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On the Question of “Discipline” (*Vinaya*) and Nuns in Theravāda Buddhism

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Abstract: This article centers on the relationship of rules (*nīti*) to the monastic form of life of contemporary Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka. A genealogy of scholarship focusing on the rules of Buddhist monks and nuns has led scholars to affirm a clear-cut distinction between nuns who have the higher ordination (*bhikkhunīs*) and those who do not have it. However, that distinction is not self-evident, because *bhikkhunīs* and other nuns lead lives that do not foreground a juridical notion of rules. The lives of nuns focus on disciplinary practices of self-restraint within a tradition of debate about their recent higher ordinations. Whether or not they are *bhikkhunīs*, nuns today refer to rules in ways that are different from that which dominant *Vinaya* scholarship assumes. This article proposes that it is misleading to differentiate Buddhist nuns based on an enumeration of their rules and argues that nuns’ attitudes to rules say more about attempts to authorize claims to power in current debates about their ordination than about their disciplinary practice as a communal form of life.

Keywords: *Vinaya*; Buddhism; Theravāda; Buddhist monasticism; Buddhist nuns; monastic discipline; rules; Giorgio Agamben; *bhikkhunīs*; Ten Precept Mothers; higher ordination; Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

This article raises questions about ideas of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) and (*nīti*) rules in Theravāda Buddhism with some focus on the relationship of rules to the monastic life of contemporary nuns in Sri Lanka, and in the context of current debates about their higher ordination.¹ Firstly, I argue that a genealogy of scholarship on the Pāli *Vinaya* and a translation of disciplinary practice centering on rules limits our understanding of monastic conduct.² Secondly, I demonstrate that the discipline of nuns entails practices of *self*-discipline more than adherence to rules, and suggest that monastics’ attitudes to rules per se speak to a claim to power and its authorization in particular discourse and debates. Thirdly, I argue that it is misleading to center on a juridical notion of enumerated rules in order to differentiate between *bhikkhunīs*, who have the higher ordination, and Ten Precept Mothers (*dasa sil mātīs*) who do not.³

¹ My reference to *vinaya* with a lower case “v” is to the literal meaning of the term as the discipline that may or may not be included in the *Vinaya* text. By *Vinaya*, I refer specifically to the (Pāli) *Vinaya* text. By nuns, I refer both to fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhunīs*), and to those nuns who do not have the full ordination.

² By monastics, I refer to monks as well as nuns.

³ This difference became particularly salient in transnational debates about the higher ordination (*upasampadā*) of nuns in recent decades, which witnessed the inauguration of the higher ordination of Theravāda nuns. In 1988, a higher ordination of Theravāda nuns took place in Los Angeles. Since then, there were higher ordinations of Theravāda nuns in India in Sarnath (1996), Bodhgaya (1998), and, on a regular basis, in Sri Lanka in Dambulla, and elsewhere. Sri Lankan monasteries are globally renowned today for their training of novice *bhikkhunīs* (*sāmaṇerīs*), and Theravāda nuns from around the world often travel there for their training and higher ordination. Nevertheless, the governments of countries whose population is predominantly Theravāda Buddhist such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), and Thailand continue to reject the validity of the higher ordination of Theravāda nuns.

The question of “discipline” (*vinaya*) plays a crucial part in the debates about the authenticity of the higher ordination and lineage of nuns in Theravāda Buddhism.⁴ In Theravāda Buddhism, the *Vinaya* is used as a touchstone to differentiate between fully ordained nuns (associated with 311 rules in the Pāli *Vinaya* texts) from other nuns (such as *dasa sil mātās*, identified with ten rules).⁵ Though scholars of Theravāda Buddhist monasticism continue to focus on the Pāli *Vinaya* as the authoritative and canonical code of rules governing Theravāda Buddhist monks and nuns, monastic discipline is not simply an exercise in observing a collection of rules. The practice of *vinaya* in contemporary monastic communities does not always follow the structure of an unchanging set of textual rules. This is not merely to suggest that texts and practices differ, but that the relationship between rule and life in monastic practices has to be thought differently. I make some suggestions toward that end by noting how the history of scholarship has misconstrued questions of monastic discipline by considering them in terms of juridical rules and injunctions. The recurring assumptions that *Vinaya* stipulations are either rules or laws,⁶ and that the communal life of monastics can be captured in a number of discrete injunctions reinforces the faulty notion about self-evident distinctions of monastic identities themselves (in terms of *bhikkhunī* and non-*bhikkhunī* nuns in this case).⁷ In this essay, I begin by examining some of the ways in which ideas about Buddhist monasticism get configured in monastic debates to note the limitations of understanding monastic discipline as observing iterations of rules. I discuss how the dominant scholarship associates monastic discipline with rules, missing the connection between the monastic practice of *vinaya* and a “form of life.”⁸ I elaborate on this point by drawing on research on current *vinaya* practices found in communities of nuns in Sri Lanka. A monastic form of life constitutes a communal existence that aims at a constant awareness of every activity that monks and nuns do. It can neither be reduced to individual rules, nor be regulated by them. My point is that the practice of Buddhist nuns is not grounded in a notion of rules. When nuns do speak of rules (*nīti*), they generally do so in terms of disciplinary practices of power that seek to authorize a coherent and common form of life in a monastic community.

Over the past four years, my research has focused on understanding the practice of discipline in terms of distinct programs and techniques of training novices in monastic communities.⁹ My particular interest is in examining the relationships between what are called “rules” (*nīti*) and *vinaya* (monastic discipline). *Nīti*, which literally translates as “rules” or “laws,” is commonly used by government officials and lawmakers. Among contemporary monastics, the notion of this juridical sense of a rule (*nīti*), when used in conjunction with disciplinary practice, is treated with some circumspection.¹⁰

⁴ For discussions about the lineage, see (Anālayo 2013; Kabilsingh 1991, p. 52; Kawanami 2007, pp. 226–44; Lindberg Falk 2007, p. 243; Mrozik 2009, pp. 360–78). Although there were attempts to compare the place of lineage in the Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhist traditions vis-à-vis the ordination debate (e.g., see (Mohr and Tsedroen 2010)), as I point out elsewhere, such a comparison is questionable since there are significant differences in the history of female renunciation in the two traditions (Salgado 2013, pp. 213–33).

⁵ See, for example, the distinction made between *sil mātās* and *bhikkhunīs* in (Sasson 2007, p. 62; Collins and McDaniel 2010, p. 1378). The specifics, including the number of rules recognized by fully ordained nuns varies according to the *Vinaya* tradition to which they belong, as indicated by (Heirman 1997; Kusuma 2015, pp. 141–71). While this article centers on Theravāda Buddhism and the Pāli *Vinaya*, the problematic conceptualization of *Vinaya* texts as a collection of rules has relevance to other Buddhist traditions.

⁶ The terms rules and laws are often used without distinction by *Vinaya* scholars even though they have different connotations in English.

⁷ *Bhikkhunīs* were known to live in communities in Sri Lanka from the third century before Common Era (BCE) until about the 10th century CE. Although information about them since the 10th century is lacking, female renunciants in Sri Lanka are mentioned in late 19th and early 20th century records (Bartholomeusz 1994, pp. 24–88; Kusuma 2010, pp. 99–120). It is possible that Buddhist nuns were present in Sri Lanka long before records about them were kept. According to my research, many *dasa sil mātās* in Sri Lanka today can trace their lineage back to the pioneering Sri Lankan nun, Sudharmachari, who was known to establish nunneries in Sri Lanka in the early 20th century.

⁸ On this question of form of life, see (Abeysekara 2018a).

⁹ In that time, I conducted multiple open-ended interviews with over 40 monastics, including those associated with small hermitages, as well as larger training centers. Interviews were conducted at eight training centers for *sil mātās*, and five for *bhikkhunīs*.

¹⁰ As Bourdieu pointed out a long time ago, the descriptions of scholars often “freely draw on the highly ambiguous vocabulary of rules, the language of grammar, morality, and law, to express a social practice that, in fact, obeys quite different principles”

When I asked monks and nuns about the relevance of *nīti* to their institutions, I encountered varying responses. Those who used the term generally did so in relation to what one might call the gatekeeping of a monastic community. Institutional gatekeeping was evidenced in regulations of activities involving admission to and exit from a nunnery and a nun's full acceptance in the communal activities of the institution.¹¹ It also differentiated between those who were deemed to have the capacity to live disciplined lives, and those who were not.¹² Some *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās* who referred to *Vinaya* stipulations as *nīti* or *vinayanīti* did so in affirming a state recognition of monastic rules or in authorizing their position vis-à-vis the higher ordination. Others rejected the nomenclature outright. However, those differing points of view are not revelatory in themselves; the monastic use of *nīti* or *vinayanīti* is made possible by the present social conditions of the lives of monastics and does not correlate with assumptions about monastic rules articulated in most *Vinaya* scholarship. In other words, how concepts like rule and discipline are used depends on how they operate in distinct forms of language and power within a tradition. Appeals to such concepts are appeals to particular modes of power—that is, the ability to authorize distinct modes of conduct.

One might be tempted to infer that there is an unmistakable difference between the identity of fully ordained monks and nuns and that of *sil mātās*. The former are seen to be associated more closely with the Pāli *Vinaya* text and the observance of its rules than *sil mātās*, who are not bound by them.¹³ However, my research indicates that positing such a clear distinction is not useful, since even fully ordained monks and nuns are quick to assert that the *Vinaya* text does not center on rules (*nīti*). Monks and nuns rarely refer to rules when speaking about discipline *within* community, where community includes those who already have the capacity to lead a disciplined life and, thus, do not need to observe rules.¹⁴ In such a community of nuns, what matters is not whether they have the higher ordination, but rather their commitment to living a monastic form of life that goes beyond discrete rules.¹⁵ Teacher monastics today want to assume that novice monastics' desire for correction, bound as it is with their moral transformation in community, renders the need for harsh punishment (*daṇḍuvama*) gratuitous.¹⁶ When punishment is enforced, it assumes a defiant novice,

(Bourdieu 1977, p. 19). How rules are conceptualized and translated in the *Vinaya* needs to be rethought, especially as *Vinaya* stipulations are named (and grouped) differently. Despite the distinctions made in their nomenclature in the Pāli, scholars often refer to them uniformly as rules. Throughout this article, my use of the English word "rule" coincides with the concept of *nīti* as it is used today in the Sinhalese.

