Introduction

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Though the Buddha’s discourses (sūtra) and advanced doctrines (abhidharma) may be forgotten, so long as the vinaya still exists the Buddha’s teachings yet endure (pamuṭṭhamhi ca suttante abhidamme ca tāvade vinaye avinatṭhamhi puna tiṭṭhati sāsanam). (Vin 1.98–99)

This pithy statement appended to the Theravāda recension of the vinaya aptly captures a fundamental attitude widely adopted in all branches of the Buddhist clergy, one with far reaching consequences. On the surface it asserts that of the three main divisions (tripiṭaka) of Buddhist scriptures (i.e., the discourses teaching mental cultivation, or samādhi; the advanced doctrinal treatises teaching the cultivation of wisdom, or prajñā; and the vinaya teaching the cultivation of morality, or šīla), survival of the vinaya constitutes the survival of Buddhism. On a deeper level the statement affirms that the teachings of the Buddha can be conveyed only through the living presence of a properly constituted religious order (saṅgha). For the vinaya alone equates the Buddhist religion with the inauguration and life of that order. In what may be termed a founding myth, the vinaya tells the story of how the Awakened One (buddha) Śākyamuni attained awakening, selected disciples to hear the truth (dharma), brought these chosen ones to the same insight, then admitted their “going forth” (Skt. pravrajyā; Pali pabbajjā) into a new religious order. He then conferred on them the authority to admit, train, and confirm additional members and finally charged them with the mission of propagating this new order throughout
the world. In identifying properly ordained members of the order as the sole heirs to the religious authority of the Buddha, the vinaya also dictates strict guidelines governing how the order maintains its legitimacy and perpetuates its existence.

Because of the vinaya’s status as the founding charter for the entire Buddhist movement, it has played a far broader and deeper role in doctrinal and social aspects of Buddhist religious life than suggested by the usual English-language translations “discipline,” “book of discipline,” or “behavioral code.” Vinaya texts are concerned with establishing not only rules for the disciplined behavior of members of the order, but also social practices that guide a well-organized religious order in the management of its affairs and property, in its interactions with the laity and secular powers, and—most of all—in defining its religious identity by linking the order historically to the Buddha, distinguishing the order from the laity, encouraging the laity to give to the order, and determining the proper procedures for going forth into the order; only by following such prescribed practices do members of the order become worthy recipients of the laity’s charity. Through this fundamental agenda ceremonial issues involving lineage, seniority, initiation, purification, repentance, visualization, vows, and ordination acquire profound social, psychological, and philosophical significance in Buddhism. Nowhere is this more evident than in the historical development of Buddhism in China and Japan, which has been characterized by unresolved tensions over attempts to legitimate Buddhist orders according to some kind of vinaya while simultaneously allowing new organizational forms and institutional structures better adapted to the demands of local culture and history to exist.

To understand why this is so—and to place the following essays within a larger context—a brief review of some of the concepts associated with vinaya and their development in East Asia is in order. Depending on context, the word “vinaya” carries a wide range of connotations. First, it refers specifically to the textual scriptures known by the title “vinaya.” In the context of these scriptures, it can narrowly denote specific disciplined actions for controlling one’s behavior as well as the broader religious aspirations and motivations that underlie that discipline. The specific actions are codified as precepts (i.e., moral standards) and as religious aspirations expressed as vows, in particular the vows to adhere to the precepts
that are affirmed as part of the ceremonies for going forth into the order and for complete confirmation (upasampadā) as a member of the order. If the ceremonies are performed properly—by a qualified preceptor and applicant, before the appropriate witness—then the applicant not only becomes a member of the order, but also acquires an inner moral fortitude associated with the religious goals of Buddhism. In China this inner aspect became known as the “essence of the precepts” (jietai 戒體; J. kaitai). If any of the required ceremonial procedures specified by the vinaya are performed incorrectly, then the essence of the precepts will be lacking and the applicant’s membership rendered invalid. In other words, members of the Buddhist order are distinguished from ordinary laypeople not by their outward appearance (e.g., shaved head, robes), their specific behavior, or the quality of their daily morality, but by whether or not the essence of the precepts was confirmed by the proper rituals (Hirakawa 1970, 521–522). This essence can be likened to an inner purity that, theoretically at least, finds outward expression in proper behavior. Buddhists, therefore, commonly describe vinaya not as rules imposed from the outside, but as the manifestation of an inner spiritual quest.

