Buddhist Ethics in Japan and Tibet: A Comparative Study of the Adoption of Bodhisattva and Pratimoksa Precepts

Karma Lekshe Tsomo PhD
University of San Diego, tsomo@sandiego.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty

Part of the Buddhist Studies Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Digital USD Citation

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact digital@sandiego.edu.
Buddhist Behavioral Codes and the Modern World
Recent Titles in Contributions to the Study of Religion

Cross, Crescent, and Sword: The Justification and Limitation of War in Western and Islamic Tradition
James Turner Johnson and John Kelsay, editors

The Star of Return: Judaism after the Holocaust
Dow Marmur

Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions
John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson, editors

Sacred Places and Profane Spaces: Essays in the Geographies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
Jamie Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley, editors

Choosing the Dream: The Future of Religion in American Public Life
Frederick Mark Gedicks and Roger Hendrix

Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions
Hiroshi Obayashi, editor

Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society: An International Symposium
Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko, editors

Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia
Douglas Allen, editor

Popular Religion in America: The Evangelical Voice
Erling Jorstad

Politics and Religious Authority: American Catholics Since the Second Vatican Council
Richard J. Gelm

Drums of Redemption: An Introduction to African Christianity
Harvey J. Sindima

Being Religious, American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States
Charles H. Lippy

Buddhist Behavioral Codes and the Modern World

An International Symposium

Edited by Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko

Contributions to the Study of Religion, Number 38

Greenwood Press
Westport, Connecticut • London
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Buddhist behavioral codes and the modern world : an international symposium / edited by Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko. p. cm.—(Contributions to the study of religion, ISSN 0196-7053 ; no. 38)

"Proceedings from the Chung-Hwa International Conference on Buddhism, which was convened in Taipei, Taiwan July 18-21, 1992"— Pref.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-313-28890-9 (alk. paper)

BQ5400.B84 1994
294.3'5—dc20 94-8355

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 1994 by Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, by any process or technique, without the express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 94-8355
ISBN: 0-313-28890-9
ISSN: 0196-7053

First published in 1994

Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881
An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.
Printed in the United States of America


10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright Acknowledgment

The editors and publisher gratefully acknowledge permission for use of the following material:


Every reasonable effort has been made to trace the owners of copyright materials in this book, but in some instances this has proven impossible. The editors and publisher will be glad to receive information leading to more complete acknowledgments in subsequent printings of the book and in the meantime extend their apologies for any omissions.

This volume is dedicated to Dharma Teacher Sheng-yen and to the members of the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, whose warmth, dedication, and unswerving efforts on behalf of the Dharma enrich the life experience of all they encounter.
Buddhist Ethics in Japan and Tibet: 
A Comparative Study of the Adoption of 
Bodhisattva and Prātimokṣa Precepts 

*Karma Lekshe Tsomo*

The religious traditions of Japan and Tibet are complex and unique, yet many interesting parallels may be drawn concerning the introduction of Buddhism and its subsequent development in the two countries. Although two very different cultural environments greeted the arrival of the imported faith, we find striking similarities in their early Buddhist history. The period between the sixth and eighth centuries was one of intense interest in the Buddhist teachings in both countries, and in both, the Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna transmissions all eventually gained acceptance. In both cases, acceptance came first from the upper classes, who were attracted to the philosophical tenets and the ritual, and later from the masses, who responded more to the recitational and devotional aspects. In each case, liberal royal patronage contributed to the success of the new foreign religion and was responsible for the rapid construction of temples and monasteries. Moreover, in both countries efforts were made to establish an orthodox Bhikṣu Sāṅgha, without equivalent efforts being made to establish a Bhikṣuni Sāṅgha. Both countries received a wealth of cultural benefits, in such fields as art, language, and medicine, along with the religion they imported. Comparisons may even be made between Kobo Daishi (Kūkai), the widely revered Tantric master of Japan, and Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), the widely revered tantric master of Tibet, each of whom became legendary.

With so many parallel developments in the two countries, it is interesting to compare the nature, interrelationship, and subsequent impact of the lineages of moral discipline that were introduced, namely, the lineages of prātimokṣa precepts and bodhisattva precepts. The critical question in both cases was whether or not the bodhisattva practitioner need follow the prātimokṣa precepts. The opinion of Saichō (767-822), who argued in the negative, held sway in Japan; the opinion of Atiśa (982-1054), who argued in the affirmative, predominated in Tibet. This chapter explores the two religious scenarios and the ramifications of these choices for subsequent Buddhist history.
First, going back to Indian precedents, we find that while many early Buddhist practitioners followed only the prātimokṣa precepts, by the fourth century, large numbers also followed the bodhisattva precepts of the Greater Vehicle, or Mahāyāna, in addition to the prātimokṣa precepts, whether the five precepts of a lay Buddhist or the numerous precepts of a renunciant. Originally, at least eighteen different schools of vinaya, or monastic discipline, developed, associated with the eighteen Vaibhāṣika schools that flourished in India. Three of these are still practiced today in various countries of the world. The Dharmaguptaka school was transmitted to Japan, via China, while the Mūlasarvāstivāda school flourished in Tibet. The third school of vinaya extant today, the Theravāda (or Sālvāvāda), prevails in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

