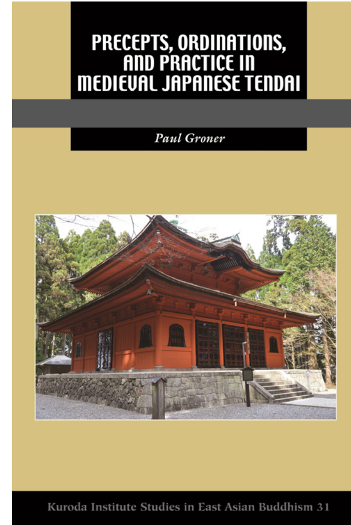
Book Review



Groner, Paul. *Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice in Medieval Japanese Tendai.* Honolulu: University of Hawaiʻi Press, 2023 Pp. 400. Hardcover, USD $68.00; Paperback $20.00

Paul Groner, one of the best-known scholars of Tendai 天台 Buddhism outside of Japan, has over the years published a number of articles on precepts within and outside the Tendai school. This volume collects twelve of those articles, revised for the occasion, with the addition of an introduction and a conclusion. Unlike Groner's previous works, *Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice in Medieval Japanese Tendai*[1] takes a thematic approach, one that lacks a clearly defined narrative arc, to tackle a number of issues that should be of concern to any scholar of Japanese Buddhism; among them: why is Buddhism in Japan today so different from the rest of East Asia? What are the historical contingencies that have led to the laxity in the observance of the precepts by Japanese monks? This collection of essays, first and foremost a study in discourses on precepts and ordinations within medieval Tendai, takes those questions and con-

[1] Hereafter abbreviated as *Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice.* Numbers in parentheses in the body of the text of this review refer to page numbers of Groner's book.

cerns as its starting point. While Groner makes an attempt to bridge the temporal gap that separates his centre of attention from the modern period in the final chapter, his study illuminates a segment of Japanese history in which, despite their perceived (and, one might say, assumed) laxity, Tendai monks showed great concern towards the precepts, and composed doctrinal and ritual texts to clarify how they were to be understood, conferred, and maintained. Groner's essays deal with a number of figures, lesser and well-known, to highlight the complexity of these conversations within Tendai, a school that, for most of the period covered in this book, constituted a major cultural and social force in Japan. At fourteen chapters and over three hundred pages, this expansive collection of essays is challenging to review. In the rest of this essay, I will therefore unequally focus on a number of thematic clusters, figures, and chapters, to highlight, without any claims of exhaustivity, some of what I perceive as the main contributions of this work to our understanding of medieval Buddhism and the Tendai school. I will also attempt, in the second part, to offer new avenues of research with regard to the precepts and ordinations in medieval Japan.

In the introductory chapter, Groner signposts some motifs that will recur in the rest of the collection. He, for instance, presents a well-known quote from the *Fanwang jing*,[2] which famously declares: 'When sentient beings receive the Buddha's precepts, they immediately enter the ranks of the buddhas. Their rank is the same as the great enlightened ones. They are truly the children of the Buddha' (2). While one would be tempted to see ordination merely as a rite of passage leading to the induction into a group—the monastic community and, more specifically, the Tendai school—this passage highlights that, while at a practical level that might be true, there were symbolic associations of a higher order tied to it. They mark, in Groner's words, 'changes in religious status' (5). The implication

[2] Despite the common English translation 'Brahmā's Net Sūtra' for the title of the sūtra in question, I will refer to it as *Fanwang jing* through this review on the basis of Funayama Tōru's analysis of the meaning of its title. See below for a brief discussion of his position.

of this understanding constitutes an important thematic strand that runs through the book, one that is present in his book on Saichō 最澄 (766 or 767–822) but is more fully developed and more broadly examined here. This is one of the main contributions of these essays, as they attempt to solve from multiple angles an ethical conundrum: if, once ordained, we join the rank of the buddhas, what need is there for continued self-cultivation, moral conduct, and ritual propriety? This is a question that's at the heart of much of Mahāyāna—one can, for instance, find numerous Chan, Sŏn and Zen writers tackling the same question. Groner provides a number of strikingly diverse Tendai approaches to this question, ranging from seemingly unfazed acceptance to demands for renewal, more or less radical.

In this introduction, Groner also introduces (without solving) an important terminological ambiguity: he writes that 'the conferral of precepts was called ordination, literally conferring or receiving the precepts (*jukai*).' (4) As I will discuss more fully in the second part of this essay, however, precept conferral and ordination are not equivalent, in particular when those terms are used in a context that is not monastic. While it is true that Groner is writing about monks, and more specifically about Tendai monks, the distinction between precept conferral and ordination is crucial in understanding certain social dynamics that began to spread precisely in the period under examination in this book.

In chapter two, Groner kick-starts his examination of the precepts in Japan by looking at the scripture whose title is usually translated into English as *Brahmā's Net Sūtra* (Ch. *Fanwang jing*, Jp. *Bonmōkyō* 梵網経), a short but extremely influential Mahāyāna sūtra. While technically consisting of two fascicles, the second (dealing with the precepts) would play an important role in the history of East Asian Buddhism, attracting the attention of exegetes and practitioners because of its conscious attempt to articulate monastic regulations from a Mahāyāna perspective specifically for bodhisattva practitioners. While purported to be the translation of an Indian scripture, the *Fanwang jing* is now believed to have been compiled in China, likely sometime in the fourth century, on the basis of a number of other Mahāyāna scriptures and Vinaya translations (16–17). Groner notes that the content of the *Fanwang jing* precepts seems to be

