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BUDDHISM AND SACRIFICE

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Abstract

This paper deals with the theme of giving away the body or parts of it. This theme is frequent in Buddhist literature, but also finds expression in the real life custom, attested in India and more so in China, of burning one's own body as an act of religious fervour. The paper studies the potential link of this theme with the Vedic sacrificial tradition, and comes to the conclusion that there is no such link.

A recent book – *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature*, by Reiko Ohnuma (2007) – deals with a wide-spread theme in Indian Buddhist literature: giving away the body or parts of it. While still relatively infrequent in earliest Buddhist literature, this theme becomes extremely popular in subsequent periods, both in Mainstream and Mahāyāna Buddhism. Judging by the reports of Chinese pilgrims in north-west India, numerous events of this kind were commemorated there, and the ideal took shape in the Perfection of Generosity (*dāna-pāramitā*) that came to be looked upon as a central accomplishment.[1] Ohnuma presents much of this material,[2] and turns in her penultimate chapter to "a number of […] interpretive contexts that might be brought to bear on this discussion" (p. 242). One of the questions she addresses is: "How is the bodhisattva's gift of his body related to the category of sacrifice?" (pp. 249–256).

Ohnuma begins the section concerned with the following words (p. 249):

> the themes of bodily mutilation, blood, and death obviously suggest that the bodhisattva's gift of his body might be interpreted as a *sacrificial ritual* in which the bodhisattva plays the double role of both *sacrificer* and *sacrificial victim*.

1 "What stands out from several of the collections of Buddhist narrative literature as well as from the *Rāṣṭrapāla* itself is the prominence of the perfection of generosity as the quintessential virtue of the bodhisattva path." (BOUCHER, 2008: 25)

2 See also STRONG, 2009: 99 f.

She then continues:

> This interpretation has indeed been advanced several times before, particularly in relation to the many connections that can be drawn between some gift-of-the-body stories and the practice and theory of Vedic sacrifice.

At first sight the parallelism is enlightening. The fact that the bodhisattva is both sacrificer *and* victim, Ohnuma explains (p. 250), only makes explicit a condition that is characteristic of all Vedic sacrifice, in which the sacrificer is always identified with the victim. Referring to Hubert's and Mauss's "still-classic account of the mechanism and varieties of sacrifice", she points out that these two authors, generalizing from the Vedic case, make this identification one of the fundamental features of *all* sacrifice:

> Indeed, it is not enough to say that [the victim] represents [the sacrificer]: it is merged in him. The two personalities are fused together.[3]

However, a closer look reveals some difficulties. Why should all those bodhisattvas choose behaviours inspired by Vedic sacrifice? Why should Buddhists care about Vedic sacrifice, and why, of all things, should they choose one of its least agreeable aspects? After all, the bodhisattvas do not just sacrifice a substitute for themselves; they sacrifice themselves, something that the Vedic sacrificer avoids doing.

There is more. Buddhism was critical of sacrifice, especially of the animal sacrifice of Vedic Brahmanism. A Sūtra of the Dīgha Nikāya, the *Kūṭadanta Sutta* (no. 5), tells us that in an earlier existence the Buddha was the chaplain (*purohita*) of a king.[4] In this capacity he taught the king how to perform a sacrifice in which "no bulls were slain, no goats or sheep, no cocks and pigs".[5] Implicitly this story criticizes the Vedic sacrifice in which animals *are* killed. Why should Buddhists take over the least explicit but most gruesome aspect of a tradition it rejected?

3 OHNUMA, 2007: 250, citing HUBERT & MAUSS, 1964: 32 (~ Hubert & Mauss, 1899/1929: 45). We will see below that the identification of sacrificer and victim may not be a fundamental feature of *all* sacrifice.

4 Note however ANĀLAYO, 2010: 69: "the Pāli version identifies the bodhisattva with the Brahmin chaplain who led the sacrifice, the Chinese version instead identifies him with the king on whose behalf the sacrifice was undertaken, and Sanskrit fragments of this discourse identify him with both", with references to the relevant passages.

