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THE RELIABILITY OF TRADITION

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From among the definitions given in dictionaries of the term *tradition* we must retain the one that specifies that a tradition is a cultural feature (as an attitude, belief, custom, institution) preserved or evolved from the past.¹ This definition reminds us that traditions are handed down from generation to generation, but also that most traditions are accompanied by the claim, often implicit, that they preserve an earlier state of affairs. A tradition is therefore something which exists in the present (any present), but which at the same time makes claims about the past. If we assist at a traditional dance performance, we are not merely entertained; we are at the same time informed about how people danced in the past.

It is this claim about the past which makes it possible to speak about the reliability of a tradition. Traditions can make an implicit claim about the past which is not true. Indeed, traditions can be newly created.² In that case they are strictly speaking no traditions at all, or at best unreliable traditions. Traditions, moreover, normally have a role to play in the present (each present) in which they occur: they may be linked to nationalistic movements, or to the sense of belonging that unites members of a certain group, or indeed they may be expressions of a religious identity. That is to say, traditions are rarely innocent survivals from a distant past, and far more often factors that play a role in the present. Traditions may be needed, which may tempt certain people to create new ones when the need arises.

Reflections like these should remind us of the fact that the study of traditions is not at all the same as the study of history. Traditions may at times provide information about the past, but this is never self-evident, and is always in need of verification. It should also be clear that people who like their traditions do not for that reason necessarily like their past. Indeed, historical research that brings to light that this or that tradition does not really continue a feature or habit from the past may not always be welcomed. The lover of traditional dances may not be pleased to learn that the dances he is so fond of are in fact a

¹ Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1986.

² For examples, see Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983.

recent creation. This implies that traditions, once in place, may have a tendency to force the past into a straight jacket: the past *has* to be seen in this particular way, and dissonant opinions are not accepted.

Classical Indian culture has many traditions, and does not look upon these as mere sources of amusement. Traditions constitute the heart of much that we call classical Indian culture, and no pains are spared to preserve these traditions and keep them alive. This applies to the present, but also to the past. There are plenty of reasons to believe that traditions played an important role during much of Indian history. Since in each tradition a vision of this or that aspect of the past is implied, the network of traditions that make up classical Indian culture is inseparable from a vision of India's past, which is, to be sure, multifaceted and complex. An especially important tradition, which often serves as a sort of backbone to some of the others and which has a particularly close bearing on this vision of India's past, is the Vedic tradition. The importance of this tradition, or more precisely of the textual corpus that is preserved by this tradition, is illustrated by the fact that certain other traditions have borrowed its name: Veda. India's longest, oldest and most important Sanskrit epic, the Mahābhārata, calls itself the fifth Veda. The fundamental text on Sanskrit dramaturgy and related matters, the Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata, makes a similar claim. Indian medicine is known by the name Āyur-veda, the Veda of long life. Other traditions claim links to the Veda without necessarily borrowing its name. Obviously these traditions felt that they could add to their prestige by imitating the Veda, or by claiming a close connection with it.

The Veda occupies a very special position in the vision of India's past that came to predominate in Brahmanical circles. Briefly put, the Veda is, or is closely connected with, the origin of all there is. The most traditional representatives of Vedic orthodoxy, known by the name Mīmāṃsakas, maintained that the Veda has no beginning in time at all; it has always been there. This they often linked up with the idea that the world has no beginning either, that it too was always there, essentially in the same form in which we know it. Other currents of thought do accept that the world we live in had a beginning in time, but do not accept that the Veda was created along with all the other things that constitute this world; on the contrary, creation itself was determined by, or carried out in accordance with, the words of the Veda. In this view the Veda predates the creation of our present world. The creation of our world itself is often thought of as the most recent instalment of an infinitely long series of creations, which has no beginning in time. The Veda stands above or outside this infinite series, and is sometimes depicted as being pronounced anew at the beginning of each new creation, exactly in the same form as in all the preceding ones.

