

CHAPTER 16

Buddhism and Symbolic Violence

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Since Paul Demiéville's seminal essay "Le bouddhisme et la guerre" (1957), most authors seem to have restricted the study of the relationships between Buddhism and violence to that of Buddhist attitudes toward war. While war is admittedly the most visible and most massive form of violent behavior, violence is a much broader, ramified, and complex phenomenon. Furthermore, publications in that domain have focused on certain forms – textual or oral – of discourse, representing canonical dogma or extra-canonical interpretations: Buddhist studies usually follow a philological and textual approach. In other words, they rarely deal with real cases of violence, but essentially with discursive representations and justifications. It is of course important to start from scriptural sources, but it is just as important to depart from them. While these sources have considerably influenced the reality of practices, the latter often go beyond them. We need therefore to reflect about other less obvious, more liminal forms of violence.

In particular, while recognizing the preponderance of physical violence in any definition of the phenomenon, we must give its due to symbolic violence – whose effects are very real. Symbolic violence can take many forms, some of which are sometimes elusive. It is expressed mainly in mythology, ritual, and predication; it consists for instance in cursing rites or threats of supernatural punishment and karmic retribution, in this world and in the next. In this sense, Buddhism, which is usually defined as a religion of salvation, can also be seen as a culture of fear. Next to the texts – canonical or not – we must therefore pay attention to the iconography, the mythological accounts, and the ritual practices, which give us a rather different image of the Buddhist tradition. We should in particular give to ritual and visual violence the room it deserves, even if they do not seem at first glance to enter the usual definition of violence as physical.

Iconography

It is probably in Tantric or esoteric Buddhism that the representation of Buddhism as a pacifist teaching comes most openly into question. According to that form of

Buddhism, which inherits many points from Mahāyāna, the bodhisattva is no longer limited by ethical norms, he stands above good and evil – and all dualities of that kind. The only value that matters in that context is compassion, but even that virtue takes an uncanny rhetorical dimension when Mahāyāna scriptures come to speak of “compassionate killing.”

Images often speak louder than words, and they do not always say the same thing. Tantric imagery reveals, in a most obvious (and at times obscene) fashion, a kind of violence that, once noticed, can also be found throughout Mahāyāna Buddhism. Despite all arguments to the contrary, it seems to contradict the claim of compassion made at the level of normative discourse. This obviously important dimension tends to be neglected by textual scholars. On the iconographic plane, if compassion is well expressed by serene images of meditating buddhas, the angry gods of Tantric Buddhism partake, conversely, in a puzzling symbolic violence: does it mark a return of the repressed, an outlet for real violence, or is it, on the contrary, its mirror image, indeed its underlying cause? The question must remain open.

We must speak for instance of the cruelty of graphic representations of Buddhist hells, which actually inherit, with some variants, the imagery of Hindu hells. In the infernal chambers of torture, the dead are dismembered like butchery animals, they are tied to a burning column, buried in a pond of ice; their knees are broken, their heart, tongue and eyes gouged out; their feet and hands cut off; they are crushed under beams or rocks, sawn or scorched alive, plunged into a pond of filth, devoured by rats, pigs, and grasshoppers, plunged into cauldrons of boiling water, mutilated by vultures, eviscerated, plunged into the latrines’ pit, ground out by millstones, or stung by wasps, ants, scorpions, and snakes. These representations of Buddhist hells, in particular with their demons with bat-wings, have inspired those of the Christian Hell, which culminated in the visions of Dante Alighieri and Hieronymus Bosch.¹ Mongol invaders themselves, Tatars or Tartars, were perceived as demons that came straight out of hell, or “Tartar,” which was indeed named after them. It is in Tantric Buddhism, however, that iconology finds its most achieved (and violent) expression. On the iconographic plane, the wrathful deities of Tantric Buddhism represent an extreme symbolic violence.

In his *Étude sur l’iconographie bouddhique de l’Inde*, Alfred Foucher wrote:

Depending on the order of the manuscripts, we see a procession of multi-handed, multi-headed deities such as Caṇḍamahāroṣana, Heruka or Hevajra ... , Mahākāla, down to Gaṇapati, all ornated with warrior attributes and gruesome ornaments, all possessed by the furors of love and hatred; because that crowd of monsters is Buddhist merely by the fact of standing next to buddhas and bodhisattvas in a same text. (Foucher 1905, quoted in Linrothie 1999: 144)

Indeed, the images of Tantric “protectors” usually show a multiplicity of faces, hands, and feet; they have blood-injected eyes, standing hair, fangs protruding from their mouth; they are often shown trampling one or two supine figures – subjugated Hindu gods or demons symbolizing ignorance and passions. Foucher echoes a resilient prejudice when he claims that this “crowd of monsters” contains nothing Buddhist. Actually they are the emanations of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and even if their origin is

Hindu, they became eminent symbols of Tantric or esoteric Buddhism. Western commentators have a tendency to see in them the mere projection of the dark powers of the human psyche (see, for instance, Rhie and Thurman 1991). Although such a psychological interpretation can be found in various Tantric traditions as well, it is clearly reductionist; Tantric Buddhism is a polytheistic form of thought, and one should not reduce its iconology to savant interpretations, nor see in it a mere concession to popular superstitions. The Tantric practitioner invokes divine or demonic energies and forms in order to eventually reduce them to Emptiness. Indeed a great part of Tantric meditation aims are reducing gods and demons to figments of the imagination. That imagination, however, is creative in the true sense of the word: it is supposed to bring to life the images it evokes, and for the practitioner these forms have an intense reality.

