
The Savage Buddha: Notes on Gautama & the Kāpālīka-vrata

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GAUTAMA'S EARLY PROTÉGÉS

From viewing a number of my online articles, certain readers have formed the impression that I strongly identify with a remote class of Asiatic asceticism. They furthermore presume my “tradition” (yes, hard to get beyond this decadent term) to be essentially shamanic, but with a particular penchant for seeking out secreted oases. Finding this not too far off the mark, I should like to suffix some orienting surfaces.

First let me make something absolutely clear: I am not a shaman. Second, since we have become so gripped by the “Buddha” thing, let us be a little scientific for once. Anthropologically we are speaking here of the *bhikkhu sangha*, or community of Bauddha ascetics, as a “living fossil.” But a primitive stratum of yogic savagery was already current with the *parivrājaka* and *anāgārika* trends of “abodeless ascetics,” and with the *śrāmana* movement in particular. The *bhikkhu* or almsman is of a later appearance. So we have to understand the *bhikkhu* or “beggar” in the light of the *śrāmana* (ascetic wander). We must also keep in mind the historical fact that in the earliest times Gautama ‘himself’ was not called the Buddha, but the “shamana.” This confirms that Gautama was something like a shaman.

Question: But how can anyone be so sure what was going on more than two thousand years ago?

First of all, one needs to discern between history and legend. One then needs to make some private, in-depth, ethnographic studies. However, in the end it is up to everybody's own interpretive and/or re-creative imagination.

Q: How might one see it then?

In the first twenty years of Gautama's mission he sent forth untold numbers of disciples that had undergone training at his bleak encampment. We visualize a broad assortment of outcast mendicant bowl beggars and wearers of robes sewn together from the rags they had scavenged from fetid cadavers¹ left to be gobbled by carrion, rat and worm. This is even more impressive in knowing that the carcasses were flung from society's nethermost rung. These were no mere untouchables, but unseeables! — Indeed, those whom 'proper' caste-society deemed inherently abominable and whose chief social function was the disposal of the most abhorrent pollutant conceivable—namely, woman's menstrual discharge. Not only the touch, but the mere sight alone of these intrinsically despicable sub-human pariahs was enough to defile a proper caste-Hindu. Hence were these virtual miscreants-by-birth compelled to lead nocturnal existences, and upon their demise they were literally "flung to the jackals" at designated sites. These gruesome haunts proved veritable conservatoires for ascetic endeavors currently in vogue.

¹ It is worth here noting the archeological evidence contained in a commentary to the *Samyutta-nikāya*, the *Sāvatthappakāsinī* (Pali Text Society, 1932, trans. Woodward: 199.27-200.9 [XVI.11]) where Sakyamuni is depicted in a charnel ground picking up a vile rag 'teeming with growth' (Pali, *tumbamatta*). Did Gautama have in mind a robe? See Jonathan Silk, "A difficult Pali word," Archives of Indology, 14 Feb 2001, online post.

These were the places where Gautama's earliest protégés flocked and established their provisional yogic encampments. They begged through the silent streets of dawn with bowls likely fashioned from human skulls. Some wore matted hair Rastaman-style while others pulled their hair out strand by strand. Some engaged in arcane rituals that involved the eating of human flesh... They kept to the woods and undisturbed places conducive to ecstatic technology. When rarely emerging from their no-man's lands, these wayward characters were sure to inspire revulsion and awe in the delicate hearts of the civil population. For it was tacitly inferred that such a class of men who dared to transgress all social restraints became privy to the magical force of chaos.

THE ORIGINS OF THE KĀPĀLIKA RELIGION

We have talked about the "savage" nature of early Bauddha asceticism. The picture becomes increasingly clear as we gather more data on the distinctive mold of early generic Indian asceticism,² which stems from the little known Kāpālīka religion.

Q: What exactly is the meaning of *kāpālīka*?

Literally "skull-ist," ("wearer of skulls"), *kāpālīka* denotes an early and primarily southern Indian medieval tantric cult regarded as an offshoot of *Śaiva Pāshupata*. Their permissive attitude toward caste distinction and the general iconoclastic and anti-social nature of their practices was an overall attack on the divinely ordained Indian social order based on *Varnāshramadharma*. They are pictured as sitting in a cemetery ground (*śmaśāna*) wearing garlands made of human bones, their bodies smeared with human corpse-ash. They eat their food from human skulls. No texts survive. As for the Sanskrit root *kapāla*, again, it simply means "skull." But the origin of

² Especially as seen in its *vrata* or "ordered observance."

the term is not entirely clear. According to Manfred Mayrhofer, opinions differ between its derivation from Indo-European **kap-* ‘take, grab, seize’ (vis-à-vis Latin *capere*, *capula*, etc.), its association with the Latin cognate *caput* as well as Old English *hafola* ‘head.’ Otherwise it may be entirely of non-Indo-European origin, perhaps more marked by Austro-Asian influence.³ Nevertheless it is worth pointing out that in the modern North India Bhojpuri language, *kapāt* denotes “head.” We may also consider the feminine form “*kapālikā*,” which is a name for Kālī, “the skull wearing one,” and the masculine “*kapāli*,” a name for Śiva. Interestingly, *kapāla* likely shares the same root with German *kaputt*.

