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## Tradition, Power, and Community among Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka

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# Tradition, Power, and Community among Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka

Nirmala S. Salgado<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article focuses on the relationship between two aspects of monastic comportment among Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka. How nuns present themselves is embedded both in a discourse of power and in a discourse of morality. Their comportment is the subject of public debate insofar as it relates to disputes about tradition and the recognition of the higher ordination of Theravāda nuns. Yet that comportment also relates to the cultivation of moral dispositions (*sīla*), such as restraint and discipline, which are intrinsic to tradition and the daily work of nuns in the communal life of a nunnery. The article argues that nuns live a communal form of life in which their cultivation of moral dispositions relates to

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questions about power and tradition that they cannot ignore, even though they may seek to do so.

## Introduction

Communal practice among Buddhist monastics is inseparable from questions about tradition and power.<sup>2</sup> Canonical texts dealing with monastic conduct cannot be adequately understood if they are seen merely as manuals of “rules” that monastics should follow; more than that, they are a form of life in a discursive-embodied tradition.<sup>3</sup> Though the canonical texts of the *Vinayaṭīkā* (as well as its commentaries) provide clues about monastics’ conduct, discerning how those texts relate to life and tradition is not easy.<sup>4</sup> A discursive tradition that is shaped by debates

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to “tradition” not as that which is unchanging and opposed to “modernity” but rather as informed by Talal Asad’s work (“Thinking about Tradition”; *Genealogies*; “Modern Power”).

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, in a study of Franciscans (and other medieval Christian monastics), has detailed how the form of life “corresponds . . . neither with a normative system . . . nor with a corpus of doctrine . . . It is a third thing, between doctrine and law, between rule and dogma, and it is only from the awareness of this specificity that its definition becomes possible” (103–104). It is this third thing that I refer to as “form of life” in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Anne M. Blackburn, writing about monastic education in the twelfth to thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, uses the term “practical canon” to distinguish it from a “formal canon,” in which the former, unlike the latter, includes texts that were prescribed for common use among Sri Lanka’s monastics. Her focus on the uses and analyses of texts and curricula remains within a framework of comparative textual study. Such an emphasis on materials that must ultimately be *read* (*Buddhist Learning*; “Looking for the *Vinaya*” 282–288) tends to displace the significance of orality as an essential component in a monastic training program. Justin Thomas McDaniel, engaging how monastics interact with textual accounts that alter in transmission, addresses a useful question regarding the “linguaging” of Pāli, but his study is similar to that of Blackburn’s in focus-

and disputes is not only an instantiation of the past but also a living discourse that is always shaped by the present.

A major debate about Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka today centers on the question of their higher ordination (*upasampadā*). Since its introduction to Sri Lanka in 1998, the *upasampadā* has been given to Theravāda nuns in Sri Lanka at least annually. But whether or not to recognize these monastics as higher-ordained Theravāda nuns (*bhikkhunīs*) is still being debated. Some monks (*bhikkhus*) and nuns, as well as householders and the state, refuse to accept these nuns as Theravāda *bhikkhunīs*; instead, they support Buddhist nuns who are *dasa silmātās/silmātās*, or mothers of the ten training precepts. The latter belong to monastic lineages in Sri Lanka that may be traced back to the late nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Although my focus here is not on the higher-ordination debate per se, that debate has become central to the ways Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka live out a discursive tradition.

This article concerns two aspects of communal practice in female monasticism, both of which relate to nuns' comportment.<sup>6</sup> First, the

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ing on texts and curricula that tend to render a monastic education comparable to the education of nonmonastic schools or colleges. It is important to note that an entire monastic training program aims to foster a form of life, which cannot be reduced to texts or curricula.

<sup>5</sup> On the different kinds of training precepts and the practice of them in Sri Lanka, see Bartholomeusz (73–74, 157–162) and Salgado (108–113).

<sup>6</sup> I appreciate the thoughtful comments given by an anonymous reviewer of this article and also the editorial work on this article done by Robert Green and Natalie Quli. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the symposium “Gender, Embodiment, and Asian Religions” at the University of Pennsylvania in February 2017. I am grateful for responses given at the symposium and for insightful comments on drafts of this work from Paul Westman, Ananda Abeysekara, Robert Launay, Joseph Walser, and Martha Reineke. I thank Daya Wickramasinghe for her assistance with the Sinhala. I gratefully acknowledge the generous funding given by the Robert H. N. Ho Family Founda-

modes of monastic practice among nuns are embedded in public debates involving relations of power with other Buddhists and with state officials. However much nuns may wish to live in isolation, they cannot avoid such debates. Second, the question of nuns' comportment ties into questions of morality. But monastic conduct, encompassing the whole of communal life, must be seen as existing within relations of power as well in the grounding of moral dispositions. Comportment, generally considered essential in the training of novices, centers on undertaking daily tasks such as sweeping, cleaning, meditation, and arranging and conducting rituals at the shrines.<sup>7</sup> Often categorized as "rules," these modes of comportment and conduct are frequently ignored as being too minor to warrant much attention. Yet they are fundamental to the training of novices and to shaping the life of the monastic community. Moreover, they are less rules than guideposts indicating how monastics may develop particular dispositions in social life.<sup>8</sup> Comportment and conduct, in the way I deploy these concepts, center on the acquisition and nurturing of moral skills and aptitudes while also being imbricated in relations of power. Conduct is inseparable from the ways nuns relate to and live with others in the social life of a nunnery, but that communal dimension of power is not my main concern. Rather, I focus on how questions about monastic comportment become subjects of public debate while centering on manners and the execution of daily tasks intrinsic to moral cultivation (*sīla*).

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<sup>7</sup> Sometimes one uses the term *worship* for such activities. But Buddhists in Sri Lanka do not worship the Buddha so much as venerate him for the virtues that he perfected. Rituals around the shrines include making offerings of food, drink, and flowers and reciting stanzas in Pāli and Sinhala that affirm specific attitudes and meditative practices.