- 11 Such regulations may be listed in the constitution (*nītivoyavastāva*) of a monastic center. As nuns' constitutions (if they indeed have such a thing) generally state, rules become meaningful only insofar as they address a broader idea of *vinaya*.
- 12 The latter were seen to need rules and punishments, unlike the former who might only need advice. The distinction between punishment and advice is present in the correction of lapsed novices. Novices who continue to misbehave despite repeated attempts to correct them through advice and penance may incur the ultimate punishment—being asked to leave the community. In contrast, a novice who admits a transgression, is contrite in penance, and heeds advice may remain in community, where she continues to be trained and corrected.
- 13 One might think of the *saṅgha* as the fully ordained community of monks and nuns, and might claim that, unlike *bhikkhunīs*, *sil mātās* are not members of the *saṅgha*. However, it is important to note that *saṅgha* has a broader meaning that can refer to other kinds of communities in Buddhism (Perry and Ratnayaka 1982).
- 14 One monk pointed out that *Vinaya* stipulations might be seen as rules or *nīti* depending on the severity of the punishment for breaking them. For instance, he included the *parājikas* (entailing defeats) and *saṅghādisesās* (entailing a formal meeting of the *saṅgha* community) as rules, both of which involve more serious transgressions that can result in excluding a monk from the community. However, he added that rules in that sense still center on self-discipline. He proceeded to state that other *Vinaya* stipulations for fully ordained monastics ought not to be considered as rules, as they did not involve punishment (*daṇḍuvama*), but rather minor correction. It is perhaps not surprising that, when I asked about the rules of their institutions, head nuns often denied that they had any. Stating that they had rules (*nīti*) would be not only an admission of the need to enforce rules (and execute punishment), but also an affirmation that their nuns were not capable of self-discipline—something that no head nun would want to admit.
- 15 What does mark a significant distinction between *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās* is the different networks of power to which they belong. For example, in Sri Lanka, district and national meetings of *sil mātās*, as well as some educational and religious projects, are sponsored by the state, but those held by *bhikkhunīs* are not. That difference may bear some comparison with distinctions among nuns living in Myanmar (Burma) or Thailand where the *upasampadā* is not legally recognized.
- 16 The commonly used Sinhalese word for punishment (*daṇḍuvama*), associated as it is with the idea of beating with a rod (*daṇḍa*), implies a severity that is not present in English. It carries with it a specific notion of corporal pain that may be absent in the English term *punishment*. While most monks and nuns reject the use of corporal punishment to correct novices, hitting novices (or school children) as a means of punishment is not unheard of in Sri Lanka.

involves authorizing her exclusion from community, and is associated with the transgression of a rule. In such instances where monastics are empowered as gatekeepers of a community and can exclude those who transgress, monks and nuns may speak of rules.¹⁷ Yet, those same monks and nuns reject a notion of individual rules that may *seemingly* constitute a communal form of life. In *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, Giorgio Agamben argues that the rule was inseparable from life in medieval Christianity. That indistinction, he suggests, is not easily comprehensible to modernity. He shows how the Franciscans in particular questioned “the very substance of the rule as a set of norms separate from life,” and, citing Hugh of Digne’s commentary on the Franciscan rule, he writes that the Franciscan “promises according to the formula of the rule and, therefore, is not obligated to observe either the individual norms or the three principle vows (obedience, poverty, and chastity), but all of them indistinctly in such a way that the monk’s very form of life (*forma vivendi*) falls ‘under the efficacy of the vow.’”¹⁸ In other words, not only are seemingly discrete rules not discrete,¹⁹ but the very presupposition that rules can somehow be abstracted from the life of monastics is questionable.

2. Toward a Genealogy of the Idea of *Vinaya/vinaya*

Let me first discuss how some scholarship represents the relationship between discipline and rule, and why I think that my research speaks to the limitations of that representation, as nuns understand that relationship very differently. Rules (and laws), in addition to often being viewed as state-sanctioned, often presuppose an abstract and universal juridical subject who risks punishment in transgressing rules. *Vinaya* stipulations, however, do not, for the most part, presuppose such a subject and are not universally applicable.²⁰ Moreover, the idea that the *Vinaya* is a set of laws readily available for analysis is misleading because it effectively assumes that the text may be abstracted from a living tradition. However, it is just such a tradition that consistently gives *meaning* to the text.²¹ What this kind of interpretation ignores is that nuns and monks live lives of continuous moral training in which they are not *expected* to be free from the possibility of lapses in discipline. However, the very lapses in certain forms of conduct do not simply constitute occasions for punishments, but also opportunities for learning what constitutes proper modes of conduct.

Nevertheless, the juridical language that scholars use to interpret rules of the *Vinaya* continues to influence how we think about monastic discipline to this day. It seeks to demarcate and reconcile putative differences between original monastic stipulations and historical practices, thereby always having to reconcile the past with the present. Such scholarship tends to employ a cryptographer’s approach, attempting to decipher a supposed coding of the text (where the Buddha is a codifier) or to advance new readings of it to account for the text’s seeming elisions and inconsistencies.²² Take Maurice Winternitz, who thinks of the *Vinaya* as a code of rules with strict regulations. Consequently, he is puzzled by what he finds to be inconsistencies in it, referring to a “liberality, if not laxity in the

¹⁷ It is increasingly common for young girls and women who are uncommitted to the monastic life to be sent to nunneries by their parents or guardians, and that is why some head nuns refuse to admit women under the age of 18 or 20. Barring instances of uncommitted nuns who refuse to be corrected and are, therefore, asked to leave, nuns generally wish to lead a monastic life in community and, hence, seek to meet communal expectations. The expectation that nuns have the capability to lead a monastic life even before they are admitted to the nunnery is present not just in Sri Lanka, but also in Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand.

¹⁸ (Agamben 2013, p. 60).

¹⁹ The Renunciant Ten Training Precepts are a good example of this. If a novice monk or nun neglects any one of these, their observance of *all* ten precepts is considered invalidated. A novice nun is given advice and corrected until senior nuns are convinced that she is willing to discipline herself. Until such a time, and depending on how strict the head nun is, the novice may not be fully restored to her place in the community. A novice can be integrated into the community only after it is clear that she has made a commitment to a form of life that does not center on rules.

²⁰ We need to keep in mind that the formulation of *Vinaya* stipulations and their subsequent interpretation always relate to unique individuals and specific contingencies.

²¹ A monastic text about the *Vinaya*, even while referring to “rules” that are part of a “code,” emphasizes the circumstances in which prescriptions arose, stating that the Buddha “formulated rules one at a time in response to events” (*Mahāmakūṭa Educational Council* 1993, p. 6).

²² For example, see (Horner 1992; Dhirasekera 1970).

rules,” since “the monk is to live only on what he obtains by begging, but he is also allowed to accept invitations to meals. He is to clothe himself in cast-off rags, but he may also wear garments of linen, cotton, and even silk. He is to live at the foot of a tree, but he may also seek a more comfortable lodging in houses, huts, or caves.”²³ This is hardly an outdated example.

More recently, in his study, Mohan Wijayaratna refers to a “precise judicial system” of Buddhist monastics in which a “final version of the rule” becomes consistent with a “code of law.”²⁴ While contributing important and timely studies on Buddhist monks and nuns, Wijayaratna presents a narrative about *Vinaya* stipulations that consistently refers to them as quasi-judicial rules. This is problematic, since it is crucial to recognize that the Pali does not refer to *Vinaya* stipulations collectively and uniformly as “rules.”²⁵ Nevertheless, scholarly narratives about the *Vinaya*, like those of Winternitz and Wijayaratna, continue to refer to an essentialist and abstract notion of rules that were established in early Buddhism. However, *Vinaya* stipulations are *always* contingent on the conditions in which they are learned and practiced. In other words, their formulation is subject to specific contingent conjunctures and debates.²⁶

In translating *Vinaya* prescriptions as rules or laws, scholars ascribe a rigidity to the formulation and practice of the *Vinaya* stipulations that is inaccurate. Another example of how *Vinaya* stipulations may be misunderstood as fixed rules is present in some scholarly accounts of the *aṭṭhagarudhammā*, which center on an interpretation of the Eight Conditions as rules that must be followed. As I indicate elsewhere, “the multivalent connotations and denotations of *dhamma* as ‘truth’, ‘reality’, ‘building block of reality’, and ‘factor of existence’ or simply ‘thing’ perhaps provide more scope for the meaning of *aṭṭhagarudhammā* . . . Translating *garudhamma* as ‘rule’ can be misleading” and the *aṭṭhagarudhammā* would be better translated as the Eight Conditions.²⁷ According to Nancy Auer Falk, these Eight Conditions were “imposed on the women as a price for allowing them to found their order” and ensured their subordination.²⁸ Falk proceeds to assume that these stipulations are rigid rules, stating that “the discriminatory provisions meant that women would never be leaders in the life of the whole community.”²⁹ Rita Gross, who finding recourse in the *aṭṭhagarudhammā* as rules in a similar vein, seeks to demonstrate that “regarding the major issue of how the women’s order would rank vis-à-vis the men’s order, there was far less flexibility.”³⁰ and that they “mandated institutional subordination.”³¹ Here again, we see how the notion of the flexibility of rules has become a concern in scholarly narratives. Unsurprisingly, interpretations of the Eight Conditions as rules has led to the publication of several studies on them that focus primarily on how and why their very existence should be challenged. Yet, scholarly engagement of the *aṭṭhagarudhammā* would be better served by thinking differently about the Eight Conditions.

In his article on Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka, Lowell Bloss, refers to a distinction between the ten “rules” of the Ten Precept Mothers and the *Vinaya* “rules” of fully ordained monastics.³² Similarly, in their 2010 publication on Buddhist nuns in Thailand, Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel discriminate between nuns on the basis of the number of precepts that they observe and that are distinguished from the so-called rules of the *Vinaya*.³³ Likewise, Tessa Bartholomeusz, who conducted research

²³ (Winternitz 1993, p. 26).

²⁴ (Wijayaratna 2001, p. 3).

²⁵ In his own appendices which include the Pali original, as well as a translation of the *bhikkhuni pāṭimokkha*, he provides a subtitle for different categories of *Vinaya* stipulations. These are untranslated and remain in the Pali.

