



Moral Discipline and Communal Justice in Theravāda Buddhism: The Ethical Significance of the Bhikkhu Pātimokkha

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
This article examines the relationship between moral discipline and communal justice in the Theravāda <i>Bhikkhu Pātimokkha</i>. It uses qualitative textual analysis and philosophical reconstruction of selected rules, their explanatory discussions, and associated procedures for settling disciplinary issues. The selected cases concern intention in theft and false speech, responsibility for learning the rules, confession, unfounded accusation, trustworthy lay testimony, and the limits of collective settlement. The analysis distinguishes ethical evaluation, liability under a specified rule, procedural validity, and evidential justification. It finds that responsibility extends from the monk whose conduct is examined to the accusers and adjudicators who interpret testimony, classify an offence, and authorize its consequences. Confession can support correction, but an admission must not be treated as establishing conditions that the person has not acknowledged. Similarly, collective agreement does not independently establish either factual accuracy or legitimate procedure. The study's results reflect a qualified restorative interpretation: some disciplinary responses allow for rehabilitation and further training, whereas grave offences and procedural restrictions place limits on restoration and repair. Reinstatement of monastic standing also differs from repairing harm experienced by others. The article contributes a framework for understanding communal judgment as morally assessable conduct within the discipline itself. Its conclusions concern normative textual standards and philosophical implications, rather than measured contemporary institutional compliance or social outcomes.	▪ ISSN No: 3139-9851 ▪ Received: 06-08-2026 ▪ Accepted: 19-09-2026 ▪ Published: 26-10-2026 ▪ IJCATM: 1(3); 2026: 225-230 ▪ ©2026, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes ▪ Paper type: Research Paper How to Cite Yen S. Moral discipline and communal justice in Theravāda Buddhism: the ethical significance of the Bhikkhu Pātimokkha. Int. J. Current Acad. Trend. Multi. 2026;1(3): 225-230
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1. INTRODUCTION

An allegation of monastic misconduct raises two connected questions. What makes a monk responsible for the alleged act, and what authorizes other monks to judge him? The first question concerns agency, intention, and the circumstances of conduct. The second concerns evidence, interpretation, and the legitimate exercise of communal authority. The Theravāda Vinaya addresses both through rules for individual behaviour and procedures for the community. Reading its disciplinary prescriptions only as prohibitions leaves unexplained how an allegation becomes a justified judgment. Reading its procedures only as administrative arrangements obscures the moral responsibilities of the people who apply them.

The *Bhikkhu Pātimokkha* belongs within a wider disciplinary framework: the *Suttavibhaṅga* explains individual rules through narratives, definitions, and cases, while the *Khandhakas* regulate communal activities. Kieffer-Pülz situates this combination of prescriptions and casuistry within Buddhist legal traditions [1]. The present inquiry concerns its philosophical implications, rather than a comprehensive legal history or a description of every contemporary monastery.

Āṅguttara Nikāya 6.63 identifies intention as central to *kamma*, or morally significant action [2]. This does not establish identical mental requirements for every monastic offence. A disciplinary finding also requires attention to a particular prescription and to the grounds for believing its conditions have been fulfilled.

The research asks three questions: how ethical responsibility differs from disciplinary liability; how confession and testimony contribute to disciplinary knowledge; and what makes a settlement legitimate rather than merely effective at ending disagreement. It argues that responsibility extends to accusers and adjudicators as well as to the monk whose conduct is examined. The contribution is a reconstruction of this reciprocal accountability through selected rules and settlement procedures. It does not claim that concern with intention or communal process is previously unknown. Its narrower claim is that determining an offence is itself conduct requiring moral scrutiny.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used qualitative textual analysis and philosophical reconstruction. It examined the Theravāda discipline of fully ordained monks through selected *Bhikkhu Pātimokkha* rules and the associated *Khandhaka* procedures. English translations of the code were consulted alongside the detailed explanations in The

Buddhist Monastic Code, volumes I and II [3, 4, 5]. Mahāvagga II supplied the context of recitation and disclosure [6]. Table 1 identifies the purposively selected textual materials and the questions addressed.

