

Alex Watson

The Self's Awareness of Itself. Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha's Arguments Against the Buddhist Doctrine of No-Self, De Nobili, Wien 2006, pp. 433. ISBN 3-900271-38-0

The central role and the philosophical significance of the controversy about the existence of an *ātman* ("self") in Indian philosophy has been examined in Claus Oetke's masterpiece "*Ich*" und *das Ich*, which philosophically investigates the conflicting opinions about the self and its nature in Theravāda Buddhism, Vaiśeṣika, Nyāya, and Bhāṭṭamīmāṃsā. Alex Watson's learned book introduces the views of a Śaiva Siddhānta author, Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha, who lived in Kashmir between A.D. 950 and 1000 ca. (p. 115), into this debate. In fact, thanks to the accurate work of Nidodi Ramachandra Bhatt, Dominic Goodall and Pierre-Sylvain Filiozat, among others, we already had excellent editions and translations of some Rāmakaṇṭha's works, whereas a philosophical appreciation of his contribution was still a desideratum. Watson has focused on a portion of the first chapter of Rāmakaṇṭha's *Nareśvaraparīkṣāprakāśa* ("[Commentary throwing] light on [Sadyojyotis'] Investigation into the Human Being and God", henceforth NPP). The motivation behind Watson's choice of author lies in the fact that, according to him (p. 77), Rāmakaṇṭha was the most dialectically engaged thinker of the Śaiva Siddhānta school (his predecessors and successors rather neglecting genuine philosophical confrontations with other schools). As well, this text in particular is the Śaiva Siddhānta text that devotes the "most space to dialogue with other traditions". Moreover, "It is not only the amount of space devoted to, but also the manner of, this engagement with other traditions that sets the first chapter of NPP apart from earlier Śaiva Siddhānta texts, and indeed from many of the others by Rāmakaṇṭha" (p. 77). So, both because of its dialogic character and its content, an inquiry about the existence and nature of the self, the first chapter of the NPP allows Watson to insert Rāmakaṇṭha directly into the philosophical arena of classical Indian thought.

The book is divided into five parts: an introduction – which presents an overview of the Indian controversy about the existence of an *ātman* (briefly outlining the theses of various Buddhist and Hindū schools), introduces Rāmakaṇṭha and gives some editorial remarks about the NPP text – followed by four chapters in which portions of the first chapter of the NPP are critically edited, translated and extensively commented on by Watson. The book's chapters, and the paragraphs therein, present Watson's own partitions of the text and are meant to guide in its philosophical understanding through distinguishing the opponents' views from those of the *siddhāntin* (the upholder of the correct view, identifiable with Rāmakaṇṭha himself) and by demonstrating the various steps of argument within each view. The first argument Watson has selected from the NPP is dedicated to the inference of the self based on desire and the synthesis of cognitions, an inference most Naiyāyikas believe to be the only way to demonstrate the existence of the self, as well as to the Buddhist opposing arguments thereof. The next chapter focuses on self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana*) as evidence for the existence of the self, here Rāmakaṇṭha directly opposing the Buddhist defeaters of the Naiyāyikas found in the previous chapter. The following chapter deals with I-cognitions, believed to yield evidence of the existence of a self by the Mīmāṃsaka Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, and to the Buddhist opponents of this view, especially Dharmakīrti. Rāmakaṇṭha's view on this matter as represented by Watson seems to hold some ambiguities, insofar as I-cognitions are conceptual cognitions and Rāmakaṇṭha has until this point rather maintained that the self appears pre-conceptually in self-awareness (and, hence, cannot be denied by Buddhists, who also credit pre-conceptual cognitions with non-erroneousness). This conflict (absent in the original version of the argument, since for Kumārila non-conceptualisation and conceptualisation are just two phases of a single perceptual act) makes the argument more intriguing, albeit also more intricate (as