intended for both ordained monastic and lay practitioners—for instance, the restrictions on killing, stealing, and illicit sexual activity would have applied to both—but that commentators' views on the issue of whom the precepts were meant for varied significantly (18). This is an important suggestion, one that has important implications on how the precepts would later be seen in Japanese Tendai. In fact, Saichō saw these as the only precepts a fully ordained Tendai monk was expected to receive and uphold, but this raises an important question: if the same set of precepts can be conferred to both lay followers and monastics, where does the difference between the two lie? Saichō saw the *Fanwang jing* precepts as a higher pedigree compared to traditional 'Hinayāna' precepts; they were preached by Vairocana, the cosmic buddha who does the preaching in the Fanwang jing, but adopting them for full ordinations exposed him to criticism from his opponents based in the Nara schools. Fully ordained Tendai monks would be, after all, little more than lay practitioners (23). Saichō responded in a number of ways, and Groner notes that Saichō observed that the sūtra called for members of the monastic community to shave their head and wear robes—a reversal of the French saying 'l'habit ne fait pas le moine'. Doesn't the robe make the monk, after all? Along these lines, Groner further observes that one of the distinguishing characteristics of medieval Tendai discourses on the precepts is that the ceremony during which they are conferred is more important than the actual precepts that are conferred (30).[3]

As critics of the Tendai approach (and Groner himself) notice, the *Fanwang jing* included very little in terms of practical instructions on how to carry out rituals, perform ordinations, or just be active as members of a community of ordained individuals. Somewhat

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[3] Saichō's other strategies included, for example, pointing out that while monks and laypeople used the same ordination ritual, they wouldn't necessarily receive the same precepts, since personal inclinations determined which of the precepts from the *Fanwang jing* they would receive and observe. As later chapters of Groner's book make clear, the *Fanwang jing* was not consistently seen as the main doctrinal foundation for the conferral of precepts in medieval Tendai, and was at times regarded as inferior to the *Lotus Sūtra* in that regard.

ironically, the descriptions of such activities found in the great exegetes of the Tiantai tradition were often based on the Vinaya, whose influence Saichō had attempted to eliminate. When it started to become clear that Saichō's adoption of the *Fanwang jing* precepts for full ordinations was unique to Japanese Tendai and didn't have correspondence in continental Tiantai, those monks who studied in China in particular attempted to import that system in which the bodhisattva precepts were combined with the Four-part Vinaya 四分律. In a later chapter, Groner focuses on the case of Shunjō 俊芿 (1166–1227), a monk who spent over ten years in China studying Tiantai, Chan, and Vinaya.

Despite the fact that, as the *Fanwang jing* famously declares, 'when sentient beings receive the Buddha's precepts, they immediately enter the ranks of the buddhas', it is clear that Tendai ordinations also function as markers of institutional continuity in the more traditional sense. Groner notes the coexistence of these two aspects, and the tension that existed between them: as he writes, 'ordinations could be used to initiate men into a religious order of monks and encourage people to seriously practice as Saichō had intended. However, Tendai ordinations were also used to suggest that monks, just as they were, were buddhas in a variety of senses' (33–34). This idea was not unique to the *Fanwang jing* and can be found in a number of other Mahāyāna texts, some of which also played an important role in the context of Tendai ordination rituals. In the *Sūtra on the Procedures for Contemplating the Practice of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra* (*Guan Puxian pusa xingfa jing* 観普賢菩薩行法経; in Japan traditionally treated as the capping sūtra of the *Lotus Sūtra*), one sees the idea that while the Vinaya emphasised the acceptance of a candidate into an order of monks, this sūtra marked the admission into the order of buddhas and bodhisattvas. The masters of precepts in that context were not, as in 'Hinayāna' contexts, other monks, but, rather a buddha, Śākyamuni, and two major bodhisattvas, Mañjuśrī and Maitreya (81–82). This marks the bodhisattva precepts and the ceremony during which they were conferred as qualitatively different from anything seen in non-Tendai contexts.

Since scholarship on the *Fanwang jing* is still limited in English, Groner's introduction and, in particular, his weaving of Tendai

themes within a discussion of the content of the sūtra, is of great value, and the chapter functions as a clear introduction to the themes and concerns that are at the heart of *Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice.* There are, however, a couple of considerations I would like to make.[4] In recent years, the sūtra has become the object of sustained scholarly attention, which has resulted in an English translation of the full scripture by Charles Muller and Kenneth Tanaka,[5] and, in Japanese, the monumental work of Funayama Tōru 船山徹. It is important to notice that the first incarnation of Groner's chapter, first published in 1990, precedes both. It's inevitable, despite the author's best intentions, that in its current form the chapter can only accommodate Funayama's findings on a reduced scale, while only Muller's work on the *Exposition of the Sutra of Brahma's Net* (Kr. *Pŏmmanggyŏng kojŏkki* 梵網經古迹記) by T'aehyŏn 太賢, the Silla monk active in the eighth century, is acknowledged in the text.[6] Funayama's critical reconstruction of the oldest ascertainable version of the second fascicle of the sūtra and his analysis of the changes occurring in later versions are a philological tour-de-force that makes virtually all other editions of the text obsolete;[7] his modern Japanese-language translation and annotations highlight his interpretation of critical passages and key expressions, and constitute a precious body of reference for scholars in and outside Japan.[8]

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[4] These considerations have more to do with Groner's discussion of the sūtra than of the Tendai reception and use of the scripture. While these latter issues are, of course, of greater significance to the theme of the book, I hope the reader will not mind a detour.

[5] Muller and Tanaka, trans., *Brahmā's Net Sutra*.

