

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is a supplemental episode.

So this is a LONG-delayed follow-up to supplemental episode No. 2, where we began a look at Buddhism during the Northern Song Dynasty, the time period in which the Water Margin is set. In that episode, we looked at the growth of Buddhism during this time and its relationship with the state. In this follow-up, I want to zoom in and take a look at some of the day-to-day minutiae of what it was like to be a Buddhist monk during this time.

My previous caveat about not being a historian, religion scholar, or Buddhist still applies, because I haven't become any of those things in the time since supplemental episode 2. And as far as sources go, the bulk of the information for this episode comes from a book called "The Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes in China." It's an annotated translation of a set of monastic codes of conduct that date to the Southern Song Dynasty. While that's a little later than the time period we're looking at, it's believed that these codes were long-standing rules, so it's logical to conclude that many of them were likely in place during the Northern Song as well. I have included a link to this translation with the transcript for this episode on the podcast website, outlawsofthemarsh.com, so go check it out if you're interested.

So let's say you're a lay person in the Northern Song, and you just accidentally killed a scumbag of a butcher. Who knew that pig-lover would have such a glass jaw, and glass nose, and glass crotch, and glass eye sockets, and glass temple. Well, what's done is done. Let's not argue over who killed whom. The important thing now is that you need somewhere to hide from the law, and it occurs to you that hey, maybe I could be a monk! So, where do you start?

Well, if the system worked the way it's supposed to, your quest to join a monastic order would be over before it even started, because, hey remember that ordination certificate that everyone needed to have before they could become a monk? Well, you would have to apply to the government for one of those puppies, and pay a pretty copper coin for it. That was a nice little revenue stream for the state. The

price of a certificate could fluctuate with inflation and was so high that the poorest people had to wait 20 years before they could save up enough. But even if you have the money, they don't give those out to just anybody, and they sure as heck aren't supposed to give it out to someone who has committed a crime. What? Did you think the government would just leave a gaping legal loophole like that? If that was the case, the streets would be littered with the bodies of bludgeoned butchers.

But, let's say like Lu Zhishen in the novel, you get lucky and run into a benefactor who already has purchased a blank ordination certificate and is willing to sponsor you, and you find a monastery willing to take you in despite your ... less-than-holy past. Before you head off to the monastery, you need to check off some items on a shopping list, like Harry Potter before he went off to Hogwarts. So here's a list of what you need: Three robes, bowls, a sitting mat, and some new, clean clothes. If you are too poor to afford new clothes, then for Buddha's sake, at least wash what garments you do have.

Oh, and in case you're wondering, no, you CANNOT borrow the robes or the bowls from someone just for the ordination ceremony. If you do, then you will never truly "get" the Buddha's precepts. And no precepts, no path to Nirvana for you. Instead, you're gonna be, quote, "an imposter who usurps the donors' offerings." Ouch. Apparently this rule came from the big man himself. The story goes that at one ordination, a monk had borrowed somebody's robes and bowls. After the ceremony, the owner took those things back, leaving the newly ordained monk naked and ashamed. When the Buddha heard about this, he was like, ok guys, we are not gonna play that, alright? I mean, look: Bask in everlasting enlightenment with me or hang out at the Gate of Emptiness. It's not that hard a call. Buy yourself some robes and bowls, ok? You're making me look bad here.

But the shopping list did not stop at the stuff you needed for the ordination. Before you went to the monastery, you needed to prepare a number of other personal effects, including: a mountain hat, a walking stick, a precept knife, a canister for your ordination certificate, a bag for your bowls, bellmouth

shoes, a sack for said shoes, complete with a cloth to wipe your feet, a pillow, a dust cover, a small cover made from tree oil, a larger cover made from persimmon oil, a bed sheet, a quilt, three clean towels, a small pure water vessel, a bath towel, a skirt for bathing, and a lock and key for your own storage compartment. If you had the money, you could also bring other items, like tea pots and tea cups, or more clothing.

Once you've gotten everything on your list, next came the tedious and precisely prescribed process of packing everything. There was a certain way things were done. For instance, you had a front and a back knapsack. The front knapsack was for "pure" clothes, such as your monk's robes, which had to be covered with a handkerchief and wrapped in your sitting mat. Other "pure" clothes that needed to go in the front knapsack included a short gown, a lined jacket, and a vest. Your rear knapsack, meanwhile, was for "soiled" items, such as your bedsheet, your cotton clothes, and your underwear, and all these things should be first wrapped in a white silk cloth.