Vinaya in China

How a Buddhist order emerged in China is not clear. Buddhists of some sort probably were active within Chinese borders as early as the first century of the common era, and Buddhist scriptures began to be translated from Indic languages into literary Chinese by the second century. When Dharmakāla (Tankejialuo 曼柯迦羅, or Tan-mojialuo 曼摩迦羅), a Buddhist from India, arrived in the Chinese Wei 魏 capital of Luoyang 洛陽 some time during the years 249–253, however, he found so-called Buddhist monks who had ordained themselves simply by shaving their heads and donning Indian-style robes. Moreover, their fasts, confessions, and religious ceremonies had the appearance of traditional Chinese ancestral rites (FT, fasc. 35, T 49:332a; Song gaoseng zhuan 宋高僧傳, fasc. 1, T 50.324c–325a). At the time knowledge of the vinaya and the correct rituals for constituting a Buddhist order did not exist in China (Moroto 1990, 287–293). Chinese translated the Buddhist notion of going forth as “leaving one’s family” (chujia 出家) and understood it as requiring the conferral (shou 授) and acceptance (shou 受) of
precepts (*jie 戒*)—a process that usually is translated into English as “ordination” (i.e., the conferral of priestly status). Yet without the actual vinaya texts to guide them, Buddhists in China lacked more than just knowledge of specific precepts or ordination ceremonies: They also lacked adequate arguments to justify leaving their families (an idea antithetical to basic Chinese values and not legally permitted until the early fourth century [Ogawa 1968, 287]) and to secure the degree of autonomy necessary for the Buddhist order to possess its own property and manage its own affairs (a matter of endless contestation between Buddhists and the Chinese state).

Even the translation of Indic vinaya texts into Chinese (which began in earnest at the beginning of the fifth century) could not fully answer the religious, social, and legal needs of the Chinese Buddhist order. Several new issues presented themselves. First, in short succession the Chinese obtained translations of complete vinaya texts from several different Buddhist communities in India: the *Ten Recitation Vinaya* (of the Sarvāstivāda, trans. ca. 404–409), the *Four Part Vinaya* (of the Dharmaguptaka, trans. ca. 410–412), the *Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya* (trans. ca. 416–418), and the *Five Part Vinaya* (of the Mahiśāsaka, trans. ca. 422–423; Hirakawa 1970, 115–145). How were discrepancies between these different vinayas to be reconciled? Second, the practices described in these translations assumed a warm climate and social customs very different from those of China. Who had the authority to adapt them to Chinese conditions? Third, by this time Buddhists in China were concerned with distinguishing between the self-proclaimed “superior” Buddhism known as Mahāyāna and other forms that Mahāyāna scriptures denigrated as inferior (*hīnayāna*). Were the spiritual goals, forms of discipline, and religious ceremonies described in these translated vinaya compatible with Mahāyāna or should they be rejected as *hīnayāna*? Fourth, the translated scriptures contained passages that clearly forbade the possibility of ordaining oneself and stated that anyone attempting to join the order merely by shaving his head and donning new robes without proper ritual confirmation was a false monk who should be expelled and forever denied admission to the order (*Five Part Vinaya*, fasc. 17, T 22.118a; *Four Part Vinaya*, fasc. 34, T 22.811c; *Ten Recitation Vinaya*, fasc. 21, T 23.153a; also see Vin 1.62). If these passages were interpreted literally, then the legitimacy of the ordination lineages claimed by the Chinese order of Buddhist monks could be cast into doubt.
A fifth element, the appearance of Mahāyāna precept scriptures, further confused the situation in China. Unlike the vinaya, which constitutes its own division of the Buddhist canon, these scriptures were seen as belonging to the discourse division of the canon, which represents the words of Śākyamuni Buddha (buddhavacana). Three in particular played major roles in East Asian Buddhism. The Bodhisattva Stage was originally part of an Indian doctrinal treatise, but it was translated into Chinese (ca. 420) as an independent discourse of the Buddha with all the scriptural authority such a text would imply. The Brahmā Net Sūtra (composed ca. 432–460) and the Bodhisattva Adornments Sūtra (Pusa yingluo jing 菩薩璎珞經, T no. 656; composed ca. 480) are Chinese Buddhist apocrypha (i.e., indigenous scriptures; Buswell 1990) that gained acceptance in East Asia as authentic accounts of the Buddha’s teaching. All three scriptures describe precepts to be observed by bodhisattvas, the followers of the Mahāyāna path. Moreover, they present an approach to the precepts that differs from that found in the vinaya. The scriptures of the vinaya emphasize in concrete detail how members of the order should discipline their behavior; the Mahāyāna discourses describe precepts that are, in some cases, little more than vague exhortations to perform good. In contrast to the vinaya’s concern with distinguishing members of the order from the laity and its different sets of rules for men and women, for novices and full-fledged members, the Mahāyāna scriptures present universal precepts to be observed by all sentient beings, whether they are male or female, monastics or laypeople, humans or nonhumans (as long as they can understand human speech). More important, these scriptures describe self-ordination procedures involving rituals of purification and repentance to obtain a vision of the Buddha (or Buddhas). Such rituals provided Chinese with a scriptural justification for dismissing questions regarding the historical legitimacy of the Chinese Buddhist order. Nobuyoshi Yamabe’s essay, “Visionary Repentance and Visionary Ordination in the Brahmā Net Sūtra,” traces the genealogy of these mystical practices in which people sought direct contact with the Buddha to expiate sins and obtain the precepts. His research demonstrates that dreams, visions, revelations, and magical omens played an important part in Mahāyāna precept ceremonies in India, Central Asia, and China. (Hence the Brahmā Net Sūtra’s acceptance in China as an authentic sūtra.) From the fifth century down to the present, visionary ordinations remain a
constant source of inspiration in East Asian Buddhism, as we will see in several other essays in this volume (e.g., McRae, Groner). Yamabe concludes his essay with an account of a vision quest in contemporary Japan, where this practice still forms part of the ordination procedures followed by some Buddhist priests.

