The First Sāṅgīti and Theravāda Monasticism

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Concord in the monastic community is [a source of] happiness.

Introduction

In this paper I explore the significance of the account of the first saṅgīti in the different Vinayas and their report that the assembled monks decided not to abolish the minor rules. In the final part of my study I turn in particular to the impact of this decision on the formation of the Theravāda sense of monastic identity.

The Convocation of the First Saṅgīti and the Minor Rules

According to the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta and its parallels, at the time of the Buddha’s decease Mahākassapa was travelling together with a group of monks. On hearing the news that the Buddha had just passed away, a monk in this company reportedly expressed his satisfaction to be now free to do as he likes. According to the Dīrgha-āgama parallel to the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta his statement was as follows:

Do not grieve that the Blessed One has attained final extinction! We gain independence. That old man kept on telling us: ‘It is proper that you should act like this, you should not act like this.’ From now on that is behind us and we can do as we like.

This episode also comes up at the first saṅgīti, a term perhaps best translated “communal recitation” (instead of “council”). Accounts of this episode have been preserved in a range of different Vinayas, as follows:

- the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya extant in Chinese translation,
- the *Vinayamātrkā extant in Chinese translation, presumably representing the Haimavata tradition,
- the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya extant in Chinese translation,
- the Mahiśāsaka Vinaya extant in Chinese translation,
- the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya extant in Chinese and Tibetan translation,
- the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya extant in Chinese translation,
- the Theravāda Vinaya extant in Pāli.

According to these canonical accounts, Mahākassapa conceived of the need to convene a saṅgīti in response to this episode. In other words, the event of the first saṅgīti is presented in the canonical sources as being from the outset related to the perceived need to ensure adherence to Vinaya rules and regulations.

The topic of adherence to Vinaya rules then takes central stage in the account of the actual proceedings in relation to a permission given by the Buddha, according to the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta and its Dīrgha-āgama parallel, that the minor rules can be abolished after his passing away.
According to the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya, the Buddha had even asked Ānanda to remind him of the need to abolish the minor rules himself before passing away. At the first saṅgīti Ānanda then has to face criticism for not having reminded the Buddha to do this.¹⁴ The other Vinayas, however, agree with the Mahāparinibbānasutta and its Dīrgha-āgama parallel that the Buddha had only given permission to abolish these rules, without suggesting that he had intended to do so himself.

The Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya reports Mahākassapa censuring Ānanda for not having ascertained which of the different rules fall into the category of those that can be abolished,¹⁵ as this raises the problem of different opinions about the categories of rules to which this permission can be applied. In the Mahīśāsaka and Sarvāstivāda Vinayas Mahākassapa similarly depicts different opinions monks might have on what the expression “minor rules” refers to.¹⁶ In the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, the (Haimavata?) *Vinayamātrkā, and the Theravāda Vinaya, once Ānanda has mentioned the Buddha’s permission to abolish the minor rules,¹⁷ this leads to an actual discussion among the assembled monks who propose different interpretations of the scope of the expression “minor rules”.¹⁸

The Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya reports such a discussion regarding the scope of the minor rules to be abolished taking place after the completion of the first saṅgīti. This discussion involves a group of a thousand monks who had not participated in the gathering. After recording a range of different opinions on which rules should be abolished, comparable to the differences reported in the other Vinayas, the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya continues with a radical suggestion voiced by the infamous group of six monks. This group of six monks is a recurrent trope in Vinaya literature, responsible for all kinds of mischief. According to the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya, the group of six made the following suggestion:

Elders, if the Blessed One were alive he would abolish all [rules] completely.¹⁹

The group of six come up in the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya again in relation to the same minor rules. Still during the lifetime of the Buddha they reportedly objected against the inclusion of these minor rules in the recitation of the monastic code of rules.²⁰ A similar objection by the group of six against the recitation of the minor rules is reported in a range of other Vinayas.²¹ Perhaps this incident led to an association of the group of six with the motif of the minor rules in the first saṅgīti account as found in the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya.

Even leaving aside this blatant suggestion found in the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya only, a lack of agreement among the monks concerning the scope of the minor rules to be abolished is not a light matter. It involves different conceptions of the scope of the code of monastic rules, pātimokkha/prātimokṣa, that is to serve as the foundation for the monastic community.