A better understanding of ritual as an invocation or “incorporation” of the gods, and a realization of their ambivalent and sometime violent nature, help to account for the stereotyped nature of Tantric iconography. The point is to reproduce in scrupulous detail the forms of these deities as they initially revealed themselves in the visions of ascetics. These images, in turn, serve as support to visualizations that allow the deities to be brought into the ritual space. Any gap in the deities’ representation would indeed risk transforming their ambivalent power into a maleficent force.

In the context of Tantric Buddhism, the existence of wrathful deities reveals another important aspect of the Buddhist conception of violence. In principle these deities are bodhisattvas, awakened beings who use violent energies and emotions to protect beings and promote the Dharma. In actual practice, however, their hubris seems sometimes to go beyond that purpose. An example among others, but one which reveals a touch of black humor, is that of a Japanese scroll probably used for exorcism: one of its images shows us a giant Tantric deity in the act of devouring demons; he has just bitten off the head of one of them, and the atrocious image of that headless body is reminiscent of Goya’s painting of Cronos devouring his children (see Japanese scroll paintings 1960; see also the catalogue of the Nara National Museum, ill. 116). With one of his six hands, he dips another demon into a cup of vinegar to give it more flavor – an eminently Japanese touch. All the talk about Buddhist compassion cannot erase the uncanny impression produced by such images.

The very existence of such deities implies the acceptance of legitimate violence. We have here, as it were, two standards: an acceptable violence, reserved to the Buddhists; and a reprehensible violence, that of others. This Tantric Buddhist approach to violence is usually glossed over in silence, despite the fact that Tantric practices, conceptions, and imagery were widespread across Asia. In this context, violence, duly mastered, is the shortest way to reach the ultimate goal – awakening. With all the necessary caveats, it seems that we have here a conception in which violence is revalorized – it is judged acceptable, or even necessary.

In the traditional Buddhist schema, local deities represent the domain of ignorance and violence, a realm to convert and integrate into the pantheon. In principle, the entire universe and its inhabitants are merely the manifestation, the body of the cosmic buddha symbolized by the mandala at the center of which he abides. This Buddhist world has therefore no limits. And yet the mandala’s boundaries define an inside and

an outside, and, by the same token, two kinds of deities: those that dwell inside the mandala are hypostases, provisional manifestations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas; those which remain outside are called in Japan the “real ones” (*jissha*). Although their reality is of a lower order, it is nonetheless threatening, and brings them close to the demons. They represent the forces of chaos that constantly threaten the established order. They must therefore either be kept at bay or forcibly integrated into the mandala, through conversion. This conversion, which transforms them from aggressors into protectors, is however never final, and vigilance remains essential. They remain therefore stationed in a liminal area at the periphery of the mandala.

Mythology

A major mythological (and iconographic) motif is that of the Buddha's victory over Māra (on this motif, see Guthrie 2004). In the standard version, the Buddha has to resist the attacks of Māra's armies and the seduction of Māra's daughters, and he responds with impassiveness and detachment. Then, when Māra himself challenges him by claiming to be the legitimate ruler of the world, the Buddha takes the earth-deity as his witness, and the latter proves him right. In some variants of that myth, however, the earth-deity is no longer content to simply bear testimony regarding the Buddha's sovereignty, she takes an active part, a military part even, by destroying Māra's armies (see Guthrie 2004). In some accounts she is identified with the Tantric deity Acala, the Immovable (Fudō in Japanese) (see, for instance, the *Shijō hiketsu* 1990: 352). At any rate the Buddha, through the intermediary of the earth-deity, ends up destroying Māra's armies. We have here the classically Indian model of the cosmic fight between the forces of good and evil. It is the same model that the Tantric practitioner invokes at the beginning of every ritual, when, identifying himself with the Buddha, he asks the earth-deity to protect him against the demons that try to hinder his meditation. It is probably not a coincidence that the motif was taken up by Japanese militarists like Sugimoto Gorō to justify Japanese imperialism: “When Śākyamuni sat in meditation under the bodhi-tree in order to see his true nature, he had to fight an army of countless demons. Those who rush forward to save the Empire are truly great men like him, pioneers who sacrifice themselves for the Emperor” (Sugimoto, quoted in Victoria 2006: 119).