The selection comprised *Pārājika* 2, *Pācittiya* 1 and 73, *Saṅghādisesa* 8 and 12, *Aniyata* 1, and the seven *adhikaraṇa-samatha* principles. These cases were chosen to compare intention, knowledge, admission, accusation, testimony, correction, and communal settlement. They do not constitute an exhaustive sample of every rule. Majjhima Nikāya 61 and Āṅguttara Nikāya 5.167 supplied ethical context rather than additional disciplinary legislation [7, 8].

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the relevant conduct, mental conditions, and prescribed response were identified for each selected case. Second, the grounds of judgment were distinguished: observation, acknowledgement, testimony, and inference. Third, conditional examples tested whether a conclusion remained warranted when a required element or procedural condition was absent. Examples involving a moved bowl or a pressured admission were hypothetical analytical cases, not reports of observed events.

A methodological distinction was maintained between translated canonical prescriptions, commentarial interpretations reported by the modern interpreter, and the philosophical conclusions developed here. The explanations in The Buddhist Monastic Code were not treated as though every interpretive judgment were itself a canonical statement. Canonical locators were retained so that the scope of a claim could be checked against the relevant rule or procedure.

Procedural justice, epistemic responsibility, and restorative discipline were analytical terms rather than literal translations of Pāli categories. They referred respectively to authorized and answerable decision-making, responsible formation and communication of judgments, and correction permitting an appropriate return to communal participation. The study did not infer a complete modern criminal or restorative justice system from these comparisons.

The inquiry reported no interviews, surveys, experiments, participant observation, or original institutional dataset. Its findings concern normative prescriptions and philosophical implications. A restriction on prejudiced judgment identifies a standard; it does not demonstrate that a community always meets that standard. Interpretation was limited by the selected corpus and reliance on accessible English translations.

Table 1: Selected textual materials and analytical purposes

Material	Focus	Role in the analysis
Pārājika 2	Appropriation and required conditions	Separates a visible movement from a completed offence
Pācittiya 1 and 73	Deception and claims of ignorance	Distinguishes factual error, intention, and responsibility for learning
Saṅghādisesa 8 and 12	Accusation and admonition	Examines reciprocal responsibility in correction
Aniyata 1	Lay testimony and uncertain classification	Tests what a credible report can establish
Mahāvagga II.3	Recitation and disclosure	Locates the meaning of silence within a specified procedure
Settlement principles and communal acts	Issue classification and valid transactions	Examines authorization and limits on communal authority
AN 6.63; AN 5.167; MN 61	Intention, accusation, reflection	Provides ethical context rather than additional disciplinary legislation

3. RESULTS

The results below are findings of textual interpretation and philosophical analysis; no experimental or observational outcomes are reported.

3.1 Disciplinary categories and differentiated responsibility

The analysis identified different kinds of prescription and consequence within the conventional enumeration of 227 *Pātimokkha* rules. Defeat, communal rehabilitation, forfeiture, confession, acknowledgement, training, and settlement were not interchangeable responses^[3]. Table 2 summarizes the categories. This differentiation supported a distinction between moral criticism and liability under a specified prescription.

Four levels of assessment were distinguished: the ethical

quality of conduct and purposes; fulfilment of the elements of an offence; authorization of the communal procedure; and adequacy of the grounds for the judgment. A finding of no offence under one rule did not amount to a comprehensive judgment of moral excellence. Conversely, moral disapproval did not supply an absent element of an offence. Table 3 compares these assessments.

This distinction limited institutional discretion. A response had to correspond to established conduct and the applicable prescription. Otherwise, severity expressed communal displeasure rather than a justified disciplinary consequence. The account treated accurate classification as part of training because learners needed to distinguish legitimate correction from misclassification.

Table 2: Categories in the conventional Bhikkhu *Pātimokkha* enumeration

Category	Number	General disciplinary function
<i>Pārājika</i>	4	Defeat; not repaired by ordinary confession
<i>Saṅghādisesa</i>	13	Requires prescribed communal processes
<i>Aniyata</i>	2	Undetermined classification in specified circumstances
<i>Nissaggiya pācittiya</i>	30	Forfeiture and confession
<i>Pācittiya</i>	92	Confession under the applicable prescription
<i>Pāṭidesaniya</i>	4	Acknowledgement
<i>Sekhiya</i>	75	Training requirements
<i>Adhikaraṇa-samatha</i>	7	Principles for settling issues
Total	227	Different categories require different forms of response

Source: ^[3]. Counts follow the conventional Theravāda enumeration. This table is a summary, not a procedure for determining liability.

