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Evil Monks with Good Intentions? 
Remarks on Buddhist Monastic Violence and Its 
Doctrinal Background 

Christoph Kleine 

Introduction 

In the West, Buddhism has a reputation of being a religion of peace and 
tolerance, quite contrary to the image of Christianity with its “crusades” 
or Islam with its “jihād.” It is evident, however, that this stereotypical 
ascription is not much more than a benevolent prejudice, an orientalist 
fantasy, another aspect of Western exoticism. Perhaps nowhere else has 
the myth of “peaceful Buddhism” been unmasked quite as clearly as in 
Japan. Traditionally, scholars both in Japan and in the West have tended 
to interpret the phenomenon of organized and institutionalized violence 
in premodern Japanese Buddhism as a visible sign of the increasing 
secularization, corruption and decadence of the larger Buddhist 
institutions; as a deplorable deviation from the Buddha’s original 
intention. This accords with a widespread pattern of interpreting 
religious history that distinguishes between the pure, ideal religion as 
such and the imperfect people who abuse this religion. In my view as a 
Religionswissenschaftler, however, there is no religion independent of 
thinking and acting people who constitute it according to a given 
historical situation. Thus there is nothing to be abused or corrupted. 
Rather, it is my task as a historian of religion to ask why, under what 
circumstances, and in which way religious people modify their beliefs 
and doctrines, moral codes, and practices. In other words, I am not so 
much concerned with deviation and decline but with change and 
development. From this perspective I will try to show why the 
prohibition in pārājika III of the traditional monastic code (vinaya) “to
deprive a human or one that has human form of life” intentionally has obviously lost its validity as an absolute moral norm in Japanese Buddhism.

Before addressing this question, I would like to give a brief overview of institutionalized violence in premodern Japan.1

The “Warrior Monks”3 of Medieval Japan

There is clear historical evidence that armed Buddhist monks were heavily involved in violent acts roughly from the tenth to the late sixteenth centuries, perhaps even earlier.4 Historians have counted up to

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1 “Whatever monk should intentionally, with his own hand, deprive a human or one that has human form of life, supply him with a knife, search for an assassin for him, instigate him to death, or praise the nature of death... and he (i.e., the man) should die by that [means], this monk is pārājika, expelled.” Prātimokṣa of the Mālasarvāstivādin; Charles S. Prebish, Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Prātimokṣa Sūtras of the Mahāsāṃghikas and Mālasarvāstivādinās (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1995), 51–3. For the Chinese version see Genbenshousyigeyoubu jieijing 根本院一切有部戒經 (T 24.501a15–20).


3 The term “warrior monk” (sōhei 侶兵) was probably introduced only in 1715 by a Confucian scholar. In medieval Japan the monks in question were usually called shuto 斧徒, indicating their being members of the illiterate mass who did the manual labor in the monastic complexes.

4 It is quite evident that temples like Kōfukuji and Tōdaiji were at least able to arrest the infamous monk Dōkyō 道謙 (772–872) and his cousins Yoshitsugu 良數 (776–777) and Kurajimaro 曲上此(734–775); see Tsuji, Nihon bukkyōshi, 29.

5 Adolphson, Gates of Power, 75.

6 According to the Genpei seizuki 源平盛記—a “history of the rise and fall of the Minamoto and the Taira” from the late twelfth century (Ôya, Nihon bukkyōshi, 2:510).

7 The well-known war tale Taiheiki 太平記—written around the late fourteenth century—quotes the great assembly of Enryakuji monks who gathered in 1333 as saying: “... suddenly after the abbotship of the monk reformer Jie (Ryogen), we girded on the autumn frost of forged weapons over our garments of forbearance, that we might conquer interfering demons therewith” [Gotô Tanji, Kamata Kisaburō, and Okami Masao, eds., Taiheiki, 3 vols., Nihon koten bungaku taikei 34-36 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1960–62), 1:256; Helen Craig McCullough, trans., The Taiheiki: A Chronicle of Medieval Japan, 6th ed. (Rutland & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1992), 217–8]. Likewise, a history of the Enryakuji finished in 1399—i.e., the Sange yōki senryaku 山根要記 ENG 研究—which was probably based on earlier materials—claims that it was Ryogen who established the monastic army (Tsuji, Nihon bukkyōshi, 25). Although the two texts mentioned were written approximately four hundred years after Ryogen’s death, there is good reason to believe that in Ryogen’s time armed monks were in fact a common sight on Mt. Hiei.

8 Ryogen’s regulations were further tightened in the same year. At particular religious meetings the covering of the head with scarfs—one of the identity markers of the soldier-monks—was prohibited: at the shushō e 修正倉, the shu negatsu e 修二月 involved in battles between Fujiwara Nakamara 藤原仲麻呂 (710–764)—who wanted to arrest the infamous monk Dōkyō 道謙 (772–872)—and his cousins Yoshitsugu 良數 (776–777) and Kurajimaro 曲上此(734–775); see Tsuji, Nihon bukkyōshi, 29. In 1053–1129 had complained that there were three things beyond his control: “the roll of the dice, the floodwaters of the Kamo River, and the monks of Mt. [Hiei].” According to tradition, the history of armed monks of the Tendai-shū 天台宗 started in the tenth century with the abbotship of Ryogen 良源 (912–985), the famous restorer of the Enryakuji 延暦寺 on Mt. Hiei 比叡山. Whether this influential abbot was personally responsible for the establishment of a monk’s army is not quite clear, however. In 970, for instance, Ryogen drew up twenty-six regulations for the monks of his order in which he—among other things—sharply criticized the rude and disrespectful behaviour of the soldier-monks who “liked to hurt just as butchers’ sons,” who entered the temple halls in full armor and dirty shoes, covered their faces with white scarfs, threatened and abused practitioners, and chased away visitors. Referring to the apocryphal Mahāyāna literature: “Warrior Monks” 3
sūtra (Ch. Fanwang jing; Jp. Bonmōkyō 梵網経) he warned against the karmic consequences of killing and criticized the possession of weapons by the monks. Whether this indicates an overall hostile attitude towards soldier-monks is doubtful. Ryögen's criticism might only have aimed at certain excesses rather than at the institution of a monastic army as such. Be that as it may; we know for sure that in Ryögen's time there existed a large group of monks on Mt. Hiei who did not hesitate to resort to violence. For instance, in 981, a Tendai army of 160 monks invaded the capital in order to force Regent Fujiwara no Yoritada 藤原頼忠 (924–989) to revoke the appointment of Yokei 餘慶 (918–991) as abbot of the Hoshōji 法勝寺. Yokei

Evil Monks with Good Intentions?

