ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Vows Without a Self

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Abstract

Vows play a central role in Buddhist thought and practice. Monastics are obliged to know and conform to hundreds of vows. Although it is widely recognized that vows are important for guiding practitioners on the path to enlightenment, we argue that they have another overlooked but equally crucial role to play. A second function of the vows, we argue, is to facilitate group harmony and cohesion to ensure the perpetuation of the *dhamma* and the *saṅgha*. However, the prominence of vows in the Buddhist tradition seems at odds with another central part of the doctrine. For vows, like other promises, seem to involve representing a persisting self as the individual who undertakes the vow. And to explicitly appeal to a persisting self conflicts with one of the most important philosophical commitments of Buddhism – the no self view. We argue though that once we articulate the details of how vows generate behavior that conforms to them, we can see that no appeal to the self is required to internalize and act on vows.

KEYWORDS
Buddhist, no self, vows, expected utility theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

Vows (rules or precepts) play a central role in the Buddhist tradition. Monastics are enjoined to learn and follow hundreds of vows, from a vow against intentionally killing a human being to a

vow against wearing a multi-coloured robe. This is puzzling. If the goal of Buddhist practice is *Nibbāna* (enlightenment) through insight, why would memorizing hundreds of vows be important? It seems instead that one should simply strive to internalize the philosophical insights and truths. Furthermore, unlike meditation, it seems that vows, like other promises, involve representing a persisting self as the individual who undertakes the vow. And to explicitly appeal to a persisting self is at odds with one of the most important philosophical commitments of Buddhism – the no self view.

In this paper, we begin by setting out the nature and classification of vows in the early Buddhist texts in some detail.[1] We go on to chart the history and the justification for the emergence of vows in the Buddhist tradition. With the history and the details in place, we argue that the vows have two important roles to play. First, as is widely recognized, many of the vows are thought to guide practitioners on the path to enlightenment. However, when we look at the range and the complexity of vows that monastics undertake, it's implausible that the only function of the vows is that of a moral compass on the path to enlightenment. A second function of the vows, we argue, is to facilitate group harmony and cohesion to ensure the perpetuation of the monastic community (*saṅgha*) and the Buddhist teaching (*dhamma*). The manifest significance of the vows in the tradition makes it all the more pressing to determine whether vows can generate conformity in a way that is consistent with the denial of the self. We argue that once we articulate the details of how vows generate behavior that conforms to them, we can see that vows can be internalized and shape behavior without representing the self.

2 | BUDDHIST VOWS IN CONTEXT

Proper moral and ethical conduct (*sīla*) is codified in Buddhism in the form of five moral precepts (*pañcasīla*), which require abstention from: (1) taking life; (2) taking what is not given; (3) sexual misconduct; (4) engaging in false speech; (5) using intoxicants. All Buddhists are encouraged to keep these five vows. Another five are added to this list for novice monks and nuns which require abstention from (6) eating after midday; (7) participating in worldly amusements; (8) adorning the body with ornaments and using perfume; (9) sleeping on high and luxurious beds; and (10) accepting money, gold and silver. The full ten precepts (*dasasīla*) are observed by novice monks and nuns, before they are fully ordained with a further caveat on (3) even novice monastics must refrain from sexual activity. A fully ordained monk or nun must follow all the rules observed by their *saṅgha*.

The vows were systematically formulated in the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka which is the first of the three baskets (*Tripiṭaka*) of the Buddhist Cannon, the other two being the Suttas (the sermons of the Buddha) and the Abhidhamma (a collection of philosophical texts that systematises the teachings in the suttas). The Vinaya is composed of the texts that cover the rules, regulations and standards of living a renunciant life. The Vinaya has been read in different ways – as ethics, as legal literature, as a method for building institutions, and as an explanation for how the ideal religious life contributes to Buddhist soteriology. In her excellent work on early Buddhist thought, Heim (2013, p. 138) maintains that these different readings of the Vinaya are all appropriate, and often these concerns overlap.

Though there is a great deal of discussion of the vows in the scholarly literature on Buddhist societies, contemporary Buddhist philosophers have paid comparatively little attention to the

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[1] Although the problem we address in this paper is a general problem for Buddhist traditions our discussion in this paper focuses on the Theravāda tradition and the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka.

vows. A notable exception is Garfield (2022), who examines the role of vows in Buddhist ethics. We think this attention to vows is amply warranted, given that the vows play such an important role in Buddhist societies.

Garfield outlines the broad range of vows that Buddhists may undertake. Importantly, he outlines how the undertaking of vows is an essential aspect in the development of *sīla* (proper ethical conduct) (ibid, p. 119). The type of *sīla* one aims to develop is usually determined by the tradition one chooses to follow, which in turn determines the vows one undertakes. Garfield describes a variety of vows that have the *pañcasīla* as their fundamental base, which tend to closely align to the path. His focus is on the Bodhisattva vows, which are more commonly taken by Mahāyāna practitioners. Our focus will be on the vows as outlined in the Pāli Vinaya in the Theravāda tradition but our aim is to offer a general theoretical account of vows that in principle would apply to all Buddhist traditions.

Garfield emphasises the importance of the vows in Buddhist traditions primarily as a means of transforming our psychology. He claims that the vows "are intended to transform our experience of, and comportment toward, the world we inhabit and toward ourselves as agents in that world" (ibid, p. 165). Vows, according to him, are means to achieve cognitive, affective, and perceptual improvement that can be used for betterment of the individual. Garfield suggests that there is a general justification for all of the vows. He writes:

The subsidiary vows are far more specific, dealing with many details of daily life, and we need not go into those in this context. For our purposes, it is only worth noting that each of these is associated with one of the perfections on the bodhisattva path, further indicating the relevance of the vows to moral experience and perception. (ibid, p. 158)

Garfield lists the perfections on the Bodhisattva path: generosity, proper conduct, patience, effort, meditative concentration and wisdom (ibid, p. 97). All of these are virtues conducive for moral progress of individual monastics. Although we think Garfield is correct that vows are essential for moral progress on the Buddhist path, we think that a much more complex story is needed to capture the wide range of vows. As we shall see, the Buddha himself and Buddhists recognise that the vows are in place to ensure that the *dhamma* is perpetuated into the future. This latter function requires more than the moral betterment of individual monastics, it requires coordination to ensure harmony within the monastic community and with the laity. But to understand fully the role of the vows in life of Buddhist monastics and laity, we need to first look closely at the history and the rationale for the introduction of the vows. Then we delve into the various classifications of the vows in the Vinaya to get a sense of the range, complexity and variety of the vows in Buddhism.

