The Vicissitudes of Vāsiṭṭhi / Vāsiṣṭhā
who became insane due to the loss of her child
—From Therīgāthā to Mahāyāna—

To Krishnāriboud, in Memoriam

Hubert Durt

In the Buddhist tradition, several stories about mothers losing their children may be found in the Pāli Therīgāthā, the versified sayings of the elder nuns or, in the words of C.A.F. Rhys Davids, the “Psalms of the Sisters.” But we also find these human dramas in Sanskrit sources and in Chinese translations based on Indian originals. Vāsiṭṭhi (Sanskrit: Vāsiṣṭhā or Vāsiṣṭhi) is one of those mothers, and her legend has been diffused throughout a large part of the ancient Buddhist world. This article focuses on variations in the tale of Vāsiṭṭhi whose grief at the loss of her children drove her to madness and who was later converted by the Buddha. As is to be expected, this conversion is effected through various teachings. The doctrinal aspect cannot be taken into full consideration in this article due to the limits of space.

Remnants of the Sanskrit Sthavirīgāthā

As for Sanskrit material, we must first acknowledge that almost nothing remains from the Sanskrit collection that was comparable to the Pāli Therīgāthā. From summaries of what Etienne Lamotte called the “Kṣudraka Sanskrit”, we know that there were Bhikṣuṇīgāthā or Sthavirīgāthā. These standard lists are mostly known through texts related to the Vinaya of the Mulasarvāstivādin. Most of the content of these lists consists of gāthā that seem to have been devotionally sung during the night and in times of distress. Probably because these
gaṭhā did not belong exclusively to a monastic context, the Sthavira-gaṭhā and the Sthavirīgaṭhā are often omitted from the lists. The omission of the Sthavirīgaṭhā could be explained *a fortiori* when there was no female context.

A collection of Bhikṣunīgaṭhā or Sthavirīgaṭhā is no longer extant in Sanskrit, Chinese or Tibetan, but we can still find a few quotations that seem to originate from these Sthavirīgaṭhā. Although they have no such title, their content is close to stanzas in the Pāli Therīgaṭhā.

Let us first point out that there are two stanzas attributed to a certain Śuklā that match the Therīgaṭhā’s stanzas of Subhā in the Bhikṣunī-Vinaya of the Lokottara-Mahāsāṃghika, edited by Prof. Gustav Roth. In her French translation and study of this scripture, Edith Nolot has established the correlation between the two texts.

Moreover, another figure in the Therīgaṭhā, Vāsiṣṭhi (or Vāseṣṭhi), named “Vāsiṣṭhi” in Sanskrit by Vasubandhu and “Vāsiṣṭhā-sagotrā Brāmana” by Yaśomitra and who should be called “Vāsiṣṭha” according to the customary Chinese transcription of her name (婆私[四]吒) has attracted my attention. The middle character of her name is written 婆私吒 only in Guṇabhadra’s translation of the Saṃyuktāgama. We find her as 婆私吒 in the “āgamic tradition” of the Saṃyuktāgama, in the Sūtrālaṃkāra and in the Mahayanic Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra. Xuanzang uses the reduced form 婆私 in his translation of the Abhidharmakośa, but he uses 婆斯蹉 in his translation of the Mahāvibhāṣā leaving in question the restitution of the final syllable as ‘thā’ or as ‘thī.’

As originally a Brahmin’s wife, she appears in two passages of the Therīgaṭhā both of which are connected to the death of children. The first episode is the more attested in literature: after the death of one or six children, she recovers from her grief-induced madness by the sight (Sk. *darśana*) of the Buddha. The second episode is a consequence
of the first: having taken religious vows, she is not affected by the
death of one more child, and she succeeds in getting her whole family,
more upset than she, to follow her in "leaving home." In some accounts
the household chariot driver is included in the "contagion de l'exemple."

The double tradition concerning Vāsiṭṭhi in the Therīgāthā

As is well known, every stanza or group of stanzas in this collec-
tion of hymns appears under the name of a nun, a bhikkhunī, who
became an elder, a Therī, in the nun's community. Some of these Therīs,
such as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Kīsā Gotamī or Uppalavāṇṇā, are
famous figures in the legend of the Buddha, while other nuns are known
only through the biographical sketch, dealing mostly with their karmic
past, that was compiled in the fifth century by Dhammapāla, found
in the sixth part, devoted to the Therīgāthā, of his large seven-part
commentary (Aṭṭhakathā), the Paramattha-dīpanī9). Older than the
commentaries, but later than the Therīgāthā, the Apadāna collection
includes a section (part 4, Therī-apadāna) devoted to the nuns. This
Therī-apadāna, spoken by nuns, is a kind of supplement to the Therīgāthā
dealing mostly with the former lives, and thus with the karmic past, of forty Therīs10.

