

A possible theory on the genesis of the fifth precept in the Pāli-Canon

There are few people who really attempted to trace the development of the teaching of morality inside the Pāli-Canon, but fortunatetly Damien Keown did so in 1992. So there is at least some solid scholarism on this topic and in this small collection of notes I wish to present his main arguments. Be aware that this is nothing more than a small collection of notes done quickly to present the main idea of the argumentation and not intended to be a real essay or anything like that on the topic.

The textual chronology

The Sutta wich Keown suggests to be the oldest one mentioning the teaching of Sīla is the Brahmajāla-Sutta. He relies on Pandes "Studies in the Origins of Buddhism" when determining the chronological order of the different Suttas of the Dīghanikāya. According to Pande the Sīlakkhandhavagga of the Dīghanikāya is a classical case where the antiquity of the different Suttas is reflected in their order, with the first one being the oldest, while the parallels of the chinese āgamas are heavily edited by a a desire to avoid doubling of phrases and grouped by content rather than by chronology.

According to this argumentation it is reasonable to assume that the Brahmajāla is one of the oldest Suttas of the whole canon. By style this makes also sense because it is a rather raw and unpolished basic representatin of the Buddha's core teaching, yet lacking the systematic clarity of the later vinaya, but nonetheless mentioning all the key features of the Buddha's teaching. In philology there is a tendency to believe that the more complicated and obscure reading is usually the older one, because later editions tend to simplify and clarify difficult passages rather than to make them even more obscure.

Pande's opinion of the first Sutta of the Sīlakkhandhavagga can be summarized thus:

A late composition out of early material. It appears thus that we have here a cse not dissimilar to that of the First Sermon. In its present form it is a late composition, but it has been compiled out of ancient material. Diverse reports about the heresies int he times of the Master and condemned by him have been reduced to a single systematic and formular shape.[...]

Keown takes this Sutta as the logical starting point of the Buddhas teaching of morality, considering the other Suttas of the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* as not very noteworthy, without giving a reason why.

I guess he skipped the other ones out of the fact that they are mainly polemic repetitions of the teaching of the *Brahmajāla* in contrast to the opinions raised by brahmins and because of, as suggested by Pande, the later Suttas of the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* have been stronger subject to interpolation.

The *Sīla* of the *Brahmajāla*

There are three tracts on the topic of *Sīla* in the *Brahmajāla*, consisting of 26 + 10 + 7 rules. Their composition seems to be rather random and certainly lacks the clarity of the later definitions of *Sīla*. An equivalent to the fifth precept cannot be found yet, but the first four precepts are also reflected in the first four *Sīlas* of the short tract, in the same order. This is remarkable.

the medium and long tract mention additional rules, which are rather difficult to understand when compared to the later *vinaya*: They include ideas of abstaining from acting as a messenger, low form of discourse, high and large couches and using magic to earn a livelihood.

Drugs are however mentioned in a different context in the long tract: Here wrong livelihood is defined as livelihood for a reclusive earned by selling medicine or drugs. Other possible ways of wrong livelihood mentioned here are palmistry, soothsaying and more. Other kinds of magic are also forbidden as a way to make livelihood. The exact intention of the Masters teaching here is difficult to grasp. There is at least an interesting contradiction given the fact that the Buddha himself occasionally resorts to magic as an instrument for teaching in other stories included in the canon.

It is important to keep in mind that these tracts are directed at reclusives and not yet formulated for the lay people. Keown argues that the later lists of precepts (five, eight or ten precepts and also the "The Ten Good Paths of Action") have been derived from the short tract, which does not include the fifth precept yet.

The addition of the fifth precept at a later stage however made sense, because it addresses a couple of social issues which might arise when the Buddha-Sangha had to interact with the laity.

Possible reasons here are:

1. Advising the laity to refrain from drinking in order to improve their moral behaviour.
2. Advising the monks to refrain from drinking in order to improve their moral behaviour and to avoid that the Sangha earns a bad reputation.

3. Making the Sangha fit well with the other religious groups of that time, which also did not allow their members to drink alcohol (this is attested at least for the brahmanical tradition).

Interestingly the first four precepts are regularly mentioned in the different patimokkha-editions (Pāli just as the Mūlasarvastivāda-vinaya) as pārājika, so breaking them was seen as a transgression which led to the exclusion of the Buddha Sangha. The fifth precept is not mentioned in this context at all, giving further rise to the suspicion that it was added in a different context, with a different intention than the first four precepts.

The Mūlasarvastivāda-vinaya mentions the fifth precept as a pāyantika dharma, an offence which requires simple expiation, just as the patimokkha of the Pāli-canon does.

Conclusion

The chronological position of the addition of the fifth precept cannot be said with certainty, just as the exact dating of the completion of the vinaya and the other different layers of the canon has also not been done to a satisfying level yet.

Some scholars claim that this was done during the lifetime of the Buddha, while others such as Schopen totally distrust the textual evidences.

Even Schmithausen states that it is not totally impossible that the vinaya was still not completed during the time of Aśoka. This gives us a rather broad frame of possible time for the introduction of the fifth precept.

But the fact that it is mentioned in all teachings on morality for the laity makes it reasonable to consider it essential of at least the later, polished and clarified representations of Buddhist teaching. To what extent these are authentic (there are other aspects of the vinaya which are highly debated, such as the garudhammas) and how much the later formulations of rules reflect the early intention of the Buddha is highly debated.

Given the way the early Suttas are mentioning drugs along with medicines as a means of wrong livelihood for an ascetic in the long tract, it is most likely that he saw the use of drugs in context of spiritual practice with a very similar attitude as he looked upon the use of magical powers.