

The Mass Murderer who owes his Existence to Ignorance of Pali

Richard Gombrich

The Buddhist monastic rule against killing a human being is obviously important, indeed fundamental. But the story of how the Buddha first came to pronounce it is inconsistent and implausible. On the one hand, it occurs in every version of the Buddhist legal code, the Vinaya, and therefore also in commentaries on those texts; on the other hand, it is hardly ever mentioned elsewhere. This article shows that the story came about through a misunderstanding of a phrase which we find in the Pali version of the rule. This misunderstanding is already present in the Pali canonical auto-commentary, so it is very ancient. Since they repeat virtually the same story, this also proves that parallel versions of the Vinaya preserved in Chinese may well depend on the Pali version (or something extremely close to it). On the other hand, evidence preserved in the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya takes us back further towards the original, quite different, story of how the rule itself came into being. But even this presupposes the wording of the rule which is preserved, albeit with its meaning unrecognised, in the Pali Canon.

I. General Introduction

This is a study of a Buddhist monastic rule. It shows how misunderstanding of a tiny detail, the failure to recognise a single word in a Pali text, has had massive consequences, of several kinds, for the Buddhist tradition. I think this

is so important that Buddhist experts must forgive me if, in order to reach a wide audience, I spell out details which they are entitled to consider elementary.

The most ancient Buddhist texts have always been divided into two categories. One establishes rules for Buddhist monks and nuns, the Saṅgha. Both the texts containing the rules, and the body of rules themselves, are known as the Vinaya, which can be translated “the Discipline”. In the other category are the rest of the Buddha’s teachings, which are conveyed in a huge number of texts, most of them called suttas.

These texts are preserved, in whole or in part, in several languages, but the oldest surviving version is in Pali, a language derived from Sanskrit. Pali is a form of Middle Indo-Aryan, also known as Prakrit, a family of languages descended from Sanskrit. It is not identical with what the Buddha spoke himself, but is not very distant from it. The words and sound changes with which this article is concerned could well occur in another form of Middle Indo-Aryan in which the same text could have existed (see below), but this would barely affect my argument.

Most of the Pali Vinaya has been translated only once: into English, by I.B. Horner. Her translation is admirable as pioneering work, but does contain quite a few mistakes, some of them serious. A commentary on the Vinaya was written, probably in the fifth century AD in Sri Lanka, in the Pali language. Almost none of it has been translated. Though it is perhaps seven or eight centuries later than the text it comments on, it is based on much older material and must be taken into account.

A substantial section of the Vinaya is concerned with the rules of personal conduct for monks and nuns. Those for monks come before those for nuns.

The rules are grouped by gravity of the offense, and the groups are arranged in descending order of gravity. Thus the gravest offenses a monk¹ can commit come at the beginning. There are four offenses in this category, and those who commit them are called *pārājika*; they are debarred from the Saṅgha and automatically revert to lay status. The several views of the etymology of *pārājika* need not concern us.² Horner translates it “one who is defeated”.

¹Since all the material dealt with in this paper concerns monks, from here on I use only the masculine pronoun. The fact that nuns too are forbidden to kill etc. is not relevant to my argument.

²For an excellent discussion of the meaning and reference of *pārājika*, see Juo-Hsüeh Shih, pp.126ff.

The presentation and discussion of the rules in the Vinaya follow a set pattern. A story is told about some episode concerning a monk or monks which has a bad conclusion; often it is that the laity complain about it and wonder whether the monks are worthy of their support. The Buddha gets to hear about it, and often questions witnesses. Then he enunciates a rule, mentioning under which category of gravity it falls. This is not necessarily the end of it. Sometimes there follow one or more subsidiary episodes which lead the Buddha to add to or otherwise modify the rule in some way, until it reaches its final form. Then there is a section of text called the *pada-vañṇanā*, “explanation of the wording”, which in the style of a commentary explains each word of the rule with synonyms and examples.

This is a code of law, not of ethics, and that distinction is often crucial. The most basic and widely used Buddhist ethical code begins with the general undertakings to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and lying; the four *pārājika* rules deal with the same four areas but each with a much more specific focus. The third *pārājika* listed and discussed is the taking of life. Whereas the general undertaking is not to take any life, the *pārājika* only concerns human life.

A monk can only be guilty of an offense if he knows that it is an offense and admits to having done it. This admission is made to the Buddha. Thus madness is always a defense; and a first offender can never be punished, because when he acted there was no rule yet.

