

The Symbolism of the Monk's Robe in China

INTRODUCTION: ROBE AS EMBLEM

In China, as elsewhere, the Buddhist monk was defined in part by his beliefs, his writings, and his oratory. But just as important to the monk's identity was the way he looked. Even when seen from a distance, monks and nuns in China have always been readily differentiated from other types of people. The most visible of distinguishing characteristics was the shaven pate. In traditional China, long hair was always the fashion, whether among men or women; outside of monks and nuns, only criminals had shaven heads.¹ The custom of shaving the monk's head can be traced back to the earliest accounts of ordination rituals in Indian Buddhism and is a practice that Chinese monks have continued to this day. In the same way, the monk's clothing has always been an emblem of the profession, whether in ancient India or China. When biographers of Chinese monks note their subject's decision to "leave the family" and become a monk, they do so with the phrase "he cut off his hair and donned the black robes of the monk." Had it not been for the distinctive array of religious professionals in ancient India, or for the persistent attitudes of Chinese towards clothing and nudity, the robe would not have acquired such importance.

Founders of the Buddhist monastic order had many options when determining proper attire for monks, ranging from elaborate gowns to no clothing at all. In ancient India, some Jains went completely naked – a practice stalwart Jain ascetics have continued to this day – while other ritual specialists were expected to wear garments of great refinement.² The *Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom* – a text now available only in Chinese but probably translated or at least based on a medieval Indian original – reflects the predominant Buddhist position on clothing in medieval

¹ Ancient and medieval medical texts reveal that long, shiny black hair was considered an important sign of health, and hair loss, regardless of one's age or state of health, a disturbing indication of old age and infirmity, making the tonsure a significant act of renunciation. Xiao Fan (Hsiao Fan) 蕭燾, "Changsheng sixiang he yu toufa xiangguan de yangshengfang" 長生思想和與頭髮相關的養生方, *ZYY* 69.4 (1998), pp. 671–726.

² See Paul Dundas, *The Jains* (London: Routledge, 1992).

India when it states: "The white-robed [Brahmans] for the sake of pleasure keep various sorts of garments. In contrast, false religionists in the name of asceticism go shamelessly naked. It is for this reason that the disciples of the Buddha reject both extremes and practice a middle way."³ Passages like this disclose the need for distinction, for marking out a place for the monk in the social hierarchy of ancient India. Indeed, one of the reasons the monastic regulations give for forbidding monks to bathe naked was that they would risk being mistaken for strident ascetics rather than Buddhist monks.⁴ In other words, in India the monk's robe was a sign of prudent asceticism, placing the Buddhist monk neatly between the well-dressed Brahman and the naked Jain.

In China, the distinction between the Buddhist monk and the radical ascetic was never important. Chinese had from very early on shunned nudity, and there was no ascetic movement in China comparable to those in India strong enough to challenge the taboo. The prominent seventh-century Chinese monk Daoxuan 道宣 gave a more immediate justification for clothing in his influential guidebook for monastic life, the *Notes on Practice*, with the words: "As our body abides amidst the entanglements of the world, we must attend to comportment, and for shielding oneself from dust and stain, nothing surpasses clothing."⁵ Later in the same text, a compendium of quotations from various versions of the monastic regulations organized by theme, Daoxuan returns to the essential use of clothing as a shield from the cold. For Chinese monks like Daoxuan, clothing was taken for granted; the possibility of a naked clergy was not entertained. But while Chinese monks did not, like their Indian counterparts, have to negotiate a delicate balance between worldly decadence and excessive ascetic zeal, they still needed to distinguish themselves from other figures, religious and secular, in Chinese society.⁶

³ *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論 (Sk.: *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*) 68, Tno. 1509, vol. 25, p. 538a.

⁴ Mohan Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life According to the Texts of the Theravāda Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1990), p. 43.

⁵ *Sifenlü shanfan buque xingshichao* 四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔 C, sect. 1, Tno. 1804, vol. 40, p. 104c. For a carefully annotated version of Daoxuan's discussion of clothing in this text along with a modern Japanese translation, see Kawano Satoshi 河野訓 et al., "Sōi shiryō kenkyū Shibunritsu gyōji shō ni i sōbetsuhen, hōbun (shō) narabi ni yakka" 僧衣資料研究, 四分律行事鈔二衣總別篇, 本文(抄)並びに譯解 *Bukkyō bunka* 佛教文化 18 (1987), pp. 85–114; and 19 (1988), pp. 74–86. For a concise survey of Daoxuan's views on monastic clothing, see Toriimoto Yukiyo 鳥居本幸代, "Nanzan Dōsen no keshā kan ni suite" 南山道宣の袈裟観について, *Tendai gakuho* 天台學報 25 (1983), pp. 185–88. The 6th-c. monk Zhiyi 智顗 made a similar case for the practical necessity of monastic clothing in his *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀 4, Tno. 1911, vol. 46, p. 41c.

⁶ Bernard Faure's, "Quand l'habit fait le moine: The Symbolism of the Kāśāya in Sōtō

A biography of the great eighth-century exegete Zhanran 湛然 describes his decision to abandon a promising career as an official for the life of a monk as a change of clothing, saying simply that he "removed his scholar's robe and registered as a monk."⁷ In a similar case dating to the Tang era, the monk Zhengong 甄公 (740–829), after passing the civil service examinations, was on the verge of beginning a career as an official, "but before he had donned the official robes of office, he fell into a discussion of profound principles with a *śramaṇa*, and decided to wear instead the robes of a monk."⁸ Both passages presume the existence of an established rhetoric of clothing in China meant to mirror the social hierarchy; monks were one category of people among many – official, soldier, peasant – each marked by a distinctive uniform. Certainly there was more to distinguish a monk from a scholar-official than clothing, but when searching for the most concise symbol to mark the distinction, writers turned to the robes they wore. Just as a monk's robe – in Chinese *jiasha* 袈裟 (from the Sanskrit *kāśāya*) – distinguished him from an official, variations in the robe also distinguished different types of monks. In India, monks belonging to different schools wore different-colored robes, ranging from red and ochre to blue and black, while in medieval China, monks from different regions were recognized by the color of their robes – pitch-black in the Jiangnan region, brown in the area around Kaifeng, and so on.⁹

In short, the monk's robes were just as important as a mark of distinction in China as they were in India. Chinese monks firmly wed to their Buddhist identity did not give up their robes without reluctance, and we have many accounts of monks who risked persecution rather than surrender their robes. Conversely, for enemies of Buddhism the monk's robe became a locus of criticism and ridicule. A telling case of the dangers of donning the monastic robe is seen in the persecution of Buddhism during the reign of the Tang emperor Wuzong (r. 841–846). In China, monks in general wore black robes; indeed, from at least the Tang on, monks were

Zen," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 8 (1995), pp. 335–69, in addition to providing analysis of the symbolism of the monk's robe in Japan, also contains useful information on the robe in India and China. I am indebted to this article for much of what follows.

