

*Are Sōtō Zen Precepts for
Ethical Guidance or Ceremonial
Transformation?*

MENZAN'S ATTEMPTED REFORMS AND
CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES

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BEYOND THEIR FUNDAMENTAL function as sets of injunctions prescribing particular standards of conduct, precepts are also the core text for a wide variety of Buddhist ceremonies, which confer a spiritual benefit or involve a change of status.¹ For example, becoming an ordained cleric involves a ceremony in which one takes the precepts (yet again). I will first give a general background of precepts in Zen and then describe in some detail Tokugawa-era controversies, when the idea of special precepts and ordinations unique to Japanese Sōtō Zen monks and laity was fully articulated, especially by Menzan Zuihō (1687–1763). Instead of having a text which has specific details of becoming a fully ordained cleric, the ceremony simply uses the general values of Mahayana Buddhist aspiration embodied in the text of the precepts. There are no additional rules specific to the station of the newly appointed cleric. The precepts thus have a central role as the main text in this ceremonial transfiguration of the new cleric, but in the contemporary Japanese ceremony the meaning of the precepts recited receives little or no attention. This habit of passing over the precepts in silence has not always been so and is not simply due to the desire to ignore them. There are much deeper reasons and impassioned controversies over the centuries that have led to the current practice.

To this historical background I will add a description of a modern precept assembly at Eiheiiji and contrast this with the precept practices that have developed in Sōtō Zen groups in the United States (which are closer to the way advocated by Menzan). My interest here is neither in the question of whether or not people followed these precepts nor in what kind of moral direction the precepts supplied. Rather I am primarily concerned with the precept ceremony as an initiation or a consecration, and I will not be discussing the content of the precepts themselves. Sōtō Zen monks usually live in the extremely complex and rule-bound Japanese society and are also deeply embedded in the complex network of spiritual relationships of the Sōtō sect that govern both their personal lives and their place in Buddhist society. These relationships are formalized in ceremonies in which taking the precepts in one form or another is almost always central.

In China, Chan monks followed the same procedures for becoming a monk as did any other Buddhist, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Japan the Sōtō school developed its own unique set of sixteen precepts. These precept ordinations came to be the crucial ritual that established a unique identity for Sōtō clerics. The same set of sixteen precepts was also used in funerals and in lay ordination assemblies to include the lay members of the Sōtō community in the lineage of the Buddha and to engage their loyalty and continued support. In the Tokugawa period the practice arose of calling this set by the name “Zen precepts” (*zenkai*), which were conferred in the Zen precepts assembly (*zenkaie*), thereby emphasizing their special quality in Zen. In modern times the more universal names of “receiving the precepts” (*jukai*) and “precepts-receiving assembly” (*jukaie*) are used. The tradition regards these Sōtō precepts as an uninterrupted transmission from the time of Dōgen, but the contemporary form of the ritual and the modern interpretation of the meaning of the precepts date only to the middle of the Tokugawa period. For over one hundred years they were the subject of an intense debate, and there was a wide variation in both the ritual and its interpretation. The position that eventually triumphed was a radical interpretation, which used only a set of sixteen precepts unique to Dōgen and which understood the taking of these precepts to entail awakening itself. Thus in Japanese Sōtō Zen the taking of the precepts became and has continued to be identified with the final goal of practice rather than the beginning of life as a Buddhist or strengthening the commitment to the Buddhist path.

The precepts used in Sōtō Zen are related to the precepts used by the Tendai school of Japanese Buddhism, but the exact form and arrangement apparently originated with Dōgen.² Modern Japanese Sōtō Zen has settled on the view that Dōgen brought back with him from China this true Zen set of

only sixteen precepts, which are traced back to Bodhidharma and the Buddha himself, and that these make the other kind of precepts (such as the full 250 precepts) irrelevant. Unsurprisingly this is a historically untenable view, a fact clearly understood by the Sōtō clerics taking part in the Edo-period controversies. The scholar-monks who were carefully sifting textual evidence showing that Chinese Chan monks were taking the same precepts and ordinations as any Buddhist were also involved in the Sōtō polemics to establish the correctness and superiority of the special Dōgen precepts, as received in a direct line from his Chinese teacher Rujing.

Leaving aside the controversy over the origin of his special set, there is no doubt that Dōgen and his disciples assumed the right to ordain monks with these precepts without approval from either the government or from the established Japanese temples, and by so doing took a major step toward controlling their own affairs. Sōtō monks also conducted lay ordinations, and beginning in the medieval period, large assemblies were held that included an elaborate ceremony in which a famous teacher conferred the precepts upon the assembled laity from all social classes. In this way people from throughout the community could establish a connection with Sōtō Zen and with its teachers. These mass precept assemblies were a major factor in the propagation of Sōtō Zen throughout the country.³

The precepts represented more than simple admission to the Buddhist community. The ceremony and its accompanying transmission charts indicated a relationship with the Buddha and thus took on a powerful charisma.⁴ This power can be seen in the frequent notices of Sōtō monks pacifying and converting local kami and spirits by administering the precepts to them.⁵ The local spirit was understood to become a supporter of Buddhism because of the power of the precepts ceremony. Such tales often formed a crucial part of the conversion of a preexisting temple of another Buddhist affiliation to a Sōtō-lineage temple.