belonged to the Gishin-Enchin faction of the Tendaishū, whereas Ryögen represented the rival Saichō-Ennin faction. Among the countless acts of violence in which the soldier-monks were involved, conflicts between the two branches of the Tendaishū were perhaps the most frequent ones, especially in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, paralleled only by conflicts between Enryakuji and Kōfukuji 興福寺. In most cases the fights ended up in the destruction of the Onjōjī 圓城寺, which had become the headquarters of the Gishin-Enchin faction or Jimon monjo 寺門徒 after they had been forced to leave Mt. Hiei. Their position had become unbearable after their rivals on the sacred mountain had burned down some forty residences of Gishin-Enchin followers in 993.11

Monastic violence was not, to be sure, restricted to the Tendaishū. All major temple-shrine complexes kept armed forces, the most powerful being those of Enryakuji and Kōfukuji in the Heian and Kamakura eras, later followed by the Shingi-Shingen 新義真言 monastery Negorōji 根木寺, founded by the dissident Shingon monk Kakuban 覚鑑 (1095–1143) in 1140 in Kii Province 紀伊国 (present-day Wakayama) and the fortress-like Ishiyama Honganji 石山本願寺, founded in 1532 in Settsū Province 瀬津國 (present-day Osaka), the stronghold of the Ikkōshū. Before attempting to answer the question why the Japanese Buddhist institutions permanently violated the vinaya by keeping and using weapons, we should first take a look at what exactly the soldier-monks did.

We can roughly classify the occasions on which soldier-monks were employed under five categories:

1. Forceful protests (gōso 強訴/喚訴) against government decisions which affected the religious institutions
2. Internal struggles over dominance in the Buddhist schools
3. Struggles among competing Buddhist orders
4. Attacks on “heretics”

9 The text was traditionally regarded as a translation by Kumārajīva. According to the preface attributed to Kumārajīva's disciple Sengzhao 僧肇 (384–414), the Chinese version is Kumārajīva's translation of the tenth chapter—the “chapter on the mind-ground of the bodhisattvas” (pusa xindì pin 菩薩心地品)—of a lost Indian text of 120 fascicles and 61 chapters, executed in Chang'ān in 402 (T 24.997a21–b5). In his catalogue of the Buddhist scriptures (the Zhongjing mulu 中經目錄 compiled in 594), Fajing 法經 for the first time classifies the Fanwang jing as a “vinaya of dubious authenticity (zhongli yihuo 穩律疑僞)” (T 55.140a3). Also, Yijing 義净 (625–713) apparently did not accept that the text was genuine, as he fails to mention it in his discussion of suicide in the Nanhai jìgǔ níjiǎ zhūan 南海寄薈記法傳. Modern scholarship unanimously regards the text as an apocryphon forged in China in the late fifth century. See, for instance, Mizuno Kögen, ed., Shin Butten kaidai jiten 新本中台待遇集 (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1968), 113; Kamata Shigao, ed., Issaikyō kaidai jiten (Tokyo: Daiti shuppan, 2002), 223; Paul Groner, “The Fan-wang ching and Monastic Discipline in Japanese Tendai: A Study of Annen's Futsu jubosatsukai,” in Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha, ed. Robert E. Buswell (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 252–4. The text must have been compiled approximately between 431 and 480. The precepts are based on passages of the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra, the Bodhisattvabhumi, the Pusa shanjie jing 菩薩戒經 (T 30, no. 1582) and the *Upāsakasāla-sūtra (Yonposajie jing 俗婆娑戒經), T 24, no. 1488). A French translation of the *Brahmajāla-sūtra by Jan J. M. De Groot was published in 1893 as Le Code du Mahayana en Chine: son influence sur la vie monacale et sur le monde nonical (Amsterdam: Verhölder Kon. Ak. Van Wetensch, 1893). Recently, an English translation of the second part—the more influential “vinaya part”—of the apocryphon has been published in Taiwan by the Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, Brahma Net Sutra: Moral Code of the Bodhisattvas (Taipei: Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1999).
5. Clashes with secular authorities over land rights

**Forceful protests**

As to the forceful protests, I have already mentioned the Enryakuji monks’ protest march against the appointment of Yokei. The appointment of abbots by the court was indeed a major source of conflict. Another issue was the right to perform important state rituals, which guaranteed the temple in charge not only high reputation but also material profit. Whenever the court took a decision which affected a powerful monastery negatively, the clergy first appealed to the court and asked for a withdrawal of that decision. If the court failed to respond as desired, the monks picked up the portable shrines (mikoshi 神輿) or sacred symbols of the gods (kami 神) that protected the temple-shrine complex and gathered in front of the main temple hall. Sometimes this threatening gesture sufficed to make the government reconsider its mind. If not, the Tendai monks descended the mountain and approached the imperial palace, or, in a few cases, the residence of the ruling Fujiwara regent. Apparently, up to the late eleventh or early twelfth century the protesting monks had been only lightly armed to protect themselves, and the use of physical violence was not intended. In 1108, however, Fujiwara no Munetada 藤原宗忠 (1062–1141) noticed a change of attitude, as he wrote in his diary:

> Previously, the clergy were clad in protective armor when they came to the imperial palace, [but] this time, they are already armed and carry bows and arrows. It is possible that the mob now reaches several thousand. Truly, it is a frightening situation when the court has lost its authority, and [the palace] must be defended with all available might.

In earlier times the Enryakuji clergy had hoped that the spiritual power of the kami they carried to the capital in their palanquins would be sufficiently threatening to convince the rulers. The protesting monks positioned the portable shrines at prominent spots in the capital and left them behind when they were driven away by the government troops. Nobody dared touch the sacred objects, and as long as the enraged kami were there, important political and ceremonial acts had to be suspended. As the effectiveness of this spiritual threat decreased in the course of time, the clergy began to put more confidence in physical force. Thus, from the fourteenth century at the latest, the forceful protests more frequently took on the character of systematic armed attacks.

**Internal struggles over dominance in the Buddhist schools**

As to internal struggles as a cause of violent clashes, I have already mentioned the fightings between the two branches of the Tendaishū. These internal conflicts appear to have been much more violent than the protest marches from the very beginning. Comparatively minor incidents frequently resulted in the almost complete destruction of Onjōji, and a considerable number of monks was injured or killed. The Onjōji or Jimon branch was in a miserable situation indeed: members of that branch were banned from becoming zasu 座主 or head of the Tendaishū by the dominating Sanmon branch 慎宗門徒; but they were also not allowed to become independent. When Onjōji had successfully applied for the establishment of an ordination platform in 1040, the Sanmon monks reacted as usual and burned down the whole temple complex.

