Qualities of Distinction
A New Perspective on the *dhutaṅga*s in the Pāli Canon

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This essay explores the so-called *dhutaṅga*s (or *dhutaguṇa*s), which are commonly understood as a group of optional ascetic practices for Buddhist monastics.[1] Richard Gombrich expresses a widely accepted scholarly consensus when he says that for monks 'of ascetic temperament' 'the *dhutaṅga* represent a limit to what the Theravādin tradition will sanction by way of mortifying the flesh'.[2] In this study I will argue that the *dhutaṅga*s, as they appear in the Pāli canonical texts, are more of a conundrum than scholarship normally assumes. Their individual meanings, their appearance in lists of various lengths, the unevenness and inconsistency of those lists, their relation to monastic law, and the contradictory statements about their value present challenges that are partly incompatible with the conventional understanding. I will address these challenges and propose a new interpretation that also invites the reader to reconsider parts of our notion of monastic life in early Buddhism.

This essay focuses on the Pāli canon, but the history of the *dhutaṅga*s has continued up to the present day. The list of thirteen practices that appears in the canonical texts became the standard in the Theravāda tradition and was commented on extensively. We find this list in post-canonical

1 I wish to thank Juan Wu, who invited me to present the initial version of this essay at Tsinghua University, Beijing, and Petra Kieffer-Pülz, Nicholas Witkowski, Amy Langenberg, Rupert Gethin, and the members of the Classical India Colloquium at The University of Texas at Austin, who read revised versions and provided most valuable suggestions. Thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers for their important comments and suggestions.

2 Gombrich 1988: 94–95. For a very similar, more recent description, see Strong 2015: 212–215. Gregory Schopen signals some caution when he points out that 'while this list of ascetic practices is well known, their role and place in the history of Indian Buddhism is not, and in fact we know very little for certain about them' (Schopen 2006: 327).

texts such as the second-century *Milindapañha*,[3] the *Vimuttimagga*,[4] and, most influentially, in Buddhaghosa's fifth-century *Visuddhimagga*,[5] where it occupies a prominent place as the final third of its first chapter on virtue (*sīla*). These post-canonical texts rearrange and systematise the list according to topic (clothing, food, dwelling place, and exertion). The *Visuddhimagga* explains each practice in great detail, including various grades of intensity (strict, medium, and mild) as well as the benefits one gains from it.[6] Modern Theravāda forest-monk traditions who practice the *dhutaṅgas* largely follow the *Visuddhimagga*.[7] Moreover, the practices were important in other Buddhist schools and in early Mahāyāna Buddhism as well. They appear, e.g., in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*,[8] the *Aṣṭasāhasrikaprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikaprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, the *Śrāvakabhūmi*, the Chinese *Dvādaśadhutasūtra*, and then also in the *Dharmasaṃgraha* and the *Mahāvyutpatti*.[9]

While several scholars have studied the *dhutaṅga*s in a variety of ways,[10] none of these studies focuses exclusively on the Pāli canon. To explain statements in the canon, scholars frequently use later interpretations, which often results, as we shall see, in selective and sometimes anachronistic readings. By contrast, my focus in this study will be primarily on the Pāli canonical texts, which, as I hope to demonstrate, provide rich material for consideration. These texts were likely finalised in the first few centuries BCE, while some content may go back to the lifetime of the Buddha in the fifth century BCE. During their centuries-long oral transmission they were not only translated into Pāli but undoubtedly also subject to dynamic modification and expansion, making the existing canon 'the result of a lengthy and complicated development' (von Hinüber 1996: 5).

3 Mil 348–362, esp. 359.

4 Chapter 3. The *Vimuttimagga*, possibly composed by one Upatissa in the first or second century CE in South India, is not extant in Pāli but in its Chinese translation (translated into English in Ehara et al. 1961); the Tibetan translation of the *dhutaguṇa* chapter has been edited and translated too (Bapat 1964). Recently, both Chinese and Tibetan versions were freshly translated into English by Bhikkhu Nyanatusita (2021).

5 Vism 59–83.

6 Ray writes that Buddhaghosa's mild and medium variants 'represent a substantial softening and monasticizing of the ideal' (Ray 1994: 305).

7 See Carrithers 1983 and Tambiah 1984.

8 On *dhutaṅga*s/*dhutaguṇa*s in this Vinaya, see now the extensive study by Susan Roach (Roach 2020).

9 For a broader discussion of Mahāyāna interpretations, see Dantinne 1991: 39–47.

10 See, e.g., Bapat 1937; Dantinne 1991; Ray 1994: 293–323; Witkowski 2017; 2019; Roach 2020.

While some collections in the existing canon are clearly younger than others, for many texts it is practically impossible to determine when they were composed or finalised into the form we have today. It is reasonable to assume that many learned monastics were involved in shaping the texts over multiple generations. When we encounter tensions, controversies, or even contradictions in the Buddha's statements, rather than assuming that the Buddha often changed his mind or interpreting them away with the notion of the Buddha's skill-in-means, historically that diversity is more plausibly explained by assuming the works of many contributors who had different opinions about the correct interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. These opinions seeped into the literary presentation of the texts, affecting not only direct statements but also the setup of narratives and much more. Since the exact nature and extent of this work is largely untraceable, I will generically speak of 'the authors' to refer to those monastic editors of the oral texts, while acknowledging that several generations may have been involved in creating the respective text, including the historical Buddha himself. But the Buddha we encounter in the existing texts is, at the very least, *also* a literary figure, and it is reasonable to assume that the authors were able to put words in his mouth—or had, at least, some agency in how these words were phrased—to validate their interpretation of the Buddhist teachings.[11]

I preface the essay with these remarks because we will encounter broadly diverging opinions about the *dhutaṅga* practices, all of which are validated in the texts by the Buddha himself. To account for these obvious tensions, acknowledging the authors' interventions and studying their rhetorical labor seems essential. The study will also reveal that the practices themselves, as they appear in the canonical texts, are remarkably diverse in

11 In recent years, several scholars have proposed theories for understanding the oral transmission of early Buddhist texts (McGovern 2019; Allon 2021; Shulman 2021; Anālayo 2022; Gethin 2025). In this debate, one important focus lies on explaining the variants in parallels texts of multiple school traditions, but the scholars rarely address the question of how to explain content-related tensions that manifest in broader divergent tendencies over multiple collections within the canon, as we find them with the *dhutaṅga*s or also with other topics (see, e.g., institutional and individualist tendencies regarding the very notion of the *saṅgha*; see Freiberger 2000a: 232–242). My general assumption is that many different authors with divergent, at times contradictory, opinions or agendas have contributed to the creation of the texts that we have today. Future research may be able to identify broader 'schools of thought', such as 'institutionalists' and 'individualists', in the early Buddhist community whose views differed on a variety of topics (structurally similar to 'conservatives' and 'progressives' in modern politics).

multiple respects; that more than the standardised number of thirteen exist and that some of them are not 'practices' in the usual sense; that the scholarly qualifier 'ascetic' may be misleading; and that their form and function in the Pāli canon requires an entirely new perspective that differs from both later Theravāda interpretations and the assumptions made by modern scholarship.

To start off, let us take a fresh look at a familiar story.

Devadatta's ascetic manoeuvre

After failing to kill the Buddha by bribing mahouts to let a fierce elephant attack him and after being rebuked by the Buddha for eating in a group, Devadatta, the Buddha's evil adversary in the monastic community (*saṅgha*), conspires with his companions to split the *saṅgha*. This is their plan: Referring to the Buddha's general call for being content with little, they would ask him to establish the following rules for monks:

> It would be good, Lord, if the monks were lifelong wilderness-dwellers (*āraññaka*)—whoever should approach the neighbourhood of a village, fault would afflict him;[12] if they were lifelong alms-gatherers (*piṇḍapātika*)—whoever should accept an invitation, fault would afflict him; if they were lifelong rag-robe wearers (*paṃsukūlika*)—whoever should accept a robe offered by a lay follower, fault would afflict him; if they were lifelong tree-root dwellers (*rukkhamūlika*)—whoever enters a roofed place, fault would afflict him; if they did not eat fish and meat (*macchamaṃsaṃ na khādeyyum*)—whoever eats fish and meat, fault would afflict him.[13]

Expecting that the Buddha will reject these demands, Devadatta envisions winning people over, and his companions agree that this will likely split the *saṅgha*, for people trusted austerity (*lūkhappasanna*). When Devadatta follows through and confronts the Buddha with his demands, the latter has a nuanced response:

> Whoever wishes, may be a wilderness-dweller; whoever wishes, may live in the neighbourhood of a village. Whoever wishes, may be an alms-gatherer;

12 I. B. Horner translates, more elegantly, 'sin would besmirch him' (BD v 276). By rendering *vajja* as 'fault', I try to avoid the Christian terminology of sin. Compared to other legal terms for offenses (e.g., *āpatti* or *dukkaṭa*), *vajja* seems less formalised, as it can refer to offenses of varying severity. See Kieffer-Pülz 2013: 1, 322–323, n. 1.

13 Vin II 197.4–12.

> whoever wishes, may accept an invitation. Whoever wishes, may be a rag-robe-wearer; whoever wishes, may accept a robe offered by a lay follower. I permit dwelling at the root of a tree for eight months, Devadatta. Fish and meat are pure with regard to three points: if they are not seen, heard, or suspected (to have been prepared especially for feeding this monk).[14]

Devadatta joyfully interprets the Buddha's ruling as a rejection of his proposal, and upon learning about this, some people in Rājagaha side with him and call the Buddha a person who strives for abundance (*bāhulla*), while others criticise Devadatta for trying to split the *saṅgha*. The Buddha urges Devadatta not to pursue a schism, but the latter walks off with five hundred monks. The senior monks Sāriputta and Moggallāna follow the schismatics, and when Devadatta is momentarily inattentive, they convince those monks to return. When Devadatta realises his loss, he vomits hot blood.[15]

I am relating this well-known episode from the *Cullavagga* section of the Pāli *Vinaya Piṭaka* in some detail because it provides a useful entry-point for the discussion about the so-called *dhutaṅga* practices and about asceticism in early Pāli Buddhism more generally. As we shall see, the first four of the five mentioned practices appear in other, and much longer, lists as well, and sometimes these are collectively called *dhutaṅga*s or *dhutaguṇa*s. I will return to this designation later.

The story helps us to reflect upon some aspects of the *dhutaṅga*s. First, the primary reason for why Devadatta feels he has succeeded is that the Buddha refuses to declare them lifelong, mandatory practices for all monks. One dimension of the discussion, therefore, concerns the Vinaya, or monastic law. The Buddha's response makes the first three (wilderness-dwelling, alms-begging, rag-robe-wearing) optional and the fourth (tree-root dwelling) mostly optional—excluding only the rainy season by restricting it to eight months in a year. (I will address the fifth practice, vegetarianism, in a moment.) The story also mentions the respective alternative

14 Vin II 197.22–27. The final sentence has a verbatim parallel in Vin I 238.5–9, where the Buddha explains that it is prohibited for a monk to knowingly consume meat that was prepared (*kata*)—Horner translates 'killed'—especially for that monk. Only in this case can he reject it. See Kieffer-Pülz (2013: 1, 861–873) for further considerations of various related aspects in the Pāli legal tradition and Schmithausen (2020: 32–45) for an analysis of the parallels in other schools and a discussion about the relation of this rule to Buddhist ethics.

