Asceticism as a Philosophical Practice

Exploring the Teachings of Sulabhā and Yeshe Tsogyal

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Introduction

Epistemic injustice manifests itself in academic philosophy at least on three levels. First, a Eurocentric focus leads to a categorical exclusion of non-European philosophies.[1] Second, non-scriptural practices are marginalized, such as dance, meditation, or asceticism.[2] Third, until recently, women were excluded from the canon altogether, and those women who have been visible within the philosophical discourse in the last years are primarily of European origin.[3] In order to challenge the intersectional connection between these mechanisms of marginalization, in this paper I will invoke the ideas of Sulabhā (around 7th century BC) and Yeshe Tsogyal (around 7th century CE) – two women from India and Tibet whose ascetic practices have led to profound (self-)knowledge. I will argue, first, that asceticism is a philosophical practice that has received significant recognition within European philosophy, yet remains absent from academic engagement, and has consequently been marginalized as a philosophical pursuit. Second, that ascetic women thinkers from India and Tibet were already engaging with profound ideas of high epistemological value in ancient times. The aim of the paper is, on the one hand, to show how philosophy was practiced beyond the academically recognized scripture-based and Eurocentric

1 See especially Garfield, Jay/Van Norden, Brian: If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call It What It Really Is, in: The New York Times, The Stone (11/5/2016), http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/11/opinion/if-philosophy-wont-diversify-lets-call-it-what-it-really-is.html (17/10/2023).

2 If we consider the philosophical canon – that is, what is taught and being published in the last decade – we can see a strong focus on scripture, literature and philosophical writings. Learning academic philosophy means studying books, articles, primary and secondary texts. This has been established since the early modern period in Europe. See Berger, Susanna/Garber, Daniel: Teaching Philosophy in Early Modern Europe, Cham 2021.

3 See Hagengruber, Ruth: The Forgotten Half of History. Why Women Philosophers Matter, Blogpost, (2/3/2023) https://blog.degruyter.com/the-forgotten-half-of-history-why-women-philosophers-matter (17/10/2023).

framework, and on the other hand, to reconstruct some ideas of hitherto omitted South- and East-Asian women thinkers.

Asceticism as a philosophical practice

The first endeavor of this paper is to show that asceticism can be interpreted as a philosophical practice and that this practice disappeared from academic philosophy. My presumption that asceticism as a philosophical practice is of great epistemological significance is based on the argument that ascetic training leads practitioners to profound insights about themselves and the nature of existence. Through the examples of Sulabhā and Yeshe Tsogyal, I will show that these individuals engage in an introspective journey that fosters philosophical understanding, as asceticism often involves a severe self-discipline which forces practitioners to confront their desires, attachments, and limitations. This process of self-exploration aligns closely with the fundamental questions of philosophy, such as the nature of desire, the self, and the human condition. Because asceticism encourages contemplation and meditation, the sustained focus on one's inner world and the environment can lead to deep introspection and a heightened awareness of the interplay between the mind and the external world.

Recognizing these characteristics of asceticism, one can argue that both mental and physical training is fundamental to achieve deeper insight and self-knowledge. Having this in mind, the question arises as to why there is no longer a focus on this practice in contemporary philosophy. When we study philosophy at universities today, the primary task is to read, understand, analyze, describe and critique texts. Physical practices such as dance, meditation, or asceticism, as well as oral philosophy, are excluded in these education systems and institutions. It is only when we look at current non-European epistemologies that we get access to such practices again. We thus find oral philosophical traditions in Africa[4] or dance as a source of knowledge in the practices of Native Americans.[5] Looking into the syllabus of western departments of philosophy, physical exercises are not emphasized as philosophical practices in the classroom, nor are African, Asian, or Latin-American philosophies part of the standard curriculum. This article therefore serves as a small contribution to the hitherto marginalized practice of asceticism, as well as the visualization of female thinkers from Asia who have carried out this practice.

4 See Odera Oruka, Henry: Sage Philosophy Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy, Boston 1990; and Oluwole, Sophie Bosede: Socrates and Ọrúnmìlà. Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy, Lagos 2014.