Another important chthonian deity in this respect is the deva-king Vaiśravaṇa (Jp. Bishamonten), protector of the North (a region often perceived as a source of demonic influences), often described as a god of war in central Asia and in East Asia (see, for instance, Granoff 1970). Because he is usually represented holding a spear in one hand, a reliquary-stūpa in the other, he is perceived as the protector of the Dharma par excellence. During the Tang period, the Tantric master Amoghavajra (Ch. Bukong, 705–74) invoked him to defend a Chinese city besieged by the barbarians and eventually defeat them. In Japan, Prince Shōtoku (Shōtoku Taishi, 573–621) wore an effigy of that god on his headgear when he went to war to impose Buddhism as the official religion. In the medieval period, many military leaders did the same, and some of them even claimed to be the god's descendants. More recently, when the Japanese army invaded China in 1937, Japanese soldiers prayed to the statues of Vaiśravaṇa they found in Buddhist temples.

The subjugation of Maheśvara

According to Mahāyāna orthodoxy, buddhas and bodhisattvas, in their great compassion, convert all beings by adapting to their capacities. In the case of the most evil beings or demons, however, it is not enough to preach the Dharma to convert them, they must be subdued by force (or even “delivered,” in other words killed). Thus, in Tantric Buddhism, the tamers take the form of the tamed – actually they outbid them by becoming even more wrathful than the latter in order to better subdue them. On the other hand, demons, once tamed and duly converted, nevertheless keep their terrible appearance, which now serves them, no longer to frighten humans, but to impose on their former colleagues.

Finally, in later Tantric Buddhism, as if to illustrate the fundamental identity between awakening and passions, or between good and evil, the buddhas project a wrathful double of themselves that is supposed to be a more appropriate expression of ultimate reality, and not simply an appearance better adapted to the conversion of narrow-minded beings. A Japanese tradition tells for instance how En no Ozunu, the legendary founder of Shugendō, asked the Buddha to appear in this world, not under his benevolent form, but under a terrible, wrathful form, more appropriated for the Japanese. The Buddha then manifested himself in the form of Zaō Gongen, a fierce deity whose wild dance calls to mind the cosmic dance of Śiva.

The motif of coerced conversion can be traced back to the myth of the submission of Maheśvara (another avatar of Śiva) by the Dharma-protector Vajrapāṇi.² Despite the violence that characterizes him, Śiva/Rudra remained for the Hindus a protector of social and cosmic balance. He represented as it were the necessary evil, the dark side that contributes to the chiaroscuro of existence. With Buddhism, everything changes, and the shadowy areas are no longer tolerated – at least in principle. In a world dominated by a single principle, the Dharma, and its representative, the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana, evil must be destroyed or transmuted (or both, as we will see). Śiva was the main victim of that reversal of values that attacked the very bases of Hindu polytheism. Vajrapāṇi is depicted as a powerful wrathful figure. Initially a servant of the Buddha, he played a major role in Indian Buddhism. In China, he became the muscular protector and model of the Shaolin monks, who played an important paramilitary role and came to be seen as the founders of several martial arts traditions (see Lamotte 1966; Shahar 2007).

According to the myth, when Maheśvara arrogantly refuses to submit to the new Buddhist order, Vajrapāṇi tramples him and his consort. The two Hindu deities thus die an infamous death. The Buddha Mahāvairocana, who has let Vajrapāṇi's wrath run its course, now asks him to resurrect them. Brought back to life and apparently wizened by their experience, they convert and vow to protect Buddhism. This myth reproduces that of the Buddha's subjugation of Māra, with that significant difference that Māra's defeat does not end with a real subjugation – since he remains a stumbling block for practitioners; whereas Maheśvara, having been trampled by Vajrapāṇi, is brought back to life and freed from his ignorance owing to the Buddha's intervention.

This happy ending looks very much like an afterthought, a clerical attempt to reinterpret the legend by euphemizing Vajrapāṇi's violence. Did Maheśvara truly die, or did he simply lose consciousness? Actually, no one ever really dies in Buddhism, since death is only the prelude to rebirth. In a sense, neither death nor the killing that causes it has the same irreversible nature as in the West. The Chinese commentator Yixing (683–723) nevertheless finds it necessary to precise that Maheśvara was not truly killed. The inversion that turns the motif of death by trampling into a moment of bliss constitutes one of the summits of Tantric paradox, reminiscent of the euphemism that defines the ritual murder of demons as "deliverance."

As Tantric Buddhism became more interiorized and evolved into a psychology, the myth was reinterpreted allegorically. It was now supposed to represent the victory over sensual desire and arrogance (symbolized here by Maheśvara, but equally characteristic of humans). Maheśvara thus becomes the symbol of mental defilements that transmute into awakening under the effect of an appropriate catalyst (Vajrapāṇi's feet). The demonic energy with which he resisted Buddhist truth finally transforms into the energy of awakening. This convert of the last hour is by the same token more powerful than his fellow demons, who converted without resistance. Likewise, for Tantric practitioners, it is the very energy of their passions that feeds the fire of awakening (see Davidson 1995).

