vinaye vā susikkhito – vane andhamahiso va careyya bahuko jano  
Yasmā ca pana idha ekacce āchāramhi susikkhitā – tasmā vidita-vinayā caranti susamāhitā” *ibid.* III, p. 368.
17. “Ahaṃ khalu maharaja nāgarājariva antaraṃ - paṭivattuṃ na sakkomi na so me vinayo siyā” *ibid.* V, p. 351.
18. “Upasamkamitvā videhaṃ vanditvā vinaye rataṃ - suvaṇṇavikate piṭthe ekamantaṃ upāvisī ti” Jātakapāli VI, (544 Jātaka tale) p. 231.
19. “Nayaṃ nayati medhāvi adhurāyaṃ na yuñjati – sunayo seyyaso hoti sammā vutto na kappti Vinayaṃ so pajānāti sadhu tena samāgamo” *ibid.*, IV, p. 241.
20. Aṅguttara Nikāya III, p. 353.
21. Jātakatthakathā IV, p. 242.
22. Jayawickrama, N.A. (1962). Inception of Discipline and Vinaya-Nidāna, SBB Vol. XXI, p. 1.

23. Ibid, p.13.
24. Samantapāsādikā I, p. 18.
25. Vinaya Pitaka I, p. 112.
26. ‘Vividha visesanayattā vinayato ceva kaya vacanānaṃ, vinayatthavidhūhi ayaṃ vinayo vinayoti akkāto’ Samantapāsādikā I, p. 19. Atthasālinī, p. 19.
27. The Sāmaññaphala Sutta gives a more detailed definition of *Sīla* forming the basis of the religious life of a Buddhist monk or nun as followers; “when he has thus become a recluse he lives self-restrained by the rules of Pātimokkha. Endowed with good manners and the practices of right behavior, he sees danger in the least of those things blameworthy. He adopts and trains himself in the precepts, being endowed with good deeds in act and word. Pure are his means of livelihood, good is his conduct, guarded are the door of his senses. Mindful and self- possessed he is contented”. By this very comprehensive description of *Sīla*, in a manner, is also revealed his purpose and the function of *Vinaya* as well.
28. Majjhima Nikāya, II, p. 27.
29. Suttanipāta Atthakathā, p. 8.
30. Vinaya Pitaka I, p. XIII - XIV.
31. The Book of the Discipline, SBB, X, p. vi-vii.
32. Holt, Jhone C. (1883). Discipline: The Canonical Buddhism of the Vinaya Pataka, Delhi: South Asia Books. p.3.
33. The term *Vinaya* usually has been loosely translated as “discipline”. There really is no reason to call that translation into question as discipline, in fact, is the root concept at work in our text. However, we gain a deeper appreciation for the type of discipline characterized within the Vinaya if we pay attention to the literal meaning of the term. The prefix *vi* connotes “difference”, “distinction”, “apart”, “away from” etc. when combined with the verb root *nī* which basically means “to lead”, we end up with *vi + nī* meaning “to lead away from.” *Vinaya*, the reified noun from of the verb *vi + ni* therefore, leads us to the general meaning of “that which separates”, or “that which removes.” Ibid. p. 3.

34. See, Edward Coze, (1959). Buddhism: its Essence and Development, New York: Harper and Row. p. 54.
35. Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Vol. VIII, 2007, p. 646
36. The discipline of the mind is as important, as the discipline of the body and word. It may be the reason why Jotiya Dhirasekara says; “of this threefold discipline, it is said that the *Vinaya Piṭaka* claims to concern itself only with two, viz. word and deed. They are the aspect of outward conduct... But true monastic discipline covers a little more. It embraces the discipline of the mind.” Dhirasekara, Jotiya. (1982). *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*, Colombo: M.D. Gunasena Printers. p. 19