15 The here-summarised section of the episode is in Vin II 194–200. For a detailed discussion and the parallels in other Mainstream schools, see Mukherjee 1966: 87–86. See also Borgland 2018.

options for Buddhist monks: living in the proximity of a village, accepting invitations for meals, accepting robes gifted by lay followers, and living under a roof. Clearly, the *dhutaṅga*s represent a stricter, more ascetic lifestyle, and this story seems to suggest that making them optional is as far as the Buddha would go, when pressed.

Second, the general 'feel' for the *dhutaṅga*s one gets from this story is negative. First and foremost, they are associated with the evil monk Devadatta, a man who had just tried to murder the Buddha. Then, the Buddha almost appears cornered by Devadatta and pressed to accommodate his request, which he does by tolerating the *dhutaṅga*s as optional practices. (He does not particularly recommend or promote them.) Subsequently, the dispute about the *dhutaṅga*s even results in the first schism in the *saṅgha*. Since, as we shall see, the *dhutaṅga*s have none of these negative associations in some other canonical passages, we may be encouraged to look at the story again from a slightly different angle by exploring its composition a bit more and by speculating about the intentions of its authors.

In addition to the above-mentioned points about the *dhutaṅga*s, there are indications that the authors question the value of asceticism more generally. Throughout the story, Devadatta's primary goal is to split the *saṅgha* (*saṅghabheda*), and he uses the *dhutaṅga*s as a means to this end. Note that the issue is less about the actual practices—the Buddha permits them to a large degree—than about making them mandatory for all monks, which the Buddha refuses to do. Consequently, Devadatta is not angry or disappointed but joyful and elated (*haṭṭha udagga*) about the ruling. As the story tells us early on, it was his plan all along that the Buddha reject his demands, so that he can split the *saṅgha* to go off and lead his own community. He and his companions make the political calculation that if they can portray the Buddha as a teacher who rejects stricter asceticism, they would gain the support of followers, since 'people trust austerity' (*lūkhappasannā manussā*). Here ascetics appear as manipulative, and (blind) trust in them appears as misguided and naïve.[16] Later in the episode this plan comes to fruition: Some people in Rājagaha, who clearly value a strict life

16 PED glosses the term *lūkha* as 'coarse, rough, wretched' and *lūkhappasannā* as 'believing in shabbiness or mediocrity, having (bodily) wretchedness as one's faith'. In a different passage, *lūkhappasannā* and *lūkhappamāṇa*, likely here: 'having confidence in, and judging by, the shabbiness (= austerity) (of a teacher)', are grouped with having confidence in appearance (*rūpa*) and reputation (*ghosa*) and then juxtaposed to having confidence in the teachings (*dhamma*) of a teacher, which is presented as the correct attitude (AN II 71.10–23). Interestingly, as we will see below, in other passages wear-

for ascetics, respond negatively to the Buddha's ruling and accuse him of striving for abundance. The authors do not fail to point out that those people are actually 'without faith, without trust, and ignorant' (*assaddhā appasannā dubbuddhino*). And is it mere coincidence that Devadatta, right before he starts plotting his *dhutaṅga* scheme, violates a monastic rule by having a group meal with his friends among householders (and is rebuked by the Buddha for it)[17]—a practice that appears less ascetic and in stark contrast to the *piṇḍapātika* practice ('alms-gathering', i.e., begging for alms individually) that he later urges the Buddha to make mandatory for all monks?[18] Do the authors want to insinuate that Devadatta did not even practice the *dhutaṅga*s himself?

All this seems to indicate that the authors of this episode were critics of the *dhutaṅga*s and stricter ascetic life more generally. I suggested elsewhere that the story might reflect a tension between proponents and critics of asceticism within the *saṅgha*.[19] If this interpretation is correct, its authors or final redactors belonged in the camp of the critics who tried to defend a more moderate lifestyle. Employing the discussed narrative rhetoric, they were able to make the *dhutaṅga*s seem unappealing, but they could not outright prohibit them, possibly because, as we shall see, the practices were, in fact, quite popular among Buddhist monastics.

Before we move on from this story, let me add a note about the fifth practice mentioned by Devadatta, the refusal to eat fish and meat. In his response, the Buddha cites, verbatim, the rule about vegetarianism given elsewhere in the Vinaya.[20] In short, Buddhist monastics must not reject offered food, even fish and meat, unless the respective animal was prepared especially for the purpose of this offering. Thus, the Buddha rejects veget-

ing a coarse robe (*lūkhacīvaradhara*) is listed along with other *dhutaṅga*s as an admired practice.

17 The Buddha refers to the Vinaya rule Pācittiya 32 (Vin IV 74.24–27), where this conduct (*gaṇabhojana*) is an offense requiring expiation. For later legal discussions about this issue see Kieffer-Pülz 2013: II, 1367–1374.

18 Centuries later, in his *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa will make that general connection between the *dhutaṅga* practice and the Vinaya rule. He lists as one of the *piṇḍapātika* practice's benefits (*ānisaṃsa*) the fact that it prevents the person from violating this exact Vinaya rule about the group-meal (*gaṇabhojana*), among other rules (Vism 67.11–12). But the fact that Devadatta himself violated this rule in the story has not been given much attention; even Mukherjee's detailed discussion omits this part entirely (Mukherjee 1966: 74).

19 Freiberger 2006: 243–244.

20 See note 14 above.

arianism as a sustained practice and provides no other option here. This fifth practice is different also in its wording. While all others are compound terms ending in *-ka*, this one is spelled out with a finite verb: '(it were good) if they didn't eat fish and meat' (*macchamaṃsaṃ na khādeyyum*). This is the only passage I am aware of where this practice is grouped together with *dhutaṅga*s—it never shows up in any other *dhutaṅga* list, including the longest list of thirteen (see below). Its appearance is curious, and we can speculate, along the lines of the above discussion, about potential rhetorical reasons for including it. Since vegetarianism is a well-established practice for Jain ascetics, the authors may have wanted to make Devadatta's demands appear not only extreme but even un-Buddhistic. In any case, we will encounter this practice again in a different context.[21]

How do the *dhutaṅga*s appear in the Pāli canonical texts?

Before I discuss, in the next section, what the names of the individual *dhutaṅga*s might mean and how they are practised, I wish to provide a short survey of their appearances in the canonical texts. Considering that in Buddhist doctrinal history, lists tend to expand over time, one might be tempted to assume that the Devadatta episode with its four *dhutaṅga*s in the *Cullavagga* of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* is an early account, and that more practices will be added in longer lists at later stages. While this assumption is generally plausible, we shall see that different, and also longer, lists appear in texts that are regarded as older, or at least not younger, than the *Cullavagga*, for example in the *Suttanipāta*, the *Udāna*, and the four major Nikāyas. A section of the Devadatta narrative also constitutes the introductory story of the Pātimokkha rule Saṅghādisesa 10 in the Vinaya, which regulates how to handle a monk who pursues a schism in the *saṅgha*.[22]

21 It should be noted here that, as Max Deeg has shown, the Chinese pilgrim Faxian reported the existence of a *saṅgha* of Devadatta in the early fifth century CE, and other sources confirm this too (Deeg 1999). In this rich and fascinating study, Deeg convincingly argues that this group, whose teachings were largely identical with those of Buddhist communities, did not actually go back to Devadatta's time but likely emerged only in the Kuṣāna period and was later folded back into the Buddhist *saṅgha*. The members of this group worshipped earlier Buddhas, but not Śākyamuni, and their ascetic practice corresponded to the practices of Devadatta as they are described in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya. These are, however, completely different from the above-mentioned practices appearing in the Pāli Vinaya and do not include any *dhutaṅga*s from the common lists. They do include the refusal to eat meat (Skt *māṃsa*) though. See also Borgland 2018.

22 Vin III 171–173. It has long been demonstrated that introductory stories in the *Suttavibhaṅga*, which describe the occasion for establishing a Pātimokkha rule, do not always

Four *dhutaṅga*s appear in the introductory story of the first Pārājika rule.[23] Here Sudinna, who has just received the lower and higher ordinations into Buddhist monkhood, takes on the following practices: living as a wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*), an alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*), a rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*), and a without-interruption beggar (*sapadānacārika*). Several relevant points can be noted in this passage: First, the fourth practice differs from the one in the Devadatta episode, where it is tree-root dwelling;[24] second, the practices get explicitly labeled as *dhūtaguṇas*; and third, unlike in Devadatta's story, they seem entirely unproblematic.[25] Another list of four, in the (perhaps older) *Udāna*, includes the identical first three and three-robe wearer (*tecīvarika*) as the fourth.[26]

A longer list of nine *dhutaṅga*s is mentioned in the *Sappurisa-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, including the four of the Devadatta story—if in a different sequence—but not the respective fourth in the just-mentioned passages:

1. Wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*)
2. Rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*)
3. Alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*)
4. Tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*)
5. Charnel-ground dweller (*sosānika*)
6. Open-air dweller (*abbhokāsika*)
7. Continual sitter (*nesajjika*)

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match the rule, and it is generally assumed that those stories were added at a later stage, roughly contemporaneous to the drafting of the *Mahāvagga* and *Cullavagga*. While here, the story of Devadatta's plot for a schism does match the content of the rule, the (old) Pātimokkha rule itself does not contain any reference to that story, let alone to the *dhutaṅgas*. See for the layers already Schlingloff 1963; for a brief survey of the Pāli Vinaya's general development see von Hinüber 1996: 13–21.

23 Vin III 15.2–5.

24 The reason may be that Sudinna lives dependent on a certain village, as the text goes on to mention. It makes more sense that he would 'beg uninterruptedly' rather than 'live at the root of a tree', distant from villages, which is Devadatta's fourth practice.

25 The same list is found in MN I 30.20–22 (plus the different practices of *pantasenāsana* and *lūkhacīvaradhara*; see below).

26 Ud 42.31–33; MN I 214.1–17; identical in SN II 202.16–22. All these passages add five additional qualities: 'desiring little' (*appiccha*), 'being content' (*santuṭṭha*), 'being secluded' (*pavivitta*), 'not being in association (with other people)' (*asaṃsaṭṭha*), and 'being energetic' (*āraddhaviriya*). The list of four also appears in Vin I 253.5–6; Vin II 299.5–6; SN II 187.9–12. Only the first three of the list in Vin III 230.32–33; AN III 391.9–10. Another list of three in AN III 108–110: rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*), alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapāta*), and tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*).

