

# Food for Good or Evil : Buddhist Precepts and Food as Depicted in Medieval Japanese Paintings

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## INTRODUCTION

For human beings, food and meals bring fundamental pleasure. But that is not the end of the matter, for there are many more aspects of food to be considered. Religions throughout the world have numerous taboos related to food. Buddhism has proscriptions, “戒 *kai*” in Japanese, that people are expected to follow in their daily lives. These are often called the Buddhist precepts. Among these are many proscriptions about food.

A basic example of a food related interdiction is, in Japanese, 不殺生戒 *fusesshō-kai*. Translated directly, it means “Do not kill anything.” An implication within this statement includes a prohibition against consuming meat. Another interdiction, 不飲酒戒 *fuonju-kai*, prohibits drinking alcohol. Yet another proscription, 不非時食戒 *fuhijishiki-kai*, restricts people to eating only at designated times. Since food is a basic necessity of human life, this sometime causes disputes and social disorder.

In ancient and medieval society, controlling food to prevent such social conflict was indispensable. As we can imagine, overcoming temptations relating to food was as difficult for people in ancient and medieval periods as it is for us today. In pre-modern times, famines often occurred in Japan, but even during difficult times there were aristocrats who could eat not only for sustenance but also for enjoyment. In other words, the elite were able to enjoy having more food than what was absolutely necessary to sustain life. This situation conflicted with the ideal world prescribed by the Buddhist teachings, which encouraged restraint. This conflict between means and spiritual ideals provoked unease and anxiety.

In this essay, I will present ideas relating to food and food prohibitions in a discussion of paintings created from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This period covers the late Heian period through and slightly beyond the Kamakura period. Through a study of these paintings, I will interpret the complex emotions of ancient Japanese toward food.

In order to understand these attitudes more deeply I will introduce the Buddhist view of the world and reincarnation. The concept of the Six Realms of Existence, or 六道 *Rokudō*, is key to understanding medieval Buddhism. At the lowest level of the six realms, literally “paths” of rebirth, are the many 地獄 *jigoku*, or hells of rebirth. Then 餓鬼 *gaki*, or hungry ghosts; 畜生 *chūshō* animals; fighting gods called 阿修羅 *Ashura*; then we humans; and at the top of the heap, 天 *Deva*, or minor divinities. Although the highest levels of rebirth are the worlds of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, they are not included in the six realms because they are outside the unfortunate rebirth cycle.

## 1 粉河寺縁起絵巻 *Kokawadera Engi Emaki*

Let us look at the illustrated hand scroll 粉河寺縁起絵巻 *Kokawadera Engi Emaki*. This work was created in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. The temple called 粉河寺 *Kokawadera* in Wakayama prefecture is still worshipped today as a sacred abode of the Kannon Bodhisattva. At the beginning of the scroll, a hunter appears with his family. He hunts a deer, then he and his family eat the deer. (fig. 1)



fig. 1. *Kokawadera Engi Emaki*. Owned by Kokawadera temple  
Image: Reprinted from *Nihon emaki taisei* 5. Komatsu Shigemi, ed.  
Tokyo. Chūō kōrōnsha, 1977.



fig. 2. *Kokawadera Engi Emaki*. Owned by Kokawadera temple  
Image: Reprinted from *Nihon emaki taisei* 5. Komatsu Shigemi,  
ed. Tokyo. Chūō kōrōnsha, 1977.

At first glance, we see a happy family of father, mother and child enjoying a meal. However, this depiction in the context of this story emphasizes that they violated the “Do not kill prohibition” in their daily life by ingesting meat. The scene, embedded in a hand scroll created for the purpose of revealing the origin of Kannon Bodhisattva-worship, also highlights the concept that Kannon Bodhisattva is capable of saving all beings, even those who have violated the Buddhist proscriptions. (fig.2)

The concept of the saving grace of the Kannon Bodhisattva is shown very clearly on the halo of a Kannon statue created in 8<sup>th</sup>-century Japan. In the 二月堂 Nigatsudō of 東大寺 Tōdaiji temple, there is a huge statue of the so-called 十一面観音 Eleven Headed Kannon bodhisattva dating to 8<sup>th</sup>-century.

