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## A Study of the Concept of *Jieti* "The Essence of the Precepts" in Daoxuan's (596-667) Vinaya Commentaries\*

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### Abstract

In Tang dynasty China, Vinaya scholars such as Dào Xuān 道宣 (596-667) debated about the theoretical underpinnings of the Vinaya and the moral injunctions contained therein. One aspect of their theories was the explanation of *jiè tǐ* 戒體, here translated as "the essence of the precepts." This was a special type of karma that was thought to be obtained when one became ordained as a monk or nun, and in Dào Xuān's view, contrary to traditional views, could be explained as a "seed" created in the "storehouse consciousness" or *ālayavijñāna*, in accordance with Yogācāra theory of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Additionally, this study throws light onto the Vinaya school (*lǜ zōng* 律宗), karma theory, ritual in Buddhism generally, and in Chinese Buddhism specifically.

### Keywords:

the Vinaya school, the essence of the precepts, Dào Xuān, karma, ordination

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## 道宣律典註疏中之「戒體」論

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### 摘要

在中國唐朝，有許多律師如道宣（596-667），爭論有關戒律的主體與其具有之道德功能。其討論的觀點之一是「戒體」（the essence of the precepts）。此是指行者受戒成為比丘或比丘尼之後，於其自身所產生的一種特殊的業。道宣的觀點與傳統不同，他依照大乘佛教唯識學派之理論，主張是藏識或阿賴耶識中之「種子」。此外，本文概論佛教的律宗、業論與儀式，並詳論其在中國佛教的情況。

### 關鍵詞：

律宗、戒體、道宣、業、受戒

## Introduction

As Buddhism spread into China from India and Central Asia, monastic communities began to develop, and Chinese monastics adopted the traditional Vinayas to govern the conduct, structure, and day-to-day activities of those who chose to become ordained. Although the rules of the Vinaya are "prescriptive," and not necessarily "descriptive" of the reality of how Buddhists conducted themselves, these codified ideals developed and were refined over time. This process of development and refinement took into account both the ideas and practices of Indian and Central Asian Buddhists, as well as the needs and ideas of native Chinese themselves, just as did any other aspect of Buddhism in China. In this paper, I will examine one example of this process of development, adaptation, and refinement of the theories used to explain the Vinaya in Chinese Buddhism, found in the development of the theory of *jièti* 戒體, translated here as "the essence of the precepts," principally as found in the work of the Tang dynasty monk Dào Xuān 道宣 (596-667).

Although ideas that formed the basis of the theory of *jièti* have served as an important topic of debate in Buddhist philosophy since the Abhidharma era, and had been taken up by scholars in China before Dào Xuān's time, this concept appears to have been discussed only in passing in secondary sources in English.

Although there has been some interest in recent years in the development of the Vinaya in China, these studies have been more historical in nature. For example, in addition to making a complete translation of the Dharmaguptaka Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya from Chinese into English (2002), Ann Heirman has written about the historical development of monastic regulations in China (2001, 2007, 2008, etc.), while Chen Jinhua (2002) and Koichi Shinohara (2010, etc.) have both studied Dào Xuān's works on the Vinaya and how they depict the roles and lives of Buddhist monastics in the Tang. Also, there have been a few theses written on Dào Xuān's Vinaya commentaries (Chen 2002, Tan 2002), as well as individual papers and book chapters discussing the Vinaya in East Asia, and the broader context of Dào Xuān's work (Bodiford, et. al., 2005). For the admittedly arcane topic of *jièti*, however, there are really only summaries in English (Groner's 1993 translation of Hirakawa, gives a summary of the concept of *avijñapti*, while Dhammajoti's 2007 work on Abhidharma gives a fuller account, but neither talk about the concept of *jièti* specifically), therefore, much of this essay is a summary of work done on the subject by

Japanese scholars such as Akira Hirakawa (1964, etc.), Shigeo Kamata (1978, 1999), and Tatsugen Sato (1986, 1994, etc).

## Historical Background

Before the time of the prolific translator Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344-413), there were relatively few translated texts related to the Vinaya available in China. Although there appear to have been a few *jièběn* 戒本 texts, or translations of the *prātimokṣa*—which outline the rules but do not give their full explication—it is thought that during this era, Chinese who chose to become monks would do so under an Indian or Central Asian teacher who had learned the Vinaya orally, and consequentially, there was no need for a formal textual translation (Heirman 2007, 169-70).

Later, feeling the need for a more codified set of rules to govern the monastic order in China, monks like Dàoān 道安 (312-385) and Huìyuān 慧遠 (334-416), took it upon themselves to make their own set of rules, based on partial translations of Vinaya texts, which became collectively known as *sēngzhì* 僧制, or “Regulations for the Saṅgha.” Another monk, Fǎxiǎn 法顯 (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c.) also felt the need for a better understanding of the Vinaya in his homeland, and near the end of the fourth century, traveled from China to India and back again, for the explicit purpose of gathering a Vinaya text to translate.

However, the situation in China changed quickly in the first quarter of the fifth century. From having no access to a full Vinaya, Chinese Buddhists had complete Vinayas from four different Indian *nikāyas* (sects) by the year 423. In fact, both the Vinaya of the Sarvāstivādins—the *Shísòng lǜ* 十誦律 (T 1435, trans. 404-408), or “Vinaya in Ten Recitations”—and the Vinaya of the Dharmaguptakas—the *Sifēn lǜ* 四分律 (T 1428, trans. 410-412) or “Four-Part Vinaya”—had already been translated in the capital of the Chinese empire, Chang’an, before Fǎxiǎn returned from India with the text he had worked so hard to get. Nevertheless, the texts he brought back—the Vinaya of the Mahāsāṃghikas (*Móhē sēngqí lǜ* 摩訶僧祇律, T 1425, trans. 416-418)—and the Vinaya text of the Mahīśāsaka school, the *Wūfēn lǜ* 五分律 (T 1421,

trans. 422-423), or “Five-Part Vinaya”—were all translated during this short period.<sup>1</sup>

Once these texts had been translated, it does seem that they were put into use to some degree, as both objects of study and as guidelines for the operation of Buddhist organizations and for the comportment of monastics. However, because of the multiple versions of the Vinaya available, there were multiple interpretations and implementations of these rules, which led to what Heirman describes as a period of “eclectic” use of the Vinaya in China (2007, 192). In the Northern dynasties, for example, the Vinaya of the Mahāsāṃghikas and the Vinaya of the Dharmaguptakas were both used, while in the Southern dynasties the Vinaya of the Sarvāstivādins was preferred. This appears to have basically been the situation throughout the Northern and Southern dynasties, when commentaries on the Vinaya first began to appear.