<sup>8</sup> I have discussed elsewhere (77–100) the implications of considering *Vinaya* specifications as rules rather than prescriptions or conditions relating to moral conduct.

As a subject of debate, monastic comportment—constituted by the color of nuns’ attire, among other things—must accommodate a political discourse within a discursive tradition. Nuns’ comportment, insofar as it is grounded in restraint (*saṅvara*) and discipline (*hikmāma*) and daily work within community, entails a continual “becoming,” with less emphasis on succoring a public identity. Carrying out daily responsibilities, emphasized especially in the training of novices, is concomitant with developing ethical-moral sensibilities. A novice nun usually enters a monastic community with a willing docility—that is, a willingness to learn from senior monastics and submit to their authority.<sup>9</sup> And given that Buddhist nuns focus on the cultivation of moral dispositions and the practice of meditation, they generally wish to ignore public debates about their monastic identity. Yet their interactions with householders, visitors, and state officials make such debates impossible for them to ignore.

Between December 2014 and the summer of 2016, I conversed with senior teacher-monastics and student-nuns associated with twenty different monastic centers. The first section of this essay focuses on how monastics at two unrelated nunnery training centers were unable to ignore disputes, even while wishing to do so, about the legal identity and monastic recognition of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka. Then the focus shifts to how the cultivation of moral sensibilities grounds aspects of monastic comportment and discipline. Scholars have sought to interpret monastic discipline by analyzing *Vinaya* texts and their commentaries without adequately considering how those texts work as part of an entire monastic program. I am not concerned here with the sometimes overdrawn divide

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<sup>9</sup> As Hannah Arendt notes, authority is not to be confused with coercion or force: “Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed” (92–93).

between “text” and “practice” but rather with how putatively minor disciplinary prescriptions that have thus far received little scholarly attention are in fact essential to how nuns comport themselves. I argue that although nuns focus on practicing *sīla* in communal living, they must also engage in public discourse about their conduct—discourse that opens up questions about the limits of tradition and sometimes compels nuns to rethink what they do.

### Practice and Power

The interface of nuns’ identity and public debate became all too evident at two nunnery centers I visited, the Bambuvatta Center and the Sandugoda Center.<sup>10</sup> Monastics at both institutions, while seeking to distance themselves from debates about monastic identity, were unable to do so. Both centers train adult nuns and emphasize meditation rather than the study of written texts. The Bambuvatta nuns chose to wear white attire expressly to avoid being associated with the saffron-clad nuns linked to the higher-ordination debate, but in doing so, they unwittingly sparked a controversy related to that very debate. The Sandugoda nuns, who all wore saffron/brown, decided to ignore the *bhikkhunī* difference, even while *bhikkhunīs*, novices, and *silmātās* lived together at Sandugoda. Both centers, having sought to distance themselves from a government that refused to recognize *bhikkhunīs* as higher-ordained nuns, were required to establish their presence as ten-precept nuns, even though they had initially preferred not to do so.

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<sup>10</sup> Names of monastic centers and informants have been changed in order to preserve their anonymity.



The Bambuvatta nuns observe (protect) the ten training precepts, as do *silmātās*.<sup>11</sup> However, in an initial effort to distinguish themselves from *silmātās*, the nuns referred to themselves as *anaḡārika* (homeless) and wore a variant of the white garb of householder-devotees (*upāsikās*). *Silmātās*, like fully ordained nuns, or *bhikkhunīs*, wear saffron/brown robes.<sup>12</sup> The Bambuvatta Center was founded after the higher ordination of nuns in Sri Lanka received national and international attention and when the full ordination of *bhikkhunīs* in the Theravāda tradition, which predominates in Sri Lanka, was still the subject of much debate. The founders of the Bambuvatta community intended to provide nuns with a space for the sole purpose of “giving them the *dharma* [Buddhist teachings].” They were adamant about side-stepping the *bhikkhunī* ordination debate. Indeed, they were keen to distance themselves from the increasingly politicized *silmātās*, whose organization had, with state support, differentiated itself significantly from *bhikkhunīs*.

The Bambuvatta nuns, by dressing in white, appeared to have found a suitable solution, as their attire distinguished them from both the established *silmātās* and the new *bhikkhunīs*—that is, until the day that they were denied admittance to an important religious festival (*ustavaya*). The festival, which was held in honor of all the Bambuvatta monastics, took place on a crowded full-moon day at a historic temple and prominent pilgrimage center. When the thirty white-clad nuns belatedly arrived at the festival venue, they were denied entry. In contrast,

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<sup>11</sup> Training precepts and *sil*, though “taken” when they are recited, are said in Sinhala to be “protected” by individuals. This essay uses the term *observe* or *observation* as a translation of *protect* or *protection* in relation to the prescriptions involving the practice of training precepts and *sil*.

<sup>12</sup> Unlike fully ordained *bhikkhunīs*, *silmātās* wear robes that are not cut and sewn (*kaḡakapala*). But because the colors of nuns’ robes are similar, it is difficult to discern from afar the difference between a *silmātā* and a *bhikkhunī*.

*silmātās* in saffron, who were unaffiliated with the Bambuvatta Center, had been admitted. Moreover, the Bambuvatta nuns failed to convince the security guards and other gatekeepers that they, as Buddhist nuns, were entitled to attend the event. The nuns were finally let in only after a householder-devotee connected with their center intervened. This event and others in which the white-clad nuns were not publicly recognized as nuns, prompted them to reconsider their attire. On the one hand, they were leery of adopting the saffron garb of other *silmātās*. Doing so would associate them with the debates centering on the higher ordination. On the other, they needed to be accorded the status of Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns. For example, they were often denied privileged seating reserved for monastics at public venues because their appearance in white likened them to *upāsikās* rather than nuns. Yet the Bambuvatta nuns “observe the ten training precepts even more strictly than [members of the more-established community of] *silmātās*,” according to one informant, who asserted, ironically, that the nuns identified as *upāsikās* were “better monastics” than the saffron-clad *silmātās*.

