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Federico Divino

The Purpose of Language

A comparative Analysis on Early Buddhist Psychology and Phenomenology

QUADERNI | 2

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2.

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Indian Texts

ṚV	Ṛgveda
MBh	Mahābhārata
BhG	Bhagavad-Gītā
ŚBr	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇam
BṛUp	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
ChUp	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
TUp	Taittīriya Upaniṣad
KUp	Kaṭha Upaniṣad
MUp	Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad
ŚvUp	Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad
Snp	Suttanipāta
Dhp	Dhammapada
Ud	Udāna
Iti	Itivuttaka
DN	Dīghanikāya
MN	Majjhimanikāya
SN	Saṃyuttanikāya
AN	Aṅguttaranikāya
Mil	Milindapañha
MK	Mūlamadhyamakakārikā
SK	Sāṃkhyakārikā

Greek Texts

Par. *Nat.* Parmenides, *On Nature*, fragments (Περὶ Φύσεως).

Plat. *Crat*. Plato, *Cratylus* (Κρατύλος). Reference edition: Burnet, John (ed.), *Platonis Opera*, Oxford University Press, 1903.

Plat. *Phaedo* Plato, *Phaedo* (Φαίδων). Reference edition: Burnet, John (ed.), *Platonis Opera*, Oxford University Press, 1903.

Plat. *Rep*. Plato, *Republic* (Πολιτεία). Reference edition: Burnet, John (ed.), *Platonis Opera*, Oxford University Press, 1903.

Aristot. *Phys*. Aristotle, *Physics* (Φυσικής ἀκρόασις).

Aristot. *Nic. Eth.* Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* (Ἠθικὰ Νικομάχεια). Reference edition: Bywater, J. (ed.), *Aristotle's Ethica Nicomachea*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894.

Aristot. *Met*. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (Μετὰ τὰ φυσικά). Reference edition: Ross, W. D. (ed.), *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924.

DL *Lives* Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (Βίων καὶ Γνωμῶν τῶν ἐν Φιλοσοφίαι εὐδοκιμησάντων καὶ τῶν ἐν ἑκάστη αἱρέσει ἀρεσάντων τῶν εἰς δέκα τὸ Πρῶτον). Reference edition: Hicks, R.D., *Lives of Eminent Philosophers. Diogenes Laertius*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.

Enkh. Epictetus, *Enkhiridon* (Ἐγχειρίδιον). Rederence Edition: Schenkl, Heinrich, *Epicteti Dissertationes ab Arriano digestae*, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1916.

Introductory note

This monograph is the result of a multi-year project aimed at exploring the themes of language, perception, and cognition through the lens of Buddhist thought. From its earliest attestations, the Buddhist world has demonstrated not only a philosophical inclination toward these issues but also a profound analytical capability. This depth allows us to speak of a 'Buddhist psychology' and, as I will explain in due course, even of a form of phenomenology.

My interest in the Pāli texts and the reflections contained within this body of literature ignited my passion for Buddhist texts almost immediately, despite the fact that my academic training did not initially focus on Indian studies. I therefore spent considerable time studying non-Indian Buddhist traditions, particularly the Tibetan and Japanese traditions, and to a lesser extent, the Chinese tradition. However, as my interest in these intellectual traditions deepened, I felt an increasing need to specialize in a specific area that most captured my attention, namely, Pāli Buddhism.

A considerable number of scholarly works have been produced on the Buddhist perspective regarding language, the world, perception, and cognition, all of which are highly commendable and have served as a source of great inspiration for my own research.[1] From

1. Roy Tzohar, *A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Viktoria Lysenko, "The Buddhist Philosophy of Language in India: An Overview," in *Buddhism and Linguistics*, ed. Manel Herat (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 19–33, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-67413-1_2; Manel Herat, ed., *Buddhism and Linguistics* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-67413-1; D. Seyfort-Ruegg, "Mathematical and Linguistic Models in Indian Thought: The Case of Zero and Śūnyatā," in *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle: Essays on Indian and Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 1–12; Tse-fu Kuan, "Cognitive Operations in

the outset, I wish to clarify that my focus will be on the Pāli texts.[2] While there is certainly a valuable body of scholarly literature

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Buddhist Meditation: Interface with Western Psychology," *Contemporary Buddhism* 13, no. 1 (2012): 35–60, DOI: 10.1080/14639947.2012.669281; W. S. Waldron, "The Dependent Arising of a Cognitive Unconscious in Buddhism and Science," *Contemporary Buddhism* 3, no. 2 (2002): 141–60, DOI: 10.1080/14639940208573763; William Waldron, "Yogācāra Buddhist Views on the Causal Relation between Language, Cognition and the Evolution of Worlds," in *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture*, ed. Armin Geertz (London: Routledge, 2014), 285–300, DOI: 10.4324/9781315728988; Ravi S. Kudesia and Ven. Tashi Nyima, "Mindfulness Contextualized: An Integration of Buddhist and Neuropsychological Approaches to Cognition," *Mindfulness* 6, no. 4 (2015): 910–25, DOI: 10.1007/s12671-014-0337-8.

2. Sasaki Genjun, *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986); Lysenko, "The Buddhist Philosophy of Language in India: An Overview"; Rune Johansson, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism* (London: Curzon Press, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, 1979); Rune Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvana* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969); Johannes Bronkhorst, *The two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993); Johannes Bronkhorst, "Historical Context of Early Asceticism," in *The Oxford History of Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 62–78, DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198733508.001.0001; Johan Blomberg and Przemysław Żywiczyński, "Language and Its Limits: Meaning, Reference and the Ineffable in Buddhist Philosophy," *Topoi* 41, no. 3 (2022): 483–96, DOI: 10.1007/s11245-021-09756-z; Johannes Bronkhorst, *Language and Reality: On an Episode in Indian Thought* (Leiden: BRILL, 2011), DOI: 10.1163/ej.9789004204355.i-170; Johannes Bronkhorst, "Dharma and Abhidharma," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48, no. 2 (1985): 305–20, DOI: 10.1017/S0041977X00033371; Alina Therese Lettner, "Peirce's Semiotic Pragmaticism and Buddhist Soteriology: Steps Towards Modelling 'Thought Forms' of Signlessness," in *Pragmatism, Spirituality and Society* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 187–219, DOI: 10.1007/978-981-15-7102-2_9; Alina Therese Lettner, "Semiotic Roots and Buddhist Routes in Phenomenology and Intercultural Philosophy: A Peircean Study of Abhidharma Buddhist Theories of Consciousness and Perception," in *Roots, Routes and a New Awakening* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 47–74, DOI: 10.1007/978-981-15-7122-0_4; Grzegorz Polak, "Language, Conscious Experience and the Self in Early Buddhism A Cross-Cultural Interdisciplinary Study," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 14 (2018): 37–76; Eviatar Shulman, "Embodied Transcendence: The Buddha's Body in the Pāli Nikāyas," *Religions* 12, no. 3 (2021): 179, DOI: 10.3390/rel12030179; Eviatar Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); E. Shulman, "Early Buddhist Imagination: The Aṭṭhakavagga as Buddhist Poetry," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 35, no. 1/2 (2012): 363–411.

analyzing these themes within the Pāli canon, in my view, it is somewhat less extensive compared to that of the Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions. This disparity in interest is not justified by a lesser richness in the Pāli literature, but rather by the fact that it is less frequently studied and remains the domain of a small group of experts. Nevertheless, the study of these issues in early Buddhism has had significant predecessors, to whom I will refer when appropriate.

Allow me to conclude this introductory note with a final contextualization. This work has its origins in an embryonic form in a monograph published in Italian, *Senso del Linguaggio* ("Sense of Language," Milan 2021), which also inspired the title of this book. While the contents are not entirely drawn from my Italian monograph—many parts will, in fact, be translated from that work—I have significantly expanded my research in comparison to that text. However, the central premise remains the same: What is language according to early Buddhist thought? How is the theory of language linked to the problem of perceiving the world? How does contemplative practice seek to address the issue of cognition in relation to these broader questions?

Moreover, Buddhist thought offers a profound analysis of the nature of the world and human existence, viewed through the lens of human experience. However, it all begins as an inquiry into the underlying causes of human suffering (*dukkha*). Since our experience of being-in-the-world is fundamentally a tragic one, all reflections on the world and on our experience of it serve a noble and practical purpose. They are not merely refined philosophical exercises, but are considered successful only if they lead to practical consequences in our lived experience.

The phenomenological focus of early Buddhist thought is an evident fact. What is the world? What are the "things" that populate the reality we experience daily? What is the relationship between us as embodied beings, as individuals who perceive themselves as autonomous identities inhabiting a world, and that very world we inhabit? Is there, and if so, what is the difference between what I witness as the subject experiencing the events of the world and those very events as I experience them? All these questions motivate the Buddhist intellectual effort,

which originates from another fundamental question: why do we suffer? Human existence is marked by intrinsic tragedy, as everything that appears to us in our experience of the world as appealing forms, emotions, and attachments is destined to decay. Similarly, everything we build with dedication and foresight, aiming for stability and a future, can crumble in no time, like a sandcastle battered by the waves of the sea.

Much has been written on the relationship between early Buddhist thought and the theme of suffering, and this monograph does not seek to add to those contributions. What interests me, however, is how the effort to understand the cause of suffering almost immediately became an effort to understand the nature of things more broadly. Buddhism poses a central, physical question: why do things function as they do, why do they appear as they appear, and what is the truth behind appearances? What eludes us if we cannot fully witness everything, and how is this elusiveness intertwined with our tragic condition? I can only describe this fundamental philosophical framework as "phenomenology," although we will soon see that other terms—such as physics, psychology, ontology, and linguistics—are equally crucial. Nevertheless, phenomenology comes closest to an all-encompassing idea that focuses fundamentally on the study of perception and cognition. It examines how the body organizes sensory stimuli from the environment and interprets them to construct its own sphere of experience, its own ecological-perceptual world. Additionally, language emerges as the most powerful organizing force at our disposal, either because it represents a shared principle between the mind and the physical world (a topic worthy of discussion in the context of pansemiotic theories) or because it serves as humanity's window onto the world, shaping and bending reality to its own terms.

A phenomenological inquiry is also necessary to grasp the fundamental, irreducible dynamics between body and world. I use these terms not to draw superficial parallels with European phenomenology but to highlight two key terms in early Buddhist thought—*kāya* (body) and *loka* (world)—that are essential for understanding this tradition. Equally important are the dynamics that explain the reasons behind the reality we define as phenomenal: both as it is attested through our witnessing it (when we are still unaware of how biased this witnessing is) and as it is

perceived when a meditator is progressively overcoming these illusory anticipations, witnessing phenomena as they truly are—a "what-is" or better, a "thusness" (*yathābhūta*) that should reveal the phenomenon in itself. Or does it? What drives the world? This is the fundamental question, presented in Ajita's Questions (Snp 5.2) and carrying a significance beyond mere symbolism: "What envelops the world?" (*kenassu nivuto loko*), which is another way of asking what holds it together. Similar questions are found throughout the Pāli texts, such as in SN 1.70, where the inquiry concerns what gives rise to the world, or in SN 12.44, where the question is directly about its origin. Hence the ontological question arises—although I caution against applying Western philosophical categories indiscriminately to early Indian Buddhist thought, as not all correspond perfectly.

Structure of the Book

The purpose of this monograph is to present a detailed study of what we will define as Buddhist phenomenology, specifically focusing on the particular conceptions developed by Buddhist thought in the Pāli texts regarding the analysis of psychological processes and reality in a broader sense. By phenomenological analysis of reality, we mean all considerations regarding the nature of phenomena as part of a continuous chain of mutually conditioned relationships, which allows for an understanding of both the mechanisms governing cognitive processes and those regulating physical processes, as seen from the perspective of these Buddhist thinkers.

This text is structured into five main chapters, each focusing on the analysis of specific texts from the Pāli canon or on particular concepts. Naturally, this analysis can only be conducted in close dialogue with textual sources.

Chapter One — On the Scope of Language, Terminology, and Designation

The first chapter will concentrate on the theme of perceptions, but it will do so from a specific perspective—namely, a linguistic one. A fundamental aspect that I aim to argue in this monograph concerns

the centrality of the linguistic problem in Buddhist phenomenology and how language, as a system, actively participates in defining issues related to perceptions and associations, and thus in the constitution of what we define as the world and what Buddhists also define as the world. It would be accurate to interpret this concept in the specific sense of *Umwelt* as described by Biosemiotics.

In this chapter, I do not intend to argue that language creates reality or that all phenomena are fundamentally structured based on language. Nor do I claim that the human psyche or the unconscious is structured like a language. Rather, I argue that the linguistic system is something based on principles analogous to those that can explain the phenomenology of the real. These same principles are recognized by Buddhists in both cognitive processes and real phenomena that we attempt to understand. The importance of language for Buddhist phenomenology must therefore be given significant consideration. In this chapter, which will lay the foundation for all subsequent ones, we will examine how Buddhists address the problem of language and how the categories and concepts they use to describe it—relying on an extremely precise and detailed lexicon—are also employed to describe analogous issues related to the phenomenology of the real. In fact, these issues must be understood as part of an extended phenomenology that includes language, perceptions, and cognitions, as well as aspects concerning lived experiences and the experience of the body, which will be the central theme of the third chapter.

Chapter Two — Foundations of Buddhist Phenomenological Analysis

The core of much of this research will naturally focus on reflections around the concept of *phenomenon* as understood from the perspective of Buddhists. We will therefore ask whether and to what extent Buddhists conceive of the idea of a phenomenon, and how it, in turn, relates to more complex concepts such as nominal entities, concepts, or formal identities. We will also explore how all of this can engage in dialogue with Husserl's phenomenology.

The second chapter will examine the concept of the *world* within the framework of this Buddhist phenomenology, attempting to

demonstrate how these authors conceive the world as an ecological—or rather psycho-ecological—dimension. This dimension forms a functional circuit between living subjectivities and their surrounding environment. This will be closely linked to the ideas expressed in the first chapter about the nature of concepts and the relationship between language and perception, as the *worldliness* formed in this complex psycho-ecological dialogue is populated by complex phenomena. These complex phenomena emerge from simpler ones and are reinterpreted within the cognitive circuit that grounds nominal identities. This cognitive process replaces a dimension that is partly shared yet also deeply personal, understood as the world: a complex environment where the educational and conceptual dynamics internalized by individual subjects interact with those shared by others in the same environment, as well as with the dynamic and complex reality that populates it.

Chapter Three — Body and World, Body in-the World

The third chapter will instead focus on the problem of the *body*, an indispensable counterpart to the world. The body serves as the vehicle through which subjectivities experience the world firsthand, but in moving through this world, it also carries a world within itself, becoming, in turn, a bearer of a complex world. To reflect on the dimension of corporeality, this chapter will rely specifically on certain Buddhist texts centered on contemplative practice. This practice is to be understood fundamentally as a *discipline of the body*, aiming to transcend sensory limits. These sensory boundaries define the semantic, perceptual, and cognitive spheres that delimit one's world. Thus, if we consider contemplative practice as an exercise that arose and developed in an ascetic context, primarily concerned with transcending worldliness through bodily practice, this chapter must draw on Eviatar Shulman's assertions regarding the fundamental unity of philosophy and practice in early Buddhist tradition. This unity allows for the outlining of a novel phenomenology of the body, largely absent from Husserl's reflections but rich in contributions to contemporary phenomenology.

Chapter Four — World, Body, and Transcendence

The fourth chapter aims to deepen the themes of body and world, now considered together and placed within the historical and cultural context that gave rise to Buddhist philosophy and contemplative practice. This reconsideration of the body and world as a unit necessitates that a philosophically in-depth study treats every issue as a fundamental part of the intellectual context in which it is situated. This context, understood as a unity of knowledge forms, bridges philosophical inquiry and practical disciplines like bodily practice and meditative discipline. Consequently, this chapter will explore these issues in a comparative light, primarily through the study of other Indian works, but also, to some extent, Western philosophy. The goal is to provide context to these themes so they can be fully appreciated in their importance. Additionally, this approach offers a broader perspective on the implicit issues tied to these topics, such as the fundamental concept of transcendence and the Buddhist ascetics' desire for *liberation*. Liberation, or *ultramundanity*, is not merely a religious concept or philosophical metaphor but something concrete that, for them, describes a reality attainable through contemplative practice.

Chapter Five — Concluding Remarks

Finally, the fifth chapter aims to be more than a long concluding note offering fundamental reflections on the themes discussed in the first four chapters. It also seeks to establish continuity with philosophical discussions from other Buddhist schools that developed after the primary texts analyzed in this monograph. Indeed, my aim is to argue that some important conceptions in later Buddhist philosophy are not simply rooted in the texts we will examine but can view these philosophical works as precursors. These works anticipated, in a highly complex and refined manner, the ideas that would follow.

While the dialogue with phenomenology will remain constant throughout all five chapters, other aspects of philosophy integral to the foundations of Western phenomenology will not be treated with the same constancy. In this final chapter, however, we will delve into key ideas through an advanced analysis of Buddhist phenomenology.

Stylistic notes

Before proceeding further, I would like to clarify an aspect of the writing style used in this monograph. As I am not a native English speaker, some expressions may appear somewhat peculiar, even after revision. Nonetheless, in the spirit of the international nature that the English language has assumed, I have chosen to retain certain expressions as a stylistic hallmark of my personal way of writing, provided they do not hinder the comprehension of the text itself.

One of these stylistic aspects concerns my choice of using quotation marks in two specific ways. When I use double quotation marks ("·"), they always indicate a direct quotation, a verbatim expression, either from other authors or in the case of a translation. In other instances, double quotation marks are used to highlight specific expressions or definitions, for example: *The concept of "body" is…* or *what we call "body" is…*

However, I would like to draw the reader's attention to my use of single quotation marks ('·'). I have chosen to use them in various circumstances. Primarily, they serve an emphatic function, a role typically fulfilled by italics, but in cases where emphasis also aims to highlight the arbitrary nature of a term, I opt for single quotation marks. This specific use of marking certain terms with single quotation marks will be quite frequent and may often seem to alternate with double quotation marks, but I wish to emphasize the rationale behind these two usages.

First, single quotation marks indicate that a term is being presented as a provisional or imperfect definition. For example: *It could be said that this works as some kind of 'body' of…* In this case, the term 'body' is not considered entirely appropriate, but in the absence of a better term, I use it while drawing the reader's attention to its provisional nature. Similarly, I use single quotation marks for uncertain definitions: *In this form of 'perception' that…* or for definitions that should be understood as flexible technical terms, such as 'phenomenal selectivity.'

A single term may appear with either single or double quotation marks, depending on its meaning. For instance, I might write: *What Buddhists call "world"…* or *What we commonly understand as*

"world"… where the term "world" is either a direct reference to a translation of another term (such as the Buddhist *loka*) or a widely accepted definition. However, if I use 'world' with single quotation marks, it is to emphasize certain aspects of the 'world' that I wish to include in that definition, even if they may not be universally agreed upon: *As we analyze how this 'world,' in the Buddhist sense, is constituted*… In this case, single quotation marks serve a merely emphatic function.

Finally, the last use of single quotation marks is to highlight my disagreement with a given definition of a term, as in the expression *Regarding the so-called 'world'*. Here, I indicate that a term generally accepted by the majority should, in fact, be considered inappropriate.

Roman Lectures

I must thank many people for the writing of this text, which owes its existence to the support and inspiration of certain figures who have acted as true spiritual patrons. To these individuals, I wish to dedicate a few words of gratitude.

Firstly, this text has been made possible thanks to the encouragement of those who pushed me to continue exploring the phenomenological and psychological aspects present in early Buddhist texts. Despite the objective difficulty of this field—given the limited interest even within academic circles—these individuals enabled me to cultivate my passion. Their reactions to my research, which sparked deep engagement and resonance, provided all the motivation I needed to persevere.

I owe special thanks to Alessandro Rossi, who, many years ago, was captivated by some of my lectures. He went out of his way to collect many of my writings in Italian—an impressive feat in itself—and read and studied them with great enthusiasm. His dedication even extended to organizing events at the RBSGROUP in Milan, where he invited or interviewed me, giving me opportunities to present and discuss the content of my research. These events, for me, became rites of passage during a time in my life when academic recognition was scarce. Despite not being held in a university setting, these conferences felt prestigious, offering cherished memories. The interest shown by

participants—and especially Alessandro and his DAEDALUS project—was a source of great pleasure.

Milan's environment and the period I lived near Milan, during which I could more easily visit Alessandro's cultural center, remain formative memories for me, not only intellectually but also in a deeper human sense. My relationship with Alessandro continued even after I left Italy. Beyond organizing events during my occasional returns, Alessandro introduced me to Marilena Fatigante.[3] I am deeply grateful to her for the invaluable opportunity to elevate my research through seminars she organized at the psychology faculty of Sapienza University of Rome.

These seminars allowed me to present structured talks on Buddhist psychology and the importance of exploring epistemological traditions outside those familiar to Western culture. This approach fosters valid methodologies for researching experiences that emphasize qualitative dimensions, alongside quantitative psychological realities. In this environment, I discovered enormous intellectual riches that enabled me to delve deeply into the phenomenological themes of Buddhism. These seminars were instrumental in structuring this monograph, which originated as preparation for those presentations. In essence, this text is a continuation of the work begun there—a more detailed articulation of those foundational ideas.

I owe particular gratitude to Marilena for providing me the platform to present my research at Sapienza University, where I earned my undergraduate degree, and for the intellectual exchange with her, a gracious and profoundly humane individual, as well as an excellent researcher. And of course, renewed thanks go to Alessandro for making the collaboration between Marilena and me possible and for fostering the development of these seminars.

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3. The seminars were held in the context of Marilena Fatigante's project "A Middle Ground: Between Psychic Physicalism and Therapeutic Immaterialism: Towards a New Epistemology." The seminar cycle hosted, besides me, other eminent scholars such as Ines Testoni and Umberta Telfener. My two main seminars were entitled "Experience and Practice of Knowing in Meditation: Tools for Understanding Buddhist Psychology" and "Investigating the Unfathomable: Qualitative Approaches to the Study of Meditative Experience between Psychology, Phenomenology and Contemplative Ethnography."

Finally, I extend my gratitude to Aldo Stella for offering me the opportunity to present this work within the *Quaderni* of *Cum-Scientia* series. For several years now, Aldo has been a pivotal philosophical interlocutor, with whom I have shared publications and reflections. It is therefore an honor for me to contribute to his project with this study, to which I have dedicated years of research and which has come to fruition also thanks to his support.

Background of the Research

This research is the result of a multi-year investigation into the problem of the phenomenon and the perception of phenomena in human cognition from the perspective of archaic Buddhist thought. I wish to specify in this introduction the *background* of the present research, as it helps to contextualize the modes of exposition that the reader will encounter.

My inquiry primarily focuses on the Buddhist intellectual tradition, with particular emphasis on the Pāli Canon. However, I also originate as a scholar of linguistics, and what has always fascinated me about linguistics is its, so to speak, psychological aspect. Language interested me as a faculty, as the capacity to communicate through an ordered system of signs. How are these signs constructed? What gives shape to the nominal identities that we employ daily in speech? And above all, how does language relate to our experience of reality, to perceptions, and to the construction of cognitive systems? With these two passions, I developed my research—initially on parallel tracks, but which I have progressively brought to convergence with the discovery of the presence of these themes in the Buddhist world, addressed not as a naïve philosophical speculation but with commendable technical precision and rigor. The philosophy of Buddhist language is an examination of *psychosemantics* of formidable depth.

After several years dedicated to the study of these issues, this monograph serves the purpose of drawing conclusions. This work has indeed been conceived to re-present, in an organic and structured form as a single volume, all the research that over the years has been

produced in the form of articles. I therefore wish to emphasize that all the works I am about to mention have undergone *peer review* by the academic journals that accepted them for publication. All the contents present in this monograph are anticipated by those works, but the element of novelty lies in the reorganization, which not only brings to light the underlying thread of the entire problem of language and the phenomenon but has also led me to unprecedented inquiries that certainly constitute an enrichment of this work.

The article *Dualism and Psychosemantics*,[4] which had been preceded by a shorter paper reflecting on the problem of *momentariness* in the Abhidharma,[5] is the theoretical cornerstone of the psychological analysis of cognitive processes. The article on *Psychosemantics* forms the foundation of my reflections on the problem of perceptions and cognitions in Buddhism.[6] In that extensive study, I systematically analyzed the principal themes of Buddhist 'psychology,' comparing them with one another and seeking to construct a reflection that would justify their underlying rationale. Terms such as *citta*, *manas*, and *viññāṇa* remain subjects of significant misunderstanding, as translators tend to use ambiguous terms—mind, consciousness, cognition—without necessarily adhering to a rigid criterion. My primary intent was to differentiate them, examining what the specific functions of each were according to the Pāli Canon, as well as their roles in perceptual and cognitive processes. This led to a more in-depth analysis of the system

4. Federico Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy," *Comparative Philosophy: An International Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches toward World Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (2023): 1–40, DOI: 10.31979/2151-6014(2023).140204.

5. Federico Divino, "Appearance and Momentariness: The Nature of Being between Nāgārjuna, the Sarvāstivādins and Neo-Parmenidism," *Comparative Philosophy: An International Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches toward World Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2022): 1–20, DOI: 10.31979/2151-6014(2022).130104.

6. The contents of this article have been presented at the roundtable discussion panel on the topic "Cross-tradition Engagement in Epistemology and Cognitive Science: Perspectives from Buddhist, Chinese, Islamic and Western Traditions" of the international conference "Comparative Philosophy toward World Philosophy" (April 21st, 2022) organized by the International Society for Comparative Philosophy toward World philosophy (CPWP).

of the five aggregates, where elements such as *vedanā* and *saññā* require particular attention in this regard.

In that article, I also identified a particular relationship between *viññāṇa* and *saññā* as two elements of the cognitive and perceptual process that are closely interconnected. While *viññāṇa* constitutes a consciousness of an isolating, discriminative type, based on divisions, *saññā* is a perception of a synthetic, associative, relational type. The article thus highlighted a sort of dual mechanism, in which, within the actual cognitive process, discernment and perception must act together. These are distinct forces—one isolating, the other synthetic—that both contribute to a unified experience. However, this experience is not 'truth' but something that is, precisely, *psychosemantic*. Another fundamental aspect of the article is the centrality of the 'linguistic' dimension in the perceptual-cognitive experience, as all the forces involved are also fundamental mechanisms of semiology.

Another decidedly important work in this regard is *What Dawned First*.[7] In this article, I began to explore the problem of the 'phenomenon' from a perspective that was not solely strictly analytical but also included historical and symbolic considerations. The representation of the phenomenon is, in fact, something that does not concern only the rigorous analysis of reality and cognitive processes but also pertains to the moment in which one realizes that what 'appears' to us seems to be driven by a sort of force, an energy that enables it to appear and that moves all the processes animating *becoming*. Only from this initial recognition are more methodical, rigorous, and analytical considerations also possible. In that article, I sought to analyze this fundamental realization by comparing Buddhism with the Greek world, particularly with Aeschylus and Parmenides, in whom the theme of the phenomenon and *appearing* assumes characteristics comparable to certain Buddhist considerations on the theme of light and the manifestation of beings. These considerations, both in the case of the Buddha and in that of Parmenides, lead to a dual outcome:

7. Federico Divino, "What Dawned First: Early Buddhist Philosophy on the Problem of Phenomenon and Origin in a Comparative Perspective," *Philosophies* 9, no. 5 (2024): 135, DOI: 10.3390/philosophies9050135.

a more poetic aspect, which attempts to describe this manifestative power from an experiential perspective as a *revelation* of a truth that had previously been obscured, and a more rational outcome, if we may say so—though not in opposition to the first—a form of dedication to the analysis of reality and its misinterpretation in the form of *doxic* (for Parmenides) or *relative* (for the Buddhists) experience, which is already a phenomenology of considerable depth.

Considerations of this kind, situated between intellectual history and philosophical analysis, were anticipated in some of my research on themes of the cultural world at the time of the Buddha as reflected in the Pāli Canon. Among these, my *Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta* represents a study particularly dear to me,[8] initially undertaken as a historical-philological analysis of a fascinating section of the Pāli Canon and culminating in an exposition of the first great philosophical questions contained in those texts, necessarily embedded within the indispensable historical-cultural dimension that produced them. These reflections are, however, immensely useful to us: they deal with considerations on the theme of truth, reality, the absolute, and their relationship with and opposition to the world of opinions and misunderstandings. All themes that we will encounter again in this monograph.

The analysis of the philosophical issues of the Sutta Nipāta also led to a collaboration with Professor Aldo Stella, a scholar of both psychology and philosophy at two Italian universities, who contacted me because he was interested in developing a comparative philosophical dialogue with Buddhism.[9] The first outcome of this collaboration is also a work of importance for the contents of this monograph and thus deserves mention. In that text, indeed, phenomenological issues of great significance were addressed—above all, the theme of the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*).

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8. Federico Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (January 29, 2023): 172, DOI: 10.3390/rel14020172.

9. A. Stella and F. Divino, "The Metaphysical Turn in the History of Thought: Anaximander and Buddhist Philosophy," *Philosophies* 8, no. 6 (2023), DOI: 10.3390/philosophies8060099.

Finally, it is appropriate to cite some works of enormous importance, namely those on the theme of the *world* (*loka*).[10] The third and fourth chapters owe a great deal to these studies, which initially emerged as an investigation into the conceptions of the term *loka* in archaic Buddhism and culminated in a discovery concerning the relationships between the perception of what we call 'world' and the very mechanisms that govern the construction of linguistic or psycho-social identities in general. The world, for the Buddhists, is a complex psycho-environmental construct governed by dynamics analyzed with precision and remarkable clarity and traced back to a proper phenomenological process, in which the networks of mutual causality and conditionality relationships are emphasized. However, since it is regarded as a veritable cage that 'chains' (*saṃyojana*) us to processes intrinsically inclined toward suffering, Buddhist contemplative practice enacts a methodical deconstruction of the mechanisms that govern the *world*, revealing their causal connections by recalling their psychosemantic natures, socio-cultural dynamics, habituations, and automatisms.

The last and most important work on this theme ultimately relates this phenomenological analysis—by now fully recognized as such—to the problem of language, beginning to highlight the reasons for a comparative analysis between the thought of the Buddha and the semiological science of Ferdinand de Saussure. This work, titled *Language and Consciousness in Archaic Buddhist Thought*,[11] is especially responsible for the first two chapters of the monograph and constitutes a detailed analysis of the problem of language in archaic Buddhism, its relationship

10. Federico Divino, "In This World or the Next: Investigation Over the 'End of the World' in Contemplative Practice Through the Pāli Canon," *Annali Sezione Orientale* 83, no. 1–2 (2023): 99–129, DOI: 10.1163/24685631-12340142; Federico Divino, "Reaching the End of the World: An Anthropological Reading of Early Buddhist Medicine and Ascetic Practices," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (February 13, 2023): 249, DOI: 10.3390/rel14020249; Federico Divino and Andrea Di Lenardo, "The World and the Desert: A Comparative Perspective on the 'Apocalypse' between Buddhism and Christianity," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2023): 141–62, DOI: 10.1353/bcs.2023.a907576.

11. Federico Divino, "Language and Consciousness in Early Buddhist Thought: On the Early Reflections on the Theme of Language and the Perception of Reality in the Pāli Canon," *Philosophies* 10.2, no. 31 (2025): 1–37, DOI: 10.3390/philosophies10020031.

with perceptual experience and cognitive dynamics, all examined by these Indian thinkers with remarkable acuity. Once the fundamental concepts of the Buddha's linguistic thought were identified, they were then compared with the foundations of Saussure's work, revealing surprising convergences and thereby inviting future investigations and further developments. The first chapter of this monograph in particular is mostly based on this article, and expands its content starting from its conclusion. To some extent, *Language and Consciousness in Early Buddhist Thought* is the necessary premise of this entire research.

Of equally fundamental importance is an extensive study on the archaeology of Buddhist contemplative practice in comparison with what is attested in the Ṛgveda.[12] Although this research might seem to fall outside the themes of this monograph, in reality, the study of the origins of contemplative practice—particularly the imagery employed to describe it—and, above all, the necessity of engaging in a dialogue with the Ṛgveda has made it possible to highlight not only surprising connections but also themes that would otherwise have remained obscure and that, through comparison with the Ṛgveda, assume new clarity. I am referring, for example, to the entire imagery surrounding the role of speech, whether understood as a divinized entity or as a faculty of language: this is precisely the meaning that the term *vāc* assumes in the Vedic world and subsequently in the Buddhist tradition. Since this figure or concept is of fundamental importance also in contemplative practice, the findings that have emerged in my research have repeatedly touched upon the theme of speech and are therefore also relevant to this monograph.

This monograph, therefore, follows in the wake of this last article and aims to offer a rigorous and innovative methodology for addressing the study of Buddhist linguistic thought through comparative lenses with linguistics and phenomenology, hopefully opening new horizons for the study of these themes and making a significant contribution to semiology and the interdisciplinary dialogue between psychology, linguistics, philosophy, and anthropology.

12. Federico Divino, "Seers and Ascetics: Analyzing the Vedic Theory of Cognition and Contemplative Practice in the Development of Early Buddhist Meditation and Imaginary," *Religions* 16.3, no. 378 (2025): 1–55, DOI: 10.3390/rel16030000.

Chapter 1

On the Scope of Language, Terminology, and Designation (SN 22.62) — Early Buddhist Conceptions on Language and its relation with Perception

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave,
lokena vivadāmi,
lokova mayā vivadati

O mendicants, it is not me who argues with the world,
It is the world that argues with me.
(SN 22.94)

The starting point of our investigation will be a specific sutta from the Pāli canon. The implications and significance of this brief discourse are such that they necessitate multiple analytical avenues, which will lead us to comparisons with other suttas and progressively more content, ultimately constructing a richly interconnected framework on the themes of perception, language, and reality from a Buddhist analytical perspective.

The sutta in question is SN 22.62, which we will examine—along with many other discourses—beginning with a commentary and translation of its most significant verses:

tayome, bhikkhave, niruttipathā adhivacanapathā paññattipathā asaṅkiṇṇā asaṅkiṇṇapubbā, na saṅkīyanti, na saṅkīyissanti, appaṭikuṭṭhā samaṇehi brāhmaṇehi viññūhi.

O mendicants, these are the three pathways of language, terminology, and designation. They are incorrupt in that they have been so from the beginning. They are not being corrupted now, nor will they ever be. The wise ascetics and brahmins are not in conflict with them.

Even from this initial verse, a substantial number of issues arise. I will outline the main points highlighted by these verses that demand a more thorough examination.

In this passage, the Buddha refers to two categories of potential sages or scholars (*viññū*): the ascetics and the brahmins (*samaṇa*, *brāhmaṇa*). A very traditional interpretation of Buddhist doctrine holds that the Buddha proposed a form of heresy against Brahmanism, and the frequent dialectical confrontations between Buddhists and brahmins have led to the view that the Buddha's position represented a struggle for orthodoxy. Here, the uninterrupted lineage of the Vedic tradition, which would later become Brahmanism, was opposed by the heterodoxy of nihilistic movements (*nāstika*), which rejected the authority of the Vedas and proposed an alternative way of life. While this interpretation is not entirely incorrect, it implies a form of anti-Vedic radicalism that is not evident in the oldest texts of the Pāli canon.

Modern scholarship has highlighted that it is by no means certain that the emerging brāhmaṇical caste was the legitimate guardian of the Vedic tradition; in fact, it is well-known that the Vedic world did not originally conceive of a priestly figure but rather that of the seer (*ṛṣi*). These figures appear to be respected even in the Pāli canon, as we shall see later, and thus, there is no total rejection of this aspect of Vedic culture. Similarly, it cannot be said that Buddhism opposed the style of that ancient culture, given that the metrical composition and poetic structuring of the Buddha's doctrine, along with its oral transmission, clearly emulate the same methods of Vedic wisdom transmission.[1]

In the Pāli canon, there is an evident debate over what it means to be a 'true' brahmin, which suggests that the figure of the brahmin was still in formation at the time of the Buddha, and their role was under dispute. While one movement prided itself on being the custodian of an orthodoxy and ancient tradition that justified a particular social structure and the effort to maintain a certain order, the ascetic

1. Nathan McGovern, *The Snake and the Mongoose* (Oxford University Press, 2018), DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190640798.001.0001; Nathan McGovern, "Brahmā: An Early and Ultimately Doomed Attempt at a Brahmanical Synthesis," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 40, no. 1 (2012): 1–23, DOI: 10.1007/s10781-011-9146-8; Federico Squarcini, *Forme della Norma: Contro l'eccentricità del Discorso Normativo Sudasiatico* (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2012); Federico Squarcini, *Tradition, Veda and Law: Studies on South Asian Classical Intellectual Traditions* (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2008).

movements defended a more contemplative aspect of the same 'wisdom' or 'science' (*veda*). For them, the sage was not meant to head a compartmentalized social order, and society itself, with its traditions, hierarchies, and rigid structures, was to be opposed.[2] It is, therefore, in this specific aspect—whether to defend or oppose the constitution of the socio-cultural ecological niche—that the two ideas of the 'true Brahmin' came into conflict. On one hand, there were those who sought to preserve, defend, and reinforce society and its normative orders, and on the other, those who wished to transcend or even dismantle them. It will become clearer later why this choice is a decisive one in the history of Buddhist thought and how the struggle over what constitutes a 'form-of-life' is of fundamental importance. Social conventions that regulate and stabilize life undoubtedly do so for its protection, but every system of power, in exchange for this protection, demands a certain degree of control. For Buddhists, this control adds to a series of deceptions with which the individual is fed from birth, only deepening the tragic condition into which they are thrown.

If the 'orthodox' brahmins saw it as essential to maintain the authority—and with it the power—of apex figures (they, of course, reserved for themselves the pinnacle of this order along with the rulers and the warrior caste), the ascetics, who often described themselves as brahmins as well (and were thus accused of heterodoxy), held a completely different view.

The simple expression *appaṭikuṭṭhā samaṇehi brāhmaṇehi viññūhi* already opens numerous lines of inquiry. Let us momentarily set aside this aspect to proceed with the analysis of the text. What is not rejected by

2. Federico Squarcini, "Le Colombe e gli Avvoltoi: sull'economia Politica delle 'Ecologie Religiose' del Passato, in India e non solo," *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie Orientale* 54 (2018): 205–38, DOI: 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2018/01/010; Federico Squarcini, "Pāṣaṇḍin, Vaitaṇḍika, Vedanindaka and Nāstika. On Criticism, Dissenters and Polemics and the South Asian Struggle for the Semiotic Primacy of Veridiction," *Orientalia Suecana* 60 (2011): 101–15; Federico Squarcini, "Tradens, Traditum, Recipiens: Introductory Remarks on the Semiotics, Pragmatics and Politics of Tradition," in *Boundaries, Dynamics and Construction of Traditions in South Asia* (Anthem Press, 2011), 11–38, DOI: 10.7135/UPO9781843313977.002; Federico Squarcini, *Tradens, Traditium, Recipiens: Studi Storici e Sociali Sull'istituto Della Tradizione Nell'antichità Sudasiatica* (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2008), DOI: 10.1400/128688.

the wise ascetics and brahmins is the uncorrupted truth of three elements or factors, all distinguished by the suffix *-pathā*. What does this *pathā/patha* mean? This Indian term is etymologically identical to the English "path" (Old English *pæþ* < Proto-Germanic *paþaz*)[3] as well as the Greek πατέω ("to walk") and πάτος ("path").[4] The specific connotation this term takes on in Pāli is not easy to determine. It certainly retains the idea of "course," but among the possible meanings, the PTS Dictionary also indicates that "it is sometimes pleonastic, and acts in the function of an abstract formation."[5] We can thus interpret it as "mode" or "pathway." A translation with some poetic license would be "purpose" or "sense." This is, for instance, Bhikkhu Sujato's choice, who translates "The Scope of Language,"[6] while Bhikkhu Bodhi opts for "Pathways of Language."[7]

It is indubitable that this poetic license is sufficiently justified, especially considering that this sutta describes why language, terminology, and designation function in a certain way, what their purposes are, and how they influence human experience, so to speak. However, the meaning of the three terms marked by the suffix *pathā*, deeply rooted in a long tradition of thought that has always reflected on the problem of language, still requires a detailed interpretation. We will begin thus with the analysis of *nirutti*.

1.1 The pathway of language (niruttipatha)

This term is referable to Skanskrit *nirukti* (*nis-vac*). In the context of Indian grammatical tradition[8] the term *nirukti* is employed to indicate

3. Guus Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic* (Leiden: BRILL, 2013), 142.
4. Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)* (Leiden: BRILL, 2010), 1158.
5. T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part V* (The Pali Text Society, 1923), 30.
6. Bhikkhu Sujato, *Linked Discourses: A Plain Translation of the Saṁyutta Nikāya - Vol. III* (SuttaCentral, 2018), 71.
7. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 905.
8. Valerie Stoker, "Vedic Language and Vaiṣṇava Theology: Madhva's Use of

the "*etymological interpretation*" of a certain word, whereas *nir-ukta* means "uttered, pronounced, expressed, explained, defined."[9] A *niruttti* is the pragmatical use of a word and, by extension, of language. In Pāli is plausible that this term is mostly used to indicate *language*.[10] In combination with *loka* ("world"), *lokanirutti* signifies "worldly language," "common expression."

DN 9 refers to *lokanirutti* as the set of common usages or expressions employed by normal people. The Realized One is able to communicate in the common language without being influenced by it. This emphasis on the role of language and world (the two things are possibly deeply intertwined as we shall see) must be kept in mind: "these are the world's descriptions, the world's languages, the world's expressions, the world's designations, which the Realized One uses to express himself without being attached to them" (*imā kho, ... lokasamaññā lokaniruttiyo lokavohārā lokapaññattiyo, yāhi tathāgato voharati aparāmasaṃ*, DN 9).

In this case, the term *loka-nirutti* is not simply a connotation of language, description, designation, and so on. This emphasis serves to state clearly that there is not such thing as a language from a non-world. Language is *of* the world, which means that *loka* can be intended also as 'worldly,' for descriptions, languages, expressions and designations are all worldly things. Also, DN 9 establishes a connection between all these factors: they all pertain to the same worldly mechanism. The term *samaññā* indicates any label, nomination, appellation. It is the conventional attribution of a certain nominal identity to a certain concept. The associative nature of description or appellation is present in the way in which this word is formed: *saṃ-* "putting together" + *ā* + √*ñā* "to know." The prefix *saṃ-* is found in many other words used to

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Nirukta in His Ṛgbhāṣya," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 35, no. 2 (2007): 169–99, DOI: 10.1007/s10781-006-9003-3; Ryukai Mano, "Nirukti in Buddhist Canon," *Journal of Research Society of Buddhism and Cultural Heritage* 2001, no. 10 (2001): l1–20, DOI: 10.5845/bukkyobunka.2001.l1.

9. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Dictionary English and Sanskrit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), 553.

10. T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part IV* (The Pali Text Society, 1923), 206.

indicate an association; it has the same function of Greek σύν-/ξύν- and Latin *cum*-, of the same origin.[11]

If *lokasamaññā* is that worldly mechanism which produces *labelling* or *attribution of names* to certain designated identities, we can understand it as a process of the *signifier* that works together with the *signified*. This process works on a double plain, for every psychological set of sounds organized to form an ideal name has to be articulatorily realized in phonation. Thus, the word *vohāra*, which carries in itself the idea of "speech," "uttering," is the concrete counterpart of a nominal designation.

Signifier	*samaññā*
Phonic act	*vohāra*

Table 1. Psycholinguistic dimension of nomination and speech.

It seems evident that the discussion here pertains to the linguistic sign, albeit without having developed the same concepts employed in general linguistics following the systematization of Ferdinand de Saussure. However, the work of the Geneva linguist is far from free of Indian influences in general, including Buddhist ones.

We will see how Saussure was not merely inspired by Indian grammarians but, to some extent, directly borrowed certain concepts from them. While much of this inspiration is well-known and acknowledged, as Saussure himself did not conceal it, there are other elements that have not received as much attention, such as the significant importance of the *nāmarūpa* dichotomy, which is central in Early Buddhist psychological theory.

Given what we know today about Saussure's keen interest in both of these philosophical traditions, the comparison I intend to draw between this dichotomy and the composition of the linguistic sign should not be seen as surprising. I am anticipating my conclusion here, but I will elaborate on the reasons for this comparison later.

11. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 1038.

Linguistic sign (*nimitta*)	*Language* (*nirutti*)	*Speech* (*adhivacana*)
Acoustic image (*nāma*)	Signifier (*samaññā*)	Phonic act (*vohāra*)
Concept, ideal form (*rūpa*)	Signified (*attha*)	Signification (*paññatti*)

Table 2. Linguistical theory in the Pāli canon compared to Saussure's hypotheses.

For now, let us return to the terminological analysis of the discourse in SN 22.62. The most significant aspect of the discourse appears to be that sages, ascetics, and (true) brahmins, as well as the Buddha himself, are characterized by not being influenced by the constraints of language. The term *appaṭikuṭṭha* refers to being "not scorned" by something (*na* + *pati* + √*kus* -*ta*). It is as if all these elements, which we now categorize within the realm of the psycholinguistic dimension, or more precisely, what I prefer to call *psychosemiotic* processes are factors that typically generate conflict.[12]

Indeed, the issue of conflict is central in this context. In contrast, the sages are not conditioned by these factors and are therefore free from the inherent conflictual nature within them. Why this conflictual nature? What causes it, and why the insistence on the need to be liberated from it?

Whatever the power of language may be, it must undoubtedly be something of considerable importance to have captivated the early Buddhists' reflection with such intensity, and as we shall see, this theme is not exclusive to this particular sutta. This first verse also establishes a connection between *nirutti*, *adhivacana*, and *paññatti*, not only because all three seem to share the same 'scope' (-*pathā*), but also because they perhaps describe different aspects or processes of a unified problem. Although *nirutti* in itself does not mean "language"

12. I am referring to those cognitive-perceptual mechanisms that shape not only how we perceive and experience the world but also the construction of anthropological structures, which are perpetuated and modeled through linguistic forms.

as we understand it today, nor as linguistics technically defines it—a system that organizes signs into morphosyntactic structures—it is still true that *nirutti*, *adhivacana*, and *paññatti* represent 'something' that in one way or another falls perfectly within the idea of 'language' as a human faculty (and perhaps not exclusively human).

We must first distinguish between *langue* and *language*. In French, Saussure uses *langue* and *langage*, a distinction that unfortunately English lacks. Thus, since both are translatable as "language" in English, I would keep the first term in French. If *language* refers to the linguistic faculty mentioned above, a single *langue* is one of the countless possible manifestations of this linguistic faculty. English is one language (*langue*), Sanskrit is another, but both are forms of the possible expression of *langage*, understood as faculty of communicating between different individuals using a specific code. Beyond the distinction between language as a faculty and as a pragmatic, historical, and cultural act (as only in this dimension can a specific historical language exist, given that, diachronically, languages do not remain unchanged but evolve alongside the cultures and histories that adopt them), Saussure also distinguishes between two analytical planes: a single *langue* as a structured system is always accompanied by its practical execution, which he calls *parole*, and which we may roughly interpret as 'speech' (see Table 2).

One should not fall into Cartesian deceptions, thinking that *langue* is a mental system while *parole* is its concrete realization. We do not precisely know 'where' *langue* resides; this distinction is made for purely practical reasons, dictated by the analytical study of language itself. Without positing an ideal plane, we cannot understand why, in the face of general rules that are unconsciously and collectively shared, there is a margin for individual variation in practical executions. This applies both to more complex aspects, such as morphosyntax, and to seemingly simpler ones, such as phonetic-articulatory elements.

For instance, every *langue* possesses a predetermined set of sounds that it uses as minimal units to form words. Every speaker has unconsciously internalized the ideal execution of those sounds, such as the vowel /a/. However, while this set of ideal sounds must be shared by all

speakers for mutual comprehension to be possible, it is equally true that each phoneme corresponds to more than one possible phonetic realization. The various sounds associated with a single ideal phoneme represent the range of variation within which the speaker's cognitive system can recognize the phonetic execution as comprehensible and correctly map it to the phoneme. Without this mechanism, communication would not be possible, as it would be impossible to account for the minimal variations in the phonetic-articulatory apparatus of each individual, which lead to a pronunciation that varies between speakers. This system extends to all aspects of language and leads Saussure to hypothesize the *langue/parole* dichotomy as a foundation of modern linguistics.

The Buddhists were far from ignorant of this phenomenon, and they had already reached the conclusion that language is a convention, a system based on the principle of arbitrary designations shared by a group of speakers, but that it can never describe reality as it truly is. Rather, language is an extremely powerful organizational system, and being aware of the power of words obviously places the most learned on a different plane from those who unconsciously 'submit' to language. Another fundamental aspect of this problem is that language is learned unconsciously from infancy; it permeates every aspect of our lives, shaping identities, roles, hierarchies, social structures, and cultural norms and habits. This is not a reference to a simplistic hypothesis of "modifying reality," as suggested by the Sapir-Whorf linguistic relativity theory.

The issue is far more complex, and simply introducing a word is not enough to create a concept. Nevertheless, it is true that language reflects certain habits, norms, and structures, and these rely on the underlying assumption that words are not conventions but rather identities attributed to real, objective referents—to 'things' that are already naturally autonomous and independent, and which human society merely labels. In reality, the division of things is itself attributable to an arbitrary organization of reality, and this is one of the mechanisms that generate the conflict from which the sages, according to the sutta under analysis, must extricate themselves.

Numerous suttas play on the ambiguities of language, emphasizing its conventional, arbitrary, and impermanent nature, just as all phenomena

we witness are merely procedural aspects of a broader phenomenology, which, in its entirety, ultimately eludes us. By focusing on the individual epiphenomena of these complex processes—because our sensory apparatus can only process these aspects to a limited extent—we construct an entire world in which they take center stage. In this world, they are endowed with specific meanings, identities, and roles that pertain only to the conventionality of our systems. Their mutability and tendency to be ephemeral escape us without a deeper analysis of these complexities. We will return to the phenomenological aspect, which concerns an inquiry that has already acknowledged the challenges posed by language—challenges that otherwise compromise any analytical effort aimed at understanding reality, contaminating it.

A particularly striking sutta from this perspective—allow me to briefly open a parenthesis here, which will be useful later on—is MN 139, entitled "Analysis (*vibhaṅga*) of the Absence of Conflict (*araṇa*)," or *Araṇavibhaṅga*. Here, too, the emphasis on overcoming conflict is linked to a linguistic issue. Language inevitably proves to be a potential source of conflict. Let us turn directly to the passage of interest. In this passage, the Buddha virtually ridicules the attitude of people who persistently try to impose a singular truth based on language. To demonstrate his point, he says:

> *iti yathā yathā naṃ tesu tesu janapadesu sañjānanti tathā tathā thāmasā parāmāsā abhinivissa voharati: 'idameva saccaṃ, moghamaññan'ti. evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, janapadaniruttiyā ca abhiniveso hoti samaññāya ca atisāro. kathañca, bhikkhave, janapadaniruttiyā ca anabhiniveso hoti samaññāya ca anatisāro?*
> *idha, bhikkhave, tadevekaccesu janapadesu 'pātī'ti sañjānanti, 'pattan'ti sañjānanti, 'vittan'ti sañjānanti, 'sarāvan'ti sañjānanti, 'dhāropan'ti sañjānanti, 'poṇan'ti sañjānanti, 'pisīlavan'ti sañjānanti.*
>
> Whatever mode of speech is known among these various peoples, you conform your speech, stubbornly insisting, "this is the only truth, all else is superfluous." In this way, you insist on commonly used terms, overestimating designations. And how can you not insist on popular language, overestimating designations? When among different peoples you

see that the same thing is perceived as "*pāti*," "*patta*," "*vitta*," "*sarāva*," "*dhāropa*," "*poṇa*," "*pisīlava*."

In this passage, the Buddha lists all possible synonyms for the term "cup," "bowl," or "jar." It is unsurprising that, even in the Buddha's time, there existed different dialects and languages, but what is remarkable is the use of the verb *sañjānati*, which denotes the act of designation and perception. The term *sañjānati* is related to *saññā*, commonly translated as "perception." This is another word that will become of fundamental importance as we progress with our analysis. For now, it suffices to inform the reader that *saññā* does indeed refer to perception, but it also implies a semantic process. Thus, we might translate it as "semantic perception" to preserve the fact that it carries a signifying function in its operation. The sutta's usage of this term is clear: *sañjānati* is used both to indicate how the bowl is called in different dialects and to imply that this name conveys a different perception—the bowl is called and perceived as a "bowl."

The name always accompanies the perceptual act of someone endowed with language. It cannot be otherwise: from the moment we learn to categorize things by their nominal identities, the name inevitably infiltrates our perceptual process—it is insidious, invasive, and almost seems to precede the perception of the object, so immediate is our tendency to see a bowl and think "bowl," instantly categorizing it within its appropriate place in the semantic-conceptual organization. Yet, the Buddha exhorts us not to insist on terminology as such: "Do not cling to popular terms, and do not overestimate nominal identities" (*janapadaniruttiṃ nābhiniveseyya samaññaṃ nātidhāveyya*). The term *janapadanirutti* (note here again the presence of *nirutti*) refers precisely to the language of the common people (*janapada*). Regarding this, the Buddha states, "this is a principle of conflict" (*eso dhammo saraṇo*). Language is *saraṇa*, intrinsically conflictual, a bearer of divergence.

At this point, I hope the use of the term *nirutti* has been sufficiently clarified, as it carries significant implications and refers to numerous issues that will accompany us in this examination. Let us now explore the other aspects of language that share the same *patha*.

1.2 The pathway of expression (adhivacanapathā)

There can be several possible translations of the term *adhivacana*, but they are all related to the idea of naming something, labeling, uttering, "to term," an "expression" for something, or even an epithet, an "attribution" of a certain "nomenclature."[13]

It seems that *adhivacana* refers to the expressive aspect of a certain language: the terminology or the attribution of a certain name *through* speech. However, it does not seem related exclusively to the formal execution (the phonation), albeit the *-vacana* part of the term *adhivacana* does mean "voice," "speech." Nonetheless, the specifical use of *adhivacana* seems related to the expressive aspect of language, what Saussure described as *parole* or "speech," in the broadest sense.

$$\frac{Langue}{Parole} : \frac{nirutti}{adhivacana}$$

Table 3. The *nirutti/adhivacana* binomial as *langue/parole*.

Neither Saussure's *parole* nor the act of *adhivacana* should be understood as something exclusively concrete, such as the physical articulation of particular sounds produced by the phonatory apparatus, nor as the mere vibrations characteristic of such sound emissions. While *parole* indeed denotes the concrete act of language, it does not refer solely to its physical execution, which is but one aspect of *parole*. In its entirety, *parole* encompasses both the phonetic articulation, understood as an act of phonation—the concrete counterpart, in terms of *parole*, of the signifier—and the act of signification, which also constitutes the *parole* counterpart of another aspect of the sign, namely, the signified. Therefore, the term *adhivacana* does not merely refer to the act of speaking, but rather to the expression of language as a whole: it involves the concrete act of assigning nominal identities as well as the act of naming them aloud when invoked in utterance through phonation.

13. T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part I* (London: The Pali Text Society, 1921), 30.

I have represented these two facets of *parole/adhivacana* as present within the Buddhist conceptual framework as well (see Table 3).

For example, in AN 5.99 and AN 10.121, the Buddha is referred to as a "lion" (*sīho*), indicating that the image of the lion is used as an epithet to describe him: *'sīho'ti kho tathāgatassetaṃ adhivacanaṃ*. This seems to imply that *adhivacana* denotes an epithet or a way of naming something in a particular manner. In AN 4.122, anger and distress are also metaphorically designated by the epithet "danger of waves" (*ūmibhayanti kho kodhūpāyāsassetaṃ adhivacanaṃ*). Similarly, in AN 4.63, parents are said to be "worthy of offerings dedicated to the gods" (*āhuneyyāti mātāpitūnaṃ etaṃ adhivacanaṃ*). In AN 6.23, the function of *adhivacana* is made explicit when terms such as danger (*bhaya*), suffering (*dukkha*), disease (*roga*), boil (*gaṇḍa*), snare (*saṅga*), and bog (*paṅka*) are all described as synonyms for sensual pleasures (*kāmānameta*) and therefore are also "called 'sensual pleasures'" (*kāmānametaṃ* adhivacanaṃ). Many other examples could be listed, but I will offer just one more: AN 6.25, again involving a synonym, states that the five types of sensory stimulation are also referred to as "desire" (*gedho'ti kho, bhikkhave, pañcannetaṃ kāmaguṇānaṃ* adhivacanaṃ).

In general linguistics the act of *parole* is "un acte individuel de volonté et d'intelligence, dans lequel il convient de distinguer : 1° les combinaisons par lesquelles le sujet parlant utilise le code de la langue en vue d'exprimer sa pensée personnelle ; 2° le mécanisme psycho-physique qui lui permet d'extérioriser ces combinassions."[14]

I am not asserting here that the Buddhist idea of language is identical to that of Saussure. However, we can surely understand more through this comparison, since Saussure's ideas have been strongly influenced by the Indian philosophies of language, as I will articulate more in depth further.

I want to remark more on the problem of abstractedness and concreteness in linguistics. For Saussure, "La langue n'est pas moins que

14. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, ed. Charles Bailly et al. (Paris: Payot, 1995), 30–31; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2016), 79.

la parole un objet de nature concrète, et c'est un grand avantage pour l'étude. Les signes linguistiques, pour être essentiellement psychiques, ne sont pas des abstractions ; les associations ratifiées par le consentement collectif, et dont l'ensemble constitue la langue, sont des réalités qui ont leur siège dans le cerveau."[15]

In these words attributed to Saussure (the *Cours* was compiled by Bailly and Sechehaye), we may detect a position that is perhaps excessively extreme—one not necessarily paralleled in Buddhism, where any use of terms such as "mental" and "psychological" ought to be approached cautiously. Furthermore, it should be noted that not all ideas presented in the *Cours* are articulated as clearly as, for instance, in Saussure's posthumously published *Écrits*, which can indeed be attributed to him with certainty. Among these writings, the most valuable teaching concerns the dual nature of language (*l'essence double du langage*), which, far from embodying a Cartesian dualism between the abstract and the concrete, is far more complex than one might assume from a superficial reading of the *Cours*.

In the *Écrits*, Saussure even appears to incline toward a dualism that juxtaposes the prototypical abstraction of linguistic function with its ideal performance, always of a psychological nature. At the phono-articulatory, acoustic, and physical levels, this ideal performance—always conceived as an ideal model—is enacted in practice. Yet within the realm of language, both the formal structure of linguistic configuration and its specific instantiation seem to be conceived as psychological data.

This does not mean that the physical datum is not relevant for linguistics. However, considering *language as a 'system*,' the physical datum is relevant only if *in relation to the system* itself. This means that the real 'dualism' of which Saussure speaks in his writings, is not a dualism between matter and psyche, concrete and abstract data, like, for instance, a physical sound vibration (concrete phonetic execution) and its ideal (phonological) counterpart.

Le dualisme profond qui partage le langage ne réside pas dans le dualisme

15. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 1995, 32; de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 2016, 80.

> du son et de l'idée, du phénomène vocal et du phénomène mental ; c'est là la façon facile et pernicieuse de le concevoir. Ce dualisme 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. 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.[16]

We can understand this conception as a 'strong dualism,' where the simplistic binomial of abstract/concrete is paralleled with a twofold dimension *in* the abstract. In other words, there are 'two' dualities: "the duality of the vocal phenomenon *as such*, and that of the vocal phenomenon *as sign*," that is, "of the physical (objective) fact, and of the physical-mental (subjective) one." It has to be noted that the physical dimension is always present. One aspect is merely physical, while the other is both physical *and* mental.

$$\frac{phénomène\ \ vocal \quad comme\ \ tel}{phénomène\ \ vocal \quad comme\ \ signe} : \frac{fait\ \ physique}{fait\ \ physicomental} : \frac{objectif}{subjectif}$$

$$\frac{Domaine\ \ intérieurpsychique\ :\ \frac{signe}{signification}}{Domaine\ \ extérieur\ :\ figure \quad vocale,\ \ ondes\ \ sonores}$$

Table 4. The linguistic system described by Saussure in his *Écrits* visualized.

The nature of the sign (*signe*) is equally important, and it will be explored when I will introduce the concept of *nimitta* and that of the binomial *nāmarūpa* in the Buddhist texts. From a linguistical perspective, a *sign* represents the *minimal semantic unity*—something that carries (expressing) a content and that *stands for* it. This is also the reason why Peirce uses the term *representamen* as a synonym for sign.

16. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Écrits de Linguistique Générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 20–21.

Saussure conceives every sign as a unity of two elements associated with one another: a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the representation through a certain medium (a series of articulated sounds, a certain writing, and so on), and the signified is the concept for which the signifier stands for, or to which the signifier wants to refer to.

This duality is what most interest Saussure in his *Écrits* as the founding principle of not just linguistics, but language itself. There is little doubt concerning his inspiration on this matter: the Indian philosophical traditions, including the great grammarians, and Greek philosophy as well. However, it is precisely the Indian influence which should interest us in this occasion. Saussure describes this principle of "dualité incessante qui frappe jusque dans le plus infime paragraphe d'une grammaire"[17] as that which is "le plus véritablement le principe premier et dernier."[18]

The most remarkable aspect of language lies in its capacity to *designate identities*. This has been evident in our examination of the *Niruttipatha* so far, yet the theme of identity also forms the core of Buddhist discourse in a broader sense. When we observe phenomena—what we witness as "events"—such as a leaf falling, a dog barking, or a stream flowing, this 'happening' is not easily accessible. This is because the observed phenomenon is immediately marked as a particular 'thing' by language: a "leaf," a "dog," or a "stream."

With this identity assigned by language, how certain can we be that the phenomenon is not fundamentally altered in our perception? But let us delve further: language necessarily participates in these phenomena; indeed, language itself is a phenomenon. This fundamentally shifts our perspective, as it must. We should be cautious not to view language as merely corrupting the purity of phenomena, as if they existed somewhere, ready to be revealed in their essence, obscured only by the veils of language. Language does not divert phenomena from a path they would otherwise take autonomously; instead, it shapes them.

Thus, the "ceaseless duality" that Saussure identified in language prompts us to question a similarly ceaseless mechanism within the

17. Ibid., 17–18.
18. Ibid., 17.

world itself. The perspective that compels reflection is that there is no alternation between an "objective, real world" and our subjective, distorted perception. What we call "the world" is itself a form of opinion: δόξα in Greek, or *diṭṭhi* in Buddhism, meaning "vision," "way of seeing," or "opinion."

The world is itself *diṭṭhi*, and within it lies both our discourse and what we witness. What, then, would truth be? For Buddhists, it is *sacca*, derived from *sat-ya*,[19] meaning simply what "is" (*sat-*),[20] not in the sense of a purer form of appearance untainted by our vision. The very visions themselves are phenomena; they appear. Therefore, the pursuit of purity should be approached with caution, as the issue is far more complex. Buddhists indeed hold that phenomena aggregate, combine, and assemble into diverse configurations, which phenomenological analysis may break down into fundamental components. Yet, each component is not independently sustainable; it is neither autonomous nor self-sufficient, but rather a crucial juncture within a distinct phase of phenomenological manifestation. This does not imply that it is self-existent. Thus, "that which is"—*sat-ya* (or *sacca* in Pāli)—must be understood as that which fully "is," in its most multifaceted completeness, whereas *diṭṭhi* is a focused gaze, a directed view toward a limited aspect, what appears to a witness who is not omniscient but sees only part of the unfolding, sequentially in time and spatially constrained. This focus on limit and transcendence is central to Buddhist reflections.

What, then, is the world? This complex theme will be summarized here and revisited later. The world is a distinct circle, a boundary marking a limit: the boundary within which we witness the appearing of things, and beyond which we cannot attest to them. Everything that lies within this defined limit also participates in the constructions and speculations we develop within it—the grand systems that interpret the absolute nature of what enters into the "world" and concern themselves with it as something absolute, something indubitable. And here we find that the fool, who does not doubt that there exists an "outside"

19. T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part VIII* (The Pali Text Society, 1925), 127.
20. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Dictionary English and Sanskrit*, 1135.

to the world on which we speculate, is, for Buddhists, the ignorant one, the dialectical adversary.

In SN 12.15, this theme is exemplified: the disciple Kaccāna asks the Buddha to explain "right view" (*sammādiṭṭhi*), and the Buddha responds by clarifying the field from the trap of two extremes: "this view relies on dual notions of existence and non-existence" (*dvayanissito khvāyaṃ, loko yebhuyyena—atthitañceva natthitañca*). Key terms here include "world" and its inherent reliance on two notions, not two real things, but two concepts. These concepts, dual (*dvayanissito*), represent two ontological extremes: existence and non-existence.

We may presume that designation is the process by which identities are intermittently assigned to things. This process, however, relies on dual principles, as the foundational principle of designated identities—opinions, in essence—endures only within dualism. After all, we are discussing the same matter, whether it specifically manifests as *attā* (identity construct) or as *diṭṭhi* (opinion). The rejection of "two extremes," that is, the two dogmatic views on reality, is summarized as the sole correct perspective (*sammādiṭṭhi*): "'Everything exists' is one extreme; 'nothing exists' is the other extreme; by avoiding these two extremes, the Realized One teaches the middle way" (*'sabbamatthī'ti kho… ayameko anto; 'sabbaṃ natthī'ti ayaṃ dutiyo anto; ete te, kaccāna, ubho ante anupagamma majjhena tathāgato dhammaṃ deseti*). This is a significant mention of the term *majjha*, the middle way, as the notion it conveys will frequently reappear in the history of Buddhism as the essence of true doctrine, notably through Nāgārjuna, who will make the middle way (*Madhyamaka*) the central theme of his school (see §4.7). Incidentally, this very sutta (SN 12.15) appears to be the only one explicitly cited by Nāgārjuna in his works (see MK 15.7), underscoring its importance.

At this point, SN 12.15 describes the Buddha's teaching (*tathāgato dhammaṃ deseti*) with a structure that is itself highly significant. We will note this idea now and revisit it later in our discussion. The teaching is as follows: "Ignorance is the condition for eidetic constructs; eidetic constructs are the condition for consciousness. This is how the entire mass of suffering arises" (*avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā,*

saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇaṃ… dukkhakkhandhassa samudayo). This schema is part of a structure mentioned repeatedly in the canon, such as in SN 12.35, titled "Conditioned by Ignorance" (*Avijjāpaccaya*). Why is this important to discuss? Because it represents the fundamental phenomenological model of Buddhist teaching. A particular phenomenon *x* is not inherently existent, autonomous, or self-sufficient; it is always conditioned, that is, dependent on another, and itself conditions at least one other. Indeed, there is only one unconditioned phenomenon, which we will address later. The model, then, is $x \rightarrow y$, where *x* conditions (*paccaya*) *y*, leading to a phenomenological chain in which each link is interrelated with others. In the following scheme that represents the model of mutual conditioning of phenomena, the *p.* above the arrow represents the *paccaya* (conditioning) function:

$$x \overset{p.}{\rightarrow} y \overset{p.}{\rightarrow} z \overset{p.}{\rightarrow} \cdots$$

The phenomenological analysis that shapes the rigorous Buddhist methodology from its origins proposes this linguistic structure as a true phenomenological syntax of the world—an inherently binary structure of $x \rightarrow y$. What does SN 12.35 tell us, which is ultimately the same conclusion as SN 12.15? A universal model exists for describing the origin of suffering in human experience, and this is the phenomenological chain, with ignorance (*avijjā*) as its fundamental node. On the one hand, then, the origin of suffering can be diagrammed as *avijjā* → *saṅkhārā* → *viññāṇa*, where the final aspect, discerning consciousness, is also crucial to keep in mind. To end this mass of suffering, it is necessary to eliminate the most critical link in this chain: ignorance (*avijjāya tveva asesavirāganirodhā*). Consequently, even what is conditioned by it, namely mental fabrications or eidetic constructs (*saṅkhārā*), will find no fertile ground, and thus neither will *viññāṇa* (consciousness).

It is, therefore, intriguing that such a factor as discernment has such a negative connotation. In SN 12.14, it is explained that this very

structure of conditional linkage ($x \rightarrow y \rightarrow z \rightarrow$ ...) can be further detailed through phenomenological analysis. We can, in fact, see that between the starting ignorance and resulting consciousness, there are numerous intermediate phases, which I will briefly outline here and explore in further depth later in our analysis.

avijjā → saṅkhāra → viññāṇa → nāmarūpa → saḷāyatana → phassa → vedanā → taṇhā → upādāna → bhava → jāti

The Buddha systematically reconstructs all the stages leading to the cognitive process of perceiving reality in a specific manner and deconstructs its components into a chain of conditioned phenomenal production (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) comprising twelve stages. These stages are: ignorance (*avijjā*), formative factors (*saṅkhāra*), consciousness (*viññāṇa*), identity markers (*nāmarūpa*), sensory-perceptual spheres (*saḷāyatana*), contact (*phassa*), perception (*vedanā*), craving (*taṇhā*), attachment (*upādāna*), becoming (*bhava*), birth (*jāti*), and aging and death (*jarāmaraṇa*). This model is known as the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the arising of "conditioned phenomena."