Repentance, the ritual expiation of sins, is a prerequisite for a successful vision quest. The relationship between repentance and the vision quest reflects the common Buddhist motif that our karmic obstructions (i.e., previous sins) are like dust in our eyes, preventing us from seeing the truth. In his essay, “The Precious Scroll of the Liang Emperor: Buddhist and Daoist Repentance to Save the Dead,” David W. Chappell describes how from a very early period Buddhist repentance rituals grew in popularity in China among both monastics and laypeople (especially government officials) and were incorporated into Chinese Daoism (Taoism) as well. In vinaya texts repentance is described as a private affair, performed by individuals who have violated one of the lesser precepts. In China, however, repentance rituals became major public ceremonies performed to ease the suffering of deceased people and baleful spirits. This is a remarkable example of the kinds of transformations that can occur when the ritual technologies of one cultural landscape reappear in a place with a different cosmological framework. Chappell argues that the development of the new repentance rituals constitutes an important part of the Chinese adaptation of Buddhism and that these rituals also integrated Buddhism into Chinese society by bringing its monastic elites into the service of mainstream society.

Chinese concerns regarding the interpretation of the vinaya eventually were addressed by a scholastic tradition that came to be called the Vinaya (Lü 梵: J. Ritsu) school. Buddhists in India and Southeast Asia never developed separate, competing traditions of vinaya studies, but then they never had to confront the difficult interpretative issues mentioned above. In China the Vinaya school ultimately determined that the disciplined behavior and rituals dictated in the translated vinaya represented neither superior (Mahāyāna) nor inferior (hīnayāna) Buddhism: Their orientation depends on the spiritual motivations of those practicing the rituals. Moreover, proper ordination rituals based on vinaya are indispensable for creating a properly constituted order capable of fulfilling its role along with buddha and dharma as one of the three jewels in which all Buddhists take refuge. Although the Vinaya school drew
on the entire corpus of translated Buddhist scriptures, it relied primarily on the *Four Part Vinaya* of the Dharmaguptaka for liturgical matters, such as determining the wording and number of the precepts; the ordination procedures used for tonsure lineages and seniority; and the decorum, monastic rituals, and procedures for managing the affairs of the order. In addition to the precepts of the *Four Part Vinaya*, both monastics and laypeople were urged to undergo ordination with the bodhisattva precepts of the *Brahmā Net Sūtra* to encourage Mahāyāna spiritual goals. The Japanese monk Eisai 東西 (1141–1215; *Kōzen gokokuron* 興禪護論, fasc. 2, pp. 39–40) characterized this approach as one in which “outward vinaya [discipline] and decorum prevent transgressions, while inward [bodhisattva] compassion benefits others” (*ge ritsugi bōhi, nai jihi rīta* 外律儀防非、內慈悲利他).

