

## Eisai's Promotion of Zen for the Protection of the Country

*Albert Welter*

The Buddhist tradition is not generally known for treatises associated with overt political aims. This is due, in part, to the Buddhist reputation for eschewing society and avoiding political involvement. This reputation, however, does little to explain the actual development of Buddhism as an ideology supporting political regimes. In the process of this development, Buddhism became, in fact, a strong force promoting political as well as religious ideology.

The impact of Buddhist political ideology in Japan was particularly strong. Early religious and political theory in Japan was heavily influenced by developments in China during the Sui (518–617) and T'ang (618–907) dynasties, an era when Buddhism was the dominant ideological force. As a result, the Japanese state was conceived in terms of a common East Asian Buddhist model. This model was based on Mahāyāna scriptures which recognized the complementary authority provided by Imperial Law (*ōbō*) and Buddhist Law (*buppō*). According to this model, the Buddhist clergy actively participated in affairs of state, and the ruler of the state was responsible for overseeing the affairs of the Buddhist clergy. No distinction between religious and secular aims was ultimately recognized. This model of the Buddhist state was based on the premise that religious and government institutions were united in a common purpose, drawn directly from Buddhist teaching. In this model, Buddhist religious aspirations were regarded as essential components of a civilized society, pillars necessary for the definition and preservation of the secular state. According to Buddhist theories relating to the social and political role of the state, the purpose of state authority and government institutions was to foster Buddhist righteousness. Both religious and secular establishments in the Buddhist state were united in this moral and spiritual aim.

By the late twelfth century, at the end of the Heian period (794–1185), the religious and political climate in Japan had deteriorated to the point that the existence of Buddhist teaching and the model of the Japanese Buddhist state were

placed in jeopardy. Furthermore, belief in the ultimate demise of Buddhism was substantiated by the Buddhist teaching of Final Dharma age (*mappō*), believed to have begun in C.E. 1052. The social chaos and moral depravity among members of the Buddhist clergy were signs confirming the Buddhist prognosis that the current age was one of social and moral decay. This climate produced a series of Buddhist reformers, one of the most prominent of whom was the monk Eisai (or Yōsai, 1141–1215).

Eisai was trained in the practices of Tendai Buddhism, which included an Exoteric scriptural tradition based mainly on the *Lotus Sutra*, and an Esoteric (tantric) tradition similar to that of the Shingon school. Tendai was religiously and politically perhaps the dominant form of Buddhism in Japan during the Heian period. Supported by the leaders of Japan, the court aristocrats living in the Japanese capital of Heian (present-day Kyoto), the teachings of this school provided the rationale supporting the existence of the Japanese Buddhist state. Tendai also had a long tradition of meditation practice based on the procedures prescribed in the *Great Calming and Contemplation* (*Maka shikan*, T 1911). But during a pilgrimage to China, Eisai became absorbed in the practices of the Zen (Ch'an, "meditation") school. We can only imagine Eisai's reaction when he discovered that the monastic complexes on Mount T'ien-t'ai (Tendai), the inspiration for the nucleus of Tendai school temples on Mount Hiei in Japan, had been turned into centers for Zen training! Zen Buddhism, particularly the Rinzai (Lin-chi) branch, dominated the religious life of China at that time and was heavily supported by the Chinese state. In Japan, Zen was a little known and largely misunderstood form of Buddhism. Its presence, particularly in Eisai's promotion of it, represented a challenge to the long-standing role played by Tendai Buddhist teaching in Japanese political and social affairs.

In Eisai's view, Zen represented a remedy for the degenerate state into which Buddhist moral discipline had fallen in Japan. While Eisai's proposal for religious reform was quickly rejected by the old leaders of the Heian government and the Tendai Buddhist establishment, it was adopted by the newly established rulers of Japan, the military warlords of Kamakura.