It follows from the above that the exposition of each *pārājika* rule must deal with an occasion on which a monk or monks, for the first time on record, did something which the Buddha decided was incompatible with being a Saṅgha member, so that he enunciated a rule against it. In our particular case, the third *pārājika*, the story must therefore show that one day a monk or monks took human life without thinking that they were doing wrong. A moment’s reflection will show us that there will not be all that many cases in which a monk may take human life while thinking that he is doing no wrong.

II. The strange story of the origin of the third *pārājika*.

The story which leads up to the enactment of the third *pārājika*³ is also to be found, with minor variants, elsewhere in the Canon: *Samyutta Nikāya* sutta 54.9

³Vin III, 68-71.

at SN V 320,7 to 322,13. Both versions are discussed in a fine recent article by Bhikkhu Anālayo, “Asubha Gone Overboard, On the Mass Suicide of Monks in Discourse and Vinaya Literature”.⁴ Anālayo kindly allowed me to provide an “Addendum” to his article in which I cast doubt on the coherence and plausibility of this story; but here I go much further. My article builds on certain parts of Anālayo’s and could not have been written without it.

The Vinaya story goes as follows. The Buddha teaches monks a form of meditation which is always known as the meditation (*bhāvanā*) on asubha. Asubha is hard to translate: it covers a range which includes unpleasant, nasty, unattractive, inauspicious, impure. In this context it refers to taking a negative view of the human body, beginning with one’s own, and it can be seen as a counterweight to sexual desire. After giving this teaching, the Buddha goes into a solitary retreat for a fortnight.

The monks who set about practising this new form of meditation get so nauseated by their bodies that they start killing themselves and each other. Many of them then approach a certain individual and ask him to kill them, in return for which he can have from each the bowl and robe which are normally a monk’s only possessions. He agrees to this bargain, stabbing them with a knife. We shall have more to say about the individual’s identity below. His name varies in the texts.

The hired murderer goes to a river to wash the blood off his knife, and begins to regret what he has done. But he is visited by a female spirit from the retinue of Māra. Māra is the personification of Death and Desire, who on other occasions appears to the Buddha and tries to tempt him to die.⁵ This follower of Māra tells the murderer that he has earned great merit because he has “taken across those who had not crossed”. Life in this world, *saṃsāra*, is often compared to a body of water one has to cross. As the commentary partly explains, for a Buddhist, crossing it means attaining enlightenment, so that one is not reborn; but the wicked spirit is here confusing that with crossing it simply by dying. The murderer is misled, and embarks on a vast slaughter of monks lasting several days. Going from cell to cell, he says, “Who has not crossed? Whom am I to bring across?” The monks who had not yet attained dispassion were terrified, but those who had attained it (i.e., were enlightened) kept calm. However, the text does not tell us that the murderer killed only those in the former category,

⁴JOCBS vol.7, 2014, pp.11-55.

⁵DN II, 104 and 112; Padhāna Sutta (= Sutta-nipāta 446 ff.).

and indeed the commentary implies the opposite, for it says that all five hundred monks were killed.⁶

Emerging from his retreat, the Buddha finds that there are now far fewer monks, and asks why. He is told what has happened. He does not respond directly, but asks that all monks living in that area should assemble. When they do, he teaches them how to concentrate on their breathing, a form of meditation which he says is calming and destroys all wrong states of mind. Only after teaching this does he get back to the problem at hand and ask if it is true that monks have been killing themselves and each other. When they confirm it, the Buddha makes his stereotyped denunciation of wrongdoing, ending as usual with the new rule. Horner translates it: “Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a human being of life, or should look about so as to be his knife-bringer, he is also one who is defeated, he is not in communion.”⁷

The text goes on to describe another, unconnected, episode in which some monks cause a man to die; in this case they do so by encouraging a layman who is ill to bring about his own death by indulging in an unhealthy diet. The Buddha then extends the rule so that it specifically includes commending death, but the first part of it (down to “knife-bringer” in Horner’s version) is unaltered. At this point,⁸ Horner says that “for lack of any better interpretation” she is following the commentary. But alas, she has misunderstood the commentary. This however hardly matters, as the commentary, which offers two possible interpretations, has not understood the passage either.⁹

There are thus three ways in which one may commit the third *pārājika*. Firstly, one may simply murder a human being. Secondly one may seek a person or thing to commit such a murder. Thirdly, one may kill someone by commending death to them so that they cause the death themselves. In this paper I shall be mainly concerned with the second form of the offense. The third will be briefly discussed at the end of this paper.

If we leave the third form of the offense aside, the text that has come down to us cannot possibly be correct. When the Buddha pronounces a new Vinaya rule, he always addresses it to the person (a monk or nun) who has done the act which he now declares to be an offense. But that is not what happens here. The person who,

⁶Sp. II, 401.

