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Emperor Wu of Liang's Reinterpretation and Elevation of the Precepts as the Bodhisattva Ideal

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Abstract: This paper examines Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty (r. 502–549) and his efforts to reform the Buddhist *saṅgha* through the establishment of the bodhisattva precepts and the proclamation of the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat. Grounded in Mahāyāna Buddhist ideals, Emperor Wu sought to integrate religious and political authority, positioning himself as the "Emperor-Bodhisattva". By analyzing the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics*, which encouraged monks to voluntarily pursue bodhisattva ideals, and the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat", which redefined meat-eating as an act of killing and imposed strict dietary regulations on all monastics, this study explores his shift from promoting voluntary adherence to enforcing these ideals through state power. Emperor Wu's reforms aimed to dismantle the hierarchical structure within the existing monastic community and establish a morally impeccable Mahāyāna Buddhist society. The analysis also addresses how Emperor Wu's criticisms of the *śrāvaka* precepts became more explicit over time, leading to their marginalization in favor of Mahāyāna interpretations of monastic discipline. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a newly redefined identity and Emperor Wu's integration of religious and political authority were ideologically interlocked forces in the historical context of the Liang dynasty.

Keywords: Emperor Wu of Liang; wheel-turning sage-king; Mahāyāna Buddhism; bodhisattva precepts; *śrāvaka* precepts; *vinaya*-masters; Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat; meat-eating; *Brahmā's Net sūtra*; *Nirvāṇa sūtra*

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1. Introduction

Nearly all traditions of East Asian Buddhism, including those in China, Korea, and Japan, draw their foundations from Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, modern scholarly research on the origins, scriptures, doctrines, and practices of Mahāyāna has revealed that the concept is far less straightforward than many East Asian Buddhists once assumed. Rather than being a clear and unified tradition, Mahāyāna appears to be a complex phenomenon, shaped by diverse and sometimes conflicting layers, making it nearly impossible to define as a single entity. Gregory Schopen (2004, p. 492) argues that, although Mahāyāna Buddhism is firmly associated with East Asian and Tibetan traditions, its identification as a distinct religious movement in India during its formative period remains unclear, particularly in light of the absence of inscriptional evidence prior to the fifth or sixth century. This indicates that the defining features of East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism cannot be traced entirely back to Indian Buddhism. Instead, it can be assumed that certain aspects of Mahāyāna identity, as understood by East Asian Buddhists, took shape outside India, reflecting distinct regional developments.

Situated within this broader scholarly discourse aimed at unraveling the multifaceted layers of Mahāyāna Buddhism, this paper examines a prominent development that emerged during a specific historical period. More precisely, it analyzes the intellectual-historical context and structural features of the bodhisattva precepts promulgated in the early sixth century by Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty 梁武帝 (r. 502–549; Xiao Yan 蕭衍), thereby shedding light on the newly formed Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideal of that era. Although numerous Mahāyāna sūtras had circulated in China since the earliest stages of Buddhism's arrival, making "Mahāyāna" a familiar concept, the movement that revived during the Northern and Southern Dynasties transcended purely doctrinal identities, forging a more assertive Mahāyāna ideology that actively rejected Hīnayāna.

Among the emperors who significantly popularized Buddhism in Chinese history, Emperor Wu of Liang issued two texts closely tied to monastic discipline: the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* 出家人受菩薩戒法 (*Chujia ren shou pusa jie fa*) and the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat" 斷酒肉文 (Duan jiu rou wen). These works rank among the earliest and most revealing examples of how a strongly exclusive Mahāyāna ideology—one that dismisses Hīnayāna and elevates Mahāyāna alone as universally valid—took concrete form in the realm of precepts and monastic regulations. Schopen (2004, p. 492) notes that references to Mahāyāna beyond textual sources were rarely attested in India before the fifth or sixth century, yet it was evidently recognized in China by Emperor Wu's era.

The rise of this Mahāyāna ideology in the Southern Dynasties was intertwined with Emperor Wu's pursuit of strong royal authority through combining religion and state governance. Concurrently, the newly developed Mahāyāna thought advocated by Seungnang 僧朗 (C. Senglang), a Goguryeo monk who had studied *Mādhyamika* in the Northern Dynasties, upheld all Mahāyāna sūtras as the Buddha's ultimate teachings. Thus, this viewpoint placed Mahāyāna sūtras above Hīnayāna sūtras, providing philosophical support for Emperor Wu's vision of religious and political governance.

The ideological foundation of Emperor Wu's rulership was deeply rooted in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Notably, he ascended the throne on the Buddha's birthday, April 8, in the first year of the Tianjian 天監 era (502), and later received the bodhisattva precepts on the same date in the era's 18th year (519) (Yan 1999, p. 56). These milestones clearly illustrate his ambition to become not merely a secular ruler but a wheel-turning sage-king 轉輪聖王 (zhuanlun sheng wang), or *cakravartin*—a model of ideal rulership with the authority and power to unify religious and state governance. Emperor Wu was deeply devoted to Buddhism, faithfully observing the precepts in his daily life. Throughout his five decades of rule in the Southern Dynasties, he undertook numerous Buddhist initiatives, including the translation of Buddhist scriptures, the composition of commentaries, and the establishment of monasteries.

Emperor Wu held great admiration for Aśoka the Great (ca. 270–232 BCE), the third emperor of the Indian Maurya Empire (322–185 BCE), widely recognized as the foremost *cakravartin* in Buddhist history. His political aspiration was to emulate Aśoka and ultimately surpass the framework of an Aśoka-like *cakravartin* in China (Janousch 2016, pp. 255–56).[1] Indeed, Aśoka's political ideology, which declared, "Truly, I consider the welfare of all to be my duty" (Dhammika 1993, p. 20), thereby blended the Buddhist ideal of equality with his aim of a centralized state. Similarly, Emperor Wu sought an ideological system that not only integrated secular authority but also encompassed the spiritual leadership of the Buddhist *saṅgha*, which he found in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

However, to realize his vision of combining religion and state governance and to establish a Mahāyāna Buddhist community in the real world, Emperor Wu encountered a major obstacle: the autonomy of the Southern Dynasties' Buddhist *saṅgha*. In contrast

to the Northern Dynasties—where imperial authority actively supported Buddhism and promoted the notion that "The King is the Buddha" 王即佛, thereby integrating the monarchy with Buddhist authority—the Southern Dynasties maintained a distinct separation between the Buddhist *saṅgha* and political power. Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416) had articulated this separation in his treatise "Monks Do Not Bow Down Before Kings" 沙門不敬王者論 (*Shamen bu jing wangzhe lun*).

Against this sociopolitical backdrop, Emperor Wu sought to redefine the relationship between the state and the Buddhist *saṅgha*. He enhanced his public image as the "Emperor-Bodhisattva" 皇帝菩薩 (Huangdi pusa), deepened his understanding of Buddhist precepts, and rigorously observed them. Simultaneously, he intervened in the Buddhist community, attempting to bring it under his direct control. A representative example of such state intervention was his Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat, which aimed to regulate monastic life through state policy.

At that time, the identity of "Mahāyāna Buddhism"—distinct from Hīnayāna and serving as a tool for Emperor Wu to overturn the existing order—was gaining renewed prominence. Within this ideological framework, Seungnang absorbed diverse Buddhist doctrines from the Northern Dynasties and subsequently founded the distinct intellectual tradition known as the Sanlun School 三論宗. This school emphasized the identity of Mahāyāna Buddhism, redefining it and propagating its teachings widely. Specifically, it rejected the *Chengshi lun* 成實論 as a Hīnayāna doctrine and criticized the theories of Southern Dynasties scholars who were deeply engaged with it. Through this process, Seungnang established new philosophical frameworks, positioning Mahāyāna Buddhism as a distinct and superior tradition. During the early years of his reign, particularly in 512, Emperor Wu dispatched ten monks—including Shi Senghui 釋僧懷 of Zhong Temple 中寺 and Shi Huiling 釋慧令 of Linggen Temple 靈根寺—to Seungnang's residence at Mount She 攝山 to study Sanlun teachings (*Jinling fancha zhi* 2011, vol. 1, p. 191; Cho 2023, p. 5). This marked a key turning point in Emperor Wu's ideological trajectory, as he fully transitioned from Hīnayāna to Mahāyāna Buddhism, demonstrating his complete and unwavering commitment to the latter (*Weimo jing yishu* T38, no. 1781, p. 912a11–14). It also confirmed Emperor Wu's active embrace of Sanlun philosophy, which he then integrated as a cornerstone of his vision to unite religious and political governance.

Although Emperor Wu pursued the ideal of a wheel-turning sage-king who would establish a Mahāyāna Buddhist state throughout his reign, the specific policy directions he followed to achieve this goal varied over different periods. According to Yan Shangwen, Emperor Wu's life can be divided into four phases: the first phase extends from his birth until his enthronement as emperor in the first year of the Tianjian era (464–502); the second spans from his accession to the throne until he received the bodhisattva precepts at the age of 56 (502–519); the third starts with his reception of the precepts and continues until the death of his eldest son Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531), formally Crown Prince Zhaoming 昭明太子 (Zhaoming taizi) in 531; the fourth lasts from the crown prince's death to Emperor Wu's own passing in 549 (Yan 1999, pp. 5–6). Among these phases, the second and third are most relevant to this paper. During the Tianjian era (502–519), Emperor Wu began laying the groundwork for centralizing royal authority by seeking to redefine the role of the Buddhist *saṅgha* within the state structure. He concentrated on fostering research in Buddhist exegesis and doctrinal studies. After establishing this doctrinal foundation, in the 18th year of the Tianjian era (519), he received the bodhisattva precepts from Huiyue 慧約 (452–535) and vowed to follow the Mahāyāna bodhisattva path. This event marked the beginning of the third phase, during which he acquired the title "Emperor-Bodhisattva" and exerted more direct control over the *saṅgha*.

Two texts directly connected to monastic rules during Emperor Wu's reign, the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* and the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat", are particularly significant in the third phase of Yan's division. They illustrate how Emperor Wu transformed Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy into concrete precepts and regulations, thereby reshaping the daily practices and conduct of the *saṅgha*.