5 DN I. 141; tr. WALSHE, 1987: 138.

Ohnuma refers in this connection to a study by Edith Parlier (1991). Parlier used the story of King Śibi to argue that the gift of the body in the Buddhist Jātakas is modelled on Brahmanical sacrifice.[6] The presence of a variant of this story in the *Mahābhārata* shows that it was known in Brahmanical circles, perhaps already before the story was incorporated in a Jātaka. But does this prove Parlier's thesis?[7] Do we have to accept, with Parlier and with Paul Mus to whom she refers, that there is a historical continuity between the speculative thought of the Vedic Brāhmaṇas about the sacrifice and Buddhism?[8]

Historical continuity can be a powerful tool in the hands of the historian. Many beliefs, practices and cultural features exist primarily because similar beliefs, practices and cultural features existed in the same geographical area during an immediately preceding period. However, sometimes the postulate of historical continuity explains nothing and rather does the opposite: it begs the question. Why should Buddhist thought be a modified imitation of Brahmanical thought to which it felt no proximity? We know that Buddhism did not arise out of Brahmanism, and that its cultural background was different from that of Brahmanism.[9]

Ohnuma appears to take the thesis of a historical continuity between the Vedic sacrifice and Buddhism for granted when she says (p. 252):

> The general kinship between Vedic sacrifice and Buddhist renunciatory ideals has been noted many times before. […] Hubert and Mauss themselves, in their pioneering work on sacrifice, noted the essential connection between Vedic ritual sacrifice and the type of spiritual 'sacrifice' embodied in Buddhist renunciation and detachment.

Referring to Heesterman (1985: 26–44), she states (p. 252):

> The idea that renunciatory and ascetic traditions in India represent an 'internalization' of the Vedic sacrifice is common, of course: the renunciant is one who internalizes the sacrificial

6 PARLIER, 1991: 134: "C'est bien sur le modèle mythique du sacrifice brahmanique qu'est conçu […] le sacrifice suprême du Bodhisattva."

7 "Sivi […] permet une comparaison avec le [*Mahābhārata*], mais faut-il soupçonner derrière le *Sivi-jātaka* 499 et le *Vanaparvan* (III, 130–131), la présence d'une légende *gemeinindisch*, dont personne n'a jamais entendu parler, et pour cause! Le parallèle prouve seulement l'importance d'un thème légendaire à l'intérieur des différentes branches d'une communauté […]" (OSIER, 2010: 26).

8 Parlier refers in this connection to Paul Mus.

9 See BRONKHORST, 2007.

fire within his own body as *tapas*, or the 'heat' of his ascetic austerities, and who performs the sacrifice within himself by means of his renunciation and detachment.

In the very next sentence she speaks about the "hereditary connection between Vedic sacrifice and Buddhist renunciation".[10]

I have great difficulty accepting all this. There is no hereditary connection between Vedic sacrifice and Buddhist renunciation. Buddhism arose in a region of India where Vedic sacrifice played no role. And even if some Buddhist renunciants were acquainted with the universe of thought of Vedic sacrifice, why should they wish to mutilate themselves and give up their lives under its influence, where even Vedic sacrificers did no such thing?

Ohnuma's answer appears to be that they didn't. Giving away the body or parts of it is a literary theme, she thinks. Real Buddhists drew inspiration from this theme by engaging in more ordinary generosity, such as alms giving, but no one would imitate the behaviour of those literary heroes.[11] Unfortunately, if the

10 Similarly WILSON, 2003: 30: "Contextualizing self-immolation […] by reference to Vedic-Hindu sacrificial practices […], I argue that this dramatic form of self-destruction may be understood as […] a sacrificial act in which one willingly offers oneself to the flames […]." KRICK 1977: 102; 122 n. 187 sees a continuity with an old Nārāyaṇa cult that also influenced Vedic ritual.

