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THE IMAGE OF THE INDIAN CITY IN TRIPĪṬAKA

– Abstract –

Several apologues included in *Tripīṭaka* open up with one and the same formula: “Look what story has been told to me: One day, the *Buddha* was to be found in Śrāvastī, in the Jetavana, in the garden of Anāthapiṇḍada.” In all the apologues introduced by this formula, the *Buddha* and the community (*Samgha*) of monks and nuns surrounding him are situated in an urban milieu. An exegesis of three of the apologues of this type throw into relief the Indian city or urban milieu in three hypostasis: the city as a literary symbol which serves to prove a moral exhortation included in the *Dharma* concerning the damnation of human beings through their self-abandonment to limitless passions; the city as social milieu which harbors a dialogue or rather a spiritual-rhetorical tournament between two sages on the Buddhist doctrine; the city as social milieu for religious disputations between two schools of the Hinduist sages, as well as between Hinduist sages and Buddhist monks.

Keywords: Buddha Śākyamuni; Theravāda Buddhism; *Tripīṭaka*; “*Sūtra of Maitrakanyaka*”; Origin of the name Śāriputra; “*Sūtra of King Ādarśamukha*”; anekāntavāda; Jainism.

In the history of *Theravāda Buddhism* or the “Doctrine of the Elders”¹, the apologue is used as a privileged narrative tool in order to transmit the religious and moral truth of the Law, *Dharma*. In the *Tripīṭaka* or the “Three Baskets” of the Buddhist teaching, the apologues narrate the previous existences of *Tathāgata*², “Thus gone One” or “Thus come One”, the *Buddha Śākyamuni*³. The religious

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¹ See Kate Crosby, “*Theravāda*”, in: Robert E. Buswell Jr. (Editor in Chief), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 1-2, Macmillan Reference USA – Thomson Gale, 2004, II, pp. 836-841.

² See John S. Strong, “*Tathāgata*”, in: Buswell, *op.cit.*, II, p. 826.

³ See Jan Nattier, “*Buddha(s)*”, in: Buswell, *op.cit.*, I, pp. 71-74. See also Heinz Bechert, “*Buddha, Life of the*”, in: *Ibidem*, pp. 82-88.

framework of *Theravāda Buddhism* thus provides the universal narrative context for any hypostasis of human existence, for any character involved in a socio-political, moral, psychological situation or conflict. At the end of the narrative development, the *Tripitaka* apologues offer the religious and moral exhortation of *Tathāgata*, the sovereign revelation of “who is who” according to the “awakening” or omniscience of *bodhi*, to the “stems which generate happiness” and the ontological dynamics of reincarnations through *karma*.

From this religious-narrative perspective, it must be remembered that several apologues included in *Tripitaka* open up with one and the same formula: “Look what story has been told to me: One day, the *Buddha* was to be found in Śrāvastī, in the Jetavana, in the garden of Anāthapiṇḍada.” In all the apologues introduced by this formula, the *Buddha* and the community (*Samgha*) of monks and nuns surrounding him are situated in an urban milieu. An exegesis of three of the apologues of this type throw into relief the Indian-Buddhist city or urban milieu in three hypostasis: the city as a literary symbol which serves to prove a moral exhortation included in the *Dharma* concerning the damnation of human beings through their self-abandonment to limitless passions; the city as social milieu which harbors a dialogue or rather a spiritual-rhetorical tournament between two sages on the Buddhist doctrine; the city as social milieu for religious disputations between two schools of the Hindu sages, as well as between Hindu sages and Buddhist monks.

In the “Sūtra of Maitrakanyaka”⁴, the teaching pronounced by the *Buddha* targets the five sorts of sensual desires and the five sorts of pleasures which induce the human beings to perpetrate evil deeds during the entire time of their lives, while this waste of the human ontological treasure leads to cyclical suffering and unfulfilled salvation: the shapes to the eyes, the sounds to the ears, the perfumes to the nose, the tastes to the mouth, the delicate and tender touches to the body. Maitrakanyaka, the main character of the apologue, is a merchant, a prudent and wise man, a “master and guide of the crowd”. Out of a company of five hundred merchants who travelled by sea with business purposes, Maitrakanyaka is the only one who survives the shipwreck caused by the “divine fish” Makara. Once he regained safety on firm land, four beautiful women “as graceful as goddesses” accompanied him to a city of silver, in the center of which a palace built of seven precious substances was to be found: yellow gold, white silver, crystal, *vaidūrya*, coral, amber, *musāragarbha*.