**Struggles among the Buddhist schools**

Violent conflicts among the Buddhist schools—especially between the Tendaishū and the Hossōshū, based at Köfukuji in Nara—arose out of disputes over land rights and the domination over certain shrines and temples, and sometimes also over the responsibility for important state rites. The Buddhist institutions had become proprietors of vast estates or shōen 薩院 throughout the country from around the ninth century onward. As a number of branch temples or shrines of the Enryakuji—such as Tōnomine 多武峯 (also Tamu no
mine) in Yamato 大和—were situated in regions otherwise dominated by Kōfukuji, and vice versa, clashes were inevitable. In 1081, for instance, the Kōfukuji clergy accused monks of Tōnomine of having illegally entered one of their estates, shooting and setting loose horses. Two days later Kōfukuji followers burned down several buildings of Tōnomine. Likewise, in 1113 the Enryakuji monks raided and destroyed Kiyomizudera 清水寺, a branch temple of Kōfukuji in Kyoto, after the court had—under pressure of the Kōfukuji clergy—withdrawn its earlier decision to appoint the Tendai monk Ensei 圓仁 (?–1133) as abbot of Kiyomizudera.

Attacks on “heretics”

Early in the thirteenth century, when a number of learned and charismatic but rankless monks formed groups of like-minded practitioners, developed their own innovative doctrines, and freed themselves from the grip of the religious establishment, the soldier-monks had to perform new tasks. The first dissident group that was violently reminded of the unwillingness of the Tendai clergy to accept any kind of sectarianism was the Ikkō senju nenbutsu shū 不動尊薬師宗—a branch temple of Kōfukuji in Kyoto, after the court had—under pressure of the Kōfukuji clergy—withdrawn its earlier decision to appoint the Tendai monk Ensei 圓仁 (?–1133) as abbot of Kiyomizudera.

Clashes with secular provincial leaders over land rights

As in the case of conflicts between the major Buddhist institutions, disputes over land rights were a frequent cause for conflicts between the powerful temples and secular proprietors or local authorities.16

The Impact of the Mappō Theory

At first sight, the examples mentioned above seem to support the secularization and corruption paradigm. If we take a closer look, however, we notice that this paradigm is rather anachronistic. From the viewpoint of medieval Japanese Buddhism the material well-being of the Buddhist institutions was not simply a secular matter but a precondition of the flourishing of the state and—in the long run—of the spiritual emancipation of all sentient beings.17 Only the monastic order could guarantee the survival of Buddhism, no matter how its members behaved. Most Japanese believed that the Age of the Latter Dharma or mappō 末法 had begun in 1052,18 and nobody could expect the monks to live pure lives according to the vinaya rules under these circumstances. This point is stressed in the well-known Mappō tōnyō ki 末法縁起記, traditionally but falsly attributed to Saichō 最澄 (762–822), the founder of Japanese Tendai. In accordance with the Mahāsaññipāta-sūtra,19 the author asserts that “in the Latter Dharma,

16 For details refer to Adolphson, Gates of Power.
19 Dafangdeng dajì jìng 大方等大集經, T 13, no. 397.
there are only nominal bhikṣus [kemyō biku 假名比丘].” Regardless of their moral shortcomings, “These nominal bhikṣus,” he says, “are the True Treasures of the world. There are no other fields of merit. . . .” Furthermore, if someone were to keep the precepts in the Latter Dharma, this would be exceedingly strange indeed. It would be like a tiger in the marketplace. Who could believe it? We further read that “There are no precepts that can be broken. Who could be called the breaker of the precepts?” As the “nominal bhikṣus” are the only representatives of the Dharma in the Final Age, they deserve to be treated as if they were Buddhas. Thus, says the Mappō tōmyō ki quoting the Mahāsāṃghika-sūtra, “The crime of striking and reproaching a monk who wears a robe but breaks or does not keep the precepts is the same as causing a trillion Buddhas to shed blood.”

From these passages we learn that medieval Japanese monks were quite aware of their permanent violation of the vinaya; and the fact that the soldier-monks were often called akusō 惡僧 or “evil monks” indicates that their conduct was indeed regarded as morally problematic. Under the given historical circumstances, however, they were badly needed. Armed monks had an important task to fulfil, for the sake of Buddhism and thus the sake of all sentient beings.

According to the Sange yōki senryaku 山家要記簡略—a history of the Tendaišū completed in 1409 by Shunzen 春全—Ryōgen had once made the following statement:

> Where there are no scriptures, there is no respect towards those of higher rank. Where there is no military power (bu 武), the virtue of authority over subordinates is lacking. For this reason, scriptures and military have always jointly pacified the world. Thus, those monks who are dull and have no talents (gudon mazai sōryō 惡钝無才僧侶) shall be separated to form a group that exclusively occupies itself with the martial arts (bumon 武門). The True Dharma (shōbō 正法) is no longer obeyed. In former times, in the period of the Imitated Dharma (zōbō 像法) the whole world believed in the Dharma [of the Buddha]. In our degenerate times, however, those who defend the Dharma have become rare. Therefore, if on this High Peak (i.e., the Heizan) in particular, the gift of oil for the lamp of the Dharma becomes extinct, how could it keep [burning] eternally and steadfastly. Just as the host of celestial beings in the four directions protect the god Taishaku (i.e., Indra), the soldier-monks (bumon shuto 武門眾徒) protect the estates against rebels and intruders; with valiant courage they protect us against the false rituals (jagi 邪儀) and extreme practices (chögyō 异行) of the various other schools, defend the True Teaching and guard those who study and practice meditation.

Moreover, a later biography of Ryōgen connects the twofold social structure of the Enryakuji monks—scholar-monks (gakusō 学僧) and soldier-monks (shuto 祟従) with the two emblems (Skt. samaya) of the spiritual qualities of the bodhisattva Māñjuśrī. According to the author, the scholar-monks represent the scripture in Māñjuśrī’s left hand—that is, the virtue of wisdom (chi’e no toku 智慧之德)—whereas the soldier-monks represent the sword in Māñjuśrī’s right hand—that is, the application of wisdom (riji no yō 利智之用).

However, it would not be correct to blame the Latter Dharma theory alone for the moral decline of Buddhism. As we have seen, weapons were used by Japanese monks before the alleged start of the Latter Dharma, and we may assume that Buddhist monks in China and Korea did so as well. Why would the *Brahmajāla-sūtra prohibit the

20 Ibid., T 13.363b4–22.
21 Mappō tōmyō ki: Saichō (?), The Candle of the Latter Dharma, trans. Robert Rhodes, BDK English Tripitaka 107-III (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1994), 9. The pseudopigraphon was cited by Hōnen in his Gyakushū seppō 違誤説法 and the Jōni mondō 十二問答. Thus we know that it was widely regarded as an important work of Saichō by the late twelfth century at the latest.
22 Ibid., 13.
possession of arms if armed monks had not in fact existed in fifth-century China, when this so-called bodhisattva-prātimokṣa was produced. And indeed, historical documents report that the troops of Emperor Taiwu (r. 424-451) of the Northern Wei (386-534/535) discovered “large stacks of bows, arrows, spears and shields” in a monastery in Chang’an. At any rate, secular rulers in China and Japan deemed it necessary to explicitly prohibit the possession of arms by monks and nuns. For example, in section 26 of the famous Rules for Monks and Nuns issued by the Japanese government in the eighth century we read that “offerings may not be made of . . . weapons [heiki], nor may these be accepted by monks . . .”

