

Evil Monks with Good Intentions? Remarks on Buddhist Monastic Violence and Its Doctrinal Background

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Introduction

In the West, Buddhism has a reputation of being a religion of peace and tolerance, quite contrary to the image of Christianity with its “crusades” or Islam with its “*ġihād*.” It is evident, however, that this stereotypical ascription is not much more than a benevolent prejudice, an orientalist fantasy, another aspect of Western exoticism. Perhaps nowhere else has the myth of “peaceful Buddhism” been unmasked quite as clearly as in Japan. Traditionally, scholars both in Japan and in the West have tended to interpret the phenomenon of organized and institutionalized violence in premodern Japanese Buddhism as a visible sign of the increasing secularization, corruption and decadence of the larger Buddhist institutions; as a deplorable deviation from the Buddha’s original intention. This accords with a widespread pattern of interpreting religious history that distinguishes between the pure, ideal religion as such and the imperfect people who abuse this religion. In my view as a *Religionswissenschaftler*, however, there is no religion independent of thinking and acting people who constitute it according to a given historical situation. Thus there is nothing to be abused or corrupted. Rather, it is my task as a historian of religion to ask why, under what circumstances, and in which way religious people modify their beliefs and doctrines, moral codes, and practices. In other words, I am not so much concerned with *deviation* and *decline* but with *change* and *development*. From this perspective I will try to show why the prohibition in *pārājika* III of the traditional monastic code (*vinaya*) “to

deprive a human or one that has human form of life” intentionally¹ has obviously lost its validity as an absolute moral norm in Japanese Buddhism.

Before addressing this question, I would like to give a brief overview of institutionalized violence in premodern Japan.²

The “Warrior Monks”³ of Medieval Japan

There is clear historical evidence that armed Buddhist monks were heavily involved in violent acts roughly from the tenth to the late sixteenth centuries, perhaps even earlier.⁴ Historians have counted up to

¹ “Whatever monk should intentionally, with his own hand, deprive a human or one that has human form of life, supply him with a knife, search for an assassin for him, instigate him to death, or praise the nature of death . . . and he (i.e., the man) should die by that [means], this monk is *pārājika*, expelled.” *Prātimokṣa* of the Mūlasarvāstivādin; Charles S. Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Prātimokṣa Sūtras of the Mahāsāṃghikas and Mūlasarvāstivādins* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996), 51–3. For the Chinese version see *Genbenshuoyiqieyoubu jiejing* 根本說一切有部戒經 (T 24.501a15–20).

² For studies on the phenomenon of “warrior monks” in Japan, see Ōya Tokujō, *Nihon bukkuyōshi no kenkyū*, vol. 2 (Kyoto: Tōhō bunken, 1929); Tsuji Zennosuke, *Nihon bukkuyōshi no kenkyū, zokuhen* (Tokyo: Kanetsu tōsho, 1931); Mikael S. Adolphson, *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000); Paul Demiéville, “Le bouddhisme et la guerre: post-scriptum à l’*Histoire des moines-guerriers du Japon* de G. Renondeau,” *Mélanges publiés par l’Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises* 1 (1957); G. Renondeau, “L’*Histoire des moines-guerriers du Japon*,” *Mélanges publiés par l’Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises* 1 (1957); Hioki Shōichi, *Nihon sōhei kenkyū* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1934); Katsuno Ryūshin, *Sōhei: Nihon rekishi shinsho* (Tokyo: Nihon hankōkai, 1965); Christoph Kleine, “Waffengewalt als ‘Weisheit in Anwendung’: Anmerkungen zur Institution der Mönchskrieger im japanischen Buddhismus,” in *Zen, Reiki, Karate: Japanische Religiosität in Europa*, ed. Inken Prohl and Hartmut Zinser (Münster, Hamburg, London: Lit-Verlag, 2002).

³ The term “warrior monk” (*sōhei* 僧兵) was probably introduced only in 1715 by a Confucian scholar. In medieval Japan the monks in question were usually called *shuto* 衆徒, indicating their being members of the illiterate mass who did the manual labor in the monastic complexes.

⁴ It is quite evident that temples like Kōfukuji and Tōdaiji were at least able to mobilize and control armed forces as early as in the ninth century when sixty armed men were led by monks of both temples to stage a riot against Myōsen 明詮 who was appointed head of the Sōgō 僧綱 (i.e., the Bureau of Priests established in 624 by Empress Suiko 推古) in 850. According to Tsuji, monks of Ōmi 近江 were already

more than four hundred disturbances, “ranging from demonstrations to battles in the capital.”⁵ Purportedly, the powerful emperor Shirakawa 白河天皇 (1053–1129) had complained that there were three things beyond his control: “the roll of the dice, the floodwaters of the Kamo River, and the monks of Mt. [Hiei].”⁶ According to tradition, the history of armed monks of the Tendaishū 天台宗 started in the tenth century with the abbotship of Ryōgen 良原 (912–985), the famous restorer of the Enryakuji 延暦寺 on Mt. Hiei 比叡山.⁷ Whether this influential abbot was personally responsible for the establishment of a monks’ army is not quite clear, however. In 970, for instance, Ryōgen drew up twenty-six regulations for the monks of his order in which he—among other things—sharply criticized the rude and disrespectful behaviour of the soldier-monks who “liked to hurt just as butchers’ sons,” who entered the temple halls in full armor and dirty shoes, covered their faces with white scarfs, threatened and abused practitioners, and chased away visitors.⁸ Referring to the apocryphal Mahāyāna **Brahmajāla*-

involved in battles between Fujiwara Nakamaro 藤原中麿 (710–764)—who wanted to arrest the infamous monk Dōkyō 道鏡 (?–772)—and his cousins Yoshitsugu 良繼 (716–777) and Kurajimaro 藏下麿 (734–775); see Tsuji, *Nihon bukkyōshi*, 29.

⁵ Adolphson, *Gates of Power*, 75.

⁶ According to the *Genpei seisūki* 源平盛衰記—a “history of the rise and fall of the Minamoto and the Taira” from the late twelfth century (Ōya, *Nihon bukkyōshi*, 2:510).

⁷ The well-known war tale *Taiheiki* 太平記—written around the late fourteenth century—quotes the great assembly of Enryakuji monks who gathered in 1333 as saying: “. . . suddenly after the abbotship of the monk reformer Jie [Ryōgen], we girded on the autumn frost of forged weapons over our garments of forbearance, that we might conquer interfering demons therewith” [Gotō Tanji, Kamata Kisaburō, and Okami Masao, eds., *Taiheiki*, 3 vols., *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 34–36 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1960–62), 1:256; Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *The Taiheiki: A Chronicle of Medieval Japan*, 6th ed. (Rutland & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1992), 217–8]. Likewise, a history of the Enryakuji finished in 1399—i.e., the *Sange yōki senryaku* 山家要記淺略 which was probably based on earlier materials—claims that it was Ryōgen who established the monastic army (Tsuji, *Nihon bukkyōshi*, 25). Although the two texts mentioned were written approximately four hundred years after Ryōgen’s death, there is good reason to believe that in Ryōgen’s time armed monks were in fact a common sight on Mt. Hiei.

⁸ Ryōgen’s regulations were further tightened in the same year. At particular religious meetings the covering of the head with scarfs—one of the identity markers of the soldier-monks—was prohibited: at the *shushō e* 修正會, the *shu nigatsu e* 修二月

*sūtra*⁹ (Ch. *Fanwang jing*; Jp. *Bonmōkyō* 梵網經) he warned against the karmic consequences of killing and criticized the possession of weapons by the monks. Whether this indicates an overall hostile attitude towards soldier-monks is doubtful. Ryōgen's criticism might only have aimed at certain excesses rather than at the institution of a monastic army as such. Be that as it may; we know for sure that in Ryōgen's time there existed a large group of monks on Mt. Hiei who did not hesitate to resort to violence. For instance, in 981, a Tendai army of 160 monks invaded the capital in order to force Regent Fujiwara no Yoritada 藤原頼忠 (924–989) to revoke the appointment of Yokei 餘慶 (918–991) as abbot of the Hosshōji 法勝寺. Yokei

會, the *fudan nenbutsu* 不斷念佛, the *nairongi* 內論義, etc. Also prohibited were the formation of gangs and the entering of monks' dwellings and sacred grounds carrying arms. See Renondeau, "Histoire," 173; see also Tsuji, *Nihon bukkyōshi*, 26.

