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CONFESSION, TESTIMONY, AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE IN THE THERAVĀDA VINAYA

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ABSTRACT

Disciplinary judgment requires an account of conduct that can be assessed against the conditions of an applicable rule. This article investigates how confession and testimony contribute to that account within the Theravāda Vinaya, focusing on the Bhikkhu Pātimokkha and selected procedural passages from the Mahāvagga and Cūḷavagga. It employs textual interpretation and epistemological analysis, distinguishing canonical prescriptions from later explanations and reconstruction. The discussion examines the disclosure of remembered offences during uposatha, the acknowledgement of conduct, trustworthy witness reports, the prohibition of groundless accusations, and the relationship between admissions and the settlement of disciplinary issues. It argues that confession and testimony have different evidentiary functions. Confession makes a person's account of their conduct available for disciplinary consideration, whereas testimony supplies information from another perspective. Neither function eliminates the need to identify the relevant facts, preserve distinctions between observation and suspicion, interpret the applicable rule, and follow the appropriate procedure. The analysis further distinguishes the establishment of facts from their classification as an offence and from the institutional resolution of an issue. These distinctions explain why truthful communication is necessary but does not by itself guarantee a justified disciplinary conclusion. Contemporary work on testimony and epistemic injustice provides comparative questions concerning credibility and responsible hearing without being attributed to the ancient texts. The article concludes that selected Vinaya practices can be interpreted as an ethically governed framework for establishing disciplinary knowledge. Its contribution is a focused analytical model connecting disclosure, assessment, normative classification, and procedurally accountable judgment within a canonical tradition.

KEYWORDS: Theravāda Vinaya, Bhikkhu Pātimokkha, Confession, Testimony, Disciplinary Knowledge, Epistemic Responsibility

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1. INTRODUCTION

A disciplinary community must determine both what its members are required to do and what they have actually done. A rule can specify a prohibition or obligation, but its application to an individual case requires information about conduct and the conditions relevant to that rule. The resulting philosophical problem concerns the relation between knowledge and responsibility. What warrants accepting an account of an event? How does a report become a premise of disciplinary reasoning? When does an acknowledgement justify treating an action as an offence? These questions direct attention to the epistemic work performed by confession, testimony, and communal assessment.

The present article examines this problem within the Theravāda Vinaya. Its focus is the discipline of bhikkhus, particularly the Bhikkhu Pātimokkha and selected

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Khandhaka procedures. The Pātimokkha contains differentiated categories of rules and methods for settling issues; the Mahāvagga supplies important material concerning uposatha and disclosure (Rhys Davids & Oldenberg, 1881, Mahāvagga II; Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 2013). The analysis does not treat the short rule formulations as a complete account of disciplinary practice. It considers the relationship between those formulations, explanatory materials, and procedure.

The central research question is: how do confession and testimony contribute to the establishment, evaluation, and communal recognition of disciplinary knowledge? Three subsidiary questions organise the inquiry. First, what distinguishes a person's acknowledgement of their own conduct from another person's report? Second, how do standards governing truthful speech and grounded accusation constrain the evidentiary use of such accounts? Third, how should the acceptance of information be distinguished from the classification of an offence and the settlement of an issue?

Modern epistemology supplies useful comparative questions. Coady's (1994) account emphasises the pervasive dependence of knowledge on others' words. Lackey (2008) examines the epistemic contributions of speakers and hearers, while Fricker (2007) investigates ethical wrongs connected with credibility judgments. These works provide vocabulary for asking how information is received and evaluated. They do not establish what a particular Vinaya passage means, and the argument does not claim that the canonical texts anticipate these theories in their full contemporary form.

The article's contribution is a focused reconstruction of four distinguishable operations: disclosure, assessment, normative classification, and procedural resolution. This model is proposed as an analytical aid, rather than as a canonical formula. It helps explain how confession and testimony can support disciplinary judgment while remaining subject to different limitations. The discussion also preserves the distinction between the disciplinary treatment of an offence and the broader ethical evaluation of a person's conduct. A successful procedural outcome should not automatically be equated with complete knowledge of every feature of an event.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Corpus and selection

The study uses purposive selection of passages directly relevant to disclosure, reporting, accusation, and settlement. The principal materials are the Mahāvagga's uposatha provisions, especially II.3 and II.27; Pācittiya 1 on deliberate falsehood; Saṅghādisesa 8 on a groundless accusation involving a pārājika offence; Aniyata 1 and 2 concerning reports by a trustworthy female lay follower; and the principles of adhikaraṇa-samatha. Canonical rule formulations are consulted in Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's (2013) translation. The older translation of Mahāvagga II supplies section-numbered passages concerning disclosure and doubt (Rhys Davids & Oldenberg, 1881).