The Bambuvatta nuns realized that they would need to “go saffron,” but leading members of the Bambuvatta community were concerned that if they wore apparel associated with that of other nuns, they would be accorded a new status. To preempt nuns from being pridefully preoccupied with such an ascribed status, senior monastics agreed to commit to writing the rationale for wearing saffron. The written statement declared that the nuns would be allowed to wear saffron robes only to assist them in their renunciant journey, not to obtain a status (*tanaturu*). Even as the Bambuvatta nuns conformed to a monastic tradition that distinguished them from householder-devotees, they wished to affirm their dedication to a monastic form of life that they had no wish to compromise. As we can see, communities never live in isolation; the very fact of their existence involves them in controversy and politics. In the

current context of debate, where monastic comportment has public visibility, even white-clad nuns must literally change color.

The question of nuns' habit is not as simple as suggesting that somehow their saffron robes symbolize Buddhist renunciation. Their habit sparked controversy among Buddhist monastics, the Buddhist public at large, and the state. State officials, attempting to assuage monks and *silmātās* who opposed the *bhikkhunī* ordinations, refused to register nuns as *bhikkhunīs* and issue them national *bhikkhunī* identity cards. Subsequently, state officials and leading *silmātās* from the National Silmātā Organization redoubled their efforts to see *silmātās* registered and their institutions regulated in an effort to "authenticate" *silmātās* as female monastics. Even monastics at nunnery centers such as Bambuvatta and Sandugoda, who preferred not to do so, were obliged to comply by registering with the state, allocating a small monetary contribution to the National Silmātā Organization, and sending representatives to the state-sponsored *silmātā* meetings. Nevertheless, the state could not mandate that anyone observing the ten precepts adopt particular attire. After all, the ten training precepts can be observed by anyone, whether or not they live in a monastic community or wear saffron. Even though the state (and other organizations and individuals) have taken a stance on the higher ordination of nuns, state officials cannot govern the monastic practice of *sīla*.

A different slant on nuns' attire emerged in my conversations with nuns at the Sandugoda Center. Whereas the Bambuvatta nuns attempted to exclude themselves from the narratives of status and identity by wearing white, the Sandugoda nuns simply rewrote the script. Nuns at Sandugoda observe the same ten training precepts as other *silmātās* observe. Their training precepts are also identical to those observed by novice *bhikkhunīs* (*sāmaṇērīs*) training to receive the full ordination. When *silmātās* accept the ten training precepts, they receive a saf-

fron/brown robe. The robe given to *sāmaṇērīs* is also saffron/brown, but unlike the robe of a *silmātā*, it is cut and sewn.<sup>13</sup> The ten training precepts—likely with the prompting of the controversy regarding the acceptance of fully ordained nuns in the country—are referred to as the ten *sāmaṇērī* training precepts (*sāmaṇērī dasa sīla*) when observed by *sāmaṇērīs* and simply as the ten training precepts (*dasa sīla*) when observed by *silmātās*. This nomenclature is effectively triangulated by interfaces of power relations with other monastics and the state.

Sandugoda Māṇiyō, the head nun at Sandugoda, is considered to be a *dasa sil* nun, despite having been ordained a *sāmaṇērī* several years ago when she was thinking of taking the higher ordination. When she was ordained a *sāmaṇērī*, she received the *sāmaṇērī* robes. But preferring to avoid entering into the *bhikkhunī* ordination dispute—and the complications it might bring her as the head nun of the center—she decided to forego the *bhikkhunī* ordination. At Sandugoda most nuns wear *silmātā* robes, though some, like Sandugoda Māṇiyō, continue to wear the cut-and-sewn robes associated with their *sāmaṇērī* and/or *bhikkhunī* ordination. What may seem unusual in this community is that the Sandugoda head nun maintains her authority and seniority at the center, even though her *sāmaṇērī* ordination would ostensibly make her junior to some of her student-nuns who are *bhikkhunīs*. It is uncommon for *bhikkhunīs* to live at the same center as *silmātās* or to defer to *silmātās* as senior monastics.

When I asked Sandugoda Māṇiyō about the *bhikkhunīs* at her center and the potential complications their ongoing residence posed, she responded, “They had already been here for some time. I cannot chase them out, no? So they are here now . . . and I do not wish to quarrel with

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on how the question of nuns’ attire previously entered public debate in Sri Lanka, see Salgado (113–116).

them.” She indicated that she treated the *bhikkhunīs* no differently from her non-*bhikkhunī* students. In effect, then, the monastic attire worn by the Sandugoda *bhikkhunīs*, *sāmaṇērīs*, and *silmātās* bears no correspondence to anything that one might expect. The Sandugoda nuns recognize a monastic seniority that correlates with their *silmātā* ordinations. *Bhikkhunīs* and *silmātās* alike defer to the authority of a *silmātā* who wears the cut-and-sewn robes associated with the full ordination, a deference based not on some new status acquired by a higher ordination, but rather on the seniority and exemplary practice of their head nun-teacher. Although the Sandugoda nuns have complied with state requests to represent their nunnery as a *silmātā* center, they continue to pursue a social life with minimal state interruption simply by playing by their own rules.

Questions of monastic comportment drew the nuns at Bambuvatta and Sandugoda into quagmires of controversy. Even though the nuns at those centers sought to ignore questions of who they supposedly were and what they supposedly did, they could not. Their very modes of comportment opened up a range of questions about monastic habit and Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka that entailed their seeking new ways to find coherence in their religious practice. While maintaining their focus on *sīla* in performing their daily responsibilities and living within the social arrangements of their communities, nuns at both locales acceded to state recognition of their centers as *silmātā* institutions. Having done so, they were left unhindered in living their lives as they saw fit. The nuns at Sandugoda could retain their sense of seniority and precedence, and the Bambuvatta nuns’ new attire rendered them more easily recognizable as nuns. Yet, to live their monastic lives, they often needed to submit to authorities who questioned their comportment and to rethink what they could do within the limits of tradition.

