

# The Importance of Vinaya and Monastic Code: Answer for Secular Reproaches in Thailand

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## Abstract

Today, Buddhism in Thailand is widely criticized in social media; in many cases, the root causes of the problems related to unawareness of the Vinaya importance and a lack of austereness in the monastic code (Pāṭimokkha). The suggested solution for the problem seen today is to retrain members of the Sangha, both the Vinaya and the monastic conducts ‘what the monks ought to do or ought not to do’ in order to maintain excellence of the monastic community. This work has its focus on the importance of the Vinaya and monastic code in solving the current crisis of Buddhism in Thailand. Its aims are to describe the importance of the key terms as found in the para-canonical, canonical and non-canonical Vinaya literature; and to address how the Pāṭimokkha shapes the life of the Bhikkhu (monks) and Bhikkhunī (nuns) and why it is important as the solution for the problem mentioned. The findings suggest that the Vinaya is a significant doctrine that supports and complements the monastic life and the excellence of the Sangha community. It can be used as a major tool in achieving the goals of Buddhism. Also, it provides monks with the ethical criteria for monastic actions and speech to maintain the peace and prevent disputes within the community while ensuring that

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it remains beyond the reproach of the secular community; and raising the equanimity of the mind, beneficial to mental practice. The Pāṭimokkha is the most important monastic code for fulfilling the monastic life of the monks, governs the actions and speech, and acts like the national laws that govern countries. The Pāṭimokkha provides a clear definition of offenses as well as their punishments. The way the monastic code shapes monastic life corresponds to the Karmavācanā is to form the foundations of monastic culture and the ceremonies that constitute Buddhist monastic life. In order to solve the crisis of Buddhism in Thailand today, the one of the best solutions is to re-install the Sangha way of life in the old day, endowed with austereness on the Vinaya and monastic code.

**Keywords:** Vinaya, importance, monastic code

## 1. Introduction

Today, many monks of Theravadic Buddhist tradition in Thailand are widely criticized through many channels of social media such as Facebook, Line, Internet and Newspaper. The criticism relies on behaviors involved materialism or scandals in the Sangha way of life. Through my primary investigation on the comments, feedbacks and critiques found on the media, although it can be assumed that those who commented or criticized are lack of knowledge in Buddhism which should be used in their justification process, to judge offenses of the Sangha is highly influenced by the

information presented on the media and many of which tell the readers information with bias perspectives not the Dharma-Vinaya.

The ‘Dharma-Vinaya’ is the Buddha’s teaching of the religion he has found. The Dharma is the truth which he has discovered and pointed out as the noble advice for all who want to gain the liberation from the suffering. The Vinaya is the discipline that the Buddha formulated as the rules, ideal, and standards of behaviors for those of his followers who went forth from home life and took up the quest for the liberation in the greater earnestness.<sup>1</sup> When he was

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<sup>1</sup> Thanissaro, (Phra) Jeffrey, “**The Buddhist Monastic Code: The Pāṭimokkha Training Rules Translated and Explained**”, (Bangkok: Mahāmakuta Educational Council, Buddhist University, 1993), p. 2.



about to pass away and leave his followers, the Buddha said the following words:

Whatever Dhamma and Vinaya I have pointed out and formulated for you, that will be your teacher when I am gone (The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, D.16).<sup>2</sup>

The significant relation of the key terms is that the dhamma represents the principles of the truth; while, the Vinaya represents the most efficacious lifestyle for the realization of truth. In other words, the Vinaya is the way of life that preserves the principles of truth in the practicalities of living within the world.<sup>3</sup>

Generally, the standard behaviors of the monastic life of the monks and nuns come from the para-canonical, canonical and non-canonical Vinaya literature.<sup>4</sup> These three literatures importantly indicate what monks and nuns should do and should not

do to fulfill their monkhood. One of the most important parts of these texts is the Pāṭimokkha which is the disciplinary or monastic code of the monk's rules.<sup>5</sup> It significantly shapes the monastic life of the monks and nuns and helps them to live according to the rules formulated by the Buddha and most importantly protects them from the secular reproaches. This paper focuses on significance of the Dharma-Vinaya application as the shield for secular reproaches with the aims to describe the importance of the Vinaya and Pāṭimokkha, to address how the Pāṭimokkha shapes the life of the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunī within the history of Buddhism and the way it is used as the tool to protect the secular reproaches as the solution of the current crisis of Buddhism in Thailand.

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<sup>2</sup> Ariyesako, Bhikkhu, **The Bhikkhus' Rules a Guide for Laypeople : The Theravādin Buddhist Monk's Rules**, (Victoria : Sanghāloka Forest Hermitage, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>4</sup> Prebish, Charles S, "Vinaya and Pratimokksa : The Foundation of Buddhist Ethics", In **Studies in History of Buddhism**, edited by A.K. Narain, (The University of Wisconsin : B.R. Publishing Corporation), 1976, p. 224.

