

Modernity for the True Dharma: The Sangha, King, and Buddhist Precepts

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A defining feature of so-called Japanese Buddhism has been the persistent influence of the ideas surrounding the “Final Age of Dharma” (*mappō*), emphasizing the continuous decline of Buddha dharma and the capacities of Buddhist practitioners after the demise of Shakyamuni, which led to inaccessibility to enlightenment and lax discipline epitomized by the “non-precept” in this age. In this article, I will explore the pivotal roles played by the utopian and primordial vision of the “True Dharma” (*shōbō*) in Meiji Japan, with a focus on the Shingon monk Shaku Unshō (1827–1909), and will unveil how his fervent ideals resonated with rapidly shifting global and nation-building settings, restructuring a new temporal-spatial order in the archipelago and beyond.

Keywords: Final Age of Dharma (*mappō*), modern Japanese Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Shaku Unshō, Oda Tokunō

Introduction

The persistence of ideas surrounding the Final Dharma Age (*mappō shisō* 末法思想) has often represented one of the defining characteristics of Japanese Buddhism. The three ages of Buddhism (*sanji* 三時) consisted of the period of the True Dharma (*shōbō* 正法), lasting either five hundred or one thousand years, the Semblance Dharma (*zōbō* 像法), lasting one thousand years, and the Final Dharma, lasting ten thousand years. The conventional understandings of the three ages hold that traditional training and disciplinary practices are all but impossible because of the declining capacities of Buddhists. Historically, Japanese people have assumed that *mappō* 末法 began in 1052, and the recurring natural disasters and destructive upheavals around that time drove this home for them. Japanese scholarship on the history of Buddhism has argued that novel and various movements, epitomized by Kamakura New Buddhism (*Kamakura shin bukkyō* 鎌倉新仏教), arose

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in medieval Japanese Buddhism in reaction to this fatalistic perspective.¹ This scholarship did not adequately examine other periods in Japanese Buddhist history, especially the early modern and modern periods.

In line with this, the idea that precepts are invalid in the age of *mappō* (*mappō mukai* 末法無戒) became prevalent. This primarily comes from *Mappō tōmyōki* 末法燈明記 (hereafter abbreviated as *Tōmyōki*), which is said to have been written by Saichō 最澄 (766–822), the founder of the Tendai 天台 denomination.² However, many scholars of Buddhism consider this text apocryphal.³

Against this backdrop, Shimazono Susumu has recently pointed out that the longing for the True Dharma (Skt. *saddharma*, Jp. *shōbō* 正法) which is the opposite of *mappō*, is a motif throughout Japanese religious traditions; it can be found in *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye) written by Zen master Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253) and fervent *Lotus Sutra* advocate Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1283). Some vinaya monks, such as Eison 叡尊 (1201–1290), the founder of Shingon-*risshū* 真言律宗 (Shingon-Vinaya school), devoted themselves to realizing the ideal sangha of Shakyamuni Buddha's age under the banner of the True Dharma.⁴ However, the modern genealogy of the True Dharma concept is remarkably understudied.

This article focuses on the Meiji 明治 period (1868–1912) Buddhist efforts to retrieve the utopian time of the True Dharma by reversing the predestined Buddhist decadence of *mappō* through upholding the precepts and the mobilization of imperial power. I examine the movement to revive the Buddhist precepts (*kairitsu fukkō* 戒律復興) through the lens of a well-known, precept-upholding Shingon monk, Shaku Unshō 釈雲照 (1827–1909).⁵ Unlike many of the monastics in Japan at the time, the cornerstone of his lineage was precepts maintenance. His movement, putting forth a utopian vision of the True Dharma in Meiji Japan, was also influenced by his predecessor, a late Edo 江戸 period (1603–1868) Shingon monk named Jiun Onkō 慈雲飲光 (1718–1804).⁶

1 On the formation of Kamakura Buddhism-centric ideas within the modern academia of Japanese Buddhism, see Fukushima Eiju 福島榮寿, “Kindai bukkyō saikō: Nihon kindai bukkyōshi kenkyū to ‘kamakura shinbukkyō’ ron” 〈近代仏教〉再考：日本近代仏教史研究と「鎌倉新仏教」論, *Nihon Bukkyō sōgō kenkyū* 日本仏教総合研究, vol. 10, 2012, pp. 117–145.

2 *Mappō tōmyōki* was translated in English by Robert Rhodes as *The Candle of the Latter Dharma* in *BDK English Tripitaka*, 107-III, Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1994.

3 On the outline of the scholarly controversy surrounding the authorship of *Tōmyōki* in the postwar period, see Ishida Mizumaro 石田瑞磨, “*Mappō tōmyōki ni tsuite*” 『末法燈明記』について, *Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 印度学佛教学研究, vol. 10, no. 2, 1962, pp. 552–555.

4 Shimazono Susumu 島藺進, *Nihon bukkyō no shakai rinri: “Shōbō” rinen kara kangaeru* 日本仏教の社会倫理：「正法」理念から考える, Iwanami Shoten, 2013.

5 For general information on Shaku Unshō, see Nathaniel Gallant and Kameyama Mitsuhiro, “On the National Doctrine of Greater Japan (1882),” In *Buddhism and Modernity: Sources from Nineteenth-Century Japan*, Orion Klautau and Hans Martin Krämer, eds., University of Hawai'i Press, 2021, pp. 131–142.

6 According to Sim In-ja, the core of Jiun's *shōbō* ideas is fourfold: (1) Sanskrit studies and trans-denominational thought to put the Buddha's insight into practice; (2) a *shōbō* precept revival movement (*shōbō ritsu fukkō undo* 正法律復興運動) to reactualize the vinaya practiced by the Buddha; (3) the making of clothes for monks per the Buddha's instructions; and (4) the practice of meditation as carried out by the Buddha. See Sim In-ja 沈仁慈, *Jiun no Shōbō shisō* 慈雲の正法思想, Sankibō Busshorin, 2003, p. 47.