This timelessness of the Veda also finds expression in other ways. The language of the Veda, i.e. Sanskrit, is as eternal and as unchangeable as the Veda itself. Language change does occur, but not in the language of the Veda, but in its corruptions which have led to the many languages that are spoken today. *Development* is hardly the term to be used for this process, which is rather an ongoing process of corruption of the original perfect language which is Sanskrit.

The essential timelessness of the Veda — or at any rate its hoary antiquity, which amounts pretty much to the same thing — has not disappeared from India with the arrival of modernity. There may not be all that many people left these days who maintain that the Veda is literally beginningless and eternal, numerous are those who assign to the Veda incredibly ancient dates. Nor has the Veda stopped, in the Indian semi-popular imagination, being the beginning and source of all that it is worth knowing. “Research” discovers evidence for the presence of the most recent scientific and technological developments in the Veda, and many a Hindu may expect that further research into this ancient textual tradition may bring to light useful knowledge such as, for example, a cure for aids.

Modern scholarship, one would expect, is not influenced by this traditional attitude towards the Veda. This optimistic expectation is not in total agreement with the facts. Modern Indological scholarship, which was initially a European affair, brought along with it its own set of presuppositions, which were in some respects not all that different from the Indian beliefs.

Note, to begin with, that the “discovery” of Sanskrit by European scholarship came at a time when the idea of India as the cradle of all civilisation had numerous adherents in Europe. Edwin Bryant (2001: 18 f.) enumerates a number of representatives of this position, among them the astronomer Bailly and Voltaire, Pierre de Sonnerat, Schelling, Friedrich von Schlegel, and Johann-Gottfried Herder. Sanskrit came in this way to be looked upon not just as one branch language of the Indo-European family, but as its parent-language, or at any rate very close to it. Lord A. Curzon, the governor-general of India and eventual chancellor of Oxford, maintained as late as 1855 that “the race of India branched out and multiplied into that of the great Indo-European family”. Scholarly interest for Sanskrit remained for a long time inseparable from the quest for the original Indo-European language. As in India, the study of Sanskrit remained also in Europe for quite a while closely linked to the quest for origins.

These romantic ideas about India did not survive for long among serious scholars, at least not in these extreme forms. It was soon discovered that Sanskrit was not the original

Indo-European language. The discovery by archaeologists of the Indus valley civilisation, which in the opinion of many preceded the period in which the Veda was composed, has placed the Veda in a relatively recent historical period.

However, in other respects modern scholarship has come up with results which have boosted the idea of the reliability of the Vedic tradition. The study of early phonological texts has shown that the oral preservation of at least certain Vedic texts has been more faithful than one might have considered possible. Max Müller was the first to edit and study the Ṛgveda Prātiśākhya, an old text which describes the phonology of the Ṛgveda in great detail. Müller discovered in this way that the Ṛgveda, which is the oldest text of the Vedic corpus, had been handed down for a period of well over two thousand years without the slightest change even in a single sound.³ Some scholars nowadays go to the extent of stating that present-day recitation preserves the Ṛgveda and other Vedic texts so well that one might speak of a tape-recording.⁴ The classical Indian belief in the unchangeable nature of the Veda has in a way been vindicated by these and other similar findings.

Modern scholarship has discarded many beliefs to which it was originally attracted, for whatever reason. No, Sanskrit is no longer the original language, it is not even the original Indo-European language. No, India no longer represents the origin of all culture, nor of all philosophy and wisdom. Yes, ancient India culture was “just another” major culture, less old than some (e.g. Egypt), older than others (e.g. Islam). One might like to think that modern scholarship has been able to free itself from all unreliable presuppositions and unfounded beliefs.