[6] In footnote one of chapter two, Groner recognises some of the limitations that I'm also highlighting. He writes that, 'much of the chapter was written before Funayama Tōru's groundbreaking studies on the *Brahma's Net Sutra* appeared. Rather than rewriting to reflect Funayama's studies, I have let stand those sections that do not disagree with Funayama's work.' (12) As I will notice below, Groner's engagement with Funayama's work seems, however, limited.

[7] Funayama, *Bonmōkyō,* 35–273.

[8] Ibid., 277–327.

On the basis of his philological examination the second fascicle of the sūtra, Funayama also proposes a new translation of its title, which has traditionally been rendered into English as 'Sūtra of Brahma's Net' (or the like), and similarly in other European languages.[9] The new translation he proposes figures prominently on the cover of the book,[10] where *fanwang* (Jp. *bonmō*) is translated as 'pure divinities' netted banners'. While Groner writes that 'the translation of the character bon as "pure" seems justified', he somewhat dismissively adds that 'I am less convinced by the translation of *mō* as "netted [banners]" because I am not sure what it would mean' (12). Despite what this remark may suggest, Funayama devotes a significant amount of space—roughly the first ten pages of Chapter 8—to his justification of this novel translation.[11]

The fact that the title of a scripture might not reflect its content (how many lotuses are there in the *Lotus Sūtra*, after all?) will strike many as of little import, but Funayama's discussion is nuanced, rich, and insightful, and based on a large body of exegetical works. Some of these works also interpreted *fanwang* as 'the net of Brahmā', while others, including Fazang, interpreted the *wang* as a banner carried by the brahmā kings who appear to listen to the preaching of the Buddha. It is curious that the term usually translated as 'Brahmā' only appears once, in a context in which it is clearly not understood as a proper noun (capital-b Brahmā), as it is preceded by 諸, which

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[9] As Funayama, *Bonmōkyō*, 460 notices.

[10] The complete translation of his book's title is given as '*The Scripture of the Pure Divinities' Netted [Banners] (Fawning jing)*, a Mahayana Code for Daily Life in East Asian Buddhism'. A new edition of this book was published in late 2023, with the addition of a new chapter. Since I haven't been able to consult this edition, all references to Funayama's book are to the 2017 edition. Those interested in an introduction to these topics from a less technical point of view can also consult Funayama, *Bonmōkyō no oshie*.

[11] Readers interested in the details of this issue should check Funayama, *Bonmōkyō*, 459–68. Since this is only tangentially related to Groner's book, here I only mean to raise the issue and bring attention to Funayama's position and work.

pluralises it. It should therefore be understood as a lowercase-b brahmā, namely a class or group of devas. While the misunderstanding at the basis of the current English title has a long history in the exegetical traditions of East Asian Buddhism, it raises an interesting question: should established titles of sūtras be changed once there's a scholarly consensus or authoritative position that points in that direction? In particular, the '[netted] banners' in question can also be seen as having implications on the way the title relates to its content: the eyelets of netted banners carried by the brahmā king are as many as the teachings that the Buddha employs to assist and guide sentient beings.[12] While some will undoubtedly disagree with Funayama's position, or even, more fundamentally, with the need to take titles of Buddhist scriptures as anything more than conventional designations, I think Funayama's position deserves attention, as he is also one a restricted number of Japanese scholars who regularly publish and present their work in English.

Annen 安然 (b. 841), a crucial figure in the Tendai conversations concerning the precepts, figures prominently in Chapters 3 and 4. Groner's discussion of Annen is particularly important as Annen is one of the major 'culprits'—according to a number of scholars, including Taga Munehaya 多賀宗隼, Takagi Yutaka 高木豊, and, it would seem, Groner himself—for the decline in monastic discipline within Tendai and, more generally, Japanese Buddhism. Annen's work on the precepts can be understood as a response to attempts led by Enchin 円珍 (814–891), who was at the time the head (*zasu* 座主) of the Tendai school, to regulate the conduct of monks on Mount Hiei 比叡山 more strictly. Despite these attempts, however, it was Annen's position that would carry the day and shape subsequent Tendai views on precepts and ordinations. A work that Annen wrote in 882, the *Futsūju bosatsukai kōshaku* 普通授菩薩戒広釈 [Extensive Commentary on the Universal Bodhisattva Precept Ordination], proved particularly influential.

A full discussion of *Futsūju bosatsukai kōshaku*, to which Chapter 3 is devoted, curiously precedes a synopsis of Annen's life and con-

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12 Funayama, *Bonmōkyō*, 468.

texts, which are discussed in Chapter 4. Annen considered himself a disciple of Ennin 円仁 (794–864), although he doesn't seem to have received much training in esoteric Buddhism and didn't have a particularly positive relationship with Enchin. He also studied under Tankei 湛契, one of Ennin's direct disciples, who, while widely respected both in aristocratic circles and within the Tendai, was laicised because of his violation of the rules against sexual intercourse. This biographical detail is important as it seems to have decisively shaped Annen's views of the precepts and his loose approach to their observance: as Groner writes, 'literal adherence to the precepts was much less important than a monk's attitudes toward them' (59). Another important figure in Annen's life was Henjō 遍照, from whom he received advanced esoteric initiations. Notably, Henjō was a grandson of Emperor Kanmu 桓武天皇 (r. 781–806), and was friendly with Emperor Ninmyō 仁明天皇 (r. 833–850), but after the death of the latter, decided to abandon life at court and undergo the customary twelve-year training period on Mount Hiei. Later, Henjō maintained close ties with the imperial family and prominent aristocratic groups. For instance, he performed ceremonies on behalf of Fujiwara no Takako 藤原高子 (alt. Kōshi, 842–910), the consort of Emperor Seiwa 清和天皇 (r. 858–876) (69), and for the boy who would later become Emperor Yōzei 陽成天皇 (r. 876–884) (70). He was granted two temples: first Unrin'in 雲林院, and later Gangyōji 元慶寺, which received special status as a *jōgakuji* 定額寺 (officially designated temple). Henjō was granted three yearly ordinands, two in esoteric traditions and one in the study of Tiantai. He would undergo a period of training of six years—half the time compared to Tendai monks of Mount Hiei. Most importantly, Henjō pursued rapprochement with the Buddhist institutions in Nara, advocated to have Gangyōji monks participate in the prestigious annual assembly on the *Yuimakyō* 維摩経 (Skt. *Vīmalakirti Sūtra*), and became the first Tendai monk to be appointed to the *Sōgō* 僧綱 (Office of Monastic Affairs), where he would eventually be appointed to the highest position of *sōjō* 僧正.