⁹ The text was traditionally regarded as a translation by Kumārajīva. According to the preface attributed to Kumārajīva's disciple Sengzhao 僧肇 (384–414), the Chinese version is Kumārajīva's translation of the tenth chapter—the "chapter on the mind-ground of the bodhisattvas" (*pusa xindi pin* 菩薩心地品)—of a lost Indian text of 120 fascicles and 61 chapters, executed in Chang'an in 402 (T 24.997a21–b5). In his catalogue of the Buddhist scriptures (the *Zhongjing mulu* 眾經目錄 compiled in 594), Fajing 法經 for the first time classifies the *Fanwang jing* as a "vinaya of dubious authenticity (*zhonglü yihuo* 眾律疑惑)" (T 55.140a3). Also, Yijing 義淨 (625–713) apparently did not accept that the text was genuine, as he fails to mention it in his discussion of suicide in the *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan* 南海寄歸內法傳. Modern scholarship unanimously regards the text as an apocryphon forged in China in the late fifth century. See, for instance, Mizuno Kōgen, ed., *Shin Butten kaidai jiten*, 2nd ed. (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1968), 113; Kamata Shigeo, ed., *Issaikyō kaidai jiten* (Tokyo: Daitō shuppan, 2002), 223; Paul Groner, "The *Fan-wang ching* and Monastic Discipline in Japanese Tendai: A Study of Annen's *Futsū jubosatsukai kōshaku*," in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 252–4. The text must have been compiled approximately between 431 and 480. The precepts are based on passages of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, the *Pusa shanjie jing* 菩薩善戒經 (T 30, no. 1582) and the **Upāsakaśīla-sūtra* (*Youposaijie jing* 優婆塞戒經, T 24, no. 1488). A French translation of the **Brahmajāla-sūtra* by Jan J. M. De Groot was published in 1893 as *Le Code du Mahayana en Chine: son influence sur la vie monacal et sur le monde monacal* (Amsterdam: Verhider Kon. Ak. Van Wetensch, 1893). Recently, an English translation of the second part—the more influential "vinaya part"—of the apocryphon has been published in Taiwan by the Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, *Brahma Net Sutra: Moral Code of the Bodhisattvas* (Taipei: Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1999).

belonged to the Gishin-Enchin faction of the Tendai, whereas Ryōgen represented the rival Saichō-Ennin faction.¹⁰ Among the countless acts of violence in which the soldier-monks were involved, conflicts between the two branches of the Tendai were perhaps the most frequent ones, especially in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, paralleled only by conflicts between Enryakuji and Kōfukuji 興福寺. In most cases the fights ended up in the destruction of the Onjōji 園城寺, which had become the headquarters of the Gishin-Enchin faction or Jimon monto 寺門門徒 after they had been forced to leave Mt. Hiei. Their position had become unbearable after their rivals on the sacred mountain had burned down some forty residences of Gishin-Enchin followers in 993.¹¹

Monastic violence was not, to be sure, restricted to the Tendai. All major temple-shrine complexes kept armed forces, the most powerful being those of Enryakuji and Kōfukuji in the Heian and Kamakura eras, later followed by the Shingi-Shingon 新義真言 monastery Negoroji 根来寺, founded by the dissident Shingon monk Kakuban 覺鑊 (1095–1143) in 1140 in Kii Province 紀伊國 (present-day Wakayama) and the fortress-like Ishiyama Honganji 石山本願寺, founded in 1532 in Settsū Province 攝津國 (present-day Osaka), the stronghold of the Ikkōshū. Before attempting to answer the question why the Japanese Buddhist institutions permanently violated the *vinaya* by keeping and using weapons, we should first take a look at what exactly the soldier-monks did.

We can roughly classify the occasions on which soldier-monks were employed under five categories:

1. Forceful protests (*gōso* 強訴/噉訴) against government decisions which affected the religious institutions
2. Internal struggles over dominance in the Buddhist schools
3. Struggles among competing Buddhist orders
4. Attacks on “heretics”

¹⁰ Renondeau, “Histoire,” 205–6.

¹¹ Adolphson, *Gates of Power*, 64. As to the Sanmon-Jimon schism see Neil McMullin, “The Sanmon-Jimon Schism in the Tendai School of Buddhism: A Preliminary Analysis,” *Journal of the American Association of Buddhist Studies* 7-1 (1984).

5. Clashes with secular authorities over land rights

Forceful protests

As to the forceful protests, I have already mentioned the Enryakuji monks' protest march against the appointment of Yokei. The appointment of abbots by the court was indeed a major source of conflict. Another issue was the right to perform important state rituals, which guaranteed the temple in charge not only high reputation but also material profit. Whenever the court took a decision which affected a powerful monastery negatively, the clergy first appealed to the court and asked for a withdrawal of that decision. If the court failed to respond as desired, the monks picked up the portable shrines (*mikoshi* 神輿/御輿) or sacred symbols of the gods (*kami* 神) that protected the temple-shrine complex and gathered in front of the main temple hall.¹² Sometimes this threatening gesture sufficed to make the government reconsider its mind. If not, the Tendai monks descended the mountain and approached the imperial palace, or, in a few cases, the residence of the ruling Fujiwara regent. Apparently, up to the late eleventh or early twelfth century the protesting monks had been only lightly armed to protect themselves, and the use of physical violence was not intended. In 1108, however, Fujiwara no Munetada 藤原宗忠 (1062–1141) noticed a change of attitude, as he wrote in his diary:

Previously, the clergy were clad in protective armor when they came to the imperial palace, [but] this time, they are already armed and carry bows and arrows. It is possible that the mob now reaches several thousand. Truly, it is a frightening situation when the court has lost its authority, and [the palace] must be defended with all available might.¹³

In earlier times the Enryakuji clergy had hoped that the spiritual power of the *kami* they carried to the capital in their palanquins would be

¹² In the case of Enryakuji, the great assembly flocked in front of the Konponchūdō 根本中堂.

¹³ *Chūyūki*, Tennin 1 [1108]/3/23; quoted from Adolphson, *Gates of Power*, 277.

sufficiently threatening to convince the rulers. The protesting monks positioned the portable shrines at prominent spots in the capital and left them behind when they were driven away by the government troops. Nobody dared touch the sacred objects, and as long as the enraged *kami* were there, important political and ceremonial acts had to be suspended. As the effectiveness of this spiritual threat decreased in the course of time, the clergy began to put more confidence in physical force. Thus, from the fourteenth century at the latest, the forceful protests more frequently took on the character of systematic armed attacks.

Internal struggles over dominance in the Buddhist schools

As to internal struggles as a cause of violent clashes, I have already mentioned the fightings between the two branches of the Tendaishū. These internal conflicts appear to have been much more violent than the protest marches from the very beginning. Comparatively minor incidents frequently resulted in the almost complete destruction of Onjōji, and a considerable number of monks was injured or killed. The Onjōji or Jimon branch was in a miserable situation indeed: members of that branch were banned from becoming *zasu* 座主 or head of the Tendaishū by the dominating Sanmon branch 山門門徒; but they were also not allowed to become independent. When Onjōji had successfully applied for the establishment of an ordination platform in 1040, the Sanmon monks reacted as usual and burned down the whole temple complex.

Struggles among the Buddhist schools

Violent conflicts among the Buddhist schools—especially between the Tendaishū and the Hossōshū, based at Kōfukuji in Nara 奈良—in most cases arose out of disputes over land rights and the domination over certain shrines and temples, and sometimes also over the responsibility for important state rites. The Buddhist institutions had become proprietors of vast estates or *shōen* 莊園 throughout the country from around the ninth century onward. As a number of branch temples or shrines of the Enryakuji—such as Tōnomine 多武峯 (also Tamu no

mine) in Yamato 大和—were situated in regions otherwise dominated by Kōfukuji, and vice versa, clashes were inevitable. In 1081, for instance, the Kōfukuji clergy accused monks of Tōnomine of having illegally entered one of their estates, shooting and setting loose horses. Two days later Kōfukuji followers burned down several buildings of Tōnomine.¹⁴ Likewise, in 1113 the Enryakuji monks raided and destroyed Kiyomizudera 清水寺, a branch temple of Kōfukuji in Kyoto, after the court had—under pressure of the Kōfukuji clergy—withdrawn its earlier decision to appoint the Tendai monk Ensei 圓勢 (?–1133) as abbot of Kiyomizudera.

