Beautiful Eyes Seen with Insight as Bereft of Beauty – Subhā Therī and Her Male Counterpart in the Ekottarika-āgama

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With the present paper I follow up a theme broached by Olivia (2011: 14) in the previous issue of the present journal regarding ways of reading the *Therīgāthā*. She observes that "we are indeed fortunate that any texts composed by ancient women have been preserved. However, we should not let our gratitude for these female voices lead us into projecting our values anachronistically and observing only their 'femaleness'". Instead, she notes that "it is necessary to read the *Therīgāthā* within its specific cultural and historical contexts. Not doing so does an injustice to the poems of these female disciples".

Regarding Buddhist Studies in general, Faure (2003: 5f) observes that at times "feminist scholars tend to project current normative conceptions and ideologies onto past cultures ... much feminist work on Buddhism has been concerned with 'singing the praises of exceptional women' or chronicling the indignities suffered by women. This approach, however, is increasingly criticized as being blind to cultural and historical contexts."

Since the groundbreaking translation and study by Rhys Davids (1909/1964) and Horner (1930/1990: 162–210), considerable scholarly attention has been dedicated to the *Therīgāthā*.[1] Due to the efforts of these scholars we have become aware of many facets of this collection,

* I am indebted to Rod Bucknell, Alice Collett and Shi Kongmu for comments on a draft version of the present paper.

[1] Besides translations provided by Norman 1971/1989, Murcott 1991 and Pruitt 1998/1999, studies of aspects or the whole of the collection have been undertaken by, e.g., Lienhard 1975, Gokhale 1976, Lang 1986, Dublay 1988, Jootla 1988, Kloppenborg 1995, Rajapakse 1995, Blackstone 1998/2000 and Choubey 2009, to name just a few.

and I believe that Olivia has a point that the *Therīgāthā* is sometimes read from a slightly one-sided perspective that over-emphasizes gender-related issues, thereby running the risk of ignoring the doctrinal points the stanzas intend to convey. With this I certainly do not intend to downplay the central importance of the *Therīgāthā* as a remarkable record of female spirituality in the early Buddhist tradition. My point is only that there is often more to its stanzas than the topic of gender.

To illustrate this point, in what follows I take up the motif of gouging out one's eyes as a way of demonstrating their lack of inherent beauty. The idea of taking out an eye is to some degree a natural one, given that the eye is the only physical organ that can be disjoined from the body without recourse to a surgical instrument. Moreover, once taken out of its socket an eye indeed loses all of its former attraction. In the *Therīgāthā* this motif occurs in a set of stanzas attributed to the nun Subhā, which report that she took out one of her eyes in order to keep a sexually aroused man at bay. After presenting the main plot, I then survey comments made by some scholars regarding this tale, followed by presenting a discourse in a collection preserved in Chinese translation which contains a similar motif, but where the gouging out of an eye is undertaken by a male protagonist rather than a female one.

The stanzas of the *Therīgāthā* attributed to Subhā Jīvakambavanikā begin by describing that, while on her way to Jīvaka's Mango Grove, she is intercepted by a man with evil intentions (Thī 366). She asks why he is obstructing her, indicating to him that it is not proper for him to touch a woman who has gone forth, adding that she is one who has gone beyond sensual desire. The man replies by praising her beauty, telling her that she should give up her robes. He tells her that instead of going alone into the woods, she could dress up beautifully and live in luxury with him. On being asked what particularly attracts him, he praises her beautiful eyes, explaining that looking at her eyes arouses his sensual desire ever more (Thī 381f). Subhā replies by declaring her total disinterest in sensuality and pointing out that an eye is simply a little ball set in a hollow place. She then plucks out one of her eyes and hands it to the man (Thī 396). He is shocked by this act and comes to his senses, begging her forgiveness for his foolish behavior. The stanzas conclude by

reporting that later, after having seen the Buddha, Subhā's eye is miraculously restored (Thī 399).

In his study of the *Therīgāthā*, Rajapakse (1995: 16f) makes the important observation that Subhā's stanzas are a striking example for a tendency in the *Therīgāthā* to depict "a veritable role-reversal: far from fostering passion, in its verses women proclaim piety and dispassion to worldly and passionate *men*". He concludes that with the stanzas spoken by Subhā "it is women's success in overcoming ... *men*, and their considered attempts to divert women from spiritual endeavours, that the verses ... most strikingly record".

