



Administration And Governance In Buddhist Mahaviharas

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Abstract: Buddhist mahaviharas such as Nalanda, Vikramshila and Odantapuri did not function merely as loose congregations of ascetics but as large, residential institutions supported by carefully structured systems of governance. Drawing on Vinaya prescriptions, narrative literature and Chinese pilgrim accounts, this paper examines the administrative logic of these monasteries. It argues that rites of admission and ordination operated as institutional filters regulating entry into the community; that hierarchical titles and teacher-student dependence formed a merit-based internal structure; that the graded Vinaya offence-system provided a legal framework for discipline and dispute resolution; that daily routines and a consciously minimal economic regime functioned as instruments of control; and that selective examinations and public disputations linked intellectual achievement to institutional prestige. Read together, these elements reveal a distinctive Buddhist model of “moral administration” in which spiritual objectives and organisational procedures were structurally aligned. The study suggests that this pre-modern experience offers important perspectives for contemporary debates on university governance and value-based education.

Keywords: Buddhist mahavihara, administration, Vinaya, Nalanda, monastic education, governance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhist monastic universities such as Nalanda, Vikramshila, Odantapuri and allied centres occupy a central place in the intellectual history of ancient and early medieval India. They housed thousands of resident monks, attracted students from different regions and sustained a dense programme of scriptural, philosophical and practical training over several centuries. The endurance of such institutions presupposes not only doctrinal and pedagogical sophistication but also robust mechanisms of administration and governance. Modern discussions, however, tend to highlight curricula, architecture or doctrinal developments more than the organisational processes that regulated entry, maintained discipline, distributed authority and assessed competence within these establishments. When Vinaya texts, narrative sources like the Jatakas, Milindapanha and Lalitavistara, and Chinese pilgrim accounts by Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing are read with attention to institutional practice, they disclose an intricate system of rules and routines through which the mahaviharas were administered.

This paper seeks to reconstruct that administrative logic. It focuses on five interrelated themes: admission and ordination as instruments of control, internal hierarchy and the teacher-student relationship, the legal structure of Vinaya discipline, daily routine and economic organisation and systems of assessment and reputation. The argument advanced is that Buddhist mahaviharas developed a distinctive form of “moral administration” in which bureaucratic procedures and spiritual aims were mutually reinforcing.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

1. To examine the administrative structure of Buddhist mahaviharas as reflected in Vinaya and narrative sources.
2. To analyse admission and ordination as institutional mechanisms for regulating entry and status within the monastic community.
3. To study discipline, daily routine and economic organisation as tools for maintaining order in large residential monasteries.
4. To explore assessment practices, including debate and gate-examinations, and their role in sustaining the prestige of centres like Nalanda and Vikramshila.
5. To relate the administrative experience of Buddhist mahaviharas to contemporary discussions on governance in higher education.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is based primarily on a textual and analytical method. It draws upon canonical and post-canonical Buddhist sources, particularly the Vinayapitaka, the Jataka collection, Milindapanha and Lalitavistara, for descriptions of monastic rules, discipline and daily practice. It also uses Chinese travel accounts of Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing, which provide detailed eye-witness information on the organisation of Indian monasteries and mahaviharas. Modern secondary scholarship on Buddhist monastic education and ancient universities, as already employed in the author's thesis chapter on Buddhist educational systems, is integrated into the analysis. The approach is interpretative rather than quantitative. Descriptive passages are examined with a view to their institutional implications, so that practices such as ordination rites, alms-rounds, debates and daily routines are read as elements of a broader administrative system.

IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholars of Buddhist history and education have examined different facets of monastic life, but administration as a distinct object of study has often remained implicit. The following works are indicative:

- Studies of Nalanda, Vikramsila and other monastic universities, which provide information on structure, curriculum and patronage, but only occasionally draw out the underlying administrative logic.
- Research on the Vinayapitaka and monastic discipline, which analyses categories of offences and procedures but tends to frame them primarily as ethical norms rather than as organisational law.
- Interpretations of Chinese pilgrim accounts (Xuanzang, Yijing), which highlight their value for reconstructing geography, architecture and curricula at major centres, and incidentally mention gate-examinations, numbers of teachers and students, and features of daily life.
- General histories of Buddhist education that discuss curricula, pedagogical methods and the integration of arts, crafts and sciences within monastic training.
- Comparative studies of Brahmanical and Buddhist educational institutions, which touch upon differences in social inclusivity, residential organisation and sources of support.

V. ADMISSION AND ORDINATION IN MAHAVIHARAS

A crucial dimension of administration is the way in which entry into the community is regulated. In Buddhist monasticism this occurred through a two-stage process: the initial going forth (*pravrajya/pabbajja*) and higher ordination (*upasampada*). *Pravrajya* marked the transition from lay life to the status of novice. Descriptions in the Vinaya emphasise that the rite, though brief in its external form, included substantial scrutiny. The aspirant was questioned regarding grave offences such as the killing of parents or an arhat, which permanently barred entry.

