

# The Battle of the Mongoose and the Snake:

Mīmāṃsā vs Buddhism

KATAOKA Kei

Inheriting Dharmakīrti's criticism of Kumāṛila, Śāntarakṣita discusses omniscience in the last chapter of the *Tattvasaṃgraha* (TS). There, Śāntarakṣita quotes a large number of verses from Kumāṛila's lost *Bṛhaṭṭīkā* (BṬ) as the *pūrvapakṣa*. Then, in the *uttarapakṣa*, he rejects every one of Kumāṛila's criticisms. In this article, I will focus on the part in which Kumāṛila compares the conflict between Mīmāṃsā and Buddhism to that between a mongoose and a snake, and the part in which Śāntarakṣita responds to this comparison. That is, the focus will be on BṬ=TS 3154–55 (*pūrvapakṣa*) and TS 3374–79 (*uttarapakṣa*). This paper explores the context for these verses and the background out of which this metaphor emerged.

Many of the verses of Kumāṛila quoted in the *pūrvapakṣa* of the last chapter of the TS are not found in his extant works. Previous studies have suggested that all of these verses were taken from his lost BṬ, not the *Ślokavārttika* (ŚV). As I have already shown (Kataoka 2011), a close correspondence can be found between the ŚV and the BṬ. As is evident from the comparison, the BṬ develops the ŚV and, in part, adds new discussions that were not present in the ŚV. The table in Kataoka 2011, II 331, n. 372 gives a bird's eye view of the correspondence between the ŚV and BṬ verses of Kumāṛila on omniscience.

ŚV <i>Codanā</i> 110cd–155 (45.5)	BṬ=TS 3123–3260 (123.5)
	0 upodghātaḥ 3123–26 (4)
1 bhāṣyavyākhyānam 110cd–111 (1.5)	1 bhāṣyavyākhyānam 3127 (1)
	1.1 sarvaśabdārthaḥ 3128–42 (15)
	1.2 sarvasmiṇ jñāte doṣāḥ 3143–56 (14)
2 sarvaṃ jñānūty ayuktam	2 sarvaṃ jñānūty ayuktam
pramāṇavyavasthā 112–115 (4)	2.1 sarvadarśananirāsaḥ 3157–74ab (17.5)
	2.2 sarvasraṇānirāsaḥ 3174cd–83 (9.5)
3 sarvajñatvāpauruṣeyatve 116 (1)	3 sarvajñatvāpauruṣeyatve 3184 (1)
4 sarvajña[tva]-abhāvaḥ	4 sarvajña[tva]-abhāvaḥ

4.1 pratyakṣa-abhāvaḥ 117ab (0.5)	4.1 pratyakṣa-abhāvaḥ 3185ab (0.5)
4.2 anumāna-abhāvaḥ 117cd (0.5)	4.2 anumāna-abhāvaḥ 3185cd (0.5)
4.3 śabda-abhāvaḥ 118–120 (3)	4.3 śabda-abhāvaḥ 3186–3213 (28/47*)
4.3.1 ekadeśasamvādanirāsaḥ 121–132 (12)	(ŚV 132≈TS 3156, moved to 1.2)
4.3.2 smṛtyavicchedanirāsaḥ 133–136 (4)	(ŚV 134≈TS 3191; 135≈3190; 136≈3192)
	4.4 upamāna-abhāvaḥ 3214–15 (2)
	4.5 arthāpatty-abhāvaḥ 3216–28 (13)
	4' sarvajñabuddhanirāsaḥ 3229–36 (8)
5 sarvajñapraṇītatvanirāsaḥ	5 sarvajñapraṇītatvanirāsaḥ
5.1 dṛṣṭarūpopadeśaḥ 137 (1)	5.1 dṛṣṭarūpopadeśaḥ 3237–39 (3)
5.2 adṛṣṭarūpopadeśaḥ 138–140 (3)	5.2 adṛṣṭarūpopadeśaḥ 3240–45 (6)
6 kevalajñānasarvajñāḥ 141–142 (2)	(omitted?)
7 nityāgamadarśanasarvajñāḥ 143–151 (9)	(moved to 2.2)
	7' svatantrasarvajñābhāvaḥ 3246ab (0.5)
8 atulyatvopasamhāraḥ 152–155 (4)	(omitted?)

