

Book Review



Foucault, Buddhism and Disciplinary Rules

By Malcolm Voyce. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2017, vii + 182 pages, ISBN 978-1-4094-1080-5 (hardback), \$141; ISBN 978-1-315-58285-6 (ebook) \$50.

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In the West, and especially in his native France, Michel Foucault (1926–1984) was one of his century’s most influential thinkers. Although mainly seen as a philosopher, he rode his highly original line of social inquiry roughshod across many disciplinary boundaries, from psychiatry and medicine, through penal systems and literary criticism, to administration and even accountancy—scandalizing the orthodox contributors to these fields at every turn.

Foucault’s line of inquiry focused on how power is articulated at the societal and local institutional levels, and how it jumps the gap in between. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), he showed how pre-modern power—the personal centralized power of the sovereign to impose his will through the threat of extreme violence on his scattered subjects—gave way to a disciplinary society in which power is decentered and manifests in local, institutionalized forms that rely on rule-based discipline. Particular discourses or ideologies impersonally generate these rules (in armies, prisons, asylums, factories, schools, and so on), which in turn produce a different kind of subject. She complies, not out of fear of some distant sovereign, but because she is already inducted into a disciplined way of life: habits, routines, gestures, and a certain etiquette constrain her actions—they are inscribed on her very body. Pre-modern monasteries pioneered this intimate kind of disciplinary power.

In his later work, Foucault modified this account of subjectivity in line with his interest in how some classical Greek and Roman philosophers, such as the Stoics, developed an aesthetic of the care of the self whereby one could fulfill one’s human potential by systematically developing self-knowledge, and thereby cultivate a unique inner life as part of a virtuous and meaningful way of life. Although the subject is still very much socially constructed, Foucault suggested, she can leverage her disciplined way of life in order to transcend its limitations, claim a degree of freedom, and practice the exploratory kind of care of the self that the ancients extolled. A Buddhist following this line of inquiry might start wondering if it could apply to the monastic agenda and to the paradoxical role of the Buddhist monastic rule, the Vinaya, that sustains it.

Such an inquiring Buddhist can now find an erudite and lucid companion in Malcolm Voyce and his *Foucault, Buddhism and Disciplinary Rules*. In it he sets out to show how,

taken together, Foucault's two analytical focuses—on discipline and on care of the self—evoke the dynamics of Vinaya-based practice, which can achieve compliance and social cohesion on the one hand and, at the same time, the possibility of a transgressive individual liberation on the other. Like Foucault himself, Voyce does not seek to elaborate a theoretical position, but rather to show what the one under consideration can achieve. As he quotes Foucault (132): "I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use.... I write for users, not readers."

Born in New Zealand, Voyce is a senior legal academic at Macquarie University in Sydney. He holds a doctorate in law based on a study of the Vinaya and another in sociology that analyses Foucault's principal ideas on power. The present book takes the reader through the recent research on—and controversies around—both the Vinaya and Foucault's reissue of the care of the self as a practice. Other major thinkers, such as Georges Bataille, an influence on Foucault, contribute to Voyce's fascinating suggestions on how we might understand the Vinaya and the monastic rituals around it, not least confession and the half-monthly *Pātimokkha* ceremony. Voyce takes his readers accessibly into the deeper recesses of the Vinaya, the teeming commentarial literature around it, and the otherwise daunting complexities of Foucault's thought.

Voyce moves from his introductory chapter on Foucault's major themes to a useful and highly useable overview of the Vinaya, complete with a summation of current literature about it. He takes this examination a stage further in his third chapter, which deals with how Western scholarship has conceived and misconceived the Vinaya, and which thus opens the door for a fresh, Foucauldian approach. He complements this analysis in his fourth chapter by uncovering the neglected influence of the Brahmanical *Dharmaśāstra* texts on the formation of the Vinaya, which rooted it in local customary norms. From this point, Voyce begins to apply his Foucauldian framework more systematically in considering the nature of the monastic sangha, the shift in emphasis from ethics to aesthetics in monastic practice, the role of confession and discipline in that practice, and the creative tension between rules and transgressions. A concluding chapter draws together the analytic strands to show how monastic life exemplifies the care of the self.

In order to pursue the thread of his own argument, Voyce explicitly states two vital working assumptions. Well aware that the totalizing term "Buddhism" faces serious challenges, given the variety of its forms, he assumes for the sake of argument that a "generic" Buddhism can serve as an object of analysis. For most purposes he treats the Theravāda as closest to generic Buddhism, while acknowledging widespread scepticism towards its claim to be the *original* version of the Buddhadharmā. He presents the Vinaya in much the same way. Iterations of the Vinaya are many and varied across Buddhist monasticism, but for most (although not all) purposes he treats the Theravādin Vinaya as his basic model.

In his initial analytical move, Voyce exempts the Vinaya from the Western conception of law and rules. The latter requires law and rules to be universal, that is, insensitive to context and particular communal needs, simply to be obeyed by all. According to

legal-anthropological research, however, the basic function of law—ensuring social cohesion—can be fulfilled without these stringent requirements, by means of norms that are sensitive to specific contexts and to dynamic communal mechanisms that serve both shared and individual interests. The Vinaya, especially in the light of its *dharmaśāstric* influence, belongs in this category: in Western terms it is a “training scheme,” not a legal code.

