

Tiziana Pontillo
pontillo@unica.it
(University of Cagliari)

The Debate on Asceticism as a Permanent Choice of Life: Some Late Clues from *Mahākāvya*s

SUMMARY: The present paper is focused on a couple of apparently contradictory *Buddhacarita* (Bcar) passages. On the one hand, there is the attribution of the pre-classical pattern of constituting kings in the sacrificial arena, implying a cyclical exchange between asceticism and warrior sovereignty, to Buddha's father and his ancestors, who possibly ignore the *varṇāśrama* system. On the other, King Śuddhodana himself wishes that his son would not choose asceticism as a permanent way of life, i.e., that he adheres to the ordered succession of *āśramas*, in accordance with the brahmanical inclusivistic *varṇāśrama* system. The interpretation proposed here consists in assuming a specific Aśvaghōṣa intellectual reading of the potential relation between Buddhist and brahmanic *dharma*, based on a shared past, denoted by the expression *sūkṣma dharma*. The poetic allusion to this epic expression might have denoted an uncertain common *dharma* path which was to be overpassed by both parts, respectively by means of the true Buddhist *dharma*, and through the brahmanical *śrauta* reform. The two questioned verses are assumed to be a further fragment of the history of the brahmanic-Buddhist debate dating back to the *Itihāsa* and *Mahākāvya* age reconstructed by Hildebeitel over these last ten years.

KEYWORDS: Aśvaghōṣa, history of asceticism, pre-reformed sovereignty, Buddhist/brahmanical debate, *sūkṣma dharma*.

1. Introduction

The starting point for this paper is some *Mahākāvya* passages which, independently of the religious context of the single works, seem to bear

witness to a still current socio-religious debate on asceticism, which is commonly refused as a permanent choice of life. Thus the classical brahmanical inclusivistic *varṇāśrama* system does not seem to be universally accepted yet, at least in the relevant literarily depicted age.¹

For instance, in some episodes of the *Raghuvamśa*, the so-called *vānaprastha* and *saṃnyāsīn* modes of life are almost praised as peculiar choices of Ikṣvāku's dynastic line, rather than as obvious stages of life, and the latter kind of renunciant ascetics seem to be veritable *ṛṣis* whose final target is *mokṣa*,² and whose corpse is buried instead of being burned on the pyre.³

Ragh. 3.70:

*atha sa viṣayavyāvṛttātmā yathāvidhi sūnave / nṛpatikakudam dattvā
yūne sitātapavāraṇam / munivanatarucchāyām devyā tayā saha śisriye /
galitavayasām ikṣvākūṇām idaṃ hi kulavratam,*

“And now he (Dilīpa), with his mind turned away from the objects of sense, in due form he made over the white umbrella, the emblem of royalty to his young son, and betook himself in company with his celebrated queen to the shade of a tree in a forest inhabited by hermits: for this was indeed the family vow of the princes of Ikṣvāku's race when in the decline of their life.”⁴

¹ This short paper does of course rely on this convincing statement by Smith (1985: 55): “[...] despite its being tentative in the extreme, the sociology of *kāvya* is crucial to the proper understanding of *kāvya*”.

² In fact, the distinction between the renunciatory asceticism of these sorts of vedic retirees (*saṃnyāsīns*) and that of a wandering mendicant (cf. Olivelle 2005: 205; Hiltebetel 2010b: 5) is not so evident.

³ Of course there are some other passages which rely on the classically ordered *varṇāśrama* system, such as Ragh. 1.8: *śaisave 'bhyastavidyānām / yauvane viṣayaiṣiṇām / vārddhake munivṛttīnām / yogenānte tanutyajām // (raghūnām: 1.9)*, “(Raghu's descendants) who spent their childhood studying, their youth aiming at pleasures, their old age performing anchorite's vows, the last part of life resigning their bodies by means of yoga.”

⁴ All translations—excluding those of the *Buddhacarita* by Olivelle (2009)—are mine, unless explicitly stated.

Ragh. 8.11:

*guṇavatsutaropitaśriyaḥ pariṇāme hi dilīpavaṃśajāḥ padavīm
taruvalkavāsasām prayatāḥ saṃyaminām prapedire,*

“For verily the descendants of Dilīpa’s race, when they grew old, transferred the royal fortune to their accomplished sons and curbing their passions, betook themselves to the life of anchorites, wearing garments of the bark of trees.”

