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*Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice  
in Medieval Japanese Tendai*

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# A Review of *Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice in Medieval Japanese Tendai*

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*Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice in Medieval Japanese Tendai*. Studies in East Asian Buddhism 31. By Paul Groner. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022, xvii + 376 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-9274-6 (hardback), \$68.00, 978-0-8248-9328-6 (paperback), \$20.00.

What's the difference between a monk or nun and a layperson? The answer would seem obvious: ordination, a ritual in which a postulant accepts the precepts and enters the monastic order. But things are seldom so simple, especially in Japan, where the modern Buddhist clergy commonly marry, eat meat, and drink whisky. Even in medieval times, many monks saw no need to receive and uphold the rules outlined in the *Vinaya*, the standard collections of monastic law. Perhaps no school has a longer and more complicated history with the precepts than Japan's Tendai tradition, the focus of Paul Groner's outstanding new book.

This work, a collection of closely linked essays, represents the culmination of more than four decades of Groner's research on the precepts dating back to 1978 ("Annen, Tankei, Henjō"). The book mostly reproduces previously published materials (outside of an opening introduction and closing summary), but some articles have been updated and revised to avoid repetition or cite more recent scholarship (xvi). The overall

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picture that Groner paints suggests ongoing and earnest debates within the Tendai tradition over the nature and meaning of precepts. While Tendai monks beginning with the founder Saichō (766/7–822), famously rejected the need to follow the *Vinaya*, no consensus consolidated over what this meant in theory and practice.<sup>2</sup> As Groner puts it, Tendai lacked a “unified and cohesive position” (13). Despite popular perceptions, Tendai monks did not simply neglect the precepts. Instead, Groner’s narrative shows that they were always, almost obsessively concerned with their relationship to ordination and monastic conduct, developing innovative and creative doctrines that wove together diverse intellectual strands deriving from *Lotus Sūtra* exegesis, esoteric ritual and cosmology, and original enlightenment thought.

To tell this story, Groner begins with a short introduction (chapter one) followed by an overview of the *Brahmā’s Net Sūtra*, an apocryphal Chinese text, which became the main source for the precepts for much of medieval Japanese Tendai (chapter two). In China, the *Brahmā’s Net Sūtra* typically functioned as a supplement to the traditional precepts of the *Four-Part Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka school. Things changed in Japan, where the *Vinaya* lost much of its authority. Saichō controversially proposed ordinations based on the *Brahmā’s Net Sūtra*’s precepts in place of those of the *Vinaya*. The stakes of whether to adopt this policy were high. Critics of Saichō asserted that “Tendai monks would be little more than lay practitioners” without proper ordination (23). But many Tendai monks refused to roll over; instead, they argued for the superiority of the *Brahmā’s Net Sūtra*, citing the text’s claims that conferral of its precepts allowed beings to “immediately enter the ranks of the buddhas” and achieve buddhahood in this very body (4). For many, ordination through precept conferral

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<sup>2</sup> I follow all dates given by Groner in his work, even when some individuals like Henjō discussed below are sometimes given alternate dates in reference works (in this case, commonly 816–890). For some figures, two different dates appear in the volume under review such as Jitsudō Ninkū (listed as both 1307–1388 on page 9 and 1309–1388 on page 338). In these cases, I follow standard references such as *Kokushi Daijiten*, which gives 1309–1388.

became less an initiation into a monastic community and more a ritual confirmation of innate enlightenment. Still, no single position dominated the Tendai tradition. Ordination represented anything from the initial entry into an order to the realization of buddhahood in this body. The chapters that follow examine these diverse attitudes toward the precepts in greater detail.