I. The Vāsiṭṭhi Chapter [Therīgāthā vv. 133-138]

There are two groups of stanzas in the Therīgāthā that describe
Vāsiṭṭhi's tribulations and salvation. The first is a set of six stanzas
appearing under her name, which I will call the Vāsiṭṭhi Chapter. In a
first-person monologue, Vāsiṭṭhi expresses her sorrow at the loss of
her child (or children) (puttasoka), a sorrow reaching madness (khi-
tacittā visaññīni), as she ran miserably, naked and with dishevelled
hair (nagā pakinnakesi) for three years (vv. 133-134).

In the next two stanzas, she describes recovering her mind (cittam
paṭiladdhāna) through the vision (addassāmi) of Gotama in Mithilā, her greeting to him (vanditvāna) and his teaching of the dhamma through compassion (anukampāya) for her.

In the final two stanzas, she tells about entering the Community (pabbajim anagāriyam), the extinction of her sorrow (sabbe sokā samucchinnā pahīna etadantikā) and her gaining knowledge (parīññātā) of the grounds (vatthū) from which is the origin of grief (sokāna sambhava).

These six stanzas constitute a standard Theri's monologue. Such compositions make up perhaps one-third of the hymns of the Therigāthā. This short and "exclamative" text is not reproduced as such in the Sanskrit or the Chinese tradition.

II. The Sundari Chapter [Therigāthā vv. 312-337]

The second group of Therigāthā stanzas related to Vāsiṭṭhi, whose name is often written as “Vāsetṭhi”, is longer than the previous one. It is found among the dialogues that constitute a conspicuous part of the Therigāthā collection. This poetical composition appears under the name of Sundari and so can be called the Sundari Chapter. This embryonic drama features seven characters: a Brahmin of Bārāṇasi, called Sujāta; a Brahmin lady called Vāsetṭhi; a charioteer (sārathi); the wife of the Brahmin; their daughter Sundari; the Therī preceptor of Sundari; and finally the Buddha who welcomes Sundari in Sāvatthi. The Pāli commentary also says that Sundari enters the religious life with her mother (Comm., Transl. p. 290). We will see later that in the āgamic rendering of the event, the two ladies, Vāsetṭhi and the Brahmin’s wife/Sundari’s mother, are one and the same person. The third woman, the preceptor, is mentioned only in the Pāli commentary (Comm., Transl. p. 296). She is absent from the āgamic tradition. Nevertheless, the vocatives ("lady", ayye, v. 330 and 332) and the lofty epithet
("lovely ornament of the order of the elder nuns", kalyāṇī therisāṅghassa sobhanē, v. 331) that Sundari addresses to this "preceptor" just after having been encouraged by her mother to leave the world, induces the reader to believe that it is in fact Vāsetṭhī herself who plays that role of "preceptor".

The chapter starts brutally with a question that Sujāṭa adresses to Vāsetṭhī, calling her first with the vocative bhoti (v. 312), then Brāhmaṇī Vāsetṭhī (v.313), later shortened to Vāsetṭhī (v. 316). He asks her why is she no longer mourning (paritappasi) her seven dead children. In the following dialogue, Vāsetṭhī mentions the city of Mithilā (v. 317) where she heard the dhamma for the abandonment of all pain (sabbadukkhappahānāya). Knowing the true doctrine (vinñāsaddhammā, she thrusts away grief for her sons (puttasokam byapānudim, v. 318). Sujāṭa decides to go to Mithilā to meet the Buddha (v. 319). He will become there a "knower of the true doctrine", leaving the world (pabbajita) (vv. 320-323).

Next there is an interlude (vv. 324-326) in which the charioteer who had to inform Sujāṭa’s wife about her husband’s new status now wishes in his turn to follow his master into the religious life. Thereafter Sundari, told by her mother that she is now the heiress (dāyādikā kule, v. 327) of the wealth left by her father, expresses the desire to follow him: as she was afflicted by grief for her son (puttasokena addita), she is afflicted by the loss of her brother (bhātu sokena additā v. 328). Her mother, showing her experience of the religious life, encourages Sundari (v. 329).