²⁶ By “contingent conjunctures,” I refer to Abeysekara’s notion of a “period of a few years, if not months or days, in which competing narratives and debates conjoin (and converge) to make centrally visible particular authoritative knowledges about what can and cannot count as Buddhism” (p. 4).

²⁷ (Salgado 2013, pp. 80–81).

²⁸ (Falk 1989, p. 159).

²⁹ (Ibid., p. 160).

³⁰ (Gross 1993, p. 36).

³¹ (Ibid., p. 37).

³² (Bloss 1987, pp. 19, 28).

³³ (Collins and McDaniel 2010, pp. 1378–79).

in Sri Lanka in 1988–1989, also refers to *Vinaya* stipulations as rules which might differentiate some Sri Lankan nuns from others who do not follow them.³⁴ Nuns are of course fully aware of the number of monastic stipulations that they may have undertaken to formally observe. However, they do not limit their practice to a specific number of stipulations. Their renunciant everyday is not grounded in discrete lists such as the Ten Training Precepts or the 311 *Vinaya* stipulations.³⁵ What is important is that even nuns who are not fully ordained observe most *Vinaya* stipulations. Hence, it is not surprising, that some *maechii* in Thailand, like some *sil mātās* in Sri Lanka, find no reason to seek the *upasampadā*.³⁶ Additionally, householders (in Sri Lanka, in particular,) generally do not (or sometimes cannot) differentiate between *bhikkhunis* and *sil mātās*.³⁷ One reason for Theravada Buddhist nuns' ambivalence toward the *upasampadā*, and for the inability of most Sri Lankan householders to differentiate between nuns who are fully-ordained or not, is that, regardless of their supposed ordination status and their formal observances of monastic stipulations, nuns' form of life is strikingly similar. That is why scholars' persistent categorization of nuns according to a rigid notion of rules remains questionable.

Likening the *Vinaya* to a strict legal code of rules and regulations leads to the kind of bafflement that Winternitz expresses about the so-called laxity of the rules. Some scholars have compared *Vinaya* recommendations to state laws. However, the monastic form of life that all nuns live, grounded as it is on *vinaya* practices rather than a book of rules, is significantly different. By considering *Vinaya* recommendations as rules, rather than as stipulations that are formed in a discursive tradition that constantly affirms, questions, and reinterprets them, scholars cannot but be perplexed by the seeming inconsistencies of *Vinaya* practice. The “liberality, if not laxity” that confuses Winternitz would not be an issue if *Vinaya* stipulations and other monastic precepts were understood not as rigid rules that are imposed on abstract monastic subjects, but rather as prescriptions whose individual contexts cannot be separated from the lives of those specific monastics who live them at particular moments in time. The cultivation of self-discipline as a form of life is grounded in such particular moments.

All too often, studies of the *Vinaya* in European languages assume that it constitutes a legal system of penalties for transgressions, whereby monastic life can be uniformly maintained through regulations.³⁸ Characteristically, scholars view *Vinaya* prescriptions tautologically, as regulations that Buddhist monastics must observe, because monastics are observers of rules. However, monastics whose form of life is shaped by programs of *discipline*, do not use *Vinaya* prescriptions as rules in the ways that such scholarship seems to assume.³⁹ While many scholars point out the importance of reconsidering the tendency to reconstruct monastic realities on the basis of texts,⁴⁰ my interest is not in differentiating between text and practice per se, but rather in thinking through the inadequacy of translating monastic discipline as rules in both text and practice. The focus on the techniques of training young novice nuns gives us clues as to how Buddhist monastics engage *vinaya*. That is why, following such scholars as Asad, Agamben, and Abeysekera, I argue that discipline constitutes a form

³⁴ (Bartholomeusz 1994, p. 122).

³⁵ By “the renunciant everyday,” I refer to “nuns’ everyday concerns, which center on duties such as maintaining and running a hermitage, cooking, cleaning, meditating, accepting alms from supporters, counseling, performing religious services, and teaching,” as mentioned in (Salgado 2013, p. 2).

³⁶ See (Collins and McDaniel 2010, pp. 1390–96; Cheng 2007, p. 172; Salgado 2013, pp. 161–65).

³⁷ (Mrozik 2014, p. 61; Cheng 2007, p. 172).

³⁸ (Anālayo 2017, p. 7; Bechert 1988, pp. 10–13; Kieffer-Pülz 2007, pp. 2–3; von Hinüber 1995, pp. 8–12; Wijayaratna 1990, p. 145).

³⁹ It makes some sense to consider *Vinaya* stipulations as laws when they are acknowledged as state regulations. Sukumar Dutt, for example, indicated that the “laws” of the *Vinaya* “enjoyed some sort of state recognition and were to that extent a part of civil law” (Dutt 1924, p. 175). However, my focus here is on the cultivation of *vinaya* among nuns rather than on state regulation of it.

⁴⁰ See, for example, (Clarke 2014, pp. 166–69; Schopen 1997, pp. 1–3; Blackburn 1999, pp. 281–309), which seek to explore the difference between a “formal canon” and a “practical canon” as do others who were influenced by her work. Though her work attempts to distinguish between texts and the realities of their use, it still focuses on texts, rather than on a monastic mode of life that is a complete program of discipline.

of life, not simply a set of rules governing conduct. In the latter formulation, form already stands separated from life. This in turn has implications for reconsidering the place of *Vinaya* prescriptions as rules, whereby scholarship makes distinctions between ordinands within the communities of nuns (e.g., between *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās*).⁴¹ At times, Buddhist monastics do indeed find recourse in the *Vinaya* to mark such differentiation of monastic statuses, but that is made possible by the social conditions of their lives and specific relationships of power; such differentiations become a form of ability to perform particular tasks in monastic life.

The term *vinaya*, often used in conjunction with the word *dhamma* (Buddhist teaching), is inseparable from the notion of *sāsana/sāsana*, the Buddhist dispensation it is said to uphold. However, *vinaya* concerns an entire mode of life that is already generally assumed among ordained monastics.⁴³ Nuns see no need to talk about that life unless queried about it. In effect, it evokes an existential reality that defies translation.⁴³ Essayng the impossible is not my labor here. On the contrary, I consider how studies of monastic practice that discuss communal discipline in terms of juridical notions of rules and laws, since such a focus on rules has implications for how scholars continue to differentiate *bhikkhunīs* and their novices (*sāmaṇerīs*) from *sil mātās* and their novices, where the former seemingly observe *Vinaya* rules, and the latter do not. My point is that nuns' observance of stipulations in the *Vinaya* is not always seen to define a distinct form of practice, because their practice concerns a much broader understanding of *vinaya*.

Although some works on Buddhist nuns see training precepts (and other *Vinaya* prescriptions) as expressions of the cultivation of *sīla* (moral dispositions), they continue to equate them with rules.⁴⁴ My research suggests that such works can distort how training precepts and *vinaya* inform the lives of nuns. *Sīla* speaks to an ability to cultivate particular sets of dispositions and sensibilities that are not reducible to *observations* of manifest precepts and rules. That is to say, the cultivation of moral dispositions does not amount to the nuns' observation of precepts; rather, it forms part of a discursive domain, constituting a tradition of training. As such, one cannot take for granted that such dispositions are self-evidently available for appropriation.⁴⁵ Moreover, that is why a monastic training presupposes an existential process of *becoming*, which is underscored in the daily training and education of young novices. That initial training segues into an ongoing cultivation of *sīla* practiced by all nuns, whether fully ordained or not.⁴⁶ What nuns are expected to do changes as they age, as do the demands and needs of their hermitages, underscoring how continual processes of self-discipline and becoming persist well beyond novitiate training and the notion of unchanging rules. Those processes are a form of life that cannot be understood in terms of individual precepts or juridical prescriptions.

⁴¹ The apparent distinctions among nuns (marked by the *upasampadā*) is seldom recognized by householder-supporters who use identical terms of address for both *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās*. Householders see little (if any) difference between *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās* in terms of their *vinaya* practice. In Sri Lanka in particular, *bhikkhunīs* wear robes similar in color to those of *sil mātās* and, hence, resemble *sil mātās*. That is not the case in Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand, where the color of non-*bhikkhunī* nuns' attire is noticeably different from that of monks. Kawanami notes that non-*bhikkhunī* (*thilāshin*) nuns in Myanmar, including those who observe Ten Training Precepts, generally wear pink robes rather than the saffron/yellow or brown robes worn by monks and fully ordained nuns (Kawanami 2013, p. 39). However, she also notes that there are some *thilāshin* of the forest tradition who wear brown robes and a few elderly *thilāshin* who wear light-brown robes (personal communication). In Thailand, most nuns who are not *bhikkhunīs* are *maechii* who observe eight or ten training precepts and who wear white (Lindberg Falk 2007, p. 99). Seeger indicates that a few Thai nuns who are not *bhikkhunīs* wear robes of the same color as that of monks (Seeger 2009, p. 808).

⁴³ The capacity to live that mode of life is considered a necessity for both *sāmaṇerīs* (novice *bhikkhunīs*) and *sil mātās* in Sri Lanka even before they begin a monastic education, as it is for nuns seeking ordination in Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand. See, for example, (Kawanami 2013, pp. 81–82; Lindberg Falk 2007, pp. 118–20).

⁴⁴ On the idea of the untranslatability of life, see (Abeysekara 2011, pp. 259–60; Asad 1993, pp. 289–90).

⁴⁴ (Anālayo 2013, p. 314; Bartholomeusz 1994, p. 122; Cheng 2007, p. 198; Wijayaratra 1990, p. 67; Hüskén 1997, p. 46).

⁴⁵ This point, which (Abeysekara 2002) made some time ago in *Colors of the Robe*, is ignored by many scholars.

⁴⁶ Keown (1983) comments on a broad sense of moral conduct that is echoed in the *Atthasālinī*, where “Buddhaghosa takes into account those cases where no particular precept is taken but where, nevertheless, one refrains from performing a bad action because it is not fitting to one's birth, age, or experience” (p. 65).