Attacks on “heretics”

Early in the thirteenth century, when a number of learned and charismatic but rankless monks formed groups of like-minded practitioners, developed their own innovative doctrines, and freed themselves from the grip of the religious establishment, the soldier-monks had to perform new tasks. The first dissident group that was violently reminded of the unwillingness of the Tendai clergy to accept any kind of sectarianism was the Ikkō senju nenbutsu shū 一向專修念佛宗 founded by the Tendai monk Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212). The now united clergy of Enryakuji and Kōfukuji forced the government to prohibit this group in 1207 and to exile Hōnen and a few of his disciples. In 1227, fifteen years after Hōnen’s death, the soldier-monks of Mt. Hiei invaded the eastern suburbs of the capital to destroy the heretic’s grave. They were, however, repelled by a troop of so-called lay priests (*nyūdō* 入道). The *Illustrated Biography of the Venerable Hōnen* in 48 scrolls (*Hōnen Shōnin gyōjō ezu* 法然上人行狀繪圖) describes these lay priests as follows: “Although they were all would-be priests, they were armed with weapons and with coats of mail over their robes.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 93.

¹⁵ Harper H. Coates and Ryugaku Ishizuka, eds., *Hōnen the Buddhist Saint: His Life and Teaching*. Compiled by Imperial Order, 5 vols. (Kyoto: Society for the Publication of Sacred Books of the World, 1949), 4:687; Ikawa Jōkei, ed., *Hōnen Shōnin den zenshū* (Kyoto: Hōnen Shōnin den zenshū kankōkai, 1978), 262.

Clashes with secular provincial leaders over land rights

As in the case of conflicts between the major Buddhist institutions, disputes over land rights were a frequent cause for conflicts between the powerful temples and secular proprietors or local authorities.¹⁶

The Impact of the *Mappō* Theory

At first sight, the examples mentioned above seem to support the secularization and corruption paradigm. If we take a closer look, however, we notice that this paradigm is rather anachronistic. From the viewpoint of medieval Japanese Buddhism the material well-being of the Buddhist institutions was not simply a secular matter but a precondition of the flourishing of the state and—in the long run—of the spiritual emancipation of all sentient beings.¹⁷ Only the monastic order could guarantee the survival of Buddhism, no matter how its members behaved. Most Japanese believed that the Age of the Latter Dharma or *mappō* 末法 had begun in 1052,¹⁸ and nobody could expect the monks to live pure lives according to the *vinaya* rules under these circumstances. This point is stressed in the well-known *Mappō tōmyō ki* 末法燈明記, traditionally but falsely attributed to Saichō 最澄 (762–822), the founder of Japanese Tendai. In accordance with the *Mahāsamnipāta-sūtra*,¹⁹ the author asserts that “in the Latter Dharma,

¹⁶ For details refer to Adolphson, *Gates of Power*.

¹⁷ For the relationship between the *saṅgha* and the state in Japan see Christoph Kleine, “Wie die zwei Flügel eines Vogels’—eine diachrone Betrachtung des Verhältnisses zwischen Staat und Buddhismus in der japanischen Geschichte,” in *Zwischen Säkularismus und Hierokratie: Studien zum Verhältnis von Religion und Staat in Süd- und Ostasien*, ed. Peter Schalk (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2001).

¹⁸ For further information on the development of this theory see Peter Fischer, *Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Mappō-Gedankens und zum Mappō-Tōmyō-Ki*, Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Natur- u. Völkerkunde Ostasiens, vol. 65 (Hamburg: Gesellschaft für Natur- u. Völkerkunde Ostasiens e.V., 1976); Michele Marra, “The Development of Mappō Thought in Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 15-1/4 (1988); Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991); Jackie Stone, “Seeking Enlightenment in the Last Age: *Mappō* Thought in Kamakura Buddhism,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 18-1 (1985).

¹⁹ *Dafangdeng daji jing* 大方等大集經, T 13, no. 397.

there are only nominal *bhikṣus* [*kemyō biku* 假名比丘].” Regardless of their moral shortcomings, “These nominal *bhikṣus*,” he says, “are the True Treasures of the world. There are no other fields of merit. . . .”²⁰ Furthermore, if someone were to keep the precepts in the Latter Dharma, this would be exceedingly strange indeed. It would be like a tiger in the marketplace. Who could believe it?”²¹ We further read that “There are no precepts that can be broken. Who could be called the breaker of the precepts?”²² As the “nominal *bhikṣus*” are the only representatives of the Dharma in the Final Age, they deserve to be treated as if they were Buddhas. Thus, says the *Mappō tōmyō ki* quoting the *Mahāsaṃnipāta-sūtra*, “The crime of striking and reproaching a monk who wears a robe but breaks or does not keep the precepts is the same as causing a trillion Buddhas to shed blood.”²³

From these passages we learn that medieval Japanese monks were quite aware of their permanent violation of the *vinaya*; and the fact that the soldier-monks were often called *akusō* 惡僧 or “evil monks” indicates that their conduct was indeed regarded as morally problematic. Under the given historical circumstances, however, they were badly needed. Armed monks had an important task to fulfil, for the sake of Buddhism and thus the sake of all sentient beings. According to the *Sange yōki senryaku* 山家要記淺略—a history of the Tendaishū completed in 1409 by Shunzen 春全²⁴—Ryōgen had once made the following statement:

Where there are no scriptures, there is no respect towards those of higher rank. Where there is no military power (*bu* 武), the virtue of authority over subordinates is lacking. For this reason, scriptures and

²⁰ Ibid., T 13.363b4–22.

²¹ *Mappō tōmyō ki*; Saichō (?), *The Candle of the Latter Dharma*, trans. Robert Rhodes, BDK English Tripiṭaka 107-III (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1994), 9. The pseudepigraphon was cited by Hōnen in his *Gyakushū seppō* 逆修說法 and the *Jūni mondō* 十二問答. Thus we know that it was widely regarded as an important work of Saichō by the late twelfth century at the latest.

²² Ibid., 13.

²³ Ibid., 17; cf. T 13.354c22–4.

²⁴ Ōya, *Nihon bukkyōshi*, 2:514–5.

military have always jointly pacified the world. Thus, those monks who are dull and have no talents (*gudon muzai sōryō* 愚鈍無才僧侶) shall be separated to form a group that exclusively occupies itself with the martial arts (*bumon* 武門). The True Dharma (*shōbō* 正法) is no longer obeyed. In former times, in the period of the Imitated Dharma (*zōbō* 像法) the whole world believed in the Dharma [of the Buddha]. In our degenerate times, however, those who defend the Dharma have become rare. Therefore, if on this High Peak (i.e., the Hieizan) in particular, the gift of oil for the lamp of the Dharma becomes extinct, how could it keep [burning] eternally and steadfastly. Just as the host of celestial beings in the four directions protect the god Taishaku (i.e., Indra), the soldier-monks (*bumon shuto* 武門眾徒) protect the estates against rebels and intruders; with valiant courage they protect us against the false rituals (*jagi* 邪儀) and extreme practices (*chōgyō* 張行) of the various other schools, defend the True Teaching and guard those who study and practice meditation.²⁵

Moreover, a later biography of Ryōgen²⁶ connects the twofold social structure of the Enryakuji monks—scholar-monks (*gakusō* 學僧) and soldier-monks (*shuto* 眾徒) with the two emblems (Skt. *samaya*) of the spiritual qualities of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. According to the author, the scholar-monks represent the scripture in Mañjuśrī's left hand—that is, the virtue of wisdom (*chi'e no toku* 智慧之德)—whereas the soldier-monks represent the sword in Mañjuśrī's right hand—that is, the application of wisdom (*riji no yō* 利智之用).²⁷

However, it would not be correct to blame the Latter Dharma theory alone for the moral decline of Buddhism. As we have seen, weapons were used by Japanese monks before the alleged start of the Latter Dharma, and we may assume that Buddhist monks in China and Korea²⁸ did so as well. Why would the **Brahmajāla-sūtra* prohibit the

²⁵ Tsuji, *Nihon bukkyōshi*, 24–5; cf. Demiéville, “Le bouddhisme et la guerre,” 377; Ōya, *Nihon bukkyōshi*, 2:513–4.

²⁶ The *Jie Daishi den* 慈慧大師傳, a biography of Ryōgen completed in 1469 by Ranban Keishin 蘭坂景菑 of Nanzenji 南禪寺.

²⁷ Ōya, *Nihon bukkyōshi*, 2:522; Tsuji, *Nihon bukkyōshi*, 25.