In the finale (vv. 330-337), Sundari, who has already become a trainee (sikkhamānā) well advanced on the holy way, asks her unidentified "preceptor" (who might be her mother) for permission to go to Sāvatthī to meet the Buddha. Before receiving the approval of the Buddha (v. 337), she calls him brāhmaṇa and declares herself to be his
natural daughter born from his mouth (*dhītā orasā mukhato jātā*, v. 336).

It is in this Sundari Chapter, in v. 313, that Vāsetṭhī is presented as having lost seven children (*satta puttāni*). Another reading is "hundreds of children" (*sata-puttāni*). This reading could be influenced by the following verse (v. 314) in which Vāsetṭhī alludes rhetorically to the hundreds of children and of groups of parents (*nātisaṅgha*) that for her as for the Brahmin have been consumed (*khādītā*) by death in the past. In favor of the reading "seven" is the fact that the number of seven children is a common feature in the non Pāli tradition that will be presented below.

Although the meeting with the Buddha in Mithilā is a common feature of the two chapters, the commentator seems to be reticent to establish an identification of Vāsetṭhī Therī with the wife of the Brahmin. As we will see, in the āgamic version of the story, it is Vāsiṣṭhī, cured of her madness by the Buddha, who will be leading her husband and her daughter on the holy way through her encouragement to free themselves from the sorrow caused by the death of a child.

The story of Vāsiṣṭhī that will be diffused in Sanskrit and in Chinese seems thus to be based on a source close to these two accounts of the *Therighāṭhā*. The madness of the mother is expressed in the first Vāsiṣṭhī Chapter, her serenity at the loss of her last child is expressed in the second group of stanzas, the Sundari Chapter. Except for a few elements known only in Chinese that we will examine later, we can say that the basic plot of the Vāsiṣṭhī / Vāsetṭhī story appears in the Pāli Therighāṭhā.

One might wonder about the discrepancy in the Therighāṭhā between the first account, her monologue, in which Vāsiṣṭhī expressed her wish to become a nun: *pabbajīṁ anagāriyam* (v. 137), and the second account, the Sundari Chapter, where Vāsetṭhī seems to be rein-
serted into family life. In the Pāli account, we must admit that it is not made clear that the Brāhmaṇī Vāseṭṭhi exhorting the Brahmin Sujāṭa, father of Sundari, could be both his wife and a Therī.

The death of a child

The drama of the death of a child is not exclusive to the story of Vāsiṭṭhi. It is a rather common feature of the life of future nuns, as shown by two other, more famous, stories about the Therī Kisā Gotamī and the Therī Paṭācārā. For these two women, the Therīgāthā and its commentary are not the best sources to read about their tribulations: their stories have been diffused in other works of the Pāli and non Pāli literature. I will mention the first case: Kisā Gotamī, in one of the stories attached to her name, was a poor woman who, in despair at the loss of her son, asks the Buddha for a remedy. He tells her to bring him a sesame seed from a house in Benares that has never experienced death. The second case is the story of the chain of catastrophes that plague Paṭācārā, not told in the stanzas of the Therīgāthā (vv. 112-116), but prominent in the commentaries on these stanzas, as in the Apadāna (No 21, v. 31): just after having given birth to her second son, Paṭācārā loses in the space of one day her husband, killed by a snake, her two sons, drowned in a flood; and her family, killed in a fire. In the Therīgāthā, Paṭācārā Therī is surrounded by a group of five hundred nuns (vv. 127-132) all of whom were motivated to join the order by the loss of a child. Another case in the Therīgāthā is Ubbiri Therī (vv. 51-53), who lost her daughter called Jivā (life); and in the Udāna we find the the famous laywoman Visākhā, who lost her granddaughter, sometimes called Dattā.

Sometimes there are overlaps in these sad stories, which were probably topics of sermons in the oral tradition. For example, we find an element of the Paṭācārā story in the stanzas (Therīgāthā, vv. 218-
219) told by Kisā Gotāmi and inversely it is to Kisā Gotāmi that is attributed a summary of the Vāsiṭṭhi legend in the Da zhidu lun⁴. Moreover, in the Paṭacārā's stanzas kept not in the Therīgāthā but in the Therīpadāna (no 21, vv. 32-34), her sorrow after her triple loss and her meeting with the Buddha can be compared with the legend of Vāsiṭṭhi. Her three catastrophes on the same day, although absent from the stanzas, are described in the commentary of these stanzas.

