Interpretation of Some Tendai Concepts of Bodhisattva in Japan’s Pre-Modern and Modern Periods

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Abstract

The present study is concerned with the problem of some aspects of the Tendai Buddhist Sect’s philosophy and its interpretations in pre-modern and modern Japan. The Tendai’s image of “Monk-Bodhisattva” first created by the school’s founder, Saicho (767–822), (posthumous name—Dengyo Daishi), was selected as the object of study. This author posits that the changing interpretations of this conception could illuminate the complex relationships between Tendai, state and society in modern Japan. Also, this study of the modern image of Saicho’s philosophy and its role in Tendai’s contemporary social movement “Ichigu wo terasu” could explain the growing interest in this Buddhist philosophy in the modern Western world.

Key words: Tendai, Monk-Bodhisattva, Saicho, “Ichigu wo terasu.”
I. The Conception of “Monk-Bodhisattva” in the Tendai School

The image of “Monk-Bodhisattva” is one of the basic aspects of the philosophy of the Tendai school of Japanese Buddhism. First it was created by its founder, Dengyo Daishi, known by his monastic name “Saicho” (767–822), who found the basis of this image in the Brahmajala Sutra (Bommokyo) as one of the arguments that the activity of the Buddhist sangha could protect state from the threat of foreign invasion and natural calamities. It was translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva in 406 and considered as a sutra of precepts. This sutra describes so called “The Way of Bodhisattva” composed of Ten Stages, which means that a Bodhisattva shouldn’t merely follow these precepts but admonish all living beings to live and act accordingly to them. Passage of stages coordinates, in turn, with the observance of the Ten Fundamental Bodhisattva Precepts (jujukai 十重戒), defining their behavioral installations: not to sell wine; not to tell about crimes and errors of both monks and laymen; not to praise himself and not to insult others; not to be greedy; not to be angry; not to slander the “Three Treasures”; not to kill live beings; not to steal; not to lie; not to behave obscenely. These ten basic precepts are supplemented with 48 “light ones” (Groner 1984, 123).

Actually, the “Bodhisattva” concept in the Mahayana Buddhism is divided into two categories. First, it is a class of the heavenly beings which have reached enlightenment, but continue to be born in samsara in order to help others to be released. At second, it is a special class of monks and laymen who vowed to reach the Enlightenment from compassion to other beings, instead of just for itself.

Accordingly, the Bodhisattva itself should not only follow to ten precepts, but also lead other people on the right path. Only this way he could obtain the qualities of a Bodhisattva: tolerance, intuition, renunciation, concentration, virtue, practice, and also congenital—analytical and contemplative—intellectual force. Because its main objective is the care for all suffering beings, he also should take active part in worldly life.

The spiritual legacy of Dengyo Daishi is preserved in Tendai’s