In early Indian Buddhism, monasticism was seen as the ideal condition for religious practice. Moral purity was extolled as the supreme, perfect foundation for spiritual growth, and the celibate life-style, free of family obligations, was considered most conducive to spiritual development. The monastic regulations, it was felt, not only assured harmony in the community of practitioners, but contributed directly to lessening mental defilements and taming the passions. In addition, with precepts as a basis, the karmic benefits of wholesome actions multiply exponentially; the more precepts one holds, the greater the benefits. Nowhere did the Buddha state that lay people were incapable of spiritual attainments, but he made it clear that, for very practical reasons, the homeless life was distinctly preferable as a working basis for spiritual growth. In both early Tibet and early Japan, monasticism was the ideal and it was this form that Buddhism took when it was first established.

With the rise of Mahāyāna thought in India, monastics acquired an additional set of precepts, or moral guidelines, which translated the bodhisattva ideal to particular circumstances. There are several sources and various formulations of bodhisattva precepts in the Buddhist texts. Several of these are still practiced as living traditions today. The ten major and forty-eight minor precepts practiced by Chinese Buddhists derive directly from the Brahmajāla Sūtra, an apocryphal text written in China. The eighteen major and forty-six minor precepts that gained currency in Tibet derive from the Bodhisattvabhūmi-sūtra attributed to the Indian master Asanga (third to fourth centuries C.E.). A third tradition of bodhisattva precepts is that of Candragomin, a seventh-century lay Indian teacher. Four major and forty-six minor precepts are contained in his Twenty Verses. A fourth tradition is Saichō’s Perfect Ten Good Precepts, though it is uncertain whether he refers to (1) the ten major precepts of the Brahmajāla Sūtra, (2) the ten precepts of a novice, or (3) the ten virtuous actions (kūśala-karma: three of body, four of speech, and three of mind). Still another tradition, which has become current in American Zen circles, is that of the Four Vows: to save all beings, eliminate all defilements, master all teachings, and realize enlightenment. These four vows can be traced to the Chinese T’ien-t’ai master Chih-i (538-597) and are mentioned by Kūkai in his Sango shiki (Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings). In his rescript of 813, Kūkai emphasized observance of the ten virtuous actions, declaring that these were foundational for all higher precepts and inviolable for all disciples of the Buddha. He taught that the Four Vows were Esoteric Buddhist precepts and constituted the essence of the Mahāyāna. They are entirely different in substance from the fourteen root and eight secondary pledges (samaya) described in the Tantric texts transmitted to Tibet.

SAICHIŌ’S REVOLUTIONARY IDEA OF THE PRECEPTS

Saichō’s early monastic career followed the normal pattern of Japan at that time. At fourteen he became a novice and in 754, at the age of nineteen, he received the bhikṣu ordination at Todaiji in Nara. After climbing Mr. Hiei, he made five vows that expressed the seriousness of his vocation. In 804, he was sent by Emperor Kanmu to China, where he received transmissions of Niu-t’ou Ch’an from Hsiu-ju, Esoteric initiation from Wei-hsiang, and teachings on T’ien-t’ai as well as bodhisattva precepts from Tao-sui. The bodhisattva precepts that he received were the precepts of the Brahmapāramitā-sūtra, taken by laypeople in China as well as by monks and nuns. For monks in China, the Brahmapāramitā precepts were taken in addition to the 250 precepts contained in the Bhikṣu-pratimokṣa-sūtra of the Dharmagupta lineage; for nuns, these were in addition to the 348 precepts contained in the Dharmagupta Bhikṣuṇi-pratimokṣa-sūtra. Among the 120 texts that Saichō collected and took back to Japan, five dealt with precepts, including one that was a subcommentary on the Dharmagupta Vinaya. This fact indicates that he was still concerned with the pratimokṣa precepts at that time.

Upon his return from China, however, Saichō became involved with establishing the Tendai school, which included distinguishing it from the other schools, effecting its independence from the domination of the Nara schools, asserting its superiority to these schools, and trying to assure its future prosperity. The policy he eventually formulated, of supplanting the pratimokṣa ordination with a bodhisattva ordination for monks, was the result of a progressive evolution. This policy seems to have been a response to the challenges faced by the emerging Tendai tradition, particularly power politics in relation to the Nara schools, the restrictions on numbers of ordinands imposed by the Office of Monastic Affairs (Sogo), and the fact that monks traveling to the ordinations in Nara frequently failed to return to Mt. Hiei. First, he managed to get two Tendai candidates admitted to the government-sponsored ordinations each year, which amounted to official recognition of the Tendai school. Then gradually, asserting the supremacy of the Lotus Sūtra with its teaching on One Vehicle, he argued for the establishment of a "purely
Mahāyāna" temple. Later, rejecting the prātimokṣa precepts altogether, he declared that henceforth his students would follow only the Mahāyāna and "abandon inferior Hinayāna practices forever." He proposed that Tendai ordinands be recognized as Mahāyāna monks, removing them from the monastic register and, thus, from government control.