⁷ *Song gaosengzhuan* 宋高僧傳 6, Tno. 2059, vol. 50, p. 739B.

⁸ *Song gaosengzhuan* 11, p. 775B.

⁹ I draw on the 10th-c. *Da Song sengshi lue* 大宋僧史略, Tno. 2126, vol. 54, pp. 237C–38A. See also John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii P., 1997), pp. 29–32. After this time, the color of robes was gradually standardized. Now Chinese monks usually wear black or gray robes.

often referred to simply as the “black-robed ones” (*ziyi* 緇衣).¹⁰ During Wuzong’s reign, because of a prophecy that “black-robed emperors” would one day rule the land, the color of monks’ robes was cited as reason enough for the elimination of the entire monastic order.¹¹ Imperial representatives continued to pay particular attention to the robes of the monk, ensigns of the monastic life, in the persecution that followed. One imperial edict announced:

The black clothing of the monks and the nuns of the land who have been returned to lay life should all be collected and burned by their respective prefectures and subprefectures. It is feared that the officials... have used their power to hide [monks and nuns] in their private homes and that *in secret* [monks and nuns] wear their black robes. These should be ruthlessly confiscated and all burned, and the matter reported to the throne. If after the burning there be monks or nuns who wear their black robes and have not given them all up and there be those who protect [monks and nuns] at the time of the investigation, they shall be sentenced to death in accordance with the Imperial edict.¹²

Given the importance attached to the monk’s robe even by those outside of the clergy, it is no wonder that leading Chinese monks devoted considerable attention to prescribing the proper form monastic robes should take. In theory, this was not a question of innovation but rather of correct interpretation of the admonitions of the Buddha, as recorded in the scriptures, which contained ample information on the robes of the monk. The ideal monastic garment propagated in Indian Buddhist texts is comprised of three pieces: a rectangular piece of cloth wrapped around the waist so that it covers the lower body, another rectangular garment draped over the left shoulder, and a third rectangular garment draped over the other two (figure 1).¹³ The inner robe (Sk.: *antarvāsa*) was worn at all times, and could be worn without the other garments when working inside the monastery on hot days. The upper garment (*uttarāsanga*) was worn on most other oc-

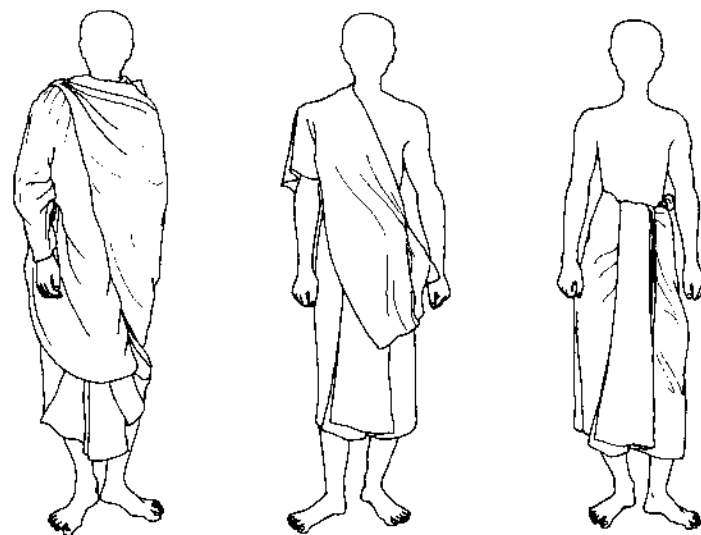


Figure 1. The Three Robes

casions. The outer robe (*samghāṭi*) was to be worn when in public, such as during alms rounds or when in the presence of high officials.¹⁴

Given the simplicity of the basic design – three rectangular pieces of cloth – the rules governing the composition of the robes are surprisingly complex. The outer robe, for instance, was made up of variously five, sev-

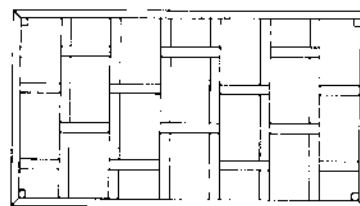


Figure 2. The Outer Robe

This robe is comprised of 7 strips (*tiao*) and 21 patches (*ge*). See *Fozhi biqu liuwu tu* 佛制比丘六物圖, T no. 1900, vol. 45, p. 897A.

en, nine, thirteen, fifteen or more strips of cloth, with each strip divided into several segments (figure 2). Different texts provided different guidelines for the number and size of the strips. The *Dharmaguptakavinaya*, for instance, recommended a robe of five vertical strips 條 made up of ten square patches 隔, but it also allowed for robes of up to nineteen strips.¹⁵ The *Sarvāsti-*

¹⁰ For examples, see the entry “*ziyi*” 緇衣 in *Hanyu daidian* 漢語大詞典 (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1991), p. 928.

¹¹ Edwin O. Reischauer, *Ennin's Travels in Tang China* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955), p. 245.

¹² Bai Huawen 白化文 et al., eds., *Ru Tangjiufa xunli xingji* (*Nittō gūhō junrei gyōki*) *jiaozhu* 入唐求法巡禮行記校註 (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1992) 4, p. 498; trans. Edwin Reischauer, *Ennin's Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955), pp. 384–85, emphasis added.

¹³ See A. B. Griswold, “Prolegomena to the Study of the Buddha’s Dress in Chinese Sculpture,” in *Artibus Asiae* 26.2 (1963), pp. 85–130.

¹⁴ Griswold refers to the three robes as, respectively, “undercloth,” “robe,” and “shawl.” I follow instead Chang Kun’s translations in *A Comparative Study of the Kathinavastu* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1957).

¹⁵ *Sifenlü* 四分律 40, T no. 1428, vol. 22, p. 855B; and 43, p. 878A.

vāḍavinaya divides robes into three types, with the “lowest grade” having 9, 11, or 13 strips; the “medium grade” 15, 17, or 19; and the “highest grade” 21, 23, or 25, although the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* differs on this point, stating that a robe made of more than 19 strips is unlawful.¹⁶ There were also careful prescriptions for how to sew the hem of each robe, including the size of the hem and the type of stitching to be used. The patches and strips were not to be sewn with straight lines, but rather in either a squared zigzag known as the “horse-teeth stitch 馬齒” or in a triangular zigzag known as the “bird’s-foot stitch 鳥足.”¹⁷ The robe was to be made of heavy, coarse material, and so forth. Robes were to be made from cloth donated by patrons in a special ceremony held at fixed times.¹⁸ By the middle of the Tang dynasty, all of the sets of the monastic regulations that were to affect Chinese monks had been translated into Chinese and were widely available, providing ample material for the investigations of learned monks.