5 See Welch, Shay: The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System. Dancing with Native American Epistemology, New York 2019.

If we look at the history of European philosophy, we see that Aristotle was already aware of the contemplative aspect of ascetic practice as something akin to the philosophical pursuit of understanding the nature of reality. Because Aristotle has recognized the high benefit of training the mind and the body, asceticism serves as a central aspect of his ethics and doctrine of virtue.[6] Since ancient times, asceticism has been referred to as a practice within the framework of self-training for religious or philosophical motivation. The final aim of this training would be the acquisition of virtues, self-control, and the consolidation of character. In particular, the Stoa emphasizes the control of both thoughts and desires and understands asceticism as abstention and renunciation.[7] Renunciation, modesty, and self-control would therefore be a prerequisite for the path to contemplation and training the philosophical mind. For Schopenhauer, asceticism is practiced through chastity, poverty, and finally a voluntary hunger through which suffering can be overcome.[8] Nietzsche later demands for his conception of the Superman an exercise of negation to be achieved through asceticism, which means that renunciation, for example through fasting, can lead to a higher form of humanity. In his estimation, self-control and renunciation are necessary to achieve a "golden nature."[9]

However, to highlight that asceticism is an important aspect of training the mind and thereby for gaining self-knowledge, I present below two independent women from India and Tibet who, through their ascetic practices, gained incontrovertible insights and engaged with philosophically relevant ideas which are of high epistemological, ontological and metaphysical value. It is not clear to this day whether these women are merely mythological figures from ancient writings, as there is a lack of proof of their actual historic existence. Nonetheless, as their ideas are valuable in themselves, it is not primarily relevant to my paper whether they actually lived, as their arguments exist in the text and will be examined as such. I will put aside the question of the true existence of these two women for now and refer primarily to the ideas and arguments attributed to them as I engage with them as representatives for women thinkers in their time period.

6 Lehn, Theres: Asketische Praxis. Die Bedeutung der Askese für das ethische Handeln und das menschliche Sein bei Aristoteles und Michel Foucault, Munich 2012, 14–15.

7 Francis, James A.: Subversive Virtue. Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World, Pennsylvania 1995, 1–11.

8 Schopenhauer, Arthur: Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung I, Stuttgart/Frankfurt am Main 1960, § 68, 516–520.

9 Sprondel, W.M.: Askese, in: Joachim Ritter (ed.): Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, Basel/Stuttgart 1971, 539–540.

The learned renunciant Sulabhā

Sulabhā is a single woman and learned ascetic who, in the ancient epic *Mahābhārata*, wins a debate against King Janaka (around 7th century BC) in which she argues for her compelling concept of freedom, as well for there being no essential difference between a man and a woman apart from gender. Using her own example, she shows that a woman can achieve *mokṣa* (skt. liberation) by the same means as a man. The discussion between the ascetic and the king is one of the most important passages in the *Mahābhārata* with regard to the philosophical emancipation of women, as Sulabhā represents an independent woman who wins the philosophical debate by means of conclusive arguments and on the basis of her self-acquired knowledge. Contemporary research on the *Mahābhārata* has not paid much attention to this episode, nor has feminist research on ancient India given it the importance it deserves.[10] Perhaps the most famous debate between a woman and a man in an ancient Hindu text is that between the Indian philosopher Gārgī and the Vedic rishi Yājñavalkya[11] (skt. *ṛṣi*: ascetic, enlightened person), which takes place in the presence of King Janaka in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (3:6 and 3:8). This debate can be seen as an example of the silencing of women in patriarchal society, for it ends with Yājñavalkya's threat that Gārgī's head would fall off if she asked more questions. Instead of appreciating her intellectual brilliance, she is silenced because of her philosophical interest.[12] Conversely, the discussion examined here – between King Janaka and the ascetic Sulabhā – ends with the silence of the male participant, who is famous for nothing less than being the king of philosophy.[13] Unlike Gārgī, Janka does not become silent because he has experienced epistemic violence, but his silence can be understood as approval of Sulabhā's speech as he seems to have run out of arguments to say something against her propositions.

