Precepts, Vaccinations, and Demons: How Did Chinese Laypeople Perceive the Bodhisattva Precepts?

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The following remarks concerning the perception of precepts by the population at large in medieval China constitute no more than a brief coda to an earlier study, in which Daoist and other materials were used to question the popular understanding of lay and monastic ordinations in China.[1] Here the same types of materials are deployed once more, but with somewhat more detail concerning the course of relevant linguistic developments, and also a somewhat different focus, addressing a topic related to but separate from that which I considered in that publication. The best way to explain this shift of focus is to return to a brief passage written almost a quarter of a century ago that formed a small part of my earlier investigation, and which was directed at a specific historical event. In this study attention was drawn to a small group of Dunhuang manuscripts consisting of certificates of Buddhist lay ordination taken repeatedly by a single individual over a number of years, a phenomenon that suggested that these documents were in themselves regarded as talismanic, in other words, as providing protection against unseen threats.[2] But if so, then perhaps to the ordinary believer the very idea of upholding the precepts themselves promised safety as much as moral improvement, and it is this hypothesis that now forms the

[1] Barrett 2005.

[2] See Barrett 2005, p. 120. From more recent conversations with experts on Dunhuang materials I gather that these multiple ordination certificates are thought to have had a variety of possible uses, including perhaps being used as gifts to friends or supporters. But to be worthwhile gifts it seems likely that some talismanic value must have been attached to them, or at least that this was one possible way in which they were construed.

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topic of the study offered here. A suspicion as to the function of precepts in the popular mind was further stimulated by a chance remark encountered in another context that suggested that I was not the first to consider such a conclusion.

Arthur Waley (1889–1966), in the course of a biographical essay published over sixty years ago, observed with reference to the Buddhist precepts in seventh-century China that "vows were often administered to young children as a protection against disease, somewhat in the manner of vaccination."[3] Such a medical model for understanding precepts might seem at odds with the way in which they are usually treated in Chinese Buddhist commentaries on the *Fanwang jing* 梵網経, for example; and if we involve demons as well, the list in my title starts to look like that concerning animals in that celebrated and much misunderstood Chinese encyclopedia.[4] But by 1952, when he made this comment, Waley had spent over two decades released by financial good fortune from the tedium of regular employment, and consequently had probably read more in Chinese sources than most Anglophone sinologists with four decades of professional experience, so his views at this stage in his career cannot lightly be dismissed. Nor has Waley been the only person to reach for a medical analogy in describing Buddhist injunctions. Subsequently, my late colleague Andrew Huxley published an essay in 1996 entitled "The *Vinaya:* Legal System or Performance-Enhancing Drug?" This essay shows that the medical analogy in discussing the precepts is well grounded in South Asian materials, at least, and includes non-Buddhist materials such as a Jain text.[5]

But we should note that Andrew Huxley's essay does not deny that "legal system" is also an appropriate descriptive rubric for the materials he examines, while at least one scholar with the philological expertise to consider a broader range of sources has located passages that he does not hesitate to

[3] Waley 1952, p. 119. He does not in fact document this assertion, and as we shall see the circumstances he describes were somewhat exceptional, but his remark forms a useful starting point even so.

[4] Franz Kuhn (1884–1961) attributed to a Chinese encyclopedia, *The Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, a list of animals ordered in an apparently wildly irrational way. Both the encyclopedia and the list were products of his imagination, but the apparent irrationality of the arrangement of Chinese encyclopedias that he wished to illustrate with an invented example is a real phenomenon, since the underlying principles of order involved in real Chinese encyclopedias are not obvious to anyone without a traditional Chinese education, and so require explanation. On this list, see my comments in Barrett 2011, pp. 217–18.

[5] Huxley 1996, p. 142.

characterize as "adjudications" constituting a form of "case law."[6] Andrew Huxley is, after all, dealing with something slightly different from the phenomenon discussed by Waley in that he is trying to describe the aims and methods of the Buddhist monastic code taken as a whole. If instead of attempting such an overview we look more narrowly at the itemized precepts that are included in that code, and that also made up the briefer Buddhist codes for non-monastics in seventh-century China, we find that even recent summaries of their purposes do not explicitly mention medical goals.[7] Of course, ultimately in the monastic view these constituent precepts do not embody either a legal philosophy or a medical regime as such, but use a medical metaphor rather in the same way as Vimalakirti's illness. That is to say, they embody instead a morality that supports the practice that will defeat ignorance, and indeed to that end some rules simply taken as rules, if they constitute a hindrance to practice, may according to later Vinaya commentary be overridden.[8] But while we are now quite accustomed to medical metaphors about the effects of the Buddhist Dharma, and indeed accustomed also to the Buddhist tradition of medical practice itself, the metaphor of vaccination is for obvious reasons not a traditional one, but represents Arthur Waley's analysis of the function of the administration of Buddhist vows.[9]