There were many other rules about how to properly pack and carry all your personal effects, and I'm not going to go into much more detail here. Suffice it to say, they seemed to have spelled out everything down to the smallest minutiae. One of my personal favorites is that if you were bringing a teapot and tea cups, those should be placed in your hat, which would seem to defeat the purpose of taking a hat on your journey to the monastery.

Anyway, once you're all packed according to the rulebook, it was time to hit the road. The first thing to do is to properly wear your hat, which, again, seems like it would be problematic if you had your teapot in there. But let's assume you are too poor to have a teapot. There's also, surprise, surprise, a meticulously laid-out way of donning your hat. Once that's done, take your walking stick, but make sure you hold it properly. Apparently the handle of the stick that has twigs on it is considered the "soiled" end and the end without twigs is the "pure" end. You must hold the pure end in your right hand and keep

that end of the stick in front of your body while you're walking. If you need to remove your hat during your journey, for instance to bow to greet someone you meet on the road, you must put the stick in your left hand and take off the hat with your right.

After a long day's journey, during which you no doubt committed many hat- and stick-related faux pas's, you finally arrive at the monastery. At this point, it's hats off and stick in your left hand while a monk leads you to the meditation hall. Since you're trying to take up permanent residence here, you are told to go to the south platform, or the left side, in front of the hall. Next, you start unpacking all the stuff you had brought, but guess what? There's a specific order and way in which everything had to be unpacked and stowed. So, have fun doing that under the judgmental gaze of a member of your future monastic family.

Once you've unpacked, it's time to go wash your feet at the washstand in the back of the monastery. Once you've done that and put on clean socks and your bellmouth shoes, you stash your ordination certificate in your sleeve and go to the rectory to meet the rector. The rector will serve you tea, and once you drink the tea, you are supposed to stand up, step forward, and declare, "We have been drawn to this monastery's spiritual tradition. On this occasion we have traveled here to remain at your side, and we greatly hope for your compassion."

To this, the rector replies, "The monastery will receive many fortunes by your esteemed arrival." I'm guessing he means this both in a metaphorical sense and a literal sense, since your benefactor probably sent along a generous donation to make sure the monastery would overlook your murderous past.

Now, you present your certificate to the rector, and once he receives it and puts it in his trunk for safekeeping, you're supposed to bow and say, "On this occasion we have received many fortunes by your warm treatment, and for this we owe you our gratitude."

In response, the rector bows once and says, "The treatment here is very strict. I hope that you will let the Buddhist teaching guide your thoughts."

Before you have a chance to ask about that “very strict” treatment he mentioned, the rector is already leading you out of his office and back to the meditation hall. What follows is an elaborate set of ceremonies that includes carrying your sitting mat and walking around the meditation hall once, lots of bowing, and the return of your certificate. Then, the rector leaves and you head to the assembly quarters, and the monk in charge of those quarters announce you to the rest of the assembly and help you find a spot to settle in, with lots more bowing along the way.

At some point during your orientation, you get introduced to the senior staff, such as the attendant, the prior, the chief seat, the scribe, the curator of the sultra, and the guest master. And over the next three days, you are supposed to stay in the meditation hall, waiting to be summoned to meet with various senior monks. During these three days, you are not supposed to wander around the monastery, because then people might have to go looking for you when they want to summon you for one of these get-to-know-you meetings. Instead, you are supposed to rise extra early and be prepared to go so that when someone does come to summon you for a meeting, they don’t have to wake up everyone else.

So, after your three-day orientation that involved a lot of sitting, bowing, and formal greetings, you’re in. So ... what exactly are you in for? Well, let’s see: Your day is regulated by many different ringing of bells and banging of drums, wooden boards, and such, and you have to learn what each one means. And there are lots of meditation, and sermons, and chanting. For instance, on the 5th, 10th, 20th, and 25th days of each month, the abbot ascends to his seat in the Dharma hall to deliver a morning sermon. In addition, on each day of the month that ends in a three or an eight, the assembly participates in chanting. On the days ending in 3, you chant prayers for the wellbeing of the emperor and for protection from the guardian deities of the monastery. On the days ending in 8, you chant about the impermanence of all things and how “we are like fish trapped in water that is slowly dwindling.” Oh and

every five days the abbot ascends the platform in the Dharma hall to do a little informal sermonizing to, quote, “inspire the monks to rise up, filled with the doctrine of the school’s traditions.”