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's online Buddhist Monastic Code is used as an interpretive resource because it distinguishes rule formulations, Vibhaṅga explanations, commentarial positions, and procedural references. Individual chapters are cited separately where the analysis depends on their specific discussion (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). This study does not claim to examine every passage in the five Vinaya books. Pārājika Pāli, Pācittiya Pāli, Mahāvagga, Cūḷavagga, and Parivāra constitute the wider canonical context, but the findings concern the selected materials.

2.2 Analytical procedure

The method is qualitative textual and philosophical analysis. For each selected passage, the inquiry identifies the action regulated, the kind of statement involved, the conditions attached to its use, and the disciplinary consequence. It then distinguishes three textual levels: the rule or procedural prescription, the explanatory interpretation accompanying it, and the philosophical conclusion proposed here. Interpretive disagreements are retained when they affect the argument, rather than silently harmonised.

The epistemological analysis asks what information a statement provides, what makes that information relevant, and what additional assessment is necessary before a conclusion follows. For this purpose,

disciplinary knowledge means adequately supported understanding of facts and conditions relevant to disciplinary assessment. The expression does not imply omniscience, unrestricted access to another person's mental states, or a single technical Pāli equivalent. Likewise, testimony is used as an analytical category for another person's communicative report; it is not assumed to name one uniform institution throughout the corpus.

2.3 Scope and ethics

The article analyses published texts and scholarly arguments. It involves no interviews, observation of identifiable individuals, personal disciplinary cases, human participants, or animal experiments. Consequently, participant consent and experimental ethics approval are not applicable to this design. No claim is made that a contemporary monastery consistently follows every prescription discussed. Translation-based interpretation is also a limitation: where a conclusion depends on a contested Pāli term, further philological comparison is necessary. All examples introduced for analytical purposes are expressly hypothetical.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Disclosure and remembered conduct during uposatha

Mahāvagga II.3 connects the recitation of the Pātimokkha with an opportunity to disclose an existing offence. Silence is interpreted within the ceremony as a declaration of purity, while remembering an offence and failing to disclose it after the repeated announcement is treated as intentional falsehood. The passage therefore connects remembrance, communication, and disciplinary accountability (Rhys Davids & Oldenberg, 1881, Mahāvagga II.3.3–8).

The epistemic significance lies in the relationship between an individual's awareness and a statement available to others. A person may remember conduct that the community has not observed. Disclosure makes that account communicatively available. Silence, however, has significance only within the established practice and its conditions. It would be an error to infer from the ceremonial treatment of silence that every silent person has been exhaustively investigated. The rule governing disclosure establishes a responsibility to communicate; it does not provide an independent guarantee that the responsibility has been fulfilled.

Mahāvagga II.27 further differentiates acknowledgement from doubt. It describes approaching another bhikkhu to acknowledge an offence and also addresses uncertainty about an offence, with subsequent treatment when the doubt has been resolved (Rhys Davids & Oldenberg, 1881, Mahāvagga II.27.1–2). This distinction matters philosophically because uncertainty is not the same epistemic condition as knowledge of misconduct. Reporting doubt accurately can itself be responsible communication. The analytical lesson is that disciplinary inquiry should preserve the difference between knowing, remembering, and remaining unsure, rather than treating them as interchangeable admissions.

Confession accordingly has both retrospective and prospective dimensions. It concerns what a person understands themselves to have done and how that conduct will be addressed. The community's interest is not exhausted by extracting a statement about the past; the acknowledgement is situated within training and future restraint. Nevertheless, its ethical value should not be used to bypass questions of factual or normative accuracy. A sincere speaker may still misunderstand which rule applies.

3.2 Confession and the classification of an offence

The principle of paṭiññātakaraṇa concerns acting in accordance with what has been admitted. In his discussion of adhikaraṇa-samatha, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu distinguishes ordinary confession from admission following interrogation and explains that confession must correspond to the actual offence. The same discussion distinguishes offence-issues from accusation-issues and cautions against assuming that an admission alone settles every kind of issue (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, n.d.-a, discussion of principle 4).

