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# SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE MOTIVES AND PURPOSES OF ASCETICISM IN ANCIENT INDIA

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One of the most striking features of Indian religious life is undoubtedly a widespread ascetic way of life. The larger part of Indian philosophic and religious literature is full of evidence of this fact.

When searching in the various ancient sources for motives that have caused individuals to live the hard and austere life of ascetics, one has to realize that their motives are frequently morally indifferent or even decidedly immoral. Especially in the epic literature only rarely may one find asceticism for the sake of liberation from *samsāra*. The lofty religious and philosophical ideals, as presented in the orthodox and heterodox philosophical systems and their corresponding rules and methods, are too sublime for the strivings of the average Hindu. Rather, very frequently one finds mundane and egoistic motives for whose sake one performs, for a limited period or even for life, castigations or other ascetic practices. A well aimed remark to this effect is stated in Śiva Purāṇa<sup>1</sup> where the question is raised concerning the purpose for which people perform such rigorous castigations. The answer which is given there is rather pessimistic: people in this world mortify themselves only to gain a certain advantage.

A reason which is frequently given for an ascetic way of life is the striving for supernatural or superhuman power which may be used by the ascetic for any purpose and which operates independently and without the voluntary co-operation of a deity. In various instances, as will soon be seen, we find that gods may even be forced by human determination to comply with an ascetic's desires. Radhakrishnan characterizing

1. Dharmasamhitā X, 119 – see W. Jahn, 'Die Legende vom Devadāruvana im Śiva-Purāṇa'. *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, LXXI, Wien, 1917, p. 193.

the spirit of the Atharva-Veda, which definitely has influenced the epic literature, refers to ascetics who control nature by *tapas*, *i. e.* the various forms of castigations and austerities. 'They reduce the elemental forces to their control by their asceticism. It was then well known that ecstatic conditions could be induced by the mortification of the body. Man can participate in divine power by the hidden force of magic ... We find people sitting in the midst of five fires, standing on one leg, holding an arm above the head, all for the purpose of commanding the forces of nature and subduing the gods to their will<sup>2</sup>.' Asceticism is here grounded in the sphere of magic from which it could never entirely be freed. Even in cases where *tapas* is performed as an act of penance under the eyes of a god, its magic character becomes apparent.

The Mahābhārata epic<sup>3</sup> tells of two brothers who, in order to gain the necessary power for conquering the three worlds – *i. e.* of gods, of men, and of demons – undergo various forms of the severest ascetic exercises. Their power increases finally to such a tremendous degree that even god Brahman is forced to fulfill their demands. Furnished with special privileges and powers, and the assurance that only one of them could cause the death of the other, they return to their wives and relatives to live a life full of sensual pleasures. They show their great power, *e. g.*, by letting the moon rise over their city each night.

Interestingly, one finds also that the great gods of the Vedic period as well as the cosmic elements, such as waters<sup>4</sup>, practice *tapas* as a means of increasing their powers. This is in itself not surprising, as one may learn from the cosmogonic myths in the Vedic literature that the gods were able to create only after rigorous ascetic exercises<sup>5</sup>. God Prajāpati, by nature mortal, was able through his ascetic fervor not only to live on, but also to originate reproductive energy within himself, and to create

2. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, New York, 1962, vol. I, p. 121.

3. Ādiparvan CCXI, 7–31.

4. Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa XI. 1. 6. 1.

5. Ibid., II. 2. 4.

the gods with his mouth<sup>6</sup>. It is remarkable, however, that the great god Brahman finds it necessary for gaining supremacy over all creation to increase his power by the same hard asceticism for thousands of years, like men and demons. The efficacy of *tapas* has here to be understood as *opus operatum*.

Another motive for living an ascetic life is revenge. On numerous occasions in the great epics this motive becomes apparent when men – and women alike –, passionately thirsting for revenge, mortify their bodies to the utmost, or even sacrifice their lives to that end, if they are certain that they can annihilate their adversaries in a future existence. In his book *Fakire und Fakirtum im alten und modernen Indien*<sup>7</sup>, R. Schmidt tells of a princess Ambā of Benares, who for many years underwent extreme mortifications to take revenge on her deadly enemy, prince Bhīṣma. God Mahādeva, impressed by her intensive asceticism, promises her that she would assume in a future life the form of a Kshatriya who would kill the much hated Bhīṣma. To support the divine promise the princess lights a big pyre and jumps into the fire shouting that she was doing this for the sake of Bhīṣma's destruction.