Another significant factor of this story is that Sulabhā does not practice asceticism as a wife, as other ascetics in the *Mahābhārata* do.[14] As a single woman and independent ascetic, she is not part of an organized order or monastery. Instead, she makes her pilgrimage through the world alone and self-determined. Sulabhā's example shows that some women received occasional intellectual recognition in ancient India, but they were usually considered to be rare exceptions. Although the

10 Vanita, Ruth: The Self Is Not Gendered. Sulabhā's Debate with King Janaka, in: NWSA Journal 15 (2003), 76.

11 Gārgī and Yājñavalkya also play an important role in the famous epic Upaniṣads. See Radhakrishnan, S./Mohanty, J.N.: Indian Philosophy, Oxford 2009, 111.

12 See Mills, Ethan: Learning from Gārgī's Silence, (5/2/2020): https://indianphilosophyblog.org/2020/02/05/learning-from-gargis-silence/ (5/12/2023)

13 Vanita: The Self Is Not Gendered, 80; and Shalini Shah, "Articulation, Dissent and Subversion: Voices of Women's Emancipation in Sanskrit Literature." Social Scientist 45 (2017), 80.

14 Like for example Kuntī or Damayantī.

narratives deal with individual cases, the idea that a woman is given the possibility of spiritual emancipation appears again and again within the eighteen volumes of the *Mahābhārata*.[15]

The story of King Janaka and Sulabhā, as narrated by Bhīṣma in the *Mokṣhadharma Parva* (skt. *mokṣa*; liberation, *dharma*: nature, quality, path, duty) in the *Mahābhārata*, is a significant episode that explores themes of liberation and the path to spiritual realization. King Janaka is often depicted as a symbol of a wise and virtuous ruler who is deeply committed to the pursuit of *mokṣa*. Sulabhā, a *yoginī* with extraordinary powers, becomes curious about King Janaka and his devotion to liberation. To learn more about him, she disguises herself as a beggar and approaches King Janaka. This act of taking on a beggar's form is a demonstration of her yogic abilities and her desire to test the king's wisdom and spiritual knowledge. The encounter between Sulabhā and King Janaka serves as a platform for a philosophical and spiritual discussion. Sulabhā discusses two important questions with King Janaka:

1) Is it possible to attain liberation while living a domestic life, fulfilling worldly duties, and maintaining relationships?
2) What is the highest form of liberation or the highest perfection of *mokṣa*?

These questions are at the core of the conversation between Sulabhā and King Janaka and deal with the pursuit of spiritual realization while living a worldly life. In response to Sulabhā's questions, King Janaka provides his profound insights into the nature of life, death, and the path to liberation. He explains that liberation from the cycle of birth and death is indeed possible for those who can transcend the attachments and desires of the material world. Janaka portrays himself as an example of a ruler who is spiritually awakened and simultaneously continues to perform his royal duties without being entangled in the worldly cycle of birth and death. This story underscores the idea that one can pursue a path of spiritual awakening and liberation while fulfilling worldly responsibilities and roles. The attainment of *mokṣa*, the highest perfection of liberation, is a central theme in this dialogue between King Janaka and Sulabhā, shedding light on the timeless quest for spiritual enlightenment within the context of a householder's life.[16]

The ascetic Sulabhā suggests to King Janka that despite his wealth and possessions, he actually has very little control and power. A king is always dependent on others, such as his advisors, and his life is shaped by the demands of others. Because of his obligations to the kingdom and the decisions to be made regarding war and peace, he could not live without attachments. Sulabhā claims that a king cannot be truly detached from the world because, in order to protect his kingdom, he must be