3. Translating Disciplinary Practice

I now turn to discussing in more detail why some scholarly studies that translate *vinaya* as monastic rules or laws are limited, and what that means for the study of Buddhist nuns. Both novice *sil mātās* and *sāmaṇerīs* observe the Ten Training Precepts⁴⁷ and live in communities under the authority of senior nuns. While admission to a *bhikkhunī* training center demands a certain level of literacy, and access to *bhikkhunī* ordination requires passing examinations after a rigorous course of studies in *Vinaya* and other texts, no such requirements apply to *sil mātā* ordinations. Nevertheless, teacher-nuns at *bhikkhunī* and *sil mātā* training centers train novices in ways that cannot be significantly distinguished. For the most part, the stipulations in the *Vinaya* text, which one might assume apply only to *bhikkhunīs*, are also observed by *sil mātās*. One may find prescriptions in the *Vinaya* that are reserved only for monks and nuns who have the *upasampadā*. For example, only *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* participate in certain rituals such as those associated with the rains' retreat and the *pāṭimokkha* recitation.⁴⁸ However, that ritual engagement primarily serves to affirm certain power relations within a discursive tradition and authorizes their status as monastics who have the *upasampadā* among monks, nuns, and state officials at large. It is mistaken to assume that participation in such rituals is essential in marking a distinction between the form of life *bhikkhunīs* lead and the form of life of *sil mātās* lead. That is precisely why training centers for *sil mātās* and *bhikkhunīs* are strikingly similar, and even some householders today see little difference between *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās*.⁴⁹ Framing the identity of a monk or a nun in terms of a juridical idea of rules belongs to a genealogy of scholarship that continues to create divisions between disciplinary practices and a form of life.⁵⁰

Among most scholars, the *Vinaya* prescriptions, including the training precepts (*sikkhāpadas/sīkṣāpadas*), are invariably defined as rules and regulations or as laws,⁵¹ and the *Vinaya* in general is viewed as the "highest legal authority."⁵² The claim was also made that "in every *Vinaya* scholars have examined, the Buddha is depicted as the lawgiver."⁵³ However, the monks and nuns with whom I conversed do not think of the Buddha as a lawgiver, nor do they consider *Vinaya* prescriptions or training precepts as laws. Moreover, present as those precepts are within a discursive tradition, their very interpretation is subject to dispute.⁵⁴ We should remember that the Ten Training Precepts are usually observed by novices *prior* to their becoming novice nuns; thus, it is not always possible to differentiate practitioners according to the training precepts they observe.⁵⁵ *Vinaya* should

⁴⁷ For the most part, the Ten Training Precepts of *sil mātās* and those of novice *bhikkhunīs* (*sāmaṇerīs*) are identical, although there are a few *sil mātās* who recite them differently. For more details on how these training precepts might differ, see (Bartholomeusz 1994, pp. 73–74; Salgado 2013, pp. 108–13).

⁴⁸ There is little agreement on a definitive translation of the word *pāṭimokkha*. According to the *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary* (PTSD), it may refer to "a name given to a collection of various precepts contained in the *Vinaya*" s.v. "*pāṭimokkha*." Some monastics in Sri Lanka agree with this rendition, as does Horner, who contrasts it with Oldenberg's rendition as a freedom from a "list of those offences which deserved punishment" (Horner 1996b, vol. 1, p. xii). Some monks and nuns in Sri Lanka also translate *pāṭimokkha* as "attaining Nibbana." When possible, *bhikkhunīs* gather about once a month for a ritual recitation of the *pāṭimokkha*.

⁴⁹ The perceptions of householders may possibly change with time as *bhikkhunīs* today continue to educate their householder-supporters about *Vinaya* practices that are unique to them as fully ordained nuns.

⁵⁰ In the case of nuns, the separation of rules from life also lends itself to pervasive liberal interpretations about the empowerment of nuns. According to a liberal feminist interpretation, *bhikkhunīs* would be identified as having a higher status than *sil mātās*, akin to that of monks and, thus, would be considered more empowered than *sil mātās*. Yet, in a country such as Sri Lanka which does not legally recognize *bhikkhunīs*, *sil mātās* may be considered empowered in ways that *bhikkhunīs* are not, since they receive state support that is denied to *bhikkhunīs*.

⁵¹ (Heirman 2000a, 2000b). Also see (von Hinüber 1995, p. 7).

⁵² (Kieffer-Pülz 2014, p. 46).

⁵³ (French and Nathan 2014, p. 9).

⁵⁴ The training precept stating the willingness to refrain from handling gold and silver (money) is a case in point. Though it is listed as a training precept that is observed by *sil mātās* and *bhikkhunīs* alike, as well as by monks, it is seldom understood literally. Most *sil mātās*, *bhikkhunīs*, and monks do handle money, much to the consternation of scholars who do not expect them to "break the rule" by doing so.

⁵⁵ Observance of eight or ten training precepts is generally expected even before a young person becomes a monastic and enters a community as a novice.

be equated not with training precepts or rules, but rather with the cultivation of self-discipline. This is clearly stated in Oliver Abeynayaka's *Vinaya Piṭakaya*, which is currently used as a training manual for nuns: "*Vinaya* means restraint (*saṅvara*). It concerns the overcoming of the *kleśas* (moral impurities). It is about bodily and verbal restraint; '*vinaya*' does not mean '*śikṣāpada*'. The *śikṣāpada* were introduced for the purpose of protecting/observing *vinaya*."⁵⁶ When translated as a form of restraint, *vinaya* points to an entire mode of life in which the elimination of unwholesome attitudes is emphasized. Such a life cannot be achieved by simply following rules that are imposed by others.

The problem with translating training precepts or *Vinaya* stipulations as rules is seldom explicitly recognized by scholars of Buddhism.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the pitfalls of translating them as such were intimated by some scholars even as they seem to be mired in that very terminology. Daniel A. Getz, in his entry on Buddhist "Precepts" in the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, refers to them as "rules and guidelines intended to properly shape the mind and its manifestations in physical and verbal behavior so as to facilitate progress on the path to liberation." Having referred to precepts as rules, Getz proceeds to focus on them more as moral guidelines, indicating that they refer to *sīla* yet cannot be "seen as ends in themselves, but rather as necessary steps in training for awakening." Hence, precepts, ostensibly seen as "moral obligations," demarcate "different levels of progress and commitment in religious life." Getz qualifies what the "rules" mean by putting them in the context of religious life, claiming that, whereas "the five and eight precepts pertain to the moral training of lay persons, the category of ten precepts sets forth a basic moral vision for Buddhist monastics." Although this categorization of the precept listings is not as strictly differentiated as he suggests—moral training and moral vision are relevant to all Buddhist practitioners—Getz hints at how training precepts constitute a practice and a moral *process* that cannot be satisfactorily subsumed under the terminology of rules.⁵⁸ Like Getz, Jotiya Dhirasekera, in his study of monastic discipline, refers to the training precepts as rules, and emphasizes that they indicate an ongoing training of monastics to eliminate *dukkha* (dis-ease). Having researched both canonical and commentarial sources, he notes that the term *sīla* was often used interchangeably with *sikkhāpada*.⁵⁹ Dhirasekera's study consistently refers to monastic stipulations in terms of their legality;⁶⁰ however, his study of the disciplinary literature often reminds us that *vinaya* practice responded to new demands even after the time of the Buddha. Dhirasekera, though circumscribed by the terminology he uses, seeks, like Getz, to contextualize how monastic stipulations may be practiced within a discursive tradition.

It is not uncommon for *Vinaya* scholars seeking an overarching Buddhist framework to anchor *Vinaya* prescriptions in an ideal or normative monastic community. John Holt, for example, posits such a framework, disputing that the Pāli *Vinaya* is based either on *sīla* or on law.⁶¹ He asserts that "if we are to argue that the basis of Buddhist discipline consists of the primary concerns of *sīla*, we would have to admit that the basis of Buddhist discipline is not exclusively Buddhist nor even monastic for that matter."⁶² Holt's assertion that the *Vinaya* does not concern *sīla* is puzzling. Indeed, *bhikkhunīs* unequivocally state that the *Vinaya* is about an immeasurable *sīla* of restraint (*koṭṭiyak saṅvara sīla*). It is well known that training in the cultivation of *sīla* as a form of restraint is crucial to monastic life.⁶³ Holt proceeds to state that the *Vinaya*, "rather than being merely a legal code enforced by sovereign authority or rather than being only an elaboration of *sīla*, represents the effective behavioral expression

⁵⁶ (Abeynayaka 1983, p. 5).

⁵⁷ An exception to this is the recent work by (Voyce 2017).

⁵⁸ (Getz 2004).

⁵⁹ (Dhirasekera 1982, pp. 43–54).

⁶⁰ As others often do, he also uses terms such as "disciplinary code," "codified law," and "regulations."

⁶¹ (Holt 1983, p. 66).

⁶² (Ibid., p. 65).

⁶³ The *Śāsanāvātaraṇaya*, a manual used by monks and nuns, states that the *sīla* of restraint (*saṅvara*) for both novices and fully ordained monks is fourfold: *sīla* of restraint in the *pāṭimokkha*, the senses, livelihood, and the requisites (Chandawimala 2014, pp. 116–18).

which became normative for the path leading to the final spiritual goal of the religion. The basis of the discipline is, therefore, to be found in the fact that it represents an ideal realization of the teaching of the Dhamma.⁶⁴ Holt's rendering of the *Vinaya* as a *representation*—that is, as something different from practice—and the discursive tradition to which it belongs is problematic. His conceptualization of the *Vinaya* as a normative expression for the path of spiritual realization promotes an idealization and orientalizing of Buddhist monasticism that has long permeated scholarship in the field.⁶⁵

As the anthropologist David Scott has observed,

The Western misinterpretation of Buddhism is shaped not only by a colonial misreading, but by the selective and biased account in the authoritative texts themselves. However, what is curious about this view is that it presumes that Western interpretive discourse occupies the same conceptual relation to Buddhist tradition that *any* Buddhist texts do. Canonical texts do not present “a view from nowhere;” they are employed to make claims for what the *dhamma* is, how it is to be interpreted, and so on. It is *this* internal argument as a discursive—if nonunitary—whole that should form the object of the anthropological investigation. The texts form part of a tradition and, as such, are integral to arguments within that tradition, and to positions regarding what correct views and practices are. The Western dilemma arises only insofar as *its* discourses seek to adjudicate what the truth of that tradition is.⁶⁶

Here, Scott not only questions the privileging of particular texts as normative or ideal on their own terms, but also indicates that the search for an all-encompassing norm, rooted as it is in a panoptic Western discourse, downplays the extent to which competing discourses constitute tradition.⁶⁷ As we will see, nuns' reference to rules has little to do with discipline within a community in the way that most scholarship assumes.⁶⁸ However, rules are invoked when they instantiate a position in particular discourses. What becomes important when thinking about nuns is not that they should be defined according to the number of rules they supposedly observe, but that, when they recognize rules, they do so as a way of appealing to certain relationships of power that enable their authorization of a specific mode of conduct.

