



# Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa

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## Abstract

With the establishment of the *Bhikṣuni Sangha*, Buddha formulated the *Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa* including specific rules the Eight *Gurudharma*. The *Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa* contains 311-364 vows for nuns depending on the tradition, which are more in number comparing to the Bhikṣu Prātimokṣa. In the present world women's empowerment is a strong agenda. In this context, the numerous rules governing *Bhikṣuni* and the eight *gurudharma* are often acknowledged as an instance of gender discrimination in Buddhism. This article aims to understand the *Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa* and Eight *Gurudharma* in the Buddhist context. The article concludes with the understanding that the *Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa* is not discrimination rather it is the protection and empowerment of women from the then socio-cultural norms and values, and for the establishment of *Bhikṣuni Sangha*.

**Keywords:** *Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa*, Eight *Gurudharma*, *Gender in Buddhism*, *Discrimination*, *Women Empowerment*

## Introduction

Bhikkhuni Pratimokkha is the fundamental monastic rule followed by ordained Buddhist nuns (Bhikkhunis). It is a set of rules for the nuns' community laid down in the Vinaya Pitakas to guide moral conduct, mental training, and communal harmony within the nun community. It is regularly recited during the Uposath Vrata observance for the central discipline guidance of the nuns' monastic community.

According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, “The purpose of the Vinaya is to uphold the discipline that safeguards the moral integrity of the community (Sangha), to prevent misconduct, and by doing so, to support the monks' progress on the path to Nirvana” (Bodhi 3). The *Prātimokṣa* is a formal code of conduct to govern the Buddhist *Sangha*. While the *Prātimokṣa* is sometimes identified with *Sīla*, their literal meanings and applications differ. *Sīla* refers to the ethical vows practiced in daily life, whereas the *Prātimokṣa*

consists of specific rules applicable to the entire community. Within monastic discipline, eight or ten *Sīla* (precepts) are commonly practiced by both *Bhikṣus* and *Bhikṣuṇīs* (Bodhi 152-54). The primary source for the *Prātimokṣa* is the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, specifically the *Sutta Vibhaṅga* and the *Khandhaka* sections, which contain the detailed codes of conduct. Furthermore, the *Parivāra* discusses the purpose of discipline, emphasizing that the *Vinaya's* goal is to maintain harmony and support progress toward Nirvana (Kabilsingh 16-18). The *Prātimokṣa* formulated for monks and nuns is known as the *Bhikṣu Prātimokṣa* and *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa*, respectively. In the Tibetan tradition, the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa* is collected within the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* (Kabilsingh 42-43).

The *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa* is specifically designed for the female monastics of the Buddhist *Saṅgha*. In the *Theravāda* school, there are 311 rules for *Bhikṣuṇīs*. However, this number varies across different schools of Buddhism: the *Dharmaguptaka* school has 348 rules, the *Mahīśāsaka* has 380, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* has 290, and the *Mahāsāṃghika* has 354 (Kabilsingh 42). The *Prātimokṣa* is transmitted to a *Bhikṣuṇī* during her full ordination. Currently, there are significant debates regarding the full ordination of *Bhikṣuṇīs* due to the "broken lineage" of ordination in certain traditions. The restoration of this lineage remains a

challenge for Buddhist communities worldwide. The *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa* is typically divided into seven sections: *Pārājika*, *Saṅghādisesa*, *Pācittiya*, *Nissaggiya Pācittiya*, *Pāṭidesanīya*, *Sekhiya*, and *Adhikaraṇa-samatha* (Kabilsingh 34).

### Analysis and Discussion

The Bhikkhuni Pratimoksa discipline is laid down in the Vinaya Pitaka, which is a basic code of conduct for Buddhist monastic life. It has seven major categories of monastic rules, which are Parajika, Sanghadisesa, Pacittiya, Nissaggiya Pacittiya, Patidesaniya, Sekhiya, and Adhikarana Samatha. Each section highlights the nature of offences, their seriousness, procedures for confession, defense for correction, and resolution within the sangha.

#### 1-Pārājika

There are eight *Pārājika* in all the traditions of Buddhism. *Pārājika* refers to grave offences. Among the eight, four are major disciplinary offences. According to the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, particularly in the *Khandhaka*, the *Pārājika* is the most serious violations that lead to the automatic and immediate expulsion or dismissal from the *Saṅgha*. Hence, it is called the rules requiring expulsion from the *Saṅgha*. The eight *Pārājika* are as follows:

1. Engage in sexual intercourse even with an animal,
2. Purposely deprive a human being of life or provide him with a (knife) take life or encourage to kill,

3. Stealing offerings or property of the *Sangha*,
4. Claiming to have special or noble knowledge or insight,
5. Awful touching or pressing against a male person,
6. Disrespectful towards *Sangha* order, criticizing others' mistakes or talking about it openly,
7. Following or imitating *Bhikṣu* who is disrespectful to rules or discipline or teachers,
8. Intentional engagement in activities that do not follow the monastic rules, like touching a man with desire, etc. (Kabilsingh, 1991).

