The Islamic Allegorical Framework for Yoga

SAKAKI Kazuyo

(0) In the history of intercultural exchange, how was yoga transmitted to the Islamic world? Among the large body of secular and religious Sanskrit texts rendered into Arabic and Persian, the Amṛtakūṇḍa and adapted literary texts are the most widely circulated. How have the translations of this work succeeded in gaining popularity in Sufi and other scholarly circles in different Islamic languages beyond Indian Subcontinent?

The main reason for this could be the narrative technique applied to the introductory and concluding sections. The peculiarity of this work exists in the frame story encasing the translation. It disguises the work as one of Islamic philosophical literature. This essay examines the frame story in the translation of the Amṛtakūṇḍa and discusses how an allegorical framework succeeds in representing yoga as the wisdom of self-realization.

(1) Most of the existent manuscripts of this translation are entitled the Cistern of Life (Ḥawḍ al-Ḥayāt), both in Arabic (HHA) and in Persian (HHP); however, they were originally entitled The Mirror of Nature that Reflects the World of Human Beings (Mir‘āt al-ma‘ānī li al-‘ālam al-insānī). This suggestive title reflects the translator’s intention and the original contents. In the introduction, the author narrates the story (ḥikāya) as the answer to the query about the origin and the return (al-mabda‘ wa al-ma‘ād) (HHA 313; HHP 13b; BH 3).

The story begins with a description of the protagonist’s homeland. He was ordered by the king of the country to leave home and travel to the City of Life (al-bilād al-ma‘mūr) and to not forget the covenant (‘ahd). A minister of the king explained the hardships and difficulties that the protagonist would encounter on his journey, including two great seas, seven mountains, four passes, three stations, and the final narrow path.

Here, the author interpolates the Arabic translation of the story of Love in the Treatise on the Reality of Love (Fi Ḥaṣiqa al-‘Ishq) by Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā al-Suhrawardī (al-Maq-tūl) (d.1191) (HHA 314-15; HHP 14a-15b; BH 4-5; Suhrawardī: 276-281). This story depicts the journey of the soul in exploring the human body and its eventual unity with its source, The
destination of the soul is the homeland of Love or the City of Spirit (shahrīstān-i jān). Suhrawardi formulated an image of the city with the description of man as a microcosm in the *Epistles* (*Rasā’il*) of the Brethren of Purity (Īkhwān al-Ṣafā’ c.10c.) (*Rasā’il* 2.390-95,458-59,468-70; 3.216,219-20,242).

With the underlying concept that Creator constructed the human body along the lines of a city, the inner world of the human body is described as follows. The five external senses are like policing agents, the five internal perceptions (sensus communis, imagination, thought, apprehension, and memory) are subservient to the king, and the seven internal active powers (attraction, sustenance, digestion, repulsion, nutrition, growth, and formation) are like the artisans of the city. The description of each faculty is rather modified in sequence; however, the details follow the original.

Following the route suggested by the minister, the protagonist reached the destination and found the chief of the city. Greeting each other, he recognized that the chief was the king and a reflection of himself. Bewildered, he found the minister who assured his safe return and persuaded him to immerse himself in the water of life (mā’ al-ḥāyāt, āb-i zindagānī). The immersion reminded the protagonist of his covenant. He recognized that all that he experienced are allusions to and symbols of the attainment of salvation and eternal happiness through the gnosis (HHA 316; HHIP 15b-16a).

In the last chapter, the protagonist returns to his homeland - the non-being country (*ādim al-bilād*) or the invisible world (*ālam al-ghayb*). The author says that the intellect is like a mirror which reflects impure things. If you wish to polish the mirror, abandon sensual perceptions and the mirror will show you who you are and the time of your death. Here again, the unity of the minister and the protagonist himself is explained through an allusion. The minister splits a spider’s thread into two, unites it again, and declares that one times one is one (HHA 342-43; HHP 30b-31a).

(2) Muslim intellectuals have sought esoteric meanings behind the symbolic words in the form of allegorical narratives, The author leads Muslim readers to the process of spiritual realization by way of the literature of aliens (adab al-ghulabā), which was familiar to poets, philosophers and Sufi masters. The typical tenets of alienation to invoke reunification with the origin and the wisdom of uncovering new values are embodied in the frame story of the HH.

In a recent study (Ernst 2006), having admitted the transformations and new interpretations, Ernst Carl observed that despite the elimination of the salient features of this tale in-
cluding the pearl itself, the introductory narrative of this work retains the core themes of the original story of the *Hymn of the Pearl in the Acts of Thomas*. However, instead of the reference to the royal garment and robe in the *Hymn of the Pearl* in Muḥammad Ghawth's Persian version, the *Ocean of Life* (*Bahr al-Ḥayāt*) (BH 4), the framing narratives in the other versions fail to depict the important elements of the Hymn and have much relevance to Suhrawardi's allegories.