8. Any-rug user (*yathāsanthatika*)
9. One-time eater (*ekāsanika*).[27]

Another one of the four major Nikāyas, the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, lists ten, omitting alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*)[28] and adding two more at the end, the later-food refuser (*khalupacchābhattika*) and the bowl-food eater (*pattapiṇḍika*).[29] The *Parivāra*, the appendix and latest section of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, gives a list of thirteen practices, again in a slightly different sequence:

1. Wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*)
2. Alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*)
3. Rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*)
4. Tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*)
5. Charnel-ground dweller (*sosānika*)
6. Open-air dweller (*abbhokāsika*)
7. Three-robe wearer (*tecīvarika*)
8. Without-interruption beggar (*sapadānacārika*)
9. Continual sitter (*nesajjika*)
10. Any-rug user (*yathāsanthatika*)
11. One-time eater (*ekāsanika*)
12. Later-food refuser (*khalupacchābhattika*)
13. Bowl-food eater (*pattapiṇḍika*)[30]

On numerous occasions in the Pāli canonical texts, one or two of these are mentioned outside of longer lists.[31] Interestingly, none of the listed passages seem to associate *dhutaṅga*s with nuns. The *Therīgāthā* do mention

27 MN III 40–42. Another passage in the *Majjhima-nikāya* has six *dhutaṅga*s—the first four plus 'open-air dweller' (*abbhokāsika*) and 'without-interruption beggar' (*sapadānacārika*, see below)—and also some other practices that are not part of the regular lists (MN II 6.31–9.8). I will discuss this passage below. A verse in the Theragāthā has five: the first three of the list plus charnel-ground dweller (*sosānika*) and continual sitter (*nesajjika*) (Th 1120).

28 The editor notes that three of his manuscripts 'erroneously insert' *piṇḍapātika* between *paṃsukūlika* and *rukkhamūlika*—at the same location as in the list above.

29 AN III 219.4–221.10. A passage in the *Niddesa*, the canonical *Suttanipāta* commentary, lists eight practices in yet another combination under the name *dhutaṅga*: *āraññaka*, *piṇḍapātika*, *paṃsukūlika*, *tecīvarika*, *sapadānacārika*, *khalupacchābhattika*, *nesajjika*, and *yathāsanthatika* (Nidd I 66.21–24; same in Nidd I 147.19–22; 231.4–7; 238.33–35; 263.19–22; 349.28–31; 476.3–6).

30 Vin V 131.9–19; also in Vin V 193.17–21. The same list, but in a different order, in Th 842–865. Here, a few other items are added that do not otherwise appear as *dhutaṅga*s (as in Ud 42, see note 26).

31 Vin II 32.17–18: wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*) and alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*) (the same in Th 1146–1147); MN I 281–282: tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*) and open-air dweller (*abbhokāsika*). Sn 11.4: without-interruption beggar (*sapadānacārin*); Ud 30.15: alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*); AN III 187: rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*); Th 904: continual sitter (*nesajjika*); Th 1148–1149: tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*).

at least two related practices: meditating at the root of a tree (*rukkhamūla*) and wearing rag robes (*paṃsukūla*),[32] but it is not clear whether, or how, they are related to the monks' *dhutaṅga*s.[33]

How are *dhutaṅga*s practised?

Even though the *dhutaṅga*s are mentioned in many canonical texts, individually or in lists, rarely do we encounter an explanation of how exactly they are practised and how this practice differs from that of a non-*dhutaṅga* Buddhist monk. The Devadatta episode provides a slightly clearer profile of the four mentioned *dhutaṅga*s, as these are contrasted with the respective alternative practices (see above). Some other *dhutaṅga*s are fairly self-explanatory, while yet others are less obvious. For the more obscure ones, I will consult the meaning suggested in the *Vimuttimagga*, with the caveat that this interpretation is from a later period (probably first or second century CE).[34] On this basis, let me briefly describe what each practice seems to entail.

1. A wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*) lives in 'the wild' (*arañña*), i.e., in spaces that are outside the culturally defined sphere,[35] rather than in the neighbourhood of a village.

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32 *Rukkhamūla*: Thī 24; 75; 230; 362 (four individual nuns); *paṃsukūla*: Thī 329; 349 (two individual nuns).

33 Note that meditating at the root of a tree does not imply that one lives there permanently, as the *dhutaṅga* practice seems to suggest. Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (fifth century CE) will declare that two of the thirteen *dhutaṅga*s are prohibited for nuns because of Vinaya rules (*sikkhāpada*): wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*) and later-food refuser (*khalupacchābhattika*), and three are hard to observe: open-air dweller (*abbhokāsika*), tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*), and charnel-ground dweller (*sosānika*), because a nun is not supposed to live alone, and if she would find a companion, it would defeat the purpose. Thus, according to Buddhaghosa, only eight of the thirteen *dhutaṅga*s are available to nuns (Vism 82.28–83.7). This question needs further investigation.

34 Ehara et al. 1961; Bapat 1964. Some interpreters also use the even further removed *Visuddhimagga* (fifth century) or other later texts to provide explanations, e.g., Dantinne 1991.

35 *Āraññaka* is often translated as 'forest-dweller', which is technically possible, but rather than positively identifying the forest as an actual location, *arañña* more likely refers to a space distant from the 'worldly' space of regular people, i.e., the village. Similar to the early Brāhmaṇical discourse, where *araṇya* is the space for the wandering ascetic and mendicant, while *vana* ('forest') is a—still culturally defined—space for retirees (*vanaprastha*) (see Olivelle 2006), Buddhist monastic law defines *arañña* essentially as any space outside the village (for nuns) or outside the vicinity (a stone-throw away) of the village (for monks). The old commentary says: 'Setting aside the village and the vicinity of the village, what remains is the *arañña*' (*ṭhapetvā gāmañ ca gāmupacārañ ca avasesaṃ araññaṃ nāma*) (Vin III 46.30–31). When a nun stays behind a group alone (*ekā gaṇambhā ohiyyeyyā*) in the *arañña*, which is not the village (*agāmaka arañña*), she

2. An alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*) relies only on food gathered with his begging bowl. He does not accept invitations to eat at a lay person's house.
3. A rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*) makes his monastic robe out of discarded cloth. He does not accept a robe offered by a householder.[36]
4. A tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*), rather than staying under a roof, uses only the branches of a tree for cover.
5. A charnel-ground dweller (*sosānika*) lives on cremation grounds (*susāna*; Skt *śmaśāna*) amidst human remains and bones.[37]
6. An open-air dweller (*abbhokāsika*) has entirely abandoned dwelling in a covered place, including under trees.
7. A three-robe wearer (*tecīvarika*) refuses to use more than the three monastic robes.
8. A without-interruption beggar (*sapadānacārika*) does not skip houses during his alms-round.
9. A continual sitter (*nesajjika*) never lies down and even sleeps in a sitting position.
10. An any-rug user (*yathāsanthatika*) uses, literally, any rug (*santhata*) to sit on. The *Vimuttimagga* takes this metaphorically and explains that the monk is not attached to a place and rather lives in a place 'as found'.[38]
11. A one-time eater (*ekāsanika*) eats in only one sitting per day.[39]

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commits an offence (Vin IV 230.18–20). See for a discussion of the legal implications of this rule Kieffer-Pülz 2013: II, 1593; 1610–1611

36 See also Schopen 2006 and Witkowski 2017.

37 This practice is often explained as an opportunity for monks to meditate upon impermanence, e.g. in the *Vimuttimagga* (Ehara et al. 1961: 34). But see also Schopen 2006, who argues that later such monks were stigmatised as low-caste *cāṇḍālas* and, alternatively, Witkowski (2025), who argues that charnel-ground dwelling, along with rag-robe wearing (*paṃsukūlika*), may refer to a subaltern, low-caste (*caṇḍāla*) community within the *saṅgha* that lived on cremation grounds, having carved out a space of 'autonomous subaltern governmentality'.

38 In their translation of the *Vimuttimagga*, Ehara et al. translate the Chinese term as 'any chanced-upon place' (Ehara et al. 1961: 35); Bapat translates the Tibetan term as 'one who lives in a place as found' (Bapat 1964: 59); Nyanatusita translates 'user of any dwelling' (Nyanatusita 2021: 189–190). The Vinaya, however, defines *santhata* as a technical term for a rug or mat which, apparently, could also be used as a garment; see Horner's discussion in BD II xxi–xxiv and the Vinaya rules Nissaggiya 11–15. What *yathāsanthatika* exactly means in the canonical texts and how it is a *dhutaṅga* practice, still seems unclear. The term never appears outside of *dhutaṅga* lists and is never explained.

39 *Ekāsana* can mean both 'a single meal' (from the root Skt *aś*, 'to eat') or 'sitting alone' (from the root Skt *ās*, 'to sit'). Buddhist tradition has interpreted the *dhutaṅga* practice as the former, but it is unclear whether the term was originally meant to mean 'solitary dwelling' and was later reinterpreted, as Ray suggests (Ray 1994: 321–322, n. 43), following K. R. Norman's translation of *ekāsana* in Th 239 ('solitary retirement'). Petra Kieffer-Pülz refers to later commentaries that address entering the first *jhāna* (medit-

12. A later-food refuser (*khalupacchābhattika*) does not eat after he has finished his daily meal.
13. A bowl-food eater (*pattapiṇḍika*) eats only the amount of food that fits into his alms-bowl.

Considering these practices as a group, three curious aspects stand out. First, some *dhutaṅga*s are virtually identical to one another. The difference between a one-time eater (*ekāsanika*) and a later-food refuser (*khalupacchābhattika*) is hard to determine—when you eat only once a day, you do not eat food that becomes available later in the day and vice versa. Since the standardisation of the list is late, both may have existed parallel to each other, as essentially the same practice with two different names, before the list was codified.[40]

Second, some practices appear very similar, with one being just a little stricter than the other. Both tree-root dwellers (*rukkhamūlika*) and open-air dwellers (*abbhokāsika*) refuse to stay under a roof, but the latter also abandons trees for cover. Both alms-gatherers (*piṇḍapātika*) and without-interruption beggars (*sapadānacārika*) rely on food acquired during a begging round, but the latter also vows to beg at every single house, no matter what kind of food he might receive there, or what amount.

Third, when it comes to the intensity of asceticism, the list reflects a rather broad range. Located at one end are severe practices such as never lying down and sleeping in a sitting position; constantly staying in the open air, exposed to the heat of the sun and other weather conditions; or living among human remains in the charnel grounds. At the other end of the spectrum, some *dhutaṅga* practices appear to differ only slightly from what the Vinaya prescribes as regular conduct for all monks. For example, according to the Vinaya, monks are supposed to wear three robes (*ticīvara*).[41] The first version of the rule Nissaggiya 1 says: 'Whatever monk should keep an

ation state) 'in one sitting' (*ekāsana*) vs. 'in several sittings' (*nānāsana*) (Kieffer-Pülz 2013: 1, 640, n. 9, and 642). In a different passage, the Buddha declares that he 'eats in one sitting' (*ekāsanabhojanaṃ bhuñjāmi*) (MN I 437.19; also in MN I 124.9–10) and recommends this practice to the *bhikkhus*. It seems probable that both meanings merged in the *dhutaṅga* practice, as Margaret Cone's rendering implies (DoP, s.v.): 'the practice of eating only at one sitting each day'.

