

M. G. DHADPHALE

SŪKARAMADDAVA: A NEW INTERPRETATION

I shall feel most happy if any competent Buddhist Scholar will give his last word on the Last Meal of the Buddha. This meal was piously served by Cunda, a Smith at Pava and consisted of a special preparation called *Sūkaramaddava* (abbr. *S.*). Scholars have struggled hard to interpret this word which unfortunately is a hapax in Pali. It has occurred for the first time in the account of The Sermon of Great Decease (*Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*) in the *Dīghanikāya* and is verbatim repeated in a *sutta* of the *Udāna*. Nāgasena had an occasion to refer to this in his explanation of the question asked by king Milinda in this regard. The commentator Buddhaghosa, the sub-commentator and Nāgasena are at pains to point out that there is not the least indication that the Tathāgata died of partaking this preparation. The Buddha partook it and he died but there is no causal relation between the two. It is purely a sequence of the events.¹

At the outset let me make two things very clear.

1) The Buddha though a staunch champion of Ahimsā was not as fastidious as the Jainas in rejecting flesh even when given as alms. He used to accept it on three conditions of the flesh being i) Unseen, ii) Unheard, and iii) Unsuspected. There are clear references of his hav-

1. The latest article on the subject is: R. Gordon Wasson "The last meal of the Buddha" (*JAOS* Vol. 102, no. 4 Oct-Dec 1982 pp. 59-63). For a complete bibliography of the writings on the subject I shall request the scholars to see this article and also one by Prof. D. G. Koparkar entitled "Sūkara-maddava" (*Poona Orientalist* Vol. 9, parts 1 & 2 Jan. 1944-April 1944, pp. 34-42). This article gives a conspectus of the various interpretations put on this word by modern orientalist.

ing accepted boar's flesh offered to him by Ugga, the householder. In that context it is clearly referred to as Sūkara-maṁsaṁ (flesh of the boar) and not in the mystified fassion as Sūkaramaddava.

2) Going through the conspectus of the varied interpretations of this queer word offered by the modern scholars one is struck by the fact that none of them could go far beyond the alternatives already suggested by the Pali commentators gave their interpretations almost after full one thousand years. The commentary on *Dīgha-Nikāya* was written in the first quarter of the fifth century A.D.

The Pali commentators diversely explain the word as

i) Soft flesh of a boar who was neither too-young nor too-old. It was oily and well-cooked (Sūkara-maṁsaṁ)

ii) A soft food of rice (*mudu-odana*) cooked with the five preparations (curds, ghee, etc.) of cow's milk. Some thing like *gava-pāna*, a name of another dish.

iii) Tender top-sprouts of young bamboo's trampled upon (mṛd) by swine. (Vaṁsakalīro)

iv) A kind of mushroom (*ahi-cchattakam*) trampled upon by pigs.

v) A medicinal preparation (*rasāyana-vidhi*) described in books on chemistry; a flavouring or sauce.

Now most of the scholars have preferred to accept the word as plainly indicating boar's flesh. R. Gordon Wasson has tried to prove on mycological grounds that it was a mushroom popular among the Santals on the border of Bihar and is known today as *putka*, the same as *pūti*, a surrogative for Vedic Soma. A few have indicated their inclination to interpret it as "Truffles" especially known as *ḍukrī* (female pig)².

None of the scholars so far has shown his preference to what I call the Elixir-interpretation (*Rasāyana*). Let me make it amply clear that it is not only because this view is not upheld by any scholar so far that I am endorsing this interpretation. I do it because I am convinced that it was a sort of liquid medicinal preparation that Cunda got prepared to serve the octogenarian Buddha. My reasons to adhere to the this view are the following:

2. See Fa Chow's article in ABORI. Silver Jubilee Vol. p. 129.

1) Had it been only a boar's tender flesh I wonder what could have prevented Cunda from using a simple and strait forward term as *Sūkara-mamsam*, which in fact has been used elsewhere in the canon?

2) Will Cunda provide Buddha knowing, that the latter had entered into his eighties anything like a pig's flesh or even mushrooms some of the varieties of which are apt to get putrid soon? This exactly is the variety Wasson has referred to and has preferred to accept.

3) Cunda's meal consisted of a) *khajja* (hard food like bread) b) *bhojja* (soft food like rice) and c) *Sūkaramaddava*. The wording "and ample of *Sūkaramaddava*" (*pahūtañca Sūkaramaddava*) clearly shows that it was something different than *khajja* and *bhojja*. Boar's flesh even if it was cooked to the degree of making it very soft would have been included at least in *bhojja*, if not in *khajja* and would not have been cautiously referred to separately.

4) Now I maintain that all the other interpretations were obliged to vindicate their say by somehow connecting them with the word *Sūkara* which they took to mean a pig or boar.

Thus the top-sporuts must be of bamboos trampled upon by swine (*Sūkarechi*). The mushrooms had to be grown on a spot trodden by pigs (*Sūkarehi*). The soft food preparation is likened to *gava-pāna* (cow-drink) for instead of cow we could imagine of a certain preparation being named after swine (*Sūkara*). Do we not talk of hot-dogs? And are dogs really used for the preparation? (I know only of our great Viśvā-mitra, when caught in peril ate dog's leg). It is only one interpretation, the Elixir- interpretation that does not require any connection with *Sūkara* meaning pig. Why? The point is very clear. It is because *Sūkara-maddava* is a splendid example of a mispronunciation and consequent mis-spelling. It is this word *Sūkara* that has caused all the varied wrong interpretations. Had Cunda meant *Mudu Sūkaramamsam* soft flesh or tit-bits of young boar. The innocent smith would have openly said *Sūkaramamsam*. Certainly he would not have followed the path of the Sacrificial Vedic texts (*Brāhmaṇa-s*) which preferred to indulge in mystifications) for as they say Gods enjoy indirect expressions (*parokṣa-priyā vai devāḥ; pratyakṣa-dviṣaḥ*) and hate direct-ones.