Saichō's primary rationale for rejecting the prātimokṣa precepts was to remove the Tendai school from the jurisdiction of the Office of Monastic Affairs that was dominated by the Nara monks. This is not to suggest that his motivation was purely political, however, for Saichō was also firmly convinced of the superiority of the Mahāyāna precepts and explicitly denounced the prātimokṣa precepts as self-centered and inferior. Nor, certainly, was it his intention to weaken standards of ethical behavior, for he endorsed strict adherence to monastic discipline and hoped to maintain it by requiring twelve years of intense training in seclusion on Mt. Hiei. Nevertheless, his innovative proposal subsequently effected a major transformation within Japanese Buddhism by declaring that those receiving bodhisattva precepts were equivalent in status to bhikṣus, even while none of the formal control mechanisms designed to regulate the order were in place.

Even in the case of an orthodox Sangha community, with the support of the traditional system for imposing sanctions, the disciplining of offenders who refuse to recant presents a serious problem. What procedures does the Sangha administration have for dealing with recalcitrant monks and how are these procedures to be implemented? Except where the Sangha is subservient to governmental authority and thus subject to civil punishment or banishment (as in modern-day Thailand and Bhutan, for example), it is virtually impossible to enforce the defrocking of a monk. Moreover, in the Mahāyāna context, forcibly expelling penitent monks is problematic, since it counters the precept to accept offenders' apologies. Celibacy and the other stipulations of monastic life are voluntary commitments and, short of incarceration, difficult to impose.

The situation becomes even more complex when we move beyond the confines of an orthodox monastic community. Without the commitments and guidelines set forth in the Bhikṣu-prātimokṣa to enforce monastic discipline, there is considerable ambiguity regarding conduct allowable for monks. By all reports the behavior of monks in Nara had already become quite lax, even with a system of tightly controlled bhikṣu ordinations. One factor encouraging laxity was economic: as the ritual aspects of Buddhism came to be emphasized, lavish imperial patronage of monks had a degenerative effect on moral standards. Saichō was strongly in favor of strict monastic conduct and certainly did not intend to contribute to a decline in standards, yet without the traditional monastic regulations, it was unclear how discipline on Mt. Hiei could be maintained, especially after Saichō's passing. Saichō's innovation, a radical departure from orthodoxy, consequently had a profound impact upon Japanese religious institutions and thought.

PRĀTIMOKṢA AS A BASIS FOR THE BODHISATTVA VOW

It could be argued that the first five of the Brahmajāla precepts (to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual activity, false speech, and intoxicants) are superfluous, in that they are a reiteration of the basic five precepts of a Buddhist layperson (upāsaka/upāsikā). Four of the five (to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual activity, and false speech) correspond to the most essential restrictions for monks and nuns, transgressing any one of which constitutes a root downfall (pārājika). One important difference, however, is that the prātimokṣa specifically imposes strict celibacy on monks and nuns, and requires a bimonthly confession of faults to help reinforce this and other constraints. The Brahmajāla Sūtra, in contrast, constrains one merely to observe chaste conduct, a concept that is open to interpretation. At first, the distinction between prātimokṣa and bodhisattva precepts was not clearly understood in Japan and even the requisite procedure for ordaining a monk was initially vague, such that monks were self-ordained. After this custom was reexamined, great pains were taken to invite high-ranking bhikṣus from China and to implement a proper lineage of bhikṣu ordination. In the setting of seventh-century Japanese, where instances of sexual activity among monks have been recorded, specific regulations and procedures for enforcement would presumably have worked to benefit the monastic establishment. Although we have no evidence that the other two required Sangha procedures, the bimonthly recitation of the prātimokṣa and the annual rainy season retreat, were held regularly, the Nara schools did at least manage to supervise ordinations and maintain monastic standards to some extent. By dispensing with the prātimokṣa as Saichō did, the days of monastic Buddhism, in the true sense of the term, were numbered.

