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Meditation Transcending Signs: Seven Concepts for a Buddhist Psychosemiotics

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide an in-depth and detailed overview of the relationship between language and cognition in Pāli Buddhist texts. These reflections will touch on several fundamental themes, such as the role of signs in structuring cognitive processes and semiosis as a force linked to the proliferation of concepts and percepts, whose organization underlies the constitution of a shared and partly subjective "world". The paper will engage with linguistics, semiotics, and biosemiotics in order to acquire a vocabulary capable of better understanding the Buddhist reflections on these issues, and, where possible, it will also offer a genealogical inquiry that explains why the theme of language takes on the pivotal role it holds in Pāli Buddhism.

Keywords: Buddhist philosophy; language and consciousness; philosophy of language; cognition; meditation; philosophy of cognition

1. Introduction

The present paper aims to examine the conception of language in the Pāli Buddhist texts, particularly in the Nikāyas, analyzing the role of language in perceptual–cognitive processes and why such reflections on language serve, in these texts, to describe the purpose of meditative practice—thus making language a fundamental key concept in Pāli Buddhist thought.

As a preliminary note, in this text I will avoid speaking of the "Pāli canon" as much as possible, since referring to a body of literature as "canonical" risks falling into the assumption that Buddhist thought is structured analogously to European religions. Yet, as demonstrated by Collins in a 1990 reflection [1], the idea that there exists a Buddhist "canon" is rather controversial. It will therefore be more appropriate to speak of Pāli texts, and particularly the collection of the Nikāyas, which indeed exists and will be the focus of our analysis. Nonetheless, it must also be noted that the expression "Pāli canon" has by now become established as designating a specific collection of texts that the Theravāda movement considers the reference point for the Buddha's teachings (here again, I would avoid speaking of "doctrine"); and therefore, if the term is understood in a neutral sense, we may accept its use, while remaining aware of the necessary distinctions to be made.

Indeed, when we speak of conceptions of language in the Pāli texts, we are faced with a dilemma: are these philosophical elaborations? Attention must be paid to the sense attributed to this term. For a long time, due to a similarly colonial or Eurocentric attitude [2,3], it was denied that peoples outside the European cultural milieu possessed a philosophy of their own [4–9], assigning to the term its exclusively Greek meaning

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(φιλοσοφία). And it is certainly true that, in the European world, "philosophy" derives from those reflections. Nonetheless, it has now become undeniable that all cultures of the world possess philosophical traditions [10–12], since, in the absence of a better term, they must be understood as distinctive elaborations through systems of reasoning that reflect on the world, on life, on the human being, and on the great principles that govern the cosmos. This includes, obviously, India as well [13–16]. Philosophy is now global, and it is therefore equally legitimate—as I will do in this paper—to speak specifically of philosophy of language, cognitive philosophy, and philosophy of perception in Buddhism [17–21], although in certain circumstances it would be even more appropriate to speak directly of phenomenology [22].

Even though the conception of language has been widely examined in the Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions [19] (pp. 27–31), especially Yogācāra [23,24] and Madhyamaka [25,26], recognizing that reflections on language constitute the indispensable trait d'union between the problem of perceptual–cognitive processes and their overcoming through meditation, investigations into the possible foundations of these reflections in the Pāli texts have been far fewer. Nevertheless, the Nikāya present reflections on language that are not only remarkably refined and profound, but which construct a complete and organic conception of language and its role in human experience—one that cannot simply be understood as a prelude to Mahāyāna reflections, also because the Pāli texts cannot be considered, tout court, antecedent to the Mahāyāna movement, even if there are indeed certain sections of the Pāli corpus that may be considered very ancient [27–31].

In this paper, we will therefore focus on the Nikāyas mainly as a corpus of Buddhist texts which, as far as investigations into the conception of language in meditative practice are concerned, has been a relatively little-studied collection compared to those of other authors such as Nāgārjuna [32–35], Diṅnāga [36,37], Dharmakīrti [38,39], Vasubandhu [40,41], Candrakīrti [42–44], Sthiramati [45], and various others.

We will nevertheless occasionally refer to some reflections made by authors who have worked on the problem of language in Mahāyāna traditions, but only for the purpose of comparing analogous concepts that can be found in the Nikāyas.

This research will focus on certain fundamental themes, which we will develop starting from the reading of the Pāli texts and which show us how language is not understood by the Buddhists merely as a means of communication, but as a fundamental principle in the functioning of the perceptual–cognitive process in a very broad sense.

Language is, above all, "recognition": the ability to distinguish the things we experience and therefore an instrument for the construction of a "world" (*loka*). In the sense in which the Nikāyas conceive this concept [46–50], there is an absolute continuity between language and world, and the "world" is understood as an environmental dimension populated by "signs" (we will define this term later) capable of interacting with the subjects who interpret them and of coordinating experiential processes.

As I will explain, the investigation into the Buddhist conception of language also reveals the existence of a progressive path, within meditative techniques, consisting in the gradual deconstruction of the influence of signs in the life of subjects. Or rather, a process of deconstruction of the force of semiosis through an actual weakening of signs. This weakening extends from their most "influential" condition for us—that is, that of fundamental "percepts"—toward that of mere primary "qualities", which in a certain sense constitute the fundamental core of the sign-percepts. A core which, moreover, will in turn be analyzed and revealed to be inherently empty.

In this sense, for meditation the idea of an analytical process of phenomena becomes fundamental, a process aimed at reaching their fundamental constituents. In this context, phenomena, percepts, and signs are the same thing.

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Although the Pāli Abhidhamma will later tend to distinguish phenomenologically what is perceived as something that "appears" from what actually constitutes an environmental causal nexus and which can also be understood as the basis of a *phaneron* [51], the Abhidhamma constructs, starting from the texts that precede it, an authentic and complex phenomenology that inevitably rests on a semiotics of perception, and the analysis of this phenomenology has been the subject of a previous study [52].

Both in the Abhidhamma and in the Nikāyas, the phenomenological aspect of meditation focuses on the logics of production and cessation of phenomena, the two fundamental phases that constitute our experiential world. Everything we witness "appears" to us at a given moment, thus presents itself as a phenomenon, and is recognized as having its own identity. In this sense, that given phenomenon "determines itself" as a "sign" because, as we shall see, the Buddhist definition of "sign" that best describes all the possible meanings these authors attribute to it in the texts is precisely that of being a "determined", something recognizable as having certain value-correlates, and distinct from other determinates by virtue of its specific identity. The idea that language is fundamentally a designating force that produces "determinates" is already present in the Ṛgveda, according to which, at the moment of creation, "unspecified subjects emerged from nonduality, giving names. They did not emerge with an established identity, but set out to create one for themselves through the language they expressed" [53] (p. 46).

To the appearing of this sign-determinate there follows, however, an inevitable moment of its disappearing, and this because, according to Buddhist logic, the conditions (the association among fundamental primary constitutive elements) that allow it to appear as a phenomenon have ceased to exist. We thus trace the equation of the "phenomenon qua sign", which is nothing other than a sign qua sign. Without the association of the fundamental constitutive elements, there are no conditions for producing the cognitive association between that aggregate of elements and a "determined" sign, and thus a recognizable identity.

Buddhist phenomenology is concerned with the meticulous and careful analysis of these phenomenal processes [54], since they determine our experience and, above all, our suffering, insofar as we are normally not truly masters of these processes, which affect and influence us without our being able to do anything about it.

In the Nikāyas, we find the conception of the existence of fundamental perceptual–cognitive elements, or forces that act in every respect within the sphere of human experience, capable of influencing and determining both the communicative and the perceptual processes, subtly directing cognition and determining the course of thought. These forces would not be entirely autonomous entities, but it is specified quite explicitly in the texts that they are in some way generated by the collectivity and managed by those who hold what we may call the "primacy of veridiction"—that is, who, for reasons of prestige or power (prestige in any case translating into power), would be able to influence the values that determine the specific functions of those signs, and thus the way in which they act within the collectivity.

The origin of the function of value correlates is to be found in the principles that regulate the perceptions of every object/sign: Uexküll refers to the value correlates that emerge or are emphasized contextually as "quality" (*Ton*), which varies in relation to the function assumed by the object in relation to its utility for the perceiving subject. The same object, such as stones, can have the value of being walkable on a road, thus a "path-quality" (*Weg-Ton*) for a human walking on them, but can be interpreted as a weapon in another context, assuming a "throw-quality" (*Wurf-Ton*) [55] (p. 27).

The capacity to determine the value-correlates of a sign is fundamental also because it is precisely in the possibility of valorization that the power of certain signs is affirmed,

and thus in the possibility of perceiving the usability of a given object of the "world" [56], with respect to certain characteristics that describe its concrete usefulness, its socioculturally codified functions, but also its ethical-moral connotations. From the point of view of human cognition, objects and persons are treated in the same way. It follows, then, that persons too are invested by the process of valorization, which charges them with a certain number of correlates that determine their social role, their prestige, their perceived duties, possible rights, and capacities to influence others. All this constitutes the fundamental elements which, aggregated together, form the model of interaction that determines what we call "identity".

From the Buddhist point of view, therefore, the identity of an object—the being "table" of the table, with all that this implies on the level of what phenomenologically is called "usability" and handiness (*Vorhandenheit*) [57,58]—is a mechanism analogous to that which determines the social role of an individual, their subjectivation in the Foucauldian sense, what they can and cannot do, how they are ethically perceived by others—in short, a set of elements that revolve around the "name" (*nāma* which the Buddhists understand in a very broad sense and not merely in an onomastic one) and that determine socioculturally what that person is, within the collective perception of a given historically and culturally determined "environment" populated by signs, that is, a "semiosphere" [59].

By carefully analyzing the texts of the Nikāyas in search of what could be the fundamental concepts that describe a Buddhist psychosemiotics, I have identified seven ideas that exert a central influence on the Buddhist reflection on language. At times these ideas correspond to several Pāli terms, at times to only one, but taken together they constitute seven levels of reflection on language, all interconnected and referring to further developments and deepening concerning the role of language in perception, cognition, and human experience in general, as well as the importance that understanding these semiotic processes has in enabling a successful contemplative practice, whose ultimate purpose proves to be precisely that of ceasing the force of semiosis and the action of signs upon the lives of subjects.

2. First Idea: The Word and Its Influence (*vacas*, *vāc*, *vacana*)

We will begin by analyzing the very concept of "speech". It is at once an excellent starting point, since it is the concept most generally connected to language, but it is also the one that proves most difficult to relate to analogous reflections in Western psychosemiotics. Nonetheless, beginning with the conceptions of the "word" is useful for tracing the inevitable ramifications that develop from this concept.

The idea of "speech", or "word" in a performative sense, is also the most general concept referring to language through its expressive faculty par excellence, and for this reason, even in the Buddhist world, one often speaks of "speech" to refer, in a general sense, to the faculty of language tout-court.

There are also numerous terms that refer to this conception, and not a single technical one, as we shall see in the case of the other six ideas. Moreover, this concept is the one that, more than others, connects to pre-Buddhist traditions—especially the Vedic world—which inevitably flowed into Buddhist reflections, since we find similarities that cannot be accidental. For now, this investigation will take the form of a textual analysis of the occurrences of the various terms. Let us therefore proceed with the examination.

The Buddhists reveal a refined and developed conception of language and of the "speech", especially as a "designating" power. The idea of language and the word as essentially "designation" is affirmed in many texts. Language is understood as the capacity to establish as facts identities that are attributed by arbitrariness, covering the conventional (the "socio-cultural") nature of identity constructs, and assigning them with efficacy to

specific objects of the world, thereby establishing with them an actual equivalence. This principle, simple as it may be, represents an enormous problem insofar as it binds the human being to norms, rules, and conventions that then determine their suffering.

We therefore find an attention to language that is twofold: one technical-grammatical, and another more philosophical-psychological. The two aspects influence each other reciprocally. An example of the first is the term *byañjana*, which denotes a physical sign, a "mark", and is used to indicate a letter or a syllable, or more specifically, something that is said or pronounced: such is the case with *sabyañjanaṃ*, "well-phrased" [MN 27], in reference to the Buddha's teaching, which is also described as "good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end" (*so dhammaṃ deseti ādikalyāṇaṃ majjhekalyāṇaṃ pariyosānakalyāṇaṃ*), as well as "meaningful" (*sātthaṃ*), employing a term also used to indicate the semantically intended meaning of something.

Another significant example of *byañjana* appears in MN 43, in reference to a contemplative practice that will become very important in this paper, namely signless meditation (*animitta*). The text speaks of two conditions necessary for the attainment of signlessness, asking whether these two are "different in both meaning and phrasing" (*ime dhammā nānātthā ceva nānābyañjanā ca*). As we can see, the idea of *byañjana* is almost always accompanied by *attha*, as two sides of the same coin, or two aspects of the same thing. If *byañjana* is in fact a "phrasing", we can understand it as an act of phonic execution, as *byañjanakusala* the one who is skilled in phonetics (see Appendix A), whereas *attha* is more generally the meaning conveyed by the *byañjana*. For this reason, when one asks about the equality of the two concepts, meaning and signification are joined together: *ekatthā byañjanameva*. In MN 18, when the text speaks of the need to "explain" the "meaning" of something, it says that this is done employing specific "words" and "phrases": "Mahākaccāna clearly explained the meaning to us in this way, employing these words and phrases" (*tesaṃ no, bhante, āyasmatā mahākaccānena imehi ākārehi imehi padehi imehi byañjanehi attho vibhatto*) [cf. also MN 133 and 138].

All these are very general concepts concerning the role of the "word" in language, yet even if they may seem trivial to us, they are in fact achievements of linguistic science that took time to be so precisely defined. Buddhism reveals not only an attentiveness to linguistic themes, but also the use of specific technical terms exactly as we would expect from linguistics.

Equally important is the idea of "what is said" (*bhāsita*), which is often invoked to authoritatively indicate the words of the Buddha: *bhagavato bhāsitaṃ*. In this context, Buddhism certainly inherits aspects of the sacredness of speech that were present in the Vedic world, insofar as it must draw upon them to emphasize the authority of those who utter certain *bhāsita*. Equally evocative is the image of the recitation of specific verses (*imaṃ gāthaṃ abhāsi*), which evoke a teaching or an important truth. From this point of view, the insistence on recalling specific utterances is a clear sign that Buddhism preserves many aspects of a reverential idea of the word (See Appendix A).

The idea of good teaching as something "well-spoken" (*subhāsitaṃ*) [AN 6.61] is important, and more generally the texts often insist on the need to pay attention to what is "spoken" by the Buddha [60]. Very frequent is the phrase "listen and apply well your mind, as I will speak" (*sādhukaṃ manasi karotha, bhāsissāmi*), or again, "listen attentively to what is said" (*sakkacca suṇantu bhāsitaṃ*) [Snp 2.1].

Still within the perspective of the word as "designation", we find the very term that denotes a term, namely *sadda*. This is used on numerous occasions, but perhaps the example that best helps us understand the conception underlying this term is SN 5.10, where it is made explicit that a given *sadda* is something that specifically indicates a phenomenon which arises when certain preconditions converge to allow the given phenomenon to ap-

pear. In this sense, the idea of *sadda* is analogous to that of conventional identity: "just as when the parts are assembled we use the word 'chariot', so too, when the aggregates are present, we use the convention 'sentient being'" (*yathā hi aṅgasambhārā, hoti saddo ratho iti*; *evaṃ khandhesu santesu, hoti sattoti sammuti*). This passage is very important because it traces the equivalence between *sadda* and *sammuti*, between "word" and "convention".

The two terms are substantially analogous. The word intervenes as the designator of a concept whenever the conditions for the manifestation of the object to be designated are present. A "chariot" is such only when its components are assembled; in the same way, sentient beings are a kind of assemblage of the various conditions that constitute them.

We have thus found a key term that indicates the fundamental aspect of the nature of language: *sammuti*. Depending on the context, it also denotes what is the result of "common opinion" or "general consensus". In this sense, this concept is perfectly comparable to what the Greeks called δόξα.

However, *sammuti* is not the only term that indicates the arbitrariness, conventionality, and relative nature of language. We shall see later a term that expresses this aspect even more strongly.

At this point we are left with the term perhaps most influenced by the Vedic tradition, namely *vacas*, *vāc*, and analogues such as *vacana* and *vākya*. These too can be generically translated as "word", "utterance", "speech", or "statement", and they are used repeatedly in the Pāli texts, sometimes without necessarily a sacred connotation—for example, "let me hear what you say" (*taṃ suṇoma vaco tava*) [Snp 5.1]; or again, *tava vīra vākyaṃ abhikaṅkhamānā*, referring to listening with emotion to what a great man had pronounced.

In compounds such as *adhivacana*, the term clearly indicates a designation or the name by which to call something—for example, "'Brahmā' is a *term* for your parents" (*brahmā'ti … mātāpitūnaṃ etaṃ adhivacanaṃ*) [AN 3.31].

We will leave aside here the issues relating to grammatical analysis and to the very development of a strong grammatical theory, since this is justified by the same reason that makes language a central theme in the Vedic world—namely, its performativity.

In the Vedic context, language holds the cardinal importance we find in the texts mainly because it is a ritual instrument and a power capable of codifying knowledge, formulas, historical or mythological memories. Mastery of language, in a culture born as oral, is linked to the importance of transmitting and preserving knowledge.

One must consider, in this regard, the context of what Campanile calls the "Indo-European poetic culture", in which—and this is certainly true for the Vedic world as well—the role of the poet was that of a highly specialized technician of language, capable of using the linguistic instrument with exceptional mastery, since his task consisted in the ability to encode, in styles and modes learned over the course of a very strict and lengthy training [61] (p. 54), information of fundamental importance—from legal to ritual matters, from mythological accounts to medical and magical knowledge (p. 55). This makes the poet "one who masters the art of the word in all its possible purposes", or again, "the custodian and professional of the word: he is by definition competent in every domain in which the word is, or is believed to be, operative" (p. 58). Such centrality of language, stemming from the need to encode and transmit information rigorously within the context of an oral culture, leads almost immediately to a reflection on the very power of language, as well as to an analysis of the linguistic medium aimed at perfecting the techniques required to master it.

Language is power, because one who masters mnemonic techniques possesses knowledge that others do not. For this reason, the attention focused on language inevitably led to the development of a grammatical tradition that reflects on language in order, first of all, to enable more efficient memorization and an ability to compose increasingly effective verses.

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At the same time, the correct recitation of formulas allows the efficient execution of rites, whose importance need not be emphasized here. Language is therefore power in multiple respects: it is knowledge but also a formula capable of securing the favor of the deity or invoking other powers useful to the performer.

Language is thus sacralized as pure potency, and the divinity of voice or speech, *Vāc* (in Vedic: *Vā́c*), assumes an immense importance—according to Miller, even comparable to that of Agni [62] (p. 64), the most frequently cited god of the Ṛgveda and undoubtedly the most important in the archaic Indian world.

I will not dwell too long on the comparison with the Ṛgveda, since this is not a comparative study between Buddhism and Vedism, and also because I have already dealt with these themes—which involve Vā́c and the philosophy of language between the Vedic and Buddhist worlds—in a previous study [63].

Nevertheless, I consider it necessary to point out the reasons for the importance of Vā́c. This deity represented creative potency par excellence. Vā́c "represents the origin of all things and plays the role of demiurge" [53] (p. 45). Things have been created through the division of voice: "the gods divided manifold speech (*Vā́c*) which enters many times into many places" [64] (p. 162).

It could be said that in the Vedic conception, Vā́c is "the supreme authority in the universe" [53] (p. 45), as she "shapes the world and extends beyond both heaven and this very earth" [63] (p. 15). Vā́c is so powerful that she "extends across the worlds" [53] (p. 49). This incredible power of Vā́c corresponds to her status of "one being" (*ékam sát*), that is, the absolute [64] (p. 175). Thus, everything derives from this originary absolute, "Vā́c is the primordial reality from which arise the unmanifest and manifest world (and everything therein)" [53] (p. 49). In other words, "speech is the origin and substance of everything known to exist" [53] (p. 49). This is also the main reason why according to Jurewicz, the Ṛgvedic conception of reality is conceptualized "in terms of speech" [53] (p. 45) [65] (pp. 62–64).

The Buddhist world partly preserves the sacredness of the concept of *vāc*, or at least its importance. For example, in Snp 3.3 it is spoken of an "immortal voice" which is "truth" (*saccaṃ ve amatā vācā*). This voice of truth corresponds to the Buddha's teaching, which is "eternal" (*esa dhammo sanantano*), for this teaching, with its "meaning", is grounded in truth (*sacce atthe ca dhamme ca*).

Nonetheless, in the Pāli texts this sacred conception of the word is significantly modified. The "word" does indeed retain an exceptional creative and performative power, but this creative power is not regarded as something beneficial. The idea of a "correct pronunciation" of formulas—whether magical, ritual, or sacred for other reasons—is not lost in Buddhism. A sign of this importance is the use of terms such as *akkhara*, which break down the simple *sadda* into its fundamental constituents, that is, the "syllables" or, depending on the context, directly the basic "sounds". An *akkhara* is therefore a phonetic (or phonological?) unit of some kind, and the very fact that the texts insist on the importance of the proper pronunciation of utterances is significant in itself.

Indeed, the Buddhists are already mindful of the importance this held for the Veda, recognizing that the brahmins of the past did precisely this—being "masters of the Veda" (*ajjhāyaka*) precisely by excelling in their ritual and performative vocabulary (*sanighaṇḍuketubhānaṃ*), as well as in phonology, the correct pronunciation of hymns, and the proper terminological classification (*sākkharappabhedānaṃ*) [AN 3.59; MN 91]. Buddhism therefore acknowledges this enormous importance of language. The good brahmin is also called a "grammarian" (*veyyākaraṇa*) as one who knows the Vedic text from a linguistic point of view, word by word.

The poet (*kaví*) is not simply a composer of verses: in the ancient world, the knowledge of language placed such figures, in every respect, at the top of society, since mastery of language corresponded, as already mentioned, to mastery of the knowledge it encodes and transmits—whether magical, medical, normative, legal, mythological, or historical. Nor should we forget the performative power of language itself, residing in correctly pronounced mantric formulas. All this is, moreover, accepted by the Buddhists, who revere the figure of the *kavi* and his mastery of language and "verses" in SN 1.60 (*kavi gāthānamāsayo*). As further specified, "metrics is the basis of verses" (*chando nidānaṃ gāthānaṃ*).