Eisai's proposals for reforming Buddhism and the moral fiber of Japan were written down in his *Treatise on Promoting Zen for the Protection of the Country* (*Kōzen gokokuron*). In effect, the *Treatise* called for replacing Tendai teaching as the spiritual and moral focus of the country with the superior teaching of Zen. As a result, Zen came to serve as the new ideology supporting the new rulers of Japan, the military rulers based in Kamakura. Together, these military rulers and the monks of the Zen school came to define the new character of the Japanese state, replacing the positions formerly held by Heian court nobles and the monks of the Tendai school. This new definition of the Japanese state, combining the military power of the samurai rulers with the ideological backing of the Zen school, dominated Japan for several centuries from the Kamakura period to the beginning of the Edo period (c. 1600).

What was it about Zen, in Eisai's opinion, that recommended it as a reform doctrine for Japan? In the first place, Eisai was impressed with Zen practice. Of all the schools of Buddhism, Eisai credited Zen with best preserving the legitimate teaching of the Buddha. This teaching, according to Eisai, was contained in the wisdom literature (*prajñāpāramitā*, *hannya-haramitsu*) of the Buddhist tradition. The patriarchs and masters of the Zen school in China had, in Eisai's view, successfully preserved the essence of the Buddhist teaching on wisdom, passing it down from master to disciple through successive generations.

In addition, Eisai was impressed with the uncompromising attitude of the Zen school on the importance of Buddhist moral training and discipline. For Eisai, the ability of Buddhism to serve the social and public good was directly connected to the moral behavior of Buddhists, especially members of the Buddhist clergy. The preservation of Buddhism and the Buddhist religiopolitical order from moral and social decay was dependent on this behavior. According to Buddhist theory, it was not only the duty of the ruler to ensure that Buddhist discipline be upheld in his domain, it was in the ruler's own self-interest to do so. The preservation of a ruler's authority, according to Buddhism, depended on the cooperation of divine forces. Buddhist as well as native Japanese deities served to protect and defend Buddhist countries from disaster. These deities were summoned through rituals and prayers conducted by members of the Buddhist clergy. The willingness of deities to intervene on a country's behalf was believed to be determined by the moral character of those who summoned them. In short, the moral character of the country was directly reflected in the behavior of the Buddhist clergy. As a result, the Buddhist clergy were believed to play an active part in Japan's fate as a nation.

In the final analysis, the Zen school represented for Eisai the repository of true Buddhist teaching and moral discipline. As such, it deserved to be recognized as the legitimate ideology of the true Buddhist country. Using Buddhist scriptures as his authority, Eisai argued to the rulers of Japan that the promotion of Zen teaching assured the revival of Buddhist ideology. In this way, Zen teaching became the basis for reasserting the traditional complement of Buddhist law (*buppō*) and political authority (*ōbō*) in Japan.

A few comments must be made about the style that Eisai adopted in his *Treatise*. Following a style that was popular among Buddhist monks, who believed that what they had to say was unimportant alongside the words of the Buddha himself, Eisai preferred to make his case through examples cited from Buddhist scriptures. The understanding of Eisai's own points must thus be filtered through the materials he chose to include in his *Treatise*. The following selections are drawn from the beginning sections of Eisai's *Treatise*.

The translation is based primarily on Yanagida Seizan, ed. and tr., *Kōzen gokokuron* in *Chūsei zenka no shisō*, in *Nihon shisō taikēi* 16, ed. Ichikawa Hakugen and Yanagida Seizan (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1972).

## Further Reading

Martin Collcutt, *Five Mountains: The Rinzai Monastic Institution in Medieval Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, Volume 2: Japan*, tr. James W. Heisig and Paul Knitter (New York: Macmillan Press, 1990); Albert Welter, "Zen Buddhism as the Ideology of the Japanese State: Eisai and the *Kōzen gokoku ron*," in *Creating the World of Zen: Song Dynasty Chan and Its Spread throughout East Asia*, ed. John McRae and Albert Welter (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press/Kuroda Institute, 1996).