As you can imagine, there is a whole long list of prescribed appropriate behaviors associated with every sermon or chanting session. For instance, with the sermons, there are no excused absences. The rulebook says “Whoever violates this rule will suffer the monastery’s penalty.” Now, the book doesn’t say what that penalty is, but it adds, “It is best to avoid this offense.” And if you’re running late and the abbot had already taken his seat in the Dharma hall, then you should not enter the hall and should avoid letting the abbot see you, which yeah, if I was late to an event with no excused absences, I would want to make sure the abbot didn’t see me. Also, during the sermon, if someone asks an unintentionally funny question, you should refrain from laughing or even so much as breaking a faint smile. Instead, you should maintain, quote, “a demeanor of sincerity and solemnity while listening to the abbot’s profound teaching.”

And of course, there are lots of other “thou shalt nots” outside of sermons and chants. The book provides a list of some of these inappropriate behaviors. Some of these seem understandable in the context of a monastery, such as not congregating in the hall, not leaning on the railing in sacred shrines, not being publicly naked at the bathhouse, not vying for the more honorable seats during assemblies, and not spreading gossip. Other entries on the list seem rather nitpicky, like not shuffling your feet after nightfall or not releasing the curtains noisily behind you as you enter or exit. Some tenets seem downright impossible to follow, like not making noise while blowing your nose or spitting since that would, quote, “disturb the assembly of purity.” Others seem to come from the “because of me they now have a policy” category, like not making medicine pills. And then there is my personal favorite frowned-upon behavior: Never being satisfied with meals and talking only of meals offered at other monasteries. I would imagine that a corollary would be thou shall not spit in the food of a monk who complains incessantly about the meals that you are preparing.

Speaking of meals, let's take a closer look at that, because that is a great illustration of how seemingly everything in a monastery is regulated by a strict set of rules. In the early morning, after everyone gets up, a bell is rung three times to signal mealtime. Before the third time the bell is rung, you should be sitting in your dining seat. Once the bell has been rung, then you go and retrieve your bowls, which are hanging on the pillars behind you. You then place your bowls in front of you, on the side of the shoulder that is closest to the center of the room.

Oh and of course there's a proper way to lay out the bowls. First, you bow and untie the cloth bundle that your bowls are wrapped in. Then you take out the cloth you're using as a bowl wiper and fold that into a small shape. Next you take out the spoon and chopstick bag and put them horizontally. And then you take out the clean towel and cover your knees. Only now do you completely open the bundle and fold the three corners closest to you so that they are neatly joined at the center, and the far corner is draped over the edge of your platform.

Now, you unfold the mat. With your right hand facing down, hold the corner of the mat closest to you on the right side and put it over the top of the bowls. Then, with the left hand facing up, reach under the mat to pick up the bowls and put them on the left side of the mat. Using the fingertips of both hands, take out the three smaller bowls, stack them together, and put them on the mat one at a time without making any noise. Then, open the bag that's holding your spoon and chopsticks, take those out, and put them horizontally behind the first bowl, with the handles to the side of the shoulder that's closest to the center of the room. You also have a brush, which you place on the edge of the mat to the side of the other shoulder, with the handle facing out.

And after all that, we're finally ready to eat. But not until the rector bangs a hammer against an octagonal stand inside the hall and declares, "We gaze upward and wish that the Three Treasures might grant us their wise approval." Then you recite the 10 epithets of the Buddhas. And after that, finally you

see untended servers, who are called the purity-keepers, coming around to serve you delicious porridge.

As a monk, you are not supposed to serve yourself with your own hands. Instead, these purity-keepers do the job following their own strict set of customs. Soups and porridges are not allowed to soil the monks' hands or the rims and sides of the bowls. They are supposed to dispense the food with only two or three dabs of the ladle, and they serve food only intermittently.

While they are serving the food, you should be holding the bowl with both hands close to the mat. You should, of course, hold the bowl level, and it's considered bad form to request too much and leave food unfinished in your bowl.

But before you can dig into this yummy porridge, there are still more formalities. You have to wait until everyone has been served, and then the rector will strike the hammer and lift up his bowl and make an offering. This involves pressing his hands together in honor of the food and performing the five contemplations. The five contemplations are: 1) to ponder the effort needed to supply the food and to appreciate its origins; 2) to reflect on one's own virtue being insufficient to receive the offering; 3) to protect the mind's integrity, to depart from error, and to avoid being greedy; 4) to consider the food as medicine and bodily nourishment; and 5) to receive this food as necessary for attaining enlightenment. After all that comes the offering of food to all sentient beings. Hey, that means you. Congratulations, you can eat now.