In the twelfth century they defended the country against the Jurchen, Demieville, “Le bouddhisme et la guerre,” 369. The minor tenth precept says: “A disciple of the Buddha should not store weapons such as knives, clubs, bows, arrows, spears, axes or any other weapons, nor may he keep nets, traps or any such devices used in destroying life. As a disciple of the Buddha, he must not even avenge the death of his parents—let alone kill sentient beings! He should not store any weapons or devices that can be used to kill sentient beings. If he deliberately does so, he commits a secondary offense” (ibid., 21; T 24.1005c20-3). The thirty-second minor precept says: “A disciple of the Buddha must not sell weapons such as knives, clubs, bows, arrows, other life-taking devices . . .” (ibid.; T 24.1005c14-9). Against this background it may be interesting to note that in the sixteenth century the Shingon headquarters Negoroji was the major producer of firearms in Japan; see Neil McMullin, Buddhism and the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 43-4.

The Thirty-Second Precept

Summary

We have already discussed the contribution of the Final Dharma theory and should now take into consideration the gradual devaluation of the traditional vinaya as “hinayānic,” a process far too complex to be discussed here in detail. Suffice it to say that canonical texts such as the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra and authoritative treatises such as the Yogācārabhūmi-sāstra propagated a specifically Mahāyānic approach to the monastic rules and emphasized bodhisattva ethics rather than the observance of a particular set of precepts. Thus they paved the way for the establishment of so-called “bodhisattva-śīlas” as a higher form of Buddhist discipline than the traditional moral code, now denounced as evil.

The Theoretical Foundation of Buddhist “Antinomianism”

As indicated above, I do not believe in the theory that organized monastic violence was simply a historical accident, neither encouraged nor justified by the Buddhist teaching. Due to lack of time, I will leave aside here the obvious social, political, and economic factors that were the immediate causes for the deployment of soldier-monks in Japan, and focus on the doctrinal factors that eroded the moral standards of the saṅgha and paved the way for fighting monks.

Hinayāna rules vs. Mahāyāna ethics, or legalism vs. altruism

We have already discussed the contribution of the Final Dharma theory and should now take into consideration the gradual devaluation of the traditional vinaya as “hinayānic,” a process far too complex to be discussed here in detail. Suffice it to say that canonical texts such as the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra and authoritative treatises such as the Yogācārabhūmi-sāstra propagated a specifically Mahāyānic approach to the monastic rules and emphasized bodhisattva ethics rather than the observance of a particular set of precepts. Thus they paved the way for the establishment of so-called “bodhisattva-śīlas” as a higher form of Buddhist discipline than the traditional moral code, now denounced as evil.

Moreover, section 1 explicitly forbids the study of military treatises [heisho 兵書].

On the occasion of religious festivals (sai'e 齋會) offerings may not be made of slaves, horses, oxen or weapons [heiki], nor may these be accepted by monks and nuns.”


34 “. . . Monks and nuns who are guilty of any of the following offences shall be punished by the civil authorities in accordance with the law: . . . By false reading of omens predicting disasters or making unreasonable statements and leading astray the people. . . .” (Sansom, “Early Japanese Law,” 127).
“srāvaka-sīlās” or “precepts of the hearers.” Confession rites came to simply serve the re-establishment of ritual purity rather than being a ritual re-confirmation of the saṅgha’s moral purity as originally intended.}

78 The Mahāyāna precepts were regarded as “magical formulas” or ritual texts, not as sets of monastic rules to be observed. Whilst the traditional vinayas claimed that every single rule had to be taken literally and be followed under all circumstances, the Mahāyānist approach was much more flexible. According to the traditional monastic code, a bhikṣu or bhikṣuṇī who committed one of the four major offenses or pārājika—such as killing a human being—was immediately and irreversibly expelled. According to the Mahāyāna code, the evildoer could regain his purity by a simple act of repentance and be reordained. In general, the texts which propagated a specifically

79 The ritual purity or merit gained by the reception of the bodhisattva precepts was believed to last eternally, while the “Hinayāna ordination” was valid for one life only. Above that, the bhikṣu ordination was clearly seen as inferior and insufficient. In the influential Pusa yingluo benye jing 菩薩璎珞本業經, it is said: “One who does not receive the bodhisattva precepts is not called a sentient and conscious being. He is not different from a beast. He is not a bodhisattva, a man, a woman, a spirit, or a human. He is called beast, he is called heretic. He is called a non-believer who has no affinity with human feelings” (T 24.102b3–6).

34 In the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra, for instance, it says: “O son of a good family! One who by his nature is capable of upholding [the sīlas] sees with his eyes the Buddha Nature and the Tathāgata. This again is called to see by hearing. There are again two kinds of sīlas. First, the srāvaka-sīlas; second, the bodhisattva-sīlas. If one proceeds from the first aspiration [to enlightenment] to the attainment of supreme correct enlightenment (anuttara-samyak-sambodhi), this is called bodhisattva-sīlas. If one contemplates white bones it leads to the attainment of arhatship, and this is called srāvaka-sīlas. If one receives and upholds the srāvaka-sīlas, it should be known, such a person does not see the Buddha Nature and the Tathāgata. If one receives and upholds the bodhisattva-sīlas, it should be known, such a person will attain supreme correct enlightenment and will be able to see the Buddha Nature, the Tathāgata, and Nirvāṇa” (T 12.529a27–b5).

35 A text in two scrolls and eight chapters (T 24, no. 1485). The Chinese translation is traditionally attributed to Zhu Fonian 竺佛念 but later scholarship considers it to have been written in China during the fifth or sixth century. Satō assumes that it was compiled around the middle of the fifth century; see Satō Tatsugen, Chūgoku bukkyō ni okeru kairitsu no kenkyū (Tokyo: Mokujisha, 1986), 360.

36 T 17, no. 839. Both the Fajing lu 法鏡錄 of 594 and the Yanzong lu 彰琮錄 of 602 regard this text as an apocryphon, as does the Datong neidian lu 大唐內典錄 which mentions the text, nevertheless, on the grounds that it was very popular and circulated widely in China; see Mori Shōji, “Kairitsu gaisetsu,” in Kairitsu no sekai, ed. Mori Shōji (Tokyo: Hokushindō, 1993), 58–60.