He was then reminded of the hardships associated with monastic life: sleeping on simple bedding, living at the roots of trees, depending on alms from all classes, enduring hunger and physical discomfort, and renouncing ornaments, luxury foods and sensual entertainments. These warnings functioned as an institutional safeguard, ensuring that those who entered did so with awareness of the discipline expected.

Consent procedures reinforced this filtering function. The novice's willingness was explicitly confirmed, and parental approval was required. In the case of married candidates, the spouse's consent also had to be obtained. Narrative traditions, such as Asvaghosa's account of Nalanda, underline this norm by showing

ordination deferred until family resistance is addressed. The Sangha thus insulated itself from accusations of breaking households and maintained a degree of accountability to lay society. *Upasampada*, generally conferred at the age of twenty, admitted the novice to full monastic status. The rite involved a formal request before an assembly of elders, followed by the thirteen-question interrogation concerning *antarayikadharmā*. These questions systematically examined the candidate's freedom from serious disease, his non-slave status, his independence from state obligations, his lack of heavy debt, his possession of robes and bowl, his parental consent and his attainment of the required age. From an administrative standpoint, this interrogatory protocol constitutes a structured vetting of health, legal standing and social obligations before the conferral of full membership. The celebrated case of the barber Upali's ordination illustrates that caste was not recognised as a legitimate ground for exclusion, rather, capacity and willingness to live under discipline were decisive. Admission and ordination thus functioned as institutional instruments for regulating the composition of the community and protecting it from destabilising elements.

VI. HIERARCHY, TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP AND DEPENDENCE

Once admitted, the monk entered a structured hierarchy in which status, titles and relationships carried administrative consequences. Vinaya sources distinguish stages such as lay follower (*upasaka*), novice (*sramanera*), fully ordained monk (*upasampanna*) and elder (*sthavira*), each with specific rights and responsibilities. Within this framework, various functional designations appear. Terms such as *dharmacarya*, *acarya* and *karmacarya* mark different teaching and ritual responsibilities, even if their precise delineation varies across texts. The designation *bahusruta* ("much-heard") is attached to monks widely acknowledged for deep learning in Buddhist and non-Buddhist sastras. Such titles are important administratively, they determine who may take pupils, adjudicate disputes, preside over communal acts or represent the institution in public debates.

Central to the internal structure is the relation of dependence (*nissaya*) between pupil and teacher. Yijing presents a vivid picture of this relationship where the pupil begins each day by practical service such as offering tooth-sticks, preparing water and towels, saluting the teacher and enquiring after his health, before commencing scriptural recitation and instruction. Reverence is expressed through continuous service such as cleaning the monastery, arranging requisites and attending to the teacher in sickness. At the same time, the Vinaya lays down that a monk may not take on pupils if he is unable to train them in conduct, instruction, care in sickness and the resolution of doubts. The teacher thus bears formal responsibility for the pupil's moral and intellectual formation. The prescribed period of five years of dependence ensures close observation and channelled socialisation before the disciple gains autonomy. In this system, advancement is linked to *prajna* (wisdom) and *sila* (conduct) rather than to birth or wealth. Privileges such as personal attendants, greater freedom of movement or leadership of communal acts accrue to those recognised for high discipline and learning. The mahavihara therefore appears as a merit-based internal bureaucracy in which authority and honour are distributed according to institutional criteria of competence.

VII. DISCIPLINE AND LEGAL STRUCTURE (VINAYA)

The Vinayapitaka provides the normative framework for maintaining order within the sangha. It arranges offences in a hierarchical fashion, with corresponding sanctions ranging from expulsion to simple acknowledgement. The gravest category, *parajika*, includes offences such as sexual intercourse, theft, intentional killing and false claims to supernormal attainments. Commission of a *parajika* offence results in "defeat" and permanent exclusion from the Order. *Sanghadisesa* offences, which encompass certain sexual misdeeds, slanderous accusations and attempts at schism, require public confession and penances such as *parivasa* (probation), during which the offender is temporarily excluded from communal acts and must seek rehabilitation. *Nissaggiya-pacittiya* rules combine forfeiture of improperly acquired property with confession. Lesser offences, such as *pacittiya* and *dukkata*, carry milder forms of acknowledgement and amendment. Tradition links the rigorous enforcement of these rules with the anxiety that followed the Buddha's passing. Although he is remembered as permitting the relaxation of minor matters, the First Council narrative reports the elders' fear that any relaxation of discipline would invite lay criticism and weaken the Order. Their decision to maintain the Vinaya unchanged reflects an understanding that strict discipline was essential for the protection of Dharma and sangha alike.

The Vinaya also offers a juridical scheme for managing disputes, distinguishing four kinds of *adhikarana*: doctrinal disputes, accusations, offence-related cases and matters of community administration. For each, it prescribes recognised procedures for investigation, determination and settlement. Buddhist sources also record the development of formal debate techniques, particularly in Mahayana scholasticism, where *vada*

(the art of debate) is treated as a serious discipline, and later logicians like Dignaga and Dharmakirti systematise rules of inference. The legal and argumentative culture of the Vinaya thus underpins both internal discipline and external intellectual contests.