It is not accurate to assume that the *Vinaya* is the code of conduct of the ideal monastic and a form of jurisprudence whereby monastics must always be evaluated. For monks and nuns, *vinaya* as a form of discipline informs a lifelong training of monastics who, like any other people, make mistakes. Scholars seeking in the *Vinaya* texts and commentaries some original truth or basing their analysis on the assumption of an ideal monastic are engaging in an endeavor that sets the texts apart from the discourses to which they belong. It is tempting to seek an underlying norm in *Vinaya* prescriptions, not just because of the end-of-the-rainbow coherence such a norm might bring to *Vinaya* texts, but also because *vinaya* frequently occurs with the term *dharma*, which is sometimes translated as “norm.”⁶⁹ Charles Willemen (2004) underscores how *vinaya* and *dharma* are interrelated even while couching his observations in juridical language: “The practice of *dharma* is found in the *Vinaya*, the

⁶⁴ (Ibid., pp. 86–87). Interestingly, even though he rejects law as the basis of discipline, Holt still resorts to legal language in his discussion of monastic discipline.

⁶⁵ See, for example, comments by Collins regarding Wijayaratta's presentation of the *Vinaya* texts, which show that “the ideal system of monasticism” is a “single and coherent one” (p. xvii).

⁶⁶ (Scott 1994, p. 189).

⁶⁷ The attempt to establish the *Vinaya* as a form of law is an affirmation of claims to certain truths about the *Vinaya*. What Joyce refers to as a “Buddhist Legal Rationalism” that is presented in accounts on the *Vinaya* (p. 37) is an instance of how thinking about the *Vinaya* may skirt the disputes intrinsic to the discursive tradition of the *Vinaya*.

⁶⁸ As Scott indicates, we need to pay more careful attention to how rules are understood within the tradition. For example, the Theravāda monk, (Deegalle 2000) comments that “the Buddha's attitude toward rules was that they should be amended whenever changing religious conditions necessitated.” Also consider Bond's thoughts on “questions of dispute” (*vivādādhikaraṇa*) about the *dhamma* that were to be settled or *sammukhā* among monastics. Among other things, *sammukhā* may mean “face to face with” or “from the mouth of” (pp. 25–26).

⁶⁹ See, for example, PTSD, s.v. “Dhamma,” and Willemen, who states that “the traditional meaning of *dharma* can be understood as uniform norm, universal and moral order, or natural law” and is often found in conjunction with the term *vinaya*. Interestingly, the PTSD translates *vinaya* itself as “norm of conduct.”

monastic instructions. The practical application of dharma [involves] the rules and regulations and their sanctions. Each of these rules is also called *dharmā*. Dharma and vinaya together constitute the teachings of the Buddha; what in the West is called *Buddhism*, the Buddhists themselves call the *Dharmavinaya*" (p. 218).⁷⁰ Any separation of *vinaya* from *dharmā* is conducive to thinking not about coherence in a tradition, but rather about how *vinaya* is different from *dharmā* (to which it ought to be connected), and detachable from the life in which it is lived.⁷¹ More attention could yet be given to how ideas about *dharmavinaya*/*dharmavinaya* are sought to establish coherence within particular traditions of monastic discipline; however, such coherence should be seen not as an objective essence that is somehow subject to change, but rather as that which involves a claim to power where practitioners might seek authority to establish one form of coherence over another at a particular moment in time.⁷²

A closer look at how terms such as *vinaya* and *nīti* are used is relevant to understanding the training practices of Buddhist nuns. Though the *definitions* of such terms may appear to change with time, it is more important to recognize how monks' and nuns' *use* of those terms authorizes particular relations of power today. *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary (PTSD)* defines *vinaya* as a "norm of conduct, ethics, morality, good behavior" and also as a "code of ethics, monastic discipline, rule, rules of morality, or canon law."⁷³ The PTSD indicates that the verb *vineti*, also connected to *vinaya*, means "to lead, guide, instruct, train, educate."⁷⁴ That use of *vinaya* has received little attention in most scholarship, which tends to see the *Vinaya* as a comprising a set of rules that need decoding. The term *vinaya* shares the same semantic field as the nouns *netti* and *netta* and *nīti*. *Netti* is glossed as "a guide, conductor, support,"⁷⁵ whereas *netta* (from Sanskrit *netra*) refers to "guidance, anything that guides, a conductor, (figuratively) the eye."⁷⁶ Gregory Schopen's sense of *vinaya* as a guide is in keeping with these connotations of *vinaya*.⁷⁷ In his entry on "Vinaya" in the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, he draws attention to the meaning of *vinaya* as Buddhist "teachings" and behavior, and explains that *vinaya* is "derived from a Sanskrit word that can mean to lead, or take away; remove, to train, tame, or guide (as a horse) or to educate, instruct, direct. All these meanings or shades of meaning intermingle in the Buddhist use of the term, where it refers to both specific teachings of the Buddha that bear on behavior, and to the literary sources in which those teachings are found." Though the notion of *vinaya* as a guide was affirmed by monks and nuns with whom I conversed, the term *nīti*, which appears to have had similar connotations to *vinaya* at one time, is now used differently. It is not a term that contemporary nuns and monks generally equate with *vinaya*.⁷⁸

The use of *nīti* to mean "guide" is well established in Pāli. Indeed, the Pāli term can refer to "guidance; rules; conduct; prudent behavior; policy; moral philosophy; political science."⁷⁹ The translation of the Pāli term *nīti* as "guide" is affirmed by Oskar von Hinüber (even though he does not shy away from using legal terminology in his discussion of *Vinaya* texts) in his reference to the "*nītisuttadhāra*" as "the one, who is an expert in the guidelines."⁸⁰ George Bond, in his study of the *Netti-Pakaraṇa*, or

⁷⁰ The term *dharmavinaya* received some recognition in *Vinaya* studies, but it needs to be thought about more carefully. Consider the following incisive comment: "Dhamma and Vinaya in practice function only together. Neither without the other can attain the desired goal. In theory, they may be separate, but, in the person who practices them, they merge as qualities developed in mind and character" (*Mahāmakūṭa Educational Council 1993*, p. 2). Noteworthy here is that, in practice, *dhamma* and *vinaya* become incrementally inseparable as one makes progress in the cultivation of moral dispositions.

⁷¹ In some instances, it would be useful to translate *Vinaya* stipulations as *conditions* that may guide life rather than as regulations that must be enforced (*Salgado 2013*, pp. 82–84).

⁷² On the question of how a form of life requires a coherence, which is not always achieved, see (*Asad 2015; Abeysekera 2018b*).

⁷³ PTSD, s.v. "*vinaya*." The PTSD also defines *vinaya* as "driving out, abolishing, destruction, removal." This definition is more commonly used among scholars of Buddhism, especially concerning the driving out or removal of unwholesome thoughts.

⁷⁴ (Ibid.), s.v. "*vineti*."

⁷⁵ (Ibid.), s.v. "*netti*."

⁷⁶ (Ibid.), s.v. "*netta*."

⁷⁷ (*Schopen 2004b*).

⁷⁸ In the rare instances when nuns refer to their discipline as *nīti*, they do so to affirm their place within relations of power, defined with reference to the *upasampadā*, or to evoke the establishment of a *Vinaya* prescription as state law.

⁷⁹ (*Cone 2013*).

⁸⁰ (*von Hinüber 1995*, p. 33).

Guide-Treatise (also called the *Netti* or *Guide*), notes that “the *Netti* was intended as a guide for all those in the Sangha . . . The commentary on the *Netti* supports this view, for it says that the work is called *Netti* (guide) because it is a guide for expositors.”⁸¹ We might suppose that the currency of the term *nīti* as “guide,” either for interpretation of the *dhamma* or as a guide for moral conduct, was once prevalent among monastic circles; however, that is not the case now. In contemporary Sri Lanka, the term *nīti* refers primarily to a law or rule, akin to the dictates of a state.

My concern with thinking about the provenance of the terms *vinaya* and *nīti* stems from a need to better understand how much these concepts and their usage may overlap, how they are articulated by monks and nuns today, and what that might mean for a monastic form of life. The Sinhala term *nīti*, referring either to *vinaya* prescriptions or to life at hermitages, was rarely used by the monastics I interviewed. In common parlance, *nīti* refers to civil and state regulations—an understanding of the term that seemed to resonate best with my informants. Whereas some nuns I met were willing to entertain my use of *nīti* in describing training practices, they tended to prefer invoking such terms as *vinaya*, *saṅvara* (“restraint”), or *hikmīma* (“discipline”) rather than *nīti*. When I introduced the term *vinayanīti* to them, monks and nuns generally dismissed it, as if rejecting the very idea of rules (*nīti*) in relation to *vinaya*. Some did refer to monastic prescriptions as *vinayanīti* (“*Vinaya* rules”), or *buddhanīti* (“Buddha rules”), but they also shied away from using the term in relation to a complete program of monastic discipline. Their discussions about the training processes and the cultivation of moral dispositions at training centers indicate that the idea of a rule as a punitive regulation that controls the lives monastics lead is hardly present in their *vinaya* practice.⁸²

Since the establishment of the *bhikkhunī* order, leading members of the national *sil māṭā* committee became increasingly active in proposing state regulations that differentiate between *sil māṭās* (who continue to receive some state funding) and *bhikkhunīs* (who do not). *Vinayanīti*, bound as it is to the current debates regarding the acceptance of the *bhikkhunī upasampadā*, is inseparable from articulations of power, identity, and religious status.⁸³ When I asked monastics about their use of the terms *vinayanīti* and *buddhanīti*, some pointed out that they are of recent coinage, but others said they were unaware of such terms.⁸⁴ It is only since the full ordination of nuns was introduced to Sri Lanka that certain *Vinaya* practices expected only of fully ordained monastics became relevant to Sri Lankan nuns. Some *bhikkhunīs*, seeking to legitimate their status vis-à-vis other nuns, state that *vinayanīti* are obligatory for them and irrelevant or unnecessary for *sil māṭās*. In that context, the use of the term *vinayanīti* in reference to stipulations in the *Vinaya* text is invoked to sanction a bid for power and authority, especially in privileging one form of ordination over another.⁸⁵ Interestingly, one *bhikkhunī* who used the terms *vinayanīti* and *buddhanīti* interchangeably as a means of differentiating *bhikkhunīs* from *sil māṭās* in terms of their ordination, later stated that that *vinaya* concerned not individual rules, but rather the development of correct monastic attitudes. Here again, we see how notions of rules are affirmed in the context of power relations, rather than as instruments governing communal discipline in a nunnery.