In a detailed analysis of the stanzas attributed to the man who accosts Subhā, Kloppenborg (1995: 160) points out that these reflect "the traditional arguments of male chauvinism", namely that

- "a young, beautiful women should not be celibate",
- "a woman should not be alone and needs male protection",
- "a woman is a man's playmate",
- "a woman under male control is happy",
- "if a woman decides to remain alone, she is despicable".

In this way, the Subhā tale can be seen to caricature such male presumptions – needless to say, such presumptions are not confined to an ancient Indian setting – set against the vivid contrast of a woman who has reached the acme of spiritual perfection and gone beyond any interest in what male company might have to offer.

In a paper dedicated entirely to the Subhā tale, Trainor (1993: 65) draws attention to the eyes as "the central metaphor of the poem, with its complex associations of aesthetic beauty and spiritual insight". The primary contrast in the stanzas indeed revolves around a male 'blinded' by passion in contrast to the nun's 'insight'. By offering her eye to the man, Subhā in a way bestows on him at least an inkling of her 'vision' of the true nature of the human body. The same theme continues until the

happy end of the story, as on coming to 'see' the Buddha her 'eye' is miraculously restored.

Based on a detailed study of the Subhā tale as part of her investigation into instances of misogyny in Buddhist texts, Wilson (1996: 169) comments that "there is great irony in the fact that Subhā must blind herself in order to get the attention of the rogue and make him listen to her. It is only by blinding herself, it seems, that Subhā is at last treated as a woman of insight – a seer and not just a sight to be seen. Perhaps we can also read Subhā's willingness to give up her own organs of sight as an indication that she eschews the female gaze".

Wilson (1996: 179) then concludes her study of several such cases by indicating that "self-disfiguring nuns like Subhā who edify men through heroic displays of their bodily repulsiveness ... thereby repudiate their role as agents of Māra. In so doing, these potential minions of Māra show themselves to be dutiful servants of their male counterparts within the *sangha*".

In her study, Wilson (1996: 169) also provides a translation of the Subhā *Therīgāthā*, the last stanza of which indicates that "when she [Subhā] saw the one with the marks of perfect merit [the Buddha], her eye was restored to its former condition". The formulation in this stanza (Thī 399) makes it clear that, contrary to what Wilson states earlier, Subhā had not 'blinded' herself. Subhā had gouged out one eye, but the other eye was still intact, since it was on "seeing" the Buddha with this eye that the other eye she had earlier taken out was restored. Wilson appears to have overlooked this part, as she speaks of Subhā "blinding" herself and then also of Subhā's giving up "her own organs of sight", where the plural does not match the single eye taken out according to the actual stanza.

Furthermore, I am also not convinced by Wilson's view of Subhā as a potential minion of Māra, a role the nun then supposedly repudiates. Since throughout Subhā's stanzas there is no explicit reference to Māra, if Māra is to be brought in, we need to turn to similar episodes where a male acts as a sexual aggressor in regard to a nun. Such episodes can be found in the *Bhikkhunī-saṃyutta* (and its Chinese parallels), where several

discourses report how nuns are challenged by Māra, inviting them to enjoy sensuality, implying a sexual threat similar in kind to the present case (Anālayo 2014). Based on the parallelism to the Subhā incident, the one who could be identified with Māra in the Subhā *Therīgāthā* is clearly the impassioned male, not the detached nun. Thus, as far as I can see, Subhā is not a minion of Māra in the first place and thus has no need to repudiate such a role.

I also have difficulties in understanding why Subhā's action provides a dutiful service to Buddhist monks, as suggested by Wilson. Similar to the case of Māra, throughout Subhā's stanzas there is no reference to monks at all. It also seems safe to assume that monks would not constitute the target audience of the *Therīgāthā*. The relative dearth of discourses spoken by nuns in the canonical collections in general and also the circumstance that counterparts to the *Therīgāthā* have not been preserved by other Buddhist schools clearly point to the predilection of the male monastic reciters, who apparently had little interest in teachings given by nuns. Thus I find no real basis for interpreting the action undertaken by Subhā as in some way providing a service to Buddhist monks.