shown by Watson's efforts to make sense of it). Finally, in the final chapter Watson departs from his strict adherence to the NPP text, and, in order to offer a brief view of Rāmakaṇṭha's own view of the *nature* of the self, that is, his equating it with cognition, he examines and comments on a different portion of the first chapter of the NPP and on a passage of Rāmakaṇṭha's *Mataṅgavṛtti*. After the conclusions, the NPP passages that have been examined are presented in an appendix together with text-critical notes. The volume is rounded out by several indexes. In addition to Watson's personal philosophical interests, leading him to evaluate the soundness and strength of the arguments devised by Rāmakaṇṭha and his opponents, the book benefits from the scholarship of Watson as well as that of his teachers and colleagues (first and foremost Dominic Goodall, Harunaga Isaacson and Alexis Sanderson, but also Karin Preisendanz, Lambert Schmithausen, Ernst Steinkellner and many others). Hence, it contains learned references to other works of Rāmakaṇṭha (of particular interest are Watson's considerations concerning the mutual contamination between the manuscripts of *different* works of Rāmakaṇṭha, see fn. 82, p. 237), but also to many other Indian authors who dealt with the same controversy. For instance, in the first chapter, within his commentary on the NPP, Watson dedicates a number of pages to a reconstruction of the argument about the inference of the self from desire and the synthesis of cognitions, closely following its sources from Vātsyāyana and the (Mīmāṃsaka) Vṛttikāra to Uddyotakara, Vācaspati Miśra and Jayanta Bhaṭṭa. In the same chapter, a similar excursus is dedicated to a reconstruction of the history of the Vaiśeṣika's usage of the compound *acāksuṣapratyakṣatva*.

Of particular interest for this reviewer are Watson's footnotes (especially numerous in the second chapter) that reproduce parallel passages from the *Mṛgendratantvavṛtti*, written by Rāmakaṇṭha's father, Nārāyaṇakaṇṭha, and, even more frequently, from Rāmakaṇṭha's *Paramokṣanirāsakārikāvṛtti* and *Mataṅgavṛtti*. It seems that Rāmakaṇṭha repeated many statements in the NPP and the *Paramokṣanirāsakārikāvṛtti* verbatim, but reproduced them somewhat more freely in the *Mataṅgavṛtti*. Such considerations are useful in the philological reconstruction of corrupted texts, such as the *Paramokṣanirāsakārikāvṛtti* (as Watson has specifically shown), but possibly also for the evaluation of the evolution of Rāmakaṇṭha's thought and, more generally, the understanding of his compositional habits. Does, for instance, the exact reproduction of his own passages or those by other authors prove that Rāmakaṇṭha had a library at his disposal? On the other hand, it appears that he probably consciously rephrased Dharmakīrti (see fn. 103, pp. 287-8) in order to better suit the immediate context of his discussions; does this prove that even for authors such as Rāmakaṇṭha, who elsewhere reproduced texts accurately, these were not felt as inviolable? Finally, how representative of a general habit is Rāmakaṇṭha's use of the text he is commenting upon to prove his own agenda (on this theme, see, e.g., p. 318)? I hope that Alex Watson will keep on working on this promising track, in order to offer us further insights into Śaiva Siddhānta authors and their manner of quoting or referring to themselves and each other. The NPP portions reproduced in the volume under review, indeed, are strikingly devoid of explicit credits to Rāmakaṇṭha's own teachers and predecessors.

Back to the main issue, the understanding of the self, Watson does not elaborate on the degree of harmony between Rāmakaṇṭha's and his fellow Śaiva Siddhāntins' views, while he stresses the disagreement with the common-stream assumptions about the self, summarised by him as follows:

According to the Brāhmaṇical schools of philosophy, we have, or rather are, an immaterial and eternal soul or Self¹. This inner core of our identity, existing beyond our body, sense-faculties and mind, is the perceiver

1 Watson uses indifferently these two terms in order to translate *ātman*.

of our perceptions, the subject of our experiences. It is that to which the word 'I' refers. It is unaffected by the death of the body, and begins a new life by becoming associated with another embryo in accordance with the merit and demerit it has acquired through its past actions (p.51).

Rāmakaṇṭha (p. 334 and passim) denies the existence of a further entity beyond cognition, and identifies the self with cognition itself. His strategy against Buddhist opponents, in fact, consists of two steps: first he accepts their claim that the postulation of a self beyond cognition is unwarranted, since we do not experience anything apart from cognition; then he concludes that this very cognition *is the form* of the self (that is, the self is said to be *saṃvidrūpa*, *cidrūpa*, *jñānātman*, etc.). Watson correctly understands this latter assertion as a statement of absolute identity between self and cognition. But the mere use of such compound words does not necessarily warrant this analysis. In fact, when Rāmakaṇṭha speaks of the self as “having the form of cognition” this could just mean that it is –against the Nyāya's view– intrinsically conscious. The “identity” interpretation, however, becomes fully justified if integrated with other Rāmakaṇṭha's passages, such as his commentary ad *Kiraṇatantra* v. 2.25ab, where he explicitly affirms that there is no *śaktimat* (possessor of power) beyond the *śakti* (power) of cognition. A supply of such quotes would have improved the consistency of Watson's presentation.

