

A Doctrinal Comparison of *Attakilamathānuyoga* and *Dhutaṅga* Practices in Early Buddhist Asceticism

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Introduction

Early Buddhist asceticism presents a complex field of practice in which the Buddha critically evaluated and redefined prevailing renunciant traditions. Within this context, the distinction between self-mortification (*Attakilamathānuyoga*) and disciplined ascetic practices such as *Dhutaṅga* observances becomes doctrinally significant. While *Attakilamathānuyoga* is explicitly rejected in the First Sermon as an extreme form of practice leading to suffering rather than liberation, *Dhutaṅga* practices are later understood within the Buddhist tradition as voluntary austerities that support renunciation, mental purification, and meditative development.

The research problem arises from a conceptual ambiguity in interpreting Buddhist ascetic practices: although *Attakilamathānuyoga* and *Dhutaṅga* practice austerity and physical self-restraint, there is a clear distinction between the two in terms of doctrinal basis and soteriological purpose. Therefore, the main question that needs to be answered in this regard is how Early Buddhism distinguishes self-mortification from ascetic practice along the lines of the Middle Path?

The importance of the research is related to its contribution to the issue of the establishment of the borders of the doctrine within the scope of the practice of Early Buddhism. By examining *Attakilamathānuyoga* and *Dhutaṅga* comparatively, the study highlights how the Buddha's Middle Way avoids both sensual indulgence and extreme self-torment while still allowing disciplined practices that support liberation. This analysis is important not only for understanding early Buddhist soteriology but also for interpreting the role of ascetic discipline in the cultivation of ethical conduct, mental purification, and the attainment of Arahantship.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a doctrinal comparison of *Attakilamathānuyoga* and *Dhutaṅga* practices in Early Buddhist asceticism, with special reference to their nature, purpose, and significance within the framework

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of the Middle Path.

Specific Objectives are;

- To examine the concept of *Attakilamathānuyoga* in Early Buddhism and the reasons for its rejection by the Buddha.
- To investigate the nature and role of *Dhutaṅga* practices in spiritual development.
- To compare the doctrinal foundations and aims of *Attakilamathānuyoga* and *Dhutaṅga* practices.
- To analyze how Early Buddhism distinguishes self-mortification from disciplined asceticism through the Middle Path.
- To evaluate the significance of *Dhutaṅga* practices in ethical purification, mental cultivation, and liberation.

The present study seeks to address several key questions concerning the nature and significance of *Attakilamathānuyoga* and *Dhutaṅga* practices in Early Buddhist asceticism.

- How is *Attakilamathānuyoga* defined and evaluated in Early Buddhist texts?
- What are the characteristics and purposes of *Dhutaṅga* practices in Early Buddhism?
- How do *Attakilamathānuyoga* and *Dhutaṅga* differ in their doctrinal and soteriological foundations?
- How does the Middle Path distinguish disciplined asceticism from self-mortification?
- What is the role of *Dhutaṅga* practices in ethical purification, mental cultivation, and liberation?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design based on textual and doctrinal analysis. The primary sources of the study include the Sutta Piṭaka, Vinaya Piṭaka, commentaries, Milindapañha and Visuddhimagga. The secondary sources consist of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant academic websites. The collected data will be analyzed using content analysis

and comparative doctrinal interpretation, focusing on the doctrinal meanings, functions, and differences between *Attakilamathānuyoga* and *Dhutaṅga* practices in relation to ethical discipline, mental development, and liberation in Early Buddhism.

Results

The comparative study of *Attakilamathānuyoga* and *Dhutaṅga* practices in Early Buddhist asceticism reveals a fundamental principle of functional simplicity and necessary sufficiency in the Buddhist path to liberation. The rejection of *Attakilamathānuyoga*, as stated in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, *Saccavibhaṅga Sutta*, *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* and *Brahmajāla Sutta*, reflects the Buddha's rejection of extreme self-mortification as a means to liberation.

The Visuddhimagga presented *Dhutaṅgas* as optional ascetic observances that support renunciation, sense restraint, and meditative absorption. The Vinaya Piṭaka emphasizes simplicity, contentment, and ethical purification. Furthermore, the Milindapañha discussed these practices in relation to mental purification and the gradual path of liberation. The findings indicate that *Dhutaṅga* practices function as “purposeful austerities” that refine mental development, whereas *Attakilamathānuyoga* represents unproductive self-torment.

Although the value of simplicity has been acknowledged in various Western philosophical traditions, the Buddhist conception of simplicity, as embodied in *Dhutaṅga*, is fundamentally soteriological rather than merely methodological. In the Pāli Canon and its commentarial tradition, *Dhutaṅga* consists of voluntary ascetic practices that cultivate contentment (*santuṭṭhi*), fewness of wishes (*appicchatā*), seclusion (*viveka*), and energy (*virīya*), thereby weakening attachment to material comforts and sensual pleasures. These disciplines provide a practical foundation for the threefold training (*tiśikkhā*). By regulating bodily and verbal conduct, they reinforce *Sīla*; by reducing external and internal distractions, they create favorable conditions for the development of *Samādhi*; and by diminishing greed and attachment, they enable the cultivation of *Paññā*, leading to direct insight into impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). Consequently, within the Theravāda tradition, simplicity is not understood as an abstract principle of conceptual economy but as a disciplined mode of practice that supports progressive purification and the realization of *Nibbāna*.