### Forms of Moral Cultivation

Habit, though important in the sense of monastic attire, is also about the development of monastic comportment and *habits* of practice. And such habits are cultivated within “habitus,” which, according to Pierre Bourdieu, involves “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures . . . without in any way being the product of obedience to rules” (72).<sup>14</sup> Monastics who appear to act in ways that are “not monastic” disrupt their communities. Such disruptions occur when politicized monastics end up in a fistfight or when renegade monks are seen to be riding brooms.<sup>15</sup> Monastics may be labeled “bad monastics” when they seem to act improperly. The importance of comportment in rendering monastics’ presence attractive to the public eye has been noted in scholarly studies of Buddhism (Collins; Mrozik; Samuels, *Attracting the Heart*).

Yet the elementary training of novices, which entails their immersion in the minutiae of repetitive tasks and seemingly minor *Vinaya* prescriptions, has yet to be given serious scholarly attention. Nevertheless, monastic minutiae matter. A focus on the training of novices sug-

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<sup>14</sup> Saba Mahmood’s critique of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is important in pointing out how Bourdieu overlooks contexts of ethics and pedagogy central to the Aristotelian conceptualization of habitus (136–139). It is necessary to consider such contexts in studies of Buddhist monastic discipline. In a fascinating essay regarding how the study of habit was long neglected in sociology, Charles Camic demonstrates how notions of habit and habitus were disconnected from attitude, morality, and behavior. It is perhaps unsurprising that the centrality of habit has received little attention in studies of Buddhist monasticism.

<sup>15</sup> Appearances of fighting monks are often sensationalized in the news. While I was conducting research in Sri Lanka, there was some conversation about a fight between protesting monks that was reported in a newspaper. Monastics who mentioned it to me deplored what they considered to be the monks’ “bad behavior.” Also see “Harry Potter Monks.”

gests how monastic practice is more than a statement about community and power. Talal Asad points out that the “concept of habitus invites us to analyze the body as an assemblage of embodied aptitudes, not as a medium of symbolic meanings” (*Genealogies* 75). Referencing Marcel Mauss’s work, he notes that “an experience of the body becomes a moment in an experienced (taught) body . . . discourse and gesture are viewed as part of the social process of learning to develop aptitudes . . . not as orderly symbols that stand in an objective world” (*Genealogies* 77). Correct comportment is evidence of a properly taught body, where experience accommodates a discipline that is concurrently mental and physical. The capacity to be taught and allow oneself to be transformed are important in the development of habitus. That kind of transformation is articulated in the commonly used Sinhala term *hadanna*, which often refers to “making” or molding a young person. It is also deployed in monastic prescriptions involving the social life of the community, where emphasis is placed on observing principles of training (*sekhiyas*) and doing daily tasks in specific ways. Such daily tasks are also known in Sinhala as *vata* (singular) or *vat/vatā-vat* (plural). Monastic discipline for novices (and even for ordained monks and nuns) has more to do with consistent training in the development of moral aptitudes than with the meting out of punishments. I focus on how the daily training of the *sekhiyas* and *vat* become a form of life for novice nuns.

According to *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary*, the term *sikkhā*, glossed as “study, training, discipline,” has a broad semantic connotation intrinsic to monastic discipline. Different forms of it are used—for example, in the naming of the training precepts (*sikkhāpada*), referred to by some as “rules”; in the word for a female trainee (*sikkhamāna*); and in the trainings (*sekhiyas*), sometimes called “training rules” (Collins 198), which focus on monastic manners.

Learning how to carry out daily activities correctly and to comport oneself properly in nunnery-training communities is inseparable from learning about *sīla*.<sup>16</sup> Life in a nunnery entails doing a host of activities that may not appear at first glance to be specifically “monastic.” The kinds of activities I refer to include common tasks such as sweeping, cleaning, eating, and washing. Such tasks, and the measures taken to perform them properly, have received little scholarly attention—perhaps because they appear to pale in significance next to other *Vinaya* prescriptions or perhaps because they do not arouse the kind of interest derived from investigations of monastics’ sexual encounters. Yet the mindful performance of those tasks forms the very foundation of a monastic’s ethical-moral sensibilities. Insofar as quotidian activities such as walking, sweeping, eating, and sleeping are associated with monastics, they are articulated in a distinct monastic vocabulary referencing *sīla*.<sup>17</sup>

Such an orientation is expected to govern practice from the moment a monastic awakens to the moment she falls asleep. One teacher-nun emphasized that it was essential for young nuns to learn to have “wakefulness” (*avadāni*) at all times. *Avadāni* is related to the Sinhala verb *avadi venna*, which means “to become awakened or roused,” as in awakening or rousing from a sleep. More fundamentally, it denotes an ongoing moral vigilance. One might say that moral vigilance among Buddhist monastics entails a “selfless” caring for oneself, including knowing one’s own limitations and taking care of other members of the

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<sup>16</sup> John C. Holt regards the *sekhiyas* as being “fundamentally concerned with expression,” with “inward demeanor” leading to “outward expression” (103). He notes that the “disciplined appearance” of monks is important. Yet, how *sīla* underlies the *sekhiyas* and other *Vinaya* prescriptions still needs attention because of the important place of the *sekhiyas* as “trainings” and because of the very process of monastic training.

<sup>17</sup> Honorific verbal forms are used for these activities when monastics do them. For example, a monastic does not just eat (*kanava*) but partakes in alms (*dāna valandanava*); a monastic does not simply come (*enava*) but comes (mindfully) (*vaḍḍinava*).



community. Michel Foucault notes that the Greek term for meditation, *meletē*, is connected with *epimelēsthai* in the expression *epimelēsthai sauto*, or care of oneself, where *meletē* involves an anticipation or a readiness (“Technologies of the Self”).<sup>18</sup> While there are significant differences in the Greek uses of the term, the idea of anticipation or readiness is perhaps not unlike the sense of moral vigilance that the teacher-nun discussed. Her reference to such vigilance was iterated in the context of the everyday activities that nuns do in their communities.