The identity between self and cognition leads to many conceptual problems, insofar as the former is generally acknowledged to be permanent, and the latter instantaneous. Thus, Rāmakaṇṭha has to defend the view that cognition is itself eternal and changeless. On the one hand, writes Rāmakaṇṭha, even Buddhists admit that an instantaneous act of cognition can grasp different objects at the same time; in the same way, cognition can be thought to be single and, thus, eternal, though grasping different time-moments. On the other, Rāmakaṇṭha suggests that only the cognition's objects change, whereas cognition remains constant; this is possible because it is the intellect (*buddhi*) which is affected by the objects' changes and not the cognition itself. Looking more closely at the matter, Watson notices that, according to Rāmakaṇṭha, conceptual (*savikalpaka*) cognitions do change and are, in this sense, to be considered as *objects* of cognition. In sum, what is left as unchanging is just a non-conceptual (*nirvikalpaka*) cognition distinct from its objects.

But how could Rāmakaṇṭha account for the Śaiva Siddhānta idea that even after the attainment of liberation, the supreme self (Śiva) is different from the individual ones, if they are both nothing but cognition? Since Rāmakaṇṭha negates the distinction between *dharma* and *dharmin*, how could one determine the difference between Śiva and the individual selves without differentiating *dharmas*? Moreover, how could a cognition be said to be an agent (the agent-character of the self is stressed also by Watson, see pp. 90-2)? More specifically, as for that special kind of agent who is Śiva, his attributes of omniscience and omnipotence seem to presuppose that he is not (just) cognition. On this particular point Rāmakaṇṭha's agreement with his school's tenets is proven by, e.g., his commentary on Sadyojyotis' *Mokṣakārikā*, where he establishes God's existence by relying on the assumption that there must be an agent of commonly experienced effects and mentions the *śaktis* of knowledge, action and will as distinct from Śiva (ad MK 2).

Short, the thorough identification of self and cognition risks to collide with other teachings of the school. In fact, even in the above-mentioned *Kiraṇatantra* v. 2.25ab one finds the expression *ciddharṃe puṃsi* (“the self, who has the character (*dharma*) of being consciousness”), in which the word *dharma* may suggest a *dharmin* beyond cognition.

Thus, Watson's depiction of the way Rāmakaṇṭha adopts the Buddhist reduction of the self to cognition seems to me incomplete. It covers brilliantly the knower aspect of the self, but it does not justify other philosophically relevant aspects, such as its character of agent². Also, Watson

² A hint for a possible solution could be Rāmakaṇṭha's cursory assertion that omniscience and omnipotence are,

does not indulge in a reconciliation of Rāmakaṇṭha's theses with the bulk of Śaiva Siddhānta conceptions about the self, and in this way he misses an opportunity to strengthen the innovative weight of Rāmakaṇṭha's views. In sum, the reader is left with the thought-provoking idea of the non-distinction between *śakti* and *śaktimat*, but no exhaustive discussion of its implications.

A further topic to which I hope Watson will dedicate a deeper investigation is a depiction of the mutual relations among Kashmir thinkers, especially Śaiva thinkers. In fact, Watson concludes his book with the following remark:

The Philosophy of early Śaiva Siddhānta remains a little-studied corner of Indology. [...] Śaiva Siddhānta not being known for its philosophy, some may have assumed that, when it comes to deal with a philosophical matter such as the refutation of Buddhism, it simply borrowed the arguments of the non-Buddhist philosophical schools. We have seen that this is not the case: Rāmakaṇṭha's voice in the Self/no-Self debate is a distinct one, and he succeeds in articulating a sophisticated stance, worthy of taking its place alongside those found in the better studied philosophical traditions. The philosophical texts of early Śaiva Siddhānta contain treasures not only for those interested in the History of Śaivism but also for those interested in the History of Philosophy (p. 388).