Ragh. 8.25–7:

[...] *vidadhe vidhim yasya naiṣṭhikaṃ / yatibhiḥ sārddham anagnim agnicit*
[...] *na hi tena pathā tanutyajas / tanayāvarjitapiṇḍakāṅkṣiṇaḥ [...] sa*
parārdhyagater aśocyatām,

“He (= Rāghu) who had arranged the sacred fire, performed his (Aja’s) funeral rite in the company of ascetics, without (the use of) fire. In fact, those who thus resign their body do not aim at getting oblations offered by their sons. One who had attained the highest rank (of *tapas*) should not be grieved for.”⁵

By contrast, in the *Kumārasambhava*, the ascetic choice of life—which is considered as an ancient institution⁶—is opposed by Queen Menā, who tries to prevent her daughter Parvatī from becoming an ascetic, by reminding her of the ‘orthodox’ feminine behaviour:

Kum 5.4:

manīṣitāḥ santi grhesu devatās / tapaḥ kva vatse kva ca tāvakaṃ vapuḥ,

“The gods we wish for are (the husbands) in our houses. My dear child, how far actually is the *tapas* way from your tender body!”

⁵ Note that, at least with regard to the Epics, the ascetics who participate considerably in the action, are generally *vānaprasthas* rather than *saṃnyāsins*, i.e. they maintain the sacred fire, and they go on performing sacrifices together with their wives (Brockington 1984: 159; Bronkhorst 1993: 51–4).

⁶ Accordingly “the presence of women in *āśramas* and actually as ascetics” is evaluated by Brockington (1984: 177) as “an archaic feature still present in both the first and second stages” of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

As recently highlighted by Boccali (2010: 192), ascetics' scopes such as *ahiṃsā*, *abhayadāna* and *saṃnyāsa* were “perfectly integrated into Hindu ideology” and “favoured by royal patronage” in *Kāvya* poetry itself, so that “the ultimate aim of this poetic and propagandistic operation” could have been the depiction of “the ideal world, free of conflicts, contradictions and changes”, which is actually only realized by ascetics themselves. Nevertheless, some specific *Kāvya* passages seem to aim at stating an elaborated religious and social picture of an actually targeted *dharma*, so that they are especially significant since we know that in India even “the literary landscape is more an imagined portion of the world than one that is experienced”, i.e. a “social construction shaped by ideologies or beliefs”—as suggested by Sudyka 2010: 111.

The present paper will focus on a couple of such passages included in the *Buddhacarita*, by crucially relying on some recent contributions by Hildebeitel, which present Aśvaghōṣa's works as treating *dharma* as “a Buddhist discourse frequently and insistently couched in brahmanical terms” (Hildebeitel 2010a: 10). Namely, the Buddhist author is supposed to use “his familiarity with the two epics to critique brahmanical *dharma* in the name of the Buddhist ‘true *dharma*’” (Hildebeitel 2010a: 10).⁷ Hildebeitel (2011: 10) consistently maintains that Aśvaghōṣa “was not only telling how and why the Buddha searched to discover the ‘true *dharma*’ but was putting *dharma* to use as a term of civil discourse with his brahmanical counterparts (both people and texts)” (cf. Hildebeitel 2006: 231). Accordingly Aśvaghōṣa can be supposed to supply us with some data about the brahmanical *dharma* of his age, otherwise lost forever.

Consideration will also be given to Olivelle's (2009: XXII) interpretation of *Buddhacarita* as a sort of response to the Epic, which in its turn is currently considered as the brahmanical implicit answer to the Buddhist contemporary challenge.⁸ In particular the two verses selected here,

⁷ Cf. Hildebeitel 2006: 273.

⁸ See e.g. Fitzgerald 2004: 128: “The *Mahābhārata* presents the political response of some brahmin-inspired community to political developments

which, to the best of my knowledge, have been disregarded up till now in the discussion of this subject, will be connected with his assumption that “Aśvaghōṣa’s presentation of the Buddha’s *dharma* as the consummation of and fulfillment of the brahmanical tradition is made implicitly and indirectly rather than openly” (Olivelle 2009: XXV).

2. A supposed contradictory position of Buddha’s father

The two passages which will be analysed here consist respectively, in some words pronounced by King Śuddhodana, before learning of his son’s real fate from *ṛṣi* Asita, and in an intriguing and presumably allusive part of the speech by *ṛṣi* Asita himself.

On the one hand, Buddha’s father wishes that his son does not retire into the forest before reaching old age, i.e., that he adheres to the ordered succession of *āśramas*.