### Doing Communal Things

In Sinhalese usage, *vata* can simply mean “thing.” In doing *vat*, one “does things.” In a monastic community, *vata* might be considered a “duty.” But a monastic’s duty does not relate merely to performing a specific activity, since *vata* and *vat* have a broader usage.<sup>19</sup> The Pāli noun *vata*, which is related to the Vedic word *vrata* (vow), is translated as “a religious duty, observance, rite, practice, or custom” and as “behaving,” as in a “practice of ascetics.” It is related to the Pāli noun *vatta*, which is similar in meaning to *vata* as well as to the Pāli verb *vattati*. Interestingly, *vattati*, which is commonly related to the notion of “turning,” is also glossed as “to move, go on, proceed; to happen, take place; to be in existence; to fare, to do” and is compared to the notion of becoming, as in the

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<sup>18</sup> Foucault points out how notions of the “care of the self”—now seen as self-centered and selfish—have been superseded by the idea of “knowing one’s self” (*Hermeneutics* 4–14). One needs to read Foucault’s work with caution, as Ananda Abeysekara (“Problem of Religion” 39–40) and Asad (*Genealogies*) note. Among other things, he tends to overlook the necessity of community relations in the discipline of ascetics. Among Buddhist monastics, knowing one’s self cannot be separated from the care of one’s self *in community*.

<sup>19</sup> According to the *Sri Sumangala Sabdakosaya*, forms of the Sinhala noun *vata* are also used to mean “custom,” “face,” “clothing,” and “austerity” or “privation.”

German *werden* (to become).<sup>20</sup> According to the *Godage Sinhalese-English Dictionary*, when *vat* is used adjectivally in Sinhala as in someone who has *vat* (*vat sampanna*), it refers to a person of “good manners and demeanour.”

Among monastics today, the notion of doing *vata/vat* is ineluctably linked to the process of being and becoming a monastic, in which the activity of doing is habit-forming activity and is inseparable from who one is. It is a process involving the kind of communal habitation of monastics that Giorgio Agamben has analyzed among medieval Christian monks (*Highest Poverty* 13, 56–57).<sup>21</sup> In popular Buddhist handbooks used by monastics, the recitation of *pirit* or *paritta* (stanzas of protection) is referred to as *vat pirit*, indicating that such recitation cannot be viewed simply as a discrete ritual; it is intercausally embedded in an ongoing monastic habitus.<sup>22</sup> The use of *vat* in relation to *pirit* demonstrates the placement of *pirit* recitation as integral to monastic life, where it is one of many necessary *vat*. Some monastics say that *vat* is “work” and that even householders need to do *vat*. But it is not work in the sense of working in a profession or doing the work a householder usually does. One

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<sup>20</sup> The moral import of *vat* and *vattati* is present in the person of the *cakkavattin*, the wheel-turning monarch, who is the idealized ethical ruler.

<sup>21</sup> I. B. Horner translates the Pāli *vatta* as, among other things, “habit” (*Book of Discipline* 292 n.1). This notion of habit or creating a habit is precisely what monastics do in doing *vat*. In doing *vat* they are not only completing tasks in a disciplined and mindful manner but also developing a habit that defines them.

<sup>22</sup> In his article on *paritta* as a training procedure for novices, Jeffrey Samuels focuses on how novices are trained in “learning” or “practice” communities (“Texts Memorized” 349–351). More specifically, he examines the procedures regarding the learning of *pirit*. Such communal learning is not significantly different from the process in which novices learn to do more seemingly ordinary daily tasks at their centers, such as sweeping. Formal lists of *vat* may be found in sections of the *Vinaya* and the training manuals used by monastics today. The emphasis in training novices is not so much on individual *vat* as on the development of correct attitudes of restraint and responsibility.

monastic characterized *vata* as “*tamaṅṅa ayiti vāḍa koṭasak*,” which can mean “the portion of work that belongs to you” or “that work portion that you have a right (to do).” Note that the sense of “right” and “belonging” conveyed by the Sinhala *ayiti* has ethical-moral and ontological connotations: you *are* what you *do*.

In a monastic community, *vat* includes *all* tasks.<sup>23</sup> Though the *Vinayapiṭaka* includes numerous detailed repetitive iterations of *vat*, monastics today generally refer to a list of fourteen *vat* that novices should recognize.<sup>24</sup> Texts used by novices-in-training may list as few as nine or ten *vat*.<sup>25</sup> One novice training manual, referencing changes in “the age of

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<sup>23</sup> Samuels appropriately references monastic training as an “*action-oriented pedagogy*, a system of learning that is centered around *doing, performing, and speaking*” (“Toward an Action-Oriented Pedagogy” 956). But his account of monastic training dwells on the ritual usage of texts without developing how *sīla* is intrinsic to action-oriented monastic training. In a later work, Samuels indicates that such novice-training activities as sweeping “instill Buddhist norms in the participants’ minds and bodies” (*Attracting the Heart* 74). What still needs to be considered, though, is how such training activities make possible certain forms of behavior. Novices, who are for the most part (depending on their youth) already conversant with Buddhist norms, are expected to cultivate moral dispositions as they go about doing what they need to do in their communities. The cultivation of such dispositions as restraint, mindfulness, and discipline are intrinsic to novice training and life in a monastic community.

<sup>24</sup> Fourteen *vats* are detailed in the “*Vattakkhandhakam*” in the *Cūḷavaggapāḷi* of the *Vinaya*. Damien Keown notes an unspecified list of “14 major duties (*mahavattāni*)” mentioned in a commentary (64). While it is possible to surmise that the specified list of fourteen *vat* known to monastics today is similar, if not identical, to the one Keown mentions, my interest is not in the iteration of different lists of *vat* but in how the habit of doing *vat* grounds the observation of *sīla*.