In Tibet, the question of whether prātimokṣa precepts were prerequisite for receiving bodhisattva precepts became an important point of debate. No less a scholar than Tson-kha-pa (1357-1419) argued in the negative, since such a prerequisite is not specifically set forth in the texts; if prātimokṣa precepts were a precondition for receiving bodhisattva precepts, devas would be unable to take them, since the prātimokṣa applies only to human beings. Proponents argued in the affirmative, following the logic that a person in a state of moral impoverishment would be unable to work constructively for the welfare of beings. Furthermore, since a bodhisattva naturally pursues all wholesome deeds, avoids all unwholesome deeds, and works relentlessly for the welfare of sentient beings, it is understood that he or she keeps at least the five basic moral maxims.

While some Mahāyānists argued that the bodhisattva precepts were superior and superseded the "lesser vehicle" precepts, others contended that a bodhisattva's moral conduct necessarily encompasses all wholesome actions and precludes all negative ones. The latter argued that sense pleasures (the major...
challenge to a celibate) hold no more attraction for such a noble being than grass or feces, euphemized as "impurity." Not only are such things as hollow and meaningless as rubbish for those advancing swiftly by means of the "Greater Vehicle," they also function as impediments to the urgent task of liberating beings. For the bodhisattva, whose grandiose ambition is to save beings infinite in number, ethical purity should be instinctive, being both of intrinsic value and of practical benefit. The ultimate moral imperative embraces all three spheres of ethical conduct: (1) to avoid unwholesome actions, (2) to engage in wholesome actions, and (3) to benefit sentient beings.

Asanga was of this persuasion. He saw the observance of \textit{prātimokṣa} precepts as a natural corollary to the altruistic mind of enlightenment (\textit{bodhi-citta}). He explained the bodhisattva ethic as comprising three aspects: the ethic of the vow, the ethic of accumulating merit, and the ethic of benefitting beings. Some scholars understand "the ethic of the vow" to mean \textit{prātimokṣa} precepts and therefore consider \textit{prātimokṣa} precepts a precondition for the bodhisattva vow. In any case, It is clear that Asanga regarded \textit{prātimokṣa} ethics as axiomatic for a bodhisattva.

For all Buddhists, morality is the first of "the three Buddhist trainings" and is foundational for the other two—concentration and wisdom. The Buddhist attitude is generally pragmatic rather than moralistic: unwholesome deeds become obstacles to concentration, concentration is preliminary to developing wisdom, and wisdom is essential for gaining liberation. Furthermore, for the Mahāyāna practitioner with the wisdom directly understanding emptiness (a distinguishing characteristic of the first bodhisattva stage), ethical conduct becomes spontaneous. At this stage, one automatically leaves off harming beings and violations of moral behavior become unthinkable. The question becomes how to judge when this stage has been reached. Some observers have surmised that the Japanese as a race, influenced by Shinrō, regard themselves as naturally pure and beyond the need for ethical restrictions. The Shinrō scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) regards "the natural mind," untouched by good and evil, as embodying the spirit of Japan. This concept, like the concept of original enlightenment, raises the eternal dilemma of whether affirming all that exists, non-judgmentally accepting the natural state of one's mind just as we accept Nature's seasonal changes, means accommodating evil and the negative emotions. Among Buddhists, however, even among those Mahāyānists who stress the doctrine of Buddha nature and the inherent purity of the mind, spontaneous moral purity comes only at a fairly high level of realization, such as the Path of Insight and beyond.

Objections to the \textit{prātimokṣa} precepts and justifications for abandoning them, however, continued to be advanced one after the other. One popular argument for dispensing with precepts was that in degenerate times no one can possibly keep them. Asanga disputed this line of reasoning. Although he denied that the \textit{prātimokṣa} precepts are specifically required for receiving the bodhisattva precepts, he argues that especially in degenerate times it is important to receive both \textit{prātimokṣa} and bodhisattva precepts. Having generated the altruistic aspiration to enlightenment (\textit{bodhi-citta}), one thereby becomes a child of the Buddha, and must therefore be scrupulous not to sully the reputation of the Buddha's kin. All of a person's behavior henceforth is adjudged by the high standards of a bodhisattva. Neglecting the bodhisattva resolve to work ceaselessly to remove the sufferings of beings, even for the time it takes to lie, kill, steal, have sex, or get drunk, for example, constitutes a transgression.

THE SITUATION IN TIBET: ATĪSA AND TSONG-KHA-PA

The Bengali reformer Atiśa, also known as Dipamkara Shrijñana, journeyed to Tibet in 1042. He set the trend for generations of Buddhist practitioners in Tibet, advising them that to observe bodhisattva and Tantric precepts in conjunction with \textit{prātimokṣa} precepts is essential. Receiving extensive teachings on \textit{bodhi-citta} (Tibetan, \textit{gser-ling-pa}) from Acārya Dharmakīrti in Sumatra, he revived these quintessential Mahāyāna teachings in India and subsequently conveyed them to Tibet. To support his contention that Mahāyāna ethics are vast and inclusive, he quotes his teacher Bodhibhadra as saying, "The training of a bodhisattva is measureless and endless." Moreover, he argues, a bodhisattva necessarily considers the long-term benefits of an action, since sentient beings infinite in number are the beneficiaries. Comparatively speaking, the transgressions to be avoided are more extensive, the number of beings affected far larger, and the potential benefits far greater than in the case of \textit{prātimokṣa} precepts.