⁷Book of the Discipline I, p.123.

⁸Id., p.125, fn.2.

⁹See below; Sp. II, 441.

according to the story, did all the killing is not even a Buddhist (even if we shall see that there is a faint attempt to suggest that he is masquerading as one), is not present when the rule is pronounced, and cannot be within the Buddha's jurisdiction; those who persuaded him to set about the killing are presumably all dead!

There is another important consideration. In a monograph published on the website of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, www.ocbs.org,¹⁰ two monks of the Theravada tradition, Ven Sujato and Ven Brahmali, argue – to my mind convincingly – that the narratives given in the Pali Canon are mostly sober and coherent. Myths are clearly marked as such, but there is hardly any display of lurid imaginings. They write: “The early Buddhist texts are generally realistic and restrained in their portrayal of the Buddha and his environment, and the details do not seem unreasonable for what we know of the historical period and geographical area” (p.73).

III. Pali words misunderstood: why a silly story was invented.

So how did this nonsensical story come to be composed? The answer must be that a remembered text, including the rule against killing a human being, was misunderstood, and in an attempt to make sense of it the new material was invented.

The problem arose from the words which Horner translates “or should look about so as to be his knife-bringer”, *sattha-hāraṇaṃ vāssa pariyeseyya*. I must account for every detail, so let me clear the ground by saying that in the text:

- *vā* means “or” and serves to connect these words to the previous clause;
- *assa* is the genitive of a common pronoun and means “of him” or “for him”; *vā* and *assa* merge phonetically to form *vāssa*;
- *pariyeseyya* is the optative third person singular of the verb *pariyesati*, which means “look for, seek”. It is in the optative because its subject is the subject of the rule, namely a *pārājika* offender: “whatever monk ... should look for ...”.

¹⁰ Ven. Sujato and Ven. Brahmali, The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts, supplement to vol.5 of the JOCBS, 2014.

So what is still unclear boils down to *sattha-hāraḥ*, the thing or person which is being looked for.

We need help from another canonical text which is not telling the same story but uses the same vocabulary. Fortunately there is one: the *Puṇṇovāda sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya* sutta 145. In this text, the Buddha and the monk Puṇṇa are discussing the latter's intention to become a missionary in a remote region called Sunāparantaka, where they believe that people may well react to him with active hostility. They consider a series of possible reactions in ascending order of violence, culminating in the possibility that the locals will kill him. What, asks the Buddha, does Puṇṇa think of that?

He replies¹¹ that sometimes people feel such self-disgust that they *sattha-hāraḥ* pariyesanti: “they look for a *sattha-hāraḥ*.” He goes on: *Taṃ me idaṃ apariyitthaṃ*¹² *yeva sattha-hāraḥ* laddhaṃ. In Pali it is a passive sentence; a literal translation would be: “So this *satthahāraḥ* has been acquired by me even unlooked for.” The natural English would be in the active: “So I have acquired this *sattha-hāraḥ* without even looking for it.”

The word *hāraḥ*, the second half of the compound, is an adjective from the common verb *harati*, which basically means “to take, take away”. But other scholars ancient and modern besides Horner have given it the unlikely meaning of “bring”. They did this because they misunderstood *sattha*.

The grammar sets limits to how we can translate *sattha-hāraḥ*. It has to be the grammatical subject of the sentence, and the neuter pronoun *idaṃ* (“this”) agrees with it. Since it is neuter, not masculine or feminine, it cannot refer to a person. It must mean “thing which takes away life”. But can *sattha* mean “life”?

Sattha is a very common word meaning “weapon”, usually a cutting weapon like a knife or dagger, and in a context which concerns killing, it is natural to assume that someone – the murderer – is bringing (though not taking away!) a weapon. But this *sattha* is quite a different word, and because the misinterpretation of the passages that concern us is so ancient, this word *sattha* is not in any dictionary.¹³ However, that does not mean that our understanding of it is dubious or far-fetched.

¹¹MN III, 269.

¹²There is a variant reading *apariyittham*; this makes no difference at all.

¹³This is not strictly accurate, because in the PED it appears as a headword on p.674a, but the dictionary gives neither its meaning nor an example of its use; it only refers the reader to the entry for *vissattha*, which in turn contains nothing relevant. The PED has six headwords *sattha*; the others are however irrelevant here.