The conception of *akkhara* is moreover a clear derivative of the Vedic *akṣara*. In the Vedic texts, the sound emitted by Vā́c "produced the material universe, organizing creation through the *akṣára*" [53] (p. 45). In this conception, *akṣara* denotes a syllable, or in any case a minimal constituent of a phonic utterance. However, given the importance of language, the role of the *akṣara* is not that of a mere phonetic unit, but that of a constituent of that same linguistic power which pervades everything: the syllable is thus in itself a sacred potency that "sweeps across the entire universe and contains the potential for all life" [53] (p. 52). Indeed, the idea of a sacred syllable is something related to an imaginary of light and primordial creation: the appearance of the first Dawn (Uṣās) "was due to the great imperishable light arising from the watery realms (the firmament) being harnessed by the seers who performed the rites to the gods through the recitation of the sacred syllable (*akṣara*)" [63] (p. 16). That is to say, "*akṣára*, the smallest seed of all language, sweeps across the entire universe and contains the potential for alla life" [53] (p. 52).

To summarize what we know concerning the role of "speech" in these ancient conceptions: "in the Ṛgveda, Vā́c is a creative force connected with the origins of the world. Her voice serves as the expression of the manifest world and the means of connecting the all-encompassing manifest parts with each other" [53] (p. 49).

The reason why I wanted to begin this analysis from the most general conception of the power of the word and names [66] is precisely because it allows us to lay the foundations for what will be developed later. Buddhism is decidedly indebted to the Vedic tradition with regard to a fundamental conception of language—namely, that it is a creative-performative power of extraordinary efficacy [67,68]. This aspect is never denied; what leads Buddhism to diverge is the moral connotation of this power. Whereas in Vedism language is positive because it is world-generating, in Buddhism, for that very reason, language will be seen as the emblem of human imprisonment, since the very conception of "world" is not positive, as we shall see in the following section.

3. Second Idea: Language and Limit (*lokaniruttiya*)

Language in the Nikāyas seems intrinsically connected to the idea of delimitation. Words designate concepts, endowing them with an identity furnished with value-correlates, and these values are inherent in a given sociocultural community—a milieu that we call "world". In turn, the world is the place of limit; it is an "inside" that stands in opposition to an uncodified, anomic, unknown, or ultramundane "outside". What exceeds the mundane order is recoded, in mundane terms, as "ultramundane", yet in itself it is not a specific place—it is precisely that which exceeds codification. However, in our common experience of the "world", we perceive it as "external" and opposed to our psychological reality and linguistic reflection.

In this sense, language and world imply one another. Language determines the limits of the "world", and the world is the locus where the delimitations and designations of language hold validity. Outside these contexts, different societies will adopt different codes that do not conform to the norms of our "world", or there will even prevail situations incomprehensible to our system of knowledge.

That language is a cognitive instrument—that is, a means of "knowing" something, of "making it known" and thereby "usable"—is a fact long discussed by philosophers; but it is nonetheless surprising to find the same continuity between language, cognition, and world also in the Pāli texts. Language renders knowable; knowability is the reverse side of usability; and a system of known "things", organized by norms and conventions, constitutes a "world".

The concept that best expresses this continuity appears only sporadically in the texts, yet it is the nucleus around which a series of other related terms revolve.

The concept of *lokanirutti*, of which we are speaking, joins two fundamental terms: *loka*, "world", and *nirutti*, a term difficult to translate (see Appendix A). It is generally rendered as "language"—for instance, this is the choice made by Bhikkhu Sujato [69] (p. 71) and Bhikkhu Bodhi [70] (p. 905).

Its Sanskrit equivalent, *nirukta*, means "uttered, pronounced, expressed, explained, defined" [71] (p. 553). The PTS dictionary instead speaks more generally of "language" [72] (p. 206); nonetheless, the term also retains the sense of "manner of expression" or, in its technical usage, "grammar" and "etymology" [60] (p. 53). Kalupahana, for instance, chooses to translate the term according to its technical sense. However, the word maintains both meanings, and the context determines whether it refers to language, understood as faculty, or to etymology [73] (p. 37), understood as a technical notion belonging to grammatical science. The latter sense is, however, later, and characteristic of reflections posterior to the Nikāyas, which make use of grammar for technical or doctrinal reasons.

3.1. Language and Arbitrariness

In the context of the Vinaya interpretation, Buddhaghosa clearly understands *nirutti* as "language", as Norman points out [74] (p. 84). Levman's hypothesis, on the other hand, focuses more on the technical sense of *nirutti*:

> Although one of the primary goals of Buddhism was the elimination of mental proliferation caused by illusory perception and conceivings, the Buddha was of course equally aware that his teachings had to be correctly understood in the first place, before liberation could be achieved and conceivings and language transcended. So he enjoined his disciples to learn his technical definitions (*nirutti*) in the way he had taught them, and to make sure they understood what he was saying. [73] (p. 31)

In the suttas, it is quite evident that the sense of *nirutti* is not that of "grammar" but more generally that of "language", understood as a faculty—the capacity to articulate and communicate messages—and thus still distinct, though related, to the "utterance" that we examined previously (see Appendix A).

This is evident also in other contexts. In the *Duṭṭhavaṃsa*, for example, Dhammakitti uses the expression *niruttiya māghadikāya* to indicate the Māgadha language [60] (p. 51). Similarly, in the Vinaya the sense of *nirutti* as "language" is also preserved, as in the expression "own dialect" (*sakāya niruttiyā*) (p. 53). Certainly, there is also the possibility of understanding this expression as "own interpretation", since the context might seem to suggest this possibility. However, this does not appear to be the case. The text, *Khandhaka* 15—specifically *Khuddakavatthukkhandhaka* 33.1.4–15—says something quite different. The beginning of the problem (expressed in the phrase *bhikkhū nānānāmā nānāgottā nānājaccā nānākulā pabbajitā*) lies in the fact that the mendicants possess their own languages, and therefore a variety of names deriving from a variety of families, castes, and households (that is, social groups from which they are assumed to have learned their language). It is quite implausible that what is meant here is "grammar" or "interpretation". Or rather, it is

evident that the theme is interpretation, but understood as something inherent in linguistic, dialectal, diachronic, and diaphasic differences, and so forth.

The consequence is soon stated. If each mendicant carries with him his own linguistic difference, he "corrupts the word of the Buddha by means of *his own language*" (*te sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ dūsenti*). Only in this sense can the expression *sakāya niruttiyā* be understood. One's "own language" (one's dialect?) "corrupts" the *buddhavacana*.

The other mention of *sakāya niruttiyā* occurs at the end of the section I have indicated, and even in this case it must inevitably be understood as "own language", "own dialect", since it is explained in connection with the following prohibition: "you should not put the words of the Buddha into verse" (*na … buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropetabbaṃ*). Incidentally, this prohibition appears to be widely contradicted precisely by the Pāli suttas, which, especially in their most archaic strata, follow a strict and refined metrical composition [75] (p. 16). Leaving aside, therefore, the longstanding problem of determining whether this prohibition—clearly defined in opposition to the Vedic model—was actually disregarded or was instead a rule invented later by the authors of the Vinaya, what interests us here is the explanation of the reasons given.

To put the Buddha's teaching into verse coincides with an offense against the Buddha himself (*āpatti dukkaṭassa*), since "the Buddha's teaching should be learned from his own words"—here understood as from his "living voice", that is, presumably, from the Buddha's "own language" (*anujānāmi… sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ pariyāpuṇituṃ*). Once again, we may set aside the contradiction: in all probability, no Buddhist textual tradition was ever codified in the Buddha's native language—but that is another problem.

Let us return to the Nikāyas. In Dhp 352, mention is made of one who is rid of craving, free from attachment, and is also "skilled in language" (*niruttipadakovido*). We shall soon understand why being knowledgeable in language is so important. Such a person, like a Vedic poet, knows the correct structure and sequence of syllables (*akkharānaṃ sannipātaṃ*—note the presence of *akkhara*), and by virtue of all this he is someone of great wisdom, a great person (*mahāpañño mahāpuriso*).

In AN 5.169, a mendicant is described as "quick-witted" if, among other things, he is skilled in the Buddhist teaching, skilled in grammar or mastery of expression, and skilled in language (*dhammakusalo ca*, *byañjanakusalo ca*, *niruttikusalo ca*).

The suttas also mention the importance of analytical understanding of language (*niruttipaṭisambhidā*) [AN 4.172; 5.169; 5.86; 5.95].

3.2. The "Purpose" of Language

To understand more clearly what the sense of *nirutti* is in the meaning found in the Nikāyas, we must turn our gaze to a text that aroused enormous interest in the past, namely "The Purpose of Language" (*Niruttipathasutta*) [SN 22.63]. This text is considered an authentic forerunner of some of the key reflections of the Abhidhamma.

Karunadasa informs us that this text can in some way be a precursor of Abhidhamma reflections, in particular because it presents the "first formal definition of *paññatti*" [76] (p. 56), a term which, as we will see (Section 6.1), is of capital importance. Karunadasa also treats the term *nirutti* as "expression" [76] (p. 56), but we will see that on this technicality there is very little agreement among translators.

This text fundamentally describes what we could call the *morphophanic process* (see Appendix B), which later becomes the basis of Abhidhamma analysis, linking it to language [77–81].

In other words, SN 22.63 recognizes that the purpose of language (*niruttipathā*) is to designate the various morphophanies on the basis of a process of discernment that classifies them into three main phases. In this regard, the purpose of language is not alone. The

text in fact brings together three terms, all characterized by the suffix *-pathā*, which indicates purpose, course, aim. Specifically, it speaks of the purpose of language (*niruttipathā*), the purpose of expression (*adhivacanapathā*), and the purpose of designation (*paññattipathā*). Kalupahana interprets *niruttipatha* as "Way of Language" [82] (p. 21), and in general he understands the suffix *-patha* as "way" (p. 48).

Now, these are all terms that may have multiple definitions: *nirutti*, as we have seen, indicates both language (in general) and etymology (in a technical sense). Likewise, *adhivacana* is found translated in many different ways, such as "expression", "epithet", "definition". Kalupahana even renders it as "synonym" [82] (p. 49). However, since it is a term connected to *vacana*, it mostly conveys the expressive–phonatory aspect, a label, a naming, or better yet, "labeling", and so on.

The term *adhivacana* would not indicate only a specific label but the very capacity for labeling. For example, SN 47.20 says "a 'bowl of oil filled to the brim' is the way to label the mindfulness of the body" (*samatittiko telapattoti kho … kāyagatāya etaṃ satiyā adhivacanaṃ*). Here we have an example of a concept, a meditative technique, which is already expressible technically through the expression *kāyagatāya satiyā*, but which is also expressed through a metaphor, namely that of *samatittiko telapatto*. A similar discussion is made in SN 35.247, where *kāyagatāya satiyā* is indicated metaphorically with the expression *daḷhe khīle vā thambhe vā* "a strong post or a strong pillar". This metaphorical capacity of terms is always indicated with *adhivacanaṃ*.

Finally, *paññatti* is a very important term, which we will encounter again later as the fifth idea connected to the philosophy of language. It will also become one of the most important terms of the Abhidhamma [51] (p. 6), describing the perception of reality founded on designatory processes, and thus the so-called conventional or relative reality, which is a reduction and reinterpretation of the single "absolute" reality, which will also be indicated in various ways. The idea of designation or conventionality conveyed by *paññatti* is therefore a central aspect of the relationship between perception and language, and for this reason SN 22.62 lists it among the three "purposes" that animate the arbitrary processes of describing morphophanic modifications.

The title of the text takes as its example the *niruttipathā*, the purpose of language, to indicate the core of these processes. There are three purposes of language, labeling, and designation, that is, the identification of three fundamental aspects in the morphophanic process: the form the phenomenon took in the past, the form the phenomenon shows in the present, and the form the phenomenon shows in the future. The text reveals that the basis of human perceptual experience rests on this temporal conception, which assigns each phase a very precise identity. Naming is the center of the concretization of this process, and to explain it the text repeats the same formula for each of the five aggregates. We will examine it only for the first: "when form has not yet arisen, has not yet appeared, its definition, its term, its designation, is 'would be'" (*rūpaṃ ajātaṃ apātubhūtaṃ, 'bhavissatī'ti tassa saṅkhā, 'bhavissatī'ti tassa samaññā, 'bhavissatī'ti tassa paññatti*). The formula is repeated in a similar way for all morphophanic aspects, and thus we have that when a phenomenon has not yet arisen and has not yet appeared, its definition, its term, its designation, is "will be" and *not* an "is" *nor* a "was" (*… ajātaṃ apātubhūtaṃ, 'bhavissatī'ti tassa saṅkhā, 'bhavissatī'ti tassa samaññā, 'bhavissatī'ti tassa paññatti; na tassa saṅkhā 'atthī'ti, na tassa saṅkhā 'ahosī'ti*). And finally, when a phenomenon has arisen and thus appears before us, its definition, its term, its designation, is, precisely, an "is" (*'atthī'ti tassa saṅkhā, 'atthī'ti tassa samaññā, 'atthī'ti tassa paññatti*).

Let us pay attention to other terms that are introduced. The first is *saṅkhā*, a technical term that indicates a concept, something that is "put together" (*saṃ* + $\sqrt{}$*khā*), and in fact its possible translations are "definition", "classification", "category", "concept". It indicates

a very abstract aspect of the designatory process, what we could define as "categorical belonging": the set of correlates that identify the meaning of a certain sign. For this reason, they are characteristics "put together" (*saṃ* + $\sqrt{}$*khā*), as they are associated with a certain meaning. In some respects, they may constitute the prototypical elements that orbit around a conceptual nucleus in the sense of prototype semantic theory [83–85]. Levman considers *saṅkhā* as "naming" [73] (p. 28). For reasons I will present below, I prefer to consider *saṅkhā* more as "concept" and, specifically, the conceptual aspect that defines meaning in the Saussurean sense (see Table 1).

Table 1. Similarities between Saussure's linguistic theory and Buddhist philosophy.

Sign-Construction	Dimension of *Langue*	Dimension of *Parole*
Level of the *Signifier*	*nāma*	*adhivacana*
Level of the *Signified*	*rūpa*	*saṅkhā*

Naturally, finding a perfect correspondence between these terms and linguistic vocabulary is difficult, and indeed translations often overlap the meanings of these technicalities.

3.3. Proliferation

We encounter *saṅkhā* in the definition of "proliferation of perceptions and concepts" (*papañcasaññāsaṅkhā*) [MN 18]. The idea of "proliferation" (*papañca*) is equally important in the linguistic conception of the Nikāyas. The process that leads to the production of cognitions is seen as something that feeds on itself and, once initiated, becomes unstoppable. The mind "continually produces", that is, it brings about the "proliferation" (*papañca*) of two fundamental things: perceptions (*saññā*) and concepts (*saṅkhā*). Perceptions and concepts proliferate together (*saññānidānā hi papañcasaṅkhā*) [Snp 4.11]. That the term *saṅkhā* can also indicate a "concept" as well as a "term", and that in any case it is used in connection with linguistic matters, is confirmed for us by Kalupahana [82] (p. 48).

Moreover, as we read in Snp 4.11, it is perception (*saññā*) that in turn leads to the proliferation of concepts and judgments (*aññānidānā hi papañcasaṅkhā*). Specifically, what is considered responsible for this process is "normal" perception, which, however, is also defined as "distorted" (*saññasaññī*, *visaññasaññī*).

We will examine later what the specific role of perceptions in human experience is. What is certainly interesting is their association with concepts (*saṅkhā*) as correlating elements of signs. Similarly to perceptions, concepts describe "characteristics" of a given sign, but while perceptions convey connotations of a "value"-type, concepts carry aspects of a more general character, suitable to "define" something. Both are associative values and in fact share the correlational aspect given by the prefix *saṃ-* that forms both terms. The perception is something that associates for the sake of knowing (*saṃ* + $\sqrt{}$*ñā*), in short, a putting together in order to make known (*ñā*).

SN 22.62 then speaks to us of *samaññā*, another term to indicate a definition, an appellation, a naming, and so forth. We will not encounter it often in the suttas. From the way it is used, it seems that *samaññā* simply indicates a terminological definition. It is invoked, for example, to indicate the way in which one defines an "ascetic" (through the *term* that designates him) in MN 40. The term is tied to social conventions; it refers to the words that a given community adopts to define the things of the world. In SN 1.5, in fact, we read of "world's labels" (*loke samaññaṃ*). The worldly dimension, or conventional nature of terminologies, is confirmed for us in MN 139, where the insistence is on the need to abandon attachment to terms and words: "do not insist on the language of the people and don't overstep the common labels" (*janapadaniruttiṃ nābhiniveseyya*, *samaññaṃ nātid-*

hāveyyāti). Note here also the mention of a "language of the people" (*janapada-niruttiṃ*) or "local language".

Finally, MN 50, speaking of how a person "becomes known" by a certain name, uses the expression *samaññā udapādi*.

SN 22.62 finally mentions again *paññatti*, in the triad of terms that designate the definition "was" for the morphophany of the "past". The repetition of this term leads us to think that it is used in two quite different senses.

To sum up, SN 22.62 first speaks of purpose or aim (*pathā*), and identifies three: that of language (*nirutti*), that of expression (*adhivacana*), and that of designation (*paññatti*). Afterwards, it defines these three purposes as the capacity to designate terminologically three categories of different morphophanies—the past, the present, or the future—and in doing so it indicates the terminological nature through three aspects: the conceptual (*saṅkha*), the terminological (*samaññā*), and, again, the designatory (*paññatti*).

As we can see, the term *paññatti* appears in both groups, and this creates a problem regarding its interpretation. The first group is headed by *nirutti*, which indicates the faculty of language. Yet we know that *nirutti* is also an ambiguous term. Depending on the context, it may also indicate a concrete aspect of language, namely the terminological one. This dual nature of the linguistic dimension was well grasped by Saussure, who adopted the term *langue* to indicate language understood as a "faculty", as an organizational system of signs. Its concrete counterpart, such as the terminological component or the concrete execution of designation, is *parole* in the Saussurean linguistic system [86–88], and is understood by the Buddhists above all as a terminological problem.

It would therefore not be surprising that *paññatti* also has a dual nature: one understood as a *faculty* of designation, the arbitrary nature of language, and another understood as an act of *parole*, that is, possibly, an actual designation. We thus have, as the Abhidhamma will also present, the idea of *paññatti* as something designated, and thus there can be as many *paññatti*s as there are designations. Understood on the level of *langue*, instead, *paññatti* indicates the capacity for designation itself. It is important to keep this distinction in mind, as it will be useful later.

The concept of language understood as a faculty (*nirutti*) is the *trait d'union* that links all the designatory aspects of language—such as the arbitrariness of the sign, designation, the construction of conceptual correlates, naming, and so on—to the very construction of a "world" that we perceive as an environment to be explored and inhabited by recognizable "things", that is, things capable of being known by our cognitive system. Thanks to linguistics, it is now possible to explore these cognitive implications [89].

3.4. Language and Semiosis

The morphophanic understanding, as we have seen, is a central theme of language and cognition according to SN 22.62, but this links the "purpose of language" to phenomenological analysis in general, which is the major theme of Buddhist contemplative practice (see Appendix B). Without an analytical capacity regarding phenomena—that is, the capacity to recognize the minimal constituents which, by aggregating and interacting, lead to the appearing of complex phenomena—it is impossible to access deeper contemplative forms.

In DN 15 the purpose of language is explicitly connected with this capacity for phenomenological analysis and, more importantly, with the central theme of Buddhist phenomenology of language: the *nāmarūpa* dyad ("name-form"), which we will examine as the third major fundamental idea of Buddhist semiotics. DN 15 says:

> *viññāṇañca hi, ānanda, daharasseva sato vocchijjissatha kumārakassa vā kumārikāya vā, api nu kho nāmarūpaṃ vuddhiṃ virūḷhiṃ vepullaṃ āpajjissathā ti.*

—no hetaṃ, bhante.

tasmātihānanda, eseva hetu etaṃ nidānaṃ esa samudayo esa paccayo nāmarūpassa—yadidaṃ viññāṇaṃ.

'nāmarūpapaccayā viññāṇan'ti iti kho panetaṃ vuttaṃ, tadānanda, imināpetaṃ pariyāyena veditabbaṃ, yathā nāmarūpapaccayā viññāṇaṃ.

viññāṇañca hi, ānanda, nāmarūpe patiṭṭhaṃ na labhissatha, api nu kho āyatiṃ jātijarāmaraṇaṃ dukkhasamudayasambhavo paññāyethā ti.

—no hetaṃ, bhante.

tasmātihānanda, eseva hetu etaṃ nidānaṃ esa samudayo esa paccayo viññāṇassa yadidaṃ nāmarūpaṃ.

ettāvatā kho, ānanda, jāyetha vā jīyetha vā mīyetha vā cavetha vā upapajjetha vā.

ettāvatā adhivacanapatho, ettāvatā niruttipatho, ettāvatā paññattipatho, ettāvatā paññāvacaraṃ.

If the consciousness of a young boy or girl were totally severed from these, would name-form still acquire growth, increase, and maturity?

—No, sir.

Thus, the cause, the source, the origin, and the reason for name-form is indeed consciousness. "Name-form is [in turn] the cause of consciousness"—this is what I have said, and this is why I say it: if consciousness were not established in name-form, could one also discern the origin of suffering, of rebirth, of old age, and of death in the future?

—No, sir.

And thus this name-form is the cause, the source, the origin, and the reason for consciousness.

This is the extent to which someone can be reborn, grow old, die, or reappear. This is as far as the *purpose* of language, of expression, and of designation extends.

From this passage we learn various things. First, the relationship of interdependence between consciousness and the name-form dyad [90] (pp. 10–20). Indeed, the name-form that emerges thanks to consciousness is what coagulates, allowing the birth of the fetus (*nāmarūpaṃ mātukucchismiṃ samuccissatha*) [DN 15]. Name-form is "conceived" (*nāmarūpassa avakkanti hoti*) [SN 12.39] as a true and proper person [91].

Secondly, the name-form dyad is a sort of semiotic potency that grows and develops as a function of consciousness, and it is in some way something the Buddhists wish to prevent from progressing, given their insistence on stopping the causes of its development.

Lastly, the semiotic potency of name-form, as a fundamental link in the chain of dependent origination, and thus of the very way in which we construct our way of perceiving the world, is part precisely of that "purpose of language" we have examined so far.

We have said that the faculty of language is something "worldly", where worldliness refers to what we might today understand as sociocultural dynamics. There is no language without users, hence the idea of *janapadanirutti*. The other face of the language of the people is precisely the cultural dimension that hosts the linguistic activity of the speakers.