Although the Vinaya school is known for its scholastic commentaries, it was much more than an academic enterprise. As John R. McRae demonstrates in his essay, “Daoxuan’s Vision of Jetavana: The Ordination Platform Movement in Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” the pioneer of the Chinese Vinaya school, Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), relied as much on his dreams and visions of the Buddha as on his scholastic learning. Or, rather, it might be more correct to say that dreams and visions constituted an indispensable part of his scholastic learning. For Daoxuan the Buddha was neither a figure confined to the ancient past nor a philosophical abstraction. The Buddha was a living presence, one who could confirm and expand on the details found in written sources. Daoxuan sought to ensure the legitimacy of the Chinese Buddhist order by creating in China exact replicas of Śākyamuni Buddha’s original monastery, the Jeta-vana Anāthapiṇḍikārāma (known in Chinese as Qihuansi 祇洹寺, or Qiyuansi 祇園寺), within which special platforms were erected for conducting ordination rituals. If Chinese Buddhist ordinations occurred on platforms similar to those used by the Buddha, then clearly they must be as orthodox and reliable as any that had been conducted by the Buddha himself. Daoxuan’s ordination platform movement transformed not only Chinese Buddhism but the spiritual landscape of China by presenting a new model for the use of traditional forms to reinvigorate religious life. This provides a key example of another theme that runs through this volume, namely, how vinaya uses the authority of (apparent) conformity to established tradition to promote innovation and adaptation.

Ordination platforms provided the Chinese government with a
new mechanism for controlling the Buddhist clergy because they allowed the authorities to distinguish between orthodox monks who had ascended the platforms for ordination and false monks (weilan seng 僧滥僧) who had not. Moreover, by controlling access to ordination platforms, the government could restrict the Buddhist cleric population. As a result of these policies the Buddhist clergy in China consisted of a set number of authorized clerics who had ascended the ordination platforms to take full monastic vows as members of the order and a larger population of privately ordained priests who had either completed the going-forth rituals to become novices (śrāmānera; Ch. shami 沙彌) or ignored vinaya procedures altogether and ordained themselves simply by shaving their heads and donning Buddhist robes. Full-fledged members of the order were allowed to reside in state-sponsored monasteries, while other clerics found refuge in a variety of other sanctuaries or were itinerant (Gernet 1995, 4–11). Ordination platforms also provided the government with a source of income: Since the eighth century, ordination certificates granting wealthy, privately ordained clerics the status of fully ordained monks or nuns were sold. Aside from its religious significance, the government-issued precept certificate was desirable because it exempted its owner from onerous corvée obligations (Gernet 1995, 48–62).

Ordination platforms demonstrate how Buddhism (like all successful religions) became an economic institution involved in the daily lives of people across a broad spectrum of society—from elite government officials to commoners. As such, it was subject to the same kinds of abuses and scandals one expects to find in any large institution. When centralized authority became weak, for example, local officials were tempted to engage in the private sale of ordination certificates for their own profit. A famous case involved a local governor named Wang Zhixing 王智興 (fl. ca. 825). Wang violated an imperial order in the waning days of the Tang dynasty (618–907) by constructing an ordination platform at a Buddhist monastery in the Linhuai 臨淮 area, where he sold ordinations at greatly reduced prices. T. H. Barrett’s essay, “Buddhist Precepts in a Lawless World: Some Comments on the Linhuai Ordination Scandal,” examines this event from a Rashomon-like variety of perspectives: cultural, historical, political, economic, doctrinal, Chan 禪 (Zen), literary, and Daoist. That one event could resonate so widely demonstrates that the study of vinaya in China demands a comprehen-
sive examination of the wider cultural landscape. It also serves to remind us that the study of vinaya should concern scholars of not only religion, but all fields dealing with traditional Asia.