Chapters three and four turn to the ninth-century monk Annen (b. 841), one of the most influential thinkers in the Japanese Tendai tradition. These chapters, particularly the outstanding biography of Annen and his purportedly amorous teachers Tankei (817–880) and Henjō (817–890) in chapter four, pave the way for future research on a figure deserving far more attention than he has received to date. In terms of the precepts, Annen helped develop and normalize the key notion of “universal ordination” (Jp. *futsūju*), in which laypeople and monastics receive precepts through the same ceremony. Before Annen, Japanese monks like Enchin emphasized distinct ordinations for monks, stressing their need for proper deportment regarding dress and possessions that would set them apart. Compared to Groner’s portrayal of Enchin as a conservative compromiser, Annen comes off as a revolutionary. Even major violations, such as killing, could be expiated through diverse means, including confession, spells, and reordination, or justified as compassionate or enlightened behavior. Annen viewed all precepts, even those in the *Brahmā’s Net Sūtra*, as mere expedients. He reinterpreted precept conferral, not as an entryway to a life of rule-following, but instead as “a sacrament marking religious attainment” (53). Following the precepts to the letter was not necessary; what mattered was “a monk’s attitude toward them” (59). To paraphrase the hippies, precepts were something close to “a state of mind, man.”

Chapter five continues the arguments for diversity in Tendai, showing that even an influential figure like Annen never held a monopoly over the tradition. Pluralism remained the norm and the *Vinaya* did not fully disappear. This chapter begins with the writings of Saichō and others that seem to reject the *Vinaya* precepts altogether. However, even Saichō

adopted a somewhat ambivalent attitude, proposing provisional *Vinaya* ordinations after twelve years on Tendai's headquarters, Mount Hiei. As Groner shows, most later Tendai monks staunchly avoided *Vinaya* precept conferral, but many lineages enacted some of its procedures in their ordination rituals, often in highly creative ways. As such, anti-*Vinaya* rhetoric was just one voice in a larger, often cacophonous, conversation.

Since many understood the precepts as more about ceremony and mental states than the actual upholding of standards of conduct, it should come as no surprise that rules were sometimes broken. Traditionally, violations of the *Vinaya* would require confession, which would occur after an individual entered the order at fortnightly assemblies. Here, monks and nuns would confess their wrongdoings before their peers. Chapter six focuses on teachings from the Chinese Tiantai and Japanese Tendai traditions that instead see confession as purifying the practitioner *before* conferral of the bodhisattva precepts. Groner's discussion of self-ordination is particularly fascinating; in these cases, people could go before an image of the Buddha, perform confession, and wait for a sign. If they received one, it signified the Buddha's approval and marked their advanced state as a religious practitioner. This chapter, which looks at Chinese and Japanese materials, can profitably be read alongside recent work by Eric Greene, who has also highlighted the importance of signs in confession ritual in medieval China (Greene 110–204).

Chapter seven examines how the *Lotus Sūtra* sometimes held greater authority than the *Brahmā's Net Sūtra* as a source for Tendai views on the precepts. This might seem odd. After all, unlike the *Brahmā's Net Sūtra*, the *Lotus Sūtra* does not contain a list of rules. Despite the lack of concrete codes of conduct, many Tendai monks saw the *Lotus Sūtra* as the superior source of precepts. Members of the Eshin lineage, which traced its history to the erudite monk Genshin (942–1017), equated memorizing and reciting the *Lotus Sūtra* with upholding precepts. Thinkers in this tradition developed increasingly abstract notions of the “precepts of the Principle,” which emphasized understanding Suchness over following

rules. Some monks, however, maintained the need for the more concrete precepts of the *Brahmā's Net Sūtra*. The Kurodani lineage, named after a valley on Mount Hiei, insisted on a hierarchical relationship between the two texts. For them, the inferior *Brahmā's Net Sūtra's* rules facilitated mastery of the more abstract and superior precepts of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In contrast, the Rozanji lineage, centered at a temple in Kyoto, treated the *Brahmā's Net Sūtra* as an embodiment of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Rozanji monks stressed equality between the two texts. The Kurodani and Rozanji lineages, both of which reclaimed the *Brahmā's Net Sūtra* in different ways, are the central protagonists of the next four chapters.