<sup>25</sup> Such apparent variations in the number of listed *vat* and their relevance should not be viewed in terms of inconsistency or distinction between the “theory” and “practice” of monastic action. It is necessary to see that doing *vat* means doing *vat* in tradition, where it concerns an “*apt performance . . . of how the past is related to present practices . . . not the apparent repetition of old form*” (*Idea of an Anthropology* 15). Observing *vat* is not about a fixed activity or list of activities that are readily available for analysis but

technology,” states that “most *vat* of earlier times cannot be protected/observed today” (*Sāmañēra Baṇadaham Pota*: 60).<sup>26</sup> *Vat* is evidently greater than the sum of its iterations.<sup>27</sup> Apart from the textual listings of *vat* that detail how monastics should interrelate in community, there are additional tasks included as *vat*. From sweeping to washing an alms bowl, from cleaning the lavatory to preparing the shrine, *vat* or *vatā-vat* is to be incorporated into every waking moment of the life of a nun. In the words of one monastic, “Apart from our knowing them, we have not created a number. . . . If there are fallen leaves here, I need to sweep them. That is my *vat*.”

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rather about the possible activity or activities appropriate to forming discipline and habit within tradition. The specification of lists (and their variations) is of less consequence than the conditions that lead to the making or remaking of the lists. Scholars often like to dwell on what they consider to be inconsistencies in *Vinaya* texts. However, as Abeysekera points out, “the disciplinary practices that constitute religious life, within which any and every *understanding* or *intelligibility* of what we call religion is possible, do not remain *available* (*verfügbar*) for any kind of definition, theorization or interpretation, conceptualization. However, scholars . . . can continue to theorize religion only by separating and releasing religion from such attuned disciplinary practices of life/living itself” (“Un-translatability of Religion” 258).

<sup>26</sup> Significantly, here *vat*, like the training precepts, or *sīla*, is articulated as that which needs to be protected, not merely observed.

<sup>27</sup> The existence of *vatta* connected to *stūpas* has become the focus of a dispute regarding the extent to which the worship of *stūpas* was known in the Pāli *Vinaya* tradition. Gregory Schopen has argued that the extant Pāli *Vinaya* may be an incomplete text. Richard Gombrich, Charles Hallisey, and Oskar von Hinüber question that hypothesis. Contemporary monastics in Sri Lanka maintain that observances such as sweeping around the *stūpa* and cleaning the small shrines of the *stūpa* are among their daily *vat*, which indicates that such activities are well within the purview of Theravāda Buddhist practice today. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that, in the context of moral cultivation, the significance of *vat/vatta* lies less in the list of what may or may not be included than in being a specific mode of practice expected of monastics.

Doing *vat* is primarily about developing moral sensibilities in community. Doing *vat* as needed constitutes doing *vat*, which is fundamental to the training of novice nuns. It involves, as Foucault might put it, the “modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills, but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes” (“Technologies of the Self” 18). The training of young monastics aims to help them learn to do *vatā-vat* as a habit, without having to deliberate about their actions. Most importantly, *vat* in monastic communities is about the cultivation of moral aptitudes as a form of life. As a popular training manual used by novice monks and nuns states, “The one who does not fulfill *vat* does not fulfill *sīla*” (Chandawimala 103).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The importance of *sīla* in the comportment of Buddhist monastics has been underestimated by scholars such as Holt, Keown, and Schopen. Holt categorizes *Vinaya* prescriptions in various ways that privilege certain Buddhist teachings (the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, etc.). He locates *sīla* as a category within the Eightfold Path rather than as something that is basic to monastic discipline. For example, he states that “the disciplinary code must be understood in a broader context than merely as an extension of *sīla*, one of the primary elements of the Noble Eightfold Path” (65). According to Holt, it is problematic to consider “that morality [*sīla*] is the comprehensive norm upon which the Buddhist disciplinary rules are based” (64). But this is not consistent with his statement that “at least one school of Buddhism considered the recitation of the disciplinary rules to be a proclamation of the community’s ‘pure *sīla*’” (65). Buddhist monastic discipline involves a form of life that belongs to an entire monastic program, in which *sīla* should not be equated only with abstractions derived from norms of discipline or doctrine. Keown, for his part, expresses frustration over Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa’s treatment of *sīla* in the *Visuddhimagga*: “Despite the detail provided, . . . the harvest in terms of a deeper understanding of *sīla* is disappointingly sparse. He skimps on what are for most of us [i.e., scholars] the most promising areas and goes into great detail, e.g., from verse 42 onwards, about minute monkish matters of deportment and trivial infringements of the *Vinaya*” (73). Nevertheless, Keown observes elsewhere that, according to Buddhaghosa, doing *vatta* involves practicing *sīla* (64). Schopen notes, in his discussion of “*Vinaya*” in the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, that questions of sexuality and property are addressed in the text, “but overwhelming-

How a monastic does *vatā-vat* changes over the course of her lifetime. The emphasis is on training young monastics in *vatā-vat*. Consistent observation of *vat* over a period may prepare nuns for lives as ordained *silmātās* or *bhikkhunīs*, whereas negligence of *vatā-vat* may delay or even preclude young renunciants' receiving the ordination. Novices, who often carry out their tasks in small groups under the guidance of senior nuns, are trained to do *vatā-vat* through observation and repetition. Such activities, initially requiring some effort and deliberation, are ultimately to be completed without deliberation and as a form of life in the monastic community. Only then might a novice be considered ready for the ordination.

While ordained monastics continue performing *vatā-vat* throughout their lives, older renunciants often find it difficult to do certain activities.<sup>29</sup> Aging monastics are respected for their wisdom and their capacity to teach others. Whereas the elderly are often marginalized in nonmonastic settings, in monastic communities they are cherished. One nun who was ordained later in life told me that she did not consider her-

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ly, perhaps, matters of proper decorum. Actual ethical concerns are surprisingly underdeveloped" (888). In the *Vinaya*, ethical-moral concerns may not be isolated from monastic actions as a focus of discussion. It is because they are already fundamental to monastic discipline that they do not need such a focus. It is necessary to recognize that admittance to monastic communities already assumes a commitment to *sīla* on the part of all members of the community. The *Vinaya*, together with its written and oral commentaries, is a living discursive tradition that is constantly being reworked within a monastic program and the limits of tradition. Asad points out that in such a program "abstract ideas are not opposed to embodied practices" ("Modern Power"). One needs to keep in mind that monastic prescriptions are not "rules," in the sense of an objective truth that determines monastic life. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that such prescriptions are not available for investigation in the ways that they have usually been thought to be. For a useful discussion of this, see Abeysekera ("Religious Studies' Mishandling").