Some of these stages deserve particular attention. It is fairly evident why ignorance is the initial link in the chain. Lack of awareness of these mechanisms of reality construction is the essential precondition for their continuous perpetuation. In contrast, the state of an "awakened" being (Buddha) is marked by correct awareness (*sammāsati*). The fourth link in the chain, *nāmarūpa*, brings us back to the theme of language, reminding us that we have not truly departed from it. *Nāmarūpa* integrates the concepts of "name" (*nāma*) and "form" (*rūpa*), which, as Buddhist texts illustrate, are entities already conceived as abstract, idealized, and prototypical. Here, "name" does not simply refer to the act of naming, but to the foundational element for phonetic production—the *acoustic image* (see Table 4). This is contrasted with and related to a hypothetical ideal form (*rūpa*), an 'embodiment' of entities, which in Buddhist psychology is also understood as idealized. There are no inherent identity forms in the external world; rather, forms are extracted from the world, organized into ideal

forms, and endowed with specific names (*nāma*) for identification. Thus, the combination of acoustic image and concept expressed by the term *nāmarūpa* can only be interpreted as the linguistic "sign."

According to Saussure, the linguistic sign is a two-sided entity (*entité psychique à deux faces*)[21] comprising an association between a concept and an acoustic image (*image acoustique*). More broadly, however, the term "acoustic image" refers to any *mental figure*, most often a vocal figure (*figure vocale*) due to the prominence of spoken language in our lives, or a figure composed of written graphemes as a counterpart to speech, which is linked to a particular designated conceptual identity.

The word "tree," which can be mentally pronounced as an abstract ideal encompassing all possible pronunciations of "tree" (similarly, all possible spellings adhere to the same principle), represents the "signifier" aspect of the sign, a term akin to the Buddhist notion of *nāma*, the acoustic image or vocal figure. The "signified," on the other hand, is the conceptual reference point, also drawn from an ideal that does not exist tangibly in the world, but serves as a cognitive prototype that encompasses all potential actual occurrences.

> Le point de départ du circuit est dans le cerveau de l'une, par exemple *A*, où les faits de conscience, que nous appelons concepts, se trouvent associés aux représentations des signes linguistiques ou images acoustiques servant à leur expression. Supposons qu'un concept donné déclanche dans le cerveau une image acoustique correspondante : c'est un phénomène entièrement *psychique*, suivi à son tour d'un procès *physiologique* : le cerveau transmet aux organes de la phonation une impulsion corrélative à l'image ; puis les ondes sonores se propagent de la bouche de *A* à l'oreille de *B* : procès purement *physique*. Ensuite, le circuit se prolonge en *B* dans un ordre inverse : de l'oreille au cerveau, transmission physiologique de l'image acoustique ; dans le cerveau, association psychique de cette image avec le concept correspondant.[22]

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21. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 1995, 99; de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 2016, 153.
22. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 1995, 28; de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 2016, 76.

We cannot store in our minds all the infinite forms in which a tree might manifest in nature. Yet cognition economizes this by attributing to each thing it aims to designate an ideal concept, a cognitive prototype in this case as well, which is not necessarily a visual image (as not all nameable things are visible) but rather a cognitive form. This form may be visual or otherwise, yet the metaphor of form aptly describes the 'ideal geometry of thought,' as we are not speaking of clearly visualizable images. What does a tree look like? If we were to ask, we would generate an infinite number of possible representations in our minds, yet all of these derive from a formal ideal model—an assembly of universally recognizable prototypical qualities, such as a cylindrical structure corresponding to a trunk with branches extending above and roots below, the potential to bear leaves, flowers, or fruits depending on season and type, and the characteristic of growing from the earth, commonly found in parks and forests.

It is crucial to emphasize these distinctly cognitive aspects of linguistic function, as these are precisely what Buddhist phenomenological analysis uses to deconstruct the cognitive mechanism. Furthermore, when discussing the sign, we must distinguish between what Buddhists refer to as *nimitta* and *nāmarūpa*. The latter term, only and exclusively in its form as a single lexeme (*nāmarūpa*, and not as separate *nāma* or *rūpa*), aligns closely with the linguistic definition of the "sign." Certainly, its components fit well within Saussure's definition: *nāma* as the nominal signifier and *rūpa* as the conceptual form. However, *rūpa* can also assume other significant meanings related to its role in semantic perception as well as phenomenological analysis; thus, *rūpa* becomes a concept that extends far beyond mere semantic function.

The term *nimitta*, translated as "sign" or "mark," is also closely related to the Saussurean *signe*. However, *nimitta* more precisely denotes something that has already concretely become a "sign," embodying "signification" in an active sense. While *nāmarūpa* primarily denotes latent semantics, *nimitta* refers to any sign traced upon a surface that, while representing a sign in the linguistic sense in that it "refers" to something, also embodies a concrete appearance that must be our focus when discussing the concept of *nimitta*. Even the evocation of an image, especially in targeted meditative exercises, is, in effect, the

evocation of a *nimitta*, a sign upon which meditation is concentrated. It is important to keep in mind this distinction, as it will become clearer as we continue our discussion.

The term *rūpa* can be associated with any form, the formal meaning, or the body perceived as the substantive form of a given entity. Together with perceptions (*vedanā*), semantic cognition (*saññā*), eidetic factors (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*), *rūpa* constitutes the five foundational elements of appropriation that construct the psychological identity of the subject (*pañcupādānakkhanda*). The term *upādāna*, indeed, is linked to the concept of grasping, appropriation, aptly illustrating the mechanism of aggregation and internalization of entities that contribute to phenomena like identity.

The concept of "contact" (*phassa*) is also important to comprehend our interaction with any *rūpa* (including those entirely 'interior' to our consciousness). Specifically, contact denotes the act of collision between two entities, which produces semantic cognition. Contact between the observing eye and the observed object (*cakkhusamphasso*) generates visual consciousness (*cakkhuviññāṇa*), conditioned by the semantic preconception that associates particular ideal forms internalized through the visual act. The same process occurs for each sense organ as it contacts its respective experiential object.

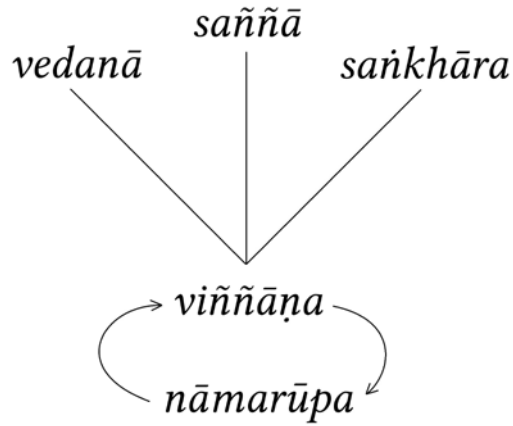

Fig. 1 – Representation of the mutual relationship between the semiotic process (*nāmarūpa*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

The self (*attā*) that emerges from this process is evidently an impermanent entity, as it depends on its constituent factors. However, the Buddha identifies ignorance as the defense mechanism that convinces the subject of an eternal soul, a self that will persist, despite the eventual disintegration of its components. Cognitive recognition is thus derived from the sign, which precedes the cognitive act itself (*nāmarūpasamudayā cittassa samudayo*).

Lastly, a note on the term *taṇhā*, which I have chosen to translate as "drive," given its etymological root: **ters*-, meaning "dry." The derived term *tr̥ṣyati* in Sanskrit, "to be thirsty," evokes a primal act aimed at satisfying a drive or a fundamental need, such as thirst (cf. *tr̥ṣyati* with *thirst* in English, τέρσομαι in Greek).[23]

The cognitive mechanism envisioned by Buddhism involves phases of form introjection, figurative and nominal identity assignment, and subsequent recognition of those entities in the external world. It projects onto them the cognitive preconception of the identity sign (*nāmarūpa*) that describes them. This mechanism, as the Buddha himself acknowledges, generates perceptual doublings, distinguishing the idea of an entity as concrete from the idea of it as abstract (see §1.5).

Taking visual consciousness (*cakkhuviññāṇa*) as described in the *Madhupiṇḍikasutta* (MN 18), we see that it is intimately connected to linguistics, initiating a sequence of interrelated reactions and productions that sustain language's self-referential nature. From the act of vision, reified into visual consciousness, arises contact (*phassa*), from which follows perception (*vedanā*), as all future perceptions are referenced to past visual experiences. In this way, the concept of the linguistic sign, initially 'established' by past visions, is subsequently reinforced and reconfirmed with each new vision (*sañjānāti*, "to perceive," means to know what is put together, *saṃ-jānāti*, it is thus a synthetic perception, based on correlations, associations): *so vatāvuso, cakkhusmiṃ sati rūpe sati cakkhuviññāṇe sati phassapaññattiṃ paññāpessatīti ṭhānametaṃ vijjati*. Discursive thought (*vitakketi*) is entirely related to linguistic conceptualization and could not exist without these prior stages.

23. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 1470–71.

Finally, this system leads to the proliferation (*papañceti*) of further concepts, which arise and persist within the same cyclical pattern: *vitakkapaññattiyā sati papañcasaññāsaṅkhāsamudācaraṇapaññattiṃ paññāpessatīti ṭhānametaṃ vijjati*. This applies to all other sense organs, following the same dynamics (*so vatāvuso, sotasmiṃ asati sadde asati pe ghānasmiṃ asati gandhe asati pe jivhāya asati rase asati pe kāyasmiṃ asati phoṭṭhabbe asati pe manasmiṃ asati dhamme asati manoviññāṇe asati phassapaññattiṃ paññāpessatīti netaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati*).

In the *Mahāvedallasutta* (MN 43), it is stated: "you perceive what you feel and know what you perceive" (*yaṃ hāvuso, vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vijānāti*), for "things are mixed, not separated" (*tasmā ime dhammā saṃsaṭṭhā no visaṃsaṭṭhā*), much like Saussure's concept of an indistinct nebula of meaning, hence "you can never fully discern them, nor describe a difference between them" (*na ca labbhā imesaṃ dhammānaṃ vinibbhujitvā vinibbhujitvā nānākaraṇaṃ paññāpetun ti*). On the nature of this nebula of meaning we read in Saussure's *Cours*:

> 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 ? Pas davantage. La substance phonique n'est pas plus fixe ni plus rigide ; ce n'est pas un moule dont la pensée doive nécessairement épouser les formes, mais une matière plastique qui se divise à son tour en parties distinctes pour fournir les signifiants dont la pensée a besoin.[24]

Regarding cognition and language, Buddhist psychology considers the lexeme-signifier (*samaññā*) that identifies a sign (*nimitta* if represented in some way, *nāmarūpa* if conceived as a function) as a concept

24. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 1995, 155–56; de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 2016, 215–16.

(*saṅkhā*), which results from the relationship between signifier (*nāma*) and signified (*rūpa*), and is no more than a convention (*vohāro*) within a shared conception (*paññatti*) that would not exist without such conventional agreement. This complex system of cognitive reiteration is known as "semantic-significative proliferation" (*papañcasaññāsankhā*, see DN 21, MN 18, Ud 7.7). Since this framework applies also to subjects (*puggala*), it follows that no beings (*satta*) exist beyond clusters of cognitive factors (*suddhasaṅkhārapuñja*).

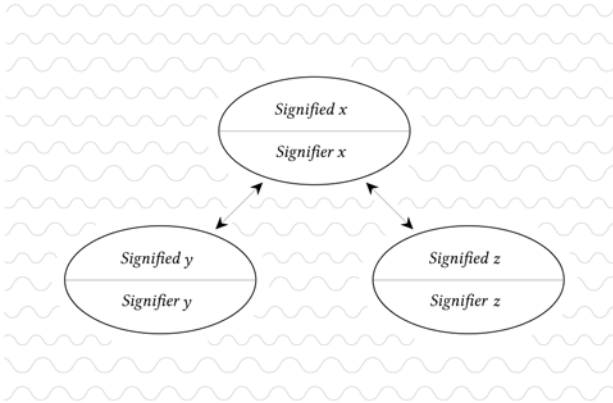

Fig. 2 – Representation of the "indistinct nebula" described in Saussure's *Cours* ("nébuleuse où rien n'est nécessairement délimité").

From this perspective, the concept of *nimitta* is worth of further examination. According to its definition, *nimitta* is not only a "sign," but also "omen, portent, prognostication."[25] As such, *nimitta* is a sign in the sense of being a bearer of some significant meaning or power. This term appears, for example, in the *Supinapañha* (Mil 6.3.5), where it functions as an "omen," "premonitory sign," or "prognostic." In this text, Menander begins by asking Nāgasena about the various dreams experienced by people worldwide. Nāgasena explains that what we call dreams (*supinaṃ nāma*) are nothing more than mental impressions (*nimittametaṃ*) that pass through cognition (*yaṃ cittassa*

25. Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part IV*, 203.

āpātamupagacchati). Nāgasena then categorizes six types of dreamers, whose dream content is influenced by their habits or external influences; each of these categories, however, is equally illusory (*micchā*). Menander subsequently asks Nāgasena about the nature of premonitory dreams (*pubbanimittato supinaṃ passati…*), but Nāgasena dismantles this notion, portraying premonitions as arising naturally, without mental intention or external communication, much like a reflection appearing on a glass without being summoned. Menander's requests for clarification continue until he finally asks Nāgasena to elucidate the nature of sleep itself.

Despite these evidences there is, however, no doubt that *nimitta* serves also as a vehicle of meaning, which makes its opposite, *animitta*, particularly relevant—a term Peter Harvey translates as "signless." An entire sutta, the *Animittapañhāsutta* (SN 40.9), is devoted to this unique state. When asked about the "signless meditative concentration" (*animitto cetosamādhi*), the response describes it as follows: "It is when a mendicant, without focusing on any sign, enters and remains in a state of signless deep meditation" (*idha bhikkhu sabbanimittānaṃ amanasikārā animittaṃ cetosamādhiṃ upasampajja viharati*). Moggallāna, the central figure in this sutta, confesses that while attempting to contemplate this signless meditation, his consciousness inevitably became distracted by *signs*. The Buddha then intervenes, using his powers (*iddhiyā upa-saṅkamitvā etad avoca*), and instructing:

> *mogallāna, mogallāna! mā, brāhmaṇa, animittaṃ cetosamādhiṃ pamādo, animitte cetosamādhismiṃ cittaṃ saṇṭhapehi, animitte cetosamādhismiṃ cittaṃ ekodiṃ karohi, animitte cetosamādhismiṃ cittaṃ samādahā ti*
>
> Moggallāna! Moggallāna! Do not neglect the signless deep meditation, O brahmin! Steady your mind in the signless meditation, unify your mind in the signless meditation.
> Through this guidance, Moggallāna succeeds in entering signless meditation.

The reason for discussing *animitta* here is its evident alignment with *Vipassanā* meditation, the foundation of mindfulness.[26] This connection is natural, as the goal of meditation is to neutralize figurative signs (*nimitta*). Those who reach this state of elimination retain consciousness (*saññī*), meaning they remain capable of semantic discernment (*saññā*), but they become fully aware (*sati*) of the true nature of signs.

The term *saññī* refers to a state of "discernment" or to the one who discerns—a kind of "discerner"—often contrasted with *asaññī*, or the undiscerned, sometimes interpreted as "unconscious," though more precisely describing a state of non-cognition or cognitionless (*acitta*), akin to the unconscious state. This distinction appears, for example, in the *Samanupassanāsutta* (SN 22.47), where we read: "I am this, I will be, I will not be, I will have form, I will be formless, I will be discerning, I will not be discerning, I will be neither discerning nor non-discerning" (*asmī tipissa hoti, ayamahamasmī tipissa hoti, bhavissan tipissa hoti, na bhavissan tipissa hoti, rūpī bhavissan tipissa hoti, arūpī bhavissan tipissa hoti, saññī bhavissan tipissa hoti, asaññī bhavissan tipis-sa hoti, nevasaññīnāsaññī bhavissan tipissa hoti*).

This close relationship that Buddhism establishes between signs, language, individual consciousness, social consciousness, or "the world" compels us to invoke the rare studies outside the Buddhist context that integrate social sciences, phenomenology, and philosophy around the "meaning" of things.

> *kati panāvuso, paccayā animittāya cetovimuttiyā samāpattiyā ti? dve kho, āvuso, paccayā animittāya cetovimuttiyā samāpattiyā sabbanimittānañca amanasikāro, animittāya ca dhātuyā manasikāro. ime kho, āvuso, dve paccayā animittāya cetovimuttiyā samāpattiyā ti. kati panāvuso, paccayā animittāya cetovimuttiyā ṭhitiyā ti? tayo kho, āvuso, paccayā animittāya cetovimuttiyā ṭhitiyā sabbanimittānañca amanasikāro, animittāya ca dhātuyā manasikāro, pubbe ca abhisaṅkhāro. ime kho, āvuso, tayo paccayā animittāya cetovimuttiyā ṭhitiyā ti.*

26. Peter Harvey, "'Signless' Meditations in Pāli Buddhism," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9, no. 1 (1986): 28.

> What are the necessary conditions for achieving signless liberation of cognition? Two conditions are necessary to achieve signless liberation of cognition: not focusing on any sign and focusing on the signless. These two conditions are essential for achieving signless liberation of cognition. (MN 43)

Among the principal suttas addressing the dissolution of the figurative sign (*animitta*), we may mention the *Nissāraṇīyasutta* (AN 6.13), the *Hatthisāriputtasutta* (AN 6.60), the *Tissabrahmāsutta* (AN 7.56), the *Mahāvedallasutta* (MN 43), the *Cūḷavedallasutta* (MN 44), the *Cūḷasuññatasutta* (MN 121), the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (DN 16), the *Saṅgītisutta* (DN 33), the *Dasuttarasutta* (DN 34), the *Piṇḍolyasutta* (SN 22.80), the *Dutiyakāmabhūsutta* (SN 41.6), the *Godattasutta* (SN 41.7), the *Suññatasamādhisutta* (SN 43.4), the *Asaṅkhatasutta* (SN 43.12), the *Gilānasutta* (SN 47.9), and the *Uppaṭipāṭikasutta* (SN 48.40). Regarding the origin and end of the world (*lokassa samudayo* and *lokassa atthaṅgamo*, or simply *lokanta*), we find relevant discussions in the *Anusotasutta* (AN 4.5), the *Dutiyarohitassasutta* (AN 4.46), the *Rohitassasutta* (SN 2.26 or AN 4.45), the *Lokasutta* (SN 12.44), the *Lokasamudayasutta* (SN 35.107), and the *Paṭhamasamuddasutta* (SN 35.228). What the function of the state of *animitta* is and why contemplative exercises insist so much on the necessity of attaining this state will become clear once we have further expressed the power of *nimitta*s and how they adversely affect the lives of those who are directed by its power without the ability to resist.

1.3 The pathway of designation (paññattipathā)

The path or mode of designation is that function of language centered on *paññatti*. This term holds fundamental importance within Buddhist philosophical vocabulary, but it is most notably employed in Abhidhammic literature, an expansive intellectual work that developed after the early texts and likely served as a guide or commentary. The distinctive feature of proto-Abhidhammic texts is their use of lists,[27]

27. Bhikkhu Anālayo, *The Dawn of Abhidharma* (Hamburg University Press, 2014).

and Abhidhammic texts themselves make extensive use of this method. These lists represent a form of doctrinal essentialization, focusing on the enumeration of core concepts.[28] However, the Abhidhamma specifically centers on what Karunadasa refers to as "*dhamma* theory."[29] In early Buddhist literature, the term *dhamma* generally denotes a "thing" or entity, but in the Abhidhamma, it is likely used to indicate a *minimal phenomenal unit*—something that, upon careful analysis, is found to be not further reducible.[30]

The Abhidhamma inherits this analytic tendency (*vibhaṅga*) from earlier texts, so it is not a novel invention. However, while the analytic approach is present in fundamental Buddhist teachings—such as the *pañcakkhandha* and *paṭiccasamuppāda*—this methodology is systematically extended to nearly everything. Aggregates and the chain of dependent origination, as well as the analysis of the six sensory channels, already present in early Buddhism, are detailed phenomenological observations on the one hand, and lists on the other: the five aggregates, the twelve *nidāna*s of dependent origination, the six sensory spheres, and so on.

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28. Johannes Bronkhorst, "Abhidharma and Indian Thinking," in *Text, History, and Philosophy* (Leiden: BRILL, 2016), 29–46, DOI: 10.1163/9789004318823_003; Bronkhorst, "Dharma and Abhidharma"; Bhikkhu Dhammajoti, *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma* (Hong Kong: The Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong, 2015); K.L. Dhammajoti, "Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 1–40, DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.682.

29. Yakupitiyage Karunadasa, *The Dhamma Theory* (Buddhist Publication Society, 1996); Yakupitiyage Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2019).

30. Paul M. Williams, "On the Abhidharma Ontology," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 9, no. 3 (1981): 227–57, DOI: 10.1007/BF00235381; Kris McDaniel, "Abhidharma Metaphysics and the Two Truths," *Philosophy East and West* 69, no. 2 (2019): 439–63, DOI: 10.1353/pew.2019.0034; Collett Cox, "From Category To Ontology: The Changing Role Of Dharma In Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32, no. 5–6 (2004): 543–97, DOI: 10.1007/s10781-004-8635-4; Lettner, "Semiotic Roots and Buddhist Routes in Phenomenology and Intercultural Philosophy: A Peircean Study of Abhidharma Buddhist Theories of Consciousness and Perception."

I mentioned the Abhidhamma here because as we progress with our discussion, it will become an indispensable point of reference. However, my current focus is to emphasize that the term *paññatti* finds much more extensive usage in the Abhidhamma than in earlier literature. As often happens when a term is appropriated by the Abhidhamma and extended far beyond its previous use, philologists inevitably ask whether and to what extent the meaning of the term has been altered, and whether the Abhidhammic authors have added their own interpretations—especially when a previously infrequent term becomes widely used.

For example, the term *suñña* was popularized by Abhidhammic literature and later by Nāgārjuna, who made it central to his doctrine. However, in the suttas, it is mentioned only a few times. The reasons for this are at least partially due to the fact that *suñña* was not initially considered fundamental, as in early literature it was effectively a synonym for *anattā*.[31] With its use in the Abhidhamma, the term's technical aspect is emphasized. In fact, the Abhidhamma employs terms as highly specialized technical lexemes. Although initially it retains the meaning of "non-substantial," "non-autonomous," "non-self-sufficient," and "non-independent," and thus continues to apply to *anattā*, it must be noted that this diversification of terms leads to unfortunate misunderstandings, such as the creation of two distinct concepts. This, in turn, reverses the original intention of a more specific technical language, resulting in confusion.

Part of the misinterpretation of the Śūnyavāda doctrine by Western commentators—leading to the erroneous and absurd notion of Buddhist nihilism—can be attributed not only to ignorance but also to the confusion generated by the proliferation of terms, among which *suññatā* (and its Sanskritization) plays a part. Understanding what is meant by "emptiness" when "non-identity" is already discussed extensively leads to the misunderstanding that these are two different concepts.

31. Abraham Vélez de Cea, "Emptiness in the Pāli Suttas and the Question of Nāgārjuna's Orthodoxy," *Philosophy East and West* 55, no. 4 (2005): 507–28, DOI: 10.1353/pew.2005.0043; Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy."

Suññatā is thus vulnerable to being read as nihilism, particularly by those offering simplistic interpretations of Buddhism.

We must exercise similar caution with *paññatti*. Here, we are in the context of the suttas and not the Abhidhamma, so we must avoid retroactively imposing an Abhidhammic reading onto the term. We know however that it does relate to language because this is the context of SN 22.62. Additionally, we know that it derives from *pa* + √*ñā*, which corresponds to the Sanskrit *prajñapti* (*pra* + √*jñā*), where the morphemic boundary is more evident (*pra-jña* is indeed etymologically equivalent to the Greek πρόγνωσις, even if the two terms have a different meaning), aiding us in our etymological task. The Sanskrit dictionary offers several options: teaching, information, instruction, or arrangement.[32] However, it must be noted that already in the Pāli suttas, regardless of the original meaning, the term is clearly understood in a technical sense.

The Pāli dictionary lists "making known, manifestation, description, designation, name, idea, notion, concept."[33] As is evident, *paññatti* relates to language, specifically its designatory aspect—that is, the aspect that involves naming, the attribution of a name. However, this designation, like the name itself, is a process of assigning an identity that does not derive from an objective and real datum to which the name is merely associated. This aspect is crucial, as it remains a source of misunderstanding to this day. People tend to assume that 'out there,' in the 'world' (another problematic term), 'things' exist independently. It is true that they do not have names in themselves, but a rock is such because it is different from a tree, which is different from a river, which is different from lightning, and so on. Given this assumption—that there exist real referents as autonomous and self-sufficient entities—the notion that language merely assigns them names, describing a pre-existing reality, is one of the greatest problems in any science. For now, let us keep this in mind: language does not capture reality but often distorts it significantly.

This is why name, idea, and notion are all aspects of the designatory act—an act by which a community of speakers agrees to establish a

32. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Dictionary English and Sanskrit*, 659.
33. Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part V*, 12.

specific signifier, something nameable through an arbitrary combination of sounds, but also a precise concept that this name conveys. Hence the sense of "description," but also "making known" and "manifestation," since what is identified through the designatory act is merely an aspect of reality that one wishes to make manifest through language. Words hold power and knowledge: they 'make known' something, but they also make it manifest when it is not physically present. If I mention the name of a tasty dish to a hungry person, I can elicit a response similar to presenting the food physically, since merely evoking the name of the delicacy causes the body to react as though it had been presented. The dish, in effect, becomes present in the listener's mind, and the salivation that follows is as if they had truly seen it.

I wish to avoid turning this into mere philosophical digressions about the nature of language, so I will focus on the analysis of *paññatti* as it is used in Buddhist texts. Without delving too deeply into theory, let us take as a given that *paññatti* means "designation" or something akin to it, such as "naming" or "notion." In what other contexts does this term appear?

DN 15 is a good example of this 'technical' use of *paññatti* (in other occurrences *paññatti* is simply used to say "this thing is designated as such," or "is considered such"). This is also the occasion to outline one of the main mechanisms pertaining the early Buddhist theory of perception.

The perceptual theory presented in the Nikāya Buddhism revolves entirely around the concept of relationality. Two elements, A and B, hold value only insofar as they are placed in relation to one another. Through the relationship between A and B, characteristics emerge that make A identifiable as 'A' and B as 'B.' Similarly, some aspects or behaviors of A may only become apparent in relation to C and not to B. Therefore, *it is the relational aspect that gives meaning to phenomena and allows us to understand them fully*. Without relational context, A, B, or C hold no intrinsic value, as their existence is contingent upon relational interaction. This impossibility for any phenomenon to exist independently or autonomously is a core teaching in Buddhist philosophy, specifically within the doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), which will be discussed in further detail.

In the context of perceptual theory, relationality is denoted by the term *phassa*, which translates to "contact." This *phassa*, here referring to the interaction between our hypothetical A and B, in the case of perceptual dynamics, has to be interpreted as *any contact between the sensory organ and the object of perception*. Buddhism conceptualizes the sensory field (*āyatana*) as an indication of the perceiver, which traditionally consists of one of the five sensory organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body), each corresponding to a sensory faculty (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch), with a sixth organ, the mind-thought (*manas*), acting both as an organ and as a coordinator of the other five.[34] These six organs are also collectively called *saḷāyatana*, "six [sensory] fields." Perception, therefore, does not occur in isolated fragments but as a continuous stream of sensory data processing, which, except in cases of cognitive dysfunction, is unified. Each of the six sensory organs corresponds to a specific *viññāṇa*, a sensory discernment function—this concept will also be elaborated further.

Sensorial *dvāra* $\overset{phassa}{\rightarrow}$ *rūpa* → *vedanā* → … (five aggregates)

34. This particular conception regarding the functioning of sensory processes—that there are six and that they are mutually coordinated—is something we also find in the Upanishads. For example, this passage in BṛUp 4.5.12 is particularly valuable: "Just as the sole site where all waters converge is the ocean, so the site of all kinds of contact is the skin, the sole site of all kinds of smell is the nose, the sole site of all kinds of taste is the tongue, the sole site of all kinds of vision is the eye, the sole site of all sounds is the ear, the sole site of all thoughts is the mind, the sole site of all knowledge is the heart…" (*sa yathā sarvāsāmapāṃ samudra ekāyanam, evaṃ sarveṣāṃ sparśānāṃ tvagekāyanam, evaṃ sarveṣāṃ gandhānāṃ nāsikaikāyanam, evaṃ sarveṣāṃ rasānāṃ jihvaikāyanam, evaṃ sarveṣāṃ rūpāṇāṃ cakśurekāyanam, evaṃ sarveṣaṃ śabdānāṃ śrotramekāyanam, evaṃ sarveṣāṃ saṅkalpānāṃ mana ekāyanam, evaṃ sarvāsāṃ vidyānāṃ hṛdayamekāyanam*…). Now, we will not analyze all the other functions. For example, the hands are connected to work (*evaṃ sarveṣāṃ karmaṇāṃ hastāvekāyanam*), a characteristic feature of Upaniṣadic thought that we do not find in Buddhism. What is interesting for us, however, is what Buddhism inherits from what was presumably a shared cultural milieu: the structuring of the sensory sphere into six main channels, each functioning through a perceptive organ that serves as the "site," "place," but the specific term used can be intended also as "final goal" (as expressed in the structure *evaṃ sarveṣāṃ*... something-*eka*-*āyanam*, "thus, of every… something-sole-site," or "something-sole-convergence"), of all perceptions related to its domain.

The Abhidhamma formalizes this concept through the term *dvāra*, or "door," referring to the sensory channels, using a particularly insightful metaphor. Sensory channels act as true "doors" to the world, providing access to it. The sensory organ is thus a fundamental actor in perceptual dynamics, but not the sole component. The other essential aspect is *rūpa*, literally "form." Some translate *rūpa* as "object," implying an external referent to the perceiver, but this misses the essence of *rūpa* as "form," not limited solely to physical matter. Cognitive and eidetic forms are also *rūpa*, and therefore reducing *rūpa* to mere materiality introduces more issues than it resolves. What the perceptual apparatus engages with is always a formal cognitive datum—whether it results from the neuroelectric translation of sensory data processing from sensory-perceptor contact or from purely cerebral processing, such as the recall of a visual or auditory image, the memory of a scent, or the formation of any sensory abstraction. In all such cases, the outcome remains *rūpa*, which then comes into contact (*phassa*) with these well-articulated sensory "doors."

The theory most adept at describing this complex dynamic is Uexküll's biosemiotics. A systematic comparison between Uexküll's approach and Buddhist perceptual theories will later be drawn to highlight similarities and differences without forcing convergence between the two frameworks.

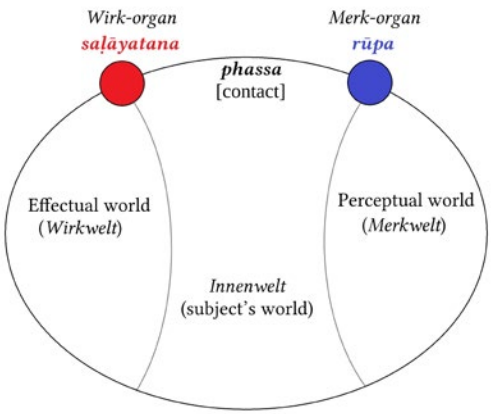

Fig. 3 — Section of Uexküll's *Funktionskreis* focusing on the relationship between the sensory-organ (receptor) and the effector. This process is compared to the Buddhist equivalent perceptual cycle established through the first contact (*phassa*) between a sensorial base (*āyatana*) and a formal effector (*rūpa*).

To describe how animal biological systems construct an "inner world" through a unique relationship that each species maintains with its environment—resulting in a specific "environmental world" (*Umwelt*) relevant only within the animal/environment relationship—Uexküll introduces two specific and distinct concepts. A *Funktionskreis* (functional circuit, see Fig. 3) describes the world relationship established between an animal and its environment, involving the interaction between a sensory organ or receptor (*Wirk-organ*) and an effector organ (*Merk-organ*). The relationship between the sensor and effector constructs the animal's inner world (*Innenwelt*). Here, I will pause with the Uexküllian concepts, as I want to develop the reflection on how the *Wirk-*/*Merk-organ* relationship provides an apt framework for understanding the analogous relationship *āyatana*/*rūpa*, or more precisely, *āyatana-(phassa)-rūpa*.

The initial section of the DN 15 text is indeed linked to the teaching of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, whose implications we will explore in introducing this foundational doctrine. *Paṭiccasamuppāda* is a teaching about the interrelation of phenomenal processes—how they are interdependent, arising and ceasing in the experience of observing subjects. Another likely foundational teaching, that of the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*), describes how the perception of a seemingly autonomous phenomenon, experienced as if it possesses an independent identity, is actually an aggregate of five fundamental or core phenomenal factors necessary for the phenomenon's appearance. These two teachings bear close resemblance and may share a common origin. In the concept of *pañcakkhandha*, as well, there exists a concatenation among the five core phenomenal aggregates, a hierarchical processing by the phenomenon's witness. Our goal is now to understand how the notion of *paññatti* arises from these two fundamental teachings.

Since the idea of *paññatti* is mentioned in DN 15, I will briefly outline the teachings of *pañcakkhandha* and *paṭiccasamuppāda* to examine their treatment of *paññatti* in this context. The five aggregates (*khandha*) are also referenced in the *Niruttipathasutta* analyzed here. Specifically, the so-called causal substrate of formal aggregation, or

cognitive form (*rūp'ūpādānakkhandha*), can be recognized as structured into several successive subdivisions: four elements (*dhātu*), representing fundamental elemental properties (*mahābhūtāni*), and twenty-four secondary forms of material combination (*rūpārūpāni*).

Finally, in the traditional definition of *nāma-rūpa* as a binomial, "form" can be identified as the more "concrete" aspect (although Indian thought does not delineate a strict dualism between abstract and concrete, as does European thought), while "name" represents the mental factor of abstraction (as in the reification of cognitive data). In BṛUp 1.4.7, for instance, it is said that there was a time "the world was not divided: name-and-form divided it, so that it is said: this thing has this name and this form" (*tad dhedhaṃ tarhy avyākṛtam āsīt; tan nāmarūpābhyām eva vyākriyatāsaunāmāyam idaṃ rūpa iti; tad idam apy etarhi nāmarūpābhyām eva vyākriyate saunāmāyam idaṃ rūpa iti*).

When the Buddha refers to the "passing" of form, it is clear he means that a certain cognitive form appears within a subject's perceptual sequence or, more precisely, that the cognitive form has "ceased" to appear (*rūpaṃ niruddhaṃ*) within the perceptual apparatus's domain.

When explaining the *pañcakkhandha* system, the Buddha repeats the same formula five times, each time substituting the term *rūpa* (form) with another term: *vedanā* (sensation), *saññā* (semantic perception), *saṅkhārā* (mental formations), and *viññāṇa* (consciousness or discernment), respectively. Each of these terms serves as a technical element within Buddhist psychological analysis, warranting detailed, individual exploration. Translating the term *vedanā* in a psychological context has historically posed challenges for scholars. The longstanding semantic interpretation traditionally favored by scholars has faced criticism, with suggestions for alternative translations. At the core of these translation challenges is the Buddhist psychological conception of mind and cognition.

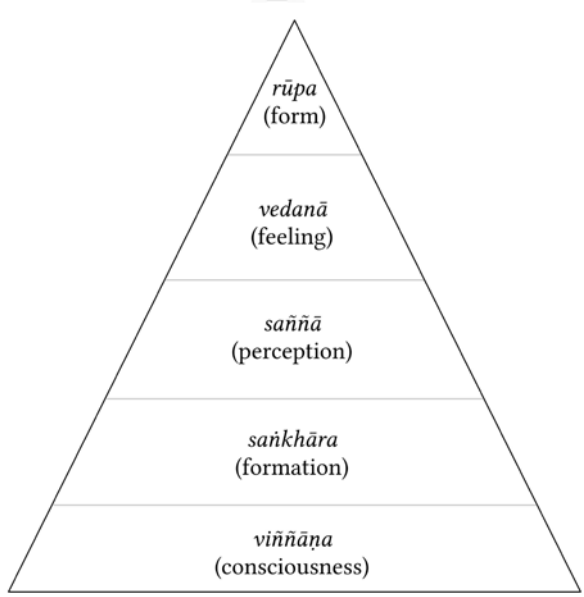

Fig. 4 — The five aggregates as a pyramidal system.

The *pañcakkhandha* system can be conceptualized in two ways: as a hierarchical pyramid, or as a cyclical process. In the pyramid model (Fig. 4), all aggregates descend sequentially from the pinnacle of *rūpa*, implying a hierarchical structure wherein *rūpa* functions as a fundamental phenomenological core around which the subsequent aggregate forms and upon which it depends; this structure cascades down such that the third aggregate depends on the second and first, the fourth on the preceding three, and so forth. Alternatively, the five aggregates can be viewed as cyclical (Fig. 5). While ordered hierarchically, the final aggregate, *viññāṇa*, is itself described as a condition for *rūpa* perception, thus suggesting a cycle. Since *rūpa* does not denote an independently existing, objectively separable form within nature—where distinct forms do not exist independently but only as a unified continuum—*viññāṇa* embodies a capacity to distinguish or 'dissect,' an ability encoded within its etymological roots. Once a *rūpa* is perceived distinctly from its continuum, it initiates the sequential unfolding of the other aggregates—*vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhāra*, and *viññāṇa* again, perpetuating cyclically.

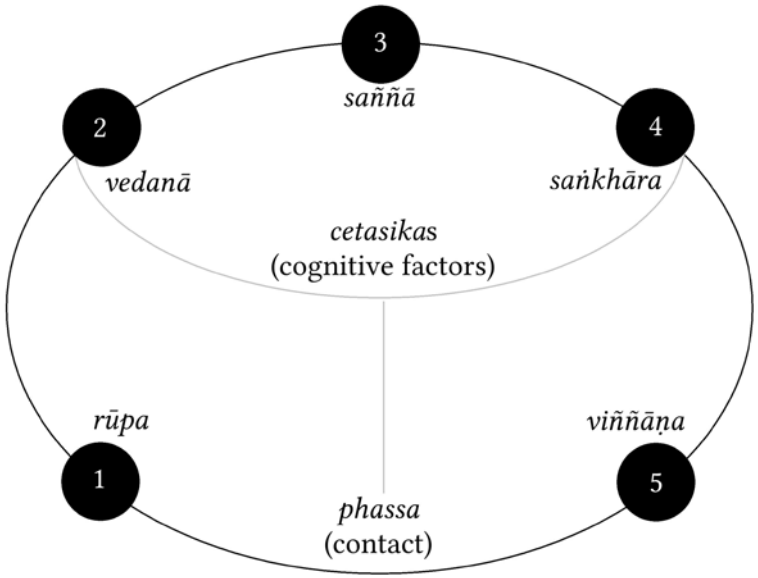

Fig. 5 — Cyclical model of the five aggregates. Contact can occur between form (*rūpa*) and sensation (*vedanā*) through a sensory organ in the most traditional way to intend this cycle. However, contact can occur also between consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and form as well. In general, the state of *phassa* in the link between every aspect of this chain. In addition, *vedanā, saññā*, and *saṅkhāra* constitute a group of their own (see also Fig. 1), known as *cetasikas*, "cognitive factors," distinct from consciousness because the latter is proper of any sensorial organ (es. *cakkhuviññāṇa* for visual consciousness, or *manoviññāṇa* for mental consciousness).

Buddhists conceive the aggregates functionally rather than as mechanical parts of a disassembled whole, conceptualizing them instead as aspects of an inseparable totality, where the totality would cease to appear intact if fragmented. For instance, *viññāṇa* is described as that which "discriminates" (*vijānāti*),[35] with the technical term as a function indicated by the verb. More precisely, the action (verb) defines the function denoted by the technical term, which is often derived from

35. See MN 43: *'vijānāti vijānātī'ti kho, āvuso, tasmā viññāṇanti vuccatī'ti.*

the same verbal root. Similarly, *saññā* is similarly described in the Pāli Canon as "to recognize" (*sañjānāti*).[36]

Discernment, therefore, entails organizing knowledge based on divisions. Accordingly, *viññāṇa* is not "consciousness" as self-awareness but a form of cognitive organization grounded in division: to know (*jānati*) through separations (*vi-*). What I interpret as "semantic perception" (*saññā*) is, by Buddhist definition, a form of synthetic recognition. The recognition process is, in certain respects, the opposite of discernment; while discernment organizes by dividing, recognition operates by reassembling: bringing together (*saṃ-*) in order to know (*jānati*).

Dissection (*vi+jānati*)	Composition (*saṃ+jānati*)
Discernment (*viññāṇa*)	Recognition (*saññā*)

Table 5.

In DN 15, discernment (*viññāṇa*) is further described as an emergent property of *nāmarūpa* (name-form), indicating that Buddhist thought conceives discernment as intricately connected to the Saussurean semiotic unit of *signifiant-signifié* (*nāma-rūpa*). Here, *rūpa* should be understood as a more primordial form, preceding the attributed sense (*attha-paññatti* in the Abhidhamma).[37]

Consciousness (SPLIT)	Perception (SPLICE)
viññāṇa (*vi-* + √*ñā*)	*saññā* (*saṃ-* + √*ñā*)

Table 6.

In SN 12.58 the doublet *nāma-rūpa* is also recognized to be the condition for the six sensory fields (*nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanaṃ*). At this point, the connection between this powerful pair and the sensory spheres should become evident even without explicit mentions of the entirety of the subject. However, it is important to also take these

36. See MN 43: '*sañjānāti sañjānātī'ti kho, āvuso, tasmā 'saññā'ti vuccati*.

37. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality*, 60.

statements into account, as they confirm certain theories that I will elaborate on later detailing the function of the six sensory spheres.[38]

It is therefore evident that the *nāma-rūpa* unity described by Buddhist thinkers denotes a function wherein naming (*nāma*-izing) originates from an undifferentiated *rūpa* through the process of *vijanāti*. The exploration then advances toward defining *vedanā* as an aspect of experiential knowing (*vedeti*).[39] This term, too, connects with the idea of "knowing," though in an experiential sense different from that of rather than *jñā* (cognate with the Greek γνῶσις).[40] The term *vedeti* derives from √*vid*, which is associated with "seeing." Notably, "what is seen" is also "what is known"—for instance, the term *Veda* generally signifies "knowledge"—and in Buddhist terms, ignorance (*avijjā*) is simply the negation (*a*-) of knowledge (*vijjā*, cf. Sanskrit *vidyā*).

> In Buddhist texts, the mind is likened to a seed […] or a fire […], but never to a pot, a room, a house or a theatre. The mind is never a container of experiences or thoughts. We don't find expressions that put a mental object *in* someone's mind. There is no equivalent in Pāli to the metaphor that consciousness is a theatre and the *suttas* appear to doubt whether 'existence' even applies to experiences and thoughts. However, consciousness as the theatre of experience seems natural to us. Having grown up with it, I find it difficult to think of my mind any other way.[41]

38. Furthermore, since the name-form pair, the phenomenological cause of the sensory spheres, is also connected to the arising of the entire mass of suffering (*evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa samudayo*), the sutta also states that the overcoming of suffering occurs through the cessation of the sensory spheres via the cessation of the functioning of their cause, namely the name-form (*nāmarūpanirodhā saḷāyatananirodho*). What is specifically meant by the 'cessation' of something that is fundamentally a perceptive and cognitively organized process will be explored in depth in the following chapters. What matters now is to highlight the causal relationship between this peculiar pair and the perceptive sphere, as well as the issue of suffering.

39. Martine Batchelor, "Vedanā or Feeling Tone: A Practical and Contemporary Meditative Exploration," *Contemporary Buddhism* 19, no. 1 (2018): 54–68, DOI: 10.1080/14639947.2018.1442142; John Peacock and Martine Batchelor, eds., *The Definition, Practice, and Psychology of Vedanā* (London: Routledge, 2020), DOI: 10.4324/9780429345067.

40. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 273.

41. Jayarava Attwood, "Defining Vedanā: Through the Looking Glass," *Contemporary*

Following Attwood's interpretive suggestion, *vedanā* can thus be considered "the process that causes us to know." Sāriputta's definition of *vedanā* aligns: "*vedanā* is the process that causes us to know. Therefore, we can read Sāriputta's definition of *vedanā* as 'It *makes* known, it *makes* known, friend, hence it is called making-known' (*vedeti vedetī'ti kho, āvuso, tasmā vedanāti vuccati*. MN I.293). *Vedanā* is not simply what you know about an object, but what you are *made* to know about it because of contact with it."[42] Based on this understanding, *vedanā* may be reinterpreted not merely as sensation but as an experiential process of knowledge acquisition. Here, the cognitive analysis central to Buddhist thought assigns a critical role to *phassa* (contact) between the knowable entity and the cognitive apparatus of the experiencing subject. It is this contact that triggers the cognitive process—what in Uexküllian biology would be termed the "stimulation" of sensory organs.

The second part of DN 15 focuses on the process of self designation or identity description (*attapaññatti*). In the Pāli Buddhist conception, an *attā* or "self" does not merely represent the identity of a subject; it also encompasses a broader scope of identity, which includes terms more specifically centered on the ego or the "I-am" (e.g., *ahaṃkāra* in MN 112 or *attānudiṭṭhi* in SN 22.156).

This identity can refer not only to psychological identities (the sense of the "I") but also to nominal or semantic identities. Thus, any entity constituted by an aggregation of designative factors can be considered an *attā.* Consequently, social selves, basic *ahaṃkāra*, and similar aspects can be considered a form of *attā* as they participate in the designations imposed by others and by self-designation—defining what "I am" through elements that delineate oneself as a psychophysical aggregate with a body and a name (e.g., "my name is *x*," "people call me *x*," "I am defined as the child of…," "the employee of…," "the member of…," and so forth). Similarly, other attributed identities are also considered as forms of *attā* (e.g., "this thing *x* is called 'stone,'" defined by the name "stone," with characteristics like a rough, solid surface, and so on).

Buddhism 19, no. 1 (2018): 2, DOI: 10.1080/14639947.2018.1450959.
42. Ibid., 6.

There are, naturally, many conceptions of *attā*, which often attempt to reify the concept, giving it a nature seemingly independent and autonomous from relational or interdependent characteristics. One might believe the self is autonomous and self-sufficient, leading to visions, theories, and beliefs that the Buddha sought to dismantle. Thus, in DN 15 he opposed views asserting that the self is finite and formed (*rūpī me paritto attā'ti*), that it is infinite and formed (*rūpī me ananto attā ti*), that it is finite and formless (*arūpī me paritto attā ti*), or that it is infinite and formless (*arūpī me ananto attā ti*). All conceivable combinations regarding the nature of the self are rejected, for it is neither purely form nor intrinsically limited or unlimited. Form, like all aggregates, contributes to the emergence of the phenomenon of self, but the self is neither form itself nor reducible to form.

To prevent the reification of a concept that serves only as an explanatory tool, lacking a true referential reality, the Buddha reiterated this with respect to the non-self (*attānaṃ na paññapento na paññapeti*), which is neither form nor formless, neither finite nor infinite—a concept that must resist reification. How can we define this dangerous reification? How can we avoid this misinterpretation that mistakes concepts for substantive entities, projecting into reality that which is neither autonomous nor independent, but rather an ensemble of interrelated phenomena, inseparable from a chain of co-causality? The term used to describe this process of reification is precisely *paññatti*. The potential pitfalls of this process are aptly summarized in these verses from DN 15:

> *yāvatā, ānanda, adhivacanaṃ yāvatā adhivacanapatho, yāvatā nirutti yāvatā niruttipatho, yāvatā paññatti yāvatā paññattipatho, yāvatā paññā yāvatā paññāvacaraṃ, yāvatā vaṭṭaṃ, yāvatā vaṭṭati, tadabhiññāvimutto bhikkhu, tadabhiññāvimuttaṃ bhikkhuṃ 'na jānāti na passati itissa diṭṭhī'ti, tadakallaṃ.*
>
> O Ānanda, a mendicant is liberated by direct knowledge of the extent to which terminology and the purpose of terminology extend; the extent to which language and the purpose of language extend; the extent to which designation and the purpose of designation extend; the extent to which wisdom and the sphere of wisdom extend; the extent to which the cycle

> [of rebirths] and its cyclicity extend. It would not be correct to say that a mendicant liberated by direct knowledge holds the view: 'there is nothing to know or see.'

The term *abhiññā*, which signifies direct knowledge, holds particular importance, as liberation is achieved through such direct knowledge (*abhiññāvimutto*). More precisely, it represents a form of "superior knowledge" (*abhi-ñā*), often understood as a form of immediate insight, which other uses of the term make apparent. *Abhiññā* is frequently associated with *paññā*, which appears in the verse above and is translated as "wisdom." This is the true term indicating direct knowledge—*jñā*, the awareness of that which is before oneself (in Sanskrit *pra-* or in Pāli *pa-*), etymologically akin to the Greek πρόγνωσις (from προ-[43] + γνῶσις[44]). While *abhiññā* might be better translated as "superior knowledge," it is also apt to interpret it as a form of apperception. Here, "superiority" (*abhi-*) does not imply hierarchy but a form of verticality, as if one who views things from above can grasp their entirety and totality. Although there are technical distinctions between prognosis (*paññā*) and apperception (*abhiññā*), both can be understood as relating to direct perception, though their specific uses will be examined further.

This verse from DN 15 is significant for multiple reasons. First, as the attentive reader will have noted, it mentions the triad with which this chapter begins and which forms the center of the *Niruttipathasutta* under analysis: terminology or labeling (*adhivacana*), language (*nirutti*), and designation (*paññatti*). In addition, the Buddha refers to other critical elements that the ascetic must acquire *abhiññā* of, including wisdom or apperception (*paññā*), which may also be translated as prognosis—bearing in mind it is distinct from clinical prognosis—and the cycle (*vaṭṭa*), presumably alluding to the existential cycle, a metonym for *saṃsāra.*

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43. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 1235,.
44. Ibid., 273.

1.4 Time and phenomenological development

As we approach the conclusion of our analysis of the *Niruttipathasutta*, I would like to refocus the reader's attention on our earlier discussion regarding Saussure's notion of the "floating nature" of linguistic signs. In offering this circular structure of my analysis, I hope it does not appear confusing; however, this work is not merely a straightforward commentary on a sutta—especially one as brief as this—but rather a thorough examination of the problems of phenomenon and language. This analysis draws inspiration from several Buddhist suttas, which, while not meant as a simple commentary, require numerous cross-references to other suttas to clarify the complex branches we have explored so far. I hope that these references have served to elucidate rather than complicate this examination.

Analyzing specific suttas here serves as a pretext for addressing particular topics that are more apparent in those verses, thereby necessitating the depth of examination we have undertaken. In the construction of the linguistic sign, this association between the two constitutive elements is not governed by any inherent rule; rather, it is left to social discretion to establish the foundations of language. It is noteworthy that Saussure himself suggests that language acts upon a pre-existing, indefinite semantic continuum—an indistinct field of meaning that language segments and to which it assigns precise nominal identities (acoustic images).

This feature of language is precisely what enables the so-called autonomy of objective expressions, which Husserl describes 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,"[45] but also as an "empty dark nebula populated by uncertainty" (*ein leerer Nebel der dunkeln Unbestimmtheit bevölkert*).

> Aber auch nicht mit dem Bereiche dieses anschaulich klar oder dunkel, deutlich oder undeutlich Mitgegenwärtigen, das einen beständigen Umring des aktuellen Wahrnehmungsfeldes ausmacht, erschöpft sich

45. Marina De Palo, *Saussure e gli Strutturalismi: Il Soggetto Parlante nel Pensiero Linguistico del Novecento* (Rome: Carocci, 2016), 191.

> die Welt, die für mich in jedem wachen Moment bewußtseinsmäßig „vorhanden" ist. Sie reicht vielmehr in einer festen Seinsordnung ins Unbegrenzte. 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*. […] 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.[46]

Similarly, within the Abhidhamma, two forms of conventionality are distinguished: one related to meaning (*attha-paññatti*) and another concerning nominal designation, or the "convention of the name" (*nāma-paññatti*). In the Abhidhamma, the term *paññatti* often denotes both the signifier and the signified, as both are subsumed under the broader category of conventionality, a concept captured by the term *paññatti* itself.

This raises the question of language's purpose, hence the title of this monograph. The Buddha provides the following response:

> *yaṃ, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ atītaṃ niruddhaṃ vipariṇataṃ 'ahosī'ti tassa saṅkhā, 'ahosī'ti tassa samaññā, 'ahosī'ti tassa paññatti, na tassa saṅkhā 'atthī'ti, na tassa saṅkhā 'bhavissatī'ti.*
>
> Monks, when a form has passed, ceased, and altered, its designation, identity, and convention is that it "was." It is not an "is," nor a "will become."

In this passage, we observe multiple 'temporal' dynamics that we will explore further. For now, it suffices to note that Indian languages are capable of articulating technical and philosophical concepts with precision. Specifically, Pāli employs three types of copulas, each of which can occasionally serve a copulative function—associating two

46. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 57, DOI: 10.1007/978-94-010-9048-3.

elements in the formula *x is y*. However, in their technical usage, these three verbs express distinct realities: *atthi* (from the root √*as*) conveys a static semantics related to existence or presence; *bhavati* (from the root √*bhū*) primarily denotes becoming; while *hoti* (from the root √*hū*) has a more complex semantics associated with arising or, broadly, "existence"—though the latter root verb originally derives from a contraction of √*bhū*.

At this point, it is essential to understand what the Buddha means by "form" (*rūpa*), likely one of the most misunderstood terms in the philosophical lexicon of Indian thought. Depending on context, *rūpa* can take on a range of meanings. Yet, a core semantic root allows us to trace all shades of *rūpa* back to a fundamental cognitive archetype. The term itself is used to indicate appearance, color, form, or contour. In extended uses, it can refer to beauty (implying "proper form" or *surūpa* as opposed to *durūpa*), nature, characteristic, condition, or norm.

Thus, the term's semantic root points to the notion of "concept" itself—something identifiable as an entity. However, *rūpa* is not merely a "floating signifier." Rather, it is more accurate to interpret *rūpa* as indicating the concept of "concept," understood as something with a form recognizable as such. In this sense, *rūpa* denotes not simply visual form but *cognitive form*. By "cognitive form," we mean any recognizable datum, be it auditory, tactile, or any other sensory configuration that characterizes perceptual data.

In Sanskrit, related uses of a potentially cognate term, *várpas*, similarly suggest an abstract sense of form, conveying ideas such as "image," "figure," "aspect," and even "phantasm."[47] However, a static definition is impossible, as *rūpa* can signify the material form of things, while in Buddhist texts, it can fluctuate between denoting physical forms and more abstract cognitive forms, occasionally serving as a synonym for *āyatana* (sensory sphere).

This proto-metaphysical distinction—which does not develop into a fully metaphysical dichotomy between material and immaterial—stems from the differentiation between apparent form as a sensory representation of matter, and the intangible nature of this appearance (*arūpabhava*)

47. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Dictionary English and Sanskrit*, 926.

as theoretically distinct from the tangible substrate (*rūpabhava*). Yet, in Buddhism, this distinction is never identified as possessing an inherent identity. Form, in itself, lacks any natural distinction that differentiates one object from another. It is human cognition that, through abstraction, categorizes forms into a cognitive *system*, then normative structures, social organization, and finally cultural transmission.

Cognitive form, along with other elements, comprises the five aggregates, which collectively and simultaneously constitute the perception of a unique cognitive datum. The continuous flow of this bundle of simultaneous perceptions forms cognitive experience. When the Buddha speaks of a form "passing," it is clear that he refers to the emergence of a certain cognitive form within the perceptual sequence of a sentient subject—or more precisely, the cessation of the appearing that form (*rūpaṃ niruddhaṃ*) within the perceptual domain.

> *yaṃ, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ ajātaṃ apātubhūtaṃ, 'bhavissatī'ti tassa saṅkhā, 'bhavissatī'ti tassa samaññā, 'bhavissatī'ti tassa paññatti, na tassa saṅkhā 'atthī'ti, na tassa saṅkhā 'ahosī'ti.*
>
> When form is not yet born and has not yet appeared, its designation, identity, and convention is a "will become." It is not an "is," nor a "was."

This statement encapsulates the process of phenomenological development. Without delving into the problem of becoming or the relationship between successive minimal phenomenal events in temporal unfolding, it is evident here that the Buddha emphasizes the concatenation, sequence, and temporality characterizing any observable phenomenon. This dimension of sequentiality and temporal progression will become the central focus of our analysis in the second chapter, as it lies at the heart of a phenomenological inquiry aimed at reducing the observed phenomenon to its minimal units.

The "composition" of the phenomenon in question is also of a temporal order, although in an absolute sense, time may not exist independently but rather functions as a coordinator of the sequential appearance of phenomena, creating the illusion of temporal progression, whereas, in actuality, a relationship of mutual implication exists.

The term *bhavati*, on the other hand, is more precisely understood as implying "becoming." It is thus noteworthy that, in this verse, the Buddha speaks of form—repeating the same formula for sensation, semantic perception, mental constructs, and discernment—as "arising" in the sense of "appearing" (*apātubhūta*, literally "manifested," a term containing *bhūta*, the past participle of *bhavati*). This suggests that its conventional nature will also appear (*bhavissatī*); however, this conventional aspect is enmeshed in the concept of becoming. Convention, in other words, makes form a process of becoming rather than, as the Buddha later clarifies, something that "is" (*atthi*) or "was" (*ahosi*), employing two different terms.

To elucidate, *ahosi* is the active singular aorist form of *hoti* (from *hū*), a verb with broad semantic range that, effectively, originates as a reduction of *bhū/bhavati*. In the texts, *hoti* can be understood as a weaker form of *bhavati*, while *bhavati* itself is used exclusively to emphasize the aspect of becoming. The nuanced alternation among these three copulative verbs within Pāli texts is indeed intriguing. On the one hand, *atthi* and its negative counterpart *n'atthi* denote a static truth: "it appears/it stands/it manifests (it is)" and "it does not appear/it does not stand/it does not manifest (it is not)." On the other, *bhavati*, "it becomes," is used solely in the future tense *bhavissati*: "it will become," while in reference to the past (which Pāli renders in the aorist), *ahosi* is preferred to indicate the becoming that no longer appears to us, the third verb being *hoti*.

In a preceding verse on language, the Buddha had indicated that the cessation of form renders its designation, identity, and convention as an "it was" (again *ahosi*), implying both a non-being (*na atthi*, meaning "not-standing," "not-appearing") and a non-becoming (*na bhavissati*). We must carefully note the use of terms in this sense.[48]

48. Thus established, *bhavati* signifies "becoming," while *atthi* indicates "standing," that is, the appearing of being. However, it must also be noted that neither term refers to being in an absolute sense. The former, for obvious reasons, cannot encompass being since being cannot "become" (this would render it non-being; hence, the root *bhū* pertains to appearances), while the latter, more challenging to interpret, does not, in its static temporal indication of a past or present moment of being's appearing, signify the eternity of existence but only the act of manifesting—of standing or, more precisely, of "being-there."

Consequently, even this concept becomes entwined in the relativity of interpreting appearances, acknowledging a "past," or "having-been," where being has vanished in comparison to the present in which we are speaking and no longer witnesses its being-there. This temporality, anchored in a before and an after, a standing and a "stood," signals that we remain within the realm of appearances.

It is clear that these ontological reflections, implicit in the Buddhists' careful lexical selection, compel us to consider a far broader scope than the purely psychological analyses that underpin Buddhist thought. Language and cognition analysis here opens radically into an exposition of the very dynamics of reality as it appears to us.

> *yaṃ, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ jātaṃ pātubhūtaṃ, 'atthī'ti tassa saṅkhā, 'atthī'ti tassa samaññā, 'atthī'ti tassa paññatti, na tassa saṅkhā 'ahosī'ti, na tassa saṅkhā 'bhavissatī'ti.*
>
> When form is born and appears, its designation, identity, and convention is a "being." It is neither a "was" nor a "will-be."

In this passage, we find the temporal formula once again, alternating an *atthi* (is) with an *ahosi* (has-become, was, has passed) and a *bhavissati* (will-be/-become).

However, we pause on this passage, as it brings us back to a reflection on form. We understand "form" here in the broad sense of "concept," grounded in an entity that lacks precise definition in its designation. And yet, in this passage, the Buddha speaks of the arising of form and, with it, of its designation (*paññatti*). This can be explained by the fact that, as is evident throughout Buddhist literature, there is a distinct difference between the thing itself and the idea of the thing.

The Buddha often refers to "form" in very general terms, as an undefined entity from which nominal segmentation derives semantic fields. And yet, if today we can say "form," it is because a semantic segmentation has already occurred. Thus, what can be described by the term "form" is not pure form but rather the name-of-the-form, which evokes a cognitive impression of the idea of form.

Finally, the fact that this text addresses phenomenology and therefore the relational aspect of causality is evident from the Buddha's final admonition to certain, presumably dialectical, rivals of his time:

> *yepi te, bhikkhave, ahesuṃ ukkalā vassabhaññā ahetukavādā akiriyavādā natthikavādā, tepime tayo niruttipathe adhivacanapathe paññattipathe na garahitabbaṃ nappaṭikkositabbaṃ amaññiṃsu.*
>
> Even those wandering ascetics of the past, Vassa and Bhañña of Ukkalā, who taught the doctrine of non-causality, non-action, and nihilism, did not imagine that these three aims of language should be criticized or rejected.
>
> *taṃ kissa hetu?*
>
> For what reason?
>
> *'nindāghaṭṭanabyārosaupārambhabhayā'ti*
>
> For fear of accusation, criticism, and reproach.

In this final section, the Buddha introduces a remarkably powerful concept that is of fundamental interest to us. The three wise ascetics he mentions, who had not sufficiently delved into the question of language due to fear of reproach from other philosophers, are identified by the Buddha as proponents of a particular theory: that of nihilism. This term is curiously rendered in Pāli as *natthikavādā*, or the doctrine (*vāda*) concerning that which "is not" (*natthi*, from *na atthi*, *n'atthi*), corresponding approximately to the Sanskrit *nāstikavāda*. Readers, however, may find it unclear what this "aim of language" precisely entails, as it has not been explicitly or emphatically articulated.

What the Buddha has done in this discourse, in fact, is to describe the process of linguistic cognition through three principal stages, which are then identified as "paths" of three distinct functions, namely, language, designation, and convention. These three functions are tightly interrelated but could be said to converge in the singular "path" (*patha*) leading to cognition. Cognition proceeds through three

principal phases, two of which unavoidably evoke the Douglasian anthropological distinction between grid and group.[49] Each cognition involves an initial stage of disaggregation of the perceived entity, followed by a reorganization of the previously disaggregated elements into cognitively perceptible "groups." The "other-sign" is nothing but the cognitive entity that subsumes in itself prototypical factors initially segmented from the perceived external world.

1.5 Signs and phanera: the 'field' of perception

To summarize, we know that Buddhist thought recognizes certain cognitive elements as constitutive of the perceived world: the formal meaning (*rūpa*), literally "form," the prototypical and signified form, the form that conveys signified; the nominal signifier (*nāma*), literally "name," that which is nameable, evocative, carrying with it the gradient of the acoustic image. These two elements are often represented as part of a unit (*nāmarūpa*), the "name-form," that is, the linguistic sign, much like Saussure defines the sign as a two-faced entity composed of a concept and an acoustic image, a formal signified and a signifying name (signifier).

However, there are also figurative signs, signs that manifest as the concrete semiotic act of *nāmarūpa*, and these signs are the *nimitta*s. Meditative practice aims to transcend language, to see things "as they are" (*tathātā*), so it is not surprising that a great scholar like Peter Harvey has defined *vipassanā* meditation as a "signless meditation,"[50] a meditation "without signs," which leads to the cessation of figurative signs; and with "signless," he translates the term *animitta*, which is precisely *nimitta*, "sign," preceded by a privative *a-* (see §1.7).

Let us set aside for a moment the materialist reductionism of an overzealous scientism and instead embrace a broader conception of

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49. Chris Gosden, "Grid and Group: An Interview with Mary Douglas," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 4, no. 3 (2004): 275–87, DOI: 10.1177/1469605304046415; James V. Spickard, "A Guide to Mary Douglas's Three Versions of Grid/Group Theory," *Sociological Analysis* 50, no. 2 (1989): 151–70, DOI: 10.2307/3710986.
50. Harvey, "'Signless' Meditations in Pāli Buddhism," 28.

rūpa as 'form' in the extended sense. If we release the notion of *rūpa* from its material constraints and correctly conceive of it as form in its most general sense—any form that is sensorily and cognitively perceptible—we arrive at the same notion of the "perceived object" in a Husserlian sense.

I suggest employing the term *phany* to indicate a *manifestative* moment recognized by the perceptual-sensory apparatus, one particularly capable of effectively capturing our attention. Unlike a *phenomenon*, which is more extensive and thus applies to any unfolding or occurrence, any appearance or configuration of something, or even its mere "presence," *phany* represents a more specific aspect of the phenomenon. This term is useful not only in navigating the magical-religious world, where *phany* dominates and is mystically exalted as a reference to any manifestative power of a magical, divine, or spiritual order, but also within phenomenology itself, where the term *phany* can prove immensely beneficial. We will therefore distinguish three different orders of magnitude, and my call for a renewed phenomenology necessitates the adoption of this scale.

In Charles Sanders Peirce's conception, a *phaneron* is the subject matter of phenomenology. His specific investigation of phenomena, termed *phaneroscopy*, offers much to learn, and he elaborates on this methodology in 1905. Although Peirce was acquainted with Husserl, his appraisal of him was less than favorable, which prevented *phaneroscopy* and phenomenology from blending significantly or even from being considered in any way sister disciplines.

I am inclined to expand, build bridges, and favor exchanges between disciplines, so I encourage not to fear the cross-contamination of one by the other, provided it is done conscientiously, and not merely for the sake of syncretism, as is often the case today regarding the much-misunderstood Buddhist thought. So let us see what Peirce can tell us.

He does not differentiate *phaneron* from *phenomenon* in the strict sense. The former term, derived from the Greek φανερόν (neuter for φανερός), indeed indicates a phenomenon, but specifically "whatever is present at any time to the mind in any way."[51] This is the defini-

51. William Rosensohn, *The Phenomenology of Charles S. Peirce: From the*

tion we wish to adopt. Now, although Peirce intended *phaneron* as a possible synonym for phenomenon, here we will make a clear distinction between the two terms.

A *phaneron* can also refer to the collective total of everything present in the mind. Peirce was intent on distinguishing *phaneroscopy* from psychology, as his aim was not to speculate on the physiological facts governing neurological processes but rather to focus on the constitution of thoughts as such.

Now, we shall employ the term *phaneron* for the sake of utility and to distinguish it from the phenomenon itself. From this point forward, a phenomenon will be understood as "any formal aspect of being" or, more precisely, as "any configuration of an aspect of being that *can* be perceived as appearing." Here, we recall that the concept of *rūpa* guides our definition. The notion of "form" is indeed a valuable concept, as it encapsulates two fundamental ideas: the form assumed by phenomena (configuration) and the 'semantic' value they carry by taking on such forms (in*form*ation). When I say that configuration is information, I am not referring solely to the principles of human language but to the principles of everything in the world. Form is information, and to take on a certain form (configuration) means to convey a certain type of information.

This principle applies to chemistry, where the sole law explaining the varying behaviors of elements derives from quantitative and formal values—that is, from how elementary particles configure themselves in the atom and enable bonding, reactions, and so on. Even the same element can configure itself isotopically in different ways, and these isotopic differences are indeed formal; therefore, they also bring about a change in the behavior of the element: as the form changes, so does the element's behavior. Similarly, in computing, strings of code are constituted purely from formal aspects, even in the most basic models, where formal aspects are constructed through the alternation of ones and zeros.

Genetics needs hardly be mentioned: it is only the sequence of purine and pyrimidine bases that determines the type of information conveyed, and nothing else; the way these bases follow each other in

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Doctrine of Categories to Phaneroscopy, (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1974), 74.

the genetic code matters immensely, such that if certain sequences are skipped due to events that lead to mutation, the code is damaged, and consequences are observed in the higher-order form—structured from the most fundamental form of the genetic code, which is encoded in modes of expression, phenotypically.

Thus, while a phenomenon is simply a configuration—a specific *rūpa* that is not necessarily registered by our perceptual attention and may remain in the background of experience—a *phaneron* is a specific phenomenal aspect that *is* perceived, brought to the conscious mind's attention. In Buddhist terminology, this could be understood as a subsequent phase, a *phassa—rūpa*.

This distinction is critically important because not all phenomena are *phanera*, but all *phanera* are phenomena or parts of phenomena. We must, in fact, distinguish at least two senses of *rūpa*, a distinction already present in the interpretations given by Buddhists in the earliest texts and further developed in the Abhidhamma in a more technical manner: form may be understood either as a continuous, unified, and multiple flow of undivided details (thus, *rūpa* in a general sense) or, following cognitive intervention, as a specific section conceptualized to be associated with a nominal identity through a designatory process—the *rūpa* 'grasped' by perceptions and associated with *nāma*. It is true that in the Abhidhamma there is discussion of the "formality" (*rūpatā*) of form itself (*rūpassa*), but to delve into such technicalities now would only add unnecessary complexity.

