

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

To KrichnāRiboud, *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 Sisters¹⁾.” But we also find these human dramas in Sanskrit sources and in Chinese translations based on Indian originals. Vāsiṭṭhī (Sanskrit: Vāsiṣṭhā or Vāsiṣṭhī) is one of those mothers, and her legend has been diffused throughout a large part of the ancient Buddhist world²⁾. This article focuses on variations in the tale of Vāsiṭṭhī 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 Lamotte³⁾ called the “*Kṣudraka* Sanskrit”, we know that there were *Bhikṣuṇīgāthā*⁴⁾ or *Sthavirīgāthā*. These standard lists are mostly known through texts related to the *Vinaya* of the *Mūlasarvāstivādin*. Most of the content of these lists consists of *gāthā* that seem to have been devotionally sung during the night and in times of distress⁵⁾. Probably because these

gāthā did not belong exclusively to a monastic context, the *Sthavira-gāthā* and the *Sthavirīgāthā* are often omitted from the lists. The omission of the *Sthavirīgāthā* could be explained *a fortiori* when there was no female context.

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

Let us first point out that there are two stanzas attributed to a certain Śuklā that match the *Therīgāthā*'s stanzas of Subhā⁶⁾ in the *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya* of the *Lokottara-Mahāsāṃghika*, edited by Prof. Gustav Roth⁷⁾. In her French translation and study of this scripture, Edith Nolot has established the correlation between the two texts⁸⁾.

Moreover, another figure in the *Therīgāthā*, Vāsiṭṭhī (or Vāseṭṭhī), named “Vāsiṣṭhī” in Sanskrit by Vasubandhu and “Vāsiṣṭhā-sagoṭrā Brāhmaṇī” by Yaśomitra and who should be called “Vāsiṣṭhā” 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 四 only in Guṇabhadra's translation of the *Samyuktāgama*. We find her as 婆私吒 in the “āgamic tradition” of the *Samyuktāgama*, in the *Sūtrālaṃkāra* and in the Mahayanic *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*. Xuanzang uses the reduced form 婆私 in his translation of the *Abhidharmakośa*, but he uses 婆斯攬 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 *Therīgāthā* 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 Vāsiṭṭhī in the *Therīgāthā*

As is well known, every stanza or group of stanzas in this collection 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, Kisā Gotamī or Uppalavaṇṇā, 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-dīpanī*⁹). 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 *Therīs*¹⁰).

I. The Vāsiṭṭhī Chapter [*Therīgāthā* vv. 133-138]

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

In the next two stanzas, she describes recovering her mind (*cittaṃ*

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 pahīnā etadantikā*) and her gaining knowledge (*pariññātā*) of the grounds (*vatthū*) from which is the origin of grief (*sokāna sambhava*).

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

II. The Sundarī Chapter [*Therīgāthā* vv. 312-337]

The second group of *Therīgāthā* stanzas related to Vāsiṭṭhī, whose name is often written as "Vāseṭṭhī", is longer than the previous one. It is found among the dialogues that constitute a conspicuous part of the *Therīgāthā* collection. This poetical composition appears under the name of Sundarī and so can be called the Sundarī Chapter. This embryonic drama features seven characters: a Brahmin of Bārāṇasī, called Sujāta; a Brahmin lady called Vāseṭṭhī; a charioteer (*sārathi*); the wife of the Brahmin; their daughter Sundarī; the Therī preceptor of Sundarī; and finally the Buddha who welcomes Sundarī in Sāvattihī. The Pāli commentary also says that Sundarī 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, Vāseṭṭhī and the Brahmin's wife/Sundarī'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”, *kalyāṇi therisaṅghassa sobhaṇe*, v. 331) that Sundarī 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 Vāseṭṭhī herself who plays that role of “preceptor”.

