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## **MEN AND LIGHTS – THE SYMBOL OF THE LIGHT-BEARER IN GREEK, BUDDHIST AND MOSLEM SOURCES**

**Abstract:** The triple occurrence of the symbol of the light-bearer who is walking in broad daylight in the public places of the cities involves the wandering of the researcher who is following in the footsteps of the hermeneutical truth in the labyrinth of hypothesis. The first attempt to reconstruct the chronology suggests the ensuing order: the text of the *Tripitaka* (the Indian-Buddhist tradition), the legend referring to Diogenes of Sinope, re-written and edited by Diogenes Laertios (the Greek tradition), the ample orchestration of the archaic theme of the light-bearer, achieved by Jalal-ud-din Rumi, in the *Mathnawi*, a medieval re-writing, indited from the perspective of the Moslem mystical theology (the Sufi tradition).

The second attempt to reconstitute the chronology implies the reversing of the order which involves the transmission of the subject-matter of the light-bearer between the Greek tradition and the Indian-Buddhist tradition: the legend focused on Diogenes of Sinope, the narrative devoted to Sariputra in the *Tripitaka*, the Sufi rewriting incorporated in the *Mathnawi*. This exegetical perspective presumes that the theme of the light-bearer had been imported from Greece and penetrated inside the Indian cultural and religious space following in the footsteps or in the spiritual headway of Alexander the Great's army.

**Keywords:** Greek Pre-Socratic Philosophy, Buddhism, Sufism, Diogenes of Sinope, *Tripitaka*, Jalal-ud-din Rumi, *Mathnawi*.

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Diogenes of Sinope (about 410–323 BCE)<sup>1</sup>, a disciple of Antisthenes the Cynic, used to walk in broad daylight in the public places of Athens holding a kindled lamp in his hand. Interrogated by his fellow-citizens, who were less skilled

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<sup>1</sup> Diogenes of Sinope or Diogenes the Cynic, Greek pre-Socratic philosopher. A native of Sinope, in Pontus, he immigrated to Athens, where he became notorious as an uncanny master in the art of thinking. He was holding in contempt the rich people and their riches, the political power and the social conventions, which he regarded as shackles to freedom. Diogenes Laertios (3<sup>rd</sup> century A. D.) edited Diogenes of Sinope's apophthegms in his work entitled *The Lives, Doctrines and Sayings of Illustrious Philosophers*.

than himself in the knowledge of philosophy, about the object of his search, he answered with a mysterious countenance: "I am searching for a man"<sup>2</sup>.

In the *Tripitaka*<sup>3</sup>, the narrative dedicated to the birth of Sariputra includes the image of the Brahman Tisya, who is holding a light on the crown of his head, at midday, while his belly is covered with copper leaves. One day, the crowd gathers in the marketplace of the city of Rajagriha, capital of the kingdom of Magadha, in Jambudvipa, and the townsmen are asking for explanations concerning the strange aspect of his vestimentary annexes. Tisya declares that the sacred texts he studied during the years are so numerous, that he is afraid that his belly, the storehouse of his readings, might be cleft asunder because of the interior force of the ingurgitated library: this was the reason why he decided that it would be prudent to reinforce the carnal layer which protects the treasure of his religious wisdom with another layer, made of copper.

As far as the light which was placed atop the crown of his head was concerned, it was meant to dissipate the darkness of ignorance, which reigns over the world even at noon, when the sun shines in the sky: "There are two kinds of obscurity. The first one covers the earth when the light of the sun is not illuminating us. The second one is the evil which is generated by the darkness of stupidity. Right now, even if we are bathed in the brilliance of the sun, the darkness of stupidity is still profound".

In order to thwart the fascination exerted by Tisya, the stranger and the erudite who landed unexpectedly from Southern India, Bimbisara, the king of Magadha, asked for the help of Mathara, the most famous and revered autochthonous master in the art of dialogue. Secluded for a long while on the estate which was bestowed on him as a gift by the king, Mathara married and devoted his life to the education of his children: a daughter, Sari, and a son, Kosthila. His way of life, circumscribed by the family milieu, erased from his memory the sacred books he studied during his youth and during his adulthood. This tragic forgetfulness of the laws and of the dogmas proved in fact to be extremely dangerous for his spiritual destiny, as long as the vanishing of the old knowledge had not been replaced by the acquiring of a new knowledge.