78 The mahāyāna vinayas such as the *Brahmajāla-sūtra, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra, the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra, and the *Brahmajāla-sūtra were regarded as “magical formulas” or ritual texts, not as sets of monastic rules to be observed. Whilst the traditional vinayas claimed that every single rule had to be taken literally and be followed under all circumstances, the Mahāyānist approach was much more flexible. According to the traditional monastic code, a bhikṣu or bhikṣuṇī who committed one of the four major offenses or pārājika—such as killing a human being—was immediately and irreversibly expelled. According to the Mahāyāna code, the evildoer could regain his purity by a simple act of repentance and be reordained. In general, the texts which propagated a specifically

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Confession rites came to simply serve the re-establishment of ritual purity rather than being a ritual re-confirmation of the saṅgha’s moral purity as originally intended. The pārājikas were regarded as “magical formulas” or ritual texts, not as sets of monastic rules to be observed. Whilst the traditional vinayas claimed that every single rule had to be taken literally and be followed under all circumstances, the Mahāyānist approach was much more flexible. According to the traditional monastic code, a bhikṣu or bhikṣuṇī who committed one of the four major offenses or pārājika—such as killing a human being—was immediately and irreversibly expelled. According to the Mahāyāna code, the evildoer could regain his purity by a simple act of repentance and be reordained. In general, the texts which propagated a specifically

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Mahāyānistic moral code laid more emphasis on a given person’s intention and mental attitude than on his actions.40 Needless to say, this stance is particularly favored by the Consciousness-Only school and in esoteric Buddhism. The general attitude towards the precepts in Mahāyāna Buddhism as formulated in the Bodhisattvabhūmi,41 ascribed to Maitreya by the Chinese and to Asanga (ca. 3rd–4th c.) by the Tibetans, and other texts, was that a bodhisattva was entitled to break minor rules if the breaking of the rule benefited others and was performed with an irreproachable (niravadya) motive.42 But even the breaking of major rules such as the four pārājikas was tolerable, nay, expected, if performed on the basis of the three supreme qualities of a bodhisattva: (1) skill in means (upāya-kauśalya), (2) insight (prajñā), and (3) compassion (karunā).43 Accordingly, Śāntideva, in his Bodhicaryāvatāra (chapter 5, verse 84), claims that “the bodhisattva should always be diligent in the interests of others. Even what is forbidden is allowable for one who seeks the welfare of others with compassion.”44

According to the Bodhisattvabhūmi, a bodhisattva is explicitly permitted to kill a robber who is on the verge of slaying living beings or hurt a śrāvaka, a pratyekabuddha or a bodhisattva, if the bodhisattva acts out of compassion for the evildoer, who is about to produce karma that would lead him to the hell of unintermitted suffering in either a virtuous or a karmically indeterminate state of mind5 (śāntiśīla or wújīxīn 無記心 Skt. avyākṛtacitta), thereby taking the risk of going to hell himself. The bodhisattva kills the robber. As he acts in accordance with the bodhisattva ethics, however, the killing does not result in an offense but produces much merit.46 In this context we should recall that the Bodhisattvabhūmi was among the most influential texts on the basis of which the so-called bodhisattva-śīlas were developed.47

The same position is taken in the Sūtra on Skilful Means48 where the bodhisattva “King Honored by All” (Zhongzunwang 星常王) says:

World-Honored One, suppose, out of great compassion for a person and in order to cause him to accumulate wholesome dharmas, a Bodhisattva who practices ingenuity [fangbian 方便] apparently or actually commits misdeeds serious enough for him to fall to the great

45 Cf. Daobida lun 大智度論: “Furthermore, in the case of murder, the culpability does not consist in the mere act of murder but also in the evil intention (duṣṭa-citta) which is the cause of murder. When one kills a living being with an undetermined intention (avyākṛtacitta), there is no sin...” (Tadeusz Skorupski, The Six Perfections: An Abridged Version of E. Lamotte’s French Translation of Nāgārjuna’s Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra Chapters XVI–XXX, Buddhica Britannica Series Continua 9 (Tring: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2002), 60; T 25.168b2–4.

46 Cf. Yogācārabhūmi-sūtra: “If all the bodhisattvas, tranquilly dwelling in the pure precepts of the moral conduct of a bodhisattva, employ skilful means to benefit others and thereby in their outwardly conduct commit one of the ‘natural sins’ (prakṛti-sūvadya; Ch. xìngzì 性行), because he does so on the grounds of his bodhisattva precepts this does not result in an offense but produces much merit” (T 30.517b6–17). See also Tatz, Asanga’s Chapter, 214–5.


48 Dačeng fangbian hui 大乘方便會. This text was translated into Chinese by Nandi and is incorporated in the Mahārājanātakā Collection (T 11, no. 310). For an English translation see Chang, ed., Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras, 427–68. An independent version circulates under the title Defangguang shangqiao fangbian jing 大方廣開巧方便經 (T 12, no. 346).
transgressions in turn are subdivided into two categories: major and minor. Some murder] and transgressions against a conventional law. These two kinds of Buddhismus,” der Buddha: Zu Sarvasattvapriyadarsana. Cf. Christoph Kleine, committed suicide by self-immolation on the model of the bodhisattva great bodhisattvas in the texts. Furthermore, even the texts such as the Bodhisattvabhūmi, which again were directly derived from, for example, the Bodhisattvabhūmi. Again, in the Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts it is clearly stated that even a serious violation of a “natural law” such as murder may only result in a “light offense.” Moreover, Xixing 一行 (682–727) in his commentary

According to this sūtra the Buddha himself in a previous life had killed a wicked man to save the lives of five hundred traders and prevented the evil man from going to hell.  Keown argues that the justification of apparently immoral behaviour by reference to the use of skilful means “does not have direct normative implications” because in “Mahāyāna literature upāya is the province of the Buddhhas and Great Bodhisattvas. Their actions are located predominantly in the domain of myth and symbol.” Although this may be true in a strictly doctrinal sense, we must not overlook the fact that texts such as the Bodhisattvabhūmi were not read as mythical and symbolical statements but as actual guidelines for the conduct of bodhisattvas in the broadest sense, namely for all those who had received the “bodhisattva-sīlās,” which again were directly derived from, for example, the Bodhisattvabhūmi.

Again, in the Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts it is clearly stated that even a serious violation of a “natural law” such as murder may only result in a “light offense.” Moreover, Xixing 一行 (682–727) in his commentary

Furthermore, in accordance with the ethical concept of the Bodhisattvabhūmi, the *Upāliparipṛcchā 54 maintains that “If a Bodhisattva who has resolved to practice the Mahāyāna breaks a precept ... but does not abandon his determination to seek all-knowing wisdom ... , his discipline-body remains undestroyed.” The text people create great transgressions by light [actions], whereas others commit light transgressions by serious [actions]. For example, Angulimāla took the worldly precepts and accomplishes the ten thousand practices. Therefore it cannot be said that when the precepts are the same the retributions from violating them are the same” [Heng-chih Shing, The Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts, BDK English Tripitaka 45-II (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1994); T 24, 1063c28–1064a4].