The term that may help us resolve this impasse is *dhamma*. In the Pāli Canon, this term is used in a highly general way and can even be translated as "thing" or "fact." Consequently, the "Buddhist thing" is understood as the "Buddhist doctrine," the Buddha's teaching. Yet a *dhamma* can also refer to a general thing, a phenomenon.[52] It is in this vein that the authors of the Abhidhamma extend the term in a technical sense to denote what could indeed be considered a "phenomenon."

52. Lettner, "Semiotic Roots and Buddhist Routes in Phenomenology and Intercultural Philosophy: A Peircean Study of Abhidharma Buddhist Theories of Consciousness and Perception"; Lettner, "Peirce's Semiotic Pragmaticism and Buddhist Soteriology: Steps Towards Modelling 'Thought Forms' of Signlessness."

The analysis proposed in the Abhidhamma is thus directed at investigating phenomena in their most irreducible sense—what Husserl calls "essence" and what in the Abhidhamma is already referred to as *tathatā*, "such-ness," a practically equivalent term.

In the Abhidhamma, it becomes evident that each phenomenon (*dhamma*) is open to phenomenological analysis in search of its ultimate essence (*tathatā*). This implies that a *dhamma* can potentially be any phenomenon and is not necessarily one that is singled out or recognized as a form, even a primordial one, by our perceptions. I therefore propose this provisional classification: *dhamma* for phenomenon and *rūpa* for the phaneron's fundamental constituent. However, we must be careful not to confuse ourselves, as Husserl often employs the Greek concept of εἶδος, which indeed means "form." In Edmund Husserl's philosophy, the concepts of εἶδος and essence are closely related, though not exactly synonymous, despite their frequent interchangeable use. But could this be due to a lack in his phenomenology of a distinction between *phaneron* and *phenomenon*?

For Husserl, εἶδος is the ideal structure that can be grasped through phenomenological reduction—that is, an analysis that brackets (ἐποχή) the empirical world to arrive at pure experience. Thus, εἶδος is understood as essence in the sense of an ideal, intangible, and timeless structure that lies beyond the concrete manifestations of an object. By "essence," on the other hand, Husserl refers to something very similar to εἶδος, in that it pertains to the fundamental structure of what a thing 'is' in its purity, apart from its accidental or contingent characteristics. Essence, then, is what makes an object what it is. In the phenomenological approach, essence emerges when one sets aside the accidental elements of concrete experience to grasp what is universal and necessary in an object.

Thus, even more so, essence is μορφή in a "geometric" sense, almost identical to that of the Buddhist *rūpa*, which precedes the *phassa* involving sensory organ interaction and, especially, the cognitive elaboration that assigns names to this *rūpa*.

In practical terms, the difference is nuanced: Husserl employs the term εἶδος to highlight the ideal and formal character of an entity's

structure, whereas the term *essence* places greater emphasis on the ontological nature of this structure—specifically, what makes this structure "true" for every manifestation of a particular type of object.

Finally, it should be noted that from the concept of appearing (φαίνω) as the manifestation of the ontic configurations of being, we recognize not only the φαινόμενα in general as possible objects of our perception (φανερός) but also, and perhaps more significantly, as something that eludes us, despite being somehow glimpsed.

Everything that does not fall within what passes entirely unnoticed, or that is fully attended to by our perceptions, lies within the scope of what is understood as manifestation—yet it is not fully apprehended in its configuration. This is not because it fails to reveal itself from all sides; to borrow from Husserl, this is not a case of a phenomenon inadequately perceived by our faculties, nor does it fall within the paradox of adequacy, wherein only a *phaneron* can operate within both cases. Here, I am referring to φάνεια.

As said, we define *phany* (from φάνεια) as that moment of awareness in which the subject, understood as a witness to a phenomenon,[53] recognizes the *phanic* manifestation—namely, the revealing of the witnessed object as an "event" that carries its own intrinsic meaning, even if that meaning is not readily identifiable.

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53. I found it necessary to coin a term to designate all those manifestative phenomenal powers that were apprehended with a certain degree of disorientation and overwhelm by those who attested to them. This topic cannot be fully understood without engaging with that highly symbolic philosophical language, which insists on themes of light, brilliance, fire, and its power—metaphorically akin to a blinding light that illuminates what was previously unknown, in shadow, hidden, or invisible. At the same time, however, it does not clarify what this capacity is or this manifestative power, which nonetheless leaves witnesses astonished and captivated. In order to avoid a mystical tone—not because the mystical is in any way objectionable, but simply because it is not relevant to this context—I shall offer as clear a definition as possible, one that draws on the shared heritage that this idea of "appearing" and "luminescence" holds not only in the Indian tradition but also in the Greek tradition. See the article "*What Dawned First*" I mentioned in the Introduction. The term *phany* wants to imitate the Greek φάνειαι, from φάνεια, as seen in terms like ἐπιφαίνω, meaning "to come into view," derived from φαίνω, "to shine" or "to bring to light."

A phanic event can be exemplified by the sudden emergence (or appearing) of fire at the exact moment it is ignited. Only at that precise instant, when fire emerges from a prior state of absence, is there potential for a phanic awareness to occur. Another significant aspect of phany is its conceptual utility in marking the moment a relationship between the witness and the witnessed is recognized as "established." In a broader sense, phany is understood as the manifestative potential inherent in the moment a phenomenon emerges or "appears." To encapsulate this intricate concept, I have chosen to relate it to the term *āvibhāva*, which in Pāli denotes a manifestation, an appearance, something that becomes visible (the phrase "appearing and disappearing," *āvibhāvaṃ, tirobhāvaṃ*, is mentioned in various discourses such as AN 10.97, among the supernatural faculties or *iddhi* attainable with the state of Buddhahood: indeed, one who attains enlightenment is able to transcend the conventional limitations of the body and its perceptual faculties).

Nonetheless, it must be noted that the technical lexicon of Pāli is exceptionally rich. The event of something's appearance, which also carries a considerable phenomenological nuance, is further conveyed by the verb *avakkanti*. Its most notable use appears in SN 12.64, where we find the phrase: "where consciousness is established and proliferates, there appear name-and-form," (*yattha patiṭṭhitaṃ viññāṇaṃ virūḷhaṃ, atthi tattha nāmarūpassa avakkanti*). This provides valuable evidence of how these thinkers clearly perceived the connection between semantic thought and the intentional act of consciousness (*viññāṇaṃ*), expressed through phrases like *patiṭṭhitaṃ virūḷhaṃ*, meaning "lays the foundation," "is firmly established," and consequently "grows" or "proliferates." Additionally, as Husserl also observes, the *thing-in-itself* can be recognized as bearing characteristics, or qualities. In Pāli, this notion is expressed by the term *indriya*.

Moreover, if the appearance of something is acknowledged as arising from preceding conditions, it is interpreted as an occurrence, an arising from foundational conditions: *uṭṭhāna.* However, in this instance, we are no longer discussing phany, which is unconcerned with the causal aspect. The causal aspect of appearing is nonetheless

articulated by terms such as *pavatti* and *pātubhāva* (e.g., in MN 28: "though the eye is intact internally, so long as exterior sights don't come into range and there's no corresponding engagement, there's no manifestation of the corresponding type of consciousness," *ajjhattikañceva cakkhuṃ aparibhinnaṃ hoti, bāhirā ca rūpā na āpāthaṃ āgacchanti, no ca tajjo samannāhāro hoti, neva tāva tajjassa viññāṇabhāgassa pātubhāvo hoti*).

This notion is also mentioned significantly in DN 22 (a text we will examine in detail later), which speaks of (re)birth as the primary cause for the *manifestation* of the entire mass of phenomena (*khandhānaṃ pātubhāvo*) and their acquisition by the sensory spheres (*āyatanānaṃ paṭilābho*). Another idea of appearing conveyed by the term *pātubhāva* is that of 'manifestation' (eg. *tassimāni pañcindriyāni… pātubhavanti*, "these five faculties appear in them," AN 4.162, or AN 7.66 that mention the "appearing" of seven suns using *pātubhavati*).

If instead of "appearing" we speak of "appearance," this term is associated with the formal aspect and is indicated by the term *rūpagata*. Other causal aspects of appearing are conveyed by *samudaya* (origin, a term previously encountered when discussing the origin of the world as linked to the sensory spheres) as well as *samuddaya* and *samuppāda*. The latter term, however, emphasizes the interrelated aspect of all manifestative phenomena, underscoring their mutual reference through indissoluble relational ties. This nuanced terminology provides a remarkably intricate framework for the phenomenological landscape these authors describe with meticulous lexical choices to ensure a description that is as precise as possible.

(A)	Ontological Plane	essence	(εἶδος)	*rūpa*
(B)	Ontic Plane	phenomenon	(φαινόμενον)	*dhamma*
(B1)	Pre-reflective	phany	(φάνεια)	*āvibhāva*
(B2)	Intentional	phaneron	(φανερόν)	*nimitta*

Table 7. An overview of Pāli phenomenological lexicon.

As an equivalent for Peirce's phaneron, I have chosen the term *nimitta* (see Table 7). Here, too, the issue is purely indicative, though there is a rationale for this choice, specifically its connotation of 'support' for phenomenal appearances. With the term "essence," we might also equate *sāra* in Pāli; however, it must be noted that, aside from a notable mention in Dhp 12, there is truly little basis for comparison with the Husserlian conception. Indeed, in Dhp 12, there is an emphasis on the importance of "knowing the essential as essential and the non-essential as non-essential" (*sārañ-ca sārato ñatvā, asārañ-ca asārato*), and so we value this mention as certainly not formulated unselectively. I reiterate that what I intended to outline in these cases is merely a proposal of terminological similarities, from which we should extract the meaning of the term *phany*, and even more so, that of *phaneron*.

Regarding Husserl's concept of the phenomenon, it is now clearer if it should be understood specifically as *phaneron* or as *phany*, and under what circumstances one or the other is appropriate. It goes without saying that this exercise is not merely a terminological one pursued for the sake of generating technicalities, but rather should translate into practical utility. For Husserl, the entire essential status of the perceived object, along with all its perceptible qualities, is one of "simple manifestation" (note the terms used here). In contrast, the "real" object is that which concerns physical science. This is where Husserl seeks to draw a distinction between his phenomenology and the natural sciences.

> Vielmehr *der ganze Wesensgehalt des wahrgenommenen Dinges*, also das ganze in Leibhaftigkeit dastehende mit allen seinen Qualitäten und allen je wahrnehmbaren, ist „*bloße Erscheinung*", und das „*wahre Ding*" *ist das der physikalischen Wissenschaft*.[54]

As we know, Husserl is not concerned with the convention that any form of *Wissenschaft*, whether it be of nature or physics (which, etymologically speaking, would essentially be the same, as it always

54. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 82.

pertains to φύσις),[55] is irrelevant to the phenomenologist. The mere manifestation (*bloße Erscheinung*), or the *phaneron* when it is grasped as an element of awareness—or simply the phenomenon as such, including even what eludes our apprehension, as Husserl discusses—is, as we can now better understand, only one of two things, the other one being *phany*. It is clear that by *bloße Erscheinung*, Husserl intends what Peirce calls the *phaneron*, as evident from his definition: "prinzipiell „bloß subjektiv" und doch kein leerer Schein."[56] If it is apprehended subjectively, there is little doubt; it is a *phaneron*.

The modes in which the object gives itself to appearing can be defined as "manifestations" (*Erscheinungsweisen*, mentioned in §44 of Volume I). We may understand these *Erscheinungsweisen* as phenomenal modes, or *phanic* configurations, which *define the appearing of certain aspects of the object*. Although it is inevitable that the object does not appear in its entirety and totality, on the other hand, this imperfection—or rather, this incompleteness—of the object is necessarily given in the correlation between the object and the perception of the object. But what, then, would this totality be if not the totality of being itself, implicitly underlying every existent? Thus, we should assert that the truth of the object, like that of all objects, is ultimately the totality of possible things, the *sabbaṃ yathābhūtaṃ* of the Buddhists. Indeed:

> Bestimmt sich der Sinn von Ding durch die Gegebenheiten der Dingwahrnehmung (und was könnte sonst den Sinn bestimmen?), dann fordert er solche Unvollkommenheit, verweist uns notwendig auf kontinuierlich einheitliche Zusammenhänge möglicher Wahrnehmungen, die von irgendeiner vollzogenen aus sich nach unendlich vielen Richtungen in *systematisch fest geregelter* Weise erstrecken, und zwar nach jeder ins Endlose, immerfort von einer Einheit des Sinnes durchherrscht. Prinzipiell bleibt immer ein Horizont bestimmbarer Unbestimmtheit, wir mögen in der Erfahrung noch so weit fortschreiten, noch so große

55. Pierre Hadot, *Le Voile d'Isis: Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de Nature* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

56. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 84.

> Kontinuen aktueller Wahrnehmungen von demselben Dinge durchlaufen haben.[57]

Let us examine the matter from a different perspective. Consciousness is the only thing about which we can be absolutely certain. While we lack any concrete proof of the 'external' world—and much less can we prove that it is 'external' in the sense of being absolutely 'autonomous' and 'independent' from us—our certainty of consciousness is nearly incontrovertible. This perspective is not unique to Husserl or to Buddhism; it is also shared by a well-known—and highly debated—British physician who has dedicated recent years to extensive research on this issue, arriving at conclusions that are strikingly similar.[58]

The aim here is not to reduce everything to panpsychism, which is as untenable as its diametric opposite, materialistic reductionism. Rather, the most plausible and therefore intriguing hypothesis may be a view in which matter and consciousness are not distinct entities but two aspects of a living unity governed by highly similar principles—a kind of neo-hylozoism.

Buddhism does not deny the existence of matter, yet its chaotic, senseless, and unconscious nature seems evident, given that the only apparent form of relation between all interacting entities resembles the A → B structure mentioned earlier. In this structure, the essential aspect lies in the arrow (→) as an intentional, conscious relational act between consciousness A and consciousness B.

For Husserl, the notion that all experiences are given essentially only to consciousness (*Alle Erlebnisse sind bewußt*)[59] is an established fact. This implies, regarding intentional experiences (→), that they are not merely consciousness (I would add that consciousness is primarily a network of relations) and thus an object (B) of a reflective gaze (A).

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57. Ibid., 92.
58. Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, vol. 1 (London: Perpectiva Press, 2021), 1042–49.
59. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 95.

On the contrary, this B already exists as a background (*Hintergrund*), "ready to be perceived" (*wahrnehmungsbereit*). As previously stated, not everything can essentially become *phaneron* ("*Nicht alle Dinge* erfüllen diese Bedingung"). A phenomenon as such may also escape perception, especially since my perceptual field is not unlimited: "mein Blickfeld der Aufmerksamkeit, das alles Erscheinende umspannt, ist nicht unendlich."[60]

If we interpret Husserl's *Blickfeld* similarly to the Buddhist concept of *cakkhuviññāṇa*, we see that the two perspectives are essentially making an analogous argument. To be more precise, *cakkhuviññāṇa* arises only in conjunction with *phassa* between the sensory organ *cakkhu* and a given *rūpa*. Thus, *Blickfeld* can be understood as the extent to which *cakkhu* can establish a *phassa* with a particular *rūpa*. The extent of this field is not unlimited, nor is it static; it is mutable, dynamically accommodating different things that enter and exit, thereby bringing various *rūpa*s to our perceptual attention in succession.

In the system of the five aggregates, we are presented with a genuine constructional chain in which progression begins with contact with a phenomenal element *x*, that is, any form. This form, while it could be considered an essence, is instead, particularly in this system, configured as a "datum"—a fundamental origin point for an initial cognitive perception. The sensory aspect, accessible through one or more of the six sensory channels, initiates the first level of processing, after which the next link in the chain is activated. This means that each link in the chain constitutes a formative stage that builds upon all prior stages.

An especially intriguing aspect is that once we reach *viññāṇa*, it, in turn, can act as an origin point, as *viññāṇa* can direct itself back toward another *rūpa* immediately. Bearing in mind this fundamental circularity (indeed, it would be more appropriate to refer to it as a *rūpa-viññāṇa* or *viññāṇa-rūpa* "circuit," see Table 8), we can emphasize the importance of *saññā*. This function, at this stage, must and should include a semantic element, following sensation but preceding more complex cognitive constructs, which are organizational by nature. The function of *saññā*, which we will further analyze later, is a semantic-perceptual

60. Ibid.

aspect, where "perception" is understood as a form of comprehension that surpasses mere sensation, which is purely sensory and not necessarily categorizable. To "feel" a surface as "smooth" or "rough," for example, in itself signifies nothing; there are infinite gradations of roughness or smoothness, and sensation is directed toward these subtleties, with generic concepts like "smooth" or "rough" only developing subsequently. The same applies across other sensory experiences, from visual-luminous qualities to olfactory perceptions, and so on.

The *saṅkhāra*s are higher mental constructs that organize "signs" into more complex eidetic systems. Thus, we should understand *saññā* as something more deeply embodied and intensely experienced by the subject. When I direct my attention to a tree, I also physically "sense" its "tree-ness" if I have internalized the "sign" of "tree." Various mental associations can arise from this semantic perception, enabling us to recall signs in our minds easily, without wandering each time in a fog where we "cannot quite remember" the name of something, even if we have a clear understanding of "what" it is ("it's on the tip of my tongue," we might say, "I can't recall right now," as if the concept, the sign, needed to be summoned to consciousness). This general sensation corresponds to *saññā*.

At this point, we must ask whether there is a possible way to connect the pathways of the five aggregates with those of the chain of conditioned phenomena. Both, in fact, present common elements: specifically, the final two elements of the aggregate factors correspond to the second and third phases of the chain of conditioned phenomena, raising a question as to why this is the case.

Upon a closer examination of the reasoning behind the five aggregates, it becomes clear that they signify a mechanism of internal interpenetration, in which the element that appears later in the sequence "includes" as premises those that preceded it. In this cognitive framework, *viññāṇa* contains within itself *saṅkhāra*, *saññā*, *vedanā*, and *rūpa*. It must include them as conditions; otherwise, it could not manifest.

1.	*rūpa*	Form-DATUM
	phassa	(Contact)

2.	*vedanā*	Feeling-SENSATION
3.	*saññā*	Semantic PERCEPTION
4.	*saṅkhāra*	Formations-CONSTRUCTIONS
5.	*viññāṇa*	Consciousness-DISCERNMENT

Table 8. Functional circuit of the five aggregates.

The term *viññāṇa* is often rendered as "consciousness," but here it has been translated as "discernment," which shares with the preceding term the notion of division (*sciō*, *scīre* < **skeį̂*).[61] However, the concept of "discernment" may lead to some misunderstandings, as it suggests a preliminary act. First, I "divide" (*dis-cernō*), and on the basis of what has been divided, I reorganize through nominal attributions. In this sense, the schema presented on Fig. 5 may seem to support this interpretation. It should be noted, however, that Buddhists do not understand *viññāṇa* as a preliminary act or as a function underlying cognition, but rather as a result.

This distinction does not significantly alter the conveyed meaning of the term. While it is true that cognition advances through successive divisions of perceived reality, this phase of the process is not identified with *viññāṇa*. Instead, *viññāṇa* denotes the outcome of the process, which is a "divided," or discrete, world with which we are *in-relation*, and this relation through discernment is what they call "consciousness." In the framework of the chain of conditioned phenomena (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the *viññāṇa* phase is the second, immediately following nescience (*avijjā*). It is from *viññāṇa* that the signifier and the signified (*nāmarūpa*) arise, leading to the six sensory fields (*saḷāyatanaṃ*). Then, through the contact (*phassa*) between the sense organs and perceptible entities, sensory-emotional experience (*vedanā*) arises, from which attachment (*taṇhā*) to things emerges, followed by their becoming (*bhava*), and ultimately, from becoming, the processes of birth (*jāti*) and death (*jarāmaraṇaṃ*). Within this structure, consciousness indeed appears to be conceptualized as a separating function, such that

61. Michiel de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and Other Italic Languages* (Leiden: BRILL, 2008), 545.

its first discernment act is precisely to structure the sign unit with its dual aspect: signifier, nominal (*nāma*), and signified, formal (*rūpa*).

There is, however, another way to interpret *viññāṇa*, which is as the fifth psychophysical aggregate (*khandha*). In this other analysis of the human cognitive process, Buddhism describes five collective elements of attachment (*pañcupādānakkhandhā*), whose sequential and therefore subordinate manifestation constitutes the apparent unity of the psychic self. In this sequence, *viññāṇa* no longer appears as the initial function that acts as a separating instance for cataloging entities; rather, it appears as the final outcome of the cognitive product. The cogitating subject, then, is an organizer of discrete elements. As the last element in the cognitive chain, *viññāṇa* contains within it the consequences of the preceding four phases, which, in order, are: the appearing of form (*rūpa*), the arising of sensation (*vedanā*), the semiotic-perceptual recognition (*saññā*) of the object appearing to our cognition, the construction of volitional and ideative instances (*saṅkhāra*), and finally, the emergence of discriminative capacity (*viññāṇa*). This role of *viññāṇa* does not, however, alter the coherence of the system in any way.

Whether *viññāṇa*, or "consciousness," is understood as a *discerning* function, thus an assumed separating instance, or as discrimination—the ultimate consequence of a previously undertaken semiotic reorganization of the cognitive mosaic—it is still to be understood as a worldview in fragments. Within the narrative of the five aggregates, *saññā* operates as a sign identity indicator that attributes a specific identity to what has been sensed (*vedanāti*), but this already presupposes that the initial form (*rūpa*) from which emotion arises is recognizable as a signified meaning.

If *viññāṇa* thus signifies discernment, it is evident that, to function as such, it must presuppose the aforementioned elements. Sensation only contains the raw form data, which it processes sensorily. Attribution, or semiotic cognition, incorporates the primary component of sensation, without which it could not execute the associative act (*saṃ-janati*). This process thus unfolds similarly to a *matrëška*, with layers nested within each other.

The connection between this and the chain of dependent origination, which is also closely involved in the issue of cognition, can be readily explained. Our view needs to combine the chain structure of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, beginning with the influence of *avijjā* on cognitive constructs (*saṅkhāra*), which initiates the discernment process (*viññāṇa*), with the concentric process of the *pañcakkhandha*, which, conversely, arrive at *viññāṇa* as a result of the co-occurrence of the previous four instances.

In the concentric conception of the aggregates, cognitive constructs (*saṅkhāra*) emerge as the outcome of prior experiences of semiotic prejudice (*saññā*), which thus contain within themselves sensation (and with it, the formal datum). However, in the concatenated view of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the starting point is directly *saṅkhāra*, describing it as the result of a misapprehension (*a-vijjā*), essentially, ignorance. In this context, *avijjā* thus encompasses both the sensation-of-form (*rūpañca vedanāca*) and the semantic sphere (*saññā*), as presented in the model of the *khandha*s.

At this point, we can understand the connection between the two systems, which are entirely consistent with each other. The realm of *avijjā* already includes the initial *khandha*, while the culmination, that is, the surface level of the aggregate outcomes, is the *activation* of the perceptual chain, which indeed begins with the influence of *avijjā* on eidetic constructs (*saṅkhāra*), ultimately affecting the separative instances of *viññāṇa*.

Indeed, it is *viññāṇa* that directs the action of the linguistic sign *nāmarūpa*, which is none other than an anticipation of cognition. The sign precedes, anticipates cognition, and prejudices perception to the extent that it behaves as a preconstructed framework that intervenes between vision and the visible, imposing its organizational and associative rationale.

Viññāṇa breaks down the panorama into fragments, and *nāmarūpa* follows with cognitive associations. These associations are, of course, possible only if prior contact (*phassa*) occurs between the sensory faculties (*saḷāyatana*) and the object, which will then be reified by our cognitive apparatus to be associated with that already assimilated

conceptual prototype (*rūpa* of *nāma*) and nominal prototype (*nāma* of *rūpa*), ready to be anchored.

From here, the process unfolds as we know: from contact arises a new sensation (*vedanā*), which, however, in the context of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, is presented in its role in constituting the problematic issue of attachment (*taṇhā*).

We have stated that perceptual attribution (*saññā*) is defined by Buddhists themselves as knowledge that brings together (*saṃ+jānāti*, which in Pāli becomes *sañjānāti*). This type of analysis can be found, for instance, in the *Mahāvedallasutta* (MN 43), where we read: *sañjānāti sañjānātī'ti kho, āvuso, tasmā saññā'ti vuccati*, literally "it is called perception because it perceives." In our case, however, we should say, "it is called *saññā* because it performs *sañjānāti*," where *sañjānāti* is the third person of a verb meaning "to know (*jānāti*) by bringing together (*saṃ-*/*sañ-*)." In the same text, we find a fundamental observation for cognitive studies:

> *yā cāvuso, vedanā yā ca saññā yañca viññāṇaṃ*
> *ime dhammā saṃsaṭṭhā udāhu visaṃsaṭṭhā?*
> *labbhā ca panimesaṃ dhammānaṃ vinibbhujitvā*
> *vinibbhujitvā nānākaraṇaṃ paññāpetun'ti?*
>
> O friend, there is feeling, perception, and discernment. Are these elements mixed or distinct? And would it be possible to separate them completely in order to describe the differences between them?

In this brief text, an age-old philosophical issue is presented: in the search for truth, philosophy inevitably encounters the problem of cognitive limitations and our perceptions. There are a number of issues to consider when discussing perceptions, and it is beneficial to turn to ethology in this regard. All of us—non-human animals and human animals alike—are born into a specific environment to which, presumably, our cognitive apparatus is adapted. The level of symbiosis between environment and cognitive apparatus, however, is such that the notion of a clear distinction between the two dimensions appears quite debatable. Conceiving of the cognitive apparatus as an extension of the

environment, or as a direct manifestation of it, is more useful for understanding, for example, the problem of *affordances* described by Gibson.

The environment is often mistakenly conceived of as a series of surfaces that separate substances from the medium in which the animal lives and is immersed. Gibson refers to the concept of affordance to indicate the set of qualities perceived as useful in a given entity. An affordance serves as a technical invitation to use the environment: types of terrain, a shelter, water, fire, even other animals can be affordances, as can human-made objects and productions.

Gibson defines affordance as the *conjunction* of physical composition and layout that enables the direct perception of meanings within an entity.[62] It is worth pausing for a moment on this notion. What does it imply to say that a particular object can convey meanings intrinsic to its form? It is by no means obvious that objects possess implicit meanings. On the contrary, it might be more accurate to suggest that meanings are conceived as attributions (*prajñapti*) that stem from the extraction and subsequent cognitive isolation (conceptual reification) directed toward only one part of the *whole meaning* that the entity communicates and represents: it is a manifestation of meaning itself, rather than a repository of implicit meanings. The issue of affordance intersects the dichotomy between objective and subjective.

The "form" (*rūpa*) in relation to the cognitive and biological capacities of the animal, determines the perceived possibilities of use: walking, swimming, residing, grasping. For example, the affordance of air is respiration. However, another problem arises here.

An affordance may be beneficial or harmful. Not everything appears in accordance with its real characteristics. An apparently solid surface that is, in reality, sandy constitutes a true trap. A solid object that is transparent and appears invisible is, likewise, an ambiguous entity.

Ethologists use the term "niche" to denote that specific environment understood not as an exteriority of the animal, but as an undefined continuum. The niche is not merely a geographical area but represents how the animal lives, both within and around itself.

62. James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 2014), 119–35, DOI: 10.4324/9781315740218.

This definition positions the concept of niche between two poles: the phenomenal environment, which constitutes the private world, and affordance, which is perceived as though external. Affordance encompasses all actual potentialities of an entity, and thus, its perception precedes linguistic classification, whereby the named object is recognized as itself and nothing else. In perceiving affordance, an object can serve multiple purposes and hold infinite potential meanings. From this perspective, the concept of affordance aligns closely with the Buddhist notion of *saññā*.

A branch with the affordance of 'graspability,' for instance, may serve as a weapon, a support, a lever, fuel for fire, and more. The potential uses of an entity thus extend beyond mere linguistic meaning. The child's cognition of the world, prior to learning the associative mechanism (*nāma-rūpa*) of language, is an experience of affordance (practically identical to the Buddhist *saññā*).

Let us continue with the analysis of MN 43:

yā cāvuso, vedanā yā ca saññā yañca viññāṇaṃ
ime dhammā saṃsaṭṭhā, no visaṃsaṭṭhā.
na ca labbhā imesaṃ dhammānaṃ vinibbhujitvā
vinibbhujitvā nānākaraṇaṃ paññāpetuṃ.
yaṃ hāvuso (/*cāvuso*)*, vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vijānāti*
tasmā ime dhammā saṃsaṭṭhā no visaṃsaṭṭhā.
na ca labbhā imesaṃ dhammānaṃ vinibbhujitvā
vinibbhujitvā nānākaraṇaṃ paññāpetun'ti.

O friend, there is feeling, perception, and discernment. These elements are interwoven, not separate. And they cannot be entirely dissected to describe their distinctions. For one perceives what one feels and understands what one perceives. This is why these elements are interwoven, not separate. And it is never possible to fully dissect them to describe their distinctions.

At this point, the interdependent nature of sensorial, perceptual, and discerning instances is revealed. We observe a remarkable precision in Buddhist reasoning here, which avoids a metaphysics of cognition—a common analytical error in which concepts are divided, leading us to mistakenly conceive them as distinct mechanical processes. The

Buddha insightfully notes that cognitive activity comprises a bundle of overlapping, intimately interconnected processes. They cannot be separated, as they sustain each other like in a house of cards.

It should not surprise us, but this mode of reasoning is applied by Buddhists across all domains of human anthropological analysis. Identity itself—the ego or self—is seen as emerging from the concomitant assembly of a series of persistent psychic events. Psychological identity collapses the moment it can no longer reference those systems that allow it to appear.

> *nissaṭṭhena hāvuso, pañcahi indriyehi parisuddhena mano-viññāṇena kiṃ neyyan'ti?*
>
> What can be known by a mind purified and liberated from the [other] five senses?
>
> *nissaṭṭhena, āvuso, pañcahi indriyehi parisuddhena mano-viññāṇena 'ananto ākāso'ti ākāsānañcāyatanaṃ neyyaṃ, 'anantaṃ viññāṇan'ti viññāṇañcāyatanaṃ neyyaṃ, 'natthi kiñcī'ti ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ neyyan'ti*.
>
> Aware of infinite space, it can know the dimension of infinite space. Aware of infinite consciousness, it can know the dimension of infinite consciousness. Aware of emptiness, it can know the realm of perpetual emptiness.

Here, we finally encounter the term *ākāśa* (in Pāli: *ākāso*), specifically invoked to denote what we initially mentioned: an indeterminate extended area, a matrix of coordinates that structures distance and relationships among things.

This final passage brings to light a fundamental theme in Buddhism, often isolated in modern narratives that tend to interpret Buddhist concepts through a European dualistic lens that does not align with Buddhism's integrated view of theory and practice. Here, theoretical and philosophical speculation is relegated to scholars who study philosophy of language, while practical acts, specifically meditative techniques, are largely ignored by academics and left instead to religious practitioners, clinicians, and laypeople drawn to exoticism.

However, this narrative is not supported by the perspective evident in the Pāli texts, which indicate that study itself is a form of practice, and practice constitutes a deepening of knowledge. Thus, there is no meditative practice that can dispense with understanding these ostensibly theoretical elements, as we see:

> *neyyaṃ panāvuso, dhammaṃ kena pajānātī'ti?*
> *neyyaṃ kho, āvuso, dhammaṃ paññācakkhunā pajānātī'ti.*
> *paññā panāvuso, kimatthiyā'ti?*
> *paññā kho, āvuso, abhiññatthā pariññatthā pahānatthā'ti.*
>
> How can one comprehend a phenomenon that can be known? One comprehends a phenomenon that can be known through the eye of wisdom. What is the purpose of wisdom? The purpose of wisdom is superior knowledge [direct knowledge], pervasive understanding, and deconstruction.

Meditation is not a palliative or a technique designed merely for relaxation or numbing; rather, it is a powerful catalyst for *crises* that should be directed towards achieving a new inner illumination. For this reason, it is necessary to abandon (*pahāna*) our inner certainties, dismantling the world of convictions in which we have thus far lived, and this deconstruction must necessarily be linguistic at first.

It is precisely in this context that Buddhism articulates a comprehensive manifesto of its philosophy, aimed not at behavioral-cognitive-oriented mindfulness therapies and protocols—undoubtfully useful, but incomplete if compared to what the Buddhist texts can offer us—but at dynamic wisdom that surpasses (*abhi-*) all others: *abhiñña*, a form of knowledge so evident, inherent in all things (but only visible to those who know how to see), and thus omnipervasive (*pariñña*). This encapsulates the essence of what the eye of wisdom (*paññā-cakkhu*), achievable solely through a theoretical-practical meditative unity, can offer humanity.

No discipline concerned with cognition can afford to ignore the concept of the "world." In Jakob von Uexküll's theoretical biology, the issue of the cognitive world as a sphere of subjective-perceptual or instinctively preconditioned awareness—formed by the cognitive resources of the

animal subject's body—lies at the heart of his work. Prior to Uexküll's biological theories, however, others had already addressed this concept, relating it to the challenge of perceptual dimensionality.

For humans, the cognitive world is not merely the boundary within which our cognitive faculties process and supply data; it also constitutes an interpretative framework through which data itself is filtered, drawing upon the logics of language.

Other normatively structured spaces include the domestic dimension (*gaha*), the city (*nagara*), and the village (*gāma*). There are also broader concepts like "field" (*khetta*), understood as a circumscribed space once considered an extended land (*bhūmi*). These technical terms also permeate philosophical lexicons: consider, for instance, the concept of the "field of knowledge" (*kṣetrajña*), which holds central importance in Sāṃkhya philosophy by shifting the notion of 'field' from the geographical to the epistemological.

We might thus conceive of the cognitive world, bounded by the limits of *loka*, as a precisely defined set of semantic fields of knowledge (*kṣetrajña*). Notably, BhG 13.1 draws a parallel between the *prakṛti*/*puruṣa* dualism and the relationship between the field and the knower of the field (*prakṛtiṃ puruṣaṃ caiva kṣetraṃ kṣetrajñam eva ca*).

The notion of "field" serves a dual and substantial function. When Buddhists refer to the sensory channels, they use the term *āyatana*, a word that can denote a realm, a sphere, a specific dimensionality, or even a range. This terminological choice conveys a particular understanding, but it is crucial to grasp its full implications. My "spheres" of sensory experience are indeed "spheres" because they represent an inclusive dimensionality, I am capable of perceiving something only as long as it remains within the limits of my sphere's extension. Reality, however, is vastly greater than the maximal extent of our ordinary perceptions; hence, it is important to keep in mind both the perimetral metaphor and the dynamic nature of phenomena, as well as the very boundary of the sensory sphere, which is not fixed at a single point.

In this regard, it is helpful to refer to the idea of the "field," understood both in a physical-geographical sense and as a domain of perceptual activity. A cultivated field is an area placed under the control

and management of human beings, who exploit this space for agricultural purposes. From above, one can easily distinguish which fields are plowed and cultivated, where human organization prevails, precisely because of the characteristic organization of these spaces, and which areas remain "free" from this structure, where nature grows unimpeded. This sense of the field as a boundary within which specific organizations are maintained is equally significant.

Perceptions are not disordered but are immediately subjected to the organizing force of the mental sense, which continually seeks to establish order within them, coordinating them—if one may excuse the analogy—just as a cultivated field is arranged into well-defined plots of land. Sensory spheres are thus a *khetta*, a "field" in this organizing sense. However, as noted, they also constitute a distinct delimitation within which phenomena appear to us as phanera.

In AN 8.34, a comparison is drawn between the cultivation of a field and the cultivation of one's ascetic practice.

> *yathāpi khette sampanne, pavuttā bījasampadā;*
> *deve sampādayantamhi, hoti dhaññassa sampadā.*
>
> When the field is excellent, the seed planted in it is excellent, and the rain is excellent, the resulting crop of grain will also be excellent.

In AN 3.83, it is stated that a farmer has three primary duties (*kassakassa gahapatissa pubbe karaṇīyāni*), which include: first, tending to his field to ensure it is well ploughed and tilled; second, planting the seed in the appropriate season; and finally, watering and subsequently draining the field at the right time.

Similarly, a Buddhist mendicant has three core duties toward themselves: training in ethics (*adhisīlasikkhāsamādānaṃ*), training in higher consciousness (*adhicittasikkhāsamādānaṃ*), and training in higher wisdom (*adhipaññāsikkhāsamādānaṃ*). We observe that the metaphor of the field (*khetta*) is frequently employed in this context.

Attention must now be paid to these terminologies. The concept of *āyatana* implies a "sphere," and indeed, these are actual worldly

circles: phenomena that enter them appear to us as *phaneron*, perceptible entities. Just as things enter our worldly circles (perceptual *āyatana*), they can also exit, as they move beyond the horizon and the limits of our perceptibility. At that point, they no longer appear to us. This does not mean they cease to exist; rather, they simply move beyond the boundaries of what we can perceive. The term *āpātha* refers precisely to this *boundary*, the horizon beyond which our sensory faculties no longer operate. In AN 6.55, it states: "When the mind of a mendicant is correctly liberated in this way, even if forms perceivable to the eye enter the visual horizon, they do not control their cognition" (*evaṃ sammā vimuttacittassa, bhante, bhikkhuno bhusā cepi cakkhuviññeyyā rūpā cakkhussa āpāthaṃ āgacchanti, nevassa cittaṃ pariyādiyanti*).

Attention should be given to the specific terms: it speaks of forms perceivable through the faculty of sight (*cakkhuviññeyyā rūpā*) and of the fact that such forms would normally overwhelm the cognition of an inexperienced meditator (*cittaṃ pariyādiyanti*), though this is not the case for the accomplished Buddhist.

The noteworthy point here is the emphasis that such forms should not influence the meditator, not simply because they avoid them, but because these forms hold no power over the meditator, even as they enter the horizon of visual perception (*cakkhussa āpāthaṃ āgacchanti*). The same principle applies to all other sensory horizons, though I will not repeat the formula here, as it is identical. However, there is the sixth sense: thought. Cognitive forms that enter this sensory horizon are, of course, ideas (*manoviññeyyā dhammā manassa āpāthaṃ āgacchanti, nevassa cittaṃ pariyādiyanti*), or more generally, "things," here called *dhammā*: phenomena.

A similar discourse appears in MN 20, where we read again of forms, described as undesirable, entering the visual horizon of a subject (*cakkhumā puriso āpāthagatānaṃ rūpānaṃ adassanakāmo*).

Returning instead to the double meaning of field as both organized space and sensory domain, the term *gocara* is the one that retains a bit of both meanings, being used as space (e.g. in SN 47.46 it speaks of "suitable place") and as "object of the senses." Dhp 92 speaks of those who are refreshed in the liberation that is constituted by the void without signs

(*suññato animitto ca vimokkho yesaṃ gocaro*). This mention is important because of the association that the Dhp makes between the concepts of emptiness and signlessness (*suññato animitto*). These are just some of the examples of the most important terms to indicate this concept.

1.6 From the figural Sign to Consciousness

As stated at the beginning of this investigation, the concept of *nāmarūpa* has an incredible breadth in early Buddhist thought. It is, with all likelihood, part of a speculative tradition shared with the philosophy of the Upaniṣads, which use the same terminology in a manner very similar to that of the Buddha. We do not know whether both inherited the concept from a pre-existing philosophical speculation nor if the innovation came from the Upaniṣads and was later adopted by Buddhism, or even vice versa.

What is certain is that, in this historical phase, it is truly difficult to determine with confidence the antiquity of certain concepts, and one should not adhere dogmatically to one chronology over another, as refutation is always around the corner. However, emphasizing the enormous importance of this concept in Buddhist phenomenology is useful for several reasons.

While it may easily be misunderstood as a notion of philosophy of language—and in part, this is true—we must not forget that, as I have sought to demonstrate in this first chapter, early Buddhism does not sharply distinguish between the linguistic and phenomenological planes. Or rather, the phenomena governing the structure of language and perception are analogous to those of the 'external world,' albeit with some differences that will become clear only at the end of this research.

The interpretation proposed by Edward Small on semiotic referentiality,[63] which first compared the concept of *nāmarūpa* to the Saussurean sign, is in every respect not only highly fitting but, I would venture to say, historically accurate. Perhaps not directly derived from the concept

63. Edward S. Small, "Semiotic Referentiality: Saussure's Sign and the Sanskrit Nama-Rupa," *The American Journal of Semiotics* 5, no. 3 (1987): 447–59, DOI: 10.5840/ajs198753/48.

of *nāmarūpa*, but we know that Saussure was a reader of both Indian grammarians and Buddhist texts. Therefore, a parallel between the two-faced nature of the linguistic sign and the *nāmarūpa* dyad is likely supported by real influences of Indian thought on Saussure.

However, there is another level to consider: without a doubt, *nāmarūpa* lends itself well to the interpretation of the two linguistic planes. Yet, it is also important to consider that *nāmarūpa* is not exclusively applied to the explanation of 'psychological' processes of meaning-making, nominal identity attribution, or the organization of 'concepts' in our mind. Assuming that this notion of 'abstraction' is indeed present in Buddhist conceptions, it is equally undeniable that *nāmarūpa* is, first and foremost, a tool of phenomenological interpretation. Moreover, it is not an interpretative tool that behaves one way when applied to language and another when applied to phenomenology: the two are not distinct at all, and this is precisely why the interpretative tool of *nāmarūpa* is so flexible. What we are discussing, then, is a total phenomenology.

I want to recall for a moment the verse in BṛUp 1.4.7 I have mentioned in §1.3. What is described here is not a mythological genesis. Moreover, this verse expresses something that Pāli texts cannot indicate, as the language in which they are composed does not have the dual declension for nouns. In BṛUp 1.4.7, the expression *nāmarūpābhyām eva vyākriyate* is used, where *nāmarūpābhyām* is in the dual form. This further underscores the nature of the problem. As stated, *nāmarūpābhyām* is not some kind of two-headed deity, a Janus figure, or a pair of twin gods. This is not a case of a creator deity whatsoever, even if BṛUp speaks of some kind of world's genesis. However, the text does not say that the world was 'created' by *nāmarūpābhyām*, but that these two elements 'divided' (*vyākriyate*) the world. This division is also an organization, a dual-based organization, as seen so far.

In the Pāli suttas, the absence of the dual number does not prevent the concept of duality from being expressed. In Snp 4.12, a text undoubtedly ancient as it is part of the Aṭṭhakavagga,[64] we read that peo-

64. Shulman, "Early Buddhist Imagination: The Aṭṭhakavagga as Buddhist Poetry";

ple in the world constantly debate what is true and false, and each one "has constructed their own vision of what is true; that is why they accuse others of madness" (*sakaṃ sakaṃ diṭṭhimakaṃsu saccaṃ, tasmā hi bāloti paraṃ dahanti*). This dogmatism, based on the dualistic principle, is the root of problems and conflicts. Buddhism does not deny the existence of truth but conceives it as a complex and multifaceted factor, rejecting those who say that "truth is only one, there is no second" (*ekañhi saccaṃ na dutīyamatthi*).

The Buddhist ascetic is the one who preaches multiple truths, which is why they do not speak of a single dogma (*nānā te saccāni sayaṃ thunanti, tasmā na ekaṃ samaṇā vadanti*). This text harshly criticizes dogmatism and those who adhere to a dogma: "They call others mad on the same grounds by which they proclaim themselves experts" (*yeneva bāloti paraṃ dahāti, tenātumānaṃ kusaloti cāha*). Furthermore, "Proclaiming themselves experts by their own authority, they disdain others despite saying similar things" (*sayamattanā so kusalāvadāno, aññaṃ vimāneti tadeva pāva*).

The critique becomes fierce when these dogmatists are described in their arrogance: "They consider themselves perfect by virtue of their extreme vision; intoxicated by conceit, they imagine themselves proficient. They are imbued with their own thoughts; such is the vision they have embraced" (*atisāradiṭṭhiyā so samatto, mānena matto paripuṇṇamānī; sayameva sāmaṃ manasābhisitto, diṭṭhī hi sā tassa tathā samattā*).

These people, the dogmatists, are described in a peculiar way, as those who assert, "There are only two things: true and false" (*saccaṃ musāti dvayadhammamāhu*). In this verse, the expression *dvayadhammamāhu* best conveys in Pāli the concept of antinomy or duality: *dvaya-dhammamāhu*, literally "dual phenomenon," "two phenomena."

The reader will recall that in SN 12.15, duality is also discussed using the term *dvayanissito*, specifically in relation to the world and the

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K. R. Norman, "On Translating the Suttanipata," *Buddhist Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (2004): 69–84, DOI: 10.1558/bsrv.v21i1.14246; N. A. Jayawickrama, "Critical Analysis of the Sutta Nipata," *Buddhist Studies Review* 3, no. 1 (1980): 3–19, DOI: 10.1558/bsrv.v3i1.13868; Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry."

notion that the world is founded on the two notions, the two dogmas, of existence and non-existence (*dvayanissito khvāyaṃ, loko yebhuyyena—atthitañceva natthitañca*). This theme is extremely common throughout the Pāli texts.

Now, let us compare the verse found in BṛUp 1.4.7 with another Pāli text. As we mentioned, according to BṛUp 1.4.7: "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 vyākriyatā-saunāmāyam idaṃrūpa iti; tad idam apy etarhi nāmarūpābhyām eva vyākriyate saunāmāyam idaṃrūpa iti*). We also have the well-known passage in ChUp 7.1.5 on the 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*).

Now, in MN 9, we read as follows:

yato kho, āvuso, ariyasāvako nāmarūpañca pajānāti, nāmarūpa-samudayañca pajānāti, nāmarūpanirodhañca pajānāti, nāmarūpanirodhagāminiṃ paṭipadañca pajānāti—	A noble disciple perfectly understands what names and forms are, what their origin is, their cessation, and what practices lead to their cessation. But what are name and form? What is their origin, their cessation, and the practice that leads to their cessation?
katamaṃ panāvuso, nāmarūpaṃ, katamo nāmarūpasamudayo, katamo nāmarūpanirodho, katamā nāmarūpanirodhagāminī paṭipadā?	Sensation, perception, volition, contact, and attention;
vedanā, saññā, cetanā, phasso, manasikāro—idaṃ vuccatāvuso, nāmaṃ;	This is called "name";
cattāri ca mahābhūtāni, catunnañca mahābhūtānaṃ upādāyarūpaṃ—idaṃ vuccatāvuso, rūpaṃ.	The four primary elements and the form derived from the four primary elements; This is called "form."
iti idañca nāmaṃ idañca rūpaṃ—idaṃ vuccatāvuso, nāmarūpaṃ.	Thus, this is name and this is form. This (together) is called name-and-form.
viññāṇasamudayā nāmarūpasamudayo, viññāṇanirodhā nāmarūpanirodho, ayameva ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo nāmarūpanirodhagāminī paṭipadā, seyyathidaṃ—	Name and form arise from consciousness. Name and form cease when consciousness ceases. The practice leading to the cessation of name and form is simply the noble eightfold path.

There is much to analyze from this brief text. Some of the notions we will learn from this analysis will also be useful up to the conclusive chapter.

In this very important sutta, we see that the *nāmarūpa* dyad is analyzed in its two fundamental components, and these are given a clear identity.

nāma ⥋ *vedanā, saññā, cetanā, phasso, manasikāro*

rūpa ⥋ *paṭhavī, āpa, teja, vāyu* (*cattāri ca mahābhūtāni*)*, mahābhūtānaṃ upādāyarūpaṃ*

The aspect of *nāma* is distinctly recognized as referring to five things: sensations, perception, contact (these three are already fundamental elements of the dynamics of the five aggregates as well as of the chain of conditioned arising), and then there are two things that require greater caution. *Cetanā* is often translated as "intention," "purpose," "will,"[65] and this is not an incorrect translation. As is easy to intuit, this term is connected to the same root as *citta* (cognition) and refers to its volitional aspect specifically.[66] Combined with the genitive, the term *cetanā* indicates precisely "having the intention" to do something, or "with will to," and is an adjective. The feminine noun *cetanā*, on the other hand, specifically means "intending" or "willing." Translating it as "intention," however, is something I would avoid doing since this term also carries another connotation beyond the strictly volitional one, which is that of the Latin *intentiō*, "tension," "effort," "tending toward" (*intendō*, *in-tendō*).[67] Although both volitional intention and intention understood as "tending toward" obviously share the same etymological root, the technical nuance of the latter term is employed to indicate the directing of the attention of consciousness toward a particular object, which in its relational bond with it as the attended-to object forms the peculiar relationship between consciousness-of-something and the attended-to-something.

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65. Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part IV*, 104.
66. The PTS dictionary defines *cetanā* also as "state of ceto in action, thinking as active thought." The term *ceto* is a derivative of *citta*, mostly used in relation with *kāya* and *vācā*.
67. de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and Other Italic Languages*, 612.

The meaning of the term *manasikāra*, which I have here translated as "attention" because it is the most frequent translation,[68] also implies this intentional act, which in this monograph will be understood by the term "intention" in the nuance just expressed: an investment of attention.

For now, then, we translate *manasikāra* as "attention" and *cetanā* as "volition" to avoid translating both as "intention," but it should be noted that this latter translation will soon be employed in a technical sense to refer mainly to *manasikāra*.

These two terms, *cetanā* and *manasikāra*, volitional intentionality and attentional intentionality, describe two particular moments of cognitive experience. In fact, the order in which the elements that define "what we call 'name'" are listed carries its own importance. Just as the five aggregates represent a dynamic cycle and are in an ordered relationship with each other, the choice to list the parts of *nāma* in this order is not random. What is being described here is the process by which the phenomenon of *nāma* operates in our experience. It involves the succession of sensation, perception, volition, contact, and attention. If *nāma* is the signifier in the system of psychosemantic experiences, then this series of factors must be understood as the progressive acquisition of elements necessary to recognize the attribution of a given signifier.

The acoustic image is the counterpart of the concept, and while the latter is a cognitively understood form, the former assigns the appropriate signifier only upon recognizing the concept to which it belongs. Sensation, as we have seen, is the simplest of experiences: it does not have its own precise discriminant, which will be attributed to it later. We say "smooth," "rough," "warm," or "cold," but obviously every surface, every environment, every sensory experience is infinitely complex. Running my hand over a table, what I receive is an infinitely complex series of data about its smoothness or coolness that are never the same as those of another table. Sensation is this experience and not the idea of "smooth" or "cold," which is already a well-defined identity established within precise boundaries.

68. T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part VI* (The Pali Text Society, 1924), 145.

Perception follows sensation as the next stage of identity determination. If sensation still exists in the midst of that "indistinct nebulousness of meaning" Saussure spoke of (*la pensée est comme une nébuleuse où rien n'est nécessairement délimité*),[69] perception is already semantic—it is already an intervention of boundary-setting that "cuts" that nebulousness into various areas and is already a first attempt at attributing identities A, B, or C to the various areas delineated within that nebulousness: "Il n'y a pas d'idées préétablies, et rien n'est distinct avant l'apparition de la langue. […] Nous pouvons donc représenter le fait linguistique dans son ensemble, c'est-à-dire la langue, comme une série de subdivisions contiguës dessinées à la fois sur le plain indéfini des idées confuses (*A*) et sur celui non moins indéterminé des sons (*B*)" (see Fig. 6).[70]

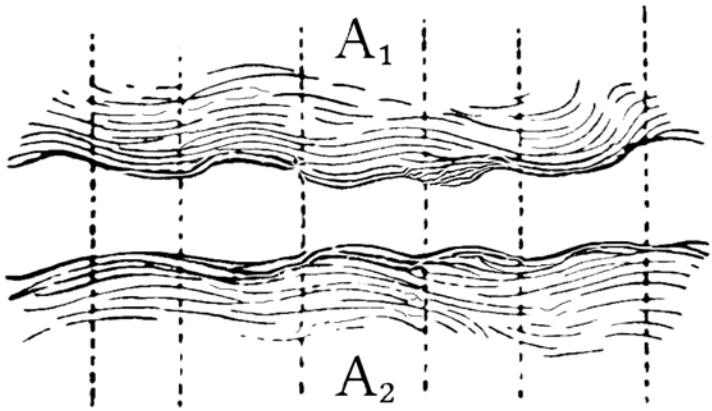

Fig. 6 — Re-proposal of Saussure's scheme with which the dissection of the original significant nebula is explained.

At this point, when perception is recognized, I can direct my intention toward it, but at this stage, it is still an embryonic, volitional intentionality. I have finally 'recognized' the object based on my

69. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 1995, 155; de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 2016, 215.
70. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 1995, 155–56; de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 2016, 215–16.

education and the naming systems that lead me to identify that thing as "cup," but at that point, I can 'think' of the cup in one of the possible ways: I grab it, observe it, throw it to the ground, move it, and so on. Contemplating all these possibilities is a series of feasible associations between the recognized object in its specific identity as "cup" and a series of possible actions to undertake with it. This mechanism is the first level of intentionality: volition.

Contact arrives at this point to recognize the actual identity of the object and its potentialities. It is important to note that contact is always implied in the entire process of nominal identity attribution: perceiving a sensation, such as the whiteness of the cup, is necessarily the result of the contact between my visual perceiver and the effectors of the cup. Contact always underlies any recognition process. So why place it only after the volitional phase? Because in this context, what is being described is the process of recognizing a certain definable nominal identity.

When I touch the table and perceive the smoothness of its surface, the slight cracks, and the wood splinters protruding due to wear, I am processing the sensory data provided by the contact between my body and the table. Still, I have not yet associated those sensations with "table," with the name "table." For this to happen, the subsequent phase must develop, bringing the entire complex series of sensory data to the plane of semantic perception: those data are compatible with the identity "table," so this is "table." At that point, and only at that point, the "table" becomes *available*. Only when I have recognized its identity does that thing re-present itself to me as available to my volitional act. This is "table," now that I have directed my intention toward it, now that I have determined the identity of that thing as "table," i.e., it presents itself to me under the recognizable and, inevitably, usable identity. What do I do with this table? I have various options, and this further elaboration is *cetanā*.

To be more precise, in the case described by the Buddhists, we are dealing with three levels of different intentionality, and we must therefore distinguish this process of *apprehending* 'things'—that is, the process that defines what *nāma* is in the Buddhist conception—as

a progressive development, albeit one that occurs cognitively very rapidly, through successive phases. The level of intentionality that Husserl typically refers to involves simply directing attention toward the object to be apprehended. This intentionality is a simple constitutive attitude of thought, which necessarily requires a content, and thus directs its intention toward an object, without which thought itself could not be constituted. This conception of intentionality entirely lacks a volitional aspect, whereas Buddhist intentionality includes it.

The three phases of *nāma* determination are nothing more than a progressive development with two main poles (see Fig. 7): the first is pre-volitional and is strictly related to recognizing the nominal identity, which must be finalized in assigning its correct "name." The second phase is the possibility of using that name. There is no other use for naming: recognizing things serves to make them available, manipulable, and usable.

Phase 1: Processing sensory data, perceptual association with semantic identity (*vedanā, saññā*);

Phase 2: Correct attribution of identity, investment of will in the recognized thing (*cetanā*);

Phase 3: Active phase of using the thing, "grasping" the recognized object, utilization (*phasso, manasikāro*).

So, even if at the beginning (Phase 1) the contact-processing was involuntary and aimed at receiving environmental data, now (Phase 3) the contact is explicitly established; this is a second contact because it is employed voluntarily to engage with the object: grasping, in Husserl's lexicon, whereby the thing is now "present-at-hand" (*vorhanden*) and thus usable. This is the contact I establish willingly.

We are not only talking about grasping with the hands. After recognizing the object as a "cup," even simply directing my gaze back to it—a gaze focused solely on its usability—is a type of "contact." However, compared to pre-nominal consciousness, once the object's identity has been recognized, I can no longer easily free myself from the thought that conceives it solely within the horizon of its possible

uses. Now, when I turn my gaze to the cup, I will only see "container of liquids," and my mental associations will wander freely: "I'm thirsty," "I could fill it," "I could make tea," "Do I feel like tea?" "I don't like this cup," "I saw a nicer one yesterday," and so on.[71]

This, still in Husserl's terminology, is to be understood as traversing the predicates of value (*Wertprädikate*): we imbue the recognized object, the "cup," with an innumerable series of possible uses, derived from its recognized value associations. At this point, the final phase, *manasikāra*, is to be understood in an active, factual sense, as the term itself suggests: a compound of *manas*, "mind-thought," and *kara*, "doing," "making." Alternatively, we could interpret the first part as *manasi*, "in the mind," but the meaning changes little, since the active, factual aspect (*kara*, √*kar*)—the "doing" (in my mind, certainly, initially as thought, but more accurately *from* my mind)—determines the intentional engagement of my "thoughts," translated into practical acts upon the object.

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71. We can imagine, also by comparison with the system of the five aggregates, that a pre-apprehensive contact, in the sense of original intentionality, is what directs itself toward the object before initiating the process that leads to the recognition of *nāma*. This is a primary intentional *phassa* that we bracket before the beginning of the process of *nāma* apprehension. At this point, the cycle involving *vedanā*, *saññā*, *cetanā*, a second *phassa*, and *manasikāra* takes place. Thus, there is a first intentional *phassa*, two further forms of intentionality, and a second *phassa* that this time refers to the actual apprehension, the grasping of the 'thing' as a (nominal) object that is thinkable, graspable, and manipulable by cognitive volition. This second *phassa* is nothing other than a form of *upādāna*. We must therefore understand the process describing *nāma* as consisting of three main phases (see Fig. 7 compared to Fig. 8) and a preceding one. It begins with *phassa* (the first intentionality, a direction toward the thing to be apprehended), after which the first phase of pre-cognitive apprehension begins. This phase involves the initial processing of sensory data (*vedanā*) and their articulation into semiotically defined perceptions (*saññā*). The second phase is transitional and constitutes the second level of intentionality, formed by *cetanā*, which unfolds the possibilities toward the object, still volitional. Following this is the third phase, representing the third level of intentionality, which actualizes the previously contemplated volitions. This is why we speak of an explicit *phassa*, here understood as the effective grasp of the thing (*vorhanden*) and directly linked to the philosophy of *upādāna*, leading to attention, which is itself a form of active intention, precisely an active thought (*manas* + *kāra*).

Thus, I *recognize* the cup. Earlier, I might have only distractedly reached out, felt the smoothness of a ceramic object, warm because it contained a hot liquid. Then I extended my palm to grasp it, and all the sensory data allowing me to identify the cylindrical object translated into semantic perception: that is a "cup" with "hot tea" inside.

At this point, possibilities open up in my mind: I grasp it, drink the tea, and now the contact is volitional; the grasp becomes effective, the contact fully attended to by my consciousness. It is an active type of contact, aimed at confirming the recognition of the object that previously arrived in my mind only as disconnected sensory data: yes, that is indeed a cup with tea inside. The possibilities explored in my primary volition can now translate into effective intention, and the attentive action is completed.

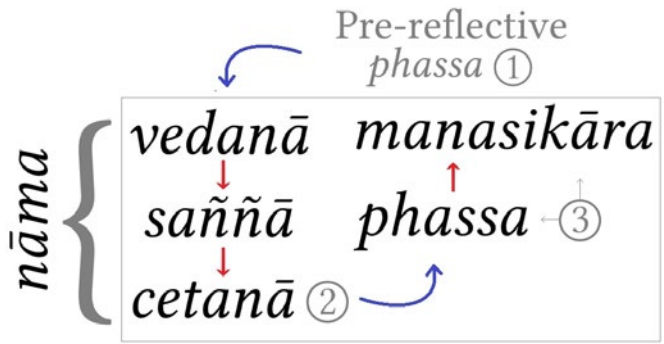

Fig. 7 — Model of apprehension of *nāma* with emphasis on the three phases of intention: the pre-reflective one that allows the beginning of the actual apprehension of *nāma*, the volitional one that acts as a watershed between sensorial-perceptive apprehension and cognitive apprehension, and finally the volitional intention of the attentive type.

To this must be added a necessary understanding of the *doxic* nature of these experiences, that is, their belonging to the partializations upon which human collectives build systems of knowledge based on arbitrariness and conventions (δόξα).

Indeed, if it is true—as it is—that nominal realities are effectively constituted on foundations of an undeniable and 'real' reality, it is

equally true that absolute reality is not perceived in its totality, in its *sabba*, as it would be called in Pāli.

To this *sabba* we juxtapose a partialization, the focus on a specific fragment of experience, which is furthermore abstracted in the etymological sense of the term: drawn-out (*abstrahō, abstractus*), and thus isolated from its context. In this isolation, it is 'identified' in a certain way. This mechanism of abstraction is perfectly expressed by the term *diṭṭhi* in Pāli, which is an exact equivalent of δόξα, although not etymologically. The term *diṭṭhi*, in fact, etymologically relates to vision (√*dis* + *ti*), and in its Buddhist connotation, it refers to opinions and beliefs. The term δόξα, on the other hand, relates to δοκέω, derived from δέχομαι according to Beekes,[72] making it comparable to the Latin *doceō*.

But beyond these etymological notes, both terms refer to the same process. Thus, δόξα/*diṭṭhi* perfectly describes the reality of *nāma* as expressed here, which should be understood as a *doxic* experience. Furthermore, the distinction I proposed between a *phassa* prior to *nāma* and one internal to the process of *nāma* itself aligns with the same distinction Husserl makes between 'passive' and 'intentional' experience.

I have described the two phases of *nāma*'s intentionality as referring to two modes, and the second is characterized by attention, by which I can reinvest the object (with 'nominal' contact) as soon as I have correctly framed it within the organizational system of *nāma* itself.[73] To put it in Husserl's terms, it is one thing to register the pres-

72. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 344–45.

73. An important passage is important to mention because it makes us understand how much importance Buddhists gave to the process of naming in the determination of perceptual realities. In SN 1.61 we read that the name oppresses everything (*nāmaṃ sabbaṃ addhabhavi*) because there is nothing superior (*nāmā bhiyyo na vijjati*), perhaps referring to its power in the capacity to oppress. The name is that phenomenon that alone has everything under its dominion (*nāmassa ekadhammassa*, *sabbeva vasamanvagu*). It is evident how this emphasis on the total control (*vasaṃ* + *anvagā*) by the phenomenon of the 'name' must make us reflect on the importance of this apparently so banal thing and which evidently for Buddhist thinkers was anything but of little importance.

ence of a given object inattentively in our perceptual field, and quite another to deliberately direct attention to it (*intentionality*). In other words, in the second case, I am performing an act of judgment in the form of a *cogito*, as Husserl would say (*manas* in Pāli).

> Es ist ein anderes zu sehen, nämlich überhaupt zu erleben, zu erfahren, im Wahrnemungsfeld zu haben und das Sehen im speziellen Sinne gewahrend zu vollziehen, im Sehen in vorzüglicher Weise zu „leben", sich als Ich im speziellen Sinne „glaubend", urteilend betätigen, einen Akt des Urteilens als ein cogito vollziehen, mit tätigem Blick auf das Gegenständliche gerichtet sein, das spezifisch *meinende* Gerichtet-sein; ein anderes, es überhaupt bewußt zu haben, daß blauer Himmel ist, und im Vollzug des Urteils, der Himmel sei jetzt blau, gewahrend, erfassend, spezifisch meinend zu leben.[74]

This attentive act is the active investment of our perceptions onto the object, and this mode of 'being-directed' is what Husserl specifically calls "intentionality." The *doxic* experiences of this attitude, for Husserl, are "theoretical acts" because they presuppose a subject positing a predicate. In our case, we become the subjects of the action, and the act of 'verifying' the teacup by grasping it requires it to present itself as an object to the self, capable of verification, and to be *actively thought* by it (the earlier *manasikāra*). Husserl states that in such acts, not only does an object exist for the self (*ist für das Ich ein Gegenstand nicht nur überhaupt da*), but the self is *directed toward* the object, actively thinking about it (*dann denkend, tätig setzend*). This lays the groundwork for its being *grasped* (*erfassend*) by the self as a "theoretical self" capable of objectifying.[75]

It is of fundamental importance to understand how Husserl conceives consciousness (*Bewußtsein*), as his definition proves to be a significant source of inspiration for interpreting Buddhist reflections on

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74. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Zweites Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band IV)* (Den Haag & Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff & Springer Netherlands (1991), 1952), 3, DOI: 10.1007/978-94-011-3028-8.

75. Ibid., 4.

the subject. The first essential notion to bear in mind is that consciousness is, in itself, a *relational* act. However, let it be noted that readers who have reached this point will not find this definition surprising. Indeed, we understand that for a devout Buddhist, everything fundamentally consists of relational ties. Nothing exists independently; all things gain meaning only through their relational connections with all other things, which is also the sole means of understanding the nature of the thing itself. In fact, removed from its relational context, a thing remains invisible, inactive, and devoid of meaning. Nothing can stand 'on its own,' in a void, self-sustained—least of all consciousness. Yet, consciousness is not strictly a 'thing' per se. We might say that consciousness is the very relationship woven among things.

More specifically, consciousness is that which is employed to define things, artificially separating and fragmenting them, yet ultimately deceiving itself, as consciousness inherently refutes this illusion of division. Consciousness, fundamentally, is nothing other than relational substance. It relates and is relationally constituted, and in doing so, imposes determinations and is itself determined (or self-determined). While the narrative of determination implies belief in separation, this process is nothing more than an emphasis on one relational node over others, which are not (and indeed, cannot be) erased under any circumstances. Consciousness constructs only within *relational* frameworks, and the reason for this is readily apparent.

In no circumstance can consciousness exist on its own. Consciousness must always be directed toward an object—even if that object is the subject itself, which then becomes an object to its own consciousness. Yet even in this maneuver, the basic A → B schema is still trivially reproduced, where A represents the presumed subject, B the object, and the arrow (→) the relation of consciousness. To be sure, Buddhists would take this further, asserting that the relation, being an indissoluble bond, reveals that the subject's perception of separateness from the analyzed object is merely a convenient illusion. However, let us proceed gradually. Whether the schema is A → B or A → A, the essence remains unchanged. Consciousness is *always* consciousness "of something," a principle well understood by Husserl

(„Bewußtsein", und zwar „*von*" all dem).[76] Here, 'object' should be understood broadly to mean any 'thing,' whether supposedly material or a content of thought. In no instance does the essence of this concept change. Consciousness is invariably "*of* something" ("ich habe Bewußtsein von etwas").[77] That means:

> Im Erlebnis der Wahrnehmung dieses weißen Papieres, näher in ihrer auf die Qualität Weiße des Papieres bezogenen Komponente, finden wir durch passende Blickwendung das Empfindungsdatum Weiß vor. Dieses Weiß ist etwas dem Wesen der konkreten Wahrnehmung unabtrennbar Zugehöriges, und zugehörig als *reelles* konkretes Bestandstück. Als darstellender Inhalt für das erscheinende Weiß des Papieres ist es *Träger* einer Intentionalität, aber nicht selbst ein Bewußtsein von etwas.[78]

We have thus seen that the concept of *nāma*, as explained in MN 9, involves multiple levels of interpretation: certainly linguistic, but also phenomenological. This phenomenology should be understood broadly, encompassing consciousness and the relationship between the intentional conscious act and the world of phenomena of which we are 'witnesses.' As we proceed with our analysis, the provisional definition we have adopted to distinguish the witness from the witnessed will increasingly reveal its insufficiency. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the conscious subject perceives itself, rightly or wrongly, as 'separate' from the world it experiences daily, from the objects toward which it directs its intentionality and attention.

If the implications of analyzing just the problem of *nāma* are as vast as we have seen, we cannot expect less for the phenomenology of *rūpa*. MN 9 tells us that *rūpa* consists of two groups of things: these two groups are called *cattāri ca mahābhūtāni* (the four great elements) and *mahābhūtānaṃ upādāyarūpaṃ* (the material form derived from the four elements), respectively.

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76. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 71.
77. Ibid., 73.
78. Ibid., 75.

At this stage, the interpretive level seems apparently more straightforward since what is referred to as *cattāri* ca *mahābhūtāni* simply indicates the four fundamental elements of the Indian tradition, likely an Indo-European heritage as they are shared by multiple cultures. These elements are *paṭhavī*, *āpa*, *teja*, *vāyu*, meaning earth, water, fire (literally "heat"), and wind, respectively. The literature on the origin and use of these concepts is vast, and we cannot account for all their implications, but we will use them solely for their phenomenological value. It should be noted that this elemental conception, widespread in Buddhist texts, is not necessarily to be understood mystically but rather akin to a Democritean interpretation of reality. The four elements represent four fundamental states in which all worldly things can be observed. When Buddhists speak of "water," they very likely mean any liquid state, as evidenced by the medical use of these terms where "water" refers to any bodily fluid, whether blood, saliva, or bile—not just water as hydrogen hydroxide, so to speak. The same applies to the other elements: "earth" does not merely mean soil or dirt but anything solid or coarse. Anatomically, staying within the medical domain, they use the concept of "earth" to denote organs, hair, nails, and other dense, solid components of the body.[79] Medically, "air" corresponds to breath and the various metaphorical ways in which breath 'moves' within the body, while "fire" primarily represents dynamic processes of a thermal nature; digestion, for instance, is seen as a metaphorical fire that 'consumes' food in the stomach.[80]

So far, nothing particularly mysterious. The four great elements are a way of indicating four modes of presentation of worldly phenomena, and as a collective term, "the four elements" refers to the 'things' of the world. In the Abhidhamma, this conception is further elaborated, and some theorize that the minimal units of phenomena's composition, already postulated in an embryonic atomic theory (*dhātu*, later *rūpa-kalāpa* in Abhidhammic phenomenology), include at least four

79. Federico Divino, "Elements of the Buddhist Medical System," *History of Science in South Asia* 11 (2023): 22–62, DOI: 10.18732/hssa97.