The Tibetan master Tsong-kha-pa, famed as a yogi, writer, and Mādhyamika scholar, was simultaneously a Tantric practitioner and a strict practitioner of the \textit{prātimokṣa} precepts. In his lifetime, he gave extensive teachings on \textit{Vinaya} and presiding over many bhikṣu ordinations. In illustrating the long-term practical worth of the celibate life, he was very graphic:

For example, to block potential misbehavior may result in immediate unpleasantness. This is like strong, very distasteful medicine that appears harmful in the present but is resorted to ultimately because of its benefit for an illness. Sexual misconduct, on the other hand, appears pleasurable in the short term, yet from it spreads great suffering in the future: One must block it as though it were a tasty rice pudding laced with poison.

In his "Three Principles of the Path," an encapsulation of the genre of teachings known in Tibet as \textit{Lam Rim} ("Stages on the Path"), Tsong-kha-pa explains renunciation, \textit{bodhi-citta} (the altruistic attitude of wishing to achieve
highest enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings), and insight into emptiness (prājñā) to be the essential elements of Mahāyāna practice, whether of the Sūtra Vehicle or the Secret Mantra Vehicle. The first of these, renunciation, emphasizes prātimokṣa morality as the foundation upon which the other two, bodhi-citta and insight, develop. Thus, generally in Tibet and particularly in the Gelugpa school that Tsong-kha-pa founded, prātimokṣa discipline is considered fundamental for the achievement of Buddhahood not only for monastics, but for lay followers as well. Still, while Tsong-kha-pa is well known as a reformer and reviver of prātimokṣa discipline in Tibet, he concurred with Atiśa in recommending an integral system of ethics that encompassed the prātimokṣa, the bodhisattva, as well as the Secret Mantra precepts.

Tsong-kha-pa explains in his Basic Path to Awakening, that addiction to cyclic existence is most effectively cured through the practice of moral discipline as embodied in the prātimokṣa. Morality is likened to water that washes away all stains and to moonlight that cools all delusions. As Robert Thurman observes, "Perhaps Tsong Khapa's greatest contribution to Tibetan Buddhism was his emphasis on using the three higher trainings—the essence of the Hinayāna—as bases and supplements to Tantric practice. Of course, these three were known in Tibet before Tzong Khapa's time, but only in words." Thurman quotes the great translator Taktzang Lotsawa: "Some, clinging to the Hinayāna doctrines, abandoned the tantras. Others, loving the Tantric system, disparaged the Hinayāna. But you, Tzong Khapa, are the sage who saw how to put every teaching given by Buddha perfectly into practice." As understood by generations of Tibetan scholars, then, the prātimokṣa precepts were not ends in themselves, but merely the best working basis upon which to achieve higher realizations. Although fastidious adherence to some minor rules, such as not eating after noon or handling money, has largely been abandoned over the ensuing centuries, a clear valuing of the prātimokṣa precepts, particularly the ideal of celibacy, has remained part of the Tibetan tradition to the present.

The relationship between the prātimokṣa and bodhisattva precepts, each with its own intrinsic value, has remained quite clear, primarily modeled upon the thought of Atiśa. Tsong-kha-pa, in particular, reinforced this line of thinking. Although he denies that prātimokṣa ordination is a prerequisite for taking the bodhisattva ordination, he nevertheless recommends it: "In creating the bodhisattva vow you must relinquish the lesser-vehicle attitude, but you need not relinquish the prātimokṣa vow." To receive either lay or monastic precepts beforehand, he says, is the natural order of things, like taking novice precepts before bhikṣu precepts. He reasons that the prātimokṣa is both Hinayāna and Mahāyāna, since it serves as the foundation for both vehicles, the essence of both being to avoid reprehensible actions. Furthermore, to refrain from harming is implied by the vow to benefit. Ethical conduct is enjoined not only upon monastics, but also upon Tantric practitioners. Tsong-kha-pa quotes Jñānāsimitra's Consistency of Ethics, Vows and Pledges:

Having rejected the monastic vow,
Neither the tantric vow nor that
Of the perfections will be held.

While bodhisattva monastics are exalted, the laity is nowhere excluded. Mahāyāna texts cite numerous examples of highly realized lay practitioners and there are also examples of lay bodhisattvas who have gone on to become monks. It is not the monastic life-style in itself that is exalted, but moral purity that is praised for its soteriological value.