After this period, China became politically unified under the Sui dynasty, and perhaps as a result, there seems to have been a movement toward unifying the rules for monastics in China as well. In the same way that Gāozǔ 高祖 (563-635, r. 618-626), the first emperor of the Tang, created a unified set of legal codes for his empire, Buddhists too sought to unify the system of rules governing their organizations. It was during this period in the early Tang that Dào Xuān wrote the first of his several commentaries on the Vinaya—the *Xíngshì Chāo* 行事鈔 (T 1804, completed ca. 630) or, the “*Commentary on Conduct and Procedure*”—a text explicating the Four-Part Vinaya from the Dharmaguptaka school, while using the other Vinayas and Buddhist literature as a basis for comparison.

A generation after Dào Xuān, the monk Dào àn 道岸 (654-717), a disciple of a disciple of Dào Xuān, helped push the government of Emperor Zhōngzōng 中宗 (656-710, r. 705-710) to mandate the use of the *Four-Part Vinaya* in temples throughout the empire (Heirman 2007, 195). Although the decision to unify the rules regulating Buddhist monasteries may have come from the government, the use of the Vinaya of the Dharmaguptakas (the *Four-Part Vinaya*), rather than one of the other three available versions, certainly was owed in large part to Dào Xuān, who used it as the base for his commentaries, and preferred its use in ordination ceremonies and monastic life.

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<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the eighth century, one more full Vinaya—the Vinaya of the *Mūla-sarvāstivādins* (*Gēnbēn shuōyīqiè yǒubù pínàiyé* 根本說一切有部毘奈耶, T 1442, trans. ca. 703)—was translated by Yìjìng 義淨 (635-713), but this was over a century after the period this research is talking about.

Explaining the Vinaya meant not only making the rules practicable and understandable to his audience, but also explaining the theory that lay behind them. As we will see, one important theoretical element for Vinaya commentators like Dào xuān was the concept of the “essence of the precepts.”

The theory of the *jiè tǐ* 戒體, or “the essence of the precepts,” is basically an answer to the question of why it is important for monks to go through a proper ordination ceremony. What changes when someone takes the precepts in such a ceremony? What is special about being a monk rather than a lay person, and how exactly does following the precepts, or taking a vow to do so, help someone reach enlightenment? If something does change in the individual by going through the ceremony, what exactly is it that changes and how does that process work: this is where the different theories of *jiè tǐ* emerge.

### “The Essence of the Precepts”: A Brief Definition

Although the term *jiè tǐ* 戒體 is found in only a few places in translated Indian texts, the concept became commonplace in Chinese works on the Vinaya beginning in the Northern and Southern dynasties period, (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century) when study of the Vinaya first began to flourish. The concept was that after taking precepts in an ordination ceremony, monastics felt they had gained something that gave them the power to practice the restraint proscribed by the Vinaya, or—to use the most common formulation—the power to prevent transgressions and stop evil (*fáng fēi zhǐ è* 防非止惡). In one sense, “having” the precepts meant having “the essence of the precepts,” but in another, “the essence of the precepts” is what gave an individual the power to restrain themselves from doing what was deemed improper, and through moral conduct, create conditions by which they get rid of the mental afflictions (*fán nǎo* 煩惱; Skt. *kleśa*) that lead to more karma and rebirth. It is in this sense that becoming ordained, and gaining “the essence of the precepts” were considered a step on the path to nirvāṇa.

For example, if one has taken the five precepts (*wǔ jiè* 五戒; Skt. *pañcaśīla*), and has made a vow to abstain from drinking alcohol, it is due to the power issuing from this “essence of the precepts” that, even if that person is tempted to drink, they have the willpower to refrain from doing so (Hirakawa 1964, 165). In theory, this concept seems analogous to what we normally call a “conscience”—the part of our conscious experience that determines what is

right and wrong and helps us to make decisions accordingly—although, as we will see, the ethical theory that explains these two ideas differs greatly.<sup>2</sup>

## The Presence of the Term *jièti* 戒體 in Translated Texts

Although the term *jièti* 戒體 appears in the *\*Mahāvibhāṣā-sāstra* (*Dà pípóshā lùn* 大毘婆沙論, T 1545, trans. 656-9), a fundamental work on Indian Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma thought, the term does not appear, as we might expect, in the translation of Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (*Jùshè lùn* 俱舍論, T 1558 & 1559, trans. 563-7)—another work on the same subject—indicating that it is unclear exactly how important the idea was in Sarvāstivāda thought. The translation of the Vinaya of the Sarvāstivādins also has the term, but in that context, the meaning diverges so far from how this idea developed that Hiraakawa suggests that Kumārajīva, the translator of this work, may not have even known that such a concept existed, further suggesting that it was a later Chinese development (Hiraakawa 1964, 178).

In Pāli scriptures, the term *bhikkhu-bhāva* can refer to the “state of being a monk” that is attained after receiving the precepts. Although at first glance it may seem like a far cry to render *bhikkhu-bhāva* (≈monk+state)—or its equivalent term in other Indic languages—as *jièti* 戒體 (≈precepts+substance), Grosnick has shown that *tǐ* 體 was a common translation for *svabhāva*, meaning “own condition” or “state of being,” indicating that *jièti* 戒體 could very well have come from a term such as *bhāva* (Grosnick 1989).

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<sup>2</sup> The technical term for “conscience” in western thought—in particular, in Christian theology—is “synderesis.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states: “Through conscience and its related notion, synderesis, human beings discern what is right and wrong. While there are many medieval views about the nature of conscience, most views regard human beings as capable of knowing in general what ought to be done and applying this knowledge through conscience to particular decisions about action. The ability to act on the determinations of conscience is, moreover, tied to the development of the moral virtues, which in turn refines the functions of conscience.” (Langston 2011)  
In Christian scholasticism, the difference between the concepts “synderesis” and “conscience” is, according to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, “the readiness with which such [self-evident] moral truths are apprehended by the practical intellect is due to the natural habit impressed on the cognitive faculty which they call *synderesis*. While conscience is a dictate of the practical reason deciding that any particular action is right or wrong, synderesis is a dictate of the same practical reason which has for its object the first general principles of moral action” (Slater 1912).

Related concepts, such as *jièsè* 戒色 (≈precepts+physical matter, Skt. *rūpa*) are found in other translated texts, but it seems that although the concept of *jièti* 戒體 is explained by Chinese exegetes using philosophical structures drawn from Indian Buddhist thought, it is highly doubtful that this is an idea directly derived from Indian thought (Hirakawa 1964, 178).