⁸¹ (Bond 1982, pp. 40–41).

⁸² (Walsler 2005) refers to “house rules” that monastics are expected to follow and that supplement the *Vinaya*. The transgression of such rules may incur punishment (pp. 91–93). Young nuns who do not comply with the expectations of their head nun (e.g., by repeatedly failing to complete homework or by continually neglecting daily tasks) may also be subject to punitive actions. Interestingly, in my conversations with nuns about such instances, the term *nīti* did not surface, even though they spoke of punishment. That may reflect how the focus in monastic discipline tends to be on the *monastic* who is still training, rather than on some abstract and universal notion of an enforceable rule.

⁸³ For an account of how monastic discipline is inseparable from questions of power, see (Salgado 2017).

⁸⁴ Some scholar-monastics indicated to me that the use of the term *vinayanīti* became more prevalent only in the past two decades, possibly reflecting the distinctions some may want to make between *bhikkhunīs* and *sil māṭās*.

⁸⁵ For other instances of how power may play out in relation to *Vinaya*, see (Schonthal 2016, pp. 85–90, 209). Schonthal’s interest is in the intersection of *Vinaya* and state law. However, my focus here is on the practice of nuns who generally do not seek state intervention to maintain communal discipline at their centers.

A leading *sil mātā* who, like the aforementioned *bhikkhunī* referred to *nīti* in a bid for state recognition and power, spoke to me of the need to obtain the support of the national *sil mātā* organization and the state in order to establish their acceptance of a *Vinaya* prescription for all *sil mātās*. The *Vinaya* prescription in question concerned the two-year waiting period required of a trainee nun who is expected to train under the tutelage of a *bhikkhunī* prior to receiving her ordination. What is important in this case is not so much that this leading *sil mātā* sought to affirm for all *sil mātās* a *Vinaya* prescription meant for trainee *bhikkhunīs* and not *sil mātās*, but that she used the term *nīti* to refer to the possibility of a state regulation that she wished were *established*, as though it were law. My point is that senior *sil mātās* are similar to senior *bhikkhunīs* in the way that they refer to rules. They both tend to do so when asserting a claim to power, rather than when speaking about *vinaya* practices.

Hitherto I have discussed why focusing on a juridical notion of rules (implying by the term *nīti*), as dominant scholars of the *Vinaya* do, is questionable. Though nuns may mention *nīti* when authority is at stake in defining who may be considered a nun in particular discourses of power, asking senior nuns about the rules of their nunnery to find out how their lives are governed is not useful because their focus in communal life is on the cultivation of self-discipline rather than on enforcing punitive regulations. Such self-discipline becomes a form of life that cannot be understood in terms of rules. Moreover, it is not useful to focus on a notion of enumerated rules in order to discriminate between nuns. I pursue these points further in the next two sections on the disciplinary practices of habit and on how nuns make use of the term *nīti*. Firstly, I discuss nuns' daily schedules, since their use of schedules shows how they might think about nunnery rules.

4. The Virtue of Habit

When I initially asked nuns about the rules of their nunnery, they generally told me that they did not have any. After some hesitation and further pondering, they would either make mention of a constitution (if they had one) or a daily schedule. The daily schedule would be presented to me orally. Yet nuns' schedules, even though they outline what nuns *should* do throughout the day, do not constitute a list of rules.⁸⁶ Monks and nuns speak about them not as regulations that require enforcement and punishment, but only as guidelines for daily practice that help develop self-discipline. Though specific activities are to be done at particular times, it became evident that things tend to happen differently in practice. In fact, monastic timetables or schedules are not what they appear to be.

What emerged from conversations with monks and nuns is that the cultivation of moral dispositions as a habit, though centered on seemingly routine activities, does not always entail strict adherence to a set timetable. When asked about timetables, nuns detailed their daily activities from their awakening at about 4:30 a.m. to their retirement at night, describing when they are to bathe, sweep, clean, partake of alms, rest, observe ritual devotions, study, and meditate. Interestingly, a schedule, even when hung up, is seldom posted in a prominent place where nuns can refer to it daily. The nunnery training centers I visited neither display clocks to assist trainee nuns in keeping time nor allow trainees to wear watches. Although a center may have a wall clock or use a gong to mark communal activities, chronometric timekeeping is not emphasized. Yet, senior nuns insisted that communal participation in all activities at the center is intrinsic to the training of all nuns, as it is central to the development of *sīla*. Nuns must show up when they are expected to and perform their ritual and monastic duties in a proper sequence and within a particular time frame.⁸⁷ While *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās* referred to their daily schedules when I asked them about the rules they follow, they

⁸⁶ Schopen's observations about the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* used by Tibetan monks are of interest here. He notes that the only evidence of something like a daily work schedule in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* was made either because of "some *Mūlasarvāstivāda* monks who got into serious trouble or the redactors of their *Vinaya* who thought they would" (Schopen 2004a, p. 260). In other words, the need for something like a daily schedule arose only because of (the possibility of) erring monks.

⁸⁷ When they fail to do so, a senior teacher-nun engages them in a conversation. Often, the lapse is the result of sickness. If a novice persists in neglecting her assigned tasks despite repeated counseling, she is asked to leave the nunnery.

were often perplexed or dismissive when I requested a written version of their schedules. If a written version existed, nuns often could not locate it. This had less to do with their reliance on oral tradition than with their having naturalized the sequence of their individual and communal responsibilities so thoroughly that they did not need a written schedule. In other words, what nuns do every day is inseparable from a habitual and communal program that requires no explanation—unless an outsider makes queries about it.

I visited a remote training center that was home to thirty nuns who observe the ten training precepts and do not consider themselves *bhikkhunīs*. Their center provides occasional meditation retreats to interested householders. When I first visited, two householder-renunciants, together with select senior nuns, were primarily responsible for attending to the administration and discipline of the center. On successive visits, I spoke with one of the householder-renunciants, Saro, as well as with senior nuns.⁸⁸ When I questioned Saro about the *nīti* at the center, she responded,

The nuns have no “big” *nīti*. They do work according to a timetable that has been set; they do things from dawn to dusk according to the timetable. They do not go out on their own. It is dharma *kaṭayutu* (things that ought to be done according to the dharma) that they do; there is no other list of rules or a constitution. The nuns have considerable discipline (*hikmīma*).

Here again, we see how *vinaya* and *dharma* are inseparable. The idea of “‘big’ *nīti*” was an unsurprising response to my query about *nīti*. What Saro and the nuns indicated was that the very idea of extraneous or “big” rules did not resonate with them. What mattered was the *kaṭayutu*—“things that ought to be done” according to the *dharma*—and those things were to be done as *vinaya* so as to inculcate correct habits and dispositions. A senior teacher-nun at a *bhikkhunī* training center about the same size as the training center where Saro lived spoke about *nīti* in a similar manner. While including among *nīti* some gatekeeping procedures, she too emphasized that nuns were expected to do the work that ought to be done (*vāḍa kaṭayutu*) in a disciplined manner, which is what shaped the renunciant life (*pāvīdi jīvitaya*), adding that “there is no need for any *amutu* (‘strange’ or ‘new’) *nīti*.”

“Work that ought to be done” is a blanket way of referring to whatever nuns should do, given their capabilities according to seniority, age, and health. That could vary, depending on the everyday needs of a center and the expectations of the senior monastics. Nevertheless, what needed to be done daily at the different training centers tended to be done by *sil mātās* and *bhikkhunīs* alike.

Monks seem to perceive schedules similarly to nuns. A senior scholar-monk (A) whom I (Q) interviewed told me how monastics became attuned to a communal sense of habit that cannot be coded by a timetable:

A. Using a timetable is not something we do. The reason for that is that [the timetable] must be kept in our thoughts.

Q. Do you generally use a gong?

A. In earlier times, a gong was sounded, but even that is not there now. That is not needed now. If you are going to sweep, you get up at the time you are to sweep and you sweep.

Q. How do you know when to do it?

A. There really is no such thing as beginning to do some specific thing at some specific time. You get up at dawn, and when it is time to sweep you sweep.

Q. How do you know *when* to do something?

⁸⁸ Names of informants were changed to preserve their anonymity.

A. Having awoken in the morning, then at a time when you can do the sweeping, you go outside and sweep.

Q. That is a communal activity?

A. Yes, yes.

Q. How do you know when to do something at a certain time?

A. You just do it; it just happens.

Q. What about partaking in alms (*dāna*) on time?

A. Usually, if there is a very big group going for *dāna*, a bell is rung. The bell is rung only because there is a very big group. But generally, the custom is like this: having done the sweeping at dawn, one washes, pays respects to the Buddha, and then goes to the refectory for alms.

Q. Is there a clock there?

A. There is no need for something such as a clock. Yes, there is a clock. But we do not do the work by watching a clock.

Q. Do you watch the sun?

A. No, it is like doing things without thinking; we are just aware of when to do things.

This monk offered an insightful take on time vis-à-vis the interrelationship of all phenomena arising in the process of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). My questions tended to seek a causal relationship between specific times and the activities related to them, whereas his responses pointed out that the chronometric scansion of monastic activity is just not possible. In other words, as he indicated in this discussion, nothing can *begin* at some abstractly defined *moment*, and there is no temporal stand-point outside the “being-time” of a practitioner and her activities. In effect, monastics are immersed in a causal field within a play of relations in which time cannot be abstracted as something different from who you are when you do something, because you are what you do. As this monk indicated, what monastics do elides the timekeeping of the rigid schedules most of us observe. Senior monks, *bhikkhunīs*, and *sil mātās* all intimated in different ways that time is causally inseparable from the performance of monastic duties—duties that evoke the dependent co-arising of duties and time. Analogously, one cannot create a division between rule and life. A monastic’s consistent focus on mindfulness and restraint, while possibly referencing a timetable, is not subject to it.