Table 3: Distinct assessments in disciplinary judgment

Assessment	Central question	Invalid inference to avoid
Ethical evaluation	What purposes and conduct merit ethical assessment?	Moral criticism alone proves a specified offence
Disciplinary liability	Are the conditions of the relevant rule fulfilled?	No offence under one rule establishes complete moral excellence
Procedural validity	Is this communal act constituted and authorized appropriately?	Personal prestige authorizes any requested transaction
Evidential justification	Do the available grounds support the finding?	A valid meeting guarantees an accurate judgment

Analytical synthesis of the selected cases and communal procedures discussed in the text. Sources: ^[3,4,5]. The four-part framework is the article's reconstruction.

3.2 Intention and responsibility for learning

Pārājika 2 required more than identifying the physical movement of property. Its analysis distinguished ownership, perception, intention, appropriation, and the value relevant to the full offence (The Buddhist Monastic Code I, Chapter 4, *Pārājika* 2)^[4]. A hypothetical monk moving a bowl believed to be his own differed from one knowingly appropriating another person's bowl. The example did not provide a ruling; it showed why an outward movement alone could not establish every required condition.

The comparison with *Pācittiya* 1 likewise distinguished factual error from deliberate misrepresentation (Chapter 8, *Pācittiya* 1). An honestly mistaken statement and intended deception required different explanations. Declared motives were also insufficient by themselves, because they could be mistaken or self-serving. Responsibility therefore depended on connecting purposes, circumstances, and the relevant rule rather than reducing judgment to either outcomes or private self-description.

Pācittiya 73 addressed a claim of newly learning a prescription despite repeated exposure to recitation; its analysis distinguished the underlying offence and the additional problem associated with feigned ignorance (Chapter 8, *Pācittiya* 73). It did not establish that all ignorance was universally an offence. The educational implication was that participation in training

required engagement with its prescriptions. The discussion of dependence, or *nissaya*, further located learning within guided practice rather than assuming immediate mastery at ordination (Chapter 2).

3.3 Confession as acknowledgement and information

Mahāvagga II.3 connected recitation with disclosure of an existing offence and treated silence within that procedure as an indication of purity^[6]. Silence therefore had a specified institutional meaning; it was not general evidence that every silent person was innocent. The practice depended on truthful participation without becoming an infallible means of detecting concealment.

Majjhima Nikāya 61 connected reflection on harmful bodily or verbal action with disclosure to a teacher or discerning companion and future restraint^[7]. Its relevance was ethical continuity between acknowledgement and subsequent conduct, rather than replacement of the Vinaya's particular procedures. Confession was consequently assessed as both an act of responsibility and a contribution to disciplinary knowledge.

The account of *paṭiññātakaraṇa* related settlement to acknowledgement (The Buddhist Monastic Code I, Chapter 11)^[4]. It did not make obtaining an admission the sole purpose of inquiry. A hypothetical monk who acknowledged moving an

object but disputed an intention to appropriate it had not thereby admitted every condition of theft. Likewise, a statement produced to escape prolonged pressure could resemble a sincere admission while differing in reliability. These examples supported attention to what was admitted, what was inferred, and the circumstances of acknowledgement.

3.4 Accusation and the limits of testimony

Saṅghādisesa 8 made an unfounded charge of defeat, advanced with the specified hostile purpose, an object of serious disciplinary assessment (Chapter 5) [4]. Invoking purity did not exempt the accuser from the discipline invoked. The broader philosophical concern with careless accusation nevertheless remained distinct from the particular conditions of this offence. *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 5.167 connected accusation with appropriate timing, factual accuracy, gentleness, purpose, and goodwill; it

also assigned responsibilities to the accused concerning truthfulness and composure [8]. The analysis therefore identified reciprocal obligations. Corrective speech could be necessary and uncomfortable without authorizing exaggeration or humiliation. *Aniyata* 1 recognized a trustworthy female lay follower's report about circumstances permitting different possible classifications [3]. The analysis distinguished taking testimony seriously from accepting every conclusion drawn from it. An observer could report the setting without directly knowing every action or intention. Interpretive tensions discussed in *The Buddhist Monastic Code I*, Chapter 6, also cautioned against treating the rule as permission to impose whatever penalty a witness named. Table 4 summarizes the contributions and limits of the sources of disciplinary information.