Issued by imperial decree in May 519, the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* is part of the broader Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Laypersons and Monastics. It outlines the ceremonial procedures and the principles of the precepts for monastics receiving the bodhisattva precepts, although some earlier scholarship interprets it as encompassing both monastic and lay ordinations (Tsuchihashi 1980, pp. 836–38; Janousch 1999, pp. 121–28). This text is the earliest known record in China detailing the bodhisattva ordination ceremonies. Tsuchihashi Shūkō 土橋秀高 (Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 841) evaluated the philological significance of this manuscript as decisive, noting that it is the only text among similar bodhisattva ordination methods found in the Pelliot collection to include a recorded date (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 885). Over the years, it has been regarded as a critical resource in Buddhist studies, particularly in the field of *vinaya* research, and has steadily drawn scholarly attention. For instance, in his work *Kairitsu no kenkyū* (*A Study of the Vinaya*), Tsuchihashi (1980, pp. 832–43) briefly introduces the overall structure and content of each chapter of the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics*, highlighting that the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* 梵網經 (*Fanwang jing*) is treated as superior to the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi sūtra* 菩薩地持經 (*Pusa dichi jing*). Furthermore, he provides the complete transcription of the text as preserved in the Dunhuang manuscript (Tsuchihashi 1980, pp. 843–86). In addition, Andreas Janousch (1999, pp. 121–33) organizes the procedural steps of the bodhisattva ordination ritual in sequential order and explains their underlying meaning. More recently, the work of Ōtsu Ken'ichi 大津健一 (Ōtsu 2022, p. 298) discusses the processes of reordination 重受 (chongshou) and precept transfer 轉戒 (zhuanjie) in the text, within the context of distinct bodhisattva precepts. While previous scholarly work has provided valuable insights into the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics*, it has not fully addressed the text's stark emphasis on the Mahāyāna–Hīnayāna division and its exclusion of *śrāvakas*. This can be seen, for instance, in Emperor Wu's distinctive use of the term "Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline" 菩薩律儀戒 (pusa lüyi jie), which leaves out the Precepts of Discipline 攝律儀戒 (she lüyi jie) from the Three Categories of Pure Precepts 三聚淨戒 (san ju jing jie) of the Yogācāra tradition. Although Emperor Wu appeared neutral by synthesizing various bodhisattva precepts in circulation at the time, his underlying goal was to dismantle the hierarchical structure of the dominant monastic communities—dismissed as "*śrāvakas*"—and to establish a new Mahāyāna-based order.

A few years later, Emperor Wu proclaimed the so-called Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat 斷酒肉令 (Duan jiu rou ling), regarded as the earliest formal ban on monastic meat-eating among monastics in East Asian Buddhism. The text "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat" includes the edict of the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat, as well as debates with *vinaya*-masters during relevant Buddhist assemblies. Scholars have extensively investigated this decree, particularly in relation to ancient Chinese vegetarianism, which is reflected in the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat". For instance, Chengzhong Pu (2014, pp. 78–99) examines Chinese Buddhist vegetarianism, emphasizing that Emperor Wu's institutionalization of vegetarianism for the *saṅgha* played a crucial role in establishing the social belief that Buddhists in China, especially monastics, should be vegetarians. Nevertheless, this paper takes a different perspective, noting that Emperor Wu's proclamation, which required monastics to follow strict vegetarian rules, with expulsion from the *saṅgha* as the prescribed penalty for any infraction, actually diverged from the positions outlined in his bodhisattva precepts text and in the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*, which he otherwise upheld as

key references. By focusing on two competing notions of Buddhist scriptures in the Southern Dynasties, this study examines the unusual interpretation of discipline in the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat". In this regard, Kai Sheng (2020, p. 92) argues that, based on the Five Periods Teachings, Emperor Wu viewed the meat prohibition in the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* 涅槃經 (*Niepan jing*) as the ultimate teaching and thus resolved the contradiction between the three types of pure meat in the *vinaya* and the prohibition of meat-eating in the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*. However, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this paper, Emperor Wu actually opposed the doctrinal classification of the Five Periods Teachings, criticizing the gradual approach to vegetarianism advocated by the monastics at the time and instead insisting on the immediate practice of complete vegetarianism. Ultimately, his resolute stance went beyond merely promoting bodhisattva ordination; it reinterpreted the rules of monastic discipline through the principles of Mahāyāna sūtras, broadening the scope of the Buddha's teaching to include the *vinaya* texts.

Emperor Wu's promulgation of the bodhisattva precepts and his edict of the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat were separated by only three or four years, allowing this paper to compare both texts and closely trace how his Mahāyāna ideology formed and evolved within that brief timespan. Unlike the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics*, which has definitively been dated to 519 CE, scholarly debate exists regarding the exact year when the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat was declared. However, scholars generally agree that both texts are interconnected and were likely produced around the same period. The main issue is whether the prohibition against monastic meat consumption preceded or followed the establishment of the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* in 519.

Gijun Suwa (1988, pp. 79–81) laid the foundation for determining the date of the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat". He argued that the text was likely written between the 17th year of the Tianjian era (518) and May of the 4th year of the Putong 普通 era (523), based on two events: Fachong 法寵 of Xuanwu Temple 宣武寺, who debated with Emperor Wu on 23 May and passed away in March 524, and when Emperor Wu issued an edict banning sacrificial offerings in 517. Thus, Suwa concluded that the prohibition likely occurred between these dates. Building on Suwa's argument, Yan (1999, pp. 230–31) further narrowed the likely date to between 8 April, 519, and the 4th year of the Putong era (523), reasoning that, since the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat" references the bodhisattva precepts, it was likely issued after Emperor Wu received these precepts in 519 (Suwa 1997, p. 119). Valérie Lavoix (2002, p. 120) later provided decisive evidence regarding the date. She pointed out that Zhou She 周捨 (469–524), an official mentioned in the record, held the positions of Yuanwai Sanqi Changshi 員外散騎常侍 and Taizi Zuoweishuai 太子左衛率, indicating that the prohibition occurred after the 3rd year of the Putong era (522). Based on her research, many scholars now conclude the edict was issued in either 522 or 523 (De Rauw 2008, pp. 170–171; Xia 2010, pp. 87–88; Zhang 2023, p. 145)—a conclusion this study supports.

According to the *History of the Liang Dynasty* 梁書 (*Liang shu*), Zhou She held the position of Taizi Youweishuai 太子右衛率 in 519 and was promoted to Youwei Jiangjun 右衛將軍. However, he took leave for the mourning of his mother, who passed away no earlier than 519. After a 25- or 27-month mourning period, he likely resumed his post around 522. Additionally, the Liang shu notes that "after the mourning, Zhou She was reappointed Mingwei Jiangjun 明衛將軍 and Youxiaoqi Jiangjun 右驍騎將軍, then promoted to Shizhong 侍中, before being named Yuanwai Sanqi Changshi and Taizi Zuoweishuai". Considering the time required for these transitions, the prohibition was likely issued in May of either 522 or 523, with 523 being the more plausible date.

Consequently, this study dates the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat" to the 4th year of the Putong era (523), or, at the earliest, to the 3rd year (522). In Yan's chronology of

Emperor Wu's life, the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* marks the end of the second phase and the beginning of the third. Meanwhile, the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat", issued three to four years later, belongs to the third phase, when Emperor Wu's role as the "Emperor-Bodhisattva" began to fully materialize, integrating religious and political authority.

The establishment of the bodhisattva precepts and the proclamation of the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat both concern monastic regulations and encapsulate Emperor Wu's political intent to reform the *saṅgha* based on Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideals. While the former encouraged monks to autonomously pursue the bodhisattva ideals through the voluntary reception of the bodhisattva precepts, the latter redefined meat-eating as an act of killing and sought to control the dietary practices of all monastics through a compulsory edict. Thus, the two initiatives differ markedly in their nature. This paper analyzes two texts to examine the underlying Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideals within Emperor Wu's establishment of the bodhisattva precepts and his Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat, alongside the evolution of his perspective from the Tianjian era to the Putong era. Building on this foundation, this study aims to investigate the interconnected nature of these two major events—occurring in close temporal proximity—and to go beyond a mere recounting of historical incidents by uncovering the meta-logical structure of Mahāyāna thought behind Emperor Wu's bodhisattva ideology. The analysis ultimately reveals how the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a newly redefined identity and Emperor Wu's integration of religious and political authority functioned as ideologically interlocking forces, much like meshing gears, thereby making Mahāyāna ideals a tangible reality in East Asia at that time.

2. The Bodhisattva Ideal in *the Ordination of Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics*

The bodhisattva precepts, closely tied to the larger framework of the Mahāyāna precepts, are a set of ethical vows rooted in Mahāyāna teachings that encourage practitioners to embody the elevated virtues of bodhisattvas, such as great loving-kindness and compassion. Highly esteemed in East Asian Buddhism, these precepts provide a foundational framework for cultivating a Mahāyāna communal ethos while challenging the traditional hierarchy between the *saṅgha* and lay practitioners. Emperor Wu of Liang considered the precepts found in the Vinaya, which are tied to the *śrāvaka* (Hīnayāna) tradition, to be insufficient compared to the compassionate practices depicted in Mahāyāna sūtras. Therefore, he deemed it necessary to establish a set of bodhisattva precepts that provided concrete guidelines for practicing compassion. After these precepts were established, Emperor Wu himself observed them and encouraged others to do the same, significantly contributing to their popularization. Through the bodhisattva ordination ceremonies, Emperor Wu conferred formal religious authority within the Mahāyāna Buddhist community.

2.1. The Bodhisattva Precepts: Equitable Guidelines for Both Monastics and Laypersons in the Mahāyāna Community

Although records indicate that others had taken the bodhisattva precepts before Emperor Wu, his contributions were pivotal in popularizing them during the Southern Dynasties. Notably, Huiyue, who administered the bodhisattva precepts to Emperor Wu, reportedly had 48,000 disciples who took these precepts. Emperor Wu actively encouraged both monastics and laypersons to receive the bodhisattva precepts. Among those who responded to his encouragement were his minister Jiang Ge 江革 (?–535) and the monastic Huichao 慧超 (475–526) (So 2009, p. 142). Moreover, Emperor Wu significantly influenced the format of the bodhisattva precepts. For example, he extensively incorporated the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*—estimated to have been produced in the Northern Wei during the 5th

century—into the bodhisattva precepts. This incorporation led to the widespread adoption of this sūtra's precept system in the Southern Dynasties.

On the Buddha's birthday (8 April) in 519 CE, Emperor Wu received the bodhisattva precepts from Huiyue and vowed to practice the bodhisattva path. By doing so, he declared himself a "disciple of the bodhisattva precepts" 菩薩戒弟子 (pusa jie dizi) and was called the "Emperor-Bodhisattva" by his officials. In May of the same year, Emperor Wu issued an edict for the compilation of the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics*, which is part of the *Bodhisattva Precepts for Laypersons and Monastics* (So 2009, p. 139). This document provides insights into the bodhisattva precepts of that time and is currently preserved in the National Library of France as part of the Dunhuang manuscripts (Pelliot chinois 2196). The ordination ceremony that took place during Emperor Wu's first acceptance of the bodhisattva precepts likely followed the procedures outlined in the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Laypersons* 在家人受菩薩戒法 (*Zaijia ren shou pusa jie fa*).