Again another motive for living the rigorous life of an ascetic is the desire for status, honor and glory. It is expressed in the story of the five year old prince Dhruva<sup>8</sup>, whose royal father does not give to him as much attention as to his half brother, a son of the king's favored wife. Deeply hurt, the little prince runs to his own mother complaining about his sad experience. The mother tries to calm him down by advising him to be patient and content. Young Dhruva, however, is not willing to accept her advice and proceeds rather into the woods, joining seven *munis* who recommend the worship of god Viṣṇu and who instruct him in Yoga exercises. Applying this newly-gained knowledge, Dhruva practices a rigorous asceticism which is rewarded by a private revelation of god

6. Ibid., XI. 1. 6. 7.

7. Berlin, 1908, p. 28.

8. Viṣṇu-Purāṇa I, 11 f.

Viṣṇu. He then intensifies his *tapas* to such a degree that finally the whole pantheon is upset and the gods try unsuccessfully to stop him. In their helplessness they approach Viṣṇu crying for assistance: 'As the moon increases in his orb day by day, so this youth advances incessantly toward superhuman power by his devotions. Terrified by the ascetic practices ... we have come to thee for succor ... We do not know to what station he aspires, to the throne of Indra, the regency of the solar or lunar sphere, or to the sovereignty of riches or of the deep ...'<sup>9</sup> To free the gods from their anxieties and to guarantee the order of the universe, Viṣṇu grants to this young ambitious ascetic the wish to assume forever an exalted station, superior to all others, by assigning him a place in the heavens as the polar star.

A typical example of Indian asceticism is found in the ancient story of king Viśvāmitra and the ascetic Vasiṣṭha which is contained in the great epics as well as in the Purāṇas. Searching for the motive of an ascetic way of life, one may find here, too, ambition, covetousness and striving after power. The object in question is – a cow. When Heinrich Heine learned of this story, he commented on it in his well-known ironical fashion:

'O König Vischwamitra,  
O welch ein Ochs bist Du,  
Daß Du soviel kämpfest und büßest  
und alles für eine Kuh.'<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, it was a special cow, one which could fulfill all wishes. Like so often in Indian stories so also in this one a historical fact may be recognized, *i.e.* the rivalry and competition between the Kshatriya and Brahman caste. The struggle in this story is not carried out with the usual weapons, but rather with the magic powers of *tapas*. Asceticism stands here against asceticism. According to the epic Mahābhārata<sup>11</sup>, the

9. John C. Oman, *The Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India*, Calcutta, 1905, p. 23 f.

10. Quoted in M. Winternitz, *Geschichte der Indischen Literatur*, Leipzig, 1908, vol. I, p. 346.

11. Ādiparvan CLXXVII–CLXXXII.

story goes that king Viśvāmitra, while hunting in a forest, meets the great ascetic Vasiṣṭha, a Brahman, who invites the king and his party for dinner. Surprised by the unusual amount of food in the hut, Viśvāmitra detects that a magic cow has produced the variety of food. Instantly the king desires to own that cow and offers his host one hundred thousand ordinary cows for it; the offer is rejected. Finally when everything else fails Viśvāmitra seizes the wonder cow by force, yet suddenly he has to realize that a Brahman's strength is superior to royal strength. The cow does not move; instead, she bellows and thus produces an army of warriors who overcome the king's men. Now the king, with the help of his hundred sons, tries to defeat Vasiṣṭha; yet because of the ascetic's heat (resulting from *tapas*), one glowing breath from his mouth turns all the sons into ashes. Viśvāmitra sees that with earthly weapons he cannot prevail against the great ascetic. He abdicates his throne and undergoes from now on severe ascetic exercises for a hundred years in order to win supernatural power and with it the desired cow. Finally god Mahādeva rewards his efforts with powerful arrows with which the king destroys the Brahman's colony. However, the great Vasiṣṭha proves again his superiority by destroying the king's weapons. After this experience the king realized the limitation of his power as a Kshatriya, and he decides to resume his asceticism – this time not for gaining a cow but for obtaining the status of a Brahman.