11 OHNUMA, 2007: 256. Ohnuma is somewhat more subtle by introducing notions that, as far as I can see, are purely speculative: "The bodhisattva within gift-of-the-body stories exists in a Buddha-less past in which there is no 'Buddhism' in the world to function as a powerful 'field of merit'. He therefore has no choice but to manifest his generosity in an extreme and unmediated manner – giving *himself* away rather than relying on any substitute. His deeds make it possible for *others*, however, to offer substitutes in place of themselves. By becoming a Buddha and establishing 'Buddhism' as a powerful 'field of merit', he creates a situation in which it is *no longer necessary* to give oneself away. Instead one can give away various substitutes (such as alms) – for once these substitutes are multiplied by the great 'field of merit' in which they are bestowed, they become equivalent, in some sense, to the original gift of oneself. We thus move from the bodhisattva's gift of his body to the ordinary Buddhist's devotional offering, from the 'ethos of the *jātaka*' to the 'ethos of the *avadāna*', from the life of the Buddha to the ritual of the Buddhist – in other words, from *not using* to *using* a substitute." Without supporting evidence, this passage suggests to me a Christian undercurrent. BOUCHER 2008: 33 follows Ohnuma's reasoning, but provides no evidence either: "[T]he bodhisattva's sacrifice of his physical body stands in place of world renunciation, for his world has not yet a buddha nor the Dharma and therefore no institutional monasticism. For a contemporary Mainstream audience, Śākyamuni's dispensation presumably makes such extreme acts of giving no longer necessary, for a devout lay person

Chinese pilgrim Yijing is to be believed, there *were* Buddhists in India who burned their own bodies as an act of religious fervour.[12] And Ohnuma herself draws attention to

> ordinary Buddhists in China, where, beginning from the fourth century C.E. and extending into relatively recent times, both individual, private instances and mass, public spectacles of bodily self-mutilation very often occurred in conjunction with the worship of relics or *stūpas*.[13]

This was in far-away China, where Vedic sacrificial thought could not possibly exert an influence.[14] Clearly, the giving away of the body in Buddhism, whether in India or in China, cannot be explained through some postulated (and indefensible) "hereditary connection", i.e. historical continuity, with the Vedic sacrifice. The once popular attempt to understand the whole of Indian culture, including Buddhist practices, on the basis of Vedic sacrificial thought is untenable and should be abandoned.

How, then, do we explain the structural similarities between Vedic sacrifice and the Buddhist theme of giving up one's body? The answer I propose is simple and straightforward: we must explain these in the same way we explain the structural similarities between Vedic sacrifice and sacrifice practised in other parts of the world. Sacrifice is not confined to Vedic India, and is found in parts of the world that cannot possibly have undergone the influence of Vedic sacrifice. No researcher will look for such influence in the case of sacrifices performed in cultures separated from each other by oceans and vast distances. One way or another it will have to be assumed that similar practices result from the

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now has available the supreme field of merit: the *saṅgha* headed by the Buddha. In a post-Śākyamuni world, the deeds of the bodhisattva are ideal only in the past."

12 See BOUCHER, 2008: 35 ff.

13 References to GERNET, 1960; JAN, 1965; KIESCHNICK, 1997: 35–50; BENN, 1998; 2007. Ohnuma admits that she has a problem (p. 257: "What are we to make […] of [these] forms of self-immolation […]?"). Her response (ibid.): "[The devotees concerned] *refuse to make use of any substitute*, choosing instead to turn *themselves* into the offering. We might say that although the Buddha – through his *jātaka*-like deeds – has brought about for them an *avadāna*-like setting, they choose to respond to this setting in the most devotional manner possible by once again acting in a *jātaka*-like manner, thereby collapsing the former and the latter ethos together."

14 BENN, 1998: 310 ff.; 2007: 176 ff. draws attention to anterior practices of auto-cremation in China (usually to pray for rain), and clearly such earlier practices may have had an influence on Buddhist practices in China, beside the Indian sources.

fact that the sacrificers in those different parts of the world belong to the same species: they are all humans. Once this much is granted, the next step is clear: that which induces certain humans to perform sacrifices in different parts of the world induces them sometimes to give away their body or its parts.

This conclusion does not necessarily imply that the Buddhists were totally unaware of the structural similarities with Vedic sacrifice. Some of them may have been aware of it, and the story of King Maṇicūḍa as studied by Phyllis Granoff (1991) indicates that they were. This is a Buddhist story about a king who gives away parts of his body during a sacrifice he performs. Granoff further argues that the ritual of expiation plays a central role in this story, and draws attention to some striking parallels in the Brahmanical Āpastamba Dharmasūtra.