Despite the fact that Watson has shown in Chapter 1 how Rāmakaṇṭha's voice is distinct from that of the Naiyāyikas, Vaiśeṣikas as well as of the Buddhist epistemologists, nevertheless in order to evaluate Rāmakaṇṭha's originality, a similar comparison to his closer intellectual milieu, that is, the coeval Śaiva Kashmir circles, would not have been out of place. Such a comparison could open a promising field for investigation especially in regard to the nature of the self (as shown by Watson himself, pp. 90-92, where he discusses the reasons that made both Rāmakaṇṭha and Utpaladeva speak of the self as an agent), and to his relationship with Buddhist opponents, since in both cases Rāmakaṇṭha seems to have much in common with at least Vasugupta (insofar as Vasugupta also stresses the permanency of the Perceiver, though different objects are perceived), Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta. For instance, Watson (pp. 245-249) stresses the fact that according to Rāmakaṇṭha the self is always a perceiver (*grāhaka*) and, hence, cannot become an object of perception (*grāhya*), an argument typical of Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta. Similarly, just before the passage quoted above, summarizing his work Watson writes:

The present work demonstrates how, as a strategy to undermine Buddhist arguments, a Śaiva Siddhāntin author creatively assimilated certain features of Buddhism, thereby strengthening his own armoury, and then used these to overcome those other features of Buddhism that conflicted with his own tradition (p. 388).

Indeed, as explained by Watson (p. 387), since the Buddhist Epistemological School was probably the most influential school of thought in 10th to 11th century Kashmir, a similar device was adopted by Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, and possibly also by other Śaiva authors and schools I am not aware of. More specifically, Watson hints at the possibility that Rāmakaṇṭha adopted Kumārila Bhaṭṭa's pattern of using Buddhist opponents as *uttarapakṣins* (upholders of a view antithetic to that of the first objectors, a view that is, however, later overcome by the *siddhāntin*) to beat Naiyāyika positions, only later defeating them himself (pp. 156-7). Nevertheless, the same means can be found in Utpaladeva³, and even if one wants to exclude a

in fact, just one power (*ekatvāt jñānakriyayoś śaktyor* [...] ad MK 128).

3 “Against the realism of the Nyāya, that claimed the reality of the external object and the actual existence of concepts such as relation etc., Utp. sets the criticism of the Buddhist logicians, but only to show that they would easily get the better of its relatively ingenuous realism if the Pratyabhijñā did not intervene to support it. After letting the Buddhist logicians demolish the Nyāya categories, he shows how the Buddhist alternative is in fact equally inadmissible” (Torella 1994: xxii-xxiii).

direct influence on Rāmakaṇṭha from the former (*floruit* ca. 900/925 – 950/975, according to Torella 1994), still this could be identified as a Kashmir habit rather than a borrowing from Kumārila.

Both Watson's concluding remarks and his fascinating preface lead one to consider the present work as aiming at a philosophical target, although it is soundly based on original texts. In fact, Watson opens his preface by saying:

The present work is an attempt to understand the ideas of an author writing over a thousand years ago in a civilisation profoundly different from our own. [...] If we want the classical Indian traditions to reveal themselves, not our own preconceptions, and the voices of their thinkers to come across louder than our voices, our most powerful tool is philology (p.9).

This dual attention to philosophy and philology, understood as care for textual reconstruction (and thus all variant readings of the NPP text or, e.g., the *Nyāyamañjarī* passages referred to are reproduced, even if they are not directly significant), characterizes the whole book. Sometimes, it even leads one to question the real purpose of the book: does it intend to produce a philosophical depiction and evaluation of Rāmakaṇṭha's contribution to the *ātman*-controversy or does it rather intend to collect as many pieces of historical and philological data as possible about this controversy and its participants, thus constituting a sort of encyclopaedic work (one of those books one does not read from beginning to end, but rather consults whenever looking for a reference)? As already hinted, Watson's own words point to the first option; however, in the first two chapters the philosophical relevance of Rāmakaṇṭha's thought runs the risk of being somehow overshadowed by the many notes focusing on the reconstruction of his and other authors' texts. Of course, one cannot understand an author's thought but through his texts, and textual criticism is a *conditio sine qua non* in order to understand Sanskrit texts, since they are often only available as manuscripts or in unreliable printed editions. Moreover, Watson might have felt the need to deal extensively with other schools' views on the self because Oetke's book is only available in German (a language more inaccessible than Sanskrit to many South Asian scholars) or because Oetke's philosophical commitment is clearly more important than the reconstruction of the texts under examination (Oetke, for example, does not regularly mention variant readings, but never fails to add a philosophical evaluation of the argument being dealt with or a comment on its significance in the contemporary debate). In any case, both because of its philosophical approach and because of its reconstruction of Rāmakaṇṭha's (and others') texts, Watson's book not only enhances Oetke's achievements by adding Rāmakaṇṭha's contribution to it, but will certainly give scholars who do not read German a deeper appreciation of the *ātman*-controversy.

References

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