2.1 | The history of emergence of Buddhist vows

When one reads the traditional Buddhist texts, one finds many inspirational examples of people following the teachings and becoming enlightened. When we read the Vinaya we are reminded that these examples took place in a very real and messy human world complete with its eclectic characters, some of whom were perhaps not so inspiring. We see rules being formulated in response to monastics making honest mistakes that violated social and local norms of the times but also in response to monks and nuns who exposed their genitalia to each other for arousal, plotted assassinations, or trained their pet monkeys for sex. It is in this messy world that we find the foundations for Buddhist Vinaya.

In the early years of teaching, the Buddha felt no need to formulate disciplinary rules (Horner, 1938). The community was small, his followers knew and understood the *dhamma* well, and they were people of high personal attainments who had succeeded in subduing many or all of the *kilesas* (i.e., the defilements arising from greed, hatred and delusion). The Canon tells of how Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, asked the Buddha to formulate a code of rules to ensure that the *dhamma* would last long. The Buddha replied that the time for such a code had not yet come, for even the most backward of the men in the community at that time had already had their first glimpse of the goal:

Sāriputta, the Tathāgata will know the right time for that. The teacher does not lay down training rules for his disciples and recite a Pātimokkha until the causes of corruption appear in the Sangha. And they do not appear until the Sangha has attained long standing, great size or great learning. But when this happens, then the Teacher lays down training rules for his disciples and recites a Pātimokkha in order to ward off those causes of corruptions. (ibid, 1938, p. 18)

Buddhaghosa offers an analogy to make the point clear. For the Buddha to give formal code for the behaviour of monastics before the problems begin to appear in the community would be like a bad doctor who pops a patient's boil, though it had only begun to swell, and makes it bleed painfully, leaving the patient worse off (Heim, 2013, p. 141). The idea is that *kilesas* have deep roots in the human psyche and will manifest in immoral actions. The Buddha, like a skilful physician, recognises the symptoms and knows how to treat them appropriately. There is no point in specifying the rules before the monastics are made aware of the problems, which would appear to be heavy-handed. And even when problems arose, the Buddha did not set out a full code all at once. Instead, he formulated rules one at a time in response to events. These events ranged from monastics' behavior that contravened moral standards, but more often, from the criticisms made by laypeople who were comparing behavior of the Buddhists monastics to local religious sects. Once formulated, many rules were amended numerous times throughout the Buddha's life in response to loopholes and limitations before being formalised in the Vinaya after the Buddha's death at the First Buddhist Council (about 483 BC).

The *Pātimokkha* (the codified set of vows that all monastics must follow which literally means towards liberation), albeit quite bare, was conceived by the Buddha himself as his following began to grow. The *Mahāpadāna Sutta* provides a glimpse at its ethos:

Patient forbearance is the highest sacrifice.

Supreme is Nibbāna, so say the Buddhas.

He's not 'One Gone Forth' who hurts others,

No ascetic, he who harms another.

Not to do any evil but to cultivate the good,

To purify one's mind, this the Buddha's teaching.

Not insulting, not harming, restraint according to rule,

Moderation in food, seclusion of dwelling,

Devotion to high thinking, this the Buddha's teach (Walshe, 1995, p. 219).

This verse encapsulates the essence of the moral code and also makes clear the basic intention for setting out the code. The moral code formulated in this Sutta was dynamic allowing for subsequent refinement. The Buddha established guidelines for the evolution of the code. For example, the *Mahāvagga* says if anything (new) is done that is similar to what is allowable, then that new thing is allowable, and if anything (new) is done that is similar to what is not allowable, then that new thing is not allowable. (Horner, 1993, p. 347).

2.2 | The Buddha's justification for the vows

Almost all Buddhist traditions agree that progress on the path is achieved by a combination of proper conduct (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). The Vinaya is mainly understood in the context of its role in the Buddhist path, that is, as specifying the proper *sīla* which is the foundation for psychological transformation. The vows are characteristically important tools used to progress on the path towards liberation. Since proper conduct is a pre-requisite for making progress on the path, the formalisation of the Vinaya and the inclusion and proliferation of the vows in the early Buddhist traditions makes sense.

Garfield (2022) suggests that vows are means to achieve cognitive, affective, and perceptual improvement that can be used for moral betterment of the individual monastics. We agree. But we think there's more to the role of vows. One way to see this is to look at the Buddha's reasons for the formalising the code of conduct:

1. "For the excellence of the Community."
2. "For the comfort of the Community."
3. "For the curbing of the impudent."
4. "For the comfort of well-behaved bhikkhus."
5. "For the restraint of effluents [*kilesas*] related to the present life."
6. "For the prevention of effluents [*kilesas*] related to the next life."
7. "For the arousing of faith in the faithless."
8. "For the increase of the faithful."
9. "For the establishment of the true Dhamma."
10. "For the fostering of discipline [Vinaya]." (Thanissaro, 2013, p. 16)

These reasons fall into two main types. Reasons 5 and 6 are *internal reasons* as they pertain to transforming the psychology of the monastics to prevent *kilesas* from manifesting themselves in immoral behaviour. The Bodhisattvas perfections mentioned by Garfield are counter virtues to be cultivated by individal monastics in order to curtail the defilements. Reason 10 is also at least partly an internal reason insofar as it emphasizes the role of discipline in the pursuit of liberation by individual monastics. These internal reasons fit Garfield's focus on the betterment of individual monastics. But the other reasons on the list are manifestly not internal reasons, they are *external* justifications focussing on the harmony within the *saṅgha* and maintaining good relationships with the laity. Reasons 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the above list ensure peace and well-being of the *saṅgha*, whereas 7, 8 and 9 foster and protect faith among the laity, which in turn supports the *saṅgha* and 10 ensures that the *saṅgha* will maintain these standards into the future. Indeed, the narratives surrounding the origin of the rules often show that the reason for the rule is to respond to the

scorn of the laity. The external justification suggests that a key part of the reasons for Buddhist vows is promoting the *dhamma*.

3 | THE VOWS AND THEIR ROLE

The scant philosophical literature emphasises the fact that vows function as a kind of compass, a way to keep to the Buddhist path. The moral transformation of one's psychology is undoubtedly one key function of the vows, but as the eight external reasons offered by the Buddha himself show, vows are concerned with much more than moral and spiritual advancement. To understand the role of the vows it is important to delve into the content of specific vows and the importance of the *saṅgha*. We will now offer a brief description of the vows in the Vinaya and some examples to give the reader a sense that although some vows function as a means of moral and spiritual progress, this is not enough to explain the wide range and complexity of vows. Many vows have another essential function: to ensure a harmonious community both for its own sake and as a means to support spiritual progress. As the Buddha anticipated, this would especially be an issue as the community grew larger and spread to other regions.