Resignation in the Pāli tradition and in the Abhidharmakosā-vyākkhyā of Yaśomitra

Although the death of a child is a sad but all too common experience, we may observe that the Buddha uses various arguments to induce the mothers to accept their sorrow. In Vāsiṭṭhi's story, there is much emphasis on the fact that Vāsiṭṭhi had been driven insane and is just recovering. In the Udāna and similar texts, when the Buddha is teaching a learned lady like Visākhā who is weeping for her lost granddaughter, the Buddha is rather sharp: pain comes from clinging to what is dear (piya, pema), he admonishes her: do not be attached and you will not suffer. This advice is a common refrain in the monkish wisdom of the Dhammapada. In the female world of the Therīgāthā the response to grief is often more subtle: samsāra is a place where people “come and go” (āgata gata), Paṭacārā tells her five hundred followers (vv. 127-128). In other cases, and especially in the case of Vāsiṭṭhi, who in some accounts has lost six or seven children, Vāsetṭhi herself, answering Sujāta, refers to the huge number of people devoured by death (vv. 314-315). Why lament? We have seen that the metaphors they use are related to feeding death.

In Sanskrit, the same flesh-eating (bhakṣita, khādīta) imagery, in reference to the burial place where wild animals devour corpses, appears in Yaśomitra's citation of an unnamed Sthavīrīgāthā. Com-
menting in the *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhya* on Vasubandhu’s mention of Vāsiṣṭhī’s madness in his *Abhidharmakośa*, Yaśomitra tells Vāsetṭhi’s story and ends with a quotation of four stanzas. They are introduced by a insensitive joke of the husband (*svabhāraḥ*) of Vāsiṣṭhā-sagotrā Brāhmaṇi, who is himself dejected after the loss of their seventh child.

“He says to her: ‘You were lamenting the death of your children and now this time you don’t lament. Is it because your children have been eaten by you that you cannot lament?’” (‘*tvaṃ pūrvam putra-maraṇena paritaptāḥ*’). This passage in prose corresponds to the first stanza of Sujāta in the Sundari Chapter of the *Therīgāthā* (vv. 312-313).

The stanzas pronounced then by Vāsiṣṭhā-sagotrā Brāhmaṇi in Sanskrit are similar but more extended than the corresponding stanzas pronounced by Vāsetṭhi (vv. 314-315). This Sanskrit version of the story also had the merit of demonstrating the connection that must have existed between the two chapters, separated in the *Therīgāthā* of Vāsiṣṭhī and of Sundāri.

Insanity caused by sorrow [Wogihara ed., *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhya* of Yaśomitra, pp. 396.3-31]

If we think in terms of certain stories having been “topics of sermon”, we can understand how the sad story of Vāsiṣṭhī has been diffused in very different Buddhist texts in the non Pāli tradition. First of all, this story belongs to the *Āgama* scriptures and can be found in the two Chinese translations of the *Sāmyuktāgama* [8]. It is referred to as a case of sorrow causing madness in encyclopedic works such as the *Da zhidu lun* (under the name, as I said before, of Kīṣā Gotami) or the *Abhidharmakośa* [16] and its commentary the *Vyākhya* [17] quoted just above.

Vāsiṣṭhā is described as insane in the *Sūtraśāntikāra*, attributed to Aśvaghoṣa [18], a collection of tales whose Chinese translation is often
close to the fragments of the Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā compiled by Kumāralāta	extsuperscript{19}. The case of Vāsiṣṭha is presented as an example of the benevolence (maitrī) of the Buddha using his superpowers (abhijñā) in the largest encyclopedical work, the Mahāvibhāṣā of Kashmir	extsuperscript{20} and in one of the most influential Mahāyānasūtra, the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra	extsuperscript{21}, whose sources are often very close to the sources used in the Mahāvibhāṣā	extsuperscript{22}.

As is well known, this Mahāyānasūtra has almost nothing common with the shorter sutra on the last moments of the Buddha’s life, although they have the same title in Pāli, Sanskrit and in Chinese translations	extsuperscript{23}.