In DN 9 we find an elaboration on this concept. It reflects on the problematic nature of language: terms are misleading; they are conventional and arbitrary designations that construct a way of perceiving reality that does not correspond to all the manifestative possibilities of phenomena, but only to that part which is "organized" by cognitions. This problematic nature of language leads meditators to want to progressively abandon it, and

yet language remains the only communicative medium for conveying knowledge, and thus also for communicating the Buddhist teaching. One reaches an impasse: one must make use of language without letting it make use of us.

The Buddha is the one who managed to tame this "dangerous" aspect of language, becoming capable of using it without it turning back against him, that is, without getting stuck on it (*aparāmasaṃ*).

In this context [DN 9], language is globally referred to as *lokanirutti*, "worldly language" or "language of the world", and it is accompanied by other typically linguistic elements marked by the prefix *loka-*, precisely to indicate their belonging to the worldly dimension: "These are the worldly terminologies, the worldly language, the worldly conventions, and the worldly designations with which the Realized One communicates, without thereby becoming stuck on them" (*imā kho… lokasamaññā lokaniruttiyo lokavohārā lokapaññattiyo, yāhi tathāgato voharati aparāmasaṃ*).

This ability to make use of language is a form of mastery described metaphorically as the illuminating power of a lamp in the dark that enables people to see clearly what is there (*andhakāre vā telapajjotaṃ dhāreyya: 'cakkhumanto rūpāni dakkhantī'ti*).

3.5. Mundanity Is Arbitrariness

There are two main issues that concern Buddhist authors with respect to language. On the one hand—the one that interests us most in this paper—there is the theme of language as the very framework of cognitive processes, a dimension that must be transcended in order to achieve liberation from the worldly prison [46], which is, in every respect, also a linguistic prison (*lokanirutti*). The second aspect of language, which has animated another branch of Buddhist reflections on this topic, concerns how language ought to be handled as the medium for encoding the Buddhist teaching. Since language is by its very nature problematic, the reflection on the arbitrariness of language translates into a reflection on the correct way to transmit the teaching through language.

In the *Khuddakanikāya* we find certain reflections that develop the theme of the "purpose of language" from the point of view of a Buddhist author interested in understanding how to treat the linguistic medium. For example, the *Catubyūhahāravibhaṅga* (*Netti* 9) reports an interesting reflection in this sense. In this text a definition is given of what is "linguistic" (*nerutta*), described as everything that "makes use of a certain language, a certain terminology, and a certain knowledge of ideas and names" (*tattha katamaṃ neruttaṃ, yā niruttipadasaṃhitā, yaṃ dhammānaṃ nāmaso ñāṇaṃ*).

Again here, it is the correct use of language on the part of the Buddhist practitioner that becomes the focus of interest. When one knows the name of a certain meaning or the name of a certain idea (*yadā hi… atthassa ca nāmaṃ jānāti, dhammassa ca nāmaṃ jānāti*), one uses it correctly (*tathā tathā naṃ abhiniropeti*), and the one who masters this correct usage is called (*ayañca vuccati*) "skilled in meaning" (*atthakusalo*), skilled in ideas (*dhammakusalo*), skilled in phrasing (*byañjanakusalo*), and skilled in language (*niruttikusalo*), skilled in syntax (*pubbāparakusalo*), as well as skilled in teaching (*desanākusalo*) and skilled in various other linguistic matters that we will not list because they concern above all morphology, such as being skilled in the formation of the plural (*anekādhivacanakusalo*). It is also said that all the languages of peoples and regions are treated in the same way (*sabbāni kātabbāni janapadaniruttāni sabbā ca janapadaniruttiyo*).

The last, and most important, remark I wish to make regarding language understood as *nirutti*, and all its related terms, concerns precisely its worldly nature, which DN 9 highlights through its association with *loka*. Worldly is language (*lokaniruttiyo*), worldly are definitions (*lokasamaññā*), worldly is oral expression (*lokavohārā*), and worldly is designa-

tion (*lokapaññattiyo*). The reason it is necessary to stress the link between language and worldliness derives from the very nature of the world (*loka*) in the Buddhist conception.

4. Third Idea: Fundamental Semiosis (*nāmarūpa*)

The dyad name-form (*nāmarūpa*) is perhaps the most important concept in all of Buddhist psycho-semiotic philosophy. This dyad can be interpreted in two main ways: on the one hand, as the basic semiotic structure, and on the other, as semiosic power, or fundamental semiosis. The first interpretation is referable to Saussurean linguistic theory, while the second has as its reference Peircean semiotics. As we will see, both interpretive proposals have their validity and are not mutually contradictory. From now on, I will refer especially to Peirce's *Collected Papers* (henceforth CP) [92], and to Saussure's *Cours* [93] and *Écrits* [94].

In both interpretative keys, the *nāmarūpa* dyad should be understood as something belonging to semiotics, which may indicate the fundamental structure of a sign, composed of two basic "faces", a nominal one (the signifier) and a formal one (the signified), or, if understood as the capacity to determine the sign itself, this dyad must be taken as part of a process involving three actors, of which it constitutes the fundamental basis consisting in the interaction between a nominal representamen and a formal-objective referent. To this basic dynamic is added the intervention of an interpretant. Thus, *nāmarūpa* as a two-faced psychophysical entity or as the basis of semiosis will be the interpretative proposal that I will examine in this section. To understand the reasons for this proposal, we must go, as far as possible, to the origin of this dyad.

4.1. Origin of the Name-Form Dyad

We can trace its mention in at least two Upaniṣadic passages, one direct and one indirect, which is relevant for comparative purposes with later Buddhist elaborations. It is indeed improbable that the Buddha did not know of the use of such a specific term within Indian philosophical culture [95]—unless we wish to suppose that its presence in the Upaniṣads was influenced by an earlier debate from which Buddhism also derives. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine with absolute certainty who first elaborated this concept.

In the Upaniṣads, the name-form dyad has only one function: it is a divisive force which, through the separation of portions of the world, determines these separate fragments with specific identities and renders them recognizable through their name. In this sense, the nominal-formal association is an association between a certain nominal identity and a "something" perceptible to the senses (a form but, as we will see, not only a form).

In *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 1.4.7 we read: "In the beginning, indeed, the world was undivided. It was divided by name and form, so it is said: this thing has this name and this form" (*tad dhedhaṃ tarhy avyākṛtam āsīt*; *tan nāmarūpābhyām eva vyākriyatāsaunāmāyam idaṃrūpa iti*; *tad idam apy etarhi nāmarūpābhyām eva vyākriyate saunāmāyam idaṃrūpa iti*).

Let us pay very close attention to this passage, on which we will dwell. It is quite likely that, in taking up a theme familiar to Vedic literature concerning creation, it is defining not so much a cosmogony as the genesis of the human cognitive process. It is certainly true that in Ṛgvedic mythology the appearing of the world results from a series of *determinations*, understood as part of a process of *separation* of things that renders them distinguishable compared to a previous condition of indeterminacy [96–100].

As we have seen in earlier sections, it is Vāc, the personification of language [63] (pp. 15–16, 27–28) [68,101], who concretely performs this separation, designating for each determined "thing" specific identities that distinguish them from one another. It is there-

fore not implausible to suppose that this idea of the sign as a determinative force has its foundations in Vedic literature.

In semiotics this process of determination is called "semiosis" [CP 5.484] [102–106], and this is why I refer to the *nāmarūpa* dyad as a semiosis. I will also distinguish between "semiotics" (what pertains the use of signs) and "semiosic" (what pertains the process of semiosis) [107].

Probable antecedents of this conception are already found in the *Brāhmaṇa*s. As Kalupahana had already pointed out in 1999, the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (2.2.7.1) presents a creation myth in which Prajāpati not only produces beings but "reduces them to order from their confusion by entering them with form (*rūpa*) and name (*nāma*)" [82] (p. 9). Again, following an entirely analogous procedure, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.2.3.1–6 informs us that during creation, this time performed by Brahman, name and form are once again created, "where form is identified with mind and name with speech" (*ibid*.).

However, Kalupahana's analysis could have focused more closely on the text of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* that describes this myth, as it presents remarkable similarities with certain aspects of Buddhist philosophy. First, the myth has Brahman state that the means by which he descends into the world is precisely name and form, mentioned separately and not as a compound (*taddvābhyāmeva pratyavaidrūpeṇa caiva nāmnā ca*). However, the two eleents are clearly linked: indeed, it is the "determinative" power of the dyad that is evoked: "whatever thing has a name, that is 'name'; and whatever has no name is that which is known through its form, 'this is [such-and-such] form', and that is form: as far as there will be form and name, that is how far this [world] extends" (*sa yasya kasya ca nāmāsti tannāma yasyo api nāma nāsti yadveda rūpeṇedaṃ rūpamiti tadrūpametāvadvā idaṃ yāvadrūpaṃ caiva nāma ca*).

This passage reconfirms what, in perhaps less cryptic form, *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 1.4.7 told us, and thus the principle confirmed is this: the name-form dyad is a divisive semiosic power which, through separation, creates distinction, attributing to certain formal (effectual) data a determined nominal identity. Again, in *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 6.3.1 we read that name intervenes for the purpose of establishing "distinctions" among forms, to which certain specific names are thus associated (*… jīvenātmanānupraviśya nāmarūpe vyākaravāṇīti*). The "distinctive" function of name is again confirmed by *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.2.3.3 and 11.2.3.6 (*… nāma nāsti yad veda rūpeṇedaṃ rūpam iti tad rūpam etāvad vā idaṃ yāvad rūpaṃ caiva nāma ca… mano vai rūpam manasā hi vededaṃ rūpam iti… sukṛtam bhavaty akṣayyo lokaḥ*).

The most effective metaphor for describing this process is given not so much by Peirce as by Saussure. In the *Cours*, in fact, we read that:

> Psychologiquement, abstraction faite de son expression par les mots, notre pensée n'est qu'une masse amorphe et indistincte. Philosophes et linguistes se sont toujours accordés à reconnaître que, sans le secours des signes, nous serions incapables de distinguer deux idées d'une façon claire et constante.
>
> Prise en elle-même, la pensée est comme une nébuleuse où rien n'est nécessairement délimité. Il n'y a pas d'idées préétablies, et rien n'est distinct avant l'apparition de la langue. En face de ce royaume flottant, les sons offriraient-ils par eux-mêmes des entités circonscrites d'avance? [93] (pp. 215–216)

For a visual representation of this process see Figure 1. The reason I feel compelled to insist on this passage is that it is not merely the best-known example of a way of conceiving the action of the sign that Saussure already showed he had clearly in mind. Not only in the *Cours*, which was reworked by Bally and Sechehaye and thus could be accused of not reflecting Saussure's authentic thought, but also in his writings published posthumously, Saussure demonstrates that he clearly held the idea that the operation of the sign is of

a divisive-organizational nature, and that language fundamentally acts at the cognitive level. He speaks, for example, of a "*dualisme profond qui partage le langage*", and in describing how it functions, Saussure speaks of an "*domaine intérieur*" and an "*domaine extérieur*" that are indissolubly linked. This aspect too we should keep in mind for later.

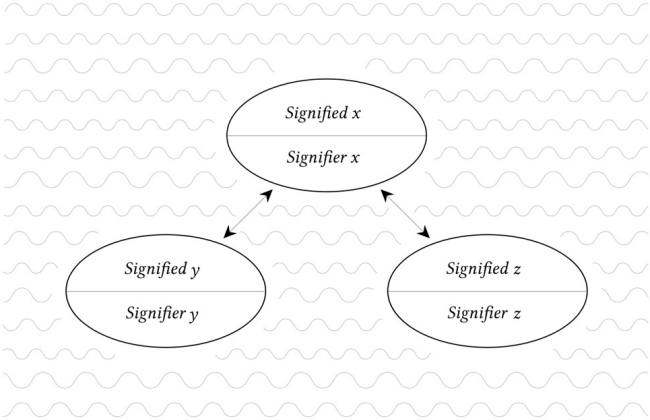

Figure 1. Visual representation of Saussure's nebula in the process of sign-determination.

> Il y a un premier domaine intérieur, psychique, où existe le signe autant que la signification, l'un indissolublement lié à l'autre; il y a un second, extérieur, où n'existe plus que le « signe », mais à cet instant le signe réduit à une succession d'ondes sonores ne mérite pour nous que le nom de figure vocale. [94] (pp. 20–21)

The considerations on the double essence of language are interpreted by Bouquet as a "*sémiotique unifiée du langage*" [108] (p. 260). Ruthorf, instead, interprets the metaphor of the nebula as a process of progressive definition of ideas: "language is a refinement of *Vorstellungen* in the sense that it transforms raw *Vorstellungen* into a series of fine-grain linguistic concepts and quite another to say that without language everything is nebulous" [109] (p. 160).

Ruthorf sustains that considering both Saussure's (and specifically the image of the nebula) and Peirce's theory as semiotic is "misleading", as in Peirce's system, "whatever we feel we need to decipher so allocate a place in our perceptual and conceptual world, is part of human semiosis", while on the other hand, "Saussure's *sémiologie* is restricted to social, conventional signs, such as symbolic rites, military signals, sign language" and so on [109] (p. 165).

In any case, the semiotic function of the *nāmarūpa* dyad described in *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* is found identically in the Nikāyas as well. Moreover, the Pāli suttas also present us with several further levels of analysis of this dyad, which explain why it functions as a divisive-cognitive force, and thus as fundamental semiosis.

4.2. A Divisive Principle: The Name-Form Dyad as Both Semiosis and Designated

The passage from *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 1.4.7 is perfectly comparable to Snp 4.13. In the first case, we read of the undivided world (*avyākṛtam*), and of the division of things effected by name-form (*nāmarūpābhyām*), so that one says that such-and-such a thing will have such-and-such a name and such-and-such a form (*vyākriyatāsaunāmāyam idaṃrūpa iti… nāmarūpābhyām eva vyākriyate saunāmāyam idaṃrūpa*). In Snp 4.13 we read of the consequences of this division, which are taken as implicit: "When a person sees, they see nothing but name-and-form; and having seen this, they will know only in this way" (*passaṃ naro dakkhati nāmarūpaṃ, disvāna vā ñassati tānimeva*). The divisive force of the name-form dyad is thus something that acts in a *cognitive* way (*ñassati tānimeva*).

The previous section, Snp 4.12, had already employed the term *dvayadhammamāhu* to indicate the "duality" that determines our conceptions. According to the text, human beings tend to divide everything into true or false (*saccaṃ musāti*), and this divergence of opinions and hearsay (*diṭṭhe sute sīlavate mute vā*) determines the separation of all things in our conception of the world, besides causing not a few problems. The conception of a "dualism" is also expressed with the term *dvayanissita* (from *dvayassa*, "duality") to indicate—explained in SN 12.15 and 22.90 in analogous terms—that duality is what organizes the world (*dvayanissito khvāyaṃ… loko yebhuyyena*). In this case, it divides it according to what is perceived as being there or not being there (*atthitañceva natthitañca*). Although this may not seem problematic to us, belief in the existence as in the non-existence of something is an eminently cognitive issue, and the division of the world into existents and non-existents constitutes two further polarities, which we might indicate as existentialism and nihilism, from which the Buddha equally distances himself. For Kalupahana, the "true/false dichotomy" essentially corresponds to the "existence/non-existence duality" [82] (p. 41).

If we turn our gaze to ṚV 10.129.1 we will notice that the emergence of existence and non-existence is something that occurs in a phase subsequent to the moment of creation (*nāsad āsīn no sad āsīt tadānīṃ*), which suggests a "nondual origin" of the world [53] (p. 30). See Appendix B for more information on this matter.

Every dualism is determined by its nominal attribution, so much so that we read in Snp 4.15: "one free from a sense of ownership in the whole name-form does not grieve for that which is not, one does not suffer for any loss in the world" (*sabbaso nāmarūpasmiṃ, yassa natthi mamāyitaṃ*; *asatā ca na socati, sa ve loke na jīyati*). The "things" of the world appear to us in a certain way insofar as they are correlated with a specific name-form. This semiotic dyad is what allows what appears to appear in the way it appears, with its value-correlates [110] (p. 217) and its conceptual characteristics.

This holds not only for material objects, but also for the ideas that organize societies and everything grounded in the attribution of a specific identity, such as belonging to a particular caste or clan.

Snp 3.9 and MN 98 inform us that one's name and family are "formulated" as "mere convention in the world", or "mere worldly conventions"; that is, a "product of common agreement, devised for each individual" (*samaññā hesā lokasmiṃ, nāmagottaṃ pakappitaṃ*; *sammuccā samudāgataṃ, tattha tattha pakappitaṃ*). Moreover, what holds for distinctions among humans holds also for distinctions within individuals themselves: distinctions among humans are only a matter of designation, convention (*paccattañca sarīresu, manussesvetaṃ na vijjati*; *vokārañca manussesu, samaññāya pavuccati*) [Snp 3.9].

This philosophy, according to which every form of distinction is nothing but a matter of convention, also gave rise to the great egalitarianism that already characterizes ancient Buddhism [111] (p. 13), and thus to the tendency to reject distinctions among sentient beings, whether cultural, social, hierarchical, economic, and so forth [112] (p. 178).

4.3. Semiosis as a Cognitive Function in Early Buddhist Thought

The operation of "division" between things and persons is not simply a power of speech, but of the semiosic process in general [113] (p. 211), of which the action of the sign is only one aspect.

As semiotics properly describes, these processes of distinction involve cognition in a broader sense, since "cognition" is just another way of saying "knowing". Cognitive modes are modes of knowing: ways of organizing the things of the world and rendering them "known", that is, recognizing in them specific value-correlates and conceptual corre-

lates. These are not the "absolute truth" (*yathābhūta*) of the thing, but rather characteristics relative to a specific way of knowing that a given culture develops.

Iti 41 describes the form of habituation to *nāmarūpa*, a condition in which the presence of name-form inhibits the perception of novelty in the stimulus, and is acquired as something "established" (*niviṭṭhaṃ nāmarūpasmiṃ*), and with this leads one to think that something is "true" (*idaṃ saccanti maññati*).

Each person, however, possesses their own truth about the "thing", which is relative to the cognitive mode they have learned [114] (p. 48). When facing a tree, a carpenter *already sees* wood for tables and chairs, because that is his way of *knowing* the tree.

From this it follows that cognitions are essentially constructed beginning from the usability of resources, and this is also quite obvious from an evolutionary point of view. No sentient being is interested in the elements of its environment for the love of knowledge in itself, but in relation to the usefulness those things have for itself. A sparrow will see in the twigs fallen from trees something of *use*, grounded in its needs, and will thus have an ecological perception different from that of other animals, which will not see in the twigs the fundamentally "useful" value they have for a sparrow that instead must build a nest.

Human beings, it is worth remembering, are not different from other animals, and therefore it is reasonable to suppose that the cognitive processes that animate them are based on the same principles.

The linguistic sign does nothing but respond to this need: it designates a recognizable identity to the "useful" things [114] (p. 50) so that their exploitation can be coordinated with other humans. In this lies the usefulness of having a common language. Naturally, identities vary from culture to culture, from ecological environment to ecological environment.

The extraordinary genius of the Buddhists recognized this fundamental principle of semiotic arbitrariness, and thus also how it coordinates thoughts and cognitions. In AN 9.14 it is asked: "On what basis do thoughts arise in a person?" (*kimārammaṇā purisassa saṅkappavitakkā uppajjanti*). The answer is *nāmarūpārammaṇā*, "through name-form". This further demonstrates how the *nāmarūpa* binomial is directly responsible for cognition and the proliferation of thoughts.

In short, this concept plays a fundamental role in Buddhist linguistic thought, but analyzing all its occurrences would lengthen this work excessively, and therefore I refer to a previous paper in which I focused exclusively on this analysis [90].

What I wish to develop here instead is the analysis of this semiosic force. It is composed of two parts: *nāma* and *rūpa*, "name" and "form". Understanding the specific nuance of these two components is not easy, and to help us we momentarily return to the Upaniṣads and turn to the second mention of semiosis, the one, so to speak, indirect.

We find this relevant mention in *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 7.1.5, where we read: "Sir, is there anything higher than name?—Nārada asked" (*sa yo nāma brahmetyupāste yāvannāmno gataṃ tatrāsya yathākāmacāro bhavati yo nāma brahmetyupāste'sti…*).

This passage is surprisingly similar to a short sutta found in SN 1.61, which reads as follows:

kiṃsu sabbaṃ addhabhavi,

kismā bhiyyo na vijjati;

kissassu ekadhammassa,

sabbeva vasamanvagu

What oppresses everything?

What has nothing greater than itself?

What is the one thing that holds everything under its sway?

The centrality of the nominal component, to the point of making the name the great oppressor and director of all things, must be understood within the double Buddhist heritage which, on the one hand, inherits the specifically Vedic conception of the power of speech and thus of the name, but on the other hand contextualizes this view within an ascetic tradition that rejects norms and rules—and language is itself the great normative producer. This makes the Buddhist attitude toward language appear "ambivalent" or "even contradictory", writes Levman [73] (p. 26). The power of language, therefore, is not denied but "negativized", insofar as its fundamental role is recognized in determining the cognitive processes from which contemplative practice seeks to disengage.

We also know from MN 9 that one interpretation of the two components of the binomial foresees that the name corresponds to five specific functions of the cognitive process: "sensation, perception, intention, contact, and attention" (*vedanā*, *saññā*, *cetanā*, *phasso*, *manasikāro—idaṃ vuccatāvuso*, *nāmaṃ*), while form is a set of effectual data, to use the biosemiotic lexicon—concrete elements corresponding to the system of the *cattāri mahābhūtāni* [90] (p. 14) [20] (pp. 21–22).

This distinction simply confirms the essentially functional nature of the name–form binomial, where the two components are two poles of a functional circuit that oscillates between a perceptual–sensorial force—namely, a capacity to process sensory data and organize or associate them into specific percepts (the *nāma* component performs this function)—related to an effectual counterpart composed of sensory data rendered objects of the senses. This oscillation is also represented in the genesis of the six types of consciousnesses (*viññāṇa*) in subjects. Each sense organ has a specific sensory object toward which it is directed. The relation between these two poles generates the corresponding consciousness. For example, to the sense organ "eye" (*cakkhu*) corresponds the sensory object "form" (*rūpa*), and the contact between the two produces "visual consciousness" (*cakkhuviññāṇa*). The same will occur between ear and sound, nose and scent, tongue and taste, skin and surface, thought and idea [90] (pp. 6–8)—this system indeed presupposes six sense organs and six sensory objects, insofar as thought (*manas*) is considered the sixth organ whose object is ideas (*dhamma*).