IV. So what did this part of the *pārājika* rule originally mean, and how do we know?

Pali is closely related to Sanskrit, and in particular Pali phonetics is related to Sanskrit phonetics in a regular way, which has been described by grammarians. Since Pali has fewer phonemes than Sanskrit, there are many instances where a Pali word is so constructed that it could come from more than one Sanskrit word, and we have to decide from the context which of the homophones is meant. Thus, for example, Pali *sutta* may be derived from Sanskrit *supta*, *sūtra* or *sūkta* – without any context, one cannot decide which.

Pali *sattha* “weapon” derives from Sanskrit *śastra*. In this case, however, *sattha* must derive from Sanskrit *śvasta*. The verbal root *śvas* means “breathe”, and by a normal derivation, its past passive participle, *śvasita*, can mean “breath”. Many Sanskrit past participles which are formed by adding –ta add –ita instead in Pali, and the opposite also occurs; for example, the Sanskrit root *vas* “to dwell” has Pali past participles both *vusita* and *vuttha*. So the extra –i- in the middle of the word is no problem. Therefore Pali *sattha-hāraṇam* would in Sanskrit be *śvasita-hāraṇam*. Both literally mean “taking away breath”. In Pali this is a very common, perhaps the commonest, way of referring to killing. In such a context the word most commonly used for breath is *pāṇa* (from Sanskrit *prāṇa*); for example that is the first word in what in English is usually referred to as “the first precept”, namely the undertaking not to kill.

Thus we should emend Horner’s translation of the rule to read: “Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a human being of life, or should look for something to take away a human being’s life-breath, ...” The second clause describes preparing to commit a murder.

In sum, then, my basic claim – which I believe to be an important discovery – is that where the third *pārājika* rule prohibits looking for something lethal, a means by which to murder someone, this has been misunderstood as looking for a person to do the killing, and this is the origin of the story which precedes the enunciation of the rule.

Note that there is no story here about the first form of the offense, just killing someone. This I shall show to be relevant to my final interpretation.

V. Where did the tradition go off the rails?

The earliest commentary on *sattha-hāraka* is at Vin III 73 in the *pada-vaṇṇanā* (word commentary) which immediately follows the enunciation of the rule in its final form. Glossing the word *sattha*, it takes it as “weapon” and gives eight examples of things that can be used to kill with: sword, dagger, arrow, cudgel, stone, knife, poison and a rope. (The words that I have here translated as “sword”, “dagger” and “knife” are generally synonyms, and the last of them is *sattha*, so that here *sattha* is its own hyponym; but none of this has any bearing on my argument.) By this stage, the tradition has gone comprehensively awry.

From this development, we can draw an important conclusion. The story that resulted from the misunderstanding is also found in the versions of the Vinaya preserved in the canons of other Buddhist sects which have been preserved in Chinese translations. Later I shall show that one version, the *Mahāsaṅghika* Vinaya, contains (in addition to that story) material which appears to derive from a more ancient form of the text, so it is possible that that is where the misunderstanding first arose. But I shall argue that it is more likely that it arose from the Pali version; and if that is so, the other versions are later than the Pali one. (Of course the Pali tradition has itself almost certainly undergone later changes.)

VI. More about the story’s absurdity.

Now let me say more about the imaginary murderer. Anālayo notes that there are slightly different versions of his name, and decides to use *Migalaṇḍika*. This name is found nowhere else. The word *miga* can mean “wild beast”; *laṇḍika* does not exist. One would expect a name which is made up for a colourful character in an invented story to have an appropriate meaning; that is what seems to have happened here.

Laddhi means “wrong view”; PED says it is a later alternative (i.e., synonym) for *diṭṭhi*, which one could describe as an early Buddhist technical term. In the commentary, the murderer’s name is given as *Migaladdhika*, with *Migalaṇḍika* as a variant reading.¹⁴ *Migaladdhika* would mean “holding a bestial wrong view”. The Vinaya commentary explains why this name fits him. The divine acolyte of Māra who encountered him, while he was washing his bloody knife,

¹⁴Sp II p.399.

persuaded him of the wrong view (laddhi) that only dead people could be freed from rebirth in *saṃsāra*, thus giving him the reason to go on killing the monks.¹⁵ This seems neat until one realises that – if he really existed -- presumably he had his name before this encounter with the deity, and of course he had been committing murders before he met her.

This suggests to me that the story arose in two stages. First a bogus ascetic (see next paragraph) is persuaded to kill a monk by being invited to inherit that monk's bowl and robes. Then someone inserts that he killed "lots" (sambahule) of monks, and someone else, faced with this version, realises that the pseudo-ascetic killer would hardly want to have lots of bowls and robes, so he needs to find a better motivation, and brings in the heretical view that one cannot be free from rebirth until one is dead. This argument of mine is merely a hypothesis; but it does, I think show that the story is incoherent even internally, and probably arose in more than one stage.

