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

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Tsomo, Karma Lekshe PhD, "Buddhist Ethics in Japan and Tibet: A Comparative Study of the Adoption of Bodhisattva and Pratimoksa Precepts" (1994). *Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship*. 18. <https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty/18>

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Buddhist Behavioral Codes and the Modern World

An International Symposium

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

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Codes and the
Modern World

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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)

1. Buddhism—Discipline—Congresses. 2. Buddhist precepts—Congresses. 3. Monasticism and religious orders, Buddhist—Rules—Congresses. I. Fu, Charles Wei-hsun. II. Wawrytko, Sandra A. (Sandra Ann). III. Chung-Hwa International Conference on Buddhism (1992 : Taipei). IV. Series.
BQ5400.B84 1994
294.3'5—dc20 94-8355

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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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



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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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.

7.

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 Saṅgha*, without equivalent efforts being made to establish a *Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha*. 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.¹ 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.² Three of these are still practiced today in various countries of the world. The Dharmaguptaka school was transmitted to Japan, via China, while the Mūla-sarvāstivāda school flourished in Tibet. The third school of *vinaya* extant today, the Theravāda (or Sthaviravāda), 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 assure harmony in the community of practitioners, but contribute 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 *Bodhisattva-bhūmi-sūtra* attributed to the Indian master Asaṅga (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*.³ 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 (*kuśala-karma*; three of body, four of speech, and three of mind).⁴ 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 *Sangō shiki* (Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings).⁵ 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.⁶

SAICHŌ'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 Mt. 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-jan, 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 *Brahmajāla-sūtra*, taken by laypeople in China as well as by monks and nuns. For monks in China, the *Brahmajāla* precepts were taken in addition to the 250 precepts contained in the *Bhikṣu-prātimokṣa-sūtra* of the Dharmagupta lineage; for nuns, these were in addition to the 348 precepts contained in the Dharmagupta *Bhikṣuṇī-prātimokṣa-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 Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*. This fact indicates that he was still concerned with the *prātimokṣa* 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 *prātimokṣa* 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 (*Sōgō*), 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 *prāṭimokṣa* precepts altogether, he declared that henceforth his students would follow only the Mahāyāna and "abandon inferior Hīnayāna practices forever."⁷ 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *Saṅgha* 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 *Saṅgha* administration have for dealing with recalcitrant monks and how are these procedures to be implemented? Except where the *Saṅgha* 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-prāṭimokṣa* 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.

PRĀṬIMOKṢA 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 (*upāsakā/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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *Saṅgha* procedures, the bimonthly recitation of the *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *prāṭimokṣa* as Saichō did, the days of monastic Buddhism, in the true sense of the term, were numbered.

In Tibet, the question of whether *prāṭimokṣa* precepts were prerequisite for receiving bodhisattva precepts became an important point of debate. No less a scholar than Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419) argued in the negative, since such a prerequisite is not specifically set forth in the texts; if *prāṭimokṣa* precepts were a precondition for receiving bodhisattva precepts, *devas* would be unable to take them, since the *prāṭimokṣa* 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.

Asaṅga was of this persuasion. He saw the observance of *prāṭimokṣa* precepts as a natural corollary to the altruistic mind of enlightenment (*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 *prāṭimokṣa* precepts and therefore consider *prāṭimokṣa* precepts a precondition for the bodhisattva vow. In any case, it is clear that Asaṅga regarded *prāṭimokṣa* 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 Shintō, regard themselves as naturally pure and beyond the need for ethical restrictions. The Shintō scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) regards "the natural mind," untouched by good and evil, as embodying the spirit of Japan.⁸ 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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. Asaṅga disputed this line of reasoning. Although he denied that the *prāṭimokṣa* precepts are specifically required for receiving the

bodhisattva precepts,⁹ he argues that especially in degenerate times it is important to receive both *prāṭimokṣa* and bodhisattva precepts. Having generated the altruistic aspiration to enlightenment (*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: ATĪŚA AND TSONG-KHA-PA