80. Federico Divino, "Humours and Their Legacy in Early Buddhist Medicine," *History of Science in South Asia* 13 (2025): 10, DOI: 10.18732/hssa118.

types of atoms or atomic modalities, one for each element. It is doubtful that MN 9 already intended such a conception; it is more plausible that the expression "four elements" referred to the four observable modes of material manifestation. From a phenomenological perspective, this suffices to assert "the four attestable types of all things."

Moreover, these types are already reduced to a minimum since complex phenomena presumably exhibit more than one of these states simultaneously: a cup of tea is both solid and liquid—it is a solid containing a liquid—but it appears as a unified phenomenon. Thus, referring to the liquid or solid separately already indicates an analytical intention regarding these phenomena.

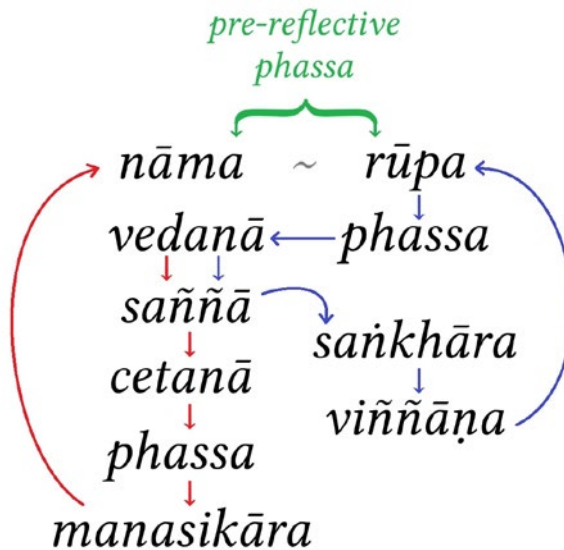

Fig. 8 — Scheme of cognitive apprehension of nominal identities compared to the process of perception of a form in the system of the five aggregates.

Additionally, MN 9 tells us that *rūpa* is not only "the four elements" but also "the form derived from the four elements" (*catunnañca mahābhūtānaṃ upādāyarūpaṃ*). This expression is somewhat obscure: the form that arises or derives (*upādāyarūpaṃ*) from the four

elements is itself form. Here, it is clear that they are already discussing something that the more technical language of the Abhidhamma defines as "formality" (*rūpatā*), a term that accounts for conceptual reflection applied even to phenomenological reductions. In other words, the phenomena of the world are numerous, complex, varied, and multiform.

However, if within this complex formal continuum we must recognize general characteristics to organize forms into fundamental units or principles, these principles would be four, based on the modes in which formed things can present themselves: a static, solid mode, and progressively more dynamic ones—the liquid is dynamic but relative to its container, adaptable; fire is even freer; and air is something we cannot perceive directly but whose free form we infer from its influence on other forms: wind moves leaves, waves, and even flames. These are merely organizing principles, four fundamental forms (or, more appropriately, formal modes). Yet recognized as such, they are already forms of a form.

Recall that "form" here, in a more general sense, denotes a concept, a prototype, an ideal cognitive form—not merely an outline but any general organizing principle we can impose to structure reality. Liquids, for example, can take infinite shapes, but I will always recognize a liquid from a solid based on its general characteristics, its form. This notion of form-of-form or the formality of form will have its significance in the Abhidhamma, but we already see its precursors in these texts.

Finally, before moving on to other matters, it is worth highlighting the central importance MN 9 places on consciousness. It is explicitly stated that there is a reciprocal relationship between name-and-form and consciousness: from consciousness arise names and forms, and they cease with the cessation of consciousness (*viññāṇasamudayā nāmarūpasamudayo*, *viññāṇanirodhā nāmarūpanirodho*).

For now, let us keep this assertion in mind because the principle it conveys—namely, the interdependence between phenomenal reality and consciousness (and not a unilateral claim that either consciousness creates reality or reality creates consciousness)—will recur throughout our discussion. It is crucial from the outset to free ourselves from both reductionisms, as they would hinder our understanding of the Buddhist discourse.

All that pertains to language, however, belongs to the psychological order. This term is improvable, but for now, let us use it as Saussure employs it, as this conception serves to clear the field of the idea that the duality he recognizes in the linguistic order is between the psychic domain and the physical domain. This is what we would normally assume: the mental aspect of language—the lexicon, morphology, and the order of signs—is 'executed' concretely, phonetically, and thus transferred to the physical plane to enable communication. Saussure is not initially concerned with *this* kind of dualism: "notre point de vue constant sera de dire que non seulement la signification mais aussi le signe est un fait de conscience pur."[81]

At most, what pertains to language and is thus in its peculiar world made of names is, for Saussure, in a dimension of "points de vue." We will define this linguistic dimension, together with the Buddhists, as something pertaining particularly to three elements: *diṭṭhi*, *paññatti*, and *sammuti*. These terms will recur frequently in our discussion. But is this dimension false? Not exactly. It is certainly something that constitutes a more complex order compared to the non-linguistic reality which, even if we can presume it exists, we have some difficulty determining at this stage. It is not impossible, but while some might think that understanding non-linguistic reality must necessarily involve the total removal of linguistic reality, we instead argue that the two are *mutually* dependent (note, mutually, not unilaterally), and thus understanding one is necessary for understanding the other. Saussure, on the other hand, focuses on the arbitrariness of the linguistic dimension—a fact that is certainly true and raises significant challenges, as it makes it difficult for us to extricate ourselves from what we might define as *diṭṭhi/point-de-vue*.

> Le continuel et subtil défaut de toutes les distinctions linguistiques est de croire qu'en parlant d'un objet *à un certain point de vue* on est, de ce fait, dans ledit point de vue; dans les neuf dixièmes des cas c'est justement le contraire qui est vrai pour une raison très simple: [...] Dès lors parler d'un objet, *nommer* un objet, ce n'est pas autre chose que d'invoquer un point de vue A déterminé.

81. de Saussure, *Écrits de Linguistique Générale*, 19.

> Après avoir dénommé un certain objet, livré le point de vue A, qui n'a d'existence absolument que dans l'ordre A, et qui ne serait pas même une chose délimitée hors de l'ordre A, il est permis peut-être (dans certains cas) de voir comment se présente cet objet de l'ordre A, vu selon B.
> *À ce moment est-on dans le point de vue A ou dans le point de vue B?* Régulièrement il sera répondu qu'on est dans le point de vue B; c'est qu'on a cédé une fois de plus à l'illusion des êtres linguistiques menant une existence indépendante. La plus difficile à saisir, mais la plus bienfaisante des vérités linguistiques, est de comprendre qu'à ce moment on n'a pas cessé au contraire de rester fondamentalement dans le point de vue A, du seul fait qu'on fait usage d'un terme de l'ordre A, dont la notion même nous échapperait selon B.[82]

The Saussurean distinction between the *signifiant* and the *signifié* can be understood as the conceptualization of a division already intuitively grasped in Indian thought. In Buddhism, this distinction originates from the recognition of the conventional nature of language (*paññatti*), which is further elaborated in the Abhidhamma into two distinct aspects: nominal designation (*nāma-paññatti*), corresponding to the signifier, and referential designation (*attha-paññatti*), which aligns with the signified.

This dual nature characterizes all aspects of the relative and pertains to the sphere of convention. Such reflection stems not only from the phenomenological analysis of early Buddhism and the dual structure (name/form) inherent in conventional phenomena but also from the interpretative debates surrounding the canon. These debates often juxtaposed literalist factions against interpretative ones. The Abhidhamma, in its synthesis, acknowledges both positions as intrinsic to the Buddha's teachings, positing that his words possess two possible interpretations: a literal one (*nīta-attha*) and an attributed meaning (*neyyattha*).

nāma	*rūpa*
Acoustic image (sheer name)	Concept (form)
nāma-paññatti	*attha-paññatti*
Signifier (name-designation)	Signified (meaning-designation)

Table 9. The signifier-signified binomial in the Early Buddhist conception compared to the Abhidhammic developments.

82. Ibid., 23–24.

It has also been argued that even an interpreted meaning must derive from a pre-existing semantic substance. These reflections on the dual nature of the linguistic sign and the conventionality of language bear such striking similarities to Saussurean linguistics that they cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence—and indeed, they are not.

Another problem arises at the end of this first chapter dedicated to language. Indeed, many of the themes we are now examining are ones we know in advance will reappear in broader phenomenological analyses, so it is essential to pay close attention to how they present themselves in this specific section.

Ferdinand de Saussure, in his remarkable reflections on language, left in his posthumously published notes something that surprised me quite a bit. The purpose of this section is to analyze this reflection in particular. He explicitly speaks of "emptiness" (κένωμα) as an element contributing to the emergence of the associative σῆμα. Since—as we will see in detail—the entire problem of language can be understood as the problem of the phenomenology of perception, it is crucial to understand in what sense Saussure employs a concept so akin to a Buddhist one in his semiological theory.

While it is well-documented that Saussure studied the works of Indian grammarians, notably influenced by Pāṇini, it is less commonly known that he had a keen interest in Buddhist texts. Acknowledging Buddhist influences on his thought sheds light on many convergences. Beyond his doctoral work on the Sanskrit absolute genitive and his profound engagement with Pāṇini's linguistic theories, Buddhist philosophy also played a role in shaping the *Cours de linguistique générale*.

For instance, Rastier's observation that substance is a "collection d'accidents" undoubtedly reflects a Buddhist influence, traceable even in Saussure's Harvard manuscripts.[83] This notion resonates with the phenomenology of aggregates (*khandha*), though the term *accidents* may appear somewhat exaggerated. However, in the context of semantic arbitrariness, this interpretation possesses its own rationale.

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83. François Rastier, "Le Silence de de Saussure ou l'ontologie Refusée," in *L'Herne - Ferdinand de Saussure* (Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 2003), 27.

Similarly, the idea of *dualité incessante* mentioned earlier is undeniably of Buddhist origin. Nonetheless, interpretations of the "nothingness" associated with the objectification of language often result in a grave misunderstanding. "Nothingness" is too frequently equated with "emptiness" or "voidness," a conflation that warrants careful disambiguation to avoid repeating Saussure's phenomenological, rather than strictly ontological, error.

Rastier's comparison of Saussure with Parmenides is intriguing and merits further exploration. Inspired by this analogy, one might delve into the ontological dimensions of the linguistic problem, which extend beyond its psychological aspects. In Parmenides' poem, the issue of semantics is addressed directly. After rejecting two untenable paths of thought, the text concludes that only one path remains viable: the path of what is (μόνος δ' ἔτι μῦθος ὁδοῖο λείπεται ὡς ἔστιν, Par. *Nat*., *fr*. 8 vv. 1-2). However, this raises a critical question: What *is*? What can be said about what *is*?

When we affirm that something "is," we inevitably engage in a process of duplication, deferral, or abstraction—a point commonly addressed in psycholinguistics and semiotics. Yet this simplification fails to grasp the complexity of the issue.

The essence of a "thing" poses a further problem. Consider the statement "*s* is *p*," such as "this is a tree," where "this" presumably denotes a real, concrete, material entity indicated by the pronoun, while "tree" signifies the identity of the said entity. This raises the perennial issue of the duality between the entity itself and the entity designated as "tree" by our linguistic act. But what is this "thing" itself? For Parmenides, whatever "is" must fundamentally "be." It cannot be said to have arisen from a prior state of non-being, as "non-being" cannot be thought or spoken: οὔτ' ἐκ μὴ ἐόντος ἐάσσω φάσθαι σ' οὐδὲ νοεῖν · οὐ γὰρ φατὸν οὐδὲ νοητόν ἔστιν ὅπως οὐκ ἔστι (Par. *Nat*., *fr*. 8 vv. 7-9).

This issue reveals the inherent contradiction in the term "nothingness," bringing us back to the problem of semantic substance. "Nothingness" is defined as absolute non-being, the nonexistent. Yet to assert "nothingness" involves making an assertion, thus affirming the existence of the term itself. The concept of "nothingness" exists, and so its very claim

negates itself. For Parmenides, this is not merely a linguistic paradox; "nothingness" as a concept is, and beyond it, nothing can exist.

The concept of negativity takes on an exceedingly peculiar connotation in Saussure's work, as his commentators even begin to speak of a "negative ontology." However, it is crucial to distinguish what is meant by "ontology of the negative" to avoid falling into the parasitic notion of theorizing the possibility that a being—defined, for instance, as a certain semantic perceptibility—might be created by the association of two nullities, which would be the two negatives interacting reciprocally within the system of associative *signs*.

> La négativité est la caractéristique principale de l'ontologie saussurienne. Si cette caractéristique vient premier, c'est parce qu'elle permet à Saussure d'opposer l'objet de la linguistique à d'autres objets de connaissance. Quand, dans d'autres domaines, les objets sont donnés en leur positivité aux savants, l'objet de la linguistique, pour sa part, n'est nullement donné au linguiste. Il ne participe pas à la réalité positive avec laquelle le sujet de connaissance a ordinairement affaire. Cela ne l'empêche pas de lui apparaître ; l'objet dont s'occupe la linguistique est même lié à une forme d'expérience tout à fait régulière et largement répandue parmi les hommes.[84]

As already mentioned, the term "nothingness" *exists*—and thus negate the nihilistic claim of nothingness itself—only as a nominal absence, which consequently implies that it *is* something and cannot be a *non-being*, which would be absurd. But in the case of the linguistic theory under discussion, a semantic substance would appear and emerge as an absence in the association of two voids. Only because they are voids must we understand their being a "negative," which is exclusively a relative negativity, as it is defined *in relation to* the apparent positivity—the manifestation of a nominal being (here, "nominal" does not refer solely to the signifier) or even a concept, and not merely to an acoustic image. This associative sign appears as something experiential, that is, as a positive entity, while the two voids that, through their association, enable its appearance stand in opposition to other, more general nominal absences.

84. Sémir Badir, "Ontologie et Phénomenologie dans la Pensée de Saussure," in *L'Herne - Ferdinand de Saussure* (Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 2003), 112–13.

These voids, being inherently non-autonomous, non-self-sufficient, and thus non-substantial, are configured as negatives. However, this negativity is not a non-being or nonexistence; rather, it is *a lack of autonomy*. Hence, we can also employ a mathematical metaphor, whereby the product of two negative numbers unquestionably yields a positive number. However, these negatives and positives are values we use relatively, not absolutely, to describe the ontology of mathematical objects. In the case of negative numbers, this does not refer to numbers that do not exist, but rather to numbers that simply lie on the opposite side of a spectrum of values. Their interactions and mutual relations follow principles distinct from those of positive numbers, yet this does not pertain to their nonexistence but, instead, to genuinely different ontic forms.

> D'une part, la langue existe sous formes d'entités négatives. D'autre part, l'esprit humain, en général, a tendance à percevoir et connaître les objets empiriques comme des positivités. Aussi la phénoménologie du langage doit-elle également être double : sous le rapport de la langue, les *formes* linguistiques ont l'aspect de pures différences, en évolution constante, que ce soit en considération du temps de l'individu (qui fonde la distinction langue / parole) ou du temps de la société (qui fonde, quant à lui, la distinction langue en synchronie / langue en diachronie) ; sous le rapport de la perception et de l'esprit connaissant, les *figures vocales* sont identifiables en fonction de caractéristique positives, alors même qu'elles servent — sans qu'elles se résorbent complètement, il est vrai, dans cette tâche — de vecteurs pour les valeurs linguistiques. La phénoménologie du langage est assignée à la fois à l'ordre négatif de l'ontologie de la langue et à l'ordre positif de la perception et de la cognition humaine.[85]

As a noematic operation, negation for Husserl is the cancellation (*Durchstreichung*) of the corresponding propositional character, whose specific correlate is precisely the sense of "non," of the negative.[86] Naturally, the negated has as its product a positive, not a negative. Husserl calls it a "non-being that is itself being" ("ein Nichtsein,

85. Ibid., 116.

86. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 243.

das selbst wieder Sein ist").[87] Negation cannot cancel, it cannot "perform" (*leistet*) the "nothing," since nothingness does not exist, and thus the claim to annihilate something is contradictory. Every negation must necessarily affirm the content it seeks to negate, thereby contradicting the very claim of annihilation. By stating "not-A," I positively affirm that B which says "not-A," but by doing so, B cannot in any way cancel A, on the contrary, it affirms it in turn ("Sie durchstreicht nicht, sie 'leistet' nichts, sie ist das bewußtseinsmäßige Gegenstück alles Leistens: dessen *Neutralisierung*").[88] Also,

> Aller echte Skeptizismus, welcher Art und Richtung er auch ist, zeigt sich durch den prinzipiellen Widersinn an, daß er in seinen Argumentationen implizite, als Bedingungen der Möglichkeit ihrer Geltung, eben das voraussetzt, was er in seinen Thesen leugnet. Man überzeugt sich ohne Schwierigkeit, daß dieses Merk mal auch für die in Rede stehenden Argumentationen zutrifft. Wer auch nur sagt: Ich bezweifle die Erkenntnisbedeutung der Reflexion, behauptet einen Widersinn. Denn über sein Zweifeln aussagend, reflektiert er, und diese Aussage als gültig hinstellen, setzt voraus, daß die Reflexion den bezweifelten Erkenntniswert wirklich und zweifellos (sc. für die vorliegenden Fälle) *habe*, daß sie die gegenständliche Beziehung nicht ändere, daß das unreflektierte Erlebnis im Übergang in die Reflexion sein Wesen *nicht* einbüße.[89]

Despite this, we conceive of "nothingness" as both a prior and subsequent state of being. Life, for example, is thought to emerge from non-existence at birth and return to non-existence at death. Yet, this perspective fails to clarify the origins of being. Does matter arise from nothingness? Can it emerge from absolute non-being? And how do phenomena such as plants growing from seeds, or consciousness and interactions in their broader sense, fit into this schema?

Parmenides critiques this discontinuous understanding, positing instead that what is must either exist altogether or not at all: τί δ' ἄν μιν καὶ χρέος ὦρσεν ὕστερον ἢ πρόσθεν, τοῦ μηδενὸς ἀρξάμενον, φῦν;

87. Ibid., 247.
88. Ibid., 247–48.
89. Ibid., 174.

οὕτως ἢ πάμπαν πελέναι χρεών ἐστιν ἢ οὐχί (Par. *Nat.*, *fr.* 8 vv. 9-11). This reflection aligns with the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence, where phenomena are understood as continuous transformations rather than creations or annihilations from and into nothingness.

To illustrate, consider a phenomenological process $\Phi(x)$ encompassing all occurrences in the universe. Let this continuum consist of specific phenomena φ:

$$\Phi(x) = ... \rightarrow \varphi_1 \rightarrow \varphi_2 \rightarrow \varphi_3 \rightarrow \varphi_4 \rightarrow \varphi_5 \rightarrow ...$$

Here, φ_1 could represent a lentil seed, φ_2 its underground germination, φ_3 its absorption of soil nutrients, φ_4 the emergence of its first leaves, and φ_5 the mature lentil plant. While simplified, this series highlights that each φ is not a discrete "creation" but a phase within an interconnected continuum. The idea of discrete "existence" and "non-existence"—whether of seeds, plants, or any other phenomenon—overlooks the inherent continuity and transformation within the flow of phenomena.

$$\Phi(x) = ... \rightarrow \varphi_1 \rightarrow \mu \rightarrow \varphi_2 \rightarrow \mu \rightarrow \varphi_3 \rightarrow \mu \rightarrow \varphi_4 \rightarrow \mu \rightarrow \varphi_5 \rightarrow \mu \rightarrow \ldots$$

Our ontological conception is a succession of existential phases φ against a backdrop of nothingness that resurfaces whenever one phenomenon gives way to the next. This is a "medelogical" conception, derived from μηδέν ("nothingness," μ in our schema), where absolute nothingness truly drives phenomena, which arise from nothing and will return to nothing.

Instead, we return to Parmenides. But in the end, "does it exist or not?" the philosopher asks (ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν, 8.16). We must necessarily refrain from that which is unthinkable and unnamable (τὴν μὲν ἐᾶν ἀνόητον ἀνώνυμον, 8.17), and attention must be paid to the idea of unnameability (ἀνώνυμον): to say "nothing" is to say "something that is," that which is denoted by the term "nothing." But can one say something that absolutely is not? If it truly did not exist, it would not even have a name, and yet we say "nothing," thus evoking a concept,

an idea that—though it refers to a real terror and thus "exists"—is no more than that: a concept, a thing that exists, an idea, a fear, a thought, something that is.

Thus: "But how then could what-is come to be in the future? How could it come to be? For if it came into being, it is not, nor would it be if it were to come into being in the future; thus, becoming is extinguished and annihilated not to be heard of" (πῶς δ' ἂν ἔπειτα πέλοιτὸ ἐόν; πῶς δ' ἄν κε γένοιτο; εἰ γὰρ ἔγεντ', οὐκ ἔστι, οὐδ' εἴ ποτε μέλλει ἔσεσθαι. τὼς γένεσις μὲν ἀπέσβεσται καὶ ἄπυστος ὄλεθρος, 8.19-21).

There is another interesting aspect in Parmenides' ontology: being is homogeneous. How should we interpret this? The hypothesis I propose is that its homogeneity is due to a pansematic aspect,[90] that is, the fact that being is characterized by multiplicity, all mutually implying one another as aspects of an indivisible totality. Hence, it is homogeneous in "its being": all being is, all is; in this sense, it is homogeneous (πᾶν ἐστιν ὁμοῖον, 8.22), which recalls its primary aspect: it is not divisible (οὐδὲ διαιρετόν ἐστιν).

Unlike the alternating 'medelogical' model mentioned above ($\varphi_1 \rightarrow \mu \rightarrow \varphi_2$), the indivisible being, in which everything that happens "is" equally and homogeneously existent, must necessarily be understood as homogeneous also in the "hierarchical" sense: there are no phenomena within it that "are" more than others, but everything is (everything is being) in the same way (πᾶν δ' ἔμπλεόν ἐστιν ἐόντος, 8.24). For this reason, being, in its totality, is already complete; it does not imply becoming, which is only the misunderstood product of the processuality with which we experience the phenomenal continuum: it is the same, remains in the same place (it is non-local because spatiality itself is part of the phenomenal background but not a location where things happen, but is already included in the ontological totality as a relational background), abiding in itself (ταὐτόν τ' ἐν ταὐτῷ τε μένον καθ' ἑαυτό τε κεῖται χοὔτως ἔμπεδον αὖθι μένει, 8.29-30).

And this brings us back to the problem of names. It is not possible to find thought based on something that is not: everything that

90. Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy."

is thinkable also is; there is no thought without being (οὐ γὰρ ἄνευ τοῦ ἐόντος, ἐν ᾧ πεφατισμένον ἐστιν, εὑρήσεις τὸ νοεῖν, 8.35-36). There is, and there will never be, any other time than the present, "for the Moirai have bound it so that it is whole in itself and immovable" (οὐδὲν γὰρ <ἢ> ἔστιν ἢ ἔσται ἄλλο πάρεξ τοῦ ἐόντος, ἐπεὶ τό γε Μοῖρ' ἐπέδησεν οὖλον ἀκίνητόν τ' ἔμεναι, 8.36-38). Here, Parmenides appears to deny becoming, but more specifically, he denies temporality, which, like space, is already included in being as a whole, as a totality. The flow of time is illusory; there is no real past or future. Things do not happen in time but only in our perceptions. But if time (οὐδὲν γὰρ <ἢ> ἔστιν ἢ ἔσται), space (κεῖται χοὕτως ἔμπεδον αὖθι μένει, 8.29-30), and division (οὐδὲ διαιρετόν) are illusions, then what is it that we perceive as time, space, and division? What are those distinct and divided things we call "past" and "future," "here" and "there," "tree" and "stone," "river" and "fire" as distinct and separate things?

Parmenides responds: "These are mere names that mortals have given, believing them to be real, as things that come into being and perish, to be and not to be, to change place and to alter brightness and color" (τῷ πάντ' ὄνομ' ἔσται, ὅσσα βροτοὶ κατέθεντο πεποιθότες εἶναι ἀληθῆ, γίγνεσθαί τε καὶ ὄλλυσθαι, εἶναί τε καὶ οὐχί, καὶ τόπον ἀλλάσσειν διά τε χρόα φανὸν ἀμείβειν, 8.38-41).

This is arguably the most important passage in Parmenides' poem. I invite the reader to reflect on this assertion about πάντ' ὄνομα in light of the passages from the *Niruttipathasutta* we have analyzed so far, specifically regarding temporal becoming, which bears incredible similarities to what Parmenides says here.

Concerning essence in spatiality and temporality, the passage in 8.45 is also extremely evocative:

> οὔτε γὰρ οὐκ ἐὸν ἔστι, τό κεν παύοι μιν ἱκνεῖσθαι
> εἰς ὁμόν, οὔτ' ἐὸν ἔστιν ὅπως εἴη κεν ἐόντος
> τῇ μᾶλλον τῇ δ' ἧσσον, ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἐστιν ἄσυλον·
> οἷ γὰρ πάντοθεν ἶσον, ὁμῶς ἐν πείρασι κύρει.
>
> For neither is there non-being, which would prevent it from arriving into sameness, nor is there being such that it could exist more here and

> less there, since all is inviolate. For wherever it is equally, it is alike in boundaries.
> (Par. *Nat*., *fr*. 8 vv. 46-49)

Parmenides urges mortals to resist the seductive deceptions of δόξα, a warning almost identical to the Buddha's admonition against *diṭṭhi*s. But can we equate δόξα/*diṭṭhi* with ὀνόματα/*nirutti*? Is he indeed saying that names, designations, and language are the real obstacles preventing us from reaching the truth? In part, but neither Buddhism nor Parmenides promotes extreme relativism or total skepticism toward language, which is not merely a machine of deception propagating falsehoods. The matter is more complex than that.

Differences understood as being absolutely different between *a* and *b* implies being nothing. The difference as an insurmountable abyss that separates *a* from *b* is itself a nothing. At the same time, however, we cannot deny that a appears to us as '*a*' precisely because it is distinct, different, from *b*, which appears to us as '*b*' and not as '*a.*' How then can we resolve this hiatus?

> Au problème de la correspondance entre les deux faces du signe se substitue donc celui du rapport entre les plans du langage, qui dépend des structures textuelles et de leur interprétation — soit, en dernière analyse, d'une poétique et d'une herméneutique. Alors que l'interprétation syntaxique restait fondée sur l'équivalence stricte entre expressions, l'interprétation, dans l'acception herméneutique, n'est « diabolique » que dans la mesure où elle est fondée sur la reconnaissance d'une altérité. Cette reconnaissance fonde a sémantique différentielle, car elle donne le moyen de faire advenir la différence comme altérité qualifiée, et de penser ainsi de la multiplicité infinie des contradictoires (a *vs* non a) à l'unicité du contraire (a *vs* b). [...]
> Dès lors, le signe n'est plus qu'un moment stabilisé de l'interprétation, et un parcours interprétatif peut « aller » d'u signifié à un autre sans passer par le signifiant, même zéro, celui-ci jouant alors le rôle d'interprétant et servant simplement à « vérifier » des attentes [...].[91]

91. Rastier, "Le Silence de de Saussure ou l'ontologie Refusée," 33.

Let us return to the issue of the "sème associatif." With this term, Saussure specifically refers to the fullness obtained from the interaction of two voids. These two voids are two *kenomes*, a term derived from Saussure's neologism (*kénôme*), itself drawn from the Greek term for emptiness. This emphasis on the concept of void, represented by a symbol indicating an open cavity, inevitably brings to mind the Buddhist concept of *suññа* (likely related to the Greek κύαρ and κοῖλος as well as the Latin *cavus*), which also signifies emptiness and etymologically traces back to the notion of "hollow" (κένωμα).[92]

The paradox Saussure seems to highlight here is the effect of fullness produced by the interaction of two empty cavities, which would clearly imply an illusion of the substantiality of the associative *sema* (σῆμα)—seemingly full but, in reality, also empty. If we interpret this emptiness as a form of nothingness, however, we fall into a fundamental error. The vacuity of the *sema* stems from its lack of self-sufficiency, its non-independence. It cannot "stand" on its own, just as the foundation upon which it is built cannot do so. Its foundation is empty, insubstantial, but not non-existent, as it incontrovertibly manifests.

For Rastier,[93] this conception of the associative σῆμα breaks with a Parmenidean conception of being, since the latter's identity-based ontology assumes convex, not concave, forms. Graphically, this translates into a negative ontology and one of difference. How sustainable this view actually is, however, is unclear. Perhaps Saussure genuinely thought that his negative ontology stood in opposition to Parmenides' idea of a wholly full being, but a close reading of the latter's poem reveals this not to be the case. When discussing the nature of names, Parmenides emphasizes that, while they may not be faithful to truth understood as the totality of being, they are necessarily included within it. This suggests that their insubstantiality as autonomous entities is impossible, precisely because their partial nature is nonetheless entirely grounded in being.

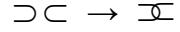
If Saussure's *ontologie négative de la différence* is to be understood—and we should be cautious here—as two nullities creating a

92. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 672.
93. Rastier, "Le Silence de de Saussure ou l'ontologie Refusée," 34.

void, then he is entirely mistaken, not only logically but also regarding his supposed inspiration from the Indian worldview, which he would have completely misunderstood.

We do not know what Saussure truly thought, but Rastier's interpretation is not entirely convincing. When he speaks of a "rupture avec les formes rondes de l'ontologie identitaire et tradition parménidienne," he seems to forget that Parmenides used the metaphor of the perfect sphere to indicate being in its totality. This is a different issue altogether from the supposed 'content-based' implication of the totality of being in all its contingent manifestations. This does not mean that contingent manifestations are all perfect spheres themselves but rather points to a more holographic and homothetic conception.[94] Hence, Rastier's claim about forms being "concaves et non convexes" is doubly misleading: first, it forgets that Parmenides' geometric metaphor is primarily symbolic, and second, it fails to grasp that the convex nature of being pertains to its totality, understood as all-pervasive and, above all, all-inclusive. Furthermore, there is no general agreement on which geometric metaphor best applies to Parmenides' ontological conception, so even a concave interpretation could, in fact, be valid.

As we have seen, Saussure describes the associative *sema* in his writings as the intersection of two cavities, two voids. He represents them as a crossing between ⊃ and ⊂, where, obviously, the two joined together are nothing more than two "empty" kenomes.



According to Rastier, this ontology of voids "rompt avec l'ontologie du plein que manifestait la monade sémiotique; par *sème associatif*, il convient ici 'entendre le signe linguistique contextuellement défini."[95] However, what Rastier means by an ontology of void as opposed to one of fullness—allegedly Parmenidean—is unclear.

94. Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy."
95. Rastier, "Le Silence de de Saussure ou l'ontologie Refusée," 34.

Once again, confusion arises between the necessity (which even Saussure could not reasonably deny) of referring to an ontological fullness, without which no sense would be possible, and the equally undeniable fact that when individual components of phenomena are forcibly isolated, especially through a mechanistic interpretation of natural phenomena, they appear as voids because, in fact, they are voids. The only meaningful substance is relational, where things exist as inseparable aspects of a multiform totality. Since vacuity is the ultimate nature of all phenomena, must we conclude absurdly that all phenomena are, in fact, "nothing"? This would be a glaring non sequitur, just as it would be absurd to believe that Parmenides speaks of an ontology of "fullness" as radically opposed to one of "emptiness." On the one hand, being, in its ontological fullness, is recognized as the only semantic substance, the sole substrate to which all meaning must refer, and thus the only logic πρώτη ὕλη. On the other hand, recognizing that its individual relational aspects, when abstracted from the network of reciprocity in which they necessarily exist, inevitably appear as "voids" does not indicate a contradiction within the system. In fact, the passages we have read from Parmenides seem to demonstrate this dual possibility.

What he defines as τῷ πάντ᾽ ὄνομ᾽ ἔσται are not "nullities" but "voids"—that is, partialities, empty cavities that, in themselves, do not refer to anything but, like all cavities, serve as supports capable of hosting, of pointing to a fullness. They are like ontic fragments of that hollow sphere that, only in its completeness, when closed, can effectively "contain" and "substantiate." Rastier correctly identifies the assumptions underlying this principle:

> Le sens consiste pour l'essentiel en un réseau des relations entre signifiés au sein du texte — et dans cette perspective les signifiants peuvent être considérés comme des *interprétants* qui permettent de construire certaines de ces relations. Elles demeurent de type perceptif : estimation de similarité, reconnaissance e forme, catégorisation.[96]

96. Ibid., 39.

Linguistics is not at all incompatible with ontology. In fact, the two are fundamentally the same thing, only a major basic misunderstanding has severed their ties.

The Harvard manuscripts further confirm the centrality of the Indian world, omnipresent in Saussure's reflections on language. As Atlani-Voisin comments, "on ne peut qu'être étonné de la place qu'y occupent le sanskrit et la philosophie de la Parole en Inde et cela dans une réflexion apparemment éloignée du *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, mais aussi, ce qui est plus surprenant, loin de toute problématique indo-européenne."[97] This should not surprise us, but the reality is that the 'philosophical' reflection on language is often seen as the most superficial and useless aspect, as is the case with all theoretical sciences. If we are thus bound to this consumerist view, where the only interesting aspect of a discipline is its 'practical' one, understood as 'quantifiable' and therefore potentially translatable into something concrete, then certainly discovering a Saussure far more interested in these theoretical aspects than in 'concrete things' would leave us bewildered. Nothing could be further from the truth, and this, as already mentioned, is only the most superficial of possible reactions.

The truth is that all fundamental linguistics, including its most practical applications—from the reconstruction of Indo-European to communication science, psycholinguistics, and pragmatics—is a discipline deeply rooted in the reflection on language as such. No one, like the Indian grammarians, has been able to pose these questions in such a technical and profound way.

> La philosophie linguistique indienne problématise toujours l'indissociabilité de la grammaire et de la philosophie et les théories du langage s'inscrivent dans une métaphysique. Si toute science indienne s'accompagne d'une pensée philosophique, on peut dire que la science grammaticale est à la pensée indienne ce que sont les mathématiques à la pensée philosophique occidentale : une science modèle de raisonnement.[98]

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97. Françoise Atlani-Voisin, "Le Don de l'Inde," in *L'Herne - Ferdinand de Saussure* (Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 2003), 79.
98. Ibid., 80.

Atlani-Voisin's brilliant reflection undoubtedly finds confirmation in the evident centrality that language occupies in Indian philosophical thought. Certainly, mathematics is not absent either, and there is no need here to mention the well-recognized innovations of Indian mathematical thought, such as the *Śulbasūtra*s, which appear to attest to very advanced mathematical knowledge, among the many possible examples.

However, the centrality of language and reflection *on* language is quite pertinent and allows me to emphasize how, for too long, Pāli Buddhism has not been recognized with the same acumen often attributed to Mahāyāna Buddhism regarding the philosophy of language. I would go further: the Pāli corpus is not only a witness to the Buddhist interest in language, thus a precursor to subsequent reflections, but is, in the first instance, an innovator and proponent of a linguistic thought that is *the foundation* of its reasoning. Not merely a metaphor for its reasoning, but the very cornerstone of its philosophical reflection.

1.7 Linguistical voidness and phenomenological emptiness

Popularized by the brilliant work of Nāgārjuna, the concept of emptiness or voidness has held a central importance in Buddhism for centuries up to the present day. It is one of the first concepts taught in university courses on Buddhist philosophy. However, despite its popularity, it must be noted that—at least in the sense we attribute to this term now—it was not used in the Pāli texts, where it played a relatively marginal role. Nonetheless, thanks to the work of Vélez de Cea,[99] we can now say that this same concept was not widely employed in Pāli because it had a valid equivalent: *anattā*, "non-self." According to de Cea's theory, which is argued more than convincingly, *suñña* and *anattā* were initially understood as synonyms. It was only later, when there arose a need to clarify further the concept of non-self, that Nāgārjuna reappropriated the term—in its Sanskrit form, *śūnya*—applying it extensively to all phenomena (*dharma*s).

99. Vélez de Cea, "Emptiness in the Pāli Suttas and the Question of Nāgārjuna's Orthodoxy."

The reason for this reappropriation lies, I believe, in the fact that the term *anātman* (Sanskrit for *anattā*) had become too ambiguous. The original meaning, which emerges nonetheless from a careful reading of the Pāli suttas—namely, "non-substantial," "non-autonomous," "non-self-sufficient"—was lost due to the identitarian connotation of *ātman* itself, the "self." Certainly, even the psychological self, like any identity, not only those of individuals, is impermanent and thus empty in the sense of "non-autonomous."

However, it must have been clear in ancient times that the critique of the notion of self—presumably an Upaniṣadic concept—was undoubtedly directed at the idea that a self, or something pertaining to a self, could be autonomous, independent, or even coincident with the Absolute. Over time, this specific connotation seems to have been lost. This is particularly evident when we examine certain tendencies in the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, which appear to reintroduce some notion of self-like essence, albeit disguised in different denominations. Nāgārjuna vehemently opposed these specific ideas, advocating a perspective closer to the Pāli Abhidhamma, in which, moreover, the concept of *suñña* already began to be used in a sense more similar to his own.

Having thus clarified these distinctions and understood this connotation of *suñña*, we must ask what it has to do with perception (and consequently with language). Well, it has much to do with it, and even a quick examination of the term's usage in the Pāli suttas makes this unmistakably clear.

In MN 121, we find the most significant mention of the term, grounding it in contemplative practice. It is said that the Buddha addresses the disciple Ānanda, stating that he practices meditation on emptiness (*suññatāvihārenāhaṃ*). What are these contemplations or 'abidings' in emptiness? The description is provided in a very peculiar way: "There is only this thing that is not empty, namely the unity that depends on the community of mendicants" (*itthipurisasannipātena atthi cevidaṃ asuññataṃ yadidaṃ — bhikkhusaṅghaṃ paṭicca ekattaṃ*).

This first statement seems to attribute a certain importance, as one might expect, to the ascetic life of Buddhist mendicants that he himself proposed. The role of ascetic discipline must necessarily be revisited

repeatedly, as one cannot understand Buddhist contemplative practice without properly contextualizing it as an ascetic practice. As such, it was situated within a specific cultural context in ancient India, which was also a context of rejection of normative orders.

Buddhists were part of this movement rejecting normative orders, which, in their case, was embedded in a certain 'world' taken as a given and not open to question.[100] This was the world of predetermined social hierarchies, the world of authority in roles capable of determining what law is, the world of 'things' and 'names' familiar to us—acquired from a given language and certain cultural and social structures—but which we scarcely consider as arbitrary. Consequently, it was also a world of communities organized around specific 'values' and, correspondingly, one of intense and often violent rejection of contrary and anomalous values.[101]

This particular reality is described by a series of social problems[102] that are direct consequences of certain perceptual problems. These problems, of course, also depend on those who manage to organize perceptions by heading normative institutions capable of 'emanating' values and laws (e.g., religious authorities or political rulers) and on certain tendencies that are adopted, assimilated, and incorporated uncritically due to a lack of tools to question them.[103]

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100. Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry."

101. Carl Olson, *Indian Asceticism: Power, Violence, and Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Martin G. Wiltshire, *Ascetic Figures before and in Early Buddhism* (DE GRUYTER, 1990), DOI: 10.1515/9783110858563; Bronkhorst, "Historical Context of Early Asceticism"; Johannes Bronkhorst, *The two Sources of Indian Asceticism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998); Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1996); Greg Bailey and Ian Mabbett, *The Sociology of Early Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

102. Divino and Di Lenardo, "The World and the Desert: A Comparative Perspective on the 'Apocalypse' between Buddhism and Christianity."

103. Squarcini, "Le Colombe e gli Avvoltoi: sull'economia Politica delle 'Ecologie Religiose' del Passato, in India e non solo"; Squarcini, *Tradition, Veda and Law: Studies on South Asian Classical Intellectual Traditions*; Squarcini, "Pāṣaṇḍin, Vaitaṇḍika, Vedanindaka and Nāstika. On Criticism, Dissenters and Polemics and

Now, the metaphorical 'place' of these normative orders is often identified with the city or 'village,' while the ascetic is one who rejects those orders, even physically moving outside the places where they are in force, for example, to the forest.

Let us read what MN 121 says about this: "In the same way, Ānanda, a mendicant ignores the perceptions of the village and the perceptions of people, focusing on the unity that derives from the perception of the forest" (*evameva kho, ānanda, bhikkhu amanasikaritvā gāmasaññaṃ, amanasikaritvā manussasaññaṃ, araññasaññaṃ paṭicca manasi karoti ekattaṃ*). In this passage, the Buddha explicitly speaks of the "perception of unity" (the same *ekattaṃ* mentioned earlier in relation to non-emptiness) of the forest (*araññasaññaṃ*), contrasted with the "perception of the village" or "perception arising from the village" (*gāmasaññaṃ*) and the "perception derived from people" (*manussasaññaṃ*).

This explicit and significant connection between the problem of perceptions and the urban dimension of the village is precisely what allows us to link the issue of language and the normative orders it implies with the ascetic intention of those individuals who, precisely, favor another type of perceptions—those of the forest (*araññ*a-*saññaṃ*), the quintessential place of ascetic practice.[104] This also means that Buddhists did not reject perceptions altogether, but sought a more direct experience less conditioned by those conventional orders we find in the dimension of the village or the multitude of people—the individuals who constitute what we might today call the cultural order, where the perception of the village represents the sociological dimension and also the idea of 'rule' and authority within it.[105]

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the South Asian Struggle for the Semiotic Primacy of Veridiction"; Squarcini, "Tradens, Traditum, Recipiens: Introductory Remarks on the Semiotics, Pragmatics and Politics of Tradition."

104. Patrick Olivelle, "Village vs. Wilderness: Ascetic Ideals and the Hindu World," in *Ascetics and Brahmins: Studies in Ideologies and Institutions (Kykéion 6)*, vol. 1 (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2006), DOI: 10.1400/60969.

105. Balkrishna Gokhale, "Early Buddhism and the Urban Revolution," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 5 (1982): 7–22; Balkrishna G. Gokhale, "Early Buddhist Kingship," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1966): 15–22, DOI: 10.2307/2051828.

The forest is crucial, for in such place "there is no pressure arising from the perception of the village or the perception of people" (*ye assu darathā gāmasaññaṃ paṭicca tedha na santi, ye assu darathā manussasaññaṃ paṭicca tedha na santi...*). Here, there is an insistence on the need to engage in an exercise of 'purification' of one's perceptions. The socio-cultural order exerts a genuine perceptual "pressure" (*darathā*), so we can understand that what is expressed as the "perception of the village" or that of people is, in fact, perception conditioned and subservient to that normative order.[106]

In this first sense, contemplation must seek emptiness—a void that is in fact the product of an emptying, a liberation from the perceptual conditionings of the village and the people: "[in the forest] there is only moderate stress, that which depends on the unified perception of the

106. The social aspect, a rejection of hierarchies and divisions, is well represented even in the "long version" of the same *sutta*, namely MN 122. For example, in relation to village perceptions, we find that the meditator must avoid thoughts that are "base, crude, ordinary, ignoble, and useless" (*yāyaṃ kathā hīnā gammā pothujjanikā anariyā anatthasaṃhitā*). This formula is frequently used specifically in relation to social divisions based on opinions and hierarchies, and in this case, these thoughts are characterized as useless. Explicitly stated, hierarchies are viewed as equivalent to all worldly things and thus ephemeral, like attachment to food, perfumes, clothes—precisely the "worldly things"—and compared to things pacifists like them rejected entirely, such as wars. In a single phrase, they invite avoiding: "talking about kings, bandits, and chief ministers, talking about armies, threats, and wars, talking about food, drinks, clothes, beds, talking about garlands and fragrances; talking about family, vehicles, villages, towns, cities, and countries, talking about women and heroes, street chatter, and gossip" (*rājakathā corakathā mahāmattakathā senākathā bhayakathā yuddhakathā annakathā pānakathā vatthakathā sayanakathā mālākathā gandhakathā ñātikathā yānakathā gāmakathā nigamakathā nagarakathā janapadakathā itthikathā surākathā visikhākathā kumbhaṭṭhānakathā*). This is an integral part of ascetic practice and cannot be considered separate from their philosophy. The rejection of what is worldly is indeed part of asceticism but is also fundamental for completing contemplation. As long as attachments persist, as long as one looks fondly at these worldly things, which are only humanity's evils, one cannot devote oneself to meditation and the good. Family, opulence, wealth, ephemeral things like festivities, "perfumes," "clothes," "gossip" (*visikhākathā, kumbhaṭṭhānakathā*), political discussions about countries, cities, and wars, the inherent evil in violence and subjugation, kings and ministers, political power but also the matrix of social division represented by hierarchies—all of this is rejected as worldly, tales about the world (*lokakkhāyikā*).

forest; thus, there is the understanding, 'this perceptual field is empty of [the conditionings of] the perception of the village, and it is empty of the perception of the people—for only the following is not empty, namely the perception of unity that depends on the forest'" (*... atthi cevāyaṃ darathamattā yadidaṃ — araññasaññaṃ paṭicca ekattan'ti; so 'suññamidaṃ saññāgataṃ gāmasaññāyā'ti pajānāti, 'suññamidaṃ saññāgataṃ manussasaññāyā'ti pajānāti, 'atthi cevidaṃ asuññataṃ yadidaṃ — araññasaññaṃ paṭicca ekattan'ti*).

The achievement of the same state of perceptual unity is also connected to meditation on other objects, all described as referring to the unity of the forest but attainable as a subsequent stage, namely by ignoring even the unity of the forest and transitioning to a new non-empty perception. In order: the infinite perception of space (*ākāsānañcāyatanasaññaṃ*), the unity of the perception of the earth (*pathavīsaññaṃ paṭicca ekattaṃ*), and the perception of infinite consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatanasaññaṃ*).

What one does, after freeing oneself from the perceptual conditionings of sociocultural orders and transitioning to meditation on 'unified' dimensions (understood as 'not divided' by the organizing thought of humans, which instead dominates as the organizing principle of perceptions in/of the village and the multitudes),[107] is to abandon even these perceptions. Although these are only 'moderately' tainting our perceptual judgment, they are still insufficient to reach—presumably—the phenomenon in its suchness (*yathābhūta*). At this point, their 'perceptual field' is 'emptied,' rendered 'empty' even of these subtler states of perception, which, after the phase of infinite consciousness, culminates in the perception defined as *ākiñcaññāyatanasaññaṃ,* i.e., the perception (*-saññaṃ*) that is *ākiñcaññā* + *āyatana.*

We know that *āyatana* indicates the sensory or perceptual sphere(s), while *ākiñcaññā* presumably derives from *na-kiñci,* where *kiñci* means "something" and *na-* is a negative prefix. In other words, this is the dimension in which the sensory sphere is deprived of objecthood. Although the more incautious and uninformed translate—without a

107. Yakupitiyage Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings. The Middle Position on Theory and Practice* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2018), 178.

clear basis—this term as "nothingness," ignoring how Buddhism rejects any nihilism from the very beginning of its philosophy, this term clearly indicates the de-objectification condition of the sensory spheres.

This is a very important meditative phase, and it will be revisited later. The "*na-kiñci-āyatana-saññā*" is the perception of the sensory spheres deprived of their object. We know that every perception is always and only a perception-of 'something,' precisely a perception of a *kiñci*, an 'object,' or 'some-thing.' So, how can one achieve a perception without an object? It is not, as one might naïvely think, about neutralizing the sensory spheres by removing their object. If I have a pen in front of me, it is not enough to look away or close my eyes to stop my sensations: remember that Buddhists include *manas,* the 'mind,' as the sixth sensory sphere, and this is not by chance, because thought too has its sensoriality, and an object of sensations is not necessarily a material object but can also be a thought.

Achieving *ākiñcaññāyatanasaññā* is therefore a difficult task, but not impossible, and it is of particular interest to ascetic discipline. Moreover, in the end, it turns out that *ākiñcaññāyatanasaññaṃ* is precisely what is the true *asuññataṃ*, the true non-empty. And thus: "Behold, they see as empty what is not there, but what remains they understand as present; thus, emptiness manifests in them, O Ānanda, in its essence, undistorted and pure" (*iti yañhi kho tattha na hoti tena taṃ suññaṃ samanupassati, yaṃ pana tattha avasiṭṭhaṃ hoti taṃ 'santamidaṃ atthī'ti pajānāti; evampissa esā, ānanda, yathābhuccā avipallatthā parisuddhā suññatāvakkanti bhavati*).

The use of the term *yathābhuccā*, "essence," "thusness," which, in addition to referring to a purity of perceptions (*parisuddhā*), is terminology we could define as exquisitely phenomenological, is significant.

But the meditative exercise does not end here, as other phases follow this one. Just as the realm of sensations must be deprived of its objectivity, perception too is not exempt from this form of purification, of essentialization. The effort in question is that of *nevasaññānāsaññāyatanasaññaṃ*, the perception of a dimension defined as *nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*, that is, the sphere (*āyatana*, as with sensations) that is "neither perception nor non-perception" (*nevasaññānāsaññā*, *n'eva-saññā* + *n'a-saññā*). Here,

too, we must make a considerable effort of understanding, as rejecting both perception and non-perception can seem absurd, until we realize that non-perception can itself be perceived. This is why we speak of a 'perception of perception' and a 'perception of non-perception,' both of which must be rejected.

If we break down the term, its meaning becomes clearer. It is a perception of negativity: the idea of non-perception is itself a perception, acting perceptively even if it is non-perception, at least as we conceive it. At this point, having gone beyond the perception of both perception and non-perception, we arrive at a dimension of "signless immersion" (*animittaṃ cetosamādhiṃ*). Here we encounter the term *animitta*, "signless," which we saw in §1.6 and which now reveals its full importance. It shows us that *nimitta* does not refer only to graphic or physical signs but to any well-defined semantic moment: a *nimitta* can even be the object of a perception or sensation. This explains how one reaches a state purely devoid of *nimitta*s when overcoming those specific perceptual dimensions or perceptions of 'somethingness' we encountered earlier.

Moreover, alongside the term *animitta*, attention must be given to *cetosamādhi*. It consists of two parts: *ceto*, obviously related to *citta*, cognition, and *samādhi*, a critical term in contemplative practice. *Samādhi* will be used later by other prominent Buddhist authors to signify explicitly the overcoming of the perception of the division of subject and object,[108] from which we understand that to deprive the perceptual-sensory spheres of their 'something,' their 'object,' it is not enough to merely ignore the object. One must achieve an understanding in which one regains being at one with it. This step is well captured by the term *samādhi*, derived from "putting (*dhā*) together (*saṃ-*)."[109]

The profound interest in unification, making it the core of Buddhist meditative practice, is easily explained. Recognizing that the world

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108. Jonathan C. Gold, "No Outside, No Inside: Duality, Reality and Vasubandhu's Illusory Elephant," *Asian Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2006): 1–38, DOI: 10.1080/09552360500491817.

109. Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*, 3.

perceived as a collection of separate, evolving elements is a product of linguistic arbitrariness—a deception that conceals the ultimate Truth of immutable reality, mistakenly perceived as dynamic due to a misunderstanding of the manifestation of beings—liberation from this deception, the root of all human suffering, is achieved precisely through unification. This involves dismantling the dualistic barriers that surreptitiously divide the entities of the perceived world. For this reason, the syncretic, which recalls the primordial Truth, appears so distinct from the world. The deconstruction that reeducates the body to recompose itself from the division that split it into two perceptual bodies is a reunification (*samādhi*) of subject and object.

In this sense, meditative practice is a discipline of the body aimed at reunifying the body. Most importantly, Buddhism recognizes that the act of splitting entities begins with the body and is mediated through language. Semantic perception (*saññā*) is an act that precedes—or rather anticipates—the vision of things as they are (*yathābhuccā*). Thus, instead of seeing reality, humans employ a mechanism of cognitive discernment (*viññāṇa*) that anticipates and superimposes upon vision the cognitive bias of what is expected to be seen. These are pre-incorporated semantic prototypes (*nāmarūpa*) that seek forms (*rūpa*) already idealized and reified in the world, identifying them with external forms and associating them with 'names,' the nominal signifiers (*nāma*) linked to a given cognitive-linguistic model.

Furthermore, in this same sutta, it is said that the perceptual field associated with the six sensory spheres, which pertain to the somatic and biological dimensions of life (*kāyaṃ paṭicca saḷāyatanikaṃ jīvitapaccayā*), must also be considered empty—or rather, one must achieve the conception of their emptiness, which is always characterized by the same formula: *yathābhuccā avipallatthā parisuddhā paramānuttarā suññatāvakkanti*, adding, however, that the meditating "ascetic or Brahman" (*samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā*) capable of abiding in the purest and most absolute emptiness (*parisuddhaṃ paramānuttaraṃ suññataṃ*) can indeed experience its purity and absoluteness (*paramānuttaraṃ*).

The Buddhist discourse, in fact, seems almost exclusively focused on the semantic problem, allowing its detractors to confuse *the thing*

with *the idea of the thing,* which would confirm their thesis: namely, that "precepts, once established, preempt sensory experience, and that remembering the 'signs' (*nimitta*) has an inhibitory effect on direct experience."[110] For this reason as well, *vipassanā* meditation seeks to lead to a body "devoid of signs" (*animitta*), or to the annulment of the *nimitta*, the figurative signs.

Although there are already significant theoretical works by philosophers, semioticians, and Indologists on the semantic-cognitive question in Buddhism, no systematic field research has yet been promoted to document the experience of *samādhi* during meditative practice and in light of what has already been said about the annulment of figurative signs (*animitta*).

The term "signless" is used by Harvey to translate the condition of *animitta* described above. From the psychosemantic production that generates the linguistic discernment mechanism that organizes reality based on learned semantic categories[111]—and which continues to reiterate the cognitive world through constant naming and reaffirmation of language—we move to the dissolution of language, the end of the world (for which Buddhism has two terms literally translatable as such), which is the Buddha's condition (see Chapter 4). Knowledge leads to awareness that transcends the limits of the linguistic and the world. The Buddha is a "world ender,"[112] or "the one who goes to the world's end" (*lokantagū*), and for this reason cannot 'heal' nor reconstitute language.[113]

A specific mention of meditation centered on the absence of figurative signs (*animitto cetosamādhi*) is also presented elsewhere, such as in SN 40.9, and bears witness to the substantial continuity of the linguistic and perceptual problem; the two are, in fact, the same problem. While the explicit claim that "emptiness" is therefore the real nature

110. Federico Squarcini, "Introduzione," in *Patañjali: Yogasūtra* (Turin: Einaudi, 2015), XCV.

111. Eleanor Rosch, "Cognitive Representations of Semantic Categories.," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 104, no. 3 (1975): 192–233, DOI: 10.1037/0096-3445.104.3.192.

112. Johansson, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, 80.

113. On the contrary, if one is not aware, the intellect turns against itself (*impia mēns ōdit etiam ipsum intellēctum*).

of phenomena—in the sense that they are neither autonomous nor self-sufficient and, in their perceptual isolation, are nothing but "empty"—comes later, even now, by observing how emptiness is characterized, we can understand how it intervenes in perceptions. How can we perceive 'things' if, in the end, they are empty? In my view, the answer is given precisely by Saussure.

> Les éléments premiers sur lesquels portent l'activité et l'attention du linguiste sont donc non seulement d'une part des éléments *complexes*, qu'il est faux de vouloir simplifier, mais d'une autre part des éléments *destitués* dans leur complexité d'une unité naturelle, non comparables à un corps simple chimique ni davantage à une combinaison chimique très comparables si l'on veut en revanche à un *mélange chimique*, tel que le mélange de l'azote et de l'oxygène dans l'air respirable; de façon que l'air n'est plus l'air si on en retire l'azote ou l'oxygène, que cependant rien ne lie la masse d'azote répandue dans l'air à la masse d'oxygène, que troisièmement chacun de ces éléments n'est sujet à classification que vis-à-vis d'autres éléments du même ordre, mais qu'il n'est plus question d'air si l'on passe à cette classification et que quatrièmement leur mélange n'est pas impossible à classer de son côté.[114]

All that pertains to language, however, is within the psychological order. This term is open to improvement, but for now, let us take it as Saussure uses it, since this conception allows him to clear the field of the idea that the duality he recognizes in the linguistic order lies between the psychic domain and the physical domain. This is what we would normally think: the mental aspect of language—its lexicon, morphology, and order of signs—is 'executed' concretely and phonetically, and thus transferred onto the physical plane to enable communication. Saussure, however, is not initially concerned with *this* type of dualism: "Notre point de vue constant sera de dire que non seulement la signification mais aussi le signe est un fait de conscience pur."[115]

Saussure also employs the concept of 'form' to indicate not only the concept or prototypical image associated with a nominal signifier,

114. de Saussure, *Écrits de Linguistique Générale*, 18.
115. Ibid., 19.

such as the 'Buddhist form,' but also the 'vocal forms,' that is, vocal figures. Signification, for example, is merely a way of expressing the value of a 'form.'[116] The general associative principle that Saussure proposes in every aspect of his linguistic theory is to be understood as the association of two voids, two entities that, in themselves, would have no value but gain the capacity to convey meaning through their association. In a broader sense, form is nothing other than signification,[117] as form is already the transmission of information:

> Il n'y a pas *la* forme et une idée correspondante ; il n'y a pas davantage *la* signification et un signe correspondant. Il y a *des* formes et *des* significations possibles (nullement correspondantes) ; il y a même seulement en réalité des *différences* de formes et des *différences* de significations ; d'autre part chacun de ces ordres de *différences* (par conséquent de choses déjà négatives en elles-mêmes) n'existe comme différences que grâce à l'union avec l'autre.[118]

> Domaine linguistique de la *pensée* qui devient IDÉE DANS LE SIGNE ou de la *figure vocale* qui devient SIGNE DANS L'IDÉE : ce qui n'est pas deux choses, mais une, contrairement à la première erreur fondamentale. Il est aussi littéralement vrai de dire que le mot est le signe de l'idée que de dire que l'idée est le signe du mot ; elle l'est à chaque instant, puisqu'il n'est pas possible, même, de fixer et de limiter matériellement un mot dans la phrase sans elle.[119]

This also liberates linguistic theory from dangerous dichotomizations (if language is structured dualistically, it does not necessarily follow that dichotomizing its understanding benefits the science of language), which tend to lead to the assumption that it refers entirely to an abstract dimension. On the contrary, the 'psychological' nature of language does not make it any less concrete: "Qui dit *signe* dit *signification* ; qui dit *signification* dit *signe*."[120] According to Rastier:

116. Ibid., 41.
117. Ibid., 42.
118. Ibid., 42–43.
119. Ibid., 44.
120. Ibid.

> les fondements de la prédication ne sont pas à rechercher dans une physique naïve des états de choses, mais dans une anthropologie : 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). On ne peut alors séparer absolument les substances des qualités, le sujet de l'objet.[121]

The concept of negativity in Saussure's theory of emptiness serves to highlight the *relational nature* of linguistic elements and the fact that definitions arise from the relation of heterogeneous, hence oppositional, elements: A-B. In this sense, *négativité* is to be understood essentially as *l'essence purement différentielle*.[122] From a semiological perspective, there are neither signs nor significations per se; these concepts are useful for describing linguistics but must actually be understood solely as elements of a differential alternation. What matters, then, are the *differences* between signs and the *differences* in significations.[123] Language as a system does not consist of a set of positive and absolute values but rather of negative values structuring differences, and thus of relative realities that hold together by virtue of the opposition of the elements that describe them.[124]

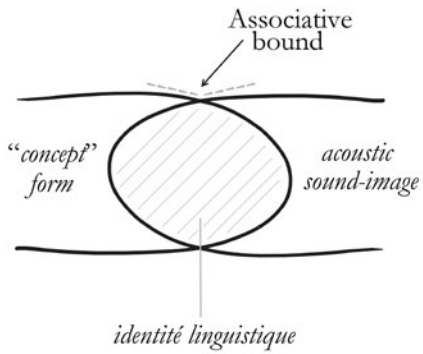

Fig. 9 — Model of the kenome according to Saussure.

121. Rastier, "Le Silence de de Saussure ou l'ontologie Refusée," 45.
122. de Saussure, *Écrits de Linguistique Générale*, 64.
123. Ibid., 70.
124. Ibid., 77.

At this point, we arrive at the theme of the void even in describing the fundamental associative elements of language. As I anticipated, Saussure coins a term, the *kénôme*, which we can render in English as *kenome*, borrowed from the Greek κένωμα, derived from κενός, meaning "void." This term is used to indicate precisely the lack of autonomy in linguistic elements with correlative value. A given *kenome* is something that, in itself, is "void," having neither meaning nor value. However, kenomic association produces the effect of meaning, generates value, and this value, for instance, in its correlation, takes the form of the associative σῆμα. Saussure then describes a *kenome* as a kind of cavity, symbolized by ∩, representing something open to relation but incapable of containing anything by itself. The juxtaposition of two *kenomes*, for example, as ⊃ ⊂, produces the effect that, in their intersection—when they enter into *relation*—these two voids become capable of 'containing' something (see the illustration in Fig. 9).

Of course, the symbolic representation is meant to illustrate the idea: the associative σῆμα produces the effect of semantic substance by associating two κενώ (two voids). In fact, given the absolute arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, all that can be observed is precisely the *kenome* and the associative *sema*.[125] Saussure at this point draws a rectangle ▭, divides it into two triangles ◸ ◿, and comments on this sketch. What we obtain is the schematic representation of a linguistic sign.

> *Item*. Représentation de l'unité linguistique par ◩, ◿
> *Item*. Y a-t-il jamais lieu de parler de ◸?
> Ce ne pourrait être qu'au point de vue diachronique.[126]

Saussure will revisit this concept in another section, indicating that the line separating the two triangles should rather be dashed, as it does not signify a clear-cut demarcation but rather an arbitrary boundary that simultaneously establishes a relational connection. For this reason, he uses a dashed line and also proposes the idea of a circle bisected by a dashed line as an alternative to the more rigid

125. Ibid., 93.
126. Ibid., 95.

figure previously mentioned. This would represent the same idea: "La réalité de l'existence des fils relient entre eux les éléments d'une langue, bien que fait psychologique immense, n'a pour ainsi dire pas besoin d'être démontrée. C'est cela même qui fait la langue."[127] Furthermore,

> Lorsqu'on représente le mot, etc. par des signaux visuels juxtaposés comme ◨, cela est parfaitement juste, mais encore à condition que le signal consistera dans la juxtaposition indéfinie, et ne consistera pas par exemple à hisser 1°, ◧ 2° ▭ etc., car alors il y a deux ordres d'idées confondus, et justement ◧ est un exemple de la simultanéité possible (ou non-unispatialité) du sème visuel, du reste lui-même seulement s'il st démembrable.[128]

A further exploration of the theme of kenomic association is provided by the *Anciens documents*, particularly a passage focusing on the phonatory act. This passage employs a complex schema that reiterates the division of the associative *sema*, which I reproduce here (Fig. 10) translated but represented exactly as Saussure does.[129]

This schema serves to explain a fundamental aspect of the phonatory mechanism. In commenting on it, Saussure argues that in the executory act of language, the phonatory act is a necessary though not essential tool (as communication can rely solely on written means or visual representations in general) for defining linguistic units. However, perception lies at the heart of everything, and thus the linguist's primary interest must lie in auditory perception. While the physical articulation of sounds is crucial to enable their production, a sound emission is itself insignificant (in the literal sense of non-signifying) without a perceptual apparatus capable of interpreting it.

127. Ibid., 103.
128. Ibid., 112.
129. Ibid., 248.

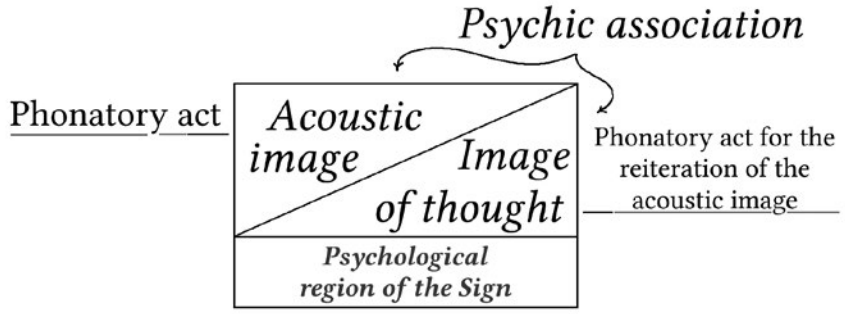

Fig. 10 — In this scheme I report the conception of the linguistic sign found in Saussure's manuscripts. As we can see from this scheme the sign outlines a reality built exclusively on the psychic level, on which the psychosemantic dualism also develops, which is therefore not an ontological dualism between physical and mental reality. The "*acte phonatoire*" (phonatory act) does not represent a physical or physiological datum, as the latter are only conformations that adapt to a psychic construction. Point d. in fact refers to "Acoustic Image" (*image acoustique*) while the concept of "Image of Thought" (*image de pensée*) is expressed by "Phonatory Act" that reiterates the acoustic image (*acte phonatoire en vue de répéter l'image acoustique*). All these elements are, as Saussure specifies, in the "*région du Signe,*" which is described as "*psychologique*" (the "Psychological region of the Sign"). Finally, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is the "*association psychique*" (Psychic association) thus, a psychosemantic dualism.

Therefore, even articulatory choices stem from the same basis, with perception governing language in a broader sense, and auditory perception specifically concerning the understanding of articulated sounds. Perceiving a certain sound in the context of a phonetic chain means situating it correctly within the phonological system of a language *in relation to which* certain sounds serve to articulate specific lexemes. Despite the countless possibilities for producing the sound [a], it is remarkable that, within the necessity of distinguishing it—for example, from [e] in a linguistic system that recognizes the distinction between these sounds—[a] can consistently be perceived as such. In reality, even in a system like English, which has one of the highest numbers of distinctive vowels and thus requires significant effort to manage them (they are approximately nineteen, a rough average between British and American variants), the perception of [a] remains feasible.

Even within the phonetic context of a single vowel such as [a], every speaker can produce a different [a]—indeed, innumerable variations of [a]. Yet, despite the fact that speakers do not have identical voices in every respect, always capable of perfectly reproducing the same sounds, auditory perception enables the comprehension of my [a] as well as that of another speaker. The centrality of the perceptual system in Saussure's thought also extends to acoustic physiology, which has no interest in describing sounds on a physical level unless they are simultaneously anchored to the perception of those sounds, the true focal point of all research. Naturally, and this is quite implicit based on the premises discussed so far, the same principle applies to any other aspect of language in general, where perception is the central element. The same organizational system of oppositional structures applies to morphology, semantics, signification, and so on.

Moreover, as Atlani-Voisin points out, it is precisely from a reflection on Sanskrit that Saussure postulates the unity of morphology and signification.[130] Additionally, Atlani-Voisin suggests a comparability between Saussure's work and Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, specifically citing passages concerning *nāma* and its interpretation in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmic work, as well as *rūpa*. This suggestion could in fact extend much further back than Vasubandhu, as we have seen that even in the Pāli suttas, highly detailed and complex psychosemantic theories are expounded. However, even without Atlani-Voisin's suggestion, it is easy to intuit that the Indian tradition was more than a mere influence. After all, Saussure was "éminent connaisseur des Veda, du sanskrit et de la philosophie linguistique indienne."[131]

130. Atlani-Voisin, "Le Don de l'Inde," 81.
131. Ibid., 84.

Chapter 2
Foundations of Buddhist Phenomenological Analysis (SN 12.44)

yathā adho tathā uddhaṃ,
yathā uddhaṃ tathā adho

"As below, so above;
as above, so below."
(SN 51.20)

The discourse that will serve as an inspiration for this second chapter is actually one of many similar texts dispersed throughout the Pāli texts. I have identified one text that will serve as our primary guide, though we will frequently reference other suttas with similar titles and analogous content. Furthermore, the themes covered in this sutta appear as sub-themes in numerous other discourses.

The subject in question is immensely vast; it has occupied many years of my study, and several articles would scarcely suffice to capture its significance within the Pāli canon alone. The topic at hand is "the world" (*loka*), yet not merely in itself, but also regarding its origin and "cessation." There is indeed substantial discussion of the world, though not as one might expect from a "religion" steeped in mysticism or exotic allure, as some may envision Buddhism.

The concept of the world is presented analytically, with commendable methodological rigor, forming an authentic phenomenology of what we call "the world." Soon we will examine how it is described. I have chosen SN 12.44 as our central text due to the strong images evoked by its opening verses, which I will soon reproduce here. However, as previously noted, this is not the only *Lokasutta*; thus, it is more fitting to speak of *Lokasutta*s, and, as such, we should prepare for digressions and connections across various parts of the corpus.

'lokassa, bhikkhave, samudayañca atthaṅgamañca desessāmi.
taṃ suṇātha, sādhukaṃ manasi karotha, bhāsissāmī'ti.
'evaṃ, bhante'ti kho te bhikkhū bhagavato paccassosuṃ.
bhagavā etadavoca: 'katamo ca, bhikkhave, lokassa samudayo?
cakkhuñca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ. tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso.
phassapaccayā vedanā; vedanāpaccayā taṇhā; taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ; upādānapaccayā bhavo; bhavapaccayā jāti; jātipaccayā jarāmaraṇaṃ sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā sambhavanti.
ayaṃ kho, bhikkhave, lokassa samudayo.'