The bodhisattva precepts, serving as superior guidelines for aspiring bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna Buddhism, elevate the status of lay practitioners by allowing both laypersons and monastics to equally receive them, in contrast to the *śrāvaka* precepts. Accordingly, Emperor Wu distinguished between the ordination ceremonies for laypersons and monastics. By actively promoting the bodhisattva precepts and referring to himself as a "disciple of the bodhisattva precepts", he established his religious authority, ultimately aiming to rule as a powerful *cakravartin* (wheel-turning sage-king) in accordance with Mahāyāna teachings. Emperor Wu's multiple receptions of the bodhisattva precepts and his ceremonial designation as the "Emperor-Bodhisattva"—a variation on the wheel-turning sage-king concept—publicly proclaimed his status as a *cakravartin*, serving both religious and political purposes.

2.2. Emperor Wu's Acceptance and Integration of Precept Traditions: Yogācāra and Brahmā's Net Sūtra Traditions

The preface of the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* reveals the ideological background behind Emperor Wu's formulation of the precepts. It identifies two primary texts—the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi sūtra* and the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*—suggesting that the foundation of these precepts was rooted in two main traditions (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 844). During the Jin and Song dynasties, various bodhisattva precept scriptures from the Yogācāra tradition were translated and introduced in China. Before Emperor Wu's time, the bodhisattva precepts were primarily derived from the Yogācāra tradition, specifically, the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi sūtra* translated by Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (C. Tanwuchen, 385–433).[2] In contrast, although the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* is recorded as a translation from Sanskrit by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (350–409 or 344–413), it is widely considered an apocryphon composed in China. Funayama Tōru 船山徹, in his recent study, suggests that it likely emerged sometime between approximately 450 and 480 CE (Funayama 2017, p. 18). The title of the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* was first mentioned in Emperor Wu's bodhisattva precepts, which aligns with Funayama's previous estimate of from 431 to 519 CE. Therefore, it is highly probable that the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* was established in Northern Wei between 450 and 480 CE (Funayama 1996, p. 59).

Moreover, the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* integrates precepts from both the Yogācāra tradition and the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*. Emperor Wu emphasized that he did not arbitrarily select any particular scripture when formulating these precepts, in accordance with his principle of not "rashly creating anything of his own accord", and stated that he only determined the sequence of the ordination procedure. (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 847). This stance reflects his broader view that all Mahāyāna sūtras are equally the Buddha's ultimate teaching, a perspective already evident in his "Preface to the Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom" 注解大品序 (Zhujie dapin xu), com-

posed in the 12th year of the Tianjian era (512) (Cho 2017, pp. 52–61). While Emperor Wu's bodhisattva precepts were founded on this doctrinal perspective, his arrangement of the ordination process implies far more than the mere ordering of steps—it reveals his deeper interpretation of Mahāyāna identity. In the bodhisattva precepts text, the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* is given priority over the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi sūtra* (Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 841). This prioritization is evident in the final section, which directly adopts the ten grave precepts 十重戒 (shi zhong jie) from the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*. Tsuchihashi (1980, p. 838) explains that, although the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi sūtra* influenced the Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds 攝善法戒 (she shanfa jie) and the Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings 攝眾生戒 (she zhongsheng jie) sections, the concluding section follows the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* because its precepts encompass both worldly and spiritual domains, providing a fitting conclusion. Furthermore, the text references a wide range of other sūtras, demonstrating its comprehensive nature.[3]

In addition, the preface identifies six types of bodhisattva precepts that were transmitted at the time, reflecting Emperor Wu's inclusive approach to Buddhist scriptures. Among these six, only the first three specify their authors. The first is attributed to Kumārajīva, who is said to have used the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* in his precepts (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 847). Although there is a record of a bodhisattva precept text said to have been translated by Kumārajīva, this has not been substantiated. Further, the attribution of the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* to Kumārajīva is based on the assumption that he was the translator of the sūtra, which, as previously mentioned, is not historically accurate. The second is associated with Tanjing 曇景 from the Gaochang Kingdom 高昌國; these bodhisattva precepts combine the Three Categories of Pure Precepts from the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi sūtra* and the ten grave precepts from the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 847). It is referred to as the "Gaochang Edition" 高昌本 because, when Dharmakṣema translated the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi sūtra* in Hexi 河西, Daojin 道進 approached him to request the bodhisattva precepts but was denied. After three years of repentance, Daojin eventually received the precepts from Śākyamuni Buddha in a dream (*Commentary on the Meaning of the Bodhisattva Precepts* T40, p. 568c6–12). His disciples, Sengzun 僧遵 and Tanjing 曇景, continued his teachings (*Commentary on the Meaning of the Bodhisattva Precepts* T40, p. 568c18–20). The third refers to the precepts of Xuanchang 玄暢 (416–484) from Changsha Temple 長沙寺 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 847). According to Zhiyi 智顗, Xuanchang's version is generally similar to Tanjing's precepts, albeit with slight differences (*Commentary on the Meaning of the Bodhisattva Precepts* T40, p. 568c20–23). These bodhisattva precepts are presumed to be closely related to the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi sūtra* and the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*. Additionally, there are three other categories of bodhisattva precepts that were developed in the capital but whose authors are not mentioned. These include those based on the *Upāsaka Precepts sūtra* 優婆塞戒經 (*Youposai jie jing*), the *Bodhisattva Jewel Necklace of Foundational Practices sūtra* 菩薩瓔珞本業經 (*Pusa yingluo benye jing*), and the *Samantabhadra Contemplation Practice Methods sūtra* 觀普賢菩薩行法經 (*Guan puxian pusa xingfa jing*) (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 847).

Rather than arbitrarily selecting one specific tradition or sūtra among these six categories, Emperor Wu consulted various scriptures and determined the ordination sequence by compiling the precepts himself (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 847). He employed an analogy from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* to critique and highlight the limitations of these six schools in their inability to transcend their own frameworks. Specifically, he compared them to people who dive into the water to retrieve a precious glass ball, each mistakenly believing that what they have found is the true gem and joyfully holding onto it (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 847). In contrast, Emperor Wu's perspective—that "all are scriptures, all are the Buddha's teachings, all are the bodhisattva's words, and all are the bodhisattva's dharma" 皆是經文, 皆是佛說, 皆菩薩說, 皆菩薩法 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 847)—aligns with

the view of Seungnang, who regarded various Mahāyāna sūtras as equally ultimate teachings. Emperor Wu, in the preface, emphasized that the Bodhisattva of Aspiration 發意菩薩 (fayi pusa) adopts non-hindrance as its guiding principle and maintains equality by abandoning discrimination (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 844). Consequently, he incorporates all scriptures and traditions of the precepts aligned with the Mahāyāna principles of non-hindrance and equality while excluding the *śrāvaka* precepts as a strategy to avoid differentiating between monastic and lay orders. He stated, "While the *śrāvaka* precepts create hindrances in preventing defilements, the bodhisattva precepts create no hindrances in preventing defilements" 聲聞戒遮其使碍，菩薩戒遮使不碍 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 844). This underscores his primary goal of establishing a bodhisattva precept system that is distinct from the *śrāvaka* precepts and applicable to both monastics and laypersons.

2.3. From Śrāvaka Precepts to Bodhisattva Precepts: The Precepts of Dignified Conduct and the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline

The Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics emphasizes that the bodhisattva precepts represent a superior and distinct set of precepts in contrast to the *śrāvaka* precepts, or Hīnayāna precepts. Dedicated to the altruistic practice of liberating all sentient beings, these precepts align with the goal of bodhisattvas, who do not attach to either *saṃsāra* or *nirvāṇa*. To understand the specific practices included within the bodhisattva precepts as outlined in this text, Emperor Wu identifies three key components: the Precepts of Dignified Conduct 攝大威儀戒 (she da weiyi jie), the Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds, and the Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings. These components correspond to the Three Categories of Pure Precepts of the Yogācāra tradition; however, they differ in the first component, which is termed the Precepts of Discipline in the Yogācāra pure precepts. Emperor Wu's version of the bodhisattva precepts includes several distinctive features not found in earlier versions. The sections detailing the bodhisattva ordination ceremony in the *Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* are structured in the following order: Chapter 5: "Receiving the Precepts of Dignified Conduct" 受攝大威儀戒法 (shou she da weiyi jie fa), Chapter 6: "Offering to the Three Jewels Precept" 供養三寶戒 (gongyang sanbao jie), Chapter 7: "Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds", Chapter 8: "Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings", and Chapter 9: "Brief Explanation of the Characteristics of Offenses" 略說罪相 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, pp. 864–85).

Emperor Wu deliberately avoided using the term "Precepts of Discipline" for the first precept; instead, he introduced the term "Precepts of Dignified Conduct". This choice reflects his intention to establish a distinct identity that does not incorporate the *śrāvaka* precepts. Additionally, it is important to note that the "Offering to the Three Jewels Precept" is positioned between the Precepts of Dignified Conduct and the Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds within the *Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics*.[4]

Considering the overall structure and sequence of the text, it is evident that it follows the bodhisattva ordination procedure. For example, in "Receiving the Precepts of Dignified Conduct", the text states, "If you wish to fully observe the Bodhisattva Discipline, you should first receive the Precepts of Dignified Conduct" 汝欲具足受菩薩律儀者, 應當先受攝大威儀戒 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 865). This explicitly indicates that the Precepts of Dignified Conduct must be received before proceeding to any subsequent stages. Furthermore, the opening of the "Offering to the Three Jewels Precept" states, "The preceptor should also speak thus: You, dharma-disciple named so-and-so, listen carefully. So-and-so has already received the Precepts of Dignified Conduct. The Buddhas of the ten directions, with great loving-kindness and compassion, ask you to fulfill the Bodhisattva Discipline" 智者又應作如是言: 汝甲法第諦聽, 某已受攝大威儀戒. 十方諸佛大慈大悲, 乞汝具足菩薩律儀 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 874). These examples demonstrate that the ordination cere-

mony in Emperor Wu's bodhisattva precepts prioritizes the Precepts of Dignified Conduct, followed by the Offering to the Three Jewels.