BRĀHMACIDE – THE KĀPĀLIKA OBSERVANCE

The Kāpālika religion is itself believed to have originated from a very strange brāhmacidal penance prescribed in the ancient *Dharmasūtras*.⁴ According to the English scholar Robert Mayer (1990), the Kāpālika observance came to be adopted as the principal ascetic practice of the earliest Tantric sect, the Lākulas. It subsequently came to pervade all tantric Śaiva and Bauddha sects, and to varying degrees, nearly all forms of Asiatic asceticism. It stems from the Ancient Indian Legal Code or *Dharmasūtras* and the punishment it prescribes for a *brāhman* who commits “brāhmacide,” that is, killing a fellow high-caste member. The specific penance is called *Kāpālika-vrata*. It has remained a constant and unchanging feature of Indian legal literature from around 600-400 BCE to

³ Manfred Mayrhofer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindiarischen*, 1986.

⁴ See Alexis Sanderson (i) “Purity and Power Among the Brāhmins of Kashmir,” 1990 in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed., M. Carrithers, S. Collins and S. Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press) 1986; and (ii) “Saivism and the Tantric Traditions,” 1988 in *The World’s Religions*, ed., Steward Sutherland, Leslie Houlden, Peter Clarke, Friedhelm Hardy (Routledge, Kegan, Paul) 1988.

the present day.⁵ This outrageous penitential observance has always comprised the following:

- (i) Banishment to a cemetery.
- (ii) Living only by alms, to be accepted from all castes.
- (iii) Wearing only rudimentary clothing, often only a lower garment made of animal skin.
- (iv) The constant carrying of the skull of the *brāhmin* one has killed.
- (v) The use of this skull (*kapāla*) as one's begging bowl.
- (vi) The constant carrying with one of a *khatvanga*, literally "the leg of a bed," i.e., a staff or trident with a skull attached at its top. (This implement has no other recorded usage; it is a unique emblem of a convicted *brāhman* brāhmacide).
- (vii) The sustaining of this entire regime for twelve years.
- (viii) The acceptance that one is highly ritually impure for the duration of the observance, and therefore one remains socially isolated and observes avoidance behavior in the presence of *brāhmans*.
- (ix) The dedication of oneself to intense moral reflection and spiritual purification for the duration of the observance (all quoted from Mayer).

MODERN REMNANTS

Q: How does this relate to contemporary monasticism, particularly Buddha monasticism? Does the Kāpālīka religion or something like it still exist today?

⁵ Robert Mayer 1990. "The Origins of the Esoteric Vajrayāna," a seminar paper for The Buddhist Forum, London School of Oriental and African Studies, Centre of Religion and Philosophy, October 17, 1990.

These questions are key. For the all-important fact that nearly everyone ignores is that many of those early, far-wandered disciples of the Buddha never returned to the Teacher at all.

Q: So where did they go, and with whom did they eventually mix?

It was during my search for answers to such questions that I came to regard my own yogic quest as analogous to a sentiment stemming from strata that predate the advent of the codified *bhikkhu*. We are talking about a savage expression of asceticism that is essentially shamanic in structure.

Now as time went on the Kāpālīka penance was adopted by both the Śaiva and Bauddha orders as their central religious observance. But why this happened I barely have a clue. For it is actually quite hard for me to fathom the extreme morbidity of the early Indian ascetic customs. However, Mayer has a very clear idea. For Mayer the strange Kāpālīka observance expresses a kind of ‘intensification of the Indian ascetic’s predilection to perform his own funerary rites at the time of his initiation (*dīkshā*).’ In other words, according to Mayer, it is the intention of the Indian tantric ascetic to ritually perform his own murder. Allow me to quote the distinguished author:

Living in that most polluting of all conceivable places, the cemetery, constantly smearing his face and body with those most polluting of all conceivable substances, menstrual blood, semen, grease from a human cadaver and the ashes of a burned corpse, he drank wine and ate meats out of a bowl fashioned from a human skull, while enjoying frequent rituals of social, commensal, religious and above all sexual intercourse with untouchable women. Far from attempting to purify himself of this inconceivably vast weight of impurity by the three-fold daily bath, instead he enjoyed a grisly parody of such

purification by “bathing” himself in human corpse ash, thus merely compounding the intensity of his pollution to the best of his ability and in accordance with the precept of his sect.