## Indian and Central Asian Theories of Karma

Although the specific term *jièti* 戒體, and the concept of “the essence of the precepts” was developed mainly in China, the idea that certain actions—such as, on one hand, killing a living being, or on the other, taking monastic vows—had greater karmic effects than others is at least as old as Buddhism itself. The explanation for this process was fleshed out in debates about what we now call “karma theory,” found in Abhidharma treatises. The “textbook” model of Buddhist karma theory comes from the Sarvāstivādin thought. This should come as no surprise, considering this group was probably the largest, longest lived, and most influential of these early philosophical schools, but their theories were as disputed as they were influential.

The aim of Abhidharma scholarship was not only to explain the teachings of the Buddha in a systematic way, but also to explain difficult doctrinal points or inconsistencies between the teachings found in what the Buddha was said to have taught. Among these, perhaps the most important question that Abhidharma scholars had to address was a discrepancy between the notion of reincarnation and the related concepts of “non-self” or *anātman* and “impermanence” or *anitya*. On one hand, Buddhists believed that the actions one carried out in one’s lifetime (i.e., one’s karma) had an effect on the rebirth of that individual in the future, while at the same time denying that there is any identifiable “individual” or “self,” or that anything is permanent at all. Taking these two fundamental principles into account, how could this process actually work? Several theories emerged to answer this question.<sup>3</sup>

### Another Sense of the Word “Karma”

Before we begin a discussion of karma, how it was created, and how it applied to Buddhist rituals, we should point out that the word “karma” itself can also

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<sup>3</sup> See Étienne Lamotte (1987) for a detailed discussion on the different theories of karma that emerged in Indic Buddhist scholasticism.



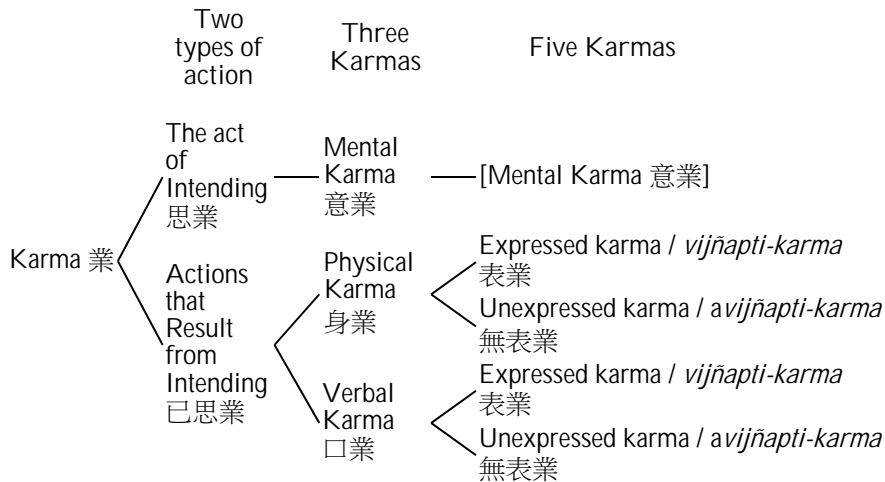
mean “a ritual.” Most people familiar with Buddhism will know the two most common senses of the word “karma,” the first being “action” in a broad sense, including everyday things that a person might do, that may or may not have any moral consequence, and the second being a more narrow, metaphysical sense: that karma is not only the action itself but the *force* that it exerts, in effect, on the future. In Buddhist philosophy, as well as other Indian philosophies, this force was thought to make an action carried out at one point in time bear fruit in the future. In fact, the metaphor of fruit—one that probably lent itself to vivid imagery in an agrarian society—is often used in Buddhist texts: “seeds” are planted in the “field” of the mind, and bear “fruit” as their result of the “labor” (another sense of the word karma) created by the action of planting. However, this physical metaphor can only extend so far, as karmic force was thought to carry even across space and time, from one lifetime of a living being to the next.

Both these senses of the word karma were translated into Chinese with the character 業 (*yè*). The third sense of karma as an ecclesiastical ritual (i.e. those that govern the operations of the Saṅgha)—such as the ordination ceremony, or the semimonthly *poṣadha* (*bùsà* 布薩) assembly to recite the precepts—is transliterated (rather than translated) into Chinese as *jiémó* 羯磨, indicating that, at least to the translators, there were two distinctive meanings of the same basic Indic term. It should come as no surprise then, that although there may be some semantic distinction between these ideas, such ritual actions were performed with the idea that they generate some kind of karmic force.

## Sarvāstivāda Karma Theory

Basic Buddhist doctrine asserts that karma is intention (*sī* 思; Skt. *cetanā*): that which motivates our actions. This formulation may seem quite innocuous, or even obvious, but when Buddhism’s “morally ordered universe” is taken into account, the notion of “karma as intention” has wide-ranging implications. For this portion of the discussion, the following chart should be helpful:

Sarvāstivāda karma theory<sup>4</sup>



The most basic explanation for karma comes from a famous phrase from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*:

Oh monks, I say that action [=karma] is volition [=cetanā, or intention]; after having willed it, one accomplishes action by means of the body, the voice and the mind (Lamotte 1987, 15).

Although seemingly innocuous, the first statement that “action [=karma] is volition” seems to contradict our everyday experience. We don’t normally consider “actions” to be mental events like volition or intention,<sup>5</sup> but *physical* ones. This contradiction is resolved simply by asserting that the mental act of *intending* to do something has the power to give rise to our physical and verbal actions, and is ultimately responsible for them. Furthermore, based on the second half of this statement “...after having willed it, one accomplishes action by means of the body, the voice and the mind,” the Sarvāstivādins interpreted this to mean that action (=karma) is divided into two categories: “action that results from intending” (yīsiyè 已思業) and “the action of intending” (sīyè 思業) itself. Action that comes from intending resulted in two types of karma: “physical karma” (shēnyè 身業) and “verbal karma”

<sup>4</sup> Based on a chart from Hirakawa (1964, 181).

<sup>5</sup> Occasionally these two terms refer to different concepts, but here they are merely different translations of the same concept, *cetanā*.

(*kǒuyè* 口業), while the act of intending itself was "mental karma" (*yìyè* 意業), thus giving three basic types of karma grouped together as "the three karmas" (*sānyè* 三業).

Because physical and verbal actions were thought to be merely an expression of some inner intention, physical and verbal actions were not thought to have the moral quality of "good" or "bad" in and of themselves, but were rather considered to be of "indeterminate" (*wújì* 無記; Skt. *avyākṛta*) moral value. Only mental actions can be said to have a moral quality of good or bad—or, more specifically, "skillful" (*shàn* 善; Skt. *kuśala*) and "unskillful" (*è* 惡; Skt. *akuśala*). "Skillful" actions were thought to eventually lead toward higher rebirths, and thus the possibility to achieve nirvāṇa, while "unskillful" actions would not.