Bcar 1.48:

*prītaś ca tebhyo dvijasattamebhyaḥ satkārapūrvaṃ pradadau dhanāni /
bhūyād ayaṃ bhūmipatir yathokto yāyāj jarāṃ etya vanāni ceti,*

“Delighted, he honored those twice-born men, and he gave them rich gifts, with the wish: ‘May he become a king as predicted, and go to the forest when he is old’.”⁹

On the other hand, King Śuddhodana himself figures as a descendant in a line of ascetic-kings who seem to completely ignore the *varṇāśrama* system and follow a *dharma* path, which involves a solemn gift giving

in north India from the mid-fourth century to the early or middle second century B.C. Puṣyamitra accomplished the actual deed of reinstating some kind of *brāhmaṇya* rule atop the old Māgadhan empire, and the *Mahābhārata* provided the narratives and the credible argumentation to challenge the principles of the Aśokan polity and society and replace them with a newly re-legitimized *varṇāśramadharmā*.” cf. Biardeau 2002: 2.776.

⁹ Cf. tr. Johnston 1936:11: “[...] wishing that his son [...] should not retire to the forest before reaching old age.”

by kings, implying something that is lost in order to gain something else. Indeed, this might allude to the so-called ‘sacrificial kingship’, i.e. the pre-classical pattern of constituting kings in the sacrificial arena through sacrifices, resulting in a cyclical exchange of roles between kingly patrons of sacrifice and priests.¹⁰

Bcar 1.56:

*etac ca tad yena nṛparṣayas te / dharmeṇa sūkṣmeṇa dhanāny avāpya /
nityaṃ tyajanto vidhivad babhūvus / tapobhir āḍhyā vibhavair daridrāḥ,*

“And this is that subtle *dharma* by which those royal sages, having obtained wealth, always ceded it according to rule, becoming thus poor in wealth, but rich in austerity.”¹¹

3. The extolled and dreadful *ārṣa mārga*

As far as the context is concerned, it is first of all noteworthy that King Śuddhodana does not immediately realize the veritable dramatic dichotomy between *grhastha* and *saṃnyāsa* life, a source of the future tension with his son. In actual fact, the previous brahmins’ prophecy about Buddha’s destiny, which is alluded to in the quoted Śuddhodana’s words and exclusively readable in Johnston’s reconstruction of verses 25–40, which are missing in the Sanskrit manuscript, is not so neatly claimed. Both choices of life are still prospected as possibilities for him:

¹⁰ Indeed it might allude to the age previous to the event that Proferes (2003: 20) defined “Transfer of ritual Authority from the clan to the priestly office”.

¹¹ Cf. Cowell’s variant reading (I.61): *etac ca tad yena nṛparṣayas te dharmeṇa sūkṣmāni dhanāny apāsyā / nityaṃ tyajanto vidhivad babhūvus tapobhir āḍhyā vibhavair daridrāḥ*, “This is the true way in which those seer-kings of old, rejecting through duty all trivial riches, have ever flung them away as was right, being poor in outward substance but rich in ascetic endurance” (tr. Cowell).

(Bcar) 1.35–6:

“Should he desire earthly sovereignty, then by his might and law he will stand on earth at the head of all kings, as the light of the sun at the head of all constellations. Should he desire salvation and go to the forest, then by his knowledge and truth he will overcome all creeds and stand on the earth, like Meru king of the mountains among all the heights.”

Only after the arrival of Asita at King’s Śuddhodana’s abode, presented as a *ṛṣi* and as a knower of *brahman* (*brahmavid*), blazing with both the splendor of *brahman* and the splendor of ascetic toil, does the actual destiny of his son become clear. The following words had been addressed to the King and reported to him by Asita who had only heard them by force of his Yoga powers:

Bcar 1.57cd:

divyā may’ādityapathe śrutā vāg bodhāya jātas tanayas taveti,

“On the sun’s path I heard a divine voice: ‘To you a son is born for Awakening’.”

Then, after some lines devoted to describing the well-known marks of auspiciousness of the blissful baby’s body, and after some other verbal exchanges about the brilliant destiny of Gautama, King Śuddhodana is seen to be really anxious, precisely because his son wishes to follow the ascetic way:

Bcar. 1.79:

*ārṣeṇa mārgeṇa tu yāsyatīti / cintāvidheyam hṛdayaṃ cakāra / na khalv
asau na priyadharmapakṣaḥ / saṃtānanāśāt tu bhayaṃ dadarśa,*

“But his heart was still filled with anxiety, thinking, ‘He (Gautama) will follow the path of seers;’ not because he were not a supporter of *dharma*; yet he saw danger: the end of his line.”