Previous scholarship has depicted the modern period of Japanese Buddhism as one of a rising lay-centric Buddhism (*zaike shugi* 在家主義) that superseded the power previously wielded by monks and has seen Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗 as the vanguard of Buddhist intellectualism. This sect possesses a tradition of its clergy being “neither monk nor layman” and has drawn much scholarly attention, leading to Shin Buddhism-centric scholarship.⁷ Notably, as I will show, Unshō proposed an alternative reformation of Japanese Buddhism whereby clergy and monasteries lead under the guiding spirit of the True Dharma.

In this article, I begin by introducing Unshō and his movement to revive the precepts and its commitment to the True Dharma. I then focus on the increasing attention paid to the *Tōmyōki* by Meiji Buddhists. Opposing its arguments surrounding *mappō*, Unshō attempted to demonstrate the viability of the True Dharma by asserting that this tract was a forgery. He was the first modern Japanese intellectual to do so. Despite his strident opposition to clerical decadence and his reactionary approach to modern agendas, his intellectual attempts were shaped by new Japanese Buddhist encounters with Buddhist traditions in South and Southeast Asia and cross-border interactions between Japanese and other Asian Buddhists, as well as by the need for nation-building in Meiji Japan.

Meiji Buddhist Efforts against Persecution and the Role of Shaku Unshō

In the late nineteenth century, Buddhism in Japan experienced several crises. These were triggered by the religious policies of the new Meiji government—which wanted to separate Buddhism and Shinto—and Buddhism’s persecution, known as the movement to “abolish Buddhism and destroy its symbols” (*haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈). This movement had a devastating impact on the entire Japanese Buddhist world and has been described as the starting point of “modern Japanese Buddhism.”⁸

7 See Ōmi Toshihiro 碧海寿広, “Shinshū chūshin shikan (Jōdo Shinshū)” 真宗中心史観 (浄土真宗), in *Nihon shūkyōshi no kiwādo: Kindai shugi o koete* 日本宗教史のキーワード：近代主義を超えて, Ōtani Ei’ichi 大谷栄一, ed., Keio University Press, p. 365. On trends in research regarding modern Japanese Buddhism, see Ōtani Ei’ichi, *Kindai bukkyō to iu shiza: Sensō, Ajia, shakaishugi* 近代仏教という視座：戦争・アジア・社会主義, Perikansha, 2012, pp. 13–41; and Ōmi Toshihiro, *Kindai bukkyō no naka no shinshū: Chikazumi Jōkan to kyūdōsha tachi* 近代仏教のなかの真宗：近角常観と求道者たち, Hōzōkan, 2014, pp. 5–14. Shimazono Susumu has paid considerable attention to another modern trend called Nichirenism (*Nichirensugui* 日蓮主義). Colored by Buddhist nationalist commitments, Nichirenists such as Tanaka Chigaku 田中智学 (1861–1939) and Honda Nissō 本多日生 (1867–1931) initiated religious movements based on fervent belief in the *Lotus Sutra*, and had a wide-ranging influence. According to Shimazono, one of the defining characteristics of Nichirenism is lay-centrism, which put lay believers instead of Buddhist monks at the center of the movement; see Shimazono, *Nihon bukkyō no shakai rinri*, 2013. See also Shimazono, “Kokumin kokka Nihon no bukkyō: ‘Shōbō’ fukkō undō to hokke=Nichirensugui zaikai shugi undō” 国民国家日本の仏教：「正法」復興運動と法華＝日蓮主義在家主義運動, in *Kindai kokka to bukkyō: Shin Ajia bukkyō shi* 近代国家と仏教：新アジア仏教史, vol. 14, Sueki Fumihiko 末本文美士, ed., Kōsei Shuppansha, 2011, pp. 159–211.

8 On the extensive influence of *haibutsu kishaku* on the Japanese Buddhist world, see James E. Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and Its Persecution*, Princeton University Press, 1990.

Shaku Unshō was born in the Izumo 出雲 domain in 1827.⁹ At age ten, he was ordained as a Shingon sect priest and spent the first half of his life training. He had a Confucian grounding and also educated himself in various Buddhist doctrines, including Yogachara (*yuishiki* 唯識). In terms of his precepts practice and thought, Unshō trained under Bessho Eigon 別所栄嚴 (1814–1900), a leading proponent of the Mūla-Sarvāstivāda-Vinaya in the Shingon denomination. At the ages of twenty-nine and thirty, Unshō also received the precepts several times from the master Tandō 端堂 (1805–1866), Jiun’s dharma descendant (*hōson* 法孫). In 1868, at the time of the Meiji Restoration, Unshō witnessed the anti-Buddhist movement’s state of devastation and fought to protect the dharma (*gohō* 護法). This placed him at the forefront of modern Japanese religious history.

The traumatic experience of *haibutsu kishaku* led Buddhists to be increasingly concerned with regaining their previously-wielded power and positions, and they united under this shared interest. In 1868, some of the leading clerics of each denomination founded the Organization of United Buddhist Sects (Shoshū Dōtoku Kaimei 諸宗同徳会盟).¹⁰ In this association, members acknowledged the faults highlighted in the persecution movement and proposed improving the quality of monks and eliminating their evil ways (*heihū* 弊風). This was a strategic narrative to defend Buddhism. Some precept-upholding monks, such as Unshō and the influential Fukuda Gyōkai 福田行誠 (1809–1888) from the Jōdo denomination, took a hardline stance against clerical corruption by accusing monastics of violating the Buddhist precepts.