As so often, reality is more complex. There can be no doubt that in-depth research has dismantled numerous preconceived ideas, both those of Indian origin and those that were European. The belief in an original invasion by conquering Aryans who brought civilisation to India, a belief so convenient to Western colonisers and invented by Europeans, is one of those that have fallen by the wayside. Indeed, the reaction in scholarship against colonialism and its intellectual heritage has done much good in unmasking certain types of presuppositions. But not all presuppositions are connected with colonialism or colonialist attitudes. Presuppositions that are pleasing to those belonging to

³ Müller, 1869: 3: “Wenn man bedenkt, dass das Prātiśākhya nicht nur Tausende von Stellen aus den beiden Texten (i.e., padapāṭha and saṃhitāpāṭha of the Ṛgveda, JB) citirt, sondern auch die anscheinend geringfügigsten Abweichungen des einen von dem andern auf das genaueste registriert, und dass in allen wesentlichen Punkten unsere besten Handschriften der beiden Texte mit den Angaben des Prātiśākhya übereinstimmen, so darf man wohl mit Zuversicht schliessen, dass wir wirklich den Text des Rig-Veda so besitzen, wie er vor mehr als 2000 Jahren den Verfassern des Prātiśākhya vorlag.”

⁴ So Witzel, 1995: 91.

the culture studied will be less systematically subjected to critical assessment and may linger on, either because no one is aware of them, or because it is considered politically correct (or merely convenient) to leave them in place. It is to some of these ideas that we now turn.

We have seen that the Veda, in Brahmanical tradition, is at the origin of almost all there is. In this form this idea has no appeal to modern scholarship. However, in a weakened form it is still very much alive, even among serious researchers. Questions about the origin of this or that feature of classical Indian culture are routinely investigated by tracing its roots in the Veda. At first sight this may seem reasonable, given that the oldest parts of the Veda are certainly the oldest literary remains we have from that part of the world. Yet on closer inspection it will become clear that it only makes sense if one accepts another presupposition, namely, that all those features of classical Indian culture belong to traditions that have their origin in the Veda. This is not self-evidently the case. Other influences may have been at work which were altogether different from the Veda and its adherents.

It goes without saying that the question here raised has to be investigated separately for each case that may attract our attention, and that general and unsupported assertions are of little use. Some classical traditions may derive directly from Vedic roots, others may not. Unfortunately modern scholarship often avoids the question altogether, and has a tendency to dive straight into the Vedic texts. An example is the research into the origins of the Sanskrit drama. In this case it is particularly simple to think of a non-Vedic source. The classical Sanskrit drama being a court drama, it is hard *not* to think of the rulers who, on the Indian sub-continent itself, cultivated a courtly drama not long before the Sanskrit drama manifested itself. These rulers were, of course, the Greeks, whose historical presence in North-Western India (and whose love for drama) is not contested. In spite of this, Indological research discards the presence of the Greeks as a possible factor in the development of the Sanskrit drama, and prefers to concentrate on possible Vedic roots, knowing all the while that Vedic culture had no courtly drama and late-Vedic and early post-Vedic culture no sympathy for this kind of entertainment. By way of justification for this omission Indologists tend to refer back to arguments which were originally presented by Sylvain Lévi at the end of the nineteenth century, but which are outdated in the present state of our knowledge and stopped being supported by their originator himself later on in his life. In spite of this, scholars refrain from carrying out a renewed reflection on this issue

and obviously feel more comfortable with their old habit of searching for Vedic antecedents.⁵

There are serious reasons for exercising restraint while looking for the origin of everything Indian in the Veda. It is becoming ever more clear that it is not justified to identify the Aryans — i.e. those who called themselves *ārya*, the authors and early users of the Vedic texts — with the Indo-Aryans — the speakers of Indo-Aryan languages.⁶ Those who adhered to the *ārya* ideology (the ‘Aryans’) were no doubt a sub-group of the Indo-Aryans, but it is by no means evident that they were in the early centuries more than a minority. And it is not at all certain that this minority was in any way representative of the other speakers of Indo-Aryan. Indeed, “the emergence of an *ārya* ideology can be traced ... to the geographical milieu of the Ṛgvedic hymns, bounded by the Indus and Sarasvatī rivers, and need not be linked to the spread of Indo-Aryan languages.”⁷