His name apart, the Vinaya text says only one thing about the man: that he is a *samaṇa-kuttaka*. In the *Saṃyutta* version he is said to be a brahmin, but there is no such claim in the Vinaya texts. *Samaṇa* means "renunciate", a term which covers Buddhist monks and many other professional ascetics. The PED 220b gives *samaṇa-kuttaka* as "sham ascetic" but cites only this passage, which thus gets us nowhere: the word *kuttaka* does not appear elsewhere, so it may be a corrupt reading. The Vinaya commentary¹⁶ interprets the expression to mean that he dresses as a *samaṇa*; it gives no

help with *kuttaka*, Monier-Williams' Sanskrit dictionary has a word *kuṭṭaka* meaning "grinder, pulveriser", which might perhaps be thought to fit. But I would prefer to give up this problem, because not much hangs on this word.

The story has other absurdities. Though I have mentioned them briefly in my "Addendum" to Anālayo's article, I shall repeat them here.

We know that Roman warriors sometimes committed suicide by getting someone to hold a sword onto which they threw themselves; Japanese warriors (*samurai*) had almost the same custom; but is there any other trace of this custom, or any similar form of assisted suicide, in India?

Buddhists believed that if one killed oneself, one would not escape from corporeal existence but be reborn in another body – but probably in worse circumstances, because one had died by self-inflicted violence.

¹⁵Sp II p.401, lines 3-6.

¹⁶Sp. II 399.

An even more startling discrepancy is that the story reflects amazingly badly on the Buddha. For a fortnight he stays nearby, quite unaware of the terrible things happening outside his retreat, even though someone arrives daily to provide his food. Not only does this impugn his omniscience: it shows him guilty of a shocking misjudgement: failing to foresee the effect of his own preaching. Anālayo mentions this, most pointedly in notes 119 and 120 and the related text in his article, but goes no further than calling it “remarkable”. Yet is any comparable episode recorded elsewhere?

Indeed, how is it that so spectacular an event is hardly ever mentioned outside this immediate context, either in the Buddhist texts or in the polemics of non-Buddhist religious literature? Did the Buddhists themselves believe this story? What does this tell us about their attitudes to their own texts?

VII. An abbreviated version in the *Samyutta Nikāya*.

In this and the next section I discuss what happened to this story in other Pali texts. Readers who are only interested in the original ruling may wish to skip this part and pick up my argument at section 9.

Anālayo begins his article, which has different emphases from mine, with a short sutta from the *Samyutta Nikāya* (SN V, 320-2); this is the only Pali sutta to mention this episode. The text he translates and discusses for us is not this Pali version but the parallel version in the Chinese translation of the *Samyukta Āgama*, which I shall soon allude to. The sutta follows parts of the Vinaya story very closely, almost verbatim, but leaves a great deal of it out completely.

In this Pali text, the Buddha teaches the meditation on asubha, and starts a fortnight’s retreat. The monks start practising what he has just taught them and become disgusted with their own bodies. The tragic result is described in only just over two lines.

They *sattha-hāraṇaṃ* pariyesanti (p.320 line 23). Ten monks in one day *satthaṃ āharanti*, then 20 do the same in one day, then 30. Then the Buddha comes out of his retreat, his disciple Ānanda tells him what has happened, and his response, exactly as in the Vinaya, is to have Ānanda convene the monks, to whom he then teaches mindfulness on breathing. End of sutta.

There is here no mention of anyone like Migaladdhika. In the Chinese parallel text his story is told exactly as it occurs in the Vinaya, but here there is no trace of it. Has the Pali version simply decided to leave it out?

A close look shows that things are more complicated than that. When on

p.320 line 23 the text says that the wretched monks *sattha-hārakam* pariyesanti, the meaning of that phrase which fits is what we have shown to be the original one: they “look for something to take life”. However, in the very next sentence it says that a lot of monks then *sattham āharanti*. Here *sattham* cannot possibly mean “life”, and the verb meaning “take” has been given a prefix *ā*, which reverses the meaning so that it means “bring”. The monks bring what? Here *sattha* can only mean a cutting weapon. These monks are committing suicide. That is very appropriate for a context which is discussing whether a particular type of meditation is dangerously depressing. But it does not suit a *vinaya* context, because the only deaths in this version of the story have occurred by suicide, and not even instigated suicide, so there is no basis here for a monastic offense. And indeed, this text does not make any mention of *vinaya* matters.