Vāsiṣṭha in the Sūtrālaṃkāra [T no 201, k. 7, [43], p. 296a17]

The references to Vāsiṣṭha / Vāsiṣṭhā in the Da zhidu lun and in the Abhidharmakośa are presented almost as a clinical case of madness caused by sorrow (śoka) in longer sections on insanity (a topic that deserves more study). The same would at first appear to be the case with the brief mention of Vāsiṣṭha as “insane due to the loss of child” in the so-called Sūtrālaṃkāra, but it is worth noting that here Vāsiṣṭhā appears in a list of famous women: nuns, laywomen, women of dubious morality.

In this “schön Erzählung 43”, as described with admiration by Lüders	extsuperscript{24} or, in the words of La Vallée Poussin, “le joli morceau où Baghavat exalte l’universalité de sa prédication”, the Indian poet (Āśvaghoṣa or Kumāralāta) highlights the perfect impartiality of his hero: “In the Law of the Buddha, compassion is without partiality” 悲心無偏覚. This message is addressed to a destitute member of the sweeper caste whose name can be reconstructed as Nithi, Nitha or Nita. For him, the Buddha selects (not without benevolent humor) twenty couples of completely contrasting personalities to whom he preaches the same Law in terms appropriate to the character of each of his forty
listeners. For example, the renunciation of *saṃsāra* is taught to both the sedate and meticulous monk Kankhā-Revata\(^{26}\), who enjoys meditation, and to Vāsiśṭhā “driven insane by the loss of her child,” whose image was that of a woman in despair and dishevelled. Along the same lines, the chaste laywoman Vaiśākhā is paired with the indecent Utpala, who might well designate the nun Utpalavarnā whose adventurous life is well known\(^{27}\); the queen Sāmāvatī (whose name is problematic: 弥拔提) is contrasted with her slave Khujjutarā who is the most accomplished at listening to the Buddha; the venerable Gautami, stepmother of the Buddha, is matched with a seven-year-old girl, who is already a novice and subjugating the heretics. The Sanskrit reconstruction of her name 至羅 remains problematic.

**Intervention of Ānanda**

It is important to note that most of the non-Pāli tradition makes an addition to the Vāsiśṭhī story that is unknown in the *Therīgāthā*. This added element, accurately told in the *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhyā*, involves Ānanda, the Buddha’s disciple and well known as a “supporter” of women and nuns. We know from the *Therīgāthā* stanzas that for three years Vāsiśṭhi, a Brāhmaṇī, was insane, running naked here and there until she saw from afar the Buddha teaching in Mithilā. In the non-Pāli tradition, it is the Buddha who sees her from afar and orders Ānanda to take her a monastic dress (*uttarasamga*) to cover her nudity. This gesture is of course a tribute to decency enabling the lady to greet the Buddha and to listen to his sermon. But the gift of monastic clothing seems also to have some ritual value that could probably be revealed through a comparison of this account with other accounts of the bestowal of monastic robes. Nakedness, madness and monastic clothes are enduring themes in the Buddhist “imaginaire”, as has been shown by Bernard Faure\(^{28}\).
The vocation of the entire family in the Samyuktāgama [T no 99, k. 44, [278], pp. 317b-318b; T no 100, k. 5, [92], pp. 404b-405a. T no 2121, k. 23, p. 125ab].

The situation of Vāsiṣṭhī as a mother and as a wife is made more clear when we look at the “āgamic tradition,” i.e., the two (rather different) Chinese versions of the Saṁyuktāgama. In those accounts, close, for the first part, to the account of the Abhidharmakośavyākhyā, there is a precision absent from the latter work. After her meeting with the Buddha, Vāsiṣṭhī is presented here as a laywoman (upāsikā), which makes the sequence of events more intelligible. Vāsiṣṭhī had lost six children, gone insane and become a naked vagrant. She then sees from afar the Buddha in the mango grove of Mithilā. The Buddha arranges for her to receive an uttarāsānga from Ānanda before being taught. After reaching the fruit of srota-āpanna, Vāsiṣṭhī takes leave of the Buddha, returns to her house and has a seventh child. When this child too dies, she does not lose her serenity, to the surprise of her husband, the Brahmin Sujāta, who himself is in despair. Sujāta receives teachings from his wife (and here ends the account in the Vyākhyā but here also starts the Sundari Chapter of the Therīgāthā) and is sent by her to the Buddha. Sujāta then becomes an arhat. His charioteer follows Sujāta’s example and enters the Buddhist order. The charioteer’s vocation inspires a lengthy description, although the daughter Sundari is mentioned only as leaving the house in the company of her mother who was already upāsikā. Vāsiṣṭhī compares this family vocation to the flight of a great dragon with his sons and daughters.