To grasp the situation described by Waley, therefore, it makes more sense in the first instance to look to the immediate context rather than the South Asian sources of the Buddhist tradition, though those sources do in the final analysis also bear some reconsideration. In China, after all, the terminology adopted in translation of the Buddhist term *śīla* for a moral precept involved Chinese linguistic usage that had had its own earlier history and its own continued independent dynamic, even if Buddhist usage did come over time to exert an influence beyond the Buddhist community. The three hundred precepts of monastic Daoism observed in modern times do, after all, look very much as if they were modelled on the two-hundred-and-fifty precepts observed by Chinese monks.[10] Yet the word used by both groups for "precept" does have a pre-Buddhist history in what might be termed

[6] See Clarke 2016, p. 79.

[7] For six reasons still advanced for keeping the monastic precepts today, see Tsomo 2014, pp. 342–43.

[8] See Gethin 2014, pp. 66, 76.

[9] For a recent survey of the metaphor of healing in Buddhism in relation to Buddhist medical practice, see Salguero 2014, pp. 67–95.

[10] Hackmann 1931.

religious contexts that, as a consequence, cannot be ignored in weighing up its subsequent range of meanings.

By itself the word *jie* 戒 in pre-imperial China seems to have been most often deployed as a verb, meaning "to be careful or guard against," or transitively, "to warn," "to tell," or, "to keep off." As a noun, however—a "keeping off"—it was at times combined with another word indicating self-restraint in consumption, *zhai* 齋, or "fast," to form the compound *zhaijie* 齋戒. The *locus classicus* for this collocation (though textually the first character in this case is rendered *qi* 齊) is in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), where the fourth century CE commentator on the "Appended Explanations" glosses the phrase as "fasting"[11] and defines it thus: "To purify the heart and mind is what is meant by fasting; to guard against calamity is what is meant by precautions" (*xi xin yue zhai, fang huan yue jie* 洗心曰齊，防患曰戒).[12] Such long-established and widely known language was of course available for Buddhist translators to borrow, and the appearance of the compound in the most well-known translation of the longer of the Pure Land scriptures, in which text it was understood to refer to the precepts observed on fast days, ensured that it was indeed widely used in Chinese Buddhist circles.[13] Much therefore could be said about this binominal expression in early China and in later Buddhist writings in East Asia, but for present purposes we confine our remarks to pointing out the contexts in which it occurs, contexts in which a precautionary approach to prospective human interaction with the unseen world seems always to have been in view.

The compound *zhaijie* occurs for example in the *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子), where Legge translates it thus: "Though a man may be wicked, yet if he adjust his thoughts, *fast* (*zhaijie*) and bathe, he may sacrifice to God (*shangdi* 上帝)."[14] The overtones of Victorian Presbyterianism evoked by the last English word chosen for this sentence might no doubt be disputed, but the ritual context evoked is ever so clear. It is moreover confirmed by the usage of another text more congenial to the eventual Daoist rivals of Buddhism,

[11] "The sages did their fasting with the *Changes* and got their precautions from it" (*shengren yi ci zhai jie* 聖人以此齊戒). Lynn 1994, p. 65.

[12] Lynn 1994, p. 65.

[13] The translations of the Chinese by Gómez (1996, pp. 188, 214) as "the eight precepts adopted during the four periods of fast" and "the precepts of the fortnightly retreat" incorporate this understanding. His translation of the Sanskrit in the same volume shows that it is actually hard to find what if anything in any Indian language underlies such an interpretation—but this is another issue from the one we are pursuing here.

[14] *Mencius*, bk. 4, ch. 2, v. 25, in Legge 1960, p. 330.

namely the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Here a number of similar contexts relating to dealings with the spirit world also occur. Angus Graham in these cases translates *zhaijie* as "fasts" (or "fasting") and "austerities."[15] This particular expression remained an important part of subsequent Chinese ritual vocabulary. We find it for instance in the mid-fourth-century compendium of occult lore entitled the *Baopuzi* 抱朴子, while an entire compilation, the *Zhaijie lu* 齋戒錄, was produced to record the varieties of practice under this name that formed part of medieval Daoist ritual.[16]