So how does it work? How does the Vinaya ensure social cohesion and survival, while also offering the individual monastic a springboard from which to seek his own unique spiritual consummation? It is in the nature of springboards to be rigid at one end but flexible at the other. The Vinaya thus constitutes an extremely detailed set of rules, but one necessarily embedded in a dialectic that includes *transgression*, Voyce argues. The first Vinaya, the work of the Buddha himself, grew like Topsy—as his on-the-spot formulations of one pragmatic rule after another, in response to various cases of disruptive or improper behaviour on the part of this or that mendicant follower. The cumulative result runs the gamut from proscribing “serious” offences such as sexual intercourse, to prescribing the size of a monk’s toothpick.

The Vinaya certainly exemplifies the early Foucault’s conception of a disciplinary regime. It drills its adherents into a fastidious model of how to behave (not least around members of the opposite sex), how to groom and dress oneself, gestures to be made, and rituals and etiquette to be followed. These rules are thus inscribed on the body; they constitute a recipe for a disciplined and regimented life and a uniform outward appearance. Yet they do not issue from any remote sovereign power, none such enforces them, and the penalties for breaches are mild. Their force lies rather in the process of training and bearing witness against oneself about infractions at recurring confessional and penitential processes. Unlike Christian forms of confession (and more like early Greek examination), however, Buddhist monastic confession does not offer the absolution of sins and reconciliation with divine authority, but rather potentiates self-mastery and self-transformation. Thus the monastic subject has an opportunity to re-fashion himself—to hone his inner life, having seen what aspects of himself he needs to overcome. In this way the concern of the later Foucault with care of the self comes into play.

The Vinaya gives pride of place to sexual taboos and thus to the issue of *desire* that so many other traditions home in on as well. Following Bataille and Foucault, Voyce suggests that the recurring, detailed reminders of sexual acts, in all their variations, in the Vinaya and the Pātimokkha ritual, systematically evoke the problem that the taboos aim to suppress, thus forcing the participants to confront the problem of desire, and even to give way to it. As Voyce paraphrases Foucault,

it is only when the taboo is violated that its full force is experienced. Transgression involves a breaking down of established patterns through excess or violation and, thus, presents the opportunity for the transgressor to experience a new kind of subjectivity. For Foucault, the religiously inspired and progressive sexual experience could be more intense than rule-based

conformity, as it gestured towards the ultimate experience of Enlightenment and ecstasy in common with the divine (14).

Contrary to popular belief, monks are not always automatically expelled from the monastic community for sexual transgressions. Voyce cites the famous case of Nandika, one of the Buddha's own mendicant followers who confessed to sexual intercourse. He remained in the community and is recorded as having later attained full awakening.

At some points, Voyce lops off subsidiary issues too severely so as not to be distracted from his main theme. Astonishingly, he echoes without qualification the popular-Buddhist truism that “[t]he aim of Buddhism is liberation from suffering” (5). As many writers (most recently Stephen Batchelor in his *After Buddhism* [2017]) have suggested, this formulation makes little sense in the context of the human condition, and is far too narrow. Surely, the goal is the process of awakening itself—to fully occupy the human estate, which comes close to the ancient Greek aspiration in answer to the questions, “How should I live?” and “What sort of person should I become?” Further down the same page, Voyce announces that “I will not be concerned with the relevance of the Vinaya to modern life.” Given his theme, and the limitations of one monograph, this exclusion is fair enough. But, as with any serious exploration of material as complex and important as his, it uncovers yet more questions that might now whet our curiosity.

In this work, the conceit that monasticism constitutes the royal road of Buddhist spiritual practice and ultimate consummation hovers in the air. But the precondition for monastic survival is a significant majority of Buddhists being laypersons who materially support monasticism out of a sense of their own spiritual aspirations, including their own care of the self. Is this majority treading a simply separate path? Or is it treading a necessarily inferior one? Given the current decline in monasticism (and not just Buddhist monasticism) in the modern world, the relationship between the monastic and the lay paths calls for re-examination, as does the future of the Vinaya in this world.

A valuable point that Voyce makes about particularist systems of rules such as the Vinaya is that—in contrast with Western-style legal systems—they tend to be syncretic and dynamic; they often absorb and mesh with cultural and institutional influences with which they come into contact, as the earlier Vinaya itself did. In this way monasticism has remained viable in its shifting wider contexts. Yet today we see Vinaya-based, hierarchical, monastic establishments that continue to resist basic modern values such as equality, gender inclusiveness, and democratic governance—values with a clear elective affinity to basic dharmic principles. The old, inherited rules now seem to have become set in stone and are no longer negotiable. They are beginning to look more like rigid, Western-style laws, after all. They assuredly do not offer a royal road to monastic survival.

Foucault, Buddhism and Disciplinary Rules is a pioneering study of Vinaya practice from Foucauldian starting points that yields significant insights. It will appeal both to students of Buddhist practice and to aficionados of Foucault's thought; each of

these groups will find something fresh here. But Voyce presents his material as only a veteran like him can—clearly, and without making assumptions about the reader’s prior familiarity with the bodies of literature that he traverses. And, like all good pioneers, he doesn’t presume to tell those who follow him what they are to make of—or do with—the terrain he has explored. He leaves his field of inquiry wide open.

References

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