Oh and yes, there are a bunch of etiquettes you should follow when you're eating. You should bring the bowl to your mouth, not your mouth to the bowl. Apparently the top half of the outside of the bowl is considered pure, but the bottom half is soiled. There is a very particular way of holding the bowl, which I'll skip over just for the sake of time. Soup and rice can only be served up to the rim of the bowl, and they should be eaten together and in order. You must not stir or pick at your food before eating it. And unless you are sick, you should not ask for seconds. You also should not use your rice to cover your

soup and then ask for seconds, nor should you compare your food with your neighbor's food and hold a grudge if yours appears to be less or inferior. And of course there are the standard rules of good dining etiquette, like not talking with food in your mouth, not making inhaling noises, not spilling your rice, not taking a giant mouthful of food, and my favorite -- not rolling your rice into balls and throwing them into your mouth. Oh and of course, don't forget that it is bad form to talk about how good the food is at another monastery.

Alright, in the remainder of this episode, I'm going to share some other interesting things I came across in my research. Let's start with using the toilet. If eating was regulated by so many rules, you can imagine the myriad guidelines for going to the latrine.

In the code of conduct, there's a whole section on relieving yourself. It starts off by telling monks that if they have to go, they shouldn't wait until the last moment so as to avoid, quote, "allowing internal pressures to compel unseemly haste." And when you are going to the bathroom, you are not supposed to pass through the main shrine on your way.

At the latrine, there's a specifically prescribed way to fold and hang up your robe and clean towel. Then, you're supposed to go into the stall with a water vessel in your right hand. And before you start doing your business, you should snap your fingers three times to give the ghosts that feed on excrements a heads up that you're about to rain down on their heads.

When you are done, the code says, quote, "when cleaning oneself, it is better to use cold water, for hot water can lead to the intestinal wind." But of course there wasn't toilet paper. So, what did you use? The English translation of the code of conduct mentioned bamboo spatulas, which, eeesh. So, apparently, monks used wood, bamboo, or reeds to clean themselves. These were between 3 to 9 inches long, about the width of a thumb, and could be painted or unpainted. I'm going to just leave that right there, because the mental image I'm getting is making me grimace. But at least you would be relieved to

know that, as a monk, you are not allowed to use grass, soil, soft bark, leaves, rare woods, or rock as toilet paper. I guess that's for the unlucky lay folks. Anyway, the used bamboo spatulas are put into a bucket. Sometimes some people would wash them before they leave the latrine, unless there's someone else waiting to use the toilet. But there's also a monk in charge of the latrines whose job it is to make sure all the bamboo spatulas get washed each day.

Oh, and after you wipe, you're supposed to wash your hands first with ash, then dirt, and then a bean pod known as the Chinese honey locust, which was for thousands of years in China as a detergent. And while you're at it, you should also rinse your mouth, possibly by chewing on a willow twig.

Alright, moving on to something a little more refined than the management of bodily functions. Let's say you get sick of the mediocre slop they call food at your monastery, and you want to write a letter to your benefactor to ask him to bring you some goodies the next time he visits. Well, guess what? The monastery has detailed rules about how to write and send letters, too.

First of all, before you even put brush to paper, ask yourself: Is this letter urgent or absolutely necessary? If not, then put the brush down. The code of conduct says it should not be sent, because, quote, "it is unsuitable to issue letters arbitrarily."

But you're gonna die if you have to go another month on monastery soup and gruel, so sure, it's urgent. So you start writing. As you write, make sure your characters are precise and consistent, and that your letter is logical and coherent. And the envelope should be sealed in the correct fashion. And as a final step before you send the letter off, you are supposed to pass the sealed letter through incense smoke.

The code says all these steps should be followed to create a letter that "will inspire benevolence and respect in the mind of the reader." And just in case you are that rogue monk who thinks such things are just silly niceties, the code also warns that a hastily and poorly written letter, quote, "will only waste

paper and ink and will hinder the attaining of enlightenment.” So, you think good penmanship and grammar don’t matter? Just wait till you are knocking on Nirvana’s door and the Buddha opens your permanent records, pulls out that slopfest of a letter from 15 years ago, and asks you to explain yourself.

Alright, this is getting to be pretty lengthy supplemental episode, so I think I’ll stop here. I hope this gave you a better idea of the life of a Buddhist monk during the Song Dynasty and why Lu Zhishen joining a monastic order was a doomed marriage from the beginning. Take care, and I will see you next time on the Water Margin Podcast. Thanks for listening!