⁴ *Tripitaka*, VI, 5, p. 66 r° - 66 v°.

After residing in the silver city more than one thousand years, Maitrakanyaka decided to leave, in order not to allow the pleasant tutelage of the four beautiful women to take hold of him and impede him to accede to more intense pleasures. His travel in search for exquisite lust brought him to a city of gold, where eight marvelous women accompanied him to the palace built of “pearls as luminous as the moon and all kinds of jewels” which turned the silver city into a distant and pale memory. Nevertheless, after residing happily in the city of gold during several thousands of myriads of years, Maitrakanyaka decided to revivify his freedom and roam the world for even more intense pleasures.

Moving up along the scale of desires and pleasures, Maitrakanyaka reached a city of crystal, where sixteen marvelous women invited him to the palace made of seven precious substances, and then a city of *vaidūrya*, where thirty-two marvelous women lured him into sensual insanity inside the palace limits. Each and every time Maitrakanyaka immersed himself into the desires and pleasures offered by the earthly cities, and it became impossible for him to contain or even put an end to this self-disintegration into the ontological labyrinth of intense desires, intense pleasures, more intense desires, more intense pleasures.

Maitrakanyaka’s initiatory journey was foredoomed to end in a city of iron. Once he arrived at the gates, nobody came to greet him, but he thought that this was a good omen and he reminisced his experiences in the previous cities and palaces: “The four women in the city of silver, the eight women in the city of gold, the sixteen women in the city of rock crystal, the thirty-two women in the city of *vaidūrya*, wonderful women who illuminate the world, came ones after the others to meet me respectfully; now the high dignity of the women who reside here must be the cause for them not being eager to meet me.” After a first tour of the city, a demon opened the gate, took hold of Maitrakanyaka and put him to the torture. The demon placed a wheel of incandescent iron on his head. While lamenting his insatiability and his insanity for not acknowledging the limits of human existence, Maitrakanyaka received the verdict according to which this punishment will be inflicted upon him during six hundred thousand years, until another greedy human being will arrive in the city of iron, in order for him to be delivered.

In the conclusion of the apologue, the *Buddha* unveils that in a previous existence he himself was Maitrakanyaka, and that the torture of the wheel of incandescent iron was the karmic result for a slight act of violence committed against his mother. His devotion to the Buddhist precepts before and after his punishment in the hell of the Great Mountain earned him the pleasant staying in the four cities and the final accomplishment on the path to salvation: “(...) He never

forgot the prohibitions incumbent on the *Buddha*, not even for a time as brief as the time needed to take a large step; due to the prohibitions, his virtue arrived at perfection, and he became himself *Buddha*. When the vulgar people act, they don't show evidence of filial piety towards their parents, and they don't serve their masters with respect; but I remark that afterwards they bring upon themselves terrible punishments: this was the case of Maitrakanyaka. In truth, when we commit evil, misfortune follows just as the shadow accompanies the body; when we give up heresy and we honor the true doctrine, all the evils vanish⁵.”

Another apologue⁶ elucidates the origin of the name “Śāriputra⁷”, one of the most important disciples of the *Buddha*, together with Mahāmaudgalyāyana, who reached the rank of *arhat* in the religious hierarchy of *Theravāda Buddhism*. In the city of Rājagṛha or the “Royal Residence”, in the Magadha region of the kingdom of Jambudvīpa, a brahman named Māṭhara, a court scholar of king Bimbisāra and a master in the art of philosophical dialogue, received the right of ownership over a small town as a royal gift. In this new and prosperous situation, Māṭhara concluded a marriage and two children, a daughter and a son were born to him. The daughter received the name Śāri because her eyes resembled to the eyes of a heron, while the boy was named Koṣṭhila because he had very strong knees. After a few years, in the city of Rājagṛha arrived Tiṣya, a brahman and expert in maieutics from Southern India, who used to bear a light on his head in daylight, while his belly was covered with copper plates. The crowd in the city asked him about his strange appearance, and Tiṣya replied that the sacred books which he studied were so numerous that he was afraid his belly might crack open were not for the copper plates to keep everything tight. Asked about the light on his head at noon, Tiṣya answered that the light is necessary in order to dissipate the obscurity of ignorance: “There are two kinds of obscurity; one is manifest when the light of the sun doesn't illuminate us; the second one is the evil engendered by the darkness of stupidity. Now even if the sun's splendor surrounds us, the darkness of stupidity is still profound.” But voices in the crowd tried to bring him to reason: “Haven't you heard about Māṭhara the brahman? If he only shows up in front of your eyes, your belly will flatten and your light will be extinguished.” In answer to this challenge, Tiṣya started to beat the drum which called for discussions between sages in the public market. King Bimbisāra heard the drum beats himself and he called for Māṭhara, glad to assist to a