²⁸ Warrior monks played a considerable role in Korea from the Koryō dynasty

possession of arms²⁹ if armed monks had not in fact existed in fifth-century China, when this so-called *bodhisattva-prātimokṣa* was produced? And indeed, historical documents report that the troops of Emperor Taiwu 太武帝 (r. 424–451) of the Northern Wei 北魏 (386–534/535) discovered “large stacks of bows, arrows, spears and shields” in a monastery in Chang’an 長安 in 446.³⁰ At any rate, secular rulers in China and Japan deemed it necessary to explicitly prohibit the possession of arms by monks and nuns. For example, in section 26 of the famous *Rules for Monks and Nuns*³¹ issued by the Japanese government in the eighth century we read that “offerings may not be made of . . . weapons [*heiki* 兵器], nor may these be accepted by monks

(918–1392) on. In the twelfth century they defended the country against the Jurchen, and in the fourteenth century against the Mongols. Again, in the seventeenth century they fought against the Japanese and in the eighteenth against the Manchu; see Demiéville, “Le bouddhisme et la guerre,” 369.

²⁹ The minor tenth precept says: “A disciple of the Buddha should not store weapons such as knives, clubs, bows, arrows, spears, axes or any other weapons, nor may he keep nets, traps or any such devices used in destroying life. As a disciple of the Buddha, he must not even avenge the death of his parents—let alone kill sentient beings! He should not store any weapons or devices that can be used to kill sentient beings. If he deliberately does so, he commits a secondary offense” (Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, *Brahma Net Sutra*, 20–1; T 24.1005c14–9). Furthermore, in minor precept eleven we read: “A disciple of the Buddha shall not, out of personal benefit or evil intentions [*sic*], act as a country’s emissary to foster military confrontation and war causing the slaughter of countless sentient beings. As a disciple of the Buddha, he cannot even move among military forces, going from one army to another, much less act as a willing catalyst of war. If he deliberately does so, he commits a secondary offense” (*ibid.*, 21; T 24.1005c20–3). The thirty-second minor precept says: “A disciple of the Buddha must not sell knives, clubs, bows, arrows, other life-taking devices. . .” (*ibid.*, 32; T 24.1005c14–9). Against this background it may be interesting to note that in the sixteenth century the Shingi-Shingon headquarters Negoroji was the major producer of fire arms in Japan; see Neil McMullin, *Buddhism and the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 43–4.

³⁰ Kenneth K. S. Ch’en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 149.

³¹ *Yōrō Sōniryō* 養老僧尼令. The rules are based on the Zhengguan Code of Tang China, issued in 636. There is clear evidence that a similar monastic code was part of the Taihō Code that was issued in 701, but only the revised Yōrō version of 757 is extant; see Hayami Tasuku, *Nihon bukkyōshi: Kodai* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1986), 89.

and nuns.”³² Moreover, section 1 explicitly forbids the study of military treatises [*heisho* 兵書].³³

The Theoretical Foundation of Buddhist “Antinomianism”

As indicated above, I do not believe in the theory that organized monastic violence was simply a historical accident, neither encouraged nor justified by the Buddhist teaching. Due to lack of time, I will leave aside here the obvious social, political, and economic factors that were the immediate causes for the deployment of soldier-monks in Japan, and focus on the doctrinal factors that eroded the moral standards of the *saṅgha* and paved the way for fighting monks.

Hīnayāna rules vs. Mahāyāna ethics, or legalism vs. altruism

We have already discussed the contribution of the Final Dharma theory and should now take into consideration the gradual devaluation of the traditional *vinaya* as “hīnayānistic,” a process far too complex to be discussed here in detail. Suffice it to say that canonical texts such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* and authoritative treatises such as the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra* propagated a specifically Mahāyānistic approach to the monastic rules and emphasized bodhisattva ethics rather than the observance of a particular set of precepts. Thus they paved the way for the establishment of so-called “*bodhisattva-śīlas*” as a higher form of Buddhist discipline than the traditional moral code, now denounced as

³² “On the occasion of religious festivals (*sai'e* 齋會) offerings may not be made of slaves, horses, oxen or weapons [*heiki* 兵器], nor may these be accepted by monks and nuns.” Quoted from George B. Sansom, “Early Japanese Law and Administration, Part II,” *The Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, 2nd ser., no. 11 (1934): 133; cf. Aida Hanji, *Chūkai Yōrōryō* (Tokyo: Yūshindō, 1964), 405; Kurt Singer, ed., *The Life of Ancient Japan*, Japan Library (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), 222.

³³ “1. Monks and nuns who are guilty of any of the following offences shall be punished by the civil authorities in accordance with the law: — By false reading of omens predicting disasters or making treasonable statements and leading astray the people.

Studying military treatises.

Committing murder and robbery. . . .” (Sansom, “Early Japanese Law,” 127); cf. Aida, *Chūkai Yōrōryō*, 368; Singer, ed., *Life of Ancient Japan*, 217.

“*śrāvaka-sīlas*” or “precepts of the hearers.”³⁴ The introduction of so-called “bodhisattva ordinations” on the basis of forged “Mahāyāna-precepts sūtras” such as the **Brahmajāla-sūtra*, the *Pusa yingluo benye jing* 菩薩瓔珞本業經,³⁵ and the *Zhancha shan’e yebao jing* 占察善惡業報經³⁶ strongly relativized the traditional precepts to a point of their *de facto* invalidation. A temporary peak of this development was reached in Japan when monks of the newly established Tendai order were allowed to skip the “Hīnayāna ordination” completely and to be directly ordained as Mahāyāna monks at a new ordination platform (*kaidan* 戒壇) on Mt. Hiei according to the rules of the **Brahmajāla-sūtra* in 823. One may object that intentional killing was also prohibited by the so-called *bodhisattva-prātimokṣas*. At first sight, the bodhisattva precepts of the **Brahmajāla-sūtra* seem to be even stricter in this regard, as they prohibit the killing of any kind of life (major section 1), not only of humans, and therefore even prescribe vegetarianism (minor section 3). However, this objection misses the point. The establishment of Mahāyāna ordinations first of all changed the general attitude towards the precepts. In the Mahāyāna context both ordination and

³⁴ In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, for instance, it says: “O son of a good family! One who by his nature is capable of upholding [the *sīlas*] sees with his eyes the Buddha Nature and the Tathāgata. This again is called to see by hearing. There are again two kinds of *sīlas*. First, the *śrāvaka-sīlas*; second, the *bodhisattva-sīlas*. If one proceeds from the first aspiration [to enlightenment] to the attainment of supreme correct enlightenment (*anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*), this is called *bodhisattva-sīlas*. If one contemplates white bones it leads to the attainment of arhatship, and this is called *śrāvaka-sīlas*. If one receives and upholds the *śrāvaka-sīlas*, it should be known, such a person does not see the Buddha Nature and the Tathāgata. If one receives and upholds the *bodhisattva-sīlas*, it should be known, such a person will attain supreme correct enlightenment and will be able to see the Buddha Nature, the Tathāgata, and Nirvāṇa” (T 12.529a27–b5).

³⁵ A text in two scrolls and eight chapters (T 24, no. 1485). The Chinese translation is traditionally attributed to Zhu Fonian 竺佛念 but later scholarship considers it to have been written in China during the fifth or sixth century. Satō assumes that it was compiled around the middle of the fifth century; see Satō Tatsugen, *Chūgoku bukkyō ni okeru kairitsu no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Mokujisha, 1986), 360.

³⁶ T 17, no. 839. Both the *Fajing lu* 法鏡錄 of 594 and the *Yanzong lu* 彥琮錄 of 602 regard this text as an apocryphon, as does the *Datang neidian lu* 大唐內典錄 which mentions the text, nevertheless, on the grounds that it was very popular and circulated widely in China; see Mori Shōji, “Kairitsu gaisetsu,” in *Kairitsu no sekai*, ed. Mori Shōji (Tokyo: Hokushindō, 1993), 58–60.

confession rites came to simply serve the re-establishment of *ritual* purity rather than being a ritual re-confirmation of the *saṅgha's* moral purity as originally intended.³⁷ The *prātimokṣas* were regarded as “magical formulas” or ritual texts, not as sets of monastic rules to be observed.³⁸ Whilst the traditional *vinayas* claimed that every single rule had to be taken literally and be followed under all circumstances, the Mahāyānistic approach was much more flexible. According to the traditional monastic code, a *bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuṇī* who committed one of the four major offenses or *pārājika*—such as killing a human being—was immediately and irreversibly expelled. According to the Mahāyāna code, the evildoer could regain his purity by a simple act of repentance and be reordained.³⁹ In general, the texts which propagated a specifically

³⁷ The ritual purity or merit gained by the reception of the bodhisattva precepts was believed to last eternally, while the “Hīnayāna ordination” was valid for one life only. Above that, the *bhikṣu* ordination was clearly seen as inferior and insufficient. In the influential *Pusa yingluo benye jing* 菩薩瓔珞本業經 it is said: “One who does not receive the bodhisattva precepts is not called a sentient and conscious being. He is not different from a beast. He is not a bodhisattva, a man, a woman, a spirit, or a human. He is called beast, he is called heretic. He is called a non-believer who has no affinity with human feelings” (T 24.1021b3–6).