40 It should also be noted that *khalupacchābhattika* appears rarely in the canonical texts: in the list of ten *dhutaṅga*s in AN III 219.4–221.10; in the list of eight in the *Niddesa* (Nidd I 66.21–24; 147.19–22; 231.4–7; 238.33–35; 263.19–22; 349.28–31; 476.3–6); and in the list of thirteen in the Parivāra (Vin V 131.9–19 = Vin V 193.17–21).

41 The inner robe (*antaravāsaka*), the upper robe (*uttarāsaṅga*), and the outer cloak (*saṅghāṭi*). See for details Horner, BD II 1, n. 2.

extra robe, there is an offence of expiation involving forfeiture.'[42] The final version of the rule includes exceptions, in Horner's translation: 'When the robe-material is settled, when a monk's kaṭhina (privileges) have been removed, an extra robe may be kept for at most ten days. For him who exceeds that (period), there is an offence of expiation involving forfeiture'.[43] The *dhutaṅga* practice of a three-robe wearer (*tecīvarika*), then, merely implies that the monk rejects an allowed (temporary) exception but otherwise follows the Vinaya rule. However, the fact that *tecīvarika*, as a *dhutaṅga*, marks an extraordinary quality of the monk seems to suggest that most other monks did not follow that rule.[44] Still, being content with three robes, as the original rule stipulated, while certainly inconvenient, seems like a rather mild ascetic practice.

Another example is the Vinaya regulation that monks are not supposed to eat at the wrong time (*vikāle*), i.e., after noon until sunrise,[45] with the exception of the five 'medicines' (*bhesajjāni*; ghee, fresh butter, oil, honey, and molasses), which are allowed during that latter period.[46] As these can be viewed as a second meal, practicing the *dhutaṅga*s of one-time eater (*ekāsanika*) and later-food refuser (*khalupacchābhattika*) seems to mean that the monk forgoes their consumption. Again, the permitted accommodation has apparently become regular conduct, which makes its

42 Vin III 195.18–19. Horner translates *dhāreyya* as 'should wear' (BD II 3), but in the parallel rule Nissaggiya 21, which prohibits an extra bowl, the same word is used (and translated by Horner as 'keep'). It seems more likely that the offence here is to keep an extra robe than to *wear* it in addition to the other robes. I thank the anonymous reviewer who pointed this out.

43 Vin III 196.9–11; BD II 4–5. Again, I replaced 'worn' with 'kept'.

44 Petra Kieffer-Pülz notes that there is 'circumstantial evidence that already at the time of the Vinaya monks had more than one set of three robes at their disposal' (KiefferPülz 2007: 39–40). She also shows that, according to the Vinaya commentary *Samantapāsādikā*, a Vinaya expert in the first century BCE insisted that a monk may take possession of no more than three robes, only to be corrected by a majority of monks who declared that it was allowed to take formal possession of the robes not only as the 'set of three robes' (*ticīvaram*) but also as 'requisite cloth' (*parikkhāracoḷa*). This circumvents the problem because the latter is not limited by size or number. The *Samantapāsādikā* agrees with this interpretation, as do other commentaries (Kieffer-Pülz 2007: 41–45). The appearance of the *dhutaṅga* practice *tecīvaraka* in the Udāna (Ud 42.31–33) and other earlier texts supports her suggestion that many monks used more than three robes even long before the first century BCE.

45 Pācittiya 37; the old commentary (Padabhājaniya) gives the explanation for 'wrong time'. The same word (*vikāla*) is used (and explained in the same way) regarding the period during which monks are prohibited to enter a village for the begging round (Pācittiya 85).

46 Vin I 200.18–20.

refusal extraordinary. Still, these *dhutaṅga*s seem much less severe than others.

All these observations show that as a group, the *dhutaṅga*s are glaringly uneven. Not only do they appear in the texts individually, in pairs, and in lists of varying lengths, sequences, and contents; they also reflect a broad spectrum of ascetic practices, from mild and moderate to more severe. This unevenness and inconsistency stand in striking contrast to their stable nomenclature. There is no trace of terminological development—the names of the individual *dhutaṅga*s do not change in the extant literature, which may indicate that they were codified in an early period. All the more puzzling, then, is the fact that, with the exception of the four *dhutaṅga*s in the Devadatta episode, the canonical texts do not provide any explication of the practices that goes beyond the meaning of their names. Such explications we find only in post-canonical works, such as the *Vimuttimagga* and the *Visuddhimagga*. It appears that in the earlier period those practices were so common and well-known that no further explanation was necessary.[47] I will return to this question at the end of the essay.

That the authors of the canonical texts do not bother to explain the practices does not keep them from expressing distinct opinions about them. We can detect two general tendencies that I wish to discuss now. One view is critical, portraying them as problematic asceticism; the other is affirmative, celebrating them as beneficial practices for Buddhist monastics.

The *dhutaṅga*s as problematic ascetic practices

The earlier-discussed Devadatta episode in the *Cullavagga* is arguably the most obvious example of a critical framing for the *dhutaṅga*s. They are associated with the evil monk Devadatta, who uses them to cause dissent among the Buddha's followers and to bring about the first schism of the *saṅgha*. But other passages in the canonical texts equally indicate, if less blatantly, that their authors were critical or, at least, skeptical of those practices. In a *sutta* of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, for example, a householder

47 Nicholas Witkowski has argued that they would remain standard practices in Buddhist monasteries well into the middle period of Indian Buddhist history (Witkowski 2019). As Roach demonstrates, this is also reflected in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, which altogether 'maintains an approving attitude towards the *dhūtaguṇas* as a collective concept' (Roach 2020: 233–234).

tells the Buddha that he gives gifts to monks who, as wilderness-dwellers (*āraññaka*), alms-gatherers (*piṇḍapātika*), and rag-robe wearers (*paṃsukūlika*), are arahants or on the path to arahantship. The Buddha counters that it was difficult for this householder, who enjoys sensual pleasures (*gihin kāmabhogin*), to determine who an arahant or a prospective arahant is. He explains that a wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*), an alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*), or a rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*) who is agitated, boisterous, ill-mannered, talkative, talking loosely, forgetful, inattentive, uncontrolled, confused, and undisciplined, is, in this respect, blameworthy. When they have the opposite qualities, they are praiseworthy. And the same was true for monks who followed the respective alternative practices, namely those who live in a village or the neighbourhood of a village (*gāmantavihārin*), who accept invitations (*nemantanika*) or wear a robe offered by a householder (*gahapaticīvaradhara*).[48]

The Buddha makes several points here. He seems to warn the householder that ascetic practices do not necessarily reflect spiritual accomplishments. Monks who observe those three *dhutaṅga*s can have blameworthy or praiseworthy features. Their 'worthiness' does not depend on the *dhutaṅga*s but on their inner qualities.[49] This is amplified by the note that monks who do not observe these *dhutaṅga*s (but rather the respective alternatives) can have the very same blameworthy or praiseworthy features. According to this *sutta*, the *dhutaṅga*s do not have any particular value for the path to arahantship, and householders must not mistake a monks' ascetic practice for spiritual accomplishment. The *sutta* ends with the Buddha encouraging the householder to give to the *saṅgha*, which will lead him to rebirth in a heavenly world. He seems to say that rather than relying on his own judgment about the spiritual quality of a gift-recipient, which can vary for individual monks, regardless of their ascetic practice, a householder should play it safe and give to the *saṅgha* as an institution, which guarantees extraordinary merit and heavenly rebirth.[50]

48 AN III 391.1–392.19.

49 By pointing out that individual ascetics can have different qualities, the authors might also express the concern that householders could fall for 'false ascetics'. While of a later time period in ancient India, the Hindu tradition expresses this—certainly pervasive—concern in many ways, as illustrated, for example, by the cases collected in Bloomfield 1924 and Doniger O'Flaherty 1971.

50 This approach, which I have called an 'institutional tendency' elsewhere, can often be found in the canonical texts, most pronounced in the notion of the *saṅgha* as the unsurpassable field of merit. The opposite, individualist tendency, which is common too,

The inner life of *dhutaṅga* practitioners is also discussed elsewhere in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. Here, the Buddha lists five possible motives for observing these practices. The same five motives are given, respectively, for ten different *dhutaṅga*s:[51] One adopts the practice either (1) out of stupidity and foolishness; (2) because one has evil desires and is driven by desire; (3) because one is mad and mentally deranged; (4) because one thinks it is praised by the Buddha and the Buddha's followers; or (5) for the sake of desiring little, contentment, austerity, solitude, and not resting. The fifth motive, the Buddha asserts, is the most excellent.[52] Again, by pointing out four possible inferior motives, the authors cast doubt on *dhutaṅga* practitioners and allege that some of them are misguided or dubious. At the very least, the authors appear skeptical of the practices' value.[53]

In the *Cūḷa-Assapura-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the Buddha addresses an ascetic's proper way of life (*samaṇasāmīcipaṭipadā*) and explains that it does not consist of particular ascetic practices but rather of the right inner attitude, meditation, and destruction of the *āsavas* (the 'intoxications' of greed, hatred, and delusion). The listed practices, whose observation alone does not make one a *samaṇa*, appear largely non-Buddhist: wearing an ascetic cloak (*saṅghāṭika*),[54] nakedness (*acelaka*), dwelling in dust and

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includes the idea that householders are capable of determining the spiritual advancement of a gift-recipient and that the amount of merit correlates with this individual accomplishment rather than with the quality of the *saṅgha* as an institution (Freiberger 2000a: 232–243; Freiberger 2000b).

51 Wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*); rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*); tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*); charnel-ground dweller (*sosānika*); open-air dweller (*abbhokāsika*); continual sitter (*nesajjika*); any-rug user (*yathāsanthatika*); one-time eater (*ekāsanika*); later-food refuser (*khalupacchābhattika*); and bowl-food eater (*pattapiṇḍika*) (AN III 219.4–221.10).

52 AN III 219.4–17. Rather than outright dismissing the first four motives, the Buddha draws a parallel. Just as milk comes from a cow, curd from milk, fresh butter from curd, ghee from fresh butter, and as the cream of the ghee comes from ghee and is known as the best, so the fifth motive is the best (AN III 219.18–25). While the first four in this list may be considered inferior of the fifth, they can hardly be dismissed as worthless. The Buddha seems to argue that while the practice itself may have positive effects, the motives of the practitioners can be problematic.