COMMONALITY IN THE SYSTEMS OF PRECEPTS

Although there is considerable overlap between the bodhisattva precepts of the Chinese (Brahmajāla-sūtra) tradition and the Tibetan (Bodhisattva-bhūmi-sūtra) tradition, one primary distinction between the two is that the Brahmagāla tradition includes many offenses that are identical with or similar to prātimokṣa offenses. Killing, stealing, unchastity, taking intoxicants, acting as a go-between, viewing armies, watching entertainments, baselessly accusing another of a major transgression, and giving deviant teachings belong to this category. There are no offenses that are contradictory.

The bodhisattva precepts followed in the Tibetan tradition do not evidence such an overlap with the prātimokṣa. There are instances, in fact, where offenses are contradictory, that is, where the observance of a bodhisattva precept constitutes a direct violation of a prātimokṣa precept. For example, accepting silver and gold is a transgression for a renunciant, yet not receiving such gifts is considered a fault for a bodhisattva, who is enjoined to accept "more than a million-million in gold and silver." The rationale behind accepting such gifts is that they afford the donor an opportunity to accumulate merit. Again, although monks and nuns are prohibited in the prātimokṣa from keeping more than three robes and one bowl, bodhisattva practitioners should accept as much wealth as they are offered (unless, of course, one suspects that the gift is stolen property or that its giving will impoverish the giver), since such wealth can then be given in charity. It is incumbent upon bodhisattvas to provide material assistance to others; not to do so would violate the major precept on "Not giving material aid or the Dharma."

Another case of contradictory precepts concerns killing. The classic worst case scenario in the texts in that of a bodhisattva (Buddha Śākyamuni in a past life) who killed a ship's captain who was plotting to murder five hundred merchants and steal their riches. The bodhisattva took upon himself the
negative consequences of killing to spare the ship captain from enacting a negative deed, as well as to save the merchants from suffering death. The bodhisattva was reborn immediately in hell (for just a moment) as a result of the action of killing, then took birth in a heavenly realm as a result of his action of great compassion. An historical example is the monk Palgyi Dorje who transgressed his bhikṣu precepts, with bodhi-citta motivation, by assassinating the anti-Buddhist king Langdarma in 842 C.E. This instance illustrates the maxim that others' welfare supersedes one's own: the practitioner is willing to commit even a grave transgression of the prātimokṣa precepts for the welfare of sentient beings. The forty-third Brahmajāla precept specifically prohibits a deliberate violation of the prohibitions, but presumably this refers to a violation of the bodhi-citta precepts, not the prātimokṣa. In the Tibetan system not to commit a violation of prātimokṣa precepts when circumstances deem it necessary is a violation of the tenth and eleventh minor precepts.

Asanga makes it clear that the bodhisattva's concern with providing requisites for others supersedes strict adherence to the monastic precepts. He does not, however, countenance those "superseders" who use the principle to rationalize violations of the precepts and lax behavior. Bodhisattvas are enjoined to receive offerings for the benefit of others' practice of generosity, not for living in luxury. They may knowingly transgress the prātimokṣa precepts, but they do so for the greater good, conscious of the karmic consequences. Although they may engage in actions that are reprehensible by nature, they do so with such skill-in-means that no fault ensues, but instead an effusion of great merit.

DEALING WITH TRANSGRESSIONS

The systems of prātimokṣa and bodhisattva precepts not only are distinct in terms of content, they also prescribe different methods of handling transgressions. In his chapter on Ethics, Asanga states that a bodhisattva who commits a sin, does not relinquish the bodhisattva's moral precepts and can receive them again in that lifetime, whereas a bhikṣu who acknowledges having committed a major transgression or defeat (pārājika) cannot receive the bhikṣu precepts again in that lifetime. The former transgression is remediable; the latter is likened to a broken glass that cannot be repaired. Tsong-kha-pa states that a prātimokṣa defeat is regarded as final (for this lifetime), because it strikes at the heart of the intention of the vows, which is to exhaust the defilements. A major transgression of the bodhisattva precepts, by contrast, does not necessarily sever one's intention to liberate beings.

Nevertheless, Tsong-kha-pa explains that a bodhisattva who has committed a defeat will be unable to generate the "purified intention," meaning that she or he will be unable to attain the actual bodhisattva stages and will be "a counterfeit, not a genuine bodhisattva." Though all is not lost, a person who commits a defeat thereby suffers a serious spiritual setback, forfeiting the opportunity for immense accumulation of merit and exponential progress on the path to enlightenment. Sāntideva concurs in his Bodhicaryāvatāra:

So between the power of the transgression,
And the power of the awakening thought,
He oscillates in samsāra, long delayed
From attainment of the [first bodhisattva] stage.20

The Ākāśagarbha-sūtra goes even further, stating that a defeat cuts one's roots of merit and propels one to a lower rebirth as well as a lengthy stay in Samsāra.