Instead of a minion of Māra who blinds herself as a service to monks, I would see the main point of this story to be simply about contrasting the attraction of physical beauty with the Buddhist doctrinal view about the true nature of the body. In support of my interpretation of the significance of the gouging out of the eye when confronted with someone who is full of passion, I would like to turn to a tale found in the *Ekottarika-āgama* collection preserved in Chinese translation. This tale reports a similar situation, with the notable difference that the main protagonist is a male. That is, here a male gouges out an eye when confronted with an impassioned woman.

The *Ekottarika-āgama* as a whole is a collection of discourses that remained open to later additions for a longer time compared to both the Pāli *Nikāya*s and the other *Āgama*s preserved in Chinese translation (Anālayo 2009). Thus one regularly finds stories in *Ekottarika-āgama* discourses that in the Pāli canon only have counterparts in the commentaries.

According to modern scholarship, some degree of lateness is also evident in both the *Theragāthā* and the *Therīgāthā* collections.[2] This much can in fact be seen in the last of the stanzas related to Subhā, which reports her magical recovery of the one eye she has earlier taken out of its socket. While in the early discourses the Buddha is often compared to a doctor, this is usually meant only symbolically. The idea that seeing him miraculously brings about an actual healing of the body is something found mainly in literature belonging to the later, commentarial period. Hence Horner (1930/1990: 339) is probably correct when she comments that the magical healing of Subhā's eyes is "a legendary accretion obviously inserted later".

Thus the tale of Subhā and the tale in the *Ekottarika-āgama* could have come into being at more or less the same period and there is no *a priori* reason for us to assume that the relevant stanzas in the *Therīgāthā* must be earlier than the discourse from the *Ekottarika-āgama*,[3] to which I now turn.

[2] Norman 1983a: 74 points out that the *Theragāthā* has various metres, ranging from very early to later metres, besides which there are "also references to beliefs and practices of the type which ... point to lateness". He concludes that, while incorporating early material, the collection as a whole took probably about three centuries to come into being, followed by indicating (page 77) that the same applies to the *Therīgāthā*. In a similar vein, von Hinüber 1996/1997: 53 explains that "probably both collections have been growing over a long period, slowly absorbing verses commemorating monks or nuns living at quite different times, for although the commentary states that Ānanda recited these collections at the first council ... other verses are supposed to be much younger even by the tradition and as having been added on the occasion of the second council ... or still later at the time of the third council under Aśoka".

[3] This has been suggested by Greene 2006: 51 note 136, who discusses this tale and also translates a few excerpts.

Translation

I heard it like this.[4] At one time the Buddha was staying in the Deer Park at Benares together with a great company of five hundred monks. At that time the Blessed One told the monks: "You should give attention to the perception of impermanence and make much of the perception of impermanence. By giving attention to the perception of impermanence and making much of the perception of impermanence, you will eradicate craving for sensuality, craving for form and craving for the formless, and you will completely eradicate conceit and ignorance. Why is that?

"In the distant past, a long time ago, there was a solitary Buddha named Beautiful Eyes. His facial appearance was very handsome,[5] with a complexion like a peach blossom, he was of dignified appearance, his mouth exuded the fragrance of lotus flowers and his body exuded the fragrance of sandalwood.

"At that time the solitary Buddha Beautiful Eyes, when the time had come to go begging alms, put on his outer robes and took his bowl to enter the city of Benares. Gradually proceeding he approached the house of an eminent householder and stood in silence outside the gate.

"At that time the householder's daughter saw from afar that there was a practitioner of the path standing outside the gate[6]. He was incomparably handsome, with a very special facial appearance, rarely found in the world. His mouth exuded the fragrance of lotus flowers and his body exuded the fragrance of sandalwood.

"Her mind was aroused with sensual desire. She approached that monk and said: 'Now, you are handsome, with a complexion like a peach blossom, rarely found in the world. Now, I am a virgin and I am also handsome. Let us be together. In my home there are many treasures and immeasurable wealth. Being a recluse is not at all easy.'

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[4] The translated text is EĀ 38.9 at T II 724a7 to b27.
[5] My translation follows a variant reading.
[6] My rendering as "householder's daugher" follows an indication by Hirakawa 1997: 1195 regarding the Sanskrit equivalent to the Chinese characters found in the present instance.