The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, the (Haimavata?) *Vinayamātrkā, and the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya continue after their report of the successful completion of the first saṅgīti with a discussion between Mahākassapa and the monk Purāṇa, who had not participated in the gathering. Purāṇa also features in the Theravāda Vinaya, which reports that, on being asked to adopt the first saṅgīti’s recital, he replies that he
prefers to remember the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* in the way he has heard it himself.\textsuperscript{22} The Dhammaguptaka *Vinaya*, the (Haimavata?) *Vinayamātrkā*, and the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* report that Purāṇa is not aware of, or even refuses to accept, that the Buddha had withdrawn certain special allowances made during a period of famine.\textsuperscript{23} Thus here the problem, which the *saṅgīti* is meant to avoid, actually manifests, namely discord regarding the rules to be followed after the Buddha’s demise, thereby endangering the harmonious continuity of the Buddhist monastic tradition.\textsuperscript{24}

**Saṅgīti and Communal Harmony**

According to different *Vinayas*, at the suggestion of Mahākassapa the decision was taken by the assembled participants of the first *saṅgīti* that no rules should be abolished and no new rules be promulgated. When evaluated in its narrative context, this decision is only natural. A central concern behind the performance of a *saṅgīti* is to affirm communal harmony.\textsuperscript{25} The same concern finds explicit expression in the concluding section of the different codes of the monastic rules, *pātimokkha*, which enjoins that all of the assembled monastics should train in concord in these rules, without dispute.\textsuperscript{26} Thus a disagreement about the scope of the code of the monastic rules, to be recited every observance day (*uposatha*) by the members of a monastic community in affirmation of their agreement to train in these rules, needs to be avoided at all cost. How could monastics be expected to recite in harmony if they did not first of all agree on the scope of what is to be recited? Discord in this respect carries with it the potential of *saṅghabheda*, a schism in the monastic community. This is the exact opposite of what the first *saṅgīti* set out to achieve.

The *Sāmagāma*-sutta and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel report that, after the leader of the Jains had passed away, his monks began to quarrel among each other. The loss of communal harmony then caused the lay followers to become dissatisfied. The relevant passage in the *Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Sāmagāma-sutta* proceeds as follows:

> Not long after his death the disciples of the Niganṭha Nātaputta had broken up into factions and there was no communal harmony … the white-clothed disciples of Niganṭha Nātaputta who were living the household life were all dissatisfied with these [monastic] disciples of the Niganṭha Nātaputta.\textsuperscript{27}

Quarrel among the monastic community leading to dissatisfaction among the lay followers is a dire prospect for Jain as well as Buddhist monastics. Their mendicant lifestyle makes both monastic traditions rather sensitive to dissatisfaction among their respective lay followers and the potential loss of their support.\textsuperscript{28}

In order to prevent communal disharmony and its dire repercussions, the assembled participants of the first *saṅgīti* would have found themselves forced to find a solution enabling them to establish communal concord on the basis of common adherence to the same set of rules. In fact the decision not to abolish any existing rule and not to allow for new rules to be promulgated just follows a precedent set according to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* by the Buddha himself. The passage in question reports that one of several principles preventing decline set forth by him was precisely that existing rules should not be abolished and new rules should not be established.\textsuperscript{29}
Sarvāstivāda Vinaya account of the first saṅgīti explicitly draws attention to this parallelism. According to its report, when Mahākassapa proposed that it would be best not to abolish any of the rules and not to promulgate new rules, he explicitly referred to the Buddha’s teaching of such a way of procedure as one of seven principles that will prevent the decline of the monastic community.\(^{30}\)

**The Liberating Teachings vis-à-vis the Rules**

The Sāmagāma-sutta and its Madhyama-āgama parallel not only provide a background for the decision taken according to the different Vinayas at the first saṅgīti with their depiction of the quarrelling Jains; they also present a contrast to this decision. This contrast emerges with the Buddha’s reaction to the report of the quarrel among the Jains. This reaction emphasizes the bodhipakkhiyā dhammā as the core of the teaching, concord in which will prevent the arising of quarrel in the Buddhist community.\(^{31}\) These are:

- the four establishments of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna),
- the four right efforts (sammappadhāna),
- the four bases for supernormal ability (iddhipāda),
- the five faculties (indriya),
- the five powers (bala),
- the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga),
- the noble eightfold path (ariyo atthaṅgiko maggo).

The Pāsādika-sutta and its Dīrgha-āgama parallel similarly recommend concord on this set of mental qualities and practices conducive to awakening as what will prevent a loss of communal harmony after the Buddha’s demise.\(^{32}\) The same concern to maintain communal harmony in contrast to the quarrelling Jains informs the Saṅgīti-sutta and its parallels.\(^{33}\) The exposition given in this discourse concerns predominantly aspects of the teaching, the Dharma; matters of monastic rule and conduct only play a minor role.