In the following year, Unshō submitted his “Petition to the Council of State on Sweeping Away the Evils of the Buddhist Clergy” (*Sōhei issen no kanpu kenpakusho* 僧弊一洗ノ官符建白書) to the new Meiji government, which proposed his basic idea of reviving ideal Buddhism.¹¹ This petition called on political authorities to crack down on corrupt monks’ precept violations. In addition, Unshō saw the Japanese emperor’s regained power (*ōsei fukko* 王政復古) as an opportunity to realize the ancient Japanese Buddhism that he saw as ideal. In the ancient period, the central government strictly regulated Buddhism through the Office of Priestly Affairs (*Sōgō* 僧綱) based on the legal code (*ritsuryō* 律令). This standpoint was linked to his position as a monk of the Shingon denomination, which was founded by Kūkai 空海 (774–835) under imperial aegis and assumed a religious role in protecting the nation (*chingo kokka* 鎮護国家) in the late Heian 平安 period (794–1185). Orion Klautau has pointed out that “for Unshō, the religious policy of early Meiji was not evil at all; on the contrary, the ‘Restoration’ of Imperial power gave Buddhism the chance it needed to return to its ideal form.”¹²

Nonetheless, Unshō’s desperate efforts led to disappointment. In 1872, the Meiji government

9 Biographical materials on Shaku Unshō include *Shaku Unshō* (Bungeisha, 1902), which was written by Yoshida Toshio 吉田敏雄 when Unshō was alive, as well as the three-volume work of the same title by Kusanagi Zengi 草繫全宜 (Tokukyōkai, 1913–1914), who had been Unshō’s disciple and later became the chief abbot (*kanchō* 管長) of the Daikakuji 大覚寺 school.

10 On the discourse of self-reflection and self-criticism among Shoshū Dōtoku Kaimei members, see Orion Klautau オリオン・クラウタウ, *Kindai Nihon shisō toshite no bukkuyōshigaku* 近代日本思想としての仏教史学, Hōzōkan, 2012, pp. 189–218.

11 Kusanagi 1914b, *Kenpakushū*, pp. 6–8.

12 Orion Klautau, “Against the Ghosts of Recent Past: Meiji Scholarship and the Discourse on Edo-Period Buddhist Decadence,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2008, p. 278.

issued a decree to decriminalize precept violations, generally called the Nikujiki Saitai law (Nikujiki Saitai Rei 肉食妻帯令), which ended legal provisions specifically for Buddhist monks. It read, “Monks may do as they wish regarding the eating of meat, marriage, and the growing of their hair. Moreover, they need not be concerned about the propriety of wearing commoner’s clothing while not performing Buddhist ceremonies.” Jaffe states that the Meiji authorities’ main aim with this law was to dismantle premodern status distinctions and establish the modern family registration system, along with building a new “emperor-centered community cult of State Shintō.”¹³ Ketelaar notes that this policy meant “a radical change in the conception of the relation between public, imperial law (*ōhō*) and the Buddha’s law (*buppō*) as contained within the priest’s religious vows” in that it was “a complete reversal of the identification of these two systems of law that had been worked out during the Tokugawa period.”¹⁴ Indeed, this law shocked Unshō. He strongly resisted it and negotiated with government officials, such as Takasaki Goroku 高崎五六 (1836–1896); however, this was in vain. In these negotiations, drawing on the West’s “public law” (*kōhō* 公法) principle of the separation of politics and religion, Takasaki turned the precept transgression into an individual issue.¹⁵ Despite this, Unshō’s reactionary interest in the revival of ancient Japanese Buddhism through political power lasted his entire life and went through various reformulations as a strategic narrative to meet the demands of the new age.¹⁶

After the setback of his trans-denominational attempt, Unshō then focused on reforming the Shingon sect he belonged to. In 1879, he led the all-Shingon sect meeting (*Shingonshū taisei kaigi* 真言宗大成会議) to address sectarian schisms and religious regulations. Unshō pushed for various reactionary reformations together with his ally, the monk Ōzaki Gyōchi 大崎行智 (1839–1884), mainly based on the threefold training (*sangaku* 三学), a set of traditional disciplines consisting of the precepts (*kai* 戒), meditation (*jō* 定), wisdom (*e* 慧), and also based on the dying instructions (*yuikai* 遺誡) of Kūkai. Despite his intense efforts, Unshō’s precept-centric reforms faltered in the face of strong opposition from a teaching-oriented group.

This setback marked a turning point in his movement. At the suggestion of his supporters, bureaucrat-turned-entrepreneur Aoki Teizō 青木貞三 (1858–1889) and Yamaoka Tesshū 山岡鉄舟 (1836–1888), a well-known politician and sword master, Unshō moved to Tokyo in 1885 and began to adopt a stance independent from the Shingon denomination. Furthermore, distancing himself from its center of power, Unshō and his lay followers (also called *gegōsha* 外護者, lit. “outside protectors of Buddhism”), launched a monastic precept school (Kairitsu Gakkō 戒律学校) in Mejirodai 目白台, Tokyo, which in 1887 was renamed the Mejiro Monastic Academy (Mejiro Sōen 目白僧園). This academy educated vinaya-upholding priests using a strict curriculum based on the threefold training.¹⁷ Also in 1889, Unshō relaunched the Ten Virtuous Precepts Society (Jūzenkai 十善会)—originally founded in 1883 but discontinued shortly thereafter—in

13 Richard M. Jaffe, *Neither Monk nor Layman: Clerical Marriage in Modern Japanese Buddhism*, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 94.

14 Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan*, p. 6.

15 Kusanagi 1914b, *Nikkishū*, pp. 30–31.

16 See Kameyama Mitsuhiro 亀山光明, “Kairitsu no kindai: Shaku Unshō ni okeru shōki jūzenkairon no tenkai” 戒律の近代：釈雲照における初期十善戒論の展開, *Bungei kenkyū* 文芸研究, no. 185, 2018, pp. 1–15.

17 Unshō 1891, pp. 73–74.

cooperation mainly with Sawayanagi Masatarō 沢柳政太郎 (1865–1927), an educator who would subsequently become the first president of Tohoku Imperial University. At that time, Prince Kuni Asahiko (Kuni-no-miya Asahiko 久邇宮朝彦, 1824–1891) was formally inaugurated as the president, and Miura Gorō 三浦梧楼 (1847–1927), an influential military figure, became the chairman of the board of trustees.