<sup>5</sup> Nyanatiloka, "**Buddhist Dictionary** ": In **Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines**, Neo Pee Teck Lane: Singapore, (Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre, 2002), p. 136.



## 2. Importance of the Vinaya

For monks and nuns, the Vinaya is an important doctrine that supports and complements the monastic life, maintains the excellence of the monastic community, and is a major tool in the achievement of the goals of Buddhism. The Vinaya provides an explanation of monastic life for monks and nuns so that they can fulfill their monastic ways of life. In other words, it provides them the criteria for monastic actions and speech. The *Sūtravibhaṅga* (Skt), for example, provides a detailed analysis of the offenses recorded in the *Prātimoksa Sūtra* (Skt) by showing the stories that explain the circumstances under which the rules were pronounced.<sup>6</sup> The commentaries, the exceptions to the rules, and the deviations in punishment are explained in this section. Furthermore, the Vinaya was formulated to support the excellence of the monastic community. It maintains the peace of monastic life and prevents disputes within the monastic community and reproach from the secular communities. The Pāli text often indicates ten aims of the Vinaya:

In that case, Bhikkhus, I will formulate a training rule for the Bhikkhus with ten aims in mind: the excellence of the Community, the peace of the Community, the curbing of the shameless, the comfort of well-behaved Bhikkhus, the restraint of pollutants related to the present life, the prevention of pollutants related to the next life, the arousing of faith in the faithless, the increase of the faithful, the establishment of the true Dhamma and the fostering of discipline (Bhaddali Sutta, M.65).<sup>7</sup>

The Vinaya furthermore supports the achievement of the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice since it raises the equanimity of the mind because the attainment of this level of mind benefits mental practice. It, indeed, supports deliverance from the defilements. The *Madhyamāgama* (ch. 10, *Sūtra* (Skt) 42-43), for instance, says that:

By observing the *Sīla* (Skt: *Śīla*), one will be freed from repentance, thence one will acquire the benefits of joy, the equanimity of mind, perceiving things in

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<sup>6</sup> Prebish, Charles S, op.cit. p. 233.

<sup>7</sup> Thanissaro, (Phra) Jeffrey. op.cit. p.8.



their reality, detached from desires, and attain deliverance from longing, anger and ignorance (rāga, dosa and moha).<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Monastic Code

The monastic code (Prātimokṣa sūtra, Skt) is an inventory of offenses or a collection of liturgical formulations.<sup>9</sup> It governs the conduct of the monks and nuns. It is recited on all full-moon and new moon days<sup>10</sup> in order to refresh the rules in the minds of the monks and nuns. This also gives them an opportunity to avow any offenses that they have committed. The monastic code contains eight categories of offenses. They are classified according to the degree of gravity. It can be separated into two categories: non-solution offenses and solution offenses.

First, non-solution offenses refer to the offenses that, when broken by monks

or nuns, their monkhood will be permanently finished. They will not be accepted back into the monastic community again. This offense is called Pārājika Dharmas (Skt). Its punishment is called ‘Tarjanīyakarma’ (Skt)<sup>11</sup>. There are four major offenses for monks: sexual intercourse; theft; deprivation of human life; and false proclamation of superhuman faculties.<sup>12</sup> There are also four more for nuns such as touching and entering into a covered place with a male person.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the solution offenses refer to offenses such that when monks have broken them, then a solution can be found. These offenses are ranked according to their degree of gravity as follows: Saṃghāvaśeṣa Dharma, Aniyata Dharma, Nihargika-Pāyantika Dharma, Pāyantika Dharma, Pratideśanīya Dharma, Śaikṣa Dharma and Adhikaraṇa-Śamatha Dharma

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<sup>8</sup> Pachow, W, *A Comparative Study of the Prātimokṣa : On the Basis of Its Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit and Pāli Versions*, Edited by Alex Wayman, Buddhist Tradition Series, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1955), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Prebish, Charles S, op.cit. p. 224

<sup>10</sup> Nyanatiloka, op.cit. p. 136

<sup>11</sup> Prebish, Charles S, op.cit. p. 233.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 224

<sup>13</sup> Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn, *The Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha of the Six Schools*, (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1991), pp.17-19.