Few scholars nowadays would doubt that Indian civilisation has other sources than only the Veda. The very presence in South-Asia of speakers of languages belonging to other families, such as Dravidian and Munda, supports this. Scholars like to speculate what elements in Indian civilisation might have “pre-Aryan” roots. However, even the early speakers of Indo-Aryan languages themselves were most probably divided in groups many of which did not adhere to, or even know about, the *ārya* ideology that finds expression in the Vedic corpus. Unfortunately only the Vedic Indians have left us a literary corpus whose oldest parts date back to a period from which we have no other literary remains. A close inspection of the other literary remains that we do possess (all of them admittedly younger than the oldest parts of the Veda) indicates that, among the speakers of Indo-Aryan, there existed at least one other important ideology, utterly different from the *ārya* ideology, which left its traces not only in non-Vedic movements and religions, but deeply influenced the tradition which saw itself as the continuation of the Vedic tradition: Brahmanism or, if you like, Hinduism.

I am not the first to draw attention to the ideology of those who often appear in the texts under the name Śramaṇas. In order to do justice to my predecessors, but also to

⁵ For details, see Bronkhorst, 2004.

⁶ See e.g. Parpola, 1988: 219: “we must distinguish between the modern use of the name ‘Aryan’ to denote a branch of the Indo-European language family, and the ancient tribal name used of themselves by many, but not necessarily all, peoples who have spoken those languages.” Similarly Erdosy, 1995: 3: “Until recently, archaeologists, and to a lesser extent linguists, had persistently confused ‘Aryans’ with ‘Indo-Aryans’.” Many scholars distinguish, often on linguistic grounds, two or more waves of immigration of “Aryans”, only one of which is responsible for the production of the Vedas; cf. Deshpande, 1995: 70 ff.; Witzel, 1995a: 322 ff.

⁷ Erdosy, 1995: 3.

introduce some important qualifications, I cite a passage from the third edition of G. C. Pande's *Studies in the Origins of Buddhism* (1983: 261):⁸

“We find, thus, that in the Vedic period there existed two distinct religious and cultural traditions — the strictly orthodox and Aryan tradition of the Brāhmaṇas, and, on the fringe of their society, the straggling culture of the Munis and Śramaṇas, most probably going back to pre-Vedic and pre-Aryan origins. Towards the close of the Vedic period, the two streams tended to mingle and the result was that great religious ferment from which Buddhism originated.”

The part of this citation which I fully support concerns the “two distinct religious and cultural traditions” that existed in the Vedic period. Besides the *ārya* ideology incorporated in the Veda there was the ideology of the Śramaṇas. This ideology belonged to certain ascetics commonly referred to as Śramaṇas, but obviously not only to them. Ascetics come from social milieus, and are never more than a tiny minority in their particular milieu. The ideology of the Śramaṇas (to be discussed below) was not the exclusive property of those who left the world to become ascetics, but characterised the community in which they grew up.

It is significant that Pande, in spite of drawing this important distinction between two altogether different cultures that coexisted in the Vedic period, feels obliged to speculate as to the origins of the culture of the Śramaṇas. He calls it a “straggling culture”, which suggests that it had wandered off from the earlier Vedic culture. He also speculates that the culture of the Śramaṇas most probably had pre-Vedic and pre-Aryan origins. All this is speculation which is not based on any reliable evidence. It merely distracts attention from the important observation that already several centuries before the beginning of the Common Era (i.e., at the time when Buddhism and Jainism made their appearance) there existed in northern India an identifiable culture, the culture of the Śramaṇas, which had no visible links with Vedic culture.

There is a further element in Pande's passage which has to be considered with much caution. It is the mention of Munis besides Śramaṇas. This mention suggests that there is a historical connection between the Śramaṇas here talked about and the Munis and other marginal figures referred to in early Vedic texts from the Ṛgveda onward. The assumption of such a connection could be misleading, as will become clear below.

⁸ Other authors who have drawn attention to the separate tradition of the Śramaṇas include A. K. Warder and Padmanabh S. Jaini.