53 See a parallel passage in the *Parivāra* (Vin V 131.9–19 and 193.1–16), where all thirteen practices appear, but in a different order. Ray remarks: 'It is interesting that the deplorable reasons are listed first, suggesting that they were uppermost in the mind of the author, who seems more than ready to attribute one or another of these motives to some forest renunciants and to condemn them' (Ray 1994: 304). While I am not as confident about this reason for the order of the listed motives, I do agree with his second observation.

54 *Saṅghāti* is also the term for the outer robe of Buddhist monks (see above, note 41). This needs further investigation.

dirt (*rajojallika*), (ritual) bathing (*udakorohaka*), standing upright (*ubbhaṭṭhaka*), eating at regular intervals (*pariyāyabhattika*), studying (Vedic) mantras (*mantajjhāyaka*), having matted hair (*jaṭilaka*). But right in the middle of this list (as numbers 5 and 6), we also find tree-root dwelling (*rukkhamūlika*) and open-air dwelling (*abbhokāsika*), two of the *dhutaṅga*s.[55] While it is possible that these two were also practised by non-Buddhist ascetics, they appear here in a list that is contrary to the ascetic's 'proper way of life' from the Buddha's perspective. Again, the authors of this *sutta* do not seem particularly enthusiastic about these two practices.

Another stock list of non-Buddhist ascetic practices appears several times in the canonical texts.[56] This long list—too long to explore in detail here[57]—includes transgressions of polite conduct, various restrictions concerning the acceptance, the amount, and the types of food, restrictions regarding the types of clothes, and a few other bodily practices.[58] These practices are often criticised, for example in the *Kassapasīhanāda-* (or, *Mahāsīhanāda-*)*sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, where the Buddha states that 'true asceticism' (*sāmañña/brahmañña*, the ideal of *samaṇa-brāhmaṇas*) does not consist in the adoption of those practices, but rather in the—much harder—destruction of the *āsavas*, which is realised by ethics and awareness attained in meditation.[59] In another *sutta* in the *Dīgha-nikāya*, the *Udumbarikāsīhanāda-sutta*, the Buddha devalues the practices as well. They could easily result in bad attitudes for the ascetic, such as arrogance, dishonesty, and hypocrisy, while true asceticism (here: *tapojigucchā*) consisted of entirely different practices, namely ethical behaviour and meditation.[60]

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55 MN I 281.32–232.6.

56 For the following argument, see Freiberger 2006.

57 For a detailed discussion of each practice that takes parallels in other Buddhist and non-Buddhist texts, commentaries, and various Western translations into account, see Bollée 1971.

58 See, e.g. DN I 166.2–167.13; MN I 77.28–78.22.

59 DN I 168.13–169.38.

60 DN III 40.23–52.31. In the *Nivāpa-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* (MN I 156.17–32), several practices of the list are said to result in a backslide into craving (in an allegory as a herd of deer that is captured by the deer-feeder, the evil Māra). In the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* (MN I 238.12–35) the Jain Saccaka states that three (Ājīvaka) ascetics performed some of the practices but must admit that they had a copious meal from time to time. Again, the practices appear as inefficient or harmful, and the ascetics are mocked.

This list also appears in the context of the famous Buddhist notion of the Middle Way between the extremes of a life in luxury and self-mortification, where it serves to illustrate the latter extreme. In a passage from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* the practices constitute the way of 'burning away' (*nijjhāma*), as opposed to the indulgence in sensual pleasures. The third way between these two is the middle way (*majjhimā paṭipadā*), which here consists in contemplating body, thoughts, feelings, and *dhammas*.[61] In the *Cūḷadhammasamādāna-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* the practices represent a kind of conduct that is both painful in the present and will have a painful effect in the future, namely rebirth in a state of suffering in hell (*apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinipātaṃ nirayaṃ*). Whoever indulges in sense-pleasures—the other extreme—will suffer from the same fate. The better (middle) option is to enter the four meditations (*jhāna*) and then be born in a heavenly world, which represents conduct that is pleasant in the present and will have a pleasant effect in the future.[62]

These brief notes show that this stock list of ascetic practices is presented as non-Buddhist and considered to be problematic and harmful, even leading to rebirth in hell. It is relevant for the present discussion because that list overlaps considerably with Buddhist *dhutaṅga*s. When we compare the two lists, three practices are literally identical: rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*), open-air dweller (*abbhokāsika*), and any-rug user (*yathāsanthatika*).[63] One is semantically identical: one-time eater (*ekāsanika*) corresponds to the practice of 'taking food only once a day' (*ekāhikaṃ pi āhāraṃ āhāreti*). Three are very similar: alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*) and bowl-food eater (*pattapiṇḍika*) correspond to the statement 'he does not accept (food) offered or prepared for him, or an invitation' (*nābhihaṭaṃ na uddissakaṭaṃ na nimantaṇaṃ sādiyati*), and charnel-ground dweller (*sosānika*) is closely related to the practice of wearing cerements (*chavadussa*).

The fact that more than half of the *dhutaṅga*s in the standard list (seven out of thirteen) are also found in a stock list of abhorred non-

61 AN I 295.1–296.15; similar in AN I 296.17–297.17. Cf. AN II 205.24–211.29, where the authors attribute the practices to the self-tormentor (*attantapa*), in contrast to the 'tormentor of another', the 'tormentor both of self and another', and the 'tormentor neither of self nor of another'; the last one is the person who follows the moral precepts of the Buddha and attains liberation. See also DN III 232.22–233.2.

62 MN I 307.21–309.14.

63 It should be noted that the fifth practice demanded by Devadatta, but later not included in the standard *dhutaṅga* lists, strict vegetarianism (*na machaṃ, na maṃsaṃ*), appears in the stock list of non-Buddhist ascetic practices as well.

Buddhist practices whose observance takes you straight to hell, should tell us something. At the very least, it confirms, once again, that some authors of the Buddhist canonical texts had a low opinion of the *dhutaṅga*s and used various methods to make them appear problematic for Buddhist monks.[64]

The *dhutaṅga*s as celebrated practices for Buddhist monastics

In contrast to this critical view of the *dhutaṅga*s, the same corpus of canonical texts also includes more favorable statements. First, versions of some *dhutaṅga*s are already present in three of the four *nissayas* ('resources'). According to the Vinaya, a candidate for ordination must be informed that monastic life is based on these four *nissayas*: sustenance from small portions of food (*piṇḍiyālopabhojana*), robes made from rags (*paṃsukūlacīvara*), dwelling at the foot of a tree (*rukkhamūlasenāsana*), and cattle urine as medicine (*pūtimuttabhesajja*). The first three can be easily associated with three *dhutaṅga*s: alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*), rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*), and tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*). The demand, immediately following each *nissaya*, that the candidate must make this effort as long as life lasts (*te yāvajīvaṃ ussaho karaṇiyo*), seems to directly contradict the Buddha's ruling in the Devadatta episode, where the latter's demand to establish them as mandatory lifelong practices is rejected. However, this passage immediately supplements each *nissaya* with several 'exceptions' (*atirekalābha*) that relax the strict practices or even render them void. It explains, for example, that it is also allowed to accept invitations, to use robes made of silk, and to live in buildings of several kinds.[65]

It is tempting to interpret this account as reflecting a historical development in which the more basic *nissayas* came first and were then qualified by options that weakened the stricter ideal. Regardless, it seems obvious that we hear two voices here, one more ascetic than the other, and that the more *dhutaṅga*-friendly voice is preserved in this passage, despite the relaxation provided by the exceptions. This equally applies to other Vinaya regulations that have *dhutaṅga* practices already built in, as a somewhat stricter conduct supplemented by exceptions. We noticed this earlier related to the *dhutaṅga* practice of a three-robe wearer (*tecīvarika*), who observes the

64 Ray argues that later texts, the *Milindapañha*, the *Vimuttimagga*, and the *Visuddhimagga*, displayed some critical aspects too (Ray 1994: 304–307).

65 Vin I 58.10–22.

original Vinaya practice and rejects the allowed (temporary) exception of an additional fourth robe. Similarly, the one-time eater (*ekāsanika*) and the later-food refuser (*khalupacchābhattika*) reject the accommodation of consuming 'medicine', as a second meal, later in the day. Practicing the *dhutaṅga* in these cases does not mean undertaking an additional, severe ascetic practice but simply observing the original variant of the respective Vinaya rule. All this seems perfectly in line with the Buddhist monastic ideal.

In the *Sappurisa-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* the *dhutaṅga*s appear as practices that monks seek to observe. Here the Buddha explains that praising oneself for one's characteristics or accomplishments and reviling others who lack them makes one a bad person (*asappurisa*). A number of such characteristics and accomplishments are mentioned individually: being from a high or wealthy family, being of renown, being successful in gaining monastic requisites, being learned (*bahussuta*), being an expert in the Vinaya (*vinayadhara*), being a Dhamma preacher (*dhammakathika*), being a wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*), being a rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*)—plus seven more *dhutaṅga*s (see above)—and having attained various meditation stages.[66] Taking pride in any of them is considered bad, but as such, these characteristics and accomplishments are all positive. Since the nine *dhutaṅga*s are located here, comfortably and auspiciously, right in-between expertise in the Dhamma and the Vinaya and attaining the four *jhānas* (meditation states), they appear fully integrated into ideal Buddhist practice.

A similar set-up and message appear in the *Anaṅgana-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. It explains that a monk will not be honored and revered by his spiritual companions if he has not abandoned evil unwholesome wishes, even when he practices *dhutaṅga*s[67]—and vice versa. Again, this is about the inner attitude of the monk; the *dhutaṅga*s are not criticised. Here, the list of *dhutaṅga*s includes two terms that are not part of the standard list (numbers 2 and 6 below):[68]

1. Wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*)
2. **Remote-dweller (*pantasenāsana*)**[69]

66 MN III 37–45; the *dhutaṅga*s at MN III 40.23–42.18.

67 MN I 30.19–25.

68 MN I 30.20–22.

69 Aside from this account and the subsequently discussed passage in the *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta*, the term *pantasenāsana* is found occasionally in the canonical texts. Except for

3. Alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*)
4. Without-interruption beggar (*sapadānacārin*)
5. Rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*)
6. **Coarse-robe wearer (*lūkhacīvaradhara*)**[70]

But later in the sutta, only three respective alternatives are listed: living in a village or the neighbourhood of a village (*gāmantavihārin*), accepting invitations (*nemantaṇika*), and wearing robes received from householders (*gahapaticīvaradhara*),[71] which suggests that the list above ought to be understood in pairs (1+2, 3+4, 5+6), each of which corresponds to one alternative.[72]

Those additional terms (*pantasenāsana* and *lūkhacīvaradhara*) also appear in the *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, where the pairing is more explicit. Aside from the above-listed three pairs, tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*) and open-air dweller (*abbhokāsika*) form an additional pair, which confirms a link between these two *dhutaṅga*s that was

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Th 1168 and 1169, where it is a quality of a Buddhist sage (*muni*) who is saluted by Brahmā, it always appears together with *āraññaka*: in DN II 284.11 (as qualities of certain non-Buddhist ascetics, *samaṇa-brāhmaṇa*); AN III 121.15 (as qualities of a monk who 'penetrates the immovable', *akuppaṃ paṭivijjhati*); AN IV 291.20–21 (as qualities of a monk who is worthy of gifts and an unsurpassable field of merit); and AN V 10.14 and 11.22–23 (as qualities of a monk who is 'complete in all ways', *sabbākāraparipura*). These parallels support the interpretation that *āraññaka* and *pantasenāsana* form a pair here as well (see below). They are also further evidence of the positive value attached to these practices.