3.1 | The content of the vows

The Vinaya consist of two main portions: the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Khandhakas* which mostly treat individual and communal rules, respectively (Hiltebeitel, 2011, p. 153).[2] The *Vibhaṅga* outlines the *Pāṭimokkha* which is comprised of 227 rules for monks and 311 for nuns.[3] It is divided into eight categories according to the moral severity of the transgression, including *pārājika* (expulsion), *saṅghādisesa* (temporary suspension), *aniyata* (undetermined accusations)*, nissaggiya-pācittiya* (forfeiture and confession), *pācittiya* (confession), *pāṭidesanīya* (acknowledgement), *sekkhiya* (training) and *adhikaraṇasamatha* (procedures). Some rules in the *Pāṭimokkha* are aimed at the moral rectitude of the individual. This becomes clear when we focus on the content of the specific rules. For example, one of the rules in the *pārājika* category states that, "Should any bhikkhu intentionally deprive a human being of life, or search for an assassin for him, or praise the advantages of death, or incite him to die he is defeated and no longer in affiliation". Another rule in the sa*ṅghādisesa* category states that, "Should any bhikkhu charge a bhikkhu with an unfounded case entailing defeat, if the issue is unfounded and the bhikkhu confesses his aversions, he is to be (temporarily) driven out, and it entails initial and subsequent meetings of the Community". Clearly these rules focus on moral behaviour of individual monastics.

But some of other rules are concerned with much more than just a guide to moral behaviour. This becomes clear when we focus closely on the content of the rules. For example, one *nissag-*

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[2] The *Vibhaṅga*, which contains the *Pāṭimokkha* vows, primarily focuses on the moral formation of the individual and serves as guidelines for exercising restraint (discipline) by the monastics. The *Khandhakas* deal mainly with the organisation of the *saṅgha* covering practical issues such as conducting ordinations, building monasteries, and assigning official duties to monks. But since the health of the monastic institutions is necessary for the survival and pursuit of the moral and religious goals of the individual monastics and vice versa, they are not completely independent.

[3] Our focus throughout the piece will be on the vows as outlined in the Bhikkhu *Pāṭimokkha* (227 rules), not the Bhikkhuni *Pāṭimokkha* (311 rules). Most of the rules in both *Pāṭimokkha's* overlap, but there are also many notable differences (see Chung, 1999). As such, our examples and numbering of vows (e.g., section 4.1) follow the Bhikkhu *Pāṭimokkha*, which by default use the masculine pronoun.

giya pācittiya rule states that if a monk requests a robe from an unrelated layperson who has not invited him to ask, it must be confessed and forfeited as follows: "This robe of mine requested from an unrelated householder at other than the proper occasion, is to be forfeited. I forfeit it to you". This rule has a double function: it is to guard greed (one of the defilements) leading to immoral behaviour but also to ensure that monks do not abuse the generosity and trust of the laity by requesting gifts at improper occasions. Maintaining good relations with the laity and being worthy of their respect is important for the ongoing support required to ensure that the *saṅgha* flourishes. Again, one of the *adhikaraṇasamatha* rules states that for the purpose of resolving a dispute, "the Community meets, with at least four bhikkhus present. All of the bhikkhus in the territory are either present or have sent their consent, and none of the bhikkhus present protests having the matter settled. Both sides of the dispute are present". This rule ensures there is harmony within the monastic community. Explicit agreement by majority is important for social cohesion and the rules were formulated with these goals in mind. The last example worth mentioning is that of the *sekkhiya* rules such as: "I will go [sit] well-covered; I will not go [sit] swinging my body/arms/head; I will not go [sit] with arms akimbo in inhabited areas". The rules in this category have to do with ensuring that the monastics maintain a certain demeanour so the laity does not have reason to complain about their behaviour, especially as the laity will be comparing their behaviour to monastics in other sects. Monastics are meant to be moral exemplars for the larger Buddhist community.

3.2 | The importance of the saṅgha

The stereotype of Buddhist monks striving for enlightenment meditating in solitude is (largely) mistaken. Monastics typically live in *saṅgha*s which function as a support group for those who decide to forgo family life, material possessions and a normal social life in the pursuit of enlightenment. Once ordained, new monks must be gently introduced to the new norms of the *saṅgha*. For this reason, newly ordained monks are paired with a mentor for a five-year training period of *nissaya* (dependence). The Vinaya states *nissaya* should be regarded as similar to a relationship between a father and son. Each has duties of care and responsibilities towards the other. The mentor's role is not only to teach the *dhamma-vinaya*, but also familiarize the mentee with the customs of the *saṅgha*, acquire requisites for them, care for them in times of sickness, and allay their doubts and personal problems. A mentee also has duties towards the mentor, he must attend to their personal needs and provide care during sickness. The importance of communal relationships between monastic peers cannot be overstated, and indeed a *kalyāṇa-mittatā* (admirable spiritual relationship) is emphasised by the Buddha as being of paramount importance:

Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, he can be expected to develop and pursue the noble eightfold path (SN 45.2; Bodhi, 2017).

It is clear that the individual monastics depend heavily on the *saṅgha*. The *saṅgha* provides emotional support for monastics in lieu of family life. But the *saṅgha* is not self-sufficient, it relies on the laity for support and perpetuation. The *saṅgha* and the larger Buddhist societies developed a symbiotic relationship grounded in the shared belief that the perpetuation of the *saṅgha* is essential for the perpetuation of the *dhamma*. The laity rely on the monastics to teach the *dhamma*. They also seek guidance from the monastics on moral and spiritual matters, and they expect the monastics to be available for performing important rituals in case of death, sickness and other significant life events. Historically, the monasteries benefitted because of the belief among the laity

that giving gifts (*dāna*) to the monks is likely to significantly enhance the positive consequences acquired by the gift-giver. Monasteries also sometimes provided homes for children, education, and even medical services.[4] The *saṅgha* in turn relies on the laity for material and social support. To support this symbiotic relationship between the *saṅgha* and the laity, several of the vows seem to be designed to facilitate regular interaction with the laity. For instance, the Vinaya sets out the rule forbidding food being stored overnight by monastics; this was in response to a monk who was storing up food for days on end (to live frugally in isolation). Instead, monastics must interact with and receive alms from the laity every day. While the precise reason for this rule is not given, the rule ensures regular interaction with the laity. The absence of such interaction would deprive monastics of a salient reminder of their dependency on others for their livelihood, and also deprive the laity of the daily opportunity to perform acts of generosity (Thanissaro, 2013, p. 499).

