



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

University of Hawai'i Press, 2022. 400 pages. Hardback, \$68.00.
ISBN 9780824892746. Paperback, \$20.00. ISBN 9780824893286.

PAUL GRONER's newest book from the Kuroda Studies in East Asian Buddhism series published with the University of Hawai'i Press collects, organizes, and revises twelve articles previously published by the author from 1978 onward. As a whole, these chapters provide a detailed and comprehensive illustration of the discourse on the Buddhist precepts in the Japanese Tendai school in a way no work in English has done before and few studies in Japanese even begin to broach. Building on Groner's previous monographs on Saichō (1984) and Ryōgen (2002), this book seeks to understand the discourse on the precepts in the Tendai school and its development throughout the medieval period.

The book consists of a "series of portraits of Tendai views, often based on a particular person, text, or ritual" (302). Although Groner does not offer an overarching narrative for this complex discourse, he nevertheless highlights several major themes in medieval Tendai doctrine and practice. The chapters of the book progress from a general discussion of the place of precepts in the history of Tendai scholasticism to studies of particular individuals, texts, lineages, and doctrinal matters. Within this overall progression, each chapter combines social, intellectual, textual, and institutional history in a way that illuminates the effectiveness and necessity of this sort of multifaceted approach to the study of religion in premodern East Asia.

A foreword by Jacqueline Stone emphasizes what is at stake in this book. By contextualizing the apparent contradiction between the loose observation of monastic precepts and a deep concern with moral and behavioral norms in Japanese Buddhism, the volume challenges assumptions that Japanese Buddhists were dismissive of the fundamental tenets of monastic life. The introduction and conclusion, in particular, address this issue by summarizing the themes discussed in more detail throughout the book: laxity vs. strictness, ordination, the tension between ideals and lived practice, and the complex discourse linking the precepts to other aspects of Buddhist doctrine and practice.

Individual chapters go into detail on a number of important individuals, themes, and concepts related to the Buddhist precepts. The bodhisattva precepts and the *Brahma's Net Sūtra* is a central topic, as is the *Lotus Sūtra* and the works of well-known Tendai scholiasts such as Annen. The book also includes

chapters about lesser-known figures such as Kōen and Ninkū of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and several influential, though obscure, types of ordination within the Tendai tradition. The difference between “universal ordination” (*futsūju* 普通授, or simply *tsūju* 通授)—a ceremony in which precepts are bestowed upon both lay believers and monastics—and “distinct ordination” (*betsuju* 別授)—when ceremonies for laity and monastics are conducted separately—forms one locus of this discussion. The “consecrated ordination” (*kaikanjō* 戒灌頂), a type of precepts ceremony that married esoteric rituals with precept conferral ceremonies, forms another. In addition to these topics, studies on the role of confession in Japanese Tendai, debates as a component of training on Mt. Hiei, and the “perfect-sudden precepts” (*endonkai* 円頓戒)—an idea that links the precepts to the *Lotus Sūtra*—form a network of concepts linking the precepts and monastic law to the philosophy of the Tendai school.

What becomes apparent through these chapters is that the precepts were a perennial concern in the history of Tendai in Japan. At the same time, the sources and individuals mentioned represent a high degree of diversity within what we might otherwise assume to be a unified vision. Tendai, as Groner writes, “was not a monolithic entity” (301), and the debate surrounding the precepts was “ongoing” and “multifaceted” (7).

What was the debate about the precepts, and why were they so important in the Tendai tradition? On the one hand, the scholars in the Tendai school consistently argued for a more rigorous application and stricter adherence to the precepts by connecting ordination and precept practice to various doctrines of the *Lotus Sūtra* or to esoteric Buddhist thought. On the other hand, their constant refrain lamenting the laxity of their fellow monastics and urging stricter regulation of monastic life may indicate that maintaining order was not easy and that “laxity” was more common than we often imagine. By Groner’s account, this “laxity” was partly a product of rules that were “vague” or “ambiguous,” particularly the precepts of the *Brahma’s Net Sūtra*. Despite its centrality, this text was “ill-suited as a basis of monastic Buddhism” (303), and, coupled with the fact that many of the monks on Mt. Hiei were sons of wealthy aristocrats who joined the order more out of obligation than religious conviction, the slide into negligence was inevitable. By working to understand Buddhist conceptions of morality, Groner argues that the Tendai scholiasts aimed to reinforce “strictness” and adherence to the *Vinaya*, particularly in regard to the ordination ceremony.

By collecting decades of research in a single volume, Groner’s book represents the most comprehensive study of the role of the precepts in Japanese Buddhism to date, one not likely to be superseded any time soon. As such, the book is not only the culmination of a single research project but of a career studying and researching Japanese Buddhism. The book concludes with a short essay by a former student, Charles Jones, describing Groner’s role as a mentor and remind-

ing us that, although we may study obscure topics such as medieval Japanese monastic law, what we do as academics matters to our students and the future generations of Buddhist studies scholars (330). While opportunities to directly study with Paul Groner may be fewer now that he has retired, with this new volume the chance to learn from Groner through his writings will be with us for years to come.

REFERENCES

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