<sup>29</sup> As Mauss points out, techniques of the body vary across and with age (77).

self a “good monastic,” as she was unable to do *vatā-vat* like the others. She lacked the skill to sound the large exterior bell or to sweep around the Bodhi tree to pattern the sand properly. She said that she could not do *vat* not because she lacked discipline but because she had not acquired the skills to do monastic *vat* when she was young. As she informed me, *vat* is less a matter of performance than it is about disciplined practice. Given her situation, this elderly nun was not expected to do *vat* in the manner of the younger nuns. In a similar vein, a senior monk in his mid-seventies affirmed that *vatā-vat* is something one does as well as one can. He stated that he did *vat* as necessary, but, because of his age, he was not obligated to do *vat* as the novices did:

My throat and head hurt. I am older now . . . but I also sweep. Sometimes an *upāsikā* who sees me sweeping asks me, “Why are the young monks not sweeping?” They know it is the work of young monks. It is not something that I *must* do.

Proper comportment—though emphasized in the training of novice monastics as a form of discipline, a dedication to fulfilling *vatā-vat*, and an observance of the *sekhiyas*—can mean something different as one ages.

### Tradition and Training

Monastics’ practice of the *sekhiyas* is similar to their mode of doing *vat*. According to one monastic, the *sekhiyas* are “the *vatā-vat* that relate to conduct [*hāsirīma*].” The Pāli *Vinaya* includes a list of seventy-five *sekhiyas*. Today these are used as guidelines for novice *silmātās*, *bhikkhus*, and *bhikkhunīs* alike.<sup>30</sup> Although fundamental in novice training, they

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Carrithers translates *sekhiyas* as “trainings” but also refers to them as “rules” (57) that “involve the personal and public etiquette of monks” (144). Though he recog-

have, as Lindberg Falk notes,<sup>31</sup> been generally overlooked by scholars.<sup>32</sup> These guidelines lay out how monastics should walk, talk, eat, and interact with householders, among other actions. While specific to monastics, many of the *sekhiyas* prescribe manners that have relevance to non-monastics living and working in a predominantly Asian Buddhist habitus. The term *sekhiya*, connected to the word *sikkhā*, has been translated by Jotiya Dhirasekera as “culture, training, discipline and also study” that incorporates “the complete spiritual development” of Buddhist monastics (43). Dhirasekera goes on to show how, in the Pāli textual tradition, *sīla*, *sikkhā*, and *sikkhāpadas* (training precepts) are “perfectly coordinated at times, but at times [are] almost identified with one another”

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nizes the importance of mindfulness and restraint in the practice of the *sekhiyas*, his comparison of monastic deportment to that of “a well-brought-up lady” (57) centers on an external visibility that downplays the cultivation of specific moral dispositions, without which the observance of the *sekhiyas* have little meaning.

<sup>31</sup> In her study of Buddhist nuns in Thailand (*mae chiis*), Monica Lindberg Falk states that the *sekhiyas* are important and deserve more attention than they have been given: “[They] are commonly described as merely dealing with social etiquette and politeness. For *mae chiis*, the rules have a deeper meaning” (82). Subsequent studies on the training of Buddhist monastics have continued to neglect the centrality of moral training in the *sekhiyas*, preferring instead to focus on the symbolism of monastic comportment. However, as Asad points out, “learning to develop moral capabilities is not the same thing as learning to invent representations” (*Genealogies* 79).

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Nissan, writing in the 1980s, suggests that monastic deportment (as mentioned in the *sekhiyas*) is observed primarily by nuns and forest monks. According to her it “expresses a particular minority monastic orientation” and is important to nuns “in presenting themselves as authentic monastics,” for they are not as well established as monks. Her remarks about the “authenticity” of female renunciators and the “stereotype of proper monastic deportment” focus on “bodily symbolism” (37–38). She duly notes that *sil* is “both an external and an internal quality” and cannot be equated with “a number of precepts to be followed” (37). But Nissan has not considered that the transformative *process* entailed in the observance of the *sekhiyas* is fundamental to the training of all monks and nuns.



(53). Ordained monastics are assumed to observe the *sekhiyas* consistently and with little or no deliberation.

Those who have not lived in predominantly Buddhist communities might misconstrue what the *sekhiyas* are about. For example, as noted on his blog, an American intending to become a Buddhist novice considers the *sekhiyas* a topic of “interesting discussion” and finds that he needs to make an effort to remember them but does not think them necessary for his practice (Bhikkhu Jayasara).

Monastics who live a Sri Lankan Buddhist habitus would consider the practice of the *sekhiyas* neither unusual nor a “choice” to be made insofar as they comprise the very fabric of the tradition in which they live. The *sekhiyas*, in line with the Buddhist notion of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, or interdependent arising, assume an interdependent mind and body. Effectively, the body is practice. Practice of the *sekhiyas*, like that of *vatāvat*, incorporates a constant mindfulness of oneself and those around one. Mauss’s “Techniques of the Body” is useful to think with when considering the *sekhiyas* as a tool of training whose aim is the embodiment of *sīla* as practice. Mauss points out that a technique must be “effective and traditional. There is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition” (75). Such techniques, he states, are “physio-psychosociological assemblages of series of actions. The actions are more or less habitual and more or less ancient in the life of the individual and the history of the society. . . . [They] may more easily be assembled in the individual . . . precisely because they are assembled by and for social authority” (85). Techniques, while implemented within the limits of tradition and authority, are about embodiment and “en-mindment.” The *sekhiyas* encourage the development of certain aptitudes and moral sensibilities within the purview of other monastics in community. They are not rules

but transformative pedagogical tools.<sup>33</sup> Senior monastics observe how novice nuns conduct themselves in community in everything they do, including their practice of the *sekhiyas*. If the novices are found to be negligent, they usually have a private consultation with a mentor-nun. Although the monastic *sekhiyas* may appear to an outsider to be gratuitously meticulous, their very detail lends fiber to a distinct habitus shared by monastics and householders alike.