For all the importance of the precepts in these early Sōtō ceremonies, it is not at all clear exactly what the precepts were and upon what textual authority they were based. In the cases mentioned earlier, it is usually not specified what precepts were being administered. It is not that this was an obvious matter, and in fact the precepts were the focus of extremely heated discussion within the Buddhist community, perhaps never more so than in the mid-Edo period. In modern times, however, it has become at least reasonably clear which precepts Dōgen used in Japan when ordaining his monks. Three texts have been established as authentic and represent Dōgen's teachings concerning precepts. In order to establish a baseline in this complex discussion, I will first outline how precepts were used in China and Japan generally and then

summarize the general content of Dōgen's three texts. It should be emphasized however, that in early Tokugawa there was absolutely no such clarity about Dōgen's position on precepts: the sources that enable us to now speak so confidently were not generally available or were not universally accepted as authentic. In addition there were other texts being used that now cannot be demonstrated to be authentic. To first sketch the modern understanding of Dōgen's use of precepts is an anachronistic approach, but it has the advantage of quickly setting out the basic parameters of the rather confusing situation behind the discussion that follows. The pre-Tokugawa Japanese part of this overview is based primarily on William Bodiford's research and his summary of scholarship on the subject.⁶

The Chinese and Japanese Background

In China there was a standard set of precepts and procedures used to become a Buddhist cleric, regardless of affiliation with any particular lineage or kind of practice. I use the word "monk" or "cleric" interchangeably and limit my discussion to male ordinations. The ordination to become a monk was based on the novice ordination, followed by the full ordination for monks as described in one of the texts of the Indian Vinaya. In China it was the norm to use the translation called the *Four Part Vinaya* (*Ssufen lu*) for the list of ten novice and 250 full ordination precepts.⁷ These precepts were given in elaborate ceremonies, at fixed times and in fixed locations at major monasteries, and resulted in the special position and privileges of a Buddhist monk. The change in status was recognized by the state (which required fees and documents), the entire Buddhist establishment, and of course lay society. Although the form and the details of the precepts were taken from the *Four Part Vinaya*, which was regarded as not Mahayana, the Chinese had long accepted these precepts as an integral part of their Mahayana practice by taking these precepts with a Mahayana attitude. Taking these precepts in this ceremony entailed the transition to fully ordained status in the eyes of the state and the Buddhist community.

Quite in addition to and entirely separate from this was another set of vows: the bodhisattva precepts. These precepts emphasized compassion and universal salvation, not the details of monastic life, and the Mahayana attitudes prescribed are appropriate for both householders and monastics.⁸ There are several lists of such precepts in the sutra literature, but apparently the most common in China, and certainly in Japan, was the list of ten major and forty-eight minor precepts as found in the *Brahma's Net Sutra*.⁹ These precepts

were taken at a variety of ceremonies along with other standard Buddhist expressions of devotion, such as the three refuges, the three pure precepts, and ritual repentances. There was no standardization, and since these precepts had no legal role to play, there was no requirement for them to be standardized. The key point is that these sets of precepts were not used to ordain monks; they were devoid of the weighty social and legal implications of the full precepts of ordination. It is true that after taking the full ordination precepts, the newly ordained monks also went on to take the bodhisattva precepts, but for them, as for the laity, these were precepts to express and strengthen their religious devotion.

The same system was used in Japan until Saichō, after his return from China with new teachings, attempted to set up his own way of ordaining monks separate from the established temples. Eventually his Tendai community obtained the necessary state approval and in 823 ordained full status monks recognized by the state. Their ultimate authority was the *Lotus Sutra*, and they used the detailed precepts of the *Brahma's Net Sutra* but without also using the full 250 precepts, as was the norm in both China and Japan.¹⁰ This new way was to be the normal ordination in Tendai, and it came to be used by other groups as well, but it continued to be opposed by many Buddhist groups. The vagueness of these bodhisattva precepts made them of little use for the guidance of the daily life of monks, and over time other rules were composed to fill the gap, but these rules lacked the universal authority of the full 250 precepts (which monks of the older Japanese Buddhist groups continued to receive).

In this confusing situation the attitude toward the precepts of the early Japanese Zen teachers reflects the full range of possibilities. Of particular interest is Eisai's position upon his return from China in 1191, as seen in his *Kōzen Gokokuron*.¹¹ Eisai was the first of the Kamakura-era visitors to China to return with a Zen lineage, and he advocated strictly following the full 250 precepts as well as the bodhisattva precepts (the standard Chinese view) and stressed the importance to Zen of beginning with a thorough grounding in the precepts. This would seem unexceptional for an advocate of renewal for Japanese Buddhism, freshly returned from his trip to China. Dōgen, however, took the opposite tack in every way.¹² Dōgen's list of precepts is contained in the "Jukai" chapter of the *Genzō*, and there are two other independent works now accepted as authentic that give further ceremonial details and explain the meaning of these precepts: the *Busso Shōden Bosatsukai Kyōju Kaimon* and the *Busso Shōden Bosatsukai Sahō*.¹³

These works make clear that Dōgen not only rejected the full precepts of the *Four Part Vinaya*, but he also regarded meditation as in effect trumping

all other kinds of practices, including following the precepts. Although there is no record of the content of the ordinations Dōgen received in China, we do know from these three texts that he administered to his own monks the first ten precepts of the *Brahma's Net Sutra* (but not the forty-eight minor ones, as was the practice in Japanese Tendai), plus the three refuges and the three pure precepts (which were commonly used in various ceremonies, as mentioned earlier). Dōgen claimed that the ceremony came from Rujing, but these sixteen precepts, although attested elsewhere individually, are apparently combined in this unique way by Dōgen himself, since no prior source has ever been discovered.⁴ This is a summary of the result of modern scholarship, based on texts that were not available and accepted until quite recently.