Chapters eight and nine delve into the Kurodani lineage. Chapter eight attends to Kōen (1262/1263–1317), a monk who advanced a “conservative” view on the precepts (148). Like almost all monks in the Tendai tradition, Kōen believed that sentient beings were originally awakened. This doctrine, known as *hongaku shisō* (original enlightenment thought), is sometimes mistakenly characterized as denying the need for practice. For Kurodani monks, like Kōen, however, following the precepts manifested one's original awakening. It was a key aspect of enlightened behavior. Kōen's emphasis on rules led him to reinvigorate the twelve years of seclusion on Mount Hiei that Saichō had originally proposed. He also prohibited eating after noon. Altogether, Kōen refused to subordinate the specific provisions of the *Brahmā's Net Sūtra* to the abstract “precepts of the Principle” of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Despite these conservative leanings toward rule following, however, Kōen too was an innovator. He often referred to dreams as a justification for novel teachings and creative interpretations.

Perhaps most significantly, Kōen played a key role in creating a new ritual, a “consecrated ordination.” Chapter nine offers a “thick description” (9) of this ritual, based primarily on a late seventeenth-century manual. The ritual involved an intimate joining of hands between the teacher and student and the reenactment of a famous scene in the *Lotus Sūtra* in which the two buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna sit side by

side in a jeweled stupa. Despite being called a “consecrated ordination,” Groner compellingly argues that we should be cautious before classifying this ceremony as an “esoteric” rite, since it draws mostly from exoteric original enlightenment thought. In making this argument, Groner gently criticizes a shortcoming in recent scholarship, which tends to treat esoteric interpretations as nearly hegemonic. Exoteric Buddhism remained influential.

Chapter ten initiates a plunge into the Rozanji lineage through the eyes of the monk Jitsudō Ninkū (1309–1388), a discussion that continues into chapter eleven. It begins with an examination of the Tendai curriculum, particularly focusing on pedagogies used in preparation for doctrinal debate. While medieval Tendai is sometimes (wrongly) seen as moribund, these chapters describe rigor and innovation. Beyond building institutions and curricula, Ninkū was a bold scholar in his own right. He departed from Annen and the mainstream Tendai’s emphasis on “universal ordination” in favor of “distinct ordinations and distinct observance” (237). In other words, he proposed separate ordination rituals and precepts for clergy compared to lay people. At the same time, Ninkū rejected both the Kurodani consecrated ordination and the efforts of Shunjō (1166–1227) to revive the *Four-Part Vinaya* ordination that had been standard in China. Ninkū’s case shows how the Japanese Tendai tradition remained vibrant and multivocal in the medieval period, never fully giving up on ordination and precepts. It should be noted that the two lineages that advocated for stricter interpretations of the precepts were somewhat peripheral to the Tendai establishment on Mount Hiei and represented a minority perspective (290).

There are obvious reasons why the precepts might be necessary. They provide guidance on how to live a moral life. The dangers of abandoning the precepts are thus the main themes of chapters twelve and thirteen. Chapter twelve is arguably the most crucial part of the book for Buddhist ethics. It deals with justifications for killing in medieval Tendai, an admittedly “slippery slope” (259). The very origin stories of Japanese



Buddhism were blood-stained. They narrate a war between factions that resulted in the extermination of an anti-Buddhist group at the hands of the Soga clan and Prince Shōtoku, a figure venerated as one of the founders of Japanese Buddhism. To make sense of these stories and other ambiguities in canonical literature, Japanese monks wrestled with the prohibition of killing, working through the relevant philosophical problems with remarkable nuance and care. According to some exegetes, people could kill out of compassion, to further Buddhist teachings, to save others, or simply for reasons that can only be discerned by awakened beings. Part of the ethical dilemma facing medieval Japanese Buddhists stemmed from the idea that the conferral, not the upholding, of precepts signified the realization of buddhahood and the belief that the precepts arose from Buddha nature. These notions led to vigorous debates over whether the precepts could be lost or violated, whether they were innate or conferred, and whether they were physical or mental, all topics covered in chapter thirteen. Again, Groner paints an image of “vigorous disagreement” within the Tendai tradition over fundamental issues of interpretation (277). The book concludes with a fourteenth summative chapter, which brings the discussion to modern times and outlines some of the arduous austerities that Tendai monks continue to practice today even without upholding the precepts. An afterword by Groner’s student, Charles Jones, offers thoughtful reflections on Groner’s inspirational teaching practices and serves as a fitting bookend alongside Jacqueline Stone’s foreword on Groner’s contributions to the field over a career spanning more than four decades.