The chapter starts brutally with a question that Sujāta addresses to Vāseṭṭhī, calling her first with the vocative *bhoti* (v. 312), then *Brāhmaṇī Vāseṭṭhī* (v.313), later shortened to *Vāseṭṭhī* (v. 316). He asks her why is she no longer mourning (*paritappasi*) her seven dead children. In the following dialogue, Vāseṭṭhī mentions the city of Mithilā (v. 317) where she heard the *dhamma* for the abandonment of all pain (*sabbadukkahappahānāya*). Knowing the true doctrine (*viññā-saddhammā*, she thrusts away grief for her sons (*puttasokaṃ byapānu-dim*, v. 318). Sujāta 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 Sujāta’s wife about her husband’s new status now wishes in his turn to follow his master into the religious life. Thereafter Sundarī, 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 Sundarī (v. 329).

In the *finale* (vv. 330-337), Sundarī, 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 Sāvattthī 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 Sundarī Chapter, in v. 313, that Vāseṭṭhī 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 Vāseṭṭhī alludes rhetorically to the hundreds of children and of groups of parents (*ñāṭisaṅgha*) that for her as for the Brahmin have been consumed (*khādita*) 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 Vāseṭṭhī *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 Vāsiṭṭhī that will be diffused in Sanskrit and in Chinese seems thus to be based on a source close to these two accounts of the *Therīgāthā*. The madness of the mother is expressed in the first Vāsiṭṭhī Chapter, her serenity at the loss of her last child is expressed in the second group of stanzas, the Sundarī Chapter. Except for a few elements known only in Chinese that we will examine later, we can say that the basic plot of the Vāsiṭṭhī / Vāseṭṭhī story appears in the Pāli *Therīgāthā*.

One might wonder about the discrepancy in the *Therīgāthā* between the first account, her monologue, in which Vāsiṭṭhī expressed her wish to become a nun: *pabbajiṃ anagāriyam* (v. 137), and the second account, the Sundarī Chapter, where Vāseṭṭhī seems to be rein-

serted into family life. In the Pāli account, we must admit that it is not made clear that the *Brāhmaṇī* Vāseṭṭhī exhorting the Brahmin Sujāta, father of Sundarī, 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 Vāsiṭṭhī. 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 literature¹¹⁾. 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 commentaries¹²⁾ 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 Ubbirī *Therī* (vv. 51-53), who lost her daughter called Jivā (life); and in the *Udāna*¹³⁾ 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 Gotamī and inversely it is to Kisā Gotamī that is attributed a summary of the Vāsiṭṭhī legend in the *Da zhidu lun*¹⁴. Moreover, in the Paṭācārā's stanzas kept not in the *Therīgāthā* but in the *Therīapadāna* (no 21, vv. 32-34), her sorrow after her triple loss and her meeting with the Buddha can be compared with the legend of Vāsiṭṭhī. 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 *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhyā* 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 Vāsiṭṭhī's story, there is much emphasis on the fact that Vāsiṭṭhī 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: *saṃsāra* is a place where people "come and go" (*āgata gata*), Paṭācārā tells her five hundred followers (vv. 127-128). In other cases, and especially in the case of Vāsiṭṭhī, who in some accounts has lost six or seven children, Vāsetṭhī 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, khādita*) imagery, in reference to the burial place where wild animals devour corpses, appears in Yaśomitra's citation of an unnamed *Sthavirīgāthā*. Com-

menting in the *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhyā* on Vasubandhu's mention of Vāsiṣṭhī's madness in his *Abhidharmakośa*, Yaśomitra tells Vāseṭṭhī's story and ends with a quotation of four stanzas. They are introduced by a insensitive joke of the husband (*svabharāt*) of Vāsiṣṭhā-sagoṭrā Brāhmaṇī, 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?'" (*tvam pūrvam putra-maraṇena paritaptā'si. Idānīm nāsi paritaptā. Nūnam te putrās tvayā bhakṣitāḥ? Yato na paritapyasa iti*). This passage in prose corresponds to the first stanza of Sujāta in the Sundarī Chapter of the *Therīgāthā* (vv. 312-313). The stanzas pronounced then by Vāsiṣṭhā-sagoṭrā Brāhmaṇī in Sanskrit are similar but more extended than the corresponding stanzas pronounced by Vāseṭṭhī (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 Sundarī.