As mentioned above, when a monastic wishes to receive the bodhisattva precepts, they must first receive the Precepts of Dignified Conduct, which was viewed not as the central focus of the bodhisattva ordination but rather as a preparatory step leading to the full reception of the bodhisattva precepts (Janousch 1999, p. 128). Specifically, the Precepts of Dignified Conduct consist of two main methods: reordination and precept transfer. The preceptor 智者 (zhizhe, lit., wise one) overseeing the bodhisattva ordination ceremony must ask the recipient—who has previously received the *śrāvaka* precepts—whether they wish to reordain or transfer their precepts. This inquiry takes place during a designated period of 21 days, 14 days, or 7 days prior to the bodhisattva precepts ceremony (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 864). Ōtsu (2022, p. 298) argues that these two methods reflect the traditions of the Yogācāra and *Brahmā's Net sūtra* precepts, respectively, asserting that reordination aligns with the Yogācāra tradition, while precept transfer corresponds to the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*. However, since the Yogācāra precepts integrate the *śrāvaka* (Hīnayāna) precepts into the Mahāyāna system, they treat the *śrāvaka* precepts as a preparatory stage for receiving the Mahāyāna bodhisattva precepts, following a sequence: first receiving the full precepts 具足戒 (juzu jie) and then the Mahāyāna (Kimura 1981, p. 493–94). In contrast, the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* distinctly separates the Mahāyāna bodhisattva precepts from the Hīnayāna traditions, placing exclusive emphasis on the Mahāyāna bodhisattva precepts (Kimura 1981, p. 495). Thus, it appears that transferring the precepts actually aligns more closely with the Yogācāra precepts tradition, while the reordination method resonates with the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*. In this way, although Emperor Wu incorporates both streams of the bodhisattva precept traditions, it is important to remember that both methods within his Precepts of Dignified Conduct ultimately aim to establish a bodhisattva precept system that completely excludes the *śrāvaka* precepts.

If the recipient chooses not to undergo reordination because they have already received the *śrāvaka* precepts upon ordination, they can opt to transfer to the bodhisattva precepts. Monastics who choose this transfer first participate in a separate confession ceremony either 21, 14, or 7 days before receiving the bodhisattva precepts (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 871). The transfer process involves reviewing the *śrāvaka* precepts received at ordination and confessing any violations. Specifically, monastics confess if they have violated the Three Refuges 三歸 (sangui), the ten precepts 十戒 (shi jie) of a novice, or the full precepts (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 871). Through this process of confession, the previously received *śrāvaka* precepts are purified. After completing this confession, and as the actual bodhisattva precept ordination approaches, the preceptor announces that the preparatory precepts 調御戒 (tiao yu jie) previously taken are in fact the Precepts of Dignified Conduct (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 872). The preceptor then declares that, now purified, those preparatory precepts have effectively become the Precepts of Dignified Conduct of a bodhisattva (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 872–873). However, because this transferring ceremony is conducted separately from the main ordination ritual—with the confession taking place 21, 14, or 7 days beforehand and the preceptor's official declaration at any earlier point before formally receiving the bodhisattva precepts—it should be understood as merely a preparatory step rather than a core component of the bodhisattva precepts themselves.

Nevertheless, while this transfer of precepts provides an alternative for fully ordained monks or nuns who wish to avoid reordination, the text treats reordination as the more standard practice within the context of the bodhisattva precepts (Janousch 1999, p. 128). It explains, "Reordaining the preparatory precepts is done so that on the day of receiving the bodhisattva precepts, all the steps may be fulfilled on the ordination platform" 重受調御戒

者, 受菩薩戒日, 即於壇上, 次第具受 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 865). This indicates that, much like the earlier precept-transfer ritual, the reordination ceremony was conducted on a separate day prior to the main bodhisattva ordination ritual. Furthermore, reordination involves relinquishing previously held precepts and receiving them anew, rather than maintaining and purifying the *śrāvaka* precepts acquired upon becoming a monk or nun. This approach aligns with the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* tradition, which advocates adherence exclusively to the Mahāyāna bodhisattva precepts. Accordingly, the reordination process described in the text includes the Three Refuges, the ten precepts, and the full precepts (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 867), which are likely equivalent to the *śrāvaka* precepts.

As a result, neither this reordination nor the transfer of precepts constitutes the complete observance of the bodhisattva precepts. Emperor Wu deliberately used the term "Precepts of Dignified Conduct" to differentiate the bodhisattva ordination from the *śrāvaka* precepts, which he essentially dismissed. This differentiation may suggest that the Precepts of Dignified Conduct are analogous to the Precepts of Discipline within the Three Categories of Pure Precepts, implying that the bodhisattva precepts encompass the *śrāvaka* precepts. However, the fact that the precept transfer or reordination ceremony is conducted separately from the main bodhisattva ordination arguably demonstrates that the Precepts of Dignified Conduct function primarily as preparatory precepts for regulating and taming the monastic's mind and body before fully observing the bodhisattva precepts. Moreover, the reordination ceremony focuses primarily on the Three Refuges and the ten precepts rather than the full precepts—further confirming that this is not yet the complete stage of observing the bodhisattva precepts, especially given that the Precepts of Discipline typically apply to all seven groups of the monastic community.[5]

Emperor Wu refers to the Precepts of Dignified Conduct simply as preparatory precepts (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, pp. 864–65, 871–73), while explicitly designating the subsequent stages—Offering to the Three Jewels, Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds, and Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings—as the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline. Generally, the "Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline" tends to refer to the Precepts of Discipline within the Three Categories of Pure Precepts.[6] However, in the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics*, it applies specifically to these latter three stages, excluding the Precepts of Dignified Conduct (Cho 2017, pp. 73–74). This terminology suggests an intentional exclusion of the *śrāvaka* tradition, highlighting the superior and exclusive status of the bodhisattva precepts. Moreover, Emperor Wu not only described the *śrāvaka* precepts as meaningless and those adhering to them as harboring significant defilement and ignorance, but also explicitly referred to these precepts as the "*Śrāvaka* Discipline" 聲聞律儀 (shengwen lüyi), in contrast to the central bodhisattva precepts, the "Bodhisattva Discipline" 菩薩律儀 (pusa lüyi). This perspective is particularly evident in passages repeated during the reordination ceremony:

> This person named so-and-so, since acquiring consciousness, has been swayed by a wandering mind and external defilements. Their ignorance is deep, and their will is weak, lacking the great vows of a bodhisattva and the intent to broadly save beings. The *Śrāvaka* Discipline they could uphold are limited and end with their physical lifespan. 某甲善男子, 有識神以來, 至於今生, 浪心流動, 客塵所染, 無明厚重, 志力淺弱, 無弘誓願, 無曠濟意. 所可受持聲聞律儀, 不能遠大, 止盡形壽 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, pp. 865–66, 870).

Such rhetoric highlights Emperor Wu's view that the *śrāvaka* tradition is intrinsically inferior to the bodhisattva path, reinforcing his stance that the Precepts of Dignified Conduct, and the stages that follow, constitute the true Mahāyāna discipline. After fulfilling these basic conditions under the Precepts of Dignified Conduct, the ordination ceremony then proceeds to the Offering to the Three Jewels. Although the recipient may have al-

ready taken refuge in the Three Jewels during their initial ordination, this stage involves making the offering anew. Why did Emperor Wu place the Offering to the Three Jewels—which typically comes at the beginning of a ceremony—after the Precepts of Dignified Conduct yet before the Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds and Benefiting All Sentient Beings? What was his intention in structuring the ceremony in this specific order? According to an annotation within the manuscript, the recipient's earlier intention under the *śrāvaka* precepts might have been limited, focusing only on Buddha Śākyamuni or only on the bodhisattvas, thus not fully honoring the Three Jewels (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 874). Therefore, placing the Offering to the Three Jewels after the Precepts of Dignified Conduct in the text indicates that the core elements of the bodhisattva precepts begin at this stage. Emperor Wu regarded the preparatory precepts, which mainly prohibit harmful acts, as being of a lower level compared to the active cultivation of virtuous deeds, which he saw as central to the Mahāyāna bodhisattva precepts. The preceptor says the following:

> The Buddhas of the ten directions, with great loving-kindness and compassion, ask you to fulfill the Bodhisattva Discipline. You should correctly contemplate that the great ground bodhisattvas of the ten directions, filling all of space, serve as your witnesses. Today, we also serve as your witnesses. Next, you should receive the Precept of Offering to the Three Jewels. Rightly mindful of all the Buddhas of the ten directions, receive them attentively with a unified mind. 十方諸佛大慈大悲, 乞汝具足菩薩律儀. 汝當正想十方大地菩薩, 遍滿虛空為汝作證. 我等今日亦為汝作證人. 汝次應受供養三寶戒. 正念十方一切諸佛, 一心諦受 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 874).

Here, it is not the preceptor who confers the bodhisattva precepts upon the recipient but the Buddhas of the ten directions. Both the bodhisattvas and the preceptor serve as witnesses. A common characteristic of the bodhisattva precepts is that the Buddha is the one who confers the precepts. At the conclusion of the Precept of Offering to the Three Jewels, the recipient vows from this day (today) until attaining enlightenment (*bodhi*) to make offerings to the infinite Three Jewels—the Buddha, the dharma, and the *saṅgha*.

Following the Offering to the Three Jewels, the ordination continues with the Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds and the Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings. According to the annotation, these precepts derive specific content from two sūtras: the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi sūtra* and the *Mahāsaṃnipāta sūtra* 大集經 (*Daji jing*) (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 875).

At the beginning of the Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds, the preceptor gives the same declaration as in the Offering to the Three Jewels, indicating that the Buddhas of the ten directions confer the Bodhisattva Discipline and that the great ground bodhisattvas of the ten directions serve as witnesses. As before, the declaration starts with "The Buddhas of the ten directions, with great loving-kindness and compassion, ask you to fulfill the Bodhisattva Discipline" (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 875). However, an additional statement is included at the end of this declaration: "The precepts to be conferred consist briefly of ten kinds. The remaining subtle aspects amount to about 84,000. You should use skillful wisdom to discern them and cultivate your wholesome roots" 所出戒相略有十種. 諸余細相略有八萬四千. 當以巧智分別張養善根 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 875). In this passage, the Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds actively encourage not only the ten kinds enumerated in the bodhisattva precept ordination ceremony but also the 84,000—that is, countless—virtuous deeds. Among these ten kinds, the first is a restatement of the precept of embracing all virtuous practices 攝善法戒 (she shanfa jie), followed by the precepts of six *pāramitās* 六度戒 (liudu jie), approaching spiritual teachers 親近善知識戒 (qinjin shanzhishi jie), self-reflection 自省戒 (zixing jie), and repentance 悔過 (huiguo jie).