If we compare the narration translated by Guṇabhadra (T 99) that I have summarized above, and the narration anonymously translated at an earlier date (T 100), several differences should be noted. Besides
The Vicissitudes of Vāsiṣṭhī / Vāsiṣṭhā (Durt) 39

interesting differences in the vocabulary, more attention is given in the second version to the doctrinal exchange between the Buddha and Vāsiṣṭhā 婆私吒. The Buddha compares her to a delicate white tissue easily tainted. Vāsiṣṭhā declares to the Buddha her wish to become upāsikā. Her husband is presented, in his first appearance, as 婆羅突遜 [or 羅] 闍 (Bharat-rāja?) and, at the end of the tale, as Brāmaṇa Bharaja 婆羅門 婆羅闍. In the meantime, the Buddha has congratulated him on his name: “good birth” (善生, Sk. Sujāti or Sujāta). After the vocation of the charioteer (called 婆羅提, probably for Sā [娑] rathī), we are told here about the vocation of Sundari 孫陀利, who declares her regret at being separated from her brothers and who wishes to follow her father as the small elephant follows the great elephant. Preceding that declaration by Sundari, another episode is also known to us through the Sundari Chapter in the Therīgāthā: Vāsiṣṭhā informs her daughter about her inheritance, i.e. governing the house 治家, since her father has left the house. This second version is thus closer than the previous one to the Sundari Chapter. But the end of the tale in the Therīgāthā, with Sundari becoming sikkhamānā and meeting the Buddha, seems to exist only in the Pāli tradition.

A third version of the tale figures in the early sixth-century anthology Jingliú yixiang 經律異相 (T 2121). The title is the only original element: “Vāsiṣṭhā lamenting her child, becoming insane, listening to the Law and reaching the Way” 婆四吒喪子發狂聞法得道. It is a shortened version of the text translated by Guṇabhadra. It is centered on the dialogue between the Brahmin and Vāsiṣṭhā after the death of the seventh child. A stanza spoken by the Buddha is introduced before the conclusion telling that the Brahmin reached arhatva and that his wife and his daughter Sundari (no mention of the charioteer) left the house and its extreme suffering.
The resurrection of the children in the *Mahāvibhāṣa* [T no 1545, k. 83, p. 429b23-c7]

The *Mahāvibhāṣa* account introduces a new, intensely dramatic and supernatural element to the story. The scene takes place in Mithilā, in the mango grove of the god Maheśvara. The recovery of Vāsiṣṭhi, the Brahmin lady 梵志婦 who has lost six children, follows a slow development. First, the sight from afar of the Buddha teaching the Dharma surrounded by a big crowd makes her “actually come to” 法爾便醒 (an expression used only in this account). Thereafter, feeling ashamed, she sits prostrated until the Buddha has Ānanda give her a dress (not described as monastic dress). Then she kneels in front of the Buddha and sits to hear him. At this stage, the Buddha has the thought that, since Vāsiṣṭhi is still drowning in the ocean of distress, she will not understand the ordinary Dharma as taught by the numerous Buddhas of the past. Thus, before making her understand the four holy truths through his teaching, the Buddha manifests his supernatural powers (神通, Sk. abhijñā) and manifests her six children standing alive in front of their mother. Her joy at that vision stops her pain. The Buddha explains this and other miracles as “shades of benevolence” 慈蔭 manifesting their effects as “loving acts” 愛事. The following tale includes a similar miracle; the resurrection of a Brahmin’s son occurs for a Brahmin who had gone insane after losing his field and his son (variant: his wife, in an entry of the *Da zhidu lun* where madness and nakedness are associated). Were these miracles unconvincing? It is interesting to compare the miraculous account of the *Mahāvibhāṣa* with the story of Vāsiṣṭhā in the mahayanic *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, where the miracle does not occur, but the scene seems to be recreated and interiorised.
The Buddha kissed by Vāsiśṭhā in the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* [T no 374, k. 16, p. 458a10-22, T no 375, k. 14, p. 700a28-b11]

This scene takes place in the longest part of this Mahāyāna scripture for which there is no correspondence in what is considered the core of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, i.e., the few extant Sanskrit fragments, the short version of this scripture that Faxian (ca 340-ca 422) found in Pāṭaliputra and translated in the early fifth century, and the short Tibetan version based on a Sanskrit original. We are thus confronted with the extended *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* that the translator Dharmakṣema (385-433), almost a contemporary of Faxian, brought from Kucha. We will see that there is an interesting difference between the versions in the “rough” Northern translation (T 374), attributed to Dharmakṣema, and the more polished Southern version (T 375), which bears the name of its revisers: Huiyan (363-443), a disciple of Kumārajīva, and the famous poet Xie Lingyun (385-433).