Regarding the world, O mendicants, I will teach you of its origin and end. Listen with attention and mindful devotion, for I shall speak.
"Yes, sir," they replied. Then the Buddha said:
And what, O mendicants, is the origin of the world? Visual consciousness arises dependent on the eye and visible forms; the union of these three is called "contact."
Contact is the condition for feeling, feeling for craving, craving for clinging, clinging for becoming, and becoming for rebirth. Rebirth is the condition for aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress. This, O mendicants, is the origin of the world.

(SN 12.44)

The same framework is repeated for consciousness linked to each of the other five sensory organs, including the mind-thought. Each of these, too, is considered an "origin of the world." At this point, we might ask: "And what is the end of the world?" (*katamo ca, bhikkhave, lokassa atthaṅgamo*).

We can readily anticipate the answer: while we cannot entirely stop sensory perception or contact—which, in themselves, may not be harmful—we can eliminate the conditions for clinging: "When clinging dissipates and ceases, leaving nothing behind, grasping ceases; with the cessation of grasping, becoming ceases… and thus is the cessation of the whole mass of suffering; this is the end of the world" (*tassāyeva taṇhāya asesavirāganirodhā upādānanirodho upādānanirodhā bhavanirodho ... pe... evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa nirodho hoti; ayaṃ kho, bhikkhave, lokassa atthaṅgamo'ti*).

In truth, this teaching is far more complex than it may seem at first glance, as it describes the world as an entity constructed from

cognitively organized perceptions. The world encompasses much more and poses a problem of much greater breadth, as evidenced by references in various other parts of the canon.

For now, however, let us begin with the simpler aspects. The world can be described both as something that can come to an end (*lokassa atthaṅgama*) and as something that can be made to cease (*lokanirodho*). Both outcomes are possible for a world described as "originated" (*samudaya*). The Buddha is the one who has fully understood the origin of the world and has realized, or experienced personally, its cessation (*lokasamudayo tathāgatena abhisambuddho... lokanirodho tathāgatassa sacchikato*, AN 4.23).

The cessation of the world is also something that must be "fully understood" (*lokanirodho abhisambuddho*), as it implies the realization of a path that leads to the end of the world (*lokanirodhagāminī paṭipadā*). This is not a matter of simple theoretical speculation or the attainment of trivial knowledge. In AN 4.23, it is described as a comprehension of "the entire world" (*sabbaṃ lokaṃ abhiññāya*) and all that is within it "as it truly is" (*sabbaṃ loke yathātathaṃ*). The use of these expressions—"the totality of the world" (*sabbaṃ lokaṃ*) and "everything within the world as-it-is" (*sabbaṃ loke yathātathaṃ*)—is highly significant. The concept of absolute reality, the "as-it-is" (*yathātathaṃ*), already implies a substantial idea, as it presumes that worldly things do not normally appear to us perfectly, entirely.

Recognizing this is an initial step, but how does one reach this *yathātathaṃ*? Through what tremendous effort? The term *sabbaṃ*, "everything," "in its entirety," provides an initial hint. This concept is immeasurable, and the Buddhists only use it in certain contexts. The totality implies all possible manifestations of being, beyond what we conventionally attest as phenomena, which represent a mere infinitesimal fraction of the whole. Assembling parts, even if by summation, into a potentiality that transcends quantitative values is impossible.

However, for the Buddhists, there is a way, and it is through contemplative practice. Achieving the "supreme peace" (*paramā santi*) that the Buddha attains through detachment from the entirety of the world (*sabbaṃ lokaṃ visaṃyutto*) requires understanding yet another aspect

of the problem, which will be analyzed further. The *paramā santi* is not mere skeptical ἀταραξία but something transcendent (*lokuttara*).[1]

The content of AN 4.23 appears nearly identical in Iti 112. The text emphasizes the release from every bond (*sabbaganthappamocano*) using the metaphor of the yoke, a critical concept within this system of thought, to which I will devote a separate section (§4.8). The concept of origin and end of the world, as seen in SN 12.44, is expressed almost identically in SN 35.107 and in a more poetic form in SN 35.82, which uses wordplay with the verb *lujjati* ("is broken," "canceled," "to wear away") and *loka* ("world"). This wordplay would have been apparent to speakers of Indo-Aryan dialects, as the verb *lujjati* (√*luj*)[2] is phonetically similar to *loka* (√*lok*-)[3] due to the same principle by which verb or noun roots featuring voiceless or voiced velar stops are sometimes rendered by a postalveolar affricate, also voiceless or voiced. A well-known example is the term *yoga* ("yoke," "union," "effort"), whose root is √*yuj*-.[4]

Thus, with the wordplay *loka*/*lujjati*, the Buddha reiterates the framework by which the world is directed by sensory perceptions, now portrayed as destructive, corrosive factors: "the eye is wearing away" (*cakkhu kho, bhikkhu, lujjati*), "forms are wearing away" (*rūpā lujjanti*), and so forth.

Another important text to mention is Dhp 167 for its use of a unique expression in connection with the consequences of incorrect views (*micchādiṭṭhiṃ*), namely that they "perpetuate the world" (*siyā lokavaḍḍhano*), and then in Dhp 170, it says: "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*). This poetic metaphor of the world as a bubble-mirage (*pubbuḷakaṃ*) warrants particular attention. In

1. Divino, "In This World or the Next: Investigation Over the 'End of the World' in Contemplative Practice Through the Pāli Canon."
2. T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part VII* (The Pali Text Society, 1924), 42.
3. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Dictionary English and Sanskrit*, 906.
4. Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part VII*, 14.

the following verse, Dhp 171, it again advises caution: the world is adorned like a royal chariot (*etha passathimaṃ lokaṃ, cittaṃ rājarathūpamaṃ*), and fools are deceived by its splendor, beauty, and opulence, so the world deceives them: "this is where fools flounder" (*yattha bālā visīdanti*).

This metaphor of people floundering, drowning in passions and ephemeral worldly things, is employed repeatedly. For example, the powerful metaphor in Snp 4.2: "I behold the people of the world floundering, devoted to yearning for becoming" (*passāmi loke pariphandamānaṃ, pajaṃ imaṃ taṇhagataṃ bhavesu*). Yet there are those immune to such ephemeral and deceptive things: one who discerns correctly is not bound (*natthi saṅgo vijānataṃ*). Furthermore, Dhp 172 says that one whose evil deeds are overcome by good will illuminate the world like the cloudless moon (*yassa pāpaṃ kataṃ kammaṃ, kusalena pidhīyati; somaṃ lokaṃ pabhāseti, abbhā muttova candimā*). This metaphor reveals additional insights. If the world is normally without light, lacking brightness, then it is normally a dark, uninviting place. Dhp 173 states that the world is "blind" (*andhabhūto ayaṃ loko*), as few are those capable of truly seeing (*tanukettha vipassati*).

We have laid the groundwork; now we will begin to build the details of this phenomenological endeavor. In discussing phenomenological analysis, there are certain foundational themes we must keep in mind. My reference to these particular analyses of reality and perceptual processes—which Buddhists have traced since their earliest texts—as 'phenomenologies' is largely influenced by Husserl's conception of phenomenology. Nonetheless, there are key points at which these two perspectives diverge, particularly regarding the concept of limit and the underlying purpose of the phenomenological endeavor itself. I refer to it as an endeavor because such analyses demand a profound ability to break free from habitual ways of perceiving the world, ways that often operate automatically, without deliberate control. This approach also requires significant resolve to engage deeply with this unsettling domain, where familiar perceptions and elements of our world are no longer experienced as they once were; they lose their recognizability and familiarity. What previously appeared 'normal' is unmasked as deceptive or as mere

appearance. Appearances, while observable and real in the sense of 'being something,' are partial, misleading, and even potentially dangerous.

One might argue that Husserl and the Buddha begin from remarkably similar, if not identical, assumptions. Perceptions construct a 'world' around us, something that feels familiar. Cognition, in turn, molds this world, organizing it from sensory data into an initial, coherent image. This cognitive organization imbues the world with more stable, well-defined conceptual identities, assigning names and fixed identities to phenomena, thus abstracting them from the dynamic flux of change, which is then incorporated into a neatly ordered system. Here, however, lies the problem: can we be certain that the 'world' created by these processes faithfully represents reality?

This question applies not only to the more naïve and superficial elements of perception-cognition but also to the more sophisticated and complex structures with which epistemological systems attempt to represent reality. Systems designed to exert control over reality—whether in social organizations or planetary resources—are all founded on the principle of description, a systematized form of cognition. This descriptive framework serves to organize the world into rigorous systems of knowledge, where objects are clearly identifiable through scientific nomenclature, and their roles and potentials are aligned with the apparatus that seeks to leverage them. This applies as much to material resources as it does to more abstract entities like social groups. Sociology, essentially, is an epistemology of social groups, oriented toward recognizing their dynamics for purposes of control; it ultimately leads to this objective. Therefore, even diverse 'objects' like social groups can be subsumed under epistemological systems that observe and organize them. Linguistics performs a similar role with languages, just as chemistry does with elements. These disciplines aim to understand how objects behave in various contexts, to classify them within a rigorous body of knowledge that explains their behaviors, and ultimately to derive mechanisms for manipulation and control. These intentions are well summarized in §27 of Husserl's first *Ideen* volume, which I anticipate here only to give us an indication of the methodology we will have to deal with, but which we will explore in more depth as we proceed with this examination.

> Ich bin mir einer Welt bewußt, endlos ausgebreitet im Raum, endlos werdend und geworden in der Zeit. Ich bin mir ihrer bewußt, das sagt vor allem: ich finde sie unmittelbar anschaulich vor, ich erfahre sie. Durch Sehen, Tasten, Hören usw., in den verschiedenen Weisen sinnlicher Wahrnehmung sind körperliche Dinge in irgendeiner räumlichen Verteilung für mich einfach da, im wörtlichen oder bildlichen Sinne „*vorhanden*", ob ich auf sie besonders achtsam und mit ihnen betrachtend, denkend, fühlend, wollend beschäftigt bin oder nicht.[5]

The important elements of §27 of *Ideen 1* are numerous, and all of them should be kept in mind: first of all, one is aware of a world (*Ich bin mir einer Welt bewußt*) that potentially extends infinitely (*endlos*) both spatially and temporally, however, being aware means that the world is "immediately" understood as "before" me, that is, one can have experience of it (*ich finde sie unmittelbar anschaulich vor, ich erfahre sie*). The other pivotal idea expressed here is found just a little further on: "it is essential," to perceive the things of the world, that they manifest themselves to me as "objects" (regardless of whether they are animate or inanimate), that is, understood as being in my "perceptive field" (*Es ist aber nicht nötig, daß sie, und ebenso sonstige Gegenstände, sich gerade in meinem* Wahrnehmungsfelde *befinden*).

This is the key concept that will accompany us from now on: field, area, delimitation, how far my sphere of perceptions extends, Buddhists would say, the boundaries beyond which my perceptive power cannot reach. The human eye is not a telescope, nor can it see through solid objects. These are two classic limits that we can understand as defining the visual perceptive field, but we can easily imagine others for other senses: how far can we perceive smells? Up to what frequency can my ear perceive sounds? We should also include the 'sixth' sense for Buddhists: thought (*manas*), the definition of whose limits will be a very interesting topic.

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5. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 56.

> Für mich da sind wirkliche Objekte, als bestimmte, mehr oder minder bekannte, in eins mit den aktuell wahrgenommenen, ohne daß sie selbst wahrgenommen, ja selbst anschaulich gegenwärtig sind.[6]

The set of objects that I can place inside the 'sphere' of my *Wahrnehmungsfelde* or my *āyatana*s, to use the Buddhist term, are what are said to be co-present in my consciousness (*als da und dort in meiner unmittelbar mitbewußten Umgebung seiend*). Husserl gives the example of where he can cast his gaze: the desk, then turning around the room and even to the veranda, the garden and the children playing outside, but no further (*Ich kann meine Aufmerksamkeit wandern lassen von dem eben gesehenen und beachteten Schreibtisch aus durch die ungesehenen Teile des Zimmers hinter meinem Rücken zur Veranda, in den Garten, zu den Kindern in der Laube usw.* …).

The world, therefore, is a system of organized objects. From the most naïve to the most rigorous perspectives, the 'world' is invariably such a system, with humanity as an integral part. However, humans can only conceive 'worlds' to the extent that their perceptual-cognitive faculties allow, which are far from comprehensive and are indeed limiting. These faculties cannot easily encompass all possible knowledge, nor do they provide a holistic or absolute vision of reality; rather, they reduce it to small, accessible perimeters, yielding only a pseudo-reality—a system that appears coherent yet is chaotic in its restriction of limitless possibilities to a small, conceivable boundary. We are like sailors unable to see the ocean, navigating invisible waters, attempting to discern the laws of waves and storms based only on limited experiences and faculties.

Our body is like a ship navigating these unseen waters: it inevitably responds to their influences, yet often lacks the understanding of why. An unpredictable variable, such as a massive wave poised to overwhelm us, may only be detected through its consequences, often just before it is too late. The ocean is invisible to us, and vast—immensely larger than the limited perimeter needed for our vessel to navigate safely. In calm waters, this invisibility may not matter; we can predict consequences of mild turbulence based on our experience and build a

6. Ibid., 57.

'science of navigation' that allows us to counteract moderate challenges by observing our ship's reactions. But this capability only extends as far as these consequences are perceivable—that is, as far as they directly influence our vessel. How could we know if, miles away in the same waters, a storm rages, currents swirl destructively, or a maelström awaits? If we were ever to venture into those waters, such dire outcomes would not always be foreseeable.

One might object that science employs rigor specifically to foresee these eventualities and expand our knowledge's boundaries as far as possible. True; yet, who can guarantee that the premises it relies on do not lead to new limitations? How can we know that we have not created a system valid only up to a point, which generates merely another illusion of knowledge and mastery over reality, while other aspects remain hidden simply because our system fails to detect even their indirect effects? Entire portions of reality may elude our awareness simply because they do not, apparently, impact our knowledge system, even indirectly. And yet, they may still exist and may not be harmless.

The sense of this limit is understood differently by Buddhists and Husserl. Buddhists see the limit as something that can, albeit laboriously, be overcome through ascetic discipline, whereas Husserl views it as a given to be accepted. Husserl advocates for a system of knowledge that, at the very least, takes perceptions seriously—as they are the only factual basis we have—and suspends judgment (ἐποχή) regarding what I previously referred to as cognitions, as they are potentially erroneous constructs. By returning to a prior stage and forgoing judgment and cognitive preconceptions, one can attempt to interpret perceptual data—the sole certainty we possess—with the greatest care. Here, I am, of course, simplifying Husserl's perspective, but as we proceed, we will see why it is precisely in the domain of perception that these two systems diverge, despite both proposing a phenomenology of sorts.

The theme of conditionality, which we have already introduced in the previous chapter, serves as a cornerstone in Buddhist phenomenological analysis. This concept challenges any cognitive biases, which it regards as potentially misleading tendencies. To clarify, it is not inherently problematic to label something as a "tree"; however, doing so

without questioning what precisely makes a tree a "tree" reflects a form of fideism. This attitude goes beyond the pragmatic act of naming and touches on a more profound inquiry into the phenomenon we perceive. All of these convictions collapse when we ask ourselves what defines a tree. A tree certainly does not emerge from nothing, as nothing can indeed come from nothing. So, something exists—something appears to us, undeniably as 'something.' But what are its boundaries? What are its distinctive characteristics? And do these qualities necessarily pertain to the tree itself? Are they properties that emanate from the tree as a tree, or are they rather general aspects that we extract from the tree without them necessarily being part of the tree as an autonomous entity? Here lies the crux of the issue. For the tree does not remain fixed.

Certainly, from a more relative perspective, one could argue that the entire universe—if freed from the temporal construct, which pertains more to our perceptual framework organized to perceive a sequential unfolding of things—could be understood as a vast, atemporal unity. However, our perceptions are limited; we experience time sequentially, and thus, even though a book inherently contains the entirety of its storyline, we can only assimilate it page by page. This process, however, creates an odd illusion—one that we might otherwise find absurd—the notion that the 'things' we encounter as we proceed through experience are indeed "things," autonomous and self-sufficient, distinct and discrete in themselves.

The dilemma then arises: where does the tree begin? *When* does the tree begin? If we were to trace it back, we would observe it growing from the ground, becoming progressively larger. Before it was a tree, it was a tiny sapling, and before that, a seed—a small seed. This seed already contained within it the entirety of the immense tree it would become, not only from a temporal perspective but 'genetically' as well: the enormous tree was already present in the small seed. And prior to this, the seed presumably originated within a fruit, which itself was produced by another tree. Thus, a tree within a tree, or rather, countless trees within a tree, each capable of producing many other trees. But ultimately, what is this "tree"? How can we resolve the conundrum of its seemingly indefinable boundary?

What we call "things" appear to be mere phenomenal glimpses of an inseparable continuum as it unfolds before us. We recognize them as "things" because we emphasize certain *phanies* (see §1.5), certain discrete appearings at specific moments in history. Yet they are simply *phanies*—prominent moments of appearing within a continuous and unceasing process of appearing, part of a phenomenological unity that our perception struggles to distinguish. Otherwise, our perceptions risk being misled by an over-reliance on the more conspicuous aspects of epiphenomenology.

Since this experiential reality possesses a distinct moment within consciousness, it is precisely this consciousness that must be expanded and extended as fully as possible to transcend its intrinsic limitations that otherwise construct this "world" for us. Husserl's concept of ἐποχή is a commendable attempt in this direction, notably akin to the Buddhist state of *animitta*, notwithstanding the critical issues within the ἐποχή system that I have previously highlighted.

Husserl argues that it is possible to attain a form of "natural knowledge," which arises from experience and remains embedded within it. His focus is thus on a natural theoretical attitude, one that moves from experience (*Erfahrung*) toward *Natürliche Erkenntnis*. This knowledge, however, should not be understood in a positivistic sense—a point I will elaborate on shortly.

The investigations oriented toward this *Natürliche Erkenntnis* are themselves, of course, *natürliche*, with *Theoretische Einstellung*, the theoretical attitude, serving as one example. The broader horizon of these inquiries, which is interesting here as it relates to the theme of this chapter, is what Husserl calls *Welt*, or "world."[7] The sciences of the world, which also encompass the sciences stemming from this original or *ursprünglichen Einstellung*, are directed toward real objects that necessarily coalesce within the unity of the world itself: a being (*Sein*) that is necessarily "*Sein in der Welt.*"[8]

At this point, we encounter a problem. Husserl frequently uses the adjective "originary" (*originärer*), applying it in various ways. This is

7. Ibid., 7.
8. Ibid.

why I began this chapter with a discussion of the origin of the world according to Buddhist thought (*lokassa samudaya*). For if we interpret *originärer* as "primordial" from a temporal standpoint, we risk falling into a foundational mythology. If we interpret *originärer* as "pure" or "untouched," we are likewise treading on uncertain ground, as I will explain. I urge readers to consider *originärer* not in an auroral sense, nor as a reference to an assumed pristine stage of perception in which it might comprehend the world before cognitive constructs distort it. Rather, we should understand *originärer* as *samudaya*: the capacity to trace back to the causes and conditions (*hetupaccaya*) that structure a complex phenomenon, compelling us to perceive it not as an isolated entity, but as part of an inseparable relationship to a more complex "whole" (*sabba*), one made intelligible by *hetupaccaya*, the causal relationship—a theme of great significance in Buddhism.

The question that may arise naturally is to what extent Husserl might have intended *originärer* in this way. I confess I am not entirely convinced. Husserl himself dangerously verges on mythological implications when he speaks of an *originärer Gegebenheit*, as if the givenness of things to human utility involved distinct stages, or as if things were to be grasped within a pure, untainted foundation where they genuinely "present" themselves, whereas now we can no longer see them as such. This would sidestep the true problem of perception: perceptions are inherently limited from the outset; they are not originarily pure only to later become corrupted—they are instead problematic from the very beginning.

Husserl understands the *natürlichen Erkenntnissphäre* as an equally *natürlichen Erfahrung*, which is precisely "perception" (*Wahrnehmung*) in the usual sense of everyday language. In contrast to an immediate perception, *Welt* is an ensemble of objects of possible experience and empirical knowledge rendered knowable by theoretical thought. We should bear in mind this definition of *Welt* as "der Gesamtinbegriff von Gegenständen möglicher Erfahrung und Erfahrungserkenntnis, von Gegenständen, die auf Grund aktueller Erfahrungen in richtigem theoretischen Denken erkennbar sind."[9]

9. Ibid., 11.

Another aspect of interest to Husserl is the alignment of experiential sciences (*Erfahrungswissenschaften*) with the sciences of factual data (*Tatsachenwissenchaften*).[10] Additionally, we must consider that all things, structured in a particular way, vary in time, space, and physical forms, rendering each of these things contingent (*zufällig*) on its relative state. Contingency, for Husserl, is specific to *Sein*. Furthermore, contingency is a factual given and correlates with necessity ("Zufälligkeit und Tatsächlichkeit... daß sie korrelativ bezogen ist auf eine *Notwendigkeit*").[11]

Moreover, what we believe we observe in the establishment of so-called natural laws is nothing more than the determination of conditions of action given by particular consequences. These consequences express factual rules, which themselves presuppose, to be so named, certain 'experiencable' objects (derived from possible experience), ordered and contingent due to these very laws.

> Mögen auch bestimmte Naturgesetze gelten, vermöge deren, wenn die und die realen Umstände faktisch sind, die und die bestimmten Folgen faktisch sein müssen: solche Gesetze drücken doch nur faktische Regelungen aus, die selbst ganz anders lauten könnten und die schon voraussetzen, als zum Wes e n von Gegenständen möglicher Erfahrung von vornherein gehörig, daß dergleichen von ihnen geregelte Gegenstände an sich selbst betrachtet zufällig sind.[12]

However, caution is warranted against believing in an "εἶδος graspable in its purity," as if ascending toward an essence embedded within a hierarchy of eidetic truths. As previously stated, I am skeptical of this possibility—not because I reject the existence of absolute principles governing things, nor because I doubt that every entity, every existent, that is, every thing that 'is,' is fundamentally a being, equal to all other entities and thus independent of the ontic configurations that phenomena assume as appearances. These appearances derive from the entity's unique "region" and "form" (to use a geometric metaphor),

10. Ibid., 12.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 12.

but ultimately it remains a being. The ontological substrate is simply this: "what-is" (*sat-ya*, or "truth," *sacca* in Pāli) should be understood as a dynamic unity, indivisible into parts, yet manifest within a complex network of phenomena that creates the impression that discrete occurrences, isolated by our attention, are independent things.

In reality, being is an immense, immeasurable unity—neither finite nor infinite, yet undeniably indivisible and, at the same time, multiple. This multiplicity is rendered through various phenomenological aspects, which can be mistaken for separate and independent entities, whereas in reality, they are aspects of a single being. This does not negate their intrinsic and fundamental difference; for instance, the aspect of being that appears as the phenomenon of a "mountain" will differ from the aspect of being that appears as the phenomenon of a "tree." Yet these are merely conventions, meant to account for the factual differences among these aspects. These differences are certainly real, but they are real to the extent that they are forms of complexity, irreducible to mere diversity and, therefore, inseparable from a fundamental unity with being.

The tree *is*, and the mountain *is*, in the same way; yet they appear distinct, they *are* distinct. Both *are*, despite their differences, because both are manifestations of being, expressed in distinct aspects of itself. This implies that the fundamental relation that supports them is ontological—it is simply *being*. Shall we call it *essence*? I find this problematic, as essence implies a sort of extraction process, a purification beyond which the true nature of things would be revealed. Yet there is nothing to purify. There is no pure being 'behind' the mountain or 'behind' the tree as though they concealed this more fundamental essence.

Being must necessarily exist in every aspect, even the most ephemeral and partial. This does not make it, any less ephemeral or partial, nor less dangerous to absolutize or approach as such. The Husserlian object is not conceived as an unrepeatable "Dies da" but as an "in Sich Selbst" constituted in its own distinctive way.[13] Here, the question arises: can eidetic seeing perceive the εἶδος or pure essence of being? Husserl seems convinced that an effort directed toward the εἶδος (a

13. Ibid.

term conveniently translatable as "form"[14] or "aspect" and thus appearing very similar to the Buddhist *rūpa*) can indeed recover this essence: εἶδος is thus understood as form in the purest, uncorrupted sense, stripped of subsequent constructions, which may reveal the essence of the thing in its original givenness.

> Zunächst bezeichnete „Wesen" das im selbsteigenen Sein eines Individuum als sein Was Vorfindliche. Jedes solches Was kann aber „*in Idee gesetzt*" werden. *Erfahrende* oder *individuelle Anschauung* kann in *Wesensschauung* (*Ideation*) umgewandelt werden — eine Möglichkeit, die selbst nicht als empirische, sondern als Wesensmöglichkeit zu verstehen ist. Das Erschaute ist dann das entsprechende reine Wesen oder Eidos, sei es die oberste Kategorie, sei es eine Besonderung derselben, bis herab zur vollen Konkretion.[15]

The scheme of phenomenological analysis in Husserl can therefore be summarized as follows: the possibility of intuiting the essence by means of ideation reaches the point of recovering the purest εἶδος of the thing understood as the upper category, if it is to have a special nature (*die oberste Kategorie, sei es eine Besonderung derselben*).

$$\textit{Wesensschauung} \xrightarrow{\textit{ideation}} \text{εἶδος}$$

It is precisely the danger of the idea of origins that I wish to draw the reader's attention to: if we convince ourselves that at some point in human history, or in the development of an individual, there existed a state unsullied by language and thus capable of pure perceptions, where things were seen as they naturally 'are' or in their original 'givenness,' we fall into the same error as those who posit a legendary foundation of the modern world and a fall of humankind, creating a foundational myth that explains little about the real problem and instead establishes the mundane reality through myth.

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14. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 379–80.
15. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 13.

However, these reflections should not be misinterpreted: the issue indeed exists, and one can certainly speak to a degree about our incapacity to perceive reality in its totality. But this is not due to an 'originary' condition; rather, it is an aspect of something that has always been a total unity, whose multiple manifestations reveal themselves progressively in changeable aspects. This has nothing to do with foundation or creation, yet it certainly points to our inability—limited by our far-from-immediate perceptions—to conceive of this totality.

The issue, therefore, is significantly different: immediate perceptions do not exist, and perception itself is mediation. Perception is a mediated experience through one or more perceptual channels—for instance, visual perception necessarily occurs via the visual organ, through which reality is perceived in a form we understand as visual, ultimately experienced as visual images that inevitably reduce or simplify reality. These reductions and simplifications do not reflect the world in its full truth but represent a limited testimony to what appears as 'manifest' within the boundaries of the world—places of limitation and mediation. Since we cannot speak of an originary condition—no point in time exists where these limitations were absent in our experience—one must not invoke a time 'outside of time,' which would exceed the scope of this inquiry. Thus, we should speak of a different type of issue: an atemporal unity, an infinitely complex totality that includes us as experiencers who are part of this whole. Observing this totality from a vantage point constrained by our limitations, we inevitably reduce it to a series of omissions or experiences, unable to fully convey the boundless complexity of this totality. We can only partially attest to what manifests within the "circles of the world"—the domains of limitation.

Given that Husserl anticipates the possibility that this gaze may sometimes be inadequate, it is nonetheless conceived as potentially capable of apprehending essence and the primordial (*originärgebende* Erschauung kann eine *adäquate* sein). Here arises the paradox of adequacy, which I will clarify shortly.

An inadequate apprehension implies that the essence of a thing is revealed only metaphorically, from one of its many sides; however,

this suggests that it is the normal human perceptual system that is inadequate. To illustrate this, I will use a geometrical example, given that Husserl employs the metaphor of sides.

Fig. 11 — A die can only be seen like in this illustration. Only three faces at once.

Consider a die. A standard game die is a cube, thus presenting six square faces. Our visual perceptual system cannot see through solid objects, nor can it bend light in any way. Placed on a table or flat surface, the die will reveal at best only three of its six faces to us. Even if we reposition ourselves to see different faces, we will inevitably obscure others, resulting in a maximum view of only three faces at any one time. The same occurs if we move the die itself. Admittedly, a strategically placed mirror could remedy this intrinsic limitation of our system, as it allows us to transcend our perceptual and, most importantly, sensorial limits.

Now consider instead a singular page taken from a book. Its written side would reveal itself in its entirety if placed on the same flat surface. Of course, if there were writing on both sides, we would encounter another limit, but for the sake of example, let us focus on a single side.

Thus, we encounter two different cases: an object with a single face can present itself to us in its entirety. In this case, the perceptual system is deemed *adäquate* because it is able to grasp all relevant aspects. In the case of the die, however, the perceptual system is *inadäquate*,

as, regardless of our positioning relative to the die, we can see only three of its six faces at once, no matter what.

For Husserl, empirical perception, and especially experience, are considered capable of apprehending an object in its givenness—that is, in its originary (*originär*). In this context, I prefer to speak of *originary* rather than *original*, as the latter translation risks even more to convey the idea of a 'primordial' state in the evolutionary or historical sense, or even suggesting a notion of 'purity'—a connotation I do not find appropriate.

> Empirische Anschauung, speziell Erfahrung, ist Bewußtsein von einem individuellen Gegenstand, und als anschauendes „bringt sie ihn zur Gegebenheit", als Wahrnehmung zu originärer Gegebenheit, zum Bewußtsein, den Gegenstand „originär", in seiner „*leibhaftigen*" Selbstheit zu erfassen.[16]

This insistence on the *Gegenstand*, in my view, is a double-edged sword if not handled with care. We must be very cautious not to slip into Heideggerian mythologemes or into constructing a narrative of the auroral or primordial that could dangerously deviate from genuine phenomenology.

Incidentally, does the Buddhist concept of *yathābhūtaṃ*, which we have occasionally encountered so far, coincide with the idea of the *originär*? In some respects, yes, if we see it through Husserl's lens, but not entirely. The comparison between εἶδος and *rūpa* is not absolute; it is valid only in certain contexts. The complexity increases when the Abhidhamma introduces concepts like *rūparūpa* or *rūpassa rūpatā*, or even just *rūpatā*, which in themselves elevate the discourse to a more technical level. This means we must be even more careful in comparing *yathābhūtaṃ*—and subsequently derived concepts like *tattva* or *tathātā*—to the Husserlian *originär*. At the very least, we should avoid doing so uncritically.

The paradox of inadequacy helps to clarify this point. As we have read in Husserl, what becomes evident is that perceptions are not inherently adequate or inadequate; rather, perception is configured as adequate or inadequate depending on the object with which it relates.

16. Ibid., 14–15.

Thus, it may be adequate when facing a one-sided object, but inadequate when facing an object with six sides that reveals only three.

This idea does not find a direct analogue in the Buddhist conception of *saḷāyatana*, as the perceptual spheres are inherently limiting, and there is no illusion of situations in which they can be fully reliable. Similarly, however, while Husserl resigns himself to the impossibility of transcending this limitation—a limit he acknowledges and skeptically accepts, merely advising caution against overreliance on it—Buddhism, by contrast, strongly believes in the possibility of transcending it. Hence, the attitude toward the analysis of reality differs significantly: Husserl aims for a rigor that addresses the limitations and inadequacies intrinsic to the perceptual system, focusing on what can be relied upon while discrediting what is recognized as inadequate. Buddhism, on the other hand, opts for rigor in contemplative practice, whose ultimate aim is to dismantle the very limiting nature of perceptions, subverting habitual patterns and accessing a phase of 'awareness' that transcends 'consciousness' in the usual sense, which is typically a divisive and organizing factor in reality. Instead, it aims toward an attestation of the absolute reality of phenomena, recognized in the form of a factual unity with ourselves, breaking down the axis of witness/witnessed, i.e., perceiver/perceived, and thus subject/object, which Husserl, however, retains.

How this stage of dualism breakdown is reached will be addressed later, as acquiring certain insights—many of which are indeed compatible with Husserlian *Phänomenologie*—is necessary to arrive at this understanding, which will continue to accompany us for some time.

As just noted, Husserl never truly abandons the dualism between subject and object. Indeed, in the explication of an object through its relation to other objects (logical determination), he assumes for it various syntactical forms as correlates of determinative thought, thereby constituting higher-order objectivities that in turn imply specific characteristics, relationships, and so on.[17] Beyond these complex syntactical-categorial formations, however, there is a necessary reference back to an ultimate substrate (*letzte Substrate*), which is neither *syntaktische*

17. Ibid., 28–29.

Ableitungen nor *syntaktische-Kategoriale Gebilde*. The ontological forms related to cogitative functions are syntactic objectivities, not ultimate substrates. If a syntactical objectivity is derived from a substrate, it will be a syntactical derivation (*syntaktische Ableitungen*) of the corresponding substrate to which it belongs, or "Individuen."[18] Once again, Husserl aims at a presumed original objectivity in relation to which all others are merely variations.

Let us now return to the most intriguing aspect of Husserl's initiative, namely the concept of ἐποχή. Initially, it is understood not as a deliberate suspension of the recognized mechanisms of cognitive stratification aimed at achieving an immediate (i.e., unmediated) perception of the thing-in-itself, but rather as a suspension of philosophical judgment regarding the content of the philosophical forms developed throughout the history of Western thought. In other words, it is specifically with respect to these particular epistemological constructions that one must "suspend judgment" to avoid distorting the new philosophical inquiry:

> Die philosophische *ἐποχή*, die wir uns vornehmen, soll, ausdrücklich formuliert, darin bestehen, daß wir uns *hinsichtlich des Lehrgehaltes aller vorgegebenen Philosophie vollkommen des Urteils enthalten und alle unsere Nachweisungen im Rahmen dieser Enthaltung vollziehen*.[19]

Experience serves as an important means of investigating reality free from those conceptual 'ghosts' and mythical-religious idols that would otherwise distort comprehension; however, this empiricism risks proving insufficient for this purpose: "Direkte Erfahrung gibt doch nur singuläre Einzelheiten und keine Allgemeinheiten, also genügt sie nicht."[20] Consequently, Husserl proposes reconceiving empiricism as skepticism, replacing experience with intuition (*Anschauung*).

To conclude these considerations, since Husserl essentially believes that any theory can access truth only in its originary data ("eine

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 39–40.
20. Ibid., 44.

jede ihre Wahrheit selbst wieder nur aus den originären Gegebenheiten schöpfen könnte"),[21] it must rely on originary intuition. However, this intuition is not directed toward facts of nature but rather toward facts of essence, as he conceives phenomenology as a science of essence (*Wesensforscher*). Yet, he does not intend to undermine the assumptions of natural science, which he esteems and defends. Phenomenology does not deny that the world presents itself as reality; it does not deny the world-in-itself nor the reality of the world.[22] The point, instead, is to propose a radical shift in perspective in rigorously relating to this world. In other words, Husserl does not deny the world nor its existence—doing so would be absurd ("dann *negiere* ich diese „Welt" also nicht").[23] Rather, he proposes a phenomenological ἐποχή („phänomenologische" *ἐποχή*), which, as previously noted, entails setting aside any discourse on the world, any epistemic system, and any epistemology. This approach does not regard such systems as absolute or valid, regardless of whether certain statements are considered as scientific evidence. This consideration is irrelevant, given the epistemic-systemic premises that create the problem outlined earlier. Therefore, such elements are excluded from our analysis; they are not encompassed: "ich mache *von ihren Geltungen absolut keinen Gebrauch. Keinen einzigen, der in sie hineingehörigen Sätze, und seien sie von vollkommener Evidenz, mache ich mir zu eigen, keiner wird von mir hingenommen, keiner gibt mir eine Grundlage*."[24]

Ultimately, the ἐποχή Husserl speaks of does not align with the naturalistic and scientific attitude still prevalent today, whereby the initiation of a scientific investigation must adhere to principles of rigor that assume as unproven anything that does not meet criteria of repeatability and measurement. This underlying skepticism may superficially resemble a form of ἐποχή: for instance, I do not believe in ghosts because my spiritual beliefs affirm their existence, but I will believe in them only if and when they can be verified by some proven means

21. Ibid., 51.
22. Ibid., 61.
23. Ibid., 65.
24. Ibid.

of scientific investigation. If I could in some way trace, photograph, or document their passage such that it could be incontrovertibly established that no other entity, beyond reasonable doubt, could account for the "ghost" leaving traces on my instruments, then I might accept their existence. Indeed, Husserl argues that this form of positivism, to some extent, undermines the very intentions of positivism itself ("Man wird die hier fragliche ἐποχή nicht verwechseln mit derjenigen, die der Positivismus fordert, und gegen die er freilich selbst, wie wir uns überzeugen mußten, verstößt").[25] Positivism, after all, is not free from ideology or from theoretical constructions it favors, regardless of what scientists may assert. It adheres to its own doctrine, a rigorism that denies the validity of certain means of knowledge inquiry, irrespective of the rigor with which it approaches them—a rigor that, in practice, it does not achieve. Husserl therefore uses the expression "*metaphysik-freien*," "free of metaphysics," to indicate the a-theoretical (*theorien-freien*) starting point that the proper phenomenologist should adopt when first approaching a rigorous investigation.

Since this will not be a comparative study between Husserl and Buddhism, I intend to draw practical consequences from my assertions about the fundamentally phenomenological nature of Buddhist Indian thought. Now that we have established a basis for understanding fundamental concepts like "World" and "reality," before moving on to more complex ones like "consciousness" and "body," let us try to clarify at least the former two, also from the perspective of the Buddha's thought.

Understanding the meaning of Buddhist phenomenological analysis requires grasping their multi-layered reading of the concepts of "world" and "phenomena," sometimes overlapping with the more general idea of "things." The challenge in delving into this analysis lies in the stratification of levels implied by their conception of world.

The term *loka* can, depending on the context, indicate the socially understood world: the people, the community, the network of social relationships normalized by cultural orders. But it can also refer to the biosemiotically understood world. In fact, there is no better framework than the biosemiotic one to comprehend the concept of the world

25. Ibid., 66.

as the structured ensemble of the six sensory spheres, functioning in concert and oriented toward maintaining an ordered conception of experienced reality.

The implications of this interpretation are themselves manifold and diverse, and they do not fully encompass the concept of 'phenomenon.' This is because, although what is witnessed by the sensory-worldly sphere is an ensemble of phenomena, they are not *all* possible phenomena. Rather, they are only *those particular phenomena* that are 'worldly framed.' Transcending them, therefore, represents a separate issue. And yet, if we do not first understand how this 'world,' so conceived, is shaped and constructed, how it is populated by its phenomena, how we recognize them, and how it responds to the constitutive need for a veritable ecological niche, we cannot transcend it or detach from it to move toward a more extended phenomenological analysis.

Understanding how the world, so conceived, functions provides the foundation for more extended phenomenological analysis. As already mentioned, the concept of *loka* is a purely ecological one, provided we interpret ecological as the biological and semantic unity that living beings constitute in true symbiosis with their environment. Therefore, the world that presents itself to us reflects these requirements. It appears to us as a sphere that seems closed, intranscendable, familiar, and it seems impossible that it could be anything other than how we are accustomed to experiencing it. Yet, precisely by suspending judgment on these habits and disorienting ourselves from our familiar world, we can realize the 'phenomenal selectivity' that this partially permeable membrane allows into our worldly environment, at the expense of a broader, sometimes overwhelming complexity.

As we analyze how this 'world,' in the Buddhist sense, is constituted, we will conduct a comparative reading of Husserl's *Ideen*.

The Pāli Buddhist texts seem to place particular emphasis on the notions of 'world' (*loka*) and totality (*sabba*). That these two things are distinct is evident not only from their alternation but also from the characteristic definition of *loka* as the *place of limits*. It becomes clear that the totality of the world (*sabba loka*) is not totality in the strict sense, especially because all the things of the world are traced back

to all the things perceptible by the senses, i.e., to the *āyatana*s. On the contrary, not everything that is 'normally' perceptible necessarily coincides with everything that populates reality. Phenomenological analysis can help uncover part of this totality, revealing to us what is not normally immediately perceivable by our senses. Hence the necessity to speak of *sabbe dhammā*, "all things."

The term *dhamma* has a rather broad semantics, and it is therefore not incorrect to understand the *dhammā* in the plural as a collection of 'things,' or as some would say, of entities. In MN 37 and AN 7.61, it is said that mendicants, those who meditate correctly, "directly know all things, and by directly knowing all things, they fully comprehend all things" (*sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhijānāti; sabbaṃ dhammaṃ abhiññāya sabbaṃ dhammaṃ parijānāti*). Here, two verbs are used: *abhijānāti*, which refers to a form of higher perception or superior knowledge (*abhi-*) in the sense of all-encompassing,[26] seen from above, comprehended as a whole; and *parijānāti*, which also refers to completeness, deriving from the prefix *pari-* meaning "around," "completely." Thus, *parijānāti* implies omniscience, total knowledge. There is a strong emphasis, therefore, on the meditator's need to arrive at complete understanding, *pariññā*, definitive gnosis. In concrete terms, this consists of the ability to see the *dhammā* in their totality, which suggests that normally, this is not the case—something quite obvious.

Not only can I, sitting in front of my teacup, see only what is not hidden by it, but I cannot even know the total truth of that teacup. I am seated at the table, and my visual perception extends toward the object "teacup" as I cast my gaze upon it. If I remain stationary in my chair, and the cup is sufficiently distant from my field of vision, I will not see what lies behind it unless I move to adjust my viewpoint. If a sugar cube is entirely concealed by that teacup, it is hidden from my view; likewise, what is at the bottom of the cup is hidden by the external surface of the cup itself, unless I move my eye above the cup. In short, I cannot see through solid objects, but neither can I see the *truth* of that solid object.

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26. Rhys Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part I*, 61.

What is the truth? The truth is that it appears to me as something constituted in its own way, distinct from the table, distinct from the sugar cube, distinct from the boiling water it contains, distinct from the tea bag that has sunk to the bottom. But what do I really know about that white ceramic object, about every single atom that composes it, about the claystone, sodium feldspars, potassium, silica sand, iron oxides, and so forth? I do not see all these things because they appear to me only as a "ceramic cup," and even the liquid inside appears at most as a transparent liquid—not as an infinity of polar covalent bonds between two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. And even if it did, would that really be the truth of water? Water in its totality and the totality of its possibilities? Certainly not. Clearly, the truth of that object remains closed off to me. But it would not be revealed even if I could see every single elementary particle that composes it clearly and completely. Indeed, we want to move away from this exclusively materialistic and frankly reductive interpretation of reality.

Fig. 12 — The truth of the cup of tea is closed to me.

Even if I saw every particle of the ceramic cup, that would not suffice to reveal the truth of the "ceramic cup" as a "ceramic cup." It would not truly explain why it appears as a ceramic cup, because this would also

require grappling with the meaning it carries—not merely by virtue of conventional attributions, not merely through linguistic designation. Even this would not suffice to tell me everything the cup has to say.

And so, if we resist the impulse to abandon the overly difficult task and withstand the sense of mental overload, we realize that some things about the cup are 'given' to us just as they are, simply—and at the same time, covered by all those preconceptions that populate our beliefs about the cup's atomic composition, its conventional linguistic identity, and the sociocultural connotations that make us perceive the "cup" as an "object for holding liquids" rather than a "tool for hammering nails." These things are certainly true, but the truth does not lie in the numerical quantification of the cup's atoms, nor in its comparison to all the infinite signs that distinguish it from "table," "sugar," "spoon," or in the conception that makes us perceive the cup as "suitable for holding liquids" rather than "suitable for hammering nails."

And so, "meditating in this way," those who focus on the totality of the *dhamma*s in their phenomenological nature—not quantitatively-mechanistic or descriptively sociocultural—dwell in the awareness of impermanence, dispassion, and cessation, letting go of negative, positive, both, or neither feelings, abandoning any attachment to the things of the world (*so tāsu vedanāsu aniccānupassī viharanto, virāgānupassī viharanto, nirodhānupassī viharanto, paṭinissaggānupassī viharanto na kiñci loke upādiyati*).

Only at this point, having correctly transcended worldliness, made of its measurements, quantities, nominal conventions, and cultural norms, can we focus on phenomenological analysis free from the emotional influences that normally accompany and mislead us. Beyond the state of non-attachment (*anupādiyaṃ*), these texts also speak of total imperturbability (*na paritassati, aparitassaṃ*), something that might strike a chord with more seasoned philosophical readers: this is Pyrrhonian ἀταραξία. But is it really so? In part, yes, but in other respects, I do not entirely agree that Buddhism aligns with Greek skepticism. Similarly, the idea of total extinction (*parinibbāyati*), often compared to the meditator's death (or rather, the death that does not result in reincarnation), is

not a correct interpretation in this case, although obviously, preventing rebirths is certainly one of the aims of Buddhist practice.

Let us take a closer look at Uexküll's theory in greater depth. The further we proceed, the less we can avoid engaging with it. The idea of "field" that we have introduced here will necessarily evolve into the more comprehensive concept of "world." But what are the differences between the various conceptions of "world" that Uexküll proposes, and how can they be integrated with the Buddhist idea of world (*loka*) and perceptual sphere (*āyatana*)? We have already begun to examine some of these aspects.

The *Umwelt* includes what we might call the "experiential world," which pertains to the network of relationships established by a living being as a sensory and operational epicenter. It is important to note that this system does not make any fundamental distinctions between humans and animals. While there are differences in the way different species organize perceptual signs and construct their environments, every living system (one might even extend this idea to plants, as Uexküll's system is conceived as biological in the broadest sense) is fully capable of organizing signs and living within its own *Umwelt*.

Distinct from the *Umwelt* is the *Umgebung*, which we can translate as "surroundings," the perceivable area for a living being that is not necessarily structured as an "environment." What matters in biological systems is the functional circuit (*Funkionskreis*) established between the perceptual world (*Merkwelt*) and the operational world (*Wirkwelt*). These two sub-worlds are integrally part of the Umwelt system, within which there is also an *Innenwelt* (the subjective world or the subject itself). The *Innenwelt* emerges from the specific relationship established between the *Wirk*-organ (effector organ) and the *Merk*-organ (perceiver organ), capable of stimulating the sensor, or, as we might say, the *āyatana* (see Fig. 3).

In an earlier work, I proposed the idea of "nature" as a principle of "relation," but here I want to expand on this subject in light of the research being discussed. If we consider nature simply as the way A relates to a situation B—where B can be a condition, another object, or an actor participating in A's conformations—we conclude that A's

nature, emerging from its way of relating to B, is nothing other than the relation itself. This implies the conformations, or modes of relating, of the possible. This was the original aim of Lavoisier's great work, the treatise on chemistry, which, if rigorously pursued to its logical conclusion, would have supported a completely different scientific vision than the one we have today, at least regarding the nature of chemical reactions. It would have shown these reactions to be governed by the same principles that regulate all other kinds of "relationships."

> Cette opération eſt une des plus frappantes & des plus extraordinaires de toutes celles que la Chimie nous préſente, & nous avons à examiner d'où vient le gaz acide carbonique qui ſe dégage, d'où vient l'eſprit inflammable qui ſe forme, & comment un corps doux, un oxide végétal peut ſe transformer ainſi en deux ſubſtances ſi différentes, dont l'une eſt combuſtible, l'autre éminemment incombuſtible. On voit que pour arriver à la ſolution de ces deux queſtions, il falloit d'abord bien connoître l'analyſe & la nature du corps ſuſceptible de fermenter, & les produits de la fermentation ; car rien ne ſe crée, ni dans les opérations de l'art, ni dans celles de la nature, & l'on peut poſer en principes que dans toute opération, il y a une égale quantité de matière avant & après l'opération ; que la qualité & la quantité des principes eſt la même, et qu'il n'y a que des changements, des modifications.[27]

Let me offer an example to better explain what I mean. If, in the relationship A → B, and only in this relationship, an aspect of the nature of A (and of B) emerges, as we are arguing here, it would imply that neither A nor B would be 'expressive' on their own, but 'mute' concerning their natures. Similarly, another aspect would emerge in the relationship A → C or B → C that could not emerge in the sole relationship A → B, which would be limited to revealing the particular nature suited to the relationship A → B. Every relational interaction would thus be specific to certain natures, and the broader concept of nature would be the total set of relations implicit in every A, B, C, and so on, which manifestly emerge when A, B, C, etc., come into relation

27. Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, *Traité Élémentaire de Chimie*, vol. Tome Premier (Paris: Cuchet, 1789), 140.

with one another at different times. We have said that information is conformation and that form is the basis of information.

The conformation A → B does not arise out of nothing but is already implicit information within the 'nature' of A and B. Conformation makes explicit, through form, an aspect of the possible resulting from the interaction of two aspects of the relational network. This interaction leads to the emergence of that aspect (specific node) of the network already contained in the specific information of A and B.

For example, consider a thermosensitive ink (A). When placed in relation (→) to a temperature gradient (B), it conforms, assuming a form appropriate to what is required by B. For instance:

A (conformed as visible) → B (conformed as low temperature)
A (conformed as invisible) → B (conformed as high temperature)

It should be noted that in this relational interaction A → B, it is the first element that brings out different information depending on the conformation of the second. However, the opposite could also occur. Furthermore, this model is a simplification and does not account for the multiple relationships always present, capable of constituting increasingly complex variables. This framework should be interpreted as a simplified representation of a network model, in which every A or B is in turn influenced by and influences countless other possible elements. No A, B, or C can be considered autonomous in determining its conformations. Therefore, it is the network of reciprocal (inter-)relations that matters, while A → B is a schematic reduction of a relationship that cannot be reduced to a single dominant entity over others or more than others.

Let us consider another example, which I find particularly significant.

A magnet cannot, in itself, be defined in any absolute way. Only when placed in relation to a series of other 'things' can we draw conclusions about 'what' a magnet is. For example, if we understand A → B as *Magnet* → *Iron*, we define A as "that thing which, when placed in relation (→) to B, has the effect of attracting B." It follows that the definition is commutative: B is "that thing which, when placed in

relation to A, is 'attracted.'" By themselves, neither the magnet nor the iron says anything. If, however, B is "wood," no perceivable effect will occur, but even this lack of apparent effect communicates something about the nature of A or B. The relationship speaks; things placed in a void or an ideal metaphysical plane say nothing—they are nothing.

The Buddhist idea of the centrality of *phassa* as a relational element (→) lies precisely in this exceptionally clear phenomenological awareness. How do I understand "something" if not through relationship, through contact? My sensory channel understands the little it can precisely through relationship: photons captured by the visual receptors of our eyes, sound waves in our ears, temperature and surfaces through our skin, and so on.

Information is any series of formal data (manifest in taking on a "form") carried by a physical vehicle. A sign is a mode of radiation (transmission) of the formal data, which is perceivable by other vehicles capable, in turn, of conforming in relation to the sign received by their system. Everything that has form is also capable of transmitting signs through that form. The "interpretation" of the sign is nothing more than a series of possible modes of receiving it, as well as, incidentally, the relational mode inherent in the relationship between the two systems exchanging the signs at a given moment.

The only reality we can reasonably say anything about is the "phenomenal world," understood by Uexküll as "the only world there is."[28] The object is therefore understood by Uexküll in a Kantian sense: solely and exclusively as a "phenomenal" object, that is, as an object of a consciousness/action.[29] The "form" of the object coincides with the subjective operation that intuits the object as such.

The object and the perceptive-effective world are indissolubly connected. The environment of every animal organism exists within a series of relationships that bind it, as a perceiving subject—benefiting

28. Felice Cimatti, "Con Uexküll, oltre Uexküll. Per un'ontologia Relazionale," *Discipline Filosofiche* 33, no. 1 (2023): 51.

29. Ibid., 52; Tiago Rama, "Biosemiotics at the Bridge between Eco-Devo and Representational Theories of Mind," *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio* 15, no. 2 (2021): 65, DOI: 10.4396/2021203.

from sensors—to its own experienced object. In other words, it is a signal emitter or effector.[30] The effector, in this sense, is far from being a passive actor in the scenario; rather, it is an active contributor in its relationship with the subject.

In the world, there are no 'autonomous' entities that enter into relations with one another. Although Uexküll conceived biological subjects similarly to a Leibnizian monad (at least concerning their relationship with their environmental sphere of belonging), his system suggests the opposite: the relational possibility is already implicit within them. In other words, all living beings are already in relation and cannot remove themselves from it.

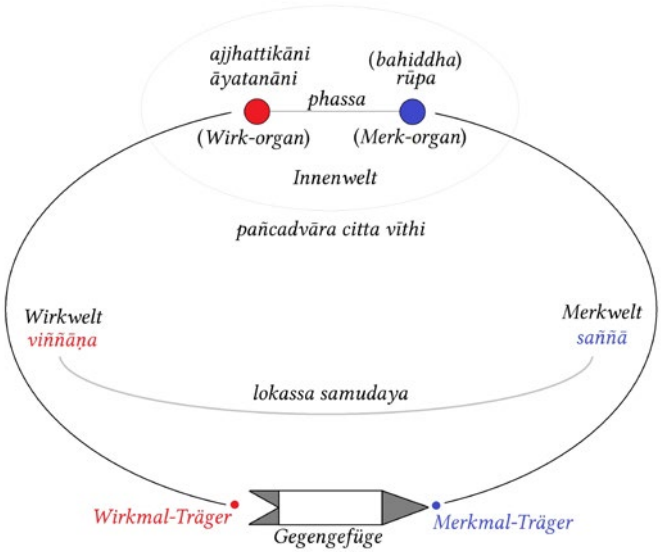

Fig. 13. Uexküllian *Funkionskreis* compared to the Buddhist theory of perception.

The system depicted here (Fig. 13) is a representation of the *Funkionskreis* developed by Uexküll, onto which I have superimposed concepts from Buddhist phenomenology that may be considered

30. Cimatti, "Con Uexküll, oltre Uexküll. Per un'ontologia Relazionale," 53–54.

comparable, if not outright equivalent. In the system articulated by Uexküll, the *Objekt* is not a mere "thing" (*Ding*), but "a set of properties and characteristics that determine its placement within a network of relations and assign a specific function to the thing."[31] Natural sciences, therefore, would have nothing to do with either reality or truth, but rather with the search for order. The *Merkenwelten* are various experiential possibilities, never revealed in their totality—unquantifiable if imagined as a 'whole' (*sabba*, as it is called in Pāli).

The boundaries of these individual possibilities are like the transparent confines of a soap bubble (*Seifenblase*)—a metaphor also evoked in Buddhism, especially in relation to the ephemeral nature of the world. In Dhp 170, we read: "Look at the world as a bubble, or a mirage; thus the king of Death will not see you" (*yathā pubbuḷakaṃ passe, yathā passe marīcikaṃ; evaṃ lokaṃ avekkhantaṃ, maccurājā na passati*). Meanwhile, in SN 22.95, we read: "Sensation is like a bubble; perceptions like a mirage" (*vedanā bubbuḷūpamā; marīcikūpamā saññā*). Finally, in AN 7.74: "Just as when heavy rain falls, bubbles disappear quickly and do not last long, so too is human life like a bubble" (*seyyathāpi, brāhmaṇa, thullaphusitake deve vassante udakabubbuḷaṃ khippaṃyeva paṭivigacchati, na ciraṭṭhitikaṃ hoti; evamevaṃ kho... udakabubbuḷūpamaṃ jīvitaṃ manussānaṃ*).

However, one should be cautious with simplistic comparisons. Uexküll does not consider it possible to transcend the boundaries of these bubbles, for the reasons mentioned earlier (the Leibnizian monad): an animal is, to a certain extent, 'confined' within its environmental possibilities. The universe, though it may be convenient to postulate its ideal unity, is always experienced in its "fundamental nuclei," which are like monads—understood here as "living units of subject and environment."[32] Buddhism, on the other hand, takes a completely different view. Transcendence is possible; it is the very center of all contemplative practice. The goal of this practice is well explained in MN 32, where the Buddha says to Moggallāna that this occurs when

31. Andrea Gentili, "La Umweltlehre tra Uexküll e Husserl," *Discipline Filosofiche* 33, no. 1 (2023): 72.
32. Ibid., 78.

"a mendicant is master of their cognition and is not mastered by that cognition" (*bhikkhu cittaṃ vasaṃ vatteti, no ca bhikkhu cittassa vasena vattati*).

It should be kept in mind the heavy influence of Kantian philosophy on Uexküll, which could be considered a limitation of his thought. However, Uexküll already employs an "extension of Kantian transcendental analysis beyond the anthropological boundaries in which it had confined itself, thus inaugurating a new region of scientific thought, which he baptizes *Umweltlehre*."[33]

A key point reached through this analysis is the awareness that any total objectification of the world, which thus seeks to eliminate the subject from any analysis, is necessarily an "impossibility."[34] This objective world is inevitably sterile on the scientific level; it must therefore be reoriented within the environmental world, which requires considering the biological subject. Perhaps it is inappropriate to speak of an ethnographic gaze in this context, yet I cannot help but see a resemblance with the same biological effort of Uexküll, who observes the environment and "makes the effort to immerse himself in the environment of the observed biological subject, without pretending to do so without simplifications and abstractions."[35]

However, the fact that for Uexküll every reality is a subjective appearance does not imply that reality does not exist when deprived of the subject.[36] The problem lies in what we define as "world," which as such cannot exist except as a phenomenal world, from which comes the impossibility of studying the environment without the subjects. Without the subjects we are left without the object as well, as the subjects are the only ones capable to constitute and experience an objective world as a 'phenomenal' world—the only possible world.

33. Emilia Marra, "Andar Tastando con lo Sguardo: La Scienza Impossibile di von Uexküll," *Discipline Filosofiche* 33, no. 1 (2023): 170.
34. Ibid., 174.
35. Ibid.
36. Vallori Rasini, "L'osservatore e l'osservato. Difficoltà Teoretiche nella Biologia di Jakob von Uexküll," *Discipline Filosofiche* 33, no. 1 (2023): 211–12.

However, this gives rise to a problem: the phenomenal dimension of an 'other' subject is, in fact, unknowable in its entirety.[37] In Uexküll, the perceptual limit is the truly given and insurmountable limit, which translates into a kind of passivism on the practical level: either one accepts it, or one suffers.

The diagram depicted in Fig. 13 has been realized starting from the famous Uexküll scheme featured in what is perhaps his most well-known work.[38] The specific dynamic described in his model primarily concerns the sphere of sensations and their crucial role in shaping perceived worldliness. Not coincidentally, Buddhists place sensations at the beginning of the dynamics of the five aggregates, while form is the first apprehension, the original intentionality, of the sensory data of the effector, whose prerequisite is obviously *contact*, the relationship. For Uexküll, this dynamic is described as a complex dialogue that is semiotic, occurring through perceptual markers that are interpretations of concrete information the senses gather from the surrounding environment. Similarly, the environment can receive analogous communications from the bodies inhabiting it through these specific markers, which are biologically valid signs.

Using the example of the visual process,[39] Uexküll tells us that sight is obviously the result of a light wave striking the optic nerve (the 'contact'), interpreted by optical cells as a "perceptual sign" (*Merkzeichen*), but not because the cells are machines responding to impulses and adequately processing them as "operational signs" (*Wirkzeichen*). Uexküll rejects the mechanistic view that reduces everything to an input-output system.

> If we may, on this account, imagine a perception organ as the site of changing groups of these cell-machine operators, which are the carriers of different perceptive signs, they are still spatially separated individuals. Their perceptive signs would remain isolated if it were not possible for them to coalesce into new units outside the spatially fixed perception organ.[40]

37. Ibid., 213.
38. Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
39. Ibid., 47.
40. Ibid., 48.

Organisms, in turn, are capable of imprinting operational markers (*Wirkmal*), which are semiotic data, onto objects in the so-called "external world." However, if an object lacks semiotic value—either because it has not been marked by a living being or because it holds no significance for a living being (it is not "interpretable")—this object, in fact, does not constitute part of the animal's world. The object must be "recognizable."

In our human system, governed by a highly categorical language, we might say the object must have a "name" to be recognized for its specific utility. Other animals, however, do not lack analogous systems; just because we cannot recognize their mechanisms of naming does not mean they have none. Indeed, animal worlds are also populated by sign-things, which are precisely the things imbued with value. For a bee, a flower is certainly a "thing" in its world, and an important one at that. Thus, it is absurd to think that a bee cannot identify, in a way peculiar to bees, the "flower," just as we do by conferring the name "flower."

Organisms do not interact with every aspect of the world but only with those aspects they can interpret and that have value for them.[41] In other words, an object becomes part of the dynamics of an animal's experience only if it possesses the necessary properties to serve as support for operational and perceptual markers. This is precisely the mechanism explained by the functional circuit in question.[42]

Certainly, Uexküll also believes that the relationships between the animal subject and its reference "things" (what we might call nameable entities or objects recognized as part of an animal's environment) exist outside the subject. The perceptual markers are, in fact, "external" to the animal's body, at least before being received by its sensory system.[43] This is a critical aspect.

For Buddhists, there is no independent exteriority because independent interiority is also missing. There are two ways to understand

41. Rama, "Biosemiotics at the Bridge between Eco-Devo and Representational Theories of Mind," 68.
42. von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, 49.
43. Ibid., 54.

the emptiness of what we call "external" and what we call "internal," for similar, though not identical, reasons. The internal is rejected as truth because the objects populating it are perceptions that appear as such due to the aggregation of other phenomena. We recognize them as having value for us and thus endow them with identity. However, this identity is dependent on the causes and conditions that allow these aggregated phenomena to appear and is therefore not autonomous or independent. Thus, it is empty, non-subsistent, just as the dimension of interiority populated by these name-things is non-subsistent.

Exteriority fares no better. The type of phenomenological aggregation that makes the attestable appear is governed by a kind of conditionality that does not pass through further elaboration by our sensors and cognitive system. Nevertheless, even effectors are phenomenological aggregates and not absolute realities.

The reader will understand that, in the context of the constitution of an animal's personal world, space will be enclosed within a hypothetical sphere, the boundaries of which extend only as far as sensory possibilities and perceptual elaborations allow. These are not merely spatial limits (e.g., I cannot see hundreds of meters away) but also sensory restrictions given by the limitations of sensors (e.g., I cannot see infrared). This sphere, within which I have some control, is defined as *Wirkraum*, the "operational space," a fitting term as it constitutes precisely the area over which I have some control. This is a theme we will revisit in §2.7. On this point, I want to share a consideration by Uexküll that will be useful in the conclusions of this chapter: for every animal (humans included, obviously), the world is populated by a series of "things" endowed with a certain potentiality, a potentiality that is relative to the utility and usability they have for the animal in question. In a famous experiment:

> A dog had been trained to jump on a chair placed in front of him when he heard the command "chair." Now, the stool was taken away and the command repeated. As it turned out, the dog treated all objects with which he could do the same trick of "sitting" as chairs, and he jumped onto them. A whole series of other objects, such as boxes, shelves, and overturned footstools, acquired a "sitting tone," as we would like to put it, and

> specifically a "canine sitting tone" and not a "human sitting tone," for many of these "dog chairs" were not proper human seating. By the same right, it was shown that "table" and "dog basket" acquired for the dog a special tone that had to do with the acts performed by the dog upon them. The problem itself can only be developed in complete relief in the case of human beings. How do we notice the sitting of the chair, the drinking of the cup, the climbing of the ladder, which is not given to the senses in any case? We notice in all objects that we have learned to use the act which we perform with them, with the same assurance with which we notice their shape or color.[44]

Organisms are not mere interpreters of the world: "They construct what is *real* for them."[45] Communication, understood in this broader sense, cannot simply be an exchange of information, as this would place meaning in the transmitted data, but it cannot be so simplistic. The environment communicates by conforming itself, assuming forms that are in*form*ation, contributing to the creation of meaning, especially starting from the environment and its context.[46]

What interests us in Uexküll's theory is that it speaks of a fundamental continuity between bodies and the environment. Understanding bodies as complex systems that interact with the environment also allows us to reconsider the problem of corporeality itself (which will be the theme of Chapter 3). However, it is primarily the environment and its experience by the subject, the *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt*, or the conceptions of the world for Uexküll, that must serve as our prerequisite before delving into the issues of the body as a living system that interacts with the environment and carries a world of its own. This is not a matter of unilateral influence of organisms on the environment, nor of an overwhelming power of the environment shaping organisms solely according to adaptive logic. Certainly, the sensors of living bodies are adapted to the

44. Ibid., 93–94.

45. Rama, "Biosemiotics at the Bridge between Eco-Devo and Representational Theories of Mind," 68.

46. Mirko Cerrone and Nelly Mäekivi, "A Zoosemiotic Approach to the Transactional Model of Communication," *Semiotica* 2021, no. 242 (2021): 13, DOI: 10.1515/sem-2020-0052.

environment, but they respond to a peculiar ontogenesis that speaks of reciprocal adjustments, making living beings agentive as well.

The constant dialogue between *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt* is thus at the basis of phenotypic plasticity. Our consideration of the "world" as a psycho-ecological unit must reconsider our experiences, sensations, and the ways our senses constitute the mundane sphere, based on this new understanding of the conceptions of the world.

I anticipate, however, that while Uexküll assigned slightly more importance to the environment as an external agent than to the bodies, in Buddhism, the notion of exteriority—and thus the role and power of the so-called "external" world—will be drastically diminished (we will begin to explore this in §2.7).

The constitutive ontogenesis of bodies, as we have said, involves a series of complex developmental processes and continuous adjustments in dialogue with the environment through "signal networks understood as biosemiotic pathways."[47] For this reason, biosemiotics can play a fundamental role in explaining living systems as organisms capable of their own agency. Thus, "both biosemiotic processes and cognitive processes are characteristic of the transmission, transformation, integration, and communication of referential units (signals and representations, respectively)."[48]

2.1 Cognitive Conditions (SN 12.61)

The discourse on the unlearned (*assutavā*) provides a solid basis for arguments supporting the thesis we have explored so far: the bridge between the mundane dimension, understood as the sphere resulting from the unity of the environment and living organisms organized semiotically, and the concept of the world as the theater of phenomena. On the one hand, as already mentioned, everything that happens in the world is a phenomenon, but on the other, not all phenomena occurring in the world represent the totality of phenomena in

47. Rama, "Biosemiotics at the Bridge between Eco-Devo and Representational Theories of Mind," 66.
48. Ibid., 74.

the strict sense. How, then, can we distinguish specifically mundane phenomena?

If the Abhidhamma is characterized as an in-depth phenomenological analysis relying primarily on the system of lists and enumerations as the outcome of such phenomenological analyses, it is also true that numerous proto-Abhidhammic suttas—marked by this very tendency toward lists—are found throughout the canon.

We have seen in the *lokasutta*s that what sustains the world is fundamentally tied to the sensory spheres, and that their functioning is what allows the world's origin to remain active. However, when they cease, the world also ceases (*nirodha*). This particular mechanism of "arising" and "ceasing"—for "production" is not an appropriate term—requires further understanding before we delve back into the theme of the *loka*.

In SN 12.61, the Buddha speaks of unlearned people, and it is interesting how they are characterized based on their conceptions of the mind, the body, and consciousness. These conceptions form convictions among the uneducated, to which they become "attached." In this discourse, the Buddha sets out to "dismantle" or "analyze" (in the etymological sense of the term, ἀναλύω, "to unsettle") these convictions, starting with those about the body and then addressing the mental and conscious dimension. Take note that we address these issues now because they will be useful later on. It is this latter dimension that particularly interests us:

> *yañca kho etaṃ, bhikkhave, vuccati cittaṃ itipi, mano itipi, viññāṇaṃ itipi, tatrāssutavā puthujjano nālaṃ nibbindituṃ nālaṃ virajjituṃ nālaṃ vimuccituṃ.*
> *— taṃ kissa hetu?*
> *dīgharattañhetaṃ, bhikkhave, assutavato puthujjanassa ajjhositaṃ mamāyitaṃ parāmaṭṭhaṃ: 'etaṃ mama, esohamasmi, eso me attā'ti.*
>
> And when, O mendicants, we come to what is commonly called "cognition," "thought," or "consciousness," an unlearned and ordinary person is incapable of becoming disillusioned, dispassionate, or free.
> — Why is that?
> Because for a long time, O mendicants, they have been attached to such notions, thinking of them as their own, and thus falling into the error of "this is mine, this am I, this is my self."

These verses are absolutely precious to us. For now, it must be said that while the term *manas* can easily be traced to the same Indo-European root as the Latin *mēns* or the Greek μάντις,[49] forming the basis of the modern "mind," I have already dissected the radical composition of *viññāṇa* to defend the thesis of "discernment." When it comes to *citta*, however, things become more complicated. Now, it must be said that I disagree with the translation of *manas* as "mind," since its etymological root pertains to thought—indeed, the related verb *maññati* specifically means "to think," "to reflect." The idea of "mind" evokes Cartesian notions, which we do not want to introduce to further complicate this dimension. Since, in the Pāli canon, it is explicitly connected to the coordination of sensory spheres as well as thought, we can understand this "organ" (it is listed among the organs) as having an extended ideative function: "thought" understood analogously to "sight" or "hearing."

Citta, however, poses entirely different challenges. I consider this term untranslatable. Consulting various authors, we find it often translated as "mind," but sometimes also as "intention" or even "heart," in a metaphorical sense, of course. However, in the Buddhist world, there are many arguments against the idea that *citta* is generically "mind." It represents a vaguely personal cognitive core, in the sense that it is transmitted in reincarnation and thus survives the deterioration of the body (something *manas* does not do). Yet, it is not similar to the Christian soul either; it seems to be connected with emotions as well. This makes it exceedingly difficult to define the meaning of *citta*.[50] The solution is to leave it untranslated or to adopt the translation I propose, "cognition," not in a literal sense, but as a placeholder term. This designation suggests that *citta* relates to cognition, but also to emotions, intentions, thoughts, and even partially to the self and reincarnation, without, however, coinciding with the self.