But the *Baopuzi* already hints at other developments, speaking also of looking at "the various precepts of the Dao" (*lan zhu daojie* 覽諸道戒) in order to determine the behavioral prerequisites of seeking long life.[17] This suggests that by this point precepts had already been drawn up into codes, a process in which we cannot discount the possible influence of Buddhism, even if written versions of the Vinaya postdate the compilation of the *Baopuzi*. The translation of *śīla* as *jie* goes back to the earliest corpus of Buddhist texts in the mid-second century CE, and though the actual contents of the Vinaya may not have been known to the Chinese during the initial period of Chinese Buddhism when ordinations were apparently forbidden to them and reserved for foreigners, the existence of codified Buddhist regulations, *lü* 律—which at this point seems to have translated *prātimokṣa* rather than Vinaya—was again something that was already made known through these foundational translations as well.[18] By contrast, it is hard to find materials in the Daoist religious tradition speaking of codified, sequentially enumerated precepts that securely antedate these developments, whatever the antiquity of conceptions of abstention in dealings with the spirit world, since although the second century CE was plainly an important developmental phase in the emergence of this tradition also, it does not seem to have preserved any sources at all that would appear unambiguously to be

[15] Graham 1981, pp. 132, 192, 212, from the chapters "Zhi bei yu" 知北游, "Tian yun" 天运, and "Zai You" 在宥, as reordered by Graham. Cf. Guo 1961, pp. 741, 511, 368; note also p. 648, "Dasheng" 達生 chapter, not translated by Graham.

[16] Wang 1985, ch. 4, p. 83; Malek 1985, p. 40—this study contains *inter alia* a full discussion of the origins of the term, plus the Chinese text, which reviews materials of Tang date.

[17] Wang 1985, ch. 6, p. 126. Cf. Ware 1966, p. 116: "the moral injunctions of the various teachings."

[18] Vetter 2012, pp. 122, 101–2, respectively. On the assertion that ordination was legally forbidden to Chinese in the first phase of Chinese Buddhism, and on the translation of Vinaya as *lü* already about a half century after An Shigao 安世高 (ca. 2nd c. CE), see Barrett 2014, p. 205.

products of this period. It is certainly the case that the *Taiping jing* 太平經, or *Scripture of Great Peace*—a massive compilation transmitted by later Daoist tradition, parts of which might possibly antedate the first period of extensive Buddhist translations—does speak of precepts as *jie* on occasion, and the work taken as a whole shows little sign of awareness of Buddhism. But it would be hard at the current stage of our research to be sure that this usage itself is capable of being assigned to such a date, and in any case the term *jie* does not seem to be a common one for admonitions in this textual corpus.[19]

Even so, there are certainly very early Daoist materials that, in the view of many scholars, date back to a couple of generations after the first era of Buddhist translation and that do make reference to precepts in some detail. The *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary on the *Daode jing* 道德經, for example, talks frequently of precepts, or perhaps specifically verbal injunctions, using the form *jie* 誡, which appears in our incomplete text forty-five times according to the concordance of Mugitani Kunio 麥谷邦男, nineteen of which are found in the collocation "precepts of the Dao" (*daojie* 道誡).[20] Not everyone would accept a date for this text of about 200 CE, but there is some evidence from the late third-century CE that the *Daode jing* was held to contain precepts, even if the word itself does not appear therein. This is because the general idea is mentioned in the *Qi ming* 七命, or "Seven Mandates," a literary work by Zhang Xie 張協 (ca. 255–ca. 310), who expatiates on what the twelfth chapter of the *Daode jing* says against horseracing and hunting in a phrase that could imply that these animadversions might be called "precepts," though "what Laozi warned against" (*Laoshi you jie* 老氏攸戒) is all Zhang's text actually says.[21]

At some unknown point, but before the seventh century, the precepts of this *Xiang'er* commentary were codified into separate lists. Terry Kleeman, in taking issue with Michael Puett's reading of the *Xiang'er* commentary as prescribing self-divinization after the fashion of pre-imperial texts, has summarized the purport of these lists as follows: "The gods produced in an individual's body through strict adherence to this demanding code are not part of a cosmically orchestrated plan of the Dao." Instead he sees these

[19] For examples see Wang 1960, fasc. 71, p. 285; fasc. 96, p. 423. On the many questions surrounding this text, see Espesset 2008.

[20] Mugitani 1985, p. 17; the *Xiang'er* text is given by Mugitani on the first fourteen pages of his concordance. The meaning of the title is unclear.