One of the functions of the *saṅgha* is community outreach to spread the Buddhist teaching and recruit new monastics. The regular interaction with the laity, as we saw above, plays an important role in perpetuating the *dhamma*. If monastics were to live only as hermits, the *dhamma* would not spread and eventually die out. Daily interaction between the laity and monastics ensures that the teachings remain alive in the world. This is both because monastics need to communicate the teachings to the laity as a primary means of recruiting new Buddhists who support the *dhamma* and the *saṅgha*, and because some of the lay Buddhists will in turn join the *saṅgha* and become monks and nuns in the future.

3.3 | The purpose of the Vinaya

Heirman (2019) nicely sums up the purpose of the Vinaya, "Without these rules, there is no *saṅgha*; and without the *saṅgha*, so it is said, there is no *dharma* (doctrine)". One reason then for rules is that they are for maintaining the *saṅgha*, for the *saṅgha* is essential to perpetuating the *dhamma*. Indeed, the Vinaya was introduced as a teacher and the guide for sustenance of the *dhamma* after the death of the historical Buddha. This fits in nicely with the Buddha's reasons for formulating the rules in the first place (section 2.2). The internal reasons alluded to focus on the psychological transformation and moral betterment of individual monastics. But the external justifications focus primarily on harmony within the *saṅgha* and with the larger community. The external reasons reinforce the point that the Buddha is thinking institutionally in terms of how to organise a *saṅgha*, how to ensure harmony and cohesion within the *saṅgha* and with the broader community to ensure the survival of the *saṅgha*. The rules ensure that the monastics are respected members of the broader community, so that they are at least at par with respected Brahmins (in ancient India, this was considered essential to attract good people to join the Buddhist order). The institutional and practical considerations are part of the package deal together with the moral and spiritual transformation of individual monastics for ensuring that the *dhamma* lives long. As Heim (2013, p. 143) puts it, "The texts do not separate the institutional from the ethical; instead, what benefits the community practically is of a piece with its ethical and religious ideals".

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[4] We are grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing our attention to these roles.

4 | DESIGN OF THE SYSTEM OF VOWS

As we've seen, one key function of the vows is the harmony within the *saṅgha* and with the broader community. To create and sustain a harmonious community requires coordination among the many members of the community. Is the system of Buddhist vows well designed for coordination? In order for a system of prohibition rules to be especially effective at facilitating coordination, it should meet several conditions (Gaus 2010, p. 113):

1. The consequences (i.e., punishments) for violations must be clearly specified.
2. The scope of the rules must be clearly specified.
3. The kinds of actions that constitutes a violation must be clearly specified.
4. The conditions for violation must be clearly specified.
5. The members of the community must know the above specifications (1-4).

If these features are absent, then people might either get punished for things that are not violations, or they might avoid certain opportunities. An efficient system of coordination rules will have these mechanisms in place in order to minimize unwitting violations and missed opportunities. How does the Buddhist system of vows fare on these conditions? We take this up next.

We're proposing that insofar as the vows aim at sustaining the monastic community, coordination is a critical function of the vows. In the following subsections, we will examine the extent to which the Buddhist tradition of vows meets each of the above conditions associated with an effective system of prohibitory coordination rules.

4.1 | Consequences (i.e., punishment)

As explained above, the *Pāṭimokkha* code of vows is divided into eight categories. These are listed in their conventional order of recitation, which moves from the most severe offenses to the most incidental and procedural misdemeanours. The categorisation of the vows in the Vinaya is given in terms of punishments associated with each violation. Following Hiltebeitel (2011, p. 156–7) we present the categories as enumerated in the Vinaya:

1. *Pārājika*: four offenses—sexual intercourse, theft, murder, and flaunting spiritual attainments—that constitues expulsion ("defeat") from the monastic order.
2. *Saṅghādisesa*: Thirteen offenses covering areas such as sexual misconduct or obstinate behaviour that call for a period of penance and probation. These violations require formal action by the monastic order.
3. *Aniyata*: Two offenses with undetermined penalties that deal with accusations from trustworthy laypeople.
4. *Nissaggiya-Pācittiya*: Thirty offenses regarding material possessions such as robes or money that require confession and forfeiture of the wrongly acquired items.
5. *Pācittiya*: Ninety-two offenses of various catagorisations (e.g., rules around false speech or general innapropriate behaviour) that require simple confession.
6. *Pāṭidesanīya*: Four offenses requiring acknowledgment for unbecoming behaviour.
7. *Sekkhiya*: Sometimes called training rules, they are 72 rules concerned with daily monastic conduct and manners, for which there is be no sanction or punishment.

8. **Adhikaraṇasamatha**: Seven principles providing procedures for resolving disputes among monastics.

Indeed, the category labels themselves denote the punisment (e.g., *pārājika* means *defeat, saṅghādisesa* means *suspension from the saṅgha*, and *pācittiya* means *confesssion*). Thus, in keeping with the first condition on an effective system of coordinating rules, note that the categorization of the vows include a specification of the punishments associated with each violation.

4.2 | Scope

Who has to follow which vow? An adequate system of rules must be very clear about this. Once again, we find that the Buddhist tradition is quite explicit on the matter. Buddhists are expected to follow different rules depending on whether they are laypersons (5 vows) or monastics, and again whether they are novice (10 vows) or fully ordained monastics (227 or 311). Monastics, but not laypersons, are expected to follow rules about sexual abstinence. Fully ordained monastics must not cut trees or dig soil, but there is no such rule for novices. However, all Buddhists are expected to follow the rules forbidding lying, the taking of intoxicants, sexual misconduct, theft, and killing (Heim, 2013, p. 145).

This difference in the scope of the vows (i.e., who must follow the different vows), is reflected in explicit theorizing about different kinds of offenses. Buddhaghosa's *Samanta-pāsādikā* commentary on the Vinaya distinguishes between two kinds of offences:

1. Those that are blameworthy no matter who commits them (e.g., murder).
2. Those that are proscribed only for the monastics (e.g., eating after noon).

Buddhaghosa interprets offences of the first kind as "blameable for the world" (*lokavajja*), while offenses of the second kind are "blameable because of the rules" (*paṇṇattivajja*) (ibid. p. 146). The point is elaborated in the *Vinaya-mukha*, which is a Thai commentary to the Vinaya:

> Some offenses are faults as far as the world is concerned – wrong and damaging even if committed by ordinary people who are not bhikkhus – examples being robbery and murder, as well as such lesser faults as assault and verbal abuse. Offenses of this sort are termed *lokavajja*. There are also offenses that are faults only as far as the Buddha's ordinances are concerned – neither wrong nor damaging if committed by ordinary people; wrong only if committed by bhikkhus, on the grounds that they run counter to the Buddha's ordinances. Offenses of this sort are termed *paṇṇattivajja* (*Vajirañāṇavarorasa*, 1913).

