

Bhikkhu Pātimokkha: the Fundamental Precepts And their Number of Rules¹

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1. Introduction

During the lifetime of the Lord Buddha, bhikkhu Pātimokkha rules have been formulated and promulgated in the Saṅgha Community. An account of the monastic disciplinary rules encompasses some of material in the Pāli Canon, particularly in the Vinaya-piṭaka: the Basket of Discipline². Therefore, this paper will mainly focus on those of the 227 Pātimokkha rules. By addressing the Pātimokkha as the Fundamental Precepts, and the Number of Rules of Pātimokkha respectively.

2. Pātimokkha: the Fundamental Precepts

The Pātimokkha is available to us in several recensions, some in Indic languages, others in Tibetan or Chinese translations. However, of the Indic recensions, only one—the Pali—is still a living tradition, recited fortnightly and put into practice by Theravādin bhikkhus throughout the world.³

Tracing back when Thera Sāriputta once requested the Buddha to formulate the monastic rules for the Saṅgha members, but the Buddha replied:

Wait, Sāriputta. The Tathagata will know the right time for that. The Teacher does not make known, Sāriputta, the course of training for disciplines or appoint the Pātimokkha until some conditions causing the pollutions (asāva) appear here in the Saṅgha.⁴

¹ Sanu Mahatthanadull, Ph.D., “**Bhikkhu Pātimokkha: the Fundamental Precepts and their Number of Rules**”, Selected Works in Buddhist Scriptures, Teaching Document, (International Buddhist Studies College: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2014). (Mimeographed)

² The Vinaya-piṭaka is of five volumes. The Suttavibhaṅga division comprises the first two books containing the 227 Pātimokkha Rules (include the rules for bhikkhunīs) with the stories of their origin and other explanations. The next two books, the Mahāvagga and Cullavagga of the Khandhaka division. The last book of Parivāra is a form of appendix or supplement.

³ Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey De Graff) (trans.), **The Buddhist Monastic Code I**, 3rd ed., (Valley Center: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013), p.27.

⁴ Phra Sāsana Sobhaṇa, “Introduction to the Pātimokkha”, in Ñāṇamoli Thera (trans.), **Pātimokkha: The Monastic Rules for Buddhist monks**, 2nd ed., (Nakornphatom: Mahāmakūṭa Rājavidyālaya Press, 2009), p. 3.

The implication of the passage is that the Lord Buddha did not at first lay down an instantaneous code but gradually formulate rules according to circumstances, within the lifetime of Lord Buddha, until later become a set of monastic rules called the Pātimokkha.

The derivation of the word Pātimokkha, Pāṭimokkha (*pāti (pāṭi) + mokkha*) refer to “disburdening, getting free”.⁵ That is to say it is the obligations for the disciple to follow the Buddha’s way out of burden or the suffering. As a consequence, bhikkhus are instantly restrained in accordance with the monastic code of discipline (Pāṭimokkhasaṃvara.)⁶ The virtue described by the Blessed One thus: “Here a bhikkhu dwells restrained with the Patimokkha restraint, possessed of the [proper] conduct and resort, and seeing fear in the slightest fault, he trains himself by undertaking the precepts of training.”⁷ This is called **virtue of Pātimokkha restraint**.

Herein, both Pātimokkha and Pāṭimokkhasaṃvara are “the Fundamental Precepts” as Phra Brahmaganabhorn notes in Dictionary of Buddhism; “the fundamental rules of the Order; the 227 disciplinary rules binding on Bhikkhus; a collection of the fundamental precepts of the Order recited every fortnight; fortnightly recitation of the fundamental precepts; Disciplinary Code.”⁸

From the above, Pātimokkha plays a crucial role in monastic community (Saṅgha) by means of the fundamental precepts for monks and nuns. This disciplinary rules, rooted by the exalted one, appoints and decrees a definite criterion of outward morality, constituted in courses of training laid down in order to restrain the unsuitable behavior of monks and nuns.

However, It is remarkable that the Lord Buddha mentioned about purpose. Once the elder Upāli questioned to the Lord Buddha “. . . with what object in view was the training enjoined on the disciples of the Wayfarer and the obligation pronounced?”. The Exalted One said:

It’s was done with ten objects in view, Upāli. What ten ?

1. *For the excellence of the Order;*
2. *For the well-being of the Order;*
3. *For the control of ill-conditioned monks and*
4. *For the comfort of well-behaved monks;*
5. *For the restraint of the cankers in this same visible state;*
6. *For protection against the cankers in a future life;*
7. *To give confidence to those of little faith;*
8. *For the betterment of the faithful;*
9. *To establish true dhamma, and*
10. *To support the discipline.*

From the above passage we can say that the main purpose of the Pātimokkha recitation is truly to perpetually preserve doctrine (dhamma) and discipline (Vinaya) by using Sangha Order as medium. We shall now move further to see their number of rules.

⁵ V.I.xii.