[21] Xiao 1977, ch. 35, p. 498.

gods as "personal protectors and supernatural agents."[22] Other texts listing precepts preserved in the canon of Daoism that are equally hard to date precisely, but that again were in existence by the seventh century, show a much greater influence from Buddhism in their laying out of the precepts, notably in such cases as a fivefold list of precepts that is plainly modelled closely on the five Buddhist precepts for lay people.[23]

But whatever the degree of influence from Buddhism to Daoism that these sources exhibit, it is the difference in aims that remains and that raises the possibility that for those not situated within the training regimes of monastic Buddhism, the influence might have flowed in the reverse direction, from Daoism to Buddhism, and not in the formulation of the precepts but rather in the understanding of their purpose. In other words, the observance of moral codes could have been seen by ordinary Buddhist lay believers not solely as a foundation for spiritual self-improvement but more immediately as having a protective function in a world in which mankind was beset by threats from hostile spirits, *gui* 鬼, somewhat on the principle "the devil cannot harm a praying man."[24] The analogy might be with meditation, again a practice that formed part of Buddhist training towards definite spiritual goals, but one that at its higher levels also conferred supernormal powers of possibly more immediate application—the ability to predict the outcome of battles, for example, that in the early history of Buddhism commended at least one monk to the attention of his warlord employer.[25] No monastics undertook training in meditation in order to secure employment in this sort of role, but it was not denied that such might be the outcome of their efforts. Likewise, no monastic might commend the keeping of precepts to ward off demons rather than to lay a basis for spiritual progress, but perhaps such an understanding was tacitly accepted or at least not denied.

The incidental benefits of meditation, moreover, could be, were, and still are construed by some as medical as much as anything else. The Tiantai 天台 meditation technique of the late sixth century known as *zhiguan* 止觀 (cessation and contemplation) in its most widely known version quite explicitly mentions the medical functions of the practice, even though its ultimate aim is the traditional Buddhist one of achieving wisdom. But

[22] Kleeman 2016a, pp. 91–95, with quotation from p. 95.

[23] Kleeman 2016a, pp. 243–46. Cf. Barrett 2005, p. 102, for some further references on the interaction of Buddhism and Daoism in this area.

[24] For some further discussion, cf. Kleeman 2016b.

[25] Wright 1990, pp. 50–51.

the consequence has been that it is still possible to find at least one late twentieth-century publication in which this material is excerpted and given an explication entirely geared towards the pursuit of good health.[26] If, furthermore, we provisionally accept that the premodern Chinese conception of health among lay persons, whether Buddhist, Daoist, or neither of the above, frequently consisted of keeping demons at bay—a point we shall explore further shortly—then in the case of the Five Precepts, which were by the fifth century if not before well known to both Buddhists and Daoists, the relationship between keeping the precepts and acquiring guardian spirits prepared to fend off demonic assaults is absolutely clear, as has been established by the research of Ikehira Noriko.[27] The only problem is that, on the Buddhist side, the materials she draws upon are either extra-canonical or obscure as to their date and origin.

I am most grateful therefore to Paul Groner for advising me that as far as concerning adherence to the precepts, the potential thereby for acquiring protection from unseen peril is indeed explicitly recognized in the compendium of Buddhist learning known as the *Da Zhidu lun* 大智度論 translated by Kumārajīva (344–413) in 405:

> Question: Why on the six fast days do we receive the eight precepts and cultivate merit?
> Answer: On those days, bad spirits pursue humans and try to seize their lives, causing them to become ill and die and causing people to suffer misfortune. Thus at the beginning of the eon, sages taught people to observe the fast and cultivate good so that they could create merit and escape death. At that time, they fasted, but did not receive the eight precepts. They simply took not eating for one day as a fast. Later when the Buddha appeared in the world, he said, "You should not eat after noon and observe the eight precepts for a day and a night. The merit will bring you to nirvana."[28]

Paul Groner's own work has pointed out that in the *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari* 源氏物語), in depicting Buddhist practice in Japan circa 1000

[26] Huang 1990. My thanks to the anonymous reader who suggested that I should bring out this point.

[27] Ikehira 2009.

[28] *Da Zhidu lun*, T no. 1509, 25: 160a05–10. The translation as well as the textual reference, and the remarks cited in the next note, were all very kindly provided to me by Paul Groner.