In the terminology here adopted, the Śramaṇa tradition is the one which has given rise to religious movements such as Buddhism, Jainism and Ājīvikism; all of these can in a way be said to belong to this tradition. This Śramaṇa tradition is distinct from the Vedic tradition and cannot be derived from it. A variety of arguments support this position. They are unfortunately rarely taken into consideration by the majority of scholars, who go on repeating the by now classical *opposite* position according to which certain developments recorded in Vedic literature are the basis from which all those other religious movements arose. I am primarily referring to the ideas about karma and rebirth, and the possibility of liberation from these, which we find in the Vedic Upaniṣads. These ideas — so the argument runs — arose at the time of the Upaniṣads; all developments in which they play a role must therefore be more recent. This way of reasoning is at the basis of all subsequent reflection, whether it concerns the background of early Buddhism and Jainism, or questions of chronology. A structure of mutually coherent ideas has thus been erected, from which it is not easy for the modern scholar to escape.

And yet there are clear indications that it is wrong. This is not the occasion to repeat all the arguments against it which I have presented elsewhere, but some cannot be mentioned often enough. The conviction, for example, that the ideas of karma, rebirth and liberation made their first appearance in the Upaniṣads is contradicted by those Upaniṣads themselves. They often ascribe those ideas to outsiders, and on one occasion the Kṣatriya who supposedly revealed this knowledge to the Brahmins pointed out to them that, because Brahmins had not been aware of this important knowledge, worldly power had so far belonged to Kṣatriyas. I am not, of course, trying to revive the old theory according to which these new ideas had been thought out by Kṣatriyas.⁹ My emphasis is quite different: These Upaniṣadic passages may well be the only ones in the whole of sacred Brahmanical literature — Vedic and post-Vedic — where it is publicly admitted that a new idea was introduced into the Vedic tradition by outsiders. We are well advised to take this admission seriously.

It is also clear that these new ideas were ignored for a long time by many within the Brahmanical tradition. The Mīmāṃsakas — representatives of the most orthodox Brahmins if there are any — still ignored them a thousand years after these Upaniṣadic passages had been composed. Other supposedly Brahmanical texts, such as the Mahābhārata, appear to be unaware of them in many of their narrative portions; these ideas become more prominent

⁹ Nor am I denying that there may have been some association with Kṣatriyas; see Salomon, 1995.

in the didactic parts.¹⁰ There can be no doubt that the ideas of karma, rebirth, and liberation did gradually find their way into the Brahmanical traditions, but the nature of this process of infiltration has been obscured in modern research by the belief that these ideas were part and parcel of those traditions since Upaniṣadic times.

A more thorough study of this process of infiltration brings to light fascinating details. It shows, for example, the way in which the so-called *āśrama* system unites originally different forms of asceticism.¹¹ It also shows how most of what we call Brahmanical philosophy is a response to challenges that originated in the Śramaṇa tradition. In other words, what is here called the Śramaṇa tradition did not only give rise to non-Vedic religions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Ājīvikism. It also exerted a lasting and often determining influence on many features that came in due time to be associated with the orthodox Brahmanical tradition. In what follows I will concentrate on one such feature, viz. Yoga and related issues, against the background of the observations just made.

Let us begin with the Yogasūtras. They are often described as Patañjali's Yogasūtras. This attribution of the Yogasūtras to someone called Patañjali is common among modern scholars, yet it is not based on reliable evidence. Those who attribute the Yogasūtras to Patañjali usually ascribe the Yogabhāṣya to someone called Vyāsa. This attribution is late, and is contradicted by the earliest extant testimonies. Several authors — among them Devapāla the author of a commentary on the Laugākṣi Gṛhyasūtra, Vācaspatimiśra the author of the Nyāyavārttikatātparyāṭīkā, and Śrīdhara the author of the Nyāyakandalī — cite sentences from the Yogabhāṣya and attribute them to Patañjali. What is more, the colophons of the combined Yogasūtras plus Yogabhāṣya do not distinguish between sūtras and bhāṣya, but call the two together Yogaśāstra; this Yogaśāstra they call *pātañjala*, which means: the Yogaśāstra of Patañjali. No ancient tradition has preserved the Yogasūtras independently of the Yogabhāṣya, and a detailed analysis of the text provides us with reasons to believe that the author of the Yogabhāṣya brought the Yogasūtras together, at least in some cases from different sources, and composed a commentary, the bhāṣya, which sometimes demonstrably deviated from the original intention of the sūtras. Since I have dealt with these issues in an article that has come out long ago, I will not enter into details.¹²

¹⁰ Brockington, 1998: 244 ff.