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49. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 901; de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and Other Italic Languages*, 372; Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part VI*, 144–46.

50. T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part III* (London: The Pali Text Society, 1922), 96–99.

We must pause the discussion on *citta* to focus on what SN 12.61 tells us, and perhaps this reading will also clarify the meanings of *citta*. Indeed, along with *manas* and *viññāṇa*, *citta* is grouped among the things that the ignorant misunderstand and upon which they are therefore incapable of achieving authentic liberation (*vimuccituṃ*). But why is liberation discussed? Because evidently, these concepts act unbeknownst to those who cling to them as elements of imprisonment, whereas the Buddhist meditator seeks detachment and dispassion. These people, the text tells us, are morbidly attached (*ajjhositaṃ*) to these three factors. Terms such as possessiveness (*mamāyitaṃ*) and even being clutched (*parāmaṭṭhaṃ*) are used.

The nature of this attachment is quickly explained: the objects in question are understood by the ignorant as follows: "this is mine" (*etaṃ mama*), "I am this" (*esohamasmi*), "this is my self" (*eso me attā*). This famous Buddhist formula is evidently a critique of another well-known formula found in the Upaniṣads. Specifically, ChUp 6.8.7 provides the famous verse "you are that" (*tat tvam asi*), while BṛUp 1.4.10 states, "I am the Absolute" (*ahaṃ brahmāsmi*).[51] The implications of these conceptions are enormous, and it would be impossible to do them justice even in a monograph.

The philosophy of the Upaniṣads is characterized by two significant moments. Like much of Buddhism, it originates from older Vedic conceptions, innovating, commenting on, or even modifying them. Buddhism was long thought to be quintessentially anti-Vedic. However, in the intellectual competition for orthodoxy, it seems more likely that during a particularly fertile period, both Buddhism and the Upaniṣads, alongside emerging Brahmanism, were reflecting on new concepts, including *Brahman*, the "absolute," and what it meant to be truly devoted to the absolute—that is, a *Brahmin* (see Chapter 4).

51. In ChUp 6.8.7 we read: "*That*, is that which is indefinitely subtle — everything has *That* as its base. *That* is the *Real*. *That* is the *ātman*. Thou art *That*" (*sa ya eṣo ṇimaitadātmyamidaṃ sarvaṃ tatsatyaṃ sa ātmā tattvamasi*). The context of BṛUp 1.4.10 is also quite similar: "In the beginning, [all] this was just the *Brahman*. *That* only knew itself as 'I am *Brahman*,' thus *That* became everything" (*brahma vā idamagra āsittadātmānamevāvet ahaṃ brahmāsmiti tasmāttatsarvamabhavattadyo*).

Frequent polemics within the Pāli texts about who is and who is not a true Brahmin suggest that this intellectual struggle revolved around these issues. The Vedic apparatus later became the tool of victorious orthodoxy to discredit heretics or heterodox thinkers.

What, then, was this conception of the absolute? It is difficult to say with certainty. Buddhists, who dedicate meditative exercises called "abodes in Brahman" (*brahmavihārā*) to it (see §4.2 and 4.5), likely had a conception distinct from that found in the Upaniṣads. While the development of a concept of an absolute principle underlying all things was not foreign to the Vedas, the idea that this principle could be identified with an individual's *ātman* is clearly an innovation of the Upaniṣads. This is the sense of the refrain *tat tvam asi*. Moreover, "that" (*tat*) was also an initial way of referring indirectly to this anonymous absolute.

Buddhism does not seem to disagree with the idea of admitting such an absolute or that it is omnipresent in all things. However, the absolute encountered in *brahmavihārā* and other Buddhist contemplative practices is precisely relational: the interdependent, interrelated nature of all phenomena. Taken individually, things do not (viz., *cannot*) exist in isolation; everything is interconnected, every phenomenon implies totality and is part of this complex phenomenal flow. The idea that personal identity—a misunderstanding of reality, a partialization unaware of its *being-in-relation*—coincides with the absolute poses a problem.

Buddhists conceive of the self (*attā*) as merely the five aggregates, a construct inherently empty and impermanent. Conversely, the Upaniṣads elevate the self (*ātman*) and the "I" (*ahaṃ*) to the absolute (*ahaṃ brahmāsmi*). This transition is rooted in history, in the shift from a phase where ritual sacrifice was no longer seen as a concrete means of exchange for what was immolated but as a metaphor for pure, intellectual devotion. In this context, when the sacrifice of a living being's body was replaced with the sacrifice of the self (*ātmayajña*), the groundwork was laid for the elevation of that self to the absolute.[52]

52. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Ātmayajña: Self-Sacrifice," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6, no. 3/4 (1942): 358–98, DOI: 10.2307/2717982.

Already in the Vedas, sacrifice was portrayed as a cosmogonic act par excellence, foundational to the reality we know. The universe was born from a primordial sacrificial act in which a giant man was dismembered by the gods (ṚV 10.90), who made the parts of his body into the various parts of the world and society. If sacrifice has this foundational power, and the concept of sacrifice is being reinterpreted in this intellectualized sense, the idea of the equivalence of *ātman* and *Brahman* begins to make sense. I will explain this process in more detail in Chapter 4. For now, it suffices to know that Buddhists oppose these logics, arguing with reasons I would not hesitate to call biosemiotic: Is what we call "self" truly this absolute and incontrovertible thing? Can we really equate the self with the absolute?

Here the famous refrain *tat tvam asi* is countered with the discourse of ignorant people: "I am this" (*esohamasmi*), made even more explicit by "this is my self" (*eso me attā*), as if to suggest that the philosophy of the Upaniṣads is actually the philosophy of the unlearned. Buddhists add another element: "this is not *mine*" (*etaṃ mama*). Why insist on the possessive? Because it is precisely through logics of appropriation and "grasping" that these cognitive mechanisms are perpetuated. We will examine this further in the following sections.

There is a reason why Buddhist terminology emphasizes possession and the appropriation of things, and it is the same reason behind the choice of the term *erfassend* in the second volume of Husserl's *Ideen*. Even in the chain of dependent origination, the act of "grasping" or "attachment" (*upādāna*) is one of the fundamental links, and this is due to two main reasons.

On one hand, *upādāna* refers to the most pernicious aspect of attachment: the desire to take possession of the "things" of the world, both material and conceptual (including the idea of the "self"), attempting to anchor them to a sort of fixity, thereby preventing them from leaving our perceptual field, decaying, or no longer being available to us. On the other hand, this idea of attachment echoes that of "thirst" (*taṇhā*), of "craving," which is also the link preceding *upādāna*: it is possession for the sake of possession, a desire for the transient, worldly goods, a headless, hedonistic craving that tries to escape the anxiety of confronting

the complexities of the world. Only with *vijjā* (knowledge) and *paññā* (wisdom), the highest form of understanding, while it certainly does not make us rich or opulent, does liberate us from suffering.

There is also a phenomenological aspect inherent in the idea of *upādāna*. Interestingly, *upādāna* originally means "fuel" for a fire. Fire burns as long as there is fuel to sustain it, and it is no coincidence that the metaphors surrounding cessation (*nirodha*)—both of the world and of cognitive mechanisms—draw upon these images. Fire also has symbolic significance, which will be explored in Chapter 4, but in its technical usage, *upādāna* refers to "acquisition," "appropriation," that is, the act of taking possession of something and holding onto it—"grasping," an unwillingness to let it go, "clinging," even to the extent of, and this is a meaning recognized in all dictionaries, "identifying with it."

The idea of *upādāna* as identification seems bizarre until we realize that the very mechanism of the five aggregates, as it relates to the psycho-physical self, operates in the same way. What we identify as "I am" is nothing more than a collection of formal, physical, and conceptual factors that we "appropriate." When we think about ourselves, we consider a series of characteristics that we "possess": "I 'am' this particular physical appearance," "I 'am' an engineer," "I 'am' a graduate," "I 'am' called Andrew," and so on. All these factors are 'possessed' by us in the sense that associating with them is an act of identification, a will to make ourselves 'identical' to them.

At the same time, this mechanism mimics the process of possessing things that we repeat every second of our lives: "my" pen is an object of my property because I am authorized to use it. I extend my hand to it and "grasp" it, making it mine physically, seizing it, and if I steal it from a store, I do the same thing: I grasp it (and then presumably run away), but the principle is the same. I hold it tightly in my hands, just as our body language naïvely enacts when we wrap our arms around a loved one in an embrace: "it's mine," a subconscious way of communicating possession to the world.

Thus, this collection of labels, of "things and names" to use de Martino's phrase,[53] or of "forms and names" as the Buddhists would

53. Ernesto de Martino, *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and*

say, constitutes a small treasure trove of my "properties," which I appropriate to build the (house-of-cards-like) castle of my "identity."

This is where SN 12.61 becomes a fundamental discourse in our examination, because without understanding this fundamental mechanism, even the *lokasutta*s can seem to speak of something distant, rather than something present in every second of our lives. As for its relationship with phenomenology, I have already mentioned that from the second volume of *Ideen* onward, Husserl delves much more deeply into these mechanisms, but even in the first volume, he speaks of the world as a world of "things" understood in their immediacy as "available," and thus as *values*, but above all as "goods" in the practical sense of the world (*Dabei ist diese Welt für mich nicht da als eine bloße Sachenwelt, sondern in derselben Unmittelbarkeit als Wertewelt, Güterwelt, praktische Welt*, see below). This line of reasoning is not to be disregarded.

> In dieser Weise finde ich mich im wachen Bewußtsein allzeit, und ohne es je ändern zu können, in Beziehung auf die eine und selbe, obschon dem inhaltlichen Bestande nach wechselnde Welt. Sie ist immerfort für mich „vorhanden", und ich selbst bin ihr Mitglied. Dabei ist diese Welt für mich nicht da als eine bloße *Sachenwelt*, sondern in derselben Unmittelbarkeit als *Wertewelt*, *Güterwelt*, *praktische Welt*. Ohne weiteres finde ich die Dinge vor mir ausgestattet, wie mit Sachbeschaffenheiten, so mit Wertcharakteren, als schön und häßlich, als gefällig und mißfällig, als angenehm und unangenehm u. dgl. Unmittelbar stehen Dinge als Gebrauchsobjekte da, der „Tisch" mit seinen „Büchern" das „Trinkglas", die „Vase", das „Klavier" usw. Auch diese Wertcharaktere und praktischen Charaktere gehören *konstitutiv zu den „vorhandenen" Objekten als solchen*, ob ich mich ihnen und den Objekten überhaupt zuwende oder nicht. Dasselbe gilt natürlich ebensowohl wie für die „bloßen Dinge" auch für Menschen und Tiere meiner Umgebung. Sie sind meine „Freunde" oder „Feinde", meine „Diener" oder „Vorgesetzte", „Fremde" oder „Verwandte" usw.[54]

Transcendence (London: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 243, DOI: 10.7208/chicago/9780226820569.001.0001.

54. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 58.

Furthermore, the Buddha extends these dynamics of "appropriation" to three things: *citta*, *manas*, *viññāṇa*. What was discussed in the first chapter should already help us understand why these three factors, so deeply tied to the perception of phenomena, their cognition, and the construction of worldliness (let us not forget that in the *lokasutta*s it is the six *viññāṇa*s that arise from the contact between the sense organ and the phenomenon that "originate" the "world"); but I will add more: they themselves must be understood, if one truly wishes to understand them, as phenomena and nothing else. The scheme of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* is divisible into two distinct phases. One includes the phenomena that precedes contact, and one those that begin right after it (see DN 15):

Phase 1: *avijjā → saṅkhāra → viññāṇa → nāmarūpa → saḷāyatana*
Phase 2: *phassa → vedanā → taṇhā → upādāna → bhava → jāti*

Let us now move from the unlearned to the learned. How does a Buddhist meditator view these three factors? The answer is quickly stated, and it lies fully within the phenomenological framework we have outlined so far.

yañca kho etaṃ, bhikkhave, vuccati cittaṃ itipi, mano itipi, viññāṇaṃ itipi, taṃ rattiyā ca divasassa ca aññadeva uppajjati aññaṃ nirujjhati. seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, makkaṭo araññe pavane caramāno sākhaṃ gaṇhati, taṃ muñcitvā aññaṃ gaṇhati, taṃ muñcitvā aññaṃ gaṇhati;
evameva kho, bhikkhave, yamidaṃ vuccati cittaṃ itipi, mano itipi, viññāṇaṃ itipi, taṃ rattiyā ca divasassa ca aññadeva uppajjati aññaṃ nirujjhati;
tatra, bhikkhave, sutavā ariyasāvako paṭiccasamuppādaṃyeva sādhukaṃ yoniso manasi karoti.

But, O mendicants, what is called "cognition" and also "thought," as well as what is called "consciousness," manifests from one thing and vanishes into another every day and night. It is like a monkey moving through a forest: it will grasp a branch, then let it go and grasp another, which it will then let go to grasp yet another.
Similarly, what is called "cognition," "thought," and "consciousness" manifests from one thing and vanishes into another every day and night. In this case, a noble disciple, carefully and rationally, will apply to their thought the knowledge of dependent origination itself.

At this point, the entire chain of dependent origination is reiterated, concluding with the importance for a noble disciple to become disillusioned with form, sensation, perception, mental constructs, and consciousness, that is, with the five aggregates (*sutavā ariyasāvako rūpasmimpi nibbindati, vedanāyapi nibbindati, saññāyapi nibbindati, saṅkhāresupi nibbindati, viññāṇasmimpi nibbindati*).

2.2 Four things of the World, four things in the World (SN 47.28)

Following the theme of the centrality of the body in relation to living in the world, let us now examine another important sutta, found in SN 47.28. At this point, without delving into more detailed analyses centered specifically on the body, it is necessary to alert the reader to a particular issue that will accompany us throughout these readings. The Buddha, in fact, repeatedly proposes meditations centered on the body that parallel the phenomenologist's approach to any other phenomenon.

The body is certainly a phenomenon as well, albeit a complex one, understood as an "aggregate" of multiple primary phenomena. While dissecting these phenomena can undoubtedly lead us back to the known aggregates or the four fundamental elements, which will become central as our analysis progresses, there is also a more precise, at times surgical, reading of the body. These meditations focus on the dissection of the body into its organs, viscera, fluids, and everything that evokes repulsion. Part of this exercise, not coincidentally called "corpse meditations" or "meditations on the impure," is meant primarily to deconstruct normative and embodied beliefs that categorize things as beautiful and ugly, pure and impure, admirable and disgusting.[55]

The "meditations on disgust," another popular term, aim to provoke reflection on the absurdity of these categories. The body, turned inside out like a sock, is revealed to be a 'bag' of skin filled with fluids and repulsive viscera. In these meditations on the repugnant contents that

55. Federico Divino, *Buddhist Psychology of Death: An Anthropological Analysis of the Contemplative Approach to the End of Life, Biopolitics and Thanatopower* (Padua: Padova University Press, 2024), 48–49.

all of us carry within, conducted with such anatomical precision that it leaves little doubt about the practitioners' familiarity with anatomy and medical knowledge, the analysis of the body is performed in a manner that Husserl would describe as clinical and aseptic, naturalistic—viewing the body as a functional, almost mechanical system: a *Körper-Ding*.

Husserl emphasizes distinguishing between two opposing views of corporeality. The naturalist perspective is not interested in the body as a dynamic system interacting with the world but in the body-object (*Körper*), subjected to the objectifying gaze of scientific knowledge, which regards the body purely as a system. This image, *Körper*, is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the phenomenological body, which Husserl refers to as the living, interacting body: *Leib*. When Husserl speaks of *Leib*, he refers to the body with its lived experiences, its perceptions, and its capacity to witness the world—not to be objectified by a scientific gaze.

It is important to note that even *Leib* can be subjected to phenomenological analysis, just as *Körper* can be analyzed anatomically and physiologically. I preface this discussion because, of course, these two conceptions of the body are inextricably part of the world. *Leib*, especially, carries within it a world that exists *in* the world, and the Buddhists seem incredibly aware of this aspect.

In SN 47.28, Anuruddha explains how he has "attained great wisdom by developing four types of mindful attention" (*catunnaṃ, āvuso, satipaṭṭhānānaṃ bhāvitattā bahulīkatattā mahābhiññataṃ patto*). He even describes it as *mahā-abhiñña*, the great knowledge, a type of knowledge distinct from mere mindfulness (*sati*), a term also linked to memory as well as mental presence (see Chapter 3). These four foundations will become the focus of our third chapter because they involve the body, but we mention them now because, being part of a *Lokasutta* (as the title of SN 47.28), they are also clearly identified as four aspects of the world, which superior wisdom must account for.

idhāhaṃ, āvuso, kāye kāyānupassī viharāmi ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ;	O friends, it is when a mendicant meditates dwelling in mindfulness of the body in the body, zealous, attentive, and mindful, free from greed and aversion in the world.
idhāhaṃ, āvuso, vedanāsu vedanānupassī viharāmi ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ;	O friends, it is when a mendicant meditates dwelling in mindfulness of sensations in sensations, zealous, attentive, and mindful, free from greed and aversion in the world.
idhāhaṃ, āvuso, citte cittānupassī viharāmi ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ;	O friends, it is when a mendicant meditates dwelling in mindfulness of cognition in cognition, zealous, attentive, and mindful, free from greed and aversion in the world.
idhāhaṃ, āvuso, dhammesu dhammānupassī viharāmi ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ;	O friends, it is when a mendicant meditates dwelling in mindfulness of phenomena in phenomena, zealous, attentive, and mindful, free from greed and aversion in the world.
imesaṃ khvāhaṃ, āvuso, catunnaṃ satipaṭṭhānānaṃ bhāvitattā bahulīkatattā mahābhiññataṃ patto. imesañca panāhaṃ, āvuso, catunnaṃ satipaṭṭhānānaṃ bhāvitattā bahulīkatattā sahassaṃ lokaṃ abhijānāmi.	Indeed, in this way, O friends, I have attained great superior knowledge by developing and cultivating these four mindful meditations. And it is precisely because, O friends, in developing these four mindful meditations, I have directly known thousands of worlds.

We have understood by now that the brevity of a text is not at all indicative of its simplicity. Analyzing the multiple implications of this *lokasutta* will be impossible in a single section, and for this reason, the theme of the four aspects will also be central to another chapter. Let us proceed step by step.

The formula presented here is a very common refrain in many suttas of the Pāli corpus and is central to the two *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*s (MN 10 & DN 22), which are believed to form the basis of so-called mindfulness meditation. The formula *kāye kāyānupassī* is repeated for three other elements, all following the same relationship between two factors: one in the locative and the other with the suffix *-anupassī,* meaning "observed" or "contemplated," which clearly refers to meditation.

The fact that the first element is in the locative makes us think it somehow contains the second, upon which meditation focuses, but this is not necessarily the case. This formula might simply be an expressive manner, and perhaps the locative indicates that attention must be given to both elements—or better, to their splitting. Incidentally, this is also the choice of translation made by Bhikkhu Bodhi. In his version of this *lokasutta,* we read: "Here, friend, I dwell contemplating the body in the body."[56]

This pairing *kāye/kāya* is interesting for other reasons as well. While it is curious to speak of a "body in the body" on its own, it becomes even more so when considering the other three elements, which do not seem as easily localized. The idea of a body within a body might sound vaguely acceptable—if understood poetically as the physical body (in which resides) the psychic body or body image—but what can we say about the other pairings? What about *vedanāsu vedanā* (sensation within sensations), *citte citta* (cognition within cognition), or even *dhammesu dhamma* (phenomenon within phenomena)? The reader will understand that this dilemma is not easily resolved, and given that this is one of the meditations considered fundamental, we are already faced with a rather complex puzzle.

The division into two bodies identified by the Buddha seems at times to clearly emphasize the distinction noted by Husserl between the body as organism or object (*Körper*) and the body as living subject (*Leib*). Certainly, this is said with hindsight, knowing of the dual perspective in Buddhist meditations on the living body, as well as the body dissected under the meticulous anatomical gaze of meditations on the corpse.[57] According to this theory, Buddhism would recognize that the splitting of experiential entities into "the idea of the proper entity" and "the sublimated idea of the entity" pervades every knowable realm. It is the habit, or *embodiment*—using terms from medical anthropology—that makes such splits perceivable as real.

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56. Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 1653.

57. I explored this hypothesis in my master's thesis, also thanks to the guidance of Federico Squarcini, who suggested me this Husserlian comparison.

The Buddha reflects on the substantiality of these four elements. Starting with the body, one realizes that what we call "body" is nothing but an assemblage of interrelated factors, perceived as united because a sign—the *nāma* of the *kāya*—is what makes us say, when faced with the *rūpa* of the *kāya,* "Behold, *this* is *kāya*."

Cognitive ordering is, in every sense, a social norm (since it is taught to all newborns) and is based on the principle of non-contradiction, which establishes the identity of signs in themselves and, consequently, the referents to which these signs are applied. On one hand, the linguistic system is advantageous for societies because it enables organization within a predictable context, thereby allowing escape from the primordial chaos of semantic confusion that characterizes pre-linguistic cognition—a presumed pure perception unable to name or identify things (since things as-they-are have no inherent name). On the other hand, it proves to be a dangerous tool because it convinces language users that the signs giving semantic substance to things also possess their own substance. Humans forget that linguistic acts are a social convention, arbitrarily segmenting indistinct meaning clouds into zones assigned significant identities. They are surprised, for instance, to find that other languages segment the (apparently) same referent differently.

This forgetfulness leads humans to the illusion that the identity conferred by signs attests to objective substance. Consequently, when they look at an object, they can no longer see the 'indistinct' material that constitutes it, nor its 'true form,' as their cognition is distracted by the association made by the psyche between the form (*rūpa*) and the name (*nāma*) directly assigned to it. Thus, even though infinite possible referents exist—since no two objects in the world can be perfectly identical in every detail—humans automatically assign each referent to its semantic category (each *rūpa* to its *nāma*), based on prototype-like similarities and the principle of the best exemplar (the idealized representation of the object-referent in the mind) and formal resemblance.

The reasons for this interpretation are drawn not so much from this *lokasutta* but from others where the same quadripartite formula

is reiterated, presenting also an additional step. Taking the body as an example, DN 22 states that the meditator who has dwelled in the *kāye-kāya* has the awareness that "there is a body" (*atthi kāyo*) until arriving at mere knowledge and full mindfulness: "one dwells free and craves nothing in the world; thus, O mendicants, one dwells practicing the contemplation of the body in the body."

In the *Mahānidānasutta* (DN 15), when asked, "Is there a specific condition for name and form?" (*atthi idappaccayā nāmarūpan ti iti puṭṭhena satā*), the answer is that they exist because of consciousness (*viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpan ti iccassa vacanīyaṃ*). When the Buddha, in the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta,* invites meditators practicing mindfulness meditation to become aware of their body, he uses the expression *atthi kāyo* because saying "there is a body" is, in fact, telling the mendicants, "there *exists* a body," or rather: "*become aware* of the existence of your body"? This awareness would move the focus from the aspect of the body as a sign (the *nāmarūpa*, the concept of the "body" associated with our experienced corporeality) to the intentional act per se: the fact that I can recognize my body as "body," thus rendering it the object *of* my cognition.

Another perspective on this issue is provided to us by SN 47.42, where we read, still in relation to mindfulness exercises, that one exercise in particular focuses on awareness of the arising and cessation of four factors (*catunnaṃ... satipaṭṭhānānaṃ samudayañca atthaṅgamañca*). Among these, we find the body again, but surprisingly, also the other three factors mentioned in the *lokasutta* that we introduced in this section. However, it approaches them from a different perspective, namely, a phenomenological analysis of their origin.

ko ca, bhikkhave, kāyassa samudayo?
āhārasamudayā kāyassa samudayo;
āhāranirodhā kāyassa atthaṅgamo.

And what, O monks, is the origin of the body?
The body originates from nourishment.
If nourishment ceases, the body ceases.

Let us remember that this is a phenomenological conception: we must understand the schema *samudaya* → *nirodha* as two phases of a phenomenological process: arising → ceasing, or manifestation → dissolution of the phenomenon.

phassasamudayā vedanānaṃ samudayo;
phassanirodhā vedanānaṃ atthaṅgamo.

Sensations originate from contact.
If contact ceases, sensations cease.

nāmarūpasamudayā cittassa samudayo;
nāmarūpanirodhā cittassa atthaṅgamo.

Cognition originates from name-and-form.
If name-and-form ceases, cognition ceases.

manasikārasamudayā dhammānaṃ samudayo;
manasikāranirodhā dhammānaṃ atthaṅgamo.

Phenomena originate from intention.
If intention ceases, phenomena cease.

This sutta, as brief as it is dense in content, offers us the fundamental interpretative key to understanding many dilemmas regarding the *kāye-kāya* model. First of all, this *lokasutta* presents four elements, fundamental also in mindfulness meditation, which are part of the world and upon which the phenomenological analysis of the meditator must focus. These four elements are different from other lists we have encountered so far, such as the five aggregates or the chain of dependent origination, yet they still seem connected to these processes.

Moreover, these four factors are characterized by a certain duality. We do not yet know how or why, but there seem to be at least two aspects of each factor, likely co-implicated in such a way that one is inherent in the other. It is this duality that we are invited to meditate upon.

The factors are:

- Body (*kāya*)
- Sensations (*vedanā*)
- Cognition (*citta*)
- Phenomena (*dhammā*)

We know that *vedanāsu* and *dhammesu* are plural locatives, so we assume they refer to "sensations" and "phenomena." My hypothesis is that this is describing a process very similar to that of the five aggregates, where these four factors act as links in a complex chain.

The body is the epicenter of the experience of the world, and this experience revolves around three increasingly complex things: sensations, cognition, and phenomena. These three are tied to the body, which is a kind of hub through which they pass or from which they emanate. They are also interconnected: the body directly perceives phenomena through the mediation of sensations and cognition. However, the body is also both a phenomenal epicenter and a phenomenon itself, so the last aspect of the chain connects back to the first.

The sutta on phenomenological origin (SN 47.42) further clarifies these four factors, explaining that each not only involves a kind of doubling—why this doubling occurs remains an open question for now—but also a phenomenon from which it originates and with which it is therefore implicated. Thus, we have a schema structured as follows:

āhāra	→	*kāya*
phassa	→	*vedanā*
nāmarūpa	→	*citta*
manasikāra	→	*dhammā*

Table 10. The process of phenomenological origin according to SN 47.42. Each cause is related to a specific phenomenon. For example, nourishment (*āhāra*) sustains the body (*kāya*) as its phenomenological cause. Contact (*phassa*) is the phenomenological base for sensation (*vedanā*), but sensation would not be possible without a body to feel it, and so on.

The term *manasikāra* refers to the attention directed toward the thought-mind: the act of noticing something, observing attentively,

focusing, or "bringing to mind" or "bringing to attention." I translated it as "intention" to emphasize the intentionality aspect that this term highlights: bringing a phenomenon to the attention of our thought is an act that Husserl would define as intentional, directing attention toward the phenomenon.

Now that we have added the important element of *nāmarūpa* to this framework, we understand that this, too, is about a process of phenomenological concatenation. It is not simply, trivially, recognizing that the body is sustained by food, but for individuals interested in breaking the cycles of reincarnation, it is fundamental to emphasize that corporeality, like every phenomenon, has its causes and conditions. More importantly, we have now better defined the identity of *citta*, as we have explicitly connected it to *nāmarūpa*, which helps us better understand the specific nuances of the type of cognition described in these texts: it is something tied to primordial semantic perception, the association of names and forms, and therefore to the entire process we thoroughly examined in the first chapter.

This chain can also be read consequentially: if we understand *kāya* as the sensory world, it is evident that the aspect of sensation reception (*vedanā*) follows the somatic, which must be a necessary precondition. Our table (see Table 9) can also be interpreted as having on the left column the sphere of *Wirkwelt*, while on the right, that of *Merkwelt*. The two are connected and interrelated, but SN 47.42 highlights two aspects: the effective on one side and the subjective on the other, albeit with a complication. If it is correct to interpret the *phassa* → *vedanā* axis as a *Wirk-Merk* for evident reasons, with *nāmarūpa* → *citta*, we must exert effort to shift into true biosemiotics, understanding *nāmarūpa* not simply as an external signal but any "sign" emitted and receivable by a *citta* that follows as an interpretative act. The situation changes for *manasikāra* → *dhammā*, which should be, at the very least, inverted. Yet SN 47.42 defines it quite explicitly: it is "the phenomena" that "originate from intention" (*manasikārasamudayā dhammānaṃ samudayo*) and not the reverse. Or rather, intention does not seem to direct itself toward a pre-existing phenomenon, but the intentional act itself appears consubstantial to the phenomenon's arising.

This conception is really suggestive. Buddhists do not seem to conceive of the relationship between phenomenon and experience, between the witnessed and the witness, as unilateral. If there is no witness to witness the phenomenon, the phenomenon likely would not manifest. In other words, the witness and the witnessed are in a reciprocal relationship, with no influence of one over the other. The very moment I direct my intention toward the phenomenon, it is witnessed as a "phenomenon." This may be the key to interpreting its duality: *dhammesu dhammānupassī* is recited in the *Lokasutta*, "the phenomena within the phenomenon."

Human beings transpose their organizational model of the psyche, based on functional and normative mechanisms, onto the so-called external world, believing that just as there are human, social, and linguistic laws, there are physical laws that act independently of will. When we touch an object, the tactile experience is not the result of direct contact between our being-self and the being-self of the object, but rather a cerebral and somatic copy elaborated through precise impulses that give us the idea of weight and surface quality (rough, smooth, and so forth).

The first obstacle to overcome is precisely the distinction between the dimension of interiority (*ajjhattika*) and exteriority (*bāhira*). There is no objective and real dimension outside of us, but peaks of reality manifestations that are caused within different subjectivities (see §4.2). Attempting to align subjectivities into a single truth will always be an act of imposition. For the Buddha, it is not about creating a synthesis but about recognizing that the totality of subjective experiences is part of the truth. Therefore, no subjective experience is 'truer' than another; all are infinite facets of the possible, and only by integrating every possibility of the real can one reach reality. This is vastly different from the modern scientific idea, which seeks to make a technical truth, derived from a reductionist method, prevail over all others, discrediting the value of subjective experience.

The idea of contact (*phassa*) between the cognitive apparatus and the perceived entity is central to the Buddha's thought as the triggering element of the perceptive-cognitive process. Contact is also one of the five constitutive factors of nominal identity (*nāma*), alongside sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), volition (*cetanā*), and attention (*manasikāra*).

Somehow, the *dhamma*s are mutually conditioned for their appearance. Each *dhamma* is conditioned but also a condition (*paccaya*) for the appearance of others (*paccayuppanna*). But if the *dhamma*s are real, albeit ephemeral and not independent, can we say that the subject (*puggala*), being conditioned by the *dhamma*s, is also "real"? Thus arises the question of whether a "person" can exist in an absolute sense (*saccikaṭṭha-paramatthena*).

When speaking of the existence of a "body-in-the-body" (*kāye kāya*), this refers to a perception of corporeality and corporality typical of cognitive doubling. There is a body *within* the body! A reified and ideal body that is the double of our 'real' body, but even the perception of a real body is, inevitably, a conceptualization. Thus, the idea of the physical body (outside) opposes the idea of bodily perception (inside), but both are perceptual strategies that lead to the reification of nominal entities.

2.3 The World is sixfold (SN 1.70)

Another brief sutta, SN 1.70, helps us clarify the Buddhist vision of the world as a biosemiotic sphere of ecological unity between the effector and the sensory dimensions. In this short discourse, three questions are posed, which I will analyze in this section.

The first is a phenomenological question, as it uses the verb *samuppanno*, which indicates "arising," "originating," or "occurring"—essentially something deeply tied to phenomena understood as what is observable and emerges as a moment in a chain of recognition: it has arisen, therefore it happens because it originated. The verb, composed of *saṃ* + *ud* + √*pad-*, refers to something similarly aggregated that "comes together" (*saṃ-ut*), much like the noun *samuppāda*, meaning "origin," "arising," or "appearing," which forms the technical term *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the chain of what has arisen due to a cause, the conditioned phenomena, the causal chain, dependent origination, or the chain of conditioned production. The first question thus employs this term alongside the interrogative pronoun *kismiṃ*, "on what basis." The object of the question is, of course, the world: "on what basis has the world arisen?" (*kismiṃ loko samuppanno*).

The second question also uses *kismiṃ* as the interrogative pronoun but refers to the term *santhavaṃ*, which means "association" or "bond." Combined with the verb *karoti*, "to do," the compound *karoti santhavaṃ* implies having a strong bond with something or being in close association. Here, the verb appears in the form *kubbati*, a variant. Thus, the question *kismiṃ kubbati santhavaṃ*, again referring to the world, asks: "with what does it form an intimate relationship?"—I believe, in this case, the question refers to the things, placed in relation to one another, that underlie the arising of the world.

Finally, the third question: *kissa loko upādāya, kismiṃ loko vihaññati.* This is longer than the others and consists of two parts: *upādāya* means attachment, while *kissa* indicates "of what." Since the subject here is still the world, this part of the question anticipates the second and asks to what the world is attached, or more precisely, in virtue of which aspect of worldly attachment does what is expressed in the second part of the question occur: *vihaññati*, "to suffer," "to be anguished," "to be troubled." Essentially, this last question asks, "By virtue of which form of attachment is what suffering of the world generated?"

These are fairly complex questions, so we also refer to Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation: "In what has the world arisen? In what does it form intimacy? By clinging to what is the world harassed in regard to what?"[58] However, I do not agree with the translation concerning 'intimacy' for the reasons already stated above, and I continue to prefer the idea of "relationship," or "bond" with the double meaning obviously of both attachment and causal link. The answer is the same for all three questions, and it is the number six. The six, which obviously refers to something else here—it is not numerology—is the basis for all three problems posed initially. In other words:

chasu loko samuppanno,
chasu kubbati santhavaṃ;
channameva upādāya,
chasu loko vihaññati

58. Ibid., 133.

In six the world has arisen,
In six the world is in relation,
Clinging to these six,
The world is tormented in six.

Here we find a sixfold structure repeated in all three circumstances. This sixfold structure lies at the root of the ultimate problem—the great torment of the world—but it is also the origin of the world itself: the world as a phenomenon "has arisen in six" (*chasu loko samuppanno*), and "is in relation in six" (*chasu kubbati santhavaṃ*). The use of the locative for the numeral six (*cha*, thus *chasu* in the locative) leaves no room for interpretation: this sixfold nature is the condition of the world itself and also the reason for its turbulence.[59] This is a notorious example of relative function of the locative, also known as relational or causative locative. In this case, the usage of *chasu* "in six," has to be interpreted as "*in relation to* six" or "*because of* six." Thus, this sixfold nature is marked as locative to signal it is the *cause* or fundamental nature of something (see also the introduction of chapter 3).

Although this sutta does not specify what this sixfold structure refers to, it is plausible to assume that it simply reintroduces the same content as SN 12.44, making it unequivocally clear that what we call "world" is precisely the horizon of our sensory sphere—what we might call the "mundane circle," comprising the perceivable and the organizable: those phenomena that enter our perceptual field and become phanera, that is, potential objects of our attention.

There is no other way to understand this conception of the world except through the concept of *Umwelt*. Certainly, the idea of *loka* also encompasses society—something I do not deny—and this is evident in

59. 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*). This seems to confirm that the phenomenological model of the sixfold *loka* is possibly quite ancient. Snp 1.9 also connects the sixfold *loka* to grasping and the sensual pleasures. This connection is made explicit when it is stated that the five sensual pleasure with mind-thought as the sixth are those things *in the world* that lead to desire and suffering (*pañca kāmaguṇā loke, manochaṭṭhā paveditā; ettha chandaṃ virājetvā, evaṃ dukkhā pamuccati*).

other discourses such as SN 3.23, where the triad of "greed, hate, and delusion" (*lobho doso ca moho ca*) is presented as one of the misfortunes that arise in the world when conditions exist among people of a wicked heart. Nonetheless, it is equally true that this specific technical sense of the world understood as perceptual-cognitive sphere (*chasu loko*) is one of the aspects, perhaps even the main one, of the Buddhist conceptions of *loka*. In this sense, to what extent is *loka* overlapping with the notion of *Umwelt*? From a sensory perspective, we have seen that there are numerous affinities between this vision of *loka* and Uexküll's *Umwelt*, but I also invite consideration of Husserl's reflections on the same term. Husserl's phenomenological use of the term *Umwelt* in his writings is, in part, integrable with what we have seen so far.

As demonstrated in an interesting article by Gentili, Husserl employs both the concept of *Umwelt* and that of *Umgebungen*. The latter, specifically, is used first.[60] The adoption of *Umwelt* as a technical term for his phenomenology occurs in the first volume of *Ideen*, a usage that is genuinely innovative, to indicate the technical sense of the "immediate opening to the world of a subject according to the natural attitude."[61] Specifically, Husserl's *Umwelt* is introduced to denote the world as normally experienced by the I, prior to phenomenological reduction.

In Husserl's *Umwelt*, available (*vorhanden*) objects populate the environment, whose modes of functioning (and use) can be recognized. Heidegger will then expand on this conception in a way I do not find useful for our discourse. The human being seems to be distinguished in Heidegger always by their almost innate tendency to transcend the environment (not transcendence in the same sense as in Buddhism), that is, to extract from it what is useful, "consuming" it. At the same time, however, alienation from the *Umwelt* is not the only human characteristic, as the *Umwelt* itself is a human feature: animals do not have it. For them, inferior creatures, only the *Umgebungen* are reserved. This, in certain respects, is the reverse of Uexküll's position.[62] This is because the *Umwelt* applies only to *Dasein*, and only humans are *Dasein*.

60. Gentili, "La Umweltlehre tra Uexküll e Husserl," 78.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., n. 7.

For Uexküll, the relationship between *Umwelt* and animals is one of mutual correspondence and completeness (*eingepasst*), and it includes dimensions of perceptual and practical-vital activity guaranteed by what Uexküll calls the *Bauplan* or "constitutive plan."[63] In this view, "The totality of the natural world, taken without any intervention or delimitation, manifests itself as an overabundance of processes, forms, connections, in an interminable jumble of particulars lacking a unified sense."[64]

The animal therefore does not reflect the totality of processes in the *Welt*—understood here as the totality of possibilities—but only a portion of it that constitutes the specific world of that animal, which is "constructed" in accordance with stimuli and signs (perceptual markers) that the animal itself can understand and organize within its world-system. This process makes it possible for the animal's world to never be excessively unfamiliar to it, as it is incorporated into a framework of comprehensibility that renders it *Heimat*, acquainted: "Among the signs it encounters with its perceptual faculties, there is nothing that appears opaque."[65] The object, which is never merely a "thing," is always embedded within an environmental framework that renders it an object "as" an actual object, making the animal's openness to its *Umwelt* complete. Moreover, this allows the animal to experience the world through *a priori* categories.[66]

The condition of the animal subject (T) expressed in the schema (Fig. 14) is precisely the invisible *Seifenblase* Uexküll refers to.[67] More specifically, it constitutes a kind of monad within the ecological relationship between the possible *Umwelt* (U) and the animal (T), both situated within the context of the total possible *Welt* (W). At the boundary zone of T-U are also the interactions *Wirkwelt-Merkwelt*, as well as the *Innenwelt*, which includes both.

63. Ibid., 72.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., 73.
66. Ibid., 74.
67. Ibid., 75.

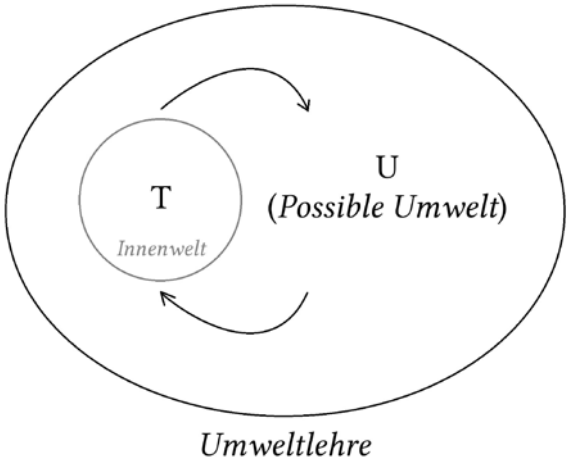

Fig. 14 — The relationship between the inner world of a possible subject and its 'field.'

As previously mentioned, in Husserl, the term *Umwelt* technically refers to the "immediate openness to the world of a subject according to the natural attitude."[68] It is first employed as a term in 1913, in the first volume of *Ideen*. In this context, *Umwelt* signifies a vicious circle imposed by passively received notions, including those enacted by the positive sciences.[69] For this reason, Husserl seeks to escape the circle (*Ausschaltung*), understood precisely as the *Umwelt*. In this sense, the notion of *Umwelt* would be dismissible once the incorporated notions that we carry within ourselves are overcome.

The objects of my world, however, are constituted by the subject in an ongoing process of reshaping.[70] An *I* would have no "access" to *Gegenstände* without *umgestalten*. Hence the notion of the historically constituted *Umwelt-Außenwelt*, as opposed to the more strictly subjective sphere, which should only admit the influence of *Umgebungen*.

68. Ibid., 78.
69. Ibid., 79.
70. Ibid., 80.

$$\frac{Außenwelt}{Historical Cultural\ \ I} \overset{Umwelt}{\leftrightarrow} \frac{Umgebungen}{Self conscious\ \ autonomous\ \ I}$$

Husserl makes this distinction also to maintain the determination of the totality of the *I* (the "I can") in its most personal sphere (to the right of the axis), which must therefore stand "in opposition to any predetermination by fate."[71] For Husserl, *Umwelt* is first and foremost a possibility for the subject to objectify itself according to a horizon of meaning in which the person enacts their role and acts, forming habits and inclinations (see the formula above). The *Umwelt* is not a world against which we struggle or in which we are anxiously thrown, but rather a world "familiar" to us, in which we place our trust. What is familiar constitutes the primary nucleus of *Weltkonstitution*, which will involve both internal and external objects. The environmental dimension in its givenness, devoid of any subjective intervention—that is, purely as *dinglich*—does not result in the subjective and personal *Umwelt*. The complex environment is a process of stratification made up of different levels of 'environmentality' (*Stufen der Umweltlichkeit*).[72]

In the social environment, a key function is the interaction between different *Leiber*—living and interacting bodies. Facing another *Leib* is not like facing *Gegenstände* but rather *Gegensubjekte*, which thus counterbalance being *Subjekt* and simultaneously are *Genoßen*.[73]

Nevertheless, even while including the life and subjectivity of the other in my environment as human (as life, precisely), this process is mere *Spiegelung* (mirroring) and never a direct penetration into my subjective *monad*.[74] Husserl would thus assert that the objective *Umwelt* would instead be the intersubjective *Umwelt*, where personal environments, if correctly reduced through phenomenological analysis, reveal a shared and common *Heimat*, a background in the network of relations that is *gemeinsame Umwelt*.[75] This intersubjective and shared environ-

71. Ibid., 80–81.
72. Ibid., 82.
73. Ibid., 83.
74. Ibid., 84.
75. Ibid.

ment is also called *Kulturelle Umwelt* in the *Meditationen*,[76] and from here, Husserl develops the specialized notion of *Lebenswelt*.

> The lifeworld is a qualified, cultural, and communal *Umwelt*, distinct in turn from the 'objective' world (in the sense of 'intersubjective' here as well).[77]

Fundamental to this distinction is that, unlike Heidegger, for Husserl even animals, like humans, possess their own environment and openness to the world appropriate to their *Lebenswelt*.[78] Husserl's more reasonable stance posits that animals are endowed with "*so etwas wie eine Ichstruktur*" (something like an I-structure). It is the intraspecific difference that makes one environment irreducible to another—not the peculiarity of the human per se, but rather the fact that the cultural environment constitutes a specific environmental form unique to the human species, which other animals do not have: "*der Mensch als Person ist Subjekt einer Kulturwelt*." The same could be said of the environment of a bee as different from that of a lynx, and so on: "*das Tier lebt nicht in einer Kulturwelt*."[79]

Whereas the peculiarity of the environment as *Kulturwelt* lies in its historical dimensionality or its shared historical-social effort, in other words, culture and history are intertwined, allowing for "a self-conscious production of spiritual subjectivity."[80]

> The environment is thus configured as a correlate of consciousness, positioned upstream from the experience made within it—situated and relative, but with a horizon always already open and thus capable of expanding (that is, of encompassing the true scope of its extension). The common social environment is set aside in the thematization of the individual environmental sphere, so that, starting from it, that initial moment, which had been methodologically set aside, may be rediscovered and assumed as a foundation.[81]

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76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid., 85.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid., 86.
81. Ibid.

Let us take a step back, as this conception of the relationship between world and subjectivity builds on prior reflections on subjectivity, consciousness, and the world, but also necessarily on the "things" that inhabit the world and with which we "interact" or, more precisely, that present themselves from time to time as *Gegenstände* of (our) consciousness.

From Husserl's perspective, the crucial point to preserve is the awareness that no object existing in itself allows us to exclude every relation with consciousness and the *I* of consciousness (*Niemals ist ein an sich seiender Gegenstand ein solcher, den Bewußtsein und Bewußtseins-Ich nichts anginge*).[82] The "thing" is not autonomous and self-sufficient in itself but necessarily belongs to the "surrounding world," namely, the *Umwelt* ("Das Ding ist Ding der Umwelt"),[83] and this holds true even for things that we apparently do not perceive, yet still exist in the world. The "world" that we understand as "real" is but one of many possible worlds, each of which is a correlate of eidetic modifications possible in the idea of experiencing consciousness.

> Es ist hier immer zu beachten: *Was die Dinge sind*, die Dinge, von denen wir allein Aussagen machen, über deren Sein oder Nichtsein, Sosein oder Anderssein wir allein streiten und uns vernünftig entscheiden können, das *sind sie als Dinge der Erfahrung*. Sie allein ist es, die ihnen ihren *Sinn* vorschreibt und zwar, da es sich um faktische Dinge handelt, die aktuelle Erfahrung in ihren bestimmt geordneten Erfahrungszusammenhängen. Können wir aber die Erlebnisarten der Erfahrung und insbesondere das Grunderlebnis der Dingwahrnehmung einer eidetischen Betrachtung unterziehen, ihnen Wesensnotwendigkeiten und Wesensmöglichkeiten absehen (wie wir es offenbar können), demnach auch die wesensmöglichen Abwandlungen motivierter Erfahrungszusammenhänge eidetisch verfolgen: dann ergibt sich das Korrelat unserer faktischen Erfahrung, genannt „*die wirkliche Welt*", als *Spezialfall mannigfaltiger möglicher Welten und Unwelten*, die ihrerseits nichts anderes sind als *Korrelate wesensmöglicher Abwandlungen der Idee „erfahrendes Bewußtsein*" mit mehr oder minder geordneten Erfahrungszusammenhängen.[84]

82. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 101.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 100.

Another problem: although it is certainly possible to hypothesize 'logically' a reality 'other' than "this world" (*dieser Welt*) it must be said that the essential conditions of its validity would require that such a reality be 'experienceable' (*erfahrbar*) in some way. This cannot be ignored, and with that, therefore, a possible 'I' capable of experiencing it would be equally necessary.[85]

> Existenz einer Natur kann Existenz von Bewußtsein nicht bedingen, da sie sich ja selbst als Bewußtseinskorrelat herausstellt; sie ist nur, als sich in geregelten Bewußtseinszusammenhängen konstituierend.[86]

Naturally, the issue here is not to deny the world, nor, however, to fall into the opposite extreme, which would be just as dangerous: the denial of the sensible, or even its perilous assimilation to falsehood. This idea, first proposed by Plato in the *Sophist*, considers the sensible world as a "copy," a false one at that, of the real world. The sensible world would be populated by "images," which are false when compared to the real, mere replicas of it. These images are thus comparable to δόξα.

In the *Philebus* (39-40a), the discussion turns to εἰκόνας, which would be mere phantasms (φαντάσματα) of the soul. In the *Theaetetus*, a similar argument is made starting with memory, whose mimetic functions are likened to wax upon which the impression of something is left by pressure, lasting for a limited time (τὸ εἴδωλον, 191d-e). These, too, being images, are merely copies, imperfect replicas. What is "impressed" by these mnemonic processes is called by Aristotle a "sign" (σημεῖον, *De Anima* 424a), of a nature analogous to a drawing (ζωγράφημα, *De Memoria* 450a).

This issue of the false nature of representational images, and the phantasmatic nature of cognitive processes, is a legacy we still carry today when we reflect on the nature of ideas. Yet Husserl reminds scientists that they cannot seriously think that what manifests itself—even in the mind of a subject—is merely for this reason an "appearance," a "false image" pointing to a physical "truth."

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85. Ibid., 102.
86. Ibid., 109.

> Auch das kann nicht die wahre Meinung der Naturforscher sein (zumal wenn wir uns nicht an ihre Äußerungen, sondern an den Sinn ihrer Methode halten), daß das erscheinende Ding ein Schein oder ein fehlerhaftes *Bild* des „wahren" physikalischen Dinges sei. Desgleichen ist die Rede, daß die Erscheinungsbestimmtheiten „*Zeichen*" für die wahren Bestimmtheiten seien, irreführend.[87]

Regarding the nature of the sign, Husserl tells us that it would be equally erroneous to believe that phenomenal determinations are merely signs of 'true' determinations. Signs are, in fact, perceived, and they are themselves phenomena; therefore, they cannot simply be dismissed as mere distortions of the phenomenon 'in itself'—this would be absurd. What is perceived manifests exactly as every phenomenon does, and must, in turn, be considered a phenomenon that manifests. Nonetheless, this does not even contradict the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign that we observed in the first chapter.

Nor is the importance of physical science dismissed, but its centrality is reframed, bracketed, because it itself starts as a reduction of reality: it extracts reductively what is useful for what is useful, and not what appears as it appears, nor what is true in a general sense. What changes, then, in relation to the thing given to us "in flesh and blood," as Husserl says (*leibhaft*), or we might say "in its living being," is that the object of science, and what is "true" for physics (*Das „physikalisch wahre"*), is in principle "differently determined" (*prinzipiell anders bestimmtes*). It starts from a common and initial configuration of the thing as experienceable as an "empty *x*" (*leeres x*), which subsequently becomes the support for the exact determinations of physical reasoning.

What, then, of the configurations of the sensible thing as *leibhaft*? It would be radically different, because it is seen first and foremost as 'perceived,' and thus accompanied by a set of determinations that are purely sensible (*lauter sinnlichen Bestimmtheiten da*), which physics, on the other hand, disregards.[88]

87. Ibid., 110.
88. Ibid., 112.

> Nur soviel kann man sagen: Das mit den und den sinnlichen Beschaffenheiten unter den gegebenen phänomenalen Umständen erscheinende Ding ist *für den Physiker*, der allgemein für solche Dinge überhaupt, in Erscheinungszusammenhängen der betreffenden Art, *schon die physikalische Bestimmung geleistet hat*, Anzeichen für eine Fülle kausaler Eigenschaften dieses selben Dinges, die als solche sich eben in artmäßig wohl bekannten Erscheinungsabhängigkeiten bekunden. Was sich da bekundet, ist offenbar — eben als sich in intentionalen Einheiten von Bewußtseinserlebnissen bekundend — prinzipiell transzendent.[89]

Regarding the animal and human worlds, Husserl makes no fundamental distinctions. Animals and humans are both sentient beings endowed with an openness to mundanity, a capacity to experience and "live" a certain "world" based on their sensory abilities. From this perspective, what truly changes is the type of "world" they subjectively experience. We might extend this consideration to plants as well, now that we know they too possess sensory capacities enabling them to interact with and adapt to their environment.

For living beings, therefore, the world is a psychophysical unity (*Die volle Welt ist ja nicht bloß physische, sondern psychophysische*).[90] This psychophysical nature requires us to include within it all streams of consciousness associated with animated bodies (*Leibern*). Hence, consciousness is indeed the absolute within which every transcendent being is constituted (the totality of the psychophysical world: *einerseits soll das Bewußtsein das Absolute sein*), but this same consciousness must also be a "real occurrence" subordinate to "this world." What links these two assertions is the fact that consciousness, whether human or animal, must be understood solely in empirical relation to the living body (*Leib*), the only means by which it can occupy a place within the space and time of nature (*der Zeit der Natur*). Moreover, if there were no interdependence between consciousness and the *Leib* in a natural and empirically perceptible unity, there would be no mutual understanding among animated beings sharing the same *Welt*. Similarly, there would be no ability for

89. Ibid., 113.
90. Ibid., 116.

each knowing subject to apprehend the world in its totality as a world inhabited alongside other subjects, nor to recognize this world as a shared *Umwelt* belonging in common to multiple subjects.

Furthermore, subjects confer meaning to the world and its things, which is an essential aspect of the essence of things, in their reality, and not as deviant constructions. Put differently, all real unities are also meaningful, semiotic unities, because they presuppose a consciousness capable of conferring meaning, without this process depending in turn on the assignment of meaning by another.

> In gewisser Art und mit einiger Vorsicht im Wortgebrauche kann man auch sagen: *Alle realen Einheiten sind* „*Einheiten des Sinnes*". Sinnes einheiten setzen (ich betone wiederholt: nicht weil wir aus irgendwelchen metaphysischen Postulaten deduzieren, sondern weil wir es in intuitivem, völlig zweifellosem Verfahren aufweisen können) *sinngebendes Bewußtsein* voraus, das seinerseits absolut und nicht selbst wieder durch Sinngebung ist. [...] Der Widersinn erwächst erst, wenn man philosophiert und, über den Sinn der Welt letzte Auskunft suchend, gar nicht merkt, daß die Welt selbst ihr ganzes Sein als einen gewissen „Sinn" hat, der absolutes Bewußtsein, als Feld der Sinngebung, voraussetzt; und wenn man in eins damit nicht merkt, daß dieses Feld, diese *Seinssphäre absoluter Ursprünge, ein der schauenden Forschung zugängliches* ist, mit einer unendlichen Fülle von einsichtigen Erkenntnissen höchster wissenschaftlicher Dignität. Das letztere allerdings haben wir noch nicht gezeigt, das wird erst im Fortgange dieser Untersuchungen zur Klarheit kommen.[91]

To fully understand the meaning of this discussion, it is necessary to distinguish between perception in a general sense and "external" perception (*Äussere Wahrnehmung*). Usual perception is the perception through which we refer to objects in the world as entities endowed with independent and stable existence, presented coherently to consciousness. This perception is based on an experience that Husserl describes as "intentional" and that occurs through a constant flow of perceptual acts, which confirm the identity of the perceived object. For example, when we perceive a familiar object (a chair, a tree),

91. Ibid., 120–21.

this normal perception relies on the continuity of our experiences, allowing us to recognize the object as something stable and reliable. Normal perception thus involves perceptual constancy, which is the ability to perceive an object as identical to itself despite changes in perspective, lighting conditions, or other sensory variations.

In contrast, external perception is "endowed with perfect clarity in all the objective moments that are truly given in it in the mode of originariness" ("Äussere Wahrnehmung hat ihre vollkommene Klarheit für alle gegenständlichen Momente, die wirklich in ihr im Modus der Originarität zur Gegebenheit gekommen sind").[92] The expression *Äussere Wahrnehmung* refers to the perception of objects as external to consciousness but, at the same time, appearing in an incomplete or partial manner. This means that the external object is always given only in one aspect, in a partial and mutable perspectival appearance. Every perception of an external object is, therefore, only one of the many manifestations that the object can assume, while its totality (the "full sense" of the object) is presented to consciousness as a regulative idea: it is always reconstructed by consciousness, never fully given in a single perception. External perception thus necessarily entails a "phenomenological reduction" or ἐποχή, an act of suspending judgment about the reality of the object perceived as existing independently of consciousness.

2.4 The Limits of the World (SN 35.116)

It is necessary to mention SN 35.116 to introduce a topic that will be addressed more thoroughly in the fourth chapter, but which is useful to clarify now as it allows us to dispel one final doubt regarding the thorny subject of *loka*. Buddhist practice seeks the liberation from the senses, which cannot simply be understood as suspension of judgment, although, for all the reasons we have seen so far, parallels are easily drawn. One way Pāli Buddhism seeks to achieve this transcendence is through the end (*anta*) of the world (*loka*).

92. Ibid., 146.

The term *lokanta*, which appears very frequently in Pāli texts yet has not received sufficient attention, can easily be misunderstood as an apocalyptic end of the world. Although Buddhism occasionally uses apocalyptic metaphors, this is not the predominant theme when speaking of the "end of the world" (*lokanta*). On the contrary, this term seems to refer primarily to the transcendence of the mundane sphere as such. In the Abhidhamma, this concept gains new prominence in the expression *lokuttara*, "beyond the world," as opposed to the "mundane" dimension (*lokiya*), from which the Buddhist ascetic seeks to detach.[93] It should be noted that *lokanta* and similar terms (such as *lokassa atthaṅgama*, *lokassa nirodha*, or *lokassa anta*) are both precursors to the idea of *lokuttara* and synonyms for the concept of *nibbāna*, as I have observed in some studies focused on this topic.[94]

To remove any doubt about the true meaning of *lokanta*, let us examine SN 35.116, which provides a clear description of what the Buddha meant by this term. From the very beginning of the sutta, the term is clarified:

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, gamanena lokassa antaṃ ñāteyyaṃ, daṭṭheyyaṃ, patteyyanti vadāmi.	O mendicants, I affirm that it is not possible to know, see, or reach the end of the world by traveling.
na ca panāhaṃ, bhikkhave, appatvā lokassa antaṃ dukkhassa antakiriyaṃ vadāmi.	But I also say that there is no ending of suffering without reaching the end of the world.

These simple words are too important to go uncommented. Let us divide the phrase into more comprehensible parts. Here, the Buddha explains what he means by "world." This is the sense of the final part: *ayaṃ vuccati ariyassa vinaye*—"thus it is said in the discipline of the noble." The expression "noble who practices" (*ariyassa vinaye*) clearly refers to the Buddha's asceticism and those who follow the same path.

93. Brahmāli Bhikkhu, "Jhāna and Lokuttara-Jjhāna," *Buddhist Studies Review* 24, no. 1 (2007): 75–90, DOI: 10.1558/bsrv.v24i1.75.

94. Divino, "In This World or the Next: Investigation Over the 'End of the World' in Contemplative Practice Through the Pāli Canon"; Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry."

We will not dwell here on the concept of *ariya* ("noble") to refer to the Buddha and his followers, but this term also appears in the foundational teaching of the Four Noble Truths, or according to some, the "Four Truths of the Nobles," where nobility is obviously not understood in terms of blood or caste. The phrase *ariyassa vinaye* thus refers to what pertains "to the training of the Buddha," to the Buddha's "discipline." It is then stated what is meant by what is "called (*vuccati*) 'world' (*loko*)" within the context of the Buddha's discipline: *lokasmiṃ lokasaññī hoti lokamānī*.

Three expressions all using the term *loka* to define *loka* itself. The first is one of the many possible forms of the locative: *lokasmiṃ*, meaning "in the world." *Lokasaññī*, meanwhile, refers to what of the world is perceived: the term *saññī* indicates the perceiver of something. You may notice the similarity with *saññā*, the perceptual stage in the five aggregates. *Saññī*, then, is the perception-of, the intentional form of *saññā*, or the recipient of the action, the perceiver (of something, naturally). Combined with *loka*, the term *loka-saññī* has been translated as "that through which you perceive" by Bhikkhu Sujato,[95] and as "that by which one is a perceiver of the world" by Bhikkhu Bodhi.[96]

Similarly, the same applies to the second term: *lokamānī*, which Sujato translates as "conceiver of the world," closely aligning with Bodhi's translation. This dual term, therefore, *lokasaññī lokamānī*, indicates two conditions of the supposed subject who lives 'in' the world (*lokasmiṃ*), but it is evident that what is being described here is a vicious cycle. The world is simultaneously conceived and constructed while one is in the world.

This psycho-ecological unity we have emphasized thus far is precisely this: the subject is 'in the world,' but at the same time, everything that is 'perceived' and 'conceived' as "world" is also what stands 'in the world' to be perceived and conceived (*lokasmiṃ lokasaññī lokamānī*). This naturally raises the follow-up question: *through what* in the world does one become a perceiver and conceiver of the world?

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95. Bhikkhu Sujato, *Linked Discourses: A Plain Translation of the Saṁyutta Nikāya - Vol. IV* (SuttaCentral, 2018), 100.

96. Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 1190.

(*kena... lokasmiṃ lokasaññī hoti lokamānī*). This brings us back to the previously examined sutta (SN 1.70), as the answer is indeed the same, and I simplify it here for clarity: *cakkhunā, sotena, ghānena, jivhāya, kāyena, manena — kho... lokasmiṃ lokasaññī hoti lokamānī*.

A series of instrumental terms (*cakkhunā, sotena, ghānena, jivhāya, kāyena*) provide the answer to our question: it is precisely *these six things* (through the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) that one becomes a perceiver and conceiver *of* the world while being *in* the world.

Having explained how the Buddha and the noble practitioner define the world, the text also identifies two fundamental aspects of one who is in-the-world: perceiver and conceiver of the very same world.

This text began by stating that the end of the world, which is also the end of suffering, is not a physical place reachable by traveling, but it did not immediately clarify what this end of the world is. Instead, it provided a better description of what the world is. The answer regarding the end of the world is not, however, avoided; we find it in another sutta: AN 4.45. Here, the deity Rohitassa takes center stage, asking the Buddha the much-discussed question: if the world is as it is, what does the Master mean by the impossibility of reaching its end by traveling?

Rohitassa approaches the Buddha and asks: "Sir, is it possible to know or see the end of the world by traveling to a place where there is no birth, aging, death, passing away, or rebirth?" (*yattha nu kho, bhante, na jāyati na jīyati na mīyati na cavati na upapajjati, sakkā nu kho so, bhante, gamanena lokassa anto ñātuṃ vā daṭṭhuṃ vā pāpuṇituṃ vā*).

The Buddha disagrees, reaffirming that he does not believe it is possible. But this time, he explains to Rohitassa what he means. Rohitassa reveals that he was once a seer among the Bhoja people with psychic powers, including the ability to fly (*rohitasso nāma isi ahosiṃ bhojaputto iddhimā vehāsaṅgamo*). Using these powers, he traveled far and wide for hundreds of years, seeking to reach the end of the world swiftly, like an arrow, but never succeeded. The Buddha acknowledges this impossibility but reiterates: "And yet, there can be no end of suffering without reaching the end of the world" (*gamanena na pattabbo, lokassanto kudācanaṃ; na ca appatvā lokantaṃ, dukkhā atthi pamocanaṃ*). To this, he adds these verses:

tasmā have lokavidū sumedho,	Thus, a sage, a knower of the world,
lokantagū vusitabrahmacariyo;	having completed the spiritual path,
lokassa antaṃ samitāvi ñatvā,	reaches the end of the world.
nāsīsatī lokamimaṃ parañcā.	Being at peace, knowing the end of the world,
	one does not hope for this world or the next.

Here, two crucial terms are used: *lokavidū*, the "knower of the world," one who understands what the world is (as we saw in SN 35.116), and *lokantagū*, one who "has gone to the end of the world," or the "world-ender." Since it is clear that the end of the world cannot be reached physically, this term refers to one who, using the language of other suttas, realizes *lokassa nirodha*, or in this case *lokassa anta*: one who realizes the end of the world not in terms of destruction but rather as the transcendence of those psycho-ecological mundane limitations.

2.5 The World is Empty (SN 35.85)

Another sutta that helps us gain a comprehensive understanding of the Buddhist concept of *loka* is found in SN 35.85, which is relatively brief. This sutta reflects on the 'empty' nature of the world. As mentioned in the first chapter, the adjective *suñña* or *suñño* ("empty") is used very sparingly. Only with the Abhidhamma, and even more so starting from Nāgārjuna, who made this adjective the centerpiece of his philosophy, does the theme of emptiness become truly central in Buddhism. However, we should not underestimate its use even before these reformulations. According to Vélez de Cea, the terms *suñña* and *suññatā* should be considered perfectly synonymous with *anattā*, and I fundamentally agree with this assertion (see §1.3 and 1.7).

How does this relate to the theme of the world? In reality, this assertion is implicit in what is said about the theme of *lokassa samudaya*. Indeed, if *loka* is inextricably linked to the six sensory spheres and their affective consciousnesses (*pathic* in the sense of being tied to πάϑος, meaning "sensation," "contact") and at the same time consciousness is

described as impermanent—as we saw in the previous sutta, but which also applies to the sensory spheres as evidenced in numerous other suttas—then it follows that the world itself is 'empty' in the sense of being devoid of *attā*. This is actually explained quite explicitly in SN 35.85, as we can see:

'suñño loko, suñño loko'ti, bhante, vuccati. *kittāvatā nu kho, bhante, suñño lokoti vuccatī'ti?* *— yasmā ca kho, ānanda, suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā tasmā suñño lokoti vuccati.* *kiñca, ānanda, suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā?* *cakkhu kho, ānanda, suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā.* *rūpā suññā attena vā attaniyena vā, cakkhuviññāṇaṃ suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā,* *cakkhusamphasso suñño attena vā attaniyena vā ...*	O venerable, "the world is empty, the world is empty," is said. But what does this phrase "the world is empty" really mean? — O Ānanda, it is said "the world is empty" because it is empty of self or of anything belonging to a self. And what is empty of self and of anything belonging to a self? The eye, O Ānanda, is empty of self and of anything belonging to a self. And forms are empty of self and of anything belonging to a self, and visual consciousness is empty of self and of anything belonging to a self, and visual contact is empty of self and of anything belonging to a self…

There is no need to comment on this sutta in its entirety; the reader can easily imagine what is being discussed at this point. The *pathic-phenomenological* dynamic, which involves the arising of consciousness through the contact between the sensory form, the effector, and the perceptive sphere, the sensor—which is also the arising of the world as we know it—is in fact empty, devoid of an autonomous and self-sufficient self. This is of primary interest in the phenomenological discourse.

This sutta also gives us an opportunity to delve into a fundamental mechanism in Buddhist phenomenological thought. The system described here, which obviously applies to all sensory receptors together, can be schematized as follows:

$$\frac{cakhu \rightarrow rūpa}{cakkhusamphasso} \rightarrow cakkhuviññāṇaṃ \rightarrow loka$$

This schema uses visual consciousness as an example, but this mechanism operates simultaneously for all the sensory *āyatana*s. The logic proposed by the sutta is simple: given the arising of *loka* by virtue of this phenomenological process (the world is a collective phenomenon, an 'ensemble of phenomena' tied to this concerted process of consciousnesses), it follows that the sensory organ initiating this arising is inseparably linked to *loka* as the outcome of the same process. However, if the sensory organ in question is recognized as non-autonomous and non-self-sufficient (empty of self and anything belonging to self), and if the cognitive forms acting as effectors for this process are also "empty," then the world itself is consequently empty. A collection of phenomena arises from causes and conditions, certainly, but these phenomena cannot in any way be recognized as autonomous or self-sufficient. Instead, they are concatenated, interdependent, and interrelated—thus, far from possessing an autonomous self or an identity of their own.

This brings us to another fundamental aspect. This mechanism, which is repeated in every sutta addressing the analysis of cognitive-sensory processes or the world, compels us to reflect—indeed, must make us reflect—on the peculiar Buddhist conception of consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Certainly, consciousness is primarily a force that determines and self-determines through processes of organization and division: it is discernment (*vi-ñā*), knowing by organizing distinctions. Yet it is also a force that *cannot exist without an object of reference*. Let me offer an example to clarify this point.

Let us revisit the schema just presented and simplify it: we replace the sensory organ, which could be any of the six, with the variable *S*, and replace *rūpa*, which we know to be cognitively understood form, with the variable *x*, indicating any effector.

$$\frac{S \overset{viññāṇa}{\longleftrightarrow} x}{phassa}$$

Let us remove *loka*, which is irrelevant for this context. What we learn from this schema is the fundamental principle of interdependence

of consciousness. *Consciousness exists only* in relation: in this case, in the relational nexus (contact) between S and *x*. If there were no *x* toward which S must direct its intentionality, there would be no *viññāṇa*. Therefore, we will denote both contact (*phassa*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) with C, as at this point we understand that *viññāṇa* is nothing other than the outcome of the return of the intentionality of S toward the object *x*.

$$S \overset{C}{\longleftrightarrow} x$$

Given the fundamentally *intentional nature* of consciousness, we understand the essential unity of intention (contact) and discernment (consciousness). We also realize that consciousness resides precisely in that relational arrow, in the contact between S and *x*, where S addresses *x*, and *x* responds to S. Consciousness is always a relational, intentional act—it is always consciousness *of* something. Conversely, neither S nor *x* can exist as autonomous and self-sufficient; they do not exist independently but appear alternately as witness or witnessed in the intentional-conscious act.

We further understand—though this will be the subject of the third chapter—that all this compels us to reconsider the centrality of the body, which in our relational schema is not reduced exclusively to S. The body is not merely a container of all possible S but is also the epicenter of the 'world,' constituted in the relationship between possible S and possible *x*. 'Body' must be understood in its complex totality, which is also why the suttas emphasize the body so much in contemplative practice.