The Vital Root of the True Dharma: Shaku Unshō's Precept-Centered Ideas

As outlined above, in Meiji Japan, Unshō actively worked for the resurgence of the True Dharma based upon the Buddhist precepts. Indeed, the modern Buddhist world witnessed the rise of lay-centric Buddhism, in line with the prevalence of *nikujiki saitai*, which has continued to the present. Against this background, Unshō and his colleagues sought to accommodate rapidly shifting Meiji-period Japanese society. Now let us turn our attention to his ideas regarding the precepts and the True Dharma.

At the core of Unshō's ideal of the True Dharma was the observance of the Buddhist precepts. While Unshō frequently used the somewhat ambiguous term "True Dharma" to encompass his multifaceted activities, it was directly connected with his precept-centric ideas. In the "Prospectus Relating to the Foundation of Mejiro Sōen" (*Mejiro sōen setsuritsu shuisho* 目白僧園設立趣意書), he presented this connection as the last words of Shakyamuni Buddha:

The precepts constitute the vital root of the Tathāgata's True Dharma (*nyorai shōbō no myōkon* 如来正法の命根). In this world, if the precepts are observed, the True Dharma endures. How does this differ from how we exist in the world? Should the Buddha's disciples abolish the precepts, it means the immediate ruin of the True Dharma. This is just like when human beings have the vital root, they can move and activate their five sense organs and the whole body (*gokan gotai shitai* 五官五体支体), but when the life force is annihilated, it immediately demolishes the whole body.¹⁸

As can be seen from the above quotation, Unshō positioned the revival of the Buddhist precepts as a cornerstone of his efforts to revive the True Dharma. As part of this revival, he founded the monastic academies (*sōen* 僧園; literally "monks' garden"), for the training of young precept-upholding monks. Unshō called the students "virtuous seeds in the fields of merit" (*fukuden zenshu* 福田善種) and denounced depraved monks as "impure weeds" (*esō* 穢草) to be pulled up.¹⁹

In antiquity when imperial rule (*ōsei* 王政) flourished, the monks of each denomination strictly observed the Buddha's precepts. Accordingly, princes and ministers deeply revered and believed in them. Yet since the great power (*taiken* 大権) shifted to military families (*bumon* 武門) in the medieval period, the monks began to despise the precepts and commit various wrongful acts. In line with this, belief [in Buddhism] among people weakened, and social

18 Kusanagi 1913, p. 120.

19 Unshō 1890a.

morality collapsed. There was no reason for this except the precepts being disregarded [by the Buddhist monks]. As time passed and it became the era of the Tokugawa, Buddhist monks only prohibited clerical marriage and meat consumption, and none of them maintained even the five precepts. The same was true for the people of the country.... Thus, at the time of the Meiji Restoration, mixed up in the disturbance of people's minds, monks abandoned and paid no regard to the precepts, and all of them violated precepts without remorse (*hakai muzan* 破戒無慚).... As a result, civil morality has corrupted and reached rock bottom, and a sense of shame in people's minds has almost completely disappeared. It really is most deplorable.²⁰

In a way similar to his early Meiji petition, Unshō aimed to provide a unique perspective on history that linked the loss of imperial power and the rise of *bushi* to the clerical decadence that followed the Genpei War, a clash between the Taira and the Minamoto clans in the twelfth century. In this narrative, the observance and violation of the Buddhist precepts among monks took place in conjunction with the rise and fall of the imperial court's power. Unshō also devoted much energy to exploring the official archival documents issued by the imperial court.

It was common for Japanese Buddhism to present its historical connections with Japanese emperors, highlighting its antiquity, as an apologetic strategy to counter anti-Buddhism sentiments. Another example is the influential lay Buddhist Ōuchi Seiran 大内青巒 (1845–1918) and others founding the nationalistic “Great Society for Revering the Emperor and Worshipping the Buddha” (Sonnō Hōbutsu Daidōdan 尊皇奉仏大道団) in 1889. In his work *On Revering the Emperor and Worshipping the Buddha* (*Sonnō hōbutsu ron* 尊皇奉仏論) published that year, Seiran expounded on the relationship between “our imperial household” and “our Buddhism” (*waga kōshitsu to waga bukkuyō tonō kankei* 我皇室と我仏教との関係) while drawing on various anecdotal accounts.²¹

Also noteworthy is Unshō's interest in social morality. He adamantly argued that “pure” precept-upholding monks can greatly contribute to solving the problems of public morality and monastic corruption. Following the above passage, he formulated the role of vinaya monks as follows: “If one wants to reverse a loss of social morality, uphold national prosperity, and make people principled and moral imperial subjects (*yūdō utoku no minshin* 有道有徳の民臣), this must be based on the monks who keep the precepts in accordance with the dharma (*nyohō jikai no sōryo* 如法持戒の僧侶).”²²

As I have shown in this section, Unshō attempted to recover the True Dharma through a movement to revive the precepts. The primary impetus was his utopian view of two primordial

20 Kusanagi 1913, p. 120.

21 Ōuchi 1889, pp. 3–4.

22 Kusanagi 1913, p. 120.

periods of Buddhism, the age of Shakyamuni and the dawn of Japanese Buddhism.²³ Although it technically belonged to the semblance Dharma period, ancient Japanese Buddhism was the crux of his idea. In his quest to recover the True Dharma, Unshō attempted to identify the relationship between imperial rule and precept-observance among monks.