⁶ Phra Brahmaganabhorn (P.A. Payutto), **Dictionary of Buddhism**, 19th edition, (Bangkok: S.R. Printing Mass Product Ltd., 2010), p. 165.

⁷ Vibh. 244.

⁸ Phra Brahmaganabhorn (P.A. Payutto), **Dictionary of Buddhism**, p. 338.

3. The Number of Rules of Pātimokkha

In general, the Pātimokkha can be classified into following eight major groups:

1. The four Pārājika: The Defeaters

Pārājika, the most serious of all the offences and that the consequences of transgressing them causes one to be no longer a bhikkhu. Those four consisting of sexual-intercourse; killing; taking what is not given; falsely claiming supernormal abilities.

2. The thirteen Saṅghādisesas: Requiring Formal Meetings of the Community

Apart from the defeaters, this is a very serious class of offence. The offender must be rehabilitated through confession and supervised probation. Finally, the monk who has been sent back to the beginning needs to be reinstated by a specially convened Saṅgha Community meeting of at least twenty monks.

3. The two Aniyatas: Indefinite or Undetermined

A class of offence which Saṅgha Community needs to decide which rule has been transgressed.

4. The thirty Nissaggiya Pācittiyas: Confession with Forfeiture

An offender to this rule needs to make a formal confession. In addition, it must be cleared by forfeiture of the improper item to another bhikkhu (s).

5. The ninety-two Pācittiyas⁹: Expiation through Confession

An offender must make a confession to another bhikkhu (s).

6. The four Pāṭidesaniyas: to be Acknowledged

As a name for training rules, it means “entailing acknowledgement.”

7. The seventy-five Sekhiyas: Trainings

This is the rules of training mainly about manners and etiquette.

8. The seven Adhikaraṇasamatha: Settlement of Issues

These are more general procedures for dealing with disputes, accusations, offences and duties.

Therefore, the controversy over the number of rules in the Pātimokkha among Buddhist scholars still can be seen today. This is because there are no apparent evidence appeared in the canonical texts. Despite they make reference to the Mahāvagga, the Aṅguttaranikāya, the Parivāra, the Suttavibhaṅga, and the Cullavagga respectively.

The Mahāvagga

Let's first take a glimpse at a passage in Mahāvagga that states the said of the Lord Buddha:

Monks, there are five ways of reciting the Pātimokkha. Having recited the introduction, the remaining rules should be proclaimed from memory. This is the first way of reciting the Pātimokkha. Having recited the introduction, and having recited the four pārājika, the remaining rules should be proclaimed from memory. This is the second way of reciting the Pātimokkha. Having recited the introduction, having recited the four pārājika, and having recited the thirteen saṅghādisesa, the remaining rules should be proclaimed from memory. This is

⁹ V.IV. 345.

*the third way of reciting the Pātimokkha. Having recited the introduction, having recited the four pārājika, having recited the thirteen saṅghādisesa, and having recited the two aniyata, the remaining rules should be proclaimed from memory. This is the fourth way of reciting the Pātimokkha. The fifth is (the recitation of these) in detail. These, monks, are the five ways of reciting the Pātimokkha.*¹⁰

From the passage, the Lord Buddha mentioned only rules of 4 pārājikas, 13 saṅghādisesas and 2 aniyatas which indicate the total number of 19 rules.

The Aṅguttaranikāya

There are more evidences appeared in the Aṅguttaranikāya to point the number of more than 150 rules “*Bhante, this twice-monthly recitation comes to more than one hundred and fifty rules. Bhante, I am not able to train herein.*”¹¹ The equal number was shown in the dialogue between King Milinda and Revered Nāgasena of Milindapañhā “. . . the hundred and fifty rules of training”.¹² Despite the Milindapañhā did not enumerate the rules in details, it is believed that the author knew the existence of more than the one hundred and fifty rules for the monks very well.

The Parivāra

The Parivāra denotes that upon the Uposatha days, monks recite two hundred and twenty rules consisting of four pārājikas, thirteen saṅghādisesas, two aniyatas, thirty nissaggiya pācittiyas, ninety-two khuddaka, four pāṭidesaniyas, and seventy-five Sekhiyas. However, The adhikaraṇasamatha rules did not stated here. In addition, the ninety-two Pācittiyas are to be counted as khuddaka which implies minor and lesser rule.¹³

The Suttavibhaṅga

The Suttavibhaṅga¹⁴, the first book of the Vinaya Piṭaka, contains in its two parts the 227 rules for bhikkhus and the rules for bhikkhunīs, who have received the admission (upasampada), together with accounts of the incidents that led to the announcement of the rules, the modification of the rules and the explanations of them. The bare rules themselves form the Patimokkha for bhikkhus and that for bhikkhunīs. They are also

¹⁰ V.I. 112.

¹¹ A.I. 230.

¹² Miln.242-243, 272-273.

¹³ V.V. 147.