Let us now consider another religion that, though not performing sacrifices in the ordinary sense, resorted to behaviours that had important elements in common with sacrifice: early Christianity. Guy Stroumsa has drawn attention to the fact that the public execution of Christian martyrs in the Roman empire was assimilated to the sacrifice: the Christian martyrs voluntarily gave up their life as sacrificial victim.[15] This assimilation might be understood as the survival of sacrifice at a time, and among people, who rejected sacrifice in the ordinary sense. To quote Stroumsa (2009: 81): "the practice of sacrifice does not want to die, and thus sacrifice appears at once terminable and interminable."

In the case of early Christianity, presumably more so than in the case of Buddhism, there was a historical continuity that linked it with religions that practised animal sacrifice. Animal sacrifice characterized most religions of Antiquity, including Judaism until the destruction of the Temple. The fact that early Christians thought of the death of Jesus and of the martyrdom of many of their coreligionists in terms of sacrifice is therefore understandable and perhaps not surprising. I would yet argue that more than mere historical continuity is required to explain the lure of victim behaviour in an age that was in the process of abandoning sacrifice. It is just not enough to explain the choice to suffer an agonizing death by the assumption that these poor souls somehow wished to continue a tradition. Traditional models may have played a role – they often do – but only to steer proclivities that are not just the wish to repeat traditional behaviour in the most gruesome way imaginable. Here, once again, we have to admit that if human beings have what it takes to perform animal sacrifices in different continents, independently of each other, they also have what it takes to

15 See esp. STROUMSA, 2009: 72 ff.; 2008.

indulge in extreme self-destructive behaviour. This self-destructive behaviour will take different shapes in different cultures: no early Christian would cut off parts of his body to feed a bird of prey, as did King Śibi in the Indian story, and no Buddhist would seek to be martyred by the political authorities, as did the Christians.[16] But both the early Christians and the Buddhists chose to enter upon a path of self-destruction that has structural similarities with patterns of behaviour known from sacrificial contexts.

What more can be said about these disturbing patterns of behaviour? I have argued elsewhere that most if not all Vedic sacrifices, and many sacrifices elsewhere in the world, fall in first instance into two distinct categories, based on the relationship between the sacrificer and the victim that is immolated. Ideally, the victim is either identical with the sacrificer, or his enemy. That is to say, *either* the sacrificer ritually kills himself, *or* he ritually kills an enemy. In practice, the ideal victim – whether he be the sacrificer or his enemy – is most often replaced by a substitute: an animal, another human being, or something else. However, Vedic sacrificial theory knows two sacrifices – the Śunaskarṇa-yajña and the Puruṣa-medha respectively – in which the victims *are* human beings: in the former the sacrificer kills himself and is therefore literally identical with the victim, in the latter the victim is a high-ranking male foreigner.

These two categories of sacrifice are not normally distinguished in modern scholarship,[17] but the authors of the great Sanskrit epic called *Mahābhārata* were still aware of them. In this epic, the leader of one of the two armies that are going to confront each other in battle, Duryodhana, is on two occasions identified as a sacrificer, and the battle as a sacrifice. In one of these comparisons the sacrificer is explicitly identified as the sacrificial victim, in the other one the leader of the opposing army, his enemy, is the sacrificial victim.[18] Clearly Duryodhana had hoped that his enemy would be the sacrificial victim in the sacrifice of battle; unfortunately for him, he became himself its victim.

Of these two categories, the first one – the one also recognized by Hubert and Mauss, and others – is the one that interests us most in the present context.

16 Buddhist self-imposed martyrdom, on the other hand, did sometimes take place; see JAN, 1965: 252 ff.

17 The theory here presented goes beyond Hubert's and Mauss's theory (see above) according to which the identification of victim and sacrificer is one of the fundamental features of *all* sacrifice, but includes it as one of the two categories to be distinguished.

18 See "Sacrifice in the Mahābhārata and beyond", in: *Proceedings of the Sixth Dubrovnik Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas* (forthcoming).