Most of the story, which is spoken by the Buddha, is identical in the two versions. The Brahmin lady Vāsiśṭhā, from Śrāvasti, was devastated by the death of her beloved only child. “She had become mad, lost her self and was naked with no feeling of shame” 使違失性裸身無恥. She wandered at the crossways, losing her voice calling, “Child, child, where did you go?” Running around tiredlessly she found herself, as an effect of her past merits, in front of the Buddha. (No mention is made of Mithilā.) The Buddha declared that he felt pity for her. “Seeing me, she imagined that I was her own son.” 即得見我便生子想. She recovered her “own spirit” 本心 and "embraced my body and kissed my mouth" 前抱我身鳴嗾我口.

The last sentence of this moving scene has been partly censured in the more “literary” Southern version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*. The kiss is replaced by a more neutral description: she embraced the
Buddha "as one does a beloved child" 如愛子法.

The Buddha then asks Ānanda to bring Vāsiṣṭhā a dress (not described as a monastic dress) so that she can be properly dressed when he teaches her the "core of the Dharma" 法要. Up to that point, we can interpret the mother's belief that she is seeing her son redivivus in the person of the Buddha as a kind of psychologicalization (French: "interiorisation") of the miracle, told in the Mahāvibhāṣā of the (temporary?) resurrection of the six children. At the same time, there is also a "mahayanisation" of the scene. Filled with joy at hearing the Dharma, Vāsiṣṭhā produces the thought of Enlightenment (bodhicittotpada), the first step in the career of a Bodhisattva. The Buddha then explains to his audience that truly he is not her son, she is not his mother, and the "embrace" 抱持 did not happen. The "strength of her good roots of benevolence" 慈善根力 made this woman able to face real life. With this, we have reached the shores of the Grand Vehicle.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me say that the ineluctability of death and the particular tragedy of the death of a child are part of the universal human experience. From a sad monologue of six stanzas in what seems to be an archaic part of the Therīgāthā, we have moved to a dramatic scene in a Mahāyānasūtra of the Buddha being kissed by a woman who thinks he is her lost son resurrected. In the Buddhist literature based on oral tradition, one theme that must have been particularly powerful, especially for female audiences, is the sorrow of a bereaved mother, illustrated by the stories of Vāsiṭṭhi, of Kīṣā Gotamī and of Paṭācārā, but also by tales about women not belonging to the world of the Therīs. I will mention here only the much illustrated example (in Gandhāra, in South-East Asia) of Maddi, the wife of Vessantara, whose two children were stolen by an evil Brahmin 32. Another drama of maternal
The Vicissitudes of Vāsiṭṭhi / Vāsiṣṭhā (Durt)

love is the tale of the ogress Hāriti, whose last child was temporarily hidden under the Buddha’s bowl\(^{30}\). The religious impact of the death of a child and his mother’s grief is also the subject of the Japanese Nō drama, *Sumidagawa*. The story of Vāsiṭṭhi can thus be considered a tale with universal meaning. Its variants illustrate an evolution in Buddhism. In regard to its tradition in the Indian languages, its place in the *Therīgāthā* is not unexpected, but it is remarkable that its standard Sanskrit version can be read only in the learned and rather unsentimental *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhyā* of Yaśomitra\(^{30}\).

**Notes**


4) As can be inferred from Guṇabhadra’s translation of the *Samyuktāgama, Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* [T] no 99, k. 49, p. 362c10: 比丘尼所説偈.