Finally, before introducing the Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings, the preceptor delivers a declaration nearly identical to the one given prior to the Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds, with only the name of the precept changed. These repeated declarations underscore that the three components of the Bodhisattva Discipline, as transmitted by the Buddha, are the Precept of Offering to the Three Jewels, the Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds, and the Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings. The Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings detail practices necessary for liberating all sentient beings from suffering and guiding them toward Buddhahood. Specifically, these precepts, which the recipient solemnly vows to uphold, include the precepts of loving-kindness 慈心戒 (cixin jie), compassion 悲心戒 (beixin jie), joy 喜心戒 (xixin jie), equanimity 捨心戒 (shexin jie), adapting to others 隨他心戒 (suita xin jie), repaying kindness 報恩戒 (baoen jie), nurturing 畜眾戒 (xuzhong jie), and taming 調伏戒 (tiaofu jie) (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, pp. 878–79).

After completing the conferral of the Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings, the preceptor declares three times before the Three Jewels that he bears witness to the recipient having received the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline. Next, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of all the worlds in the ten directions say to the assembly on behalf of the recipient:

> In a certain world, so-and-so has received the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline from bodhisattvas. Therefore, the bodhisattvas regard him as a son and as a younger brother, and with compassionate hearts, they love and remember him. Because of their compassionate hearts and loving mindfulness, they cause this bodhisattva's virtuous deeds to increase and ultimately never regress or diminish. 某世界中, 有某甲, 從菩薩, 受菩薩律儀戒. 於是菩薩, 起子想弟想, 慈心愛念. 慈心愛念故, 令是菩薩善法, 增長終不退滅 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 880).

Immediately after the bodhisattvas' blessing, the text states, "Thus, the reception of the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline is completed" 如是受菩薩律儀戒竟 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 880). This indicates that the essential stages of receiving the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline conclude with the Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings. Notably, these core precepts are conferred on a separate day from the preparatory precepts (reordination or precept transfer), further demonstrating that the term "Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline" does not apply to the Precepts of Dignified Conduct. This ordination structure diverges significantly from the Three Categories of Pure Precepts mentioned earlier, suggesting that Emperor Wu deliberately redefined the terminology to fit his unique framework of bodhisattva precepts. Traditionally, the Precepts of the Discipline 律儀戒 (lüyi jie) were understood as prohibitive norms articulated in negative terms and were generally seen as the subset aligned with the *śrāvaka* precepts within the Three Categories of Pure Precepts. However, Emperor Wu designated the core components of the bodhisattva precepts as "Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline" 菩薩律儀戒 (pusa lüyi jie), thereby excluding the Precepts of the Discipline 攝律儀戒 (she lüyi jie), despite the similarity in their names. This structural redefinition of the bodhisattva precepts emphasizes the exclusivity of Emperor Wu's Mahāyāna ideology.

After completing all the constitutive stages, both the preceptor and the recipient stand up and respectfully bow to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 880). The preceptor makes nine prostrations to the Three Jewels of the ten directions and one prostration to the assembly (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 880). While the preceptor stands before the statues of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, the recipient also makes nine prostrations to the Three Jewels of the ten directions, three prostrations at the preceptor's feet, and three prostrations to the assembly, thus concluding the ceremony of the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, pp. 880–81).

At this point, the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline are considered the highest precepts and are praised as follows:

> Thus, the Precepts of Discipline received by the bodhisattva are the most excellent and supreme among all other precepts of discipline. They embrace immeasurable and boundless merits, arise from the foremost and unsurpassed true mind, and counteract all kinds of evil actions of all sentient beings. The *prātimokṣa* precepts, in comparison to these precepts of discipline, do not equal even one part in a hundred; even one part in a million, or through extreme calculations and metaphors, they do not equal even one part, for they embrace all merits. 如是菩薩所受律儀戒, 於餘一切律儀戒, 最勝最上. 攝受無量無邊功德, 從第一無上真實心起, 一切眾生一切種惡行對治. 波羅提木叉戒, 於此律儀戒, 百分不及一, 百千萬分乃至極算數譬喻, 亦不及一, 攝受一切諸功德故 (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 881).

Subsequently, the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* presents a brief explanation of the characteristics of offenses. After completing the reception of the bodhisattva precepts, the preceptor should once again briefly explain these characteristics (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 881). The preceptor returns to his seat and the recipient kneels on one knee before the statues of the Buddhas, facing the preceptor (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 881). The preceptor then explains the ten grave precepts from the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*, indicating that Emperor Wu's bodhisattva precepts place considerable emphasis on this sūtra. Specifically, the ten grave precepts (*pārājika*) that a bodhisattva must strictly observe are the prohibitions of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, selling alcohol, speaking of the faults of others, self-praise and disparagement of others, parsimony and abuse of others, harboring resentments and not accepting apologies, and denigration of the Three Jewels (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, pp. 881–85). After the preceptor finishes explaining the characteristics of the offenses, the recipient makes three prostrations to the Buddha and one prostration at the preceptor's feet (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 885). Notably, this stage simply signifies the end of the ceremony, as the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline have already been received; therefore, the number of prostrations made by the recipient is significantly fewer than during the main stages previously discussed. When the preceptor departs, the recipient follows him out (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 885). Although this appears to be an additional ritual following the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline, its importance in regulating the life of the ordained who have received the bodhisattva precepts has arguably been no less than that of the preceding Precepts of Practicing All Virtuous Deeds and Precepts of Benefiting All Sentient Beings.

3. The Mahāyāna Ideals in the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat"

After receiving the bodhisattva precepts on 8 April, 519, Emperor Wu issued the edict of the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat approximately three to four years later, which completely banned alcohol consumption and meat-eating among monastics. This was a significant event that had a decisive influence on the complete prohibition of meat-eating by monks in East Asian countries in later times. While the previous *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* allowed monks to receive the bodhisattva precepts based on their autonomous judgment—aiming to inspire a high ethical consciousness of Mahāyāna bodhisattvas—the edict on prohibiting alcohol and meat differed in nature by forcefully controlling monastic discipline through secular law. In other words, Emperor Wu declared that monastics who consumed alcohol and meat had effectively lost the most basic qualifications as monks; thus, he proclaimed that he would use royal law to identify and defrock them from the *saṅgha*.

Emperor Wu firmly believed that the monastic community's practice of vegetarianism was a necessary condition for establishing a community that realizes the ideals of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Although he did not outright deny the autonomy of the *saṅgha* as a layperson, he argued that, as a wheel-turning sage-king protecting Buddhism, he had

the duty to minimally interfere to prevent the Buddhist dharma from being extinguished—specifically, by punishing monastics who consumed alcohol and meat. He warned that, if any monk was found eating meat, he would order the monastic supervisor to strike the gong, assemble the community, and have the offender renounce their precepts and return to lay life (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 297c13–14). While the monks had no disagreement regarding the prohibition of alcohol—because it conformed to existing precepts and was not open to rebuttal—there was significant opposition, especially among *vinaya*-masters, to the prohibition of meat consumption. In fact, there is room for debate regarding meat-eating in Buddhism, and, perhaps because of this, the discourse on the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat" focuses more on the precept of not eating meat than on the precept of not drinking alcohol. Therefore, this paper also centers on the prohibition of eating meat by monastics in the edict and analyzes the Mahāyāna ideals and theoretical structures underlying Emperor Wu's assertions.

3.1. Meat-Eating Equivalent to Killing

Emperor Wu's prohibition on meat consumption is based on the ethical judgment that "meat-eating is, in itself, the act of killing". This distinguishes his stance from early Buddhism, which, while emphasizing non-killing, differentiated between "meat-eating" and "killing", allowing exceptions such as the three types of pure meat 三種淨肉 (sanzhong jing rou). In early Buddhism, consuming these three types of pure meat was considered ethically faultless because it involved eating food without the intention of killing. This principle arose from the situation where ordained monks, whose primary practice was alms begging, could not selectively choose the food offered to them. Since the *vinaya* allowed these three types of pure meat and did not prohibit meat-eating per se, monks of the Southern Dynasties at the time generally practiced vegetarianism but would sometimes relax their vegetarian restrictions 解素 (jiesu) and consume meat, depending on their individual circumstances such as physical conditions. Given this context, Emperor Wu's "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat", which strictly regulated monastics' consumption of alcohol and meat and declared that violations would be punished under secular law, naturally caused a significant stir in Southern Dynasty society.

Moreover, meat-eating is prohibited in the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*, which is emphasized in the bodhisattva precepts promoted by Emperor Wu. The sūtra's teachings on vegetarianism are rooted in the *tathāgatagarbha* 如來藏 (rulaizang) doctrine presented in several Chinese-translated scriptures, including the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* 大般涅槃經 (*Daban niepan jing*; hereafter, *Nirvāṇa sūtra*), the *Aṅgulimāla sūtra* 央掘魔羅經 (*Yingjue moluo jing*), and the *Laṅkāvatāra sūtra* 楞伽阿跋多羅寶經 (*Lengqie abaduoluo bao jing*). The underlying rationale is that, since all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature 佛性 (*foxing*)—the qualities and potential to achieve Buddhahood—one should not eat their flesh, just as one would not eat the flesh of a Buddha (Funayama 2017, p. 479). Accordingly, the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* states, "All sentient beings in the six realms are my parents. Killing and eating them is equivalent to killing my parents and also killing my past bodies" 六道眾生皆是我父母. 而殺而食者, 即殺我父母, 亦殺我故身 (*Brahmā's Net sūtra* T24, p. 1006b11–12).

Nevertheless, while the *Brahmā's Net sūtra* forbids meat-eating, this precept against eating meat 不食肉戒 (*bu shirou jie*) appears among the forty-eight minor precepts. Notably, the sūtra does not specify how to handle transgressions after one has fully received the Brahmā's Net precepts; however, if one has not yet taken these vows, the text allows repenting a violation of the minor precepts before a single individual, rather than in front of the entire monastic community or the Buddhas and bodhisattvas (Funayama 2017, p. 477). In Emperor Wu's bodhisattva precept ordination method, promulgated in 519, meat-eating therefore does not constitute one of the ten *pārājika* offenses, which are the most funda-

mental rules and can, in the worst case, lead to the immediate loss of bodhisattva status. However, Emperor Wu advances the logic that "meat-eating is equivalent to killing", interpreting it under the precept against killing—the first of the ten grave precepts. Moreover, an instruction for a *pārājika* violation (from a standpoint predating the reception of the Brahmā's Net precepts) suggests that one may repent by reciting the ten grave and forty-eight minor precepts six times a day before statues of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas; upon witnessing an auspicious sign of the Buddha, one is thereby freed from serious wrongdoing (Funayama 2017, pp. 477–78). Drawing on Mahāyāna scriptures such as the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, Emperor Wu thus extends the prohibition on meat-eating beyond a mere minor precept, situating it within his broader Mahāyāna logic and practice.