### *Avijñapti-karma*, or Unexpressed Action

Over time, certain problems arose with this theory of karma that required further elucidation, and unfortunately, further complication. All forms of karma were thought to invariably have some effect (*guǒ* 果) in the future. The effect may be relatively immediate, or come much later, even in another lifetime, but basic Buddhist theory held that the effects of karma were certain to happen eventually, as a matter of universal law, thus effectively asserting a form of theodicy. Some considered intention alone insufficient to fully explain how this karmic "force" worked, and how our actions resulted in certain effects in the future.<sup>6</sup>

For example, in cases where someone has the intention to kill a living being but does not go through with it, their karma was thought to be significantly different than that of someone who actually did go through with it, although the original intention may have been indistinguishable. This problem pertained particularly to serious actions with specific moral consequences that were "accomplished with a great violence of passion, or with an extreme strength of faith," for example, killing, or stealing, on one hand, or, on the other hand, taking the precepts (Poussin, 1988: 2, 642).

Although the intention to carry out such morally significant actions may only last for a moment, and the physical and verbal actions that result from those intentions are also only momentary, how could it be that the force of these actions could persist once they had ended? How could the effect of such

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<sup>6</sup> This was the position of the Sarvastivādins. See Hirakawa (1993, 190).

actions come about after death? In these cases of serious and moral actions, the Sarvāstivādins thought another type of karma must be created in order for it to have an effect in the future, most likely after the doer's physical body has passed away. This karma was called *avijñapti-karma* (wúbiǎo yè 無表業), literally unexpressed karma, or in some translations, “uninformative” karma. This was an invisible type of karma in contrast to *vijñapti-karma* (biǎo yè 表業), or “expressed” karma, which could give information to the outside world, in the form of movement or speech, etc.

Although *avijñapti-karma* was invisible objectively, it could still provide information or “be expressed” subjectively, to the mind of the doer, subsequently affecting his or her intentions and actions. For example, a murderer looks no different after he or she committed their crime, although they may act and think differently. Furthermore, because the Sarvāstivādins thought *avijñapti-karma* was only created in situations with moral consequences, it could only be considered either “skillful” or “unskillful” (but could not be “indeterminate”). Most importantly, although the *vijñapti-karma* of physical and verbal actions was fleeting and soon passed away, *avijñapti-karma* was thought to remain with the person who performed the action until the end of their life, where it would then come to fruition and play a heavy role in determining how that person would be reborn.

### *Avijñapti-karma* as a Dharma of Form

However, in solving the problem of how some karma lasted from one lifetime to the next, these Abhidharma scholars created another. How exactly was this karma created? What was it? These thinkers attempted to explain their understanding of the world by dividing all the phenomena of the world into even more fundamental phenomena, which were termed dharmas, and karma, too, was also subject to this analysis. What kind of “thing”—what kind of dharma—was karma?

Because *avijñapti-karma* was created by physical and verbal actions, which were dharmas of form (*sèfǎ* 色法; Skt. *rūpa-dharma*) (i.e., part of the physical world), *avijñapti-karma* itself, it was reasoned, also had to be a dharma of form. By this explanation, the karma of moral and immoral actions existed as a type of invisible matter that seemed to reside in the body, and held the “weight” of moral transgressions—our sins, as well as our virtues—and was called unexpressed matter, or *avijñapti-rūpa* in Sanskrit and usually translated as *wúbiǎo sè* 無表色 in Chinese (Hirakawa 1964, 165-85).

Although this explanation may seem unintuitive or merely theoretical, to the Sarvāstivādins, this invisible matter created by moral actions was a dharma that really existed, to the degree that it even had purchase on one's mental state and most importantly, one's rebirth in the future. Although this theory only applied to particularly serious actions, it was one of the earlier theories that explained one of the fundamental problems of the Abhidharma scholars: how to account for an ever-changing world, a nonexistent self, and a morally determinate universe, even if the effects of actions may come lifetimes after the body of the doer had passed away. Hirakawa summarizes these concepts best:

... even after an action has ended, a force that cannot be perceived remains. Although the moment it takes to make a promise quickly passes, a person may still feel responsible for fulfilling that promise even after many years have passed. After a person has been killed, the guilt or responsibility for the death may follow the killer for years. Thus, although an action is quickly completed, the force of that action continues (Hirakawa 1993, 187).

Although the Sarvāstivādins were probably the most influential Buddhist group during this period of history, this interpretation was understandably controversial—how could something be made of physical matter yet not have any effect on the physical world? Other schools of this period held similar theories regarding the existence of an imperceptible force between cause and effect. For example, the Sautrāntikas explained the process in terms of an agricultural metaphor: they thought mental "seeds" grew into branching "trees," finally resulting in the "fruits" of action. Although their explanations and names for this force varied, each school grappled with the problem of how to link the actions of this life to rebirth in the next without recourse to the notion of an eternal soul.

### Harivarman's *Satyasiddhi-śāstra*

Although the Sarvāstivādin theory was influential in China, it was in fact later exegetes, whose theories tended to break with the mainstream, who gained more currency there. In addition to the famous *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu 世親 (ca. 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c.), the \**Satyasiddhi-śāstra* (*Chéngshí lùn* 成

實論 or *Treatise on Establishing Truth*, T 1646<sup>7</sup>)—by a “dissident” Sarvāstivāda scholar named Harivarman 訶梨跋摩 (ca. 250-350)—was an influential source for Buddhist doctrinal explanation in China. Translated by Kumārajīva in 412, this text deals with the concept of emptiness, but also seems to portray some middle position that “constitutes a transitional stage between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna,” having some connection with the Sarvāstivādin thought, although relatively little research appears to have been done on this text in English (Priestley 1970).

In this text, Harivarman presented his theory of karma in a similar way to the Sarvāstivādins, but breaks with their theory by asserting that *avijñapti-karma* created a dharma that could be classified as neither matter nor mind (*fēisè fēixīn* 非色非心)(i.e., rather than *avijñapti-rūpa*, or “unexpressed form”), a category that had previously existed, but was perhaps considered more theoretical than applicable. In addition to studying the Vinaya, several Vinaya scholars, including those under which Dào xuān studied—for reasons that are not entirely clear, but may simply be related to the popularity of the work—were also well versed in the *\*Satyasiddhi-sāstra*, an influence which can also be seen in Dào xuān’s work.