The verses in question, TS 3154–55, belong in §1.2. No corresponding verse can be found in the preceding work, the ŚV. It is assumed that this is a new argument introduced by Kumārila in the BṬ. In this §1.2, Kumārila points out various inconvenient consequences of postulating omniscient beings who truly perceive everything. For example, if the all-cognizing Buddha really perceived everything directly, he would directly perceive even impure tastes, such as alcohol. The following table summarizes the discussions in §1.2 in more detail. The *uttarapakṣa* verses that correspond to the *pūrvapakṣa* are also shown here.

BṬ=TS 3143–56 ( <i>pūrvapakṣa</i> )	TS 3317–73 ( <i>uttarapakṣa</i> )
1.2 sarvasmiṇ jñāte doṣāḥ 3143	
1.2.1 aśucirasādayaḥ 3144	3317–18 (2)
1.2.2 vedopavedāṅgavid 3145	3319–20 (2)
1.2.3 anibaddhatvam 3146	3321–23 (3)
1.2.4 vardhamānakapilādayaḥ 3147–48	3324–46 (23)
1.2.5 pratibimbodayaḥ 3149–53	3347–52 (6)
<b>1.2.6 nakulasarpavat 3154–55</b>	<b>3374–79 (6)</b>
1.2.7 jñeyatvādayaḥ 3156	3353–73 (21)

As can be seen from the correspondence table, basically Śāntarakṣita responds in the order of the *pūrvapakṣa*, but at the end (§§1.2.6–7), he switches the order and responds to the metaphor in question last.

The subject of the preceding passages, §§1.2.4–5, is the following. It is good to say that the Buddha is omniscient, but since there are many omniscient beings who teach mutually contradictory doctrines, it becomes difficult to know who is actually omniscient. For example, in opposition to the Buddha of Buddhism, there is Vardhamāna of Jainism and Kapila of Sāṃkhya. “If the Buddha is omniscient, what proof do we have that Kapila is not? If they are both omniscient, how can there be a difference in their views? (TS 3148)” This is one of the most famous verses of Kumārila in this particular debate. The same arguments and criticisms that the Buddhists used to prove the Buddha’s omniscience and to criticize Vardhamāna’s omniscience can be used by his enemies, the Jainas (TS 3150–51). Thus, there is no way to settle a dispute between Buddhism and Jainism, because a look-alike reflection or image (*pratibimba*) will appear from the opponent, whether to prove their own view or criticize the other (TS 3152). Concluding this section, Kumārila states in TS 3153: “Thus, after the pseudo-omniscient beings strike down each other, the Vedicist [Mīmāṃsaka] will destroy all those who are left.” Here Kumārila depicts the situation in which many omniscient teachers fight with each other, and finally, the Mīmāṃsaka (represented by Jaimini) benefits from it. It is in this context that the metaphor of the mongoose and the snake comes into play.

The two verses of the *pūrvapakṣa* and the six verses of the *uttarapakṣa* concerning this metaphor are arranged side by side below. (The text of the TS is based on a critical edition by Sato 2021. TS 3377–79 are omitted, because the discussion therein is not directly relevant to the metaphor in question.)