CE, the five lay precepts are administered to women in cases of illness.[29] But one occasionally picks up hints in even later times in China too that keeping the precepts specifically kept demons away. In the late Ming period in China, circa 1600, almost a millennium after the incident noted by Arthur Waley, we find a Buddhist monk and a layman discussing vegetarianism in an exchange translated by Jennifer Eichman. The point about not killing animals is to the layman an obvious one, but what about abstention from onions and the like? What purpose does that serve? The reply is: "As to eating allacious vegetables, this will provoke malevolent demons to follow the smell. Now how could worthies and sages delight in this? Hence, one has no choice but to restrict these five flavors."[30]

The one link that remains to be clarified here—though it is not a problematic one to anyone working in the field of medieval Chinese history—is that between demons and disease, the link that prompted Waley to refer to "vaccination." But this can be very readily documented in medical sources from seventh-century China, to say nothing of the earlier (and later) medical tradition. Famously, the *Qianjin yifang* 千金翼方 by the great physician Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (581?–682) appends a work known as the *Jinjing* 禁經 that concerns itself solely with "interdictions" against demonic forces causing disease.[31] This text, citing a certain *Shenxian jing* 神仙經, opens with a recommendation that the Five Precepts—evidently as absorbed into Daoism—are indispensable for anyone intending to practice the exorcistic art of interdiction.[32] As for Waley's reference to "vaccination," we should bear in mind that in the struggle against demons the young were particularly vulnerable, and that Daoists expected their children to enter the novitiate and thereby acquire the protective supernatural agents to ward off demons at the age of six. Earlier than that it seems that they were, in the terminology we use today, registered on their parent's insurance.[33]

In fact, the specific "vaccination" mentioned by Waley involved the birth of the future Tang emperor Zhongzong 中宗 (656–710) to the future

[29] See Groner 2002, pp. 81, 102, n. 75. It may be that the practices described in *The Tale of Genji* helped prompt the observations by Waley introduced above.

[30] Eichman 2016, p. 165.

[31] For a brief characterization of the *Jinjing* within broader forms of iatromantic literature, see Harper 2005, pp. 135–36 and 160, nn. 7–9, and note that Harper's n. 9 refers to a lost Buddhist work apparently in a similar vein. The *Jinjing* has been studied and translated in Fang 2001, which I have not seen.

[32] Sun 1955, ch. 29, p. 341.

[33] Kleeman 2016a, pp. 273, 277–78.

Emperor-Empress Wu 武 (624–705) in 656, so for an imperial prince the normal Five Lay Precepts, or even the Bodhisattva Precepts, were plainly not impressive enough to provide the requisite first-rate level of supernatural cover. The distinguished traveller and translator Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 602–664) was therefore called upon to perform a tonsure on the child at the age of one month to give the effective coverage of a full monastic ordination, with seven adults ordained at the same time, "for good luck," as one might say.[34] I have suggested elsewhere that the rather limited range of formal options existing in choosing between secular and clerical life in Buddhism placed Chinese Buddhists in a relatively inferior position when competing with Daoists, who had at their disposal a much more finely gradated scale of initiations from childhood upwards. So here we may have in the tonsuring of this neonate another example of Chinese Buddhists improvising something they felt appropriate within the options they had at their disposal.[35] The temporary ordination of young persons is, however, frequent enough in Southeast Asian Buddhism even now to suggest that medieval Chinese imperial parents were not the only ones to perceive the process as conferring worthwhile immediate benefits. Given, too, the recent work of Shayne Clarke reassessing the nature of Buddhist monasticism and the family, it would seem that Buddhist practice concerning children within ancient India could encompass quite a wide range of expedients.[36] No doubt further research will clarify these matters. Be that as it may, I hope that the foregoing remarks will have been sufficient to highlight not practice so much as motive, even though to venture into such territory is inevitably somewhat speculative. While monastics may have had to provide new ways of using the distinction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist, and between clergy and laity, it was—on this understanding of the evidence given above—the desire of the laity to use those distinctions to confer immediate practical benefits in a world of unseen threats that obliged the monastics to improvise in the first place. This is not, to repeat, an aspect of bodhisattva ordinations that was, as far as I am aware, much discussed within the tradition of commentary on the precepts, but it is one that is perhaps worth bearing in mind as having probably existed, so to speak, in the background to such discussion. Perhaps in some instances it still does. I look forward to learning if

[34] Huili 慧立 (615–d.u.), comp., *Da Tang Da Ciensi sanzang fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳, T no. 2053, 50: 272a10–12.

[35] See Barrett 2005, pp. 111–12.

[36] Clarke 2014, especially pp. 159–61.

there is any evidence in the works of erudite Buddhist clerics of past ages, or indeed in the accounts of observers of contemporary Buddhism, that suggests that such was—or may even still be—the case.[37]

ABBREVIATION

T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–35.

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[37] I am grateful to Raoul Birnbaum for offering in response to this appeal some anecdotal evidence suggesting that this hypothesis might indeed have some value. Systematic research on attitudes to the precepts today among the laity might therefore not be out of place.

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