How nuns sequence their responsibilities may alter according to the demands made of them on any given day. They must attend to visitors who come unannounced, to medical or other emergencies within or outside the nunnery, and to pre-arranged duties and appointments. Such communal demands are not subject to timetables or rules, but unfold in the broader cultivation of communal habits and daily practices that correlate with nuns doing monastic things in a particular sequence.

Schedules that seem to define nuns’ practice, which were often presented in response to my inquiries about *nīti*, may be what nuns *ostensibly* observe. However, they do not observe schedules as such, because their schedules do not correspond to chronometric timekeeping.⁸⁹ That was evident in

⁸⁹ Such timekeeping is also absent in the passage, *Pauranika Dina Cariyāva*, (“Ancient Daily Routine”) found in the *Sāsanaāvatarāṇaya*, which is well known to nuns. The text provides an outline for monastic conduct and mentions activities that ought to be done throughout the day at monasteries that are home to large numbers of monks. Those activities are not measured in the way non-monastics measure time, but they do follow a general sequence. It is noteworthy that, in Sinhalese, the word *cariyāva* meaning “routine” and included in “*dina cariyāva*” meaning “daily routine” is identical to the word for “conduct.”

my conversation with Karuṇā *sil māṭā*. During my most recent visits to her training center, located in the hub of the city, Karuṇā was a senior nun who, while sitting for monastic exams, supervised the education and training of junior nuns. I spoke with her in the middle of a busy day, when she had just returned from a distant journey in the heavy rain after reciting all-night *pirit* (protective stanzas). When I asked her about her daily program, she responded that her timetable was variable: “I plan to do specific things on certain days, but if the head nun asks us to do something, we cannot say no.” I noticed a timetable hanging in the room where guests would meet the head nun. The timetable indicated a sequence of activities that was almost identical to that of other training centers. When I asked her about it, she said, “that is not what takes place; for the most part, it changes;” however, she then added, “some nuns do follow that.” She then proceeded to detail a sequence of activities that nuns followed at the center, and that seemed to mirror the listing framed on the wall. However, her description (excluding the time for awakening (4:00 a.m.) and for partaking of alms (noon)) omitted the times when things were done.⁹⁰ When I asked about specific times when things were done, it became evident that those were of little consequence to her. In effect, her timetable, if she had one, hardly reflected an iteration of conventional timekeeping.

Karuṇā’s listing of activities indicated that nuns were “doing what ought to be done” in their daily life. Such phraseology was frequently given in response to my queries. Parsing and regulating monastic activities according to a daily schedule is simply unhelpful. While segueing into an example of how she was unable to keep to a specific schedule, Karuṇā provided the details of her immediate situation. She had stayed up the previous night with several other nuns, reciting all-night *pirit*. The home the nuns had visited was on the summit of a hill. Since there was no proper road, the nuns had climbed the hill with difficulty, all the while combating an incessant downpour that muddied the path they walked. Though she and the other nuns had been invited to wash at the home, the facilities there were so unsanitary that they felt unable to do so. Upon returning to her center, she had felt obliged to spend some pre-arranged time with a guest (me), but was due to leave to visit a funeral home. Even though she was exhausted, and her head nun was unwell, they were planning to visit that home to honor a deceased teacher of her head nun. When I suggested that I leave to afford her time to wash, she insisted I not do so, since she now felt that it was unnecessary to wash. She said she was fully awake (despite having had no sleep the night before), and was due to leave for the funeral home.⁹¹ Being short on time, and needing to bathe after the upcoming visit anyway, she wished to delay bathing until she returned.

Karuṇā described to me a life apparently governed by neither time nor rules—a renunciant everyday calibrated to the particular contingencies of the given day. That is not to say that the nuns at her center neglected doing the usual kinds of things that nuns ought to do, including obeying the head nun, making offerings to the Buddha, meditating, cleaning the nunnery, and studying. Yet, their monastic practice cannot be disassociated from attending to the needs of the householders they knew who were a part of the larger communal network to which they belonged. Traveling away from the hermitage, performing ritual services at homes, and attending to visitors constituted a necessary part

⁹⁰ Some monks and nuns stated that partaking of the noon meal before noon is not essential—unless householders are present. I noticed that it is not uncommon for monastics to eat the meal after noon if they cannot do so earlier, but that would not be done in the presence of householders. Attitudes to eating after noon may vary among nuns, as some are stricter than others; eating a meal after noon is not always seen as a reason for chiding a nun. Important here is that, just as the Ten Training Precepts do not adequately define a nun’s identity, the training precept about the noon meal cannot be viewed in the juridical sense of a rule. Nevertheless, certain eating habits, such as eating together within community and not snacking during the day, are considered necessary in the practice of self-discipline.

⁹¹ Adjusting her bathing schedule was not a main concern for her. Bathing is viewed as an aid to awakening in the morning (she already felt no need to awaken), and bathing after visiting a funeral home and before paying respects to the Buddha is necessary. She saw no need to bathe at that moment. In describing the conditions of the previous day and her present situation, she referred to the renunciant life as one that necessarily involves difficulties. For her, those difficulties were no different from the routine duties or observances of renunciants (*pāvīdi pīḷivēt*).

of what Karuṇā did. Here, we can see how the virtue of habit might best be seen as the cultivation of a habit of virtue in which adherence to a fixed schedule is not essential.

I have indicated how timetables are less about observing rules than about following guidelines of a monastic program that are inseparable from a communal form of life. Such a mode of life, in which rules do not rule, cannot make clear distinctions between the life of *bhikkhunīs* and that of *sil mātās*. Nuns' daily life is less about a division between time and the activities with which it supposedly correlates, than about how nuns go about being nuns as they cultivate self-discipline and mindfully do the tasks that they need to do.⁹² I now turn to conversations with monks and nuns that say something more about training precepts, since scholars continue to equate training precepts and *Vinaya* stipulations with rules. I proceed to argue that, just as a precise chronometric scansion of time lacks significance in determining the minutiae of what is done when, and in regulating the life of a nunnery in terms of rules, it is problematic to assume that discrete *Vinaya* stipulations and training precepts are rules that can govern the cultivation of self-discipline in monastic life.

5. Renouncing Rules

As we can see, monastics do not focus on *Vinaya* stipulations or training precepts as rules, or *nīti*. In my discussions about what a training center expected of novice nuns, monastics often centered less on the kinds of punitive regulations generally associated with rules and more, as with our conversations about schedules, on developing the daily awareness of *vinaya* as discipline. A communal program of training among nuns may be understood as the cultivation of a habit of virtue that defies the observation of schedules and rules, as they are generally understood.

I now wish to focus on how nuns maintain discipline at their institutions. When I asked senior nuns about the communal cohesion of their centers, *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās* alike talked about the importance of *vinaya* and *hikmīma*, both used to mean “discipline,” as well as *saṅvara*. What they talked about was not a discipline that senior nuns expected to enforce, but rather a form or *self-discipline* that had to be cultivated. Even though some nuns referred to *nīti* as a means of attempting to authorize a particular relationship of power, the idea that *nīti* correlates with *vinaya* was rarely entertained by them.

One *bhikkhunī* who trains novice nuns for the higher ordination, said that the word *vinayanīti* lacks accuracy, for “there is a distinction between *vinaya* and *nīti*. *Vinaya* refers to discipline, restraint, and behavior, as practiced in the practice of the Path in the spiritual sense, whereas *nīti* refers to rules and regulations in minute detail concerning that discipline that is recommended for the *saṅgha* (community of monastics). For instance, what is there so spiritual about not having a night meal? When we see the evolution of the rule (about the night meal), we see that the regulation came about because of certain circumstances and contingencies. My point is that *vinaya* and *nīti* have two distinct meanings.”⁹³ Noting that a putative rule was not spiritual, this *bhikkhunī*, like others I met, echoed the *sil mātās* in affirming the importance of upholding discipline (*vinaya*)—rather than observing rules.

Tappā, a senior *sil mātā* I interviewed at another training center, addressed my queries about *nīti* in a similar way. Tappā heads a training institute for *sil mātās* of all ages that provides a monastic education akin to that of monks. Her training center is home to sixteen *sil mātās*, ten of whom come from other hermitages. When I asked her about *nīti* at her center, she asserted, “yes, there are *nīti*—that is, a *nīti paddatiya* (list of rules), a constitution—for example, that nuns cannot stay overnight at the home of a householder.” After my asking her for it, she showed me a list of rules constituting a

⁹² It should come as no surprise that it is impossible to differentiate between the daily schedules of *bhikkhunīs* and those of *sil mātās*.

⁹³ This nun is an English-speaking *bhikkhuni*. In subsequent conversations, she referred to rules (in English) and then proceeded to explain how and why they are of little significance.

written “constitution.” The rules include injunctions about gatekeeping at the monastery.⁹⁴ Though the constitution reads as a list of rules to be followed, those apparent *nīti* occur in the context of Buddhist disciplinary practice. Prefacing the list is a statement confirming that, in addition to providing a Buddhist education for the nuns, the nunnery aims to “increase religious knowledge and Buddhist education in order to establish a retinue that could work for the *sāsana* and according to the *vinaya*.” The document also states that, if a *sil mātā* did not comply with the list or “acted in opposition to *vinaya*,” she could be asked to leave the institution. When I asked Tappā precisely what she meant by *vinaya* (since the *Vinaya* text is primarily associated with fully ordained monastics rather than with *sil mātās*), she responded that “*sil mātās* must have a *vinaya*; we cannot do without a *vinaya*. It is like this: even though we do not in fact have the *upasampadā*, we (*sil mātās*) too must have a *vinaya*.” Her reference was not to the *Vinaya Piṭaka* but rather to the *vinaya* as a disciplinary practice intrinsic to moral cultivation. She proceeded to cite a passage, known well among monks and nuns, in which *vinaya* and *sāsana* (Buddhist dispensation) are considered inseparable: “*Vinaya* and *sāsana* have a coexistence. If *vinaya* is present, the *sāsana* is present. When the *sāsana* is present, *vinaya* is necessarily present. The *sāsana* itself is protected/observed because of *vinaya*. Those two are inseparable.”⁹⁵

For Tappā, the focus of life at her training center is not on the observance of rules or *nīti* per se, but rather on cultivating a disciplinary foundation for life. Though she acknowledged some *nīti*, she also asserted that the relevant rules apply only within a framework of *vinaya* and *sāsana*. Notably, the Ten Training Precepts are not among the listed regulations. Indeed, none of the training centers for *sil mātās* that I visited display a listing of the Ten Training Precepts. Some nuns told me that only those who can follow *nīti* are accepted into their communities. However, such *nīti* are generally gatekeeping regulations, which reflect the assumption that nuns are already observing training precepts and prepared to do what nuns ought to do in the communal life of the center even before they formally join it.