TS 3154–55 ( <i>pūrvapakṣa</i> )	TS 3374–79 ( <i>uttarapakṣa</i> )
yathā nakuladantāgra- sprṣṭā yā kācid auśadhiḥ/ sarvaṃ sarpaviṣaṃ hanti krīḍadbhir api yojitā//3154 vedavādimukhasthaivaṃ yuktir laukikavaidikī/ yā kācid api śākyādi- sarpajñānaviṣāpahā//3155	vedavādimukhasthaivaṃ yuktir laukikavaidikī/ na kācid api śākyogṛa- sarpajñānaviṣāpahā//3374 drgviṣair iha drṣto 'pi svalpaśaktir dvijo jaḍaḥ/ ucchvāsam api no kartum śaknoti kim u bhāṣitum//3375 vedavādimukhassthā tu yuktiḥ sādhyv api durbhagā/ kaṇṭhikā caranastheva jaghanyāśrayasaṃsthitē//3376
	3377–79 omitted

Kumārila compares the conflict between the Vedicist (*vedavādin*), i.e., the Mīmāṃsaka, and the Buddhist, etc. (*śākyādi*) to that between a mongoose and a snake, as follows:

3154. Just as any grass touched by the tips of a mongoose's teeth destroys all snake venom, even when [the grass is] used by people for fun.

3155. In the same way, any reason, worldly or Vedic, in the mouth of the Vedicist destroys the venom-cognition of the snake-Buddhists, etc.

Any grass touched by the tips of a mongoose's teeth, whatever kind it may be, can destroy the snake's venom. To reinforce the situation of "any" (*yā kācid*), whatever it may be, Kumārila adds the further circumstance of "even if it is used by people for fun." These are the main elements in the metaphor. When organized, the following five elements emerge as the main ones here: antidote (grass), contact-zone (tooth tip), origin (mongoose), destroyed object (venom), and its locus (snake).

In the target of the metaphor, too, we are given something that corresponds to the above. In other words, the central structure is that the reason (*yukti*) in the mouth of the Vedicist invalidates the cognition of the Buddhist. And to explain the situation of "whatever," the phrase *yā kācid api* is added, and then a further adjective, *laukikavaidikī*, is added, namely, "[whether the reason is] worldly or Veda-based." Any reason uttered by the Mīmāṃsaka, be it Vedic or worldly, can negate the understanding of the Buddhist. The following five elements can be seen here as well: antidote (reason), contact-zone (mouth), origin (Mīmāṃsaka), destroyed object (cognition), and its locus (Buddhist, etc.). Kumārila carefully shows in TS 3155cd (*śākyādisarpajñānaviṣa*) that the Buddhist, etc., corresponds to the snake and cognition corresponds to venom, using the method of *rūpaka* in rhetoric.

In response to Kumārila's criticism in TS 3155, Śāntarakṣita, parodying this verse, totally rejects Kumārila's claim as follows:

3374. In this way, no reason, worldly or Vedic, in the mouth of the Vedicist kills the venom-cognition of the fearsome snake-Buddhist, etc.

Here he adds the adjective "fearsome" to the snake. Also, the word *evam* in this sentence refers specifically to Śāntarakṣita's rejoinder (TS 3353–73) which precedes this verse—a rejoinder to Kumārila's denial of the omniscience of the Buddha with *jñeyatva* and other argumentative reasons (§1.2.7). He uses the following clever metaphor to depict the inability of the Mīmāṃsaka to do anything when stared at by a snake (Buddhist).

3375. An incompetent and stupid/stupefied brahmin cannot even breathe if he is just glanced at by a

snake [with venom in its eyes]. How can he even speak [i.e., open his mouth]?

This verse, of course, can be interpreted in a straightforward way. In that case, it would mean that the helpless and foolish Brahmin, stared at by the snake-Buddhist, can neither breathe nor speak. However, if we keep in mind the above metaphor, we can read it in a deeper way as follows. Because of its incompetence, the mongoose is unable to move when the snake merely stares at it. The mongoose cannot even breathe, much less open its mouth. Therefore, the tips of its teeth cannot even touch the grass. Similarly, the Mīmāṃsaka, because of his incompetence, would be stunned and unable to breathe just by being stared at by the Buddhist, etc. And moreover, he cannot speak at all. Therefore, it is impossible for him to form an argument against the Buddhist, etc.

The Buddhist's attack with the eye venom is a reversal of the above metaphor of the mongoose destroying the venom of a snake. In this controversy, the foolish Mīmāṃsaka, helpless in the face of the Buddhist, etc., has no choice but to remain silent and be defeated.