## Karma Theory and Receiving the Precepts

Where these theories enter the discussion of the Vinaya is when they explain not only how nefarious deeds such as killing living beings affected one’s karma, but also to explain what was gained by taking the precepts—how did making a vow in a formal ceremony affect one’s karma and the path to enlightenment? Suffice it to say that although each school’s explanation of karma was even more detailed and nuanced than has been described above, becoming ordained and taking precepts (*shòujiè* 受戒) was also thought to generate *avijñapti-rūpa* (in the Sarvāstivādin model), and although it was thought to last until the death of that individual, breaking the precepts (*fànjiè* 犯戒) or willfully giving up the precepts (*shějiè* 捨戒) would also cause someone to lose *avijñapti-rūpa*, as well as the effects that it would have on future rebirths.<sup>8</sup> Because “the essence of the precepts” was in some sense

<sup>7</sup> Sometimes back translated as the *\*Tattvasiddhi-sāstra*.

<sup>8</sup> Based on informal conversations the author has had about this topic with monastics in Taiwan, it seems that some think that there is not one singular “essence of the precepts” but plural “essences” corresponding to each vow, and breaking one precept would only entail the loss of one of these, but not all. I

attached to the physical body, it was thought to literally leave the body in these cases, for if it didn’t, that person would still—in some sense—be ordained, and have an obligation to their monastic vows, and would furthermore incur the negative karma that would accrue if they broke them further.<sup>9</sup>

In order to gain this “essence of the precepts,” it was important, in the view of Vinaya scholars, that the ordination ceremony was performed properly—which is to say, according to the proscriptions of the Vinaya texts—and much of the work of these scholars centered around sanctioning and regulating proper ordination ceremonies, such as the construction of precept platforms (*jiètán* 戒壇) to perform such ceremonies.<sup>10</sup>

Vowing to uphold the precepts (*chíjiè* 持戒) was carried out through specific ecclesiastical rituals—also called karma, as explained above—and those who performed these rituals were thought to generate through their actions this special type of karma as well. Although the ceremony itself consisted of merely the performance of physical actions (e.g., bowing to the preceptor overseeing the ceremony) and verbal actions (e.g., saying that one accepts the precepts), if the ceremony was performed properly, it was thought to create a strong sense of moral duty in mind of the ordinand, which would manifest as *avijñapti-rūpa* when these physical actions were completed. This *avijñapti-rūpa* was thought to be this “essence of the precepts,” or this same conscience-like substance that subtly encouraged the mind toward restraint of the body, good intentions, and proper actions.

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have yet to find a canonical basis for this interpretation, but based on my current understanding, it is certainly possible.

<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it was thought that the *avijñapti-rūpa* created by taking the precepts was lost if the world system entered the period of the latter days of the Dharma (*mòfǎ* 末法). See Dhammajoti (2007, 502).

Also, the loss of the “essence of the precepts” at death only applies to the so-called “Hīnayāna” precepts—those found in the Vinaya. In the case of the bodhisattva precepts, the “essence” was thought to last from lifetime to lifetime.

<sup>10</sup> See McRae (2005) and Tan (2002) for two studies on the subject of ordination platforms.

## Theories of Karma in a Chinese Context—The “Sinification” of Karma

Before we move to how these doctrines developed in China, we have to first keep in mind that much of the debate described above was going on around the first to fifth centuries in Indic languages, so it should come as no surprise that when these ideas were carried to China and developed in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, their character had changed beyond simply the creation of new terminology or the substitution of one language for another.

### The “Essence and Function” Dichotomy: Speculation about how the Concept of the “Essence of the Precepts” Developed

Although “the essence of the precepts” clearly had precedence in Indian thought, one possible explanation of how the specific terminology of *jiètǐ* 戒體 emerged in a Chinese context is that it was an application of the tendency of Chinese thinkers to describe phenomena in terms of a dichotomy of *tǐ* and *yòng* 體用, or “essence and function” (or something similar to it)—a framework that came to be formally fleshed out in Chinese thought in the third century, beginning with Wáng Bì's 王弼 (226-249) commentary on the *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (Muller 1999). This was basically the idea that phenomena could be explained in terms of having a fundamental “essence” or “principle” which determined how they manifested, appeared, or “functioned” in the real, physical world. In a similar sense, we might imagine *jiètǐ* 戒體 as being the fundamental “essence” of the codes by which Buddhist monastics live, that enables a monastic to carry out the “function” of the precepts—that is to say, the actual day-to-day restraint and comportment required by the Vinaya.

Although it seems at reasonable to suspect that there was relationship between “the essence of the precepts” and the “essence and function” dichotomy which may perhaps shed light on how this idea originated, verifying such a hypothesis will require more textual analysis on the part of the author. Dào xuān, for his part, begins his discussion of precepts in the *Commentary on Conduct and Procedure* (discussed in more detail below) by describing four aspects (*sìzhǒng* 四種) of the precepts: The laws of the precepts (*jièfǎ* 戒法), the essence of the precepts (*jiètǐ* 戒體), the observance of the precepts, (*jièxíng* 戒行), and the characteristics of the precepts (*jièxiàng* 戒相), but none of these other three seem to be a perfect analog for the concept of *yòng* 用 or “function” (T 1804, 40: 4b23).



## “The Essence of the Precepts” in Zhìyǐ’s Works

The first person to discuss “the essence of the precepts” at length in China was the Buddhist philosopher Zhìyǐ 智顓 (538-597) in his two works, the *Púsàjiè yìshū* 菩薩戒義疏, (*Commentary on the Meaning of the Bodhisattva Precepts*, T 1811, latter half of the 6<sup>th</sup> c.) and the *Shìchán bōluómì cìdì fāmén* 釋禪波羅蜜次第法門, (*Explaining Dhyāna Pāramitā: A method in stages*, T 1916, ca. 568-575). However, his explanation differs between the two texts. The first text, the *Púsàjiè yìshū*, explains “the essence of the precepts” as “unexpressed matter” (*wúbiǎo sè* 無表色; Skt. *avijñapti-rūpa*)—in other words, effectively adopting the same position as the Sarvāstivādins. In the second work, the *Cìdì fāmén*, Zhìyǐ criticizes this position as being a “Hīnayāna” understanding, and asserts that it is instead a dharma of the mind (*xīnfǎ* 心法), which he claims is a Mahāyāna understanding of the concept.<sup>11</sup> We can see then that even Zhìyǐ was grappling with the problem of how to explain “Hīnayāna” precepts within “Mahāyāna” ideals—and that this larger problem turned on the explanation of “the essence of the precepts.”