## Treatise on Promoting Zen for the Protection of the Country

### PREFACE

Great indeed is Mind! Heaven's height is immeasurable, but Mind rises above Heaven; the earth's depth is also unfathomable, but Mind reaches below the earth. The light of the sun and moon cannot be outdistanced, yet Mind passes beyond the light of sun and moon. The universe is limitless, yet Mind travels beyond the universe. Though referred to as Space, or the Primal Energy that gives rise to myriad existence, it is Mind that encompasses Space and generates the Primal Energy. Because of it, the sky shelters from above and the earth supports from below. Because of it, the sun and moon rotate, the four seasons change, and all things are generated. Great indeed is Mind! . . .

The great hero Śākyamuni Buddha transmitted the Mind teaching (the essence of enlightenment and the essential teaching of all the Buddhas) to the golden-haired ascetic, Kaśyapa, calling it "a special transmission outside the scriptures" (*kyōge betsuden*). . . . Knowledge of the Mind teaching has been made possible through the combined efforts of several generations of patriarchs in India and the followers of the teaching in China. It represents the actual teaching propagated by former Buddhas, transmitted from master to disciple via the robe of authentic transmission. In matters of religious discipline, it represents the genuine methods of the sages of old. The substance of the Mind teaching and the form that it takes are fully evident in the masters and disciples [that have adhered to it]. The stipulations for practicing the Mind teaching and the regulations governing its practices leave no confusion regarding its orthodoxy.

After the Great Master who came from the West (India), Bodhidharma, sailed by way of the South Seas and planted his staff on the banks of the East River in Loyang (the capital of China), the Mind teaching spread to Korea through Fa-yen Wen-i (885–958), and to Japan through Niu-t'ou Fa-jung (594–657) (whose teachings were brought back by Saichō). By studying it, one discovers the key for understanding all forms of Buddhism. By practicing it, one attains enlightenment in the span of this life. Externally, the Mind teaching conforms to the position taken in Tendai teaching that the Buddha-nature, through the

aid of the precepts, is always present. Internally, it joins to this the view of *prajñā* that awakening is attained through wisdom. This in the final analysis, is the teaching of the Zen school.

In our country, the Divine Sovereign, the Japanese emperor, shines in splendor, and the influence of his virtuous wisdom spreads far and wide. Emissaries from the distant countries of Korea, India, and Southeast and Central Asia pay their respects at his palace. Government ministers carry on the business of governing the world, and Buddhist monks spread the religion of those who have renounced lay life in search of enlightenment. Even the sacred teaching of the Indian Brahmins, the Vedas, are included in the teachings [spread by these monks]. It is utterly impossible to consider that the teachings of the Five Houses of Zen (the five main branches of Zen that developed in China) be omitted from it.

Nevertheless, there are those who malign Zen teaching, calling it "the Zen of obscure realization," and those who harbor doubts about it, calling it "the false view of emptiness." Still others claim that it is ill-suited to this degenerate age, or that it is not what our country needs. . . . These people, while ostensibly upholding the Buddhist Law, are actually destroying the treasure that this law contains. They reject my position outright, without knowing what I have in mind. Not only are they blocking the entryway to Zen teaching, they are also ruining the work of our great forbear at Mount Hiei, the Tendai master Saichō. It is sad and distressing that my position be so dismissed before ascertaining whether it is correct or not.

As a result, I have gathered here representative materials from the three branches of the Buddhist canon (scriptures, monastic rules, and treatises) to inform the philosophically minded of our age about Zen teaching, and to record the essential teachings of the one true school of Buddhism for posterity. . . . The reason this is called the *Treatise on Promoting Zen for the Protection of the Country* is that it is consistent with the ideas originally taught in the *Benevolent Kings Sutra* (*Ninnōkyō*, T 246). . . . In the hope that Rinzai Zen will flourish far into the future, [I have taken up the brush,] undeterred by my violation [against proscriptions for indulging] in literary artifices. My hope is that the flame of succession in the transmission of the lamp will not be extinguished but will continue to burn brightly in the three assemblies at which Miroku (the future Buddha) is destined to preach; that the fountain from which Buddhist teaching sprang will not be exhausted but will continue to flow in the future age of a thousand Buddhas.

