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A note on the Caraka Saṃhitā and Buddhism

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In an article recently published in *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū* ("An *ātman* by any other name: two non-Buddhist parallels to *antarābhava*", IBK 47(1), 1998, (5)-(11)), Robert Kritzer draws attention to some parallel passages in the Caraka Saṃhitā and in several Buddhist texts, primarily the Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya, concerning the intermediate being (*antarābhava* in the Buddhist texts) which supposedly links two succeeding bodies of one person in the course of transmigration. At the end of his article, while reflecting on the possibility of influence between these texts and on the direction such influence may have taken, Kritzer mentions my name in connection with "a number of points that ... may have been borrowed from Buddhism by the Caraka Saṃhitā".¹ This note is meant to present these points to public scrutiny. It must here be emphasised that these points struck me during a superficial reading of parts of the Caraka Saṃhitā. In other words, this note does not in any way claim to be exhaustive.

1. The Sūtrasthāna of the Caraka Saṃhitā contains the following passage (CS, Sūtra 16.27-38):

*jāyante hetuvaiṣamyād viṣamā dehadhātavaḥ/
 hetusāmyāt samās teṣāṃ svabhāvoparamaḥ sadā //27//
 pravṛttihetur bhāvānāṃ na nirodhe 'sti kāraṇam/
 kecit tatrāpi manyante hetuṃ hetor avartanam //28//
 evam uktārtham ācāryam agniveśo 'bhyabhāṣata/
 svabhāvoparame karma cikitsāprābhṛtasya kim //29//
 bheṣajair viṣamān dhātūn kān samīkurute bhiṣak/
 kā vā cikitsā bhagavan kimarthaṃ vā prayujyate //30//
 tac chiṣyavacanāṃ śrutvā vyājahāra punarvasuḥ/
 śrūyatām atra yā saumya yuktir dṛṣṭā maharṣibhiḥ //31//
 na nāśakāraṇābhāvād bhāvānāṃ nāśakāraṇam/*

¹ This should be the reading. The printed version has: "a number of points that he believes were borrowed from Buddhism by the Caraka Saṃhitā".

*jñāyate nityagasyeva kālasyātyayakāraṇam //32//
 śīghragatvād yathā bhūtas tathā bhāvo vipadyate/
 nīrodhe kāraṇam tasya nāsti naivānyathākriyā //33//*

This passage presents a discussion between Punarvasu and Agniveśa, or more precisely: Ātreya Punarvasu teaches Agniveśa. Verses 27-28 give the initial instruction by Ātreya Punarvasu, verses 29-30 present the questions this inspires Agniveśa to ask, and verses 31-33 give further specifications from the mouth of Ātreya Punarvasu. The subject-matter of the discussion is momentariness, its proof, and the difficulties it provokes.² If this general subject-matter might suggest some affinity with the Buddhist doctrine of momentariness, the details of this passage allow us to be more precise.

The above passage can be translated as follows:³

The elements (*dhātu*) of the body get into disequilibrium due to imbalance of the cause and they enjoy equilibrium when the cause is in balance. They always have a natural termination. (27)

There is a cause of the production of things, but there is no cause of their disappearance. Some think that there is a cause of that, too, viz., the non-functioning of a cause. (28)

After the preceptor finished saying this, Agniveśa addressed [him in the following manner]: If [disequilibrium] terminates naturally, then what is the task of a skilled physician? (29)

What imbalanced elements does the healer bring to equilibrium by means of medicaments? What is the nature of therapeutics, Sir, and why is it used? (30)

Having heard those words of his disciple, Punarvasu said: O gentle one! hear the reasoning observed by the great sages (*ṛṣi*). (31)

Since there is no cause of destruction, the cause of destruction of things is not known, just as the cause of the lapse of the eternally moving time [is not known]. (32)

Because it passes so rapidly, a thing perishes the moment it has come into being. There is no cause of its disappearance, nor does it undergo modification. (33)

The proof of momentariness based on the non-existence of causes of destruction is known from certain Buddhist texts. Rospatt (1995: 178) observes: "With the exception of the [Śrāvaka]bhūmi, a proof based on the non-existence of causes of destruction is

² The passage does not seem to have attracted much attention in the secondary literature. An exception is Śrīvāstava, 1983: 119 f.

³ Cp. Sharma, 1981: 112-113.

adduced in all the early Yogācāra sources known to me that establish the momentariness of all conditioned entities." The Vibhāṣā, moreover, attributes this position to the Dārṣṭāntikas (ibid., p. 187). This proof of momentariness is particularly prominent in the works of Vasubandhu, both as representative of Sautrāntika and of Yogācāra.