15 Vanita: The Self Is Not Gendered, 81.

16 Mahābhārata 12.321.20–150 (Translation by Manmatha Nath Dutt).

suspicious of others, even if they mean no harm. He is also obliged to share the problems of all the people of his kingdom and must suffer sleepless nights because of it. Subsequently, Sulabhā relativizes the power of the king and especially the privilege that he has as a king by pointing out that other men are also kings of their own houses and have sons and wives in the same way. For these reasons, a king is not special in principle, but rather experiences mental suffering just the same as every human being, triggered by attachment, rejection, and fear. Finally, she addresses the notion of sovereignty by pointing out that with the king's sovereignty comes little joy, but rather a great deal of suffering. In this assertion, she deconstructs the king's original statement, which proudly asserted that the king's power is one of sovereignty. In her view, this power is ultimately not something desirable, but rather to be rejected because too many obligations come with kingship.[17]

With this argument, she claims that it is *de facto* impossible to attain liberation without living an ascetic life. She thus argues for the necessity of renunciation and asceticism in order to live truly liberated and to attain *mokṣa*.[18] For Sulabhā it is a *conditio sine qua non* to have an ascetic lifestyle in order to be free from desire, attachments, and suffering. After her argumentation, the story ends with the note that the king was not able anymore to reply or contradict. The fact that King Janaka – who represents a wise and enlightened ruler – remained silent after Sulabhā's discourse can be viewed as an endorsement of the ascetic path as a means to attain deep philosophical insight. In this interpretation, the story serves to highlight the idea that a life of asceticism, characterized by the renunciation of and detachment from worldly desires, can be a potent way to gain profound philosophical insight and to ultimately attain *mokṣa*. King Janaka's silence is a powerful symbol of the recognition of the value of asceticism as a way of knowledge in the pursuit of realization and understanding.

Yeshe Tsogyal, the queen of bliss

Yeshe Tsogyal is one of the most influential women in Tibetan Buddhism. Not only was she an effective teacher in her own right, but she was also the disciple and consort of Padmasambhava, also called Guru Rinpoche, a tantric master who brought the Indian Buddhist teachings of Vajrayāna (Buddhist tradition of tantric practice) to Tibet. Through her spiritual practice, Yeshe Tsogyal is said to have gained deep

17 Mahābhārata 12.321.154–163.

18 Fitzgerald, James: Nun Befuddles King, Shows 'Karmayoga' Does Not Work. Sulabha's Refutation of King Janaka at MBh 12.308, in: Journal of Indian Philosophy 30 (2002), 647; Black, Brian: Sulabhā and Indian Philosophy, in: O'Reilly, Katharine R./Pellò, Caterina (eds.): Ancient Women Philosophers. Recovered Ideas and New Perspectives, New York 2023, 48–51.

insight into the nature of the mind, making her a guide for countless practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. Her main work is seen in the writing and dissemination of Padmasambhava's philosophy, which is explained in her autobiographical texts. According to the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, her writings emphasize the importance of compassion, the cultivation of wisdom for the benefit of all living beings, and the value of the renunciation of worldly belongings and activities. Her teachings, ascetic and meditative practices, and life story remain a source of inspiration to this day.[19]

Yeshe Tsogyal's story is one of liberation, as she freed herself of her parents' oppressive actions after they tried to force her into marriage. The Tibetan princess decided to step out of the monarchic structures that she was born into and to live an emancipated life as a Buddhist practitioner. As a result of this decision, she experienced physical violence and was sent into exile. Before her retreat, she voluntarily gave away all her belongings to her former servants and dressed her body only with leaves. In the jungle, she fed on berries and rose hips and, according to the story, lived in harmony with nature and animals. After a few months, the Tibetan king, whose daughter-in-law she should have become, learned of her location and sent his son personally to her, accompanied by officials, to persuade her to come with him.[20] The princess refuses the request, explaining that asceticism is the only way for her to attain bliss. As she recounts to him:

> Your golden, turquoise jewelry and articles have a noble sheen, but my wearing leaves causes little harm. Your consuming meat and alcohol is delicious in your mouth, while my eating fruit ripens into bliss and heat in my body. You travel swiftly by horse, as I harness my circulating energy to reach the level of bliss. Your family is important and you have your father's solid name, while I am an excellent adept who practices the teachings as spiritual attainment keeps me company. No matter how noble your clan, how lofty your royal line, my mind's blissful basic nature is comfortable in a humble position. Worldly activities do not thrill me. Young man, you too should enjoy the wealth of the sacred teachings.[21]

In this key passage of the narrative, Yeshe Tsogyal refers to the philosophical practice of asceticism and meditation, which are fundamental not only to her own practice

19 Klein, Anne C.: Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self, Delhi 2008, 15–18.

20 Ye-shes-mtsho-rgyal: The Life and Visions of Yeshé Tsogyal. The Autobiography of the Great Wisdom Queen, Boulder 2017, 110–150.