This supports a distinction between admitting an action and correctly classifying it. The statement that an action occurred answers one question. Whether the action fulfils the conditions of a particular offence answers another. A person's willingness to confess

cannot substitute for the rule-sensitive analysis required by the second question. For example, in a hypothetical inquiry, a bhikkhu might acknowledge speaking particular words while disputing that they were intentionally false. That acknowledgement would establish a different premise from an admission that all conditions of deliberate falsehood were present.

The proposed reconstruction therefore treats confession as a structured contribution to inquiry. It may communicate facts, the speaker's understanding of those facts, and acceptance of responsibility. These contributions can coincide, but they should not be conflated. Their separation is especially important when an individual possesses detailed memory of an event but limited knowledge of its disciplinary classification. The resulting requirement is interpretive cooperation: an account of conduct must be related to the applicable norm with care.

Nor should confession be presented as a universal mechanism capable of reversing every disciplinary consequence. The Pātimokkha differentiates offences involving defeat, communal meetings, forfeiture and confession, and other categories (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 2013). The epistemological argument concerns the establishment and assessment of information. It does not imply that every established offence can be resolved through an identical remedy. Knowledge of an offence and the procedure required to address it remain distinct.

3.3 Witness reports and the Aniyata rules

Aniyata 1 and 2 identify circumstances in which a trustworthy female lay follower reports conduct involving a bhikkhu seated privately with a woman. The rule formulations connect the report with the bhikkhu's acknowledgement and possible disciplinary treatment. The first rule describes three possible offence categories, while the second describes two (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 2013, Aniyata 1–2). Their significance for this inquiry is the recognised role of information supplied from outside the community of bhikkhus.

The evidentiary contribution of a witness differs from confession. The witness reports from a perspective external to the accused person's own account. That perspective may supply information the accused has omitted or correct a misleading account. Yet an external perspective also has limits. Observing a situation is not necessarily observing every action that occurred within it, and perceiving an outward event does not automatically disclose every intention relevant to disciplinary classification. These are analytical distinctions; their exact disciplinary significance must be determined from the applicable rule.

A further qualification is necessary. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's discussion identifies a tension between the wording of the Aniyata rules and the Vibhaṅga's treatment in relation to admission. He explains the rules in conjunction with the wider procedures for accusation and inquiry (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, n.d.-b). It would therefore be inaccurate to derive a general principle of automatic conviction solely from the witness's reputation, or to represent the witness's account as irrelevant whenever the accused disagrees.

The narrower conclusion is that credible testimony can initiate and inform disciplinary assessment without eliminating interpretation and procedure. The philosophical challenge is to preserve both responsiveness to the witness and careful assessment of the report. An institution that accepts every confident assertion risks error; one that dismisses relevant information because the speaker lacks institutional membership risks overlooking evidence. The selected rules make this tension a legitimate object of analysis, without resolving every contemporary question about credibility.

3.4 Grounded accusation and truthful evidentiary description

Saṅghādisesa 8 regulates a malicious, groundless accusation that another bhikkhu has committed a pārājika offence. The accompanying analysis distinguishes grounds in what has been seen, heard, or suspected and discusses the misrepresentation of one kind of ground as another (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, n.d.-c, discussion of rule 8). Pācittiya 1 separately concerns deliberate falsehood (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 2013, Pācittiya 1). These materials connect the ethical character of speech with the accuracy of information used against another person.

A justified basis for raising a concern should not be confused with a sufficient basis for concluding that the alleged offence occurred. A report can warrant further inquiry without establishing the final disciplinary conclusion. This distinction prevents suspicion from being promoted into certainty merely because an accusation is formally permissible. It also explains why accurate description of the source of information matters. Claiming direct observation when the information is actually second-hand changes what hearers are invited to believe about its evidentiary weight.

Consider a hypothetical case in which one bhikkhu hears a report about another but tells the community that he personally witnessed the event. Even if the underlying report later proves true, the description of his access to the event is false. His statement offers an apparent warrant that he does not possess. Conversely, honestly identifying uncertainty allows others to evaluate the report without mistaking it for direct knowledge. The relevant epistemic responsibility is therefore not limited to avoiding invented events. It includes representing the basis and limits of one's assertion accurately.

This interpretation also distinguishes two possible errors: error about the occurrence of an event and error about the evidentiary status of an account. The second can affect inquiry even when the first is absent. Disciplinary knowledge depends on preserving this difference because a community must decide what has been established and how it has been established. Truthful reporting supports that task by making the route from information to conclusion open to assessment.