Having described that Suhrawardi's philosophical allegories beginning with the *Western Exile* (*Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*) bear much resemblance to the elements of the *Hymn of the Pearl*, Henry Corbin suggests that the translator or compiler of this work might have been an Iranian intellectual who was acquainted with the Illuminationist school (Corbin 329). The translator models the allegorical stories of Suhrawardi, which inherit Ibn Sinā's plot and style to outline the core part of the work, and interpolates the portion of the story taken directly from Suhrawardi's original work.

The frame story depicts the descending journey of the protagonist, from the royal kingdom in the celestial realm into the physical world, as a microcosm to find his self and return to his original abode. From the Islamic perspective, the minister's assurance of a safe return denotes the primordial assent to the divine realm of his homeland. This represents the pre-eternal covenant between human beings and God. On the one hand, it symbolizes the ecstasy of unification, and on the other, it accompanies the absolute submission to God.

This frame story can be read as the master's initiation tales to the disciple. In the teaching tradition of Sufism, a novice should concentrate on the narrative which is orally narrated by the master. Once the novice is admitted, the master unfolds the symbolical meaning of the narrative. The contextual interpretation of the HH leads Muslim readers to the realization of one's self through knowledge and the obligatory preparation for the return to the original abode of the self. For this purpose, the novices should attain purified intellect through a visionary contemplation of the unity of the self and the divine with the help of yogic discipline and tantric visualization.

(3) The HH, as I have already examined (Sakaki 2005), is an inspired rendering of the yogico-tantric doctrines and disciplines of the Nātha tradition. Before the advent of Islam in Indian subcontinent, yogic practices were reported as wonders by Muslim travellers, and as the consequences of the power of apprehension (*wahrn*) by geographers and philosophers. In the same way, the knowledge transmitted by the yogin from Kamarupa was described as
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the science of breath and the influence of the waḥm of the soul and celestial forces (Vat. Pers. 20. ff. 2a,15b).

In the framework of the journey, beginning with the account of the external correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, the science of breath (svarodaya) is incorporated as the subject in question. This includes the classification of breaths, divination through breaths, hatha-yogic disciplines such as a purification practice with the eyes (trāṭaka) and five kinds of postures, the meditation on the seven cakras and the invocation of seven celestial spirits and their propitiation. The author insists that the stained mirror should be polished by way of the observation of breaths and the abandonment of sensual perception if one wishes to know the inner world (HHA 342; HHP 30a).

Among the texts of the Nātha tradition, we find the Retention of Breaths (Pās-i Anfās) styled as a conversation between Matsyendranātha and Gorakṣanātha. It is a Persian translation of extracts from the longer version of the Gorakṣaśaṭataka. Beginning with the process of world creation from the primordial spirit (jān), the translator proceeds to the explanation of the microcosm. The stained mirror of the intellect should be polished through the extraction of sensual faculties from the sensual object. For the purpose of emancipation from the bondage caused by the actions generated by the sense perceptions, the knowledge (jñāna) of six-limbed discipline of yoga is called for (Pās-i Anfās ff.2a,5a).

The idea of the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm is universal and very familiar to Nāthas. The view that the human body functions like a city is also found in classical literature; however, one pad of Gorakhbānī gives us an utterance of some interest: The human body is like a city (shahr). Intellect (manas) is the gate of the city where the king (pādshāh) is Shiva (Hari) who protects vital breaths (prāṇa), thought is a judge (qāzi), the five elements are the ministers (vazir), the mind is an elephant, breath is a horse, consciousness is a warehouse, and intelligence is a chief police officer (kōṭvāl) (Gorakhbānī pad 27). As is often found in Sant literature, we see the evidence of relevant ideas in Nātha literature in terms of Perso-Arabic terms.

(4) When a religious ruling (fatwā) to avoid yoga exercises like reciting mantras and acts of worship was issued in Malaysia and Indonesia, because it could cause Muslim practitioners to deviate from their beliefs, considerable confusion and controversy arose. Religious authorities said that if it was purely a sport or a means of exercise, it could be practiced and should not declared to be prohibited (ḥarām). However, from the beginning stages of mu-
tual communication, yoga attracted Muslim intellectuals as a means of divine knowledge of and preference for their spiritual needs.

In the Nātha tradition, self-realization (tattva-darśana, tattva-bodha) is the essential theme. The allegorical frame story secures Muslim intellectuals the realization of the unity of the self with the Universal Soul through the visualization of the universe in the novice's body and the return to its primary spiritual source - pure intellect. For this purpose, the purification of the intellect by abandoning sensual perceptions is required as an obligatory preparation.

As Ibn Sinā recognized the importance of breath in relation to the psychic process, the Muslim translator succeeded in representing the manner of self-realization in the woven body with various threads of breath guided by one's own wisdom and by alien knowledge.

References
BH: Bahr al-Ḫayāt, Muhammad Ghawth Gwāliyāri, Delhi, 1311A.H. (1893-4).

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(Part-time Lecturer, Hokkaido Musashi Women’s Junior College, Ph.D.)