For Chinese monks looking for a quick summary of the proper robe, works like Daoxuan’s *Notes on Practice* provided a handy collection of prescriptions from the various monastic regulations on exactly how the robe was to be made. Yet even Daoxuan’s work did not resolve the knottiest problems in the proper composition of the robe, and controversies continued to rage over colors, hem-stitching and fabric. The monk Yuanzhao 元照 (1048–1116), for instance, defended Daoxuan’s stance on the use of silk against a more recent detractor, while Zanning 贊寧 (919–1001) complained of Chinese monks who wore robes dyed pitch-black 黑 – a color he claimed was unsupported by the monastic regulations – rather than the more orthodox “gray-black 緇.”¹⁹ In sum, much ink was spilt over what in retrospect seem at first the most trivial of matters. Of course the fact that monks studied the composition of the robes with such intense scrutiny tells us that for them these matters were far from trivial. The impetus behind all of this meticulous attention to detail was more than a need for distinction. Nor can it be explained by an even more nebulous “force of tradition.” To understand the full significance of the robe, we must appreciate its symbolism.

THE ROBE AS ASCETIC SYMBOL

The arrangement of three robes probably derived from indigenous Indian clothing, but monks were quick to discover specifically Buddhist symbolic implications in the number three. The three robes, we are told, represented abandonment of the “three poisons” (greed, anger, and ignorance), with the inner garment representing the elimination of “the greed of the body,” the upper garment the “anger of the mouth,” and the outer garment the “ignorance of the mind.”²⁰ Elsewhere, the robes are said to symbolize buddhas of the “three times” (past, present, and future).²¹ With the monk’s rug symbolizing the stupa, the monk’s robe symbolizes the *dharma-kāya*, or ultimate aspect of a buddha.²² But there is an arbitrary quality to such pronouncements. Given the prevalence of numbers in Buddhist writings, it was a simple matter for a Buddhist exegete of even modest erudition to assign symbolic equivalents to the three robes when attempting to explain why monks wore what they wore. There is nothing inherent in the robe that suggests the “three poisons” or the “three times.” These are conventional groupings of doctrinal concepts common throughout Buddhist literature. Commentators could just as easily have turned to the “three forms of being 三有,” the “three assemblies of the Buddha 三會,” the “three realms 三界,” or any of dozens of common sets of “threes” in Buddhist doctrine.²³ Nor need we give undue significance to the number three: doctrinal correlates could just as easily have been found for four, five, six, or ten robes. In contrast to such off-the-cuff assignment of symbols, the notion that the monk’s robes symbolized a life of mendicancy and austerity is apparent in the robe itself, in the way the fabric is cut and the way the robe is worn. And unlike the symbolic interpretations mentioned above, this interpretation of the robe – as a symbol of renunciation of wealth and comfort – appears persistently in various types of writing throughout Buddhist history.

²⁰ Daoxuan, *Guanzhong chuanglei jietan tujing* 關中創立戒壇圖經, T no. 1892, vol. 45, p. 816A. Daoxuan is probably drawing here from a passage in the *Flower Adornment Scripture* (*Da fangguang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經; Sk.: [Buddha] *avatamsakasūtra*) 6, T no. 278, vol. 9, p. 430C.

²¹ *Sifenlü* 40, p. 855B. In *Fenbie gongde lun* 分別功德論 4, T no. 1507, vol. 25, p. 44C, the three robes are correlated with winter, summer and spring. See also Faure, “Quand l’habit fait le moine,” p. 338, n. 6.

²² *Lüxiang gantong zhuan* 律相感通傳, T no. 1898, vol. 45, p. 881A.

²³ Nakamura Hajime’s 中村元 *Bukkyō daijiten* 佛教語大辭典 (Tokyo: Tōkyō shoseki, 1975) contains over a hundred doctrinal groupings beginning with the number “three.”

¹⁶ *Sapoduo pini piposha* 薩婆多毘尼毘婆沙 (Sk.: **Sarvāstivāḍavinayavibhāṣā*) 4, T no. 1440, vol. 23, p. 527B; *Sifenlü* 40, p. 855B.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ For a careful study of texts in various languages describing this ceremony, see Chang, *Comparative Study of the Kathinavastu*.

¹⁹ *Fozhi biqiu liuwu tu* 佛制比丘六物圖, T no. 1900, vol. 45, p. 898A; *Sengshi lue* A, p. 238A.

Chinese discussions of monastic property frequently evoke an ideal expounded in ancient Indian Buddhist texts in which the monk was to own only a few basic necessities, all of which could be carried with him during his life of wandering. The most common such set of possessions consisted of six objects, usually given as: the three articles of clothing making up a monk's garment, the alms bowl, the water strainer (used to ensure that the monk does not consume insects with his drinking water), and a small rug on which the monk could sit.²⁴ Careful study of the archeological record reveals that this list represents only an ideal: Indian monks in fact possessed all manner of personal property.²⁵ In China, vast amounts of textual and archeological evidence show that there too monks owned private property – from books and images, to gold, slaves and even landed estates.²⁶ But regardless of the shared wealth of the monastery or even how much personal property individual monks possessed, the elements of a plain monastic uniform consisting of a few simple objects consistently played an important symbolic role in the life of the monk and the perception of the monk by those outside the order.

In other words, while I have emphasized the emblematic function of the monk's robe as a marker of distinction, the robe was more than simply a sign of difference: the robe meant something much more specific. Made of simple material, stitched together from rough rags and dyed a dull, simple color, the robe was readily recognized as the minimal clothing of the ascetic.²⁷ For covering oneself, nothing could be simpler, nothing more humble, than three drab rectangular pieces of cloth wrapped around the body.

Textual evidence as well as early images of Chinese monks reveal that the three-part robe was brought to China from abroad. But while this ideal

uniform continued to hold a prominent place in the minds of leading Chinese monks for centuries, the history of the monastic robes in China is a history of adaptation and compromise. Modern Chinese monks and nuns in general no longer wear the three robes, a custom that monks maintain in countries in which Theravada Buddhism is practiced; Chinese monks and nuns now wear sleeved robes, and often wear trousers as well. While still a relatively simple type of clothing, the Chinese monk's sleeved-robe and trousers require a degree of design – pieces of cloth have to be cut and sewn to fit, thus widening the gap between the ideal of a peripatetic, impoverished ascetic, and a more comfortable reality.

This slow shift from the rectangular inner garments of medieval India to the sleeved robes of modern Chinese monks began in medieval times. In a detailed, passionate plea to Chinese monks to adhere to Indian monastic practice in the cut and manner of wearing monastic robes, seventh-century monk Yijing 義淨 complained of the practice of Chinese monks wearing garments with sleeves.²⁸ But Yijing's remonstrations did not carry the day, and by the end of the Tang we can easily spot sleeves beneath the outer robe in images of monks, as the sleeved robe gradually took the place of the more cumbersome three rectangular pieces of cloth which needed to be carefully wrapped, tucked and held in place.