These experiences—Tankei's laicisation, Henjō's connection with the imperial family and Heian aristocracy, and the training in esoteric Buddhism that he received from both—played a role in shaping

Annen's views of the precepts, and Groner weaves these strands into a compelling narrative. He provides an abundance of detail when discussing the lives of Tankei, Annen and, in particular, Henjō, but they never seem gratuitous. He also discusses episodes that, when placed in different contexts, could highlight understudied aspects of medieval Japanese Buddhist thought and practice. For instance, the importance of dreams emerges quite forcefully in Groner's examination of the relationship between Annen and Ennin. Annen had been unable to receive advanced esoteric initiations from Ennin while he was alive, and this is obviously something that troubled him. Dreams, however, filled the gaps in the relationship, so to speak—Annen writes of a dream encounter in which Ennin taught him mudrās and dhāranīs that would later be proven accurate; in another case, Ennin criticised Enchin's mudrās for being 'very ugly' (58). As the 'dream relationship' between Annen and Ennin highlights, dreams played a very important role both in Buddhism and lay society, among practically oriented monks as well as exegetes and scholar monks.[13]

On the basis of these models and precedents, Annen's view of the precepts constitutes a significant departure from Saichō's model. Groner notices how, for instance, instead of using the precepts in the *Fanwang jing* as references for monastic conduct, he emphasised those passages of the scripture that dealt with buddha-nature (42), an approach that he also similarly applied to the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Adornment Sūtra* (*Pusa yingluo benye jing* 菩薩瓔珞本業経). Precepts could be violated whenever it was deemed necessary or

[13] Another episode that highlights the importance of dreams is found in Groner's discussion of Kōen in chapter eight. Kōen had a dream in which an old monk confirmed his understanding of the essence of the precepts ('The significance of the precepts lies in using the phenomenal to master Principle; it is the observance of the prohibitions on no killing and no stealing. If one focuses on the letter of the rules and their observance, then one will master the origins of the Principle and will return to the direct path *(jikidō* 直道) to enlightenment. Thus the Buddha compiled the ten major and forty-eight minor rules'). The old monk in the dream was Saichō, and this crucial episode was for Kōen a confirmation of the fact that his views were in accordance with the founder of Tendai (151–52).

opportune, an interpretation that reduced them to mere expedients. In Annen's own words (and Groner's translation), 'thus even if they are not the rules of the true vehicle, one should observe the rules of the provisional, Hīnayāna, human, and deity vehicles. If one does not observe all of these, he will cause others to despise [them], fail to benefit others, and cause them to drop into bad rebirths' (45). The propriety of one's actions (and their accordance with the precepts) is thus seen as defined by their contexts. An important implication of this attitude, as Groner repeatedly (and aptly) stresses, is that the precepts lose their prescriptive value and cease to function as formal guidance for monastic behaviour. What, then, provides discipline and guidance? Groner writes that 'sets of rules for particular monasteries or the Tendai School sometimes filled this role but depended on a strong abbot or chief prelate of the Tendai School for their implementation' (53), but, unfortunately, the rest of *Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice* offers little in this sense, and it's hard to get a sense of what, concretely and extensively, such arrangements might have looked like.[14] I will discuss this issue more extensively later in this review, but Groner's emphasis on the discursive domain renders his treatment of the precepts highly abstract. There is plenty said on what monks were writing about the precepts, but little on what they were actually doing with them.

If Annen, in Groner's telling, is the main culprit of the general disregard for precepts we see in Tendai, other figures emerge as more invested in preserving at least a modicum of attention to monastic regulations. Two in particular are examined in detail: Jitsudō Ninkū 実導仁空, affiliated with both Tendai and the Seizan 西山 lineage founded by Shōkū 証空 (1177–1247), a disciple of Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212); and Kōen 興円 (1262–1317), of the Kurodani 黒谷 branch of Tendai, who attempted a revival of the precepts by going back to Saichō.

[14] In chapter ten, Groner does discuss some examples from a set of rules written by Ninkū for monks at Rozanji, and that he later revised at Sangoji. The scope is, however, quite limited, as Groner is interested in how monks were trained. See in particular 224–25.

Ninkū emerges as a particular interesting figure, first of all because of his 'divided' allegiance. He was a Tendai monk who was also affiliated with the Pure Land tradition that saw Hōnen as its founder and was understood as a rival tradition, especially in its more radical expressions. Ninkū, however, shared with other Tendai thinkers a strong interest in the bodhisattva precepts of the *Fanwang jing*, and wrote a sub-commentary on the *Pusajie yi ji* 菩薩戒儀記 [Record of the Meaning of the Bodhisattva Precepts] attributed to Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597), which was itself a commentary on the *Fanwang jing*. Emphasis on this particular commentary was passed on to Ninkū, we are told, via a storied line of transmission. Ninkū, in fact, saw himself as part of a lineage that originated with Hōnen, who transmitted his teaching on the *Pusajie yi ji* exclusively to Shōkū, the traditional founder of the Seizan branch of the Pure Land tradition; this would have then reached Ninkū's own teacher, Jidō Kōkū 示導康空 (1286–1346) (210; 240–41). The appearance of Hōnen here is important, as his position on the precepts is usually reduced to his later writings in which the upholding of the precepts was seen as merely ancillary to the practice of the *nenbutsu* 念仏. Hōnen had been a Tendai monk and, as a number of studies have shown, despite his claim that the precepts were irrelevant to one's salvation and rebirth in the Pure Land of Amida 阿弥陀, he upheld the precepts his entire life. I will return to Hōnen and some related topics in the last part of this review.

