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Studies on Bhartṛhari, 7:
GRAMMAR AS THE DOOR TO LIBERATION[1]

In the beginning of his *Vākyapadīya*, Bhartṛhari describes grammar as *dvāram apavargasya* 'the door to liberation'. This remark has drawn the attention of several scholars, none of whom have been able to explain how the study of grammar could possibly lead to the highest aim of Indian religions, liberation from this world. Some complain about the lack of information about this in the *Vākyapadīya*. E.R. Sreekrishna Sarma, for example, states (1986: 583): "The statements of Bhartṛhari available to us do not speak of the path towards mokṣa except that the study of Vyākaraṇa will ultimately lead one to emancipation." Madeleine Biardeau (1964: 269-70) is more drastic; she believes that Bhartṛhari cannot be taken literally on this point: "Il ne faudrait alors pas trop presser le sens des affirmations, d'ailleurs vagues, concernant la délivrance, ni prendre sans plus de précautions à la lettre l'hémistiche [qui dit]: 'il accède au Brahman suprême'." Other authors think that the expression *śabdapūrva yoga* 'yoga preceeded by words' refers to the path, which would therefore be some kind of yoga.[2] But this expression occurs only in the old *Vṛtti,* whose author is, in all probability, different from the author of the *Vākyapadīya.* In view of all these difficulties Jan E.M. Houben, in his recent and outstanding study of the *Sambandha-samuddeśa* (1992: 418), comes to the following conclusion: "If at all cost one wants to see the [*Vākyapadīya*] as a work contributing to *mokṣa* 'liberation' it is not because an exclusive meditative practice (such as *śabdapūrvayoga*) is advocated in it, but because it contains a wealth of viewpoints and suggestions which stimulate independent reflection on the relation [98] between language, thought and reality (and that insight in this relation was a factor in attaining liberation was accepted by several schools, Brahmanical and Buddhist)." In other words, probably the *Vākyapadīya* is not really intended to help its readers to attain liberation, and if at all, then because it stimulates reflection on the relation between language, thought and reality.

It is appropriate to raise some objections against this conclusion. To begin with, the *Vākyapadīya* states in so many words that grammar is the door to liberation; it is not

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[2]References to the secondary literature in Houben, 1992: 416 n. 439.

our business to discard this statement as not expressing the view of its author, without strong evidence to support this. Second, even though meditative practice is often regarded a method to obtain liberation, this is by no means the only method known in India. Insight is an equally prominent method, which in certain religious currents completely supplants meditation. But this insight — and this leads us to the third objection — is rarely, if ever, concerned with the relation between language, thought and reality. Houben refers in a footnote to the Bhāṣya on *Yoga Sūtra* 3.17, according to which he who knows the difference between word, cognition and thing-meant is 'all-knowing' (*sarvavid*).[3] But this is almost a passing observation in a text which never links this kind of knowledge with liberation. Liberating insight in most Brahmanical traditions is concerned, wholly or at least in part, with the true nature of the self, or soul. The *Vākyapadīya*, on the other hand, never presents insight into the true nature of the soul as in any way conducive to liberation. This leaves us with the question: how does grammar, or the teaching of the *Vākyapadīya*, or both, lead to liberation?

In order to answer this question, we can, with Houben, discard the possibility that Bhartṛhari advocated some sort of meditative way as leading to the ultimate aim. Nothing is said about it in the *Vākyapadīya*, so that, if it played any role at all, then only a minor one. It seems indeed wiser to assume that Bhartṛhari expected some sort of knowledge, or insight, to do the job. But what kind of knowledge?