A New Encounter: Japanese Buddhists' Entanglement with an Alternative Tradition and the Reformulation of Their Self-Awareness

In this section, I will focus on the confrontation between Unshō's attempt to revive the True Dharma and Final Dharma-age-related ideas using his 1897 work *Mappō kaimōki* 末法開蒙記 (Chronicle on Dispelling Darkness during Mappō). As can be surmised from its title, the purpose of this work was to refute the arguments of *Tōmyōki*, especially the idea that the precepts are not valid during the age of *mappō*. As Mori Shinnosuke 森新之介 reminds us, despite its wide-ranging influence on Japanese Buddhist tradition, it was only in the Meiji period that *Tōmyōki* gained increasing attention among Japanese Buddhist intellectuals. For instance, Kanno Senmon 間野 闡門 (d.u.), a cleric of the Ōtani 大谷 branch of Shin Buddhism, published *Mappō tōmyōki ronsan* 末法灯明記論讚 (In Praise of the *Mappō tōmyōki*) in 1895 to disseminate the *Tōmyōki*.²⁴

Indeed, Unshō became unable to overlook the looming influence of *Tōmyōki*. In the preface of *Mappō kaimōki*, Unshō looked back on his activities, saying, "It has been several years that an imperfect Buddhist training monk [Unshō] lamented in his mind that the True Dharma is just declining, and struggled to spread the precepts, the vital root of the Tathāgata's True Dharma, through the construction of a monastery and education of pure monks." One person, he says, questioned his activities and asserted that the Buddhist precepts were no longer helpful in the age of *mappō* while drawing on Saichō's *Tōmyōki*.²⁵

One of the main points of *Mappō kaimōki* is demonstrating that *Tōmyōki* is a forgery. In this respect, previous scholarship on *Tōmyōki* has framed Unshō as a pioneering modern Buddhist who came from outside the academic sphere. Unshō asserted the inconsistency of *Tōmyōki* with Saichō's other writings, such as *Kenkai ron* 顕戒論 (A Clarification of the Precepts, 820) and *Sange gakushō shiki* 山家学生式 (Regulations for Students of the Mountain School, 818–819). From this viewpoint, Unshō made the case that Saichō was a promoter of the Buddhist precepts (especially Mahayana precepts) and could not have formulated ideas such as the nominal bhikkhu without precepts (*mukai myōji no biku* 無戒名字の比丘) and that the precepts were not valid during *mappō*.

Unshō's movement was also spurred on by information about foreign countries, especially

23 Micah Auerback has shown in his analysis of the *Light of the Three Worlds* (*Sanze no hikari* 三世の光), authored by the early modern nun Kōgetsu Bhikkuni 皓月比丘尼 (d.u.), a disciple of Jiun, that images of Shakyamuni were widely disseminated through the circulation of printed media, such as storybooks written mainly in *kana* (*kanazōshi* 仮名草子), and puppet shows (*ningyō jōruri* 人形浄瑠璃). Auerback also demonstrates that views of Shakyamuni as an exemplar of a monk's practice greatly influenced the Buddhist precept revival movement. See Micah L. Auerback, *A Storied Sage: Canon and Creation in the Making of a Japanese Buddha*, University of Chicago Press, 2015, pp. 96–118.

24 Mori Shinnosuke, *Sekkan inseiki shisōshi kenkyū* 撰関院政期思想史研究, Shibunkaku Shuppan, 2013, pp. 43–45.

25 Unshō 1897a, *Mappō kaimōki-engi*, p. 1 verso–1 recto.

Buddhist countries in South Asia. Unshō associated the ideal of the True Dharma with the Buddhist tradition of South Asia. That is, modern encounters with this tradition created the opportunity to reconsider whether the precepts could truly be ignored during the *mappō* era.

Although previous scholarship, adopting an east/west binary, has paid much attention to the impact of Western scholarship on modern Japanese Buddhists, recent research by Erik Schicketanz and Richard Jaffe has underlined the pivotal role of other Asian Buddhist countries in the modern formation of Japanese Buddhism. Japanese Buddhists' regard for the South Asian tradition was complicated. They were confronted with colonized Asian countries occupied by Western powers and also saw this tradition as an inferior form of Buddhism (shown by the derogatory term "Hinayana"). At any rate, India, the land of Buddhism's birth, sparked Unshō's interest, leading him to reconstruct his view of the True Dharma.

Remarkably, Unshō utilized the Buddhist tradition in South Asia, called "Southern Buddhism" (*Nanpō bukkyō* 南方仏教), to refute the idea of the *Tōmyōki* that precepts were invalid during the age of *mappō*.²⁶ Unshō also argued against the apologetic discourse of *Tōmyōki*, which states that in the age of *mappō*, "donors don't have the true intention of donors (*dan'otsu no kokorozashi* 檀越の志). Who can censure the monks for not practicing as monks?"²⁷ In response to this challenge, Unshō strategically used Southern Buddhism as a Buddhist tradition in harmony with his ideal of the True Dharma. This also allowed him to reconsider the monastic tradition of Japanese Buddhism within a broader and comparative context. He noted as follows:

They say that recently, in the Buddhist countries surrounding India, when laypeople enter temples, they devote themselves to receiving the threefold refuge and five precepts and listening to [talks on] the True Dharma, never drinking even a cup of cold tea. This occurs because [monks] rigidly observe the Buddhist precepts, which make monks be monks, and reveal the reason why the three jewels are the three jewels, and also preach and admonish that wasting the three jewels can lead to the evil path. Japan has already entered the *mappō* era, and more than two thousand and several hundred years have passed, and India has also entered the *mappō* era. If, as argued by the writer of *Tōmyōki*, there is a sort of tide of the times, and in the age of *mappō*, things occur naturally and there is no way monks can do anything, how come the Buddhist precepts, such as the four grave precepts, can be observed and the strict regulations (*katsuma* 羯磨), such as monks' repentance, can be faithfully practiced in the other land (India), and how would it be only in this land (Japan) that the True Dharma cannot be practiced?²⁸

Embracing a sort of idealized view of Southern Buddhism, Unshō sought to demonstrate the viability of the True Dharma within the Japanese context. Unshō was among the first Japanese Buddhists to encounter the Southern Buddhism tradition in the Meiji period. The adoration

26 On the classification of Buddhism from a global perspective in the Meiji period, see Okuyama Naoji 奥山直司, "Nihon bukkyō to Seiron bukkyō tonō deai: Shaku Kōzen no ryūgaku o chūshin ni" 日本仏教とセイロン仏教との出会い：釈興然の留学を中心に, *Contact Zone*, vol. 2, 2008, pp. 23–25.

27 *The Candle of the Latter Dharma*, p. 19.