According to the order given by Bimbisara, Mathara is summoned to Rajagriha for the purpose of confronting Tisya in a tournament of wisdom which was intended to eulogize the monarchical authority as an arbitrator. Tisya left his

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Diogène Laërce, *Vies, doctrines et sentences des philosophes illustres*, translated by Robert Genaille (Paris, 1933), VI, 41, II, p. 17; Nicolae Balca, *Istoria filozofiei antice* (Bucharest, 1982), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Édouard de Chavannes (trad.), *Tripitaka Chinois. Cinq cents contes et apologues extraits du Tripitaka Chinois*, I–IV (Paris, 1910–1934) (reprinted Paris, 1962), XX, 1, p. 70<sup>v</sup>-71<sup>r</sup>; Chavannes, III, 491, p. 290-294. In Sanskrit, *Tripitaka* means "the three baskets". In the Buddhist religion, this syntagm designates the canonical sacred text, comprising the apologues, the narratives and the sermons that the Illuminated One or the Saviour Buddha Sakya–Muni has preached to his disciples who constituted the Community, *sangha*. The *Tripitaka* is divided in *Sutrapitaka* (the "basket" which contains the *Sutras* or the sermons uttered by Buddha himself), *Vinayapitaka* (the "basket" which contains the precepts concerning the Discipline) and *Abhidharmapitaka* (the "basket" which contains the precepts concerning the Metaphysics).

homestead with his soul overwhelmed by doubts, conscious of the fact that his spiritual skills were far from being up to the mark for a maieutic event of such a scale: "I forgot everything, and I was not anxious about acquiring new information. I do not know if I am really capable to stand the requirements of a dialogue with that man".

Along the way, he met two bulls fighting each other, with their horns pointing forward. In search of a good omen, he told to himself that the bull on the right side represented Mathara, while the bull on the left side represented Tisya: in the end, the bull on the right side was defeated and abandoned the battle ground. Moreover, the auspicious nature of the prophetic presence remains inaccessible to him, as he sees a woman carrying a jug which is shattered.

When he enters the city of Rajagriha, Mathara recognizes from afar the signs of triumph on the face of his adversary. He is indeed defeated in the maieutical tournament by the Brahman who was carrying, at midday, a light on the crown of his head. Advised by the courtiers, Bimbisara confers the property of Mathara to Tisya. Mathara renounces the world and gives his consent to the marriage of Sari and Tisya: "You are an intelligent man; I am giving to you my daughter in marriage; my son will accompany her. As far as I am concerned, I wish to withdraw far away, in a foreign kingdom, with a goal to pursue my own projects".

The union of Tisya and Sari gave birth to Upatisya ("him who drives Tisya away") or Sariputra: "Thanks to the previous vows, which he made during his successive existences, Sariputra became, in the proximity of Sakya-Muni, the first and foremost among the disciples devoted to the acquiring of wisdom".

Unexpectedly, the symbol of the ascetic who is walking in the middle of the bazaar, in broad daylight, holding a kindled lamp in his hands, is also mentioned by Jalal-ud-din Rumi (1207-1273), in the fifth Book of the *Mathnawi*. The initial metaphor, which is integrated in the ancient Greek sapiential tradition, and in the Indian-Buddhist religious tradition as well, is spectacularly reinvested with a new significance in the context of the medieval Sufi theology. The heart of the Christian monk, the light-bearer, overflows with love and spiritual ardour. The common people, perplexed because of the absurdity of the situation, are meaninglessly asking him what is he searching for, from one shop to another, at midday, with a kindled lamp in his hands. The answer uttered by the light-bearer reveals itself as an exiguous gate, opened towards the Invisible Kingdom of the Real Reality, towards the limitless space of the pure spirit, enlightened by the Divine Sun: "I am searching everywhere for a man that is alive with the life inspired by that Divine Breath. Is there a man in existence?" His interlocutors are replying, with an all too human innocence, that the bazaar is full of people. But the Christian monk knows extremely well the high quality of the adamic merchandise that he is looking for: "I want one who is a man on the two-wayed road – in the way of anger and at the time of desire". The purity of such an exquisite human nature could never be troubled by the temptations of anger and desires.