Next, Śāntarakṣita illustrates that even if the reason (*yukti*) of the Mīmāṃsaka is excellent, it is still ugly, as follows:

3376. On the other hand, reason in the mouth of the Vedicist, even when excellent, is ugly. Just as a necklace on a foot is ugly because it is in the lowest place.

This metaphor reminds us of Kumāṛila's statement in the *Tantravārttika* (TV) that some Buddhist doctrines, such as non-killing, are useless and untrustworthy, even if they are based on a valid source, comparing them to milk in a dog leather (*śvadr̥ṇiṅkṣiptak-ṣīravat*).<sup>1)</sup> This is because they are taught in the middle of Buddhist false dharmas.

In the following verses, i.e., TS 3377–79, Śāntarakṣita points out that Kumāṛila's system of ontology and epistemology (especially inference) is fundamentally wrong, probably in view of the worldly reason (*yuktir laukikī*) mentioned above. Śāntarakṣita's discussions thereof can be summarized as follows. Smoke exists only where there is fire. But according to Kumāṛila's ontology of identity (*tādātmya*), smoke is identical to water in so far as it is a real entity (*vastu*), so it could also exist in the ocean which has water (*udanvati*). Real entities would be mixed together in his ontology. As a result, his ontology would not allow for negative concomitance (*vyatireka*), e.g., “no smoke without fire,” which is a prerequisite for inference. Therefore, there would be both fire and smoke in a dissimilar example (*vipakṣa*), e.g., in the ocean; and there would be no dissimilar example to show

that there is no smoke without fire. Thus, if one followed Kumāṛila's ontology, one could see fire in the ocean as well. If Kumāṛila accepted that fire is different from the ocean, then he should accept the distinction between the two entities in full. The exchange of the entire argument between Kumāṛila and Śāntarakṣita can be summarized as follows:

Kumāṛila	Śāntarakṣita
3154. Any grass touched by the mongoose's teeth eliminates the snake's venom.	3375. The incompetent mongoose, helpless against the snake's stare, cannot even breathe, much less open the mouth. The stupid Vedicist, incompetent against the wise Buddhist, cannot even breathe, much less speak.
3155. Any reason uttered by the Vedicist denies the cognition of the Buddhist. (TV: Buddhist reason is useless and untrustworthy, even if it is warranted, like milk in a dog leather.)	3374. No reason uttered by the Vedicist can deny the cognition of the Buddhist. 3376. Vedicist reason is ugly even if it is excellent, like a necklace on a foot. 3377–79. The secular reason (ontology and epistemology) of the Vedicist is wrong.

But why did Kumāṛila compare the Mīmāṃsaka to a mongoose and the Buddhist, etc. to a snake? In the following, I will explore the background. First, it is natural for Kumāṛila to compare a Vedicist to a mongoose. In TV ad 1.3.7 (207, 8–23), he refers to the metaphor of the mongoose when explaining that the customs of the learned (*śiṣṭācāra*) can be a criterion for dharma.

Or just as in snakeology, I heard, when a mongoose grasps grass with its teeth, that [grass] is said to be the [thing] that removes all venom. Or just as when a virtuous person lives in a certain land, it is recognized as meritorious because it is purified through contact with him. In the same way, those who want to know dharma should accept the good deeds of those whose selves are made of dharma, such as their customs, self-satisfaction (i.e., the deeds which please them), etc., determining that they are prescribed in the Vedas.

He introduces two metaphors to illustrate that the deeds of the learned are righteous: a mongoose and a virtuous person. The first source of the metaphor has exactly the same structure as the metaphor above. That is, the grass touched by the teeth of a mongoose will remove the venom. The second source of the metaphor is that the land becomes meritorious when a virtuous person lives there. Kumāṛila explains that the contact with the virtuous person has purified it.