In Sri Lanka, an adult householder is expected to conform to particular modes of conduct akin to those detailed in the *sekhiyas*. Monastic informants affirmed that the *sekhiyas* are primarily about the restraint and discipline associated with mental attitude and proper bodily comportment. The *sekhiyas* prescribe manners relating to common social activities such as eating, walking, and talking. As some monastics pointed out to me, the *sekhiyas* are also relevant to nonmonastics. Monastics, however, place more emphasis on mental cultivation than householders do. One teacher-nun at a training center, whose novices included elementary-school-aged nuns, said that it was extremely difficult to train such young nuns in the *sekhiyas*. Consequently, she introduced the youngest nuns to the *sekhiyas* only after they had trained in meditation. Her comments, emphasizing the disciplinary and moral grounding without which the *sekhiyas* make little sense, suggest that they are more than

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<sup>33</sup> Samuels, like other scholars, refers to the *sekhiyas* as “rules.” He says that they “instill a vision, in the novices’ minds, of a monastic who is physically disciplined and serene. . . . The rules work to transform a novice or monk into an aesthetically pleasing object” (*Attracting the Heart* 72). One needs to bear in mind that these trainings are prescriptions rather than rules. Like most *Vinaya* prescriptions, the emphasis on inappropriate activity (improper deportment, in this case) is on persuasive correction rather than punishment. Those who have left the household to become Buddhist monastics already have in mind a particular image of monastics. Though developing a pleasing public image of monastics is necessary, a more fundamental transformative purpose of the *sekhiyas* concerns the cultivation of moral aptitudes.

indicators of a decorum intended to engender respect in onlookers. This is not to say that the *sekhiyas* have no role in guiding how nuns present themselves in public. Senior monks and nuns who have trained others state that the observance of the *sekhiyas* ensures that monastics *look* disciplined. Young monastics sometimes do play ball and climb trees, but they are encouraged not to be *seen* playing or climbing trees.

Nuns' public faces seemingly characterize who they are while marking their habitus in community. How nuns appear to others has drawn them into current disputes among leading monastics and the state regarding the recognition of Theravāda *bhikkhunīs*. Hence, conversations about the *sekhiyas* figure in those narratives. *Silmātās* and *bhikkhunīs* alike may position the *sekhiyas* in terms of their relevance to the higher ordination. *Silmātās* who observe them but are keenly aware of the prevailing disagreements have said,

We are not *bhikkhunīs*, so [the *sekhiyas*] are not relevant to us. But they are a help to *sīla*, and we observe them. . . . They are not relevant . . . in the form of *Vinaya* but as a means of observing *sīla*. . . . It is for the sake of *sīla* that [we] observe the *sekhiyas*.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, *bhikkhunīs* who wish to distinguish themselves from *silmātās* have said that the *sekhiyas* must be followed by all *sāmaṇērīs* training for the *bhikkhunī* ordination, but they are not necessary for *silmātās*. Such seemingly trivial forays into whether nuns observe the *sekhiyas*, and if so, how and why, factor little in the cultivation of moral

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<sup>34</sup> *Silmātās* consider the practice of the *sekhiyas* as necessary, even though they do not always recognize the *Vinaya* text as prescriptive for their practice. However, in an effort to distinguish themselves from *bhikkhunīs*, some *silmātās* maintain that the observation of the *sekhiyas* is not required of them; that is, the *sekhiyas* are obligatory for *silmātās* but only in the sense of their willingness to practice *sīla*, not in the sense of a marker of identity.

dispositions. The *sekhiyas* and *vatā-vat* are fundamental in the nurturing of those dispositions. But to assert that the *sekhiyas* are obligatory is tantamount, in this instance, to recognizing their associations with fully ordained monastics. What is in dispute here is not the necessity of the *sekhiyas* for training nuns—they are essential in the training of novice *silmātās* and *bhikkhunīs* alike—but rather the question of nuns' higher ordination in relation to the state's proffered mandate.

### Concluding Remarks

This article has focused on two interrelated aspects of nuns' comportment: its importance vis-à-vis discursive narratives centering on the higher ordination and its centrality for moral cultivation. Nuns' conduct in community is inseparable from questions of tradition and power. Nuns live disciplined lives that play out within relations of power and the limits of tradition, which prescribes guidelines for moral comportment. The training of novice nuns cannot be made available through abstractions based on textual norms but must be situated in communal life and a discursive tradition. As Asad has said, the term *tradition*, besides being used as “a theoretical location for raising questions about authority,” is

an empirical arrangement in which discursivity and materiality are connected through the minutiae of everyday living . . . a process in which one learns and relearns how to do things with words, sometimes reflectively and sometimes unthinkingly, and learns and relearns how to comport one's body and how to feel in particular contexts. Embodied practices help in the acquisition of aptitudes, sensibilities, and propensities through repetition until

such time as the language guiding practice becomes redundant. (“Thinking about Tradition” 166)

Such practices attest to an ongoing process of transformation. They defy the kind of abstract categorization of *Vinaya* stipulations prevalent in the scholarly study of Buddhist monastic discipline. The continual cultivation of nuns’ moral aptitudes within tradition is about nurturing sensibilities that cannot be developed in isolation or without the assistance and observation of teachers and peers. That cultivation is not readily available through the study of monastic texts alone. The texts lack an adequate say in how nuns comport themselves vis-à-vis monastic and state authorities. All too often the training of Buddhist novices is conceived as a textbook exercise: following curricula, mastering texts, and observing rules. But rules are not rules. What matters are the processes that make possible monastic modes of discipline. In the end, it is more useful to consider the training of novices in connection with the ways in which their practice plays out as a communal form of life.

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