Table 4: Contributions and limits of disciplinary information

Information	Potential contribution	Limit requiring attention
Self-report of intention	Explains the purpose attributed to an act	May be mistaken, self-serving, or deceptive
Confession or acknowledgement	Identifies conduct or an offence admitted	Does not establish elements that were not admitted
Lay witness report	Supplies relevant observations outside ordained membership	Credibility does not establish every classification proposed
Silence at recitation	Functions as an assurance within the stated practice	Is neither infallible nor general evidence of innocence
Circumstantial inference	Connects observations with a disputed condition	An allegation or investigation is not itself proof
Rule interpretation	Relates facts to disciplinary categories	Must distinguish prescription from modern explanatory judgment

Sources: [3,4,6,7,8]. Limits are philosophical implications drawn in the analysis, not a claim that the Vinaya contains a modern evidence code.

3.5 Communal settlement and the limits of restoration

The analysis distinguished dispute-issues, accusation-issues, offence-issues, and duty-issues. Selection of a settlement method depended on correctly identifying the issue (*The Buddhist Monastic Code I*, Chapter 11; volume II, Chapter 12) [4, 5]. A disagreement about interpretation was not identical to determining whether conduct occurred or whether a formal transaction was valid. Table 5 compares the seven settlement principles and their limits.

Sammukhāvinaya required an appropriately constituted process involving the relevant parties and Dhamma-Vinaya. Qualified majority settlement concerned appropriate unresolved disputes; it was not unrestricted authority to vote an accused monk guilty.

Formal communal acts also depended on conditions concerning the assembly, territory, matter, and announcement. A respected participant's demand could not substitute for these conditions. The restorative comparison remained qualified. Appropriate confession and rehabilitation could support renewed participation, and *Saṅghādisesa* 12 made receptivity to legitimate admonition relevant to training [3]. However, a completed *pārājika* offence was not cancelled by ordinary confession or communal preference. *Tiṇavathāraka* also contained exclusions concerning grave offences and matters involving the laity. Restoration of standing did not demonstrate repair of every injury. Table 6 separates confession, rehabilitation, reconciliation, and repair.

Table 5: Settlement principles and restrictions on their use

Principle	General function	Important limitation
<i>Sammukhāvinaya</i>	Face-to-face settlement in the relevant disciplinary setting	Presence alone does not guarantee adequate consideration of testimony
<i>Sativinaya</i>	Specified verdict associated with innocence and recollection	Not an automatic verdict based on confidence in memory
<i>Amūlavinaya</i>	Specified response to past conduct during mental derangement after recovery	Not general absolution for regret
<i>Paṭiññātakaraṇa</i>	Settlement in accordance with acknowledgement	The admitted facts and applicable conditions still matter
<i>Yebhuyyasikā</i>	Qualified majority settlement of appropriate disputes	Not unrestricted voting on the guilt of an accused monk
<i>Tassapāpiyasikā</i>	Specified response to culpable conduct in accusation proceedings	Not a licence to punish an inconvenient account
<i>Tiṇavathāraka</i>	Qualified collective settlement of certain offences	Exclusions prevent its use to erase every offence

Source: [4], Chapter 11. The underlying canonical exposition is in *Cullavagga* IV. These summaries are insufficient to enact the procedures; detailed conditions and interpretive differences must be consulted.

Table 6: Correction, rehabilitation, reconciliation, and repair

Concept	Question addressed	What completion does not establish
Confession	Has wrongdoing been acknowledged appropriately?	Every admitted classification is correct or every injury is repaired
Monastic rehabilitation	Have the prescribed conditions for restored participation been fulfilled?	All affected relationships and losses have been repaired
Reconciliation	Can a damaged relationship or conflict be addressed?	A grave offence can be cancelled by agreement
Practical repair	What can be done about continuing consequences for others?	Repair is identical to a change in monastic standing
Communal harmony	How was agreement or the end of conflict achieved?	Silence or lack of public disagreement proves justice

Analytical synthesis informed by ^[4,5]. Reconciliation and repair are comparative analytical terms; they are not presented as a complete canonical programme of victim-centred justice.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings support a distinction between responsibility for conduct and responsibility for judgment. The former concerns a monk's action, mental conditions, and relation to the training. The latter concerns allegations, interpretation, and the exercise of communal power. Both are morally assessable because both can harm others and distort communal life. Treating judgment as mere administration would exempt consequential conduct from the scrutiny applied to the alleged offender.