Such a man, who does not exist, who exists in the non-existence, beyond the light of the mundane sun and the light of the candle, is nothing but a branch which

testifies about the unseen Root of the Divinity, the principle of Truth and of the Real Life, of the infinite existence itself, without beginning nor end.

Rumi exhorts his disciples and his readers to accomplish the spiritual alchemy of self-humiliation until they will reach the threshold of non-existence, before the Divine Will, to excel in the mystical craftsmanship of self-denial, until all the results and all the fruits of the human efforts will turn into nothingness: “the real man is he that hath the spirit within him”, like a canal which is really a canal only if the water is flowing through its middle. The other human beings are nothing but “forms”, nothing but shadows, the real existence of whom has been destroyed by “the desire for bread”, by the terrestrial desires.

A series of literary and religious images of an ineffable beauty illustrate the truth of the consubstantiality which defines the complex relationship uniting him and Him: the human being who contemplated the revolution of the millstone, must also see the water of the river; the human being who contemplated the dust rise into the air, must also see, amidst the dust, the invisible active presence of the wind; the human being who contemplated the kettles of thought boiling, must also look with intelligence on the fire, too; the human being on whom God bestowed the gift of patience, must not allow his sight to be arrested by patience, but by the act of God Who is bestowing a gift; the human being who has taken a summary view of the circling movement of the foam, must feel bewilderment in front of the sea, because only through pure contemplation he will be able to become one and the same with the substance of the sea and to leave off his conscious will and his hypocrisy. Even if the human beings know the meaning of the word “to behold”, the human–divine reality, the Invisible Reality subtending the word remains oftentimes inaccessible to them: “Thou wilt say ‘I am beholding it!’; but there are many good signs of really beholding it”<sup>4</sup>.

This perspective on the *reality*, *al-Haqq*, on the relationship of love uniting God and the human beings, coincides with the enunciation contained in the statement concerning *fana* and *baqa*, the annihilation of the human attributes in the divine attributes, followed by the conversion of this self-annihilation in eternal life, in pure spiritual existence: “There is no dervish in the world; and if there be a dervish, that dervish is really non-existent. He exists in respect of the survival of his essence, but his attributes have become non-existent in the attributes of Him (God). Like the flame of a candle in the presence of the sun, he is really non-existent, though he is existent in formal calculation”<sup>5</sup>. In other words, the earthenware lamp and its wick (the Adamic being) are distinguishable from the light (the Adamic spirit), but the light is not distinguishable from the Light (the Kingdom of God, the Realm of Spirit), because the light comes from Yonder<sup>6</sup>.

The triple occurrence of the symbol of the light–bearer who is walking in broad daylight in the public places of the cities involves the wandering of the researcher who is following in the footsteps of the hermeneutical truth in the

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rumi, *Mathnawi*, V, v. 2885-2911; Nicholson, VI, p. 174-175.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rumi, *Mathnawi*, III, v. 3669-3671; Nicholson, IV, p. 206.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Rumi, *Mathnawi*, III, v. 1255; Nicholson, IV, p. 71.

labyrinth of hypothesis. The first attempt to reconstruct the chronology suggests the ensuing order: the text of the *Tripitaka* (the Indian–Buddhist tradition), the legend referring to Diogenes of Sinope, re-written and edited by Diogenes Laertios (the Greek tradition), the ample orchestration of the archaic theme of the light-bearer, achieved by Jalal-ud-din Rumi, in the *Mathnawi*, a medieval re-writing, indited from the perspective of the Moslem mystical theology (the Sufi tradition).