## 2-Sanghadisesa

The meaning of *Sanghadisesa* is the fault affecting the *Sangha*. It involves misconduct committed by a member or members of the *Sangha* that has severe consequences for the whole *Sangha*. The *Sanghadisesa* comes from the *Vinaya Piṭaka* since it is a long-lasting or fundamental aspect of Buddhist teachings which have ongoing relevance and influences; hence it is mentioned as *Dīghadhamma* or *Dīgha-Dīkṣā*. In *Sanghadisesa*, there are 17 rules in most traditions, but in *Mula-Sarvāstivāda* and *Sarvāstivāda*, there are 19 and 20 rules, respectively. All the members of the *Sangha* have a combined responsibility to uphold discipline. When *Sanghadisesa* occurs, it requires collective action to address and rectify the fault. Engaging in a serious breach of monastic discipline, disobedience or

rebellion against the *Sangha's* decisions, causing disunity or division, refusing to accept corrective discipline, violating the communal rules repeatedly, etc. are some examples of *Sanghadisesa*. In the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikaya* 16), Buddha emphasizes the importance of discipline and unity, warning that serious breaches by *Sangha* can lead to sanctions affecting the entire community.

## 3-Pācittiya:

This is known as offences that are less severe than *Pārājika* but still require penance and confession. *Pācittiya* means offense. In the *Suttavibhanga* and *Khandhaka* of *Vinaya Piṭaka*, *Pācittiya* offences are systematically listed and explained in 16 sub-sections (*vagga*). The *Pācittiya* is typically involved in everyday conducts and ritual rules of the *Sangha* discipline. Eating food outside the prescribed time, wearing robes improperly, talking loudly or frivolously, using or handling forbidden items, not observing silence or solitude when required, accepting gifts or donations improperly, improper conduct during alms-round, etc. are examples of *Pācittiya*. There are variations in the number of rules of *Pācittiya* according to the traditions. In *Theravāda* 166, *Dharmagupta* 178, *Mahisāsaka* 210, *Mula-Sarvāstivāda* 141, *Mahāsaṅghika* 178, *Sarvāstivāda* 180 *Pācittiya* rules are formulated as *Bhikṣuṇi Prātimokṣa*.

## 4-Nissaggiya Pācittiya:

It refers to the specific category of

disciplinary offences committed by *Sangha* members or a specific subset of *pàcittiya* offences. The set of rules focuses on the handling and possessions of objects. *Nissaggiya* means abandoned acts by the *Sangha*. And *pàcittiya* means offense referring to minor to moderate violations. Hence the *Nissaggiya Pàcittiya* means the category of offenses where the *Sangha* must abandon certain items or cease certain actions as a form of penance. The *Mula-Sarvàstivàda* tradition contains 33 rules; other traditions have 30 rules in the *Nissaggiya Pàcittiya*. Handling sacred objects without permission, possessing or accepting items that are forbidden, using or handling tools improperly, and buying or selling items that are classified as *Nissaggiya* are some examples of the *Nissaggiya Pàcittiya*.

### 5-Pàtidesaniya:

In the section of *Pàtidesaniya* there is a similarity in all traditions, consisting of 8 rules. *Pàtidesaniya* generally refers to a formal declaration, statement, or affirmation made by *Bhikṣu* and *Bhikṣuni*, especially during disciplinary procedures or formal discussions. *Suttavibhanga* of *Vinaya Piṭaka* discusses the regulations relating to the *Prātimokṣa*, which includes *Pàtidesaniya* as a specific ceremonial or procedural act. It is considered a necessary ritual to re-establish discipline and maintain harmony within the *Sangha*. The *Khandhaka* provides details procedures, i.e. timing,

rituals, recitations, and declarations. *Suttavibhanga* emphasizes the importance and significance of *Pàtidesaniya* as a renewal discipline. *Bhikṣu* or *Bhikṣuni*, who is not ill and has had these 8 items, ghee, oil, honey, molasses, fish, meat, milk, and curd asked for, should partake of it, there is an offence to be confessed under *Pàtidesaniya* the rules.

### 6-Sekhiya

It is the training rules or guidelines of conduct formulated to cultivate proper behavior and discipline among *Sangha*, especially for novice monks and nuns. It complements the *Bhikṣu* or *Bhikṣuni Vinaya* by fostering ethical behavior and *Sangha* harmony. The *Sekhiya* has four parts: dealing with proper behavior, dealing with food, dealing with teaching Dharma, and miscellaneous rules. Greeting elders and peers with respectful gestures, walking in an orderly manner, eating with decorum, avoiding distractions, maintaining cleanliness, respecting Buddha images or relics, etc. are some examples of *Sekhiya*. The rules of *Sekhiya* have variety in number as the traditions. There are 75 in *Theravāda*, 100 in *Dharmagupta*, 100 in *Mahisāsaka*, 77 in *Mula-Sarvàstivàda*, 106 in *Mahāsanghika*, and 90 in *Sarvastivàda*.