In this way the Sāmagāma-sutta, the Pāsādika-sutta, and the Saṅgīti-sutta, together with their parallels, present a broader vision of the foundation for concord, which covers various practices that purify the mind. Although these of course require establishing a basis in morality, they are not concerned with adherence to moral conduct alone.\(^{34}\)

A discourse in the Aṅguttara-nikāya and its Saṃyukta-āgama parallel report that a monk in front of the Buddha declared his inability to train in the whole set of regulations covered in the monastic code of rules.\(^{35}\) The Buddha in reply suggests that the monk should just dedicate himself to the three trainings in higher virtue, the higher mind, and higher wisdom. This pragmatic reply is significant for appreciating the importance given to the rules in early Buddhist thought. The importance of virtue, sīla, has its proper place as the first of the three trainings, building a foundation for the higher mind and higher wisdom. Nevertheless, observance of the rules is clearly
seen as subordinate to the overarching aim of cultivating the higher mind and higher wisdom, that is, tranquillity and insight.\textsuperscript{36}

A set of three discourses in the \textit{Aṅguttara-nikāya} and their parallels in the \textit{Samyukta-āgama} go so far as to indicate that someone who has fulfilled the higher training in virtue could still incur breaches of the minor rules, in fact the same holds even for someone who has fulfilled the training in the higher mind.\textsuperscript{37}

The danger of mistaking the means of moral conduct for being the goal comes up for explicit comment in the \textit{Mahāsāropama-sutta} and its \textit{Ekottarika-āgama} parallel. According to both versions, to mistake accomplishment in virtue, \textit{sīla}, as the goal would be comparable to a person who mistakes the bark or else the leaves of a tree for being its heartwood.\textsuperscript{38} Having taken only the bark or the leaves from the tree, this person will be unable to carry out the task to be accomplished with the help of heartwood. Needless to say, the main task to be accomplished from the normative viewpoint of early Buddhist thought is awakening. For progress to awakening a discourse in the \textit{Udāna} then recommends avoiding the two extremes of either taking rules and observances to be the essence of the holy life or else seeing no fault in sensuality.\textsuperscript{39} Reaching the first level of awakening in turn entails precisely the overcoming of the fetter of dogmatic adherence to rules and observances.\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{Mahākassapa and Ānanda at the First \textit{Saṅgīti}}

Whereas the emphasis in the above discourses is on concord regarding the liberating teachings as a whole, with the first \textit{saṅgīti} an increasing emphasis on firm adherence to the rules sets in. This exemplifies a theme that runs through the entire \textit{saṅgīti} account, particularly evident in the contrast set between Mahākassapa and Ānanda. In the early discourses the former Brahmin Mahākassapa stands out in particular as a devoted adherent to ascetic practices and thus naturally functions as an emblem of an attitude that gives particular importance to aspects of moral conduct.\textsuperscript{41}

A discourse in the \textit{Samyutta-nikāya} and its parallels showcase Mahākassapa as being so devoted to his ascetic conduct that he is unwilling to give it up even on being explicitly invited by the Buddha to do so.\textsuperscript{42} This stands in a telling contrast to the \textit{Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta} and its parallel, which report the Buddha making the explicit point that he was considerably less ascetic in his conduct than some of his disciples.\textsuperscript{43}

In the accounts of the first \textit{saṅgīti} Mahākassapa and the attitude he embodies take precedence over Ānanda who, in spite of being the Buddha’s personal attendant who had memorized the teachings, finds himself being demoted and criticized in various ways. The \textit{Vinaya} accounts of the first \textit{saṅgīti} report that Mahākassapa at first did not even include Ānanda in the gathering. According to one of the parallels to the \textit{Mahāparinibbāna-sutta}, Mahākassapa explained:

\begin{quote}
Ānanda is [like] a lay person. I am afraid that, being with covetousness in his mind, he will not recite the discourses completely.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

By comparing Ānanda to a lay person, he is implicitly presented as not living up to the ideal of a real monk as conceived by the participants of the first \textit{saṅgīti}, and this in turn puts into question his potential contribution to the first \textit{saṅgīti} by reciting the
discourses. According to the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya, in reply to the suggestion by other monks to let Ānanda be part of the assembly, Mahākassapa refused:

No! A person in training like him entering among the community of those powerful and virtuous ones who are beyond training is like letting a jackal enter among a pride of lions.\(^{45}\)