Now most would consider this pretty weird stuff. Indeed, this is freak asceticism at its most extreme. We are fathoming the life of a serial Brāhmicide, these very annotations inscribed on human parchment, corpse-ash ground with blood for pigment, a sharpened bone for cryptic stylus. It’s the charnel ground method, what do you expect.

Q: But what exactly is the writer’s point then? Does this have any relevance in the Twenty-first century?

Well, perhaps it takes strange historical tid bits such as these to wake up all you Bauddha-monk worshippers to a sensible perspective on the objects of your worship. Or maybe the writer simply has an axe to grind. I’m in no position to say. But to me such facts lend a priceless glimpse into the character and life of the quasi-historical Buddha who, once again, during his lengthy monk’s career was apparently not known as “The Buddha” at all, but rather, the *śrāmana*, that is, something on the order of a “shaman.”

THE SAVAGE BUDDHA

Q: Are we making the Buddha out to be some sort of witch doctor?

We have to be prepared to recognize “Buddha” primarily as a literary device; as either a shorthand allusion to the dressed up protagonist of the Pali texts on the one hand, or a code-word for the “authors” of the scriptures themselves on the other. Obliquely conceding this tacit qualification, along with the urge to suspended disbelief, one then becomes privy to a quasi-historical data-source that avers to the ‘fact’ that the ‘mythical’ Buddha took part in the ritual disciplines known widely in India



as *śavavāda*. *Śavavāda* literally means “corpse-way.” The practice involved certain extreme necrophilic beliefs that were common to ‘Hindu’ and ‘Bauddha’ Tantric cults. Its practitioners were notorious for their deep involvement with scatological matters, death and the dead. It entailed erotic attraction to corpses and eating the putrefied flesh of semi-cremated and exhumed cadavers. The *śavavāda* discipline was also distinguished by yogins’ repeated performance of their own symbolic funeral rites. The cemetery thus became a fundamental iconographic motif that underpinned the role of “initiatory fear.” This was typically symbolized by the terrible appearance of Goddess Kālī.

As “the black one,” Kālī, represents not only fear of death, but more importantly the death of fear. For fear is that over which the yogin must triumph in order to cut through the fraudulent mass of ego-consciousness. Such death is followed by the birth of liberation. This is why Kālī is black and naked. Iconographically her face is terrifying. She wears several wreaths of skulls around her neck. Every detail is significant—the snake or *nāga* that serves as her sacred thread, the thousands of amputated hands about her hips, her bloodstained body, the two infant corpses in place of earrings. The Goddess also treads upon a naked Śaivite ascetic. He seems to be a Nātha or a Kānphatā yogin, as the huge wooden earrings inserted through the split cartilage of his ears would indicate. He wears nothing but two *nāgas*, one around his neck the other around his waist. His facial expression is that of spiritual illumination. His third-eye is opened. In his right hand he holds a small damaru or ritual hourglass-shaped Indian drum.⁶ The setting of these rituals is a smoldering *śmśāna* or “charnel ground” It is littered with a child’s severed head and other body parts upon which birds and jackals feed.⁷ The scene thus illustrates the fundamental aspects of the *śavavāda* or “corpse-way” sacrament, distinguished by extreme necrophillic beliefs and by the repeated performance of the ascetic’s own symbolic funeral rites.

⁶ F.B.J. Kuiper treats *domba* [retroflex d] together with other words for drum in his Proto-Munda Words in Sanskrit (1948: 84-87). See *Domba*, 87, under the heading (Rigvedic), and *dundubhi*, ‘drum,’ 43. In regard to these listings, Witzel mentions “a comparison to many other words for drum with similar shape: Skt. *dunduma*, *DiNDima*, *tumbukin*, *ADambara* (Vedic), *lambara*, *Dimbima*, Pkt. *heramba*, Pali *dudrabhi*.... Finally,” writes Witzel, “Kuiper connects [Munda] Santali DoDom DoDom ‘sound of drumming,’ and with a slightly different -o-, DoDom DoDom ‘sound of Doms drumming when arriving in a village,’ with the word *Dom* designating a ‘certain low Hindu caste...small agriculturists and...drummers’ = Hindi *Dom(b)*, Skt. *Domba*, [and] Pkt. *Dumba* (who cook dogs!).” See Michael Witzel, Re: .dombii as scavenger woman, Archives of Indology, 23 Apr 2000, online post. Bracketed words mine. For more on the Doms see my “Digression-Loop: The Sacred Dombi” in my *Mystical Eroticism* (revised 2002).