70 Aside from this and the following passage, the exact term *lūkhacīvaradhara* appears only in AN I 25.16, where the monk Mogharāja is identified as chief among monks who wear coarse robes, and AN I 25.30, where Kisāgotamī is declared chief among coarse-robe wearing nuns. *Lūkhacīvara* ('coarse robe') appears several times in Mogharāja's *Apadāna* story (Ap 487.1–488.21). In another *Apadāna* story, Kisāgotamī says that the Buddha had placed her 'chief in the assemblies' (*aggamhi parisāsu*) for her coarse-robes-wearing (*lūkhacīvaradhāraṇa*) (Ap 564.20–567.13, esp. 567.7–8). In the Vinaya, *lūkhacīvara* is a robe that has turned shabby by neglect, and the rules issued prevent a monk from becoming 'badly dressed' (*duccola*) (Vin I 109.22–34; 298.4–32; Vin III 262.26–263.27, esp. 263.4). Here, wearing a *lūkhacīvara* is not intentional. In the other passages, it is a positive attribute.

71 MN I 31.6.

72 Rather than taking the two additional terms (2 and 6) as separate practices, it is tempting to regard them simply as qualifiers of 1 and 5, respectively, as I. B. Horner proposes in her translation: 'a forest-dweller whose lodgings are remote' and 'a rag-robe wearer who wears robes that are worn thin' (MLS I 37). Consequently, she also merges 3 and 4 into 'one who walks for almsfood on continuous almsround'. This, however, obscures the fact that these two (*piṇḍapātika* and *sapadānacārin*) are otherwise considered as two distinct practices that appear separately in the standardised list of thirteen (see below). The fact that these translations are possible and perfectly reasonable demonstrates a fluidity of the terms that I will address again at the end of this essay. In the passage discussed next, we encounter the same issue with yet other practices.

noted earlier. Aside from the four pairs, an additional unique practice appears here as the first in the list: eating a cupful or half-a-cupful of food (*kosakāhāra*; *aḍḍhakosakāhāra*) or a *bilva* fruit's or half-a-*bilva*-fruit's quantity of food (*beluvāhāra*; *aḍḍhabeluvāhāra*).[73] The *amount* of food is normally addressed in the *dhutaṅga* practice of bowl-food eater (*pattapiṇḍika*), which is not mentioned here.

In line with previous passages, the Buddha notes here that some of his followers (*sāvaka*) observe these practices, but that he (the Buddha) should not be praised for it, because he sometimes (*app ekadā*) also eats more, gets his robes from householders, accepts invitations, dwells under roofs, and is surrounded by people (rather than living remotely in the wild). While this seems to stress, once again, the optional nature of the *dhutaṅga*s, it also asserts that the Buddha himself observes them—not exclusively, but frequently.

While all these passages seem to portray the *dhutaṅga*s as widely observed and entirely legitimate practices,[74] others are explicit about the high value they attach to them. One *sutta* in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* warns about potential future perils and predicts that future monks will desire fine robes, fine alms-food, and fine lodgings, abandoning the lifestyle of rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlikatta*), of alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātikatta*), and of tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlikatta*).[75] Then they will bond with nuns, female probationers, and novices, and become susceptible to committing offenses and returning to lay life. And they will bond with attendants and novices and become susceptible to storing goods and engaging in agriculture. The Buddha urges the monks to understand these perils and to strive to resist them.[76] Here, the three mentioned *dhutaṅga*s do not appear as optional, additional practices but as the present standard conduct that is at risk of being compromised in the future.

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73 MN II 6.31–7.9. To match the following pairs, one could interpret this as a pair as well—or as two pairs. This seems to be the only passage in the canonical texts where these terms appear.

74 Also, according to the Vinaya, a monk on probation (*pārivāsika*) is prohibited to undertake the practices of wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*) and alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*) (Vin II 32.17–18), perhaps because neither in the wild nor in the village the *saṅgha* is able to control his behaviour. This indicates, once again, that these were regular practices for monks in good standing.

75 Note that each discussion of these three also predicts that future monks will abandon 'remote lodgings in the wild and in forest jungles' (*araññavanapatthāni pantāni senāsanāni*). This echoes the practices of the wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*) and the remote-dweller (*pantasenāsana*), which form a pair in the above-discussed passages from the *Majjhima-nikāya*.

76 AN III 108.19–110.8.

The introductory story of the Vinaya rule Nissaggiya 15 relates how the Buddha goes into three months of seclusion and orders the monks not to allow anyone to approach him except the person who brings him alms-food. When the monk Upasena, who observes three *dhutaṅga*s, approaches him together with his followers, ignorant of the ruling, the Buddha makes a formal exception: When he is in seclusion, monks who are wilderness-dwellers (*āraññaka*), alms-gatherers (*piṇḍapātika*), and rag-robe wearers (*paṃsukūlika*) are permitted to approach him if they wish.[77] *Dhutaṅga* practitioners are afforded a special status that other monks do not have.

A major proponent of ascetic life and the *dhutaṅga*s is the eminent monk Mahākassapa.[78] The *Mahāgosiṅga-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* relates that when the Buddha's most renowned monks gather, Sāriputta asks them what kind of monk would 'illuminate the Gosiṅgasāla grove', the place where they are meeting. Each of them answers 'according to their own inspiration/intuition/understanding' (*yathā sakaṃ paṭibhānaṃ*) and highlights the quality with which he is widely associated. For Ānanda, that monk would be learned; Revata highlights solitary meditation; Anuruddha the divine eye; Mahākassapa ascetic life; Moggallāna discourse about the *dhamma*; and Sāriputta mastery over one's mind. Subsequently the Buddha praises each one of them equally. In his answer, Mahākassapa specifically mentions four practices: Wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*), alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*), rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*), and three-robe wearer (*tecīvarika*).[79] Here the *dhutaṅga*s are not only endorsed by the Buddha; he also attaches the same high value to them as to all the other qualities.

A group of monks who observe exactly these four *dhutaṅga*s, the thirty monks of Pāva, appear several times in the texts. In the Mahāvagga of the Vinaya they are in a conversation with the Buddha after they got

77 Vin III 231.20–22.

78 In AN I 23.20 he is listed as foremost among the Buddha's followers and monks who speak of, or proclaim, the shaking-off (of defilements) (*dhutavāda*); a variant reading is *dhūtaṅgadhara*, 'observing the *dhūtaṅga*s' (see more on the terms *dhuta* and *dhutaṅga* below). In the *Udāna*, Mahākassapa is portrayed as an alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*) who also goes on a begging round without interruption (*sapadānaṃ piṇḍāya caramāna*), which corresponds to the *dhutaṅga* practice *sapadānacārika*. In the concluding verse, such a monk is praised as being an envy of the gods (Ud 29.7–30.16). The subsequent chapter has a similar verse about the *piṇḍapātika* (Ud 31.19–20). In the *Theragāthā*, Mahākassapa calls himself the most distinguished in the *dhutaguṇa*s except for the Buddha, mentioning this general term, but not listing individual practices (Th 1087). Equally, one verse in the *Buddhavaṃsa* highly praises him for the *dhutaguṇa*s, again mentioning only this term (Bv 5.21–22).

79 MN I 212–219; Mahākassapa's response in MN I 214.1–17.

stuck on their way due to the rainy season.[80] In the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, when the Buddha meets them, he realises that they are 'all still with fetters' (*sabbe sasaṃyojanā*) and delivers a *dhamma* talk, whereupon they lose their attachments, and their minds are released from the intoxicants (*āsava*), which means that they have attained liberation.[81] Apparently their *dhutaṅga* practice had prepared them so well that they only needed one more talk to enter *nibbāna*. In the *Cullavagga* of the Vinaya, they now appear as a group of sixty, and all are arahants.[82]

The *dhutaṅga*s are also popular in the *Theragāthā*, the collected verses ascribed to individual Buddhist monks. The elder Bhaddiya declares that he observed all thirteen *dhutaṅga*s of the standard list and had, over time, attained the extinction of all fetters (*sabbasaṃyojanakkhaya*),[83] which equals liberation. It is noteworthy that Bhaddiya adds to the thirteen *dhutaṅga*s five additional items that are presented in exactly the same way: desiring little (*appiccha*), being pleased (*santuṭṭha*), being secluded (*pavivitta*), not being in association (with other people) (*asaṃsaṭṭha*), and being energetic (*āraddhaviriya*). While the third and the fourth are broadly related to seclusion, the others seem to reflect inner attitudes rather than bodily practices. Still, the form of their presentation suggests that they were viewed as equal to the practices that are elsewhere standardised in the list of thirteen.[84]

Despite naming all thirteen practices (and more), Bhaddiya does not use the term *dhutaṅga*. This connection is tentatively made in one verse ascribed to the elder Tāḷapuṭa, where he says that his mind urged him to always delight in the 'shaking-off' (*dhuta*) by observing these practices: Wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*), alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*), charnel-ground dweller (*sosānika*), rag-robe wearer (*paṃsukūlika*), and continual sitter (*nesajjika*).[85] Ascribed to the elder Mahāmoggallāna are vers-

80 Vin I 253.5–6. The text has *Pāṭheyyakā bhikkhū*, while the parallel reads *Pāveyyakā bhikkhū*. The city of Pāva is associated with the Mallas.

81 SN II 187.7–189.3.

82 Vin II 299.4–6. The text has *Pāṭheyyakā bhikkhū* as well.

83 Th 842–865.

84 These additional five are also included in Mahākassapa's above-mentioned response about the monk who would illuminate the Gosiṅgasāla grove. Here Mahākassapa adds yet more items: the monk abounds in virtue (*sīlasampanna*), concentration (*samādhisampanna*), wisdom (*paññāsampanna*), deliverance (*vimuttisampanna*), and the perfect knowledge of deliverance (*vimuttiñāṇadassanasampanna*); MN I 214.6–16. See also Ray 1994: 308–310, who discusses the *Theragāthā* list but does not mention the parallel account of Mahākassapa.