5) What then was the original word? It was simply *Śarkarā-mārdava* ‘Sugar-malt’. Malt is cognate with Sanskrit *mṛd* (soft, mild); German - malz. All these represent IE *meld* a d-enlargement of basic *mel* (to grind. cp-meal). Thus S is literally ‘Sugar-meal’. The word *Śarkarā* changed to *Sakkarā* and further to *Sukkara* which to compensate the dropping of the conjunct was lengthened to spell as *Sūkara*. The change from *Sakkarā* to *Sukkara* is definitely sporadic in Pali. But we do have instance of *mata* changing to *muta*. Moreover the Arabic also is *Sukkar* or as-*sukkar*, German is *Zucker*, Spanish *azucar* and Portuguese *aşukar*. English has also ‘sugar’. I specifically say that the fate of the word *Śarkarā* (i.e. the vagaries of its morphology) is really astonishing. Dravidian *Sakkarā-poḷe* turned into Marathi as *Śamkarā-pāle* wherein really speaking the Lord *Śamkarā* is not at all involved. Bihara (Magadha) is situated in Gangetic planes where the rain is ample and, therefore, yields a rich crop of Sugar-cane. The Sugar-cane juice when boiled produces molasses, a word which again has cognates in malt, melting, mill and are related to the Sanskrit root *mṛd* (to grind). *Phāṇita* or molasses are allowed by the Buddha for the use of monks. But in Bihara and in many other provinces of India a special preparation is in vogue. Molasses may not be pure and indeed are used mostly for preparing alcoholic drinks. By a certain processing of purification a special recipe is prepared and is known by various names in different areas. The Maharashtrians call this “thick sweet liquid prepared by boiling sugar-cane juice” *Kākaṅvī*. In South Canara it is called *Jone-bella* (Honey like Jaggery) and in North Karnataka it is known as *Kākaṅbī*. Some informants tell me it is also called *Kākaṅbelle*. The Marathi language knows this preparation also as *rāb* and what is most important in the present Bihara the same word is found in a modified form (and incidentally this happens to be the name of the present Woman Chief Minister of Bihar) *Rābārī* (*Rābḍī*). The word with an ‘a’ vowel at the beginning is used for boiled dense liquid sweet milk (*Rabaḍī*). See also *Tu-rave-syrup* made of sugar-cane juice; *kol-ūsne rāp*; Turner (Dict. Of Indo-Aryan. *Rābṛī.s. v.*)

6) In determining the meaning of *S*. we should also take into account the pious wish of the devoted Cunda. In traditional Indian way a worthy guest is offered *madhu-parka* (honey mixture) and *Rābḍī* can

always be a surrogate or substitute of honey. It is believed that by offering jaggary (*guḍa*) and sugar-cane juice one earns religious merit. (*guḍmikṣurasodbhūtam mantrāṇām praṇavo Yathā / danenānena me tasya parā lakṣmīḥ sthirā grhe*). This faith must have prompted Cunda to offer *S.* to the Buddha and the Buddha further, through Ananda, promise religious merit to Cunda (*tava lābhā, tava suladdham*).

7) The whole tenor of the account of the meal provided by Cunda suggests strongly that the recipe was in all likelihood a liquid. It is not difficult to deposit solid food by digging a pit. But the wording strongly suggests that it was a liquid to be poured in the pit. Sugar products directly go to the blood and give energy. The commentators and Nāgasena emphasise that ‘gods’ have enriched the food-value of *S.* by pouring into it ‘Ojas’ or vitality and they further maintain that Cunda was particular in serving this recipe to the Buddha as he wanted to postpone the death of the Buddha as he wished Tathāgata a longer life. Now the very first entry of the vocable *Rasa* in Apte’s *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* is ‘sugar-cane juice’ (*ikṣurasa*) and sugar-cane juice is even equated in *Nirukta* with *Jivana* (life). Yes! Glucose makes even sick people feel lively and energetic. *Rasa* is a sap of plants like sugar-cane and has cognotes with OI *aṣati* (flows). Thus we have words like *Rsabha* (bull or steed, showering semen), *arshan*-(man). The I.E. roots are *eras, *ras, *eres and *res to flow, moisten whence Latin. *ros*. gen. *Roris* (dew). We should remember that even Manna, the food provided for the Israelites in the desert by God ‘tasted like water mixed with honey, Manna is called spiritual food’ while *S* because it contained ample *Oja* was ‘spirited food’. This also perhaps is the reason why Tathāgata said that ‘no one except him in all the lokas of the Universe can digest it’. The Buddha it seems at that advanced age had stopped eating hard and soft food but wanted to satisfy the wish of his devotee and, therefore, graciously accepted to take only a very small quantity of the sweet savour, which, however, proved to be the Sweet-Dish of his Life for after taking it he entered into *Parinirvāṇa*.