Insanity caused by sorrow [Wogihara ed., *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhyā* 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 *Samyuktāgama*¹⁵⁾. 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 Kisā Gotamī) or the *Abhidharmakośa*¹⁶⁾ and its commentary the *Vyākhyā*¹⁷⁾ quoted just above.

Vāsiṣṭhā is described as insane in the *Sūtrālaṃkāra*, attributed to Aśvaghōṣa¹⁸⁾, a collection of tales whose Chinese translation is often

close to the fragments of the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* compiled by Kumāralāta¹⁹⁾. The case of Vāsiṭṭhī is presented as an example of the benevolence (*maitrī*) of the Buddha using his superpowers (*abhijñā*) in the largest encyclopedical work, the *Mahāvibhāṣā* of Kashmir²⁰⁾ and in one of the most influential *Mahāyānasūtra*, the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*²¹⁾, whose sources are often very close to the sources used in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*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 translations²³⁾.

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

The references to Vāsiṭṭhī / Vāsiṭṭhā 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 Vāsiṭṭhā as “insane due to the loss of child” 爲失子狂亂 in the so-called *Sūtrālaṃkāra*, but it is worth noting that here Vāsiṭṭhā appears in a list of famous women: nuns, laywomen, women of dubious morality.

In this “schön Erzählung 43”, as described with admiration by Lüders²⁴⁾ or, in the words of La Vallée Poussin, “le joli morceau où Baghavat exalte l'universalité de sa prédication²⁵⁾”, the Indian poet (Aśvaghoṣa or Kumāralāta) highlights the perfect impartiality of his hero: “In the Law of the Buddha, compassion is without partiality” 悲心無偏党. This message is addressed to a destitute member of the sweeper caste whose name can be reconstructed as Nīthi, Nītha or Nīta. 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-Revata²⁶⁾, who enjoys meditation, and to Vāsiṣṭhā “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 蓮華, who might well designate the nun Utpalavarṇā whose adventurous life is well known²⁷⁾; 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 Gautamī, step-mother 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 Vāsiṭṭhī 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 Vāsiṭṭhī, 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 (*uttarāsaṃga*) 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 Faure²⁸⁾.

The vocation of an 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 Vāsiṭṭhī 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 *Samyuktāgama*²⁹). In those accounts, close, for the first part, to the account of the *Abhidharmakośa-vyākhyā*, there is a precision absent from the latter work. After her meeting with the Buddha, Vāsiṣṭhā 婆四吒 is presented here as a lay-woman (*upāsikā*), which makes the sequence of events more intelligible. Vāsiṣṭhā 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 *uttarāsaṃga* from Ānanda before being taught. After reaching the fruit of *srota-āpanna*, Vāsiṣṭhā 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 宿闍諦, who himself is in despair. Sujāta receives teachings from his wife (and here ends the account in the *Vyākhyā* but here also starts the Sundarī 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 Sundarī 孫陀槃梨 is mentioned only as leaving the house in the company of her mother who was already *upāsikā*. Vāsiṣṭhā 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

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 婆羅突邏 [or 羅] 闍 (Bharat-rāja?) and, at the end of the tale, as Brāhmaṇa 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] *rathi*), we are told here about the vocation of Sundarī 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 Sundarī, another episode is also known to us through the Sundarī 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 Sundarī Chapter. But the end of the tale in the *Therīgāthā*, with Sundarī 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 *Jinglü 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 Sundarī (no mention of the charioteer) left the house and its extreme suffering.