After the fall of the Tang dynasty and the warfare and chaos that followed, the Song dynasty (960–1279) witnessed a rebirth of Chinese culture and a reassertion of Chinese cultural identity. New technologies, new arts, and new philosophies ruled the day. Chan hagiographers of the Song (as well as modern Japanese scholars) depicted the Chan lineage as a sectarian and uniquely Chinese school of Buddhism that asserted its religious independence by replacing the vinaya with its own distinctive “pure rules” (qinggui 清規) for monastic life. Earlier scholars have cited the Song court’s designation of major state monasteries as “Chan cloisters” (chan-yuan 禪苑) as evidence that a Chan school had gained sectarian and institutional independence from rival “vinaya monasteries.” Essays by Yifa and by Morten Schlütter challenge this received interpretation by carefully examining its textual basis and the historical relationships between the vinaya and Song-period developments.

Yifa’s “From the Chinese Vinaya Tradition to Chan Regulations: Continuity and Adaptation” demonstrates that the pure rules did not deviate from earlier Chinese monastic norms; they merely summarized established practices based on vinaya texts as interpreted by the Vinaya school. Although they did not break away from the vinaya, these pure rules responded to new developments in the Chinese cultural milieu at the time of their writing. As such, they provide a valuable resource for examining how vinaya practices evolved in China. Schlütter’s “Vinaya Monasteries, Public Abbacies, and State Control of Buddhism under the Song (960–1279)” examines the new Song system of classifying Buddhist monasteries. Schlütter’s analysis shows that although the terms “vinaya monasteries” and “Chan monasteries” in Song-period documents did carry certain sectarian implications, they are not the ones emphasized by previous scholars. Rather than representing an institutional identity separate from other schools of Chinese Buddhism, the Chan monastic title designated the elite institutions of Chinese Buddhism wherein resided monks and nuns who had been ordained according to the vinaya and who claimed to be the legitimate heirs to the teachings of the Buddha.

Bodhisattva precepts and rituals for bodhisattva ordinations have remained important features of Chinese Buddhism to the pres-
ent day. Daniel A. Getz’s essay, “Popular Religion and Pure Land in Song-Dynasty Tiantai Bodhisattva Precept Ordination Ceremonies,” shows how successive generations of Buddhist monks in the Tiantai 天台 (J. Tendai) lineage worked to develop bodhisattva ordination rituals for laypeople (for whom ordination does not imply the conferral of priestly status but induction into a lay brotherhood). This process required the development of cultic practices of popular appeal that addressed the religious aspirations of ordinary people who could not devote all their energies to the Buddhist path. For these (and most) people the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha, which anyone of pure faith could achieve in the afterlife, offered a soteriological alternative that seemed more accessible than the difficult goal of religious awakening or enlightenment in this life. Thus bodhisattva ordinations came to be seen as a way of promoting Pure Land faith. These rites also addressed traditional Chinese religious concerns, such as prayers to local gods and spiritual benefits for one’s ancestors. Vinaya procedures developed initially for those leaving their families behind helped to affirm family bonds as they addressed the religious hopes of those who remained at home.

**Vinaya in Japan**

In many ways the status of the vinaya in Japan reflects the same kinds of unresolved tensions found in China—but in reverse. The Chinese Buddhist order, emerging without access to the vinaya, had to develop its own interpretation of the vinaya to gain legitimacy and acceptance by the Chinese government. In Japan, however, Buddhist institutions were incorporated into the very first law codes and the Vinaya school was one of the six fields of learning (*rokushū* 六宗) officially promoted by the early Japanese court. In one of the great heroic journeys of all time, the Chinese monk Jianzhen 鉴真 (688–763; J. Ganjin) and his disciples endured twelve years of hardship and five shipwrecks to travel to Japan where, to the delight and acclaim of the Japanese rulers, they established an ordination platform in the capital of Nara 奈良. Within the confines of that ancient town the Vinaya school remains a living tradition to this day, but mainstream Japanese Buddhism went on to develop in a different direction. In a startling move, the Japanese monk Saichō 最澄 (767–822; Dengyō 伝教) fought for and succeeded in establish-
ing a separate Tendai school of Buddhism that rejected the vinaya and conducted ordinations based solely on Mahāyāna discourse scriptures (Groner 2000). As the Tendai school flourished, Saichō’s successors found themselves having to fashion an organized Buddhist order without reliance on the vinaya and even in direct opposition to it (Groner 1987, 1990a).