Building on this view that meat-eating and killing are fundamentally no different, Emperor Wu criticizes attempts to distinguish the two. For instance, he refutes the argument that "Buying meat with money is not the same as killing it by oneself" (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 294c26–27). Instead, he asserts that consuming meat is akin to "using wealth to net meat", arguing that this is essentially no different from catching meat with a net (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 295a7–12). He believed that monks were merely invoking the three types of pure meat as a pretext for killing. This perspective is illustrated in a conversation between Emperor Wu and *vinaya*-master Sengbian 僧辯 of Fengcheng Temple 奉誠寺 on the 29th day of May[7], soon after the meat prohibition edict was issued:

> Emperor Wu asked: Does buying fish and meat with money correspond to "doubtful meat" or not? 問: 以錢買魚肉, 是疑非疑?
>
> Sengbian responded: In terms of principle, it is naturally doubtful. 答: 若理中理自是疑.
>
> Emperor Wu asked: Can't we understand it from the perspective of principle? 問: 不得以理中見?
>
> Sengbian responded: If we discuss it from principle, monks should not purchase fish and meat. 答: 若理中為論, 眾僧不應市魚肉.
>
> Emperor Wu asked: Right now, I'm asking whether, in phenomenon, it corresponds to "doubtful" or not. 今所問事中是疑不?
>
> Sengbian responded: According to the teachings, it is not doubtful. 答: 若約教非疑.
>
> Emperor Wu asked: For whom does the butcher in the market kill? 問: 市中人為誰殺?
>
> Sengbian responded: They kill for the buyer; however, the buyer does not have this thought. 答: 乃為買者殺. 但買者不作此想.
>
> Emperor Wu asked: If someone buys meat, and this person is not mentally confused, how can they not know that it was killed for them and fail to have such thoughts? 問: 買肉者, 此人既不惛亂, 豈得不知是為買者殺, 而不作此想?
>
> Sengbian responded: At that time, they thought of it as already dead meat. 答: 于時作現死肉心 (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 299c2–10).

In the dialogue above, Emperor Wu argues that fish and meat purchased with money cannot be free from the suspicion of having been "killed for oneself" and thus cannot be considered pure meat. In response, *vinaya*-master Sengbian distinguishes between the two levels of principle and practice, asserting that, from the perspective of principle, it can be viewed as doubtful meat, but, from the perspective of the teachings, it is not. However, Emperor Wu insists that, unless one is mentally impaired, one cannot remain unaware that meat is killed for the buyer's sake. Sengbian defends his position by noting that the

buyer perceives the meat as already dead and may not realize it was killed specifically for them.

Additionally, Emperor Wu contends that naturally dead meat is rarely encountered.[8] Even if such meat is consumed, he maintains that it is difficult to avoid the karmic sin of killing. Since all meat-eating presupposes an act of killing, he concludes that monastic consumption of meat should be categorically forbidden. His unwavering conviction extends to prohibiting the consumption of naturally dead animals, citing the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* for support, which bans all meat consumption, including naturally dead meat. When Emperor Wu asked Sengbian whether he ate meat, Sengbian replied, "In the past, I never ate meat, but when I reached middle age and fell ill, there were times when I temporarily allowed myself to eat meat" 昔恒不食肉, 中年疾病有時暫開 (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 299b14–15). Assuming Sengbian had someone else purchase the meat on his behalf, Emperor Wu inquired about Sengbian's mindset at the time. Sengbian answered that he had believed it to be from a naturally dead animal. Emperor Wu found this response contradictory, pointing out that calling it naturally dead meat while purchasing it at a slaughterhouse was inconsistent. Ultimately, Sengbian admitted that the meat he consumed was not pure meat, and the discussion ended in favor of Emperor Wu's argument.

Emperor Wu further asserts that naturally dead animals are rarely encountered in any context; thus, it is impossible for such meat to exist among products bought and sold in the market. Furthermore, he argues that even consuming naturally dead meat inevitably results in killing. He explains that a single sentient being hosts countless creatures within the 80,000 pores of its body (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 303a26–27). Therefore, killing one being not only ends its life but also destroys the countless lives that depend on it (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 303a27–28). Additionally, even if the creatures originally parasitic on the naturally dead meat have already perished, the number of newly hatched insects and creatures increases significantly (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 303a28–b1). Consequently, when one boils or roasts the meat, one commits the sin of killing innumerable sentient beings (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 303b1).

In conclusion, Emperor Wu classifies all forms of meat consumption as unethical acts of killing, maintaining that truly pure meat cannot exist. He insists that monastics, who should serve as role models for laypeople, must refrain from eating meat under any circumstances. Furthermore, he argues that eating meat with a repentant mind does not lessen the severity of the sin. Instead, eating meat again after repentance amounts to knowingly committing the act, making the offense even more severe (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 300c22–24).

3.2. From the Bodhisattva Precepts to Mahāyāna Sūtras

Emperor Wu's rationale for prohibiting meat-eating is rooted in Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, the *Laṅkāvatāra sūtra*, and the *Aṅgulimāla sūtra*, rather than in texts on bodhisattva precepts like the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*, which he neither cited nor referenced in the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat". Among these scriptures, his primary source was the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*. Employing Mahāyāna thought as a framework for integrating state and religion, Emperor Wu argued that meat-eating fundamentally undermines monastic practice within Mahāyāna Buddhism. Notably, the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* defines meat-eating as "cutting off the seed of great loving-kindness" (*Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* T12, p. 626a10). Emperor Wu reinterprets "great loving-kindness" 大慈 (daci) as the duty to "bring comfort and joy to all sentient beings" (*Guang hongming ji* T52, pp. 295c–296a). He perceived this not merely as an individual practice but as essential for creating a harmonious community in which various life forms unite under Mahāyāna compassion. However, he argued that consuming the flesh of other beings would inevitably foster resentment within the community, severing the foundation of great loving-kindness. In such an environment, he

contended, any practice leading to Buddhahood would be impossible. Consequently, he believed it crucial to uphold Buddhist principles through royal law.

In the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat, Emperor Wu enumerates the karmic consequences of meat-eating, stating it obstructs all paths to Buddhahood, from the thirty-seven aids to awakening 三十七道品 (sanshiqi daopin) to unsurpassed *bodhi* 無上菩提 (wushang puti) (*Guang hongming ji* T52, pp. 295c–296a). He maintains that meat-eating is detrimental to both *śrāvakas* and bodhisattvas yet is especially harmful to Mahāyāna bodhisattva practices. He reprimands monks and nuns: "Though all monastics may not achieve the ultimate bodhisattva practices of great loving-kindness and compassion, nor attain unsurpassed bodhi, why can they not abstain from foul-smelling meat and instead cultivate the paths of the *śrāvakas* and Pratyekabuddhas?" 諸出家人雖復不能行大慈大悲, 究竟菩薩行成就無上菩提. 何為不能忍此臭腥, 修聲聞辟支佛道? (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 296a23–26). Consequently, he emphasizes that all monastics must refrain from meat, equating its consumption with Hīnayāna practices and deeming it contradictory to the Mahāyāna bodhisattva path. He also warns that meat-eating undermines the awakening mind (*bodhicitta*) and leads to the decline of bodhisattva practices, leaving no future Buddha's disciples (i.e., bodhisattvas) to emerge. Thus, he highlights the necessity of protecting the bodhisattva dharma from the corrupting influence of meat-eating.

Emperor Wu also argues that meat-eating is not only a hindrance to *nirvāṇa* but a "seed of hell" (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 296b7), leading individuals to severe retributions such as disease and natural disasters, and amplifying resentment within the community:

> If one eats the father of a sentient being, that being will repay by eating one's father. If one eats a mother, the being will repay by eating one's mother; if one eats a child, the being will repay by eating one's child. Thus, enemies eat each other in retribution, enduring through countless eons of long, endless nights. 若使噉食眾生父, 眾生亦報噉食其父. 若噉食眾生母, 眾生亦報噉食其母. 若噉食眾生子, 眾生亦報噉食其子. 如是怨對報相噉食, 歷劫長夜無有窮已 (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 297a14–17).

In Mahāyāna thought, the affection between parents and children extends beyond humans to encompass all beings. When one being consumes another's family member, the other being retaliates in kind, perpetuating a cycle of animosity within the community. This emphasis on familial bonds resonates with universal human emotions and aligns with the Confucian principle of filial piety 孝 (xiao).

Moreover, Emperor Wu asserts that over countless rebirths in the six realms, all beings have been each other's parents. Thus, eating them is akin to eating one's own parents. He laments, "Today's sentient beings were once our parents, teachers, brothers, sisters, children and grandchildren, or friends. Yet, lacking the Dharma Eye 道眼 (daoyan), we fail to recognize this and continue to consume each other without awareness" 今日眾生或經是父母, 或經是師長, 或經是兄弟, 或經是姊妹, 或經是兒孫, 或經是朋友, 而今日無有道眼, 不能分別, 還相噉食不自覺知 (*Guang hongming ji T52*, p. 297a25–28). This view aligns with the *Aṅgulimāla sūtra*: "All sentient beings, endlessly revolving through beginningless birth and death (*saṃsāra*), have invariably been our fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters, like actors constantly changing roles. One's flesh and the flesh of others are essentially one and the same." 一切眾生, 無始生死, 生生輪轉, 無非父母兄弟姊妹, 猶如伎兒變易無常. 自肉他肉則是一肉 (*Aṅgulimāla sūtra* T02, p. 540c23–26). Drawing on the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, Emperor Wu portrays individuals as interconnected beings linked by vast webs of relationships. He also notes that he had already regulated ancestral and folk sacrifices before issuing the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat to prevent the offering of living creatures. To achieve a harmonious Mahāyāna society, he believed vegetarianism must be practiced, extending compassion not only to humans but also to animals and hungry

ghosts, thereby allowing all life to experience peace. Thus, Emperor Wu aimed to establish his identity not merely as a typical wheel-turning sage-king who protected Buddhism but as an "Emperor-Bodhisattva" dedicated to safeguarding Mahāyāna teachings while striving to build an ethical and harmonious community. To this end, he ultimately went beyond even the ten *pārājika* he had codified a few years earlier in his *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics*, choosing instead to impose the more rigorous standards outlined in the Mahāyāna sūtras upon monks and nuns.