Nuns' robes were perhaps even more susceptible to innovation. According to Yijing's prescriptions based on canonical precedent, nuns should have worn essentially the same garments as monks. But because such robes are not firmly secured and run the risk of exposing the right breast, nuns were prone to feel "ashamed before men," and hence developed a more secure form of attire. As Yijing puts it, "The Chinese dress of the nuns is that of ordinary women, and the existing mode of wearing it is much against the proper rules."²⁹ Again Yijing's pleas were ignored, and nuns depicted in painting and sculpture from the medieval period on invariably wear either sleeved gowns or a high skirt that covers the breasts (figure 3).

Yet the ascetic ideal persisted, and even after the Tang, monks and nuns continued to make regular use of the outer robe – worn over a sleeved robe or even a shirt and trousers. This outer robe continued to attract exegetical attention, even after the tripartite uniform had been replaced. If the symbolism of the three-piece robe as the ascetic's simple uniform had been

²⁴ Hirakawa Akira, *A History of Indian Buddhism from Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*, Paul Groner, trans. (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 1990), p. 68; Mochizuki Shinko 望月信亨, *Bukkyō daijiten* 佛教大辭典 (Tokyo: Sekai Seiten Kankō Kyōkai, 1958–1963), p. 5078c. The monastic regulations are not, however, consistent on this point. Another list excludes the sitting rug, but adds a needle, a razor, and thread, making for eight items. Yet another, apparently later list, adds a ring-staff, a censor, images of bodhisattvas, and a number of other items, bringing the number up to eighteen. See Kawaguchi Kōfū 川口高風, "Keshashi ni okeru Dōsen no chii ryokubutsu o chūshin ni" 袈裟史における道宣の地位六物を中心に, *Shūkyō kenkyū* 宗教研究 47.2 (1974), pp. 98–100.

²⁵ Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii P., 1997), pp. 3–5.

²⁶ Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, Francis Verellen, trans. (New York: Columbia U.P., 1995), pp. 79–93.

²⁷ Indeed, the Sanskrit word for "dull color" (*kāśaya*) became synonymous with the monk's robe; Nakamura, *Bukkyō daijiten*, s.v. "keshā" 袈裟, p. 298.

²⁸ *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan* 南海寄歸內法傳 2, Tno. 2125, vol. 54, p. 214A–B; J. Takakusu, *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago* (London: Clarendon Press, 1896), p. 67.

²⁹ *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan* 2, p. 216A; Takakusu, *Record of the Buddhist Religion*, p. 78.



Figure 3. Nun in Tenth-Century Painting from Dunhuang

Note the separate garment covering the breasts.

lost, this symbolism could at least be maintained in the appearance of the outer robe.

As we have seen, in China as in India the outer robe was always made of several pieces of cloth, stitched together into a single rectangular garment. But what was the point of this practice? The modern scholar Mohan Wijayaratna has suggested that when making their robes Indian monks tore up the whole cloth in order to reduce its commercial value to a minimum; that is, they wished to render the fabric worthless.³⁰ Perhaps more important was the even more severe ascetic ideal to which the patched robe can be traced: the ideal monk's robe was pieced together from discarded rags – a clear gesture of renunciation of standard ideals of fine clothing. In practice, however, at least in China, this seems seldom to have been the case: most robes were prepared from new whole cloth which was cut into strips and then sewn together into the rectangular cloth that comprised the monk's outer robe. Again, despite the fact that this outer robe was not really a patchwork of discarded rags, it still conveyed an image of ascetic rigor. The poet Zhang Ji 張籍 (fl. 798), for instance, once praised a valiant monk who “practices the Four-part Regulations, and protects the purity of his robe of seven strips.”³¹ The strips are “pure” because they represent the uncompromising detachment of the monk from secular pursuits. The symbolism was heightened in the “robe of a hundred patches” 百衲衣, made up of small patches of different fabrics and colors. Even more than in the case of ordinary, seven-strip robes, these robes were recognized by monk and layman alike as the mark of austere self-cultivation and renunciation.³² Again, such robes were symbolic representations of poverty rather than a consequence of poverty itself: many such robes were especially made of fine material.³³

We see the same sort of anxious compromise in the methods used to fasten the monk's robes. The simplest version of the three robes is held in place by tucking the robes in once they are wrapped around the body. At times a sash was used to secure the inner garment. The most visible device

³⁰ Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life*, p. 36.

³¹ Zhang Ji, “Song Min seng” 送閻僧, *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 384, p. 4312.

³² See, e. g., “Du zhu seng” 獨住僧, by the Tang-era poet Xu Ning 徐凝; *Quan Tang shi* 474, p. 5380.

³³ Very few old Buddhist robes are extant. For three spectacular examples of medieval robes from Japan but probably reflecting the style of Chinese robes at that time, see Shōsōin Jimusho 正倉院事務所, eds., *Shōsōin hōmotsu, hokusō* 正倉院寶物, 北倉 (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1987), pl. 24–29.

for securing the outer robe was a ribbon attached to the part of the garment that draped over the back which was tied to a knot or ring attached to the part of the cloth draped over the front (figure 4). As this was one of the most conspicuous parts of the monk's robe, it attracted the attention of monks and others concerned with the image of the monk. The chief concern



Figure 4. Ming Court Painting

Yongle reign (1402–24). Note the ring used to affix the robe.

was to show that there was canonical precedent for the ring. While at some point even leading Chinese monks had to admit that the three-part robe had given way to a sleeved garment over which an orthodox, rectangular garment was draped, these same monks could rest assured that there was precedent; the ring, they insisted, was perfectly orthodox, and not another slip away from the ascetic ideal towards a more decadent form of attire.

Most monks justified ring and ribbon with stories drawn from various canonical texts, stating that originally monks did not make use of any device to secure their robes, but simply tucked their robes in around their bodies. Because of this, the robes tended to sag, becoming “disorderly.” Critics, this apologetic goes, began to ridicule monks by saying that they looked like “lascivious women.” At other times, the robes could even fall off entirely, forcing the monk to quickly set his alms bowl on the ground and scramble to reassemble the robe, prompting ridicule of the “sordidness” of the monk. For all of these reasons, the Buddha is said to have intervened and permitted the use of ring and ribbon 鈎紐.³⁴ We sense in such discussions an anxiety over the ideals the robe represented. If monks could not win every battle in this struggle for symbolic equivalence, they could at least win the most visible ones. Daoxuan and others warned against the use of silver and other precious metals for the ring, although into the Song and beyond, monks of means continued to use silver and even gold for the ring, as the ascetic ideal persistently slipped from the control of even the most exacting monks.³⁵

In addition to the question of how one fastened the robe, monks also debated the proper material for the robe. Daoxuan, as we have seen, devoted considerable attention to the question of monastic robes, discussing them at length in his handbook on monastic regulations, and even composing a treatise devoted entirely to the subject of the monk's robes. A large section of this treatise discusses the use of silk to make monastic robes. The

³⁴ *Lüxiang gantong zhuan*, p. 881A; *Fozhi bigu liuwu tu*, p. 900B; *Sifenlü* 40, p. 855C; *Genben shuoyiqieyou bu pi'naiye zashi* 根本說一切有部毘奈耶雜事 (Sk.: **[Mūlasarvāstivāda] vinaya-kudrakavastu*) 4, Tno. 1451, vol. 24, p. 233C.