Ōbaku Influence and the Revival of Precept Assembly Practice

Although these precepts have now come to be the norm for Sōtō, at the beginning of the Tokugawa period the whole question was still very open, and the textual clarity just described was simply lacking. It was not at all clear which precepts Dōgen had in mind because there was so little reliable textual evidence, and apparently there was no standard customary practice in Sōtō Zen. Between the time of Dōgen and the Tokugawa we know almost nothing about the details of Sōtō precept practices. Why was there such a sudden surge of interest in precepts in Sōtō Zen? As in so many other aspects of Japanese Zen of this period, one has to look to Ōbaku Zen to see where things got started. One might be inclined to think that, since Sōtō is a separate lineage from the shared lineage of Japanese Rinzai and Ōbaku, it was not really concerned with these Chinese monks who appeared in Nagasaki. But the Zen monks of this time were not so clearly split into Sōtō and Rinzai groups, and there was a great deal of movement back and forth for teaching and learning about different practices and rituals.

There were in fact many Sōtō monks that were extremely interested in whatever they could learn from the Chinese monks, and in a number of cases they studied for extended periods and then returned to their Sōtō temples, bringing what they had learned. They heavily modified the Sōtō practices to bring them more in line with the Ōbaku ways, which they saw as more authentic. The influence of Ōbaku monks on the Sōtō school of Japanese Zen begins with this initial attraction and even a wide-ranging adoption of many Ōbaku ideas and practices. The initial enthusiasm was followed by acrimonious struggles that continued into the nineteenth century. In most cases, and

perhaps especially so with precepts, although the position that became the standard for Sōtō was quite in opposition to Ōbaku, a full appreciation of that position entails its contrast to the Ōbaku starting point. The main weapon used in this rejection of Ōbaku ways was the texts of Dōgen, and this use of his texts was an all-important part of the emergence of Dōgen as the source of Sōtō orthodoxy.

I will refer to this group of Chinese and Japanese monks as Ōbaku for convenience, but to do so is both anachronistic and a little misleading. In Japan the members of the lineage referred to themselves as the True Lineage of Linji Zen (Rinzai shōshū) until 1874, and in Sōtō writings of the period the group is often referred to simply as the Ming Chinese monks. There are times, however, when the term Ōbaku is used to distinguish between this recent Chinese lineage and the more established Rinzai and Sōtō lineages of Zen.¹⁵ Be that as it may, the term Ōbaku will be used here, understanding that both the word and the connotations of a third stream of Japanese Zen in addition to Rinzai and Sōtō is problematic in many Tokugawa-era contexts.

The most important figure of these Chinese teachers was Yinyuan Longqi (Jp. Ingen Ryūki, 1592–1673), who was a major figure in Chinese Buddhist circles and an important reformer before coming to Japan.¹⁶ When he arrived in 1654, the Chinese Buddhist community was already well established in Nagasaki, and Yinyuan was known in Japan, at least in certain circles, from his writings. It seems that when he arrived, the practice of holding precept assemblies had fallen into abeyance, and one of the most popular things he did was to hold eight-day-long precepts assemblies. In 1658 Yinyuan printed his own set of ordination rules (*Gukaihōgi*), in which he both prescribed the ceremonies and discussed the meaning of the precepts.¹⁷ His work followed contemporary Chinese standards; even the title was something he borrowed from other works about precepts that appeared in the Ming canon. Apparently, in this area, Yinyuan was not the reformer he was in other aspects, but what he was doing must have been quite different from Japanese practice, judging from the distinguished crowds he attracted. When I asked about precept assemblies recently at the head temple, Manpukuji, the monks told me that this text was still the standard for their school and showed me hand-copied guides for precept assemblies, explaining that there were no printed materials. This is in stark contrast with the volumes of materials from Sōtō clerics written and printed beginning in the middle of the Tokugawa era.

The Ōbaku assembly encourages both lay and monk participation. In the first part of the event, everyone receives the three refuges, followed by the five precepts, the eight precepts, and the ten novice precepts. The second main stage is for the postulant monks to receive the classic 250 precepts of

mainstream Buddhism and become full monks. At the end everyone takes the ten major and forty-eight minor bodhisattva precepts. In Yinyuan's 1661 assembly the precepts were conferred on hundreds of people, and it later became a standard practice by abbots of Manpukuji as well as its branch temples that continues to this day, albeit in a shorter form.

Many people received these extended precepts, which are the standard for any kind of Chinese Buddhism, from various Ōbaku teachers. Some prominent Sōtō monks participated in the assembly and stayed for long periods of practice, and then years later returned to the Sōtō fold. They had a profound effect. The Ōbaku abbot who was directly responsible for most of the ordination ceremonies involving Sōtō monks was Muan Xingdao (1611–84), the second abbot of the head temple of Manpukuji and the man responsible for training most of the Japanese Ōbaku monks.¹⁸ Shōe Dōjō (1634–1713) received full precepts from Muan in 1668 and stayed in Ōbaku training until 1674, when he returned to help with the first retreat of Gesshū Sōko (1618–98) at Daijōji (an extremely important Sōtō training temple). Mokugen Genjaku (1629–80) also was ordained with full precepts by Muan in 1670 before returning to Daijōji. Spurred by the Ōbaku example, in 1671 Abbot Gesshū began to build what he called a lineage precepts platform (*kechimyaku kaidan*) at Daijōji. This practice continued at least until the next generation, as evidenced by the fact that Manzan Dōhaku (1636–1741), the champion of exclusive allegiance to the teachings of Dōgen, also received an Ōbaku ordination. This is revealed in his edition of Dōgen's *Kōroku*, published in 1673, which included a preface by Muan that indicates that Dōhaku (I will continue to call him Dōhaku just to avoid confusion with Menzan) received the full precepts from Muan, a fact not recorded in Dōhaku's own chronology.¹⁹

Apparently the influence was strong and persistent because some ninety years later Menzan Zuihō complained in the *Tokudo Wakumon* (1763), his set of questions and answers about ordinations, that most Sōtō monks were doing Ōbaku-style ordinations with too many rules and ceremonies, unlike the proper (i.e., Sōtō) Zen ordination.²⁰ The crucial point here is that the example of the elaborate Ōbaku ceremonies led first to imitation and then to serious research on the part of Sōtō monks into what their own lineage had to say on the subject. They found (apparently rather to their surprise) that Dōgen held that only his unprecedented set of sixteen precepts was necessary. It was only after unearthing previously obscure manuscripts and a great deal of wrangling that this conclusion was reached, and it was apparently due to the powerful example offered by Ōbaku that they began this research. It was not until the nineteenth century that the position that Sōtō Zen has its own special precepts came to be fully accepted.