What we find on the halo is a very complex rendering of the Buddhist universe.(fig.3 ) The universe is made up of 25 layers, beginning with the heavenly beings called Bodhisattvas at the top. The middle includes human beings in the cosmic center called Mt. Sumeru, and then, at the lowest level of the Buddhist hells, shows many suffering humans and creatures. But the Kannon Bodhisattva is capable of saving all beings, even those who suffer in Hell, including people who have violated the Buddhist proscriptions, such as in the first scene of the hand-scroll of *Kokawadera*.



fig. 3. A tracing of the Buddhist universe on the halo of the Kannon statue of the Nigatsudō. Image: Reprinted from Inamoto Yasuo. 2004. "Tōdaiji Nigatsudō honzon kōhai zuzō kō—Daibutsu renben senkoku wo sanshōshite—" *Rokuonzasshū* 6

## 2 Retribution for Excessive Eating in three Scrolls 地獄草紙, 餓鬼草紙, 病草紙

The proscriptions concerning food that we saw in the *Kokawadera* Scrolls are expressed more explicitly in the handscrolls called 地獄草紙 *Jigoku-zōshi*, the Hell scrolls in English. These are handscrolls dating to the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. (fig. 4)

This scene of The Hell for Burning Hair has a text section that states: "Those who violated the five Buddhist proscriptions will fall into this hell." Among many rules for monks and nuns, the so-called five Buddhist proscriptions, 五戒 *Gokai* in Japanese, are the most important and they apply to lay people as well. They are as follows: "do not kill, do not steal, do not have physical relationships with people other than spouses, do not lie, and do not drink alcohol." In short, violation of these proscriptions—including the prohibition of drinking alcohol—will result in horrible punishment for anyone.

Figure 5 shows a scene from 餓鬼草子 *Gaki-zōshi*: the Scroll of Hungry Ghosts. Hungry Ghosts are creatures that inhabit one of the Six Realms of Existence below humans. They are in the realm just above the lowest hell.

These Hungry Ghosts scrolls are thought by scholars to form a set with the Hell Scrolls. In this scene, we can see elegant aristocrats enjoying their party. Plenty of food is on the 高坏 *takatsuki*, a tall stand, served with *sake*. The men are so relaxed and drunk that their jackets fall from their shoulders. They are clearly enjoying their





fig. 4. *Jigoku-zōshi*, The Hell for Burning Hair, Tokyo National Museum  
Image: Tokyo National Museum

delightful evening. But let us carefully observe all the details of the picture. We can detect small hungry ghosts that cling to each human figure.

Unfortunately, the original text that accompanied this scene does not survive, but it is possible to understand the meaning of the scene from the Buddhist sutras. One sutra, the 正法念處經 *Shōbōnenjokyō*, explains that there is a kind of *gaki* or creature, that is microscopic in form, and invisible.<sup>1</sup> This tells us, then, that people may enjoy their transient lives without knowing about the existence of the omnipresent Hungry Ghosts.

Two women are also depicted in this scene. The significance of the women in this scene has gone unnoticed in all the scholarly literature on the Hungry Ghost Scrolls. The two women are playing musical instruments, one a floor harp (*koto*), and the other a drum. Note, however, that there are no tiny Hungry Ghosts on these women. Why is that? The answer may also be found in the Sutra. The *Shōbōnenjokyō* sutra says that *gaki* sometime pretend to be a woman and in that female form they can slip into the humans' world.<sup>2</sup> Considering the teachings of the Buddha, these women might actually be *gaki*. In medieval Japan, viewing 絵巻 *emaki* was mainly a nobleman's culture, so these depictions represent society's complicated mentality not only about food but also about women. Both food and women are attractive, but in Buddhist terms they are dangerous.