Should one accept at face value the orthodox interpretation of the subjugation of Maheśvara and other Hindu deities, as reflecting Buddhist compassion based on nonduality? Most commentators seem to accept that charitable interpretation. Confronted with Vajrapāṇi's apparently gratuitous violence and the infamous circumstances of Maheśvara's death, it seems, however, difficult to follow them when they claim that the humiliation of Hindu deities, far from asserting Buddhism's superiority, reflects above all the identity of good and evil, or the transmutation of evil into good. The myth can admittedly be read on several different registers. Yet the fact that these levels are not mutually exclusive does not mean that there is no tension between them. If the subjugation of Śiva (Rudra, Maheśvara) does indeed constitute the model of all Tantric exorcisms, the orthodox interpretation in terms of compassion and conversion should not make us forget that, from the standpoint of local cults, these rituals (and the integration of local cults to Tantric Buddhism) constitute an act of symbolic, and sometimes real, violence.

The myth of Maheśvara's "conversion" reflects Buddhism's encounter with local cults. Indeed, it is in the mythological realm that Buddhist intolerance most clearly manifests itself. Buddhism claims that it "pacified" the new lands to which it spread. A case in point is the myth of Tibet's pacification by Padmasambhava in the eighth century. Owing to his wondrous powers, Padmasambhava is said to have subjugated all the local "demons" of that land (actually, they were the former gods). The metaphor behind the conversion of local deities is often that of sexual submission. In many of these tales, Buddhism is fundamentally male, whereas local deities are often female. For instance, we are told that, even before Padmasambhava's conquest, the first Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo (ca. 620–50), had subdued the telluric powers symbolized by a demoness, Srinmo, whose body covered the Tibetan territory. He had done so by "nailing" her down to the ground, that is, by erecting (no pun intended) stūpas that

served as so many metaphoric nails driven into the 12 points of her body (on this question, see Gyatso 1987). The Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, the most holy place of Tibetan Buddhism, is said to be the nail driven into the demoness's genitalia. The rape imagery could hardly be more explicit Gyatso 1987. An even cruder sexual symbolism is found in a variant of the myth of Maheśvara's subjugation, in which Rudra (another form of Śiva) is literally sodomized by his Buddhist nemesis, Hayagrīva (a terrible form of the "compassionate" Avalokiteśvara) (see Stein 1995: 140).

In Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, where Theravāda Buddhism is dominant, the assimilation of local religions appears to have been less ruthless, although symbolic violence is present nonetheless. The reform implemented in Burma in the eleventh century is indicative of this: several local gods (*naths*) were allocated a certain role – in the form of the 37 *naths* stationed in one of the numerous temples of Pagan – yet most of them were actually thrown out of the royal city and the official religion.

The myth of Maheśvara's subjugation is also found in Japanese esoteric Buddhism. Japan features numerous accounts of indigenous gods being more or less forced to convert. Eventually a more elegant solution was found, known as the theory of the "original ground and manifest traces" (*honji suijaku*). According to this theory, Japanese gods (*kami*) are merely the "manifest traces" (*suijaku*) of Indian buddhas who are their "original ground" (*honji*). This means that there is no longer any need for conversion, since the *kami* are already essentially buddhas. Paradoxically, the notion of the absolute derived from Buddhist speculation enabled theorists of a new religion, the so-called "ancient Shinto", to call the Buddhist synthesis into question. Eventually, this Shinto fundamentalism led to a "cultural revolution" at the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–73) during which Buddhism, denounced as a "foreign religion," saw a great many of its temples destroyed or confiscated ((see Skya, chapter 17 in this volume). Thus the gods, having been done violence, returned with a vengeance. The indirect result of this was that Buddhism began to take refuge in a purism tinged with modernity, which rejects local beliefs as "superstition."

Myth comes to the rescue of reason by offering sacred models of behavior, and by the same token sacralizing violence and murder. In the last analysis, the only difference between violence committed by Buddhists and violence committed by non-Buddhists seems to be the former's realization of the lack of reality of the self. That realization, however, is in most cases merely a pious wish, an act of belief. At any rate, it allows a double standard through which Buddhists justify their own violence while condemning the violence of others, and bridge the gap between their principled nonviolence and a violent ritual practice.

Ritual Violence

In his book *Violence and the Sacred* (1979), René Girard defines violence as the "heart and soul of the sacred." He sees ritual as a means through which humans try to channel violence. By equating violence and the sacred, he leads us to reconsider both in a different light. This view leads us to reconsider the relation between Buddhism and violence: perhaps not accidental, but essential.