#### SECTION I: ENSURING THE LASTING PRESENCE OF BUDDHIST TEACHING

According to the *Scripture on the Six Perfections* (*Rokuharamitsukyō*, T 261), "The Buddha said, 'I preached the rules governing moral training (*vinaya*) so as to ensure the lasting presence of Buddhist teaching (in the world).'"

According to the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* (*Daichidoron*, T

1509), "There are seven divisions of Buddhist disciples. The first five are for different ranks of male and female clergy who have renounced lay life. The last two are for male and female members of the laity." When the conduct of these seven congregations of the Buddhist assembly is pure, Buddhist teaching will have a lasting presence (in the world).

As a result of this, the *Regulations for Pure Conduct at Zen Monasteries* (*Zen'on shingi*) of the Zen school says,

The ability to spread Buddhist teaching throughout the world of unenlightened people most assuredly rests on strict purity in one's moral training. As a result, observing the Buddhist rules governing moral behavior (*kairitsu*) takes precedence in the practice of Zen and the investigation of the Way. Without the insulation and protection from transgressions and errors [provided by the monastic rules], how will one ever become a Buddha or a Patriarch? . . . Through reading and reciting the monastic rules and understanding the benefit they provide, one is well-versed in the differences between upholding the rules for moral behavior and violating them, and on what behavior is permissible and impermissible. . . . [Monks of the Zen school] rely completely on the sacred utterances issued from the mouth of the golden one, the Buddha; they do not indulge their fancies to follow ordinary fellows.

According to another scripture (the *Net of Brahma Sutra*, *Bommōkyō*, T 1484),

Those who violate the legitimate rules of moral behavior in the Buddhist order are not allowed to receive any of the gifts provided to the monastery by lay donors. Nor are they allowed to set foot in the land of a righteous monarch who upholds Buddhist teaching within his kingdom, or allowed to drink the water in the land of a righteous monarch. The five thousand great deities who protect the land of the righteous monarch constantly obstruct the path that these people proceed along, rebuking them as 'terrible thieves . . .'

According to the *Benevolent Kings Sutra*,

Oh Great Monarch, when Buddhist teaching has degenerated to the state where its doctrines alone survive but it is no longer practiced (*masse*) . . . the king and his chief ministers of state will frequently carry out activities unwarranted by Buddhist teaching. They will only support Buddhist teaching and the community of monks for their own selfish interests, causing great injustices and all sorts of crimes. In opposition to Buddhist teaching and in opposition to the rules governing moral behavior, they will restrain Buddhist monks as if they were prisoners. When such a time arrives, it will not be long before Buddhist teaching disappears.

According to the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (*Dai hannya-kyō*, T 220), Śariputra, five hundred years after my passing into nirvana, at the beginning of the age when Buddhist teaching has degenerated, this scripture on the

most profound teaching of Buddhist wisdom (*hannya*) will be found in a land to the northeast (i.e., Japan), where it will greatly enhance the practice of Buddhism. How is it so? All the Buddhas, the Thus Come Ones, together value this land and regard it as important, and together concentrate on protecting it. They ensure that Buddhist teaching will always endure in that land and will not perish.

The passages cited here make it clear how to “ensure the lasting presence of Buddhist teaching” by following the teaching of the Zen school that insists that the eternal presence of the Buddha and the potential for enlightenment are predicated on upholding the rules for moral behavior that the Buddha set forth.

## SECTION II: PROTECTING THE COUNTRY (THROUGH ZEN)

According to the *Benevolent Kings Sutra*, “The Buddha has entrusted the Buddhist teaching on wisdom to all present and future rulers of petty kingdoms; it is considered a secret treasure for protecting their countries.” The Buddhist teaching on wisdom referred to here is the teaching of the Zen school. In other words, if people within a country uphold the Buddhist rules governing moral behavior, the various heavenly beings will protect that country.