The most impressive handscroll from the 12<sup>th</sup> century is 病草紙 *Yamai-no-sōshi* the Scroll of Disease and Affliction. This is also thought to form a set with the Hell scrolls

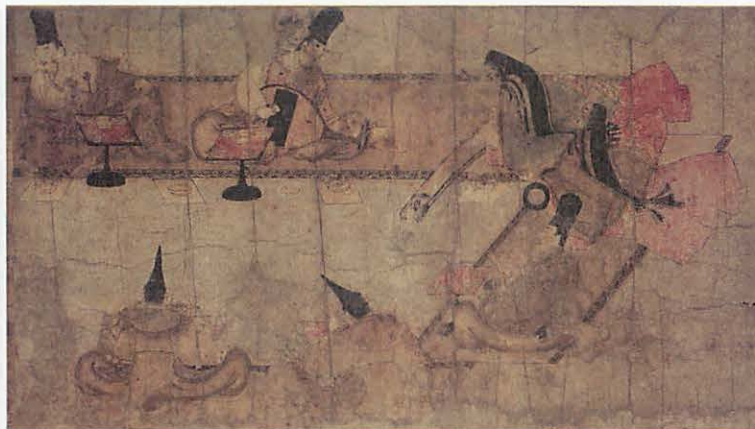


fig. 5. *Gaki-zōshi*, Tokyo National Museum  
Image: Tokyo National Museum

and the Hungry Ghost scrolls. Shown here is a fragment of the Disease and Affliction scroll, the Man with a Toothache. (fig. 6) Actually, this is quite a comical depiction. The poor man is suffering from a toothache and yet he is hungry. There is enough food, but he can't eat because of the condition of his tooth.

Shown in front of him are a heaping bowl of rice and three more types of dishes. (fig. 7) For most researchers, this depiction is an important historical record showing what medieval people ate and how they prepared foods. This image is not just a historical record, however. When medieval audiences looked at this toothache picture, they probably concluded that these foods are a little excessive and that this man is greedy. They would have been critical of him. The woman depicted beside him appears very cynical. She might represent the feelings of the audience. In short, this depiction of one soup and three dishes connotes more than satiation.

Shown in figure 8 is another scene from the Disease and Affliction scrolls. This is called 肥満の女 *Himan-no Onna* in English, the Obese Woman. The text that accompanies the painted illustration states "Of late, an obese woman, a money lender, can be seen around 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue in the Capital. Due to her wealth she has more than enough to eat and she has grown very fat and cannot walk about without the help of several servant ladies." Here again the audience would be critical. The scene connotes a strong sense of over satiating one's self through overindulgence. This is expressed both in words and in the picture. Additionally, the text mentions her occupation as a moneylender, which is also of great interest. It was not a common profession for women



fig. 6. *Yamai-no-sōshi*, The Man with Toothache, Kyoto National Museum  
Image: Kyoto National Museum



fig. 7. *Yamai-no-sōshi*, The Man with Toothache (detail), Kyoto National Museum  
Image: Kyoto National Museum

at the time, and probably provoked the audience's hostility to a female moneylender.

In medieval Japan illness was understood in spiritual terms as the result of one's bad actions: in Buddhist terms, what we would today call "bad karma." In observing this picture the medieval audience would have understood that the obese woman's suffering was linked to her lifetime of bad activity as a money lender. Thus, viewers can see that her karma is expressed in the present moment by her previous actions. It's also clear from this scroll that overindulgence was considered very bad karma in the medieval





fig. 8. *Yamai-no-sōshi*, The Obese Woman, Fukuoka City Museum Matsunaga Collection  
Image: Fukuoka City Museum

Buddhist social setting.

If we examine the hand scrolls I've shown up to this point as a group, it can be seen that prohibitions against food come to be clearly expressed in art works dating to the late 12<sup>th</sup> to early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. This period is considered the first half of Japan's medieval era.

### 3 伴大納言絵巻 *Ban Dainagon Emaki*

Next, let's look at how the messages about overindulgence in food are depicted in other medieval paintings. The Minister Ban scroll or *Ban Dainagon emaki* depicts the message in less obvious ways but with the same connotations. This is a late 12<sup>th</sup>-century scroll about a government minister of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Minister Ban. It dates to about the same time as the Scroll of Disease and Affliction and the others discussed.