A similar explanation of the two components of the binomial is expressed in *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 1.6.1, according to which the universe consists of only three things: name, form, and action (*trayaṃ vā idam—nāma rūpaṃ karma*). The text describes name as that which arises from Vāc (*teṣāṃ nāmnāṃ vāgityetadeṣāmuktham*, *ato hi sarvāṇi nāmāny uttiṣṭhanti…*), while form arises from the eye (*atha rūpāṇām cakṣurityetadeṣāmuktham*, 1.6.2). The equation *nāma = vāc* is confirmed also in 3.2.3–7. See also *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.2.3.6 (*vāg vai nāma*). We may suppose that already in this phase form is understood as representing the set of sensory data, and not simply as what arises from the eye, ignoring the other senses. This is because Upaniṣads itself presents a conception of the sensory organs similar to that of Buddhism (cf. the doctrine of the *Pañchendriya*s).

The semiosic reading of the name–form binomial [90] unites the Saussurean conception of the sign with the idea of semiosis in Peirce's thought. I will briefly summarize the meaning of this double reading. The necessity for it is to unify semiology and semiotics, which in my view have been unjustly kept distant, without recognizing the significant convergences they exhibit, even with the due distinctions deriving from the ideas of Saussure and Peirce, which are not always superimposable. Nonetheless, despite the expressive diversity of certain concepts, some fundamental issues are in fact analogous.

4.4. Saussure and the Semiological Interpretation of Name-Form

In Ferdinand de Saussure's theory, the center of the entire linguistic *system* (Saussure spoke of *système* and not so much of "structure", as would be done later) [115,116] is the sign (*signe*).

The sign is a unit that carries meaning and, coordinated with other signs to construct messages, makes communication possible. The linguistic sign is defined as a "two-faced psychic entity" (*entité psychique à deux faces*) [93] (p. 153), namely, a "concept" and an "acoustic image" (*image acoustique*).

Although one tends to think that the concept is a psychic component while the acoustic image is the physical configuration, the sound emission corresponding to the concept designated by specific sounds, Saussure specified that both "faces" of the sign are to some degree psychic: "c'est un phénomène entièrement *psychique*" [93] (p. 76). The concrete phonetic execution is nothing but the articulation, through the organs of the phonatory apparatus, of sounds (phones) from their ideal and mental model (phonemes). The physical plane does not "materialize" the phone; rather, it executes, within a possible range, sounds that are referable to an ideal phonemic model. There is no single pronunciation of vowels and consonants, since each person will have their own way of producing them. However, there is a range within which speakers of a given language correctly recognize those sounds as one archetype, which is an ideal phoneme.

Thus, in the case of the sign, Saussure speaks of an "acoustic image" because it is a mental datum. The true dualism, he writes in the *Écrits* [94] (pp. 20–21), "réside dans la dualité du phénomène vocal *comme tel*, et du phénomène vocal *comme signe*—du fait physique (objectif) et du fait physico-mental (subjectif), nullement du fait « physique » du son par opposition au fait « mental » de la signification".

It is the same circumstance in which he speaks of an "interior domain" (semiotic) and "exterior domain", in which the sign is "reduced to a succession of sound-waves". In other words, it is the opposition between what is "internal" (*ajjhatta*) and what is "external" (*bahiddha*) in the Buddhist conception, or what is "sensorial" (known as *cha ajjhattikāni āyatanāni*) and what is "effectual" (*cha bāhirāni āyatanāni*) in the biosemiotic conception [20] (pp. 8–13) [117,118]. This reflects a perceived phenomenological duality between inner and outer world [110] (p. 199). As SN 12.19 also affirms, there exists a perceived duality between inner body and outer name-form, and "contact" is what depends upon this dualism (*eti ayañceva kāyo bahiddhā ca nāmarūpaṃ, itthetaṃ dvayaṃ, dvayaṃ paṭicca phasso saḷevāyatanāni*…).

The two faces must associate a certain set of characteristics, rendered a concept, with a certain set of ideal sounds, rendered a name.

Let us recall that Buddhists understand sensory data as belonging to six possible categories: besides those pertinent to the five senses we also possess, there is a sixth sense, the mind (*manas*), which processes a sixth type of sensory datum, namely ideas (*dhammas*). It follows that a set of ideas can constitute a concept, just as a set of forms, sounds, odors, tastes, and surfaces can constitute a whole set of data representing the ideal object of reference. It is with these data that something is distinguished from something else: it is the diversity of sensory data that creates, in our mind, the diversity of objects.

The concept of "form" (*rūpa*), as noted, represents by synecdoche all sensory data, and therefore lends itself well to representing the "conceptual" side of the sign.

The "name", instead, is exactly what it seems: a signifier, that is, a certain ideal way of designating a concept. It is not the phonetic execution in the articulatory sense (this concept is expressed by other terms we have seen earlier, such as *akkhara* and *adhivacana*, or others, such as *ghosa*, see Appendix A), but is the name in the ideal sense—in short, the *signifier*.

The first proposal to compare the *nāmarūpa* binomial with that of signifier/signified in modern linguistics (see Figure 2) was advanced by Edward Small in a 1987 article for the *Journal of Semiotics*.

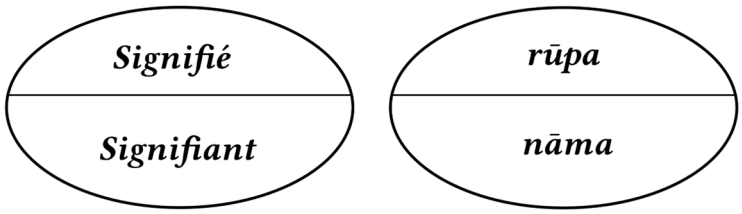

Figure 2. Proposed comparison between Saussurean sign and *nāmarūpa* binomial.

Small's proposal does not go too deeply into the details, limiting itself to noting the possibilities of comparison between the two binomials [119] (p. 455), hoping that this "provisional transliteration" may be of use for semiotics. Small also notes the possibility that these similarities are not accidental, but may somehow be due to Saussure's knowledge of Sanskrit grammatical literature and beyond (p. 454). This fact has been confirmed through a more detailed analysis of Saussure's writings, particularly the Harvard manuscripts [20,120–123] (pp. 19–20).

However, Small's proposal must be framed in a context in which he attempts to resolve the problem of referentiality, and in his article he seems to lean more on Peirce than on Saussure, which is explainable by the fact that "nowhere in Saussure's *Cours* does the slightest attention seem to be given to a component like referentiality" [119] (p. 450).

But if we turn to Peirce, in order to recover the theme of referentiality, we realize that the semiotic reading of cognition offered by the Buddha does not lose value; in fact, it becomes more readily comprehensible.

4.5. Peirce and the Semiosical Function of Name-Form

In order to interpret correctly the linguistic function of the name–form binomial in the Buddhist conception, we are inevitably bringing Saussurean semiology closer to Peircean semiotics, and we will see how the triadic model [124] provided by the latter is at times more adequate for understanding the functions of this binomial.

For Peirce, signs are fundamental units of information exchange, and language is thus a universal principle, not solely human. Signs are everywhere in the world [CP 5.448], and what best describes their operation is above all their reciprocal relation, since they are organized among themselves in complex systems.

The meaning of a given sign is not found in the sign itself but rather in the relation that sign has with other signs. This conception of a system essentially composed of reciprocal determinations, in which "everything holds together", is compatible with the Buddhist idea of interdependence, whereby no existent is autonomous and independent, but stands, appears to us, and manifests because it is co-determined by others, and in turn contributes to co-determining others, and so on. Nothing is autonomous and self-sufficient in the Buddhist ontology, and only the totality, in its infinite possibilities (which, however, are perhaps inconceivable to ordinary sentient beings), acquires real overall meaning. "Signs" are contingent manifestations corresponding to individual determinations of this totality, and are therefore partial and misleading.

Peirce describes in detail the process through which a given sign acquires its own contingent sense, that is, presents itself as a certain determinate. This process is called "semiosis" and entails the interaction of three different signs, which represent three different semiotic modes, corresponding to three great categories [125] which for Peirce explain every phenomenon, and which we shall therefore find again later.

If semiosis is nothing but an interaction of signs, then *nāma* is in turn a sign, and specifically it is the sign properly speaking. In the process of semiosis, Peirce refers to this "first" element as the "representamen" [126,127]. This is the "sign" to which we commonly refer when we speak of a "sign".

The representamen is the "first" element of the triadic model of semiosis, and is thus "something that stands for something else" (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*), and this something else is another sign—specifically, an object-sign.

We make the *nāma* of the semiosic binomial correspond to the representamen. That *nāma* itself is a sign can be confusing, since Peirce's model tends to treat as a sign everything that is determined or determining in a certain way [128–137]. However, the sign as understood in semiology is something determined by the relation of all three elements of semiosis. The way in which *nāma* is a sign is different from the Saussurean model.

If I pronounce the word "water", the person who is able to identify that phonetic datum with the corresponding word will correctly associate that signifying sound with the signified concept. It is in the union of these two processes that the sign "water" consists (likewise if I signify it in written form, the process would be analogous, with only the vehicle of the nominal signifier changing).

Thus, while for Saussure the nominal signifier and conceptual signified are components of the sign, for Peirce the components of semiosis are in turn signs (we might understand them as incomplete signs) that interact with one another, and in their interaction (semiosis) the sense of the sign is *determined*.

Once this aspect is understood, we too will consider *nāma*, as representamen, a kind of "incomplete" sign, which acquires its authentic value as a sign in its referring to an object (*rūpa*) and in its being *interpreted* by another sign—a "third" element, called the "interpretant" [138–140]. The "sign" itself is something given by semiosis or the semiosic process, that is, by *nāmarūpa*. In the Āgamas, for example, *nāmarūpa* is considered to be equivalent to the "totality of signs" (*sarvanimitta*) [141] (p. 345).

The end-point of the model of referentiality, the "second" of the relation, is what in other contexts is called the "immediate object" [CP 1.541; 2.228]: it is the referent to which the sign refers. We may understand it in turn as a sign—it represents the object as the sign constructs it [142] (pp. 219–220). It is not a physical object, or rather, not the pure effectual data. The effectual organ, to use biosemiotic terminology, corresponds instead to what Peirce calls the "Dynamical Object" [143] (p. 51). These effectual data are mirrored, naturally, in sensory data that come to constitute the immediate object, which is nothing other than the organization of certain effectual data suited to constituting the ideal object to which the referent will refer. Put differently, the immediate object is simply the mode in which the dynamical object is focused upon [135].

We understand this sensory object in turn as a "primary sign", and we make it correspond to *rūpa* for obvious reasons, insofar as this part of the binomial is precisely the one that represents the objectual aspect of the sign.

At this point, Peirce requires a third element, itself another sign, which interprets the sign to be determined. This semiotic determinant is called the "interpretant".

We will not dwell here on the nature of the interpretant because it is not relevant to our concerns in this context. I limit myself to saying that Buddhism foresees this possibility in the form of *citta*, "cognition" (see Figure 3). As we read in SN 47.42, *nāmarūpa* is "determined" by cognition (*nāmarūpasamudayā cittassa samudayo*), and therefore, as it has been proposed elsewhere, the element *citta* functions in this system as the interpretant [90] (p. 18).

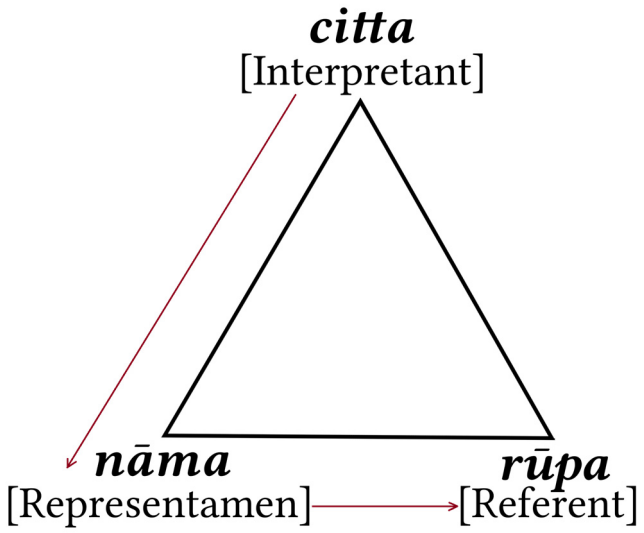

Figure 3. Scheme of the relational boundaries in the process of semiosis. The arrows indicate a direct relationship between signs. The basis of this process is the direct reference from a Nominal Sign (*nāma*, i.e., the Representamen) to an Effectual Sign (*rūpa*, i.e., the Referent, that Peirce calls "Immediate Object"). A third, Interpreting Sign (*citta*, i.e., the Interpretant), serves the function of conferring a certain meaning to the Nominal Sign.

Moreover, this nature of continual references among first, second, and third makes semiosis a potentially unlimited process, and Peirce indeed speaks of "unlimited semiosis" [CP 5.284], precisely because it is a constant mechanism of reciprocal references that can potentially produce meanings ad infinitum [CP 2.303]. It is interesting to note how this idea is perfectly reflected in the Buddhist concept of "proliferation of name-form" (*papañcanāmarūpa*), a mechanism that in Snp 3.6 is even equated with the root of every illness (*sabbarogamūlabandhanā…*).

For various reasons we consider the state of "cessation" (*nirodha*) sought at the culmination of meditation precisely as a cessation of cognitions (see Section 5) and, more specifically, as a cessation of the mechanisms of percept–cognitive proliferation. Similarly, Peirce recognizes that "every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions" [CP 5.265], confirming that a semiotic model exists that explains the mechanisms of "proliferation" (*papañca*).

Snp 4.11 tells us that name and form are the precondition of contact (*nāmañca rūpañca paṭicca phasso*), and contact, as we know, is the triggering element of the entire process of dependent production. For this reason, name and form are factors responsible for the arising of the desire for possession (*pariggaha*). Therefore, to overcome the mechanisms of "appropriation" or possession, it is sufficient to interrupt the action of semiosis (… *rūpe vibhūte na phusanti phassā*).

Desire as the triggering factor of the primordial organization (division) of the world is already present in ṚV 10.129.4, where a link is established between desire (*kā́ma*) and the originary seed of thought (*mánas*): "desire overcame *that* in the beginning, which was the first seed of thought" (*kāmas tad agre sam avartatādhi manaso retaḥ prathamaṃ yad āsīt*). Bausch interprets this original divisive intervention of desire as the "bifurcation and multiplication of That One into many, generating the mind that experiences dualistically" [53] (p. 31).

The implications of this process are principally two: on the one hand, the absolute is connected with an originary singular and unified source, which may be understood as a pre-determined totality; thus its division is not a true splitting but the progressive appearing of aspects of the originary in the form of "determinates"—that is, of "signs" recog-

nizable by cognition, which "isolates" those aspects by considering them as separate. This mechanism corresponds to what the Buddhists define as "proliferation" (*papañca*).

On the other hand, emphasizing the fundamentally cognitive nature of the experience of this appearing explains how human cognition operates essentially through mechanisms of appropriation, which Husserl more properly described as "intentionality" [57]. The directing of attention toward an object or sign *x* implies an investment that "encompasses" the intended thing in an attempt to grasp its usefulness, which is the only possible way of conceiving a "something". The mechanism of possession is closely tied to that of desire (*chanda*), and for desire to be possible at all it is necessary that an object be present to the mind, generating a need in the one who intends it, to the point of desiring it. What we Husserlianly call "intentionality" [110] (p. 186) is nothing other than what Levman identifies as the process of "objectification of the 'world'" [73] (p. 29).

The texts attribute to discriminative thought (*vitakka*) the origin of desire (*vitakke sati chando hoti*) [DN 21], and discriminative thought is in turn determined by perceptual–conceptual proliferations (*papañcasaññāsaṅkhā*). This term forms a binomial together with *vicāra*, which Kalupahana translates as "initial thought" [82] (p. 42). It is significant that discriminative and initial thought must be surpassed by contemplative practice. Repeatedly, texts dealing with the foundations of contemplation affirm that, since the teaching of the Buddha lies beyond the logics of discriminative—and therefore linguistic—thought, it is to be considered "beyond logic" (*atakkāvacara*) or, in other words, "devoid of any conceptualizations" (p. 42).

The overcoming of the *vitakka*/*vicāra* binomial is closely linked to *jhāna* meditation [144], which has a fundamental role in the process of overcoming semiosis [90] (pp. 24–25). For this reason as well, Kalupahana recognizes that *vitakka*/*vicāra* may be identified as functions inherent to *vacīsaṅkhāra*, or "speech dispositions", that is, "the internal mechanism that connects language with consciousness" [82] (p. 43).

At this point what I wish to examine in conclusion of this section is the nature of *nāma* as referent. This indeed places this element on a level of particular importance, and it is in fact what constitutes the head of the compound *nāmarūpa*.

Peirce describes the relationship between first and second (representamen and object) as a relationship between agent and patient [CP 1.359], or between immediate consciousness of the thing and a "dead external" thing [CP 1.361]. These definitions are rather curious, in that they would describe the nominal entity, the representamen or *nāma*, as an active factor, capable of *determining*, and this extends to cognitive capacities in general.

Peirce in some way inherits the Greek conception of the *nominal* aspect of the sign (ὄνομα). Aristotle describes ὄνομα as that "sound" which "by convention signifies something without temporal specifications, and no part of which, taken separately, has any meaning in itself" (μὲν οὖν ἐστὶ φωνὴ σημαντικὴ κατὰ συνθήκην ἄνευ χρόνου, ἧς μηδὲν μέρος ἐστὶ σημαντικὸν κεχωρισμένον, cf. Aristotle, Περὶ Ἑρμηνείας 16a). The center of his definition is φωνὴ σημαντικὴ κατὰ συνθήκην, "sound which by convention signifies something", exactly as Saussure defines the relation between signifier (sound, acoustic image) and signified ("something", concept).

In Aristotle's definition, however, we notice that it is ὄνομα, and not merely σημεῖον, that has a semiotic value. The "name" is already in itself a "something" (a sign) that *stands* for something else, and precisely in its "standing for" it is a "sign": it is a determinate that is determinative of another determinate.

The name points back to the sign because the representamen always points back to an interpretant which is another sign [CP 2.228]. This type of sign can only limit itself to representing the "object" and saying something about it [CP 2.231].

DN 15 tells us that "name" is something seen as possessing "features, attributes, signs, and details through which the aggregate of phenomena" allows what is called "name" to be recognized (*ākārehi yehi liṅgehi yehi nimittehi yehi uddesehi nāmakāyassa paññatti hoti*). If these factors were not present, thus enabling the appearing of the nominal phenomenon, even form would not be given (*tesu ākāresu tesu liṅgesu tesu nimittesu tesu uddesesu asati api nu kho rūpakāye adhivacanasamphasso paññāyetha*).

Finally, it is in fact liberation from the whole set of names (*nāmakāyā vimutto*) that allows the sage (*munī*) to reach a condition in which he himself becomes unrecognizable (*atthaṃ paleti na upeti saṅkhaṃ*), free from conceptual determinations [Snp 5.7].

4.6. Conception of "Name" and the Problem of Referentiality

The importance of the conferral of the name is already found in the Vedic hymns, for example in ṚV 10.71.1 (*nāmadheyaṃ dadhānāḥ*), which links the name to the power of speech (*prathamaṃ vāco agraṃ*).

In this sense, although it is not a study centered on the semiotic value of the *nāmarūpa* binomial, the important work of Liudmila Olalde from 2014 should be mentioned, unfortunately available to date only in German [145]. In her careful examination of the concept of *nāmarūpa*, Olalde presents some extremely useful considerations on the archaeology of this binomial in the pre-Buddhist world, and also on its individual components (*nāma* and *rūpa*) even before they were associated to form a unitary force. In this investigation Olalde nevertheless presents data of interest to us, which I will summarize here.

According to Olalde's theory, the concept of *nāmarūpa* is used in the suttas to indicate the person as a whole. Prior to its analysis as an aggregate of principal factors, a *nāmarūpa* is first and foremost a "something" endowed with a "name" that is its own. Similarly, the theory according to which the originary use of *nāmarūpa* was that of indicating the psychophysical subject prior to the five aggregates is rather difficult to demonstrate, because it presupposes a development of the concept of the five aggregates in a later phase, and it also does not demonstrate that originarily *nāmarūpa* had no semiotic implication (something clearly refuted by the texts). What is certainly true is that the five aggregates describe the psychophysical subject—they are in fact an incontrovertible synonym of it [146]. There is no strong evidence supporting the idea that *nāmarūpa* previously fulfilled this function.

The formal aspect of *rūpa* is understood as the set of organic factors that constitute a "body", or a "something" physical in general, sometimes called *Körper* by Olalde [145] (p. 70), to which a *nāma* proper to it is associated: "a body that has a proper name, i.e., a person" [145] (p. 156). This is an interpretation that is, however, too clear-cut and does not take into account the fact that already in the earliest texts in which *nāmarūpa* is mentioned, it is not used at all to indicate a person, but rather a principle *through which* the experience (or better, the cognition) of a person is directed, like is described in the mechanism of implication (1.) *seeing through name-form* → (2.) *knowing accordingly to name-form*, that is, (1.) *passaṃ naro dakkhati nāmarūpaṃ* → (2.) *disvāna vā ñassati tānimeva* [Snp 4.13]; or also what is described in AN 9.14: name-form is the basis (*nāmarūpārammaṇā*) *through which* thoughts arise (*kimārammaṇā purisassa saṅkappavitakkā uppajjanti*).

Certainly, the social function of the name as *Eigenname* ("proper name"), that is, a factor of identification of an individual as belonging to a group (*welcher als Erkennungszeichen für die Person und ihre Gruppenzugehörigkeit dient*) [145] (p. 4), is truly real. This is certainly confirmed also by texts such as Snp 4.13, but the point is that the identifying power of the name is already understood by virtue of a semiotic reasoning, which sees above all the binomial *nāmarūpa* as an action of semiosis that allows these mechanisms of identification.

In any case, the conceptions of name and form, before the two terms were combined, must certainly owe a great deal to the use that the Vedic world makes of these

terms. Here too, however, I find myself in disagreement with Olalde. According to her interpretation, *nāman* in the Veda has no linguistic value but merely an ontological one. It would have no value of designation but of mere identification: "Die Identität—und keine bloße Korrespondenz!—des Namens mit dem Namensträger sehr oft vorausgesetzt wird" [145] (p. 40).