Of course King Śuddhodana worries about his offspring because of the implicated condition of celibacy, but at the same time his words sound as if they were directly pointing a finger against the ascetic way of life in itself. He emphasizes his position, which is on the side of

dharma, so that we wonder what the *dharma* he is speaking about actually is. What does King Śuddhodana exactly mean with the expression *ārṣa mārṅa*? Why does Aśvaghoṣa need to point out that Śuddhodana is *priyadharmapakṣa*, if he nevertheless does not accept this prediction, as in the future he will refute the mode of life chosen by his son? What is Aśvaghoṣa's target in this passage?

From the above quoted recent contributions by Olivelle and by Hildebeitel, especially with regard to the ninth Chapter of the *Buddhacarita*, which also involves the important term *mokṣadharmā* in the peculiar sense of “renunciatory asceticism of a wandering mendicant”, we are made aware that Aśvaghoṣa is surely eager to reflect on the potential relation between Buddhist and brahmanic *dharma*. Therefore, it would not be amazing to find here the emergence of a new and captivating light on the essential socio-religious contention between the brahmanic preference for the householder *āśrama* (as the root of all four), and the Buddhist custom of leaving home and family and devoting oneself completely to the pursuit of salvation (within an ascetic way of life). It must have been a current issue when Northern India was reunified under the Kushanas, who—as is well known—showed an imperial preference for Buddhism. Namely, the former disputant must have been the adherent of the quite recent brahmanic theory of three debts and four stages of life to be followed sequentially, whose fundamental aim was to include renunciation but limiting this to mere old age. In fact, this complex theory had probably only been advanced in the Epics and it was to be fixed in the classical formulation in the Laws, even though it was intentionally projected in the past so as to appear archaic, to give a sort of “hoary” Vedic antiquity to rules which were being freshly advanced.

An apparent double contradiction seems to derive here from the alignment of the two different tendencies of King Śuddhodana's attitude towards asceticism. He is disappointed with the ascetic way of life which is foreseen for his heir Gautama, even though he is extolled, together with his whole ancestry, for his *tapas* and more precisely for his *nīparṣi* behaviour. Nevertheless, Asita's sentence (Bcar

1.56) is undoubtedly a consistent part of praise for his host, received as he had been with reverence and homage both by the preceptor of the King and by the King himself. In fact in Bear 1.55, Asita's thanksgiving also involves some other honorable epithets referred to King Śuddhodana: *mahātmani tvayy upapannam etat priyātithau tyāgini dharmakāme sattvānvayajñānavayo 'nurūpā snigdhā yad evaṃ mayi te matiḥ syāt*, "This befits you—noble, hospitable, generous, and a lover of *dharmā*—that you should show me this loving regard, fitting your character and family, fitting your wisdom and your age." Additionally, the wandering renunciatory asceticism announced as his son's destiny is unusually labelled as just a kind of *ārṣa mārga*, as if it did not deal with a heterodox way of life, but with a very ancient and almost mythic pattern.

As a consequence, the contrastive comparison between the two advanced antiquities is inevitable: the favoured *varṇāśrama* system, whose 'Vedic' antiquity is assumed, is opposed to the way taught by the *ṛṣi*, i.e. by the believed founders of the Vedic tradition itself, but the latter is praised by Asita, as a way proper to the Śuddhodana dynasty, even though unexpectedly feared by Śuddhodana himself. Furthermore, a specific kind of *dharmā*, the so-called *sūkṣma dharmā*, is ascribed to this dynasty and mentioned as deserving praise in Bear 1.56, as quoted above (§ 2).

4. Aśvagoṣa's use of the expression *sūkṣma dharmā*

Here the phrase *sūkṣma dharmā* is assumed to be the crucial label chosen by Aśvagoṣa to denote a supposed socio-religious past, shared by both the Buddhist and brahmanic cultures, between which a potential relation could be relied on.

First of all, it is noteworthy to consider a second significant occurrence of this phrase in Saund. 2.37: *prajāḥ paramadharmajñāḥ sūkṣmaṃ dharmam avīvasat / darśanāc caiva dharmasya kāle svargam avīvasat*, "Knower of the highest *dharmā*, he (King Śuddhodana) made his subjects live within the subtle *dharmā* and live within the heaven at the end, because of their perception of *dharmā*."