54 Dapulunshen Chenggong jing shu 大悲观逝稱佛經疏, T 39.757b27–c6.  Youpoli hui 优波離會, a text translated by Bodhiruci and contained in the Mahārattakāya Collection: not to be confused with the Youpoli wenfo jing 优波離問佛經 (T 24, no. 1466) or the “Chapter on the Questions of Upūlī” (Youpoli wenfu 优波離問語 in the Sarvāstivāda-vinaya (T 23.379a5–409c18).

further states:

Even if Bodhisattvas enjoy the five sensuous pleasures with unrestricted freedom for kalpas as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, as long as they do not give up their bodhicitta, they are said not to break the precepts. Why? Because Bodhisattvas are skilled in protecting their bodhicitta, and dwell securely in it; they are not afflicted by any passions, even in dreams. Further, they should gradually root out their defilements instead of exterminating them all in one lifetime.56

The text also explicitly explains the fundamental difference between the “Hinayāna precepts” and those of the Mahāyāna and concedes that a pure precept observed by Śrāvakas may be a great breach of discipline for Bodhisattvas. A pure precept observed by Bodhisattvas may be a great breach of discipline for Śrāvakas.57

Consequently, a bodhisattva may violate the vinaya rules:

Why do the Bodhisattvas’ precepts not need to be strictly and literally observed while those for Śrāvakas must be strictly and literally observed? When keeping the pure precepts, Bodhisattvas should comply with sentient beings, but Śrāvakas should not; therefore, the Bodhisattvas’ precepts need not be strictly and literally observed while those for Śrāvakas must be strictly and literally observed.58

Annen 安然 (841–889?) in his influential Detailed Explanation of the Universal Bodhisatta Ordination (Futsū jubosatsukai kōshaku 普通授菩萨戒疏) claims that a follower of taimitsu 台密 or Tendai esotericism could readily violate both the Hinayāna and the Mahāyāna precepts, as long as he did not violate the esoteric or samaya (Jp. sanmaya 三摩耶) precepts, namely:


The chiefly ritual character of the “bodhisatta-sīlas” becomes evident when the vinaya experts of the Nanshan Lūzong 南山律宗 connected the concept of the so-called “threefold pure precepts” (sanju jingjie 三聚淨戒) with the trikāya theory. According to the Shimen guijing yi 鍾門歸敘, a text attributed to Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), the founder and highest authority of the Vinaya School, the first kind of precept, observing the rules of moral conduct—namely to cut off all evil—is connected with the dharma-kāya (fashen 法身); the second kind of precept, embracing all good dhammas—namely to do good—is connected with the sambhoga-kāya (baoshen 報身); the third kind of precept, embracing sentient beings—namely to save all sentient beings with a compassionate mind—is connected with the nirmāṇa-kāya (huashen 化身).60

Based on this theory, Annen argues that while receiving the “perfect and sudden precepts” (endonkai 圓頓戒) at Tendai ordination, the candidate receives the qualities of the dharma-kāya together with “the precept that embraces all the rules of discipline” (she liyi jie 撫律儀戒; Skt. saṃvāra), those of sambhoga-kāya together with “the precept that embraces all good dhammas” (Ch. she shanfa jie 撫善法戒; Skt. kuśaladharma-saṃgrāhaka-sīla) and those of the nirmāṇa-kāya together with “the precept that embraces all sentient beings” (Ch. she zhongsheng jie 撫眾生戒; Skt. sattvārtha-kriyā-sīla). Furthermore, the Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts leaves no doubt that the main import of the precepts lies in their ritually purifying value rather than in their ethical

1. Not to abandon the true dharma
2. Never to abandon the aspiration to enlightenment
3. Never to refuse to confer Buddhist teachings on someone who sincerely wishes to study them
4. To benefit sentient beings.59

59 Annen argued that “the sanmaya precepts should never be violated but that other precepts, such as the Fan-wang or Hinayāna precepts, were expedients and could be readily violated if one were complying with the spirit of the sanmaya precepts. Tendai monks consequently had no set of rules that they were absolutely required to follow other than the idealistic and vague principles of the sanmaya precepts” (Groner, “Fan-wang ching,” 265).
60 T 45.856b27–c3.
implications. Accordingly, the bestowal of the “bodhisattva precepts” was in fact basically a purifying or exorcistic ritual without any ethical dimension.

In short, the observance of the traditional monastic rules established in the vinayas—defamed as hinayānistic, legalistic, and lacking compassion—had completely lost their character as normative guidelines for the actual conduct of Buddhist monks in China and even more so in Japan. The reception of the prātimokṣa rules at ordination was a purely ritual matter. Even the violation of the so-called “bodhisattvaśīlas”—received at the second higher ordination—was allowed if higher ethical goals—namely compassion—were at stake. And finally, if a Mahāyāna monk had unmistakably violated a major precept, he could simply be ordained again after an act of proper repentance.

Ethical Relativism in Tiantai Philosophy

The third major factor in paving the way for violent monks, I think, was the strong tendency to deny any moral judgment, especially in Tiantai or Mahāyāna Buddhism. Following Madhyamaka philosophy, major Tiantai thinkers held that any definite statement is ultimately wrong of necessity, judgments about good and evil included. One should not choose between “good” and “evil,” but seek for “real truth, which is beyond good and evil or inclusive of both good and evil.” Accordingly, to use the words of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-upadeśasūtra (Ch. Dazhidu lun 大智度論) attributed to Nāgārjuna, “The worldly precepts are those against killing and stealing. The Buddhist precepts also include these but in addition ban taking intoxicants. The worldly precepts are essentially impure. After taking them, one is not purified and, likewise, adornment, contemplation, mindfulness, and retribution are also not purified. These are not ultimate precepts but just worldly precepts. Consequently, one should take true [Buddhist] precepts” (Shih, *Sūtra on Upiṣāka Precepts*, 150; T 24.1064a6–9).

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62 See, for instance, Daoxuan’s *Sīfenlī hanzhu jieben shu 四分律合注本疏*. MZZ 62.768b.


64 There are some doubts concerning the authorship of this bulky work in a hundred juan. There is no Sanskrit version extant. The Chinese translation is attributed to Kumārajīva; see Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Biographical Notes*, Buddhist Traditions 1 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), 240. Approximately one-third of the Chinese text was translated into French by Étienne Lamotte between 1944 and 1980. The chapters XVI to XXX on the “Six Perfections” have recently been translated into English by Skorupski (*Six Perfections*). A partial translation by Bhikṣu Dharmamitra is provided on the following website: http://www.kalavinka.org/

65 Ziporyn, *Omnicentrism*, 242; Miao Fa lianghua jing xuan zi 妙法蓮華經玄子, T 33.743c26–744a3.

66 See, for instance, Daoxuan’s *Sīfenlī hanzhu jieben shu 四分律合注本疏*. MZZ 62.768b.


69 Ibid., 308–9; Mohe zhiguang 娑诃止觀, T 46.17c13–7.

can be deduced from a quotation in Gishin’s 天台法華宗義集 and a commentarial remark by Annen, who maintained that “because he killed out of devotion to his teacher,” who had ordered his disciple to make him a necklace of one thousand human thumbs, “Anqulimāla’s actions should not be considered violations of the precepts on taking life.”71 In other words loyalty and obedience to his teacher was regarded as more important than keeping the precepts.

