

Yantrapuruṣa:

Mechanical Beings in Buddhist Literature

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1. Introduction

Mechanical beings are used as metaphors to question the agency problem in Indian literatures.¹⁾ For the Jains and Hindus, a robot “represents an unanimated body,”²⁾ hence a self is suggested by the simile; while for Buddhists, on the contrary, it forms a poetic argument exactly for non-self doctrine. In this essay, I will focus on the Buddhist side and read closely two sets of examples roughly dated to the early centuries of the common era.

2. Dāruyanta: A Simile for Emptiness

While modern readers would like to ask “whether robots are sentient beings just like us”, Buddhists might feel more natural to turn the question around: are we in fact artificial products? From early on, it has been suggested to think or to imagine oneself as a mechanical being—“a physio-psychological machine.”³⁾ Buddhaghosa (5th c.) says:

Just as a wooden contrivance (*dāruyantam*) is empty, soulless and without desire (*suññaṃ nijjīvaṃ nirīhakam*), while it walks and stands merely through the combination of strings and wood, yet it seems as if it had desire and occupation (*saṃyāpāra*); so too, this (*idam*) *nāmarūpa* is empty, soulless and without desire, while it walks and stands merely through the combination of one another (i.e., *nāma* and *rūpa*), yet it seems as if it had desire and occupation.⁴⁾

Here, the demonstrative “*idam*” is not trivial. As scholars pointed out, in Sanskrit or Pali contexts, it usually “relates to specific events that are perceived in real time”, that “can be pointed to specifically by the observer.”⁵⁾ So, *idam* is urging the reader to be mindful of his own embodied experience: this is mere compound of *nāmarūpa*, the five-fold events. It should not be mistaken that this soulless thing is inert. The mental parts are just too subtle to see.⁶⁾ By this comparison, Buddhaghosa could not make it more explicit: to be as if “we are all robots.”⁷⁾

Though the simile is not found in canonical suttas, we believe it is not an innovation of Buddhaghosa.⁸⁾ In fact, the simile may be traced back to the earliest Chinese witness of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* 道行般若經 (DX). In the middle of the 23rd chapter of the DX, Subhuti asks an interesting question: if our mind is as empty as mere illusion, how is it possible for anyone to achieve the so-called unsurpassable full enlightenment by means of the perfection of wisdom?⁹⁾ After a brief elaboration on the question, the conversation turns to the nature of the *Prajñāpāramitā* from two perspectives. First, one cannot conceive how close or how far the enlightenment is, for the *Prajñāpāramitā* is indifferent like the space (*ākāśa*), an illusionary man (*māyāpuruṣa*), etc. Second, neither does the wisdom bedear (*priya*) to one and detest (*apriya*) another as it accomplishes what it is supposed to do; just like an artificial body conjured up (*nirmita*) by the Tathāgata, or a mechanical man/woman. While *māyāpuruṣa* is more of an objectified appearance, a mechanical man is not so different from Tathāgata's *nirmitakāya*, embodied and immersed in. The text is then followed by further accounts of such a mechanical being: (1) It does not stand or stay by itself; (2) It does not think, "I have to move in order to please the audience"; (3) Yet, it accomplishes what is supposed to be done.¹⁰⁾ What is essential and intriguing here is *the hypothetical line of thought in first-person*. A wooden man does not act out of his own will, nor could it even refer himself as "I." This impossible thought of a mechanical man puts the readers into the shoe of the ineffable *prajñāpāramitā*, making us "capable of articulating what truth feels like when attained by a specific embodied individual."¹¹⁾

In the same vein, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* used the simile even more frequently. Not only a donor (*dāṭṭr*) is compared to a *dārūyanta*,¹²⁾ but also a Bodhisattva. In the end of the day, all conditioned dharmas are just like mechanical men, moved by the mechanism of karma, not by any self.¹³⁾

3. Yantraputraka/-īkā: Variations of a jātaka plot

Quite different from the standardized and emotionally neutral simile used to gloss the idea of emptiness in the Vism and DX (also AP), the following stories of exquisite mechanical man and woman generate abundant feelings, mixed with curiosity, desire, wonder, mourning, ridicule, followed by a sense of peace — a palette of *rasas* indeed. The first of our examples is from the collection of jātakas *Shengjing* 生經 translated by Dharmarakṣa as early as 3–4th century. This "Five Men of the King" 國王五人經 is a parallel to the much

more famous *Puṇyavanta Jātaka* in the *Mahāvastu*. They share the same characters and general storyline, but with a completely different tale of the second prince Śilpavanta, which is exactly our focus here.