"Then the solitary Buddha said: 'Dear sister, now what part [of me] do you feel lustfully attached to?' The householder's daughter said: 'Right now I am attached to the color of your eyes, also to the fragrance of lotus flowers exuding from your mouth and the fragrance of sandalwood exuding from your body.'

"Then the solitary Buddha held out his left hand and with the right hand plucked out an eye and placed it in the middle of his palm. He said to her: 'The eye you crave – here it is. Dear sister, what part [of me] are you attached to now? Just like a boil, which has nothing desirable to it, so this eye oozes impurities. Dear sister, you should know that the eye is like foam, being unstable, deceptive and false, deceiving people in the world.

"The ear,[7] the nose, the mouth, the body and the mind are all unstable, deceptive and false. The mouth is a container for spittle; what comes out of it is impure matter; what it contains, [the teeth], is just white bones. The body is a container of pain, its nature is to become worn away. It is a place constantly full of foul smells and troubled by worms, being like a painted jar full of impurities inside. Dear sister, what part [of me] are you attached to now?

"Therefore, dear sister, apply your mind and give attention to these phenomena as deceptive and false. If, sister, you give attention to the eye and forms as impermanent, then whatever perception you have of attachment and desire will naturally disappear. The ear, nose, mouth, body and mind are all impermanent. Having given attention to this, whatever desire there is in the mind will naturally disappear. [If] you give attention to the six sense organs [like this], there will be no more perceptions of sensuality.'

"Then the householder's daughter felt embarrassed and stepped forward to pay respect at the feet of the solitary Buddha. She said to the solitary Buddha: 'From now on I am going to correct [myself]. I will cultivate what is wholesome, without giving rise to further perceptions of sensuality. Please accept my regret for my transgression.' Three times she spoke like this.

"The solitary Buddha said: 'Wait, wait, dear sister, this is not your fault. It is because of my offences done in the past that I have received this body. On seeing it, people arouse sentiments of sensuality.

"One should carefully contemplate the eye: 'This eye is not me, nor does it belong to another;[8] it is not made by me, nor is it made by another. It has arisen from nowhere and, having come into existence, it will naturally decay and be destroyed. Whether in the past, in the present or in future, all this is caused by the coming together of conditions.

"The meaning of the coming together of conditions is: 'In dependence on this, that exists; with the arising of this, that arises. This not being, that is not, with the cessation of this, that ceases.' The eye, the ear, the nose, the mouth, the body and the mind are just like that; they are all completely empty.

"Therefore, dear sister, do not attach with the eye to forms. By not attaching to forms you will attain the place of peace, without further sentiments of sensual desire. You should train yourself like this, dear sister.' Then the solitary Buddha, having given that woman a teaching on the fourfold impermanence, rose up into the air, manifested the eighteen transformations and returned to his dwelling place.

"Then that woman contemplated the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, understanding that there is nothing to them. In a tranquil place she gave attention to this teaching. That woman also gave attention to the fact that the six senses are without an owner. She attained the fourfold even-mindedness (*brahmavihāra*) and on the breaking up of the body, after death, was reborn in the Brahmā world.

"Monks you should know that if you give attention to the perception of impermanence and make much of the perception of impermanence, you will completely eradicate craving for sensuality, for forms and for the formless, and you will get rid of all conceit and ignorance. Therefore, monks, you should train like this."

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[7] My translation follows a variant reading.
[8] My translation follows a variant reading.

At that time the monks, hearing what the Buddha had said, were delighted and received it respectfully.

Study

The doctrinal significance of the gouging out of the eye is self-evident in the above tale from the *Ekottarika-āgama*, since the whole story comes as an explanation of the initial instruction given by the Buddha that perception of impermanence will lead to freedom from all types of craving. That is, the theme of going beyond craving is the central topic. The same can safely be assumed to apply to the Subhā tale as well.

Unlike the Subhā episode, however, the exchange that leads up to the act of gouging out the eye in the present tale is rather brief, lacking the dramatic build up and the tension created by the apprehension that the other might eventually use force to achieve his aim. In the above tale, the solitary Buddha is obviously not under any kind of physical threat, hence the scene is naturally less dramatic.