But this argument applies equally well to Buddhism, which seems to treat the name as an object in itself. The fact that the correspondence between the thing designated and its nominal designation is arbitrary does not mean that the name is false and that "out there" there is a real object. On the contrary, the name acts as a thing, but it is its objective correspondence that is called into question: since semiosis creates "objects" without their having any correspondence with absolute reality, which is neither segmentable nor reducible to the identities it designates.

Olalde above all wishes to avert the reduction of *nāman* to concept [145] (p. 43), insisting that in the Veda *nāman* already indicates a "thing in itself", a real entity. This interpretation would seem amply refuted by all the circumstances in which *nāman* is employed with a clear function of designation, and this absolutely does not diminish its importance. Certainly, there is a greater correspondence between the act of naming and the creation of the thing in itself in the Veda, but *not* because it is created *ex nihilo* at the moment in which it is named (and therefore not because the name *is* the thing in itself), but because the name makes it manifest, evokes it, sections it from the original undifferentiated unity (see Appendix B). In the Vedas, "there is no creation from nothing. The 'non-being' (*asat*), placed at the beginning of the world, corresponds to chaos rather than to a true absence of matter" [147] (p. 3). The situation is very different from a perfect correspondence between name and entity.

From an ontological point of view, the "substance", or rather the *essence*, of the thing is already pre-existent. The name does nothing but identify a section of that continuum and confer upon it a sort of autonomy of its own (that this autonomy indicates its self-essence is something that the Buddhists will criticize), and therefore it makes no sense to speak of ontological correspondence with the name. Conversely, the Veda would recognize the necessity that every being have its own name, whereas the name is clearly a designation that groups similar objects under a common umbrella. Olalde herself recognizes that the term *nāman* is polysemic, oscillating between two poles: that of proper identification (*Eigenname*) and that of genus (*Gattungsname*). In the case of the discourse of the frogs, for example, Olalde justifies the clearly designatory use of *nāman* by saying that "the individuality of the frogs among themselves derives only from their different appearance, not from their names, which simply distinguish them from other animals or species" (*Die Individualität der Frösche untereinander ergibt sich nur daraus, daß sie anders aussehen, nicht aber aus ihrem Namen, der sie bloß von anderen Tieren bzw.*) [145] (p. 22). This unfortunately seems a rather weak justification for denying a use of the nominal function that clearly contradicts her theory.

The fact that in general the use of the name seems to indicate directly the thing in itself in the Vedic texts does not imply that the name as such is the thing in itself, and not a way to recognize and evoke it, since this is the common use that all civilizations have of the name. The importance of naming is to be attributed to the Vedic conviction that language has a power over the shaping of reality, and it is therefore natural that the name suffices in itself to evoke the thing, but this does not in any way imply that it creates it *ex nihilo* and therefore that the ontology of the thing is reducible to its name.

The confusion derives from the use of the proper name. If on the one hand the *Gattungsname* is indeed a collective that indicates a set: "frog", which encompasses various individuals, on the other hand it is true that the name is also used to indicate individuals

(*Eigenname*): "my" name is specific *to me*, just as the name of *Agni* indicates only and solely the god Agni. Does this mean that the very existence of Agni depends on his name, or that Agni is *the very name* "Agni"? This interpretation, the *Nāman als Daseinsmacht*, derives from the conviction that the name indeed persists beyond the death of the body. Or rather, the name accompanies the deceased and is his guarantee of access to another world:

> Mit *nāman* ist hier also keinesfalls die abstrakte Vorstellung, die wir von einem Verstorbenen als Erinnerung behalten, gemeint. Vielmehr tritt der Name hier wieder als Bestandteil der Person auf, und zwar als der einzige, mit dem der Verstorbene in eine andere Welt gelangt. [145] (p. 44)

However, this is also stated in the Buddhist texts (*rūpaṃ jīrati maccānaṃ, nāmagottaṃ na jīrati*) [SN 1.76], and it certainly does not mean that the name is permanent or an autonomous ontological substance. The mention of the persistence of the name and of the lineage after the death of the body rather indicates its distinct semiotic function, since the sign is associated with bodies in order to designate them, and can be disassociated from them and used for something else.

The fact that in the Vedic conception the name follows the deceased into the world of the dead does not imply that the name *is* the deceased.

> *Nāmarūpa* könnte sich hier sowohl auf die eigene Person bzw. Identität als auch auf Objekte beziehen. Ersteres würde bedeuten, daß man von Körper und Namen Besitz ergreift, d. h. sich mit ihnen identifiziert, und um deren Nicht-Existenz—wohl nach dem Tode—trauert. [145] (p. 121)

If anything, the Vedic texts are concerned with reaffirming the ontological autonomy of the deceased, and therefore for this reason the name, which is his identifying characteristic, the indication of this autonomy of his, follows him, but this certainly does not imply that the name corresponds perfectly to the individual. In this sense as well, the critique directed at Hamilton [145] (p. 45) turns out to be rather weak. Olalde rejects the conceptual nature of *nāman* without, however, providing a convincing alternative explanation.

Although the conception of the name in the Vedic world is undoubtedly linked to ontological questions, differently from Buddhism, in which the name is understood as a mere signifier or *representamen* (see Figure 3), the reason for this cannot be attributed to an ontological correspondence of the name: in no passage of the texts analyzed does there seem to be any suggestion that the name "creates" the thing, but rather that it evokes it, that it removes it from the undetermined (and indeed, by determining it, *designates* it unequivocally), that it allows it to appear as such, but not that it confers ontological essence upon it: the latter is drawn from a pre-existing substratum (see Appendix B).

Nevertheless, it is worth recalling that the semiotic nature of the name does not mean that it is a sign in its full sense. The name remains, even in this consideration, a signifier. Here we wish to avoid the phenomenon of *glissement* that Saussure described with a certain irritation and that he observed in relation to the sign, namely the "tendance naturelle à prendre le sens de *signifiant*" [148] (p. 87). We certainly do not wish to lapse into *glissement*, and yet we will employ the conception of the name as a "nominal sign", that is, as an incomplete part of the sign in its totality as semiotically understood. Nevertheless, for us the "sign" is also any "determinate", on the basis of the definition we derive from reading the Buddhist texts, and therefore, however incomplete, the name is already a "sign", just as the conceptual datum and the sensorialized actual datum are.

5. Fourth Idea: The Perceptive-Sensory Circuit (*saññāvedayita*)

That there exists a direct relationship between the perceptual process and psychosemiotics is a fact that in itself would not need demonstration. Interestingly, the Buddhists con-

struct a system in which this relationship is explained and contextualized within the aims of contemplative practice, namely the cessation (*nirodha*) of the entire process.

The *saññāvedayita* binomial appears only in relation to the concept of cessation (*nirodha*). Nevertheless, the pairing constituted by *saññā* + *vedayita* is very fascinating. The term *vedayita* indicates "what is felt", and in itself is a derivative of *vedanā*, "sensation". To pair "perception" (*saññā*) and "sensation" (*vedanā*) is curious for a fundamental reason: both these factors are part of the system of the five aggregates (*pancupādānakkhandha*). This system defines a basic process of every system, whether physical, psychological, or linguistic. Whatever appears as a certain "determinate", whether sign or phenomenon, is constituted by a set of five fundamental factors, and thus if subjected to analysis one can identify this stratification.

5.1. Perception and Sensation in the Five Aggregates

The five layers begin from a fundamental actual core, in this case also simply called *rūpa*, representing however all possible actual data. Starting from an actual core, sensation (*vedanā*) processes the corresponding sensory datum. The binomial *rūpa-vedanā* thus constitutes a sort of primary basis of the process. This core is still undefined; it is pure undetermined quality. It may be the shape of an object, its color, and so on, but this shape is still pure undetermined quality, not yet recognizable through a precise identifier. To say "red", "blue", "square", "cylindrical" already means to have developed a subsequent phase of identification, which associates to that pure primary quality a secondary element of perception.

The percept (*saññā*) is the third layer. As we know, perception is in some way a "semantic" force [149], in the sense that it attributes a sense of *recognizability* to the thing: it organizes the sensory datum on the basis of its resemblance to ideal prototypical models, allowing for identification. This phase is not yet true discernment, but a mode of associative, synthetic knowing (*saṃ* + *ñā*).

If therefore with the process *rūpa-vedanā* we are in a dimension of pure primary undetermined quality, with the intervention of perception (*saññā*) we enter a *secondary* phase, based on *recognition*: "*saññā* processes the bare contact and the result of the bare contact (that is, *vedanā*) in order to transform such a result into an actual sensory 'information'; that is, into a datum that is so made available to the consciousness" [150] (p. 698). This second phase is characterized by dualism, a dualism in which the element of secondness necessarily positions itself in relation to an element of firstness, with respect to which it is "second".

Always part of the process of secondness is the fourth aggregate: *saṅkhāra*. This is a complex term that indicates composite constructs (*saṃ* + *kar*), referring to ideas, mental constructs, and volitions. The term *saṅkhāra* indeed possesses a volitional, desiderative nuance, and is used to indicate the result of the "conceptual" elaboration (*saṃ* + *kar*) that it constitutes. In other words, it is the beginning of a process of intentionality: now that the "thing" perceived has been traced back to the percept, its fundamental "values" are recognized, which are its eidetic *correlates*. A thing is in fact not devoid of values relating to its usability in the human world, and these values are perceived together with the ideas correlated to it.

As Husserl writes, whatever appears to us structured in a certain way, including its variation in time, space, and physical forms, is nothing but a series of contingent determinations (*zufällig*) of relative states. Such contingencies are factual data, but correlated with necessity ("Zufälligkeit und Tatsächlichkeit… daß sie korrelativ bezogen ist auf eine Notwendigkeit") [114] (p. 12).

The "value predicates" (*Wertprädikate*) also contribute to this process of correlation that allows us to recognize the usefulness, the role, the (socioculturally determined) identity of the "thing" we are perceiving. It is precisely in the role of value predication that the action of *saññā* lies. Such perceptual–predicative processes constitute that set of recognizable data that populate our "environment":

> la prédication ne décrit pas des interactions dans le monde mais présentifie et ordonne le couplage des individus avec leur entour, par la constitution sémiotique de leur monde propre (l'Umwelt selon Üexküll). [151] (p. 45)

The notion of "environment" (*Umwelt*), that biosemiotics has provided us [152], is fundamental for understanding the relation between perception and language [153,154]. In other works I have proposed comparing the idea of *Umwelt* with that of *loka* [20] (pp. 8–9), since the constitution of *loka* is described precisely starting from the process of development of six consciousnesses, based on the six principal sensory-actual relations.

$$bāhirāni\ āyatanāni \overset{phassa}{\leftrightarrow} ajjhattikāni\ āyatanāni \rightarrow lokassa\ samudaya$$

According to Husserl, the *Umwelt* is not merely the physical space surrounding the subject but is more precisely that surrounding area of which the subject is conscious: it is a cognitive dimension as it exists as such only insofar as the subject "knows" of it (*sondern nur soweit sie von ihr „weiß"*), inasmuch as they grasp it through their field of perception (*Erfassungsbereich*), and posit it, or when they are conscious of it as something given in their horizon of existence (*Daseinshorizont*), which is ready to be apprehended (*vorhanden*) [110] (p. 186).

This interaction between actual organs and sensory organs is always described as an interaction between two dimensions. The texts indicate in fact as "external" (*bahiddha*) everything that pertains to actual data, while as "internal" (*ajjhatta*) everything that pertains to sensory data. This oscillation between external and internal, which constitutes the foundation of consciousness processes, is also what constitutes the "world" (*loka*), or the environment (*Umwelt*), exactly as in biosemiotic theory [155–157].

5.2. The Role of the Biosemiotic Circuit

In Snp 1.9 also it is said that the world "is arisen in six" (*chasu loko samuppanno*), and because of grasping these six, the world is troubled sixfoldly (*channameva upādāya, chasu loko vihaññati*). It is no coincidence that the texts insist on the necessity of detachment from the entirety of the world (*sabbaṃ lokaṃ visaṃyutto*).

Dhp 167 speaks to us of the consequences of wrong views (*micchādiṭṭhiṃ*), describing them as what "perpetuate the world" (*siyā lokavaḍḍhano*), and therefore in Dhp 170 it is said: "regard the world as a bubble, or a mirage, so that the king of death does not see you" (*yathā pubbuḷakaṃ passe, yathā passe marīcikaṃ; evaṃ lokaṃ avekkhantaṃ, maccurājā na passati*).

The idea of the world as a "bubble" is also present in biosemiotics. Uexküll indeed describes the world (*Umwelt*) of sentient beings as *Seifenblase* [158] (p. 75). In SN 12.44, as well as in SN 35.107 and in a more poetic form in SN 35.82, it is said that the world (*loka*) is what is "broken", playing on the expression *lujjati* ("is broken", "canceled", "to wear away") and its resemblance to *loka* ("world"). This wordplay would have been apparent to speakers of Indo-Aryan dialects, as the verb *lujjati* ($\sqrt{luj}$) [159] (p. 42) is phonetically similar to *loka* ($\sqrt{lok}$-) [71] (p. 906). Also for this reason the good meditator is one who is "dwelling on the non-self of the six inner and outer sensory fields" (*chasu ajjhattikabāhiresu āyatanesu anattānupassī viharati*).

In short, to put it in Husserl's terms, the world is what for various reasons is "experienceable" (*erfahrbar*) [114] (p. 102). This condition of experienceability is precisely what conveys the expression *saññāvedayita*.

Once the thing is fully identified in its fundamental aspects (felt through the senses, associated with its ideal identity through perceptions, and recognized in its fundamental correlates through intention), we enter a third level, which is its full discernment. The fifth aggregate, *viññāṇa*, is a form of discriminating knowledge (*vi* + *ñā*), whose task is to put the various "things" of the world into *relation* in order to emphasize their difference. The value of thirdness is therefore given by the contextuality of the thing: object *x* is not object *y*, which is not object *z*, and vice versa. Discernment creates a gap between *x*, *y*, and *z*, just as it distinguishes each thing based on its fundamental *value*.

It should be specified, as Kalupahana notes, that the term *viññāṇa* does indeed indicate consciousness, but that the latter is conceived by the Buddhists as a process that "involves analysis, discrimination or distinguishing", being a term composed of *vi*– "divide" and *ñā* "know" [82] (p. 38). Moreover, the term *paññā* is also treated in a similar way, and differently from its Sanskrit equivalent *prajñā* understood as "wisdom" in the higher sense. In the Nikāya, and in particular in MN 43, it is said that *paññā* and *viññāṇa* are the same thing (*ime dhammā saṃsaṭṭhā, no visaṃsaṭṭhā*), which does not mean that they are identical (otherwise they would not have two terms) but rather that, as Kalupahana hypothesizes [82] (p. 39), they are part of a common process.

Both involve cognitive processes (*ñā*), of which *paññā* represents the "objective" aspect, which is reached "with wisdom". Part of the cognitive processes involving the root *ñā* is also *saññā*. This term is found in a particular relationship with *viññāṇa*. As stated, *saññā* is a type of synthetic knowledge, in that it "puts together" (*saṃ*), and in doing so, knows (*ñā*). It may also be a form of associative knowledge, and it is interesting when compared with *viññāṇa* where the prefix *vi-* indicates the opposite action: divisive-discriminating.

In a previous work [149] (p. 19), I had hypothesized that *viññāṇa* and *saññā* alternated as two parts of the cognitive process, one cognitive and the other perceptual, and I had coined the expression SPLIT/SPLICE to signal how the two phases proceeded in unison. On the one hand, cognition discriminates, separates A from B, while on the other, perception assimilates, associating to the sensory data the correlates or percepts.

Kalupahana also speaks of "synthetic knowledge" [82] (p. 39) in the case of *saññā*, and recognizes its synchronous functioning with *viññāṇa*: "In this process of comparison and synthesis, the object becomes more and more delineated" (*ibid*.). What results from the split/splice mechanism is the tracing of "boundaries". This is, for Kalupahana, a "need" of language: "Distinguishing things is important for cognition, synthesis is needed when the content of cognition has to be placed in context, and distinction is again necessary when trying to determine the truth of the content of cognition" (p. 40).

Within this system of the five aggregates, it is therefore possible to create different types of groupings. The first type is that proposed by the Buddhists themselves, who indicate sensation, perception, and eidetic-volitional constructs as part of the cognitive factors (*cetasika*) [146] (p. 673), separated from the head and tail of the aggregation process, which instead are part of a fundamental cyclic dynamic: *viññāṇa* is in fact not only the outermost layer of the aggregates but, precisely by virtue of this, it is also the one that constantly interacts with the "world", and thus enters into "contact" (*phassa*) with actual data (*rūpa*), constantly triggering the aggregative cycle.

Another way of grouping the five aggregates is according to their fundamental function. As we said, actual data and the corresponding sensation constitute a first sensory phase, of feeling. The second group concerns the volitional aspect, which brings together

the phases of perception and eidetic association, in which value correlates also arise. Finally, consciousness or discernment is a phase of full knowing.

This type of grouping is inspired by a classification that Peirce himself formulates in relation to the three fundamental categories of human experience. Knowing these three categories will be essential for us in Sections 6 and 7, where I will propose the semiotic reading of some fundamental ideas of "sign" in the Pāli texts.

According to Peirce's theory, in fact, every form of human experience is characterized by three fundamental aspects. These three categories also describe, as we have seen in Section 4.5, the process of semiosis. The sign is indeed at the center of a mechanism of reciprocal relations based on three fundamental semiotic actors.

Human experience, too, can be described in three fundamental aspects. The aspect of firstness describes what is unique, initial, ancient, original, spontaneous, and free [CP 1.357], without a second: it is pure possibility [CP 1.25] and indeterminate and immediate quality [CP 1.531]. At the very moment one thinks one has grasped it, one loses it [CP 1.357]. Its actualization is already secondness [CP 1.24]. The "tableness" of a table, its "squareness", the brownness, the smothness of its surface, are unique and unrepeatable aspects [CP 1.418] (there are no two perfectly identical smothness), and therefore also the category, however undefined, of "tableness" or of "smoothness" of its surface, are already aspects of a perception that thus makes firstness slip away and reduces it to a relational form with a second, which indeed shifts immediate sensoriality into a perceptual–categorical dimension of secondness.

Even without having the categories, we can already identify the similarity of two sensory experiences, but in doing so we place them in a perceptual dimension, of secondness. Even more so is secondness that which begins to conceptualize, and for this reason it necessarily implies firstness [CP 1.358; 1.528].

From the point of view of cognitive experience, Peirce thus distinguishes firstness as that which is pre-categorical "feeling", "sensible quality" [CP 1.304; 1.422; 1.424], while secondness is experience [CP 1.321], resistance [CP 1.322], recognizing the mere fact [CP 1.427].

The aspect of knowing is what Peirce defines as thirdness. Thirdness is the dimension that we might call "social" or "cultural". It refers to the role of the interpretant in semiosis processes, and is therefore the third element that intervenes to confer a precise meaning upon secondness [CP 1.343; 1.345; 1.541]. This meaning is "mediation" [CP 1.26; 1.356], it is what places the sign within a system of relations and shared values that interpret it based on the arbitrariness of a collectivity. Thirdness is the dimension of norms, laws, and conventions [CP 1.420].

5.3. Feeling, Willing, Knowing

Now, for Peirce the primary function of the sign is that of knowing and recognizing an object [CP 2.231]. From here Peirce develops an interesting cognitive theory based on the three fundamental categories of experience. According to the summary made by Knight [160] (p. 86), these are defined as follows:

Firstness: feeling, sensation;

Secondness: willing, volition;

Thirdness: knowing, cognition.

These cognitive functions stratified according to the three fundamental categories provide us with a development of the process that leads from the experience of a pure quality to its "recognition" in cognitive terms, which seems to perfectly mirror the system of the five aggregates: firstness is represented by *rūpa-vedanā*, which is what Peirce considers

the dimension of feeling/sensation; secondness is represented by the volitional dimension of *saña-saṅkhāra*; thirdness is the cognitive level, represented by *viññāṇa*. Even better, in MN 43 these three categories (sensory quality, perception–volition, and cognition) are presented perfectly in order, and their relationship of mutual conditionality is also explained: "you perceive what you feel, and you cognize what you perceive" (*vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vijānāti*). For this reason too the text tells us that sensation, perception, and consciousness (*vedanā yā ca saññā yañca viññāṇaṃ*) are not separate, but mixed together (*saṃsaṭṭhā, no visaṃsaṭṭhā*).

We come to the third interpretative possibility, which is provided again by the Pāli texts. According to this idea, perception and sensation constitute a particular binomial, *saññāvedayita*. This term brings together the second and the third aggregate (indeed, first the third and then the second), and indicates what must be *overcome* in the course of a very important eight-stage contemplative exercise, namely the eight *jhāna*s [161]. We find *saññāvedayita* always in relation to *nirodha* (cessation), which indicates to us that it is part of a process, but why precisely perception and sensation are paired to indicate it is a question difficult to resolve. We do, however, have some clues that help us.

In the context of the meditation of the eight *jhāna*s, for example, the cessation of the perception–sensation group (*saññāvedayitanirodha*) is what must ensue after the overcoming of the dimensions (*āyatana*s) from 1 to 4. *Jhāna* meditation is based on the progressive overcoming (*samatikkamā*) of a series of "dimensions", which are constituted by different ways of the formation of "worlds". What defines the world we conventionally inhabit, socioculturally determined, with its norms and conventions, encompasses four types of formal dimensions (contemplated in the respective formal meditations, *rūpa-jhāna*) organized through the perceptual–sensory force (*saññāvedayita*), which depends on the formal perceptions (*rūpasaññāna*) [144].

The ultimate goal of this exercise is the cessation of perception and sensation (*saññāvedayitanirodha*). We will not explore *jhāna*s 5 to 8 because this would take us off topic, so I refer to a previous work where I analyzed the psychosemiotic value of the exercise [90].

The overcoming of the *saññāvedayita* dimension is mentioned in several texts such as DN 16; SN 6.15, 16.9, 48.40, 54.8; DN 33 and 34; as well as SN 36.11, where it is described in terms of cessation (*saññāvedayitanirodhaṃ samāpannassa saññā ca vedanā ca niruddhā honti*). It is also cited in other texts such as SN 14.11, 36.15, 36.19, 41.6.

In all cases, these are meditations intended to *overcome* (by making it cease) this mechanism. That this binomial has an eminently semiotic value is also confirmed by Levman, who writes: "The highest meditation level, the cessation of feeling and perception (*saññāvedayitanirodha*), is attained by ceasing to form mental intentions and thoughts; as long as one continues to plan and aspire—which is at least in part, if not wholly a linguistic process—one remains in a conditioned state" [73] (p. 30).