2. Surendranath Dasgupta, in the second volume of his *A History of Indian Philosophy* (1922: 302, 307), draws attention to a passage from the Śārīrasthāna of the Caraka Saṃhitā:⁴

The embryo, indeed, is a modification of ether, wind, fire, water, and earth; it is the seat of consciousness. In this way the embryo is an aggregate of modifications of the five elements and the seat of consciousness. For this [consciousness] has been called its sixth *dhātu*.

Ether (*antarikṣa*), wind (*vāyu*), fire (*agni*), water (*toya*), earth (*bhūmi*) and consciousness (*cetanā*) are therefore the six *dhātus* that somehow constitute the embryo. But the Buddhist texts know from an early time onward a list of six *dhātus* that is remarkably similar to this one.⁵ The Saṃyutta Nikāya (II 248; III 231) enumerates *pathavīdhātu*, *āpodhātu*, *tejodhātu*, *vāyodhātu*, *ākāśadhātu* and *viññādhātu*; this is an enumeration of the six *dhātus* earth, water, fire, wind, ether, and consciousness, the same ones as in the Caraka Saṃhitā, but in a different order, and using different terms. Dasgupta refers to a passage from the Śālistambasūtra, cited by Candrakīrti in his Prasannapadā, which describes the formation of the embryo through the combination of these same six *dhātus* (*ṣaṇṇāṃ dhātūnāṃ samavāyāt*).⁶ To this we can add that the Śikṣāsamuccaya — which is acquainted with, and cites, this passage from the Śālistambasūtra⁷ — describes some pages later the person as consisting of the six *dhātus* (*ṣaḍdhātur ayaṃ ... puruṣaḥ*), and then enumerates the same six *dhātus*.⁸

3. The first Adhyāya of the Sūtrasthāna mentions *rajas* and *tamas*, the two disturbing factors of the mind, and enumerates a number of ways in which they can be appeased.

⁴ CS, Śārīra 4.6: *garbhas tu khalv antarikṣavāyavagnitoyabhūmivikāraś cetanādhiṣṭhānabhūtaḥ/ evam anayā yuktyā pañcamahābhūtavikārasamudāyātmake garbhas cetanādhiṣṭhānabhūtaḥ/ sa hy asya ṣaṣṭho dhātur uktaḥ/*

⁵ Cp. Lindtner, 1997. Ro{u, 1978: 160 emphasises the difference between *cetanā* and *viññāna*.

⁶ BBu 4 p. 561; BST 10 p. 275 l. 20-21. The passage occurs Śāl(S) p. 8 l. 5. Compare this passage with CS, Sūtra 11.32: *ṣaḍdhātusamudāyād garbhajanma*.

⁷ BBu 1 p. 220 f.; BST 11 p. 120 f.

⁸ BBu 1 p. 244; BST 11 p. 131.

They are:⁹ insight (*jñāna*), discursive knowledge (*viññāna*),¹⁰ mental firmness (*dhairya*), *smṛti*, and yogic concentration (*samādhi*). The problematic term is *smṛti*, which the commentator explains as *anubhūtārthasmarāṇa* "recalling things one has experienced". But this hardly fits the context. Much more satisfactory is the Buddhist usage of *smṛti*, often translated as "mindfulness". Indeed, *smṛti* and *samādhi* occur next to each other in the so-called noble eightfold path, of which they occupy steps seven and eight respectively. Buddhist usage of *smṛti* is also found in Yoga Sūtra 1.20 (*śraddhāvīryasmṛtisamādhiprajñāpūrvaka itareṣām*), which presents this term in an enumeration which coincides with the five Buddhist faculties or powers (*indriya / bala*); cp. La Vallée Poussin 1937: 228. The Yoga Bhāṣya, while commenting on this sūtra, uses the Buddhist expression *smṛtyupasthāna* "application of mindfulness".