The impact of the śūnyatā doctrine: The voidness of the killer and his victim

Furthermore, if applied resolutely, the śūnyatā doctrine or doctrine of voidness inevitably led to the point where the concept of the killer, the killing, and the killed evaporated. For instance, in the Dazhidu lun, we find passages such as these:

If there are no beings then there is no offense of killing either. Because there is no offense of killing there is no upholding of precepts either.72 Also, when one deeply enters into the contemplation of these five aggregates [skandha], one analyzes and realizes that they are empty, like something seen in a dream, and like images in a mirror. If one kills something seen in a dream or an image in a mirror there is no killing offense committed. One kills the empty marks [śūnyatānimitta] of the five aggregates. Beings are just the same as this.73

This is perfectly in line with a verse uttered by the Buddha according to the *Upāliparipṛcchā of the Mahāratnakūṭa collection:

I often praise the observance of pure precepts, But no being ever breaks any precepts. Precept-breaking is empty by nature, And so is precept-keeping.74

A similar position is formulated in the Sūtra on the Questions of Suśhitamati (*Suśhitamatiparipṛcchā; Ch. Shanzhuzitianzi 善住天子會) in the same collection. After the Buddha had been attacked by Mañjuśrī with his sword of wisdom, he explained to the irritated audience that “all dharmas are without substance or entity. . . . Therefore, there is no sinner and no sin. Where is the killer to be punished?”75 Thereupon, five hundred bodhisattvas uttered the following verse:

Where are the Buddhas? Where are the Dharma and the Saṅgha? Nowhere can they be found! From the beginning, There are no father and mother, And Arihats are also empty and quiescent. Since there is no killing of them, How can there be retribution for that deed?76

A somewhat tricky way of arguing can be found in Dharmarakṣa’s (法藏: 385–433) translation of the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra:

If there was a self, there would actually be no killing. If there was no self, there would again be no killing. Why is that so? If there was a self, it would be unchangeable forever, and as it would last forever, it could not be killed. . . . How could there be the sin of killing?

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71 Futsu jubosatsukai kōshaku (T 74.777b); Groner, “Fan-wang ching,” 274 (slightly amended).
72 Cf. Avataṃsaka-sūtra: “Having contemplated thus, having no attachment to the body, no clinging to practice, no dwelling on doctrine, the past gone, the future not yet arrived, the present empty, there is no doer, no receiver of consequences. . . .” [Thomas Cleary, The Flower Ornament Scripture (Boston and London: Shambala, 1993), 402].
75 Ibid., 66–7; T 11.590c2–4.
76 Ibid., 67; T 11.590c20–3.
If there was no self, all the dharmas would be impermanent, and as they were impermanent, they would be constantly disintegrating. As they would be constantly disintegrating, the one who kills and the one who dies would [also] both be constantly disintegrating. If they are constantly disintegrating, to whom could a sin [be ascribed]?\footnote{77} As Damien Keown writes:

Those who sought to promote compassion as the supreme quality of a bodhisattva were able to exploit the doctrine of emptiness in an ingenious (if dubious) way to help overcome the more restrictive normative aspects of Buddhist ethical teachings. The justification for the employment of upāya thus proceeds along the lines that the precepts cannot be broken since there is no such thing (ultimately) as a precept.\footnote{78}

It would of course not be fair to interpret all these passages from sūtras and treatises as an encouragement to murder. Most of the authors passionately warned against an antinomian abuse of their theories which were originally not meant to be taken as guidelines for the actual conduct of unenlightened commoners.\footnote{79} And yet, it can hardly be denied that all these lofty expositions about the killer and the killed being ultimately void, of cultivating the bodhisattva who kills out of compassion and so forth could easily serve passionately warned against an antinomian abuse of their theories which were originally not meant to be taken as guidelines for the actual conduct of unenlightened commoners.\footnote{79} And yet, it can hardly be denied that all these lofty expositions about the killer and the killed being ultimately void, of cultivating the bodhisattva who kills out of compassion and so forth could easily serve as a justification of murder and invited antinomian interpretations.\footnote{80}

The core problem of the negation of a moral subject on the basis of the śūnyatā doctrine lies in the “attempt to argue to an ethical conclusion from metaphysical [or rather ontological; C. K.] premises,”\footnote{81} as Keown rightly points out. What makes me suspicious with regard to the real intentions of Buddhist authors such as Nāgārjuna(?), Zhiyi, and Zhānran is the fact that they quite unnecessarily draw upon the (moral) example of grave offenses to illustrate the (ontological) theory of voidness. To me it is hard to believe that their arguments should have no normative implications whatsoever. Whether or not they really intended to and succeeded in denying the absolute validity of the prohibition against killing in order to enable the saṅgha to react more flexibly to challenges, such as attacks from government troops, robbers, rebels, and rival religious groups, remains a matter of speculation.

Killing for the Dharma, or the End Justifies the Means

Besides such debatable philosophical and ethical statements, we also find outright encouragement to murder in Mahāyāna sūtras, most prominently in the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra. This important scripture—in Zhiyi’s classification scheme second only to the Lotus Sūtra—explicitly claims that “defenders of the True Law . . . should carry knives and swords, bows and arrows, halberds and lances and protect those pure bhikṣus who keep the precepts.”\footnote{82} According to the sūtra, the Buddha even encouraged his followers to kill slanderers of the Dharma by relating the story of his former incarnation as the king of a great country who loved and admired the Mahāyāna scriptures. When he heard the brahmins slandering these teachings, he had them put to death on the

tendencies among Chinese monks to give up monastic discipline with reference to the doctrine of emptiness: “Some observing one single precept on adultery say that they are free from sin, and do not at all care for the study of the Vinaya rules. . . . Simply directing their attention to the Doctrine of Nothingness [sic] is regarded by them as the will of the Buddha. Do such men think that the precepts are not the Buddha’s will?” (Yijing, A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malaya Archipelago (AD 671–695), trans. Junjirō Takakusu, 1896 (Reprint, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1998), 51; Nanhai jiguī neīfa zhuan 南海寄歸內法傳, T 54.211c14–7.\footnote{83}