Although not necessarily in such stark terms, the different Vinaya accounts of the first saṅgīti agree in drawing a pronounced contrast between these two disciples. This contrast may well reflect an actual conflict between two contending factions in the monastic community after the Buddha’s decease, with the more ascetically inclined faction emerging as the winning party in the accounts of the first saṅgīti.\(^{46}\)

The shift in attitude that emerges out of this contrast concords with the agenda of the first saṅgīti, reportedly convened by Mahākassapa to ensure adherence to Vinaya rules and regulations. This in turn forms part of an attempt to shore up institutional authority and achieve maximum acceptability in the eyes of public opinion, in order to safeguard the continuity of support for the monastic community.

**The Legacy of the First Saṅgīti and Theravāda Monasticism**

The decision to curtail the possibility of any adaptation of the rules reflects not only a shift of perspective by foregrounding monastic discipline over other aspects of the Buddha’s teaching, it also involves to some degree a shift of perspective in relation to these very rules. According to a basic pattern evident in the different Vinayas, the Buddha is on record for promulgating rules only in reply to a particular problem that had arisen.\(^{47}\) Often enough rules given in order to address a particular issue then turn out to be insufficient to settle the matter at hand, whereupon the Buddha is shown to amend them by changing their formulation or making additional stipulations. In short, the Vinaya narratives on the promulgation of rules present these as *ad hoc* regulations taken in response to specific situations, always open to amendments if the situation should require this.

The in itself natural decision taken at the first saṅgīti to consider these *ad hoc* regulations to be unalterable law that admits no longer of any change moves Buddhist law closer to ancient Indian brahminical attitudes towards law as something invested with a timeless status.\(^{48}\) In this way the first saṅgīti marks the onset of an attitude that has its basis in ritualistic tendencies prevalent in the ancient Indian setting, whereby rules originally meant to support the monastic life acquire such importance that they become the timeless essence of the monastic life.

The decision reportedly taken at the first saṅgīti has had considerable impact on the implementation of Vinaya rules and their observance in the Theravāda tradition in particular, where strict adherence to the rules in the way these are found in the Pāli Vinaya has become a core element of normative monastic identity.\(^{49}\)

The Dhāpavamsa (4.6) defines the expression *theravāda* as a referent to the sayings that were collected by the elders at the first saṅgīti:

> The collection of the teaching and the discipline [was made] by the five hundred elders, this collection made by the elders is called *theravāda*.\(^{50}\)
A similar definition can be found in the *Mahāvamsa* (3.40). In other words, for Theravāda monastics the Pāli *Vinaya*, held to have been recited in this form at the first *sāṅgīti*, forms the core of their monastic identity, and this often to such an extent that it can overshadow the other component of the definition of *theravāda* in the *Dīpavamsa*: the Dhamma. Unsurprisingly this sense of monastic identity by foregrounding the *Vinaya* comes in close association with the decision enshrined in the first *sāṅgīti*’s account to keep the rules unaltered and not permit any change or amendment. The resultant attitude in traditional Theravāda monastic circles finds a succinct summarisation in a statement reportedly made by the venerable Ajāhn Buddhadāsa at the sixth *sāṅgīti* in Burma in 1956. He explains that Theravāda monastics are

against the revoking, changing or altering of the original even in its least form … we have no warrant of addition in such a manner that would make Buddhism develop according to [the] influence of the … locality, or to any other circumstances … we are afraid of doing such a thing … by means of this very cowardice, Theravada is still remaining in its pristine form of the original doctrine. May we be in cowardice in this way forever.

**Conclusion**

The convening of the first *sāṅgīti* takes its motivation from the perceived need to ensure strict adherence to the rules promulgated by the Buddha. Faced by the permission to abrogate the minor rules, the monks assembled at the first *sāṅgīti* reportedly find themselves unable to determine which rules this permission refers to. In view of the central purpose of the first *sāṅgīti* to ensure communal harmony and avoid discord in the monastic community, it seems almost inevitable that the decision taken in this situation was to avoid any change and pledge adherence to the code of rules as received without allowing any alteration.

Although in itself a natural development, this decision involves a change of attitude towards what at the outset were *ad hoc* regulations to deal with specific situations, amenable to adjustment and modification if this should be required. The resultant legal conservatism particularly evident in traditional monastic Theravāda circles needs to be understood in the light of its historical roots as the final result of what originally appears to have been mainly an attempt to maintain communal harmony after the demise of the Buddha.