It is difficult to exaggerate how much Saichō altered the course of Buddhism in Japan. By rejecting ordinations based on the vinaya in favor of rituals derived from Mahāyāna precept discourses alone, Saichō implicitly dismissed any distinction between the laity and the clergy insofar as the bodhisattva precepts themselves admitted no such distinction. Many of the bodhisattva precepts seem applicable to both secular and religious lifestyles. Henceforth the conferral of religious status and ecclesiastical authority became as much a social process as a sacerdotal one. Just as radical in its effects was the fact that Saichō’s new ordinations split the Japanese Buddhist order into rival factions. The clergy of Nara viewed Saichō’s ordinations as illegitimate, while members of Saichō’s breakaway sect rejected the ordinations practiced in Nara. Monks from one camp were not recognized or allowed to enter the temples of the other camp. Temple sectarianism became the norm for subsequent Japanese Buddhism. Saichō established his monastic center on Mount Hiei 比叡山, initiating a move away from urban centers like Nara to a rural-based Buddhism in the mountains, close to the local gods. Finally Saichō’s new sect and ordinations incorporated practices based on tantric or esoteric (mikkyō 密教) initiation ceremonies, thereby helping to generate the mixed exoteric-esoteric (kenmitsu 顯密) Buddhism that prevailed for much of Japanese history.

As mentioned above, the order of monks and nuns constitutes one of the three jewels to which all Buddhists turn for refuge. In rejecting the vinaya, Saichō did not intend to disband the Japanese Buddhist order—however much his critics accused him of doing so. Rather, Saichō sought to establish a new Mahāyāna order of monks and nuns that obtained legitimacy directly from Śākyamuni Buddha without reference to the vinaya, which he rejected as hinayāna. This issue was never fully resolved. Throughout Japanese history Buddhists continued to debate the relationship between the vinaya and their monastic orders, and new vinaya lineages continued to be introduced from China. In spite of these efforts, Saichō’s exclusive reliance on Mahāyāna precepts always remained the norm for the
majority of Buddhists in Japan. For this reason, many Japanese texts posit a somewhat artificial distinction between vinaya (ritis), interpreted as external rules (and thus regarded as hinayana), and precepts (kai 戒), which imply inner spiritual qualities.

The ritual format of Saichō’s new exclusive Mahāyāna ordinations was based on the Brahmā Net Sūtra and its set of fifty-eight bodhisattva precepts (ten major, forty-eight minor) and visionary ordination procedures in which one receives the precepts directly from Śākyamuni Buddha. (See Yamabe’s essay for a contemporary account of an ordination procedure.) The religious doctrines that sought to legitimate the use of this procedure for going forth (i.e., monastic ordinances), however, went far beyond anything in the Brahmā Net Sūtra. It is misleading, therefore, to describe the Japanese precept traditions that began with Saichō merely in terms of the Brahmā Net Sūtra without giving full consideration to the other doctrines. Although the details of these doctrines continually evolved at the hands of Saichō’s successors without ever achieving a consensus, their mature features can be summarized (Fukuda 1954, 568–649). First, the Mahāyāna precepts advocated by Saichō are Perfect Sudden Precepts (endon kai 圓頓戒); they are attained immediately, in a single instant. The Vinaya school, in contrast, practices a series of step-by-step ordinations (kenju 兼受) in which one first goes forth to receive the precepts of a novice (10 precepts), followed by a separate confirmation ceremony to receive the precepts of a full-fledged monk (250) or nun (348), and finally yet another ceremony to receive the Mahāyāna bodhisattva precepts (58). At each step, the ceremonies differ, the sets of precepts differ; the wording of the individual precepts differ, and the essence of the precepts differs. Sudden precepts are received in a single act (tanju 單受) because each precept embodies all others. They are “perfect” (literally, “round”) because they are without deficiency. As the superior (mahāyāna) practice they embrace the entire Buddhist path, taking into consideration all three categories (morality, mental cultivation, and wisdom) of Buddhist learning (sangaku ittai 三學一体). In other words, Perfect Sudden Precepts are not preparatory to anything else because they embody the goal of the Buddhist path. Second, even though the format of these precepts is based on the Brahmā Net Sūtra, their spiritual power derives primarily from the Lotus Sūtra (shōe hokke, bōe bonmō 正依法華、傍依梵網). The central scripture for the Tendai tradition, the Lotus Sūtra reveals
the eternal Śākyamuni who proclaims the one vehicle (*ichijō* 一乘; *ekayāna*), which, in transcending all distinctions between bodhisattvas and followers of inferior (*hīnayāna*) forms of Buddhism, saves all beings. Thus the Lotus One-Vehicle Precepts (*hokke ichijō kai* 法華一乗戒) transcend all distinctions between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna to save everyone. Third, their essence is the true reality of buddhahood (*shinmyō busshō* 真如佛性) itself. It is eternal and can never be lost, lifetime after lifetime, even if one fails to keep the precepts, which also are known as the Unconditioned Vajra Jewel Precepts (*musa kongō hō kai* 無作金刚寶戒). The precepts of the vinaya, in contrast, last only as long as one's present physical body and only so long as one does not violate them.