Buddhist rituals are not only aimed at protection, but also at aggression: the difference between white and black magic is by no means always clear. A preventive attack is often presented as defensive action (even if it is perceived as an attack by the other). In a traditional context, these rites were perceived as efficacious. The apocryphal *Brahmā Net Sutra* condemns “killing with spells.” The rulers took these rituals seriously and imprisoned anyone who was suspected of performing them.

The magical aspects of Buddhism have unfortunately been largely neglected by Western scholars, who chose to focus instead on its spiritual or scholastic aspects. “Supranormal powers” (*abhijñā*), obtained through asceticism or ritual, are contrasted with pure spirituality. Yet it is these powers in particular that appealed to the imagination of followers, who counted on the clergy to protect them from all evil and guarantee them happiness in this world and other worlds.

In the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (trans. 775), Garuḍa, enemy of snakes and nāgas, gives to the bodhisattva Mañjūsūri a number of protective formulas against snakes (a real danger for ascetics). These formulas allow their holders to perform healing rituals, subjugation rituals, propitiating rituals, or maleficent rituals. These rituals require the making of a mandala and of Garuḍa icons, in front of which one performs a fire ritual while reciting mantras. After discussing healing and propitiation rites, Garuḍa discusses black magical rituals (see Lalou 1932):

When you want to cause the death of an enemy, [use a] fumigation of ox gall and human bones with melted butter ... When you want to harm someone, [make an] oblation with human flesh ... When you want to harm a country, use goat hair; for cursing, [use] human hair. To destroy an enemy, make a fire sacrifice for seven days with all these ingredients.

Similar subjugation rituals were found in Tibet.³ In the *gto* ritual, for instance, the priest first invokes a wrathful protecting deity, then throws his offering in the direction in which the hostile power is supposed to dwell. The sacrificial gift symbolizes the flesh and bones of the enemies, as well as the protecting deity or deities (see Tucci and Heissig 1973: 228–9). In other rituals, one uses a triangular *linga*, with an image of the supposed enemy in chains, a stone to crush him, a knife to cut him up, etc.

A significant example is that of the ritual reenactment of a regicide, the killing of King Langdarma (r. 838–41) by the monk Palgyi Dorje. Carmen Meinert examines that event in light of the “deliverance ritual” and tries to understand how, placed in a religious context, such a murder came to be reinterpreted into a sacred act that allows one to restructure the world according to Tantric principles. She also shows how, in the deliverance ritual as it appears in a Dunhuang manuscript, we are actually dealing with a rite of passage from the profane to the sacred sphere (Meinert 2006). However, this murder was not initially interpreted as a deliverance ritual; it is only much later that it reached that mythical dimension and became a justification for regicide in some cases.⁴

The legend was associated with Cham dances, as they are still performed today in Tibet and Bhutan, and whose climax is the moment when the dancers stab the demon (i.e., Langdarma), represented by a human effigy (*linga*). Langdarma has become a symbol of evil in general; his effigy absorbs all evil energies, which are then tamed by

ritual murder. When the dagger (*purwu*, Skt. *kīla*) nails the effigy, the forces are channeled into the ground. Thus it is no longer a profane, political murder, but an apotropaic act aimed at protecting a community, as well as a soteriological act that frees an evil being (symbol of all humans) by “transferring his consciousness” (*powa*) to an even higher level.⁵ The killing of the king is reinterpreted as a sacred act (a sacrifice) with ethical and soteriological implications.

The encounter of the regicide-monk and the demon-king has been coded in terms of good and evil. The murderer becomes a hero, the victim a monster. Murder becomes an act of foundation, or rather of restoration: it aims at restoring social and cosmic order disrupted by an evil spirit, and at bringing Tibet back to the Dharma. Furthermore, the responsibility is shifted from the monk to the deity. In this case, as in many others, murder does not entail negative (karmic or juridical) retribution. Indeed, the ritual nature of the act transforms it into a sacrifice. As in any sacrifice, the claim is that “ritual murder is no murder.” Not because it is purely symbolic, in this case, but because the “actual” murder has no karmic or juridical consequence.

Regarding this kind of ritual, Giuseppe Tucci feels compelled to ask:

How is it possible that Buddhism, at least in its Lamaist form, came to tolerate the killing of an enemy, even for defensive purposes? We touch here an extremely subtle – not to say casuistic – distinction: the assistance of the Dharma protectors is indeed invoked to completely annihilate the demons, to the point of reducing the latter’s body to dust, but this request is accompanied by the prayer that their conscious body may dissolve ... on the plane of absolute potentiality, in the absolute peace of eternal being. (Tucci and Heissig 1973: 238)

A touching thought, which calls to mind the words of the Inquisitor: “Kill them all; for the Lord knows them that are His.” As if in need of justification, Tucci adds: “Furthermore, Buddhism allows the killing of an enemy in particular cases, for instance under the pretext of bringing him a spiritual gain, inasmuch as one prevents him from loading his consciousness with heavy external sins.” As he points out, many famous masters resorted to incantations with a similar intent, either in times of war, or for personal purposes. U rgyan pa, for instance, when threatened by bandits during a pilgrimage in Swat, killed them with particularly potent magic formulas (Tucci and Heissig 1973: 238; see also Tucci 1967).