¹¹ Bronkhorst, 1998.

¹² Bronkhorst, 1985

However, the same colophons that ascribe the *Yogaśāstra* — i.e. the *Yogasūtras* plus *Yogabhāṣya* — to Patañjali, also describe that *Yogaśāstra* as *sāṃkhyapravacana* “expository of Sāṃkhya”. That is to say, these colophons do not describe the *Yogaśāstra* as presenting a separate philosophy, namely the Yoga philosophy, but as presenting the Sāṃkhya philosophy. This is not surprising, because an analysis of the theoretical positions taken by the *Yogabhāṣya* shows that they coincide in all essentials with the positions ascribed to the Sāṃkhya teacher Vindhyavāsin in the *Yuktidīpikā*, called “the most significant commentary on the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*” by its most recent editors (Wezler & Motegi, 1998). The idea of a separate Yoga philosophy did not yet exist at that time.¹³ There is therefore no need to search for the early history of the *Yoga philosophy*, for there was none. We can concentrate on the early history of *Yoga practice*. The identification of the theoretical positions taken in the *Yogabhāṣya* as being those of Vindhyavāsin allows us to date this text at least approximately. Vindhyavāsin is known to have lived around the year 400 CE. The *Yogabhāṣya* may date from that time, or from slightly later. We have already seen that the *Yogasūtras* cannot be dated earlier, at least not in the collected form in which we know them.

Modern scholars have noted the indebtedness to Buddhism of the Yoga practice presented in the *Yogasūtras* since 1900. Émile Senart drew attention to it in an article that was published in that very year. Louis de La Vallée Poussin returned to the topic and explored it further in an article that came out in 1937. I myself have been able to draw attention to some further elements borrowed from Buddhist practice.¹⁴ The influence of Buddhism on the *Yogasūtras* is not therefore in doubt. It does however raise a number of serious questions, such as: Has Yoga practice always been influenced by Buddhism? Is Yoga practice nothing but a borrowing from Buddhism, dressed in a slightly adjusted theoretical garb? Do we have to look for the origin of Yoga in Buddhism?

The answer to all these questions, in my opinion, is: no. The *Yogasūtras* present us with a mixture, part of which is of Buddhist origin, and part of which is not. As a matter of fact, we can study the earlier history of Yoga by leaving the *Yogasūtras* for the time being on one side and concentrating on earlier sources. There are plenty of those, among them a number of Upaniṣads (*Kaṭha*, *Śvetāśvatara*, *Maitrāyaṇīya*, and others) and of course the *Mahābhārata*. The Yoga we encounter in these texts is as a rule quite different from that in

¹³ Bronkhorst, 1981.

¹⁴ Bronkhorst, 1993: 71 ff.

the Yogasūtras. The emphasis is here on motionlessness of body and mind. One passage from the Mahābhārata should serve as an illustration:¹⁵

Having made his senses firm with his mind, ... and having made his mind (*manas*) firm with his intellect (*buddhi*), he is motionless like a stone (14). He should be without trembling like a pillar, and motionless like a mountain; the wise who know to follow the precepts then call him ‘one engaged in Yoga’ (*yukta*) (15).