The *lokavajja* offenses are clearly wrong for everyone (*Majjhima Nikāya* 84 makes clear that these offenses would be punishable by the king or *karma* irrespective of whether it was performed by a high or low caste Hindu; Nanamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 698). And, there is a clear distinction between the *lokavajja* offenses and those – the *paṇṇattivajja* – which depend explicitly on the rules.

The fact that there is acknowledged variation in the *paṇṇattivajja* suggests that these are treated more like conventional than moral violations (cf. Turiel, 1983). And the distinction between *lokavajja* and *paṇṇattivajja* violations suggests that not all behaviours that are improper for monks

are immoral. For example, there is nothing morally wrong with sleeping on high or comfortable beds or adorning oneself. Nonetheless these rules can be important for monastics because such behaviors show desire for material possessions and worldly comforts. Monastics are pursuing the highest end of enlightenment which requires getting rid of all desires. In addition, monastics are perceived by the lay Buddhist community as representatives of the *saṅgha* and thus must be seen as moral exemplars.[5]

Finally, there seems to be some correlation between the blameworthiness of a violation and the severity of punishment. For instance, *pārājika* vows such as killing or stealing would be considered *lokavajja* and if a monk violates them, he is expelled from the *saṅgha*. But if a monk violates a *pācittiya* vow not to eat a proper meal after noon, which would be considered *paṇṇattivajja*, he must merely confess. The confession itself is somewhat painful, but no further punishment is exacted. Some *paṇṇattivajja* don't even require this much – for instance, if a monk breaks the vow to eat his food methodically, it merely requires acknowledging it as a misdeed. There is no need for a public confession.

4.3 | Explicit conditions for violation

Vague rules are, for purposes of coordination, bad rules. Take rules against theft. If the rule says that it's a serious offense to steal valuable objects, then this invites disputes about what counts as valuable. The *Vibhaṅga*, by contrast, provides more explicit instruction about which actions constitute violations. For intance, in the case of stealing, the *Vibhaṅga* articulates conditions under which taking another's possession counts as the kind of theft that is a *pārājika* violation. In order for a case to constitute a *pārājika* violation, the object needs to have a value that would be considered a criminal offence (approximately 1/24 troy ounce of gold; Thanissaro, 2013). If it doesn't reach this value threshold, this would only warrant a "grave offence", and not grounds for expulsion.

4.4 | Conditions for transgression

When does an action count as a transgression? For this, actions are divided into five factors; one's effort, one's perception of the event, one's intention motivating it, the object for which it is aimed, and the result (Thanissaro, 2013). For some vows, all five factors need to be present to be considered a transgression. For example, all five factors must be present for an action to be classified as murder. The object must be a living human being, the monastic perceives them as such, the monastic has murderous intent, tries to murder, and kills the living human being. If any of these factors change, so does the penalty. If the monastic tries to kill someone but doesn't succeed (no result), the penalty is downgraded to a "grave offence" (ibid, p. 83–84). For certain rules though,

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[5] Among the *paṇṇattivajja*, we also see much more variability in interpretations of the Vinaya across monastic traditions. Monastics in most Theravāda traditions vow not to eat after noon. But in terms of what they can drink after noon, there are variations. For example, the Theravāda Thai forest tradition allows monks only to have certain drinks (say tea or coffee with no milk). But another Theravāda tradition, the Thai city tradition, allows monks to have milk, even cheese and yoghurt after noon. Monks visiting a monastery in another region will agree to do the *Pātimokkha* recitation together – signifying implicit agreement on the vows – as long as there is agreement on the *lokavajja*. A difference in colour, style or fabric of the robe which varies across regions is not a basis for excluding monks from participating in the *Pātimokkha* recitation.

the factors of intention, perception or result make no difference. If a monastic intends to drink a glass of apple juice and perceives the cool beverage offered to him as juice, but on drinking finds out he downed an alcoholic cider, he incurs a penalty for drinking intoxicants all the same (ibid, p. 360–362).

4.5 | Community knowledge

The first 4 conditions on effective systems of coordination rules are all met. It's clear to whom the vows apply – e.g., the *lokavajja* apply to everyone; the other vows apply only to the monastics (section 4.2). The details for what counts as a violation and the conditions for when a violation has occurred is also made quite explicit (section 4.3, 4.4). And the punishments associated with each violation is included in the categorisation of the vows (section 4.1). What about the condition that the vows be widely known in the community? As we've seen, the vows number in the hundreds. How can monastics be expected to know so many vows?

The answer is provided by the Uposatha ceremony, required of monastics every fortnight. The Uposatha involves the community gathering to recite all of rules in detail.[6] It provides an opportunity for individual monastics to publicly confess transgressions and privately acknowledge minor misdemeanours. And it functions as a declaration of a bond which unifies diverse monastic *saṅghas* in various geographical regions. For example, any Theravāda monk can join the *Pāṭimokkha* recitation at a monastery anywhere in the world. Most importantly for our purposes, though, the central part of every Uposatha ceremony is the recitation of all of the vows. The recitation thus functions as a means of publicly ratifying the consensually recognized agreed rules.[7] Since these vows are recited fortnightly, it is known to all monks what the rules proscribe as well as the associated punishment for violating each rule. When all the rules in the category are finished, the monastics explicitly recite what the offense involves. For example, after the *pārājika* rules are recited, they state, "any monk who commits these acts is defeated and no longer in communion, so he once was before, he will now be again, he is disqualified and defeated" (Nyanatusita, 2014, p. 30).

In summary, we have argued that a key goal of Buddhist vows is sustaining the *saṅgha*, and this entails that the vows be effective at facilitating coordination. A close look at the elements of the system of vows indicates that this system is indeed very well designed to achieve that end.

5 | VOWS AND NO SELF

A vow is a kind of promise. And promises seem to involve an invocation of self: *I promise to be faithful. I promise to be home by midnight. I promise to pay you back*. Indeed, in his discussion of vows, Garfield (2022, p. 152) writes, "A vow is a kind of promise or agreement, but it is more a promise or agreement to oneself— a resolution— than to anyone else". If a vow is indeed a promise, then monks who undertake the vows make a commitment on behalf of their future self

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[6] In Theravāda cultures, the laity also regularly recite the five precepts. The recitation is conducted on various occasions in front of the monastics, such as lunar observance days, before listening to *dhamma* talks, when making an offering, and generally, before any ceremony that involves both the laity and monastics.