*Back to the Sources: The Development
of the Sōtō Precepts*

The following discussion of the Sōtō response to this challenge draws on overview articles that are not further cited, in addition to the sources cited below.²¹ The first major work of the Sōtō reform movement concerned with precepts was the *Taikaku Kanwa*, written by Dōhaku and published in 1715, toward the end of his life.²² In this text he claimed that his position came directly from his teacher, Gesshū (the abbot of Daijōji), who delivered many public lectures on the topic and administered precepts in what he described as the proper manner of the direct tradition of Rujing and Dōgen. Dōhaku maintained that the correct precepts for Zen, for which the term *zenkai* was now being used (Dōgen did not use this term), were the one-mind precepts (*isshinkai*). These had been transmitted to China by Bodhidharma and then to Japan by Saichō as part of his Zen lineage (which he received as well as his Tendai lineage). Dōhaku maintained that this lineage of precepts, despite the different name, had the same content as the Tendai perfect-sudden precepts (*endonkai*). Dōhaku also held that both Rinzaï and Sōtō lineages originally had the same Zen precepts, but the ceremony and precepts were lost in China sometime after Dōgen returned to Japan, which explains why the contemporary Ōbaku Zen monks do not follow this form.

Before discussing the responses to Dōhaku's (very problematic) views, I will lay out the background for his arguments concerning the relationship between Zen precepts and Tendai, since this is the key point upon which years of dispute rests.²³ Dōhaku was arguing from passages coming at the end of the *Denjutsu Isshinkaimon*, which was written around 833 by Saichō's student Kōjō (779–858), who was defending the new usage of precepts under Saichō.²⁴ This text mentioned Bodhidharma in connection with something called the one-vehicle precepts (*ichijōkai*), the meaning of which was not explained. The text also referred to the bodhisattva precepts of the *Brahma's Net Sutra* as the one-mind precepts. Neither of these terms figure in later Tendai precepts discussions, and in fact Bodhidharma and the Zen lineage were of little importance to Kōjō's arguments. Kōjō took the step (which Saichō did not) of entirely doing away with the full precepts even in a provisional manner and claimed that the one-vehicle precepts allow one to dispense entirely with the other precepts. Kōjō also equated precepts with the mind which perceives things as they are (*jissōshin*). This led in turn to the position that receiving the precepts entails mastery of meditation and wisdom, and thus entry into the ranks of the buddhas.

For Kōjō (unlike Saichō, who continued to emphasize strict adherence) the details of following the precepts were of little importance. Kōjō's arguments are a pastiche of quotations from Chinese writers, mostly of the Tendai lineage, but he arrived at his own conclusions. In short, compared to Kōjō, Saichō himself was relatively conservative in that he retained more of the forms of the precepts and he emphasized their place in practice as leading toward (but not encompassing) the goal. The same differences (between Kōjō and his teacher) were still to be seen in the two sides of the precepts dispute in Sōtō of the mid-Edo period. Despite strong arguments for a more conservative position, in the end the more radical position (which was apparently closer to Dōgen's) prevailed. Thus *zenkai* in Japan continued to mean much more than simply precepts that are observed by monks of the Zen lineage. The mainstream Sōtō lineage view came to be that to receive the precepts was to enter the lineage of the Buddha and without further endeavor to be ritually transformed to the status of the buddhas and ancestors.

To return to Dōhaku, his position was not accepted at the time by everyone even within Sōtō. It was roundly denounced in every aspect by Sekiun Yūsen (1677–?), a student of Dokuan Genkō (1630–98), who had been Dōhaku's great ally in the reform movement. Sekiun's position was very similar to the standard Chinese view, which might be explained at least in part by the fact that his teacher, Dokuan, was so close to Yinyuan's predecessor in Nagasaki, Daozhe Zhaoyuan (1602–62), that Dokuan was entrusted with the Chinese master's ritual implements (symbolizing his teaching authority) when he returned to China in 1658. Despite the friendship of his teacher with Dōhaku, in Sekiun's *Sōrin Yakuju*, printed in 1719, he followed the Chinese model of precepts (i.e., no special precepts for Zen) and emphasized the importance of following the precepts as an integral part of progress on the path.²⁵ Sekiun was a Sōtō monk, but he later took full precepts with a Shingon monk who was involved in the precepts revival of Shingon. Sekiun quite correctly wrote that Dōhaku's assertion about Zen precepts being lost was untenable in view of the fact that the standard Pure Rules texts (*shingi*) of the lineage clearly indicate that the full precepts are to be administered, followed by bodhisattva precepts.