This book accomplishes a great deal, and it would be unfair to ask it to do much more than it already does. Still, the focus on Tendai creates some blind spots. Key figures in medieval precept revival movements such as Jōkei (1155–1213), Jippan (d. 1144), and Eison (1201–1290) are largely absent, outside of occasional mentions. (Groner has published on Eison elsewhere and is currently engaged in a large translation project on this monk’s writings with Lori Meeks [xi].) Analyses of how Tendai views of the precepts informed the so-called Kamakura founders like Hōnen (1133–

1212), Dōgen (1200–1253), and Nichiren (1222–1282) are similarly glossed over or ignored (interestingly Ninkū, one of the book’s protagonists, held a lineage in Hōnen’s Jōdo school and claimed that he followed Hōnen’s teachings on the precepts [233]; Hōnen is referenced briefly on occasion, e.g. 116, 240–241, etc.). A comparison of Saichō’s conception of the precepts with those of his contemporary Kūkai, not to mention later Shingon thinkers, is also mostly missing, despite Kūkai’s apparent influence on Annen. As a result, some readers may step away with the false impression that the conversation about precepts is only happening amongst Tendai monks.

This sectarian approach contrasts with an emerging view of Japanese Buddhism that downplays divisions between schools. Scholars have profitably advanced “interactive” models of mutual influence between Tendai and the new Kamakura Buddhist movements, an approach that could also be used to study precepts (Stone 235–236, 300–355). As Groner himself notes, “sectarian lines frequently did not adequately describe the institutional or doctrinal framework within which monks led their lives” (300). In fact, many of the figures he discusses held multiple lineages in diverse traditions including Pure Land (Jōdo) and Zen (Rinzai). At the end of the book, I was left wondering how the history of the precepts in Japan might change if we were to move away from sect as the organizing principle.<sup>3</sup>

As a collection of previously published essays, there are a few inevitable shortcomings. There is some repetition, and I sometimes questioned the ordering of the chapters (Annen’s biography, for example, appears in the second of two chapters on Annen, when it would have been helpful to learn about his life first). But ultimately, this book is a delight,

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<sup>3</sup> For those interested in engaging in this type of comparative, trans-sectarian work, it might be helpful to read Groner’s volume alongside another edited collection of essays published in the same series that includes a chapter on Eison by Groner, as well as ones on Tendai and Zen by William Bodiford, Pure Land Buddhism by James Dobbins, and debates about meat eating in early modern and modern Japan by Richard Jaffe. See Bodiford.

a masterful and erudite tome on one of the most important but shockingly understudied aspects of the Buddhist tradition. It hopefully reminds readers that there is a payoff to slowly reading texts, to mastering the Buddhist intellectual tradition, and to pursuing narrow topics deeply. Research takes years, even decades, to gain a proper command of the sources, and we are lucky to be in the hands of such a learned guide as Groner. If there is a shortcoming at all, it is not with this book but with the academy as a whole. The very structure of higher education now impedes this type of scholarship. With the devaluing of language learning; rapid time-to-completion requirements from university administrators; the decline of funding for the humanities; and the adjunctification of faculty, a phenomenon that leaves most scholars without the time or money to engage in sustained research, I only fear that this book marks a type of scholarship no longer possible in the decades to come. We are fortunate that Groner worked in different times and chose to share his wisdom with us.

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