As Anālayo points out¹⁷, this short text in the *Samyutta Nikāya* is in a section which is devoted to the meditation on breathing (*ānāpāna*)¹⁸, and the second half of it is about how the meditation on breathing brings calm and happiness. The point of the sutta is clearly to contrast the two types of meditation and their effects. That they are thus juxtaposed makes perfect sense here – in fact, it is the very point of the text; so we may deduce that when this meditation on breathing, in almost the same words, is taught by the Buddha in the *Vinaya* text, it has been moved to there, inappropriately, from here.

However, this text has its own incoherence, though it is relatively minor. Depressed by this new form of meditation, the monks look for something to take their own lives; here the text has the term from the *pārājika* rule, *sattha-hārakam*, and its original meaning of “something lethal” fits perfectly. But it seems that though the composer of the text understands the general meaning correctly, he does not know enough Pali to understand why it means what it does. He takes *sattha* in its commonest meaning, “sharp weapon”, and since *hāra* in the meaning of “take away” would not fit, he emends the text he inherits by inserting an *ā*.

It is not unusual for people to know the meaning of some text, for example in a liturgy, without understanding the individual words. Fieldwork among rural Buddhists in Sri Lanka has shown that almost everyone can recite the Five Precepts, and most people have a good knowledge of what they mean, but rather

¹⁷I shall not at every point indicate whether I agree or slightly disagree with Anālayo; I merely encourage my readers to read his article too.

¹⁸It is section LIV in the whole *Samyutta Nikāya*, section X in the *Mahāvagga*.

few know the meanings of the individual Pali words.¹⁹

I mentioned above that the version of this sutta preserved in Chinese does include the whole Migaladdhika episode. I think it far more likely that the *Samyutta* text originally did not contain this, as it was irrelevant to the text; but then someone who dealt with this in another branch of the tradition, whether because he wanted to show off his own learning, or because he felt that the more of the tradition he could cram in, the better, “restored” it.

VIII. What about the commentaries?

In the previous section I have argued that the monk who put that sutta together probably understood what was meant where the text said *sattha-hāraṇaṃ* pariyesanti, but, chiefly because he did not recognise that *sattha* could mean “breath”, then created a muddle in trying to explain the words. We find varieties of the same situation in the Pali commentaries, composed many centuries later.

I begin with the Vinaya commentary²⁰, because I think it may well have influenced the other commentaries on this point. Glossing *sattha-hāraṇa*, it says that *hāraṇa* means that it takes (*harati*), and what it takes is life. “Or better (*atha vā*), *hāraṇa* is what is to be taken, meaning what is to be supplied (*upanikkhipitabbaṃ*); so *sattha-hāraṇa* is both *sattha* and *hāraṇa*.” “Looking for it means acting so as to get it, supplying it, and by this he shows that he is not talking about something which does not move, otherwise merely going to look for it would be a *pārājika* offense, which is incorrect.” At this point the commentator seems to say that bringing a movable weapon must be involved for it to constitute a *pārājika* offense. No one else seems to have followed this contorted interpretation. However, other commentators have as it were tried to translate *sattha* twice, glossing it as “life” and then translating it as “weapon” as well.

Thus the commentary on the *Samyutta* begins²¹ by glossing *sattha-hāraṇaṃ* as *jīvita-haraṇa-satthaṃ*, a mixture of right and wrong. First the commentator glosses *sattha* as *jīvita*, “life”, which is correct, but then he cannot get rid of the idea that *sattha* means “weapon”, so he inserts it redundantly in the wrong place, and ends up with “life-taking weapon” (*haraṇa* is equivalent to *hāraṇa*.) He

¹⁹Richard F. Gombrich, *Precept and Practice*, p.254.

²⁰Sp III 441.

²¹*Sārattha-ppakāsinī* III 268.

goes on to say that not only did the monks seek weapons and commit suicide but they also got hold of the sham ascetic Migalaṇḍika and asked him to kill them. Then he adds that no one who had entered the stream towards enlightenment killed anyone, incited anyone to kill, or approved of killing, but those less advanced (*puṭhujjanā*) did all those things. This reminds us of the distinction made in the Vinaya story between the monks who had attained dispassion and those who had not. Since every monk had to learn the *pārājika* stories as part of his training, it is not surprising that we find such traces of influence.

The commentary on the *Punṇovāda Sutta*²² likewise has the gloss *jīvita-hāraḥ* sattaṃ, both right and wrong as above. It adds nothing of interest.