³⁵ In *Shishi yaolan* 釋氏要覽, Daocheng 道誠 cites a passage from the *Mahāsāṃghikavinaya* prohibiting the use of precious metals in the ring, but I have been unable to find the passage in the Taishō version of the text: *Shishi yaolan* A, Tno. 2127, vol. 54, p. 270. For Daoxuan's comments, see his *Shimen zhangfu yi* 釋門章服儀, Tno. 1894, vol. 45, p. 838C. Cheng Dachang 程大昌 (12th-c.) cites the prevalence of silver robe-rings in his day in an essay entitled “Sengyi huan” 僧衣環, idem, *Yan fan luzheng* 演繁露正 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 1984) 12, p. 343a. Cheng postulates that use of the ring originated as a mark of rank among Tibetan officials. While there is ample evidence that pre-Song monks fastened their robes with ribbon and knot, and Daoxuan complains of metal rings in his day, I have yet to find an example of a metal ring in pre-Song images of monks. Hence, Cheng's hypothesis is not impossible.

manufacture of silk necessarily entails killing silkworms in order to extract the silk from their cocoons, yet the practice of wearing silk was common among monks in Daoxuan's day. As Daoxuan notes, "From the time China received the teachings [of Buddhism], monks have had nothing to do [with meat eating]. The system whereby meat is forbidden has long been in practice, yet prohibitions against silk have not been adopted."³⁶ That is, rules against killing for one's personal comfort were not applied consistently.

Later in life, Daoxuan experienced a series of visions in which he conversed with Buddhist spirits. The topic of most of their conversation, duly recorded by Daoxuan, concerns the monastic regulations. At one point in this remarkable book, the spirits comment on how much they enjoyed reading Daoxuan's work on monastic robes. They are particularly impressed with his admonitions against silk, and ask him how he came to this noble, correct view. Daoxuan replies that he first began to have suspicions about silk when reading a passage in the *Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom* that remarks on the rough cloth of the Buddha's robe. Later, Daoxuan continues, he questioned monks from the West who told him that they did not wear silk.

Whether this text represents a calculated fabrication or a genuine vision, the passage suggests that, however much his spirits might have approved of his stand, Daoxuan met with resistance among fellow monks, and that consciously or unconsciously his visions served to vindicate his stance. Yijing, who was in his early thirties at the time of Daoxuan's death, was among those who objected to Daoxuan's rejection of silk. Yijing argued that silk was in many cases more readily available than other types of fabric, and that it was improper for monks to be overly fastidious when accepting gifts of robes from donors. "Why should we reject the silk that is so easily obtained and seek the fine linen that is difficult to procure?" Further, the use of any kind of fabric, including cotton, at some level involved the taking of life, as worms and such are killed when the fields are cultivated. Where, Yijing asks, does this excessively rigorous interpretation of the monastic regulations end? "If one attempts to protect every being, there will be no means of maintaining oneself, and one has to give up life without reason. ... There are some who do not eat ghee or cream, do not wear leather boots, and do not put on any silk or cotton. All these are the same class of people as are mentioned above."³⁷ Yijing's views on silk seem to

have found widespread acceptance. While it is true that some monks in later periods eschewed the use of silk in monastic robes,³⁸ in China avoidance of silk was never as prevalent as the vegetarian diet, based on similar ethical concerns, and monks continued to accept gifts of silken garments.

Clearly the debate over silk involved more than symbols; for a monk like Daoxuan, silk was wrong because it involved the taking of life. The silk question involved complex quasi-legal issues of ethical culpability, and not just the image the monk projected to the outside world. This being said, the ascetic impulse seems also to have played a role in the debate, with Daoxuan intimating that just as a monk renounces the pleasures of meat, he should also renounce the pleasures of silk, and Yijing countering that the renunciation of silk was hardly an ascetic act since silk was in fact easier and cheaper to procure than other materials.³⁹

Lurking behind all of these debates, commentaries, and admonitions was an elusive ascetic ideal beyond the reach of all but the most determined monk. If scholarly monks like Daoxuan could not achieve an austere ideal of poverty and eremitic renunciation in practice, they could achieve it, to a degree, through careful attention to symbolism, both in their erudite treatises and in the very clothes they wore. This being said, in China the monk's robe was not always a symbol of asceticism; on the contrary, some robes were marks of prestige and influence. This tendency is clearest in the curious history of the purple robe, to which we now turn.

THE PURPLE ROBE

According to an early legend, the monk Śāṇavāsin, one of Ānanda's disciples, was born wearing a monk's robe.⁴⁰ A tenth-century Chinese interpreter of the story remarked that Śāṇavāsin

was born wearing a robe which looked like a thin layer of skin but was not. When he was a child, it was like swaddling clothes; when he grew up,

³⁶ Some monks, for instance, wore robes of paper in order to avoid the use of silk. See Tsien Tsuen-hsuei, *Paper and Printing*, Part 1 of Volume 5, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, in Joseph Needham, ed., *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1985), p. 112.

³⁷ In his *Notes on Practice*, Daoxuan cites versions of the Vinaya that emphasize that the monk's robe is to be made of heavy, coarse material and not fine material like silk. See *Sifenlü shānfān buque xingshichao* C, sect. 1, p. 105B; Kawano, "Sōi shiryō kenkyū," p. 91. The debate over the use of silk in monastic garments underwent an interesting transformation in Japan. See Faure, "Quand l'habit fait le moine," pp. 346–52.

⁴⁰ Cf. Mochizuki, *Daijiten*, p. 2746c. On this and the "placenta robes" discussed below, see Faure, "Quand l'habit fait le moine," p. 363.

³⁶ *Shimen zhangfu yi*, p. 836A. Later in the same text Daoxuan complains also of the practice of "robbing bees of their honey." Although in later periods some monks eschewed silk, few ever objected to eating honey.

³⁷ *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan* 2, pp. 212C–13A; Takakusu, *Record of the Buddhist Religion*, p. 38.

it covered his body. When he became a monk, this then served as his monk's robe. Only when he entered extinction and his body was cremated was the robe reduced to ashes.⁴¹

Here, the "fetal robe" had clear symbolic associations: Śāṇavāsin was born to be a monk. In the same work, two instances are recorded of Chinese monks born wearing "monks' robes," which, according to the compiler, were unusual placentas, although signs nonetheless that the infants were destined to become monks. A minor detail of one of these accounts, the biography of Huileng 慧稜 (early 900s), easily escapes the attention of anyone unfamiliar with the history of the monk's robe in China: unlike Śāṇavāsin's robe, Huileng's robe was purple.⁴² By Huileng's time the purple robe signified that not only was its owner a monk, but that he was a monk of some distinction as well.