## “The Essence of the Precepts” in Dào Xuān’s Works

Among Dào Xuān’s many works on the Vinaya, perhaps his most influential was one of his earliest works: the *Sìfēnlǜ shānfán bǔquē Xíngshì chāo* 四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔 (*A Commentary on Conduct and Procedure: Abridgments and Emendations to the Four-Part Vinaya*, T 1804), abbreviated as the *Xíngshì chāo* 行事鈔, or *Commentary on Conduct and Procedure*. Although the work is principally a commentary on the *Four-Part Vinaya* (*Sìfēn lǜ* 四分律)—that is, the Vinaya text that came from the Indian Dharmaguptaka school—Dào Xuān in fact refers frequently to the other Vinaya texts that had been translated at the time: those of the Sarvāstivāda, Mahāsāṃghika, and Mahīśāsaka schools, as well as translated commentaries on the Vinaya, not to mention a huge number of both Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna sūtras. The text is thus a comprehensive study of the Vinaya and of Buddhist monasticism in general; to be able to draw on such a vast array of texts in his work, Dào Xuān’s command of Buddhist literature must have been superb.

Although the term *jiètǐ* 戒體 does not appear in the *Four-Part Vinaya*, nor in the *Dīrghāgama* (*Cháng āhán jīng* 長阿含經, T 01, trans. 413)—the

<sup>11</sup> See T 1916, 46: 484b07ff, and Hirakawa (1964, 166-67).

other principal work coming from the Dharmaguptaka tradition—nor explicitly in the *\*Satyasiddhi-sāstra*, these texts were combined in Dào Xuān's work to explain “the essence of the precepts” and promote an interpretation of the Vinaya that favored the use of the *Four-Part Vinaya*. This is to say that by using the theory of karma found in the *\*Satyasiddhi-sāstra*, Dào Xuān and other exegetes of the *Four-Part Vinaya* school explained “the essence of the precepts” as a dharma that was “neither matter nor mind,” standing in opposition to advocates of the Sarvāstivāda position, and perhaps also to those who advocated for the use of the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya texts, as well as Zhiyi and the Tiantai tradition.

To see how this explanation was fleshed out in Dào Xuān's work, let us look more closely at the source text. The concept of “the essence of the precepts” first appears in the introductory chapter of the *Commentary on Conduct and Procedure*:

二、明戒體者。若依通論，明其所發之業體。今就正顯直陳能領之心相。謂法界、塵沙、二諦等法，以己要期，施造方便，善淨心器，必不為惡，測思、明慧、冥會前法。以此要期之心與彼妙法相應，於彼法上有緣起之義，領納在心名為戒體。

[Section] Two: Explaining the Essence of the Precepts:

In the general commentaries 通論, it explains that [the essence of the precepts] is the essence 體 generated by karma 業. Now, I will reveal what is correct and say directly that [the essence of the precepts] is a characteristic of those minds which are capable of taking [them on] 能領之心相. It is said that of the dharma realms 法界, the dusts 塵沙, the two truths 二諦, and all the other dharmas, for one that has already had the aspiration 要期 [for Buddhahood] and has built up the expedient means to cleanse well the vessel of the mind 心器, they cannot do evil, [instead,] they evaluate their intentions, clarify their wisdom, and gain insight into all of these afore-mentioned dharmas. Such subtle dharma 妙法 is a response to the mind with aspiration, and such dharma comes by the principle of dependent origination 緣起, and when this [dharma] is received and held within the mind 領納在心 it is called “the essence of the precepts” 戒體 (T 1804 40: 4c1-6, author's translation).

Although we can get a general sense of what Dào Xuān was talking about from the translation, scholar Satō Tatsugen 佐藤達玄 explains this in more detail. He interprets this as Dào Xuān presenting two points of view on “the essence of

the precepts." From the point of view of the general commentaries (*tōnglùn* 通論), he says, the essence of karma (*yètǐ* 業體) is generated (*suǒ fā* 所發), which Satō believes refers to the traditional Sarvāstivādin explanation of "the essence of the precepts" as "unexpressed matter" (1986, 203).

From Dào Xuān's own point of view, Satō explains, "the essence of the precepts" truly appears (*zhèng xiǎn* 正顯) as a mental object (*xīnxiàng* 心相) that is receivable (*néng lǐng* 能領). Satō believes this refers to the idea that "the essence of the precepts" is neither matter nor mind (*fēisè fēixīn* 非色非心) (1986, 203). Further explanation of the concept comes up later in the *Commentary on Conduct and Procedure*:

言「無作戒」者，以「非色非心」為體。「非色」者非塵大所成。……言「非心」者體非緣慮，故名非心。

That which is called the unmade precepts 無作戒, takes neither matter nor mind 非色非心 as its essence 體. Not matter 非色 is that which is not made from the great elements. ... The essence of what is called not mind 非心 is not conditioned by thought, this is why it is called not mind (T 1804 40: 52b10).

Although it has other meanings in other contexts, the term "unmade" (*wúzuò* 無作) is an earlier translation for the concept of *avijñapti*, or unexpressed (*wúbiǎo* 無表), explained above. This same term is used in the Chinese version of the *\*Satyasiddhi-śāstra*, and according to Satō, the above passage is basically paraphrases the explanation for unmade or unexpressed karma given in that text.<sup>12</sup> Thus, he takes this to be Dào Xuān's position on the issue as presented in the *Commentary on Conduct and Procedure* (Satō 1986, 203-5).

However, there is yet another explanation of "the essence of the precepts" in Dào Xuān's later works. In another commentary on the Vinaya, the *Sìfēnlǜ shānbǔ suījī jiémó shū* 四分律刪補隨機羯磨疏 (*Commentary on Karma in the Four Part Vinaya, Abridged and Amended according to different abilities*, T 1808, written 635), also called the *Jiémó shū* 羯磨疏 or *Yèshū* 業疏 (*The Commentary on Karma*), we find the following explanation:

<sup>12</sup> The passage from the *\*Satyasiddhi* at T 1646, 32: 290a22 shows that the term 作業 was indeed a synonym for 無表, and searches reveal that the concepts of 無作, 非色, and 非心 are important and commonly discussed topics in that text.

欲了妄情，須知妄業。故作法受，還熏妄心，於本藏識成善種子。此戒體也。

If one desires to end delusion 妄情, they must know their own afflicted karma 妄業. Because of this, they create dharma and take [the precepts] 作法受<sup>13</sup> and, perfuming 熏 their deluded mind 妄心, a good seed 善種子 is created in the fundamental storage consciousness 本藏識. This is the essence of the precepts (T 1808 40: 258a23).