Whereas in Bcar 1.56 an almost evident socio-economic mobility seems to be depicted in brief, this second passage focuses on a comparably unstable background for the ethic: *dharma* is thus not a strictly prescribed collection of rules yet. It rather depends on how the individual perception of it determines the single adopted behaviour.

Neither does the occurrence of *svarga* seem to be accidental in this context. It is also a term employed in Bcar. 2.12 in order to define King Śuddhodana's kingdom: *udyānadevāyatanāśramāṇām kūpaprapāpuṣkariṇīvanānām cakruḥ kriyās tatra ca dharmakāmāḥ pratyakṣataḥ svargaṃ ivopalabhya*, "In their love for dharma, they constructed parks and temples, hermitages and wells, cisterns and lotus ponds and groves, as if they had seen heaven with their own eyes." Once again the exemplary conduct of the inhabitants of Śuddhodana's kingdom is presented as a consequence of their relationship with *dharma*: they are fond of *dharma* (*dharmakāmāḥ*) and their world seems to be heaven itself, of which they thus accede to the direct perception.

Nonetheless, *svarga* merely terms a step—and not the highest one—in the scale of the available human targets, as some other Aśvaghoṣa occurrences plainly show. In fact, *svarga* and *dyau* are the terms employed in Bcar 7.18–26, 48–53, in the context of Prince Gautama's meeting with the anchorites, when the future Buddha is seen overtly aiming at a higher goal in life. This is noticed by Hildebeitel (2006: 253 n. 60): "One of the reasons he does not stay with them is that their practice of *tapas* merely yields 'Paradise'." Self-evidently, unlike King Śuddhodana, the anchorites know what Gautama is aiming at, i.e. the liberation which they call both *apavarga* and *mokṣa* (7.52–53). In this context, in fact, the term *dharma* results as being a synonymous word for the third life-stage of the *vānaprastha* according to Hildebeitel and in our questioned passage (Bcar 1.56), it is tempting to consistently suppose that the *sūkṣma dharma* favoured by King Śuddhodana might have been implicitly opposed by Aśvaghoṣa to the *mokṣadharmā*, by contrast, aimed at by his son. Therefore, King Śuddhodana perceived the tension between him and his son as something which had to be worked out between the '*dharmas*' of the second

and third life-stages, by confusing the ancient *rājarsī* way of life with the orthodox semi-final way of life and wrongly making them overlapping.

In actual fact, this might not be so different from the intentional merging of the ascetic way of life with the second half part of the orthodox fourfold pattern of the ideal householder, as eventually governed by the *Śrautasūtra* and *Kalpasūtra* rules in general, and possibly “philologically” pursued through these brahmanic sources themselves. Of course I mean that Aśvaghōṣa might have represented the historical inclusivistic orthodox reform embodied in the character of Śuddhodana. He might be the literary witness of the supposed passage to the so-called *varṇāśrama* system and the move from the regime of several choices of life, as illustrated in ChUp 2.23.1, according to the most recent interpretations:

*trayo dharmaskandhāḥ // yajño 'dhyayanam dānam iti prathamāḥ // tapa
eva dvitīyah // brahmacāry ācāryakulavāsi tṛtīyo 'tyantam ātmānam
ācāryakule 'vasādayan // sarva ete puṇyalokā bhavanti // brahmasaṁstho
'mṛtatvam eti,*

“There are three types of persons whose torso is the Law (dharma). The first is one who pursues sacrifice, Vedic recitation, and gift giving. The second is one who is devoted solely to austerity. The third is a celibate student of the Veda (living at his teacher’s house; that is, a student who settles himself permanently at his teacher’s house). All these gain worlds earned by merit. A person who is steadfast in brahman reaches immortality” (tr. Olivelle 1996: 217).

Therefore, in the past, on the one hand, there might have been the *Dharma*-based way of life, and on the other, the Brahman-based one, either of which could be freely chosen. Indeed one of the most difficult tasks undertaken by the Reform might have thus been the action of discouraging the latter one as a permanent choice, skillfully placing it afresh at a late stage of life in the newly provided socio-religious brahmanic frame.