As is the case with the prātimokṣa precepts, there are certain conditions that qualify an action as a defeat in terms of bodhisattva ethics. To constitute a defeat, a transgression must be committed with complete involvement, except in the case of generating wrong views and abandoning bodhi-citta, which are defeats regardless of circumstances.21 "Complete involvement" is defined as committing the action without any sense of remorse, viewing it as something positive, rejoicing in it, and wishing to commit it again.22

Tsong-kha-pa delineates two sets of bodhisattva transgressions. He designates four actions as "defeats" along the lines of the four defeats (pārājikas, or major downfalls) of the Bhikṣu-prātimokṣa, while classifying other transgressions of the bodhisattva precepts as "misdeeds." The four types of defeats thus designated are (1) praising self and belittling others (out of desire for reputation and gain), (2) not sharing material wealth or the Dharma (out of miserliness), (3) not accepting an offender's apology (out of anger), and (4) repudiating the Mahāyāna teachings.23 In explaining the Ākāśagarbha-sūtra's list of five seminal transgressions for rulers and eight for beginners, Tsong-kha-pa maintains that the transgressions are fundamentally the same, just differently numbered.24

Three of the precepts for beginners from the Ākāśagarbha (namely, rejecting the prātimokṣa, claiming that desire and attachment are not eliminated by the śrāvaka vehicle, and falsely claiming to have attained realization) are included within the first defeat, that is, praising self and belittling others. The reasoning is that to praise the Mahāyāna, one's own vehicle, and deprecate the "Lesser Vehicle" is tantamount to praising oneself and belittling others. The other precepts of the Bodhisattva-bhūmi formulation can similarly be correlated and subsumed within particular transgressions of the Ākāśagarbha-sūtra. But what is interesting about this instance, particularly in light of subsequent events in Japan, is that it explicitly prohibits depreciation of the śrāvaka vehicle or repudiation of the prātimokṣa precepts. The relevant precepts read as follows: (13) Rejecting the prātimokṣa; and (14) Disparaging śrāvakas.
Tsong-kha-pa points out that it is a grave transgression to mislead a person, causing him or her to reject or turn away from the *pratimokṣa* precepts by teaching that all defilements of body, speech, and mind will be purified simply through generating *bodhi-citta* and reciting teachings of the Greater Vehicle.25 Similarly, it is a grave transgression to repudiate the śrāvakas or *pratyekabuddha* vehicles and claim that no matter how hard one trains in them, defilements will not be eliminated—meaning that one will not become liberated from cyclic existence.

In effect, this means that Tsong-kha-pa would consider Saichō guilty of a major bodhisattva transgression—namely, a defeat—because of his abandoning of the *pratimokṣa* precepts. Moreover, each instance of exhorting others to abandon the *pratimokṣa* and of suggesting that defilements are purified solely through practice of the Mahāyāna precepts would be an equally grave transgression. If he had repented his transgression and confessed it during his lifetime, it could have been purified and the vows restored, but there is no evidence that he did so. To regard the Mahāyāna precepts as superior is no fault, but denunciation of the *pratimokṣa* constitutes a defeat in the Tibetan system. Harsh as it may seem, by the reasoning presented, adherents of the Tibetan system could conclude that Saichō and his followers did not achieve even the first stage of the bodhisattva path.

CONCLUSION

The question of ethical precepts in Japan and Tibet, of both the *pratimokṣa* and bodhisattva categories, is no mere intellectual exercise. The question is thoroughly relevant in light of the current transmission of Buddhism to the West. The questions that were being asked then, in the early days of Buddhist transmission and adaptation in East Asia, are being asked again now: What is the benefit of celibacy? Why keep more precepts than necessary? Why should precepts be necessary for moral behavior? Do bodhisattva precepts not obviate *pratimokṣa* precepts? Some new questions are being asked as well: Is a layperson less able to practice than a monk or nun? Why do nuns have to take more precepts than monks? Who needs monasticism anyway? Already we see evidence in Western countries of problems that developed in both Japan and Tibet, including abuses of power in religious centers, a need for direct lay participation, problems related to the role of women, and sexual abuse by religious leaders. The various solutions proposed in Japan and Tibet, as well as their ultimate results, will be instructive for the Western Buddhist situation.

One American Buddhist scholar has suggested that the virtually unattainable, transcendent goal of the Buddhism that went to Japan explains the Japanese lack of interest in ethics.26 He implies that the antinomian approach of the later Japanese Buddhist schools was antithetical to the practice of ethics. However, the Buddhism that reached Tibet was similar, with its lofty goal of Buddhahood itself and its emphasis on faith, yet *vinaya* practice and the monastic ideal took root and survive to the present day. The divergent Buddhist developments regarding precepts in the two countries were strongly influenced by the attitudes and personal power of Saichō and Atiśa, as well as by the organizational abilities of their followers. In the very different Western social milieu, the evolution of attitudes toward the precepts may similarly depend upon the viewpoints of particular personalities.