Another major Sōtō figure of this time, Tenkei Denson (1648–1753), also took full precepts from the same lineage of Shingon teachers and held the same basic position as Sekiun. However, even Tenkei's own lineage did not continue to support this position, and Genrō Ōryū (1720–1813), although a member of the Tenkei lineage, argued in his *Ittsui Saiga* for using only Dōgen's precepts.²⁶

Menzan's Middle Way

It is into this very confused and highly polemical situation that Menzan issued his voluminous and enormously learned tomes. Menzan is arguably the most influential and certainly the most erudite and prolific writer of the Sōtō reformers of this era. Although he grew up amid Sōtō priests who were strongly influenced by Ōbaku, he never took their precepts or trained in Ōbaku temples. Indeed he spent much of his life trying to eliminate Ōbaku influence, which he regarded as deviations from Dōgen and hence improper for a reformed Sōtō school. Menzan presided over assemblies in which he lectured on the precepts and conferred the precepts upon hundreds of people who had assembled for that purpose. In his three-volume major work on the precepts, *Busso Shōden Daikaiketsu* (1724), he asserted that the procedure Dōgen received from Rujing was to administer the novice precepts (*shamikai*), followed by the bodhisattva precepts, and that the full precepts had never been used in the lineage of Rujing.²⁷ The precepts are also to be given a second time, with full explanation in the abbot's room, when dharma transmission is bestowed to recognize the status of attainment as a teacher. Menzan relied on the *Busso Shōden Bosatsukai Kyōju Kaimon* and the *Busso Shōden Bosatsukai Sahō* as the sources of the early modern consensus on Dōgen's precepts.

However, Menzan also used another, much more problematic text that he had previously collated from various manuscripts, the *Eihei Soshi Tokudo Ryaku Sahō* (1744), also known as the *Shukke Ryaku Sahōmon* (1744).²⁸ He published this text as Dōgen's instructions for ordination, but now it seems unlikely that the text can be accepted as coming from Dōgen. It has a different series of precepts than the other texts mentioned earlier, and there are several different extant manuscript versions with different content, none of which is earlier than the fifteenth century.²⁹ At the time it was not clear which texts were authentic, and the rejection of Menzan's position did not depend on that question but rather on how the factions wanted precepts to be used, or not used, in the life of the lineage. Menzan did use texts that can no longer be accepted as supporting his choice of precepts, but his arguments about the meaning and use of precepts still stand.

Much later, in the short and accessible *Tokudo Wakumon*, Menzan stresses that the novice precepts are a necessary part of the ordination of monks because the bodhisattva precepts were concerned with the mind of awakening, and gave no guidance concerning the rules of proper conduct for monks.³⁰ It is also noteworthy that Menzan refers in this text to Eisai for authority for his assertion of the importance of upholding (not just receiving) the precepts.³¹ He also addresses the problem of to what degree Dōgen is following the

Chanyuan Qingqui (Jp. *Zen'en shingi*), the standard set of Pure Rules for Zen monastics.³² As Menzan and everyone else had come to recognize, Dōgen had not explicitly directed that the novice precepts should be taken. In the “Jukai” chapter, Dōgen quoted the *Chanyuan Qingqui* for his authority, as usual, but he ignored (even though he correctly quoted it) the part about taking the novice and full precepts.³³ Dōgen’s extended discussion and detailed list of precepts is concerned only with the set of sixteen (now standard in Sōtō), inexplicably ignoring the other precepts in the passage he just quoted. Menzan’s position was that Dōgen assumed that no further detail was necessary and that the precepts would be taken as usual. This was soon contested by Gyakusui Tōryū (1684–1766) of Dōhaku’s lineage. In his *Tokudo Wakumon Bengishō* (1755), he claimed that there was a transmission from Jakuen (who was Chinese), which included the novice precepts and that Menzan mistook this Jakuen lineage ceremony for Dōgen’s.³⁴ In any event, unless further manuscripts come to light, the question of the authenticity of this *Eihei Soshi Tokudo Ryaku Sahō* edition is doubtful, and on the basis of current evidence it seems that in this case Menzan was following the general Buddhist tradition more closely than he was following Dōgen’s teachings.

Meaning of Precepts

I come back to what one might expect to be the main point regarding precepts: What happens after the precepts are received and what role does receiving the precepts play in the life of practice, whether of the laity or clerics? In mainstream Chinese Buddhism, and also in Eisai’s writings (for example), the precepts are an all-important part, but only a part, of Buddhist practice. They are the crucial initial step upon which the later practices of meditation and wisdom depend. The other viewpoint holds that taking the precepts in some sense completes practice, which is what came to be the Sōtō position under the name of the unity of Zen and the precepts (*zenkai itchi*). This view is very similar to the Tendai notion that precepts are expressions of innate buddha-nature (*bushshō*). The roots of this idea date back to the time of Saichō and his student Kōjō and were later developed in the Tendai tradition, until in Dōgen’s time there were discussions of the precepts as the way to immediately realize buddhahood, indeed a way superior to meditation.³⁵ This view is also seen in *Zenkaiki* (1325) by the celebrated Rinzai monk Kokan Shiren (1278–1346).³⁶

Although something like this notion can be seen as early as in the *Platform Sutra*, the idea becomes of central concern to Sōtō school writers in the

Edo period, who tend to equate the formless precepts of the *Platform Sutra* with their current Zen precepts. See, for example, Menzan's *Jakushū Eifuku Oshō Sekkai* (1752).³⁷ That is not to say, however, that this was a new idea in Sōtō: from the thirteenth century onward precepts were used to ordain lay people and even ghosts, who were thereby transformed without the need for further cultivation.³⁸ Despite its long pedigree, this use of precepts as a kind of initiation into a sacred lineage conveying immediate results (instead of precepts as either rules to follow or a change of status opening the opportunity for practice) was still controversial. In the Tokugawa period Sōtō writers were sharply divided on the question of whether to understand the precepts as this kind of initiation that entailed immediate results or as the basis of beginning to practice.