Keown's account of the centrality of ethics and Harvey's discussion of ethical foundations and practice help situate discipline within moral cultivation ^[9, 10]. The present contribution is narrower: cultivation depends partly on reliable distinctions. Someone can know the conditions of an offence while avoiding its technical completion for selfish reasons. Such conduct may warrant ethical criticism without authorizing the sanction for an unestablished offence. Maintaining both judgments prevents technical evasion from becoming moral excellence and prevents disapproval from becoming unrestricted punishment.

The link between instruction and adjudication is also worthy of comment. Knowledge and seniority can support teaching competence without establishing that every judgment is correct. A learner must remain open to legitimate admonition, while an assembly must remain open to reasons showing a mistaken interpretation. The proposed reciprocity does not supply a new canonical appeal mechanism. It explains why a demand for correction is weakened when the people demanding it refuse relevant scrutiny of their own reasoning.

One objection is that attention to fallible testimony and inaccessible intention makes decision impossible. The argument requires responsible judgment within the applicable procedure, not complete access to another person's mind. Accounts can be compared, circumstances examined, and admitted facts separated from further inferences. The appropriate response to uncertainty is neither automatic exoneration nor automatic condemnation. It is to identify what is established and what remains unsupported.

A second objection is that scrutiny of admissions undermines confession. The opposite follows when confession is understood as truthful acknowledgement. A process that rewards agreement independently of accuracy degrades the practice. Distinguishing a reliable admission from an inaccurate or pressured one protects the relationship to truth that makes confession ethically significant. Hypothetical cases illustrate this inference; they do not establish how any contemporary community actually interrogates its members.

A third objection concerns historical anachronism. Kieffer-Pülz's legal contextualization cautions against conflating Vinaya with modern institutions ^[1]. The concepts used here are limited comparative tools. The paper does not attribute equal citizenship, a contemporary criminal procedure, or a complete victim-centred restorative programme to the texts. Lay testimony can matter without implying equal lay authority in bhikkhu

communal acts. These boundaries are part of the argument rather than exceptions to be concealed.

Finally, harmony requires justification. A community may be quiet because its members trust an appropriate settlement, or because dissent is costly. The absence of public disagreement does not distinguish those conditions. Nor does complete monastic rehabilitation establish that an injured person's practical loss has been repaired. Compassion can guide the manner of response while remaining compatible with an authorized consequence. These implications identify questions for documented institutional research; they do not constitute findings about named monasteries.

The study is limited by its purposive corpus, reliance on English translations, and use of a small range of modern scholarship. It does not establish the chronology of prescriptions or their historical enforcement. Further philological work should examine disputed relations between testimony and admission, followed by carefully documented research on how particular communities interpret and apply the standards.

5. CONCLUSION

Moral discipline and communal justice in the Theravāda *Bhikkhu Pātimokkha* are connected through the practice of making conduct answerable to training. The analysis distinguishes ethical evaluation, liability under a particular prescription, procedural validity, and evidential justification. Intention matters, but the conditions of the relevant rule must still be established. Confession contributes both acknowledgement and information; its value depends on the accuracy of what is admitted and the appropriateness of its classification. Accusation and testimony similarly impose responsibilities on the people who communicate and evaluate them. The principal philosophical conclusion is that communal judgment itself belongs within moral responsibility. An assembly does not become ethically neutral merely by acting collectively or claiming to protect harmony. It remains answerable for distinguishing suspicion from an established offence and for applying an authorized response. A qualified restorative interpretation is defensible because some procedures support correction and continued participation. That interpretation must nevertheless recognize the limits imposed by grave offences, competent procedure, and the difference between rehabilitation and repair of remaining harm. These conclusions identify standards for assessing disciplinary reasoning, rather than evidence that contemporary institutions consistently fulfil them. Further research should examine disputed Pāli passages and commentarial interpretations more closely and investigate documented disciplinary practice without assuming that normative prescriptions establish actual compliance.

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