Mindful of this past, and eager to highlight the undeniable continuity between the abandoned heroic way of ancient king-ascetics and the emerging Māgadha forms of asceticism, Aśvaghōṣa seems to have devoted special care to defending the possible combination of the warrior's ideal represented by the historical Buddha's family tradition with the purely non-violent horizon of ascetics in his heroic *Mahākāvya*, aiming his rhetoric at his likely challenging Buddhist or Jaina audience.¹² His proposal seems to rely on the cheered consciousness raising of this shared past synthetically conveyed by the phrase under analysis and to aim at a plausible dialogue, actually available on this basis.

If one follows Hildebeitel's suggestion regarding the religious terms studiedly involved by Aśvaghōṣa in order to compare the two opponent doctrines, and the trend of allusions to the MBh indicated in his 2006 paper, it is noteworthy to recall that *dharma* is repeatedly said to be 'subtle' in the *Mahābhārata*, basically because its course is difficult to follow, so that the heroes are often forced to face difficult dilemmas to delineate it.

This expression *sūkṣma dharma* has already been studied by Hara 1997 on the base of several epic occurrences. For instance, in a passage

¹² This assumption is inspired by analogous considerations advanced by Peterson 2003 on Bhāravi's *Kīrātātārjunīya*: "Long segments of the mahākāvya are devoted to justifying the martial goal of Arjuna's ascetic practice. In these passages Bhāravi appears to be defending the hero's combination of a warrior's violent ends with the nonviolent discipline of ascetics, and he appears to be aiming his rhetoric at an implied audience of challengers, who are most likely to have been Buddhist and Jainas" (pp. 25–26). The problem of violent action raised by Indra in this work and the condemnation of *kṣātradharmā*, presented in a Buddhist / Jaina garb "is only the *pūrvapakṣa*, the opinion to be refuted, in the debate. Our approbation is to be given to Arjuna's response, representing the conservative solution of the brahmanical social system and the relativistic point of view, which seeks to make a case for legitimate (i.e., "dharmic") violence [...]" (p. 133). Aśvaghōṣa's arguments seem to constitute the Buddhist counterpart of this kind of cultural re-interpretation of the recent historical facts.

which according to Yardi 1986 dates back to the Sūta level and where the relevant expression occurs twice, Bhīṣma admits his failure in solving moral questions such as this submitted by Draupadī:

(MBh 2.60.31; 40ab)

*dharme sthīto dharmasutaś ca rājā dharmas ca sūkṣmo nipuṇopalabhyaḥ
/ vācāpi bhartuḥ paramānumātraṃ necchāmi doṣaṃ svaguṇān viśṛjya //
[...] na dharmasaukṣmyāt subhage vivaktuṃ śaknomi te praśnam imaṃ
yathāvat, (Draupadī)*

“The king, son of Dharma, is stable in the *dharmā* and the *dharmā* is subtle for the wise to seize, but even though [I am requested] by my husband’s words, I would not accomplish the least offense nor abandon my virtue” [...] (Bhīṣma) “Since *dharmā* is subtle, my dear, I do not manage to resolve your question in the proper way.”

Furthermore, a piece of evidence for the extremely negative nuance of this *sūkṣma dharmā* syntagm seems to be supplied by MBh 12.33.10,¹³ which is not included in Hara’s survey:

*dvijaśreṣṭha tatra me nāsti saṃśayaḥ / vyaktaṃ saukṣmyāc ca dharmasya
prāpsyāmaḥ strīvadhaṃ vayam,*

(Yudhiṣṭhira): “O most excellent of twice-born, I have no doubt of this. And it is evident, we shall also be guilty of killing women because of the subtlety of *dharmā*.”

As maintained by Hara (1997: 515), the statements in the Epic literature involving the concept of *dharmasūkṣmatva* aim at underlining that “the course, or unfolding process (*gati*) of *dharmā* is too subtle (*sūkṣma*) to be judged solely by human reason (*tarka*), which is almost equal to nothing in face of the Vedic revelation”.¹⁴ This is the only

¹³ Chapter 12.33 is more recent, i.e. it dates back to the Sauti level according to Yardi 1986: 158.