My contribution to this volume, “Bodhidharma’s Precepts in Japan,” examines the nexus between Saichō’s Perfect Sudden Precepts and the Zen tradition. Saichō’s disciple Kōjō 光定 (779–858) identified Saichō’s precepts as the One Mind Precepts (*isshin kai* 一心戒) and described them in tantric terms. More important, he stated that they had been brought from India to China by Bodhidharma (the legendary Zen ancestor), who transmitted them to the founders of the Tendai lineage. Although Kōjō’s explanations exerted little influence among subsequent Tendai scholars, they were readily accepted within medieval Japanese Zen circles, where the One Mind Precepts became synonymous with the mind-to-mind (*isshin denshin* 以心傳心) transmission of Zen. Thus many Japanese Zen lineages relied on Chinese monastic pure rules for their standards of proper behavior and performed precept ordinations not for their moral content but as a tantric initiation rite that conferred a direct link to the awakened mind of the Buddha. This adherence to a Japanese approach to the precepts contrasts sharply with the role of Zen lineages in popularizing many aspects of Song culture in medieval Japan.

The medieval period (ca. eleventh to sixteenth centuries) witnessed many major transformations in Japanese society. New agricultural technologies, population growth, and foreign trade provided additional sources of wealth, for which both established and new social groups competed. The royal court found its authority challenged by warrior governments and outlaws. The established Buddhist orders of Nara, Mount Hiei, and Kyoto 京都 expanded even as many fledgling Buddhist organizations, such as the Zen lineages mentioned above, appeared on the scene. Lawlessness and
frequent military campaigns, with their wanton killing and destruction (including the burning of the major Buddhist monasteries of Nara in 1180), sparked renewed interest in morality and the proper role of vinaya in Japanese Buddhism. Some monks promoted strict adherence to the norms of the traditional Vinaya school by either introducing new vinaya lineages from China or revitalizing the standards for ordination in Nara. Others went to the opposite extreme and openly abandoned all pretense of observing any Buddhist precepts.

An example of the latter type is Shinran 観世 (1173–1263), the well-known Pure Land teacher who came to be regarded as the founder of the Jōdo Shinshū (Pure Land True Doctrine) denomination. Shinran taught that the Buddha Amitābha alone possessed the spiritual power to save humans from the heavy karmic burden of their sins. Only those who abandoned their own power (self power; jiriki 自力) for Amitābha’s (other power; tariki 他力) could be saved. From this perspective, observing the Buddhist precepts is an exercise in self-power and thus should be avoided. But Shinran’s rejection of the precepts did not mean that he discarded basic morality. He taught that people who rely on Amitābha’s power are endowed with a spiritual joy and faith, which causes them to lament any intentional or willful wrongdoing (Dobbins 1989, 49–56). Although some scholars have interpreted Shinran’s disavowal of all precepts as a logical and inevitable result of Saichō’s rejection of the vinaya, his interpretations were by no means universally accepted by Japanese Buddhists.

One monk who called for strict adherence to the norms of the traditional Vinaya school is Eison 継承 (1201–1290; Eizon), the subject of Paul Groner’s essay, “Tradition and Innovation: Eison’s Self-Ordinations and the Establishment of New Orders of Buddhist Practitioners.” Eison was the son of a Nara monk, which indicates a lapse in the standards of the Nara Buddhist order in spite of its supposed adherence to the interpretations of the Vinaya school and its ordinations based on the Four Part Vinaya. (Refraiming from sexual activity is its first precept.) If the monks of Nara had lost the essence of the precepts—and it is clear that they had—then the ordinations they performed would be invalid. Eison sought to create a new ordination lineage based on the Four Part Vinaya. But to accomplish this he had to rely on the visionary ordination procedures described in Mahāyāna precept discourses. In other words, to revive
the vinaya he employed ritual techniques that the vinaya itself would never have admitted. However, the Vinaya school's interpretation of the Four Part Vinaya as being compatible with Mahāyāna teachings provided a way for Eison to justify his methods. Eison's new order of monks (and nuns) demonstrates how the vinaya in Japan, as elsewhere, became a living and mutable document in the hands of its interpreters.