VIII. DAILY ROUTINE, ECONOMIC LIFE AND ORGANISATION

The daily routine of the monastery translates norms into lived practice. Evidence from Vinaya, Jatakas and pilgrim accounts suggests a tightly ordered day in which devotional, scholastic and practical tasks are interwoven. The student's schedule begins with service to the teacher and worship, followed by scriptural reading, recitation and explanation. Time is allocated for self-study, memorisation, group debates and meditation, as well as for communal chores such as cleaning the Uposatha hall, maintaining public spaces and caring for the sick. Regulations govern clothing, food and sleep: monks wear simple robes, avoid ornaments, eat only at prescribed times and sleep on modest bedding. Such routine is not incidental, it functions as an administrative tool for minimising idleness, preventing disorder and fostering a shared institutional culture.

Economic life centres on the alms round (*bhiksatana*). Monks depend on daily alms for their sustenance and for materials needed to maintain huts and communal buildings. Because livelihood is based on alms, individual monks are discouraged from accumulating private wealth, thereby reducing administrative complications associated with property and finance. At the same time, the Vinaya prescribes an exacting code for behaviour on the alms round: the monk must stand silently without demanding particular items, accept what is given without anger or complaint, and guard his senses while eating, taking food as support rather than as indulgence. Novices are instructed in the ideal of the four requisites-alms food, rag robes, tree-root dwelling and simple medicine-thereby establishing a model of minimal reliance against which later endowments are measured. This minimalistic approach reduces both material expectations and the administrative burden of provisioning large communities. Nevertheless, the rule-set allows ethically motivated flexibility. Students could receive permission to leave temporarily in order to care for sick parents, suggesting that institutional discipline was balanced by recognition of filial obligations.

IX. ASSESSMENT, DEBATE AND INSTITUTIONAL PRESTIGE

Assessment in mahaviharas was closely linked to performance in doctrinal exposition and debate. Learning was not evaluated through written examinations but through sustained participation in teaching, discussion and public disputation. Scholastic debate (*sastrartha*) became a hallmark of monastic intellectual life. Formal terminology namely *anuloma* (presentation of thesis), *pratikarma* (counter-argument), *nigraha* (defeat), *upanaya* (adoption of opponent's reasoning) and *nigamana* (conclusion) corresponds to classical Indian logical procedure. Debates were held both inside monasteries and in public assembly halls, and often involved scholars from Brahmanical, Jaina and other traditions. Victory could bring honour, patronage and increased prestige for the institution, while defeat could result in loss of reputation and withdrawal from public engagement.

Accounts of Nalanda provide striking evidence that admission itself could be turned into a high-level assessment. Xuanzang's narrative, as interpreted in later synthesis, refers to a learned "gate-scholar" (*Dvara-Pandit*) stationed at the entrance, who tested aspirants, with only a minority, perhaps two or three out of ten, succeeding in entry.

Those admitted already possessed substantial prior learning, indicating that Nalanda functioned primarily as a centre for advanced study. This gate-examination served as an institutional mechanism for preserving academic standards and managing the scale of the student body. The same context further notes that supervision operated at multiple levels-teacher, elder and community-and that students could be tested by assigning them tasks in social or practical contexts where their ability to apply learning was visible. Canonical-style narratives such as Jivaka's medical training at Taksasila, where his teacher examines his grasp of medicinal plants through an empirical test, exemplify the expectation that knowledge must be demonstrable in practice. Assessment in the mahaviharas thus integrated doctrinal mastery, practical competence and moral comportment.

X. CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion suggests that Buddhist mahaviharas were not merely centres of advanced doctrinal instruction but highly organised institutions in which spiritual discipline, intellectual training and administration were deeply interwoven. Admission and ordination rites functioned as institutional filters, screening candidates for moral reliability, legal independence and readiness to embrace a rigorous lifestyle. Hierarchies of status and office, together with systems of teacher-student dependence, created a merit-based internal order in which authority and privilege were linked to learning and conduct rather than to birth.

The Vinaya's graded taxonomy of offences and procedures for adjudicating disputes provided a legal framework through which the community could maintain order and present itself as a disciplined, self-regulating body. Daily routines and a consciously minimal economic regime reduced the administrative burdens associated with large residential communities while fostering virtues of simplicity, contentment and collective responsibility. Assessment practices, from internal supervision and practical tests to public disputations and gate-examinations at centres such as Nalanda, ensured that intellectual distinction and institutional reputation remained closely allied. Taken together, these features point to a Buddhist model of "moral administration" in which organisational procedures served not only to manage people and resources but also to cultivate the ethical and cognitive capacities central to the Buddhist path. For contemporary debates on university governance and value-based education, the experience of the mahaviharas suggests that durable institutions of learning arise where regulatory frameworks, ethical commitments and pedagogical aims are designed to reinforce each other rather than to operate in isolation.

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