This passage clearly describes in simple terms the basic “storage consciousness” theory of the Yogācārin, a theory which, at least in the most basic terms, gives one explanation for the functioning of karma. The term “fundamental storage consciousness” (*běn zàngshì* 本藏識) is a translation of the term *ālayavijñāna* (*ālāiyé shì* 阿賴耶識), where seeds (*zhǒngzi* 種子) are created by good and bad actions, which then perfume (*xùn* 熏) the mind at higher levels of consciousness, influencing a person's physical and verbal actions. Once again, the Yogācāra theory of a “fundamental storehouse consciousness” was in effect answering the same question as to how this “imperceptible force between cause and effect” could carry karma from one moment to the next, and from one lifetime to the next, just as described above.

It is widely thought that Dào xuān developed this theory through the close relationship he developed with Xuán zàng while they were working together on translations in the capital (Satō 1986, 204). Xuán zàng was an advocate of Yogācāra thought, and was later called the “founder” of the East Asian Yogācāra school, the Dharma-Characteristics school or *Fǎxiāng zōng* 法相宗.

By using this explanation of “the essence of the precepts,” Hirakawa argues that Dào xuān was creating his own position apart from the traditional position of the *Four-Part Vinaya* school, and its forerunner, the Dharmaguptaka school, and he appears to have been the first in China to have discussed the topic in such a way (Hirakawa 1964, 176).

## Dào xuān's Doctrinal Classification System

Although we could say that these two explanations for “the essence of the precepts” simply reflect development in Dào xuān's thought, Hirakawa

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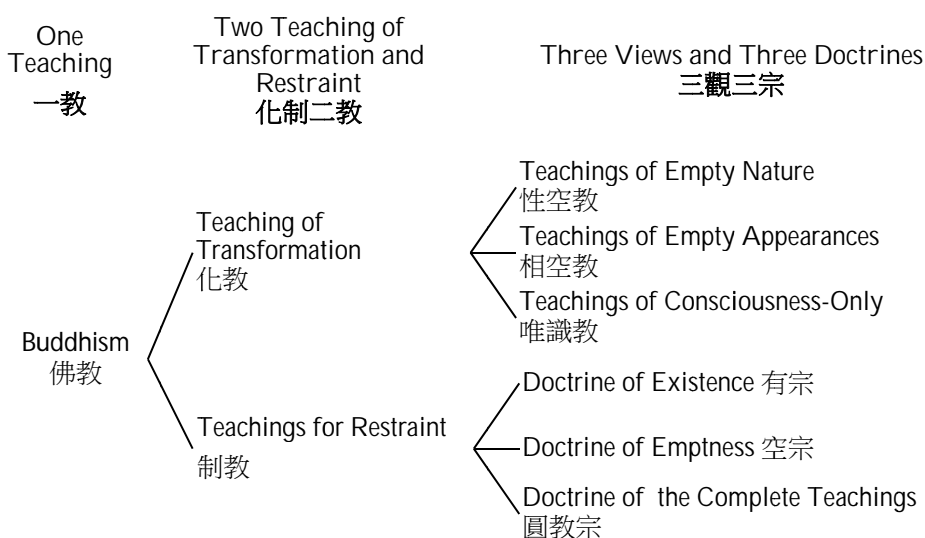
<sup>13</sup> Creating dharma (*zuòfǎ* 作法) in this case seems to be simply a synonym for taking the precepts, and seems to have been an alternate translation for karma.

explains that the later Yogācāra explanation found in the *Commentary on Karma* became the more influential position on the issue (1968, 176). Although the *Commentary on Conduct and Procedure* is generally considered more influential, the reason for this judgment comes down to Dào Xuān’s doctrinal classification (*pànjiào* 判教) system.

Such doctrinal classification schemes were a common feature of Chinese Buddhist writing during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, as an attempt to create a systematic account in terms of theme, time period, etc, for the diverse set of ideas—all labeled “Buddhism”—that had come to China over the preceding centuries. Perhaps the best-known example is Zhìyǐ’s system of five periods and eight teachings (*wǔshí bājiào* 五時八教). Compared to Zhìyǐ’s system, however, Dào Xuān’s system is relatively straightforward.

The following offers a summary of this system, and should serve as a reference for the following discussion:

#### Dào Xuān’s Doctrinal Classification system



Here, Dào Xuān basically claims that Buddhism consists of two distinct doctrinal approaches: (1) teachings for transformation (*huàjiào* 化教), aimed at transforming the mind of the person being taught; and (2) teachings for restraint (*zhìjiào* 制教), meant to keep the physical and verbal actions of the student of Buddhism in check. The former category corresponded to the doctrines found in the sūtras (*jīng* 經) as well as the treatises and

commentaries (*lùn* 論). The latter category corresponded to the doctrines found in the Vinaya (*lǜ* 律), and thus are only meant for monastics. Together they are termed the “two teachings for transformation and for restraint” (*huà zhì èrjiào* 化制二教), an idea that can be found even in Dào xuān's earliest work, the *Commentary on Conduct and Procedure*.

These two categories are further divided into three sub-categories each, called the “three views and three doctrines” (*sānguān sānzōng* 三觀三宗). The teachings for transformation are divided into three “teachings” (*jiào* 教) or “views” (*guān* 觀), which consist of the teachings of empty nature (*xìngkōng jiào* 性空教), the teachings of empty appearances (*xiàngkōng jiào* 相空教), and the teachings of Consciousness-Only (*wéishì jiào* 唯識教). The first of these, the “teaching of empty nature,” refers to Hīnayāna doctrines, which includes the doctrines found in the *Āgama Sūtras* (*āhán jīng* 阿含經), the Vinaya texts, and Abhidharma treatises such as the *\*Satyasiddhi-śāstra*.

The second category, the “teaching of empty appearances,” refers to teachings for “lesser bodhisattvas” (*xiǎo Púsà* 小菩薩), such as those found in *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.

Finally, the third category, the “teachings of Consciousness-Only,” refers to teachings for “greater bodhisattvas” (*dà púsà* 大菩薩), found in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (*Huáyán jīng* 華嚴經), the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Fǎhuá jīng* 法華經), the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (*Nièpán jīng* 涅槃經), and the *\*Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* (*Shè dàchéng lùn* 攝大乘論).

The teachings for restraint are then also divided into three different “doctrinal positions,” (*zōng* 宗) which consist of the doctrine of existence (*yǒu zōng* 有宗), the doctrine of emptiness (*kōng zōng* 空宗), and doctrine of the complete teachings (*yúan jiào zōng* 圓教宗). These three doctrines refer specifically to different viewpoints regarding “the essence of the precepts.”