James C. Dobbins examines a third approach to the vinaya, one that stands between the two extremes represented by Shinran and Eison, in his essay, “Precepts in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism: The Jōdoshū.” The leaders of the Jōdoshū inherited the same Pure Land traditions as Shinran and advocated the same doctrine of sole reliance on the power of Amitābha Buddha. They therefore felt no inclination to follow the Four Part Vinaya. But unlike Shinran they did not reject all precepts outright. Together with Japanese Zen teachers they regarded themselves as the rightful heirs to Sai-chō’s doctrines concerning the Mahāyāna precepts, which they struggled to reinterpret in a way that was compatible with their Pure Land faith. However, the Jōdoshū clerics differed from some of their Zen counterparts in that they never treated precept ceremonies solely as initiatory rites. The precepts are understood and practiced as moral teachings—but as Dobbins points out, their ethical implication is seen more as an unattainable ideal than a practical requirement. Thus Dobbins argues that the Jōdoshū’s approach to the precepts was (and is) an ongoing exercise in ambivalence.

The passage of time amplified this ambivalence and spread it to clerics of all denominations as illustrated by the changing attitudes toward vegetarian diets, which Richard M. Jaffe examines in his essay, “The Debate over Meat Eating in Japanese Buddhism.” Establishment of the Tokugawa shogunal government in 1603 ushered in a new age of stability and peace during which Buddhist temples were established in every village and neighborhood to help suppress dissent. Buddhist temples promoted education, causing new editions of Buddhist books to be imported from China and printed in Japan. Social changes prompted Buddhists of all backgrounds to re-examine their practices and justify them in light of their own sectarian traditions. In this new atmosphere of sectarian debate, initially clerics in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition of Shinran found themselves on the defensive as rival Buddhists denounced their eating of meat—a practice condoned in many passages in vinaya literature
but forbidden in certain Mahāyāna sūtras. In response to these denunciations, Shinshū leaders developed their own Buddhist justifications for meat consumption. Jaffe explains that while opponents of the practice continued to couch their arguments in terms of Buddhist scripture and doctrine, over time the pro-meat advocates began expressing their Buddhism in the rhetoric of social progress. This trend accelerated after the Meiji regime overthrew the Tokugawa in 1868 and adopted anti-Buddhist, pro-Western policies. The introduction of social Darwinism along with Western notions of medicine, hygiene, and nutrition transformed meat eating into a symbol of national strength. Buddhist clerics of all denominations came to see a meat diet as one of the requisites of a modern industrialized civilization.

Tensions between local social imperatives and the ideals of vinaya pulse through the history of Buddhism. Vinaya provides the founding charter for the order, the rationale for the order, and the procedures for perpetuating the order. As such it has been essential for the survival of Buddhism from ancient times down to the present day. The means by which Buddhism survives, however, frequently tells us as much about its fallible followers as its ideals.

Notes

1. In practice, this process overlaps with aspects of ceremonies that in other religions are not necessarily associated with ordination, such as baptism (as a ritual purification and a rite for joining a religious community), christening (as a ritual for assigning a religious name), consecration (as a ritual anointment that confirms a religious status), or initiation (as a ritual admission to the secret traditions or knowledge of a religious order).

2. In addition to these four complete vinayas, Chinese translated many other minor vinaya texts. Almost three hundred years later, during the years 700–713, the Chinese monk Yijing 襄澄 (635–713) introduced much of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vi-naya, which he translated as a series of eighteen separate texts (T nos. 1442–1459; Hirakawa 1970, 147–145) and passages of which (according to Gregory Schopen) he incorporated into his travel diary (Nanhai jìgǔ nié fà zhuān 南海寄附內法傳, T no. 2125) as his own firsthand observations.

3. The Chinese order of Buddhist nuns eliminated any doubts as to its legitimacy in 437 when a group of twelve nuns from Sri Lanka who had traveled to China performed ordination rituals for more than three hundred Chinese women (Biqùnì zhūan 比丘尼傳, fasc. 2, T 50.939c; Tsai 1994, 54).