IX. So who did first commit the third *pārājika*?

I have traced a series of stages through which, I argue, the story which we now read in the Pali Vinaya has evolved, but the fact remains that none of this gets us back to a version which remotely resembles what a vinaya rule should look like. What is that? I have explained that the Buddha formulates each rule to meet the case of a monk who has misbehaved, and does so in the presence of that monk, who admits his guilt. That means, of course, that the relevant misbehaviour cannot be suicide.

Several versions of the Vinaya survive in Chinese translation. Of these, four are the Pali version and three others²³ closely parallel to it. One, probably of much later origin, is so unlike the others that it cannot be used to draw deductions.²⁴ This leaves the *Mahāsaṅghika* Vinaya, which is ancient but has important differences from the group of four which I describe as parallel. Those four all contain a very similar account of the third *pārājika*.

When I gave a version of this paper in the Buddhist Studies Centre of Hong Kong University, Andrew Ananda Lau spoke in the discussion and briefly drew attention to the *Mahāsaṅghika* version. Since I know no Chinese, I asked my friend Dr Kuan Tse-fu to tell me what that said; I am much indebted to him for his full reply, which I here summarise.

The *Mahāsaṅghika* version contains no less than four accounts of what led

²²Papañca-sūdanī V 85.

²³The Dharmaguptaka, Mahīśāsaka, and Sarvāstivādin.

²⁴This is the Mūlasarvāstivādin, It is incomplete in Chinese.

up to the Buddha's pronouncing the third *pārājika* rule. The last,²⁵ and by far the longest, is very close to the version in the Pali Vinaya and its three parallels: monks, demoralised by the practice of *asubha bhāvanā*, embark on mass suicide, in which they are much aided by a member of another sect, who is clearly the same as our Migaladdhika. (His name in Chinese means "Deer-stick", which suggests an Indian original something like Migadaṇḍika.) On his return to the scene, the Buddha diverts the monks to the practice of mindful breathing.

But what about the other three stories? Since they come earlier in the text, it is reasonable to suppose that they were there first. Dr. Kuan writes:²⁶ "These three stories all state that an attendant monk was tired of looking after a sick monk, who intended to die.

Story 1: the attendant monk killed the sick monk with his own hand.

Story 2: the attendant monk sought someone who held a knife to kill the sick monk.

Story 3: the attendant monk praised death and incited the sick monk to suicide."

It is immediately obvious that these three stories correspond to the three forms of the offense of taking human life. Moreover, in each story the offender is a monk, so he can be – indeed, he must be – the person whom the Buddha reprimands for having committed the offense.

It is also obvious is that the three stories are variants on a single situation and cannot possibly reflect a historical reality. One of them might, but surely not all three. This is of general relevance to our evaluation of Vinaya narratives.

As we have them, these four stories are not presented as wholly independent of each other. Story 4, the final long one, begins by introducing the killer Deer-stick and says of him, "having killed the monk". So story 4 is presented as a sequel to story 2.

Dr. Kuan's summary of story 2²⁷ is as follows:

"A monk was gravely ill. His attendant monk was tired of looking after him

²⁵Taishō no. 1425, vol. 22, pp. 254b11–255a11.

²⁶Both here and below I have made a few small changes to his wording.

²⁷Taishō no. 1425, vol. 22, pp. 253c25–254a16.

and complained. The sick monk said: ‘It would be good if you could kill me.’ That monk replied: ‘The Blessed One has laid down a rule that prohibits killing mankind with one’s own hand.’ This sick monk said: ‘You can seek someone who holds a knife for me.’ The attendant monk approached Deer-stick, a follower of another sect, and said: ‘If you kill the monk, [his] robe and bowl will be given to you.’ He killed him and took his robe and bowl.”

From this material, I believe that we can make some extremely important deductions about the development and relative chronology of the accounts of what led up to the third *pārājika*. First, however, we need to advert to the problem of language. We are now dealing with double translations: English from Chinese, and before that Chinese from an Indian language, though precisely what Indian language varies with the different versions.

The language of the *Mahāsāṅghika* Vinaya is particularly problematic. A long text called the *Abhisamācārikā Dharmāḥ* has survived in the Indic original (as well as in Chinese translation) and has recently been published and discussed by Seishi Karashima. It is a part of the Vinaya of a branch of the Mahāsāṅghikas, the Lokottaravādins.²⁸ It has no parallels in other schools and, unfortunately for us, it does not deal with the *pārājikas*. Its relevance here lies solely in its language. So far as we can tell, the canonical language of the Mahāsāṅghikas was what we now call Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit; and Karashima describes this as “the oldest Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit text”. It is perhaps our earliest evidence for the gradual Sanskritisation of the earliest Buddhist texts, which were originally in a Prakrit (= Middle Indo-Aryan),²⁹ and even so is unlikely to date much earlier than the turn of the Common Era – which means that it is considerably later than our Pali evidence.