¹⁴ Hara’s (1997: 515) statement is based on MBh 3 App. 32.65–68: *tarko’pratiṣṭhaḥ śrutayo vibhinnā / naiko ṛṣir yasya mataṃ pramāṇam / dharmasya tattvaṃ nihitaṃ guhāyāṃ / mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ*, “Reasoning is not stable and the Vedic texts are different. There is no

authoritative source to be resorted to in order to solve dilemmas, as shown by some stories collected in MBh 8.49 and well explained by Hara (1997: 516–8) himself. The following is the important comment Kṛṣṇa addresses to Arjuna, who had even decided to kill his brother Yudhiṣṭhira merely to carry out one of his vows:

(MBh 8.49.18; 24) *na hi kāryam akāryam vā sukhaṃ jñātum kathaṃcana / śrutena jñāyate sarvaṃ tac ca tvaṃ nāvabudhyase [...] sa gurum pārtha kasmāt tvaṃ hanyā dharmam anusmaran / asaṃpradhārya dharmāṅgāṃ gatiṃ sūkṣmāṃ duranvayām,*

“It is by no means easy to know what has to be done and what not. Everything is known by means of Vedic revelation, but you do not realize this. O Pṛthā’s son, by paying attention to dharma, how could you kill your venerable brother, without having reflected on the subtle course of dharmas, which is so difficult to follow?”.

It deals with a very ancient passage which has been classified as a part of the so-called “original Bhārata” by Yardi (1986: 156).

The alternative is to rely on the consuetudinary rule, in order to go beyond the incertitude determined by the *sūkṣma dharmā*, as suggested in MBh 1.187.6; 28, i.e. in a passage that Yardi (1986: 157) classified as a part of the so-called Sūta-level of the poem. It deals with Draupadī’s discussed marriage to five brothers:

kāmayā brūhi satyaṃ / tvaṃ satyaṃ rājasu śobhate / iṣṭapūrtena ca tathā vaktavyam anṛtaṃ na tu / [...] sūkṣmo dharmo mahārāja nāsyā vidmo vayaṃ gatim / pūrveṣāṃ ānupūrvyeṇa yātaṃ vartmānuyāmahe,

“Speak the truth willingly!. Among kings truth shines forth over sacrifice and gifts. Thus no lie must be spoken. [...] O great King, *dharmā* is subtle, we do not know its course. Let us therefore follow the path trodden by the ancestors in due order.”

single ṛṣi whose thought is an authoritative means of acquiring knowledge. The reality of dharma is hidden in a hiding-place. The way is that walked by the majority of people.”

Nevertheless, the elusive character of *dharma* is precisely explained elsewhere as a consequence of an improper overlap between *dharma* and *ācāra* “customary behaviour”:

(MBh 12.254.21) *pranaṣtaḥ śāśvato dharmāḥ sadācāreṇa mohitāḥ / tena vaidyas tapasvī vā balavān vā vimohyate,*

“The perpetual *dharma* disappears when it is confused with good customary behaviour. Everyone is deluded, whether learned, ascetic or powerful.¹⁵”

In my opinion, the occurrence in MBh 3.196.39–40, nonetheless included in an almost recent text (i.e., in a so-called “addition made by the Harivaṃśakāra” according to Yardi 1986: 157), is extremely illustrative, inasmuch as it proposes a sort of opposition between the *sūkṣma dharma* and the true *dharma*. A pious woman unexpectedly asserts that her interlocutor, i.e. a Brāhmaṇa, does not actually know the plurality of *dharmas*, which by contrast will be taught by a hunter coming from Mithilā, i.e. by a Śūdra:

durjñeyāḥ śāśvato dharmāḥ sa tu satye pratiṣṭhitāḥ / śrutipramāṇo dharmāḥ syād iti vṛddhānuśāsanam //
bahudhā dṛṣyate dharmāḥ sūkṣma eva dvijottama / bhavān api ca dharmajñāḥ svādhyāyanitataḥ śuciḥ / na tu tattvena bhagavan dharmān vetsīti me matiḥ,

“The perennial *dharma* is hard to know, but it is well founded on truth, *dharma* should have Revelation as its source of knowledge according to the teachings by the elders. Many times *dharma* is seen as a subtle thing, o supreme twice-born and you too are aware of *dharma*, devoted to study, and pious; yet, sir, I think that you do not actually know <the several> *dharmas*.”

In other words the awareness of the true *dharma* is independent from *varṇa*.

¹⁵ The expression *sūkṣma dharma* occurs some lines below, in MBh 12.254.35.