Although Dōhaku championed Dōgen's unique way, he did not accept the idea of the unity of Zen and the precepts. He maintained that precepts were in a secondary position to Zen; that is to say, they were a necessary condition but not in themselves the ultimate. Menzan held largely the same view. In general Menzan took the position that, as important as it was to take the precepts, the taking was a confirmation of practice, not its completion. Menzan's general attitudes are plainly laid out in his *Jakushū Eifuku Oshō Sekkai*, which are his lectures delivered in 1752 during a seven-day precepts assembly attended by six hundred people, including clerics and male and female laity.³⁹ Although he refers the audience to his recently printed *Busso Shōden Daikaiketsu* for the detailed evidence, he emphasizes very clearly that for all their importance, the precepts are only one of the three main parts of the triad of precepts, meditation, and wisdom, likening them to the three legs of a pot.⁴⁰ Menzan also emphasizes that the ceremony for monks should not be confused with the precepts assembly ceremony, which is for both monks and laity of both sexes.⁴¹ Further the conferring of precepts as done in these ceremonies should not be confused with the transmission of precepts (*denkai*) done only in the private dharma-transmission ceremony. Contrary to the tendency seen in the medieval precepts assemblies, where it was believed that to receive the precepts was to attain buddhahood, Menzan emphasizes the different uses of the precepts for the two groups of people.

After Menzan, however, the trend was strongly toward the unity of Zen and precepts. Banjin Dōtan (1698–1775) based his position on the *Bonmōkyōryakushō* (1309), written in the first generation after Dōgen.⁴² This all-important text explains Dōgen's *Busso Shōden Kyōjukaimon* in terms that make it clear that he regarded the precepts as not being bound by textual details and moral prescriptions but entailed awakening itself.⁴³ On the basis of his reading of this commentary Banjin claimed that Dōgen's view was that taking the precepts

entailed buddhahood and that both Zen and the precepts were the eye of the true dharma. The question of following the precepts is of little importance; it is the ceremony of the precepts that entails the transformation.

For Banjin the transmission from the Buddha himself to Mahakasyapa was the basis for authority in the question of precepts, not Bodhidharma, much less any texts of mainstream Buddhism. Banjin's *Busso Shōden Zenkaishō* (1758) opens with an unusual list of rules, specifying that it is not to be shown outside of the group, and ends with the admonition that the blocks from which it was printed must be destroyed after fifteen years.⁴⁴ The preface opens with the statement that Zen and precepts are but two names for the true teaching passed down from the Tathagata to the Sōtō school. The content is simply parts of the *Bonmōkyōryakushō* that explain Dōgen's *Kyōju Kaimon*, leaving out the parts that discuss the remaining forty-eight precepts of the *Brahma's Net Sutra*. Despite the opening prohibitions and the fact that it is only a selection from a text that itself was a commentary, it was chosen to be included in the Taishō canon.⁴⁵

The Modern Zen Precepts Assembly at Eiheiiji

This transcendental view of the precepts as the text of an initiation or consecration ceremony is the position that came to prevail in Japanese Sōtō. The idea that simply participating in a ceremony is all it takes to become a buddha is not simply a fancy way of speaking. As can be clearly seen in the modern precepts assembly ceremony, which I describe below, that is exactly what is meant. Following the interpretation of Banjin, the precepts are not something to be carefully followed. Instead of considering how to observe the precepts in one's everyday life, one somehow keeps them without keeping them. I will skip over the intervening developments, as well as how this understanding was propagated in the modern era via the *Shushōgi*.⁴⁶ Instead I turn now to the annual precepts assembly at Eiheiiji, the temple most closely identified with Dōgen and hence the touchstone for orthodoxy. This ceremony shows clearly the power of Banjin's position in uniting disparate groups of Sōtō followers but also highlights to what degree the precepts are detached from ethical considerations. I will describe events primarily from the viewpoint of a participant by bringing in comments from other participants and my own observations as a lay participant.

The precepts assembly lasts one full week but in other respects is utterly different from the traditional Chinese-style assemblies held by Ōbaku leaders in the seventeenth century. The precept list is the group of sixteen, as taught

by Dōgen, and the event is open to participants, living or dead, with very little restriction. The deceased can participate by proxy and receive a lineage chart just as if they had been there. About two hundred people come for the week, with both men and women well represented, ranging in age from college students to retirees. Participants are often from Sōtō temple lay families, but people from other Buddhist denominations and others with no fixed affiliation are welcome. A significant minority come every year either to Eihei-ji or to another Sōtō precepts assembly. Attendance is arranged by a simple application and the payment of a modest fee for room and board.

The ordinands (*kaishi*) live together for the week in one room, divided roughly in half, with men on one side and women on the other, leaving a wide gap in the middle in front of the altar. This means that there is exactly one tatami mat per person for sleeping, with the mats on all four sides occupied by fellow ordinands. Earplugs are highly recommended. All personal belongings are kept in rough wooden shelves around the edges of the hall. There is one toilet facility immediately adjacent, shared by men and women. The only concession to modesty is a small temporary hut to be used by women (only) for changing clothes.

This same hall is used not only for sleeping but also for eating and for many of the lectures given to the ordinands. All of the necessary arrangements of the room for meals, sleeping, and ceremonies, as well as meal clean-up, are done not by the ordinands but by the young monks in training, who are members of the great assembly (*daishū*) living in the nearby training hall. Their usual routine is to eat, sleep, and meditate in the monks' hall (*sōdō*), not unlike what the ordinands do during this week. At 9 p.m., when the ordinands return from their final evening lecture (held in a nearby modern Japanese-style tatami room), the monks have paved the hall with sleeping mats and pillows. The ordinands file into the room in separate parallel rows of men and women and simply take the bed position they stop at. When all have found their place for the night, they are released to affix their sheet and pillow case. After arising before 3 a.m., they go to another hall for morning meditation, and the bedding is put away by the monks.