**Abbreviations**

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<tr>
<td>AN</td>
<td>Aṅguttara-nikāya</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>Derge edition</td>
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<tr>
<td>DĀ</td>
<td>Dīrgha-āgama (T 1)</td>
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<td>Dhp</td>
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<td>DN</td>
<td>Dīgha-nikāya</td>
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EĀ  Ekottarika-āgama (T 125)
It  Itivuttaka
MĀ  Madhyama-āgama (T 26)
Mil Milindapañha
MN  Majjhima-nikāya
Mp  Manorathapūraṇī
Q  Peking edition
SĀ  Samyukta-āgama (T 99)
SĀ²  Samyukta-āgama (T 100)
SN  Sāmyutta-nikāya
Sn  Sutta-nipāta
T  Taishō edition
Ud  Udāna
Vin  Vinayapiṭaka
Vism  Visuddhimagga

References


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1 Uv 30.22, Bernhard 1965: 397: sukhaṃ saṃghasva saṃmagrī (with its Tibetan counterpart in Uv 30.23, Beckh 1911: 116, or Uv 30.24, Zongtse 1990: 336: dge 'dun rnam gs mi thun pa bde). Similarly worded counterparts can be found in Dhp 194: sukhaṃ saṃghasva saṃmagrī (cf. also AN 10.40 at AN V 77.1, It 19 at It 12.8, and Vin II 205.7), and the Patna Dharmapada 68, Cone 1989: 121: sukkhaṃ saṃghasva saṃmagrī; cf. also T 212 at T IV 755b29 and T 213 at T IV 794c8.

2 DĀ 2 at T I 128c14 (the translation is based on adopting a variant). Parallels to this type of statement can be found in DN 16 at DN II 162.29, a Sanskrit fragment version, Waldschmidt 1951: 422.6 (§48.10), T 5 at T 173c27, T 6 at T I 189b25, and T 7 at T I 206c20 (in this version a group of monks have such thoughts); cf. also Durt 1980. On the lack of significance of the circumstance that the Mahāpārṇībhāna narrative does not explicitly refer to the first sangītī cf. Anālayo 2011a: 863f note 43.


4 T 1428 at T XXII 966b18.

5 T 1463 at T XXIV 817c17; for a discussion of the school affiliation cf. Anālayo 2011b: 270f note 11.

6 T 1425 at T XXII 490a25.

7 T 1421 at T XXII 190b24.

8 T 1451 at T XXIV 401a19 and its Tibetan parallel in Waldschmidt 1951: 423,7 (§48.10).

9 T 1435 at T XXIII 445c29.

10 Vin II 284.26; for a comparative survey of several of these versions cf. Kumar 2010. In what follows my study focuses on these Vinaya accounts; a study with translations of a range of different accounts of the first sangītī can be found in Przyluski 1926; for English translations of several Vinaya versions cf. Anuruddha et al. 2008, for a translation from the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya cf. Rockhill 1883/1907: 148–161; and for a comparative study cf. also, e.g., Suzuki 1904, Bareau 1955: 1–30, and de La Vallée Poussin 1976: 2–29.

11 As already pointed out by von Hinüber 1997: 73 in relation to the Theravāda version, “this remark is actually the reason why Mahākāsapa decides to convoke the first council.”

12 Bareau 1955: 4 comments that, even if this episode should be purely fictive, “il n’en est pas moins certain qu’il reflète une situation et des préoccupations très réelles”; namely that “l’unité de la Communauté était menacée par certaines tendances laxistes.”

13 DN 16 at DN II 154,16 and its parallel DĀ 2 at T I 26a28. Gnanarama 1997: 114 comments that “the Buddha’s intention was to hand over the controlling power — to the Sangha themselves. He wanted to create an atmosphere amicable for free administration and growth of the dispensation.”