Suppression of bodily and mental activity, which often includes the suppression of breathing, are a frequent theme in those early texts. This theme can be followed further back in time. Its earliest manifestation in the surviving literature is linked to the Jainas and Ājīvikas; this we know from the Jaina canonical texts of the Śvetāmbaras (the Digambaras have not left us any texts from the earliest period, and the Ājīvikas no texts at all), but also from Buddhist texts that criticise the Jainas. There is therefore no doubt that motionlessness of body and mind was an ideal which many early ascetics aspired to, and also that this ideal was not confined to just one religious current. The popularity of this ideal should not surprise us. Motionlessness of body and mind is linked to the belief that activity — i.e. motion of body and mind — leads to rebirth and continued suffering. Escape from the cycle of rebirths was hence believed to be possible through the discontinuation of all bodily and mental activity. This conviction could take extreme forms, such as that of seeking death through inactivity at the end of a long process during which one would remain standing, refusing to eat and in the end suppressing the breath, meanwhile keeping one's mind completely motionless. But extreme or not, it is clear that this conviction is necessarily connected with the belief in karma and rebirth. And this belief, as I pointed out earlier, belonged originally to the Śramaṇa tradition. It is not therefore surprising that our earliest evidence for this kind of practices comes from Jainism, which promulgated these practices not only at the time of Mahāvīra (a contemporary of the Buddha) but already at the time of Pārśva, who according to tradition lived 250 years before him.

Having discussed one of the two main historical roots of the practices of the Yogasūtras, we now turn to the other one. This, as already indicated, is Buddhism. The question we have to address is: how is Buddhism to be situated with regard to the Śramaṇa tradition on one hand, and the Vedic tradition on the other. The easy answer to this question is that

¹⁵ Mhbh 12.294.14-15: *sthīrīkṛtyendriyagrāmaṃ manasā mithileśvara / mano buddhyā sthiraṃ kṛtvā pāsāṇa iva niścalaḥ //14// sthāṇuvac cāpy akampaḥ syād girivac cāpi niścalaḥ / budhā vidhividhānājñās tadā yuktaṃ pracakṣate //15//*

Buddhism arose from the Śramaṇa tradition. The full answer is more complicated, and I will now try to disentangle some of the complications that are relevant in the present context.

Buddhism, like Jainism and other currents belonging to the Śramaṇa tradition, is based on the belief in karma and rebirth. However, Buddhism gave a different twist to this belief. Recall that the early Jainas and those others who practised motionlessness of body and mind were convinced that all and any activity would carry undesired consequences. The only effective response was therefore to stop all activities, voluntary or involuntary, conscious or unconscious. Only total suppression of all bodily and mental activities, including in the end even breathing and thinking, could in this way liberate a person from repeated existence. Buddhism, on the other hand, did *not* share the belief that every single movement carries karmic consequences. No, only activities that were the result of desire had this effect. More precisely, desire is the force that carries a person from one existence to the next.

Given this different point of departure, the practices of the early Buddhists could not but be different from those of the Jainas, Ājīvikas and others. It would of course be totally pointless for a Buddhist to practise complete motionlessness of body and mind. He might not physically or mentally act in that case, but his desires would remain unaffected. No, the way the early Buddhists conceived of karma and rebirth entailed that they needed a different practice altogether. Their aim was to eradicate desire and therefore to effect a psychological transformation. Asceticism based on immobility would not bring that about. What they needed was a psychological method. This is what the Buddhist texts contain in the form of succeeding levels of meditation. These are supposed to allow the practitioner to reach ever deeper levels of interiorisation. At the deepest level of interiorisation he is supposedly able to bring about the psychological changes required. He then emerges from his meditation a different person, free from desire and liberated from rebirth and suffering. This is what the Buddha claimed had happened to him, and to all others entitled to be called arhats.

For our present purposes it is important to see that the mental exercises of Buddhists and most others who continued the Śramaṇa tradition were profoundly different from each other. Both might use the same terms — *dhyāna* is used both by Buddhists and Jainas, for example — but this does not prove that they did the same thing. Most ascetics belonging to the Śramaṇa tradition tried to suppress all mental activity, which includes consciousness itself. In Buddhism suppression of consciousness was no aim, and could be no aim, for the meditator was supposed to consciously bring about the required psychological changes at

his deepest level of interiorisation. The Buddhist meditator, even if he did not succeed in eradicating all desires, cultivated modified states of consciousness; the other meditators of the Śramaṇa tradition tried to suppress consciousness altogether.