The *Vākyapadīya* speaks at several places of a special kind of knowledge, which it describes as 'pure', or as belonging to the seers (*ṛṣi*). This kind of knowledge is beyond the reach of language, and has no external objects, [99] or it has the form of the totality of objects. The following verses show this: "Knowledge arising from a defect [in the organs of perception] and supernormal knowledge [of the seers], verbal usage does not take place on the basis of these two; words are based on everyday life."[4] This verse mentions supernormal knowledge, literally knowledge which is not of this world (*alaukika*). Another verse deals with the same topic: "What the seers see and what is established in [the highest] reality, is not expressed in language, it is not based on words."[5] The following two verses introduce the idea of purity: "To have the form of the totality of objects, without [dependence on] a support, is purity of cognition. Some say that [if] it has a purity which is without any form whatsoever, [this] is still higher than that [other purity]. It is indeed a distortion of the cognition, when it follows an outer form. It acquires a kind of impurity, which arises from the close connection when

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[3]He also refers to a remark by Paul Williams to the extent "that the purpose of writing the *Madhyamakakārikā* would have been 'to destroy adherence to language and secondly to the referents of language'". This comes closer to the truth, as will be argued below.

[4]VP 2.297: *yac copaghātajaṃ jñānaṃ yac ca jñānam alaukikam/ na tābhyāṃ vyavahāro 'sti śabdā lokanibandhanāḥ//* Tr. Houben, 1992: 408-09.

[5]VP 2.139: *ṛṣīṇāṃ darśanaṃ yac ca tattve kiṃcid avasthitam/ na tena vyavahāro 'sti na tac chabdanibandhanam//*

there is commingling [with the object]."[6] VP 1.37 speaks of those 'whose minds are not distorted' (*anupaplutacetas*) and 'in whom insight has manifested itself' (*āvirbhūtaprakāśa*); they have knowledge of the past and of the future. The following verse VP 1.38 refers probably to the same beings when it states that "with the vision of a seer they see things which are beyond the senses and unknowable".[7]

It would seem reasonable to assume that the pure knowledge referred to by Bhartṛhari constitutes the insight which leads to liberation. Before we address the question how this special knowledge is obtained, it is necessary to point out that it is, at least for Bhartṛhari, a special knowledge indeed. Much of his *Vākyapadīya* shows the close interrelationship of language and thought, and indeed of language and the world. The following lines are particularly clear in this respect: "The capacity residing in words holds this whole universe together."[8] "There is no cognition in the world that does not [100] follow language. All knowledge appears as if permeated by words."[9] We must conclude that the word *loke* 'in the world' in this last citation is meant to exclude knowledge which is not of this world, which is *alaukika*.

In itself it is not particularly surprising that Bhartṛhari admits the existence of supernormal knowledge, which goes beyond the realm of language, for he equally accepts the existence of a higher reality, which he sometimes calles Brahman. In a recent publication I have argued that this higher, or rather highest, reality is the undivided totality of all that exists, has existed and will exist. Our ordinary reality — which is strictly speaking not real at all — is the result of (unreal) divisions of the absolute reality. Responsible, or at any rate co-responsible, for this division is language. Ordinary knowledge corresponds to the form of reality that has been divided, distorted by language. In the words of the *Vākyapadīya*: "The resemblance of division is a persistent distortion of cognition and speech."[10] Pure knowledge, on the other hand, corresponds to reality that has not been affected by division and speech.

How is this superior knowledge obtained? Some verses indicate that traditional knowledge and grammar in particular have an important role to play here: "Even the knowledge of the seers is preceded by tradition."[11] "Therefore the purification of the word is the perfection of the highest Self. He who knows the truth of the employments

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[6]VP 3.3.56-57: *sarvārtharūpatā śuddhir jñānasya nirupāśrayā/ tato 'py asya parāṃ śuddhim eke prāhur arūpikām// upaplavo hi jñānasya bāhyākārānupātitā/ kāluṣyam iva tat tasya saṃsarge vyatibhedajam//*Tr. Houben, 1992: 411, modified.

[7]VP 1.37-38: *āvirbhūtaprakāśānām anupaplutacetasām/ atītānāgatajñānaṃ pratyakṣān na viśiṣyate// atīndriyān asaṃvedyān paśyanty ārṣeṇa cakṣuṣā/ ye bhāvān vacanaṃ teṣāṃ nānumānena bādhyate//*

[8]VP 1.122 ab: *śabdeṣv evāśritā śaktir viśvasyāsya nibandhanī.* Tr. Houben, 1992: 109.

[9]VP 1.131: *na so 'sti pratyayo loke yaḥ śabdānugamād ṛte/ anuviddham iva jñānaṃ sarvaṃ śabdena bhāsate//*Tr. Houben, 1992: 109.