In many Vedic and other sacrifices, the sacrificer sacrifices a substitute for himself. The same schematic understanding of sacrifice can be used to explain certain behaviours in religions that reject sacrifice. Early Christianity and Buddhism illustrate this, as we have seen.

A question remains to be addressed. In sacrifices where the sacrificer immolates a substitute for himself, there is often an third party: the god (or gods) to whom the sacrifice is directed. We expect a sacrificer to kill a victim for a god. The same applies to the early Christian martyrs: they gave up their body for God. The situation is not always parallel in Buddhism: the Buddhist may give up his body or part of it for a god-like being, preferably the Buddha, but a number of narratives about bodhisattvas giving away their bodies do not specify for whom this was done. Or rather, these bodhisattvas give their body or its parts to such disagreeable characters – calculating Brahmins, for example – that it is difficult to draw a parallel with sacrifices to a god.[19] What is more, these bodhisattvas are frequently depicted as quite simply feeling a strong need to give away their body, with no specification of the intended recipient. Does this mean that the parallel between giving away the body and sacrifice is not justified after all?

I think it is the other way round. These cases of giving away the body may show that we tend to impose a scheme on the sacrifice that is not always valid: the third party in the sacrifice is not obligatory. A sacrificer may immolate a substitute for himself, or indeed kill himself, without this being an offering to a god, or to any being for that matter.

Indian sacrificial literature contains various instances of sacrifices that are not offered to a god. The Creator God – variously called Puruṣa or Prajāpati – created this world by sacrificing himself, but not to anybody. The identification in the *Mahābhārata* of the battle as a sacrifice and Duryodhana as both sacrificer and victim mentions no god to whom this sacrifice is offered. The role of gods in the classical Vedic sacrifice is minimal and often barely more than nominal. And the school of Vedic hermeneutics called Mīmāṃsā goes to the extent of denying that gods have bodies with which they might eat the gifts sacrificed to them, reducing them in this manner to little more than nothing. All these examples suggest, at least at first sight, that the presence of gods in sacrifice is not always necessary.

19 BOUCHER, 2008: 34 draws attention to Śāntideva's unexpected critical remarks regarding giving one's life to an unworthy recipient.

However, the issue may be more complicated than this. Consider the question why anyone should strive after the destruction of him- or herself? The full scheme presented earlier seems to offer some kind of answer: In an ideal sacrifice, the victim is either identical with the sacrificer or with his enemy. So far we have mainly concentrated on the kind of sacrifice in which the victim is identical with the sacrificer. However, the other kind of sacrifice, in which the victim is the sacrificer's enemy, is instructive, too. We know that sacrifices close to this model took place in certain historical societies, most notably among the Aztecs and in the kingdom of Dahomey. Few details of these sacrifices are necessary in order to understand that they imposed, sanctified, a hierarchical relationship on the people involved; through their sacrifices the Aztecs imposed their superiority on their unfortunate neighbours.

Let us now return to the first kind of sacrifice, in which the victim is identical with the sacrificer. Here the initiative is taken by the victim. And it seems reasonable to assume that here, too, a hierarchical relationship is imposed. The victim, here as elsewhere, is the inferior party. But where there is an inferior party, one expects a superior party. Which is the superior party in this case? This superior party can be the divinity, or the ruler, to whom the sacrifice is addressed. But we have seen that the superior party is sometimes absent, both in certain sacrifices and in the gift of the body of bodhisattvas. In these cases the sacrificer's (or bodhisattva's) goal is not to establish his inferiority with respect to any other person, whether human or divine. The goal is abandonment in general, not abandonment to anyone in particular. Abandonment in general came to be seen as the quintessential element of the Vedic sacrifice,[20] and abandonment in general appears to be the motivating force of the bodhisattvas we have considered.

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20 Note the definition of sacrifice adopted in Mīmāṃsā: *yajñaś ca tyāgaḥ* […] *tyāgī ca yajamānaḥ* "abandonment is sacrifice […] and the one who abandons is the sacrificer" (Śabara on Mīmāṃsāsūtra 3.8.10).

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