5.4. The Psychosemiotic Function of saññāvedayita

The association between sensation and perception constitutes in fact the passage from the qualitative and pre-categorical dimension to the categorical one. Without the initial sensation, the association with the perceptual datum cannot take place, and perception is a beginning of the semanticization of the datum, a cataloging of it based on pre-constituted ideal models.

As stated in the *Addhasutta* [Iti 63], sentient beings perceive only what can be expressed, meaning by "expression" the vehicle of concepts allowed by language (*akkheyya-saññino sattā, akkheyyasmiṃ patiṭṭhitā*). The centrality of "communicability" is fundamental, and we learn that it is anchored precisely to the perceptual function: *akkheyya* + *saññī*, acquiring perception of what is expressible.

According to AN 6.63 perception is the fundamental requirement for constituting expression, and therefore precedes it [73] (p. 29). Moreover, perception is associated with specific sensory data, and for each of them it elaborates specific percepts. This process is called "perceptual diversification" (*saññānaṃ vemattatā*). We therefore have visual (formal), auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and eidetic percepts (*rūpasaññā*, *saddasaññā*, *gandhasaññā*, *rasasaññā*, *phoṭṭhabbasaññā*, *dhammasaññā*). The text finally evokes the necessity of knowing the path that leads to the cessation of percepts (*saññānirodhagāminī paṭipadā veditabbāti*).

Furthermore, MN 44 brings together perception and sensation as cognitive factors (*saññā ca vedanā ca cetasikā ete dhammā cittappaṭibaddhā*), without mentioning the eidetic constructs, as in other cases. Moreover, also MN 44 informs us that by obtaining the cessation of the perception–sensation binomial the meditator first obtains the cessation of the verbal process (*vacīsaṅkhāra*), and subsequently of the physical and cognitive ones (*saññāvedayitanirodhaṃ samāpajjantassa kho, āvuso visākha, bhikkhuno paṭhamaṃ nirujjhati vacīsaṅkhāro, tato kāyasaṅkhāro, tato cittasaṅkhāro*).

This explains not only the "linguistic" nature of percepts, but also the insistence of the texts on the necessity of stopping precisely the perceptions: "it is possible to go beyond this entire realm of perceptions" (*atthi imassa saññāgatassa uttariṃ nissaraṇaṃ*, MN 7).

The *saññāvedayita* binomial can indeed be considered, precisely as a proto-semiotic force, as the instance capable of tracing boundaries: it is a mechanism of organizing reality based on general principles. As we have seen, the true/false dualism is one of these. Perception is no less: in the texts it is described as a worldly factor (*loka*) that leads to believing in the existence of multiple truths (*saccāni*), which exist only in worldly configurations (*aññatra saññāya niccāni loke*, Snp 4.12). As Kalupahana writes: "it appears to be the mind that draws the *conceptual boundaries*, an all-important issue to experience and language" [82] (pp. 35–36). Indeed, as SN 1.62 states: "cognition guides the world, cognition drags it around, cognition is the only thing that has everything under its sway" (*cittena nīyati loko, cittena parikissati, cittassa ekadhammassa, sabbeva vasamanvagū*).

The final reason for the link between sensation and perception in the construct *saññāvedayita* depends on the fact that, probably, this function describes the capacity for the elaboration of abstract thought, which indissolubly binds sensory stimulus to somatic reaction *and* vice versa: just as the sensory stimulus leads to a perceptual reaction, percepts too lead to a sensory reaction.

Abstract thought is the capacity to evoke into attention an object for which the physical effectors are not present, and which therefore is not processed by the sensory organs in order to be traced back to its specific identity. In this case, the identity is directly evoked.

What is interesting about this process, which certainly played a key role in human evolution [162–166], is not only that it is characteristic of language, a system in which one can indeed evoke "something" through the name even if it is not present in its actual counterpart (the set of sensory data normally associated with it), but also the capacity to evoke sensory stimuli analogous to the evoked thing even in the absence of its actual organs.

An example will hopefully clarify what I mean. It will suffice to conduct a mental experiment by recalling experiences from our daily life. If we are hungry, or if we are in general lovers of a certain food, say strawberries, if we were to encounter strawberries, they would stimulate a physical reaction in us, activating hunger, salivation, the desire to eat chocolate.

In the same way, however, even in the absence of the object "chocolate", it will be enough for someone to evoke the name "chocolate" for the same identical processes to be triggered, as if the thing were actually before us.

In the first case, the stimulation of the actual data that correspond to the characteristics of chocolate made us recognize the object "chocolate", and with this triggered a somatic

reaction. In the second case, the opposite occurred: upon hearing the word "chocolate", the hungry person may almost smell it, recall its taste, the organoleptic qualities that stimulate the reaction of hunger, as if the chocolate were there, though it is not.

In short, not only is it true that the presence of actual data (form, color, smell, taste of chocolate) stimulates a psychological (recognizing "chocolate") and somatic (hunger or desire) reaction, but the opposite is also true: the evocation of a nominal datum stimulates sensory perception *as if* the thing were there. This is an extraordinary power of language that the Buddhist thinkers knew how to describe well.

As stated in Snp 4.2: "having fully understood perception, the sage, unattached to any possession, having removed the poisoned dart and living diligently, desires neither this world nor the next" (*saññaṃ pariññā vitareyya oghaṃ, pariggahesu muni nopalitto; abbūḷhasallo caramappamatto, nāsīsatī lokamimaṃ parañca*). As formulated in other texts, one who has surpassed the perceptual–sensory bond experiences a condition in which "there is no longer the world or that which we designate as the world" (… *natthi tattha loko vā lokapaññatti vā*) [SN 35.68].

At the end of the analysis of the functional circuit we understand why the Buddha distrusted language. Language is ultimately based on the senses, and for this reason, exactly like the senses, it is unreliable and constructs a deceptive reality. The genesis of consciousness from the sensory spheres [MN 18] means that the nature of consciousness, however sophisticated, is still the same as that of the sensory spheres, of which it is nothing but a complex re-elaboration of data.

We have specified that the goal of contemplative practice is a state indescribable in words, as it is beyond language, and therefore ineffable. Kalupahana already glimpses this idea of ineffability in the attainment of the condition of "neither-perception-nor-non-perception" (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*) which characterizes many contemplative practices [82] (p. 44) and which he describes as "the best candidate for ineffability". However, ineffability in itself is not sufficient, and for this reason it is the state of *saññāvedayitanirodha* that best describes the state of one who has "gone Beyond his strivings" completely (*ibid*.).

In any case, the ineffability of the absolute to which the meditator aspiring for liberation aims seems to echo Vedic reflections on the nature of the originary: "one cannot use the intellect to know the origin" [53] (p. 31). The type of mind that human beings have cannot conceive the originary because it reasons in a dual way, while, as ṚV 10.19 remarks, "the many arose from the One without duality" [53] (p. 31). The originary state is also described as "perfect fullness without manifestation". It is interesting to note how something that is perfectly full can also be understood as having no real content, hence the Buddhist reinterpretation of "emptiness" (*suñña*) as the culmination of meditation [27,28,167]. All these comparabilities between the Vedic world and early Buddhism have a historical reason and a real intellectual filiation that brings the figure of the Vedic *ṛṣi* closer to that of the *samaṇa*, especially on the themes of language and its relation to reality [63].

In Snp 3.6 it is said that one who has dispelled all perceptual or percept-based expressions is passed over the dark flood (*saññakkharasaññanissitāni, osaraṇāni vineyya oghatamagā*). Interesting is this reference to a certainly Vedic imagery of the dark originary waters (see Appendix B).

6. Thirdness, Secondness, Firstness: Meditation as Transcend Semiosis by Going Backwards

The proposal I intend to articulate in this section brings our exploration of Buddhist contemplative semiotics to its conclusion. Ideas 5 through 7 (Sections 6.1–6.4) concern three different interpretations of the concept of "sign".

Here too, the notion of sign we will adopt is that of Peirce, the only one capable of providing us with a triadic model, that is, one focused on three possible aspects of the sign.

Indeed, there does not exist a single way of being a "sign", which in our case means being a certain "determined". Since signs are above all *organizational functions of reality* and therefore, in the case of human constructs, also of everything concerning traditions, behaviors, cultures, societies, ways of communicating and, above all, of perceiving, Peirce identifies three fundamental levels through which these processes are organized.

In Section 5.3, we saw how, from the point of view of human experience, these three levels can be identified as felling (the primary qualitative–sensory core, or firstness), willing (the formation of the secondary perceptual–intentional layer, or secondness), and knowing (full cognition, the outermost level where mediation, interpretation, and normative order prevail, or thirdness). Corresponding to these three experiential levels are three semiotic functions. Since this is nothing other than the process of aggregation of phenomena and complex psychophysical constructs, we must understand the value of thirdness as the most external and thus the most superficial: that with which we constantly interact.

Meditative practice is grounded in processes of analyzing complex phenomena in search of their primary qualitative foundations, that is, that which is not susceptible to further analysis. A similar analytical process had been hypothesized also by Peirce, in the form of phaneroscopy [168,169]. Buddhist meditative exercise, however, is more than a simple theoretical activity; it is something that must be experienced firsthand. In the course of my analysis of the semiotic terms found in these texts I discerned an organizational model of three ideas of sign that is clearly comparable to that hypothesized by Peirce, and since the Buddhists' attitude toward these types of signs is always deconstructive, what emerged from my analysis was a true process in reverse, which, starting from the level of normative and sociocultural designation—the outermost conventionality—proceeded all the way to the level of pure pre-determined quality, the sensory-actual core that forms the basis of the aggregative processes that then determine the semiotic (and cognitive) unit.

6.1. Fifth Idea: Designation (paññatti) and the Relational Function of Thirdness

Previously (Section 3.3) we encountered the notion of *paññatti*. What I wish to propose in this section is not only an explanation of the term *paññatti* within the context of Buddhist linguistic thought, but also how it forms part of a semiotic conception comparable to Peirce's system of the three categories [124,125,135], together with the last two linguistic notions we will explore.

The heart of the entire psychosemiotic process is the function of "designation". A sign is something "designated", that is, something "determined"—inserted within a system of cognitions—and as such made known or knowable [170].

This function of designation is, as we have seen, called *paññatti* in the Pāli texts. This term will assume a crucial importance in the Abhidhamma, where it constitutes one of the fundamental descriptors of psychosemiotic processes. The term indicates any designated entity, in contrast with that which is the essence and fundamental constituent of a phenomenon (*dhamma*), that is, something no longer further analyzable. The study of Abhidhammic conceptions from the starting point of semiotics is only just beginning [51], and we cannot dwell on the Abhidhamma so as not to prolong the discussion excessively. However, it will be appropriate to deepen our examination of Abhidhammic themes as well, since they considerably broaden semiotic conceptions.

In the suttas it is clear that this term is used simply to indicate a designation. Yet such designation is infused with all the evaluative and conceptual correlates that a given culture attributes to a certain sign. For example, someone "designated as foremost" will

be defined *aggapaññattiyo* [AN 4.14]. In this context, the text is not simply saying that the person is "called foremost"; it is not a mere terminological indication, but something that together with the term carries the evaluative correlate.

DN 15 indicates the existence of the nominal object as something "designated", or rather, that designated entity which is the nominal object (*nāmakāyassa paññatti*), a way of perfectly understanding a "sign".

However, as we will have the opportunity to see, these texts seem to indicate the existence of three different types of sign, depending on the evaluative dimension to which they belong.

In other words, *paññatti* indicates that semiotic aspect which corresponds to thirdness, that is, which is normative, evaluative, social. Yet DN 15 also mentions *nimitta*, and the *nimitta* is something fundamental for determining designation, the "sign of name-form" (*nāmarūpassa paññatti*). The *nimitta* is placed together with the features, the characteristics (*ākārehi*, *liṅgehi*), and the details (*uddesehi*) that determine the name, the form, the name-form, and their designation, that is, their manifestation as determined signs. The term *paññatti* may also indicate a description, something that contributes to recognizing what is "determined".

According to Saussure, "notre point de vue constant sera de dire que non seulement la signification mais aussi le signe est un fait de conscience pur" [94] (p. 19). Likewise, this connects the function of the designated with the issue, seen previously, of the construction of "opinions" (*micchādiṭṭhi*), which are based on dogmatic constructs of reality and falsity and are also at the foundation of human experience. Saussure is no less ready to acknowledge this issue as inherently present within the very function of designation: "nommer un objet, ce n'est pas autre chose que d'invoquer un point de vue A déterminé" (p. 23). This *determination* of A, through the signification "A", contributes to constructing what for Peirce is the dimension of thirdness, that is, the dimension of mediation, of norms, of conventions.

This "mundane" dimension must be understood as a dimension inhabited by subjects capable of performing designations. The signs of the third category—that is, norms and conventions—constitute the basis for mediation among different subjects. This mundane dimension, characterized by the action of *paññatti*, is what Husserl calls *Umwelt*. For him, indeed, the "subject" is such only as subject of an environmental world (*als Subjekt einer Umwelt*) [110] (p. 185). For the Buddhists, it is the cognitive process that leads from the sensory organ to the elaboration of the actual datum and to the development of the corresponding consciousness that constructs what we call "world" (*loka*), and that makes it possible to "render the world designated" or "known" (*loko vā lokapaññatti*) [SN 35.68]. In this sense, *lokapaññatti* is also the "sign" of the world, the system of designation that renders the world known. This process of designation, of constructing the mundane sign *paññatti*, is the same process that, starting from an indistinct nebula of pre-determined meaning, allows the determination of parts of it, severed from the undifferentiated continuum of sense, so as to be framed within a "determined" semiotic boundary: an act of semiotic "designation" (*paññatti*).

Husserl describes something very similar: an *unbestimmte Umgebung*, the infinite world that transcends the limits of our perceptions as a "floating of the signifying" that leads to a "floating of meanings", but also as an "empty dark nebula" (*ein leerer Nebel*) that is "populated by uncertainty" (*der dunkeln Unbestimmtheit bevölkert*).

> Das aktuell Wahrgenommene, das mehr oder minder klar Mitgegenwärtige und Bestimmte (oder mindestens einigermaßen Bestimmte) ist teils durchsetzt, teils umgeben von einem *dunkel bewußten Horizont unbestimmter Wirklichkeit* […].

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> Im allgemeinen ist der Erfolg aber ein anderer: ein leerer Nebel der dunkeln Unbestimmtheit bevölkert sich mit anschaulichen Möglichkeiten oder Vermutlichkeiten, und nur die „Form" der Welt, eben als „Welt", ist vorgezeichnet. Die unbestimmte Umgebung ist im übrigen unendlich. Der nebelhafte und nie voll zu bestimmende Horizont ist notwendig da. [114] (p. 57)

We find the very same metaphor expressed in Saussure's *Cours*, as we saw in Section 4.

At this point, however, a problem arises. These mechanisms, like every semiotic form of experience, are considered the basis of human beings' suffering (*dukkha*). The construction of a conventional world populated by arbitrary designations is nothing but an illusion that reduces the vastness of possible meaning into interpretations that are nevertheless asserted as truth.

The insistence with which the texts promote the overcoming of every linguistic mechanism confirms that contemplative practice is focused on the cessation of semiosis. In the case of the dimension of designations—that is, the "world" (*loka*)—we must refer to the numerous texts that promote a veritable cessation of the world itself (*lokassa nirodha*), or an "end of the world" (*lokassa atthaṅgama*, *lokanta*, *lokassa anta*, and various other terms). The texts on the "end of the world" [50] (p. 58) [46] (pp. 108–20) [171] (p. 145) do nothing other than describe the "world" (*loka*) as that process which emerges from the functional circuit: the interaction between sensory organs and actual organs and the arising of the corresponding consciousness (for example, *cakkhuñca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ*). The "end of the world" is nothing other than the cessation of this very mechanism, and thus the prevention of the arising of a discriminating consciousness (*… ayaṃ kho… lokassa atthaṅgamo*).

6.2. Sixth Idea: Sign (nimitta) and Secondness

While the semiotic function of *paññatti* is fundamentally relational in nature, with *nimitta* we confront a semiotic idea very close to what for Peirce is the *representamen*. Cousins defines *nimitta* as "the object of meditation, of whatever kind" [172] (p. 5). At least, this is the sense he attributes to the early literature. It is important for us to focus on the "whatever kind" nature of *nimitta*.

The semiotic dimension of *nimitta* is that of true secondness. In semiotic terms, this function translates into operations that, depending on the context, may be defined as iconicity, indexicality, or symbolism. In many respects, the function that *nimitta* most frequently assumes is precisely indexicality. In other words, *nimitta* may represent, depending on the context, the signs of the second correlate in Peirce's trichotomic theory.

For example, in DN 1 the "sign" indicates or designates the limbs (*aṅgaṃ nimittaṃ*) employed as a divinatory technique along with omenology, planetary sign reading, and various similar disciplines. Analogously, in DN 18 the "signs" are considered an index marking the advent of certain phenomena, "as indicated by the signs, the light and radiance that appear… since these are the premonitory signs of the appearance of Brahma, that is, the arising of light and radiance" (*yathā kho, mārisā, nimittāni dissanti, uḷāro āloko sañjāyati, obhāso pātubhavati… brahmuno hetaṃ pubbanimittaṃ pātubhāvāya yadidaṃ āloko sañjāyati obhāso pātubhavati*). Later it is explicitly stated "*just as indicated by the signs*" (*yathā nimittā dis-santi*). Again, Ud 6.1 uses the expression "*obvious indication*" and a "*clear sign*" (*oḷārike nimitte kayiramāne, oḷārike obhāse kayiramāne*).

If the *nimitta* possesses characteristics that make it significant, it is defined as an icon [CP 2.304], or rather, the icon is that sign which denotes an object by virtue of its characteristics [CP 2.247]. Whereas if the characteristics of the *nimitta* are determined by the object it denotes, this means that the *nimitta* is the "sign" of the existence of that object, and thus its function is indexical [CP 2.248]. In this regard, we may refer to texts such as DN 2 and DN

10: "when one knows a phenomenon with one's own mind, one is not distracted by signs and details" (*manasā dhammaṃ viññāya na nimittaggāhī hoti nānubyañjanaggāhī*). An iconic use of the sign/*nimitta* is also found in SN 35.95, in which, during *the meditative exercise*, one is asked to evoke a positive icon, "to focus on a positive sign" (*piyaṃ nimittaṃ manasi karoto*). Lastly, I mention the example of AN 10.72, which refers to *a meditative practice focused on the "beautiful icons" of something*, which is considered an obstacle ("thorn") for those instead meditating on ugliness (*asubhanimittānuyogaṃ anuyuttassa subhanimittānuyogo…*).

If instead it is by virtue of an arbitrary choice or a convention that the *nimitta* refers to a given object, then it corresponds to the Peircean idea of symbol [CP 2.249]. AN 3.102, for example, speaks three typologies of symbols (*tīṇi nimittāni*), saying that in contemplation one should focus on the symbol of unification, the symbol of discipline, and the symbol of equanimity (*kālena kālaṃ samādhi-nimittaṃ manasi kātabbaṃ, kālena kālaṃ paggahanimittaṃ manasi kātabbaṃ, kālena kālaṃ upekkhānimittaṃ manasi kātabbaṃ*). Again, AN 7.38 speaks of those who bear the symbol of darkness or of light (*kaṇhasukkasappaṭibhāgesu nimittaṃ*), naturally a symbol here representing something else, such as a moral judgment. All three of these aspects are derivations of the function of secondness, and correspond to various modes of employing the *nimitta* in the Buddhist texts [173] (pp. 31–32) [174] (p. 187) [90] (p. 4).

> These nuances seem to be preserved also in the Abhidhamma.
>
> The term *nimitta*, meaning 'mark/sign' in Pali and Sanskrit, is used in multiple contexts: omens, visions in dreams, and the visual/physical experiences of meditation are all referred to with this one term. [175] (p. 14)

The influence of the *nimitta*s on human life is equally pervasive. In certain respects, the basis of human perceptual processes is dominated by a series of *nimitta*s. To observe an object *x* means to attest it as a "sign". Closing one's eyes and evoking it in the mind is another sign, and even more abstract forms are concretized in the mind as "signs".

6.3. Transcending Secondness: From nimitta to animitta

The *nimitta*s populate our mind and coordinate our thoughts without our realizing it. To use Harvey's definition, a sign *nimitta* is any "delimited object of attention, that may, or should be taken as indicating something beyond itself or the general features of that to which it belongs" [173] (p. 33).

For this reason, one of the most important meditations of all bears precisely the name *animitta*, or "signlessness". The contemplative exercise proposed has as its goal the attainment of an asemic liberation of cognitions (*animittā cetovimuttiyo*). In other words, to stop the action of signs in the influence they exert on human cognitions. The state of "liberation of cognition free from signs" (*animittāya cetovimuttiyā samāpattiyā*) is achieved in two main phases [MN 43]:

1. Not focusing on any sign (*sabbanimittānañca amanasikāro*);
2. Focusing on the condition of signlessness (*animittāya ca dhātuyā manasikāro*).

This type of meditation is presented in various ways in the texts, sometimes in association with different exercises. It is not my intention to examine these contemplative exercises in detail, having already done so in another work [90], but rather to reflect on the asemic nature of the condition of signlessness (*animitta*), and on why it is so important. Furthermore, I intend to advance the hypothesis that the condition of *animitta* is essentially analogous to that of *suññatā*, or "emptiness". The two terms would in fact be understood as synonyms, and both would essentially involve attaining a liberation from semiosic processes.

My proposal is based on an association made by the Buddhist texts themselves: in Dhp 92 we read that those who do not accumulate goods and who reflect attentively on their food also experience the condition of liberation of the mind that is "emptiness and signlessness" (*suññato animitto ca vimokkho yesaṃ gocaro*). It is therefore the Buddhists themselves who associate emptiness and signlessness (*suññato-animitto*), and it is easy to understand why if we observe the way in which the concept of "emptiness" is employed in these texts, always in relation to a condition of "absence" of objectual determination, and therefore the absence of the object's influence on cognitive experience. The environment is not "emptied" of objects because they annihilate themselves, but because they are no longer "distinct" through the psychosemiotic force that "determined" them as "signs". For this reason, the condition of emptiness is likewise the condition of signlessness.

Necessary mention must also be made of those texts that evoke a condition of supramundane attainment achieved through emptiness (*lokuttarā suññatāppaṭisaṃyuttā*) [AN 5.79, SN 20.7 & 55.53].

Meditative exercises that employ the evocation or manipulation of certain *nimitta*s are still practiced today in the South Asian world, particularly in relation to traditions such as *Borān Kammaṭṭhāna*, which are strongly inspired by the Abhidhamma.