Discussion

The comparative study between *Attakilamathānuyoga* and *Dhutaṅga* reveals a clear doctrinal and functional distinction associated with austerity and renunciation in Early Buddhist asceticism. *Attakilamathānuyoga* is explicitly rejected by the Buddha as an extreme form of self-mortification characterized by painful and unwholesome practice. As stated in the First Sermon: “*Dve me, bhikkhave, antā pabbajitena na sevitabbā... yo cāyaṃ kāmesu kāmasukhallikānuyogo hīno gammo pothujjaniko anariyo anattasaṃhito, yo cāyaṃ attakilamathānuyogo dukkho anariyo anattasaṃhito.*” (SN 56.11). This practice is regarded as suffering, ignoble, and spiritually unprofitable, since it does not lead to liberating insight. It classified as wrong practice (*micchā paṭipadā*) that is opposed to the Middle Path.

The *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* demonstrates that the Bodhisatta renounced *Kāmasukhallikānuyoga* (self-indulgence) and practiced opposite practice *Attakilamathānuyoga* (self-mortification). Therefore, this *sutta* serves as important evidence for one of the central principles of Buddhist philosophy: avoiding the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification, and following the Middle Path that leads to enlightenment. According to the *sutta*, the Bodhisatta practiced extreme fasting and severe food deprivation, causing his body to become emaciated and his bones and joints to protrude visibly. The Bodhisatta, through severe fasting and harsh ascetic practice, became extremely emaciated, with his limbs gaunt and bamboo-like, his buttocks wasted away, and his backbone and ribs prominently exposed. His eyes sank deeply, his head skin shriveled, and his abdomen clung closely to his spine. His body hair fell out easily, and his skin became dry, rough, and darkened, reflecting extreme physical exhaustion and collapse.

As per the *Visuddhimagga*, *Dhutaṅga* refers to the practice of thirteen voluntary ascetic practices that practiced by the monks for leading lives of simplicity, contentment, and detachment. These practices support the purification of ethical conduct and strengthen renunciant qualities that functioned to the meditative practices in Buddhist path.

1. *Pamsukūlikaṅga* — the refuse-rag-wearer’s practice
2. *Tecīvarikaṅga* — the triple-robe-wearer’s practice
3. *Piṇḍapātikaṅga* — the alms-food-eater’s practice
4. *Sapadānacārikaṅga* — the house-to-house-seeker’s practice
5. *Ekāsanikaṅga* — the one-sessioner’s practice

6. *Pattapiṇḍikaṅga* — the bowl-food-eater's practice
7. *Khalupacchābhattikaṅga* — the later-food-refuser's practice
8. *Ārañṇikaṅga* — the forest-dweller's practice
9. *Rukkhamūlikaṅga* — the tree-root-dweller's practice
10. *Abbhokāsikaṅga* — the open-air-dweller's practice
11. *Sosānikaṅga* — the charnel-ground-dweller's practice
12. *Yathāsanthatikaṅga* — the any-bed-user's practice
13. *Nesajjikaṅga* — the sitter's practice

The point is confirmed in the Milindapañha, where *Dhutaṅga* is described as aids to purity and mental discipline rather than compulsory means of liberation. The text emphasizes that such practices function as supportive conditions for controlling defilements and strengthening detachment, but they do not replace wisdom (*paññā*) as the direct cause of liberation. Therefore, even in the later tradition of Theravāda Buddhism, *Dhutaṅga* is viewed as a voluntary purification exercise, while Attakilamathānuyoga is definitely excluded from the practice.

The preference for simplicity has also been recognized in several Western philosophical and scientific traditions. Similar ideas are reflected in Kant's caution against the unnecessary multiplication of theoretical principles and in the modern design maxim "Less is more," both of which emphasize conceptual economy and functional simplicity. While these perspectives primarily advocate simplicity as a methodological or design principle, the Buddhist concept of *Dhutaṅga* presents simplicity as a transformative mode of practice. In the Pāli canonical tradition, the voluntary observance of *Dhutaṅga* disciplines reduces attachment to material comforts and sensual indulgence, thereby reinforcing Sīla through ethical restraint, cultivating Samādhi by minimizing distractions, and facilitating the development of Paññā through direct insight into impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). Consequently, simplicity in Buddhism is not merely an epistemological or methodological ideal but an integral component of the path to liberation (*vimutti*).

In this study, *Dhutaṅga* in Early Buddhism is an expression of practical minimalism through the disciplined body in which ascetic practices are consciously limited to only those aspects that have a direct relevance to ethical cleansing, mental steadiness, and the generation of wisdom for liberation. Attakilamathānuyoga is considered inappropriate since it unnecessarily escalates

the level of austerity and brings about suffering without any spiritual gain. Therefore, asceticism in Early Buddhism is seen to express a doctrine-oriented approach in agreement with the broader principle of economy of means that eliminates what is redundant and leaves what is practically efficient.

Keywords - *Attakilamathānuyoga, Dhutaṅga, Milindapañha, Theravāda Buddhism, Visuddhimagga*

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