This same hall, where ordinands sleep, eat, and have their piles of personal stuff, is the dharma hall (*hattō*), the main ceremonial hall of this most famous of Japanese training temples. This means that they get to see the daily round of ceremonies of the notables of the Sōtō sect and that they (and their disorderly stacks of junk) get to be seen by the unceasing flow of tourists, some in their Sunday best and others in their latest hip-hop apparel. The center of the room is an enormous main altar, behind which are the ashes of Dōgen, and it is this altar that is the focus of the week's activities, both for the ordinands and

the monks, as well as the tourists, for whom space is somehow made in the already full hall. The more than one hundred monks in training of course have to participate in some of the daily services, but most of their time is devoted to looking after the needs of the ordinands. There is an approximately equal number of more senior clerics who are in some way or other teaching or taking care of the ordinands. This is all taking place in the midst of the usual flow of visitors to Eihei-ji. It is not exactly a time of quiet retreat, but the ordinands display an impressive degree of quiet discipline and attentiveness.

The daily routine begins with a 2:50 a.m. wake-up, followed by a twenty-minute period of seated meditation, most of which is taken up with explanations about how to do meditation. The rest of the day is spent in various ways. First there are talks by either the Precepts Explaining Teacher (*sekkaishi*) or by an invited cleric flown in for the day from as far away as Hokkaido. Although the talks are ostensibly concerned with the precepts, in the ceremony I participated in they were mostly some variety of uplifting popular light stories with occasional Buddhist homilies and a brief summary of the life of Dōgen. Almost nothing was presented about the meaning of the ceremonies or about how to follow the precepts. Much of the remaining time is spent chanting the liturgy of the dharma hall or just watching from the edges. A few of the ordinands know the chants, but most of them do not even try to follow along in the handbook that is presented to each at the reception area. Several times each day there is group practice in the Sōtō slow melodic chanting (*baika ryūei sankā*), which has become very popular among some Sōtō groups. The text we chanted was the “Hymn to Receiving the Precepts” (“Ōjukai Gowasan”), led by young clerics. This is one activity where real training took place. To round out these events, twice a day for some twenty minutes the ordinands were led in a very slow procession around Eihei-ji, chanting (in *baika* style), “Homage to the original teacher Sakyamuni the Tathagata” (*namu honshi shaka nyorai*). These activities left time only for eating and a daily afternoon bath.

For the ordinands as well as the other people visiting and those living in the temple complex, the focus of attention was the head of Eihei-ji, which at the time of my visit was Abbot Miyazaki, universally referred to simply as Zen Master (Zenji sama). He was 104 and was rolled into the hall in an elaborate wheelchair, from which he conducted most ceremonies. He spoke without notes, slowly and softly. He gave short talks of up to ten minutes in the dharma hall, usually speaking to the ordinands about the meaning of what they were doing, teaching that Zen and the precepts are one and the same and that to receive the precepts is to become a buddha. In the ceremonies of the last two days, he repeated this message again and again.

The evening of the next to the last full day is the repentance ceremony (*sangeshiki*), for which the women make themselves up and dress in the formal clothes they have been holding in reserve. The ordinands are assembled in the dharma hall, joined by the monks in training, who will also be receiving the precepts. The hall has been completely curtained off with red cloth, forming an enclosed space around the altar with a pathway to an adjoining room. The ordinands are instructed in the procedure and then led in single file, in the order of the names in the registry, into a room adjoining the dharma hall. The entire route is lined with red cloth and dimly lit, in part with real candles. As each ordinand approaches the abbot, who is surrounded by all the major teachers of the assembly, he or she is handed a small slip of paper upon which is written “Minor infractions are endless” (*shōzai muryō*), which he or she then hands to the abbot as the ordinand chants this same phrase. This is the one time that the ordinand is required to give a solo performance, to say something for himself or herself; everything else is done as a group. The slip of paper is added to the growing mound in front of the abbot.

After all the ordinands have made this acknowledgment of their transgressions to the abbot and reassembled in the dharma hall, the abbot returns to the hall. The register containing the names of the ordinands is burned before the abbot in a brazier, and the abbot tells the ordinands that their transgressions have been entrusted to him and that he warrants, with his full authority, that those transgressions have been consumed in this fire.

The quiet and solemn nature of the ceremony is suddenly broken by very loud chants, ringing of hand bells, and shaking of staves as the assembly of clerics forms a circle and circumambulates the assembly of ordinands. They stop every twenty paces or so and bow to the ordinands in the center, and then take off again at a clip while chanting loudly, “Homage to the Original Teacher Sakyamuni Buddha” (*namu honshi shakamuni butsu*). The contrast with the solemn stillness that prevailed up until then is startling, and people are clearly very moved. Several of the ordinands tell me that they feel a great weight has been taken from them by the ceremony.

The following morning the abbot tells us that we have become buddha (*jōbutsu*) due to the connection made in this ceremony, and that he never tires of the great joy of this occasion. The morning lecture includes for the first time a few details about the precepts to a very tired but happy group of ordinands, of which perhaps half appear to be asleep. The mood of the group is indeed as if a cloud has been lifted. People are very cheerful and for the first time chat animatedly in the breaks between events. They again dress in their finest for

the final evening ceremony, the receiving of the precepts along with the lineage certificate (*kechimyaku*) containing their Buddhist name. For those who have already participated in such a ceremony, their previous precept name (*kaimyō*) is used, but for others the abbot selects a name.

The central altar is again partitioned off with red curtains, and we are again presented to the abbot in the order of the name registry, separated into the usual four groups of male and female, cleric and lay. After many preliminary ceremonials, the ordinands approach the abbot, who is seated upon the altar with two brushes which he dips in water and then uses to anoint the heads of the ordinands, two at a time, leaning down from his position upon the altar. When all have been anointed, the abbot recites the precepts, and after each group the ordinands recite together, "I will preserve them well." At the end of this part the abbot tells the ordinands that from now on they begin again, living as a buddha, and that somehow they will keep the precepts even if they do not keep them.