### 7-Adhikarna Samatha

It is known as rules for settling disputes among the *Sangha*. The word *Adhikarana* means authority or jurisdiction and *Samatha* refers

to the meaning of agreement. Hence the *Adhikarana Samatha* means the agreement regarding authority in the setting of rules and disciplinary decisions among the *Sangha*. There is uniformity in the number of rules in *Adhikarana Samatha* in all traditions of Buddhism, containing 7 rules. The *Mahavagga* and *Cullavagga* of *Vinaya Pitaka* is the source of *Adhikarana Samatha*.

### **Eight Gurudharma**

The Eight *Gurudharmas* are the rules of respect or principles of respect. The additional precepts required to *Bhikṣuni* concerning respect and honor to *Bhikṣu* and *Bhikṣu Sangha*. The eight *gurudharma* are either given before the *Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa* or after. The *gurudharma* is considered as a fundamental guideline that every *Bhikṣuni* needs to hold during monastic life. The Eight *gurudharma* are as follows:

- 1) A *Bhikṣuni* who has been fully ordained even for more than a century must bow down, rise from her seat, salute with hands palm-to-palm over her heart, and perform the duties of respect to a *Bhikṣu* even if he has been fully ordained only a day. This rule is to be honored, respected, revered, venerated, and never to be transgressed as long as she lives.
- 2) A *Bhikṣuni* must not spend the rains in a residence where there is no *Bhikṣu*.
- 3) Every half-month a *Bhikṣuni* should

request two things from the *Bhikṣu Sangha*: she should ask for the date of the *Uposatha* day and come for an exhortation.

- 4) At the end of the Rains-residence, a *Bhikṣuni* should invite (criticism both from) the *Bhikṣu Sangha* and the *Bhikṣuni Sangha* on any of three grounds: what they have seen, what they have heard, and what they have suspected.
- 5) A *Bhikṣuni* who has broken any of the vows of respect must undergo penance for half a month under both *Sangha*.
- 6) Only after a probationer has trained in the six precepts for two years should she request ordination from both *Sangha*.
- 7) A *Bhikṣu* must not in any way be insulted or reviled by a *Bhikṣuni*.

From today on, *Bhikṣunis* are not permitted to criticize *Bhikṣus*. *Bhikṣus* are permitted to criticize *Bhikṣunis*. This is a principle to be revered, respected, honored, venerated, and not to be transgressed for the whole of one's life. (Bhikkhu Anālayo, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

*Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa* is the code of conduct given to Buddhist celibate nuns at the time of ordination. There are 7 sections of rules containing 290 to 380 rules depending upon the traditions and, or lineages. The Buddhist *Sangha* rules for *Bhikṣuni* are more in numbers compared to *Bhikṣu*, which is often understood as gender discrimination

in Buddhism. In addition, the eight *gurudharma* has established the *Bhikṣu* (male) superiority in the Buddhist *Sangha*. This ignited the issue of gender discrimination even more in the contemporary world of gender equality and dignity. General perception regarding the more restrictive rules for *Bhikṣuni* seems contradictory. After analyzing the socio-cultural context of the history, where there was male dominating culture and society, the formulation of the *Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa* with additional rules of eight *gurudharma* were to the establishment of *Bhikṣuni Sangha* and to protect women from the existing attitude of male domination. It can be said that the core teaching of Buddha has no gender bias rather it is influenced by cultural norms and values. The difference in the number of *Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa* in different traditions exposes the context of different historical development, cultural adaptations, and lineages. Hence it can be concluded that the formation of *Bhikṣuni Prātimokṣa* has a direct influence of socio-cultural norms and values. Around the world, there are different cultures and with those differences, there are different gender expectations too. In the present context, some of the rules could be reviewed with diligence of care. Buddha is an omniscient, his formulation of more rules to *Bhikṣuni* cannot be discrimination; it was required to maintain harmony in the Buddhist *Sangha*. His all teachings are of compassion elaborating equal

potential of all beings for spiritual attainment. The formulation of more rules for women is necessary because women's biological changes affect their psychological changes as well. In the counterargument, it can be said, it was applicable for that time now the world has changed and hence the rules must be reconstructed and so on. But, the truth is, a feminine quality that impresses and influences more than a masculine gender. The appearance of a woman, flirtatious talking, gestures, presence in the wrong place or time, etc. could lead to unfavorable consequences. It is a truth whether it was the period of Buddha or the present world. Referring to this truth, it seems that applying more rules to *Bhikṣuni* is appropriate to safeguard a woman and to maintain harmony among the *Sangha*. It is better prevent with more rules than to cure.

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