3.5 Procedure and communal recognition

The seven principles of adhikaraṇa-samatha include face-to-face resolution, resolution associated with recollection, acting according to what is admitted, and other specified methods (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 2013, Adhikaraṇa-samatha). They do not constitute a single evidentiary test applied identically to every problem. The procedural discussion distinguishes different kinds of issue and the conditions appropriate to their treatment (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, n.d.-a).

The article proposes that institutional recognition should be analysed separately from individual belief. A person may be convinced that an allegation is true, but that conviction alone does not establish the appropriateness of a communal disciplinary act. Conversely, completion of a procedure does not warrant claiming infallibility about the event. The point of distinguishing these levels is to identify the separate requirements involved in responsible judgment: relevant information, correct normative classification, and the authority to act through the prescribed procedure.

The resulting four-operation model begins with disclosure: an account is made available. Assessment then considers its content, grounds, and relation to other relevant information. Normative classification asks whether established conditions satisfy the applicable rule. Procedural resolution addresses what action is appropriate to the issue and how it should be carried out. These are logical distinctions, not a claim that every case follows four successive meetings. Ordinary confession may involve them in a compressed form, while a disputed matter may require extended inquiry.

The model also identifies different failure points. Accurate disclosure can be followed by misclassification. Correct classification can be accompanied by an inappropriate procedure. A formally orderly meeting can rely on inaccurate information. These possibilities explain why a justified disciplinary conclusion cannot be reduced to the credibility of one speaker, the sincerity of an admission, or the appearance of procedural regularity alone.

3.6 Ethical and epistemic responsibility

The selected texts support an interpretation in which responsibilities concerning conduct interact with responsibilities concerning communication. A person who reports another's conduct participates in a process that can affect reputation, communal standing, and disciplinary treatment. The hearer also has a responsibility to attend to the report's grounds and relevance. Lackey's (2008) account of the contributions of both speaker and hearer offers a useful comparative framework for articulating this shared epistemic work. The analogy is limited: it does not identify her theory with the Vinaya or

decide a disciplinary case through contemporary epistemology.

Fricker's (2007) analysis supplies another critical question: might the credibility assigned to a speaker be distorted by prejudice? Applied as a contemporary evaluative lens, this question encourages reflection on whether relevant testimony is dismissed for reasons unrelated to its evidentiary quality. The Aniyata rules' attention to a lay witness makes the question especially pertinent, but does not justify claiming that the canonical system embodies a complete modern theory of epistemic justice. Nor does the article offer historical evidence that bias was absent in actual communities.

Buddhist ethical inquiry must also retain the wider setting of training and moral cultivation rather than isolate disciplinary assessment as a purely technical exercise (Harvey, 2000). Within the present model, the relevant virtues have concrete functions. Truthfulness helps prevent misrepresentation; attentiveness helps distinguish what was observed from what was inferred; willingness to acknowledge an error allows information to be corrected. These are proposed philosophical implications of the analysis, rather than additional canonical rules.

The main finding is consequently qualified but substantial. Confession and testimony can be interpreted as contributions to an ethically governed practice of establishing disciplinary knowledge. Their importance arises from the different perspectives they make available and the responsibilities attached to using those perspectives. Their limitations explain the continuing need for interpretation and appropriate procedure. Further research should test this reconstruction against a larger Pāli corpus, commentarial differences, and evidence of contemporary practice before making broader institutional claims.

4 CONCLUSION

This article has examined how confession and testimony contribute to disciplinary knowledge in selected Theravāda Vinaya materials. Confession supplies an account of one's own conduct, while testimony supplies information from another perspective. The analysis of disclosure, doubt, credible reporting, and groundless accusation shows why the content and evidentiary basis of statements must be distinguished. Neither sincerity nor reputation alone guarantees a justified disciplinary conclusion.

The proposed model separates disclosure, assessment, normative classification, and procedural resolution. Its contribution is to clarify how information becomes relevant to disciplinary responsibility without treating institutional acceptance as infallible knowledge. Truthful communication facilitates inquiry but the classification must be correct and the technique appropriate. Modern discussions of testimony and epistemic injustice help formulate comparative questions without replacing the canonical framework. The findings are limited to the selected textual materials and translations. They support further philological and institutional research into the relationship between ethical accountability and responsible knowing in Theravāda monastic discipline.

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