The resurrection of the children in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* [T no 1545, k. 83, p. 429b23-c7]

The *Mahāvibhāṣā* 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 Vāsiṣṭhī, 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 Vāsiṣṭhī 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*³⁰ where madness and nakedness are associated). Were these miracles unconvincing? It is interesting to compare the miraculous account of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* 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 Vāsiṣṭhā 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 法顯 (*ca* 340-*ca*422) found in Pāṭāliputra and translated in the early fifth century, and the short Tibetan version based on a Sanskrit original³¹). We are thus confronted with the extended *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* that the translator Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (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 慧嚴 (363-443), a disciple of Kumārajīva, and the famous poet Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385-433).

Most of the story, which is spoken by the Buddha, is identical in the two versions. The Brahmin lady Vāsiṣṭhā, from Śrāvastī, 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” 狂亂失性裸身無恥. She wandered at the crossways, losing her voice calling, “Child, child, where did you go?” Running around tirelessly 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 起慈愍心 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” 前抱我身鳴啞我口.

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 Vāsiṭṭhī, of Kisā 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 Maddī, the wife of Vessantara, whose two children were stolen by an evil Brahmin³²). Another drama of maternal

love is the tale of the ogress Hārītī, whose last child was temporarily hidden under the Buddha's bowl³³). 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 Vāsiṭṭhī 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 *Abhidharmakoṣa-vyākhyā* of Yaśomitra³⁴).

Notes

- 1) K.R. Norman and L. Alsdorf, ed., *Therī-gāthā*, London: Pāli Text Society [PTS], 1966; C.A.F. Rhys Davids, transl., *Psalm of the Early Buddhists: I Psalm of the Sisters*, London: 1909 (revised ed.: C.A.F. Rhys Davids and K.R. Norman, transl., *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (Therī-gāthā)*, Oxford: PTS, 1989). On the Buddhist nuns, see: Peter Skilling, "A note on the History of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, (I) Nuns at the time of the Buddha, (II) The Order of Nuns after the Parinirvāṇa," *W.F.B. Review*, nos 30/4 & 31/1 (1993-1994), pp. 29-49 [second part] and nos 31/2-3 (1994), pp. 47-55 [first part].
- 2) See G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names [DPPN]*, London: John Murray, 1937-38, p. 862, s.v. Vāseṭṭhī; and Akanuma Chizen, *Indo bukkyō koyū meishi jiten [Ibkj]*, Nagoya: Hajinkaku, 1931, p. 741, s.v. Vāsiṭṭhī.
- 3) Etienne Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien [HBI]*, Louvain: Bibliothèque du Muséon, 1958, pp. 174-178.
- 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 Lankā and converted the princess Muktikā to Buddhism (she is called Ratnāvali in the *Life of the Buddha* by Rockhill, p. 59). In this account (*Adhikaraṇava-stu*, ed. Gnoli, p. 64.17), the devotional texts are listed as 1) *Udāna*, 2) *Pārāyaṇa*, 3) *Satyadṛśa*, 4) *Sthaviragāthā*, 5) *Sthavirīgāthā*, 6) *Śailagāthā*, 7) *Munigāthā*, 8) *Arthavargīyaṇi*. These texts have been identified (Lamotte, *HBI*, p. 179). In other tales, such as the *Koṭikarṇāvadāna*, the *Sthavirīgāthā* appear in the account of the *Carmavastu* (Gilgit Manuscripts, III, 4, p. 188.15), but are absent, along with the *Sthaviragāthā* from the corresponding account of the *Divyāvadāna* (ed. Cowell & Neil, p. 20.24-25). In the *Pūrṇāvadāna* (*Divyāvadāna*, 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 *Therīgāthā-Atthakathā* (see note 9). From a philological standpoint, see Siegfried

Lienhard, “Sur la structure poétique des *Therātherīgāthā*,” *Journal Asiatique* 1975, pp. 375-396.

7) Gustav Roth, ed., *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya: Manual of Discipline for Buddhist Nuns*, Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute 1970, p. 111-113. For comparison, see also Akira Hirakawa, transl., *Monastic Discipline for the Buddhist Nuns: An English Translation of the Chinese Text of the Mahāsāṃghika Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya*, Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute 1982, p. 145-147.