[10]VP 1.88ab: *bhedānukāro jñānasya vācaś copaplavo dhruvaḥ.*

[11]VP 1.30cd: *ṛṣīṇām api yaj jñānaṃ tad apy āgamapūrvakam.*

of [the word] attains the immortal Brahman."[12] Whatever the precise meaning of the expression 'highest Self' in this last verse, it is clear that purification of the word is an important step — perhaps the most important step — towards the highest goal. Yet grammar does not directly produce the highest knowledge; according to Bhartṛhari, who does not mince his words, it describes nescience: "It is only nescience which is described in the [different] sciences [of grammar] through different modes of derivation. [Real] knowledge, on the other hand, arises spontaneously, free from the alternatives of tradition. Just as an effect is inexplicable, not being related to its causes, just so [real] knowledge, too, is inexplicable; it only appears to be obtained by means of the science [of grammar]."[13]

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These last two verses, and especially the comparison with an effect, are revealing. For Bhartṛhari, a material effect — such as a vase — does not really have parts, it has no real link with its material causes. More generally, for Bhartṛhari totalities are more real than their supposed constituent parts. Supreme knowledge and the forms of nescience taught by grammar relate to each other much like wholes relate to their parts. We may need the parts in order to come to grips with the whole, but once we know the whole, we also know that the parts do not really exist. This kind of reasoning is familiar to students of Bhartṛhari, especially in the case of linguistic units: sounds are no more than means to come to know words, in reality they do not exist; words are non-existing parts of sentences, which alone exist, etc.

It appears, then, that the highest knowledge is obtained as the result of a kind of quantum jump, precondition for which is the study of grammar. Details of the process are hard to find in the *Vākyapadīya*, but we can with some plausibility imagine the following order of events: first we learn that grammatical elements (sounds, or stems and suffixes) are no more than means to gain access to the word; then we learn that words have no real existence either, that they are but steps leading to the sentence; subsequently we pass to even larger units, such as the Veda. In this way we prepare our mind for the highest truth, that only the totality of all really exists. Once we have reached this insight, all preceding steps reveal themselves as so many forms of nescience, dealing with non-existing entities.

It is not necessary here to further dwell upon Bhartṛhari's position according to which the constituent parts of words are not really existing, and words are mere means to obtain the flash of understanding (*pratibhā*) which is the meaning of the sentence.

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[12]VP 1.144: *tasmād yaḥ śabdasaṃskāraḥ sā siddhiḥ paramātmanaḥ/ tasya pravṛttitattvajñas tad brahmāmṛtam aśnute//* Tr. Houben, 1992: 415.

[13]VP 2.233-234: *śāstreṣu prakriyābhedair avidyaivopavarṇyate/ anāgamavikalpā tu svayaṃ vidyopavartate// anibaddhaṃ nimitteṣu nirupākhyaṃ phalaṃ yathā/ tathā vidyāpy anākhyeyā śāstropāyeva lakṣyate//*

What is of particular interest in the present context is Akamatsu's observation (1993: 41): "Clearly Bhartṛhari treats *pratibhā* as the same kind of cognition as extraordinary perceptions." Akamatsu bases this observation on the similarities between VP 1.35-37, which discusses extraordinary perception, and VP 2.143-152, which deals with *pratibhā*. Both are inexplicable (*asamākhyeya, anākhyeya*). What is more, *pratibhā* assumes the form of the whole (*sārvarūpyam ivāpannā*, 2.145); we remember that the purity of cognition, according to VP 3.3.56, cited above, is precisely 'to have the form of the totality of objects' (*sarvārtharūpatā śuddhir jñānasya*). Our proposal that the Veda, by being a linguistic unit larger, much larger, than the sentence, plays a role in the process leading to the highest insight, is supported by VP 1.5, which speaks of the Veda as the means for attaining (*prāptyupāya*) Brahman, and as its imitative resemblance (*anukāra*).
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VP 1.14ab states: "[Grammar] is the door to liberation, the cure of the impurities of speech."[14] The second half of this line seems, at first sight, to speak of grammatical mistakes. After the passages we have considered above, it will be clear that it speaks about more than just this. Grammar helps us to reach pure knowledge, which is non-verbal. The impurities of speech, from this point of view, are the impurities which attach to ordinary knowledge. The highest knowledge is free from the impurities of speech, and grammar helps to remove these.