21 Ibid., 152–153.

but also to Buddhist epistemology.[22] In her words, she clarifies that the highest bliss and concomitant freedom consists in the renunciation of worldly activities such as owning material possessions, consuming meat and alcohol, and the attachment to the family clan. In doing so, she refers to important anchor points of ascetic practice by addressing modesty and renunciation and claiming to be free of material desires for clothing, meat, or alcohol, thus demonstrating her advanced discipline. Finally, she refers to the richness of the sacred teachings of Tibetan philosophy, which seems more valuable to her than all material goods.

The parallels between the thoughts of Yeshe Tsogyal and Sulabhā are obvious, as they both argue for the necessity of renunciation in order to attain inner freedom from attachment. Sulabhā explains to King Janaka that he cannot experience liberation as long as he, a king, is in possession of material goods and insofar as he bears political responsibility. Similar is the argument of Yeshe Tsogyal, who, despite brutal consequences (being whipped and banned), chose not to live in the royal court in order to practice meditation and asceticism for the attainment of knowledge. Like Sulabhā, Yeshe Tsogyal insists on the importance of an ascetic lifestyle to liberate the mind from attachment. They both emphasize that one can only truly enjoy a liberated life if one is free of attachment from belongings and worldly affairs.

If we look at this argument from an epistemological perspective, an apparent interpretation could be that the knowledge they seek to experience true liberation is grounded in the practice of renunciation and meditation. Without these ascetic practices, they say, no liberation from attachment is possible, which makes them a necessary condition for understanding and embodying freedom. The argumentation of these two women can be summarized as follows:

- Premise 1: Beings who do not practice renunciation are attached to worldly activities and possessions.
- Premise 2: This attachment leads to mental and/or physical suffering.
- Premise 3: Because of the suffering one endures due to these attachments, it is not possible for them to be free.
- Conclusion: In order to free oneself from all attachment and the suffering associated with it, renunciation of fame and possessions is necessary.

From an epistemological perspective, the argument suggests that the knowledge that leads to true liberation is achieved through renunciation and meditation. Without these practices, one remains attached to worldly activities and possessions, leading to suffering and the inhibition of freedom. Therefore, the conclusion is that re-

22 For a perspective from Buddhist epistemology on meditation see: Chandha, Monima: A Buddhist Epistemological Framework for Mindfulness Meditation, in: Asian Philosophy 25 (2015) 1, 65–80.

nunciation of fame and possessions is necessary to free oneself from attachment and its associated suffering.

Conclusion

Both Yeshe Tsogyal and Sulabhā were early exemplars of women who actively pursued forms of asceticism which, I argue, should be considered as philosophical practices. These two women provide profound historical examples of female ascetics with philosophical engagement. They challenged the gender norms of their societies by actively participating in ascetic pursuits and philosophy. In patriarchal contexts, their dedication and intellectual acumen were groundbreaking, and their recognition challenged prevailing stereotypes about women's roles and abilities. In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that asceticism was historically acknowledged in European philosophy but later marginalized. Furthermore, it has highlighted the philosophical contributions of ascetic women from India and Tibet, emphasizing their recognition in ancient times. The paper's overarching goal was to reveal philosophy's existence beyond the confines of academically recognized, scripture-based, and Eurocentric traditions, while also reconstructing the ideas of overlooked Asian women thinkers.[23]

23 Special thanks to Anke Graness, Rolf Elberfeld and the team of the Koselleck-Project "Histories of Philosophy in a Global Perspective" who have supported my ideas in many ways.