The kernel of our problem remains what is here story 2. It says that the sick old monk says, “You can seek someone who holds a knife for me”, or something very like that. This shows that already here the story is built on a failure to recognize *sattha* as meaning “life-breath”, and that failure leads on to the misinterpretation of *hāraka*, which, as we have seen, cannot mean “holds”. Then *satthahārakaṃ* is taken as a masculine instead of a neuter, thus introducing another person into the story: enter Migaladdhika, the hired assassin.

I have shown how easily all this can occur in Pali. It could not occur in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. It is possible that it could also occur in some form

²⁸Karashima p.78.

²⁹Karashima p.84, fn.26

of Prakrit in which the *Mahāsaṅghika* Vinaya was originally composed, before being semi-Sanskritised, but we have no evidence for any such text and it is virtually certain that none will ever be found. If we are not looking here at the influence of the Pali version, there remains perhaps one intriguing possibility: that the muddle occurred even before the two traditions had separated, which would mean within a century or so of the Buddha's death. Prohibition of homicide is, after all, likely to be a basic feature of a legal code. If we refer the texts to such an early period, we are dealing with purely oral literature, not written texts. This would not, of course, vitiate my argument in this paper.

My main presentation ends here. I have shown something which surely is remarkable: that down the centuries a text which deals with so important a matter as killing people, and yet deviates so seriously from the norm of how a vinaya rule comes to be made, has been uncritically accepted.

X. The three forms of the 3rd *pārājika*.

I have mentioned above, near the end of section 2, that there are three ways in which one may commit the third *pārājika*. This is true of every version.

Though it must be speculation, it is not difficult to suggest how the muddle which I have analysed then spread further. I have argued for a stage at which the second form of the offense had been newly understood as hiring an assassin. The next part of the text talks about persuading someone to commit suicide. It is easy to jump to the conclusion that the assassin, though he himself carries a weapon, is dealing with suicides. Moreover, the assassin leaves the medical attendant with no further part to play, so he drops out of the story. This also destroys the story for the first, basic, form of the offense: killing someone directly oneself. (I noted above that the Pali has no such story at all.)

Finally, let me consider the third form of the offense: talking someone into suicide (broadly interpreted). By now, the muddle over the second form of the offense has established that this rule is -- however illogically -- mainly concerned with suicide. The story in the Pali Vinaya says that a Buddhist layman was very ill. He had a beautiful wife, and six monks, who formed a group and are not named, were greatly attracted to her. These monks go to see the invalid householder and tell him that he has led a virtuous life, so that he will be reborn in a heaven where he will have a wonderful time. At this he decides to begin indulging himself right away, and takes the wrong kind of food and drink, so

that he soon dies. His wife accuses the monks of killing him by praising death to him. The Buddha then adds praising death to the content of the rule.

While I do not wish to propose that this story is historically accurate, it seems to be a more competent invention than the story of Migalaṇḍika. One would expect that the kind of murder that a monk might conceivably commit, especially before there was a specific rule against it, would not involve physical violence, but would be something indirect, like persuading a sick person not to look after himself properly by suggesting that he will be happier in the next life.

The implausible feature of this story is that the miscreants number six. A single bad monk might reasonably hope that a woman whom he desires would fall into his arms if her husband died. But for several monks to plot this together makes no sense at all.

However, this “group of six monks” is an important feature of the dramatis personae of the Vinaya. They crop up when a new rule is being pronounced by the Buddha, but no specific monk is identified as the original miscreant. Since a rule can only be pronounced in reprimand to an identified miscreant, this “group of six” plays that role to fill the gap. Whether there really existed a group of six monks who committed some new offenses we shall probably never know, but even if they existed, it is clear that the tradition has vastly expanded their role. Maybe when they turn up it is because the identity of the monk whose misbehaviour occasioned the rule had been forgotten -- possibly deliberately.

Abbreviations

ARIRIAB --

DN – Dīgha Nikāya

JOCBS – Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies

MN – Majjhima Nikāya

PED – Pali-English Dictionary

Ps – Papañca-sūdanī (= Majjhima Nikāya commentary)

Sāp – Sārattha-ppakāsinī (= Saṃyutta Nikāya commentary)

SN – Saṃyutta Nikāya

Sp – Samanta-pāsādikā (= Vinaya commentary)

Vin – Vinaya

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