85 Th 1120.

es that celebrate three practices: Wilderness-dweller (*āraññaka*), alms-gatherer (*piṇḍapātika*), and tree-root dweller (*rukkhamūlika*).[86] And Anuruddha claims to have remained a continual sitter (*nesajjika*) for fifty-five years.[87]

Aside from all the passages in the canonical texts that praise the *dhutaṅga*s and the monks who observe them, this positive value also seems to be reflected in the category itself, to which I will now finally turn. The term *dhutaṅga* is a compound whose first member, *dhuta* (or, in some instances, *dhūta*) is a perfect participle of the root *dhu*, 'to shake, toss; to shake off, remove, destroy'. As K. R. Norman has noted, *dhuta* seems to function as an action noun, referring to the act of 'shaking-off',[88] and the objects of this shaking-off are traditionally understood to be defilements (*kilesa*).[89] The second member of the compound, *aṅga*, is often translated as 'practice', but its regular meanings are 'limb, part, factor, attribute, quality'.[90] This is also supported by the synonym *dhutaguṇa* (or *dhūtaguṇa*), which appears alternatively in the texts. The second member, *guṇa*, is glossed as 'element, quality, attribute'.[91] A literal translation of the compounds, then, would be 'attributes/elements of the shaking-off (of defilements)'. It seems fair to assert that when these terms are used in connection with the practices, they attach a positive value to them—shaking off defilements is a good thing.

To summarise, the survey of how the *dhutaṅga*s are viewed and evaluated in the canonical texts has yielded two general tendencies. Some authors regard them as problematic, suspicious, or even harmful ascetic practices, while others celebrate them as positive and beneficial for Buddhist monastics. We will return to this discourse in a moment.

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86 Th 1146–1148.

87 Th 904. He adds that sluggishness has been removed for twenty-five years.

88 Norman 1969: 129, n. 36. For the phenomenon of perfect passive participles functioning as action nouns, he refers to Hendriksen 1944: 15–19. In his *Theragāthā* translation, he translates *sadā dhute rato* as 'always delighting in shaking-off' (Th 1120, Norman 1969: 102) and *dhutaguṇe visiṭṭho 'haṃ* as 'I am outstanding in the qualities of shaking-off' (Th 1087; Norman 1969: 99).

89 DoP lists many passages in the *Visuddhimagga* and commentaries that make this connection but also one in the *Therīgāthā*, where two nuns are said to have shaken off defilements (*dhutakilesa*) (Thī 401). Note that here *dhuta* does not seem to be an action noun but a regular participle. The syntactic functions of *dhuta* in the canonical texts and its connection to *kilesa* need a more comprehensive investigation.

90 DoP, s.v. Avoiding a semantic discussion, I. B. Horner simply states that *aṅga* was 'a technical term covering these various modes of scrupulous living' (BD II 86, n. 2).

91 DoP, s.v.

Is *dhutaṅga/dhutaguṇa* a useful scholarly category?

The observations so far suggest that the practices we call *dhutaṅga*s were well established at the time of the canonical texts' composition. Their individual names are stable across all texts, and most of them are not described or explained beyond what their names say, nor do we ever encounter uncertainty or disagreement about how they are practised. Whether or not they are of pre-Buddhist or non-Buddhist origin, as Dantinne claims,[92] could be explored further, but this study has shown that, at the very least, in all these canonical texts they appear firmly Buddhist.

While their individual names are stable, as a group they are wildly uneven. Some seem identical or extremely similar to one another, others differ only in their respective level of intensity. They show up individually, in pairs, or in groups of varying lengths, in diverse combinations and varied orders, and some passages plausibly pair them up thematically, related to dwelling place, alms-gathering, and clothing, respectively. They reflect a wide spectrum of ascetic intensity, from slightly stricter Vinaya conduct to severe austerities, such as remaining permanently exposed to the sun or never lying down. Some passages include practices that are presented alongside, and in exactly the same way as, *dhutaṅga*s but do not show up elsewhere or in the standardised list of thirteen:[93]

- Remote-dweller (*pantasenāsana*)
- Coarse-robe wearer (*lūkhacīvaradhara*)
- A-cupful or half-a-cupful-of-food eater (*kosakāhāra*; *aḍḍhakosakāhāra*)
- A *bilva* fruit's or half a *bilva* fruit's quantity of food eater (*beluvāhāra*; *aḍḍhabeluvāhāra*)
- Devadatta's rejection of fish and meat (*macchamaṃsaṃ na khādeyyum*)

Yet other passages add items to lists of regular *dhutaṅga*s that partly reflect inner attitudes rather than bodily practices:[94]

- Desiring little (*appiccha*)
- Being content (*santuṭṭha*)
- Being secluded (*pavivitta*)
- Not being in association (with other people) (*asaṃsaṭṭha*)
- Being energetic (*āraddhaviriya*)

92 Dantinne 1991: 27. Unfortunately, he provides little evidence for this suggestion.

93 MN I 30.20–22; MN II 6.31–7.9; Vin II 197.4–12. See the discussions in previous sections.

94 Ud 42.31–33; MN I 214.1–17; SN II 202.16–22; Th 857–861. In MN I 214.6–16, Mahākassapa adds yet another five inner accomplishments (see above, note 84).

All this raises the question of how we should understand and address these practices in the canonical texts. I have cumulatively employed the term *dhutaṅga/dhutaguṇa* here, as it has been the custom in scholarship, undoubtedly because post-canonical works such as the *Vimuttimagga* and the *Visuddhimagga* grouped thirteen practices under this name. But when we check the canonical texts themselves for these very terms, the result is rather sobering. If my survey is correct, the word *dhutaṅga/dhūtaṅga* appears merely two times in the entire canon,[95] while the word *dhutaguṇa/dhūtaguṇa* appears merely three times.[96]

Scholarship has used the terms as a convenient shortcut to refer to any or all of the thirteen practices, but the present discussion has made this seem rather anachronistic. Most importantly, looking through the lens of a later standardisation that includes exactly thirteen *dhutaṅga* practices has obstructed our view and prevented us from acknowledging the additional practices and attitudes mentioned above. As a pragmatic alternative and in lieu of a better term, I propose to speak of '*dhutaṅga*(-like)' practices in the canonical literature. We find more than thirteen *dhutaṅga*(-like) practices in the canon, and, even more importantly, its authors seem to have generally no interest in determining an exact number. While they tend to group the practices together in various ways, the lists are diverse in length and fluid in composition. As I will argue below, acknowledging this fluidity helps us get a better sense of their original nature.

Are the *dhutaṅga*(-like) practices 'ascetic' practices?

Turning from nomenclature to content, a scholarly term that dictionaries and other scholarship regularly use to describe *dhutaṅga/dhutaguṇa* is 'ascetic', and at first glance, the definition 'optional ascetic practices for Buddhist monastics' seems to work quite well. But my study suggests that

95 Once in the *Parivāra*, the appendix to the Vinaya (Vin v 193.16: *dhutaṅgavagga*), where it labels the summary of an earlier section on the thirteen practices (in which the term does not appear); and once in the canonical *Suttanipāta* commentary *Niddesa*, which classifies eight of the practices as *vatta* ('observance') but not *sīla* ('moral conduct') (Nidd I 66.21–24). While not technically a canonical text, it may be noted that the term also appears in the (commentarial) prose section of the *Vātamigajātaka*, where a recently ordained monk takes on the 'thirteen *dhutaṅga*s' (Ja I 156.16).

96 In the introductory story to the Vinaya rule Pārājika 1, where the monk Sudinna undertakes four of the practices (Vin III 15.2–5) and in the *Theragāthā* and the *Buddhavaṃsa*, where Mahākassapa is generally praised for practicing the *dhutaguṇa*s (Th 1087; Bv 5.21–22).

the term 'ascetic' may be slightly misleading. If we use any standard substantive definition of 'asceticism', such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s 'rigorous self-discipline, severe abstinence, austerity', classifying practices that are very similar to Vinaya rules, such as the three-robe wearer (*tecīvarika*), creates analytical problems. There are two equally unsatisfactory options: Either we consider the Vinaya rule of wearing three robes as the regular, non-ascetic custom for Buddhist monks, in which case 'ascetic' practice would mean something more rigorous, and *tecīvarika* would not be 'ascetic'. Or we define wearing three robes as 'ascetic'—in contrast to using more robes, as many monks seem to have done—in which case the Vinaya rule must equally be classified as 'ascetic'. In this context, it would defeat the term's purpose of distinguishing *dhutaṅga*s from 'regular' monastic life. Either way, *tecīvarika* could hardly be called an 'optional ascetic practice', let alone one that is related to 'mortifying the flesh'.[97]

In scholarship on early Buddhism the term 'ascetic' often has the connotation of irregular, extreme, or even non-Buddhist, none of which would be appropriate for this example. In addition, we encountered differing opinions about the value of *dhutaṅga*(-like) practices in the canonical texts. While some authors do view them critically and associate them with one of the two hell-bound extremes in the concept of the Middle Way, the ascetic extreme, others embrace them as part of the ideal Buddhist path to liberation. For the former, 'ascetic' practices are those that are problematic or even detrimental for Buddhist monastics—they are observed by non-Buddhists and should be avoided. For the latter, the practices are 'ascetic' only in the sense that the ideal life of Buddhist monks and nuns is ascetic.[98]

Recognising this discourse about asceticism[99] reminds us that while *dhutaṅga*(-like) practices may contain a certain degree of physical rigor,

97 Gombrich 1988: 94; as quoted in the beginning of this essay.

98 Clearly, this is but a simple sketch of two general tendencies. The variety of accounts and lists in the discussed passages suggest that the discourse is more differentiated, and taking a closer look at certain passages, perhaps also including parallels in other Mainstream schools and non-Buddhist literature, such as Jain and Brāhmaṇical, might produce further insights. Nicholas Witkowski has recently published substantial studies on two practices, rag-robe wearing (*paṃsukūlika*) and charnel-ground dwelling (*sosānika*), that demonstrate that the asceticism discourse continued far into the so-called middle period of Indian Buddhism (Witkowski 2017 and 2019; see also Witkowski 2025). Highlighting this discourse helps to recognise multiple voices in the canonical texts.

99 For general reflections on discourses about asceticism, including a discursive definition, see Freiberger 2010: 189–190; see also Freiberger, forthcoming.

many authors of the canonical texts viewed this rigor as admirable, or even ideal, Buddhist practice, while other authors had a lower opinion of the practices and regarded them as one 'extreme' in the Middle Way doctrine. Embracing this interpretation of the Middle Way, scholars have tended to side with the latter when they labeled the practices 'ascetic'. In this portrayal, they became irregular, optional (and rather suspicious) practices for 'monks of ascetic temperament'—marginal rather than standard; problematic rather than optimal. This study has shown that *both* perspectives are attested in the canonical texts. And that the authors invoke the literary presence of the Buddha to promote either one.

Are they 'optional'? Are they 'practices'?