Historical processes are always messy and irregular. They never present themselves in the kind of pristine purity that would delight the historian. The history of Yoga and meditation in India is no different. The distinction which I have just pointed out between Buddhist meditation and the mental practices of the early Yogins soon got blurred. The textual sources we have to work with show signs of contamination, if you allow me the expression. It is practically impossible to determine whether these sources originated in circles where Yoga and meditation were actually practised. Let us not forget that literary traditions are not normally preserved by practising ascetics. As a result our sources may very well be the products of lineages of teachers and pupils who practised minimally or not at all. Even the *Yogabhāṣya*, as I argued long ago (1985), shows signs that its author may not have had any direct experience of Yogic states. The modern study of Yogic practice and meditational states in ancient India necessarily passes through a prolonged stage of intense philological study of texts which are on the one hand our only source and which may on the other be far removed from the object of our study.

Leaving philological detail aside for the time being, the preceding reflections allow us to conclude that the Yoga of the *Yogasūtras* continues a line of practices that were current in the Śramaṇa tradition. These practices originally concentrated on the immobilisation of body and mind, and were intimately and essentially linked to the belief in karma and rebirth. This lineage continued and finds expression in a number of early Brahmanical texts, and is still recognisably present in the *Yogasūtras*, as for example in its very first sūtra: *yogaś cittavṛttinirodhaḥ*. But another lineage of practices was introduced by Buddhism, based on a different understanding of karma and rebirth. These alternative practices emphasised mental interiorisation, and consequently the search for modified states of consciousness. The Buddhists tried to strictly distinguish their practices from those of the others, but with mitigated success. Mutual influence between the two is discernible from an early date onward, and culminates in the *Yogasūtras*.

It is important to keep in mind that the early tradition of Yoga (using the term is risky, because not all early texts employ it) has, in most of its manifestations, no connection with mysticism in the sense of search for modified states of consciousness. This element was introduced by Buddhism, for the reasons indicated earlier. Before the rise of Buddhism, and

to a considerable extent also after it, Yoga had nothing to do with anything that might be called mystical. That is not to say that there were no people who had mystical experiences; there may always have been such people, in all cultures on earth, including South-Asia. It only means that, in researching the earliest history of Yoga, we should not fall in the trap of collecting early indications of what might look like ecstatic states. Yet this is that has often happened. We all know how often early Yoga is linked to the sages with long hair (*keśin*) mentioned in the Ṛgveda, or with the Vrātyas. Yet their inclusion in early Yoga is based on a fundamental misunderstanding, for early Yoga has nothing to do with ecstatic states, not even (until the arrival of Buddhism) with “enstatic” states.

An equally serious misunderstanding, which still comes up from time to time in careless publications, finds expression in the point of view that Buddhist practice owed much, if not all, to Yoga. This misunderstanding dates from the time when the chronological relationships between various texts was a lot less clear than it is now. There are indeed elements in the Yogasūtras which we also find back in the early Buddhist texts. The Yogasūtras stand however at the end of the long tradition during which Buddhist elements entered into the Yogic tradition, not vice-versa. The kind of Yoga that existed at the time of early Buddhism (it is not clear whether the term Yoga was already used at that time) was firmly rejected by the latter, and replaced by something altogether different.

A further source of confusion has been the fact that the Vedic tradition, too, knew ascetic practices in connection with its rituals. These are however to be understood in their sacrificial context, and have nothing whatsoever to do with the belief in karma and rebirth. Here, too, the later tradition made ever fewer distinctions between the Vedic form of asceticism and the Śramaṇic one, and ended up confounding them completely. Once again the historian is confronted with texts and traditions that are contaminated to different degrees. Yet the early texts distinguish clearly between the two forms of asceticism, and it is clear that the Vedic sacrifice offers no help in tracing the origins of Yoga.¹⁶

The preceding reflections have illustrated that it is a mistake to look for the origin of everything Indian in the Veda. The Vedic tradition is extraordinarily reliable in the way it has preserved the Vedic texts. The accompanying claim that the Veda is the origin of everything, on the other hand, is not reliable at all, and is in many cases demonstrably wrong. Indologists should take heed.

¹⁶ Bronkhorst, 1998.

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