[7] Perhaps not surprisingly, differences in interpretation of the vows have arisen over the history of the tradition. If there are four or more monks disagreeing over the rules, they can form their own monastic community.

to behave in ways that conforms to the vows. Garfield is careful to note that vows differ from promises in some ways, "It is less than a promise in that a vow is a resolution for oneself, not a commitment to another; it is more than a promise in that a vow transforms who one is, changing one's ethical standing in the world." (ibid, p. 155). But insofar as a vow is resolution to transform who one is, it entails an agreement that one will adhere to the vows in the future.

This seems to be at odds with the central Buddhist idea that there is no persisting self. Adhering to the vows is essential to the Buddhist soteriological project and the perpetuation of *saṅgha* and *dhamma*. Vows ensure moral conduct and thus are critical for following the path; vows are also crucial for coordination of the *saṅgha* and the wider Buddhist community. But it is not immediately clear how we can make sense of the practice of undertaking the vows in light of the doctrine of no self. This mismatch between the Vinaya and the theoretical commitment to no self is rarely addressed in the Buddhist literature. How are we to square all this talk of the vows with no self?

Perhaps the most obvious strategy for dealing with this apparent inconsistency is to appeal to the doctrine of two truths. Across a wide range of contexts, the doctrine of Two Truths is called upon to explain away the inconsistency between the no self view and frequent use of conventional terms like persons, Brahmin, Bhikkhu and even the first-person pronoun "I" by the Buddha himself in the scriptures. According to the Two Truths doctrine, while reference to a self cannot be ultimately true – since ultimately there is no self – a statement that talks about persons can be conventionally true provided acceptance of the statements reliably leads to successful worldly activities (Siderits, 2008, p. 35). The Vinaya and the commentarial literature in the Abhidhamma tradition abounds with names of monastics and reference to bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, and some training rules are artculated using the first-person pronoun "I". What might these terms stand for?

According to most Buddhist philosophers, the implicit or explicit reference to the self in the Vinaya rules is best understood as referring to conventional persons. *Dhammas* alone are ultimately real but many things in our folk ontology, for example chariot and pots, are conventionally real, they are mere conceptual fictions. The idea here is that terms like "pot" stands for a concept that has proven useful (for storage) for creatures like us given our interests and cognitive limitations. We are unable to keep track of many evanescent momentary *dhammas*. Pots and chariots are in this sense useful fictions that deserve a place in a sort of second-tier ontology (Siderits, 2019, p. 315). Using exactly the same strategy, Siderits argues that given that there is no self and the *dhammas* that ultimately constitute a person are replaced many times in one life, what should we say of persons over a lifetime? As in the case of pots and chariots, we employ distinction between the two truths. The term "person" does not refer to anything at the level of ultimately real *dhammas*. But persons can refer to conventionally real, conceptual fictions that supervene on causal series of appropriately organized sets of *dhammas*. Siderits (2019) goes on to say that:

> An important constituent of our personhood concept is the disposition known as appropriation (*upādāna*): for a suitably organized set of *skandhas* [ultimately *dhammas*] to apply the concept of a person to itself is for it to appropriate or identify with earlier and later parts of the series in which it occurs.... One example given in this text is that of a criminal who does not appropriate earlier and later parts of the series. Predictably this individual fails to take responsibility for his past crime, sees his present punishment as unjustified, and persists in criminal behavior after release. Clearly, adoption of the personhood concept promotes practices we wish to encourage. For this reason, Buddhists claim, persons are conventionally real, and it is conventionally true that persons endure for at least a lifetime. If, as the Buddha appears to have thought, the causal series of psychophysical elements carries on after death in accor-

dance with karmic causal laws, it is also conventionally true that persons undergo rebirth. (p. 316)

Since we have to admit persons as useful fictions, Siderits claims, in Buddhist second-tier ontology, we can use this fiction across the board. In the case of the explanation of vows without a self, we can talk about persons undertaking the commitment to uphold the vows and transform themselves in accordance with the vows.

Our concern with this strategy is that substituting person for self surreptitiously imports the idea of self into the argument. Sure, persons can do all the work of selves, they can be agents of action and bearers of responsibility. However, person as a convenient fiction brings back in the notion of self-interest and attachment to the future self. These attachments and interests are exactly the sorts of things that encourage the defilements of greed, hatred and the "I" delusion. And postulating more or less persisting persons will lead to the unwholesome emotional habits and biases that lead us to prioritise our personal futures (Williams, 1998, p. 110–2; Chadha, 2021). The only difference is that in the second-tier ontology the "I" refers to conventional persons rather than ultimately real selves. Buddhists should rethink whether they really want to admit persons as useful fictions.

Given this, in what follows, we explore how one might make sense of undertaking and keeping a vow without reverting to the idea of persons. How are we to explain the experience of making a commitment, of having agency, of continuity between making the commitment in the past and the keeping it at a future time, etc? We think that by using some resources from contemporary decision theory, we can explain how vows might function without selves and persons.

6 | VOWS, DECISIONS, AND THE NO SELF DOCTRINE

As we've seen, vows are supposed to play a role in generating the right kind of behavior. This is supposed to happen via decision-making processes. But are these processes innocent of self representation? It will be helpful to frame the issue in terms of a standard way of thinking about decisions – *Expected Utility Theory* (EUT).

Expected utility theory appeals to a limited set of elements: a set of options the agent is deciding among, the agent's expectations about the probability that a given option will produce a given outcome, the values or utilities the agent assigns to each of the possible outcomes, and simple calculations of the expectations and utilities.

The simplest way to articulate the framework is in terms of various gambles one might make for money. I assign greater utility (that is, I value more highly) an outcome in which I get $100 than to an outcome in which I get $90. Thus, if I'm given a choice between (A) $100 and (B) $90, the decision I should make is for A. However, if the choice I am offered is between (C) a 10% chance of $100 and (D) a 90% chance of $90, then I should choose D. In the first instance, EUT is a normative theory – it specifies the decisions one *should* make given one's expectations and utilities. However, it is also the foundation for a descriptive theory, and indeed in the above examples, it's very likely that agents would in fact choose A over B and D over C.

6.1 | Outcome-based Expected Utility Theory

Of course, not all decisions are about money, and that is part of the reason that decision theory frames the subjective value assigned to outcomes in terms of "utility" rather than monetary values.
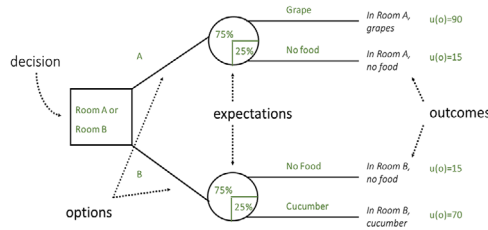
FIGURE 1   A decision tree reflecting outcome-based expected utility theory

Note: u(o) = utility of this outcome, e.g., the utility of the outcome in which you are in room A with grapes is 90.