The degree of difficulty in achieving this goal is symbolized by several cycles each of a thousand years of mortification which do not lead to the desired result, but to a preferred place in heaven and other promotions offered by god Brahman. Viśvāmitra, however, rejects this transitory reward and takes up again a series of even stricter forms of asceticism leading to such tremendous powers – to be compared only with nuclear power – that he is able to upset the whole universe including the realm of the gods. Full of fear, the gods, under the leadership of Brahman, see themselves forced to grant him the favor of raising him to the dignity of a sage (*ṛṣi*) hoping he would be satisfied and give up his castigations. Yet



driven by strong ambitions, so typical for many Hindu ascetics, he is not satisfied with this honor, and resumes anew his exercises, interrupted only by similar episodes. Finally, because of the threat of total annihilation of the world, the gods have no other choice but to bestow upon him the dignity of a Brahman as well as the ideal brahmanic qualities<sup>12</sup>. One thing, however, is impossible for him: he cannot gain the desired cow nor overcome the Brahman Vasiṣṭha. The story also shows clearly the limitation of non-brahmanic asceticism.

Again another motive for asceticism is conceit for knowledge. Kshemendra<sup>13</sup> tells of a stupid and spoiled son of an ascetic who practices *tapas* for a long time in order to gain knowledge. One day god Indra approaches him and asks him why he, the son of a great saint, would so steadfastly mortify his body in vain. Knowledge, the god says, can be transmitted only through a teacher, and this opportunity is unfortunately gone. Moreover, knowledge is not the point, but the fruit of it: firmness of character, gentleness, *ahimsā*, modesty, freedom from greediness, etc. In various ways Indra tries to explain to the narrow-minded ascetic that knowledge without understanding is fruitless. Yet the young man does not heed the god's warning and continues his exercises until Indra, as a reward for the ascetic's mortification, bestows upon him all knowledge. Returning home, his father realizes the dubious value of his son's knowledge and warns him as did god Indra, because he anticipates trouble for his son. And so it happens that not long after, the conceit for knowledge leads him to presumptuous actions which cause his destruction.

In the *Kathā-Sarit-Sagara*, Somadeva<sup>14</sup> tells about penitent virgins of *deva*- and *asura*-origin. The purpose of their asceticism is – which may be surprising – the obtaining of a husband. For the same reason Parvatī,

12. The main purpose of this legend was to demonstrate the exalted position of the Brahman caste. Cf. P. Horsch, *Die vedische Gāthā- und Śloka-Literatur*, Bern 1966, p. 370f.

13. 'Darpadalanam', translated by R. Schmidt, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, LXIX, Wien, 1915, p. 19f.

14. H. Brockhaus, *Kathā Sarit Sagara – Die Märchensammlung des Śrī Somadeva*, Leipzig, 1839, p. 132.

daughter of the 'prince of the mountain'<sup>15</sup>, mortifies herself hoping for Śiva's affection.

Military success is another motive for asceticism. King Udayana<sup>16</sup> makes use of this means before he sets out for his conquests. He tells his ministers and advisors that he intends to please god Śiva by devout ascetic practices, for without god's help and favour it would be impossible to gain the desired victory. With the consent of his ministers, the king, together with his two wives and the court, undergoes for three days and nights a series of exercises which result in a revelation by way of a dream in which Śiva shows his satisfaction by promising the king certain victory.

One gets here, as well as in numerous other instances, the impression that an ascetic way of living has the character of a deal with the deity. With three days of collective asceticism the assurance of success can be bought; the victory completes the business transaction. If there is a new demand, the same procedure takes place. It is a form of causal asceticism which is being performed for so long a time until a certain and is achieved. Even if the concepts of divine grace or favor are used, they must not be understood in their intrinsic meaning, since they do not appear in the proper context. Asceticism is here rather a much too independent and hard a currency; the rate of exchange is beyond the determination of the gods. They are not free to decide but have to fulfill the ascetic's wish, provided that the necessary quantity and quality of *tapas* is produced. The god's position is here only that of administrators who have to distribute according to certain standards.

At another occasion the same king Udayana<sup>17</sup> decides, following the advice of the saint Nārada, to resume his mortifications in order to gain a son. Again a collective form of asceticism is carried out by the entire royal family as well as the people. After three days and nights the royal

15. R. Schmidt, *Fakire und Fakirtum im alten und modernen Indien*, Berlin, 1908, p. 26.

16. H. Brockhaus, *Op. cit.*, p. 114.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 115.



couple is promised in a dream a son, and on the following day the whole kingdom celebrates this happy event in anticipation.