The expression used by Tucci, “under the pretext of bringing him a spiritual gain,” is perhaps more accurate than he realized, because we are indeed dealing here with a “pretext” to commit a particularly violent act – killing an enemy. Here, as in many other rituals, “to kill is not really to kill” – not in the sense that comes to mind, namely, that a ritual act cannot really kill. For the officiating priest, such an act can indeed kill, but this murder is not recognized as such, it does not constitute a sin, it is followed by neither penal punishment nor karmic retribution.

Buddhist rituals cannot simply be explained away as remainders of a pre-Buddhist, shamanistic stratum. They were indeed performed by high-ranking priests, and perfectly integrated into Buddhist teaching. Actually, there are no “survivals”: a ritual becomes part of living religion, or dies away. One cannot therefore, as Émile Durkheim

did in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, separate the wheat (“religion”) from the chaff (“magic”). The popularity of tantric magic is not due to the fact that, as Walther Heissig (and Max Weber) would have put it, “petit-bourgeois or middle class people and peasants are not interested in the soteriology of the educated aristocratic class” (Tucci and Heissig 1973: 391). It is rather the nobility, in Tibet as in Japan, which demanded magic rituals.

In medieval Japan, Tantric or esoteric Buddhism occupied the front stage in terms of symbolic violence. From this standpoint, even asceticism, meditation, or the observance of discipline, instead of leading toward awakening or salvation, become means to have more power, more impact on the ritual plane, in order to defeat enemies. Subjugation rituals constantly refer to the “bow of concentration” and the “arrows of wisdom” shot at enemies. At the beginning of these rituals, the priest invokes the Wisdom King Fudō to avoid being attacked by external impure forces, the demons of Māra’s horde. By the same token, he can also keep at bay inner demons and eliminate obstacles to awakening.

Magical aggressors were not only demons, but also Buddhist deities, manipulated by humans during more or less orthodox rituals. Demon or god is only a matter of perspective. Take the case of Kuṃbhira (Jp. Konpira), one of the 12 Divine Generals, acolytes or emanations of the Healing Buddha, Bhaiṣajyaguru (Jp. Yakushi). They are in fact elemental spirits that can be put into motion through dark magic rituals. Although Konpira is usually ritually invoked as a protector, he can also become an aggressor. The *Tale of the Heike* tells how monks of Mount Hiei performed a black magical ritual to crush the priest Saikō and his sons, whose calumnies had led to the exile of their master Meiun in 1177:

They wrote out the names of the three and placed the paper under the left foot of the Konpira image in the Central Hall group of Twelve Divine Commanders. Then they shouted, yelled, and uttered maledictions. “Ye Twelve Divine Commanders and Seven Thousand Yakshas, take the lives of Saikō and his sons without an instant’s delay,” they implored. It was terrifying merely to hear them. (McCullough 1988: 59)

Whatever the authenticity of that story, the cursing ritual in question probably reflects real practices. In this case, it is justified by the belief that its main target was a maleficent individual, a “demon,” who had to be subjugated for the benefit of the Dharma.

Another medieval Japanese chronicle, the *Taiheiki*, tells the following story about the death of one of the courtiers whose calumnies had caused the exile of the famous statesman Sugawara Michizane, at the beginning of the Heian period. When that courtier fell ill, a priest was asked to perform a healing ritual centered on the Buddha Yakushi and his 12 Divine Generals. However, when the priest invoked the name of Konpira, the patient, in his delirium, heard “kubi kiran” (“I will cut your head!”) and died from fear. Apparently Michizane’s vengeful spirit, which had caused the illness, was also able to “turn” Konpira, thereby annihilating the spiritual protection of the courtier (see McCullough 1979: 360).

Japanese fire rituals (*goma*) used for exorcisms were performed in front of a triangular hearth, in which paper figurines representing the presumed aggressor were burnt. These figurines call to mind the Tibetan effigy (*linga*) mentioned above. In 1329,

Emperor Go-Daigo performed a ritual aimed at “quickly driving away evil men and dissipating evil deeds” – in other words, at getting rid of the military government (*bakufu*) that ruled over Japan. Go-Daigo thought himself perfectly justified in trying to ritually subdue warriors whom he assimilated to demons. The fundamental ambiguity of magic is that it looks “black” (that is, aimed at destroying) to those who are its objects, and “white” (aimed at protecting) for those who perform it.