The Scripture on the *Perfection of Wisdom of the Victorious Ruler* (*Shō-tennō hannya-kyō*, T 231) says,

Suppose a Buddhist disciple (*bodhisattva*) on the way to enlightenment who had studied the Buddhist teaching on wisdom became the ruler of a country. When mean despicable sorts of people came to slander and insult him, this ruler defended himself without making a show of his majesty and authority, saying, ‘I am the ruler of the country. I shall rule exclusively by the authority vested in me in the Buddhist teaching on wisdom. This is none other than the intention that I developed in the distant past when, in front of the Buddhas and World Honored Ones, I uttered the great vow to save all living beings without excepting any, by causing them to obtain the unsurpassable enlightenment of the Buddhas.

According to the *Scripture in Forty-Two Sections* (*Shijūnishōkyō*, T 784), “It is better for donors to donate food to one person who has attained ‘no-thought’ and ‘nonabiding,’ and ‘freedom from cultivation’ and ‘freedom from realization,’ than to donate food to a hundred billion Buddhas of the past, present, or future.” What is here referred to as “no-thought” and “nonabiding,” and “freedom from cultivation” and “freedom from realization,” are the aims of the Zen school.

According to the *Surangama Sutra* (*Ryōgonkyō*, T 945),

The Buddha said, “Ananda, [the condition for] single-minded recitation of my ‘white-umbrella’ *mantra* [to invoke divine assistance and protection] is firm adherence to the prohibitions against the four grave offenses—unchastity, stealing, destruction of life, and false statements—on the part of Bud-

dhist monks. To carry this out, it is necessary to designate someone, selected for their purity in abiding by the rules for moral behavior, as the Master [in charge of moral training]. The monks should put on clean new robes for the occasion and, while burning incense and secluding themselves inside, recite 108 times the 'white-umbrella' mantra that was taught by the Mind Buddha (the eternal essence of Buddhahood). After this is done, they should decide on a place to build a practice hall (*dōjō*) in accordance with the restrictions on the location of such buildings in the Buddhist rules for moral training. The possibility of enlightenment will present itself as quickly as it is sought. In the practice hall, the monks voice aloud their vows as bodhisattvas to save all living beings. They cleanse themselves with water whenever they return from going out. They perform worship services to the Buddha at the six designated times throughout the day and night, and as a result of this, do not lie down [during the training period]. If they continue this for the three-week training period, the Buddha will appear in person to them, pat them on the head and console them, and cause their awakening (i.e., enlightenment). Any living being who supports this 'white-umbrella' mantra through recitation [will be protected as follows]: fire will be unable to burn them, and water will be unable to drown them. . . . For those realizing the advanced state of mental absorption (*samādhi*), no curse or foreboding heavenly body will be able to harm them.

"Ananda, you should know that the 'white-umbrella' mantra has at its constant disposal a race of incalculably numerable Diamond Treasure-King Bodhisattvas, each of whom has the various members of a Diamond association under their command that accompanies them day and night. If there are any living beings who, though their minds are flustered or distraught, call to mind and recite aloud the 'white-umbrella' mantra, these Diamond Treasure-King Bodhisattvas will always be on hand to protect them. Imagine how much more divine assistance and protection can be commanded when the 'white-umbrella' mantra is recited by those whose minds are enlightened!

"Ananda, in this world which humanity inhabits there are eighty-four thousand heavenly bodies and twenty-eight great configurations of stars that may portend calamity. When evil portents appear in the world, they are able to cause calamities and disasters. In the places protected by the 'white-umbrella' mantra, [however,] . . . the portents of impending doom will never be able to appear . . ."

The "white-umbrella" mantra [invoking divine assistance and protection] is constantly performed in Zen monasteries. It is clear from this that the Zen school maintains the principle of "protecting the country."