⁵ See Édouard Chavannes (trans.), *Cinq cents contes et apologues extraits du Tripitaka Chinois*, tomes I – IV, Paris, Adrien Maisonneuve, 1962, I, pp. 131-137.

⁶ *Tripitaka*, XX, 1, pp. 70 v° - 71 v°.

⁷ See Susanne Mrozik, “Śāriputra”, in: Buswell, *op.cit.*, II, pp. 749-750.

rhetorical tournament involving the two scholars. In this way, the downtown of Rājagṛha became the scene for a duel of maieutics between the court scholar Māṭhara and the wandering scholar from Southern India, Tiṣya.

Nevertheless, Māṭhara was conscious of the fact that during the past few years he stopped the process of developing his studies and spiritual inquiries, he lost the power of assimilating new books, treatises and manuscript. While walking towards the public market of Rājagṛha, he had forebodings of failure, a fact confirmed by several omens and oracles which he encountered along the road. Tiṣya triumphed of Māṭhara, in the tournament of sapience arbitrated by king Bimbisāra, and he also won the right of ownership over the small town and the hand of Śāri in marriage. Māṭhara decided to leave in exile in a foreign kingdom, while Koṣṭhila acquired the knowledge of the sacred books in Southern India and became *Dīrghanakha* or the “brahman with long nails”. The marriage of Tiṣya and Śāri was accomplished through the birth of Upatiṣya, the “one who will chase Tiṣya” or Śāriputra, the “son of Śāri”. The name Śāriputra was given to him because the people of Rājagṛha and Jambudvīpa cherished Śāri greatly.

The apologue is concluded by the voice of the *Buddha*: “Afterwards, because of the antecedent vows that he made during successive existences, Śāriputra became, in matters of wisdom, the first of the disciples in the proximity of *Śākyamuni*; this name ensued to him from the causing power of his antecedent vows. This is why he was named Śāriputra. (...) The people of that time honored greatly his mother Śāri, who was the most intelligent of all women, and it is for this reason that this named this man Śāriputra⁸.”

The same formula (“Look what story has been told to me: One day, the *Buddha* was to be found in the kingdom of Śrāvastī, in the wood of Jeta, in the garden of Anāthapiṇḍada.”) opens another apologue entitled “Sūtra of King Mirror-Face (*Ādarśamukha*)”⁹. As lunchtime was approaching, the Buddhist monks, the *bhikṣus*, took their bowls for offerings and entered the city with the purpose of begging for nourishment. As they arrived before noon, they realized that it was too early to go from door to door and start asking for the offerings, so they decided that it was best for them to spend some time in the conference hall of the Hindu sages or “heretical brahmins”. The *bhikṣus* entered the conference hall, exchanged greetings with the brahmins, and spent a time interval sitting in their company. In those circumstances, the *bhikṣus* witnessed a religious disputation between the Hindu sages concerning the hermeneutics of their saintly books: “What we know is the

⁸ See Chavannes, *Cinq cents contes et apologues*, III, pp. 290-294.

⁹ *Tripitāka*, VI, 5, p. 89 r° - v°.

law; what you know, how could that be the law? What we know is in accord with the doctrine; how would it be possible that what you know be in accord with the doctrine? Our doctrine must be put into practice; it would be difficult for anyone to form a bond with your doctrine. What must be said before, you say it afterwards; what must be said afterwards, you say it before. Concerning a lot of laws, what you say is falsehood. Like a burden too heavy to be lifted, you cannot explain the meanings which you pretend to discuss. Your science is vain, and you don't have the slightest knowledge. If we would overwhelm you with questions, how would you be in a position to answer?" The *bhikṣus* assist silently and peacefully at this war of words, as long as the Hindu sages brandish the weapons of language and inflict unforgettable wounds on their soul. After a while, they left the conference hall, walked the streets of the city and begged for their offerings. They returned to the garden of Jeta, rendered homage to the *Buddha*, narrated to him the disputation which took place in the conference hall and concluded: "We think that those brahmins took the pain to study. When will they understand the truth?"