28 Unshō 1897b, p. 47 verso–47 recto.

toward India, also called Tenjiku 天竺, was a motif throughout Japanese Buddhist traditions. For instance, Myōe 明恵, a well-known vinaya-upholding monk in the Kamakura 鎌倉 period (1185–1333), lamented that he was born in Japan, a peripheral land of Tenjiku, during *mappō*, and attempted to journey to India.²⁹ In his younger days, Jiun, the most influential predecessor of Unshō's movement, also tried to go to India, seeking his ideal Buddhism. Nonetheless, virtually no Japanese Buddhist could succeed in traveling there due to limited navigation technology and the foreign policy of Japanese authorities. Yet, the drastic changes of the Meiji period allowed Japanese Buddhists to travel to the Indian subcontinent. They did so for various purposes, such as pilgrimage, learning canonical languages, and searching for the orthodox lineage of the Buddha dharma (*gubō* 求法). Unshō also had a strong desire to travel to India on his own, but gave up because of old age. In 1886, to conduct research on South Asian Buddhism, Unshō dispatched his nephew Shaku Kōzen 釈興然 (1849–1924) to Ceylon, through which Unshō “discovered” the True Dharma. From the correspondence with Kōzen, we can see that Unshō's main concern was pursuing the precepts transmission lineage that directly goes back to Shakyamuni, and the degree to which the True Dharma was actually practiced among Ceylonese Buddhists.³⁰ Unshō's monastic educational endeavors reflected this gaze at Southern Buddhism. In his *Sōen seiki* 僧園制規 (Regulations of the Monks' Garden), this tradition served as a model for his movement: “Don't you hear that nowadays Southern Buddhists strictly observe the True Dharma precepts of Tathagata and stick to them? Hence, kings and ministers revere and worship [Buddhism] and all people high and low alike admire and take refuge in the sangha treasure.”³¹

Equating the True Dharma tradition with Southern Buddhism was not unique to Unshō. Another major example is Oda Tokunō 織田得能 (1860–1911), a well-known scholar-monk of Shin Buddhism's Ōtani branch. Tokunō was the first Japanese Buddhist to go to Thailand (in 1888). In his 1891 account, *Shamu bukkyō jijō* 暹羅仏教事情 (The State of Siamese Buddhism), he also understands Siamese Buddhism within the framework of the True Dharma. Remarkably, before his sojourn in Thailand, Tokunō had studied Jiun's accounts and the Four-Part Vinaya at Kōkiji 高貴寺, a temple in Osaka where Jiun had served as an abbot and that became the center of the Shingon Vinaya school.³² His *State of Siamese Buddhism* was written during his stay at Kōkiji. In its preface, Tokunō states his intention to share with a broad audience how the True Dharma exists today.

In this work, Tokunō praises Siamese Buddhism as still having “the True Dharma of Shakyamuni's time” (*Shakuson zaise no shōbō* 釈尊在世の正法) with regard to three aspects of “the law of temples,” “monk's practice,” and “way of teaching.”³³ This also led him to reconsider the neither-monk-nor-layman tradition of Shin Buddhism. Tokunō recalled his astonishment at

29 As Ichikawa Hirofumi reminds us, together with the temporal factor of the three periods, the spatial factor also played a large role in medieval Japanese Buddhists' self-perception within the traditional Buddhist framework of the “three country worldview” (*sangoku sekai kan* 三国世界観). See Ichikawa Hirofumi 市川浩史, *Nihon chūsei no rekishi ishiki: Sangoku, Mappō, Nihon* 日本中世の歴史意識：三国・末法・日本, Hōzōkan, 2005, p. 82.

30 Kusanagi 1914a, *Shokanshū*, pp. 31–32.

31 Unshō 1890b, p. 18.

32 Tsunemitsu Kōnen 常光浩然, *Meiji no bukkyōsha* (1) 明治仏教者・上, Shunjūsha, 1968, p. 333.

33 Oda 1891, p. 1.

witnessing Siamese monks embracing “the two sacred precepts on the suppression of vice and the promotion of virtue.” Here, Tokunō, seeing himself as a Buddhist monk in the age of *mappō*, confesses that he only had knowledge of the True Dharma indirectly through reading and chanting old sutras. On the other hand, his encounters with the monks in “remote areas in the South Seas” (*nanyō no henchi* 南洋の辺地) helped him realize that the *Great Collection Sutra*’s (Skt. *Mahāsaṃnipāta sūtra*) idea that the age of the True Dharma continued for five hundred years is only a “conditioned teaching for one type of practitioner capacity” (*ikki zuien no setsu* 一機隨縁の説), not a general teaching.³⁴

As we have seen in this section, Unshō relativized ideas surrounding the Final age of Dharma. This reflected the transnational dimension faced by modern Japanese Buddhism. In particular, encounters with Southern Buddhism allowed him to reconsider the ideas surrounding the Dharma’s Final Age, something also found in the case of the Shin Buddhist Oda Tokunō. Despite his comparative perspective that considered Southern Buddhism, Unshō recognized that Buddhist practitioners’ capabilities declined in the age of *mappō*. Indeed, other Buddhists recognized the declining Buddhism he faced as a reflection of *mappō*. To respond to this, Unshō also asserted the validity of his conception of the True Dharma by appealing to its connection with the power of the Japanese emperor, who he calls the “king of the True Dharma” (*shōbō ō* 正法王), as I show below.

The Shōbō Ruler: Toward Restoring the True Dharma and Reversing *Mappō* Decline

As already seen, Unshō worked to return to the ideal past of the True Dharma against the growing influence of *Tōmyōki*. In this attempt, his encounter with Southern Buddhism played a central role in relativizing the Japanese Buddhist tradition’s precepts. It was also obvious to him that monastic discipline and power in Meiji Buddhism were on the decline. The Buddhist movements to revive the precepts by his predecessors had ended up in the minority throughout Japanese Buddhist history. He was also aware that the influx of Muslims resulted in the extinction of Buddhism on the Indian mainland. In his view, all of these devastating situations were none other than the realization of “Buddha’s predictions about the future” (*kenki* 懸記) found in various sutras.³⁵

Nonetheless, Unshō claimed that through his movement an increasing number of people had recently begun to observe the dharma and more lay followers had received the precepts, such as the ten virtuous precepts and eight precepts. He highlights that this is the fruit of reverence for the True Dharma and that “high-priests and the saint kings in successive dynasties” pray for it to celestials and earthbound deities in Japan.³⁶ Thus, besides the relativizing approach to the border-crossing aspects of the True Dharma, the particularity of Japanese tradition took a central role in Unshō’s movement to revive the True Dharma.