\footnote{77} Dabanningjing 大般涅槃經, T 12.476b3–8.
\footnote{78} Keown, Nature of Buddhist Ethics, 160–1.
\footnote{79} Zhānran, for instance, referring to the story of a handsome ascetic in the Huishang puṣa wen dashanquanjīng慧上菩薩問大善權經 (T 12.157e4–21)—a similar story is told in the Sūtra on Skilful Means (Chang, ed., Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras, 433; T 11.596b24–c18)—who had sex with a lustful woman only to prevent her from committing suicide out of frustration, calls upon his readers to consider carefully whether they are ready “to take the pains of purgatory that would come from breaking the precepts.” (Ziporyn, Omnicentrism, 264; T 46.205b24–c4). This accords perfectly with the above-mentioned passage on the compassionate and virtuous killing in the Bodhisattvabhūmi.
\footnote{80} As early as in 692 the famous pilgrim monk, translator, and vinaya expert Yijing 義淨 (635–713) in his Nanhai jiguī neīfa zhuan 南海寄歸內法傳 warned against
spot. “Thereafter,” the Buddha declares, “I never fell into hell because of this.” As to faithless enemies of Buddhism, or icchantikas, the sûtra states that “when one kills an icchantika no sinful karma [will arise].” Accordingly, “one commits the sin of murder on killing an ant, but one commits no sin of murder on killing an icchantika.”

In short, killing the enemies of the Dharma is no crime at all—not even within the realm of conventional truth—and from the standpoint of the Japanese clergy, those who attacked or slandered the Buddhist institutions or deprived the saṅgha of its possessions were doubtlessly enemies of the Dharma. For instance, in medieval documents such as the Daijōin jisha zōjiki 大乗院寺社事記 those who failed to pay annual taxes or monetary dues, who acted against a temple’s landholdings and the like, were labeled jiteki 寺敵, “enemies of the temple,” jinteki 神敵, “enemies of the gods,” and butteki 仏敵, “enemies of the Buddha.” And as we have learned from the Mahāsaṃnipāta-sūtra and the Mappō tōmyō ki, to act against even a bad monk is the same as causing Buddhas to shed blood. As is well known, Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) quoted extensively from the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra in order to convince the Kamakura Bakufu to persecute the nenbutsu movement. This goes to show that the sûtra was indeed read as a call for physical violence against alleged enemies of Buddhism. It may be objected that the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra addresses Buddhist laymen who have received the Five Precepts (pañca-sīla) for

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83 T 12.434c8–20.
87 Interestingly, Coates and Ishizuka in the translation of the Hönen Shōnin gōyō ezu quoted above, likewise in a footnote refer to the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra to justify the defense of Hönen’s grave by armed “would-be priests” or “lay-monks”: “According to the great Nirvāṇa Sūtra (Southern version vol. VIII) no kings, ministers, men of high rank or other laymen should be called breakers of the Buddha’s commandments, simply because they are armed with weapons, if it be for the protection of the Law” (Coates and Ishizuka, eds., Hönen, 4:687).

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Evil Monks with Good Intentions?

Finally, we may draw three main conclusions from this cursory study:

First, that violence including the destruction of human life was resorted to regularly in an organized and institutionalized manner by Buddhist monks in medieval Japan.

Second, that from the viewpoint of Mahāyāna Buddhism—not only in Japan—physical violence including the killing of human beings was under certain circumstances judged as a legitimate or “canonical option,” and in some cases even as an obligation.

And finally, that Buddhist ethics in a narrow sense and philosophy in a broader sense did not drift apart but developed in parallel and in close interrelation, which amounts to the provoking thesis that it is somewhat inconsistent to praise Mahāyāna philosophy as subtle and profound upāsakas, not monks. Although this is true, against the background of the ethical relativism discussed above, there is no reason why monks should not violate the precept against killing if the True Dharma was in serious danger. It was a dictate of compassion for deluded sentient beings of the present and the future to preserve the good teaching for them by every means.

I will abstain here from discussing the undeniable impact of the Original Enlightenment doctrine or hongaku hōmon 本覺法門 on Buddhist ethics in Japan, as I think that this doctrine is basically a further development of tathāgatagarbha and Tiantai theories. Critical Buddhists such as Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō have dealt with this topic before and in detail.

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90 For a thorough discussion of critical Buddhism in English see Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson, eds., Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism, Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); as for hongaku thought see especially Jacqueline Stone, Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism, Studies in East Asian Buddhism 12 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).
while at the same time deploring the moral decline of the \textit{saṅgha}.

Abbreviations

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Bibliography


Evil Monks with Good Intentions?


Shih, Heng-ching. The Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts. BDK English
Between the Profane and the Sacred?
On the Context of the Rite of “Liberation” (sgrol ba)\(^1\)

Carmen Meinert

Object of Research

The twelfth-century Buddhist history Chos 'byung me tog snying po by Nyang Nyi ma 'od zer relates in great detail the story of what is probably the most famous and richly symbolic murder in Tibetan history: lHa lung dPal gyi rdo rje’s assassination in 842 of the Tibetan king gLang Dar ma, the apparent enemy of the Buddhist teachings.\(^2\)

The murder was seen as an immediate reaction to the radical changes with regard to the development of Buddhism in Tibet instigated by

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1 I am indebted to Professor Lambert Schmithausen and Jacob Dalton for suggestions on an earlier draft of this article and to Ethan Goldings for kindly proposing improvements to my English.

2 Nyang Nyi ma ‘od zer, Chos ‘byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi’i bcud, ed. Chab spel Tshe bstan phun thogs (Lhasa: Xizang remnin chubansen, 1988), 438-44. The story is retold in most Tibetan Buddhist historical accounts, yet to my knowledge the Chos ‘byung me tog snying po is the oldest extant description. A later extended version of the sBa bsbed, published by R. A. Stein relates the story similarly to Nyi ma ‘od zer; cf. Rolf Alfred Stein, Une chronique ancienne de bSam-yas: sBa bsbed (Paris: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1961), 81-2. This version of the sBa bsbed is assigned to the fourteenth century. Cf. also the interpretation of David Seyfort Ruegg on this ritual murder “Deux problèmes d’exegeése et de pratique tantriques,” in Tantric and Taotist Studies in Honour of R. A. Stein, ed. Michel Strickmann (Brussels: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1981), 1:223. My thanks to Jens Schlieter for a copy of his article “Tyrannenmord als KonfliktsГ¶sungsmodell? Zur Rechtfertigung der Ermordung des "antibuddhistischen" KГІnings Langdarma in tibetisch-buddhistischen Quellen,” before it was published in KarГЁina Kollmar-Paulenz and Inken Frohli, eds., Zeitschrift fГјr Religionswissenschaft (Buddhismus und Gewalt) 11-2 (2003): 167-83. In it he discusses strategies for the use of violence in providing a solution to conflicts on the basis of the different Tibetan Buddhist accounts of this assassination.