One question remains: How do we explain the curious tension between the practices' individual terminological stability and the striking instability and inconsistency of the practices as a group? As discussed above, the scholarly classification of the practices as 'ascetic' has (mis)led us to perceive them as extreme and marginal. We may want to reconsider the other two components of the phrase 'optional ascetic practices' as well.

First, calling them 'optional' stresses their relation to Buddhist monastic law. But as far as I can see, the Devadatta episode is the only account in which four of them are regulated by the Vinaya—and only in the sense that the Buddha refuses to make them mandatory. Although only four practices are officially declared optional in the Devadatta episode, scholars have silently extended this regulation to any practice that they identified as a *dhutaṅga*. But the authors of the Vinaya never bother to regulate any of the others.[100] When a practice's value is subject to controversy in the texts, the issue is not its legality but rather its positive or negative effects or the monk's motivations. Our use of the qualifier 'optional' seems to overemphasise the legal dimension and, at the same time, imply that they are rare exceptions. Rather, some are mentioned often and all over the canonical texts, which seems to indicate that they were quite common and widespread in the early Buddhist community.

100 The simple fact that the Vinaya makes only four of thirteen (or more) *dhutaṅga*s explicitly optional has rarely, if ever, been pointed out. As discussed above, some *dhutaṅga*s are mentioned in narrative passages of the Vinaya, but their optional status is never discussed anywhere else. This also applies to the list of thirteen that appears in the *Parivāra* (Vin v 131.9–19 = Vin v 193.17–21), where the authors merely list five reasons for observing them.

Second, calling them 'practices' emphasises the physical effort associated with them. While this is an important aspect, I propose that they may better be understood as *qualities* ascribed to individual monks. The term 'quality' has occasionally been associated with the *dhutaṅgas/dhutaguṇas* but generally without further discussion.[101] I argue that individual monks expressed these qualities through their effort and commitment, thus distinguishing themselves from other monastics. Mostly these qualities comprise the monk's physical efforts, but some of them, mentioned alongside the others in some lists, are inner attitudes: desiring little (*appiccha*); being content (*santuṭṭha*); being energetic (*āraddhaviriya*); etc. Again, the fact that Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*—solely concerned, as it is, with the list of thirteen—, glosses the word *aṅga* in *dhutaṅga* as *paṭipatti*, 'practice, conduct',[102] may have contributed to the scholarly focus on the physical effort. By contrast, this study has shown that some canonical authors felt the need to include other qualities as well, which suggests a certain degree of fluidity in talking about the qualities. If the primary purpose of these terms was to highlight distinctive qualities of individual monks, there may have been no reason to restrict them to physical feats. Nor would it have made much sense to envision these diverse qualities as a stable group with a uniform character.

Conclusion

All these observations may help us to reconsider the original nature of the *dhutaṅga*(-like) qualities in the Pāli canon. If they referred to distinct and widely recognised features of individual monks, sufficiently defined by their name, their conceptualisation as a group was likely secondary, which would explain the unevenness. Similar practices may have had slightly

101 Here are some examples from scholarship: As mentioned above, 'quality' is listed as one meaning of both *aṅga* and *guṇa* in Margaret Cone's DoP; Norman translates *dutaguṇe* as 'qualities of shaking-off' (Norman 1969: 99), as does Ray (1994: 295); Edgerton translates it as 'qualities of the purified man' (BHSD, s.v.); according to Roach (2020: 11), Tibetan translators rendered it as *sbyangs pa'i yon tan*, with *yon tan* (Skt *guṇa*) being glossed as 'good qualities, excellence' by multiple Tibetan dictionaries (see Steinert, s.v.); the title of Dantinne's book is *Les qualités de l'ascète (Dhutaguṇa)* (Dantinne 1991); Boucher translates *dhutaguṇa*s as 'qualities of purification (Boucher 2008: 43); and the title of Roach's dissertation is ' "The Qualities of the Purified": Attitudes Towards the *dhūtaguṇas* in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*' (but she also states that 'the MSV usually portrays the *dhūtaguṇas* as practices, not as qualities', Roach 2020: 10).

102 Vism 80.9.

different names in different regions, and some recognised qualities were physically more demanding than others. We encountered various ways of grouping these qualities that eventually resulted in a standardised (but incomplete) list of thirteen. Why practices that sometimes appear alongside those on this standardised list—even physical ones such as remote-dweller (*pantasenāsana*), coarse-robe wearer (*lūkhacīvaradhara*), and others—were not included in that list, is unknown but can probably be explained by its general fluidity and overlaps. An intentional exclusion seems rather unlikely.

An analogy might help to illustrate how we could envision the early Buddhist use of the terms. I propose that they resemble the ways professors today identify and highlight certain qualities in students. For the purpose of a light comparison, I created a random list of such qualities:

1. Rigorous note-taker (a student who takes extensive notes on all readings)
2. Theory buff (a student who is particularly interested in and knowledgeable about theories)
3. Night-worker (a student who studies until deep into the night)
4. All-nighter-puller (a student who works all through the night ahead of a deadline)
5. Continual attendant (a student who never misses a class)
6. Outside the box-thinker (a student who regularly challenges themselves by exploring unfamiliar academic terrain)
7. Diligent reader (a student who has an eye for details)
8. Citation master (a student who knows multiple manuals of style and creates perfectly crafted bibliographies)

Some of these qualities are more intense than others; some are similar, with one being a bit more rigorous than the other (e.g., the night-worker and the all-nighter-puller); some are slightly more attitudinal than practice-related (the theory buff and the outside the box-thinker); and quite surely, more such qualities exist that are not listed here. Teachers may have different opinions—affirmative or critical—about the value of these qualities. They could employ the respective term not only as a compliment but also as a critique or even a light mockery. For example, some teachers may critically note that pulling an all-nighter is not praiseworthy at all, because the student should have worked on the assignment earlier and more regularly. Or they may mock a student as a 'citation master' who is able to create perfect bibliographical references but has no original thoughts. And I suspect it would be easy to find different opinions among professors—that is, a discourse or controversy—on the value of being a theory buff.

Since the items on this list are not formally required by university rules and regulations (compared here to the Vinaya), they could be called 'optional' for students. But this seems to be somewhat beside the point, since most professors would probably hope that students come with many of these features, at least to some degree, and certainly with the dedication that underlies them. Some, such as continual attendant or diligent reader, barely differ from regularly expected conduct, even though such students might still stand out (sadly) and be recognised for it. And disapproving or admiring an 'all-nighter-puller' student is hardly based on whether this practice is permitted by university rules. Thus, it seems much more apt to view the listed features as distinctive qualities that teachers ascribe to individual students. Since those qualities are widely recognised and any instructor will likely understand the meaning of the terms with no difficulty—even though I just made them up for this purpose—there is no need for a detailed description or definition. They are generally not intended to be precise technical terms.

If this (rather playful) analogy holds up, it helps to perceive the early Buddhist *dhutaṅga*(-like) qualities in a new light. I propose that the terms were originally meant to acknowledge outstanding features of individual monks. These qualities of distinction could include physical efforts, severe or less severe, as well as recognised inner attitudes such as 'desiring little' (*appiccha*). The diversity within the list was not an issue because there was no list—or defining category—that they had to fit into. Unlike other monastic practices that are minutely described and regulated by the Vinaya, they are never defined or theorised in any way, nor do the canonical texts ever teach monastics how to pursue them (the *Visuddhimagga w*ould do that much later). Considering the complete lack of explanation, all terms must have been self-explanatory at the time—like the qualities of students given in my analogy—even though later generations may have no longer fully understood some of them.

While all this would have to be checked against parallels in other traditions than the Pāli, the fact that the Buddhist *dhutaṅga*(-like) qualities appear all over the canonical texts suggests that they were widely recognised and quite common. That their value is discussed controversially may, by itself, support this assumption—truly marginal practices would likely not receive this amount of praise or criticism. Unregulated by the Vinaya, they may give us an interesting peek into the practice of Buddhist monasticism in the early period. Apparently, individual monks lived in the wilderness, under trees, or entirely exposed to the climate in the open air; ate only what

fit in their bowl or only once a day; dressed in rag robes; and refused meal invitations or new robe material from lay followers. Some lived in charnel grounds or even refused to ever lie down. It may be tempting to view this as an early, more ascetic and less institutionalised phase of Buddhist monasticism, but the evidence shows that the lists of *dhutaṅga*(-like) qualities only expanded over time. Thirteen practices became standardised and affirmed in the *Visuddhimagga*, there enriched with much more detail, and they are still being undertaken today. Rather than assuming that with increasing institutionalisation, Buddhist monasticism lost its early ascetic edge and became increasingly more moderate, we may need to reckon with a continual presence of a stricter lifestyle that did not appear as marginal, extreme, or subversive, but as a regular and common variant of monastic life.

Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara-nikāya*, ed. by R. Morris and E. Hardy, 5 vols (London: Pali Text Society, 1885–1900).
Ap	*Apadāna. The Apadāna of the Khuddaka Nikāya*, ed. by Mary E. Lilley (London: Pali Text Society, 1925–1927).
BD	*The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya Piṭaka)*, trans. by I. B. Horner, 6 vols (London: Pali Text Society, 1938–1966).
BHSD	Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*: Volume II: Dictionary (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).
Bv	*Buddhavamsa*, in *Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpiṭaka*, ed. by N. A. Jayawickrama (London: Pali Text Society, 1974).
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*, ed. by T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, 3 vols (London: Pali Text Society, 1890–1911).
DoP	*A Dictionary of Pāli*, by Margaret Cone, 3 vols (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001–2020).
Mil	*The Milindapañho: Being Dialogues between King Milinda and the Buddhist Sage Nāgasena*, ed. by V. Trenckner (London: Pali Text Society, 1890).
MLS	*The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-Nikāya)*, trans. by I. B. Horner, 3 vols (London: Pāli Text Society, 1954–1959).

MN	*Majjhima-nikāya*, ed. by V. Trenckner and R. Chalmers, 2 vols (London: Pali Text Society, 1888–1899).
Nidd I	*Mahāniddesa*, ed. by L. de la Vallée Poussin and E. J. Thomas (London: Pali Text Society 1916).
PED	*The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, by Thomas William Rhys Davids and William Stede (London: Pali Text Society, 1921–1925).
Sn	*Suttanipāta*, ed. by Dines Andersen and Helmer Smith (London: Pali Text Society, 1913).
SN	*Saṃyutta-nikāya*, ed. by L. Feer, 5 vols (London: Pali Text Society, 1884–1898).
Th/Thī	*Thera- and Therīgāthā*, ed. by Hermann Oldenberg and Richard Pischel, 2nd edition with Appendices by K. R. Norman and L. Alsdorf (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990 [1966; '1883]).
Vin	*Vinaya Piṭaka*, ed. by Hermann Oldenberg, 5 vols (London: Pali Text Society, 1879–1883).
Vism	*Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa, ed. by C. A. F. Rhys Davids, 2 vols (London: Pali Text Society, 1920–1921).

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