³⁸ This attitude is obvious in esoteric interpretations of the precepts in particular. According to Annen and others, the bodhisattva precepts were “magically” conferred upon the practitioner by a Buddha, and once he was endowed with the precepts even a violation of them did not annul their power, as long as the violation was confessed and “absolution” granted by the Buddha through a miraculous sign. If confession failed, the bodhisattva precepts could simply be received again. See Groner, “*Fan-wang ching*,” 273, 279; **Upālipariprcchā* (*Youpoli hui* 優波離會 in the *Dabao jijing* 大寶積經, T 11.515c18–516b8; translation in Chen-chi Chang, ed., *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Selections from the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 265–7). The interpretation of the conferring of the precepts as a means of cleansing sin and reestablishing ritual purity became particularly prominent in the so-called Shingon-ritsu movement. Its founder Eizon 叡尊 (1201–1290) is believed to have conferred the precepts on 97,710 people.

³⁹ Satō, *Kairitsu no kenkyū*, 150/361. The Tibetan translation of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* says: “The bodhisattva does not relinquish the bodhisattva vow-of-ethics undertaking [*lüyi jie* 律儀戒] by only once committing an act that has the quality of being ‘grounds for defeat [*pārājika*],’ as the monk does [relinquish] his *prātimokṣa* vow with his events of defeat. And even when the undertaking has been relinquished, the bodhisattva still has the opportunity to receive the bodhisattva vow-of-ethics undertaking in the same lifetime. The monk established in the *prātimokṣa* vow for whom a defeat has developed has no such opportunity. To summarize,

Mahāyānistic moral code laid more emphasis on a given person's intention and mental attitude than on his actions.⁴⁰ Needless to say, this stance is particularly favored by the Consciousness-Only school and in esoteric Buddhism. The general attitude towards the precepts in Mahāyāna Buddhism as formulated in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*,⁴¹ ascribed to Maitreya by the Chinese and to Asaṅga (ca. 3rd–4th c.) by the Tibetans, and other texts, was that a bodhisattva was entitled to break minor rules if the breaking of the rule benefited others and was performed with an irreproachable (*niravadya*) motive.⁴² But even the breaking of major rules such as the four *pārājikas* was tolerable, nay expected, if performed on the basis of the three supreme qualities of a bodhisattva: (1) skill in means (*upāya-kauśalya*), (2) insight (*prajñā*), and (3) compassion (*karuṇā*).⁴³ Accordingly, Śāntideva, in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (chapter 5, verse 84), claims that “the bodhisattva should always be diligent in the interests of others. Even what is forbidden is allowable for one who seeks the welfare of others with compassion.”⁴⁴

According to the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, a bodhisattva is explicitly permitted to kill a robber who is on the verge of slaying living beings or

relinquishment of the bodhisattva vow-of-ethics undertaking comes from only two causes: complete relinquishment of the aspiration for supreme, right and full awakening, and action with greater involvement in an event that is ‘grounds for defeat.’ If the bodhisattva has neither relinquished the aspiration nor acted with greater involvement in events that are ‘grounds for defeat,’ then even when he has changed lives, the bodhisattva born anywhere—up, down, or on a level—does not abandon the bodhisattva vow-of-ethics undertaking. Even if he is robbed of his memory upon changing lives, the bodhisattva coming into contact with a spiritual adviser may make the reception again and again in order to rouse his memory, but it is not a fresh undertaking.” Mark Tatz, *Asaṅga's Chapter on Ethics with the Commentary of Tsong-kha-pa* (New York and Ontario: Edwin Mellen, 1986), 65; T 30.913b19–27.

⁴⁰ Paul Groner, *Saichō: The Establishment of the Japanese Tendai School*, Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series 7 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 259.

⁴¹ Translated by Dharmarakṣa in the early fifth century as an independent text (T 30, no. 1581), it is actually an extract from the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra* (chapter 15 in the translation of Xuanzang 玄奘; T 30, no. 1579).

⁴² Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1992), 149.

⁴³ According, for example, to Prajñākaramati's commentary to Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*; cited in *ibid.*, 151–2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

hurt a *śrāvaka*, a *pratyekabuddha* or a bodhisattva, if the bodhisattva acts out of compassion for the evildoer, who is about to produce karma that would lead him to the hell of unintermitted suffering in either a virtuous or a karmically indeterminate state of mind⁴⁵ (*shanxin* 善心 or *wujixin* 無記心; Skt. *avyākṛtacitta*), thereby taking the risk of going to hell himself. The bodhisattva kills the robber. As he acts in accordance with the bodhisattva ethics, however, the killing does not result in an offense but produces much merit.⁴⁶ In this context we should recall that the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* was among the most influential texts on the basis of which the so-called *bodhisattva-śīlas* were developed.⁴⁷

The same position is taken in the *Sūtra on Skilful Means*⁴⁸ where the bodhisattva “King Honored by All” (Zhongzunwang 眾尊王) says:

World-Honored One, suppose, out of great compassion for a person and in order to cause him to accumulate wholesome dharmas, a Bodhisattva who practices ingenuity [*fangbian* 方便] apparently or actually commits misdeeds serious enough for him to fall to the great

⁴⁵ Cf. *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論: “Furthermore, in the case of murder, the culpability does not consist in the mere act of murder but also in the evil intention (*duṣṭacitta*) which is the cause of murder. When one kills a living being with an undetermined intention (*avyākṛtacitta*), there is no sin. . . .” (Tadeusz Skorupski, *The Six Perfections: An Abridged Version of E. Lamotte’s French Translation of Nāgārjuna’s Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra Chapters XVI–XXX*, Buddhica Britannica Series Continua 9 (Tring: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2002), 60; T 25.168c2–4.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*: “If all the bodhisattvas, tranquilly dwelling in the pure precepts of the moral conduct of a bodhisattva, employ skilful means to benefit others and thereby in their outwardly conduct commit one of the ‘natural sins’ (*prakṛti-sāvadya*; Ch. *xingzui* 性罪), because he does so on the grounds of his bodhisattva precepts this does not result in an offense but produces much merit” (T 30.517b6–17). See also Tatz, *Asaṅga’s Chapter*, 214–5.

⁴⁷ See the entry “Bodhisattva Prātimokṣa” in Gunapala P. Malalasekera, ed., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* ([Colombo]: Government of Ceylon, 1961–); further Tatsugen Sato, “Dao-xuan and His Religious Precepts,” in *Buddhist Behavioral Codes and the Modern World*, ed. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 72.

⁴⁸ *Dacheng fangbian hui* 大乘方便會. This text was translated into Chinese by Nandi and is incorporated in the *Mahāratnakūṭa* Collection (T 11, no. 310). For an English translation see Chang, ed., *Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, 427–68. An independent version circulates under the title *Dafanguang shanqiao fangbian jing* 大方廣善巧方便經 (T 12, no. 346).

hells and remain there for hundreds of thousands of *kalpas*. Then, his virtuous vow not to forsake a single person would enable him to bear all the evils and sufferings of the hells.⁴⁹

According to this sūtra the Buddha himself in a previous life had killed a wicked man to save the lives of five hundred traders and prevented the evil man from going to hell.⁵⁰

Keown argues that the justification of apparently immoral behaviour by reference to the use of skilful means “does not have direct normative implications” because in “Mahāyāna literature *upāya* is the province of the Buddhas and Great Bodhisattvas. Their actions are located predominantly in the domain of myth and symbol.”⁵¹ Although this may be true in a strictly doctrinal sense, we must not overlook the fact that texts such as the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* were not read as mythical and symbolical statements but as actual guidelines for the conduct of bodhisattvas in the broadest sense, namely for all those who had received the “*bodhisattva-śīlās*,” which again were directly derived from, for example, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.