The purple robe had become a sign of particular eminence because Tang emperors began the practice of conferring a purple robe on monks of special merit. Even before the Tang the color purple had a long history of associations with nobility and high status in general. Rulers wore purple during the Warring States period, and after the Six Dynasties the purple robe became a mark of high office more generally.⁴³ According to the tenth-century monastic historian Zanning, the first instance of a ruler conferring the purple robe on a monk was in 690 when empress Wu Zetian awarded a purple robe to the monks who composed a commentary to the *Great Cloud Scripture*, a text that was instrumental in her campaign to establish her legitimacy to the throne.⁴⁴ Subsequent emperors continued the practice, granting robes to monks who performed well in debate before the throne, or when assigning prominent monks to important monastic positions, or more generally for a monk's reputation for virtue. At times a prefect or princess would memorialize the throne, reporting that they had recently discovered a particularly worthy monk who should be granted a purple robe.⁴⁵

Monks were well aware that purple had been an important mark of high office in the Chinese bureaucracy from very early on,⁴⁶ and some

Tang-era monks expressed discomfort at associating themselves with this secular symbol, seemingly at odds with the traditional symbolism of the dim-colored robe as a mark of sacred renunciation.⁴⁷ The purple robe even came in for ridicule by writers in Song times who scoffed at the hypocrisy of monks too busy scrambling for purple robes to take time out for their alms rounds.⁴⁸ But for the most part, monks and laymen alike seem to have accepted the purple robe as a sign of prestige and imperial favor. When the seventh-century monk Huijing 慧警 died, for instance, his cloister proudly displayed his purple robe together with his portrait. A pilgrim to the site would have instantly realized that the robe had belonged to a monk publicly recognized by the emperor for his virtue (in this case, chanting the *Great Cloud Scripture* for empress Wu at the age of three).⁴⁹

Well before the first purple robe was granted, monks were at times awarded robes of other sorts. A biography of the great seventh-century pilgrim Xuanzang repeatedly notes gifts of robes from rulers, including one sewn by ladies in the harem, "so dexterously made that the stitches left no trace of sewing."⁵⁰ What distinguished the purple robe from such gifts is not the quality of the robe itself, but that an official system was established for its bequeathal, thus imbuing the robe with associations derived from a lengthy tradition of formal, official recognition of imperial favor. After empress Wu, the practice of bestowing purple robes was continued by emperors in the mid-Tang and into the Song, growing gradually in scope as a system developed of recommendations from local officials and review by the central authorities before a purple robe could be bestowed. As the number of requests for the robe increased – in the year 939 alone, 105

⁴¹ Kieschnick, *Eminent Monk* (see n. 9, above), pp. 31–32.

⁴² Huang, *Songdai Fojiao*, p. 450.

⁴³ *Song gaosengzhuan* 24, p. 863A. Roderick Whitfield has suggested the same practice at work in the patched cloth in the Stein collection which he argues may in fact be the purple robe conferred on the Dunhuang monk Hongbian 洪鑒 in the ninth century. The cloth, like most of the other Dunhuang artifacts in the Stein collection, was discovered in Cave 17, which was originally a memorial cave for Hongbian. See Roderick Whitfield, *The Art of Central Asia: The Stein Collection in the British Museum* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1985) 3, pl. 9. The cloth, however, contains only two small patches that are actually purple. Further, at 107 cm, it is less than half the length of the robes in the Shōsōin. I suspect that, rather than being Hongbian's purple robe, the robe may in fact have been used to adorn a statue. According to one Dunhuang inventory, purple fabric was used in some such statue garments. (See Hou Chinglang, "Trésors du monastère Long-hing à Touen-houang: Une étude sur le manuscrit P 3432," in Michel Soymie, ed., *Nouvelles contributions aux études de Touen-houang* [Geneva: Droz, 1981], pp. 149–68). In short, I do not believe that the Dunhuang robe is an example of a "purple robe."

⁵⁰ *Da censi sanzang fashi zhuan* 大慈恩寺三藏法師傳 7, Tno. 2053, vol. 50, p. 258c; Li Rongxi, *A Biography of the Tripitaka Master of the Great Cien Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995), p. 212.

⁴⁴ *Song gaosengzhuan* 11, p. 775B.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 13, p. 787A.

⁴⁶ *Hanyu dacidian*, s.v. "ziyi 紫衣" and "zifu 紫服," p. 815.

⁴⁷ Huang Minzhi 黃敏枝, "Songdai de ziyi shihao" 宋代的紫衣師號, collected in her *Songdai Fojiao shehui jingji shi lunji* 宋代佛教社會經濟史論集 (Taipei: Xuesheng shujin, 1989), p. 444. My discussion of the purple robe relies heavily on this article. See also Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1976), p. 11.

⁴⁸ Here I draw from accounts in the *Song Biographies of Eminent Monks*, which contains dozens of references to the purple robe.

⁴⁹ *Sengshi lue*, p. 248C.

such robes were granted – criteria were established for just what sort of monk could receive the robe. Robes were given to reward monks for administering to the sick and for burying the dead, in addition to robes given to monks for vaguer notions of virtue and sanctity. One indication of the value accorded the purple robe at the local level is the number of reports that reached the throne of bribery and cases of the robe reaching unworthy monks. These worrying reports in turn sparked periodic attempts to reform the system. From the standpoint of the state, instances of bribery and corruption threatened the efficacy of the policy, intended at some level to exert state control over the *saṅgha*.

In the eleventh century, a government in search of innovative ways of increasing revenue announced that purple robes could now be purchased from the state. In motive, the new policy represented a departure from the previous one, intended to strengthen the moral character and social utility of the clergy; the purple robe was no longer a symbolic reward for moral eminence or virtuous service to the state – it had become instead a simple commodity, similar to other forms of currency.

By this point the severance of any connection to Buddhist ideals of ascetic simplicity and ethical purity was complete; funds derived from the sale of the robes were applied to various secular purposes, including even the training of imperial soldiers.⁵¹ The policy of selling robes encountered problems similar to those of the practice of selling ordination certificates, or indeed, the issuing of state money: cases of forgery became common, forcing the state to issue a new style of robe embossed with the imperial reign mark, making it more difficult to copy. A long-standing ordinance requiring that the purple robe be returned to central authorities after a monk's death also helped to ensure the state monopoly on the robes.⁵²

In sum, while originally a symbol of the renunciation of secular values, the monk's robe, at least in its purple variety, was absorbed into the hierarchy of these very values as Indian Buddhist symbolism was overwhelmed by Chinese imperial symbolism. Subsequently, the purple robe, relying on this imperial symbolism, became a valued commodity that, in addition to departing from traditional, canonical Buddhist prescriptions, extended beyond the reach even of the Chinese state, as individuals contended for a symbol disconnected from traditional Buddhist concerns, and only tangentially linked to the imperial symbolic network.

⁵¹ Huang, *Songdai Feijiao*, p. 454.

⁵² On the purple robe in Japan, see Faure, "Quand l'habit fait le moine," p. 355.