In this section, I will demonstrate how Unshō set forth an ideal for the relationship between the nation and religion as part of his effort to revive the True Dharma. He considered the True Dharma and its imperial connection as a way to protect the monastic community, proposed

34 Oda 1891, p. 5.

35 Unshō 1897b, pp. 15 recto–16 verso.

36 Unshō 1897b, p. 17 verso.

regulations against precept transgressions, and equated the ideal Buddhist ruler, called the “king of the True Dharma,” with the Japanese emperor. The religious rulers that are patrons of Buddhism are frequently referred to in many sutras, such as the *Nirvana Sutra* and the *Humane Kings Sutra* (*Ninnō kyō* 仁王經). His apologetic arguments also drew upon these sutras. Meiji Buddhists often saw Japanese emperors as the ideal kings found in sutras and emphasized the four debts of gratitude (*shion* 四恩), which refers to obligations towards parents, sentient beings, rulers, and the three treasures.³⁷ Unshō tried to prove that the king of the True Dharma and the Japanese emperor are closely linked, connecting this with “our dynasty” (*honchō*) and “the Empire of Japan” (*Dai Nihon teikoku* 大日本帝国). He states that in the declining age of *mappō*, it is all but impossible for “the four groups of Buddhist disciples” (*shibu no deshi* 四部の弟子; kings, ministers, monks and nuns, and lay followers) to keep the True Dharma. Nonetheless, Shakyamuni Buddha had already foreseen this and entrusted the True Dharma to the “four heavenly kings, the four dragon kings and the earth deities.” Through this direct transmission, he noted, “their supernormal power” (*jinzū iriki* 神通威力) would enable the True Dharma to be revived in the age of *mappō*. He argues as follows:

Even though after one thousand five hundred years, the True Dharma utterly disappeared without a trace in the country of Kōsambi, in our Empire of Japan, after 1,501 years, the kings of the True Dharma emerged and Buddhism was transmitted from foreign countries, and they spread it. This is not a coincidence. It occurred because the Buddha entrusted the True Dharma to kings, the four dragon kings, as is stated in the *Great Collection Sutra*. [This was also because] the Buddha created a record written about the future in *Sutra for Humane Kings*, ordering kings and the four groups of Buddhist disciples to recover the True Dharma in the time of no Buddha, dharma, and monks. In this way, the Buddha’s word is never false. How can anybody not believe in this?³⁸

Kōsambi, mentioned here, is a legendary country also referred to in *Tōmyōki*. In a mythic anecdote, it is said that in the fifteen hundred years after the Buddha’s nirvana, the True Dharma would be stored away in a dragon’s palace (*ryūgū* 竜宮) due to a quarrel and murder taking place between two monks in the country.³⁹ In the text, this is a major event representative of the demise of the True Dharma in the age of *mappō*. However, Unshō argued that the *shōbō* was transmitted to ancient Japan and that the Japanese emperor inherited it, thereby highlighting the special characteristics of Japanese Buddhism. In this passage, Unshō also presented a unique exegesis concerning the historical incipency of Japanese Buddhism and its relationship with the True Dharma. According to the account of *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀 (compiled in 720), Paekche’s King Sōng (聖) sent the envoys responsible for the introduction of Buddhism to the Japanese court, and they

37 In particular, in many accounts of modern Japanese Buddhists, the compound *shion* was frequently combined with the ten virtuous acts (*jūzen*). See Ikeda Eishun 池田英俊, “Meijiki no bukkō ni okeru shujō no on ni tsuite” 明治期の佛教における衆生の恩について, *Indogaku bukkōgaku kenkyū* 印度學佛教學研究, vol. 14, no. 2, 1966, pp. 755–759.

38 Unshō 1897b, p. 41 verso–41 recto.

39 *The Candle of the Latter Dharma*, p. 7.

arrived in 552, broadly known as the Official Transmission of Buddhism (*bukkyō kōden* 仏教公伝).⁴⁰ Although the chronology of *bukkyō kōden* has been a matter of scholarly contention, the date of 552 is designated as the beginning year of *Mappō* in line with another hermeneutical theory which claims the 500 years of the True Dharma and the 1000 years of the Semblance Dharma.⁴¹ Thereby, Unshō sought to reinterpret this putative introduction of Buddhism in Japan as the story of the transmission of the True Dharma to accentuate the exceptional and privileged position of Japanese Buddhism and the Empire.

Unshō depicts the king of the True Dharma as an ideal ruler who “cultivates the multitude and makes the three jewels flourish (*okuchō o tōya shi sanbō o kōryū* 億兆を陶冶し、三宝を興隆) through the application of the “saintly ten virtuous precepts” to his governance.⁴² In addition to this, Unshō holds that the ruler’s function includes the protection of the sangha and preventing precept transgressions by establishing the “office of superintendent of monks” (*sōtō* 僧統) in the evil world of *mappō*. In this respect, Unshō regarded the Set of Laws for Monks and Nuns (*Sōniryō* 僧尼令), part of the *ritsuryō*, as an ideal model for the emerging nation of Japan. Nonetheless, he recognized a contradiction inherent in the True Dharma: between the intervention of the king of the True Dharma and the “sangha” in its original sense. More specifically, Unshō had in mind an account in *Tōmyōki* that states, “Judging from the words of the *Humane Kings Sutra*, and so on, to venerate the superintendent of monks is a profanity destroying the community of monks.”⁴³ Concerning this problem, Unshō conceded that having a superintendent of monks is against “the regulations of the True Dharma” (*shōbō no kisoku* 正法の規則), but he also justified it by pointing to the declining capacity of Buddhist practitioners in the *mappō*. He noted as follows:

Yet since in the age of *mappō* the world is stained by defilements, if there is no law supervising the clergy [the monks’ superintendent], various sorts of traitors will enter into the Buddhist community, seeking clothing and food, and be beyond control. In the time of imperial rule in the southern capital (*nanto ōsei* 南都王政), this law of clerical registration was installed to protect the Buddha dharma from the outside, but because there were still many pseudo-monks, having become monks for the avoidance of taxes and corvée, and without the necessary qualifications, soon after the transfer of capital to the northern city in Enryaku 延暦 7 (798), the great imperial edict for dharma protection and denominational support, mentioned above, was issued. If the imperial court does not implement a clerical register system (*sōseki* 僧籍) and gives up its responsibility regarding their practice, how can we prevent clerics from violating the Buddhist precepts and transgressing?⁴⁴

40 Concerning the cultural and political background behind the transmission of Buddhism in the ancient East Asia, see Jonathan W. Best, “Paekche and the Incipiency of Buddhism in Japan,” in *Currents and Countercurrents: Korean Influences on the East Asian Buddhist Traditions*, Robert E. Buswell, ed., University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005, pp.15–42.

41 About the scholarly debate on the Buddhist transmission to Japan, see Yoshida Kazuhiko 吉田一彦, “The Credibility of the *Gangōji engi*,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2015, pp. 105–106.

42 Unshō 1897b, p. 40 recto.

43 *The Candle of the Latter Dharma*, p. 20.

44 Unshō 1897b, p. 55 verso–55 recto.

In this way, Unshō justified sangha regulations by mentioning the *shōbō* ruler (*tennō* 天皇), thereby emphasizing the correspondence between the True Dharma and the power of the Japanese emperor. He presents the emperor as an individual entrusted with the True Dharma through a direct transmission from Shakyamuni. Thus, the antiquity of Japanese Buddhism was depicted as a utopian age when the order of the True Dharma was maintained by imperial power, and interpreted as the future direction that Japanese Buddhism and the Empire of Japan should take.

Conclusion

Through the lens of Shaku Unshō, this article has examined how the concept of the “True Dharma” unfolded in Japan’s modern period as a response to the rapidly changing religious environment from the late nineteenth century onwards. We can see that Unshō’s movement to revive the precepts was unsuccessful. This is apparent from the lay centrality of contemporary Japanese Buddhism. As Maekawa Ken’ichi 前川健一 states, “The Buddhist precepts lost almost all of their meaning as religious practice after the Meiji period.”⁴⁵ Nonetheless, as sketched above, this was far from a linear process. Indeed, against headwinds, Unshō’s movement progressed to a degree, strategically taking advantage of modern settings. It did so by utilizing the concept of the True Dharma. In this attempt, an orientation toward Shakyamuni Buddha occupied an integral position that superseded other denominational founders and buddhas.

Fundamentally, at the core of Unshō’s True Dharma movement was the revival of the precepts as “the vital root of the Tathāgata’s True Dharma.” To embody this ideal, Unshō vigorously engaged in a wide range of endeavors primarily through his Monastic Academy and the Ten Virtuous Precepts Society. With regard to the former, Unshō took a hard-line attitude against the rampant transgression of the precepts and celibacy among Buddhist monks, including the Shingon denomination. By doing so, Unshō sought to reform temples by rebuilding the monastic order (*sangha*) through a revival of the Buddhist precepts.

In order for Buddhism to regain its previous power, Unshō tried to mobilize support from lay followers by promoting the ten virtuous precepts. In the crucible of the public debate over civil morality, Unshō envisioned the observance of the precepts among the people at large as upholding social morality and contributing to nation-building. In this process, he faced a great predicament when confronting Buddhism’s tradition surrounding the Final Age of the Dharma. It was inconsistent with his ideas regarding the True Dharma.

In his ideological and pragmatic efforts, the greatest ideological challenge he faced was from the rediscovery of *Tōmyōki*, a historically influential tract that claimed that the precepts were not valid in the context of *mappō* as Buddhists’ capacities declined. Here Unshō regarded the True Dharma as a transcendent concept that went beyond temporal and geographical conditions. He also sought to demonstrate the viability of the True Dharma from his encounter with the tradition of Southern Buddhism. Such encounters opened new opportunities for Meiji Buddhists to

45 Maekawa Ken’ichi, “Ishida Mizumaro: Nihon bukkyō kenkyū ni okeru kairitsu e no shikaku” 石田瑞磨：日本仏教研究における戒律への視角, in *Sengo rekishigaku to Nihon bukkyō* 戦後歴史学と日本仏教, Orion Klautau, ed., Hōzōkan, 2016, p. 278.

reconsider their monastic tradition within a comparative framework. The True Dharma functioned as the important lens for this, as can be seen from the case of Oda Tokunō.

To reclaim the True Dharma, Unshō also emphasized the role of the king of the True Dharma, that is, the Japanese emperor. He suggested that in light of the declining capacities of the monks in the age of *mappō*, crackdowns on precept violations should rely upon the authority of the emperor, and he justified this by stating that throughout history the emperor has aimed to prevent precept transgressions.

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正法の近代

——僧伽、王、戒律——

亀山光明*

いわゆる日本仏教を総合的に叙述するに際して、釈迦滅後の仏教徒の法や機根の衰えを強調する末法思想が強調されてきたことは概ね認められるだろう——それは解脱の不可能性や末法無戒に象徴される戒行の衰退にあらわされる。本稿では、真言僧・釈雲照（1827-1909）を題材とし、末法と対蹠を成すユートピア的な原初理念である「正法」という思想が明治期の仏教界に果たした役割を検討する。この作業により、いかに彼の正法への理想が当時のグローバルな情勢や国民形成の課題と共鳴し、また日本列島とそれを超え

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た時間的・空間的秩序の再編成を反映したものであったのかを明らかにする。

キーワード：末法、近代日本仏教、上座部仏教、釈雲照、織田得能