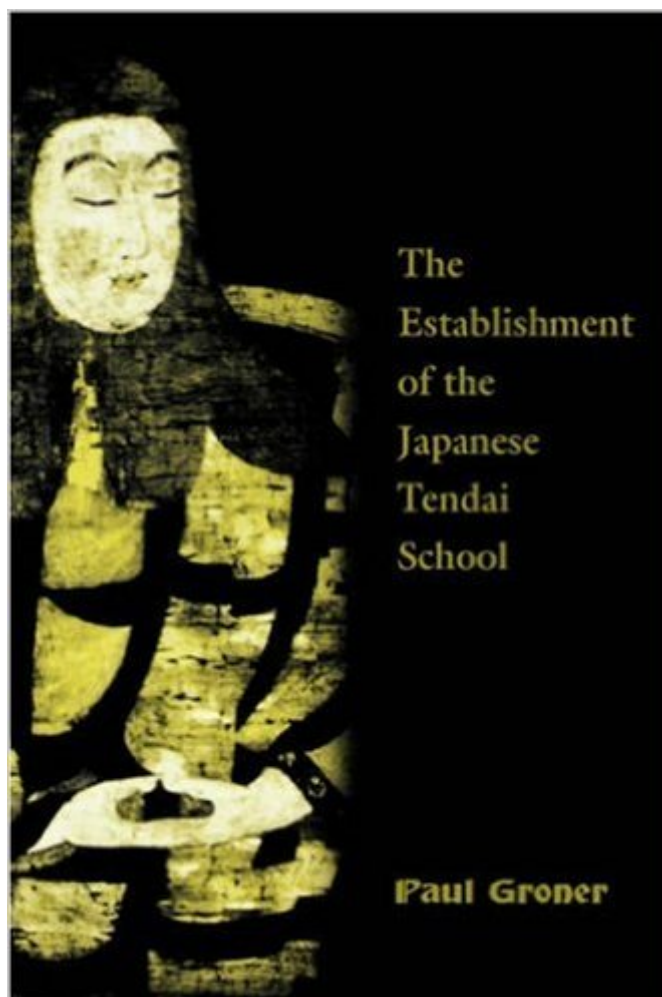


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Saicho : The Establishment Of The Japanese Tendai School



Synopsis

Saicho (767-822), the founder of the Tendai School, is one of the great masters of Japanese Buddhism. This edition, which includes a new preface by the author, makes available again a classic work on this important figure's life and accomplishments. Groner's study focuses on Saicho's founding of the great monastic center on Mount Hiei, the leading religious institution of medieval Japan, and his radical move to adopt for purposes of ordination the Mahayana bodhisattva precepts -- a decision that had far-reaching consequences for the future of Japanese Buddhist ethical thought, monastic training and organization, lay-clerical relations, philosophical developments, and Buddhism-state relations.

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: University of Hawaii Press (September 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0824823710

ISBN-13: 978-0824823719

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (3 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #717,749 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #181 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Eastern > Buddhism > History](#) #249 in [Books > History > World > Religious > Buddhism](#) #4450 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Religious](#)

Customer Reviews

This Berkeley Buddhist series volume is the definitive work of the founder of Tendai Buddhism in Japan. This volume of the series steps you through the beginning of Saicho's life into his later years fighting for an ordination platform on Mount Hiei. Included are details concerning the rise of Tendai Buddhism away from the influential Buddhism of Nara. Saicho's views of the bodhisattva precepts and his wish to move away from the Hinayana goals of the Ssu fen lu precepts. This is a treasure of Buddhist history in the Heian period. This work is a must for any serious Buddhist researcher. Critical for any Tendai researcher to read.

To my knowledge, this is the only existing equivalent to a biography of Saicho (at least in English

translation). Most works on Japanese history depict Saicho as a befuddled foil to Kukai, while in other places it's admitted that he may have died too early to properly develop his vision. In either case, Groner offers a rather stoic (yes, dry and academic) but insightful analysis of the Tendai founder's likely thought process and the intentions he may have had (an area of discussion which otherwise seems scattered in journal publications). One point would be that Saicho and later proponents of the Lotus Sutra tended to speak with fierce nationalism, and could be seen as pets of the royal court. However, a closer look at the political implications of Tendai Buddhism seems to suggest the primary goal was rather pragmatic, playing favor to popular custom while hoping to establish a stable and accessible, catholic form of Buddhism. Saicho did not proclaim the kind of esoteric insight which often plagues other Buddhist masters, as if they were prophets; instead, he was taken by the commonalities between all forms of practice, and the moral and philosophical necessity of setting up an infrastructure for pragmatic dialogue and cooperation between religion and lay life. More than anything else, the Heian period deserves closer study for the fact that it eventually decayed into the exact opposite of what Saicho wanted. In his vision, the implementation of a unified state religion would ensure that the ways of gentlemen would never die, that monks would routinely be involved in helping the communities around them in constructive ways, resembling modern philanthropic foundations. Instead, the Tendai school would end up in flames, as militaristic regimes moved in and Japan took on the aesthetic affectations of feudal culture. Instead of the Buddhist equivalent of Franciscan monks offering pastoral care and administering schools, one eventually saw samurai killing strangers in the street for practice. Further down the road, this spiraled into the opposite extreme of imperial militarism (see "Zen at War"), allowing the Japanese to commit war crimes and make use of kamikaze pilots. In short, the historical context and the content of his teachings seem to run parallel to the American social gospel movement, which also dissipated with the oncoming of the first world war. Keeping with the analogy of the lotus, one might paraphrase Richard Rorty's view of his grandfather Walter Rauschenbusch: all the centuries after the Buddha's appearance may have seemed to Saicho as "a long preliminary stage of growth, now the flower and fruit were almost here...one could not have foreseen the fierce, blighting storms that were to come."

Knowledgeable and lots of detail. I would prefer Japanese sutra names to sandscrit names, my only quarrell.

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