Again, in the *Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts* it is clearly stated that even a serious violation of a “natural law” such as murder may only result in a “light offense.”⁵² Moreover, Yixing 一行 (682–727) in his commentary

⁴⁹ Chang, ed., *Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, 432–3; T 11.596b18–21; cf. Keown, *Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 152.

⁵⁰ Chang, ed., *Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, 456–7; T 11.604b24–605a6; see also T 12.175c6–6b7.

⁵¹ Keown, *Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 162. To strengthen his argument Keown refers to chapter 4 of Michael Pye’s *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism* (London: Duckworth, 1978). Pye, however, in this chapter deals with the *Lotus Sūtra* which belongs to an entirely different genre than the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and similar texts. Furthermore, even the “mythical” and “symbolical” stories about the behavior of great bodhisattvas in the *Lotus Sūtra* were often taken literally as models for Mahāyāna monks and nuns. Numerous Chinese monks and nuns, for instance, committed suicide by self-immolation on the model of the bodhisattva Sarvasattvapriyadarśana. Cf. Christoph Kleine, “Sterben für den Buddha, Sterben wie der Buddha: Zu Praxis und Begründung ritueller Suizide im ostasiatischen Buddhismus,” in *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 11 (2003): 3–43.

⁵² “There are two kinds of transgressions: transgressions against a natural law [e.g., murder] and transgressions against a conventional law. These two kinds of transgressions in turn are subdivided into two categories: major and minor. Some

to the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*—highly esteemed by Japanese Shingon 真言 as a compilation of the oral teachings of his teacher Śubhakarasiṃha—wrote the following sentences:

Furthermore, you must have a mind that does not abandon *bodhi*. This is in fact the real four major precepts of the bodhisattva. Whenever a bodhisattva raises such a mind as to abandon the Buddha, this is called the breaking of the major precepts. . . . Because a bodhisattva himself takes refuge in the Buddha, he in fact [keeps] all the *pārājika* precepts and accomplishes the ten thousand practices. This seed produces the fruit. Whenever one abandons the spontaneous knowledge of the basis of the character “a” (*azi* 阿字), all the good cannot grow. Therefore, if one abandons the Buddha, one does in fact kill all the bodhisattvas and cuts off the roots of becoming a Buddha. If one commits illicit sex, theft, murder and lying, this is only an obstacle on the way. It does not cut off the roots of becoming a Buddha. Therefore, it is only a *sthūlātyaya*.⁵³

Furthermore, in accordance with the ethical concept of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, the **Upālipariṣcchā*⁵⁴ maintains that “If a Bodhisattva who has resolved to practice the Mahāyāna breaks a precept . . . but does not abandon his determination to seek all-knowing wisdom . . . , his discipline-body remains undestroyed.”⁵⁵ The text

people create great transgressions by light [actions], whereas others commit light transgressions by serious [actions]. For example, Aṅgulimāla took the worldly precepts, whereas Elāpattra-nāga took Buddhist precepts. Although Aṅgulimāla transgressed a natural law, he did not commit a serious offense. Elāpattra-nāga transgressed a conventional law but committed a serious offense. So some people by light [actions] create great offenses, whereas some by serious [actions] create light offenses. Therefore it cannot be said that when the precepts are the same the retributions from violating them are the same” [Heng-ching Shih, *The Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts*, BDK English Tripiṭaka 45-II (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1994); T 24.1063c28–1064a4].

⁵³ *Dapilushena chengfo jing shu* 大毘盧遮那成佛經疏, T 39.757b27–c6.

⁵⁴ *Youpoli hui* 優波離會, a text translated by Bodhiruci and contained in the *Mahāratnakūṭa Collection*; not to be confused with the *Youpoli wenfo jing* 優波離問佛經 (T 24, no. 1466) or the “Chapter on the Questions of Upāli” (*Youpoli wenbu* 優波離問部) in the *Sarvāstivāda-vinaya* (T 23.379a5–409c18).

⁵⁵ Chang, ed., *Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, 269; T 11.517a7–10.

further states:

Even if Bodhisattvas enjoy the five sensuous pleasures with unrestricted freedom for *kalpas* as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, as long as they do not give up their bodhicitta, they are said not to break the precepts. Why? Because Bodhisattvas are skilled in protecting their bodhicitta, and dwell securely in it; they are not afflicted by any passions, even in dreams. Further, they should gradually root out their defilements instead of exterminating them all in one lifetime.⁵⁶

The text also explicitly explains the fundamental difference between the “Hīnayāna precepts” and those of the Mahāyāna and concedes that

a pure precept observed by Śrāvakas may be a great breach of discipline for Bodhisattvas. A pure precept observed by Bodhisattvas may be a great breach of discipline for Śrāvakas.⁵⁷

Consequently, a bodhisattva may violate the *vinaya* rules:

Why do the Bodhisattvas’ precepts not need to be strictly and literally observed while those for Śrāvakas must be strictly and literally observed? When keeping the pure precepts, Bodhisattvas should comply with sentient beings, but Śrāvakas should not; therefore, the Bodhisattvas’ precepts need not be strictly and literally observed while those for Śrāvakas must be strictly and literally observed.”⁵⁸

Annen 安然 (841–889?) in his influential *Detailed Explanation of the Universal Bodhisattva Ordination* (*Futsū jubosatsukai kōshaku* 普通授菩薩戒廣釋) claims that a follower of *taimitsu* 台密 or Tendai esotericism could readily violate both the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna precepts, as long as he did not violate the esoteric or *samaya* (Jp. *sanmaya* 三摩耶) precepts, namely:

⁵⁶ Chang, ed., *Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, 269; T 11.517a24–8.

⁵⁷ Chang, ed., *Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, 268; T 11.516c20–2.

⁵⁸ Chang, ed., *Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, 268–9; T 11.517a4–6.

1. Not to abandon the true dharma
2. Never to abandon the aspiration to enlightenment
3. Never to refuse to confer Buddhist teachings on someone who sincerely wishes to study them
4. To benefit sentient beings.⁵⁹

The chiefly ritual character of the “*bodhisattva-sīlas*” becomes evident when the *vinaya* experts of the Nanshan Lüzung 南山律宗 connected the concept of the so-called “threefold pure precepts” (*sanju jingjie* 三聚淨戒) with the *trikāya* theory. According to the *Shimen guijing yi* 釋門歸敬儀, a text attributed to Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), the founder and highest authority of the Vinaya School, the first kind of precept, observing the rules of moral conduct—namely to cut off all evil—is connected with the *dharma-kāya* (*fashen* 法身); the second kind of precept, embracing all good dharmas—namely to do good—is connected with the *sambhoga-kāya* (*baoshen* 報身); the third kind of precept, embracing sentient beings—namely to save all sentient beings with a compassionate mind—is connected with the *nirmāṇa-kāya* (*huashen* 化身).⁶⁰

Based on this theory, Annen argues that while receiving the “perfect and sudden precepts” (*endonkai* 圓頓戒) at Tendai ordination, the candidate receives the qualities of the *dharma-kāya* together with “the precept that embraces all the rules of discipline” (*she liuyi jie* 攝律儀戒; Skt. *saṃvara*), those of *sambhoga-kāya* together with “the precept that embraces all good dharmas” (Ch. *she shanfa jie* 攝善法戒; Skt. *kuśaladharmasamgrāhaka-sīla*) and those of the *nirmāṇa-kāya* together with “the precept that embraces all sentient beings” (Ch. *she zhongsheng jie* 攝眾生戒; Skt. *sattvārthakriyā-sīla*). Furthermore, the *Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts* leaves no doubt that the main import of the precepts lies in their ritually purifying value rather than in their ethical

⁵⁹ Annen argued that “the *sanmaya* precepts should never be violated but that other precepts, such as the *Fan-wang* or Hīnayāna precepts, were expedients and could be readily violated if one were complying with the spirit of the *sanmaya* precepts. Tendai monks consequently had no set of rules that they were absolutely required to follow other than the idealistic and vague principles of the *sanmaya* precepts” (Groner, “*Fan-wang ching*,” 265).

⁶⁰ T 45.856b27–c3.

implications.⁶¹ Accordingly, the bestowal of the “bodhisattva precepts” was in fact basically a purifying or exorcistic ritual without any ethical dimension.

In short, the observance of the traditional monastic rules established in the *vinayas*—defamed as *hīnayānistic*, legalistic, and lacking compassion⁶²—had completely lost their character as normative guidelines for the actual conduct of Buddhist monks in China and even more so in Japan. The reception of the *prātimokṣa* rules at ordination was a purely ritual matter. Even the violation of the so-called “*bodhisattva-śīlas*”—received at the second higher ordination—was allowed if higher ethical goals—namely compassion—were at stake. And finally, if a Mahāyāna monk had unmistakably violated a major precept, he could simply be ordained again after an act of proper repentance.