Our reflections up to this point have not yet addressed the central question, why knowledge which is beyond speech should lead to liberation. Where did Bhartṛhari get this idea from? A far more common way to liberation in Brahmanism, one indeed which is accepted, in one way or another, in all so-called orthodox systems of Brahmanical philosophy, has as key element the insight into the true nature of the self. In Bhartṛhari's philosophy, on the other hand, insight into the true nature of the self does not appear to play any role whatsoever. His method is altogether different. How do we explain this? To my knowledge, there is only one movement in early classical India, besides Bhartṛhari himself, which accepts knowledge of the kind specified by Bhartṛhari as leading to the highest aim. This is Mahāyāna Buddhism. Since this situation can be explained in the case of Mahāyāna Buddhism as the result of a historical development, whereas Bhartṛhari's Brahmanical background does not help us to explain the presence of these ideas in his philosophy, it seems exceedingly likely that Bhartṛhari has, in this respect, been influenced by Mahāyāna Buddhism. Let us consider the situation within Buddhism somewhat more closely.

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[14]VP 1.14ab: *tad dvāram apavargasya vāṅmalānāṃ cikitsitam.*

Buddhism knows a number of ways leading to the highest goal. The one that interests us at present is the cultivation of a series of 'perfections', known both in Śrāvakayāna (or Mainstream Buddhism)[15] and Mahāyāna. In Mahāyāna this series comes to occupy an important position indeed, and among the various perfections, it is the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) which gains pride of place. Some texts even claim that wisdom is sufficient unto itself and that the other perfections are unnecessary. Indeed, Rāhulabhadra's *Prajñāpāramitāstotra* (v. 17) calls it "the one path to salvation"[16] (tr. Conze, 1954: 149). The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ch. 3, p. 81-82) states [103] that "the perfection of wisdom controls, guides and leads the five perfections". Further: "The five perfections are in this manner contained in the perfection of wisdom, and the term 'perfection of wisdom' is just a synonym for the fulfillment of the six perfections. In consequence, when the perfection of wisdom is proclaimed, all the six perfections are proclaimed. Just as ge[r]ms, scattered about in the great earth, grow when all conditions are favourable; and the great earth is their support, and they grow supported by the great earth; even so, embodied in the perfection of wisdom, the five perfections rest in all-knowledge, they grow supported by the perfection of wisdom; and as upheld by the perfection of wisdom do they get the name of 'perfections'. So it is just the perfection of wisdom that controls, guides and leads the five perfections."[17] (tr. Conze, 1973: 111-12.)

What is this wisdom or perfection of wisdom? For a number of Mahāyāna texts it is non-conceptual awareness (*nirvikalpakajñāna*), which has emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as object.[18] It is beyond the realm of speech. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ch. 7, p. 177) explains: "Where there is no perception, appellation, conception or conventional expression, there one speaks of 'perfect wisdom'."[19] (tr. Conze, 1973: 138).

The following are some passages from the *Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā-Śāstra* attributed (though wrongly) to Nāgārjuna, in the paraphrase of K. Venkata Ramanan (1966: 280, 286): "The six *pāramitā*s and the *prajñāpāramitā* are one and the same thing and not different." "The different kinds of knowledge are the different levels and phases

[15] This is the expression preferred by Harrison (1990: xviii n. 8; 1992: 77-78 n. 8).

[16] *buddhaiḥ pratyekabuddhaiś ca śrāvakaiś ca niṣevitā/ mārgas tvam ekā mokṣasya nāsty anya iti niścayaḥ//* This set of 21 verses is printed on pp. 1 and 2 of Vaidya's edition of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*; according to Vaidya they constitute the *Prajñāpāramitāstuti* of Nāgārjuna.