14 T 1425 at T XXII 492b4.

15 T 1451 at T XXIV 405b3 and D 6 da 307b6 or Q 1035 ne 291a5.


17 The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, T 1428 at T XXII 967b12, the (Haimavata?) *Vinayamātrkā, T 1463 at T XXIV 818b3, and the Theravāda Vinaya, Vin II 287,30. Franke 1908: 13 notes that DN 16 at DN II 154,24 continues by reporting that the Buddha, about to pass away, asked the assembled monks if they had any doubt or uncertainty about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, or the path, encouraging them to have it clarified now while he was still alive. Franke notes that this would presumably have been an occasion for Ānanda to have the scope of the expression “minor rules” clarified. A similar invitation to get any doubts clarified can be found in the Sanskrit fragment parallel, Waldschmidt 1951: 390,21 (§42.2), as well as in DĀ 2 at T I 26b1, T 5 at T I 172c7 (here the
doubts are only about the scriptures), T 6 at T I 188b4, and T 7 at T I 204c7 (which just mentions doubt in general, without further specifications). Another point worth noting is that in the Theravāda Vinaya Ānanda’s mentioning of this permission by the Buddha is preceded by his recitation of the discourses where, had he recited DN 16 in full, the monks would already have been informed of the Buddha’s injunction; a narrative inconsistency already noted by de La Vallée-Poussin 1976: 14. This problem does not hold for the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, as in its account Ānanda’s recitation of the discourses takes place only afterwards. The *Vinayamātrkā has the same temporal sequence as the Theravāda Vinaya, in that here the recitation of the discourses takes place before Ānanda mentions the Buddha’s permission to abolish the minor rules. This does not result in the same degree of inner inconsistency as in the Theravāda Vinaya, however, since in the *Vinayamātrkā the recitation of the discourses is not done by Ānanda, but rather involves the whole assembly of monks and Ānanda’s role is only to be interrogated in case something has been forgotten; cf. T 1463 at T XXIV 818a12. Since his mentioning of the Buddha’s permission occurs right after the recitation of the texts has been completed, it falls naturally within the role assigned to him in the account of the first saṅgīti in the *Vinayamātrkā to mention what has not been recalled by the other assembled monks.

Different views on the scope of the minor rules can also be found in later texts of the Pāli tradition: Mil 144.4 takes the expression to refer just to the dukkata type of offence, whereas Mp II 348.14 considers all rules except for the four pārājikas to be minor rules. Vism 11.34 correlates the minor rules with the rules of behaviour, abhisamācārika sīla, followed by indicating that the rules of behaviour correspond to regulations found in the Khandhakas of the Vinaya.

The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, T 1428 at T XXII 685c11 (pācittiya/pātayantika no. 72), the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, T 1421 at T XXII 41b9 (no. 10), the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, T 1442 at T XXXII 775a27 (no. 10) and D 3 cha 276b4 or Q 1032 je 255b7, and the Theravāda Vinaya, Vin IV 143.6 (no. 72). An exception is the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya, T 1435 at T XXII 74b25 (no. 10), where according to the narrative introduction such an objection had been voiced just by a single monk who according to the Sarvāstivāda Vinayavibhāṣā, T 1440 at T XXVIII 526a1, was one of the group of six. The objection itself in all versions seems to reflect, as already pointed out by Dhirasake 1982/2007: 312, “one of the first attempts to get rid of some of the monastic regulations which had found a place in the code of the Pātimokkha.”

The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, T 1428 at T XXII 968c4, the (Haimavata?) *Vinayamātrkā, T 1463 at T XXIV 819a10, and the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, T 1421 at T XXII 191c25.

Tilakaratne 2000: 196 explains that “we need to view these acts of communal recitals as determined, first and foremost, by a very important communal requirement, namely, the assurance of the solidarity of the Saṅgha, as a group, to one way of behaviour (the Vinaya).” As noted by Nānatsita 2014: xxxviii, “the most important purpose of the fortnightly Pātimokkha recitation is assuring the unity of the Saṅgha.”

Tilakaratne 2000: 175 points out that “the fundamental purpose of … events described as saṅgīti is the assurance of the unity of the Buddhist monastic organization … the key activity was to recite together the Dhamma and the Vinaya … [which], first and foremost, was meant to be a public expression of one’s allegiance to the organisation which was represented by the Dhamma and the Vinaya.” Collins 1998: 447 summarizes the general spirit of early Buddhist monastic administration and law in the following way: “a community organizing its affairs by uncoerced vote rather than authoritarian fiat, and achieving (in aspiration, at least) a state of unanimous harmony.”

Dharmaguptaka, T 1429 at T XXII 1022b11, Kāsyapīya, T 1460 at T XXIV 665a19, Mahāsāṃghika, Tatia 1975: 36.2, Mahīśāsaka, T 1422 at T XXII 199c19, Mūlasarvāstivāda, Schmidt 1989: 92,9 (fol. 37R, this part has been omitted by Banerjee 1977), Sarvāstivāda, von Simson 2000: 258,9, and Theravāda, Pruitt and Norman 2001: 110,9; cf. also Pachow 1955: 214 and Schmidt 1989: 34f. In the words of Gombrich 1988: 110, “the pātimokkha ritual’s communal function … was the one thing which held the Saṅgha together.”

subsequent periods of Indian history “the divisiveness associated with sectarianism was much more 
severe among Jainas than among the Buddhists.”