(Skt).<sup>14</sup> For example, *Samghāvaśeṣa* Dharmas, the first five of these thirteen offenses deal with the sexual transgressions, two with dwelling places, two with false accusation, two with schisms, and one with the case of an obstinate monk.<sup>15</sup> The solution for these offenses is to be retrained in the limited area called “*Parivāsa*” (Skt).<sup>16</sup> One who has broken these offenses has to be detained in the limited area until they have paid for their misbehavior. However, other offenses are not punished by means of the *Parivāsa*. Other forms of punishment involve simple confession of their offenses to others. An example is *Aniyata Dharmas*. There are two offenses that involve a prohibition on monks and nuns staying and speaking with a person of the opposite gender in a secrete place. These are the rules that protect the sexual conduct of monks and nuns.<sup>17</sup> Another example is *Nihsargika-Pāyantika Dharmas*. There are thirty offenses in the *Nihsargika-Pāyantika*. Ten

rules concern the repairing, exchange and receiving of robes: ten rules concern rugs and the use of money. The rugs need to be made of a suitable material. Gold and silver should not be accepted. Selling and buying are forbidden.<sup>18</sup>

It should be noted that the numbers of the *Bhikkhu Pāṭimokkha* are different according to the various Buddhist text versions. In a comparative study of the *Prātimokṣa* (Skt), on the basis of the Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit and Pāli versions of W. Pachow indicates the different numbers of the monastic code by showing that in the *Sarvāstivādin* version of *Kumārajiva* (404 AD) and Chinese *Vinayanidāna Sūtras* translated by *Chu Fo-nien* (378 AD), 263 *Prātimokṣa* rules are found; 257 in the *Sarvāstivāda-Vinaya* version translated by *Puṇyatāra* and *Kumārajiva* (404 AD), 241 in the *Sarvāstivāda-Vinaya-vibhāṣā*, a version by an unknown translator; 248 in the *Mūlasarvāstivādin* version of *I-Shing* (710 AD). In the Tibetan texts translated by *Satis*

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<sup>14</sup> Prebish, Charles S, op.cit. pp. 224-228.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 224

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 231

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 225

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 225



Chandra Vidyabhusana, there are 258 Prātimokṣa rules. In the version of the Dharmagutaka tradition translated by Buddhayaśas (403-413AD), the number is 250. The Mahīśāsaka versions of Buddhajīva in (423-424 AD) and also those of Chu Fo-nien in the same period, have the number as 251. The Prātimokṣa number of the traditional Kāśyapīya version translated by Gautama Prajñārucci (538-543 AD) is 246. In the Upālipariprcchā versions which were translated by Guṇavarman (431 AD), the numbers are 244 and 215. In the Mahāsaṅghika (Skt) version with its commentary translated by Buddhabhadra (about 416 AD), it is 218. Also, in the Pāli cannon, the number is 277.<sup>19</sup>

Although the numbers are different, there are merely minor differences in the minor rules viz. in the Śaikṣa part, some say there are 113, some say about 100, and some refer to 60 to 90. In the major Sīla such as Pārājika, Saṃghāvaśeṣa, Aniyata, Niḥsargika-Pāṭayantika and Pāṭayantika, the numbers are mostly similar.<sup>20</sup> However, in the case of the Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha

version, the numbers are dissimilar. Here there are found 311 for the Theravadic version; 348 in the Dharmagutaka text; 354 in the Sarvāstivāda version; and 346 for Mūlasarvāstivādin.<sup>21</sup>

The monastic code shapes the monastic life of monks and nuns in its relation to the Karmavācanā viz. the Pāṭimokkha indicates and emphasizes what they ought to do and ought not do individually. In other words, it more emphasizes on monastic ethic for the Saṅgha. For example, they must not break the non-solution offenses in order to maintain their monastic way of life. Also, they have to confess if they have broken the solution offenses. Yet, the Karmavācanā puts more emphasis on the explanation of monastic activities as they relate to acting together or in a group. Charles S. Prebish says all transactions appertaining to the communal life of the Saṅgha were settled by acts referred to as the activities of monks (Saṃghakarmas).<sup>22</sup> There are fourteen Karmavācanās that significantly shape the monk's life.

<sup>19</sup> W. Pachow, op.cit. pp. 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn, op.cit. p. 12 .

<sup>22</sup> Prebish, Charles S, op.cit. p. 228.