Ethical Relativism in Tiantai Philosophy

The third major factor in paving the way for violent monks, I think, was a strong tendency to deny any moral judgment, especially in Tiantai or Tendai Buddhism. Following Madhyamaka philosophy, major Tiantai thinkers held that any definite statement is ultimately wrong of necessity, judgments about good and evil included. One should not choose between “good” and “evil,” but seek for “real truth, which is beyond good and evil or inclusive of both good and evil.”⁶³ Accordingly, to use the words of the **Mahāprajñāpāramitā-upadeśa-śāstra* (Ch. *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論) attributed to Nāgārjuna,⁶⁴ “The

⁶¹ “The worldly precepts are those against killing and stealing. The Buddhist precepts also include these but in addition ban taking intoxicants. The worldly precepts are essentially impure. After taking them, one is not purified and, likewise, adornment, contemplation, mindfulness, and retribution are also not purified. These are not ultimate precepts but just worldly precepts. Consequently, one should take true [Buddhist] precepts” (Shih, *Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts*, 150; T 24.1064a6–9).

⁶² See, for instance, Daoxuan’s *Sifenlü hanzhu jieben shu* 四分律含注戒本疏, MZZ 62.768b.

⁶³ Brook Ziporyn, *Omnicentrism, Intersubjectivity, and Value Paradox in Tiantai Buddhist Thought* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), 111.

⁶⁴ There are some doubts concerning the authorship of this bulky work in a hundred *juan*. There is no Sanskrit version extant. The Chinese translation is attributed

Bodhisattva duly relies on the non-existence of sin (*āpatti*) and of non-sin (*anāpatti*), and this constitutes the perfection of morality.”⁶⁵ The *de facto* founder of Tiantai Buddhism, Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597), repeatedly asserted that “Good comes from evil; without evil there can be no good,” that “the appearance and nature of evil are the appearance and nature of good,”⁶⁶ that “it is possible to attain saintliness even though one may engage in the obscurations. Nor does the way obstruct evil,”⁶⁷ and so forth. Referring to the story of Aṅgulimāla, the mass murderer who was converted by the Buddha and became an *arhat*, Zhiyi claimed that “the more he murdered, the more he had compassion [*misha mici* 彌殺彌慈].” And he concludes that

If it had been impossible to cultivate the Path in the midst of all that evil, then all of these people [such as Aṅgulimāla, Jeta, Mallikā, Vasumitra and Devadatta] would have remained ordinary ignorant people forever.⁶⁸

The Tiantai patriarch Zhanran 湛然 (711–782) commented that Aṅgulimāla “displayed murder as the Dharma-gate by which to benefit others [*yisha wei lita famen* 以殺爲利他法門].”⁶⁹ That Zhiyi’s interpretation of this story was influential in Japanese Tendai as well

to Kumārajīva; see Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Biographical Notes*, Buddhist Traditions 1 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), 240. Approximately one-third of the Chinese text was translated into French by Étienne Lamotte between 1944 and 1980. The chapters XVI to XXX on the “Six Perfections” have recently been translated into English by Skorupski (*Six Perfections*). A partial translation by Bhikṣu Dharmamitra is provided on the following website: <http://www.kalavinka.org/>

⁶⁵ Skorupski, *Six Perfections*, 46; T 25.163b28–c1.

⁶⁶ Ziporyn, *Omnicentrism*, 242; *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanyi* 妙法蓮華經玄義, T 33.743c26–744a3.

⁶⁷ Neal Donner and Daniel B. Stevenson, *The Great Calming and Contemplation: A Study and Annotated Translation of the First Chapter of Chi-i’s Mo-ho chih-kuan*, Classics in East Asian Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 309–10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 308–9; *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀, T 46.17c13–7.

⁶⁹ Ziporyn, *Omnicentrism*, 265; *Zhiguan fuxingzhuan hongjue* 止觀輔行傳弘決, T 46.205c13–7; see also Neal Donner, “Chi-i’s Meditation on Evil,” in *Buddhist and Taoist Practice in Medieval Chinese Society*, ed. David W. Chappell, Buddhist and Taoist Studies 2 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

can be deduced from a quotation in Gishin's 義真 (780–833) *Tendai Hokkeshū gishū* 天台法華宗義集⁷⁰ and a commentarial remark by Annen, who maintained that “because he killed out of devotion to his teacher,” who had ordered his disciple to make him a necklace of one thousand human thumbs, “Aṅgulimāla's actions should not be considered violations of the precepts on taking life.”⁷¹ In other words loyalty and obedience to his teacher was regarded as more important than keeping the precepts.

The impact of the śūnyatā doctrine: The voidness of the killer and his victim

Furthermore, if applied resolutely, the *śūnyatā* doctrine or doctrine of voidness inevitably led to the point where the concept of the killer, the killing, and the killed evaporated. For instance, in the *Dazhidu lun*, we find passages such as these:

If there are no beings then there is no offense of killing either. Because there is no offense of killing there is no upholding of precepts either.⁷² Also, when one deeply enters into the contemplation of these five aggregates [*skandhas*], one analyzes and realizes that they are empty, like something seen in a dream, and like images in a mirror. If one kills something seen in a dream or an image in a mirror there is no killing offense committed. One kills the empty marks [*śūnyatānimitta*] of the five aggregates. Beings are just the same as this.⁷³

⁷⁰ Gishin, *The Collected Teachings of the Tendai Lotus School*, trans. Paul L. Swanson, BDK English Tripiṭaka 97-II (Berkeley: Numata Center of Translation and Research, 1995), 115.

⁷¹ *Futsū jubosatsukai kōshaku* (T 74.777b); Groner, “*Fan-wang ching*,” 274 (slightly amended).

⁷² Cf. *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*: “Having contemplated thus, having no attachment to the body, no clinging to practice, no dwelling on doctrine, the past gone, the future not yet arrived, the present empty, there is no doer, no receiver of consequences. . . .” [Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture* (Boston and London: Shambala, 1993), 402].

⁷³ Bhikṣu Dharmamitra, trans., *Dazhidu lun*, (<http://www.kalavinka.org>); T 25.164a19–24. See also Skorupski, *Six Perfections*, 47–8.

This is perfectly in line with a verse uttered by the Buddha according to the **Upālipariṇcchā* of the *Mahāratnakūṭa* collection:

I often praise the observance of pure precepts,
But no being ever breaks any precepts.
Precept-breaking is empty by nature,
And so is precept-keeping.⁷⁴

A similar position is formulated in the *Sūtra on the Questions of Suṣṭhitamati* (**Suṣṭhitamatipariṇcchā*; Ch. *Shanzhuzitianzi hui* 善住意天子會) in the same collection. After the Buddha had been attacked by Mañjuśrī with his sword of wisdom, he explained to the irritated audience that “all dharmas are without substance or entity. . . . Therefore, there is no sinner and no sin. Where is the killer to be punished?”⁷⁵ Thereupon, five hundred bodhisattvas uttered the following verse:

Where are the Buddhas?
Where are the Dharma and the *Śaṅgha*?
Nowhere can they be found!
From the beginning,
There are no father and mother,
And Arhats are also empty and quiescent.
Since there is no killing of them,
How can there be retribution for that deed?⁷⁶

A somewhat tricky way of arguing can be found in Dharmarakṣa's (曇無讖; 385–433) translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*:

If there was a self, there would actually be no killing. If there was no self, there would again be no killing. Why is that so? If there was a self, it would be unchangeable forever, and as it would last forever, it could not be killed. . . . How could there be the sin of killing?

⁷⁴ Chang, ed., *Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, 274; T 11.518b28–9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 66–7; T 11.590c2–4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 67; T 11.590c20–3.