Chakravarti 1987/1996: 62 explains that “since the laity provided for the saṅgha, they … often 
exercised their influence upon the saṅgha”, as a result of which “the conduct of the bhikkhu was 
ultimately shaped and moulded by the very society he had opted out of.” The ability of the laity to 
assert their influence results in particular, in the words of Findly 2002: 13, from “the renunciant 
being normally prohibited from using the cooking fire and from storing edibles, and being thus 
dependent on a daily round of door-to-door petitioning to procure his serving of cooked food.” 
Findly 2002: 18 adds that “this dependence on resources by the Buddhist renunciant is, in this way, 
curious: in spite of the fact that they are enjoined to live as islands unto themselves, as refuges unto 
themselves … they do indeed need others; they need donors to give them, on a continual basis, the 
material means” they require, resulting in in “the need for the petitioner to consider and maintain the 

DN 16 at DN II 77.3 (= AN 7.21 at AN IV 21.18), with similarly formulated counterparts in Sanskrit 
fragments, Waldschmidt 1951: 120.20 (§2.8), and in DĀ 2 at T I 11b29 and MĀ 142 at T I 649b16, 
all of which precede this injunction with another such principle that throws into relief the importance 
of communal harmony for preventing decline. The principle not to abolish any rule and not to 
promulgate new rules comes up again with positive connotations in the Theravāda Vinaya in the 
narrative introduction to nissagāyita pācittiya no. 15, according to which the Buddha praised Upasena 
for having precisely this attitude; cf. Vin III 231,14.

14 T 1435 at T XXIII 450a22.
15 MN 104 at MN II 245.7 and MĀ 196 at T I 753c5; cf. also Gethini 1992: 233f.
16 DN 29 at DN III 127.15 and DĀ 17 at T I 74a14.
17 DN 33 at DN III 210.19 and its parallels in Sanskrit fragments, Stache-Rosen 1968: 44 (v to x), DĀ 9 
at T I 49c6, and T 12 at T I 227a23. The similarity in purpose between the Saṅgīti-sutta and the first 
saṅgīti has already been noted by von Hinüber 1996/1997: 32; cf. also Peoples: 2012: 27–33, 
Shravak 2012: 240f; and Anālayo 2014: 15–49.
18 Dhirasekera 1982/2007: 227 highlights “the relatively secondary importance which the Buddha 
attached to discipline in its mere outward form in contrast to the more fundamental teachings of the 
discipline and their practice in the religious life”; cf. also Guruge 1970: 11.
19 Whereas AN 3.83 at AN I 230.17 speaks of over hundred and fifty rules, perhaps reflecting an early 
count of the Theravāda pātimokkha still in evolution, its parallel SĀ 829 at T II 212c11 instead mentions 
two hundred and fifty rules; cf. also, e.g., Dutt 1924/1996: 75f, Law 1933: 21, Bhagvat 1939: 64, 
discourse preserved in a Sanskrit fragment uddāna can be found in Pischel 1904: 1139 (IIla.1).
20 In this context it may also be worthwhile to note a recurrent pattern emerging from a comparative 
study of the Majjhima-nikāya in the light of its parallels, where the Pāli discourses have an apparent 
predilection for commending seeing fear in even the slightest fault when training in the precepts, 
aṃmatteyyu vajjeṣu bhayaḍassāvī, saṃmādāya sikkhasu sikkhāpadesu, whereas their Mādhyama-
āgama parallels rather place emphasis on bodily, verbal, and mental purity; cf. Anālayo 2011a: 718.
21 SĀ 820 at T II 210c2, SĀ 821 at T II 210c28, and SĀ 822 at T II 211a24 envisage a breach of the 
minor rules possible for someone who has fulfilled the training in higher virtue, and for someone 
who has fulfilled the training in higher virtue as well as in the higher mind. The parallels AN 3.85 at 
AN I 232.22, AN 3.86 at AN I 233.38, and AN 3.87 at AN I 234.19 go a step further, since according to 
them a breach of the minor rules would be possible even for someone who has fulfilled the 
training in the higher virtue, the higher mind, and higher wisdom, i.e., for an arahant.
22 MN 29 at MN I 193.21 compares this to the bark of the tree; its parallel EĀ 43.4 at T II 759b11 
compares the same to the tree’s leaves (adopting a variant reading without an additional reference to 
twigs. In MN 28 the taking of the leaves of the tree rather illustrates mistaking gains and renown for 
being the goal.
23 Ud 6.8 at Ud 71.29; the parallel T 212 at T IV 737c17 seems to be based on a similarly worded Indic 
original not entirely understood by the Chinese translator.
24 Cf., e.g., Sn 231 and its counterpart in the Mahāvastu., Senart 1882: 292.3; on the problem posed by 
this fetter being quite relevant for Buddhist practitioners (and not only for non-Buddhists) cf. 
The listings of outstanding disciples, AN 1.14 at AN I 23.18 and EĀ 4.2 at T II 557b8, reckon Mahākassapa as foremost in the undertaking of ascetic practices. His eminence in this respect is also recorded in the Divyāvadāna, Cowell and Neill 1886: 395,23, and in the Mahāvastu, Senart 1882: 64,14.