Even after purple robes were made available to whoever could afford them, monks continued to receive purple robes from powerful patrons. But a purple robe obtained in these circumstances – purchased directly or through bribery – meant something different from a robe conferred by an emperor. Although still a mark of prestige, the robe had become an indirect symbol of vague connections to wealth and power, rather than a direct symbol of prestige conferred by the court, which, in principle, was decided on the basis of merit. A modern analogy would be the difference between winning a prestigious prize and the prestige that comes with owning an expensive watch. No single entity was in control of this slippery process of symbolic association: erudite monks made little effort to evaluate the purple robe on the basis of the scriptures, and even the emperor could not control the vagaries of the purple robe at the local level. In the end, the significance of the robe was decided in a haphazard fashion by any number of individual monks and their patrons. We can turn from this sort of loose, secular symbolism back to more specifically Buddhist concerns by taking up the rise and spread of the robe as a symbol of the highest, ineffable Buddhist truth – a symbolism embodied in the "Dharma robe."

THE DHARMA ROBE

Early in the Tang, at approximately the same time as the purple robe was introduced as a symbol of imperial favor, the monastic robe was invested with yet another possible meaning: it became a symbol of the transmission of the Dharma, the essence of the eternal truths discovered by the Buddha.⁵³ Several legends circulating at that time conveyed this notion. The most important of these was the story that just before his death, Śākyamuni bequeathed to his disciple Kāśyapa a "gold-embroidered robe" (given to the Buddha by his aunt) that Kāśyapa was to pass on to Maitreya, the next buddha. In the version of the legend told in Xuanzang's *Account of the Western Regions*, Kāśyapa eventually takes the robe with him when he enters into Cock-foot Mountain (the mountain closing behind him) and awaits the coming of the future buddha.⁵⁴

⁵³ The discussion that follows draws heavily on Wendi Leigh Adamek's "Issues in Chinese Buddhist Transmission as Seen through the *Lidai Fabao ji* (*Record of the Dharma*)" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1997).

⁵⁴ *Da Tang xiyu ji* 大唐西域記 9, Tno. 2087, vol. 51, p. 919a-c; Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India* (1904-5; rpt. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1973), pp. 143-46. Curiously, the detail that the robe was made of "embroidered gold" contradicts the ideal monk's robe discussed above. Note also that while the Buddha was of course held to a different standard than ordinary monks, Daoxuan, as noted earlier, claimed

The *Forest of Pearls in the Garden of the Law*, compiled by Daoshi 道世 (d. 668), contains a similar story that it attributes to Daoxuan. In it Śākyamuni first receives from a tree-spirit the robe worn by the previous buddha; as in the other legends, the robe is a sign of the transmission in a lineage of buddhas. Just before entering nirvana, Śākyamuni entrusts the robe to Ānanda who is told to take it to the cave at Mount Qingliang (that is, Wutai) in China where the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī resides.⁵⁵

These stories suggested to the medieval reader not only that there was a robe passed down from one buddha to another, but that this robe had somehow found its way to China. These notions were adapted to several key, early texts of the Chan tradition and eventually incorporated into what would become one of the most beloved motifs of Chinese Buddhist narrative: the secret transmission of the Dharma from master to disciple. By far the most famous account of such a transmission occurs in the *Platform Scripture*, in which Hongren 弘忍, the "Fifth Patriarch" of the Chan lineage, determines to transmit the Dharma not to his leading disciple, the learned Shenxiu 神秀, but instead to the illiterate but intuitively enlightened Huineng 慧能. After secretly calling Huineng to his quarters in the middle of the night, Hongren passes on a robe to Huineng, saying, "I make you the Sixth Patriarch. The robe is the proof and is to be handed down from generation to generation."⁵⁶

While this version of the story became the most popular, texts discovered in modern times at Dunhuang provide us with further glimpses into the ways in which Chan monks in the Tang understood the symbolism of this robe of transmission. For instance, the *Record of the Jewel of the Law throughout the Ages*,⁵⁷ a Chan text compiled to lend support to claims of a particular Chan lineage in the ninth century, fleshes out the legend of the transmission of the robe. Here we read that the robe was passed down from Bodhidharma, the monk credited with bringing the Chan Dharma to China, or, in Chan parlance, the "First Patriarch," who at the moment when he passed the robe on to his disciple Huike 慧可 said,

I have transmitted the robe for the sake of verification of the teachings. It is like the consecration of a Cakravartin King who obtains the seven true

to have first recognized the inappropriateness of fine silk robes when reading in the *Daxi du lun* that the Buddha wore a coarse garment.

⁵⁵ *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 35, Tno. 2122, vol. 33, p. 560a–c. The passage is discussed in Adamek, *Issues in Chinese Buddhist Transmission*, p. 206.

⁵⁶ Philip Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1967), p. 133.

⁵⁷ *Lidai fabao ji* 歷代法寶記, Tno. 2075, vol. 51.

jewels and inherits the eminent kingly throne. Possession of the robe is the outward expression of the true inheritance of the Dharma.⁵⁸

The robe was then passed on from Huike, the "Second Patriarch," to his disciple and then from patriarch to patriarch until it reached Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch. At this point the account in the *Record of the Jewel* diverges from that of the *Platform Scripture*. According to the *Platform*, the transmission of the robe ended with Huineng. In the *Record of the Jewel*, however, the transmission continued when the robe was passed from Huineng to a monk who passed it on to empress Wu, who then passed it on to yet another monk until the robe finally made its way to Sichuan, where the lineage responsible for the compilation of the *Record of the Jewel* was located.

The relationship among the accounts in these and other Chan texts – who borrowed from whom – is complex, and involves knotty problems of textual history with which Chan specialists continue to grapple. Setting aside the question of the precise historical development of the robe legends, we can still ask the more general question of what the compilers of relatively early versions of the legend made of the robe as a symbol. In these accounts, the robe is a mark of the authentic transmission of the Dharma. It signals a link with enlightened masters of the past, and constitutes a "contact relic"; that is, it is a relic by virtue of having come into contact with a holy man.⁵⁹ It is also a mark of legitimization that resonated with Chinese traditions of the legitimization of imperial reign through sacred talismans, stretching back to pre-Buddhist times.⁶⁰ As we have seen, some monks felt uncomfortable with the association of the monastic robe with imperial prestige. Chan monks were even more marked in their ambivalence toward the "Dharma robe." In their case, it was not simply a symbolic association with prestige that made them uneasy, but the association between the Dharma, ultimate truth, and any material object. For monks who emphasized the need for unmediated, direct enlightenment, to resort to any sort of symbolic mediation was considered an embarrassing compromise.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Adamek, *Issues in Chinese Buddhist Transmission*, p. 188.

⁵⁹ On the term "contact relic," see Bernard Faure, *Visions of Power: Imagining Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1996), p. 159.

⁶⁰ Anna Seidel, "Den-e," in *Hōbōgiri: Dictionnaire encyclopédique du Bouddhisme d'après les sources chinoises et japonaises* (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve), vol. 8 (forthcoming).