Next the ordinands ascend to the center of the altar in groups of thirty. This is the main altar of the main hall, in the back of which are the ashes of Dōgen, a space usually reserved for the Zen Master and the statue of the Buddha. The assembled teachers circumambulate each group while shaking their staff and chanting that the ordinands have entered the rank of the buddhas, a position equal to that of the great awakening. After this has been done for each group, the ordinands approach the altar and receive their certificate, wrapped in a paper binder with their secular name on the outside. After a formal display of the lineage chart that all have just received, the ordinands repair to a nearby room where the certificates for the deceased ordinands (*mōkai*) are distributed to those who have arranged to have this done for their departed relatives. About one third of the participants have arranged for this. To everyone's evident relief we are told we can sleep in (until 3:40 a.m.), which is good because everyone is so excited and talkative that it takes some time before sleep descends.

After the usual morning ceremonies and a round of formal thanks, the assembly is dissolved and people return to their homes with an invitation to come back again as many times as they like. This ceremony clearly follows the line of thought that flows from Banjin's teaching. The ceremony itself is a complete religious event, which can be repeated, and yet one from which there can be no retreat, no defeat. Although the manual that was distributed to everyone at the beginning clearly says that to receive the precepts is to become a disciple of the Buddha, the ordinands have themselves become Buddha. They go forth in a new life, unburdened by either their past transgressions or the concern of trying to live up to a new standard.

North American Sōtō Zen Precept Assemblies

As might be expected, the Sōtō Mission temples in North America have precepts assemblies that follow closely the official head temple model. Zenshūji in Los Angeles has held five-day events that followed the same basic schedule as Eihei-ji. According to the manual prepared for the occasion, the rituals include *baika* chanting, burning of the registry of names, and ascending the altar.

On the other hand, there are a number of independent Sōtō lineages that have developed in North America, which often primarily follow the lead of their own teachers. Even if those teachers are fully recognized by the Japanese hierarchy, they may not emphasize the teachings as understood by the mainstream Sōtō school. I will discuss only the lineage founded by Suzuki Shunryū in San Francisco. In his lectures about the precepts Suzuki clearly follows the idea of *zenkai itchi*, the unity of Zen and the precepts: “When I say precepts, what you will think of is something like Ten Commandments or grave prohibitory precepts. But Zen precepts are not like that. To start with, Zen precepts means to understand zazen. So another interpretation of zazen is precepts.”⁴⁷ However, this community has come to see the precepts as an aid to deepening one’s commitment and expressing one’s intention to follow a more Buddhist style of life. In this aspect the style of this American Sōtō group is much closer to the practice advocated by Menzan and other, more mainstream thinkers of the Tokugawa. The belief that we are already Buddha is acknowledged in the beginning of the ceremony with the phrase “In faith that we are Buddha we enter Buddha’s Way,” but the focus is on the meaning of the precepts and on how to follow them.

For American Sōtō Buddhists, who are seldom born into a Buddhist family with ties to a particular lineage, receiving the precepts has become more like a rite of passage. Students must first develop a personal relationship with a Zen teacher and receive the teacher’s permission to participate in a precepts ceremony. They must also sew their own miniature version of Buddha’s robe, worn hung from the neck (*ryakusu*). This does not play a role in the mainstream Japanese Sōtō practice done at Eihei-ji, but there are some Japanese Sōtō groups that follow a similar practice.⁴⁸ Before the ceremony takes place the ordinands are expected to attend classes about the precepts and to deepen their understanding and commitment. These preparations usually take several months, though they can take even longer.

Unlike the week-long event at Eihei-ji, the precepts assembly itself is very short, usually one hour or so, though it may be held at the same time as another event, such as a weekend meditation retreat. The elaborate repentance

and burning of the registry is compressed into a simple recitation of the repentance verse (*sangemon*), the same used in everyday ritual. The elaborate ritual preparations of the site for the ceremony done by the Japanese Sōtō school are absent. The repentance verse is immediately followed by the receiving of the precepts, and then the ordinands are presented with both their lineage certificate (as at Eiheiiji) and also with the *rakusu* they have sewn, which has now been inscribed with their Buddhist name. There is no mounting of the altar, nor is there provision for ordination being received by the deceased.

When Eisai was working to establish the Zen lineage upon his return to Japan, he stressed the role of precepts in Zen, probably in response to a lack of such concern in much of Japanese Buddhism. He clearly meant following the precepts and taking the details seriously, so much so that Zen was also known as the Precepts School. The modern Sōtō school also has an idea of the importance of precepts, but it is expressed in the notion of the unity of Zen and the precepts, which has come to mean that taking the precepts trumps everything else. As discussed earlier, this position has an impeccable pedigree and has no doubt been of great importance to the social position of the school; the all-important funeral rites depend upon the idea of transforming the deceased through the conferring of precepts. With this in mind, one could make a case that the modern Sōtō lineage could also be called the Precepts School. Within a single name, however, is contained an enormous disparity of meaning.

Into this gulf steps the new American lineages, determined to both find their own way and also to follow the teachings of the lineage. Just as the set of precepts used by Dōgen is a new list out of old elements, so the American precepts practice makes something quite new out of very old elements. Although they keep Dōgen's list of precepts (certainly not following Menzan's insistence on the novice precepts), they approach precepts in a way quite different from their Japanese teachers: they emphasize personal commitment to attempt to follow the precepts in their own lives. This way, however, is much closer to the old ideas of mainstream Buddhism than it is to how Eiheiiji takes what Dōgen wrote about precepts. Whether or not Menzan would have been pleased is impossible to know, but his example of precepts being only one of the three legs of the Buddhist life clearly applies much more to Zen practice at San Francisco Zen Center than at Eiheiiji.

NOTES

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