This kind of ritual can be traced to the tradition related to another famous case, that of the ritual of subjugation performed by the priest Son’i in 940, at the time of Taira no Masakado’s rebellion against the court. The deity worshiped on the main altar during these rituals was often the Fudō (Skt. Acala). The Chinese monk Yixing (673–727) describes such a ritual, during which the priest draws an image of the trouble-making demon inside a triangular altar. He visualizes Acala on the altar and identifies with him, imagining that his own foot tramples the head of the demon, who runs away to avoid being killed. In thirteenth-century Japan, Mongol invasions triggered a flurry of subjugation rituals, many centered on the Wisdom King Fudō. In political fights between the court and the warrior government, both sides invoked Fudō and other esoteric Buddhist deities.

Another case in point is the Wisdom King Aizen (Skt. Rāgarāja), usually represented in a wrathful form with six arms. Five of his hands hold various attributes – bow and arrow, vajra and vajra-bell, lotus; one of them, however, remains empty. According to medieval interpretations, it actually holds a mysterious substance, called “human yellow,” which is none other than the vital principle of the enemy to be destroyed (see Iyanaga 1999). In other words, Aizen holds in his hand the life of the person that is the target of the ritual. The new emperor received the mantras and mudrās of that secret ritual from the Fujiwara Regent during his enthronement ceremony.

A characteristic example of Aizen’s efficacy is a ritual performed in 1069 by the Shingon monk Seizon (1012–1074) for the benefit of his patron, the crown prince Takahito Shinnō (the future emperor Go-Sanjō, 1034–1073). Confronted with the longevity of his elder brother, the reigning emperor Go-Reizei (1023–1068), the latter was beginning to despair of ever ascending the throne. The ritual allegedly remedied that state of things, by causing the rapid death of Go-Reizei. Aizen also played a crucial role in the subjugation rituals performed when Japan was threatened by Mongol invasions, in 1274 and 1281. One of his statues is said to have shot an arrow in the direction of the Mongol armada, which was twice destroyed by a typhoon labeled “divine wind” (*kamikaze*).

Tantric rituals could also serve as means of social control, or even of repression. In medieval Japan, the Shingon monastery Kongōbuji on Mount Kōya performed cursing rites four times a year asking the buddhas and gods to punish those whose names were on a black list for opposing the monastery or not paying their dues. When people under Daigoji refused to pay their dues in 1469, the monastery replied with armed force and a cursing rite, parading the statue of Vajrapāṇi. Soon after, the peasant leaders were arrested and executed, while peasants and cattle died en masse (see Taira 2005: 85). Thus, symbolic violence was used to keep peasants under the control of great monasteries and their domains. The abbot was identified with the Buddha, and paying dues was a way to worship the gods and the buddhas. Conversely, not paying was a sin, leading

to immediate retribution in this world (leprosy, begging) or in the next (hell). Thus, if hunters fall into hell, it is less because they have killed animals than for having trespassed on the temple's domain. And the interdiction of hunting is not a sign of compassion but a claim of "private property."⁶

When a ritual aims at getting rid of an enemy, it is no longer distinct from black magic. Commentators (Asian and Western) have a tendency to accept the soteriological or cosmological explanation of the ritual and to gloss over its violence (real or symbolic). Despite attempts at reform, Buddhist rituals remain both apotropaic (magical) and soteriological (religious). To emphasize the soteriological side, as advocates of "pure" Buddhism do, is to misunderstand the nature of traditional Buddhism and its history, and perhaps its future.

But one must see that the violence contained *in* the ritual shows the violence contained *by* the ritual. In other words, ritual violence may be a way to channel real violence. But even if ritual violence is to some extent more "civilized," it is still violence, and it cannot simply be explained as compassion. Of course, this kind of violence has also been denounced by Buddhists, who in principle reject sacrifice. Yet Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), the founder of the Gelugpa – a school that emphasizes strict morality – did not seem to object to offerings of animal flesh (and even human flesh), although he emphasized that the priest must not kill the victims himself (see Gray 2007). In most cases, flesh offerings were replaced by substitutes, *torma*. Yet the goal is still the death of the enemy, and violence remains central. Apotropaic rituals were performed on a large scale during war. Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, the fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682), used such rituals to defeat the king of Tsang in 1641. On the Mongol side, similar rituals were performed by Buddhist priests to help the king of Tsang. Chinese rulers sponsored similar rites by Tibetan lamas till the beginning of the twentieth century.

The distinction between physical and symbolic violence was not as clear for traditional Buddhism as it is for us, as can be judged by the justifications, which are about the same in both cases. Like physical violence, ritual violence is justified as based on compassion and aimed at the salvation of beings.

Yet the performance of subjugation rituals seemed like a radical departure from Buddhist compassion. Ritual or symbolic violence looks like a way to reenact physical violence, to get the same benefits, without dirtying one's hands. It is also an outlet for human passions, and sometimes allows physical violence to be domesticated; at other times it presupposes it, leads to it, reinforces it. Admittedly, it was attenuated by asking that the aggressor be defeated, but not killed – but this was a standard rhetorical clause.