⁶¹ The problems created by the Chan propagation of unmediated enlightenment and the compromises entailed in such a claim are the subject of Bernard Faure's, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1991).

Commenting on the meaning of the robe, Shenhui 神會, Huineng's most prominent disciple, wrote:

Although the Dharma is not in the robe, the robe symbolizes that the Dharma was transmitted from generation to generation. The robe is a mark of trust, so that propagators of the Dharma can receive something [to show to] students of the Way that they may know that the essence of the doctrine is not mistaken.⁶²

Shenhui's comments suggest that for some the Chan robe was not just a symbol representing the Dharma, but was in fact the embodiment of the Dharma, and that by possessing the robe one magically acquired the Dharma itself.⁶³

It was this belief in the robe as a magical locus of the Dharma that Chan monks like Shenhui feared and spoke against so eloquently. We see the same notion challenged in the *Platform Scripture*, where, after Huineng takes the robe and the Dharma and leaves his master, he is pursued by a gang of murderous monks intent on killing him and taking back the robe. When one of these monks catches up to Huineng, the monk surprisingly asks not for the robe but for the Dharma, saying "I have come this long distance just to seek the Dharma. I have no need for the robe."⁶⁴ Later, just before dying, Huineng himself makes a clear distinction between the Dharma and the robe when he announces that the robe, handed down from patriarch to patriarch beginning with Bodhidharma, will no longer be transmitted. In its place, he offers a series of verses also handed down from patriarch to patriarch beginning with Bodhidharma.⁶⁵ In this way, the less material symbol of the verses is substituted for the more material – and hence suspicious – symbol of the robe.

A more explicit statement of the secondary role Chan monks wished to ascribe to the robe, so central to their own legends, occurs in the writings of Shenhui when he explains that the robe was not used as a sign of trust in India where the monks are of higher attainments and the people pure and simple; the transmission robe is only necessary, he tells us, in

⁶² *Putidamo nanzong dingshifei lun* 菩提達摩南宗定是非論, in Hu Shih 胡適, "Xin jiaoding de Dunhuang xieben Shenhui heshang yi zhu liang zhong" 新校定的敦煌寫本神會和尚遺著兩種, *ZYY* 29 (1958), p. 846.

⁶³ As Bernard Faure puts it, the Chan transmission robe "is not just a symbol: like Huineng's other relics, including the *Platform Sutra*, it is the *embodiment* of the Chan Dharma" (*Rhetoric of Immediacy*, p. 166), and elsewhere, "the robe and other 'tokens,' which were at first included as proofs of enlightenment, tended to become its magical cause" ("Quand l'habit fait le moine," p. 343).

⁶⁴ Yampolsky, *Platform Sutra*, p. 134.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 176–78.

places like China, where the people are "vulgar, seek after fame and fortune, and become involved in complicated disputes."⁶⁶ Shenhui provides us with an especially clear example of Chan ambivalence with regard to the robe; there is an uneasy tension between, on the one hand, the Chan obsession with the robe as a mark of legitimacy, and on the other a wish to downplay any overt symbolism, regarded by some Chan thinkers as awkward and crass. That is, Chan monks felt it necessary to lard enthusiastic stories of robe transmission with erudite asides dismissing the robe as peripheral.

Radical iconoclasm is, perhaps, always doomed to failure; for without symbols of some sort, expression itself is impossible. And, taken together, Chan stories of contention for the transmission robe seem hardly more lofty in spirit than official documentation of bribery and payments received for the prestigious purple robe. What distinguishes the Chan literature, however, is the awareness of Chan monks to the problem. Not only were they conscious of the symbolism of the robe; they were conscious as well of the problem of utilizing *any* symbol, however inevitable this sort of mediation between abstract truths and the everyday world may be. As in the famous Chan analogy, when pointing out the moon, there is always a danger that others will focus on the finger before them, rather than the moon in the distance.

CONCLUSION

From medieval times to the present we can easily find images of Chinese monks wearing the outer robe. For from early on in the history of Buddhism in China, the robe was an emblem of the monk, a sign that marked the monk as a distinctive type of person. The ascetic symbolism of the robe was also readily apparent to monk and layman alike. More precise symbolic interpretations of, for instance, the number of robes a monk wore, or the number of strips of cloth a robe was made from were the preserve of literate, well-read monks who could find answers to questions about the significance of the robes based on commonly accepted canonical texts. We have also seen, however, that once we venture beyond the world of the erudite monk to the lay patron, and particularly to the imperial patron, the neat rules and categories of the monastic regulations give way beneath the pressures of imperial symbolism, as purple becomes an important color for the

⁶⁶ *Putidamo nanzong dingshifei lun*, p. 849; Adamek, *Issues in Chinese Buddhist Transmission*, p. 189.

monk's robe in place of the dull colors prescribed in Buddhist texts; silk becomes a suitable material in place of coarse rags; and "stitches that leave no trace of sewing" become preferable to the intentionally obvious stitching prescribed in the monastic regulations.

Even within the monastic community, the symbolic interpretation of objects as fundamental as the robe was subject to manipulation and dispute, as when, for instance, Chan monks expressed new concerns through the traditional symbol of the robe, or as other monks shifted attention away from the two inner robes they had abandoned to the minute details of the outer robe they continued to wear. Surprisingly, different symbolic interpretations of the robe existed side by side, and we find few traces of ideological struggles in which one group attempted to prevent another from appropriating the symbolism of the robe. The monk's robe could be used both as an emblem of the ascetic and as a sign of imperial favor. Here the Buddha's robe is made of "embroidered gold," but there it is made of the coarsest cloth. Nor is the robe, in this respect, an isolated case. Perhaps owing to China's rich literary tradition, the symbolism of Buddhist objects accumulated, layer on layer, over the centuries. The history of the monk's robe in China is not, then, a history of degeneration in which a profound, pristine notion is slowly abandoned for a coarser more mundane one; it is instead a history of the growth and expansion of the potential of objects as conduits of expression.

APPENDIX: List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Diagram of the three robes, based on photographs in Itsutsu Gafū 井筒雅風, *Hōshi 法衣史* (Tokyo: Yūzankaku, 1993), pp. 2–3.

Figure 2. Diagram of the outer garment, based on *Fōzhi biqiu liuwu tu 佛制比丘六物圖*, Tno. 1900, vol. 45, p. 897A.

Figure 3. Tenth-century painting of nun from Dunuang; from Jacques Giès, ed., *Les arts de l'Asie centrale: La collection Paul Pelliot du musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1993), vol. 1, pl. 92-1; with permission.

Figure 4. Fifteenth-century court painting, "The Lohan Cndapanthaka"; reproduced with permission from the King's Collection, San Francisco. Also reproduced, in color, in Marsha Weidner, ed., *Latter Days of the Law: Images of Chinese Buddhism 850–1850* (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii P., 1994), pl. 10.