4. The first Adhyāya of the Śārīrasthāna presents concepts of the person (*puruṣa*).¹¹ We find here the idea of the person as a collection, a whole (*rāśī*) of various elements. In verse 16 it is the whole of the six *dhātus*, i.e., ether, wind, fire, water, earth, and consciousness (*cetanā*) (see above). In verse 35 the constituent elements are twenty-four in number, no doubt the twenty-four principles of Sāṃkhya: *avyakta*, *buddhi*, *ahaṃkāra*, *manas*, the five senses, the five elements, the five qualities. Verse 85 speaks of the *saṃyogapuruṣa*, the "person due to contact (?)", apparently in the same sens. The same Adhyāya also knows the notion of a highest self. Indeed, verse 53 contrasts the two, pointing out that the highest self (*paramātman*) is without beginning, whereas the person conceived of as a whole (*rāśisaṃjñā puruṣa*) is born from acts produced by confusion, desire and hatred.¹² Many Buddhists looked upon the person (often *pudgala*) as a composite entity.¹³

Buddhism and medicine have often been companions. Zysk (1991; cp. 1999) finds the earliest traces of Āyurvedic medicine in the Buddhist canon, and Jean Filliozat (1934) drew attention to the fact that the two travelled out of India together. The famous medical author called Vāgbhaṭa may have been a Buddhist (Meulenbeld, 1999: I A: 602-612).

⁹ CS, Sūtra 1.57-58: *vāyuḥ pittaṃ kaphaś coktaḥ śārīro doṣasaṃgrahaḥ/ mānasaḥ punar uddiṣṭo rajaś ca tama eva ca// praśāmyaty auśadhaiḥ pūrvo daivayuktivyapāśrayaiḥ/ mānaso jñānavijñānadhairyasmṛtisamādhībhiḥ//*

¹⁰ I follow Cakrapānidatta's interpretation of these terms: *jñāna* = *adhyātmaprajñāna*, *viññāna* = *śāstrajñāna*.

¹¹ Ramakrishna Rao, 1962.

¹² CS, Śārīra 1.53: *prabhavo na hy anāditvād vidyate paramātmanaḥ/ puruṣo rāśisaṃjñas tu mohecchādveśakarmajaḥ//*

¹³ Cp. e.g. Bronkhorst, 2000: 85 ff.

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After most of the above had been written, the first two volumes G. Jan Meulenbeld's *A History of Indian Medical Literature* (1999, 2000) — which summarize and comment much earlier research, not all of which is unfortunately accessible to me — came to my attention. One reads here (vol. I A, p. 110-111, with notes in vol. I B, p. 191 f.): “The question whether or not Buddhist influences are detectable in the Carakasamhitā is touched upon frequently in the secondary literature, but few scholars have searched seriously for these traces. ... One of the few Indian scholars to study the subject seriously is P.V. Sharma, in whose opinion the following elements point to an acquaintance of the author of the Carakasamhitā with early Buddhist doctrines. The *kṣaṇabhāṅgavāda* (the doctrine concerning the momentariness of any conglomeration of elements) was known, as well as the concept of *svabhāvopama* (the cessation of the *dhātus* due to their *svabhāva*). ... The *śaḍdhātuka* nature of the embryo and the individual human being is laid stress on.” Other elements (and authors) are also enumerated. Meulenbeld comments (p. 111): “Although not all the features, highlighted by P.V. Sharma and others, are convincing, it seems nevertheless reasonable to concede that traces of Buddhist thought are clearly discernible in the Carakasamhitā and belong to the layer antedating Dṛdhabala's revision.” It appears from these remarks that the above points 1. and 2. are not altogether new; they may be taken to continue the discussion of P.V. Sharma and Surendranath Dasgupta in particular. Points 3. and 4., for whatever they are worth, may be new.

P.V. Sharma's conclusion to the extent that the Carakasamhitā "was composed in a period when Buddhism was prevalent side by side with Brāhmaṇic culture, or in an age when, though Buddhism was still a living force, Brāhmaṇism was gaining the upper hand, i.e. during the third or early second century B.C., at the juncture of the Maurya and Śuṅga periods" (Meulenbeld, 1999: I A: 111) is hard to reconcile with point 1, above. The doctrine of momentariness was not yet part of Buddhism at that early date, and the proof of momentariness based on the non-existence of causes of destruction may be a relatively late development of this doctrine.

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Abbreviations:

ALB	The Brahmavidyā, Adyar Library Bulletin, Madras
ALS	Adyar Library Series, Madras
ANIS	Alt- und Neu-Indische Studien, Hamburg
BBu	Bibliotheca Buddhica, St. Petersburg (Leningrad)
BST	Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, Darbhanga
CS	Caraka Samhitā
IBK	Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū, Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies, Tōkyō
JA	Journal Asiatique, Paris
MCB	Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques, Bruxelles
Śāl(S)	Śālistambasūtra, ed. N. Aiyaswami Sastri, Madras 1950 (ALS 76)