⁷ It may also be the case that “jackal” is the right or wrong translation for Hindi *gīdar*, “wild dog.” The Latin name for *gīdar* is likely *Canis aureus*. There is great similarity between the wild *gīdar* and certain domesticated dogs, but the *gīdar* does not look at all like what one thinks of as a jackal. See Jaap Pranger, cooking dogs [was: .dombii as scavenger woman], Archives of Indology, 26 Apr 2000, online post.

Q: But why have ascetics so long carried out these bizarre procedures while living in the fiery environs of cremation grounds?

Performing yogic practices amidst the evanescent ambiance of death and in constant contact with decomposing corpses was believed to instill a heightened awareness of the utter meretriciousness of “ego” experience. The symbolism of the cemetery (*śmśāna*) and the meditations performed while sitting on corpses plays an important role in a number of Indian ascetic schools. Writes Eliade (1954),

The cemetery represents the totality of psychomental life, fed by consciousness of the ‘I’; the corpses symbolize the various sensory and mental activities. Seated at the center of his profane experience, the yogin ‘burns’ the activities that feed them, just as corpses are burned in the cemetery. By meditating in a *śmśāna* he more directly achieves the combustion of egotistic experiences; at the same time, he frees himself from fear, he evokes the terrible demons and obtains mastery over them.⁸

This arcane symbolism played an important role in a number of other Indian ascetic schools as well, and which gained popularity especially from the 12th century. But exactly how, when and where these early morbid practices began is not plainly known; most likely they emerge from a remote pre-historic past. But this we know for sure: the Kāpālīka Religion acted as the model for many such later ascetic orders that emphasized the teachings of yoga-tantra. These show close affinity with the Bauddha

⁸ Mircea Eliade 1958. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. W. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul) 1958: 296. First published in French as *Yoga: Essai sur l'origine de la mystique Indienne* in 1933.

Vajrayāna, the tradition of the Eighty-Four Siddhas and the Indian alchemists, too.

For many it is strange and understandably difficult to imagine that the Buddha ever involved itself with such eerie and anti-social goings on. To waylay doubt, I would direct the patient reader's attention to the *Mahā-Sihanāda Sutta*,⁹ a Pāli discourse that the Buddha seems absolutely horrified to quote. In this extraordinary document the Buddha is heard to be almost boasting over having undergone more extreme austerities than any of his yogin contemporaries. He then recites his comprehensive catalog that includes, for one thing, sleeping on human bones in cremation grounds. Here we find the fundamental *śavavāda* sacrament where the Buddha symbolically performed his own funeral rites while living in a cremation-ground. Also included in the Buddha's list of extreme austerities is crawling into cow pens to eat fresh cow dung, a typical custom of the *govrata*, or "cow-vow" practice. Based on this scripture, then, we know that the Buddha spent a certain amount of time living and eating like a cow. We furthermore hear the Buddha making claims of having consumed his own urine and fecal matter. In the words of Oxford Professor Richard F. Gombrich, "the author of the text" appears to be saying, "Anything your guru has done, ours has done better."¹⁰ At any rate, this data needs some time to sink in.

⁹ *Majjhima-nikāya*, 12. It has been brought to my attention that the title of the discourse is actually associated with the culture of Śiva, Mahā-Sī = Mahā-Shiva. See *Maha-sihanada Sutta* ("The Great Discourse on the Lion's Roar"), trans. from the Pāli by Ñānamoli Thera 1993, ed. and revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

¹⁰ Richard F. Gombrich 1996. *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (London and Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Athlone) 1996: 78-9. See also Axel Michael's review in *Numen*, vol. 45 (1997): 222-23.

Sritantra is described in studied succinctness as an ascetic researcher, writer and artist who left his native Los Angeles at the age of 22 and who has lived nearly all of his adult life abroad in Asian and European countries. He is furthermore depicted as having been inducted into the Bhikshu Sampradāya in 1978 at the Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya, India. It is additionally declared that his spiritual father is nobody less than His Holiness Śrī Satyānanta Sarasvatī Svāmin more commonly known as Saint Guru Chod (1900-1988). Venerable Sritantra currently resides in Singapore at his private Jasmine Hermitage & Centre for Research. Portions of his writing are accessible at <http://sritantra.co.uk/> and <http://www.blogger.com/profile/>.