These meditations make use of mental operations inspired by actual linguistic processes. For example, a specific "sign" (*nimitta*) is evoked and visualized in order to serve as the substitute for a particular cognitive factor (*cetasika*) that the meditator wishes to purify: "The use of substitution in the representation of *cetasika* by *nimitta* or letter symbols might draw on a certain similarity between substitute and substituted" [176] (p. 125). The exercise of "substitution", as Crosby notes, is one of the many examples of "grammatical" inspiration in the contemplative process. In this case, the inspiration is *lopa*, the grammatical principle of deletion (p. 123). Mention must also be made of the use of "letter syllables in *borān* practice", which reflects a conception of language, and specifically of Pāli, which, Crosby writes, is conceived as "potent in a way that is different from ordinary language. All language is potent in that it has the power to convey meaning" (p. 126).

The general principle of contemplative exercises that involve the use of *nimitta* may be summarized as follows: the "signs" are evoked, manipulated, and used to convey a certain "effective" action. The *nimitta*s may therefore be a particular way in which the meditator "directly experiences all meditation objects" [177] (pp. 211–212).

There are then mentions of different types of contemplative sign such as the *uggaha nimitta* and the *paṭibhaga-nimitta* (p. 213):

> … a *nimitta* is an eidetic image, seen with the practitioner's internal/mental eye-faculty, and when developed typically has the form of a coloured sphere of light or crystal.
>
> The *uggaha nimitta* is restricted in size and brightness and does not change throughout each meditation session. The *paṭibhāga nimitta* however is qualitatively different, being both brighter and clearer but also capable of change during the course of the meditation. Reflecting the quality, i.e., purity and concentration, of the practitioner's mind, the *paṭibhāga nimitta* can change colour, become intensely brighter and expand in size during the meditation session, as the mind is purified. One can only gain access concentration (*upacāra samādhi*) with the *uggaha nimitta*, whereas full absorption (*jhāna*) or absorption concentration (*appanā samādhi*) occurs with the *paṭibhāga nimitta*.

Attention should be paid here to the process of the progressive rarefaction of the sign and to the "chromatic" residue as a more rarefied or purified form of the sign, since this aspect will be useful in the next section.

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In general, a certain luminous sign that represents the purifying action is "incorporated" during a visualization exercise in which the luminous sign-*nimitta* is introjected into oneself in order to acquire the beneficial action that that sign conveys and determines [176] (pp. 155–157), something that already occurs, though in a slightly different form, in texts such as AN 3.103 (*adhicittamanuyutto bhikkhu kālena kālaṃ samādhinimittaṃ manasi karoti, kālena kālaṃ paggahanimittaṃ manasi karoti, kālena kālaṃ upekkhānimittaṃ manasi karoti, taṃ hoti cittaṃ muduñca kammaniyañca pabhassarañca, na ca pabhaṅgu, sammā samādhiyati āsavānaṃ khayāya*).

These meditations do nothing other than echo the attainment of what in other contexts is described as the purest and most absolute emptiness (*parisuddhaṃ paramānuttaraṃ suññataṃ*) [MN 121], through a process of stripping away the "determined", that is, breaking down the elements which, by aggregating, lead to their appearing, and in doing so approaching that undetermined essence that is one step before the undifferentiated totality—precisely "the void", the absence of semiotic determination (*animitta*).

6.4. Seventh Idea: What Can Be Behold Directly (kasiṇa) and the Sheer Quality of Firstness

We arrive at the last semiotic conception in our analysis. I have chosen to focus on a concept that, within the Suttapiṭaka, has been little studied. The reason is the rather nebulous nature of the concept in question, which, however, gains greater clarity when compared with contemplative exercises and traditions of unquestionably long history that originate precisely from these texts and their interpretations.

In Peirce's system, the dimension of firstness is characterized by pure possibility of being in and of itself [CP 1.25]. Describing this aspect from the point of view of human experience is very difficult. It cannot pertain to cognition, since cognition belongs to the sphere of knowing and of thirdness, and is therefore too socioculturally determined and tied to processes of mediation. It cannot pertain to perception, since perception is already semantized, but it pertains to sensory experience understood in its pre-categorical sense, thus before it determines the "felt" quality in a specific percept.

Firstness is what concerns pure qualities or immediate sensations [160] (pp. 74–77), is present and immediate, "fresh and new" [CP 1.357], which makes it extremely difficult (indeed, impossible) to determine linguistically. The Buddhists, in my view, attempted to do so, though with difficulty. In many respects, the aim of meditative practice is to stop semiosic action, and in this I fully share D'Amato's claim: "Buddhism is directed toward the end of semiosis" [174] (p. 202). Yet the consequence of this liberation from semiotic systems is that the meditator progressively comes closer and closer to the pure essence of things—but this essence is unnamable, and every attempt to name it conceptualizes it again, reducing it to a word. The table-ness of the table, its smoothness, its brown-ness, are all essences that escape conceptualization, and thus the concepts of table-ness, smoothness, or brown-ness are terribly insufficient to describe it.

And yet, some kind of expedient must be found. Using language to transcend language is difficult, and this is also why meditative exercises so often employ metaphors and forms of symbolism that are not to be taken literally, but describe a "as if" that serves primarily to give an idea. In the concrete reality of meditation, only direct personal experience of the process can make one fully understand what is meant.

The least semantized level of the sign, its fundamental qualitative bases, is what most closely approaches the idea of firstness, and is also what, according to my theory, corresponds to the idea of *kasiṇa*.

For the moment let us begin from this assumption: a *kasiṇa* indicates an indistinct fundamental quality, a degree of firstness that is therefore at once a totality and an indeterminate, a fundamental constituent, something that remains as a residue from

a process of distillation or rarefaction of a more complex sign, a stripping down of its qualitative components.

Just as in the five aggregates the point of departure is always the qualitative–sensory datum (*rūpa-vedanā*), to which the perceptual–conceptual aspect (*saññā-saṅkhāra*) is then associated—and thus the semiotic—up to its mediation within a complex cognitive system (*viññāṇa*), similarly, meditation proceeds in reverse, manipulating the sign (*nimitta*) and then, once it has been mastered and no longer conditions the meditator, stripping it down, loosening it to dissolve its compactness and rarefy it until its purely qualitative and primary components are identified.

6.5. Rarefaction: Contemplating Firstness Directly

Such an exercise is found in the *Visuddhimagga*, where a system based on ten *kasiṇas* is presented. The term *kasiṇa* literally means "whole", "entire", or "total" [178] (p. 29). A very general term used in the texts to identify a meditation object, whose characteristics, however, are extremely generic and undefined.

For example, the ten *kasiṇa*s presented in the *Visuddhimagga* are "earth (*pathavī*), water (*āpa*), fire (*teja*), air (*vāya*), blue (*nīla*), yellow (*pīta*), red (*lohita*), white (*odāta*), light (*āloka*) and limited space (*paricchinnākāsa*)" [179] (p. 3). The reader will notice the absolute generality of these "signs", which appear rather as primary and fundamental constituents—elements, colors, or even light and space.

In any case, the *Visuddhimagga* did not invent anything. Similar conceptions of these indistinct qualitative signs are also found in the *suttas*: AN 10.25 speaks of a meditation on the same ten *kasiṇa*s (*dasayimāni… kasiṇāyatanāni*), and for each of them the meditator perceives its essence "above, below, across, undivided and unlimited" (*uddhaṃ adho tiriyaṃ advayaṃ appamāṇaṃ*). These qualitative notes, equally generic and "universal", are very interesting. Similar mentions are found in AN 1.455–464; 10.26; 10.29.

Now, if we observe the meditative traditions that developed from these texts (or rather, from later texts that elaborate upon these), we notice that the attainment of the primary or proto-semiotic quality of the *kasiṇa* would seem to be directly linked to a process of rarefaction of the previous stage of secondness, that is, of the *nimitta*.

> … we notice that the practitioner asks for the meditation with and without *nimitta*. *Nimitta*, as noted above, is often translated as 'sign'. The term may derive from the Pali verb *ni-mā* ('to create') and means the image or experience created by meditation on a meditation object. These are usually associated with *kasiṇa*, external devices used as the basis for meditation, because the Visuddhimagga provides its fullest explanation of *nimitta* in the chapter on *kasiṇa* […]. [175] (p. 24)

The meditation described in the *Visuddhimagga* serves us as a compendium to those far more generic indications given in the Suttapiṭaka.

The starting point is a rarefaction of the sign. The meditator takes up an object, which we know is perceived as "determined" (distinct from other objects) precisely insofar as it is a "sign". The first phase therefore consists in becoming aware of the semiotic nature of determinations. The sign of the object is introjected (*uggahanimitta*). At this point, the sign is progressively rarefied, gradually arriving at the pure general quality.

An admirable description of this process is given by Greene, and is therefore worthy of being quoted in full. Let us begin, for example, with the contemplation of a physical sign-object composed of earth, "such as a flattened patch of dirt". This is a good starting point, and the process of rarefaction is simple because the object is not conceptually very complex. The first phase, as noted, is to concentrate on the sign (*nimitta*) of the object:

> The meditator stares at this object until able to "see" it even with closed eyes. This mental representation of the meditation object is termed the "acquired sign"

> (*uggahanimitta*), and by continuing to focus on it the meditator eventually enters "access concentration" (*upacārasamādhi*), a state that, while technically still preliminary to the first *dhyāna*, is described as a momentous achievement marking the first taste of the higher "world of pure form" to which *dhyāna* gives access in this life and the next. [180] (p. 69)

We note here that the general compass guiding the meditative exercise is the "world of pure form". Now that we have the *nimitta* of the object (*uggahanimitta*), this must be reduced to its essential qualities, that is, to its counterpart (*paṭibhāganimitta*):

> For the earth *kasiṇa*, originally a patch of dirt, the counterpart sign is "like a mother-of-pearl dish well washed, like the moon's disk coming out from behind a cloud". [180] (p. 69)

At the beginning of the purification process, the "counterpart sign" (*paṭibhāganimitta*) is "described in distinctly visual terms as a purified version of the original meditation object". The purification process proceeds until the attainment—at least as far as possible—of the firstness of the sign that was originally taken up.

> Importantly, the counterpart sign is *not* a perfect, eidetic *visualization* of the initial object in the sense of a mental representation that is phenomenologically equivalent to ordinary vision. Rather, it is something like the purified essence of the object. For the water *kasiṇa*, for example, both the original object and the "acquired sign" have bubbles, froth, and other such details whereas the counterpart sign "appears inactive, like a crystal fan set in space". [180] (p. 69)

The emphasis on colors as an example of a sensory datum constituted by pure quality will also be taken up in the centuries that follow. Incidentally, what likely fascinated these thinkers was the direct connection through which, starting from the sensory datum of pure, indescribable quality, one immediately frames it within a level of conceptuality: precisely the passage from the pure blueness of blue to the recognition that associates the visual sensation with its corresponding percept: "blue". This passage from *vedanā* to *saññā* is also reflected upon by Diṅnāga, who uses the example of the twofold phase of recognition: 1. "one knows blue" (*nīlaṃ jānāti*) and 2. "one knows that is blue" (*nīlaṃ iti jānāti*) [82] (p. 46). We must not understand the chromatic phase in a literal sense, as the perception of "blue" understood in its semiotic sense. It is not being said that the "true nature" of a blue object is its "blue-ness". Such an interpretation would merely create an ontological hierarchy within the semiotic system, whereby a certain sign—"blue"—would be ontologically superior (as constitutive) to another.

On the contrary, when "blue" is intended, what is meant is not the determination of the concept "blue". That would itself be a sign and would fall within the perceptual–cognitive system, as MN 43 already fully explained, in its distinction between sensation and perception: what is called "feeling", the text says, is so called because "it feels" (*vedeti vedetī'ti kho, āvuso, tasmā vedanāti vuccati*), and "perception" is so called because "it perceives" (*sañjānātī'ti kho… tasmā saññāti vuccati*). But what does "feeling" and "perceiving" mean in this sense? What sensation feels is simply said, in worldly terms, to be what may be called pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral (*sukhampi vedeti, dukkhampi vedeti, adukkhamasukhampi vedeti*). Perception, it is said, perceives things such as "blue, yellow, red, white" (*nīlakampi sañjānāti, pītakampi sañjānāti, lohitakampi sañjānāti, odātampi sañjānāti*).

Perception therefore conceptualizes what in other contexts is considered "pure quality", with the difference that when it is described in terms of pure quality, the intention is not to dwell on the sign that describes that concept. Conversely, when the concept is evoked in perceptual terms, then it is being semantized (*sañjānātī'ti … tasmā saññāti vuccati*).

The final step clarified for us by Greene is thus very important for understanding the relationship between the *kasiṇa* and the stage of *paṭibhāganimitta*. This meditative exercise, precisely the attainment of what Greene calls the "purified essence of the object" [180] (p. 69), is a perfect example of the passage from secondness to firstness. In these terms the meditative effort must in fact be understood—an effort which, in other words, is also the inevitable cessation of the semiosic process, as D'Amato had hypothesized.

Similar to D'Amato's conception is the idea of zeroness proposed by Arning, according to which the culmination of meditation is a drawing away from the flow of semiosic action, a "step outside of its flow, having been conditioned to regard it as all encompassing" [181] (p. 102). Arning specifically studies *vipassanā* meditation, concluding that:

> The whole procedure of Vipassana meditation is dictated by the use of indexicality—the pointing function of the mind in determining the vector of body scanning. The use of indices—sign to referent through a relationship of contiguity—is more of a last resort than a first call. It is a way of reaching out to the more hard to sensitize areas of the body […].
>
> This is an indexical operation of conscious maneuvering rather than "blind compulsion." It is a method for reckoning approximation of position through contiguity. Often it is a way by which completely inaccessible areas yield, after multiple scannings, to touch. [181] (p. 106)

This condition is described in a very similar way also by Arning, who holds that meditation reaches a state of semiotic perfection, that is, of de-semiosization, to put it in other terms:

> When everything has been signified, when the sign encompasses all possible interpretants (signs), then a state of semiotic perfection has been attained and semiosis has been brought to its completion. [174] (p. 202)

In other terms, this mechanism is analogous to the meditative exercise that focus on the *absence* of a "something" (*na* + *kiñci*) determinate, or absence of the referential object (*ākiñcaññaṃ pekkhamāno satimā*…, cf. Snp 5.7). With this final definition, which seems to me very pertinent, I conclude the section on the last semiotic concept in archaic Buddhist thought, and we are now ready to draw the appropriate conclusions from this analysis.

7. Concluding Remarks

In this text a linguistic reading of Buddhist philosophy as found in the Pāli texts has been proposed. The center of the discussion has unfolded around seven fundamental themes, all comparable to major issues in semiology and semiotics, and these have allowed us to understand how these texts developed a complex system of phenomenal analysis capable of interweaving language, perception, cognition, and contemplative practice: an authentic psychosemiotics and a proposal for the "cessation" (*nirodha*) of mechanisms of semiosis that bind human beings to the power of signs and their proliferation (*papañcasaṅkhā*). According to Tragel, "Signlessness should not be considered as an opposite of the sign, but rather a situation of absence of the sign, or the mind being cleared of signs" [182] (p. 107). Furthermore, Tragel describes the state of *animitta* as "a fundamental dimension of Buddhist thought and a characteristic of the final level of absolute truth".

The hope of this study is that of a renewed dialogue between different semiotic traditions, which might contribute to a new understanding of psychological phenomena through a different epistemological perspective. Studies on contemplative practice, for example (contemplative studies), can benefit enormously from adopting a psychosemiotic system grounded precisely in the Buddhist texts, and which finds its foundation in the prin-

ciples of structural linguistics or semiotics—fields that both Saussure and Peirce based on a deep understanding of issues related to perceptual–cognitive processes.

Small's proposal of a semiotic reading of the *nāmarūpa* dyad has allowed us to establish a basic foundation for comparing this concept not only with Saussure's semiological conception of the bifaciality of the sign.

Thus, our analysis is not a simple equivalence between *nāmarūpa* and the signifier/signified dyad, since the Buddhist concept goes well beyond a simple definition of what a sign is in a general sense: it describes the semiosic force with which the sign is defined in a given context. This force involves not only perceptual–cognitive processes, and therefore a knowledge of cognitive science and the phenomenology of perceptions, but also knowledge of the extensive work in biosemiotics [183]—an interpretive key which, although imperfect in many respects [158,184–186], allows us to employ a framework that corresponds perfectly with the model described by the Buddhists, in which there is no sharp separation between subject and environment, but rather a functional circuit in which continuity prevails between effector and sensor, between datum and sensation, and which explains how everything is permeated by semiotic systems, by dense networks of information exchange through fundamental units endowed with meaning and themselves "constituted" (semiosis) in continuity with the individual-environment that uses them and is also "used" by these systems. As Tragel writes: "From the point of view of semiotics, meditation could also be modelled as a complex communicative act" [182] (p. 101).

And it is here that the Buddhist reading intervenes, from which arises the necessity of a "cessation" of the mechanisms of semiosic production or of the proliferation of concepts. This achievement is crucial in the meditative practice, as the cessation of semiosis (name-form) determines also the cessation of cognition (*nāmarūpanirodhā cittassa atthaṅgamo*) [SN 47.42]. Small defines this attitude as "a-semiotic mentation".

> However, the contradistinct regard for a-semiotic mentation which is metaphysically interwoven with the Sanskrit *nāma-rūpa* provides a far more positive promise for Saussure's "uncharted nebula" (within which, it would seem to agree, "there are no pre-existing ideas") [119] (p. 455).

Small also correctly identifies the potential of the binomial, particularly with regard to its mutual dependence on the human sensorium, which indicates a conception "that is neither positivist nor materialist but which rather suggests that signs are constitutive devices for cognitive-perceptual categorization" (p. 458).

SN 41.6 informs us that "when a mendicant has come out of the attainment of the cessation of perception-sensation [*saññāvedayitanirodha*], only three types of contact are experienced"—namely: the contact of emptiness (*suññato phasso*), the contact without sign (*animitta phasso*) and the undirected contact (*appaṇihito phasso*).

In conclusion, in this paper, we analyzed the importance of signs in cognitive processes in the context of Pāli Buddhist philosophy. We started from the assumption, already shared in semiotics, that there is a direct correlation between signs and cognitive processes [170]. Starting from this basic understanding, we analyzed the Buddhist philosophy of language. The topic of language has been recognized as very important in Buddhist thought in recent decades [187], but although its role has subsequently been significantly explored within the Mahāyāna traditions, Pāli literature has not enjoyed the same attention, despite its incontrovertible richness, as we have observed throughout this examination.

The hope of this paper is to lay the foundation for the subsequent development, within the philosophy of cognition and language, of a new way of doing philosophy that adopts these texts as valid interlocutors for developing its own reflections.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ṚV	Ṛgveda, Rajwade, V. K., Abhyankar, V. S., Sontakke, N. S., et al. (1965) (eds.), Ṛgveda-Samhitā with the Commentary of Sāyaṇācārya, vol. 1, Mandal 1 (Poona: N. S. Sontakke for the Vaidic Samshodhan Mandal).
Snp	Suttanipāta, Andersen, Dines, and Smith, Helmer (1913) (eds.), Sutta-Nipāta (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Dhp	Dhammapada, Ānandajoti Bhikkhu (2020), A Comparatve Edition of the Dhammapada with Parallels from Sanskritised Prakrit Edited Together with a Study of the Dhammapada Collection (4th edn., Colombo: University of Peredeniya).
Iti	Itivuttaka, Kashyap, Bhikkhu (1959) (ed.), The Khuddakapāṭha-Dhammapada-Udāna-Itivuttaka-Suttanipāta (Bihar: Pāli Publication Board). Other reference edition: Mahāsaṅgīti Tipiṭaka Buddhavasse 2500.
DN	Dīghanikāya, Davids, T. W. Rhys, and Carpenter, J. Estlin (1890–1911) (eds.), The Dīgha Nikāya (London: Henry Frowde for the Pali Text Society).
MN	Majjhimanikāya, Trenckner, Vilhelm, and Chalmers, Robert (1888–1925), The Majjhima-nikāya (Pali Text Society Text Series, 60; London: Published for the Pali Text Society, by H. Frowde).
SN	Saṃyuttanikāya, Feer, Léon (1884–1904) (ed.), Saṃyutta-nikāya, 6 vols (London: Henry Frowde for the Pali Text Society).
AN	Aṅguttaranikāya, Morris, Richard, Hardy, E., Hunt, Mabel, and Davids, C. A. F. Rhys (1885—1910) (eds.), The Aṅguttara-Nikâya, 6 vols (London: Pali Text Society).
CP	Peirce's *Collected Papers*.

Appendix A

In this appendix I intend to present some necessary reflections on the ambivalent relationship that the Buddha shows toward language. In particular, the relations with grammatical science and with knowledge that is certainly linguistic in nature: morphology (*veyyākaraṇa*), phonetics (*byañjana*), syntax (*pubbāpara*), and so on. On the one hand, early Buddhism rejects that language reflects reality, while on the other rejects also the opposite extreme, "that language plays no role at all in expressing reality" [19] (p. 22).

It is undeniable that the Suttapiṭaka contains numerous allusions to grammatical issues, which therefore testify to a particular attention on the part of the Buddha to linguistic themes—not only as a philosophical matter or one linked to the explanation of cognitive processes, but also to linguistics understood as the study of language as such.

The two things are not necessarily separate. On the contrary, they probably influenced each other. Levman even goes so far as to suggest that the Buddha "may have been trained

in the *Vedas* and *Vedaṅgas*" [73] (p. 35). And the practice of interpretation (*nirukta*, related to *nirukti*, "grammar", "linguistic explanation") is part of one of the six ancient *Vedāṅga*s.

The term *nirutti* used in the suttas derives directly from the Vedic tradition. In that context, as mentioned earlier, a science of language had become indispensable, one that would allow absolute mastery of the medium used to codify the sacred verses. It is noteworthy that *nirutti* is a term that contains *vāc*, since it derives from *nir* + $\sqrt{vac}$, which yields *niruk-*, and various derived terms such as *nirukti* (which gives *nirutti* in Pāli), but also *nirukta* and *nirvacana*. While *nirukti* properly indicates a kind of etymological explanation, since, as Kalupahana writes, it means "making explicit what is being spoken" [82] (p. 6): *nir* + $\sqrt{vac}$, the other terms indicate the "etymological explanation" (*nirukta*) (p. 8) and the "definition" (*nirvacana*) (*ibid*.).