The Minister Ban scroll depicts the historical events surrounding a fire in the year 866 at the 応天門 *Outenmon*, the main gate of the Imperial Palace. The main characters comprise two noble households. One is the family of 源信 Minamoto no Makoto, the other, the family of Minister Ban. At first, Minamoto no Mokoto was accused of arson, and the strongest accusation came from 伴善男 Tomo no Yoshio, called 伴大納言 Ban *Dainagon*, that is Minister Ban. In the end, however, Minister Ban was arrested as the





fig. 9. *Ban Dainagon Emaki*, Idemitsu Museum of Arts

Image: Reprinted from *Shinshū Nihon Emakimono zenshū* 5. Tokyo. Kadokawashoten, 1976.



fig. 10. *Ban Dainagon Emaki*, Idemitsu Museum of Arts

Image: Reprinted from *Kokuhō Ban Dainagon Emaki*. Tokyo. Idemitsu Museum of Arts, 2006.



fig. 11. *The Ten Realms*, Taimadera-temple, Okunoin

Image: Reprinted from *Kokka*1224, 1997.

guilty party for setting the fire. Minamoto no Makoto is presented in the scroll as the “good person” and Minister Ban as the “bad person.”

Looking closely at the details of the two men’s households to see whether the Good and Bad judgment was expressed in food or through other over-indulgences, we find significant evidence suggesting goodness and badness. In the scroll many, many possessions are depicted but only in Minister Ban’s residence. For example, here are many cosmetic boxes are shown in the room at the rear, and in front is a golden cup on an elaborate stand and a red tray with a beautiful cup, and a stand that is heaped high with delicious foods, with the pooling cup probably filled with *sake*. (fig. 9) This is a portrayal of Minister Ban’s residence, where the ladies lament the fact that he will be banished from the capital. In the scene, the artist has very carefully placed evidence of their over-indulgence in the luxuries of life.

In contrast, Minamoto no Makoto’s household does not show any possessions other than things associated with virtuous educational activities—namely, a stationary box with a writing brush and a paper box. (fig.10) Comparing these to Minister Ban’s goods, it is very clear that the Makoto’s household is depicted as “Good.” These scenes clearly suggest that the artist who created these scenes and also the audiences of this picture scroll could both understand the connotations of these possessions including the depiction of foods.





### 3 十界図 The Ten Realms

Next, let's look at an art work from around the midpoint of the medieval era, a mid-14<sup>th</sup> century pair of folding screens, or *byōbu*, owned by 当麻寺奥院 Taimadera temple, that depict the Six Realms of Existence, *Rokudō*. These screens show the Ten Realms, that is, the Six Realms plus the four levels of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, for a total of ten realms, in Japanese 十界 *Jikkai*. (fig.11)

Of great importance to my thinking about depiction of food is the scenes of the human realm on the screen, and the fact that nearly every scene with humans in this painting shows them with food. Stated another way, food is the primary way to depict the character of humans in this screen. For example, the storage room of a very prosperous household is depicted. In addition to boxes and textiles we clearly see at the center bags of gold dust and rugs, probably from Central Asia. All of these are very luxurious goods. Behind the people are shelves full of dried and preserved foods including salted fish, and celadon jars probably filled with tea or sake.

In another scene women are fighting over a kimono. The artist has added an important figure: a servant lady passes by with a tray filled with food. This message about food functions in tandem with the excess goods to demonstrate the bad character of the people in this household. The heaping rice bowl is excessive if we keep in mind that rice was a luxury in this time.



Another scene shows the household's yard. Horses are laden with bales of rice on their backs. A man with documents—probably for the officials—travels with bundles of straw and bamboo that likely contain fresh fish. Nearby, men have opened the bales of rice to weigh them before rewrapping and putting them in the storehouse, which, as can be seen through the open doors, already holds bundles of textiles. Also shown is a stack of rice bales; also basins, called 臼 *usu*, for grinding and pounding rice.