In the famous Sāvitṛī story the Mahābhārata epic tells of a similar instance, yet with an entirely different character. There, Aśvapati, a childless monarch, mortifies himself for eighteen years in order to have descendants. Pleased with his asceticism, the goddess Sāvitṛī appears in bodily form and bestows a favor on him. The king, happy about the divine acceptance of his ascetic exercises and sacrifices and mindful of his duty of procreation, asks Sāvitṛī for descendants:

‘Holy rites and sacrifices and this penance have I tried,  
If these rites and sacrifices move thy favour and thy grace,  
Grant me offspring, Prayer-Maiden, worthy of my noble race.’  
‘Have thy object’, spake the maiden, ‘Madra’s pious-hearted king,  
From Swayambhu, Self-created, blessings unto thee I bring.’<sup>18</sup>

After this promise Aśvapati returns to his palace and resumes his royal and marital duties.

This episode is considerably older than the two previous ones. It refers to god Brahman, the Self-created, as represented in the ancient Vedic mythology. He is conceived here as world father who determines the fate of men. According to this idea of god, asceticism has here still the original character of a meritorious act, still being free from later magic features, which is able to rouse the free favor of the lord of the universe.

Asceticism is a means for achieving little ends as well as great ends, as the preceding instances have shown. It is practiced not only for gaining certain goods, but also for preventing certain evils. The story of the destruction of Dvāravatī illustrates the latter. The citizens of the Jainist city of Dvāravatī are called upon to protect their city from destruction

18. *The Rāmāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata*, condensed into English Verse by Romesh C. Dutt, London and Toronto, 1926, p. 254f.

by the brahmanic ascetic Dvīpāyana<sup>19</sup>. They are daily admonished to repent, and to eat only once a week, and never to relax in their ascetic zeal.

When the ascetic Dvīpāyana, who has cursed the city, dies because of his mortifications, he is raised in his new existence to the status of a god. But instead of enjoying this new rank, he is occupied with thoughts of revenge, constantly waiting for the right moment. He is, however, unable to destroy the city, since the people of Dvāravatī are faithful in their ascetic duties. This is another instance of asceticism standing against asceticism, where the sum total of joint ascetic exercises surpasses that of the brahmanic Dvīpāyana. For twelve years he lies in wait for an opportunity to strike. During this time the Dvāravatians develop the fateful notion that as a result of their own ascetic life the power of their great enemy is broken. They become careless and begin to indulge in pleasures and lusts. Within a short time the balance of power is upset and Dvīpāyana gains the upper hand. He then destroys the lax city entirely.

Like so many other Jainist stories, this tale reveals clearly the tendency to praise continuous asceticism, particularly fasting, as an unsurpassed remedy. To emphasize this point and to impress it upon the people's minds, the same episode also makes reference to the sixteen thousand wives of Kṛṣṇa who sought death through fasting.

In the epic literature, relatively seldom do we find asceticism practiced for the sake of liberation from *saṃsāra*. The Mahābhārata contains an episode which originally must have been an old titan myth, according to M. Winternitz. Only later, under brahmanic influence, was it converted into a moral story; and it became a favored subject of the ascetic poetry<sup>20</sup>. The part of this story which is of interest in the context of this paper tells of a king, Yayāti, who has lost his youth as a result of a curse. Yayāti, however, comes again into possession of youthful strength

19. H. Jacobi, 'Die Jaina Legende von dem Untergange Dvāravatī's', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, XXXXII, Wien, 1888, p. 511.

20. Cf. M. Winternitz, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

through his son who is willing to bear old age in his father's stead. For a thousand years, Yayāti fully enjoys life with his two wives and a heavenly nymph. Yet the more he indulges in his pleasures, the less he finds satisfaction. After a period of a thousand years, he realizes that he will never find perfect happiness in this way. His deep insight, which reveals the spirit of a new philosophy, is expressed in these verses:

49. 'One's desires are never satiated with enjoyments. On the other hand, with indulgence they flame up like the sacrificial fire with *Ghee* poured into it.
50. Even if one enjoys the whole earth, with its wealth, its diamonds, gold, animals and women, still his desires will not be satiated.
51. It is only when a man does not commit a sin in thought, deed or word in respect of any living creatures, it is then that he attains to the purity of Brahma.
52. When a man fears nothing, and when he is feared by none, when he desires for nothing, and when he injures none, it is then that he attains to the purity of Brahma.'<sup>21</sup>

These verses contain the morality which is valid for the ascetics of all Indian systems; in this particular instance, however, the concept of liberation is influenced by Vedānta thought.