Additionally, there is a significant implicit factor in this equation. The way in which the axis S—*x* is connected in its conscious relation has the biosemiotic denominator of *nimitta*. My proposal, linked to what was expressed in the first chapter, is to interpret the concept of *nimitta* specifically as a *biosemiotic marker*, an element mediated within the system of relationships between biological subjects and their environments. This allows for a deeper understanding of the concept of *nimitta*, which, as we have seen, does not perfectly align with the

semantic idea of the linguistic sign, as other concepts are better suited to be the ideal candidates for inspiring the Saussurean *sema*, primarily the *nāmarūpa* dyad. Yet *nimitta* unequivocally means "sign."

On one hand, it can also be interpreted as any 'mark,' any physical 'sign' drawn on a surface, a grapheme, a drawing, and so forth. On the other hand, *nimitta* holds a central role even in contemplative exercises, indicating a figurative sign, a specific mental image, a luminous sphere, the figure of the Buddha—something evoked by the mind as a support for meditation, an initial focus on a 'sign' meant to convey something, facilitating meditation through attentive focus on a single *nimitta* for a certain period.[97] Moreover, it does not appear only in meditation; *nimitta*s seem to populate our daily life, constantly influencing us. This leads us to think that, yes, it is also a 'sign,' but the term used indicates a more dynamic aspect, tied precisely to these complex processes.

$$S \longleftrightarrow \frac{C}{nimitta} \longleftrightarrow x$$

In the final stage of the Buddha's meditation as described in DN 16, it is said that "sometimes the Realized One, without focusing on any sign, and bringing certain sensations to cessation, enters and remains in the signless meditative absorption. Only then, O Ānanda, does the body of the Realized One become more comfortable" (*yasmiṃ, ānanda, samaye tathāgato sabbanimittānaṃ amanasikārā ekaccānaṃ vedanānaṃ nirodhā animittaṃ cetosamādhiṃ upasampajja viharati, phāsutaro, ānanda, tasmiṃ samaye tathāgatassa kāyo hoti*). Here we learn two fundamental points: first, that the sign (*nimitta*) has a peculiar relationship with the body (*kāya*); and second, as we saw in the first chapter, that there exists a state of absence of these signs—presumably a transcendence of the conditioning that normally involves the body, which is constantly invested by these figurative signs and instinctively reacts to their stimuli.

97. Kate Crosby, *Esoteric Theravada: The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2020), 155–161.

All of this is part of what we call "the world," and it does so in an incredibly dynamic, complex way. The abundance of these terms is not meant to confuse the reader but to highlight these complex aspects that are part of the phenomenology of the world.

Understanding the *kāya-loka* relationship is fundamental to grasp why Buddhists consider the body simultaneously as the epicenter of a constant exchange and emanation of figurative signs (*nimitta*) and the world as this great construct experienced by the body, in an indissoluble bond with the body, yet also empty. This is, in fact, a true ecology of the biosemiotic relationship (linked to the *nimitta*s) between *kāya* and *loka*.

In SN 22.94, the Buddha criticizes those who regard the five aggregates as imperishable, eternal, and therefore immutable. In doing so, he connects them—not coincidentally—to the world, using a very particular formula: the expression *loke lokadhammo*. The first term, *loke*, is a locative, meaning "in the world," while the construct *lokadhammo* can have various interpretations, as we know that *dhamma* indicates a generic thing, a phenomenon, or an event.

However, as we have seen, the phenomenological interpretation promises to be the most faithful. I suggest interpreting *loke lokadhammo* as "phenomenon of the world in the world," which is a truly intriguing expression. Why this duplication? Because the world must be understood in its duality: as an ecological dimension in relation to the body, but at the same time as a semiotic construct that is in dialogue with the body itself. This explains the enigmatic statement: "Consciousness, O mendicants, is a phenomenon of the world in the world that the Buddha comprehends and understands perfectly" (*viññāṇaṃ, bhikkhave, loke lokadhammo taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti*, SN 22.94). The same phrase is repeated for all five aggregates; here, I have cited consciousness as an example.

The expression *abhisambujjhati abhisameti* is also noteworthy: these are two verbs marked by the prefix *abhi-*, which we know indicates something superior or complete. *Sambujjhati* and *sameti* refer to understanding, grasping, or 'reaching' the true nature of something. With the prefix *abhi-*, it is emphasized that the Buddha is the one who has the full

capacity to understand this *loke lokadhammo* of the five aggregates: he has complete and perfect realization and comprehension of it.

One of the reasons for the importance of the concept of *loka* in Buddhist phenomenology is found in the more archaic sections of the canon, such as the Aṭṭhakavagga.[98] In this text, the term *loka* is already used in its dual sense: as a place of suffering, which the Buddhist ascetic seeks to transcend, and as a phenomenological stage. What is particularly interesting for our analysis is how these two aspects are interconnected, explaining the importance of phenomenological study by the meditator, as it also reveals the origin of suffering—a central theme in the entire Buddhist narrative.

We read in Snp 4.11: "From where do quarrels and disputes originate?" (*kutopahūtā kalahā vivādā*). This sutta is a poetic lamentation, reaching great heights of Buddhist expressiveness, characteristic of the more archaic verse texts. Here, the author is suffering, despairing: "And where does lamentation, sorrow, and stinginess arise? What about presumption, arrogance, and malice? Please tell me, from where does all this originate?" (*paridevasokā sahamaccharā ca, mānātimānā sahapesuṇā ca, kutopahūtā te tadiṅgha brūhi*).

It is answered that all these arise from attachment, possessiveness, or what is regarded as dearest (*piyappahūtā*). Thus, disputes and conflicts are tied to stinginess, and when disputes arise, so do the causes of slander. The issue, then, lies at the base of this phenomenological pyramid: from what does that which we hold dear in the world arise? Alongside this question arises another about craving (*piyā su lokasmiṃ kutonidānā, ye cāpi lobhā vicaranti loke*), and with this craving, the hopes and desires humans harbor for future lives (*āsā ca niṭṭhā ca kutonidānā, ye samparāyāya narassa honti*).

These things arise from desire in the world, as do the cravings that wander through it (*chandānidānāni piyāni loke, ye cāpi lobhā vicaranti loke*). The text traces the phenomenological genesis of these

98. Shulman, "Early Buddhist Imagination: The Aṭṭhakavagga as Buddhist Poetry"; Norman, "On Translating the Suttanipata"; Jayawickrama, "Critical Analysis of the Sutta Nipata"; Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry."

issues, culminating in a crucial question: the origin of pleasure and pain themselves (*sātaṃ asātañca kutonidānā*), a theme linked to the phenomenological problem par excellence—the arising and ceasing of phenomena. Then it is asked the teacher to explain, "from where do these things come?" (*vibhavaṃ bhavañcāpi yametamatthaṃ, etaṃ me pabrūhi yatonidānaṃ*).

Contact is identified as that which arises "in the world" as the primary cause of subsequent problems, such as possessiveness (*phasso nu lokasmi kutonidāno...*). A key aspect of contact is the *name-form* pair, though here they are presented as separate elements: "Name and form originate contact, and possession arises from desire. When desire is absent, there is no possessiveness, and when form disappears, contact does not occur" (*nāmañca rūpañca paṭicca phasso, icchānidānāni pariggahāni; icchāyasantyā na mamattamatthi, rūpe vibhūte na phusanti phassā*).

The importance of this text is fundamental because it allows us to identify, even in the oldest strata of the canon, a profound capacity for phenomenological analysis. These are, in fact, the foundations for all the texts analyzed so far. Here, we already find the problem of phenomenological intentionality expressed through a fundamental schema that proceeds from name and form to activate contact, the principle of any phenomenon we can attest to.

Another incredible theme of this text is the use, even at this early stage, of highly sophisticated technical terms, such as *saññasaññī* ("perception of perception") or *visaññasaññī* ("distorted perception"). These terms are invoked to alert the meditator to the reality of phenomena, as the perception of forms and phenomena leads to the arising of judgments, which are the cause of conflicts and suffering. Yet the arising and ceasing of forms are merely the outcome of their ephemeral nature, given by our perceptual limitations. The illusion that what falls within the limits of our perception "is" causes us to form bonds, affections, and attachments, only to suffer their disappearance when they exceed the bounds of our perceptual capacity. At that point, they vanish, causing suffering and creating conflicts.

Bodhi translates this critical passage as follows: "Not percipient through perception, not percipient through disturbed perception, not altogether without perception, not percipient of what has vanished: form vanishes for one who has so attained, for concepts due to proliferation are based on perception"[99] (*na saññasaññī na visaññasaññī, nopi asaññī na vibhūtasaññī; evaṃ sametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ, saññānidānā hi papañcasaṅkhā*).

2.6 Phenomenological Conditionality: Interdependence, Interrelatedness, Interpenetration

The implications of the philosophy of interpenetration are an aspect of phenomenological conditionality as expressed in its earliest articulations in Buddhist philosophy. The implication I am referring to is the one I discussed in a previous work on dualism and psychosemantics in early Buddhism,[100] namely, that the chain of dependent origination does not describe an ontological progression—that is, the transition of the being of x to the being of y in the phenomenological sequence $x \rightarrow y$.

What occurs is not that the being of x is replaced by the being of y, meaning that x becomes nothing and y arises from nothing to 'be' y, where x once 'was.' Instead, the fact that y follows x in the phenomenological progression testifies to the mutual implication of x and y. In other words, as in the metaphor of the tree and the seed, it is true that the phenomenon "tree" follows (for *our temporal perspective*) the phenomenon "seed," but it is equally true that the seed already implies the tree, in that without the seed stage, the tree stage would not exist. At the same time, the tree continues to imply the seed even when it no longer appears as such in the phenomenological present.

This issue led to significant debate in the Abhidhamma regarding the ontological status of the various *dhamma*s that succeed one another.

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99. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Suttanipāta: An Ancient Collection of the Buddha's Discourses Together with Its Commentaries, Paramatthajotikā II and Excerpts from the Niddesa* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2017), 306.

100. Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy."

Some asserted that a *dhamma* exists only in the present moment when it manifests, while others maintained that *dhamma*s are eternally existent and that what changes is merely their capacity to phenomenologically influence the present moment when they become active. Both positions represent extremes that fail to account for the ontological problem of *dhamma*s. In the first case, an unbridgeable fracture is created, and the progression $x \rightarrow y$ describes two distinct and irreconcilable ontic states, ignoring their mutual implication. In the case of sempiternalism, however, the progression $x \rightarrow y$ remains problematic because it allows for the possibility that phenomena—*dhamma*s—"exist" differently depending on the temporal moment in which we experience them, forgetting that time itself is a perceptual illusion.

While it is undeniable that we experience phenomena in a temporal sequence, it is not equally true that they 'exist' differently depending on how we experience them. The theme of interpenetration already addresses this dilemma: every phenomenon *necessarily implies* all others and metaphorically 'contains' them within itself. The same applies to any other phenomenon "different" from itself, which retains its difference but simultaneously contains, because it implies, that from which it is distinguished. Thus, if we observe a phenomenological progression such as $x \rightarrow y \rightarrow z$, we must certainly understand x as distinct from y and z, and y as distinct from x and z, just as z is distinct from x and y. Yet it is equally true that neither x, y, nor z can be considered autonomous and self-sufficient, that is, beings that exist independently of the others. Autonomous identity, the *attā* x, or the *attā* y, are nothing more than emptiness, theoretical constructs that logic *forces* us to think of as lacking intrinsic identity. Only in this peculiar concatenation x—y—z can we conceive x, y, or z in turn, and we do so because we unconsciously imply the evidence: x requires y and z to be called "x," and vice versa. But what do we mean by this co-implicative necessity? Nothing other than the fact that x "contains" the nature of y and z as relational possibilities.

Let us recall the example of the magnet and the iron: the magnet, in itself, is inert; it would have no characteristics. We derive its characteristics by observing its behavior and consider them as existing in a kind

of void. But reality is quite different. The iron already anticipates the existence of the magnet, "containing" it within its identity as "iron." Only in relation to the magnet will it be attracted, and in turn, the magnet will attract the iron because its relational possibilities include being an attractor of iron. The relationship simply makes explicit what is already interpenetrated in various beings and in what we erroneously call "qualities," which in reality are not distinct from being itself. There is no difference between the being of the magnet and its attractive quality toward the iron.

This principle was also well understood by Saussure in his writings on linguistics, as it is as true in phenomenological reality as it is in linguistic systems, which are in no way dissimilar from phenomena. The ontology of linguistic objects behaves in the same way as that of real phenomena, simply because there is no ontological distinction between linguistic objects and 'material' ones.

> C'est ainsi qu'on ne cesse en linguistique de considérer dans l'ordre B des objets *a* qui existent selon A, mais pas selon B ; dans l'ordre A des objets *b* qui existent selon B mais pas selon A, etc.
> Pour chaque ordre en effet on éprouve le besoin de déterminer l'objet ; et pour le déterminer on recourt machinalement à un second ordre quelconque, parce qu'il n'y a pas d'autre moyen offert en l'absence totale d'entités concrètes : éternellement donc le grammairien ou le linguiste nous donne pour entité concrète, et pour entité absolue servant de base à ses opérations, l'entité abstraite et relative […].[101]

On this subject, the concept of intentional form to which Husserl refers, calling it simply μορφή, is of utmost importance, particularly in how it intersects with the problem of sensoriality, represented by the concept of ὕλη.[102] Intentional form, or μορφή, is the aspect of the act of consciousness that gives structure and direction to intentionality. It determines the modal aspect, the 'how' of an object's representation in consciousness. For instance, perceiving, imagining, or remembering

101. de Saussure, *Écrits de Linguistique Générale*, 24.
102. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 191–96.

an object involves distinct intentional forms. Each intentional form shapes the mental act according to specific modalities but does not carry the sensory content itself: it provides only the intentional schema or the specific mode by which it relates to the object.

The importance of the substantive-perceptual aspect, in turn, appears as the other side of this morphological element: sensory matter, or ὕλη, represents the concrete content of perception, i.e., the set of sensory qualities (colors, sounds, shapes) that make up the experience. This content is provided by the sensory data received by consciousness from sensitive experience and serves as the "material" upon which intentional form acts, thus presenting the perceived object in a particular manner. In other words, matter constitutes the "what" of perception, namely, the collection of the object's specific characteristics.

It goes without saying that this duality and unity of ὕλη and μορφή plays a dominant role throughout the "phenomenological territory" (*eine beherrschende Rolle*).[103] The intentional act is thus constituted by the synthesis of form and matter. Husserl distinguishes these two elements to emphasize that every act of consciousness involves an internal structure, in which intentional form "organizes" and gives meaning to sensory matter. This dual structure enables consciousness to specifically apprehend objects and represent them in their determinacy and individuality.

For example, when we perceive a tree, the sensory matter includes qualities such as the green color of the leaves, the shape of the trunk, etc. The intentional form, on the other hand, is what allows us to understand that collection of data as "a tree" in a certain way (e.g., a tree in a park, a tree seen from a window).

Sinnlichkeit, sensitivity in the strict sense, refers to the phenomenological residue of what is typically supplied by the senses in external perception. Phenomenological reduction, on the other hand, leaves as residual an essential affinity among the sensory data of external intuitions, corresponding to a peculiar and more general essence.[104]

103. Ibid., 192.

104. Certainly, here we do not wish to succumb to Husserl's single great flaw: terminological proliferation. This profusion of technical terms, frankly, often exceeds

Husserl then introduces two important concepts that are *noesis* and *noema*. Noesis (from Greek νοεῖν, "to think") represents the mental act itself, that is, the intentional act through which consciousness is directed toward an object. Noesis is therefore the subjective element of conscious experience, the "how" of our intention: for example, perceiving, remembering, imagining, or desiring an object are all distinct noetic acts. It encompasses the modes through which consciousness "experiences" an object, the "tonalities" that characterize the act itself (perceiving it, thinking about it, doubting it, etc.). Each of these modes adds a specific "coloration" to the intentional experience.

Noema (from Greek νόημα, "that which is thought") is the intentional object as it appears in consciousness, i.e., the object as intended in the noetic act. It is the objective element corresponding to the act of consciousness but is not the real object in itself: it is the object as represented and experienced by the subject. Noema, therefore, is not an external object but the object *as intended*—the meaningful content of the intentional act. For example, if I see a mountain, the noema is "the mountain as seen," with all its characteristics as it appears in my perception (but not the mountain as a physical entity independent of my consciousness).

The distinction between noesis and noema is fundamental because it allows Husserl to analyze acts of consciousness without reducing the intentional object (νόημα) to an external reality. Phenomenology can thus describe phenomena as they are experienced by consciousness, without making assumptions about their independent existence. Husserl calls this approach "phenomenological reduction," as it focuses on the data of consciousness and the pure experience of the object, rather than on the object as "existent" in the physical world.

Regarding the previously discussed issue of formality, the concept of noesis proves useful for the following reason. What "shapes," what

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tolerable limits without being justified by actual necessity, and I believe this can be demonstrated. Buddhist phenomenology employs its own technical terms, often quite precise, but it is their volume that deserves attention. Without resorting to an excessive number of technicalities, Buddhist phenomenology achieves a high level of sophistication, marked by intricate detail and profound understanding of phenomena. Yet, it does not require the sheer lexical expansion characteristic of Husserl's approach, as will be amply demonstrated through examples from Buddhist texts.

renders μορφή the various ὕλαι, transforming them into intentional lived experiences by introducing the specific element of intentionality, is precisely what gives the term "consciousness" its specific meaning, namely, that consciousness inherently refers to "something" *of which* it is consciousness. At this point, the term *noesis* is introduced out of the necessity to indicate the particular moment (the noetic moment) that constitutes νοῦς in its broadest sense: that which relates to cogitation and thus to intentional lived experiences in general, also forming the eidetic presupposition of the idea of norm. On this subject, Husserl does not exclude that the concept of νοῦς can also be understood as referring to the "sense" and "sense-bestowal" accomplished in the aforementioned noetic moments.[105]

> Was die Stoffe zu intentionalen Erlebnissen formt und das Spezifische der Intentionalität hereinbringt, ist eben dasserbe wie das, was der Rede vom Bewußtsein seinen spezifischen Sinn gibt: wonach eben Bewußtsein *eo ipso* auf etwas hindeutet, wovon es Bewußtsein ist. Da nun die Rede von Bewußtseinsmomenten, Bewußtheiten und allen ähnlichen Bildungen, und desgleichen die Rede von intentionalen Momenten durch vielfältige und im weiteren deutlich hervortretende Äquivokationen ganz unbrauchbar ist, führen wir den Terminus *noetisches Moment* oder, kürzer gefaßt, *Noese* ein. Diese Noesen machen das Spezifische des *Nus im weitesten Sinne* des Wortes aus, der uns nach allen seinen aktuellen Lebensformen auf *cogitationes* und dann auf intentionale Erlebnisse überhaupt zurückführt und somit all das umspannt (und im wesentlichen nur das), was *eidetische Voraussetzung der Idee der Norm ist*. Zugleich ist es nicht unwillkommen, daß das Wort Nus an eine seiner ausgezeichneten Bedeutungen, nämlich eben an "Sinn" erinnert, obschon die "Sinngebung", die in den noetischen Momenten sich vollzieht, vielerlei umfaßt und nur als Fundament eine dem prägnanten Begriffe von Sinn sich anschließende "Sinngebung".[106]

Every intentional lived experience (*intentionale Erlebnis*) is in turn defined as "noetic" precisely by virtue of its noetic moments. It essentially includes within itself something like a *Sinn* (sense) and

105. Ibid., 194.
106. Ibid.

potentially a multiplicity of senses. Based on these conferrals of sense, it carries out successive operations that themselves acquire meaning.[107]

Even perception is associated with its νόημα (meaning or reference), the "perceptual sense" (*Wahrnehmungssinn*), which for Husserl is to be understood as "the perceived as such" (*Wahrgenommene als solches*). Similarly, every memory will be accompanied by its "memory as such," or more precisely, "remembered as such," as it is 'given' to consciousness. These noematic correlates (*Noematische Korrelat*), which constitute the "sense," are to be apprehended precisely and immanently within the lived experience of perception, judgment, pleasure, and so on. The noematic correlates are offered to us as senses by the lived experience itself, provided that we know how to interrogate it phenomenologically 'in its purity' (*wenn wir rein dieses Erlebnis selbst befragen, uns von ihm dargeboten wird*).

Husserl gives the example of the perception of a tree in a garden. The object "tree" is not to be understood, as we might be tempted, through its epistemological, scientific-natural configurations, or, I would add, through any other epistemic systematization that might arise. The risk is not limited to a naturalistic understanding of the tree as a "thing of nature," as a "plant," or as a "vegetable," and so forth. An analogous danger arises from any religious systematization or other belief-based classification. If we imagine a language incorporating systems of lexical classification, such as those involving counters, even perceiving the tree as a "cylindrical thing" or a "thing of nature" that belongs to an order where some items are included and others excluded is already a misleading cognition. Such cognition must be bracketed or suspended.

Moreover, this "tree simpliciter" (*Der Baum schlechthin*), as a thing of nature (or as belonging to an epistemic order), is not the tree as such (*Baumwahrgenommene als solches*). The tree perceived "as such" is any perceptual correlate that is given to consciousness at that moment. It does not correspond to any presumed real referent, whose continued existence or configuration matters little. "The tree may burn, dissolve into its chemical elements, and so on. But the sense, the sense of *this* perception—something that necessarily belongs to its essence—cannot burn; it

107. Ibid., 202.

has no chemical elements, no forces, no natural properties" ("Der Baum schlechthin kann abbrennen, sich in seine chemischen Elemente auflösen usw. Der Sinn aber—Sinn dieser Wahrnehmung, ein notwendig zu ihrem Wesen Gehöriges—kann nicht abbrennen, er hat keine chemischen Elemente, keine Kräfte, keine realen Eigenschaften").[108]

This perceptual content is, specifically, the thing of which we can be certain that it is present to consciousness and can be the object of effective phenomenological analysis. The characteristic of "having sense" (Sinn zu haben), that is, "having something present to the mind" (etwas „im Sinne zu haben"), is the fundamental character (*Grundcharakter*) of all consciousnesses.[109] Since we have thus defined consciousness, we also agree that this "having sense," "having *something* present," is not merely a generic lived experience but a lived experience of sense, and thus "noetic."

A full νόημα is also, and above all, a complex of noematic moments, within which the specific moment of sense forms only a kind of necessary "core layer" (*Kernschicht*) on which all other noematic or sense moments are essentially founded.

If we are thus liberated from the notion of the tree, including the notion of it as a "thing of nature," we can conclude that the perceived tree, as an object of nature, as something 'there,' in the garden, can be understood as the real object of perceptual intention. What I do not have present—because it would be absurd—is "a second immanent tree," an "internal image," a presumed 'real' tree that stands 'out there before me.'

> Das Ding, das Naturobjekt nehme ich wahr, den Baum dort im Garten; das und nichts anderes ist das wirkliche Objekt der wahrnehmenden „Intention". Ein zweiter immanenter Baum oder auch ein „inneres Bild" des wirklichen, dort draußen vor mir stehenden Baumes ist doch in keiner Weise gegeben, und dergleichen hypothetisch zu supponieren, führt nur auf Widersinn. Das Abbild als reelles Stück in der psychologisch-realen Wahrnehmung wäre wieder ein Reales — ein Reales, das für ein anderes als Bild *fungierte*.[110]

108. Ibid., 205.
109. Ibid., 206.
110. Ibid., 207.

Here we reach the absurdity of the cognitive copy paradox. The mental copy of the tree, as an actual part of psycho-physiological perception, would itself be something real, and thus reality would act as a propulsion for the copy of something else which, however, cannot but also be real in turn. This would imply a representational consciousness in which 'something' must first manifest itself as the initial object of intentionality, and subsequently this x would function within consciousness as the basis for producing another object or cognitive image x_1, which would become the focus of a second intentionality.

We thus have the paradox of infinite regression:

$$\mathrm{C} \rightarrow x \rightarrow x_1 \rightarrow x_2 \rightarrow x_3 \ldots$$

Each of these x would already imply and necessitate the distinction between immanent and real object, thus encapsulating the same initial problem. If we assume such a system of images, we remain entangled in the thicket of infinite production. One would need to demonstrate from the outset that consciousness does not perceive something real in any way, but rather perceives something false and doubled, in the form of a cognitive photocopy—though it remains unclear where this photocopy originates. From the processing of sensory data by perceptual systems? But then, what would those perceptual systems be dealing with if not something real? And why, then, suppose a copy rather than another real thing?

Given that reality has nothing to do with ontological truth, and certainly does not tell us, in any absolute or incontrovertible sense, what (or how) the totality of being is, assuming that the mere fact of having as the intentional object of consciousness partial aspects of being makes them necessarily 'false' or 'copies' leads to the paradox of a mechanism of infinite doubling, which certainly does not stop at the first x_1 but must continue indefinitely.

Now, concerning perception, the elimination of contingent and irrelevant data for the phenomenologist produces, in relation to the tree mentioned earlier, the perception of that 'reduced' phenomenon which is the sole and first x, namely, that tree in its being perceived as such; for

example, as "blooming out there in the garden," and thus as a correlate belonging to the essence of phenomenologically reduced perception.

This applies not only to perception but also to all types of intentional lived experience. In each of these 'reduced' lived experiences, the noematic sense is included. Then, Husserl notes (in §91 of *Vol. 1*)[111] the necessity of isolating essentially different strata within the full noema, which cluster around a pure object sense. However, this is not strictly necessary, for reasons that I hope will become clear in examining how the Buddhists understand phenomenal analysis—prior even to phenomenological analysis, and distinct from Husserl's framework.

It should also be noted that one must be cautious not to confuse the noematic content with a perfect snapshot of a perceptual moment and thus of the phenomenon itself, that is, when a phenomenon is attested to as being witnessed in the phenomenal moment, which we might call φ. This moment φ includes a single phenomenal unit, which implies a φ that could be "a lit bonfire." In this specific moment φ, I will have included only one instant of the fire burning as a phany belonging to moment φ, but the following instant—the one immediately succeeding that just perceived—is a different moment φ entirely. For practical purposes, we group together φ moments belonging to a certain phenomenal continuity; thus, as long as the fire burns, we consider it part of a single process. However, we must never forget that this grouping is purely arbitrary. In principle, nothing distinguishes φ_1 and φ_2 of two different burning moments from φ_3, when the fire has gone out.

The discussion becomes even more complex when considering my specific perceptions. Without invoking the insoluble problem of the uniqueness of my perceptual moment—where, for instance, the red of the burning fire in φ_1 is not the same "red" of the same fire burning in another observer's φ, even though they witness the same φ—even within my own perceptions, I cannot attest to the same φ twice. Yet, I can turn my gaze to the same tree repeatedly, and we surely do not want to descend into the extreme absurdity of believing that every moment I look at a tree *x*, it is always a different phenomenon. Certainly,

111. Ibid., 210–11.

the *phenomenal moment* φ is never the same, but that which is related to φ must somehow be connected.

Let us consider, for instance, the color of the trunk.[112] For Husserl, the same noematic color (*selbe noematische Farbe*), which in the continuous unity of perceptual consciousness continuously modifies, is given to that same perceptual consciousness 'as' identical in itself and unchanging. We will call this relational continuity between different φ moments φ(α). The commonality that allows us to assert that we are witnessing the same noematic color stems from a factor we will conveniently call α, which relates to the identity of that color in our perception. This allows a given α to be attested to by consciousness as identical and unchanging in itself, yet this α appears to consciousness as a continuous multiplicity of chromatic sensations ("einer kontinuierlichen Mannigfaltigkeit von Empfindungsfarben ab").

Now, we see a tree that always appears the same to us: it does not seem to change color every passing moment; and if it does, we do not perceive it. Let us set aside unusual situations and focus only on 'normal' perceptions—it is obvious that if I get hit on the head, my perceptions will be affected and vary from second to second. I might lower my head or shift the orientation of my eyes, yet I will always perceive this color as having a formal identity α with the phenomenon "tree," the same phenomenon "tree," incidentally.

For Husserl, if we pay attention to the sensations, to the adumbrations, and grasp them as evident data while simultaneously varying the attitude and direction of attention, we can "with perfect clarity" relate the adumbrations themselves to the corresponding objectual moments, recognize their correspondence, and thus perceive something we previously overlooked: namely, that the chromatic adumbrations of the color fixed as the *color-of-the-thing* relate to this unity as a 'multiple' and continuous flow of phenomena tied to a phenomenal unity.

By applying phenomenological reduction to the tree in question to achieve its eidetic evidence, the object "tree" manifests itself as objectively determined, as it appears in perception, only if the hyletic moments (relative to ὕλη) or the hyletic continuities belong to a continuum.

112. Ibid., 226.

Translated into our formula: φ(α) represents a phenomenon composed of a bundled continuum of phenomenal manifestations that are hyletically interconnected (α_1—α_2—α_3—α_4—α_5—...). Hyletic continuity entails a general belonging of the bundle of phenomena to a complex interconnected group.

This theme of continuity also applies to the relationship between εἶδος and νόημα. Indeed, the εἶδος of νόημα refers to the εἶδος of noetic consciousness, with both reciprocally belonging to each other for essential reasons.

> Das überträgt sich natürlich in die eidetische Betrachtungsweise: das Eidos des Noema weist auf das Eidos des noetischen Bewußtseins hin, beide gehören eidetisch zusammen. Das Intentionale als solches ist, was es ist, als Intentionales des so und so *gearteten* Bewußtseins, das Bewußtsein von ihm ist.[113]

In the case of noematic objects, such as the image-object or the depicted object, the one that functions as the sign and the one designated, regardless of the inherent categorizations like (image-of-*x*), it is evident that all these are given to consciousness in lived experience, yet transcend it.[114] Husserl is interested in the intentional object as such, the noematic core, and this is "always and necessarily given to consciousness," which he calls the "objectual noema" and considers as necessarily characterized in some way by specific characteristics drawn from every kind ("allzeit und notwendig ein noematischer Kern, ein „Gegenstandsnoema", bewußt ist, das irgendwie charakterisiert sein *muß*, und zwar nach diesen oder jenen [...] Differenzen aus *jeder* Gattung").

Noetic characteristics are important as manifestly different characteristics of being. Husserl therefore defines them as "doxical" (*doxische*) because they pertain to opinions or perceptual beliefs („Glaubenscharaktere" — sind bei den anschaulichen Vorstellungen).[115]

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113. Ibid., 230.
114. Ibid., 237–38.
115. Ibid., 239.

We are almost at the totality of the concepts from the first book of the *Ideen* that we are interested in exploring for the purpose of Buddhist analysis, which we will address in detail. Nonetheless, I am not summarizing the entirety of Husserl's work, but rather selecting the parts that will be most useful for our analysis of Buddhist phenomenology.

Husserl conceives of each νόημα as having its own "content" (*Inhalt*), meaning it has its own sense through which it refers to its own object (*Gegenstand*).[116] Naturally, we must understand this content nature in a relational sense: where the object of the noematic content is any element with which one has the relevant relationship. The intentional lived experience (*intentionale Erlebnis*) is what Husserl defines as having a specific relationship with its objectual element (*Beziehung auf Gegenständliches*).[117] Hence, the famous phrase, which we will reflect on further, that consciousness is, necessarily, always, consciousness *of* something (*Bewußtsein von etwas*).[118]

Thus, in *every* noema, there is something objectual, but what interests us primarily is the relational aspect. In this relationality, the object, which is never autonomous but is always understood as 'object-of' something, i.e., 'object-as-directed-by-consciousness,' is exactly what is "targeted" (*Gegenstand im Wie*) by the intentionality of consciousness, but far from being passively invested by it, it is also a co-participant. The sense, therefore, is not a concrete essence in the overall structure of the noema but is primarily—and attention must be paid to the term Husserl uses—"form," specifically for Husserl, the sense is an abstract form that inhabits the noema. However, for us, the distinction between the abstract and the concrete will soon become little more than indicative.

> Der Sinn, so wie wir ihn bestimmt haben, ist nicht ein konkretes Wesen im Gesamtbestande des Noema, sondern eine Art ihm einwohnender abstrakter Form. Halten wir nämlich den Sinn fest, also das „Vermeinte" genau mit dem Bestimmungsgehalt, in dem es Vermeintes ist, so ergibt sich

116. Ibid., 297.
117. Ibid., 298.
118. Ibid., 299.

> klärlich ein *zweiter Begriff* vom „Gegenstand im Wie" — *im Wie seiner Gegebenheitsweisen*.[119]

Like the thing, so also every characteristic determination (*Beschaffenheit*) belonging to its eidetic experience and therefore every "form" as we have understood it here (and therefore as constitutive form or *konstitutive „Form"*) are "ideas,"[120] and for Husserl this applies as much to the regional generality (*regionalen Allgemeinheit*) as to the finest particularities (*Besonderheit*).

Let us return for a moment to the discussion we began in §1.7 regarding the relationship between two voids. According to Rastier, "Le signe comme *point d'un réseau* se définit au sein d'une structure relationnelle ouverte — si le réseau est extensible."[121] Through our comparative reading between Saussure and Buddhist linguistic thought, we concluded that yes, indeed, the full is formed by the interaction—or rather, the relationship—of two empties.

Care must be taken to avoid confusion: emptiness is not a nothingness, nor a "negative" in a nihilistic sense, though Saussure seems to mistakenly interpret it as such, even though he does not explain how something can arise from nothing in the first place. If we understand the negative in the sense of opposition, we are not talking about nothingness. Something that imposes a relationship, requires interaction, and is not "nothing" but simply "what is said in the relation." What I mean is: if the positive is the result of the relationship between two negatives, it is not because these negatives are a "nothing," but because their negativity indicates their non-autonomy.

If phenomenon *x* is the result of the connection between *a* and *b*, it does not mean that *a* and *b* are themselves a nothing, but simply that *a* and *b* cannot be said to be autonomous entities (but in fact, neither can *x*). Their negativity simply refers to their *positional possibilities*. For instance, if *a* and *b* interact and give rise to *x*, there will also be a *y* that arises from the interaction of *a* and *c* or *b* and *c*, but not from

119. Ibid., 304.
120. Ibid., 347.
121. Rastier, "Le Silence de de Saussure ou l'ontologie Refusée," 34.

a and *b*. Thus, *a*, *b*, or *c* are negative interactors: their combinations are multiple, and each is associated with a phenomenon *x*, *y*, or *z*. If we then consider phenomenon *x*, *y*, or *z* as potentially interacting with each other, which is highly plausible, we can hypothesize a superior phenomenon Φ, which might indeed be the result of the interaction *x*-*y* or *x*-*z* or *y*-*z*, however you wish to describe it. This is a fact that the Buddhists had already perfectly understood: the analysis of phenomena is not simply at two levels, since there are phenomena of ever-increasing complexity that can be traced back to multiple interacting factors, which in turn can be experienced as phenomena themselves, and thus the result of the interaction of phenomena. Therefore, if we say that, regarding phenomenon *x*, *a* and *b* are two negatives interacting for a positive, *x* can also be considered as a negative when taken in relation to phenomenon Φ.

Our body is sustained by nutrients such as proteins, vitamins, minerals, and our genetic code is the result of a sequence of purine and pyrimidine nitrogenous bases. We can think of these as phenomena Φ, but if we analyze them further, proteins are biological macromolecules made up of chains of amino acids linked together, and these amino acids are simply organic molecules, which in turn consist of carbon atoms joined through covalent bonds with other elements. And if we analyze organic molecules, we will find atoms, and if we want to examine the atoms further, we will find subatomic particles, and physicists enjoy searching for the minimal unit(s) within them. The same principle applies in any social, psychological, linguistic, perceptual, sensory, or experiential process.

The very fact that I think and perceive is the most significant proof of existence. This notion extends far beyond the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, for in Husserl's view, every immanent perception necessarily guarantees the existence of its object; it could not be otherwise: "Jede immanente Wahrnehmung verbürgt notwendig die Existenz ihres Gegenstandes."[122] In addition, with regard to Buddhist phenomenology, we assert that while the existence of the object is certainly not

122. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 96.

denied, the fact that it exists does not imply that it is separate from us in the sense of being autonomous or self-sufficient. Ontological dualism is, in fact, the true indemonstrable. Naturally, this also applies in reverse: we are not independent from the object.

However, some find it challenging to understand even the basic implications of these ideas, leading to various misconceptions about the supposed nihilism of Buddhist thought. These misinterpretations stem from a fundamental inability to understand a principle that even Husserl identifies as evident, and which is also central to the Buddhist worldview:

> Richtet sich das reflektierende Erfassen auf mein Erlebnis, so habe ich ein absolutes Selbst erfaßt, dessen Dasein prinzipiell nicht negierbar ist, d.h. die Einsicht, daß es nicht sei, ist prinzipiell unmöglich; es wäre ein Widersinn, es für möglich zu halten, daß ein *so gegebenes* Erlebnis in Wahrheit *nicht* sei. Zu jedem Erlebnisstrom und Ich als solchem gehört die prinzipielle Möglichkeit, diese Evidenz zu gewinnen, jeder trägt die Bürgschaft seines absoluten Daseins als prinzipielle Möglichkeit in sich selbst.[123]

The Buddha historically rejected two extremes he regarded as incompatible with his doctrine. One was nihilism (*ucchedavāda*), the belief that all things are, in reality, "nothing" or are moving inevitably toward their own annihilation. The first claim is, as we know, inherently false: if things were truly nothing, they would not present themselves as "things" at all. Here, even the Parmenidean principle suffices: what is, cannot not be—a concept that, of course, also applies to thoughts, though we will come to that. The other notion is contradicted by Lavoisier's law of mass conservation, but was well understood by Western thinkers and the Buddha alike: things are in constant transformation, yet this change—manifested as different configurations or forms—does not signify that things that do not appear anymore vanish into nonexistence, which would be absurd. If I possess an iron vase and melt it down to create cutlery, the iron in that cutlery comes necessarily from the vase. The melted vase has not become 'nothing,' nor has it been annihilated; rather, it simply no longer *appears* as the 'vase' phenomenon.

123. Ibid., 96–97.

However, the Buddha also rejected the second extreme, namely sempiternalism (*sassatavāda*). The idea here is that a given phenomenon (specifically its *attā*) endures eternally even when it is no longer appearing. The fact that the *phanera* are perceivable as such only when they are within our mundane circles does not, in fact, necessitate the exclusion of the idea that when the *phanera* move beyond the horizon (*āpātha*) of our *āyatana*s (sense bases), they continue to be "themselves." Yet, this concept is unrelated to eternalism. Since time is an illusion, it is mistaken to believe in the ontological becoming of *phanera*—or, more broadly, of phenomena in general. What occurs is that a particular phenomenon, as an aspect of a part of being that appears to us formally, enters our spatiotemporal perceptual horizon at a certain point and thus 'manifests' or 'appears' to us in its distinct form. Even an appearing form is something that exits, it certainly does not cease to be when it ceases to appear (to us); such a notion would be absurd. In this sense, a form neither 'was' before nor 'will be' after; it simply 'is.'

Our sensory spheres do not conceive of being itself but rather its appearances, or more precisely, its appearing progressively, as explained in the *Niruttipathasutta*. Where, then, does the problem with sempiternalism lie? Sempiternalism absolutizes an ontic aspect of being, mistaking it for a self-sufficient absolute: a given self (*attā*), typically no more than a unitary identity perceived from a coordinated aggregate of phenomena, is elevated to the status of eternally and universally true, despite our clear understanding that this is not the case—this, too, is absurd.

The basis for rejecting both extremes lies in this very absurdity: by rejecting both nihilism and sempiternalism, we aim to avoid mistaking for the absolute that which is an ephemeral mental construct, which is the true risk we seek to avoid. Indeed, while it is true that all that appears "is"—whether sensory data, noetic impressions, "thoughts," "mental images," "ideas," or even "memories"—it is equally true that their mere "being" does not imply that they reveal anything about the absolute. They may be seductive deceptions, ephemeral and misleading forms.

> Aber ist es nicht denkbar, möchte man fragen, daß ein Ich in seinem Erlebnisstrome nur Phantasien hätte, daß dieser aus nichts anderem, denn

> aus fingierenden Anschauungen bestände? Ein solches Ich fände also nur Fiktionen von *cogitationes* vor, seine Reflexionen wären, bei der Natur dieses Erlebnismediums, ausschließlich Reflexionen in der Einbildung. — Aber das ist offenbarer Widersinn.[124]

Let us express this in another way. Plato's allegory of the cave can be reinterpreted to help us better understand our point. If we consider the shadows cast in the cave as a series of reductive formations, we risk establishing entire epistemologies on these partial perspectives: ontic and contingent aspects of being that do not reflect the full ontological reality of absolute being, but are instead grasped only in their reductive facets.

When we emerge from the cave, we realize that those shadows, while grounded in the undeniable realities of a singular being, have been misinterpreted, leading to epistemologies based on a strict internal coherence but ultimately rooted in a flawed, partial, or even distorted vision. In this way, we have effectively absolutized "hallucinations."

> Immer kann es sein, daß der weitere Verlauf der Erfahrung das schon mit erfahrungsmäßigem Recht Gesetze preiszugeben nötigt. Es war, heißt es nachher, bloße Illusion, Halluzination, bloßer zusammenhängender Traum u. dgl.[125]

Husserl uses a particularly precise expression to describe these misunderstandings: "presumptive reality" (*präsumptive Wirklichkeit*),[126] which I must say is extremely apt. The Abhidhamma employs an equally lucid expression to describe this issue, namely *sammuti*, meaning "general opinion" or "consensus." Earlier texts, however, are no less insightful, as the general sense of *diṭṭhi*, often expanded by the prefix *micchā* (from the same Indo-European root as the Greek μῦθος, "story" or "legend")[127] to denote "speculation" or "hearsay," generates the term *micchādiṭṭhi*, typically translated as "erroneous view." It signifies a "worldview" based on a shared yet arbitrary consensus. Then, there

124. Ibid., 97.
125. Ibid.
126. Ibid., 98.
127. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 976.

are the various technical terms related to *Niruttipatha*—as we saw in the first chapter—which aptly explain the problem of the conventionality of the terms and concepts that populate our 'worlds.'

What, then, of the objectivity of things? If we understand it as the idea that a 'real,' independent 'world' exists beyond our subjective experiences, governed by blind and inexorable natural laws which can only be decoded by stripping away our experiential context, we are bound to be disappointed.

Admittedly, our perceptions are fallible and unreliable—this much seems certain. However, the belief that 'external' reality (itself yet to be proven) exists independently of us and is governed by 'laws' rather than 'principles'—terms which are not synonymous, as I hope will become clear as we proceed—is an unprovable assumption. This is not an invitation to plunge into reckless subjectivism (we must avoid *both* extremes!) but rather a call to recognize the indispensable role of subjectivity. It is essential in our phenomenological approach, as it actively shapes worlds and participates in being, thus influencing its configurations and its concrete and factual aspects. We are part of being, which implies that, like everything else, we implicate it in its entirety. A phenomenology of the real cannot avoid considering the importance of the subject and its inseparability from the object. Indeed, it should transcend both as soon as this dichotomy reveals itself to be evidently futile.

2.7 The World of Usability: things and names, things as names

What I do think is appropriate at this stage of the argument's development is to explain why the themes expressed in the first chapter—namely language and perceptions—are continuous with those on the phenomenology of the world, and indeed constitute a unified whole. To do this, we will, as usual, rely on fundamental concepts of Pāli Buddhism, contextualized within their primary suttas.

This section particularly connects to the topics discussed in §1.6 and the theme of constructing the perceived world. The foundational aspects of this discussion will start from the idea of reality and the challenges in defining it. We begin with the assertions of an author,

and then proceed to verify whether and to what extent these are supported in the texts.

In a 2002 article on dependent arising and the theme of the unconscious in Yogācāra Buddhism, Waldron makes some very interesting claims. Yogācāra Buddhism is part of a tradition that is not the focus of this monograph, however, even though it is separated by several centuries, various doctrinal disputes, and the use of Sanskrit as the preferred language of its authors, I believe that this school is one of those most continuous with the assertions found in Pāli texts. In any case, Waldron supports his claims partly based on a continuity that is particularly noticeable in the doctrine of *ālaya-vijñāna*, which Yogācāra develops from many of the ideas we have already seen in the Pāli suttas on consciousness and perception. On this subject, Waldron writes:

> As long as the cognitive process give rise to sensation (*sparśa*) and feeling (*vedanā*), then craving (*tṛṣṇa*) and grasping (*upadāna*) will tend to arise, which in turn tend to elicit the intentional afflicted activities, the karma, that ultimately shape and sustain the structures (*saṃskārā*) [...] all of which constitutes the 'arising of the world'.[128]

In this passage, Waldron refers directly to the Pāli *Lokasutta*s, as this idea of the "arising of the world" is clearly expressed in those texts, as we have seen so far. What is even more remarkable is that he explicitly links the arising of the world—a vision he also compares to evolutionary biology—with the linguistic system: "The most deeply entrenched locus of these recursive possibilities, which also doubles back to instigate its own linguistically generated recursivity, is no doubt our sense of self as an enduring experiencing agent. [...] The very thought 'I am' is, according to the *Sutta-nipāta*, the root (*mūla*) of proliferation itself. In short, as long as the thought 'I am' persists, so long will endless cycles of apperceptions, conceptual proliferation and further apperceptions, and so on, keep spinning."[129] That language

128. Waldron, "The Dependent Arising of a Cognitive Unconscious in Buddhism and Science," 147.
129. Ibid., 149.

is at the foundation of the "world" as we have understood it so far should also hold us back from the impulse to conceive of this world and its relative reality as "fake" or "nonexistent." A "world" is a psycho-ecological unit of communication between bodies and the environment—and it is, therefore, populated by "signs," by things that are meaningful to the bodies that perceive and interpret them, and which are in communication with these bodies. According to Waldron,

> As a medium for sharing, conceiving and expressing experience, language provides the stimulus for similar kinds of cognitive processes to arise, processes that tend to provoke similar responses, which, in turn, typically give rise to similar results. That is, actions that are informed and instigated by similar conditions and similar intentions give rise, over the long term, to a similar 'world'.[130]

This world responds and communicates, and even though it is constituted in a biosemiotic concert with bodies—and is thus merely a reduction of possible reality—it is, furthermore, a reconstruction made for the use and benefit of the bodies that need this world to be-in-the-world. This does not imply that the world is false.

The emphasis on the fact that this reality is a relative one indicates for Buddhists its conventional and modifiable nature, the dynamic and impermanent aspect of the world, which is therefore not the absolute, fixed, and incontrovertible reality. This absolute reality, by necessity, is not the totality *of* the world (*sabbaloka*), but rather the totality *of all worlds* possible, as well as everything that does not fall within worldliness, but transcends and exceeds it.

Another term, similar to "relative," is precisely that of "conventional." The world is a convention, not in the sense of being founded on an arbitrary whim—typical of a very naïve linguistic relativism which holds that altering language would suffice to reshape reality. Clearly, we are far removed from this possibility, as it fails to account for the counterpart in this dialogue which, though reduced to our perceptual capacities, exists and engages in dialogue with us. Waldron, in an

130. Ibid., 152.

important contribution to the volume *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture*, writes that:

> We humans do not see the ultra-violet light bees do, nor hear the ultra-sonic sounds bats do. What constitutes *our* world, then, depends upon our particular sense faculties. Cognition is unavoidably "a function of the world and our biology interacting", a correlation neatly captured in the expression "visible object". [...] This correlative character of cognition therefore also alters our idea of "world" (*loka*), which in Indian Buddhist thought was primarily conceived in relation to human experience. [...] As with the arising of cognitive awareness, a "world" here is explicitly defined in relation to the faculties and activities of the beings who live in it. Just as we only see "visible objects", we only inhabit an "experience-able world", one that is both inseparable from, and necessarily defined in terms of, our specific cognitive faculties.[131]

Where I use the term "relative," Waldron prefers "virtual," but the meaning is the same. The terminology is taken from Deacon, who uses the metaphor of virtuality to describe the same mutable nature of the world. As a collective, we inhabit an ecological niche that is a shared virtuality, a *shared virtual world* that Waldron describes as "dependent on the linguistic categories and their embodied cognitive structures."[132] Another aspect of this shared virtuality is habituation. The fact that norms, "things," are constitutive of our daily life and part of a shared and unquestioned knowledge means that this "utterly habitual" world can operate "automatically and nearly unconsciously." This, of course, applies not only to the identities of the "things" we interact with daily but, above all, to our own identity, which is constituted in a similar way.[133]

With respect to possible reality, humans intervene in the same way that language does in Saussure's metaphor of the nebula (see §1.6): they draw a boundary, a mundane circle (or square, if you prefer), a delimited area that is very, very narrow compared to the vastness

131. Waldron, "Yogācāra Buddhist Views on the Causal Relation between Language, Cognition and the Evolution of Worlds," 288.
132. Ibid., 292.
133. Ibid., 294.

of the real. Within those well-defined boundaries, humans construct their fence, the defensive walls of the city, plow their fields—all neatly squared and orderly—and build their urban plan, with buildings and streets. Everything within this ordered boundary constitutes the "world." Of course, this hypothetical city must draw its resources from reality itself: the walls of the houses cannot stand on mere desire or the word "wall" but on materials from the *real*, which are then manipulated, transformed, and adapted for use and need.

Similarly, cultivated fields represent a boundary within which control is exercised: the soil and seeds always originate from the real. What happens in the "world" is that this field is forced to produce in a way it would not naturally do, according to spatial orders and human logics that no longer see the earth for what it is but as "soil," a resource for cultivation. The seed becomes a source for food production, inserted into an epistemological framework, a way of understanding the world, governed by peculiar logics not aimed at knowing the truth of the seed but at determining what a "seed" is for the farmer's use and needs. Botanical science or plant biology serves no other purpose than agronomic engineering, crop science, and optimizing the consumption of the resources in question.

In this sense, I wish to emphasize a fundamental point, which I will return to repeatedly in this monograph: for Buddhists, "things" and "names" are effectively one and the same. To clarify, by "names," I do not simply mean the truncated part of the name-form dyad but the nominal aspect of this dyad. The "name" is a nominal entity, something that appears to me as such because it is traceable to its specific identity. We do not know how I would perceive what I call a "tree" without having the linguistic conception—not just the word "tree" but the belief that all of us share that in the world there are "things" and that they, even if we do not know their names, certainly have an identity, a name, a function of their own. However, what I know for certain is that once I know the name, I cannot see anything else. This thought is devastatingly powerful because it puts us in the position of believing a priori that everything conforms to our nominal expectations. When a researcher discovers a "new" plant, the first thing they think is that

it belongs to an established order, that it possesses inherent characteristics, and that by studying them, they will reveal the identity of that plant. The fact that it does not yet have a name is irrelevant: all the other "things" in the world have a name, so the unknown thing just needs to be given a name and characteristics to 'determine' it.

From this perspective, I hope it is clear what I mean when I say that for Buddhists, things and names are essentially the same. Nominal entities, qualifiable things, are in fact "things." They are everything that is thinkable, and "things" (that is, "names") are everything that populates the world. There is nothing else in the world, only thing-names, and this also applies to subjects who, if not qualified by their name and by the other nominal things that qualify them (e.g., "My name is John Smith, I am a lawyer, I live on such-and-such street"), are, in fact, non-things—they *are not*.

Since things are names, and things are everything that populates the 'world,' we also understand why "world" and "language" are two different ways of saying the same thing. One must ask: from what does language create this great mystification of the world? Indeed, the farmer draws the earth and the seeds from the 'real,' but what is this real? How can one escape the city? And once outside the city, where does one find oneself? Undoubtedly, one might think at this point that what transcends this world made of name-things, where the latter are in their original essence and uncorrupted by language, must surely be "nature." Let us proceed cautiously. This is an equally dangerous drift, but we will approach it gradually. Before moving on to the problem of nature, it is necessary to better understand how the language-world functions and how we perceptually relate to name-things. We are still unprepared to take the next step and look beyond the fence, and with the wrong premises, the world would simply follow us, spilling over everywhere, leading us to see "nature," which, as we will discover, is nothing more than the specter of the world—not its transcendence.

One way to understand the link between perceptions and the world is to explain how name-things are embedded in the language-world, and this process is called *upādāna*.

The term *upādāna*, as well as *upādāya*, which is used in a very similar function, derives from *upa* + √*ādā*. The literal sense is that of "taking," "taking up," "seizing," or "grasping onto." We must pay close attention to the literal meaning of this term because its philosophical use is not casual. These terms speak to us of an actual grasping: taking the thing, seizing it, with the purpose of possessing it but also manipulating it. Possession is the aspect most emphasized by Buddhists, but this has led to confusion, with the term often associated with criticism of materialism or attachment to ephemeral things. Certainly, this aspect exists, and the Buddhist critique strongly underscores the foolishness of such behavior. Yet, the mechanism of grasping is also used to refer to non-material things, such as attachment to identities.

But why speak of grasping? Why speak of "seizing possession" where, in other contexts, Buddhists speak of "thirst" or "greed"? The reason is that here the emphasis is not merely on greed but on indicating an associative mechanism involving the absorption of certain cognitive 'goods.' Identity is nothing but an association with a series of conceptual 'objects': I *am* this name, I *am* this profession, I *am* this person. To say "I *am* good" means that the 'thing' identified as "goodness" is *my own*: I have grasped it, I hold it tightly, it is 'mine' in some way. I make it mine and identify with it because it is 'part' of me, like a 'piece' I assimilate.

Identification is a highly sophisticated form of possession, but it is nothing more than the same mechanism of grasping. Let us not be deceived by the supposed non-material nature of the objects grasped. Remember: things are names; they are a name-thing unity. Thus, the mechanism of "I am" reflects this conception: *I am name-thing-x*.

An illustration of this is provided in SN 22.83. Here, the Buddha imparts a valuable teaching to Ānanda: "O Ānanda, the thought 'I am' arises from grasping" (*upādāya, āvuso ānanda, asmīti hoti*). At this point, we can easily understand why the Buddha says this. The simple thought "I am" (*asmīti*), which is clearly meant in the associative model of grasping mentioned earlier, arises for a series of reasons, and these reasons are the five aggregates, as the Buddha explains. Or rather, this thought arises by virtue of grasping applied to the five aggregates

(*rūpaṃ upādāya asmīti hoti*, and so on for the other four). Therefore, according to this model, the issue can be summarized as follows. We will denote with N the name-thing, which, of course, can refer to a complex of five aggregates that determine a given N in our perception:

I *grasp*-N → I *possess*-N → I *am*-N

Since I 'grasp' a certain 'form,' since I want to acquire it, possess it, and associate myself with it, I trigger a complex mechanism of grasping everything that follows from that form: namely, sensation, perception, mental constructs, and consciousness. This is because every N is an aggregate of these five components, to which we then associate nominal identity. Perception must always be understood as proceeding hand-in-hand with these aggregative mechanisms.

I could be a pastry chef, and when I declare my identity by saying "pastry chef," the listener—if they are a dessert lover—immediately begins to imagine a series of mental images. They see me kneading, making a cake, pouring melted chocolate, and this mental proliferation becomes unstoppable: sweets, chocolate, "I like chocolate," "I crave chocolate," as if it were right there in front of them. It's not just a mere image; it's something real, something sensory (*vedanā*). The mere cognitive form of chocolate evokes its flavor, its taste, and my body reacts—I feel hunger. This means that "Words directly evoke images, and these can seize control of the motor system, and emerge as a psychological automatism without meeting any resistance."[134]

Then come perceptions, mental constructs, consciousness: "Yes, he is a pastry chef; he does these things." The five aggregates are a *pathic* phenomenon; they pertain to πάθος, to feeling in the most physical sense, far from being disconnected mental abstractions. Conversely, if I dislike chocolate, I will have the opposite reaction. But isn't the very fact that my reaction to the other being a "pastry chef" involves disgust—"yuck," "sweets *nauseate* me," and even makes me physically feel nauseous—equally a testament to the *pathic* domain of perceptions?

134. Onno van der Hart and Rutger Horst, "The Dissociation Theory of Pierre Janet," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 2, no. 4 (1989): 406, DOI: 10.1007/BF00974598.

The term *upādāna* itself has two meanings: one related to grasping, taking, clinging, acquiring, possessing, and by extension "identifying," but also, as noted in the PTS Dictionary,[135] a "substratum by means of which an active process is kept alive or going." This is a considerable extension compared to the simple adverb *upādā* (from *upādiyati*), which straightforwardly means "taking up," along with all the derivations about grasping and clinging we have already explored for *upādāya*. Yet, the idea of a substratum, like fuel allowing a fire to keep burning, is not so distant from that of grasping. The type of process to which *upādāna* refers is indeed phenomenological, but specifically concerns the phenomenology of perceptions. This lets us connect to Waldron's observation that perceptions are not just world-forming but a kind of process, a cycle that continues as long as the conditions sustaining it persist—hence the idea of *upādāna* as the fuel for these processes.

Some examples: "once there is fuel, it becomes a vast conflagration" (*laddhā hi so upādānaṃ, mahā hutvāna pāvako*, SN 3.1), or: "rebirth pertains to those who have attachment (to the fuel), not to those without this attachment" (*saupādānassa upapattiṃ paññāpemi, no anupādānassa*, SN 44.9). Yet it is undeniable that the sense of reference is dual: grasping and, because of it, the genesis of cognitive-identity mechanisms. For example: "when you meditate observing the arising and ceasing of the five aggregates of grasping, aversion toward attachment persists" (*pañcasu kho... upādānakkhandhesu udayabbayānupassino viharato upādāne pāṭikulyatā saṇṭhāti*, AN 5.30). The five aggregates are described as what fuels the grasping process (SN 22.121), and indeed, the five aggregates are often referred to extensively as *pañcupādānakkhandhā*, "the five aggregates *of grasping*."

As we saw in §2.5, the world is considered "empty," employing the important adjective *suñña*, which we also explored in §1.3 and especially §1.7. There, we explained in more detail that it is synonymous with *anattā* ("non-self"). Reinforcing this, SN 35.85 explored in §2.5 states that the world is empty precisely because it is "devoid of a self and of what pertains to a self" (*suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā tasmā*

135. T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part II* (The Pali Text Society, 1922), 149.

suññho lokoti vuccati), confirming the equivalence of *suñña* and *anattā*. Let us expand further on this aspect.

We know that names-things populate the world and that they are nothing more than composite phenomena that are the object of a cognitive mechanism based on grasping. The model—which, as a model, is of course a general principle—explains that what we previously identified as N, here defined as the object of the cognitive mechanism of grasping, can be analyzed as composed of more basic phenomena. But this does not make it different from being a phenomenon itself. Its distinctive characteristic is not merely being a phenomenon composed of others, as the reality we experience is full of such things, but rather the additional layering, the superimposition of cognition—being made an object of grasping.

Indeed, the world itself, when we direct our thought to its being a "world," becomes 'available' to us, 'thinkable,' and thus the very idea of the world is an N, a name-thing that is N-*world*. Since this N-*world* is, as SN 35.85 says, "empty of a self and of what pertains to a self," then N-*world* is empty (*suññho loko*). This passage is very important because it certainly applies to N-*world* as a nominal entity significant in our daily lives, but it also holds true for all other Ns—the names-things populating the aforementioned world. This leads to a fundamental conclusion: as grounded in the Pāli texts, the popular Abhidhammic assertions that all phenomena are selfless (*sabbe dhammā anattā*), including, specifically, mental constructs (*sabbe saṅkhārā anattā*), are undeniably valid.

In AN 10.60, we find an exhortation to meditate on the absence of self in all senses, as well as in forms, sensory objects such as tastes, the body and contacts, thoughts, and phenomena (*cakkhu anattā, rūpā anattā, sotaṃ anattā, saddā anattā, ghānaṃ anattā, gandhā anattā, jivhā anattā, rasā anattā, kāyā anattā, phoṭṭhabbā anattā, mano anattā, dhammā anattā*). This type of meditation is called "dwelling on the non-self of the six inner and outer sensory fields" (*chasu ajjhattikabāhiresu āyatanesu anattānupassī viharati*).

Here, we arrive at a crucial point. The notions of "external" and "internal" are rejected as a dichotomy because they do not refer to a

concrete reality but rather to an aggregate of nominal and selfless phenomena. This concept is reiterated multiple times: in SN 35.6, forms are non-self (*rūpā... anattā*) and so too are the sensory perceptions that arise from them, as already mentioned. The meditator must focus on dis-identifying with these: "This is not mine, this is not me, this is not my self" in order to arrive at the correct understanding of the suchness of things and their absence of self (*'netaṃ mama, nesohamasmi, na meso attā'ti evametaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ*).

This applies, of course, to the six senses as well (*cakkhuṃ... anattā*, and so on), for which the same triple disidentification must be repeated (SN 35.3). Interestingly, this sutta is titled "The Internal as Non-Self" (*ajjhattānattasutta*; see also analogous suttas such as SN 35.224 *ajjhattāyatanaanattasutta*, SN 35.192-194 *ajjhattātītādianattasutta*, SN 35.210-212 *ajjhattātītādiyadanattasutta*).

This should prompt reflection because, while it is true that interiority and exteriority are rejected as unreal and merely conventional perceptions, they still refer to something—an error, albeit one defined in precise terms. In this case, interiority corresponds to the perceivers, the six sensory spheres. Likewise, the external is non-self (cf. *Bāhirāyatana-anattasutta*, SN 35.227, and similar suttas like *Bāhirātītādianattasutta* in SN 35.201-203, *Bāhirānattātītānāgatasutta* in SN 35.12). Here, the six elements are the corresponding effectors, which are also to be recognized as devoid of self (e.g., *rūpā*, *bhikkhave*, *anattā... saddā … gandhā … rasā … phoṭṭhabbā … dhammā anattā*).

Equally interesting is how these six effectors are articulated: forms, tastes, smells, tactile sensations, and *dhammā*. How should we understand the latter term? Phenomena? Concepts? Ideas? It seems to refer to the effector objects of mental perception, but it is not incorrect to speak of "perceived phenomena" in a broad sense. Similar discussions are found in many other suttas structured as teachings to specific disciples. In SN 35.164, for example, Koṭṭhita is taught the same principle in a more extended sense: "The eye is non-self, form is non-self, visual consciousness is non-self, visual contact is non-self," and so on for the other five canonical senses. In SN 35.149, the same idea is expressed regarding the practice leading to Nibbāna (*nibbānasappāyā*): "This

occurs when a mendicant sees that the eye is non-self, forms are non-self, visual consciousness is non-self, the contact of visual consciousness is non-self, and they understand that the pleasant sensation, the unpleasant sensation, and the neutral sensation that arise in dependence on visual contact are non-self" (*bhikkhu cakkhuṃ anattāti passati, rūpā anattāti passati, cakkhuviññāṇaṃ anattāti passati, cakkhusamphasso anattāti passati, yampidaṃ cakkhusamphassapaccayā uppajjati vedayitaṃ sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ vā tampi anattāti passati*). The same, of course, applies to all sensory spheres.

This brings us back to the theme of thought, as here too, the object of the mental sphere is precisely phenomena, which are also described as non-self (*dhammā anattāti passati*). We might think that, in this specific case, the reference is to particular phenomena—those that are objects of mental consciousness (*manoviññāṇaṃ*). However, it is notable how Buddhists choose to use such a general term rather than one of the many available to them for indicating concepts or ideas.

Returning to the discussion of the dichotomy between interiority and exteriority, this leads us to the issue raised at the beginning of this section: the existence of a "world" beyond our sphere of cognitions. Merleau-Ponty wrote about this indistinctiveness between what is interior and what is exterior, saying that:

> Cet accord extraordinaire de l'extérieur et de l'intérieur n'est possible que par la médiation d'un infini positif, ou infiniment infini (puisque toute restriction à un certain genre d'infinité serait un germe de négation). C'est en lui que communiquent ou que se soudent l'une sur l'autre l'existence effective des choses *partes extra partes* et l'étendue pensée par nous qui, au contraire, est continue et infinie. S'il y a, au centre et comme au noyau de l'Être, un infiniment infini, tout être partiel directement ou indirectement le présuppose, et en retour y est réellement ou éminemment contenu. Tout ce que nous pouvons avoir de rapports avec l'Être doit y être simultanément fondé. D'abord notre idée de la vérité, qui justement nous a menés à l'infini et ne peut donc être remise en cause par lui. Ensuite toutes les notions vives et confuses que les sens nous donnent des choses existantes.[136]

136. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 241–42.

If the worldliness referenced by the Buddhists is this imagined village, internally populated by its boundaries with name-things, then there must exist a "nature" from which these name-things are drawn, objectified, or nominalized. This concrete reality is the objective "nature" understood as what is "external," with the "world" seen as a purely psychological realm of interior conventions.

We must, however, be careful to follow this particular path. For the moment, the existence of an "external world" is as problematic as that of an "internal world," without, for now, entangling ourselves in the problem of nature which, in relation to the specific conception we have of it today, is absent in Buddhism. Something similar to "nature" as understood in antiquity by the Greeks—namely, as φύσις—could indeed be found, but it represents a further level of the problem.[137]

As for external reality, it is treated in the same way as internal reality. If the internal world is that of the sensors or "sense spheres," the external world is simply that of the effectors. Nonetheless, the claim that sensory objects are a reinterpretation of effector data is not present in Buddhism. Indeed, we might doubt whether even the substantial, not just functional, difference between sensed object and object of sense is a given. What we can be certain of is that both the sensors *and the effectors* are to be considered empty: "O mendicants, forms are non-self; therefore, the cause and conditions that lead to the arising of forms are also non-self. And since forms appear from what is non-self, how could they be a self?" (*rūpā, bhikkhave, anattā; yopi hetu, yopi paccayo rūpānaṃ uppādāya, sopi anattā, anattasambhūtā, bhikkhave, rūpā kuto attā bhavissanti,* SN 35.145).

Someone might object to translating *anattasambhūtā* as something that "appears" from a non-self rather than "arises" from a non-self. However, *sambhūtā* is not an ontological datum, something that "is," but something recognized as existing in the sense of appearing, because it is a collection of other existents (√*bhū*), that is, other phenomena "put together" (*saṃ* + √*bhū*). In any case, this sutta repeats the same

137. Divino, *Buddhist Psychology of Death: An Anthropological Analysis of the Contemplative Approach to the End of Life, Biopolitics and Thanatopower*, 23–25.

reasoning for the other specific effectors, such as sounds for the ear, and so on, until arriving also at *dhammā* for thought-consciousness.

We can compare this discourse side by side with that on the non-self of the sensory spheres (SN 35.142), described as "interiority," and realize that the internal/external binary is completely rejected in its antinomic nature. This is not about failing to conceive of Cartesian dualism (which Descartes, in fact, formalized out of a much older Christian tradition of the split between soul and body), as some claim. Rather, the Buddhists considered it as a possibility, only to dismiss it as unsustainable.

Not only are the *Wirkwelt* and *Merkwelt* "non-self," but so too are the five aggregates. Let us return for a moment to the term *dhamma* as "phenomenon," akin to a hypothetical φ. I insist on this conception because it is evident that in many cases, the term *dhamma* indeed refers to a phenomenon of some sort, whether composite or a component of complex phenomena. It is a "thing" distinct from the name-thing, from our N, but rather any recognizable phenomenological unit, as described, for instance, applied to each of the five aggregates in SN 23.18: *rūpaṃ anattadhammo,* "form is a phenomenon devoid of self." Like form, all five aggregates are *anattadhammo*: they are phenomena (*dhammo*) but not autonomous selves (*anatta-*): *vedanā anattadhammo*, *saññā anattadhammo*, *saṅkhārā anattadhammo*, *viññāṇaṃ anattadhammo*.

This sutta elaborates on an earlier one, SN 23.17*,* where the five aggregates are simply described as "non-self" (*rūpaṃ anattā, vedanā anattā, saññā anattā, saṅkhārā anattā, viññāṇaṃ anattā;* see also SN 22.68). Therefore, this re-elaboration is fascinating, as it was deemed necessary to specify that when we say "form is non-self," we are stating that *the specific phenomenon identified as "form" lacks autonomous identity.*

Since the preliminary contemplative exercise involves a threefold disidentification ("not mine," "not I," "not self"), it follows that we will find various suttas that repeat the same concept in more elaborate forms. For example, in SN 22.69, the five aggregates are not listed as "not-self" but as *anattaniyaṃ*, "not belonging to the self." It is also clear that this exercise is, in some respects, disorienting precisely because of

the implications it has for our system of cognitive "graspings." This system of shaping name-things and placing them in a context of intentionality—understood in the threefold form of orientation, grasping, and volition (and thus the desire to possess, manipulate, or make something useful)—is well summarized in SN 22.59 and in the use of terms derived from the root √*labh-* "to obtain," "to seize," "to take."[138]

> *rūpaṃ, bhikkhave, anattā; rūpañca hidaṃ, bhikkhave, attā abhavissa, nayidaṃ rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvatteyya, labbhetha ca rūpe: 'evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahosī'ti; yasmā ca kho, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ anattā, tasmā rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvattati, na ca labbhati rūpe: 'evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahosī'ti.*
>
> O Mendicants, form is not-self. If it were self, it would not lead to affliction, and you would not want from form: "May my form be like this! May my form not be like this!"
> But since form is not-self, it leads to affliction. And you cannot obtain from form: "May the form be like this! May the form not be like this!"