According to the Buddhist tradition, the *Sutrapitaka* or “the basket of the Sermons” had been recited by Ananda by way of an answer to the questions formulated by Mahakasyapa during the first Council which took place in a great cave situated near the city of Rajagriha, in the first rainy season after the entrance of the Blessed One in the *parinirvana* (about 478 BCE). The *Vinayapitaka* or “the basket of the Discipline” had been communicated in the same circumstances by another disciple, Upali<sup>7</sup>. *Chambers’s Biographical Dictionary*<sup>8</sup> states that Diogenes of Sinope lived between 412 and 323 BCE (323 BCE is also the year of Alexander the Great’s death). His asceticism made a vivid impression upon the collective memory of the Athenians and his commentaries, his apophthegms and his vituperations elevated him, in the spiritual hierarchy of the metropolis, to a rank comparable to that of the Hebrew prophets: “From the outset he requested his cloak to be doubled, for his own convenience, and also because he needed a warm cover while he was sleeping during the night, afterwards he took a knapsack, in order to keep his victuals, and resolved to eat, to sleep and to talk no matter where. When he fell ill, he leaned upon a staff. In course of time, he carried his staff everywhere, in the city and on the roads, and he used to carry his knapsack as well”<sup>9</sup>. It is impossible to reconstitute the sources that Diogenes Laertios, living in the city of Laertia, in Cilicia, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., used in order to indite his anthology. The Moslem rewriting of the theme of the light-bearer that Rumi (1207–1273) included in the text of the *Mathnawi* (“I am searching everywhere for a man that is alive with the life inspired by that Divine Breath”) seems to be founded on Diogenes of Sinope’s enunciation (“I am searching for a man”). Even if Rumi’s knowledge of the Greek version of the theme of the light-bearer (in the Greek original or translated in Arabic) can be considered as a certitude, it is meet and proper to analyse concomitantly the hypothesis according to which the *Mathnawi* borrowed this topic from the Indian–Buddhist tradition.

The second attempt to reconstitute the chronology implies the reversing of the order which involves the transmission of the subject-matter of the light-bearer between the Greek tradition and the Indian–Buddhist tradition: the legend focused on Diogenes of Sinope, the narrative devoted to Sariputra in the *Tripitaka*, the Sufi rewriting incorporated in the *Mathnawi*. This exegetical perspective presumes that

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, II, *De Gautama Bouddha au triomphe du christianisme* (Paris, 1978), p. 204-205; M. Eliade, Ioan P. Couliano, *Dictionnaire des religions* (Paris, 1990), p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. David Patrick, F. Hindes Groome, W. M. Geddie, J. Liddell Geddie (eds.), *Chambers’s Biographical Dictionary* (London–Edinburgh–Philadelphia, 1935), p. 301.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Diogène Laërce, *Vies, doctrines et sentences des philosophes illustres*, VI, 13, 22, 37; Genaille, II, p. 10.

the theme of the light-bearer had been imported from Greece and penetrated inside the Indian cultural and religious space following in the footsteps or in the spiritual headway of Alexander the Great's army. The anecdotal and historiographical relationship established between Diogenes and Alexander ("You can stand out of the sunshine!" or "Turn aside from the light of the sun!") seems to justify this hypothesis<sup>10</sup>. Mircea Eliade threw into relief the fact that the invasion of Alexander the Great occurred only a quarter of a century after the schism of Mahadeva (in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), after the Councils of Vaisali and Pataliputra, which brought about the division of the *samgha* order into *mahasamghika* and *sthavira*. "Indifferent to history" and "devoid of historiographical consciousness" from the moment of the Macedonian conquest onwards, India opened its spiritual gates in order to receive the Hellenistic influences: "the saga of Alexander" was gradually integrated in the Indian folklore and in the Greek-Buddhist statuary art of Gandhara, which engendered the first anthropomorphic representations of Buddha. These are two major examples of the Greek-Indian syncretism<sup>11</sup>, which hypothetically includes also the transmission of the myth of the light-bearer.

A relative permeability brings near the *Tripitaka* and the *Mathnawi*, against the background of the mutual cognition of the Sufi milieu and the Hindu-Buddhist milieu. From this point of view, it must be recalled that Annemarie Schimmel devoted an entire chapter<sup>12</sup> of *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* to the elucidation of the particular dynamics which accomplished the exchange of religious and mystical values between the Moslem community on one side and the Hindu and Buddhist communities on the other side, beginning with the year 711, when the Arabs conquered Sind and the adjacent provinces situated north of Multan. The impact of Sufism on the Indo-Pakistani territories occurred at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, after the consolidation of the main Sufi orders inside the central provinces of Islam. Among the most illustrious representatives of the Sufi missionary spirit within the religious space of Hinduism and Buddhism mention must be made of Mu'in-ud-din Chishti, Qutb-ud-din Bakhtiyar Kaki, Farid-ud-din, Jamal Hanswi, Nizam-ud-din, Amir Khosrau, Chiragh-i Dehli, Jalal-ud-din Tabrizi, Baha-ud-din Zakariya Multani, Fakhr-ud-din Iraqi. In this context, the theological notion of the "Unity of Being" constituted an important point of convergence between the Sufi way of thinking and the Vedanta system of the Hindu religious philosophy, in spite of the fact that this syncretism was discouraged by all the Moslem orthodox authorities. Nevertheless, the Sufi hagiography of India describes a series of jousts of a magical and mystical nature involving yogis and Sufi saints, notwithstanding the fact that the borders between the three religions were consistently defined along the centuries that followed the establishment of the Moslem rule over the vast regions of the Indian sub-continent.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Diogène Laërce, *Vies, doctrines et sentences des philosophes illustres*, VI, 77; Genaille, II, p. 16, p. 14, p. 25, p. 28; Plutarque, *Vies parallèles. Vie d'Alexandre*, translated by Anne-Marie Ozanam, edited by François Hartog (Paris, 2001), XIV, p. 1238-1239.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. Eliade, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, II, p. 206.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Annemarie Schimmel, "Sufism in Indo-Pakistan", *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1975), p. 344-402.