Ninkū's interpretation of the *Fanwang jing* went against more mainstream Tendai views on the precepts. While Annen and his followers had emphasised those passages in the scripture that discussed buddha-nature and the transformational power of the precepts, Ninkū seems to have taken a narrower and more literal approach, one in which the bodhisattva precepts of the *Fanwang jing* could actually be used as rules of conduct. Many on Mount Hiei had concluded that as long as the *Lotus Sūtra*, the central scriptural authority of the Tendai school, was upheld, then literal upholding of the bodhisattva precepts was not necessary. Ninkū, however, attempted to reconcile this tradition with a stricter view of the bodhisattva precepts by claiming that the *Fanwang jing* precepts had equal dignity to the *Lotus Sūtra* (215), and by establishing a system that could adjudicate

on violations and impose penalties (216). Groner depicts this new interpretation and application of the precepts as an attempt to establish a new tradition that relies on both Saichō and Zhiyi for authority (223), but how this system would have worked on the ground is (possibly because of limitations in terms of sources?) unclear.[15]

In contrast with Annen's 'universal ordinations' (*tsūju* 通受), Ninkū devised a position that he named 'distinct ordinations and distinct observance' (*betsuju betsuji* 別受別持), in which different sets of precepts were conferred on practitioners at different junctures of their careers. For instance, lay followers were to receive the three jewels and five lay precepts; later on, in order to qualify as novices, they would have to be conferred the ten good precepts (*jūzenkai* 十善戒) (237–38). Fully ordained monks, after a twenty-one-day period of confession, would receive the ten grave and forty-eight minor precepts of the *Fanwang jing* (241). Groner notes that by maintaining the precepts as markers for changes of status, Ninkū adopted some procedural aspects from the Vinaya (32). This is notable because, at the same time, he kept a critical attitude towards those like Shunjō who, after studying and practicing in China, attempted to establish similar ordination procedures in Japan.

Another notable aspect of Ninkū's discussion of the precepts is his mention of *mappō* 末法, the final age of the Dharma in which the world had entered. While the language of the *Fanwang jing*, embraced by Annen and other original enlightenment (*hongaku* 本覚) proponents, is triumphant and stresses the fact that those who receive the precepts join the rank of the buddhas, Ninkū's tone and views are much more subdued. Groner also notices that this is the result of his relationship with the Seizan branch of the Pure Land

[15] Groner does notice that monks getting their ordination under Ninkū would have to go through a twenty-one-day period of confession, presumably held at temples that were supervised by Ninkū, since he did not hold a position on Mount Hiei that would have allowed him to broadly call for a reform of precept conferrals and ordinations at the highest levels of the Tendai school. In addition, monks under his supervision would have to obtain their full ordination at the ordination platform on Mount Hiei (239).

tradition, and of Hōnen's views. He often stressed the importance of precepts for sentient beings living in *mappō* (219), and, in planning the physical space in which they were to be conferred the precepts, he insisted on the presence of an icon of the Buddha and a scripture so that the three jewels could be present in the same space at once. While he himself had received the precepts in front of just the two buddhas at Raigōin 来迎院 in Ōhara 大原 (241), the physical presence of the three jewels was deemed necessary in a ritual intended for the debased sentient beings living in the age of the end of the Dharma (244–45). In other words, I think it's fair to say that Ninkū was not merely offering an alternative view of the precepts and of monastic training, but rather developing a curriculum based on views of human nature permeated with the pessimistic anthropology of Hōnen and his followers. His case—and Groner's extensive, granular analysis—also shows that, from a methodological perspective, defining thinkers and practitioners on the basis of their school affiliation can be misleading. His combination of Tendai ideas and Pure Land ethos resists easy categorisation, a complexity that can also be seen in more famous Tendai reformist monks, for instance Eisai 栄西 (1141–1215); the latter's retrospective identification as the founder of the Rinzai 臨済 school of Zen in Japan further complicates the matter. It should be stressed, in any case, that institutionally Ninkū was a Tendai monk, who resorted to Tendai (and Tiantai) *loci classici* (e.g., Saichō and Zhiyi) to build his own curriculum and approach to the precepts, and who sent monks under his supervision to the platform on Mount Hiei to obtain full ordination.

It is unclear to what extent Ninkū's positions attracted followers (or critics) outside of Rozanji and Sangoji, the temples he led. An intellectual history of Tendai could present Ninkū's position as a response to Annen, but whether this holds true at an institutional level is less obvious. Despite this, Groner repeatedly claims that his study of the precepts within the Tendai school and his attention to minority positions and internal disagreements can be seen as a response to the *kenmitsu taisei* 顕密体制 (exoteric-esoteric regime) theory, first put forward by Kuroda Toshio 黒田俊雄. He claims that the variety of positions on the precepts we see in Tendai shows that Tendai was not a monolithic entity (13, 177, 277); but this position

sounds incongruous. First of all, the '*kenmitsu taisei* theory' is part of a framework that emphasises institutional aspects; while I do believe that many of the positions found in that theory are no longer tenable, even in later revised forms, I'm not persuaded that Groner's study—primarily an intellectual and theological history—can fulfil that function. Groner discusses figures like Ninkū and Kōen at length, but there is no indication that these figures ever occupied any position of prominence within Tendai, nor that they ever managed to accrue followers or influence the laypeople who sponsored them or resorted to their services. Talking of 'Tendai' in the singular form is, naturally, an abstraction that smoothens out differences and that makes conflicts and tensions less visible, but one has to recognise that socially, politically and culturally, some positions were more representative than others. Those positions were not those advocated by the likes of Ninkū or Kōen. A different framework to more accurately understand and evaluate these figures within their own networks of ideas and patronage could have been, in my opinion, even more fruitful and illuminating.