Śilpavanta, renowned for his skill of crafts, went to a foreign country where the king was particularly fond of art and crafts. He manufactured a wooden man 機關木人 and introduced to the royal couple this smart and good-looking one as “my son” 我子 ([yantra-] *putraka*?).¹⁴⁾ In this brief opening, three perspectives are integrated: the “father” the omniscient, the “son” the non-knower, and the king an outsider (emphasized by “foreign”). The youth “danced”, which pleased everyone. But suddenly, the king burst into fury when he realized the dancer coveted the queen with his eyes rolling 便角瞋眼, 色視¹⁵⁾ 夫人. At the king’s order of execution, the “father” cried and pleaded. His unbearable grief sounds so vivid and reasonable that for a moment we almost forget that the “son” is not real. Then the father was allowed to “kill” his son as he begged for. He pulled out one wooden piece from the shoulder of the youth, the whole body collapsed into pieces of “bones.”¹⁶⁾

Here, the number of bones worth noting: 360, a precise anatomical observation, in agreement with mainstream Indian medical traditions like the Caraka. We also learn this from the detailed embryology transmitted in the *Yogācārābhūmi* of Saṅgharakṣa, i.e., 道地經: during the twenty-seventh week of conception, the embryo is equipped with 360 jointed [bones] 二十七七日, 三百六十節具. A baby-to-born is now capable of moving. Similarly, when a man is frightened still or about to die, the 360 bones are said to shake and fall.¹⁷⁾ The number, therefore, marks the edge of a living man with active bodily movement. With such concrete a picture, we are drawn back to doubt if the *putraka* is or is not a real man? Remember that this moment of revelation is not only about the falsehood of the “dancer,” but also of any viewer, represented by the king.

This fascinating episode also find a playful variation, slightly later, in a Tocharian fragment.¹⁸⁾ In this version, a painter from a foreign country (again!) came to stay in his artisan friend’s house. The latter introduced him a female servant—one of his own works. The pretty maiden aroused the burning desire of the painter, he could not help but to take her hand as she was not verbally responsive. Inevitably, the mechanical girl collapsed into a pile of wood. The painter was utterly fooled. He thought to himself “Just like this thing I perceived was put together from rags, ropes and sticks, so is also the perception human beings have of the *ātman* put together from bones, flesh, and sinews...”¹⁹⁾ Then, as a revenge

and a challenge, in the deep night, the painter created a self-portrait hanging dead on the wall.

In the morning, the artisan having come to the painter, saw the mechanical girl fallen in pieces, and saw the painter hanging dead on the hook...Thereupon the artisan was intending to cut the rope with the axe. Then the painter, having come out in sight, says to the artisan-teacher:

*...Be not sad, O artisan! Not thy wall, not my painting, destroy with cause!*²⁰⁾

Here *everything is doubled*: two artifacts, made by two men; two moments of delusion, with two different sentiments, terminated by two revelations. Through the doubled structure, this variation suggests the painter's work to be more fundamentally deceptive: he deluded his artisan friend only by a mere resemblance. As Martini insightfully pointed out: "believing the reality of a represented image is in itself a powerful analogy to the deception of mind-made *samsāra*."²¹⁾ The "cause" or the real "painter" to be revealed here then is our mind. Through this variation, it seems to undermine a reductionist view by an idealist one. Yet, the nuance between the painted surface and the contrived girl is highlighted.

4. Conclusion

In Buddhist contexts, a mechanical man is said to be devoid of volitional subject, incapable of self-reference, but effective with all kinds of physical-mental activities. So is every human being. As shown above, the simile is not a cliché, but an invitation to reflect upon one's own embodied experience. Reading the didactic and the literary genres side by side, we come to realize how the narrative mode, more experimental in nature, developed this reflection on body *vis à vis* mere appearance, witnessing contemporaneous waves of thoughts. I also proposed to take the perspectives in and of the narrations seriously, which is not so crucial in propositional writings. Without the manipulation of readers' views, these stories would not have accomplished such powerful poetic argument.

Notes

- 1) The Sanskrit or Pali term of a mechanical man is not univocal. For a brief list of such terms, see Cohen 2003, 65–66. 2) Cohen 2003, 72. 3) Rahula 1978, 26. 4) Vism 594–595.
 5) Shulman 2014, 146. 6) Vism 591–593. 7) Cohen 2003, 71. 8) See Mori 1997. Many thanks to Prof. Baba Norihisa for this reference. 9) AP 217. 10) AP 219.8–9 = T224, 8.466c9–14. For further parallels, see Karashima 2011, 422, n. 276. 11) Mikkelsen 2020, 68.
 12) T1509, 25.147b5–c21. 13) T1509, 25.26a8–28. 14) T154, 3.88a17–23. 15) 色視

was an innovative expression of Dharmarakṣa, in opposition to 空觀 (T154, 3.71a20). 16) T154, 3.88a24-b7. 17) T607, 15.234a15-c5=T606, 15.187b16-17. 18) Shorter versions can be found in the Gilgit *Bhaiṣajyavastu* etc., see MacDonald 2014, 179, fn.346. 19) Cohen 2003, 71. 20) Lane 1947, 41-45. 21) Martini 2008, 92.

Abbreviations

AP *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā with Haribhadra's Commentary Called Āloka*. Ed. P. L. Vaidya. Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, no. 4. Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960.
Vism Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*. Ed. C. A. F. Rhys Davids. 2 vols. London: Pali Text Society, 1920-1921.

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