Mittā, who leads a meditation center for about thirty adult *sil mātās*, affirmed Tappā’s perspective on *nīti*, even suggesting that the Ten Training Precepts alone are of little relevance. In accord with the previously cited *bhikkhunī*, she noted that the training precepts were introduced by the Buddha to facilitate the cultivation of *sīla* and the elimination of wrongdoing. In our discussion about Buddha *nīti*, she said, “one cannot protect the *sāsana* without *nīti*, no? You cannot do that without *vinaya*, no?” Seemingly equating *nīti* with *vinaya*, she eschewed the conventional meaning of *nīti* as “law” and elaborated on how the cultivation of *sīla* and the Ten Training Precepts relates to *vinayanīti*. In stressing that her practice is not ruled by the training precepts, she downplayed their relevance in seeking to cultivate a deeper and more extensive meditative practice. Even though *sīla* is sometimes equated with the training precepts, she pointed out that it is not meaningful to parse the precepts (in differentiating *bhikkhunīs* from *sil mātās*) when it comes to the development of *sīla*.

I (Q) began the following discussion by asking her (A) how the Ten Training Precepts (*dasa sil*) relate to *vinayanīti*, which we had already discussed as being the *nīti* introduced by the Buddha:

Q. Can the *dasa sil* be considered *vinayanīti*?

A. There is no such thing as *dasa sil*; if one marks regular observances (*pīlīvet*), the necessary duties of the *sāsana*, even if one has no understanding of *nīti* or that which we call *nīti*, meditative cultivation (*bhāvanā*) is fulfilled. It is *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* [moral cultivation; concentration {meditation}; wisdom] that one must have, no? If one can observe *sīlaya* [*sīla*], if one can develop *samādhi*, and if one can do one’s work with *paññā*—that is all a part of Buddha *nīti*.

⁹⁴ The rules concern restrictions on how and when nuns are permitted to interact with the outside world, and prescriptions for harmonious living in community, such as the care of personal items, daily and weekly responsibilities, and respect for senior nuns.

⁹⁵ For textual references to this idea, see (Horner 1996a, vol. 4, pp. xxii–xxiii).

Q. So we cannot say that the *Vinaya* book is about *nīti* alone?

A. It is useless just to study and read the *Vinaya* book. By developing *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* (alone), one can also be observing the *dasa sil* and Buddha *nīti* and all that. There is no issue with *sīlaya*, even though one might divide it up (e.g., into eight or ten training precepts). It is *guṇa* (virtue) that one wants; it is the virtue of the *dharma* (*guṇa dharma*) that we must observe. Even if one were to (formally) take all the *śikṣāpadas*, but were not really to observe them, there is no use in that, no? It is not possible to proceed in the *dharma* in that way, is [it]? Would *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* develop in that way?

Although at one point she was willing to entertain the relevance of *nīti* to *vinaya* and *sāsana*, she now qualified her use of *nīti* and focused on the cultivation of a contemplative life in terms of following the Eightfold Path comprising *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*. Mittā's comments on the training precepts are not unlike those of the *bhikkhunī* mentioned earlier who questioned the "spirituality" of the training precept concerning the noon meal. In sum, precepts *guide* practice; they do not rule.

In a similar vein, even a senior *bhikkhunī*, who occasionally used the terms *Buddha nīti* and *vinayanīti* to differentiate the identity and status of *bhikkhunīs* from those of *sil mātās*, indicated that monastic discipline cannot be limited to observing a collection *Vinaya* rules. When I asked her how she could possibly even remember all 311 *Vinaya* observances that she was expected to keep as a *bhikkhunī*, she responded with the following account of a conversation purportedly dating to the time of the Buddha:

A monk told the Buddha, "I cannot keep to all those numerous *Vinaya* rules (*nīti*), so I am going to disrobe and leave." Then the Buddha asked him, "Can you cultivate your thought?" The monk responded, "Yes." Then the Buddha said, "That is all that you need to do." Later, that monk became enlightened.

Even while finding recourse to the term *nīti* in reference to the *Vinaya*, this *bhikkhunī*, commenting on a well-known textual account, added that "observing training precepts is about observing *vinaya*. *Vinaya* means 'discipline' (*hikmīma*). It is about the discipline of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body; that is what is called *vinaya*. That is what the Buddha has said." This *bhikkhunī*, like the other nuns I conversed with, centered on how living the renunciant life can defy the idea of observing rules. Rules (*nīti*) may relate to schedules or gatekeeping procedures, but they fail to distinguish adequately between the monastic life of *bhikkhunīs* and that of *sil mātās*. The discipline that matters to all nuns concerns a discipline of self-restraint rather than rules.

Some monastic teachers I interviewed rejected any likening of the training precepts to *nīti*. A senior monk who serves as a teacher and consultant at several nunnery training centers said, "the Buddha did not impose rules (*nīti*). What he said was, this was good and that was bad, and he would say *why* one thing was good and another bad. He said that we would benefit from avoiding what was bad if we followed some basic things." Referring to *Vinaya* stipulations as *śikṣā*, the monk responded, "none of them are rules (*nīti*). Where is the word *nīti* used? Those are *śikṣā* (trainings). *Nīti* is about punishment (*daṇḍuvama*). But here there is no punishment. Rather, there needs to be an effort (among monastics) to follow the path of the various *vinaya śikṣā* (disciplinary trainings)." That monk, like the nuns mentioned above, emphasized that the prescriptions of the *Vinaya* texts focus on *training* monastics, not punishing them.

My conversations with senior monastic teachers indicated that rules are not central to governing the moral training of nuns in ways that have been thought. Nuns do not talk about their lives in terms of rules, but rather in terms of the practice of self-discipline and duties that must be done *while* cultivating particular moral dispositions and sensibilities. I propose that the relationship between rules and a monastic mode of life needs to be thought about differently. Rules might well determine who may or may not join a community of nuns or might be invoked in specific discourses of power. However, it is misleading to think that the *vinaya* of nuns concerns a juridical idea of rules, as scholars often assume.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have argued that the dominant scholarly focus on Buddhist monastic discipline as if it were a set of rules is misguided. A genealogy of scholarship on the *Vinaya* has misled us into thinking that it is the enumerated *Vinaya* rules or “laws” that are central in governing the life of Buddhist monks and nuns. That scholarship assumes monastic regulation to be juridical and fails to see monastic *vinaya* practice as a form of life. I have demonstrated that the practice of monks and nuns generally foregrounds *vinaya* as the exercise of self-discipline and self-restraint and not as the enumeration of rules to be followed. That does not mean that ideas about *nīti* or rules are always completely rejected, but rather that they are not central in the ways they are thought to be. More specifically, nuns’ reference to enumerated rules, far from being constitutive of monastic life, is context-dependent. *Nīti* do become relevant for nuns in the context of gatekeeping procedures and who may or may not remain in their community. Nevertheless, even the *bhikkhunīs*, who occasionally refer to *Vinayanīti* that should be observed, assert that they are not of much significance. Most often, when nuns resort to talking about rules, they do so in the context of affirming particular authoritative discourses and power relations more than in the practice of monastic discipline per se. I have indicated that training centers for *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās* alike focus on developing a shared understanding of *vinaya* in daily practice and argued that, contrary to what is generally assumed, rules are not helpful in differentiating between the mode of life of *bhikkhunīs* and that of *sil mātās*. Though there is some distinction between the formal education of *bhikkhunīs* and that of *sil mātās*, and though *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās* may participate in different rituals, what matters most to them both is forming a habit of virtue as they develop moral dispositions grounded in the daily activities of a nunnery. It is noteworthy that householders in Sri Lanka generally do not differentiate between *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās*. Nevertheless, the scholarship on Buddhist nuns continues to highlight differences between *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās* and often focuses on monastic rules and questions of status in order to emphasize that some nuns are lacking certain rights and privileges. Such scholarship promotes the ideals of liberal feminism and overlooks the renunciant everyday of nuns. There is, thus, a disconnect between the way that nuns talk about *vinaya* and the ways that some scholars discuss their practice in terms of “rules.”

I contend that distinctions based on an idea of rules comes into play primarily when monastics make claims to particular authoritative discourses, e.g., in relation to state recognition. Distinctions based on an idea of rules are not of particular significance in differentiating between the general everyday life of *bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās*. In Buddhist texts, *vinaya* is often juxtaposed with, and seen as inseparable from the *dhamma*. Monastics today, echoing what is stated in early texts, affirm that the Buddhist dispensation cannot survive without *vinaya*.⁹⁶ The practice of *vinaya* and the maintenance of the dispensation are interdependent. *Bhikkhunīs* and *sil mātās* agree that *vinaya* grounds a consistent practice of monastic life based on *sīla*, which has Nirvana as its goal. To assume that monastics have rules that are readily available for representation and analysis, and to posit divisions between nuns on the basis of their observation of collections of rules or on whether they have the higher ordination is to misconstrue the everyday life that nuns lead. Just as a life cannot be reduced to law,⁹⁷ monastic training precepts cannot be reduced to rules. Rather, they are guideposts for the development of moral dispositions and a lifelong training in accordance with the *dhamma*. Although *dhamma* is translated as “norm,” a norm may not “refer to single acts and events but to the entire existence of an individual, to his *forma vivendi*. It is no longer easily recognizable as a law, just as a life that is founded in its totality in the form of a rule is no longer truly life.”⁹⁸ Likewise, *vinaya*, grounded as it is in a life of virtue, is no longer easily recognizable as a law.

⁹⁶ Note the observation that “*Dharma-Vinaya* was the Buddha’s own name for the religion he founded” (Mahāmakūṭa Educational Council 1993, p. 2).

⁹⁷ (Agamben 2013, pp. 46–47).

⁹⁸ (Ibid., p. 26).

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