1. Admission into the order (Pravrajyā)
2. Ordination of monks (Upasamṃpadā)
3. Holding the confession ceremony (Poṣadha)
4. Holding the ceremony of invitation (Pravāraṇā)
5. Residence obligation during the rainy season (Varṣopagamana)
6. Use of leather objects (Carman)
7. Use and preparation of medicines (Bhaiṣana)
8. Robe-giving ceremony (Kaṭṭhina)
9. Discipline
10. Daily life of the monks
11. Beds and seats, i.e. dwellings (Śayanāsana)
12. Schisms in the order (Saṃghabheda)
13. Duties of a student and teacher to one other
14. Rules for nuns<sup>23</sup>

These activities form the monastic culture and ceremonies that constitute Buddhist monastic life. It is noted that

some activities require the support of the lay people. For example, in the Robe-giving ceremony, lay people play an important role in the offering of robes to the monks in this ceremony.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Discussion

As mentioned, the Vinaya is clearly the tool for attaining deliverance from longing, anger and ignorance, so it should be held and practiced austerely. Based on today's crisis of Buddhism in Thailand, where Buddhist monks are widely criticized on social media; in many cases, the root causes of the problems related to unawareness of the Vinaya importance. Reproaches or disputes from the secular community are clearly based on criticism on monk behaviors. For instance, in some parts of the country, monks are behaving the same as lay people such as having three meals a day, getting involved in sexual activities, and getting involved in materialism or even self-training of other

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>24</sup> PS. According to the my personal 10 year experiences as a member of the Saṃgha, in Thai Tharavāda tradition, the underlying themes of these fourteen are the ordination of monks, holding the confession ceremony, holding the ceremony of invitation, the residence obligation during the rainy season and the robe-giving ceremony.



religious practices. This indicates that ordination today is not for the liberation from the suffering, but temporary refuge or self ease. Unawareness of the Vinaya or monastic code importance does not only damage the faith of Buddhists in the country but also Buddhism as a whole. The following solution for this possibly can be done; that is, the Sangha governors should pay more attention to keep austereness of Vinaya practice with in the monastic communities to maintain the faith of followers. As mentioned above, the text mentions the aims of the Vinaya as to arouse the faith in the faithless and to increase the faithful. This is one option which should be immediately done to maintain excellence in the Sangha community. Today, the Sangha Supreme Council is organizing the massive project ‘Five Precepts Village’ in order to develop the society and to provide the protection and solutions for social problems within the secular communities through the basic practices of avoiding killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling a lie and alcohol consumption. Although the project is truly significant in relation to the development of the society, it emphasizes on secular community development and is not the

solution for the present monastic crisis in Thailand. In other words, the Sangha is trying to solve the secular problems while overlooking the problems within the monastic communities. The project, like ‘Vinaya or Monastic Code Austereness within the Sangha Community’ should urgently be established. Also, the old version of the practices related the activities of monks (Samghakarmas) and fourteen Karmavācanās which traditionally shape the monk’s life should be renewed. When the spiritual leaders have been seen as the moral models in austereness of disciplines, the negative images will be soon eradicated and increase in faithfulness of laypeople will be there. Life of Buddhism will be prolonged. The peace of the entire Sangha community will happen. Reproaches and disputes from the secular community will not be seen. Even if the suggested project may not be the sudden solution for the Sangha community which has been altered through a change of external factors or social environments, it is the long-term answer for the crisis today. However, the operation of the suggested project can possibly be adapted based on a change of the society. Clearly, Buddhism in the old time is not the same as that of



the present day. The academic research based on the project like ‘Change of Vinaya and Monastic Code Observation within the Present Sangha Community’ or ‘Suitability of Monastic Code Practice for the Modern Day’ should be carefully carried out. This will be an effective guideline for the Sangha governors to run the project and to maintain the excellence of Buddhism in the country.

## 5. Conclusion

As mentioned, Buddhism in Thailand is widely criticized on social media; in many cases, the root causes of the problems related to unawareness of the Vinaya importance and a lack of austerity in the monastic code. The suggested solution for the problem seen today is to retrain the Sangha members’ the right conducts on ‘what the monks ought to do, ought not to do’. Even if the numbers of the Bhikkhu Pāṭimokkha are different according to the various Buddhist text versions, in a comparative study of the Prātimokṣa (Skt), on the basis of the Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit and Pāli versions, the Vinaya is still a central doctrine that supports and complements the monastic life and the excellence of the monastic

community. It has been observed that the Vinaya is a major tool in the achievement of the goals of Buddhism. It provides monks and nuns with the criteria for monastic action and speech. It maintains the peace of monastic life and prevents disputes within the monastic community while ensuring that it remains beyond the reproach of the secular community. It also supports the achievement of the ultimate goal of Buddhism in that it raises the equanimity of the mind. This level of the mind benefits mental practice. The Pāṭimokkha is the most important code for fulfilling the monastic life of the monks and nuns. It governs the actions and speech that support their monastic life. It acts like the national laws that govern countries. It provides a clear definition of offenses as well as their punishments. It is the key for comprehending the monastic life. The ways that the monastic code (Pāṭimokkha) shapes monastic life corresponds to the Karmavācanā. They form the foundations of monastic culture and the ceremonies that constitute Buddhist monastic life. Most importantly, it is certainly the solution for the monastic crisis in Thailand in the long term.



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