In consequence of his insight, king Yayāti exchanges his youth for old age, assumes the life of an ascetic and undergoes the usual course of a thousand years of austerities in order to overcome his passions and to achieve liberation.

The essence of this story, however, is too old to incorporate consistently the later philosophical concept of liberation as a uniting of Ātman with Brahman. Instead, as a reward, the royal ascetic enters heaven where he is honored by gods and sages until he is thrown out of heaven because of his arrogance towards god Indra.

21. M. N. Dutt, *A prose English translation of the Mahābhārata*, Calcutta, 1895, p. 113 (Ādi-parvan LXXV, 49-52).

Another story from the same epic<sup>22</sup>, which already contains the concept of Nirvāṇa, tells of the ascetic Mudgala who pursues liberation. Similarly, in this story, according to the prevalent brahmanic morality, the attempt is made to overcome the desire for a finite and therefore imperfect bliss in heaven in favor of eternal liberation, which attempt, unlike in the preceding episode is successful.

Through a divine messenger the ascetic Mudgala is offered a place in heaven. Before he is willing to accept the invitation, he inquires in all details about the heavenly existence, and learns that all conceivable happiness would be his – of course, only for a limited time until his good karma would be consumed. After such time, he would have to leave heaven and start all over again on earth. Mudgala is not interested in such a temporary arrangement. He resumes his asceticism and practices Yoga which finally leads him to the desired eternal liberation.

Frequently the decision to lead a life of renunciation and penance is prompted by wandering ascetics and mendicants who by way of sermons and admonitions as well as example encourage individuals to join in their way of life. In some cases a bad omen or a shock may cause a reflective sobering during sensual indulgence and result in repentance. The best known example is the famous incident of the four passing sights in the life of prince Gautama as recorded in the Jātaka tales. Another less-known case is king Yaśodhara<sup>23</sup>, who leads a life of pleasure until one day he finds on his head a gray hair which he interprets to be a message from the god of the dead. He decides to change his way of life and to become an ascetic despite the objections of his wife. Unsuccessful in her persuasion, she now wants to share the ascetic life with him; the king, however, rejects her plan. Before he leaves his palace he finds out – how typical of the Jainist opinion of women! – that the queen deceives him

22. See M. Winternitz, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

23. J. Hertel, *Jinakīrti*, 'Geschichte von Pāla und Gopāla', in *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der kgl. Sächsisch. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig*, phil.-hist. Klasse, Bd. LXIX, Heft 4, 1917, p. 83.

with a humpbacked guard. Next day she poisons her husband, and afraid the poison might not bring the desired result, she strangles the dying man.

In another Jainist story<sup>24</sup> with a similar tendency, a heavy blow, well-deserved, causes a woman to take up an ascetic way of life. A Yogin, begging for food, walks through the street constantly repeating: 'What one does, one will reap.' A woman hears these words and wants to put them to the test by giving him two poisoned pancakes. The Yogin leaves the town and is just about to eat the gift when the two sons of the woman approach him. He is pleased by the two hungry lads and offers them the food before he proceeds on his way. The two boys die, and the mother comforts herself by believing that their death was caused by poisonous snakes, until one day she meets the same beggar walking through the street. By questioning him, she learns with horror that he had given her pancakes to two boys. She recognizes instantly the connection and the truth of the Yogin's statement. Shaken over this news, she repents by living the life of an ascetic.

Shame as well as shock may have a similar effect. A favored story of ascetic poetry<sup>25</sup> tells of a rude hunter who is deeply moved by the self-sacrificing love of two pigeons. Love of enemy and self-denial go so far that the male-pigeon offers himself to be roasted and eaten by the hungry hunter who has already caught the female-pigeon. Full of grief over the death of her mate, the female-pigeon ends her own life. Ashamed of his own conduct, the hunter is so moved by the pigeons' sacrifice that he repents and becomes an ascetic, and finally ends his own life by burning himself to death.

In summarizing the observations, gained from a limited yet characteristic cross-section of ancient Indian literature, we find a very wide variety of motives and purposes that have prompted men and women alike to practice asceticism. In the non-philosophical sources the magic

24. J. Hertel, *Indische Märchen*, Düsseldorf-Köln, 1959, p. 185f.

25. Cf. M. Winternitz, *op. cit.*, p. 354.



character is prevalent; we may even say: the more mundane, selfish and immoral the reasons for taking up an ascetic way of life appear to be, the more is asceticism caught in the sphere of magic.