8) Edith Nolot, *Règles de Discipline des nonnes bouddhistes: le Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya de l'école Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin*, Collège de France: Publications de l'Institut de Civilisation Indienne, Fascicule 60, Paris: Diffusion de Boccard 1991, pp. 96-98.

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 Ācariya Dhammapāla, Oxford: PTS, 1998. For the time being, my references will be made to this translation.

10) M.E. Lilley, ed., *Apadāna*, II [Ap. II], London: PTS, 1927. See Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pāli Literature*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996 [Reprint: New Delhi; Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997], pp. 60-61.

11) For Kisā Gotamī 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 *Manorathapūraṇī*, I (Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, ed. by Max Walleiser after the manuscript of Edmund Hardy), London: PTS, 1924, pp. 356-360.

13) Paul Steinthal ed., *Udāna*, London: PTS 1885, pp. 91-92. See also the “Visākhāvatthu” of the *Dhammapadāṭṭhakathā*, cf. H.C. Norman ed.,

The Commentary on the Dhammapada, III, London: PTS 1912, pp. 278-279.

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. 317 b-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 *Jinglü yixiang*, *T* no 2121, k. 23, p. 125 ab.

16) P. Pradhan, rev. 2nd ed. Aruna Haldar, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*, Patna 1975, p. 234.2; *T* no 1558, k. 15, p. 83a12-13; Louis de La Vallée Poussin, *L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu*, III, chapitre 4, Louvain: J.B. Istas, Paris: P. Geuthner, Reprint: Bruxelles: Institut belge des Hautes études chinoises, 1980, p. 126.

17) U. Wogihara ed., *Sphuṭārthā Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*, *The Work of Yaśomitra*, Tōkyō 1932, Reprint: Tōkyō: Sankibō 1971, pp. 396.3-31.

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

19) Heinrich Lüders ed., *Bruchstücke der Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā des Kumāralāta*, *Kleinere Sanskrit-Texte II*, Königlich Preussische Turfan-Expeditionen, Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1926, p. 69 and 159-160.

20) *T* no 1545, k. 83, p. 429b23-c7.

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

22) See Durt, "Two Interpretations of human-flesh offering: misdeed or supreme sacrifice", *Bulletin of the International College for Advanced Buddhist Studies*, No 1 (1998), p. 63, p. 70.

23) See Durt, "The Long and Short Nirvāṇa Sūtras" in *Problems of Chronology and Eschatology: Four Lectures on Tominaga Nakamoto's Essay on Buddhism*, Kyōto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 1994,

pp. 57-74.

24) Lüders, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

25) La Vallée Poussin, *op. cit.*, p. 126, note 3.

26) See *Ikbj*, pp. 277-278, *DPPN*, pp. 474-475.

27) S.v. Uppalavaṇṇā, *Ikbj*, pp. 715-716, *DPPN*, pp. 418-421. See also the interpretation of her case in Japanese Buddhism (concerning Dōgen) in B. Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 158.

28) See B. Faure, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-111; “Quand l’habit fait le moine: The symbolism of the kāṣāya in Chan / Zen Buddhism;” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 8, *Mémorial Anna Seidel* I, pp. 335-369.

29) *Cf. supra* note 15.

30) *T* no 1509, k. 8, p. 118c21-23; Lamotte, *Traité* I, p. 488.

31) *Cf. supra* note 21.

32) Among the rich bibliography on that subject, see Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977; Durt, “The Offering of the Children of Prince Viśvantara / Sudāna in the Chinese Tradition” and “The Casting-off of Mādrī in the Northern Buddhist Literary Tradition,” *Bulletin of the International College for Advanced Buddhist Studies*, No 2 (1999), pp. 147-182, and No 3 (2000), pp. 133-158.

33) There is an abundance of studies on Hārītī. For a recent contribution, see Emmanuelle Lesbire, “La conversion de Hārītī au Buddha: origine du thème iconographique et interprétations picturales chinoises,” *Arts Asiatiques* 55 (2000), pp. 98-119.

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.