3.3. Unifying the Vinaya Under the Universality of Mahāyāna Sūtras

A central issue between Emperor Wu and the *vinaya*-masters, as illustrated in the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat, concerned the relationship between the Mahāyāna sūtras and the *vinaya* texts. After issuing his edict on 22 May, Emperor Wu convened a dharma assembly on 23 May, during which the Chapter on the Four Marks 四相品 (Sixiang pin) from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* was recited. This session emphasized that eating meat cuts off the seeds of great loving-kindness. Following the assembly, a monk argued that "The *vinaya* does not mandate abstaining from meat or repentance for eating meat" 律中無斷肉事及懺悔食肉法 (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 299a9–10). This remark revealed a divergence between Emperor Wu, who aimed to enforce the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat based on Mahāyāna sūtras, and the *vinaya*-masters, who adhered to the traditional Vinaya texts. To address this conflict, an intense debate unfolded on May 29 between Emperor Wu and the *vinaya*-masters at Huaguang Hall. The debate began with Emperor Wu questioning *vinaya*-master Sengbian:

> Emperor Wu asked: When did the teachings of the *vinaya* begin? 制又問: 律教起何時?
>
> Sengbian responded: They began eight years after the Buddha's enlightenment and continued until his *parinirvāṇa*. 僧辯奉答: 起八年已後至涅槃.
>
> Emperor Wu asked: If the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* includes teachings on abstaining from meat—just as the *Laṅkāvatāra sūtra*, the *Aṅgulimāla sūtra*, the *Mahāmegha sūtra* 大雲經 (*Dayun jing*), and the *sutra of the Bound Elephant* 縛象經 (*Fuxaing jing*) all contain precepts against meat consumption—how can it be said that no teachings on abstaining from meat existed until his *parinirvāṇa*? 問: 若如此涅槃經有斷肉, 楞伽經有斷肉, 央掘摩羅經亦斷肉, 大雲經縛象經並斷肉律, 若至涅槃, 云何無斷肉事?
>
> Sengbian responded: The *vinaya* follows the initial teachings, and thus it is this way. 答: 律接續初教, 所以如此.
>
> Emperor Wu asked: You said that the *vinaya* follows the initial teachings until the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa.* If it continued until his *parinirvāṇa*, shouldn't it also include teachings on abstaining from meat? 問: 律既云接續初教, 至於涅槃. 既至涅槃, 則應言斷肉.
>
> Sengbian responded: From the perspective of establishing the precepts, these teachings build on the initial teachings and relate to the Five Periods Teachings. However, it does not mean that all teachings are identical. This is Sengbian's understanding. 答: 若制教邊, 此是接續初教, 通於五時, 不言一切皆同. 僧辯解正齊此 (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 300a6–14).

In this exchange with Sengbian, Emperor Wu argued that, since several Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, mention abstaining from meat, the *vinaya* should also include teachings on abstaining from meat. He further believed that Mahāyāna sūtras were superior to the *vinaya* and, thus, found it appropriate to interpret the *vinaya* in light of

the Mahāyāna sūtras. Conversely, Sengbian acknowledged the content of the Mahāyāna sūtras but maintained that the *vinaya* had a distinct nature. He explained that the precepts were established progressively, meaning their content could not be entirely uniform and was viewed as adaptable, evolving over time. This view was further illustrated in dialogues with other *vinaya*-masters, such as Dao'en 道恩 from Longguang Monastery 龍光寺, who explicitly stated, "The *vinaya* does not prohibit meat, whereas the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* does", a stance differing somewhat from Sengbian's. Specifically, although Sengbian granted that precepts existed during the time of the *nirvāṇa*, he argued that not all of the Buddha's teachings were identical. On the other hand, Dao'en contended that no new precepts were established during the *nirvāṇa* period. Given that the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* was one of the most popular scriptures among Southern Dynasty monastics, neither side could dismiss it outright, necessitating a systematic interpretation of its teachings alongside other scriptures, including the *vinaya*. Their debate continued as Emperor Wu questioned Dao'en:

> Emperor Wu asked: Did Upāli compile all the teachings spoken by the Buddha? 問: 優波離悉集佛所說不?
>
> Dao'en responded: He compiled the teachings from the first four periods but none from the *nirvāṇa* period. 答: 集前四時, 不集涅槃時.
>
> Emperor Wu asked: If that's the case, how did Mahākāśyapa ask Ānanda, "Where did the Buddha speak?" and compile the *sūtra piṭaka* up until the *nirvāṇa* period? And similarly, how did he ask Upāli, "Where did the Buddha speak?" and compile the *vinaya piṭaka* up until the *nirvāṇa* period? How can it be said that they only collected teachings from the first four periods without including any from the *nirvāṇa* period? 問: 若爾, 迦葉那得語阿難道, "佛從何處說法", 至涅槃時, 集修多羅藏；語優波離道, "佛從何處說法", 至涅槃時, 集毘尼藏? 云何得言唯取前四時, 不取涅槃?
>
> Dao'en responded: No new precepts were established during the *nirvāṇa* period. 答: 涅槃時, 不復制戒.
>
> Emperor Wu asked: The *Nirvāṇa sūtra* states, "Eating meat cuts off the seeds of great loving-kindness. From today onward, I decree that all disciples should no longer eat any meat, including that of naturally dead animals." Is this not a precept? 問: 涅槃云, "夫食肉者, 斷大慈種. 我從今日, 制諸弟子不得復食一切肉, 一切悉斷及自死者". 如此制斷, 是戒非戒?
>
> Dao'en was unable to respond further. 道恩不復奉答 (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 300b20–28).

Dao'en believed that Upāli had compiled only the teachings of the first four periods, excluding those of the fifth *nirvāṇa* period. This interpretation led to the view that the *vinaya* and the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* were distinct works. At the time, the Southern Dynasty Buddhist community frequently employed the "five flavors" metaphor from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*—the era's most popular scripture—to classify and systematize teachings. These five flavors or foods, drawn from the stages of dairy processing, are (1) milk 乳 (ru), (2) curds, derived by fermenting the milk 酪 (C. lao; S. *dadhi*), (3) fresh butter, derived by churning the curds 生酥 (C. sheng su; S. *navanīta*), (4) clarified butter, derived by boiling the fresh butter 熟酥 (C. shu su; S. *sarpis*), and (5) ghee, derived by further refining the clarified butter 醍醐 (C. tihu; S. *sarpir-maṇḍa*). This progression symbolized the successive phases of the Buddha's teachings, corresponding to the varying capacities of sentient beings to comprehend them. The *Nirvāṇa sūtra* likened its own teachings to ghee, the most refined "flavor", thus placing itself as the teaching of the fifth period (*Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* T12, pp. 690c28–691a8).

In the Southern Dynasties, the most popular classification of Buddhist scriptures was the Five Periods Teachings 五時教 (wushi jiao), which categorized the Buddha's teachings into five successive periods and associated specific scriptures with each stage. Influential scholar-monks such as Sengliang 僧亮 (ca. 400–468), Sengzong 僧宗 (438–496), and Baoliang 寶亮 (444–509) advocated the Five Periods Teachings based on the five flavors analogy from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*. According to figures like Huiguan 慧觀, Sengzong, and Baoliang, the Buddha taught the *śrāvaka tripiṭaka* during the first period, the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* in the second, and scriptures such as the *Śrīmālādevī Simhanāda sūtra* 勝鬘經 (*Shengman jing*) and the *Vimalakīrti sūtra* in the third, the *Lotus sūtra* in the fourth, and the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* in the fifth (*Collected Exegesis on the Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* T37, p. 493a23–b24). It should be noted that this is only one interpretation of the Five Periods Teachings, and alternative classification methods also existed. For example, Sengliang placed the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* in the third (*Commentary on the Large Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* T33, p. 66b26–29) or the fourth period (*Collected Exegesis on the Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* T37, p. 493a23–26), rather than the second. Meanwhile, monks such as Sengmin 僧旻 of Zhuangyan Temple 莊嚴寺 arranged the scriptures into four periods (*Weimo jing xuanshu* T38, p. 561c12–13). Yet, in all these schemes, the later teachings were considered superior to the earlier ones, with the final *Nirvāṇa sūtra* regarded as the most supreme.

However, influenced by Seungnang, founder of the Sanlun School, Emperor Wu rejected such hierarchical classifications. In his "Preface to the Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom" (512 CE), he explicitly refuted the Five Periods Teachings, which had characterized the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* as an incomplete teaching in the second period (*Chu sanzang jiji* T55, p. 54a8–12). Instead, he argued that all Mahāyāna sūtras are equally ultimate and sought to dismantle the hierarchical classifications established by scholar-monks. Disavowing both the five- and four-period frameworks, he contended that the Buddha's teachings responded to the myriad capacities of sentient beings and were, therefore, boundless, not confined to particular periods. Emperor Wu then extended his view that all Mahāyāna sūtras are equal and ultimate to the *vinaya* as well, aiming to establish the universality of monastic discipline. In response to Dao'en's claim that the *vinaya* does not include the fifth period's teachings, specifically, the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, Emperor Wu argued that the Buddha's instruction to cease all meat-eating, including that of naturally dead animals, should be regarded as a core discipline.

The Five Periods Teachings, emphasizing the progressive nature of the Buddha's teachings, also provided a foundation for the gradual implementation of spiritual practices within the monasteries of the Southern Dynasties. When Emperor Wu questioned Sengbian on why the Buddha would allow meat-eating if it hindered liberation, Sengbian replied, "The Buddha spoke to guide those with shallow practice towards deeper cultivation" 為淺行者說, 引其令深 (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 299c27–28). Sengbian agreed that complete abstention from meat was ultimately necessary for liberation but contended that beginners might find it difficult to give up meat entirely at an early stage of their practice, thereby requiring a gradual approach. Indeed, the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* itself clarifies that the Buddha's earlier teaching on the three types of pure meat was meant to lead practitioners step by step toward complete abstention from meat. Supporting this, *vinaya*-master Baodao 寶度 remarked, "Those with sharp faculties, upon hearing the teaching on the three types of pure meat, immediately understand it as an instruction to abstain from all meat. Those with dull faculties, however, require further teachings" 若利根者, 於三種淨肉教, 即得悉不食解. 若鈍根之人, 方待後教 (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 299b4–6). This statement indicates that the time needed to achieve complete abstinence from meat depends on the practitioner's level of understanding.

Nevertheless, Emperor Wu rejected the gradualism implied by the Five Periods Teachings, asserting that monastics clinging to the taste of meat lacked moral integrity. In his view, abstention from meat—that is, refraining from killing—constituted the minimum ethical baseline. Hence, when monks and nuns, from whom high ethical awareness was expected, failed to observe this requirement, he disparaged them as morally inferior to laypeople. While advocating a unified approach to the *vinaya* and Mahāyāna sūtras, he regarded the *śrāvaka* precepts as inadequate for guiding the Mahāyāna bodhisattva path, elevating the bodhisattva precepts as the highest discipline and viewing the *śrāvaka* precepts as inferior and ultimately dispensable.