¹⁴ Suttavibhaṅga derived from Sutta+vibhaṅga, the word sutta (sūtra) literally means string or thread, vibhaṅga means analysis or classification. Suttavibhaṅga means the classification of a sutta or training rules included in the Patimokkha.

known as the “two codes” (dve matika). The Patimokkha is recited by bhikkhus on the uposatha days of the full moon and new moon.¹⁵

In Suttavibhaṅga The Exalted One, at Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery, laid down the rules of training for monks:

*Recited, Venerable ones, is the occasion, recited are the **four** rules for offences involving defeat (pārājika), recited are the **thirteen** rules for offences entailing a formal meeting of the Order (saṅghādisesa), recited are the **two** rules for offences of undetermined (aniyata), recited are the **thirty** rules for offences of expiation involving forfeiture (nissaggiya pācittiya), recited are the **ninety-two** rules for offences of expiation (pācittiya), recited are the **four** rules for offences which ought to be confessed (pāṭidesaniya), recited are the rules for training (sekhiya), recited are the **seven** rules for the deciding of legal questions (adhikaraṇasamatha rules).¹⁶*

So much (of the sayings) of the Buddha, handed down in clauses, contained in clauses, comes up for recitation every half month. All should train therein harmony, on friendly terms, without contention.

Regardless of the exact number of the seventy-five sekhiya rules which are not given in the above. The Suttavibhaṅga still comprehensively elucidates the monastic disciplinary rules for recluse Buddhist monks that are divided into two sections namely Pārājika and Pācittiya. Between them, we can say these two sections comprise two hundred and twenty seven rules divided into the eight following groups:

1. The four Pārājika
2. The thirteen Saṅghādisesas
3. The two Aniyatas
4. The thirty Nissaggiya Pācittiyas
5. The ninety-two Pācittiyas
6. The four Pāṭidesaniyas
7. The seventy-five Sekhiyas
8. The Adhikaraṇasamatha rules.

Whilst in the Pali Text Society’s translation there are said to be more than (sādhika) 150 rules, the commentary states that this is to be understood as “fifty more than hundred”. With the rules as we have them, one can only arrive at precisely 150 by subtracting from the 227 rules of training, the 75 Sekhiyas plus the 2 Aniyata. The commentary again comes to our aid by simply stating, “at that time there were only one hundred and fifty rules”, which seems very reasonable.¹⁷

¹⁵ See footnote, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, **The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)**, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2010), p. 19.

¹⁶ V.IV. 207.

¹⁷ Phra Sāsana Sobhaṇa, “Introduction to the Pāṭimokkha”, in Ñāṇamoli Thera (trans.), **Pāṭimokkha: The Monastic Rules for Buddhist monks**, 2nd ed., (Nakornphatom: Mahāmakuta Rājavidyalaya Press, 2009), p. 13.

The Cullavagga

The passages in the Cullavagga denote the story telling of the first Council¹⁸. The Exalted One once said: “*When I am gone, Ānanda, let the Order, if it should so desire, abolish the lesser and minor rules of training*”¹⁹. It is evident that Ānanda did not ask the Buddha what those lesser and minor rules of training were, so many monks accused him of an offence of wrong doing. No matter who was right or wrong in such circumstance, this raised the interesting question “what were lesser and minor rules?”. Even Kassapa the Great, the chairman of the Council, does not tell us what exactly those lesser and minor rules were. He said:

If we were to abolish the lesser and minor rules of training there would be those who would say: 'At the time of his cremation a rule of training had been laid down by the recluse Gotama for disciples; while the Teacher was amongst them these trained themselves in the rules of training, but since the Teacher has attained nibbāna among them, they do not now train themselves in the rules of training.' If it seems right to the Order, the Order should not lay down what has not been laid down, nor should it abolish what has been laid down. It should proceed in conformity with and according to the rules of training that have been laid down.

What Mahākassapa said was right and good for that time and that society. And this attitude towards the monastic rules continues until today.

4. Conclusion

Examining the issues pertaining to the ***Pātimokkha as the Fundamental Precepts*** for Bhikkhu depicts the outline of the organization of the Buddhist Saṅgha community from the early years of the Buddha. The purpose of the Pātimokkha recitation is to preserve dhamma and Vinaya by using Saṅgha Order as medium. The survey of ***Pātimokkha's Number of Rules*** provides a brief overview of how the Buddhist monastic code has been methodically formulated.

In conclusion, the account of the monastic rules in the Pāli Canon can clarify the number of 227 Pātimokkha rules; the four Pārājikas, the thirteen Saṅghādisesas, the two Aniyatas, the thirty Nissaggiya Pācittiyas, the ninety-two Pācittiyas, the four Pāṭidesaniyas, the seventy-five Sekhiyas, and the Adhikaraṇasamatha rules. The Pātimokkha that Saṅgha Order has been reciting today.

¹⁸ V.II. 287-288.

¹⁹ V.II. 213-215.

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