Imagine that you're hungry and you have an option to go into one of two rooms, A or B. There are either grapes or nothing in room A and either cucumber or nothing in room B. You really like grapes, and so you place a high utility on an outcome in which you are in room A with grapes: let's say that has a utility of 90 for you. Being in either room with no food has a low utility: let's say it is 15. You like cucumbers well enough, and you are hungry, so being in room B with cucumber has significant utility for you, let's say 70. Now suppose that you learn that there is a 75% chance that there are grapes in room A and a 25% chance that there is no food in that room, whereas in room B, there is a 75% chance that there is no food, and a 25% chance that there is cucumber. We can represent this scenario via a decision tree (see *Figure 1*).

Given these probabilities and values, EUT dictates that you should opt for room A.[8] However, if the chance of grapes in room A is only 5%, then EUT says that you should opt for room B. Let's call this kind of decision theory *outcome-based EUT*. Again, although we have articulated this example in terms of a normative theory of decision-making (in the first case, one *should* opt for room A), it's also plausible that outcome-based EUT describes what people would actually decide under the specified expectations and utilities.

At this point, notice that no representation of self has been invoked. EUT includes representations of probabilities (e.g., the probability of grapes is .75) and values assigned to outcomes (e.g., value of room A + grapes = 90 utils). Neither of these needs to have "I" attached. I don't have to think "I think the probability is .75" or "I value grapes". Rather, I merely need to represent the probability and have the relevant value assignment for grapes. I don't also need to represent myself as having those representations and value assignments.

The point of the foregoing was merely to make clear that decision-making in general does not require a representation of self on the familiar EUT approach. With that background in place, we can begin to think about the role of vows in behavior.

6.2 | Vows in expected utility theory

How might vows factor into a decision tree? As we have characterized EUT values are assigned to outcomes. However, EUT does not need to be restricted to outcomes. Agents sometimes assign utility to outcomes (i.e., states of affairs), but agents also sometimes assign utility to an action-type. For instance, sometimes experimental participants are placed in situations where they can get a larger monetary payoff if they lie. Many participants in these studies do lie, but many other participants do not (Batson et al., 1997). What is going on with them? Does this mean that they

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[8] This is because the expected utility of A (.75*90 + .25*15) is greater than the expected utility of B (.75*15 + .25*70).
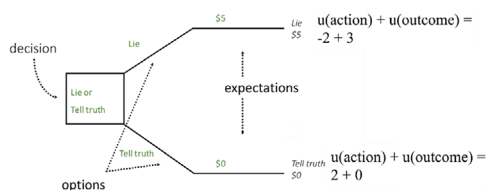
FIGURE 2   A decision tree reflecting expected utility of lying

don't value money? Or that they perversely prefer less to more? Those would be rash conclusions that would not make sense of the rest of the agent's behavior. Rather than attribute incoherence to the subjects or give up on the framework of EUT, we might infer that these participants assign low utility to a *type of action – lying* (Gaus & Thrasher, 2022, p. 43, 78; Nichols, 2021, p. 224–225). And it's plausible that the reason such participants assign low utility to those types of actions is because they endorse a moral rule that proscribes lying. Let's call this augmented version *action-based EUT*.

If we allow that, in addition to assigning utility to the outcomes of actions, people also assign utility to actions themselves, this gives us a natural way to incorporate the vows into decision trees. If I have internalized a vow not to lie, this leads me to assign a low utility to actions in which I lie. Let's suppose that a participant in one of these experiments knows that if he lies, he will get \$5, and if he tells the truth, he will get \$0. We can suppose that the amount of utility he gets from \$5 is 3 and the amount of utility he gets from \$0 is 0. Now, let's also suppose that he assigns a low utility to actions that are lying, say, -2; and he assigns a higher utility to actions that are truth telling, say, 2. In that case we can fill out our decision tree (see *Figure 2*), and calculate that telling the truth has a higher expected utility than lying even though the expected monetary payoff is lower.

Thus, we can characterize the role of vows in decision-making within the broad framework of EUT.[9] Internalized vows can have an impact on decision making because monastics assign negative utilities to forbidden types of actions and positive utilities to promoted types of actions. For our purposes, what matters is whether the psychological processes involved in rule following necessarily implicate the self. An important part of the issue is how the internalized rules are represented. One possibility is that the representations invoke the self, e.g., *I must not lie*. When considering whether to lie for monetary advantage, the subject would weigh off the utility of the

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[9] There is a debate about whether or not Buddhist ethics is consequentialist (See Goodman, 2021, Keown, 1996). Since we are using Expected Utility Theory as the way to model decisions, it might seem as if we are endorsing the view that Buddhist ethics is consequentialist. But we aim to be neutral on the issue. It's true that Action-based EUT represents rules as having values that then factor into all-in decisions. However, the justification for the rules themselves is a key issue that distinguishes consequentialists from their opponents. And action-based EUT is neutral on whether or not the implicated rules have consequentialist justifications. (It's also neutral on whether the implicated rule is represented by the agent in terms of a consequential justification.) One possibility is that the rules are justified consequentially. For example, perhaps the justification for the rule prohibiting lying is that lying will undermine trust in the community. Trust is valued, and so actions that undermine that value will be prohibited. However, another possibility is the justification for the rule against lying is not consequentialist – it's simply that lying is wrong, and no further justification in terms of consequences is needed. Of course, once the values associated with the rules are determined, action-based EUT specifies a calculation over those values. But that doesn't entail that the rules themselves are consequentialist rules. After all, a non-consequentialist might maintain that killing is worse than lying even though both actions are wrong for nonconsequentialist reasons (see also; Gaus & Thrasher, 2021, p.78). In that case, for the purposes of decision-making, an action of killing would receive a lower value than an action of lying, and as a result in the case of a dilemma, one might choose to lie rather than to kill, because the value of lying isn't as low as the value of killing.

money and the disutility of *me lying*. However, it's not at all clear that internalized rules typically have this self representational format.

Consider first prudential rules. We learn rules about not touching hot pans and about wearing a hat when it's sunny. Instead of representing these as *I must not touch hot pans* and *I must wear a hat when it's sunny*, we might instead represent them in something like an imperatival form: *don't touch hot pans*, *wear a hat when it's sunny*. One reason to favor this proposal over the self-representational one is that for most of these prudential rules, the self representation is unnecessary. Insofar as my decision-making system controls my arms and no one else's, it can leave out the specification that the injunction against touching hot pans is being applied to *me*. If I come to represent an injunction as an imperative, it will *de facto* be an imperative for me, and this does not need to be explicitly part of the representation. An imperatival representation like *don't touch the pan* will work at least as well at protecting my hands as a declarative representation like *I must not touch the pan*.