In Buddhist thought, a solitary Buddha (*Paccekabuddha*) differs from a full-fledged Buddha by not having a following of disciples.[9] Nevertheless, a solitary Buddha does at times dispense short teachings, as seen in the present case. Such a teaching regularly tends to contain a strong visual component, as solitary Buddhas often teach through their appearance or through magical feats (cf. Wiltshire 1990: 66f and 76ff). Thus for the solitary Buddha in the present tale to gouge out an eye is in line with this tendency of teaching through some form of action. The same can be seen in the miracles he performs when he is about to depart. In Buddhist literature in general, the teachings delivered by a solitary Buddha arouse inspiration in the listener and lead to rebirth in a higher heavenly realm, while teachings that result in the listener's awakening are usually rather the domain of a full-fledged Buddha.

[9] On my reasons for adopting the expression "solitary Buddha", contrary to suggestions by Norman 1983b, cf. Anālayo 2010: 11ff.

As already noted above, unlike the Subhā episode, the present motif of gouging out the eye recurs with a significant shift of gender in the protagonist, as the disfiguration is undertaken by a male. Moreover, even the solitary Buddha's attractiveness is not depicted in terms that emphasize maleness. The text introduces him as handsome with a face is like a peach blossom, a comparison with flowers that one would have rather expected to find in a description of a beautiful woman. Moreover, the fragrance of lotus flowers that exudes from his mouth and the scent of sandalwood from his body both highlight more feminine descriptions of beauty. In another discourse in the *Ekottarika-āgama* the same type of description is associated with the queen of a wheel-turning king, as part of a depiction of what, according to ancient Indian standards, apparently constitutes the acme of female beauty and attractiveness.[10]

Also noteworthy is how the solitary Buddha tells the woman to stop worrying about what she had done, clarifying that from his perspective it is his own fault to have such an attractive body. The fact that the speaker of these words is a male makes it clear that these words need not be interpreted as a form of self-reproach for being attractive – a natural interpretation had the speaker been a female – but may simply be meant as a kind remark in order to dispel the embarrassment and regret felt by the householder's daughter.[11]

Clearly, the present tale inverts simplistic gender roles, thereby offering a significant corrective to readings of the Subhā tale from a perspective that is only concerned with the issue of gender discrimination. Once the gouging out of an eye by Subhā is considered in conjunction with the same act undertaken by the solitary Buddha, it becomes clear that this is simply a teaching aimed at deconstructing the notion of beauty of any body, male or female.

Detachment from craving in regard to the body is in fact a requirement in the early Buddhist soteriological scheme, the relevance of

[10] EĀ 50.4 at T II 807c15; for a translation of this discourse cf. Anālayo 2011.

[11] The present case thus stands in contrast to what Faure 1998: 20 sees as a pattern in Buddhist texts, where "in a man, beauty is often perceived as the effect of good karma, whereas in a woman it is usually seen as the result of past sin – paradoxically enough, because it produces attachment in men".

which is independent of the gender of the practitioner. This can be seen in the instructions given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels on contemplating the anatomical nature of the body, which are clearly meant to be applied first of all to one's own body. The Pāli version introduces the listing of anatomical parts with the phrase "there are in this body", a phrase similarly found in the two Chinese parallel versions, one of which explicitly speaks of this body "of mine".[12] That is, a male will first of all have to contemplate his own body, just as a female will first of all have to contemplate her own body. It is only when such contemplation has been successfully cultivated that the same understanding will also be applied to the bodies of others.

Due to the circumstance that the Buddha apparently traveled together with monks, it is only natural that the discourses often address a male monastic audience, with the inevitable result that the dangers of the attraction of female bodies are a frequent topic. Neither the frequency of such instructions nor the tale of Subhā, however, implies that early Buddhist texts adopt a simplistic logic where one gender is cast unilaterally in the role of being the tempter and the other of being the victim.

Primary Sources

EĀ *Ekottarika-āgama*

MĀ *Madhyama-āgama*

MN *Majjhima-nikāya*

T Taishō edition (CBETA)

Thī *Therīgāthā* (PTS edition)

[12] MĀ 98 at T I 583b6 indicates that the contemplation is to be undertaken "within this body of mine", something implicit in the corresponding reference to what is "in this body" in MN 10 at MN I 57,15 and EĀ 12.1 at T II 568a19.

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