If there was no self, all the dharmas would be impermanent, and as they were impermanent, they would be constantly disintegrating. As they would be constantly disintegrating, the one who kills and the one who dies would [also] both be constantly disintegrating. If they are constantly disintegrating, to whom could a sin [be ascribed]?⁷⁷

As Damien Keown writes:

Those who sought to promote compassion as the supreme quality of a *bodhisattva* were able to exploit the doctrine of emptiness in an ingenious (if dubious) way to help overcome the more restrictive normative aspects of Buddhist ethical teachings. The justification for the employment of *upāya* thus proceeds along the lines that the precepts cannot be broken since there is no such thing (ultimately) as a precept.⁷⁸

It would of course not be fair to interpret all these passages from sūtras and treatises as an encouragement to murder. Most of the authors passionately warned against an antinomian abuse of their theories which were originally not meant to be taken as guidelines for the actual conduct of unenlightened commoners.⁷⁹ And yet, it can hardly be denied that all these lofty expositions about the killer and the killed being ultimately void, of cultivating the Path in the midst of evil, of the *bodhisattva* who kills out of compassion and so forth could easily serve as a justification of murder and invited antinomian interpretations.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ *Dabanniepan jing* 大般涅槃經, T 12.476b3–8.

⁷⁸ Keown, *Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 160–1.

⁷⁹ Zhanran, for instance, referring to the story of a handsome ascetic in the *Huishang pusa wen dashanquan jing* 慧上菩薩問大善權經 (T 12.157c4–21)—a similar story is told in the *Sūtra on Skilful Means* (Chang, ed., *Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*, 433; T 11.596b24–c18)—who had sex with a lustful woman only to prevent her from committing suicide out of frustration, calls upon his readers to consider carefully whether they are ready “to take the pains of purgatory that would come from breaking the precepts.” (Ziporyn, *Omniscientism*, 264; T 46.205b24–c4). This accords perfectly with the above-mentioned passage on the compassionate and virtuous killing in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.

⁸⁰ As early as in 692 the famous pilgrim monk, translator, and *vinaya* expert Yijing 義淨 (635–713) in his *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan* 南海寄歸內法傳 warned against

The core problem of the negation of a moral subject on the basis of the *śūnyatā* doctrine lies in the “attempt to argue to an ethical conclusion from metaphysical [or rather ontological; C. K.] premises,”⁸¹ as Keown rightly points out. What makes me suspicious with regard to the real intentions of Buddhist authors such as Nāgārjuna(?), Zhiyi, and Zhanran is the fact that they quite unnecessarily draw upon the (moral) example of grave offenses to illustrate the (ontological) theory of voidness. To me it is hard to believe that their arguments should have no normative implications whatsoever. Whether or not they really intended to and succeeded in denying the absolute validity of the prohibition against killing in order to enable the *saṅgha* to react more flexibly to challenges, such as attacks from government troops, robbers, rebels, and rival religious groups, remains a matter of speculation.

Killing for the Dharma, or the End Justifies the Means

Besides such debatable philosophical and ethical statements, we also find outright encouragement to murder in Mahāyāna sūtras, most prominently in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*. This important scripture—in Zhiyi’s classification scheme second only to the *Lotus Sūtra*—explicitly claims that “defenders of the True Law . . . should carry knives and swords, bows and arrows, halberds and lances and protect those pure *bhikṣus* who keep the precepts.”⁸² According to the sūtra, the Buddha even encouraged his followers to kill slanderers of the Dharma by relating the story of his former incarnation as the king of a great country who loved and admired the Mahāyāna scriptures. When he heard the brahmans slandering these teachings, he had them put to death on the

tendencies among Chinese monks to give up monastic discipline with reference to the doctrine of emptiness: “Some observing one single precept on adultery say that they are free from sin, and do not at all care for the study of the *Vinaya* rules. . . . Simply directing their attention to the Doctrine of Nothingness [*sic*] is regarded by them as the will of the Buddha. Do such men think that the precepts are not the Buddha’s will?” (Yijing, *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malaya Archipelago* (AD 671–695), trans. Junjirō Takakusu, 1896 (Reprint, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998), 51; *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan* 南海寄歸內法傳, T 54.211c14–7.

⁸¹ Keown, *Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, 161.

⁸² T 12.383b22–4.

spot. “Thereafter,” the Buddha declares, “I never fell into hell because of this.”⁸³ As to faithless enemies of Buddhism, or *icchantikās*, the sūtra states that “when one kills an *icchantika* no sinful karma [will arise].”⁸⁴ Accordingly, “one commits the sin of murder on killing an ant, but one commits no sin of murder on killing an *icchantika*.”⁸⁵

In short, killing the enemies of the Dharma is no crime at all—not even within the realm of conventional truth—and from the standpoint of the Japanese clergy, those who attacked or slandered the Buddhist institutions or deprived the *saṅgha* of its possessions were doubtlessly enemies of the Dharma. For instance, in medieval documents such as the *Daijōin jisha zōjiki* 大乘院寺社雜事記⁸⁶ those who failed to pay annual taxes or monetary dues, who acted against a temple’s landholdings and the like, were labeled *jiteki* 寺敵, “enemies of the temple,” *jinteki* 神敵, “enemies of the gods,” and *butteki* 佛敵, “enemies of the Buddha.”⁸⁷ And as we have learned from the *Mahāsaṃnipāta-sūtra* and the *Mappō tōmyō ki*, to act against even a bad monk is the same as causing Buddhas to shed blood. As is well known, Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) quoted extensively from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* in order to convince the Kamakura Bakufu to persecute the *nenbutsu* movement. This goes to show that the sūtra was indeed read as a call for physical violence against alleged enemies of Buddhism.⁸⁸ It may be objected that the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* addresses Buddhist laymen who have received the Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*) for

⁸³ T 12.434c8–20.

⁸⁴ Ming-Wood Liu, “The Problem of the *Ichchantika* in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7-1 (1984): 68; T 12.460b17–21.

⁸⁵ Liu, “The Problem of the *Ichchantika*,” 73; T 12.562b6–7.

⁸⁶ A series of diaries written by the Kōfukuji abbot Jinson 尋尊 (1430–1508) between 1430 and 1508.

⁸⁷ Fabio Rambelli, “Buddha’s Wrath: Esoteric Buddhism and the Discourse of Divine Punishment,” *Japanese Religions* 27-1 (2002): 49.

⁸⁸ Interestingly, Coates and Ishizuka in the translation of the *Hōnen Shōnin gyōjō ezū* quoted above, likewise in a footnote refer to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* to justify the defense of Hōnen’s grave by armed “would-be priests” or “lay-monks”: “According to the great *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (Southern version vol. VIII) no kings, ministers, men of high rank or other laymen should be called breakers of the Buddha’s commandments, simply because they are armed with weapons, if it be for the protection of the Law” (Coates and Ishizuka, eds., *Hōnen*, 4:687).

upāsakas, not monks. Although this is true, against the background of the ethical relativism discussed above, there is no reason why monks should not violate the precept against killing if the True Dharma was in serious danger.⁸⁹ It was a dictate of compassion for deluded sentient beings of the present and the future to preserve the good teaching for them by every means.

I will abstain here from discussing the undeniable impact of the Original Enlightenment doctrine or *hongaku hōmon* 本覺法門 on Buddhist ethics in Japan, as I think that this doctrine is basically a further development of *tathāgatagarbha* and Tiantai theories. Critical Buddhists such as Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō have dealt with this topic before and in detail.⁹⁰

Final Conclusion

Finally, we may draw three main conclusions from this cursory study:

First, that violence including the destruction of human life was resorted to regularly in an organized and institutionalized manner by Buddhist monks in medieval Japan.

Second, that from the viewpoint of Mahāyāna Buddhism—not only in Japan—physical violence including the killing of human beings was under certain circumstances judged as a legitimate or “canonical option,” and in some cases even as an obligation.

And finally, that Buddhist ethics in a narrow sense and philosophy in a broader sense did not drift apart but developed in parallel and in close interrelation, which amounts to the provoking thesis that it is somewhat inconsistent to praise Mahāyāna philosophy as subtle and profound

⁸⁹ The difference between monastics and laypeople was blurred in Mahāyāna anyway, as both groups frequently received the same “bodhisattva precepts.” Furthermore, killing was prohibited for laymen as it was for monks and nuns, and if this precept could be suspended for the laity for the sake of the Dharma, why not for monastics?

⁹⁰ For a thorough discussion of critical Buddhism in English see Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson, eds., *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism*, Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); as for *hongaku* thought see especially Jacqueline Stone, *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism 12 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).

while at the same time deploring the moral decline of the *saṅgha*.

Abbreviations

- MZZ Maeda Eun 前田慧雲, and Nakano Tatsue 中野達慧, eds., *Manji zokuzōkyō* 卅續藏經, 150 vols. (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, n.d.). Reprint of Dainihon zokuzōkyō 大日本續藏經 (Kyoto: Zōkyō shoin, 1905–1912).
- T Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭, eds., *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, 85 vols. (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932).

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