Insofar as internalized rules are represented as imperatives, it seems that the self representation need not be part of it. In keeping with this, corpus data on parental inculcation of rules in children indicates that parents tend not to explicitly mention the agent. In CHILDES (a standard corpus of child directed speech; MacWhinney, 2000), we find that parental instruction usually takes the form of imperatives. Here are some representative examples of negative injunctions:

Don't throw paper on the floor

Quit whining

Don't write on the desk

The same holds for positive injunctions. Here again are some representative examples from CHILDES:

Pick up that mess.

Put it on the floor

Eat over your plate

When internalizing a rule like "don't write on the desk", the specification that *I* *don't write on the desk*, is unnecessary since my decision-making system controls my speech and movement and no one else's. Similarly with vows more generally. If I come to represent an injunction not to lie as an imperative, it will *de facto* be an imperative for me, and thus does not need a representation of self.

We have emphasized how vows might be implicated in decision-making without any explicit reference to the self. However, it's also true that sometimes when we represent values and transgressions, we do include the self representation. For instance, I might be especially concerned that *I* am not the one to commit some infraction. So rather than merely attaching a negative value to *lie* in the decision tree, one might explicitly attach a negative value to *I lie*. In moral philosophy, the classic example comes from Williams (Smart & Williams, 1973). In his example, Jim is told that either he kills an innocent person or a villain will kill that person and several others. Williams thinks that Jim might reasonably refuse to kill the innocent person, as a matter of retaining his moral integrity. Let's work with a less fraught example. Suppose I'm in a situation where two

people are bound to lie, but if I tell one lie, those two lies can be avoided. If I have a special concern that lies not come from *me*, I must somehow be representing myself.

Are Buddhist vows encoded in this kind of explicitly self-representational fashion? It might depend on what kind of vows. Theravāda traditions allows for various kinds of vows. If the goal is to follow the path to seek your own liberation, then the kinds of vows I take will stop me from breaking a promise, irrespective of what happens to others. But if I have taken the Bodhisattva vows then I have vowed to free all beings from suffering. In that case, I will be willing to break my promise. That said, if someone has internalised the Boddhisattva vows they do not need represent the self. The Bodhisattva who has *bodhicitta* (awakened mind) has developed great compassion and equianmity, for her there is no distinction between "self" and "others".

Although Buddhist practitioners might encode some vows in this self-representational fashion, we think that there is a more thoroughgoing way in which vows might not require self representation. It involves the first branch in a decision tree, which specifies the options that the agent considers (see *Figures 1&2*). If a possible option is not represented as such by an agent, then that possible option cannot be selected.

Sometimes the decision tree omits various options because they are simply irrelevant to the problem at hand, and it is counterproductive to review irrelevant options. Another way that the decision tree might omit options though is via vows. As we internalize a vow, we might simply exclude from the option set violations of those vows. Indeed, it's plausible that for many vows, once they are internalized, they prune the decision tree. When I go to the grocery store, it would be trivial to slip the bottle of vanilla extract into my pocket (I now realize thinking about it), but when I was in the grocery store it never entered my mind that I might steal the vanilla (see Phillips & Cushman, 2017). I am not peculiar in this. For many people, stealing from the grocery store is never considered. In that case, we are not representing the self in relation to the vow (e.g., *I have vowed not to steal*) since there is no representation at all. The vow in this case does its work by eliminating a forbidden option from the decision tree.

We suggest that for many advanced practitioners, the foregoing is exactly what happens. They don't explicitly represent the option of the self acting in a way that would violate any of the monastic vows because they don't represent that action as an option at all. We can go further to imagine a being so compassionate that only a few highly compassionate actions appear in their tree. When advanced practitioners have internalised the vows, their character has been transformed. They no longer have to think about avoiding the transgressions, the unethical options such as consuming liquor or stealing are no longer available as options that they consider while thinking about what to do. The stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*, a person who has achieved the first of the four stages of enlightenment) and those further advanced no longer cling to the vows or the rules as something that *she* keeps or follows. Nonetheless, she still follows the rules. In a sense, our account shows a way of sharpening Garfield's claim that Buddhist vows are a means of transforming psychology. Thinking of vows on this model allows us to avoid the commitment to selves (or persons) thus giving the Buddhists, and indeed all those who favour the view that there are no persisting selves, a coherent way of thinking about our ordinary practice of vows and promise-keeping.

7 | CONCLUSION

Vows play a huge role in the life of Buddhist monastics. Theravādan monastics must memorize hundreds of vows and recite the entire set fortnightly. The characterization of the vows is set out in great detail, specifying exactly what kinds of behavior count as violations as well as what the punishment is for each violation. This intense focus on vows seems to be at odds with the

more popular conception of Buddhism in terms of the path to individual enlightenment. To be sure, some of the vows are directly aimed at helping the individual along the path to enlightenment. But many of the vows are not aimed at the individual but at the community. There are vows that help to make members of the monastic community recognizable (e.g., rules concerning robes), vows that manage lay impressions about monastics (e.g., rules concerning comportment of monastics when visiting the laity), vows that help monastics engage in community practices (e.g., rules concerning the duties of junior monks like cleaning and fetching water), and vows that facilitate interaction between different monastic communities (e.g., rules concerning joining another monastery's *Pātimokkha* recitation). At a high level, the explanation for these vows is that they contribute to the continuation of the *dhamma*. They do so by facilitating a harmonious Buddhist *saṅgha*. But this entails a considerable amount of coordination, and in fact, we argued, the Buddhist system of vows constitutes a well-designed system of rules for social coordination.

Given the critical role of vows in the tradition, it is a matter of some significance for Buddhism whether one can effectively internalize vows without explicitly invoking a persisting self. We normally think of vows, like promises generally, as commitments the self makes at one time regarding the self at some future time. However, when we consider the details of decision-making, we can see that there is room for vows without a self. Humans, as well as rats, bats, and wombats, make many decisions without ever thinking about themselves. Just as one internalizes a prudential rule against touching a hot stove, one can internalize a vow against eating after noon, and in neither case does one need to think about oneself in order to follow the injunction. There are, however, cases in which one adopts vows that explicitly do invoke the self, as when one aims to uphold one's personal integrity at the expense of the integrity of another. Those provide interesting cases for Buddhism. But perhaps the most important way vows affect decision-making is by making the forbidden option simply disappear from the option set. After internalizing the vow against eating after noon, for instance, the optimal endpoint would be the elimination of even considering eating after noon. In that case, there is no representation of the self eating after noon because that option is not represented at all.

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