In answer, the *Buddha* offers the parable of King *Ādarśamukha* or Mirror-Face, who used to study and recite the essential books of Buddhism. In marked contrast to the knowledge of the king, "as vast as the sand of the Ganges", his subjects and ministers were ignorant of the Buddhist scriptures and were wasting their time on vulgar books: "they had faith in the clarity of the shining glass and were doubting the far reaching brilliance of the Sun and Moon". In order to conceive an apologue, King *Ādarśamukha* ordered his emissaries and officers to travel all the roads of the kingdom, to search for all the human beings who were blind since their birth and assemble them at the ground level of the royal palace.

Then King *Ādarśamukha* ordered his officers to show elephants to the blind people. The officers guided the blind people's hands along the bodies of the elephants: one of them touched a foot; another one touched a tail; another one touched the root of the tail; another one touched the belly; another one touched the side; another one touched the back; another one grabbed an ear; another one embraced the head of an elephant; another one embraced an ivory tusk; another one embraced a trunk. While mingling with the elephants, each and every one of the blind human beings was involved in a tumultuous disputation, claiming to hold the truth on what the being of an elephant was like, and also that the others were wrong.

According to the elephants' body parts seized and perceived only by their touch, the blind people declared to King *Ādarśamukha*: the elephant is like a varnished pipe; the elephant is like a broom; the elephant is like a stick; the elephant is like a drum; the elephant is like a wall; the elephant is like a high table; the

elephant is like a winnowing basket; the elephant is like a huge bushel; the elephant is like a horn; the elephant is like a thick rope. And they continued their disputation in front of the king, claiming: “The elephant is really according to what I describe.” The king laughed and concluded: “All of you who ignore the Buddhist books, you are like the blind people who attempted to acknowledge and define the elephant.”

King *Ādarśamukha* pronounced a *gāthā*, in order to sum up the spiritual essence of the parable: “Now you, who are nothing but a group of blind people, are disputing in vain and pretend to speak the truth. While you acknowledge only one point of view, you declare that the rest is falsehood. And you quarrel on the topic of the elephant.” And the king continued his meditation: “Those who waste their time with the study of vulgar books and refuse to understand that the Buddhist books hold a truth and a rectitude of such a vastness that nothing is exterior to them, of such eminence that nothing is higher than them, those are like the human beings deprived of eyes.” As a consequence, the aristocrats and the commoners accepted the Buddhist books.

And in order to close the story within the story, to reveal the moral and spiritual meaning of the apologue and to accomplish the *mise en abîme* narrative effect, the *Buddha* exhorts the *bhikṣus*: “The King Mirror-Face was myself; concerning the people deprived of their sight, they were the brahmins in the conference hall; in that epoch, these people were unwise and they were involved in a disputation because of their cecity; now when they discuss, they are also overwhelmed by darkness, and because of their disputes, they make no progress¹⁰.”

It must be thrown into relief that the “Sutra of King *Ādarśamukha*” is a Buddhist version of the Jainist concept of *anekāntavāda*, the “theory of non-absolutism”, the “theory of innumerable conclusions”, the “doctrine of non-exclusion” or the “doctrine of the multiplicity of viewpoints”, illustrated by the Jainist parable of *andhagajanyāyah* or the “parable of the blind people and the elephant”¹¹.

¹⁰ See Chavannes, *op.cit.*, I, pp. 336-339.

¹¹ See Indra Chandra Shastri, *Jaina Epistemology*, Vārānaśī: Pārśvanāth-Vidyāśram Institute, 1990, pp. 37-40. See also Jain Hemachandra, “Anekāntavāda”, in: Sagarmal Jain, Shriprakash Pandey (eds.), *Multi-Dimensional Application of Anekāntavāda*, Vārānaśī – Ahmedabad, Pārśwanātha Vidyāpīṭha & Navin Institute of Self-development, 1999, pp. 103-110.