Traditionally, precepts have been pivotal to Buddhist practice, yet many Westerners reject the very concept of restraint. When they take precepts at all, they are usually Tantric precepts, most often without *pratimokṣa* precepts as a basis. As occurred in Japan and Tibet, the bodhisattva and Tantric practices are taking precedence over the practice of the *pratimokṣa*. One reason may be the ideals of individualism, unrestricted creative expression, and sense gratification, which are so prevalent in Western society. Another is a widespread rejection of authority among those embracing Buddhism. Furthermore, the theories of *karma* (cause and effect) and rebirth, which provide the underlying rationale for keeping precepts, are concepts still foreign to most Western minds. The concept of accruing merit through receiving and keeping precepts is equally foreign. The social and situational benefits of ethics are compatible with Western rationality, but in this respect Buddhist ethics do not differ significantly from Judeo-Christian ethics. The virtue of the Buddhist system for modern minds is its pragmatic approach and its emphasis on personal responsibility.

The question conservative Buddhists ask is whether the goal of true enlightenment can be reached without the preliminary steps of the process. Many Tibetans prior to Atiśa hoped to gain Tantric realizations without the foundational teachings on renunciation, compassion, and wisdom. Similarly, many Western people today hope for a simpler method of Buddhist practice, without precepts, schedules, studies, rules, or teachers. In the orthodox view, this is like expecting to gain fruit from a tree without cultivating the roots (renunciation, *bodhi-citta*, insight into emptiness) and branches (the six perfections). Hoping to gain the fruits of spiritual practice without nurturing the simple virtues—the roots of the plant—may well result in disappointment. We must wait to see which ethical model the Western Buddhist world will heed—whether that of Saichō, of Atiśa, or perhaps an entirely different course.

134 Karma Lekshe Tsomo

25 One reason may be the sheer organizational abilities of their followers. In the very different Western social milieu, the evolution of attitudes toward the precepts may similarly depend upon the viewpoints of particular personalities.

26 He implies that the antinomian approach of the later Japanese Buddhist schools was antithetical to the practice of ethics.
NOTES

1. Translated into Tibetan as so-so tar-pa, “individual liberation,” and used in that sense in this chapter.
3. The minor precepts include thirty-four injunctions to collect virtuous dharmas and twelve injunctions to promote the welfare of living beings, all phrased in the reverse.
7. From the Eizan Daishen, quoted by Groner, p. 115.
12. A commentary to the chapter on Ethics from Asanga’s *Bodhisattva Stage*, translated by Tatz, pp. 91-263.
15. Tatz, p. 111.
16. The following is a comparison of the two systems (M = major precept, m = minor precept):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bodhisattva Precept</th>
<th>Brahmajīla</th>
<th>Tibetan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>M1</td>
<td>&lt;M8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td>M2</td>
<td>&lt;M5,M17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>False speech</td>
<td>M4</td>
<td>&lt;M16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praising self and deprecating others</td>
<td>M7</td>
<td>M1,m32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not giving material aid or Dharma</td>
<td>M8</td>
<td>M2,m4,m7,m9, m38,m41,&lt;m18 M3,m8,m19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusing to accept offender’s apology</td>
<td>M9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slandering the Triple Gem</td>
<td>M10</td>
<td>M4,M6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not accepting invitations</td>
<td>m27</td>
<td>m5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning from Mahāyāna</td>
<td>m8 (self)</td>
<td>M12(others) m31 (self)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting destructive fires</td>
<td>m14</td>
<td>M10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not respecting teachers and senior monks</td>
<td>m1</td>
<td>m3,m34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not making offerings to the Triple Gem</td>
<td>m6,m44</td>
<td>m1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving biased or deviant teachings</td>
<td>m15</td>
<td>M9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failing to care for the sick</td>
<td>m9</td>
<td>m36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departing from altruistic resolve</td>
<td>m34</td>
<td>m14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to study the teachings</td>
<td>m7,m22,m24</td>
<td>m27,m33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not answering questions</td>
<td>m23</td>
<td>m4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distorting teachings for profit</td>
<td>m16</td>
<td>M14,M15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not making repentance</td>
<td>m5 (others)</td>
<td>m16(self)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking offerings intended for the Triple Gem</td>
<td>m27</td>
<td>M17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. Another distinction is that the prohibition against eating meat and pungent foods is conspicuously absent in the Tibetan rendition. The importance attached to dietary restrictions in the Chinese tradition may have Taoist origins.
21. “Wrong views” here means rejection of the Three Jewels, the law of cause and effect, and other essential Buddhist tenets.
22. Or, according to the *Sūtra-samuccaya*, committing it continuously for the duration of a watch, which is four hours. Tsong-kha-pa rejects this interpretation.
24. Tatz, pp. 166-76.
25. Tatz, pp. 177-78.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