In the end, the debates between Emperor Wu and *vinaya*-masters such as Sengbian and Dao'en over meat-eating reflected a deeper tension between political authority and monastic autonomy. Emperor Wu's assertion—"If precepts are violated, I will interrogate the oldest monks or those with the most disciples first"—illustrates his ambition to bring the monastic order under political control. By transforming dietary observance from an individual matter into an affair of public accountability, he scrutinized whether monks upheld the pure ethical standards that society expected of them.

Interestingly, throughout the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat", the term "Bodhisattva precepts" appears only once. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Emperor Wu, who leveraged nearly every conceivable argument to prohibit meat-eating, did not reference the specific content of the bodhisattva precepts as outlined in the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* or the *Brahmā's Net sūtra*. By the Putong era, he moved beyond the framework of bodhisattva precepts, boldly interpreting the teachings of Mahāyāna sūtras as monastic precepts. He fully embraced Mahāyāna Buddhism as a political ideology, advocating for the rule of a monarch embodying the ideal of a bodhisattva who would unify Mahāyāna teachings and precepts to strengthen ethical governance. In doing so, Emperor Wu effectively subsumed the *vinaya*—a specialized domain within Buddhist tradition—into the universality of Mahāyāna sūtras, treating all teachings as identical expressions of the Buddha's voice. Although he outwardly aimed to integrate "Hīnayāna" within a grand Mahāyāna vision, in practice, everything deemed Hīnayāna, including what he regarded as the inferior or dispensable *śrāvaka* precepts, was systematically excluded. This reinterpretation of monastic codes led to the marginalization and social stigmatization of contemporary *vinaya*-masters as *śrāvakas* of the Hīnayāna, whom Emperor Wu perceived as lacking the core Mahāyāna virtues of compassion and equality. Consequently, the unique domain of *vinaya* was absorbed into universal Mahāyāna ideals, and, while this may have appeared as a unification of lesser and greater teachings, it effectively marginalized all non-Mahāyāna elements.

4. Conclusions

This study examined Emperor Wu's Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideals as presented in the "Abstinence from Alcohol and Meat" and the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics*. In 519, Emperor Wu both established and became a disciple of the bodhisattva precepts, widely promoting them as superior to the *śrāvaka* precepts. The bodhisattva precepts preserved in the extant manuscript emphasize the Mahāyāna values of equality and non-hindrance. The concept of equality, central to Mahāyāna Buddhism, begins with recognizing inherent equality across divisions such as monastics and laypeople, Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna, and all sentient life. Accordingly, Emperor Wu established Mahāyāna bodhisattva precepts for both monastics and laypeople, seeking to advance the bodhisattva ideal within society, with equality taking precedence over vertical hierarchy.

At the same time, Emperor Wu reinforced the Mahāyāna's perceived superiority over the Hīnayāna within the bodhisattva precepts, positioning himself as the "Emperor-

Bodhisattva" who would protect Mahāyāna Buddhism. Although bodhisattvas and *śrāvakas* are ontologically equal, their states are viewed as entirely distinct; only bodhisattvas, who grasp the value of equality, attain unhindered function. Further, this serves as a critique of the *śrāvakas*. Based on this logic, the bodhisattva precepts established by Emperor Wu appear to include the existing *śrāvaka* precepts in principle, reflecting the universality of Mahāyāna; yet, in practice, they exclude the *śrāvaka* precepts. Similarly, the Precepts of Dignified Conduct—comprising reordination or the transfer of the *śrāvaka* precepts—are regarded as preparatory steps for receiving the Precepts of the Bodhisattva Discipline.

By the time he proclaimed the Prohibition of Alcohol and Meat, three to four years after the bodhisattva precepts, Emperor Wu's criticism of the śrāvaka precepts had become more explicit. He reinterpreted the monastic precepts based on Mahāyāna sūtras rather than relying solely on the bodhisattva precepts. In line with the Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideal, Emperor Wu argued that meat-eating equated to killing and obstructed spiritual progress. He advocated a strict prohibition on meat-eating among monastics to foster a morally pure community centered on great loving-kindness and compassion. His vision of a wheel-turning sage-king for the Mahāyāna Buddhist community transcended the traditional, anthropocentric concept of rulership, adopting a universal approach. It embodied the ideal of the "Emperor-Bodhisattva", who would protect a community of life that included animals, insects, and even microorganisms.

Consequently, Emperor Wu prohibited monastics from consuming meat, defining vegetarianism as the act of planting the "seed of enlightenment" 菩提種子 (puti zhongzi), a fundamental requirement for practicing the Mahāyāna bodhisattva path. He believed that monastics must uphold strict morality, embracing complete vegetarianism as an expression of their moral conscience. Therefore, he urged monastics to adopt strict vegetarianism immediately, holding firm faith in the teachings of Mahāyāna sūtras expounded by Buddhas and bodhisattvas, rather than making gradual transitions to vegetarianism under the pretext of low spiritual capacity. Through this process, the *śrāvaka* precepts were portrayed as degenerating into craving bloody meat, and Emperor Wu established a new bodhisattva ideal grounded in the teachings of Mahāyāna sūtras.

Through his bodhisattva precepts and edict, Emperor Wu aimed to dismantle the hierarchical structure of the existing monastic community and foster a morally impeccable Mahāyāna society. This reform exemplified his strongly exclusive Mahāyāna ideology, which rejected Hīnayāna elements in favor of what he regarded as a universally valid Mahāyāna vision. As a result, Emperor Wu's reforms, situated within the broader Mahāyāna movement, proved instrumental in establishing the newly conceived Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideal of that era. These developments laid the groundwork for the widespread adoption of bodhisattva precepts and vegetarianism beyond the Liang Dynasty, shaping practices that continue to the present day. Notably, Emperor Wu's exclusive pursuit of Mahāyāna's universality left a deep mark on subsequent East Asian Buddhism, and its effects remain evident in contemporary Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Buddhist traditions, where monastics are generally expected to observe vegetarianism as part of their religious practice.

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Abbreviations

T	*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 *[Revised Version of the Canon Compiled During the Taisho Era]*. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭 et al. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai 大正一切經刊行會, 1924–35
P	Pelliot Chinese Dunhuang manuscript

Notes

1 While the ideal of the wheel-turning sage-king (*cakravartin*) had been present since the early Southern and Northern Dynasties, Emperor Wu developed a unique interpretation of this concept based on the historical Aśoka, who was revered as a *cakravartin* in Indian history. This interpretation differs from the more conventional concept of the *cakravartin* found in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā śāstra* 大智度論 (*Dazhi du lun*), which was widely spread in the Northern Dynasties (Joo 2012, pp. 9–12). In the 10th year of the Tianjian era (511), the *Aśokarājāvadāna sūtra* 阿育王經 (*Ayuwang jing*) was translated. By the 15th year of the same era (516), the publication of the *Jinglü Yixiang* 經律異相 under imperial edict referenced the *Aśokarājāvadāna sūtra* on multiple occasions (So 2009, p. 135). The frequent citation and imperial attention underscore Emperor Wu's high regard for the text and the influence of Aśoka, as a model of the wheel-turning sage-king, on his own reign.

2 Notably, before Emperor Wen of the Song dynasty 宋文帝 (r. 424–453) received the Bodhisattva precepts, the sūtra *on the Good Precepts of the Bodhisattvas* 菩薩善戒經 (*Pusa shan jie jing*), which belongs to the Yogācāra tradition, was similarly translated and introduced into China (Xia 2016, p. 42).

3 The sūtras cited include the *Treatise on the Sūtra of Generating Bodhicitta* 發菩提心經論 (*Fa puti xin jing lun*), *Flower Hand sūtra* 華手經 (*Hua shou jing*), *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra*, *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* 般若波羅蜜經 (*Bore boluomi jing*), *Mātṛkā sūtra* 摩得勒伽經 (*Modelejia jing*), *Sūtra on the Good Precepts of the Bodhisattvas*, *Śrīmālādevī Simḥanāda sūtra*, *Samantabhadra Contemplation Practice Methods sūtra* 觀普賢行經 (*Guan Puxian xing jing*), *Commentary on the Sudassana Vinaya* 善見律毘婆沙 (*Shan jian lü piposha*), *Upāsaka Precepts sūtra*, *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*, and *Mahāsamṇipāta sūtra*, among others (Yan 1999, pp. 148–49).

4 Tsuchihashi (1980, p. 837) suggests that the Offering to the Three Jewels Precept should actually be performed as the first in the sequence. He argues that its placement later in the text implies that the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* does not follow the actual ordination ceremony sequence. According to Tsuchihashi, Chapter 5, titled "Receiving the Precepts of Dignified Conduct", addresses the critical issues of reordination 重受 and transfer of the precepts 轉戒 for monastics who receive the Bodhisattva precepts, which explains its description preceding the Offering to the Three Jewels Precept.

5 The seven groups 七衆 (qizhong) of the monastic community consist of *bhikṣu* 比丘 (fully ordained monks), *bhikṣuṇī* 比丘尼 (fully ordained nuns), *śikṣamāṇā* 式叉摩那 (probationary nuns undergoing a two-year training before full ordination as *bhikṣuṇīs*), *śrāmaṇera* 沙彌 (novice monks), *śrāmaṇerikā* 沙彌尼 (novice nuns), *upāsaka* 優婆塞 (male lay devotees), and *upāsikā* 優婆夷 (female lay devotees).

6 This general use can also be observed in the "Requesting to Receive the Precepts" section of the *Ordination of the Bodhisattva Precepts for Monastics* (P2196; Tsuchihashi 1980, p. 850).

7 *Vinaya*-masters Sengbian, Fachao 法超 of Zhuangyan Temple 莊嚴寺, and Baodu 寶度 of Guangzhai Temple 光宅寺 ascended the high seat at the Huaguang hall in Hualin Garden on the 29th May. While they showed a willingness to engage with Emperor Wu's arguments and demonstrated some acceptance, their discussions remained parallel to, rather than converging with his views. It is also likely that other *vinaya*-masters at the time were more critical of Emperor Wu's policies than these three.

8 Emperor Wu also stated, "Owls, crows, wild pigeons, and domestic pigeons do not die wherever they go; we have not seen a single one that died naturally. Even though roe deer, deer, pheasants, and rabbits fill the fields and marshes, we have never seen a single one that died naturally. Therefore, to find dead meat, one must go to the slaughterhouse; to find dead fish, one must go to the places where nets are cast. Without killing, how could there be dead meat?" 鴟鴉鳩鴿觸處不死. 那不見有一自死者. 麞鹿雉兔充滿野澤, 亦不嘗見有一自死者. 而覓死肉其就屠殺家, 覓死魚必就罾網處. 若非殺生豈有死肉? (*Guang hongming ji* T52, p. 303a20–24).

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