[17] *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ed. Vaidya) ch. 3, p. 40 l. 28 - p. 41 l. 4: *prajñāpāramitā pañcānām pāramitānām pūrvaṃgamā nāyikā pariṇāyikā/ anena yogena antargatāḥ pañca pāramitāḥ prajñāpāramitāyām eva ānanda ṣaṭpāramitāparipūrṇādhivacanam etad yad uta prajñāpāramiteti/ tasmāt tarhi ānanda prajñāpāramitāyām parikīrtitāyām sarvāḥ ṣaṭ pāramitāḥ parikīrtitā bhavanti/ tad yathāpi nāma ānanda mahāpṛthivyām bījāni prakīrṇāni sāmagrīm labhamānāni virohanti/ mahāpṛthivī ca teṣām bījānām pratiṣṭhā/ mahāpṛthivīpratiṣṭhitāni ca tāni bījāni virohanti/ evam eva ānanda prajñāpāramitāsaṃgṛhītāḥ pañca pāramitāḥ sarvajñatāyām prati[ti]ṣṭhante/ prajñāpāramitāpratiṣṭhitāḥ pañca pāramitā virohanti/ prajñāpāramitāparigṛhītatvāc ca pāramitānāmadheyam labhante/ tasmāt tarhi ānanda prajñāpāramitaiva pañcānām pāramitānām pūrvaṃgamā nāyikā pariṇāyikā//*

[18] See Williams, 1989: 42 f.

[19] *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ed. Vaidya) ch. 7, p. 89 l. 18: *yadā na bhavati saṃjñā samajñā prajñaptir vyavahāraḥ, tadā prajñāpāramitety ucyate.*

of understanding. All these different levels and phases are alike called *prajñā*, and the entire course of understanding culminates in the complete knowledge of the true nature of things. It is the ideal of this complete knowledge, which is of the Buddha, viz., *sarvākārajñatā*, the knowledge of all forms, that inspires the bodhisattva from the very beginning."

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The parallelism with Bhartṛhari's thought is striking. The highest reality for Bhartṛhari is not emptiness, but like emptiness it is beyond the range of speech. Knowledge of this highest reality, too, is beyond speech, and free from speech. The Buddhist texts, like Bhartṛhari, speak of knowledge of all forms, or of the all. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (7.171) calls the perfection of wisdom "identical with all-knowledge"[20] (tr. Conze, 1973: 135). Conze (1951: 137) states, quite generally: "From a positive point of view, salvation is described as Omniscience."

Similar ideas are current in Yogācāra Buddhism. There too, liberating insight is free from all conceptual awareness (*vikalpa*), beyond speech and thought. Its content is truth (*tathatā*). Lambert Schmithausen (1978: 112 f.) has investigated the history of this particular content of liberating insight, and observed that this truth concerned originally dependent origination, and subsequently the selflessness (*nairātmya*) of things. A further development took place in connection with the illusionistic ontology of Mahāyāna. *Tathatā* now concerns the essencelessness of all there is, including the elements of Buddhist ontology, the *dharma*s. In Yogācāra sources, however, *tathatā* frequently takes on the character of a positive reality, of an absolute being which hides behind the unreal phenomenal world. Here, in particular, we come close to the ideas of Bhartṛhari.

There are many aspects of Bhartṛhari's thought where the influence of Buddhism is clearly noticeable. His conception of the highest reality is an example, as I have tried to show elsewhere.[21] His view as to to what extent the world of our daily experience is determined by language, is another example.[22] The present paper has tried to show that even his ideas about the ultimate religious aim, and how to reach it, may have been borrowed from the Buddhists. To all this we must however add that Bhartṛhari never borrows ideas without thoroughly adjusting them to their new surroundings. Many of his ideas may be Buddhist in origin, together they constitute Bhartṛhari's philosophy which, as such, is not Buddhist at all. His is the philosophy of a traditional Brahmin, who man-

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[20] *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (ed. Vaidya) ch. 7, p. 86 l. 13: *sarvajñataiva bhagavan prajñāpāramitā.*

[21] Bronkhorst, 1992.

[22] Bronkhorst, 1996.

ages to adjust the Buddhist and other ideas in such a way, that they come to contribute to a Veda-centered view of the world.

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