The Bengali reformer Atīśa, also known as Dipamkara Shrijñāna, 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 *prāṭimokṣa* precepts is essential. Receiving extensive teachings on *bodhi-citta* (Tibetan, *gser-ling-pa*) from Ācārya 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."¹⁰ 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *prāṭimokṣa* precepts. In his lifetime, he gave extensive teachings on *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,"¹¹ an encapsulation of the genre of teachings known in Tibet as *Lam Rim* ("Stages on the Path"), Tsong-kha-pa explains renunciation, *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*¹², 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 Tzong 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."¹³ 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."¹⁴ 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 Jñānaśīmitra's *Consistency of Ethics, Vows and Pledges*:

Having rejected the monastic vow,
Neither the tantric vow nor that
Of the perfections will be held.¹⁵

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,¹⁶ one primary distinction between the two is that the *Brahmajāla* tradition includes many offenses that are identical with or similar to *prātimokṣa* offenses.¹⁷ 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 offences 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."¹⁸ 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 is 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *prāṭimokṣa*. In the Tibetan system **not** to commit a violation of *prāṭimokṣa* precepts when circumstances deem it necessary is a violation of the tenth and eleventh minor precepts.

Asaṅga 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 "supersederers" 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *prāṭimokṣa* and bodhisattva precepts not only are distinct in terms of content, they also prescribe different methods of handling transgressions. In his chapter on Ethics, Asaṅga 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.¹⁹ The former transgression is remediable; the latter is likened to a broken glass that cannot be repaired. Tsong-kha-pa states that a *prāṭimokṣa* 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. Śāntideva concurs in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*:

So between the power of the transgression,
And the power of the awakening thought,
He oscillates in *saṃsāra*, 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 *saṃsāra*.

As is the case with the *prāṭimokṣa* 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-prāṭimokṣa*, 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 *prāṭimokṣa*, 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 deprecation of the *śrāvaka* vehicle or repudiation of the *prāṭimokṣa* precepts. The relevant precepts read as follows: (13) Rejecting the *prāṭimokṣa*; 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *śrāvaka* or *pratyeka-buddha* 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 *prāṭimokṣa* precepts. Moreover, each instance of exhorting others to abandon the *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *prāṭimokṣa* 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 *prāṭimokṣa* precepts as a basis. As occurred in Japan and Tibet, the bodhisattva and Tantric practices are taking precedence over the practice of the *prāṭimokṣa*. 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.

NOTES

1. Translated into Tibetan as *so-so tar-pa*, "individual liberation," and used in that sense in this chapter.

2. For a comparison of various systematizations of the eighteen Vaibhāṣika schools, see Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1983), pp. 413-19.

3. The minor precepts include thirty-four injunctions to collect virtuous dharma and twelve injunctions to promote the welfare of living beings, all phrased in the reverse.

4. See Paul Groner, *Saichō: The Establishment of the Tendai School* (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1984), pp. 118-19.

5. Translated in *Kūkai: Major Works* by Yoshito S. Hakeda (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), pp. 137, 197.

6. See Jeffrey Hopkins, *The Kalachakra Tantra* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1985), pp. 412-14.

7. From the *Eizan Daishen*, quoted by Groner, p. 115.

8. See Tamura Yoshirō, "Japanese Culture and the Tendai Concept of Original Enlightenment" in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. XIV, 2-3, 207.

9. Mark Tatz, *Asanga's Chapter on Ethics: With the Commentary of Tsong-kha-pa* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), pp. 108-11.

10. Quoted in Richard Sherburne's translation of Atiśa's *A Lamp for the Path and Commentary* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 92.

11. Translated in Robert Thurman's *Life and Teachings of Tsong Khapa* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 1982), pp. 57-58.

12. A commentary to the chapter on Ethics from Asanga's *Bodhisattva Stage*, translated by Tatz, pp. 91-263.

13. In *The Life and Teachings of Tsong Khapa*, Robert A. F. Thurman, ed. (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works & Archives), pp. 257-58.

14. Tatz, p. 109.

15. Tatz, p. 111.

16. The following is a comparison of the two systems (M = major precept, m = minor precept):

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

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.

18. Tatz, pp. 209-10.

19. Tatz, p. 65.

20. Tatz, p. 183.

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.

23. See Tatz, pp. 157-62.

24. Tatz, pp. 166-76.

25. Tatz, pp. 177-78.

26. Gil Fronsda, *The Transition from Monastic to Priest in Japanese Buddhism*, Unpub. paper, 1990, p. 12.

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