This leads me to some more general reflections on *Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice*, reflections that have less to do with the content of the book than with broader contexts that the book leaves out.[16] After reading Groner's book, one may get the impression that, while discussions on the precepts were lively within Tendai, as well as other traditions (e.g., the revival movements in Nara), laypeople were not really part of this conversation, and that interest in the precepts was merely monastic or scholastic. This is, however, not the case: in the medieval period, the period in which most of Groner's essays take place, the interest in the precepts was indeed extremely high—unprecedented, possibly—as a number of new practices and approaches show.

Anyone who has read *Heike monogatari* 平家物語 [The Tale of

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[16] This and the following paragraphs are based on research included in my doctoral dissertation. In particular, chapter five is devoted to the treatment of precepts and ordinations as a therapeutic device in medieval Japan. See Poletto, *The Culture of Healing*, 287–343.

the Heike] will be familiar with Taira no Kiyomori's 平清盛 (1118–1181) depictions as a warrior in the guise of a Buddhist monk; but long before that, Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1028), the most powerful man in Japan during his lifetime, had also taken the tonsure while remaining active at court. Michinaga's ordination can be seen as an accident—it was likely meant to function as a deathbed practice, similar to a number of other occurrences studied by Japanese and North-American scholars.[17] Michinaga, however, unexpectedly recovered. This episode marks the first known case of a 'lay monk' in the history of Japanese Buddhism—someone who, having received the precepts and having taken the guise of a monk, will nevertheless still be active in the secular world, a 'type' of practitioner often referred to in contemporary sources as *nyūdō* 入道 or *hōshi* 法師. If it is true that the robe makes the monk, as Groner argues in his book, why don't we see accounts (or even passing mentions) of this understanding of the precepts and of ordinations in his book? Michinaga's 'deathbed' ordination in 1019 was conferred to him by Ingen 院源 (951/952–1028), an eminent monk and twenty-sixth head of the Tendai school. He maintained his positions at court until his death, and in official occasions received a treatment that was similar to that reserved to the emperor and his consorts, something that, as it is noted in *Fusō ryakki* 扶桑略記 [Abbreviated Chronicles of Japan], 'after tonsure was a rare example' (出家以後希代之例也).[18]

The existence of 'lay monks' à la Michinaga (and Kiyomori) became increasingly popular starting from the end of the twelfth century (end of the Heian period and beginning of the Kamakura period, according to traditional periodisation). However, there are also other important episodes that define the relationship between the monastic community, their lay patrons and followers, and the conferral of the precepts. I think, for example, of the emergence of

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[17] Katata, 'Ōchō kizoku no shukke nyūdō'; Stone, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment*.

[18] *Fusō ryakki*, entry for Kannin 寛仁 3/5/8, 273. Dates are given in the following format: era name followed by year/month/day. Also cited in Taira, 'Shukke nyūdō to chūsei shakai', 9.

the practice of post-mortem ordinations, first attested in 1188 on the occasion of the death of Fujiwara no Kanezane's 藤原兼実 (1149–1207) son Yoshimichi 良通 (1167–1188), onto whom Butsugon 仏厳 (d. 1231), a monk who combined ideas and practices from Shingon 真言 and Pure Land, conducted an ordination ritual (*shukke jukai* 出家授戒), while another monk cut his hair. Yoshimichi was given an ordination name, Zōdō 増道. Later on, starting from the thirteenth century and throughout the late medieval period, we also witness what we may call a Buddhist refashioning of the lifecycle, in which ordinations would constitute the last step in an individual's life, a process somewhat akin to retirement in today's society. These episodes and developments highlight that, far from being merely a topic of academic interest, precepts and ordinations came to occupy an increasingly important position within medieval society as a whole, reshaping the boundaries between the Buddhist and non-Buddhist realms, and shaping the life of people in ways that still resonate today.

In my own research, I have in particular focused on an important aspect of the medieval practice of precept conferral: the treatment of illness (and, closely related, the precepts in the context of pregnancy and childbirth). In these contexts, first of all, I see the necessity to distinguish between ordinations and precepts conferrals, a distinction that is not always made in contemporaneous sources and, on the basis of Groner's own usage, might have been of no significance to Tendai authors, but that nevertheless has important implications. In the case of a precept conferral (which I have tentatively called 'free-standing conferral of precepts'), there are no consequences in terms of observances and outfits. However, ordinations, even deathbed ordinations (which sometimes scholars see as 'symbolic', but the distinction between what is symbolic and what is not is fraught with complications),[19] as in the case of Michinaga, had consequences. First and foremost, Michinaga had to negotiate his role at court, since the emperor was not willing to let him retire and live like a recluse.[20] Both acts are referred to as *jukai* 授戒 (to give the precepts; but also, writ-

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19 Stone, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment*, 141.

20 *Shōyūki*, entry for Kannin 3/3/29, 5: 130.

ten 受戒, to receive the precepts) which is at times paired with *shukke* 出家, but the ambiguity is mostly terminological. In my research on illness and healing, for instance, I have shown how, from the mid to the late Heian period there is a clear shift in lay quarters from ordinations towards the conferral of the precepts ('free standing') within the *imaginaire* of death and illness.