As is well known, Buddhists had long been opposed to the kind of ritual violence that characterized Brahmanism (and later Hinduism). The same attitude can be found among them when it comes to the ritual violence of Tantric or esoteric Buddhism (for instance, the fire ritual when it is performed with the intention of killing an enemy). In spite of criticisms against the use of armed force in monasteries, there are practically no criticisms of ritual violence. A case in point is that of the Tendai abbot Jien (1155–1225), who could not understand the existence of Buddhist texts justifying killing. Even for him, however, ritual violence remained justified – because according to him ritual curses could only affect evil people. In that case, there was no need to feel guilty. This is probably due to the fact that, in the case of Japan, it was one of the instruments of

power legitimized by the court and the bakufu (see Taira 2005: 99). Here, for instance, is what Kakuzen's Commentary (*Kakuzenshō*) has to say about the Ritual of the Six-Letter Sūtra (*rokujiikyō hō*): "This ritual is not aimed at harming a human being in his body, nor at depriving him of his life. It is strictly aimed at destroying by fire the evil deeds committed by someone ... In order to perform a ritual of crushing, compassion is essential. Without compassion one will harm oneself and others." According to a record of the god Hachiman's oracles, whereas for an ordinary person such a ritual seems aimed at "taking the enemy's life," in reality it is a "cause of deliverance" (Taira 2005: 98, 99).

Can one really curse someone with compassion? Yes, Japanese esoteric Buddhists claim, owing to the ritual technique of "empowerment" (*kaji*), that is, the fact that the practitioner identifies himself with the buddha(s). When one cannot perform the ritual in a state of inner emptiness, one entrusts oneself to the *kaji* power of the main deity (*honzon*). Thus, the imprecatory crushing is redefined as saving violence. As one can see, a ritual – of malediction – can hide another – a compassionate and saving one.

In Indo-Tibetan Tantrism, one of the main deities of the fire rituals is Heruka, an emanation of the cosmic buddha who appeared in this world to vanquish the Hindu deity Bhairava (Śiva again). Unlike the Hindu deities whom he physically resembles, Heruka is supposed to emanate, not from a mental affliction, but from pure compassion. Here again, it is the intention that counts, and the intention is to vanquish evil, not to commit it.

An argument often invoked by esoteric Buddhist masters to justify ritual violence exerted against demons is that the latter have a purely mental existence. They are in the last analysis mere symbols of the obstacles produced by our own mind, and their ritual massacre is only the imaged version of the purification of our mind through meditation. If such is the case, however, one may wonder why it is necessary to emphasize that violence must be exerted on the basis of compassionate motives. Compassion seems to imply the reality of the objects to which it is addressed – unless it becomes empty of all content. And from the phenomenological standpoint, it seems obvious that the majority of the monks believe – at least to a certain extent – in these powers which they spend a good part of their time invoking or revoking.

The officiating priest is invested with the Buddha's authority and compassion, and in that regard he is exempt from all sin. Some go so far as to say that "killing" belongs to conventional truth, whereas from the standpoint of ultimate, nondual truth it does not exist. This kind of argument seems to deny all karmic causality and ethical responsibility.

The application of these theories is found in Tantric rituals such as the fire ritual (*homa*), supposed to "pacify" or simply eliminate the enemies that threaten the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha). The fire that devours all is the symbol of Tantric fierceness. In some cases, the rituals require offerings of animal flesh. But the transgression of taboos is not a sin for those who understand the emptiness of the self as well as that of ethical distinctions between good and evil. Unlike the heretics, who fall into hell when they commit murder, the sages can act as they deem fit without committing any transgression.

Conclusion

Buddhism is an elusive object, which perhaps does not exist apart from the representations we have of it. There are Buddhist texts and doctrines – sometimes contradictory – as well as Buddhist institutions and rituals; there are also groups and collectivities that call themselves, and therefore are, Buddhist. None of these various elements alone can claim to represent Buddhism.

Clearly Buddhism is not, and never was, as exempt from violence as its adherents claim. Its ideal of peace and tolerance, as expressed in certain canonical sources, is contradicted by other – just as canonical – sources according to which violence and war are allowed when the Dharma is threatened. Last but not least, Buddhist imagery, myth, and ritual reveal a deeper, perhaps more essential violence. Those who dream of a monological Buddhist tradition must confront that *part d'ombre*, or what Georges Bataille (1991–3) would have called its “accursed share.” The richness and potentiality of Buddhism dwell precisely in the tension between these two radically different conceptions.

Notes

- 1 On that point, see Baltrušaitis 1993.
- 2 On this myth, see Iyanaga 1985; Davidson 1991.
- 3 The Tibetan rites of subjugation are described by various authors. See, for instance, de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956; 1976.
- 4 On that point see Schlieter 2006.
- 5 Significantly, the notion of *powa* was used by the adepts of the Japanese millenarian movement Aum Shinrikyō, during their sarin gaz attack in the Tokyo subway in 1995.
- 6 On this question, see Rambelli 2002.

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