SN 16.5 at SN II 202,16, SĀ 1141 at T II 301c13, SĀ² 116 at T II 416b15, EĀ 12.6 at T II 570b6, and EĀ 41.5 at T II 746a24. Tilakaratne 2005: 236 comments that his behaviour “in this context is not typical of a disciple of the Buddha. Usually … the disciple would abide by the request of the Master.”

SN 16.5 at SN II 202,16, SĀ 1141 at T II 301c13, SĀ² 116 at T II 416b15, EĀ 12.6 at T II 570b6, and EĀ 41.5 at T II 746a24. Tilakaratne 2005: 236 comments that his behaviour “in this context is not typical of a disciple of the Buddha. Usually … the disciple would abide by the request of the Master.”

T 5 at T I 175b11.

T 1425 at T XXII 491a22; my translation is based on an emendation of the term for “jackal”.


Cf., e.g., MN 65 at MN I 445,7 and MĀ 194 at T I 749a13, or else Vin III 9,28 and T 1425 at T XXII 227c2; cf. also T 2121 at T LIII 70a11. In the words of von Hinüber 1995: 7, “rules are prescribed only after an offence has been committed. Thus rules are derived from experience and based on the practical need to avoid certain forms of behavior in future. This means at the same time that the cause for a rule is always due to the wrong behavior of a certain person, and consequently there is no [pre-]existent system of Buddhist law.”

Verardi 1996: 216 sums up that “the Veda has been considered as a holy text, (self)-revealed and … perceived as eternal and apauruseya, i.e. not composed by any human author.” Lariviere 1997/2004: 612 explains that, however much it may reflect current customs and be influenced by them, “the idiom of all the dharma literature is one of eternity and timelessness … dharma literature clings to the claim that all of its provision can be traced directly or indirectly to the Veda, the very root of dharma”; cf. also Lubin 2007: 95: “the Dharmaśāstra has been consciously constructed in such a way as to subsume everything within an overarching system unified (at least theoretically) by dependence on the Veda.” On the general influence of the brahminical heritage on early Buddhist monasticism cf. also Oberlies 1997 and on the relationship between Dharmaśāstra and the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya Voyce 2007.

Tilakaratne 2005: 245 sees the first saṅgīti’s decision to disallow any change of the rules as expressing attitudes that “seem to have had tremendous influence in determining the subsequent history”, representing “the formal beginning of the tradition that subsequently came to be known as” Theravāda. Tilakaratne 2005: 252f notes that for the Theravāda monastic tradition “strict adherence to Vinaya has been seen as its hallmark … [the] decision not to abolish any of the rules prescribed by the Buddha and not to formulate any new rules crystallizes this attitude.” Tilakaratne 2005: 254 concludes that “the end result of this emphasis was a monastic organization which lay more emphasis on the letter than on the spirit of the Vinaya.”


Geiger 1958: 19,20. Bond 1982: ix explains that “Theravada Buddhism is a ‘religion of the book.’ It has at its center a body of authoritative scripture, the Tipitaka. This … scripture constitutes the foundation and source of the Theravada tradition.” Gombrich 1988: 3 similarly points out that the “hallmarks of Theravāda Buddhism are the use of Pali as its main sacred language and dependence on the Pali version of the Buddhist Canon as its sacred scripture.” On the significance of the term theravāda cf. in more detail Anālayo 2013.

Pace Sobisch 2010: 243, who assumes that in legal matters “the fact that the saṅgha has autonomy and the authority to decide the matter is probably unchallenged”; cf. also Huxley 1996: 157.

Quoted in Seeger 2006/2008: 158 note 11.