This link with the earlier tradition makes the interpretation of the term in Pāli somewhat difficult. I would suggest avoiding univocal readings. The interpretation of *nirutti* as "technical definition" [73] (p. 31) may be valid, but it does not work if applied rigidly, as we saw in the case of the *Niruttipathasutta* (Section 3).

What interests me in this appendix, therefore, are the reasons behind the apparent contradiction in the Buddha's position: on the one hand he seems to inherit certain Vedic conceptions of language, while on the other he rejects them.

Part of the contradiction also lies in the adoption of an ambiguous attitude, in which it is claimed at once that meter (the preferred medium for encoding Vedic verses) is abhorred by the Buddha, yet at the same time the texts recognized as the oldest in the Pāli corpus employ a system of verse construction that is clearly modeled on the Vedic one. It therefore seems undeniable that this system very early established itself as the most practical for guaranteeing effective transmission of the teaching, but we must also consider reasons of prestige. In this sense, the Buddha never concealed his admiration for the figure of the seer (*ṛṣi*), and thus for Vedic wisdom. What he clashed with was perhaps a certain faction that had emerged much more recently, and certainly in his own time, which debated what the correct interpretation—and with it the sociocultural and normative consequences—of the Vedic text should be [188] (pp. 51–58).

The ambivalent attitude is therefore to be located in this double nature of Buddhist teaching: neither fully conservative nor fully innovative. The rejection of the sacralization of a language is anchored in the philosophical view of worldly phenomena, which sees in language the epitome of those cognitive means capable of constituting norms and conventions and which by their nature are unreliable in describing reality: "all phenomena are conditional and relative, including language" [189] (p. 20). At the same time, language was indispensable in order to allow the transmission of the teaching [190,191].

In AN 2.20 the disappearance and decline of the correct teaching (*dhammā saddhammassa sammosāya antaradhānāya*) is attributed to eminently linguistic causes: misplacement of words and phrases leading to misinterpretation of meaning (*dunnikkhittañca padabyañjanaṃ attho ca dunnīto*).

Nevertheless, to preserve this teaching a "popular" language was chosen, that of the *vulgus* [189] (p. 18), in sharp contrast at least to tendencies toward the sacralization of a worldly medium such as a human language. It follows that secondary phenomena beyond the simple need to preserve the teaching did not take root in the most archaic Buddhism—such as sacral conceptions of sound, proto-mantric forms, or recitation of magical formulas. The only thing that mentions the relation between word and sound is limited to the mention of producing pleasant sounds (*cittakkharā*), which perhaps are such by virtue of a closer affinity with concepts important to the doctrine.

> The Buddha did not believe in the ultimacy of sound; sound and language were conventional phenomena developed by humans by mutual agreement for the purposes of communication. [189] (p. 33)

The very conception of *bráhman* was originally a technical term linked to the power of language: *bráhman* indicated the correctly recited formula [192], and then, by extension, the power that resulted from correct recitation of the formula [53] (p. 26), until it became creative power itself. Indeed, "in the Ṛgveda, *bráhman* can be a verbal utterance, the power manifested in the words, the ability to formulate reality, and the absolute" (p. 27). As the absolute, the *bráhman* that "arises from a place beyond thought" (p. 41) is understood to grant the meditator "a unified state of perfect creative possibility" (p. 42). Mastery of the formulas is effective for one who lives in unity with the *bráhman* (*ṛco akṣare parame vyoman yasmin devā adhi viśve niṣeduḥ…*) [ṚV 1.164.39]. Here, and in ṚV 1.164.41 as well, emphasis is placed on the fact that the space of speech is supreme, "further" (*sahasrākṣarā parame vyoman*).

Similarly, Vā́c possesses an authentic demiurgic role on which all things depend, since they originate from her [53] (p. 45).

It is precisely by channeling Vā́c that the poet obtains divine inspiration. This channeling takes place through the articulation of the formula, of the *bráhman* (p. 48). In short, it is precisely "Vā́c herself, awakening the mind to its fullest potential" that allows one to glimpse the absolute originary (p. 49).

As we saw in Section 1, all these conceptions are radically overturned in the Buddhist idea of *vacas* or *vacana*, in which the term assumes the simple function of speech, or of an act of words, to use the Saussurean expression. This does not deny the performative power of speech, a capacity already attributed to Vedic Vā́c. But whereas in the Vedic world this is a positive power, because it is capable of creating, in Buddhism linguistic forces are intrinsically binding, constitutive of a world that is constraining in itself, like any world (*loka*), and therefore must be transcended.

> *ye ca rūpe pamāṇiṃsu,*
>
> *ye ca ghosena anvagū*
>
> *chandarāgavasūpetā*
>
> Those who judge according to form,
>
> And those who are guided by the voice,
>
> Are filled with desire and greed.
>
> [AN 4.65]

Another issue that seems to have required Buddhist attention to language is the need to distinguish explicit meaning (*nītattha*) from implicit meaning, or meaning that nonetheless needed to be inferred (*neyyattha*) [82] (p. 82) [76] (p. 11). Although this is a fairly common interpretation, it should be said that the importance of such an antinomy is not found in the suttas, where the two terms are mentioned only in AN 2.25, and moreover do not appear to have great doctrinal importance. Certainly, this is a distinction that took hold later on, and would become the probable basis for strengthening the *sammuti*/*paramattha* binomial, where *sammuti*, if interpreted as a derivation of *sammata* [73] (p. 39) indicates something collectively "agreed upon", whereas *parammattha* indicates the "ultimate" (*parama*) "sense" (*attha*).

In AN 2.25 the discourse does not seem to favor either of the two interpretations; indeed, it even defines both as ways in which someone "calumniates" or "misinterprets" (*abbhācikkhanti*) the Buddha. Both "the one who explains a discourse whose meaning needs

to be inferred as if it were an exoteric discourse" (*yo ca neyyatthaṃ suttantaṃ nītattho suttantoti dīpeti*) and "the one who explains a discourse whose meaning is exoteric as if it were instead explicit" (*yo ca nītatthaṃ suttantaṃ neyyattho suttanto'ti dīpeti*) are misinterpreting the Buddha (*dve tathāgataṃ abbhācikkhanti*). Rather than a solid assertion of a difference between esoteric and exoteric teaching, this seems instead to confirm the attitude of archaic Buddhism toward language, always seen as a misleading instrument. The final goal is the incommensurability that transcends linguistic determinations; therefore both exoteric and esoteric meanings are viewed with suspicion.

It must also be taken into account that this is the only mention of the distinction in the Suttapiṭaka, and it may be later than we imagine. It is true that the Buddha is often asked to "clarify the meaning" of a certain teaching (*etassa bhāsitassa attho*), for example in AN 10.58; however, these mentions of *attha*, "meaning", "sense", do not seem to confer any mystical nuance to it, as if its explanation implied the unveiling of something esoteric, but refer simply to episodes in which the Buddha is asked to explain in detail certain aspects of his doctrine.

In the Vedic world, Vā́c, on whom the entire universe depends—seemingly substantiated through the emission of sacred syllables (*akṣára*)—continues to reverberate throughout the cosmos; yet Vā́c is "hidden from ordinary cognition" [53] (p. 46). One must therefore develop a higher type of cognition in order to understand what transcends ordinary capacities.

It will instead be the commentarial tradition that increasingly emphasizes the correct transmission of language, precisely by virtue of the *neyyattha*/*nītattha* opposition, which seems to echo the same importance the Vedic world gave to mastery of the linguistic medium. The transmission of the correct meaning as well as the correct phonetic realization of terms in Buddhaghosa's reflections [73] (p. 32) belongs to that commentarial tradition that began to develop "grammatical" attention to language in order to prevent "the possibility of misunderstanding the meaning of the dhamma" (p. 33) due to even marginal issues such as "consonantal confusion", but nonetheless relevant because of the extremely diverse linguistic backgrounds of the individuals who received, repeated, and transmitted the Buddha's message.

This concern for "correct" transmission of the message seems already to have preoccupied the Buddha. In MN 139 there is a discourse on synonymy. In this text the Buddha notes how, to indicate the same object—a "bowl"—there existed numerous different words depending on regional linguistic variation. This is a view fundamentally detached from any sacrality of language, since it emphasizes its worldly and shifting nature, but it also attests to concern about the unreliability of the linguistic medium. The issue is also mentioned by Kalupahana [82] (p. 49).

This discourse is formulated in a similar way in ṚV 7.103.6, where the designatory function (*Erkennungszeichen* for Olalde) of the nominal sign (*nāma*) is considered through the example of the name of frogs. There are very many frogs, and none is perfectly identical to the others; and yet, despite this formal divergence (*virūpāḥ*), there exists a unique and "common" nominal sign (*samānaṃ nāma*) that designates "frog" [145] (p. 8).

Levman likewise hypothesizes that differences in the linguistic background of the Buddha's disciples led to a renewed grammatical focus, so as to ensure the "correct" transmission of the teaching. Originally, however, language was primarily criticized for its misleading power over human cognition. This leads to the paradox that the Buddha initially addressed issues such as vocal sound as essentially "arbitrary", thereby anticipating one of the central principles of modern linguistics, while "centuries after the Buddha, Buddhist scholasticism developed its own essentialist theories of the origin of the names of things which come very close to Brahmanism" [73] (p. 37).

Levman suggests that fear of the "misunderstanding of phonemes" (p. 49) grew especially due to disciples who were not native speakers of Indo-Aryan dialects, or whose speech was too distant from that of the Buddha. But it was only "well after his death that the distinction between conventional and ultimate naming developed, in the hands of his disciples" (*ibid*.). We must therefore consider the linguistic conceptions prior to this renewed grammatical interest as primarily directed at deconstructing language in a phenomenological sense, with reference to the idea explored throughout this paper, namely that signs and phenomena act essentially in the same way, and that both are "conditioned", and thus "all conditioned dhammas which led to the creation of a sense of 'I', and craving, clinging and afflictions" (*ibid*.).

In conclusion, the Buddha certainly had a conflicted relationship with the linguistic medium. On the one hand, it is necessary to convey the teachings; on the other hand, language underlies precisely those mechanisms that imprison human beings and from which meditation must liberate practitioners, representing in every respect a practice of transcending language.

This leads to the paradox by which Buddhism develops a particularly refined and detailed technical vocabulary in order to express with precision the concepts it wishes to convey, while at the same time disdaining the importance of language in various ways.

One example is provided by Buddhist phenomenology itself [22], which develops from a highly advanced technical vocabulary that Kalupahana calls the "language of conditionality" [82] (p. 18), and which describes—through the device of the term *paccaya* ("support", "condition", "dependence", "necessity")—the mechanism of conditioned production of phenomena. This phenomenological perspective may be summarized in the phrase "when this is present, that comes to be; due to the arising of this, that arises" (*iti imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti*, *imassuppādā idaṃ uppajjati*). And precisely because of this focus on the origin of phenomena, "etymology and grammar were very useful disciplines so long as they were not utilized as means of discovering either the ultimately irreducible 'individual,' the 'self' or the incorruptible 'universal'" [82] (p. 18).

Appendix B

In this appendix I intend to highlight another aspect of Buddhist philosophy of language, namely the reflection concerning the relationship between signs and phenomena.

As we know, the Buddhist conception of the sign is that it is a "designating" force, capable of conferring a certain nominal identity (signifier), a true label for recognizing something from something else, upon a certain set of "formal", or rather "morphological", data (if with this term we mean everything pertaining to the actual dimension in its six possible configurations).

This idea implies that phenomenological appearing constitutes a true "morphophany" (from μορφή, "form" and φάνεια, "manifestation", "appearing"), such that everything we witness is nothing but the simple change of configuration of substances or essences; and, as the form—the appearing—of something changes, there must correspond, according to our cognitive system, a different identity, therefore a different designation, a different sign to recognize it.

This raises a fundamental problem, which also underlies the view concerning the relationship between signs and phenomena. If one claims that everything is a sign, the view is that of a pansemioticism (πάντα σημεῖόν ἐστιν) very similar to Peirce's idea of semiotic omnipervasiveness [CP 5.283]. Yet at the same time, one loses the distinction between an objective reality and a perceived reality—and the two do not coincide for the Buddhists.

The other view is that of a radical dualism between the objective and the subjective, but we know that this view is also rejected by the Buddhists.

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The mediation between Buddhist radical anti-dualism and the view that we nonetheless live in an unreal world lies in the way "world" is conceived. According to the Buddhist psychosemiotic view, the world is not a mirror of reality; it is not "constructed" by signs but is "described" by them. The world would be a reduction of the phenomenal framework of the real—potentially unlimited—restricted instead to a section limited by the subjects' perceptual means. In this "reduced" context, things appear distorted because the means by which we perceive them are limited. Signs are not distortions of reality; they are the very things of the world. But since they do not appear to us in an unlimited way, but reduced to a specific frame, that is, to a specific worldly system that considers only some signs as possible, they guide the experiences of individuals and do not provide a faithful picture of reality.

Reflection on language is the consequence of a careful phenomenological analysis of cognition. What describes the functioning of signs and concepts is governed by the same principles that drive every phenomenal change. This perhaps derives from a shared pansemiotic vision that unites Peirce and the Buddha. What is certain is that sign and phenomenon are certainly understood by the Buddha as essentially the same thing, and therefore the analysis of the behavior of signs is the analysis of the behavior of phenomena. These are "linguistic" laws, according to Kalupahana, which lead the Buddha to develop his fundamental phenomenological laws, such as the law of causalism that explains how "when that is, this comes to be", and which explain nothing other than "the observed instances of phenomena" [82] (p. 69). Said otherwise, it is the law of causal dispositions that explains how every observable phenomenon is nothing but a determinate, that is, a sign made a sign by another sign that renders it dispositionally conditioned (*saṅkhata*) [82] (p. 80). Yet there is a mutual reference among these dispositions that makes every sign depend on the others reciprocally, such that nothing that is a single "determinate" can be said to be ontologically autonomous or self-sufficient.

This does not imply the nonexistence of what evidently appears. What this pansemiotic law implies is rather that what appears to us is nothing but a set of determinations arising from a complex network of relations that cannot be reduced, in its incommensurable totality, to individual determinations.

The progressive determination given by the name is therefore not the "creation" of something that previously did not exist, but the shaping, with already-existing clay, of certain forms that previously did not appear to our perceptions. In *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 7.1.5 we find an authentic exaltation of the name (the nominal designation) as an act "capable of creating" and "more powerful than any other" (*sa yo nāma brahmetyupāste yāvannāmno gataṃ tatrāsya yathākāmacāro bhavati yo nāma brahmetyupāste'sti bhagavo nāmno bhūya iti nāmno vāva bhūyo'stīti tanme bhagavānbravītviti*).

We must therefore avoid extreme linguistic determinism, while not denying the incredibly effective capacity that words have in "determining" the way we experience the real. This was also true in the Vedic world, where the power of the word did not create from nothing, but determined something that was previously undetermined; and here lies the distinction between existent (determined by the name) and nonexistent (undetermined). Not an ontological difference, therefore, but a phenomenological one, or better yet, a morphophanic one.

The conditions of existence (*sát*) or nonexistence (*ásat*) of something in the Vedic world are not meant ontologically: existence indicates something that is linguistically "determined", thus a "sign", something "recognizable", whereas *ásat* is not nonexistence in a nihilistic sense. On the contrary, *ásat* is identified with *bráhman* [64] (p. 177), precisely to indicate its pre-determined nature, and therefore not formed linguistically, or more simply "devoid of name and form" (p. 178).

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The condition of *ásat* described as the principle of the world does not indicate nonexistence, and therefore even statements of "existence coming from nonexistence" (*nāsad āsīn no sad āsīt tadānīṃ nāsīd rajo no vyomā paro yat*…) [ṚV 10.129.1] are not incoherent, since they must be interpreted as "the determinate arising from the indeterminate", indeed thanks to name–form, as affirmed in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 14.4.2.15 (*taddhedaṃ tarhyavyākṛtamāsīt tannāmarūpābhyāmeva vyākriyatāsaunāmāyamidaṃrūpa iti tadidamapyetarhi nāmarūpābhyāmeva vyākriyate'saunāmāyamidaṃrūpa iti*). For this reason, these statements are traceable to the original division of the world through linguistic means.

As Ronzitti aptly summarizes, "*asat* refers to the unmanifest aspect of reality, and *sat* to its manifest aspect" [147] (p. 89). Moreover, ṚV 10.129 specifies that the condition of nonexistence is essentially the indeterminate that precedes the appearing of determinate phenomena, like the undetermined night: "there was no distinguishing of night from day" (*na tarhi na rātryā ahna āsīt praketaḥ*) [ṚV 10.129.2].

It has to be noted that the Buddhists employ the concepts of "being" and "non-being" in a similar way. Their reading is exclusively phenomenological, as Brown already noted in a detailed analysis published in 1999: "the problem of a perishing into nonexistence is a confusion of an entity with an identity, the construal of a nonexistence with a change in the identity of an entity, not the assumption by the entity of an altered state. […] In sum, an entity does not arise from nothing nor does it perish into nothing, but is a transition from one baseline state to the next. Something is retained in the causal transition that is the basis for the close replication" [193] (p. 264).

It is indeed through linguistic dynamics that we must understand the mythological constructions of the "emergence" of being (represented as light) from non-being (represented by dark primordial waters). Darkness does not represent a nihilistic nothingness, but rather something *indeterminate*. Light, by contrast, is a "sign", since it provides a determination: it renders visible a "something", which becomes determined out of the prior darkness.

The same symbolic-mythological conception reported in DN 27, according to which originally there was only a single mass of dark waters from which everything emerged (*ekodakībhūtaṃ kho pana, vāseṭṭha, tena samayena hoti andhakāro andhakāratimisā*), is nothing but a mimicking of the Vedic myth of the emergence of Agni precisely from the darkness of primordial waters (*tvām agne tamasi tasthivāṃsam*) [ṚV 6.9.7], [98,194–197].

This kind of mimicking of the Vedic myth is also meant to ridicule what, relying on its authority, had been proposed—such as caste division and the superiority of the priestly class (*brāhmaṇova sukko vaṇṇo, kaṇhā aññe vaṇṇā*). Besides the rejection of normative order and social classes [99], this parodying of the Vedic myth also counters the narrative of luminous cognitions and of fire, which represents cognition and is metaphorically presented as the positive and benevolent light of the world [198].

This process in which the original condition, in the Vedic world, is an anomic darkness preceding any cognitive determination, followed by the "light" of fire—that is, the manifestation of cognitions—seems replicated perfectly in Genesis 1. The first phase, exactly as in ṚV 3.39.5; 5.40.6, is that of a world covered by dark waters: Genesis 1:2 speaks of an earth that is formless and empty, with darkness over the face of the deep (*wəhāʾāreṣ, hāyətāhṯōhû wāḇōhû, waḥōšeḵ, ʿal-pənêṯəhôm; wərûaḥ ʾĕlōhîm, məraḥepeṯ ʿal-pənê hammāyim*).

Then we have the second phase (Genesis 1:3), comparable to passages like ṚV 4.3.11, in which light (in the form of the god Agni) manifests. And in manifesting, fascinatingly, it does so through speech: "God said 'let there be light', and there was light" (*wayyōʾmer ʾĕlōhîm, yəhî ʾôr; wayhî-ʾôr*). Exactly as in the Vedas there is insistence on the connection between the sacred syllable *akṣára* and Agni or the Dawn [ṚV 3.55.1]. Moreover, in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.3.9 it is reported that when Agni emerges, he asks Prajāpati to give him

a name so that he may be protected from evil. In general, as ṚV 10.125 reiterates, the world is nothing but the result of the progressive division of Vāc (in the form of *uktam*, "what is spoken"), which therefore pervades various places [64] (p. 162).

One cannot fail to mention also the parallel with John 1:1, where again language, in the form of the λόγος, is the principle of all things (ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος). Furthermore, the divine nature of language is confirmed by its being not only with God, but God himself (καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος).

It is to this originary light–language that the Vedic seer intends to return in his contemplations. This "steadfast light" (*dhruvaṃ jyotir*) [ṚV 6.9.5] allows one to attain a perception vastly superior to ordinary perception, so that the seer illuminated by this light "no longer operates according to ordinary cognition" [53] (p. 37). Vāc, who shares with the originary light the same divine nature, does not reveal herself to just anyone, but only to one who is "fully committed" [53] (p. 39) [ṚV 10.71.4]. From Vāc then flows the sacred syllable (*akṣára*), which is the foundation or resonance of "this entire universe" [53] (p. 45), [ṚV 1.164.42] (*tataḥ kṣaraty akṣaraṃ tad viśvam upa jīvati*). As Bausch summarizes, "Everything flows from the *akṣára* when Vāc speaks" [53] (p. 51).

Recalling this myth of primordial waters from which cognitive dualism emerged is important because the Buddhists themselves evoke the metaphor of the ocean and its immeasurable vastness (*tathāgato gambhīro appameyyo duppariyogāho*) [SN 44.1; MN 72; MN 77] precisely to indicate the condition of one who has attained Buddhahood. The ocean is the preferred metaphor for something too great to be conceived [50]. The Buddha is calm, vast, immeasurable, and ineffable like the ocean (*mahāsamuddo*), thus returning to a kind of originary condition that the Vedas themselves described in the myth of the primordial waters. And in the Greek world, too, we witness the same association between light and "name":

> αὐτὰρ ἐπειδὴ πάντα φάος καὶ νὺξ ὀνόμασται
>
> καὶ τὰ κατὰ σφετέρας δυνάμεις ἐπὶ τοῖσί τε καὶ τοῖς,
>
> πᾶν πλέον ἐστὶν ὁμοῦ φάεος καὶ νυκτὸς ἀφάντου
>
> ἴσων ἀμφοτέρων, ἐπεὶ οὐδετέρῳ μέτα μηδέν.
>
> Now that all things have been called "light" or "night", and that these things, pertaining to their respective powers, have been assigned to these and those other things, everything is at once full of light and hidden night, both equal, since neither of the two shares anything with the other.
>
> (Parmenides, Περὶ Φύσεως, *fr.* 9)

If therefore in the Vedic world Vāc is "the prototype of the absolute" [53] (p. 25), it is so by virtue of the profound relationship that the Vedic texts establish between word and light [20] (note 6). The word itself is luminous, luminescent (*vācaḥ… jyotiragrā*) [ṚV 7.101.1]. The Buddhists, by contrast, will oppose this conception of the luminous world with one in which the world is "aflame", "ablaze" (*āditta*ka) negatively connoting fire—which in the Vedic conception was the positive light of the world—as a fire that instead consumes and corrodes everything [50].

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