5) In that literature, the most complete standard list is known through an
account about merchants who by mistake reached the island of Lanka and converted the princess Muktika to Buddhism (she is called Ratnavali in the Life of the Buddha by Rockhill, p. 59). In this account (Adhikaranavastu, ed. Gnoli, p. 64.17), the devotional texts are listed as 1) Udāna, 2) Pārāyaṇa, 3) Satyadṛṣa, 4) Sthaviragāthā, 5) Sthavirīgāthā, 6) Sālīlagāthā, 7) Munīgāthā, 8) Arthavargīyaṇī. These texts have been identified (Lamotte, HBI, p. 179). In other tales, such as the Koṭikarṇāvadāna, the Sthavirīgāthā appear in the account of the Carmanvastu (Gilgit Manuscripts, III, 4, p. 188.15), but are absent, along with the Sthaviragāthā from the corresponding account of the Divyaśadāna (ed. Cowell & Neil, p. 20.24-25). In the Pūrṇāvadāna (Divyaśadāna, pp. 34.29-35.1), the Sthaviragāthā figures in the list, but not the Sthavirīgāthā. On that "minor" tradition, see Eugène Burnouf, Introduction à l’histoire du bouddhisme indien, Paris: 1842, 2nd ed. Paris: Maisonneuve et Cie, 1876, p. 221; Sylvain Lévi, "Sur la récitation primitive des textes bouddhiques", Journal Asiatique 1915, pp. 19-138.; The best guide through the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādin remains Jampa Losang Panglung, Die Erzählstoffe des Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya analysiert auf Grund der tibetischen Uebersetzung, Tokyo: Reiyukai, 1981.

6) V. 362-365. Since the first PTS edition of the Pāli text of the Therīgāthā by Oldenberg and Pischel in 1883, there have been numerous printed editions of this collection of hymns, in the West as well as in Asia, including the revised edition by Norman and Alsdorf (PTS, 1966), mentioned in note 1. I will thus refer here only to the stanzas numbers and not to any pagination. For the terms translated from Pāli, I will as much as possible use the terminology of the best English translations, by Norman and Pruitt. A survey (not including the Japanese translations) of the ever-growing number of publications related to the Therīgāthā figures is found in the Introduction by William Pruitt to his translation of the Therī-gāthā-Āṭṭhakathā (see note 9). From a philological standpoint, see Siegfried


9) The section of the *Paramatthadīpanī* commenting on the Therī-gāthā was edited for the PTS by Eduard Müller in 1893. A revised edition of that part of this *Aṭṭhakathā* is being prepared by William Pruitt, whose translation of this text has already been issued: *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs (Therī-gāthā Aṭṭhakathā Paramatthadīpanī VI)* by Acariya Dhammapāla, Oxford: PTS, 1998. For the time being, my references will be made to this translation.


11) For Kīśa Gotāmi whose name seems to have been used by two different female figures of the Buddha legend, see *DPPN*, pp. 609-610, and *Ibkj*, pp. 308-309; for Paṭācārā see *DPPN*, pp. 112-114, and *Ibkj*, pp. 495-496.

12) See *Manorathapūrāṇī, I* (Buddhaghosa’s Commentary on the Aṅguttara-nikāya, ed. by Max Walleser after the manuscript of Edmund Hardy), London: PTS, 1924, pp. 356-360.

46 The Vicissitudes of Vāsiṣṭhī / Vāsiṣṭhā (Durt)


14) T no 1509, k. 8, pp. 118c23-24, E. Lamotte transl., Le Traité de la grande vertu de sagesse, I, Louvain 1944, pp. 488 and note.

15) T no 99 [Transl. by Guṇabhadra, mid. 5th cent.], k. 44, [278], pp. 317b-318b; T no 100 [less complete anonymous transl. of the early 5th cent.], k. 5, [92], pp. 404b-405a. The tale has been introduced in a shortened theatrical form in the anthology Jinglù yixiang, T no 2121, k. 23, p. 125ab.


18) T no 201, k. 7, [43], p. 296a17; French translation: Śūtrālaṃkāra, traduit en français sur la version chinoise de Kumārajīwa par Edouard Huber, Paris: Leroux, 1908, p. 205.


21) T no 374, k. 16, p. 458a10-22, T no 375, k. 14, p. 700a28-611.


The Vicissitudes of Vāsiṣṭhī / Vāsiṣṭhā (Durt) 47

pp. 57-74.


29) *Cf. supra* note 15.


31) *Cf. supra* note 21.


34) An abstract of this paper was presented at the 11th World Sanskrit Conference in Turin, April 7th, 2000. I wish to thank Elizabeth Kenney for her revision of the English version of this article.