With the above two metaphors, he tries to explain the following as the target. That is, the dharmic criteria of the learned, such as *ācāra* and *āmatuṣṭi*, should be accepted as valid precisely because they belong to the learned, who are wholeheartedly dharmic. The contact

of the conduct or feeling with the learned, i.e., that it belongs to him, is a sufficient reason for its purity.

Kumāṛila's comparison of Buddhists to snakes is not arbitrary. Rather, Buddhists themselves have a history of likening themselves to snakes. A source can be found in Vasubandhu's work, and Dignāga inherited this metaphor from him. In the concluding verse of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, Vasubandhu describes his teaching as follows:

I have exposed this little bit for the very learned, like a spot of poison of a wound it will diffuse by its own force. (Tr. by Stcherbatsky, quoted in Muroya 2016, 295)

Just as poison spreads throughout the body from an open wound, so the understanding of a wise man spreads throughout the body from hearing a tiny preached part of the teaching. This unique metaphor seems to have been inspired by the image of the word *udghaṭitajña* (an intelligent person who understands the whole from a disclosed piece of information), as Dignāga later explicitly uses the word *udghaṭitajña*. In other words, “the part disclosed” (*udghaṭita*), Vasubandhu seems to have seen as an open wound, and imagined the understanding of a sharp-minded person as something that spreads to the whole at once, like snake venom. This metaphor of Vasubandhu must have been well known to the Buddhists after him. The following verse of Dignāga is a continuation of Vasubandhu's above metaphor.

This [treatise, as the] mere gate of the proper ways concerning the real object[,] is composed for [the sake of intelligent] persons with intellect-poison who understand through condensed statements. (Tr. by Muroya 2016, 307)

This verse is quite abbreviated, probably because the metaphor is so well known that Dignāga has omitted an unnecessary explanation. The description of the situation regarding the snake venom is limited to the word “venom” (*viṣa*) and the rest is omitted. Dignāga makes it clear that venom is the cognition (*dhī*) of a wise person (*udghaṭitajña*). Furthermore, Dignāga explains that the whole to be known is “the direction of the truth” (*sadathanīti*), i.e., the Buddhist teachings, and that his treatise, the *Nyāyamukha*, is only an opened entrance to it.

## Conclusion

The metaphor involving a Mīmāṃsaka and a Buddhist as a mongoose and a snake has its

own background and was not arbitrarily thought up on the spot by Kumārila. A mongoose-Mīmāṃsaka is a learned person, whose self is formed of dharma and whose deeds are righteous. Therefore, any reason that touches his mouth can destroy the venom of the snake, i.e., negate the cognition of the Buddhist.

On the other hand, according to Buddhists, just as the venom of a snake spreads quickly from the wound to the whole body, the intellect of a smart Buddhist can quickly understand the whole from a disclosed small part. The venom of such a fearsome smart snake-Buddhist overwhelms a Mīmāṃsaka opponent in a debate. The Buddhist glares at him, and the Mīmāṃsaka falls silent in fear. Also, a reason stated by a Mīmāṃsaka, even though excellent, is ugly because it is in the lowest mean place, i.e., in his mouth. This can be compared to a necklace on a foot. And in fact, the reason of the Mīmāṃsaka (Kumārila), especially its worldly reason (ontology and epistemology), is fundamentally wrong.

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#### Notes

- 1) TV ad 1.3.7, quoted and translated in Kataoka 2011, II 400, n. 476.

#### Abbreviations

- TS *Tattvasaṃgraha of Ācārya Śāntarakṣita*. Ed. Dvārikadāsa Śāstrī. Varanasi: Baudha Bharati, 1981–1982.  
 TV *Tantravārttika. Śrīmājjaiminipraṇītaṃ Mīmāṃsādarśanam*. Ed. Subhāṣāstrī. Poona: Ānandāśramamudraṇālaya, 1929–1934.  
 BṬ *Bṛhaṭṭikā* (quoted in TS)  
 ŚV See Kataoka 2011, I.

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(Kyushu University, Associate Professor, Doctor of Letters)