5. Conclusions

The thesis suggested by the quoted verses, which however insist on underlining the necessary link to the scriptures (*śrutipramāṇo dharmah*), is that a more important one does exist, namely the true *dharma*. It directly relies on Truth (*satyam* occurs twice in the occurrences mentioned above, i.e. in MBh 1.187.6 and 3.196.39), but it is subtle, uncertain and unstable, so that a reformed rigid system of Law is a *desideratum*, i.e., the promoted rising of the winning and lasting brahmanical inclusivistic *varṇāśrama* system, which was possibly being fixed contemporaneously. In fact, the *dharma* which is *sūkṣma* is said to be fortunately taught in the *Dharmaśāstras*, according to MBh 5.138.7 (which is a passage not included in Hara's survey¹⁶):

*tvam eva karṇa jānāsi vedavādān sanātanān /
tvam hy eva dharmāśāstreṣu sūkṣmeṣu pariniṣṭhitah,*

“Karṇa, you know the perennial sayings of the *Vedas*, and you are well grounded in the subtle corpora of rules on *dharma*.”

If this is a likely justification for emphasizing the elusive character of *dharma*, on the other hand, we have to wonder why it was involved in Aśvaghōṣa's works which paradoxically, however, put the *sūkṣma dharma* in a better light than that found in *Mahābhārata* occurrences, since it is considered as a valuable instrument for governing, available to *rājarṣis*. Nevertheless, the two works share at least a single viewpoint: the so-called *sūkṣma dharma* might have been considered by Aśvaghōṣa as a sort of zero-level, from which respectively, the true Buddhist *dharma* way started, and the rigid brahmanic rule system (*Dharmasūtras* and so on) was fixed. This shared conscious position could be an additional reason to lean towards MBh and Bcar as being earlier than *Manusmṛti*—by agreeing with Biardeau (2002: I.85) and Hildebeitel (2006: 231), rather than with Olivelle (2005: 37–40; 2009: XVII–XXIII). As a consequence the important Indo-Aryan change that

¹⁶ MBh 5.138 dates back to the Sauti level according to Yardi 1986: 157.

started with the systematization of the *śrauta* ritual might not have been a “Brahmanical counter-reformation”, but rather a “Brāhmaṇical Reform”.¹⁷

Accordingly, the peculiar emphasis given by Aśvaghōṣa to this common Buddhist and brahmanic past could be the outcome of the well-known self-consciousness typical of such a long Indian tradition, which has interpreted and re-interpreted itself many times. Therefore, Aśvaghōṣa could have used the MBh expression in order to remind his listeners that both Śuddhodana’s and his ancestors’ course of life was closer to the future Buddha’s way than Śuddhodana himself was aware of, while it was extremely distant from the contemporary Brāhmaṇa-oriented reform. In Saund. 2.38, i.e. immediately after the occurrence of the expression *sūkṣma dharma*, King Śuddhodana is praised, precisely for his deliberately abstaining from applying the hereditary right etc.:

*vyaktam apy arthakṛcchreṣu nādharmiṣṭham atiṣṭhipat / priya ity eva
cāśaktam na saṃrāgād avīṛdhat,*

“He did not appoint an unrighteous man to a difficult office, even when he was the obvious candidate, nor did he promote an incompetent man out of affection, merely saying ‘he is a dear person!’.”

In other words, King Śuddhodana still seems to adhere to the pre-reformed *dharma* of kings, when a real contest determined the winner in the sacrificial arena. Furthermore, it could not be a mere accident that Śuddhodana’s kingdom is compared with the *dīkṣā* in Saund 2.6:

*yaḥ pūrvai rājabhīr yātām yiyāsūr dharmapaddhatim / rājyaṃ dīkṣām iva
vahan vṛttenānvagamat pitṛṇ,*

“In his wish to follow the path of *Dharma* trodden by previous kings, he followed his ancestors with regard to his behaviour, considering his kingship as a consecration for performing a sacrifice.”

¹⁷ Cf. Pontillo, in press.

It closely recalls Heesterman's (1993) reconstruction of the bloody sacrifice as a ritual pattern for aspiring kings, who as ascetics lived inside the forest and as wandering warriors accumulated the goods mandatory for becoming *yajamānas*. The following well-known *Rāmāyaṇa* passage consistently recalls the fact that all the ancient royal seers alternatively lived in the forest as ascetics as a current king-ly pattern:

(R 2.88.19) *idam evāṃṛtaṃ prāhū rājñām rājarṣayaḥ pare / vanavāsaṃ bhavārthāya pretya me prapitāmahāḥ,*

“Living in the forest – as the royal seers of old, my ancestors, used to say – is the real drink of immortality for kings, and leads to well-being after death” (tr. Pollock 1986: 269).

We could thus assume that this was a further fragment of the brahmanical *dharma* of Aśvaghōṣa's age which his *Mahākāvya* makes known, to be added to the already broad mosaic reconstructed by Hildebeitel in 2006.

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