At the same time, in this context of heightened concern with the efficaciousness of the precepts and their more expansive application in medieval society, we also see explicit reflections concerning those in charge of administering the precepts to laypeople. For instance, in the journal of the courtier Fujiwara no Tsunefusa 藤原経房 (1143–1200), we see the following passage:

> Starting from today, the consort of the retired *tennō* [Kenshunmon'in] will receive the precepts for seven days. It is Butsugon *shōnin* who will impart her the precepts. This is something that has ordinarily been done before, and should be thus [done this time as well]. Butsugon is a highly esteemed person, but should not [in a situation like this] a leader of one of the established Buddhist schools have been summoned first?
> 自今日女院[限]七ヶ日、有御受戒、仏厳聖人奉授之、此事日来所申行也、尤可然、但仏厳雖無止者、先被召[可?]然之一宗長吏等歟.[21]

Kenshunmon'in 建春門院 (1142–1176), consort of Goshirakawa 後白河 (1127–1192) and Kanezane's sister, was ill at the time, and Tsunefusa in this passage expresses his discomfort with the fact that a monk of low status like Butsugon had been summoned. A response—albeit indirect—to Tsunefusa's comments can be seen in Kanezane's own journal, known as *Gyokuyō* 玉葉, on the occasion of his daughter's Taeko 任子 (alt. Ninshi; also widely known as Gishūmon'in 宜秋門院; 1173–1239), when he summoned Hōnen, the famous Pure Land master who also makes a number of appearances in Groner's book. Hōnen here appears in a very different fashion: he confers the precepts to Taeko as a form of treatment for her

21 *Kikki*, entry for Angen 安元 2/6/27, 1: 229.

illness. Kanezane comments are quite clear in that regard:

> Today I summoned Hōnen-bō *shōnin* Genkū, and the *tennō's* consort received the precepts [from him]. There are people who criticised me saying that according to precedent, a *shōnin* like him should never be allowed to visit the residence of an aristocrat. [Such criticism] is based on the fact that people are ignorant on the matter. Precepts are something that should not be taken lightly, and one should only take as their master someone who has been properly instructed. However, nowadays eminent monks do not know anything at all about precepts. Up until the time of Zennin and Chūjin, eminent monks all favoured the granting of precepts. Since then, there has not been anything like that. In these times, the *shōnin* all learn this Way (学此道), and they are efficacious (又有効験). For these reasons, I disregarded their opposition and summoned him.
> 此日、請法然房上人源空、中宮有御受戒事、先例如此上人、強不参貴所之由、有傾輩云々、是不知案内也、受戒者、是事不聊爾、以伝受人可為師、而近代、名僧等、一切不知戒律事、禅仁、忠尋等之時までは、名僧等、皆好授戒、自其以後都無此事、近代上人皆学此道、又有効験、仍不顧傍難、所請用也.[22]

This is a fascinating passage that explicitly shows how laypeople such as Kanezane saw the precepts as important; how the observance of the precepts was believed to be connected with ritual efficacy; and how eminent monks (*meisō* 名僧) were seen critically because of their lack of attention towards the precepts. While we might be tempted to see the use of precepts to treat illness as a misunderstanding or perversion of their originally function, it is clear that at least in some quarters ritual efficacy was tied with the observance of the precepts by the monks in charge of conferring them. More research is necessary in this direction, but the divorce between scholastic elaborations and the domain of practice appears evident here.

But, on the other hand, there also seems to be the possibility that by following different threads we may reach different conclusions.

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[22] *Gyokuyō*, entry for Kenkyū 建久 2/9/29, 13: 111.

Consider the case of Tangō 湛斅 (fl. late twelfth century)[23] a monk who makes a number of appearances in early medieval sources. In *Gyokuyō*, he is often called 'Ōhara *shōnin*' (大原上人), or 'the *shōnin* [from] Ōhara', the mountain area in the northeastern outskirts of the capital. More specifically, Tangō was affiliated with Raigōin, a temple that makes a number of appearances in Groner's book as the site where Ninkū was ordained. Despite being poorly known today, judging by the figures he was involved with, Tangō must have been widely respected during his lifetime. He conferred the precepts to Kōkamon'in 皇嘉門院 (also known as Taira no Shigeko 平滋子, alt. Jishi; 1122–1182), Kanezane's half-sister and the widow of retired emperor Sutoku; functioned as *zenchishiki* 善知識 (literally, 'virtuous friend', which Stone aptly renders as 'deathbed attendant') for the retired emperor Goshirakawa; and carried out a number of precept conferrals for Kanezane and his family, mostly as a therapeutic modality. On the basis of the passage translated above concerning Hōnen, we can that say Tangō, in Kanezane's eyes, was someone who followed the precepts and, therefore, was suitable to confer them efficaciously. Tangō and Hōnen are also related in other ways—Tangō, for instance, is in some of Hōnen's biographies said to have been present at the famous 'Ōhara debate'. Tangō is, in other words, part of the genealogy that leads from Hōnen through Shōkū (who was very concerned with the precepts) to Ninkū, who appears in Groner's book as someone who was more attentive towards the observance of the precepts and the propriety of monastic conduct than mainstream Tendai thinkers. This is a possible point of contact between the theories on precepts discussed in *Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice*, and instances of the practice of precept conferral described by lay patrons in a variety of contexts; more research is

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[23] For a brief introduction in English, see Stone, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment*, 302–03. Notice that she reads his name as 'Tankyō'. It's not clear how his ordination name would have been read at the time but, on the basis of Kanezane's prevalent usage 斅, and of the character 豪 utilised in the *Azuma Kagami* 吾妻鏡—and, as a consequence, in virtually all versions of the *Heike monogatari*—I have adopted the reading 'Tangō'.

necessary in this direction, but these are aspects of medieval Buddhist *practice* that a traditionally textual, buddhological approach is unable to elucidate.