However, at the level of the historical time the encounter between Indian Buddhism and Islam was not devoid of the warlike traumas triggered by the clash of civilizations. In 1197 and 1203, the Turkish conquerors destroyed the famous Buddhist universities of Nalanda and Vikramasila, where the *Mahayana* (“The Great Vehicle”) and the *Vajrayana* (“The Diamond Vehicle”) were studied. After these events, while “the Buddhism went through the process of hinduisation” and “the Hinduism assimilated numerous Buddhist ideas and practices”, Buddhism practically vanishes from the Indian religious space<sup>13</sup>.

The dialogue between Sufism, Hinduism and Buddhism continued under the rule of the Moghul emperors during the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries: Babur, Akbar and Dara Shikoh. The son of Shah Jihan and of the princess Mumtaz Mahal – to whom the Taj Mahal was dedicated –, Dara Shikoh (1615–1659) represents the climax of the mystical proximity between Hinduism and Islam. He translated the *Upanishads* from Sanskrit into Persian, under the title *Sirr-i akbar* or *The Great Mystery*, and identified them to “The Hidden Book” mentioned in the *Qur’an*, S. LVI / *The Terror*, vv 74–79: “No! I swear by the fallings of the stars (and that is indeed a mighty oath, did you but know it) it is surely a noble *Qu’ran* in a hidden Book none but the purified shall touch, a sending down from the Lord of all Being”<sup>14</sup>.

The inditing of the *Mathnawi* (about the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century) coincides with the success of the Sufi missionary activity in India and Pakistan. The climax of the Hindu–Moslem syncretism under the reign of Dara Shikoh would not have been possible without an elaborate grounding, without a detailed build-up of the mystical and sapiential dialogue between Islam and Hinduism–Buddhism, extended over four to five centuries of Moslem government. This historical background seems to justify the hypothesis according to which the occurrence of the theme of the light-bearer in the fragments attributed to Diogenes of Sinope, in the *Tripitaka* and in the *Mathnawi*, is not fortuitous. On the contrary, it is able to illustrate the circulation of the texts and of the themes included in the Greek spiritual treasury or in the Indian spiritual treasury inside the religious and mystical universe of the Sufi academy that Rumi founded in the city of Qonya. Nevertheless, the aim of our hermeneutical approach must be emphasized: not to demonstrate a large scale symbiosis between the pre-Socratic philosophical tradition, the Buddhist religious thinking and the Sufi mystical wisdom, but to render evident a Greek and Indian bibliographical detail incorporated in the text of the *Mathnawi*. In this respect, it must be pointed out that the symbol of the light-bearer is reinvested with a new significance and islamized by the poetical art and the Sufi genius of Rumi. For this reason its integration in the textual fabric of a Sufi encyclopaedia of the magnitude of the *Mathnawi* takes place without any harshness or discontinuity.

Undoubtedly *Mawlana* (“our Master”) always assumed with gladness of spirit the identity of the narrator who forsakes the desert and enters the city, as an act of

<sup>13</sup> Cf. M. Eliade, I. P. Couliano, *Dictionnaire des religions*, p. 76.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 344–362; Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford, 1991), p. 562.

obedience to God's command, in order to impart to his fellow-men the most interesting and truthful narratives.

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