The doctrine of existence refers specifically to the Sarvāstivāda theory that “the essence of the precepts” exists as “unexpressed matter” (as discussed above).

The doctrine of emptiness refers to the theory that “the essence of the precepts” is “neither matter nor mind”—the explanation found in the *\*Satyasiddhi-śāstra*, as well as in Dào xuān's earlier work and the work of his predecessors.

Finally, the doctrine of the complete teachings refers to the idea found in Dào xuān's *Commentary on Karma* that “the essence of the precepts” was a “good seed” created in the “storehouse consciousness” (Kamata 1999, 707-808).

Because this theory was derived from the "teachings of Consciousness-Only," by this explanation he was able to unite the Vinaya "teachings of restraint" with ideas from the Mahāyāna sūtras, thus showing that although the Vinaya texts were Hīnayāna, they were based on the same principles as the Mahāyāna. Dào Xuān claimed that his explanation of the Four-Part Vinaya was "separate from but permeating the Mahāyāna" (*fēntóng dàchéng* 分通大乘), and Hirakawa argues that this can be taken to be Dào Xuān's position on "the essence of the precepts," although it stands in contrast to the traditional position of his predecessors in the *Four-Part Vinaya* school (Hirakawa 1964, 176).

This interpretive strategy, furthermore, allowed Dào Xuān to argue that although the texts of the Vinaya were "Hīnayāna," with the correct understanding, the essence was the same essence as that found in Mahāyāna teachings. The above six sub-categories, taken as a whole, are termed "three views and three doctrines".

## Conclusion

Not all Vinaya scholars of the Tang dynasty agreed with Dào Xuān's interpretations of "the essence of the precepts." For example, Fǎyuàn 法願 (524-587), the scholar-monk who represented the *Bìngbù* school 并部宗 of Vinaya exegesis, described "the essence of the precepts" in terms of "five conditions" (*wúyuán* 五緣), while Hùiguāng 慧光 (468-537), one of the earliest Vinaya scholars, explained it as "principle" (*lǐ* 理).<sup>14</sup> One of Dào Xuān's teachers, Fǎlì 法礪 (569-635) of the *Xiàngbù* school 相部宗, based his explanation on the *\*Satyasiddhi-sāstra*, while Huáisù 懷素 (634-707) of the *Dōngtǎ* school 東塔宗—a student of both Dào Xuān and Xuánzàng—rejected Dào Xuān's interpretation, and explained this concept in more traditional Sarvāstivādin terms as "unexpressed matter." Regardless of how they explained it, however, this concept was still seen as fundamental; the question of its existence was never an issue.

By using ideas from principally Indian—not Chinese—sources, which in their original context would have represented opposing viewpoints, the Chinese Vinaya scholars were using ideas in new ways that perhaps could not have happened in their original context. On one hand, they were providing

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<sup>14</sup> See Satō Tatsugen 佐藤達玄 (1986, 205).

their own answer to a fundamental question in Buddhism: what is the nature of karma and rebirth? But on the other, they were using their theory to answer a social and religious problem that was unique to the Chinese context: Why were monastic discipline and regulated ordination ceremonies—both part of “Hīnayāna” doctrines—necessary to “Mahāyāna” Buddhists? By explaining the theory of the Vinaya, and the philosophical reasoning for taking and keeping the precepts using Mahāyāna theories borrowed from the Yogācāra system, Dàoxuān was able to assert the importance of maintaining traditional Vinaya precepts in the form of the Four-Part Vinaya.

The least that can be said is that the contentious doctrine underscores a fundamental point made by McRae:

[T]he Vinaya tradition was not limited to the dry explication of monastic regulations, but played an important role in generating rituals of profound religious power, by which Chinese Buddhists defined themselves and their religion (2005, 68).

The religious power of rituals—to Chinese Buddhists, to East Asian Buddhists, to the Sarvāstivādins, and likely to the majority of Buddhists outside the Sinitic cultural sphere as well—can be found precisely in the beliefs that underlie the concept of “the essence of the precepts.”

If this is true, however, it furthermore calls into question how the role of ritual in Buddhism is presented, exemplified by what Richard Gombrich has written in *What the Buddha Thought*:

[T]he Buddhist layman declares, “I undertake to abstain from taking life” and so forth, and thus articulates personal *conscience*. At least in theory, even the recitation of the words is useless and pointless unless one is consciously subscribing to their meaning. *The point of ritual lies in doing, not in intending. Thus ritual is ethically neutral for the Buddhist. It has no moral and hence no soteriological value.* It is not normally forbidden, unless it involves an immoral act such as killing, but it is certainly not commended (2009, 14).

Although Gombrich is discussing South Asian Buddhism, the author believes that this is the general way that the role of ritual is depicted in Buddhism: rituals have no real role except as some sort of “artefact” of the cultural reality in which Buddhism developed. While the above may, perhaps, reflect how the earliest Buddhists criticized the rituals of the contemporary Brahmanic priests, it is certainly not representative of later Buddhists who, with great creativity



and ever increasing sophistication, attempted to explain the realities of religious life, and the value of social organizational tools such as rituals. The notion that "ritual is ethically neutral," and that it "has no moral and hence no soteriological value," would have been problematic for Dào Xuān and many other Buddhist thinkers, to say the least. To them, ritual is far from "ethically neutral." In fact, one important aspect of going through the ordination ritual, is to receive this "essence of the precepts," "beneficial karma" that through its power, helps practitioners maintain their morality, and walk the path necessary to attain nirvāṇa. In this sense, ritual is efficacious and powerful.

In the strand of Buddhist thought that endorses the efficacy of ritual, it is not only the intention to act in accordance with Buddhist moral injunctions that creates this skillful karma, but, in fact, the act of taking the precepts is the key that empowers one to do so. Ritual *is* karma, and its correct performance ensures that, "by the force of moral shame—the dominant influence of the world" (Dhammajoti 2007, 502), the vows one takes have a sort of soteriological efficacy, whether monastic or lay. When one makes the hard and fast decision to utter that "yes, I can uphold the precepts," bow to the preceptor, and upon the acknowledgement of the Saṅgha, receive some invisible essence, a causal chain created by the skillful karma of having performed these actions leads to getting rid of the mental affliction, and toward enlightenment. Although the mere physical performance of a ritual may soon come to an end, participation in such rituals is a powerful act, and does have some kind of lasting effect, if only as a memory, or, to use Dào Xuān's terminology, as a "seed" in the "storehouse consciousness." It is in this sense that ritual has meaning for Buddhists and thus contains a great deal of moral and religious value.

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