After reading Groner's book, I was left with a number of questions: how seriously were Tendai monks taking the *Fanwang jing*'s claim that after receiving the precepts one would enter the ranks of the buddhas? And should we understand that shift as something with ontological connotations (e.g., taking the precepts has a transformational effect on the individual who receives them), or merely as the confirmation of something that was already known—that all sentient beings possess buddha-nature? Laypeople, at least, don't seem to have taken that idea too seriously, and despite the abundance of records on all aspects of Buddhism in its quotidian dimensions in medieval Japan, we see no references to the idea that ordained practitioners (Tendai or not) were living buddhas of sorts. Quite the opposite: in Kanezane's case, we see criticism levied against those seen as deficient in their observance of the precepts. The gap between the expectations of lay practitioners (or at least some lay practitioners), and the way ordained monastics from mainstream schools acted in society seems to have been quite significant. I hoped that Groner would have taken the chance, in this rich and nuanced examination of discourses on the precepts, to also look at practice. Whether in its contemporary or historical manifestations, the study of Buddhism shouldn't be limited to the analysis of prescriptive texts and doctrinal elaborations; after the groundbreaking studies by figures such as Gregory Schopen concerning ancient India, an approach that only puts emphasis on texts is no longer tenable. It is my hope that, moving forward, more scholars will start paying attention to the actions and practices of monks out in the world, and of their relationships with lay practitioners within the context of their everyday lives—Buddhism 'on the ground', in Schopen's words.[24]

At this point, however, it would be remiss of me not to mention that, despite these methodological differences, I have learned a great

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[24] See for instance the essays collected in Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks*. The expression 'on the ground' appears specifically in chapter seven.

deal from Groner's book, and that I am actively planning to use some of its chapters for teaching. In particular, since I teach a course about the *Lotus Sūtra*, and also discuss the scripture more or less extensively in other classes, I found the idea that Tendai monks saw the sūtra as an authoritative source for positions on the precepts quite fascinating, although a bit counterintuitive. The *Lotus Sūtra*, after all, isn't that concerned with the precepts, and the only section that has something to offer in terms of regulations for conduct is chapter fourteen, the 'Anrakugyō' 安樂行 [Course of Ease and Bliss] (more simply rendered as 'Comfortable Conduct' in Leon Hurvitz's translation). The understanding of the *Lotus* as an important reference for the interpretation of the precepts was present already at the inception of the Tendai school. In the 'Anrakugyō' chapter, Saichō found justification for his rejection of the traditional Vinaya, and already in his will he mentioned the interpretation of the tathāgata's room, robes, and seat as compassion, forbearance, and emptiness (122). The centrality of the *Lotus Sūtra* and its superior status compared to the *Fanwang jing* and its precepts is something that we see in very different figures, e.g. Annen, a central figure in Tendai history who advocated for a looser interpretation of the precepts, but also in Kōen, a marginal figure in the Kurotani branch of Tendai. Kōen, while stressing the importance of observing the precepts to the best of one's abilities, also emphasised the role of the *Lotus Sūtra* and established an idiosyncratic ordination ceremony called *kai kanjō* 戒灌頂[25] in which the master and students reenacted one of the most famous episodes in the scripture, the encounter between Śākyamuni and a buddha of the past, Tahō 多宝 (Skt. Prabhūtaratna; Many Treasures), which culminated in the famous scene of the two buddhas seated side by side. Despite differences in emphasis, which seems to have translated into different approaches to practice and stronger attention towards the precepts in Kōen's case, the superior status of the *Lotus Sūtra* compared to the *Fanwang jing* is an idea that can be found at both the centre and periphery of the Tendai school. Given the fact that the scripture,

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[25] *Kai kanjō* is mentioned in chapter eight and extensively described in chapter nine.

including chapter fourteen, isn't that well equipped to provide practical guidance to novices and monks, it's hardly surprising that this would lead to a more untethered attitude, so to speak, in most cases. This attitude towards the *Lotus* also highlights its centrality and resilience, so that in medieval Japan it could be seen as textual basis for the idea of universal buddhahood for trees and plants (on the basis of a quirky interpretation of the parable of the medicinal herbs in chapter four), but also, as discussed by Groner, as an authority when it comes to the interpretation of the precepts. I'm sure it's another of those stories that would equally fascinate and puzzle my students.

In conclusion, Groner's *Precepts, Ordinations, and Practice* is a nuanced account of some of the conversations concerning the precepts that were taking place in medieval Japan, in particular within a Tendai milieu. It is much richer than this review would suggest, and I would recommend it to anyone with an interest in Buddhism, in Japan or elsewhere. Groner's rich descriptions are peppered with details that, taken one by one, have the potential to inspire dozens of diverse avenues of research, from the role of dreams in the establishment and maintenance of monastic lineages, to the role of ritual as a tool of ontological transformation, just to name two. It is also my hope that at least some of the readers of this book will be inspired by Groner's research to bridge the gap between theories on the precepts, their application, and the discussions (and tensions) concerning the precepts that were emerging among the lay patrons who resorted to the services of Buddhist practitioners on a daily basis. This was not merely an academic issue: if, as Kanezane claims, ritual efficacy comes from the observance of the precepts, then people in medieval Japan were in serious trouble.

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ALESSANDRO POLETTO
Washington University in St. Louis

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