In celebration of this largesse the household foremen are celebrating with sake, poured for them by a young boy, or in Japanese, 稚児 *chigo*—who is probably the “special friend” of the monk, seen here. The artist is showing criticism of immorality in this scene with excess possessions such as rice and textiles and by including sinful drinking and a monk with a page-boy. Deep inside the household in the master's private rooms we see the master himself with a page-boy drinking *sake*. Elsewhere we see drunken men dancing in silver moonlight, and more drunk people outside playing football under a willow tree. One man gestures as if saying, “come back and drink and play some more!” Back inside the house a servant sits on the veranda sampling the soup. In the back we see wild game, such as two kinds of rabbits and a duck, along with jars of liquid. The wild game is hung from a tree. Inside the kitchen, servants are preparing pheasant and fish with knife and chopsticks, with more duck in the back ready to cut up and be consumed. The world of the wealthy is full of luxurious forbidden foods, and alcohol.

The people are depicted as relaxed and happy in this lifestyle. However, stepping back to look at the overall composition of the folding screen paintings, we, the viewing audience, are acutely aware that these prosperous people are located on the same visual level as the hells. In this pair of folding screens, the Ten Realms are depicted like a map of the world, and its composition visualizes the order of the Ten Realms. Hell is depicted at the bottom of the flames. The next of the six realms shows the fighting divinities or *Ashura*, shown in a level above Hell and the Hungry Ghost and Beasts, but the next realm, that of humans, is depicted on the bottom.

Turning now to the left folding screen we can observe depictions of the human realm once again. But on the left screen the humans are closer to the higher realms, next to the Deva divinities and the four Buddha realms. At the bottom of the screen but closest to the Buddhas are humans. In the lower left the humans are shown departing from this world by boat with a heavenly destination. There are depictions of a poor man

whose occupation was a lowly salt collector, also a woman who ladles water into a bucket by small huts. To the far right side we see more human beings.

Let us contextualize this human realm in relation to the whole—to the pair of folding screens. The world of pleasures should be understood as “living on borrowed time.” The pleasure world is fleeting and meaningless in the broader context of Buddhist salvation. The Buddhist precept was taken more seriously by medieval society than by us today; the depictions of these folding screens obviously show society’s ambivalence toward food and drink; on the one hand they constitute a good, but, if abused they can be the downfall of human beings. They can corrupt people and bring suffering.

#### Notes

- 1 復有異處。名髮火流。是彼地獄第三別處。衆生何業生於彼處。彼見有人殺生偷盜邪行飲酒樂行多作。彼人則墮叫喚地獄髮火流處。殺盜邪行業及果報。如前所說。何者飲酒。優婆塞五戒人。說酒功德。作如是言。酒亦是戒。令其飲酒。彼人以是惡業因緣。身壞命終。墮於惡處叫喚地獄髮火流處。受大苦惱。所謂雨火。彼地獄人常被燒煮。炎燃頭髮。乃至脚足。有熱鐵狗。煥食其足。炎嘴鐵鷲。破其髑髏而飲其腦。熱鐵野干食其身中。如是常燒。如是常食。彼人自作不善惡業。悲苦号哭

Taishō shinshu Daizōkyō 17: pp. 40c-41a

- 2 若男若女。若黃門人。著種種衣。而自嚴飾。服女人衣。行姪女法。若人欲發。與之交会。因此事故。而得財物。施與凡人。非福田處。不淨心施。以是因緣。身壞命終。生於欲色餓鬼之中。受鬼身已。種種嚴飾。隨意所念。皆得從心。欲善則美。欲惡則醜。若其欲作。愛不愛色。悉能為之。或作男子。顏容端正。或作女人。姿首美妙。或作畜生。相貌殊異。能作種種上妙莊嚴。能遍遊行一切方所。若得食飲。能食無患。少行施故。能以微細之身。盜入人家。以求飲食。世人說言。毘舍闍鬼。盜我飲食。或作人身。入他節会。或作鳥身。食人祭飯。其身細密。人不能見。此鬼如是。隨意能現種種衆色。世人皆名如意夜叉。或作女身。與人交会。如是種種莊嚴誑人。行於人間。

Taishō shinshu Daizōkyō 17: p. 97c

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