This crucial passage recalls Severino's discussion of the problem of will in philosophy, which I revisit here in anticipation of a more systematic comparison in the conclusive chapter:

> Insofar as one conceives of the world as something that can be transformed by a force (and, therefore, also by that force – the will – that consciousness believes it controls), or as something that can transform itself independently of the presence of any external forces, one thinks that all things (bodies, states of mind, relations, thoughts, etc.) can become – and, as a matter of fact, do become – other than what they are. Willing the construction of a house entails willing those forms of becoming-other constituted by, among others, the fact that a construction project becomes real, that the available construction material becomes a determinate material unity, that a land becomes a construction area, and that certain human individuals, according to specific ways and times, become workers. Every transformation of the world entails that something should *become other than itself*. Becoming

138. Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part VII*, 39.

> consists precisely of a process through which something becomes other than itself. The accomplishment of that process consists in a situation in which something has become other than itself – and, having become other than itself, is other than itself. Becoming is realized when a thing, having become other than itself, is other than itself.[139]

What Severino identifies as the will that things be "something and not something else" is simply the same will that name-things conform to the process of grasping that seeks to shape them. Indeed, human desire laments because it suffers from forms (and other aggregates) not being as it wishes: "May form be like this! May it not be like this!" or again, "May my consciousness be like this! May my consciousness not be like this!" (*evaṃ me viññāṇaṃ hotu, evaṃ me viññāṇaṃ mā ahosi*). And yet, since the five aggregates are not-self, how could they be subject to the will of the self?

Since form arises from not-self, it is not-self; it cannot be otherwise (*anattasambhūtaṃ, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ kuto attā bhavissati*). But being not-self does not mean non-being; rather, it means being an abstraction that cannot, by itself, be autonomous. Disidentification from all this is therefore essential for proper meditation (SN 22.17). Other meditative exercises are based precisely on observing the selfless nature of each of the five aggregates (SN 22.149) or on letting go of greed, the clinging will and grasping for what is *anattā* (again, the five aggregates in the case of SN 22.143, 22.144, 22.145). The desire for what is not-self thus "fades" (*nibbindaṃ*), and the meditator is liberated (*vimuttamiti*, SN 22.14, and similarly in SN 22.11 in the form of *nirodhāya paṭipanno*).

Before addressing the problem of nature, let us reflect further on the issue of phenomena in the world. As mentioned, the world is populated by a series of phenomena. These phenomena can aggregate to form apparent units, which are themselves aggregates of phenomena. This phenomenology is a theme explored deeply in the Abhidhamma, but its precursors are already present in the canon. It is appropriate to examine it now for the implications it will have in the future. Moreover,

139. Emanuele Severino, *Beyond Language* (London, New York, Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2024), 7–8.

a certain analytical tendency is itself a problem, as it can give the analyst the illusion that 'real' reality is reducible to these fundamental constituent elements. In fact, the Abhidhamma also specifies that this analytical approach is practical but should not be confused with ultimate reality (*paramattha*), which is complex.

In our peculiar conception of nature, there is an analytical germ brought to an extreme. All biology is chemistry; all chemistry is atomic physics. Thus, 'atoms,' as the 'definitive' constituents of reality, lead to a vast mechanistic view. This consists of isolated elements—individual atoms—exalted as the constituents of ultimate reality. Similarly, Western psychology was long infused with the illusion of "psychic atoms." The concept of psychic atomism proposed by Wundt was merely an aspect of psychological associationism, where even psychic phenomena were considered nothing more than the product of complex associations of simpler psychic elements.

Wundt's idea of the psychic atom served a praiseworthy but partially flawed purpose. In his search for fundamental sensory elements, for example, Wundt encouraged an exercise of reducing sensory phenomena. A subject, exposed to a sensory stimulus, was to remove any higher-level perceptual classification and arrive at the sensory foundation itself. However, this task is, in many ways, impossible. If, for instance, I wanted to reach the fundamental perception of a pencil, I would have no tool to describe it. I might grasp the pencil and feel its smooth, wooden surface and graphite tip, but what could I say about it? What would I achieve by removing all higher-level conceptions? I might call it "sharp" regarding the tip, but "wooden" already implies a complex notion involving knowledge of the material. Or I might call it a "cylindrical thing," but then I would have to ask where my notion of "cylindrical" comes from. Before long, we would realize how difficult it is to escape this impasse.

The problem is that even presumed 'minimal' constitutive elements are describable only through complex nominal notions. Thus, they function as phenomenal referents for a designation, but at that point, nothing guarantees that the referent—the thing I define as "cylindrical," which somehow refers to a "cylindricity"—is indeed a

fundamental constituent. Truly, beyond 'form' understood in its simplest sense, we cannot recognize any other effective constituent.

In SN 14.1, the question of elements (*dhātu*) is addressed. Sometimes, *dhātu* is used synonymously with fundamental elements (*mahābhūta*), but it does not indicate exactly the same thing. It is a fairly generic term linked to the state, property, or condition of something. We might interpret it as similar to a fundamental constituent, though the notion of atom, closer to that of Democritus, appears later in the Abhidhamma.

Specifically, SN 14.1 discusses the diversity of constituents (*dhātunānattaṃ*). Again, as with *dhamma*, this term can apply to anything that might serve as a fundamental constituent of complex phenomena: *cakkhudhātu, rūpadhātu, cakkhuviññāṇadhātu*. As sensory constituents, effector constituents, and consciousness constituents, the sutta lists all combinations related to the sensory world, denoting them as *dhātu*.

This same term is used in the following sutta (SN 14.2) to denote what gives rise to different forms of contact (*dhātunānattaṃ... paṭicca uppajjati phassanānattaṃ*) and always pertains to the six sensory aspects. However, the next sutta (SN 14.3) specifies that there is a phenomenological hierarchy among these fundamental elements, an order of co-implication with which they present themselves: the sensory element is a precondition for contact, but contact itself cannot lead to the sensor (*cakkhudhātuṃ... paṭicca uppajjati cakkhusamphasso, no cakkhusamphassaṃ paṭicca uppajjati cakkhudhātu*). The same applies to sensations (SN 14.4, 14.5), perceptions (SN 14.7, 14.8), and even the perceptibility of externalities themselves, populated by their percepts, of course (SN 14.9).

To understand the relationship between the effector and the sensor as co-participants in a worldly unity, it is helpful to analyze SN 22.22, the discourse on the *Bearer and the Burden*. Using this metaphor, the Buddha explains that the burden (*bhāro*) consists of the five aggregates of clinging (*pañcupādānakkhandhā*), while the bearer of these aggregates is referred to as *puggalo*. This term is used to indicate the subject, the person, the individual.

Then there is the condition in which the subject takes on the burden (*bhārādānaṃ*), a state characterized by craving, desire, a will to

possess things, and a hedonism oriented toward fleeting pleasures. This is why it is said that "carrying the burden is the suffering in the world" (*bhārādānaṃ dukhaṃ loke*), while letting it go brings joy (*bhāranikkhepanaṃ sukhaṃ*). The one who has freed themselves from the burden is called *nicchāto*, desireless, but also satisfied.

In a different form, the same teaching is repeated in SN 22.33, where disciples are exhorted to abandon what is not theirs—literally: *na tumhākaṃ, taṃ pajahatha*. What is "not theirs" is, of course, a metaphor for the five aggregates. Phrases such as "consciousness is not yours; let it go" (*viññāṇaṃ na tumhākaṃ, taṃ pajahatha*) provide another way of expressing the metaphor of the burden.

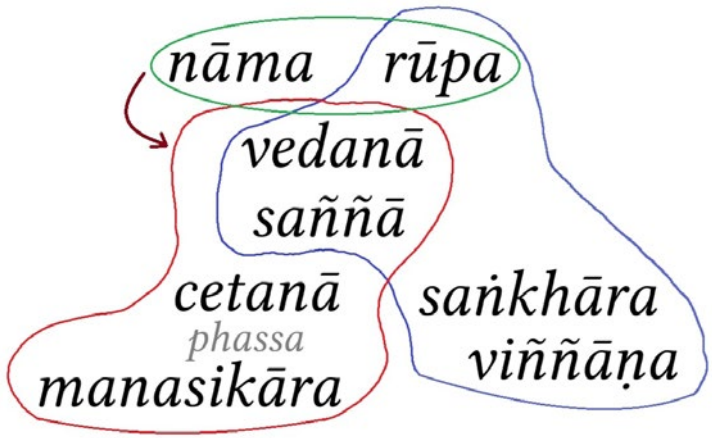

Fig. 15 — How the five aggregates and the components of *nāma* relate together through the name-form binomial.

Thus, there is a close connection linking the five aggregates, including form, with the components of the nominal phenomenon, our hypothetical N. In the diagram (see Fig. 15), we see the intersections. The pair *name-and-form* (circled in green) is analyzed in two ways: form as part of a group on its own, the five aggregates (circled in blue), some of which are also part of the phenomenology of apprehending the nominal aspect (process circled in red), which we have already analyzed in §1.6.

At this point, the problem could no longer be avoided, and we must ask to what extent Buddhists consider both interiority and exteriority as apparent realities, rather than incontrovertible objective truths. On the one hand, it seems obvious to believe that the world of interiority is characterized as a series of empty perceptions lacking an autonomous self. On the other hand, it seems difficult to accept that the world of exteriority is governed by the same principle—namely, emptiness, or more precisely, the absence of an autonomous and self-sufficient self. In both cases, however, this should be understood as a philosophy of recognizing the profound interdependence of all phenomena.

While this model cannot claim to be incontrovertibly valid, it provides a more comprehensive and less reductionist picture of the phenomenology of what we call the world. It should also encourage us to move beyond the simplistic notion of nature, which is neither exhaustive nor capable of resolving our deepest phenomenological doubts.

> Cercle encore entre la Nature et les personnes, puisque la Nature au sens des sciences de la Nature (mais aussi au sens de l'*Urpräsentierbare*, qui est pour Husserl la vérité du premier) est pour commencer le tout du monde (*Weltall*), qu'elle englobe à ce titre les personnes, qui, par ailleurs, directement explicitées, enveloppent la Nature comme l'objet qu'elles constituent en commun. Voilà sans doute aussi pourquoi, dans un texte prophétique de 1912, Husserl n'hésitait pas à parler d'une relation réciproque entre la Nature, le corps et l'âme, et, comme on l'a bien dit, de leur « simultanéité ». […] L'idée serait alors celle-ci : puisque nous *sommes* à la jonction de la Nature, du corps, de l'âme et de la conscience philosophique, puisque nous la vivons, on ne peut concevoir de problème dont la solution ne soit esquissée en nous et dans le spectacle du monde, il doit y avoir moyen de composer dans notre pensée ce qui va d'une pièce dans notre vie.[140]

This recognition does not allow any phenomenon to be considered absolute, thereby detaching it from its web of complex interactions. Conversely, the naturalistic stance, which seeks to identify a series of absolute laws and constituents in what it calls "nature," represents the same pretension as language, which isolates things

140. Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, 287, 288–89.

and is constantly searching for entities to name, i.e., laws to identify and fundamental building blocks of reality to compose essential atoms. However, these atoms, severed from their relational context, are nothing and can be nothing.

So, what is the value of the naturalistic claim, and what is the value of the concept of nature when it is conceived as absolute objectivity (that is, as absolute exteriority existing in itself, independently of the values brought by the subjects inhabiting it)? The notion of environment, understood as a psycho-ecological or eco-psychical unity (if you prefer), offers a model where complexity and mutual-constitutivity allow subjects and objects to co-participate in this intricate chain of phenomena.

Regardless of the sensory nature of the data learned, every sensory perception uses the same cognitive principle of *phassa*, which is a form of tactile-derivative "apprehension." Specialized cellular receptors employ all forms of contact, and thus it is correct to assume that every sensory sphere is based on the 'contact' between the effector and the sensor. The mere objective apprehension of the data, which we cannot now call "external data" as this definition is problematic, results, as already mentioned, in an objectifying consciousness.

Vision (*cakkhu*) produces, in the contact between the eye and the visual form, the arising of a *cakkhuviññāṇa*, which is the actual structure of dependence, as the *cakkhuviññāṇa* is *viññāṇa* of something seen by *cakkhu*. This mere objective apprehension is objectifying and thus already oriented toward the grasping of the 'thing' to be objectified. A sensation that is not yet an objective apprehension is, for Husserl, mere *Auf-fassung*, which is proposed as an intentional derivative of *Er-fassung* but does not render the object as objectified and leaves it instead in its more spontaneous mode of apprehension, a purely sensory objectivity that contains only representations of a single sensible sphere without intentionally referring to latent theses (αἰσϑητά ἴδια) that would need to be activated to become such.

As we said in §1.5, every form is essentially information, and we have just reiterated that the only psychic atom that makes sense to talk about, aside from the impossibility of structurally defining it, is

the form. Husserl seems to think in a somewhat analogous way, as he intends not only the animal nature as *extēnsiō of nature* but we can also understand "ordering principles" as the potential form of concrete things.[141] Again, with the change in forms, the information changes—it is *already* concrete data, not abstract. We are at the inseparability of the thing from its properties. The form is already action; information is both form and action (property-characteristic). The body (which is not by chance sometimes directly referred to as *rūpa* by Buddhists) is a real determination and form for all other determinations.[142]

The second book of Husserl's *Ideen* opens with a long and important reflection on the concept of nature. It is important to reference this because it allows us to bring our phenomenological analysis to a further level, that of the recognition of *doxastic* experiences (related to δόξα) and how they intervene in our daily life, and thus also prejudice or modify the phenomenological reduction.

Nature is obviously the object of natural sciences (*Gegentand der Naturwissenchaft*), but it is also part of the 'normal' conceptions of those who are not scientists but who still conceive of nature in some way, for example, as the overall space-time universe (for scientists), the total scope of possible experience (for some philosophers), or the dimension in which things happen according to their own laws and inhabited by animals and plants (for everyone else). Nature also serves the function of a 'reservoir' that includes everything untouched by human action. Especially in this era of the Anthropocene and reflection on human impact on the environment, the urban dimension, buildings, industries, offices, are often considered 'non-nature' in the sense of artificiality that would not be 'normally' predicted by the laws of nature, and which humans instead distort and alter. In this conception, humanity alienates itself from nature, and the human becomes an animal that has identified itself as different from all other animals and is even capable of acting outside the laws of nature. Nature in turn becomes the *refugium peccatorum* of all those who consider themselves good

141. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Zweites Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band IV)*, 33–34.
142. Ibid., 36.

and just and oppose the evil distortions of human civilization, wanting to recover a contact with the spontaneity of life, and thus pouring into nature a series of positive conceptions like "harmony," "peace," "balance," and other beautiful things.

Naturally, I imagine it is unnecessary to emphasize how both of these conceptions are extremely partial. The view of nature as always good is an ideology that forgets that nature is the supreme place of cruelty and the worst atrocities: the struggle for survival, carnivorous animals that tear apart and disembowel other innocent species to feed, blood, killings, endless violence, not to mention the brutality inherent in those species that sometimes eat their own young or leave them to die of hunger because they are deemed unfit for survival. Not exactly the place of peace and harmony that some paint it to be. Certainly, humanity is not exempt from these dynamics, but I thank our having established laws to protect the weakest, rather than throwing them from a cliff because they are unfit. In other contexts, we would identify this way of thinking as eugenics, forgetting that according to the logic of 'nature,' these are hard currency.

This does not mean that humanity is the place of all good, but it is precisely because of its forgetfulness of the inseparability between the cultural, urban, and familial environments it creates and the nature it believes itself to be disconnected and alienated from, that many of the objective and undeniable environmental disasters we witness today take place.

This forgetfulness also begins thanks to the conception of nature as a field of transcendent realities (*Feld von transzendenten Realitäten*), since this need to conceive nature as such first establishes a 'world' and an idea of the world and of mundaneness interacting (the human cultural world, the natural world), and is also the result of a mode of thinking brought to hypertrophy, that of the world as a sphere, a dimensionality whose boundaries are the limits of our sensory comprehensibility. These boundaries, made more sophisticated by scientific reflection, may seem different to us, but they maintain their basic principle, namely that of limitation, characteristic of every boundary, field (*kṣetra*, *Feld*).

Consciousness is what performs the function of experiencing natural sciences as well as any conception of the world or nature, and in the specific case of the experimental thought that characterizes *Naturwissenschaft*, it is marked by its essential phenomenological unity (*seine wesentliche phänomenologische Einheit*), which has nature as its essential correlate, a dominant apperception that is preventive, meaning it acts as an element obstructing immediate perception, like lenses that mediate our direct vision of the world placed in front of our eyes, a preliminary determination (*bestimmt*) of what is and what is not to be considered the object of natural sciences. This applies to every conception of the world, including that of the natural world, it goes without saying.

> Unsere Betrachtung sollte aber auf Natur im Sinne dieser Korrelation gehen. Es ist nun keineswegs die Art dieser Wissenschaft, sich in der Auswahl ihrer Objekte, bzw. der auf ihre Objekte bezüglichen Prädikate willkürlich zu beschränken. Vielmehr *eine wesentliche Idee von Natur* liegt, wenn auch undefiniert zu Grunde.[143]

Nature is in the correlates of the theoretical subject, even though this does not imply that nature is completely determined already as the correlate of a possible theoretical (knowing) subject. Even if we conceive of nature in the most generic and naturalistic sense possible, thus as containing processes and objects belonging to a presumed natural order, it is inevitably characterized as a set of lived experiences (*Dossische Erlebnisse*) for the time being, and thus as objects available to a knowing "I" who directs their attention to these objects to verify them and, especially, to 'grasp' them (*erfassend gerichtet*), objectify them.

We must necessarily focus on this aspect. Grasping the objects of nature means that they are conceived as available, graspable, subject to scientific verifiability, and therefore objectifiable, certainly, but also 'possessable.' Knowledge has no other purpose than to possess things. One studies chemical reactions not for fun, but for utility, because

143. Ibid., 2.

once you know chemical reactions, you can master chemistry, possess the elements, put matter under the *yoke* of your dominion, produce goods useful for increasing your power, and so on. This is the sense intended in the idea of 'grasping' the thing, certainly not knowledge for the pleasure of knowing for its own sake. I 'grasp' the object placed under the horizon of my knowable, I make it 'mine' (or at least I think I do). This is not a mechanism peculiar in itself, but the development of a mode of thinking already inherent in humans. Anything perceived is understood in these terms of possession, grasping, control. When I see an apple hanging from a branch, I immediately think of it in terms of its utility; I cannot do otherwise, and the fact that it is right there in front of me, 'at the disposal' of my perceptual sphere, also makes it vulnerable to my grasp: I can pick it with my hand and take it, and at that point it is 'mine,' but in potential it is mine from the moment I see it and recognize it as an "apple," as an edible fruit.

The object is then characterized by a series of values. These can be recognized as specific historical-cultural connotations, but it is undeniable that they affect the object at every moment of its perception. The object, therefore, that shows certain specific characteristics of value, is experienced with these connotations as attached to it, and the object-value stimulates me to engage with it. However, this attention towards the object, this observation of it, does not derive its natural properties,[144] but those that are useful to me. The valorization and constitution of a "world" made up of "things and names" is no coincidence the fundamental theme of de Martino's anthropology, and I believe that this specific use of the concept of "things and names" is of great utility for us here.

For Husserl, the noema should not be confused with essence because the noema does not allow one to grasp the essence, and although it is possible to present the noema as existent, this does not imply presenting the objectivity corresponding to the noema, even if it is objectivity signified in the noema.[145] A given objectivity can indeed present

144. Ibid., 217.

145. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Drittes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band V)*

itself in the noema as a moment of unity, which can even be identical for different noemata, understanding unity always as a convenient concept and not as an absolute reality.

A peculiar relationship exists—or rather, comes to be determined—between subject and object once the objects are placed under the particular nominal conception we discussed in Chapter 1. The perceptual-sensory relationship between the subject and the object also constitutes the ways in which the subject conforms to the object in question. The object provokes a stimulus that can be sensed as something pleasant or unpleasant and that is subsequently processed by perceptions and made more complex in relation to the reference value systems. Therefore, it is not simply a matter of stimulation of the object by virtue of its properties but, above all, of its experienced properties—not therefore from the physicalistic properties of which I might know nothing, and even when I do know about them, they may not be true.[146]

My reactions in relation to these value-based perceptions of the object can vary; for example, it is good to use it, or it is good to eat it, and all sorts of characteristic determinations that are value-based and that are experienced together with the perception of the object itself, so the way in which the object stimulates me to engage with it is part of the value-laden connotation of the object itself and its relationship with me as the subject.

> It is necessary to try to think of the economic as the *value of securitas* and thus as the inaugural value in which the ethos of the transcendence of life must be realized. The economic is the horizon of the domestic, of *at hand givenness*, of a world of "things" and "names" related according to a communitarian project of possible or actual handiness. Something useful can be made of this world precisely because it is given, and its givenness, indeed, indicates its character of practicable resistance. Through this horizon of the domestic, being-there first of all finds itself as the center of utilitarian agency, as a center of loyalty to past sureties (*sicurezze*) converted into effortless habits, and as a center of initiative for establishing, here

(Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 85, DOI: 10.1007/978-94-010-2967-4.

146. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Zweites Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band IV)*, 217.

> and now, the preeminent security (*sicurezza*) that it needs. […] Being-there has it precisely in that domain of the vital that would seem to be the sovereign realm of the most solitary, closed individuality of pleasure and pain, of need and satisfaction. Only on the basis of this intersubjective domain of "security"—increasingly put into question and expanded in history, always "given" and always "givable"—can other horizons of the world's valorization be constructed.[147]

By "economic," de Martino intends the management of the set of *values* that a certain culture adopts. From this, we also derive another very important consequence for the theme of usability, namely that the *Umwelt* can also be the theme of the "techniques of natural sciences" (*Thema der naturwissenschaftlichen Technik*),[148] that reflects what de Martino terms as "technical domination of nature."[149]

> Human worldhood is the order of meaningful agency that produces values, overcoming the situations and negativity that harms them, through the historically conditioned permanence of values. Detachment from the naturalness of living is carried out by interspersing the order of material instruments and the regimes of production of economic goods; the order of mental instruments for bending nature to the needs of individuals and groups; the order of social rules for disciplining the division of labor and relations between persons and groups; the order of moral rules to educate the individual to go beyond the "libido" and to give a horizon to feelings that imply gratitude and love; the order of aesthetic catharsis and the self-consciousness of human operating and producing and rising above nature. […] Nature is the horizon that signals the inexhaustibility of the valorization of life according to a communitarian project of things at hand. In this sense it always lies "beyond" at-hand projection, manifesting itself as resistance, as substance, as exteriority that in and of itself conspires with humanity. But at the same time, nature is what lies "inside" at-hand projection, as a horizon of the possible handinesses accumulated

147. de Martino, *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence*, 243.
148. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Zweites Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band IV)*, 219.
149. de Martino, *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence*, 242.

> in a whole society's own cultural history. […] Nature always appears *in* culture, at least if culture is led back to the overall ethos that encompasses its valorizing transcendences and to the consciousness of that ethos without being fetishized in one of its dimensions, as, for example, the naturalistic valorization of the sciences (where nature is effectively assumed as if it were prior and independent of any human cultural molding).[150]

And certainly, we must accept the objection: but can't my body itself be conceived as a 'thing'? Absolutely, it can, and in fact, not only my body but also its conception as composed of 'parts' demonstrates this fact daily. My body can perceive itself as a 'thing,' just as it can perceive its hand as a 'thing,' but what really determines the process of valorization is not so much that the body 'imposes' itself on an object, 'grasping it,' but the fact that anything can be conceived as usable by my *potentialities*. Therefore, the important thing is not the hand that grasps the object as such, also because the hand itself can be conceived as being grasped by another, but the object becoming a theme as part of an "I can," "I am able to do," which precedes every "I move," "I do," or "I grasp."[151]

This does not alter the essence of reality: for Husserl, in fact, the experiences that constitute reality, the knowledge of reality, and—above all—the knowledge of causality are in fact the same thing.[152] And regarding the importance of causality, we connect to the fundamental theme of the Abhidhamma, whose study of *causal connections* is precisely the foundational knowledge that begins with the most archaic suttas and forms the basis of all more advanced Abhidhamma examinations.

Consciousness is an integral part of the causal processes that interest us, and if so far we have defined consciousness as something that determines and self-determines but, above all, as the relational nexus par excellence of every determination, Husserl also views consciousness

150. Ibid., 244–45, 284.

151. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Zweites Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band IV)*, 261.

152. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Drittes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band V)*, 3–4.

in general as the lived experience or the connection of lived experiences ("Bewusstsein überhaupt ist nichts anderes als Erlebnis überhaupt und Erlebniszusammenhang, oder ist darin beschlossen").[153] This leads him to assert as true the consideration that even the part includes the whole within itself (*wirklich, der Teil verschlingt das Ganze*).

In conclusion as regards this second chapter, we could borrow the words of Shulman to say that, as a "number of leading scholars have already shown," the Buddhist conception of the world (*loka*) "refers not so much to the external, objective world, but first and foremost to the world of human experience."[154] Pointing this out Shulman also reports an interesting consideration of Harvey that notes how the term *loka* is not only related to the idea of "light" (*āloka*), but also to "looking at" something (*oloketi*) and, most notably, perception, as the verb *locate* in Sanskrit means "he perceives," and *locana* is another term to indicate the "eye."[155] This fundamental connection between the visible (something upon which the "light" is casted) and the *perceived* is the fundamental sense preserved also in the Buddhist phenomenology of the "world."

153. Ibid., 72.

154. Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*, 71.

155. Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 2013), 79, DOI: 10.4324/9781315026336.

Chapter 3
Body and World, Body in-the World (DN 22, MN 10)

passāmi loke pariphandamānaṃ,
pajaṃ imaṃ taṇhagataṃ bhavesu;
hīnā narā maccumukhe lapanti,
avītataṇhāse bhavābhavesu.
mamāyite passatha phandamāne,
maccheva appodake khīṇasote;
etampi disvā amamo careyya,
bhavesu āsattimakubbamāno.

"I behold the people of the world floundering,
Devoted to yearning for the becoming.
These men of lowly nature groan within the jaws of Death,
Unfree from their craving for future lives.
Observe them thus, flailing after their possessions,
Like fish in a drying pool.
And having seen this, may you live without selfishness,
Do not cultivate attachment for the becoming."
(Snp 4.2)

With the theme of the body, we definitively enter a dimension that can be understood as more 'practical' compared to the more 'theoretical' themes concerning the problem of perception and the foundation of the "world." Yet, it would be profoundly mistaken to believe in such a division. Indeed, the theme of the body will appear practical because it involves addressing the significant theme of contemplative practice, i.e., meditation, the ascetic discipline of the body, and yoga. But this is only because this aspect is indispensable in the history of how Buddhists developed their refined knowledge of perception and the world. These notions derive from the experience of contemplative practice, not from theoretical considerations—assuming such considerations are even possible without experience. Conversely, all the themes we have discussed so far reveal themselves to be eminently practical insofar as they are embedded in the extended bodily dimension, the sense from which they derive.

What we must avoid is the danger of believing that philosophy can be done by merely studying the 'abstract' notions derived from the *concrete* results of inquiries that were themselves concretely grounded. For the original thinkers, there was no "theory" as we understand it today. Instead, there was θεωρία in its etymological sense: that of a witness who performs "contemplation" as a committed act derived from θεωρέω, "to observe," not passively, but rather actively, grounded in experience. The Greek term θεωρός, "spectator," is a concept we wish to reinterpret phenomenologically, as "witness." The witness is one who attests to phenomena, the "witnessed," through experience. If they do not live them, they cannot attest to or witness them.

Buddhism has many terms to indicate contemplative practice. One of these derives from *dhyāna*, or *jhāna* in Pāli. This term, in addition to indicating contemplation, also stems, like θεωρέω, from a root that denotes observation.[1] While the Greek θέα and θεάομαι are traditionally connected to θαῦμα (wonder, marvel), whose etymological root is difficult to reconstruct, some hypotheses suggest linking it to *$d^{h}e\underset{\wedge}{i}h_{2}$-, reconstructed as "to perceive" or "to see." This root is indeed the source of the Sanskrit *dhī* and *dhyāna*. Although the connection between *$d^{h}e\underset{\wedge}{i}h_{2}$- and θεωρία is less solid than that between *$d^{h}e\underset{\wedge}{i}h_{2}$- and *dhyāna*, this Indo-European root aligns well with another Greek term, σῆμα, "sign" ($d^{h}yéh_{2}m\underset{\circ}{n}$, which extends the original *$d^{h}e\underset{\wedge}{i}h_{2}$- with the suffix -$m\underset{\circ}{n}$,[2] related to the concept of thinking, as seen in the Sanskrit verb *dhyāyati*, "to think, to imagine"). Beyond etymological reconstructions, which are often speculative and prove nothing by themselves (two concepts can be connected for practical reasons without necessarily being etymologically linked), we will try to understand why the body is so important in Buddhist thought, particularly in its phenomenological framework, and how it becomes the center of contemplative practice.

The introductory sutta of this chapter, which will provide various insights for our branches, connections, and elaborations, is a double sutta. Like many others, it is preserved in both a short and a long

1. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 544–45.
2. Ibid., 1323.

variant. It is possible that the original teaching was the shorter one and that commentarial traditions later expanded it by providing elaborations based on connections to other teachings (the contents of which are identical in other suttas). Alternatively, the reverse might be true: the original teaching could have been the more substantial one, while the shorter sutta represents a summary from which the elaborations subsequently "branched off" into scattered forms in other shorter suttas. Regardless of its genesis, this is of little importance.

The sutta in question is the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, found in its more concise form as codified in MN 10, and in its longer form as the "Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness" (*Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta*) in DN 22. It is a famous discourse, popularized by modern mindfulness, which has made it the foundation of its practice. Today, saying *satipaṭṭhāna*—or more specifically *sati*—is equivalent to saying mindfulness. Nonetheless, even if contemporary mindfulness can claim to have been vaguely inspired by Buddhist meditation, the intent of the latter diverges so radically from the capitalist and consumerist product of mindfulness that a vast gulf separates the two. Even though this book does not aim to argue why mindfulness is the antithesis of any philosophical, practical, or even therapeutic teaching of Buddhism, this chapter will clarify some of the reasons why a bodily discipline based on taming subjectivities, on calmness and inner peace that accommodates passive adaptation to the environment (rather than dismantling its pathogenic premises), and that is commercialized as a product entirely divorced with the social structures it operates in, has nothing to do with contemplative practice as understood by the Buddhists.

In general, I would argue that Buddhist thought lacks the stoic passive acceptance of one's limits, treating them as something to be merely "lived with." This is even less applicable to the social context. Buddhists have historically assumed a position of such profound critique of social order, hierarchical power, class divisions, and the acceptance of one's "role" as an incontestable given that there can be no doubt. Moreover, it is hardly apparent that mindfulness practitioners today are interested in dismantling the social order based on

the current system. In such a world, the time for real meditation has been reduced to a narrow window where one might at best have the outlet of a "quick fix" practice to "relax" and find "inner peace," thus passively accepting all this.[3]

What does modern mindfulness have to do with Buddhist meditation? With the Buddhist critique of submissive bodies, upending hierarchies, and identifying rulers as the ultimate "violence" against individuals? As far as modern mindfulness is concerned, one could even argue for the total absence of a reflection on the body as a living subjectivity embedded in a "world." Indeed, the theme of the "world"—as addressed in the second chapter, and as we will see in this one and the fourth—does not exist in mindfulness. Yet the "world" of Buddhism is what we read in the texts, not the fantasies of mindfulness tycoons and techno-mindfulness[4] as a *prêt-à-porter* therapy for all seasons—a dinner party conversation piece for those wishing to appear intellectual.

Arguably, modern mindfulness has little to do with Buddhist meditation, nor does it have anything to do with the ethical vision of Buddhism, proposing instead an idea of society that is in many respects incompatible with the Buddhist vision of radical social criticism that certainly does not marry with the 'mindful' intentions of biopolitically shaping an individual who 'adapts' to society, without subverting its order,[5] but rather is complacent with it and aims at

3. Federico Divino, "Metaphor, Metamorphosis, Mindfulness: Social Change through the Dispositive of 'Mental Presence,'" *Rivista Italiana di Antropologia Applicata* 8, no. 1 (2022): 25–72, DOI: 10.32054/2499-1848-2022-1-2.

4. Federico Divino, "From Meditation to Techno-Mindfulness: On the Medicalization of Contemplative Practices and Future Prospects," *Histories* 4, no. 1 (2024): 125–43, DOI: 10.3390/histories4010008.

5. Liz Jackson, "Must Children Sit Still? The Dark Biopolitics of Mindfulness and Yoga in Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 52, no. 2 (January 28, 2020): 120–25, DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2019.1595326; James Reveley, "Neoliberal Meditations: How Mindfulness Training Medicalizes Education and Responsibilizes Young People," *Policy Futures in Education* 14, no. 4 (2016): 497–511, DOI: 10.1177/1478210316637972; Edwin Ng, "The Critique of Mindfulness and the Mindfulness of Critique: Paying Attention to the Politics of Our Selves with Foucault's Analytic of Governmentality," in *Handbook of Mindfulness*, 2016, 135–52, DOI:

self-taming through the spasmodic search for inner peace, that is, the softening of one's own positions.[6]

Thus, given that mindfulness advocates claim to draw inspiration, particularly from *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, we will now explore how the sutta addresses themes that are genuinely fascinating, profoundly meaningful, and essential for continuing our phenomenological reflections. None of the analyses we will undertake, derived primarily from the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, as far as I can tell, touch upon the themes addressed even tangentially by mindfulness. Yet they are written in the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*.

This preamble serves also to alert the reader to the meaning of the term "mindfulness." Here, it will be used—as it was in the first English translations of Buddhist suttas, long before "mindfulness" meant what it does today—to denote the term *sati*. This Pāli word, connected to memory and attention, to the discipline of concentration aimed at developing a mental presence, refers to a state opposite to automatism, where the subject is unaware of their actions, performing them simply because the body has internalized the knowledge necessary for the task.

When we walk, eat, or work, we are not constantly present with conscious attention; rather, we perform actions automatically, unconsciously. One of the aims of *sati* meditation is precisely to recover a state capable of truly understanding these mechanisms of automatism, bringing to conscious awareness what would otherwise remain invisible, subterranean, and unconscious processes and structures.

Of course, the aims of *satipaṭṭhāna* certainly do not stop there, but understanding these premises is fundamental to grasping the rest. Secondly,

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10.1007/978-3-319-44019-4_10; Will Leggett, "Can Mindfulness Really Change the World? The Political Character of Meditative Practices," *Critical Policy Studies* 16, no. 3 (2022): 261–78, DOI: 10.1080/19460171.2021.1932541; Alexander I. Stingl and Sabrina M. Weiss, "Mindfulness As/Is Care: Biopolitics, Narrative Empathy, and Technoscientific Practices," in *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Mindfulness* (Wiley, 2014), 608–29, DOI: 10.1002/9781118294895.ch31; Mary V. Wrenn, "Corporate Mindfulness Culture and Neoliberalism," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 54, no. 2 (2022): 153–70, DOI: 10.1177/04866134211063521.

6. Divino, *Buddhist Psychology of Death: An Anthropological Analysis of the Contemplative Approach to the End of Life, Biopolitics and Thanatopower*, 95–123.

we now understand that this is a meditation focused on the body. The body should not be understood as merely an organism but as a living and complex, similarly to how Husserl's phenomenology treats the *Leib*. Focusing primarily on "pure lived experience," albeit in the form of an eidetic descriptive science (*deskriptive Wesenslehre*), phenomenology seeks to account for transcendently pure lived experiences.[7]

The subject is an essential component: everything we experience, we experience as subjects, whose primary vantage point on phenomena is their body. Everything passes first through the body, and without starting from an awareness of the body, we cannot understand the more complex and profound dynamics involving perceptions, their limits, or—least of all—their transcendence.

Husserl defines *somatology* as the study of the *Leib* as a living body, approached with phenomenological attention.[8] The *Leib* must necessarily be understood as a unity, and any part of it extracted and removed from that unity forms another unity that must necessarily balance itself. Thus, if we imagine a body in its biological entirety, it is evident that it cannot be devoid of any of its parts—neither an eye nor an arm—without ceasing to be a "body." Nonetheless, this is not entirely true: removing an eye means the removed part is no longer a body; the body without that eye must rebalance itself, and the subject must adapt to living with vision from only one eye instead of two. This does not negate that there are parts whose removal leads to irreparable corruption of the body's integrity. Concerning the parts, they are not a body—not without a system of belonging. For example, I can transplant a heart, as this does not corrupt the integrity of the body, which requires a heart for its unity. However, I cannot throw a dead organ on the street and call it a "living body."

Can we interpret the phenomenological philosophy of the body presented by the Buddhists as a form of *somatology*? Part of our

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7. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/2)* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 156, DOI: 10.1007/978-94-010-1041-2.

8. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Drittes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band V)*, 7–8.

objective will be to discover this. I will therefore not linger further on the premises and will move on to outlining the main themes of the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*, specifically the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta*. In this chapter, we will engage with its extended version (DN 22), which is more comprehensive in its content and allows for more connections and digressions. Moreover, a more summarized form that reiterates the core essence of this meditation, namely the fourfold aspect (*cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*), is also found in AN 4.274. Let us then examine these four foundations, as presented at the opening of MN 10 and DN 22.

Here, however, we encounter a longstanding problem: the divergence in interpretation that we must address from the outset when discussing *satipaṭṭhānā*. We have already partially tackled this issue in §2.2, namely, the double axis. The Pāli verses present this model for the fourfold *satipaṭṭhānā* exercises:

1.
idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharati ātāpī sampajāno satimā vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ,

2.
vedanāsu vedanānupassī viharati ātāpī sampajāno satimā vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ,

3.
citte cittānupassī viharati ātāpī sampajāno satimā vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ,

4.
dhammesu dhammānupassī viharati ātāpī sampajāno satimā vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ.

Attention must be paid to the highlighted terms. As already mentioned (§2.2), all follow the same model, which we can outline by taking the first term as a reference. The model *kāye/kāya* presents two identical terms declined in two different forms: the first in the locative (*kāye*) and the second as part of a compound term linked to *anupassī*,

which relates to observation, contemplation. This term is then connected to another, the following verb: *viharati*, referring to the meditator: "he dwells." The metaphor of dwelling in a contemplative absorption precisely indicates dedicating oneself to that specific practice.

These are therefore four "contemplative dwellings," and on this point, there is considerable agreement among scholars. However, on the nature of these dwellings, opinions diverge. While it is indisputable that the axis *kāye/kāya* indicates a locative/base-form model, it is unclear how it should be interpreted. What seems quite evident is that it should not be understood literally. The locative is likely evoked to draw on the image of dwelling (*viharati*), but it is equally possible that it might also—or alternatively—mean that the first element relates to the second. Is it a relationship of container/contained, obviously in a metaphorical sense? It seems here we are discussing a form of doubling. Following the reasoning of the locative/base, this speaks of a body-in-the-body (*kāye/kāya*), sensations in sensations (*vedanāsu/vedanā*), cognition in cognition (*citte/citta*), and phenomena in phenomenon (*dhammesu/dhamma*).[9]

9. We can encounter another interpretative problem: while we know for certain that *vedanāsu* and *dhammesu* are locative plurals, we cannot be sure of the number of their nominatives. If they were "sensations in sensations," we could not ascertain it anyway, first because *vedanā* in the plural always allows *vedanā* as a possible form in addition to the alternative *vedanāyo*. The term *dhamma* does have *dhammo* in the nominative and *dhammā* in the plural, but what eludes us is that these terms are used in a compound, thus in its base-form, in which case the numerical marker is rarely indicated. Moreover, even if it were indicated (which it usually is not), we face a vocalic *sandhi* resulting from the second term of the compound, *anupassī*, so it is their neutral form, typically referred to the vocative, that we must consider (*vedanā* and *dhamma*). For example, we see *kāya-anupassī* rendered directly as *kāyānupassī* with the fusion into a single long vowel by combining the two short *-a*s. But the union of a long *-ā* with a short *-a* still results in a long *ā*, so whether the compound refers to a hypothetical *dhammesu dhammā-anupassī* or a hypothetical *dhammesu dhamma-anupassī*, we cannot know. One might say: but the final term, which is usually declined for all, is always *anupassī*. However, the form *anupassī* refers to both the masculine singular nominative and the plural. In the case of *dhamma*, a masculine noun, we thus know nothing. The "sensation," however, is a feminine noun, and although the form *anupassī* is also the feminine singular, it is not identical to the plural, which we reconstruct as *anupassiniyo* or *anupassinī*, although these forms

We thus come to the translational problem of interpreting this locative. There are some choices made by other translators that I intend to examine. The translation by Bodhi and Ñāṇamoli, identical to that of Walshe, is, in my view, not entirely correct. Bodhi and Ñāṇamoli translate this passage in MN 10 as follows:

> a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating mind as mind, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. He abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.[10]

The translation is identical to Walshe's on DN 22,[11] and it is unclear whether Bodhi and Ñāṇamoli adopt this choice to align with his translation or fully agree with it. What I do not agree with, first of all, is the choice to represent some kind of locative/nominative axis as a term of comparison. Saying "body as a body" is like saying "of the body as a body" or "of the body as such." Here, the locative is interpreted as having a relative function. This function is not fabricated; it is indeed possible in Pāli to use the locative in this way, but it is a truly exceptional construction. Usually, the locative indicates a place, whether physical, metaphorical, or occasionally a specific moment in time, and this is its most common use.

The locative referenced in this translation seems to be the relational locative, also known as the causative locative, which usually expresses the concept of "concerning" something. However, given that this is a particular usage, it must be said that it is employed only when it

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are never found in the Pāli suttas.

10. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 145.

11. Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 335.

is unambiguous in relation to the other functions of the locative. For example, in the famous discourse SN 56.11, the Buddha says: "Such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science and the light that arose in me concerning these teachings not learned from others" (*pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi*).

In this case, the construction *pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu* ("the previously unheard teachings") puts *dhamma* in the locative, here used to refer to Buddhist teaching. This locative is neither spatial nor temporal but a relational locative, as it refers to *cakkhuṃ, ñāṇaṃ, paññā, vijjā, āloko udapādi* (the vision, knowledge, wisdom, science, and light that arose). All these things arose *in relation* to *pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu* (the previously unknown teachings). In this case, the construction is quite clear, and it is difficult to interpret it as knowledge that arose *within* the teachings. Or rather, expressing it this way still allows us to understand the message, but we know it involves a figurative process. We also understand why this case manages to represent these two concepts.

The reason why I think it is inappropriate to translate this *kāye* strictly as a relational locative is primarily redundancy. If the intention were to emphasize meditation *in relation* to the body, the term would not have been repeated twice (*kāye/kāya*). One might argue that this repetition is intended to emphasize meditating on the "body *as* body," or "body *qua* body," which is reasonable except that the suttas have other ways to express this concept of "as such" less ambiguously. This leads me to think that this doubling intends to convey something else.[12]

This redundancy *kāye/kāya* is, in my view, intentional, and not to emphasize "as such," but rather a duality. A duality certainly apparent, as we will see, but perceived. This does not detract much from Walshe's interpretation, which remains always implicit in my argument, but as

12. Let me give a few examples: the term *tathaṃ* by itself or in combination with *yathā* often indicates the thing in itself, the thing as such: "listen to this as truth as it is" (AN 7.64). Another example is the term *eva* ("just"), often used as a suffix and in combination (*tatha* + *eva*): "and they will train in the teaching as such" (*tatheva dhamme sikkhetha*). The same applies to the construction *taṃ yathā.*

a secondary form. That is, this meditation reflects on the body as such but does not arrive there immediately; rather, it reflects on the body *that is in the body,* meaning in this the most authentic sense of that locative. It does not indicate that there is a body contained in another, but rather that there is a perceived duality. A body *in* the body means exactly this: like the image of the body in the body, the idea of the body in the body.

There is a very valid reason, in my opinion, to defend this interpretation, and it is the mention in the same *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* of another duality: the *ajjhatta/bahiddhā*, which, in my view, is the true reason for this redundancy.

> *iti ajjhattaṃ vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati, bahiddhā vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati, ajjhattabahiddhā vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati.*
>
> And so they dwell in contemplation of the body in the body internally, and they dwell in contemplation of the body in the body externally, and they dwell in contemplation of the body in the body both internally and externally.

The presence of this oscillation between internal and external must indeed make us deeply reflect on the repetitions we find in the fourfold model of *satipaṭṭhāna*. Let us recall, as we also saw in the previous chapter, that the internal/external dichotomy is presented in Buddhist suttas primarily to be critiqued. It certainly refers to the great problem of Buddhist psychology: *nāmarūpa* and the process of perceptual apprehension.[13]

In this framework, reference is made to two fundamental levels of analysis of the perceptual process. Phenomena can be understood as structuring themselves at varying degrees of complexity. What is attested as a phenomenon can be highly complex. The five *khandha*s, as the name itself indicates, appear as a phenomenal aggregate (*upādāna*), something we can identify as a certain 'identity,' but this identity

13. Divino, "Language and Consciousness in Early Buddhist Thought: On the Early Reflections on the Theme of Language and the Perception of Reality in the Pāli Canon."

is precisely a complex agglomerate of at least five other phenomena—or better, five phenomenal aspects resulting from the passage through different stages of the chain of apprehension. How the phenomenon of *nāma* itself is structured follows a similar principle. Another phenomenological term, *uppajja* and all its derivatives (*uppajjana*, *uppajjanaka*, *uppajjamāna*, *uppattika*, *uppāda*), conveys the same concept: something that "arises," that "manifests" as a phenomenon because it is "put together," because it is "composite," as its etymology indicates (*ud* + √*pad*). And indeed, *paṭiccasamuppāda* is but a more sophisticated variant of the same concept of phenomenal aggregates.

However, at least two fundamental levels of this composition are recognized. That practically all the phenomena we witness are composite and interrelated is a given for Buddhists. Nevertheless, beyond the already present degree of complexity of these phenomena and their experience by us, a further nuance of complexity arises when they are placed in the realm of *lokasamaññā*, the mundane designations. Indeed, the world is a plane that must be distinguished from the normal phenomenal process. The world, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, is this sort of sphere, circle, boundary, limit *within* which all phenomena that occur are also *conceived* in a certain way.

The world is indeed the *limit* of our perceptual-sensory spheres, but just as it can refer to the 'world for me,' which is precisely the world I represent with my mundane circle, collectively this sphere of mundanity can also be extended and shared within the historical-cultural dimension, yet the principle does not change. The world, both subjective and shared, is this sort of sphere that delimits an *internal* space, which is said to be internal because it is the space *within* which the things that happen, the phenomena, are subject to an additional degree of stratification. Phenomena are all that happens as an aspect of being; they are complex but also an indestructible chain, inseparable from one another. It is by convention that we speak of phenomenon *x* and *y*, drawing a demarcation between the two. In reality, the shifting of modality is a complex continuum—not undifferentiated, certainly, but necessarily indivisible.

And so, we number the pages of this book even though it is complete in its entirety; moreover, we cannot read it in an instant, nor in its totality, that is, entirely as a complete snapshot. Our mundane sphere can 'read' only what it can, and of the multiple levels of reading—like a text written in a highly complex code—we might understand only some aspects, very few, and we attest only to what is 'within the boundaries' of our mundane sphere at that moment. It is as if we were traveling on a plane, and all we can see is what presents itself through the view of a small porthole. What enters within the horizon of visibility of that porthole is *within* the boundaries of the perceptible, and thus we will say it is "internal."

However, things will seem to pass before us and constantly change. Where there was once a lowland, now there is a mountain; thus, the lowland has exited the horizon of our visibility and is now outside our mundane circle. Moreover, we see the mountain in a certain way depending on whether we fly lower or higher, but these variations also constitute modifications of the perception of the territory. Certainly, we cannot see the single ant that inhabits the mountain, nor all the myriad trees, or whether a leaf falls in a precise spot. Yet this too is an inalienable part of the mountain, inseparable from it, indispensable.

Thus, we certainly do not possess a psychic world, but simply a horizon of relative and mutable perceptibility, which is interiority, the internal. In relation to this internal, we construct the *loka* through *samaññā*, designation, the attribution of 'names' through processes of knowledge ($\sqrt{ñā}$) that proceed by association—"knowing by putting together" ($saṃ + ā + \sqrt{ñā}$). This is the sense of SN 22.62 that we saw in the first chapter. Certainly, we will say at various times, based on what we can associate, "this is a mountain," or "this is a tree." Similarly, when the mountain exits our 'world,' our circle of perceptibility, and another is now visible in its place, we might say, "*this too is a mountain,*" employing an associative process.

Evidently, both things are, exist, and are very similar. But what does it mean that they are "mountains"? Can we extract them entirely from everything, abstract them (*abstrahō*) from their context, tearing them from the earth so as to place them in an imaginary collection

where they will all be "mountains"? But how can such a thing be done? I, having decided that "mountain" and "lowland" are different and distinct, have certainly carried out a distinction based on factual evidence: a *formal* difference between the two (in terms of *rūpa*s), and on this point there is apparently no debate. But when I am asked to trace the boundary and separate the mountain from the lowland, I encounter some difficulty because the earth is continuous, and at some point, it simply begins to rise, more and more, until it reaches a peak, and then descends again. What I do not observe, however, is a sharp truncation suggesting even in the pre-conceptual world a clear, radical discontinuity separating the mountain from the plain.

Now, all these complex semantic articulations—one cannot call them anything else—pertain to the *internal*. But what of the *external*? The external is everything that supposedly remains "outside" this perceptual field, as an originary openness to things. However, it does not retain the intrinsic deception found in Heidegger's idea of *openness*, namely that it is something purer, specifically linked to the originary. This is because openness understood as an absence of boundaries is an oxymoron. The external presupposes the internal, and the open presupposes the closed. Without the establishment of the sphere of mundanity we've discussed so far, there is no "outside the sphere of mundanity."

This "external" is constituted only as an *expectation*, as an idea that is always and inevitably preserved within the intrinsic dichotomizing mechanism of our perceptions. It is as dependent on the internal as the internal is on the external. As a dimension of expectation, therefore, the external should not be understood as naïve naturalism would have it—namely, simply as that which exceeds the limits of our measurable perceptions, such as "how many meters can I see with the naked eye?" This external is neither a physical location nor a place of dreams.

Let us consider some practical examples. I cannot, in any way available to my habitual perceptions, see the back of my own head. I cannot even see my own face, for that matter, and so I need the aid of a mirror—or two mirrors—to see what I normally cannot. This is a fitting example of the *external*. I can touch the back of my neck and thus have a partial perception of it. Yet I possess a collective image of my

body as a whole, a mental schema that exists as a model within complex neural networks.[14] This serves, for example, to coordinate my body's movements and manage its orientation in space.[15] This *body image* is a cognitive model that reconstructs somaticity for practical purposes, but it is also a body *within* the body.

However, the idea of a body within the body is much more than this. As already stated, I must include exteriority as a concept and as an expectation to have a perception of interiority. If I lacked the idea of the external, every novelty would be unbearable to me: every unknown flower would be an astonishment. Instead, even if I encounter an unseen flower while walking through the woods, I may be struck by its beauty but will never be overwhelmed to the point of being incapable of imagining, even hypothetically, what it might be. I will engage in a process of association, of *samaññā*, and assume that this flower, previously external to my system of knowledge, can be categorized as a "flower" or more generally as a "plant," even if I can never be entirely certain.

This system works, though it does not always align with the more technical *samaññā* used by biologists. This discrepancy leads to awkward situations, such as when some insist that bats are birds because they have wings, or that olives are not fruits because they are not sweet—causing the classificatory system to falter due to mere associative reasoning in contrast to one based on more technical and complex associations.

Nevertheless, the principle works *precisely because* it contemplates and already includes the possibility of an "external" as an expectation.

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14. I am aware that for this specific purpose the neurologists prefer to employ the term "Body schema" (*Körperschema*), but I prefer to employ the term "image" for both functions for reasons will be clear further.

15. Davide Sattin et al., "An Overview of the Body Schema and Body Image: Theoretical Models, Methodological Settings and Pitfalls for Rehabilitation of Persons with Neurological Disorders," *Brain Sciences* 13, no. 10 (2023): 1410, DOI: 10.3390/brainsci13101410; Harrison G. Pope et al., "Body Image Perception Among Men in Three Countries," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 157, no. 8 (2000): 1297–1301, DOI: 10.1176/appi.ajp.157.8.1297; T.F. Cash, "Cognitive-Behavioral Perspectives on Body Image," in *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance* (Elsevier, 2012), 334–42, DOI: 10.1016/B978-0-12-384925-0.00054-7.

There is no true external that does not depend on an internal, and vice versa. It is a rupture, something that the idea of *samādhi* attempts to reconcile, to put back together (*saṃ* + *ā* + √*dhā*). But what would result from this is, if anything, the total absence of an external as well as an internal, certainly not a pure external or a pure internal—maintaining equidistance from both materialist reductionism and psychological reductionism.

For this reason, Buddhist meditation emphasizes the degree of this complexity: the meditation of the body in the body is internal, external, and internal-and-external together. Reconciliation occurs by healing the rupture between the body experienced as the interface of subjectivity with the world and the body experienced as something we drag along, partially unknown, and which inevitably appears as the 'external' residue of our unprocessable corporeality. I have 'my' body, which is mine and seems like an inalienable part of my experience. But then there is also 'my' body as lived by 'others,' for instance, who will always see something of me that is unknown to me, and which, however, grounds the expectation—the possibility—that my body is other.

This process also works in reverse: when I want to 'change,' I do so in relation to this expectation projected onto others. I want to present a new 'image' of myself—specifically, one that aligns with the ideal I want to project to the world. I already have this image of myself 'inside' me, but I must 'actualize' it, bring it outward, so that it *coincides* with what others see of me, engaging in a process of identification. This process applies to any other 'phenomenon,' and I refer back to the earlier example: phenomena occur 'externally' (or so we assume), yet only that portion that enters *within* my worldly circle and can be perceived *by* my sensory faculties is returned to me. This is the aspect of the phenomenon that is in the phenomenon, the internal aspect of the phenomenon, the one that appears to me as attested by me, the attestor. This has a counterpart, always eidetic—this is not yet a question of absolute truth—which is the supposed 'external' phenomenon, understood as the factual 'basis' of what is returned to me internally.

Conversely, the elements termed 'external' by the Buddha, such as the phenomenology of forms (*rūpa*), are identified as the four great

primary elements.[16] However, the aggregative process—how simpler elements (phenomena) aggregate and interact to manifest a more complex formal phenomenon—remains fundamentally analogous to the phenomenology of reality we might define as psychic, which is based on the same fundamental processes and dynamics.

But this can also be taken to a deeper level of understanding: it is possible to argue that the phenomenon is double even in itself, because if only a part of it reaches me, this partiality can certainly be seen as *already contained* within the original phenomenon, which, however, is not given to me in its entirety. Thus, there is a phenomenon within the phenomenon that I perceive, and a phenomenon containing the phenomenon that I do not perceive.

In this sense, Sujato's translation, which interprets the peculiar locative of the Satipaṭṭhāna as "an aspect of,"[17] is undoubtedly a suggestive translation, but it opens up an interpretation of partiality that, in my view, is not entirely accurate. This splitting is more precisely an indication of an internal/external axis, which they intend to dismantle, and which we can interpret as an axis of attested/attestor, witnessed/witness or perception/expectation. The Husserlian *Leib*/*Körper* dichotomy is equally intriguing as an interpretative hypothesis if we consider it as a dichotomy between the 'my' body as a subject experiencing its own body and carrying an idea of its body as living, and the body seen instead by 'others.' However, in Husserl's specific view, this alterity pertains to the technical observer and not to any random person, as it is the technician who reduces the living body to a mere organism, a *Körper-Ding* disassembled into 'parts' and 'limbs' that are 'observed-by' someone who deprives them of their vital coefficient and renders them objects of mechanistic observation.

The Satipaṭṭhāna meditation thus focuses on the individual terms of this analysis. The body is what concerns us most right now, not only because it is the first term of their analysis and the theme of this

16. Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*, 96.

17. Bhikkhu Sujato, *Long Discourses: A Faithful Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya - Vol. II* (SuttaCentral, 2018), 272.

chapter, but also because the problems of cognition (*citta*), sensation (*vedanā*), and phenomenon (*dhamma*) have already been extensively covered in the first two chapters. What *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation will add pertains to their relationship with corporeality, where things become decidedly more interesting.

The *Kāyānupassanā-ānāpānapabba* section, specifically dedicated to mindfulness of the breath centered on the body, also presents themes reminiscent of those discussed in §1.7. When we ask what *kāye kāyānupassī* means, or more specifically how to practically implement this meditation, the answer begins by stating that the meditator should seek a tranquil place in the forest, at the root of a tree, or in an empty hut (*bhikkhu araññagato vā rukkhamūlagato vā suññāgāragato vā*), sit cross-legged (*nisīdati pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā*), with the body upright (*ujuṃ kāyaṃ*), and establish stable contemplation on something called *sati* (*paṇidhāya parimukhaṃ satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā*).

According to Shulman's analysis, the term *sati* can be considered a particular form of highly focused attention, directed at concentration on the present contents of experience.[18] What fascinates about this term is its etymology and usage, which connects it not only to this technical conception of attention but also to memory. How memory and attention are linked has long been a puzzle to solve. But for Shulman,

> This problem will be shown to result from an initial misunderstanding of the terms; when "mindfulness" means "bare awareness," mindfulness and memory are nearly antithetical. But when, on the other hand, mindfulness is understood as structured awareness, as a form of attention that can be directed and worked upon, and thus as an implementation of Buddhist "memory," the terms end up representing different aspects of the same notion of consciousness.[19]

On this topic, it is worth referring to an important 2010 article that better clarifies how to understand the concept of *sati* in Pāli Buddhist texts. Based on what emerges from meditative practice, it appears

18. Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*, 113–14.
19. Ibid., 114.

evident that "*sati* pertains to a unique ability, perhaps a potential, of the mind to be in continuous and intense contact with its object."[20] Naturally, the goal of meditation centered on *sati* is to extend this ability, whose usefulness becomes evident when we realize that under normal conditions, our perceptual system implements constant inhibitory forms toward what is experienced daily. What is learned habitually is progressively taken as a given if we talk about notions, or reproduced as an automatism if we talk about behaviors. The potential of *sati* intervenes by dismantling precisely these inhibitory mechanisms and thus "allows one to subvert the common structuring of cognition."[21]

The meditation continues, emphasizing the need to focus this attention (*sati*) on a specific action of the body, which is the breath:

so satova assasati, satova passasati.

With this awareness, a mendicant inhales; with this awareness, a mendicant exhales.

dīghaṃ vā assasanto 'dīghaṃ assasāmī'ti pajānāti,
dīghaṃ vā passasanto 'dīghaṃ passasāmī'ti pajānāti.

Inhaling deeply, [the meditator] knows: "I am inhaling deeply."
Exhaling deeply, [the meditator] knows: "I am exhaling deeply."

rassaṃ vā assasanto 'rassaṃ assasāmī'ti pajānāti,
rassaṃ vā passasanto 'rassaṃ passasāmī'ti pajānāti.

Inhaling lightly, [the meditator] knows: "I am inhaling lightly."
Exhaling lightly, [the meditator] knows: "I am exhaling lightly."

'sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī'ti sikkhati,
'sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī'ti sikkhati.

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20. Eviatar Shulman, "Mindful Wisdom: The Sati-Paṭṭhāna-Sutta on Mindfulness, Memory, and Liberation," *History of Religions* 49, no. 4 (2010): 395, DOI: 10.1086/649856.
21. Ibid., 397.

> [The meditator] trains thus: "I will inhale experiencing the entirety of the body."
> [The meditator] trains thus: "I will exhale experiencing the entirety of the body."
>
> *'passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī'ti sikkhati,*
> *'passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ passasissāmī'ti sikkhati.*
>
> [The meditator] trains thus: "I will inhale calming the somatic processes."
> [The meditator] trains thus: "I will exhale calming the somatic processes."

At this point, one recognizes themes we have encountered in Shulman regarding *sati* as mindful attention. Particularly fascinating in this context is the use of the term *paṭisaṃvedī*, which invokes an experiential value, in this case referring to the body in its entirety, "the whole body" (*sabbakāya*).

In addition, the term *passambhayaṃ*, which refers to a calming, should not be interpreted in terms of modern mindfulness as the pursuit of "inner peace" as the ultimate goal of well-being. This calming should be read as contrasting with a normal condition where experience is governed by entangled processes. Borrowing a metaphor used many centuries later by Patañjali, the usual state of the cognitive system is compared to a whirlpool (*cittavṛtti*), which his yoga practice aims to bring to cessation (*yogaś cittavṛtti nirodhaḥ*). This metaphor is particularly apt when we consider that much of the content of the *Yogasūtra* draws heavily from Buddhist discourses.[22] If, then, experience is usually governed by whirling processes—not chaotic, but complexly layered—the intent to calm (cease or pacify) them also makes clearer sense in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna*. It is also unsurprising that this discussion involves bodily processes (*kāyasaṅkhāraṃ*), as the body is indeed the epicenter of all experience.

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22. Squarcini, "Introduzione"; Pradeep P. Gokhale, *The Yogasūtra of Patañjali* (Routledge India, 2020), DOI: 10.4324/9780367815950; Karen O'Brien-Kop, *Rethinking 'Classical Yoga' and Buddhism: Meditation, Metaphors and Materiality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

I now invite the reader to pay close attention to the following section. The text offers an interesting analogy:

> *seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, dakkho bhamakāro vā bhamakārantevāsī vā dīghaṃ vā añchanto 'dīghaṃ añchāmī'ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā añchanto 'rassaṃ añchāmī'ti pajānāti;*
> *evameva kho, bhikkhave, bhikkhu dīghaṃ vā assasanto 'dīghaṃ assasāmī'ti pajānāti, dīghaṃ vā passasanto 'dīghaṃ passasāmī'ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā assasanto 'rassaṃ assasāmī'ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā passasanto 'rassaṃ passasāmī'ti pajānāti.*
>
> O mendicants, imagine a skilled carpenter or their apprentice. When making a deep cut, they know, "I am making a deep cut," and when making a shallow cut, they know, "I am making a shallow cut." In the same way, O mendicants, when a mendicant breathes in deeply, they know, "I am breathing in deeply," and when breathing out deeply, they know, "I am breathing out deeply." When breathing in shallowly, they know, "I am breathing in shallowly," and when breathing out shallowly, they know, "I am breathing out shallowly."

What distinguishes the non-meditator, the ordinary human, when breathing, from the carpenter when cutting wood? And what connects that same carpenter with the meditator? The carpenter's action requires a certain attention, a certain focus, whereas breathing is an automatism, something we perform involuntarily, automatically, without the conscious presence of vigilant attention.

The French psychologist Pierre Janet described a particular psychological behavior: automatism. A condition in which a person is unaware of their actions and behaviors but—what we might now call unconsciously—executes perfectly all the movements required to accomplish what must be done. This is a true state of unawareness, which is precisely what Buddhist psychology identifies as a state of discomfort, the opposite of *sati* (mindfulness), which must be cultivated.

This dynamic appears in the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* when we read that mindfulness essentially means that a mendicant, to cite the sutta, while walking is aware: "I am walking," while standing is aware: "I am standing," while sitting is aware: "I am sitting," and while lying down

is aware: "I am lying down," being aware in whatever state their body is in.[23] This applies to every aspect of life. The concept of *sati* means bringing into consciousness what was previously unconscious, which also carries ethical implications.[24]

The sutta reiterates the formula we know. By focusing mindful awareness on the breath to de-automatize habitual action, the meditator concentrates on the "body in the body" internally, externally, and both internally and externally (*iti ajjhattaṃ vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati, bahiddhā vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati, ajjhattabahiddhā vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati*).

Equally important, this meditation aims at non-attachment to anything in the world (*na ca kiñci loke upādiyati*). The final result, resolving the initial *kāye/kāya* dualism, is clearly expressed: the meditator now abides in the awareness that for them "there is a body" (*'atthi kāyo'ti vā panassa sati paccupaṭṭhitā hoti*).

This final unity is essential: it does not state that for the meditator there is a "body in the body," but simply "a body," (*atthi kāyo*).

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23. *puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu gacchanto vā gacchāmī ti pajānāti, ṭhito vā ṭhitomhī ti pajānāti, nisinno vā nisinnomhī ti pajānāti, sayāno vā sayānomhī ti pajānāti, yathā yathā vā panassa kāyo paṇihito hoti tathā tathā naṃ pajānāti.*

24. In ancient Buddhist thought, cognition (*citta*) is contrasted with a state of non-cognition (*acitta*), that is, a condition in which the cognitive process is suspended. However, this state is not one of calm but of biological automatism, a kind of unconsciousness—not in the Freudian sense, that is, not a dynamic unconscious that stores psychic elements which, while not present in the subject's awareness, are still active and capable of influencing behavior. This type of unconscious is understood as immobile cognition (*appavattaṃ cittaṃ*).

This suspended state of cognition is called *bhavaṅga*, particularly expressed in the Abhidhamma. The *bhavaṅga* state is alternative to conscious thought, which can interrupt it. These two states do not occur simultaneously. Moreover, *bhavaṅga* is not a container of repressed elements but an automatic mechanism of preserving psychic identity. In the Abhidhamma, the cognitive process is represented as an interruption of the suspended automatic state (*bhavaṅga*), described as a vibration (*calana*) triggered by the contact-impact between a perceivable object and the sensory door. For example, in the case of the eye, it could be said that the contact between photons and the retina generates vision. After this contact, the flow of *bhavaṅga* is halted (*upaccheda*), but this is only the beginning of the cognitive process proper (*vīthi-pāta*). See also chapter five for more information.

Certainly, we can understand this dualism as reflecting the illusory belief in internal and external, which mindfulness resolves. Another essential aspect emerges: there is a body that performs automatic, unconscious, habitual actions without focused awareness, in suspended states we might call unconscious but which are better described as suspended consciousness. This is one aspect of the body.

Then there is the body of conscious, present, and focused attention: the body over which the carpenter has full control when cutting wood, and also the body of the ascetic, disciplined through rigorous contemplative practice aimed at achieving a state of present awareness. Attaining this state is not easy, and even a meditation focusing on the breath (*ānāpāna*) is easier said than done. As noted, "*ānāpāna* demands an intense awareness of what happens in the body and, most significant, of the process of breathing itself."[25]

This mindfulness, however, extends immediately to any other normally automatic bodily action:

> *puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu gacchanto vā 'gacchāmī'ti pajānāti, ṭhito vā 'ṭhitomhī'ti pajānāti, nisinno vā 'nisinnomhī'ti pajānāti, sayāno vā 'sayānomhī'ti pajānāti, yathā yathā vā panassa kāyo paṇihito hoti tathā tathā naṃ pajānāti.* [...]
> *puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu abhikkante paṭikkante sampajānakārī hoti, ālokite vilokite sampajānakārī hoti, samiñjite pasārite sampajānakārī hoti, saṅghāṭipattacīvaradhāraṇe sampajānakārī hoti, asite pīte khāyite sāyite sampajānakārī hoti, uccārapassāvakamme sampajānakārī hoti, gate ṭhite nisinne sutte jāgarite bhāsite tuṇhībhāve sampajānakārī hoti.*
>
> Furthermore, O mendicants, a mendicant, while walking, is aware: "I am walking," or while standing, is aware: "I am standing," or while sitting, is aware: "I am sitting," or while lying down, is aware: "I am lying down." Or similarly, in whatever position their body is arranged, they clearly understand it. [...] Furthermore, O mendicants, when a mendicant approaches or departs, they act with active understanding; when looking back or around, they act with active understanding; when bending or extending,

25. Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*, 116.

> they act with active understanding; when wearing their robe and carrying their alms bowl, they act with active understanding; when eating, drinking, chewing, tasting, they act with active understanding; when attending to their bodily functions, they act with active understanding; while walking, standing still, resting, waking, speaking, or maintaining silence, they act with active understanding.

The essence of this section can also be found in the form of individual suttas throughout the canon, but more concisely in the AN. For example, AN 6.117 offers a meditation on the body (*Kāyānupassī*) that clearly references the one analyzed thus far, while making explicit that the aspect of the body-in-the-body to be specifically observed is possible only by freeing oneself from the conditioning of six things or six phenomena (*cha dhamme appahāya abhabbo kāye kāyānupassī*). These six things are not the six sensory spheres, or rather, the six sensory spheres as a collective form part of the six things to be abandoned (*indriyesu aguttadvārataṃ*), along with pleasure in work (*kammārāmataṃ*), conversation (*bhassārāmataṃ*), sleep (*niddārāmataṃ*), the fleeting pleasure of social company (*saṅgaṇikārāmataṃ*), and unregulated eating (*bhojane amattaññutaṃ*). These points provide an opportunity to introduce another aspect, which will also become clear in the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, but is too often overlooked: the importance of asceticism. Renouncing the most ephemeral pleasures, such as social company, idle conversations, or even sleep, is part of an ascetic context where bodily discipline is central to the practice.

3.1 Conceptions of the Body

Speaking of discipline, the section we will now analyze is titled "Contemplation of the Repulsiveness of the Body" (*Kāyānupassanāpaṭikūlamanasikārapabba*). The term *paṭikkūlamanasikāra* (or its variant *paṭikūlamanasikāra*) is a compound of *paṭi* and *kūla*, which we can translate as "adverse," while the second part of the term, *manasikāra*, is derived from the locative of *mana*, indicating thought. Thus, *paṭikkūlamanasikāra* is something that provokes an adverse thought.

The reason why a meditation on the body suddenly shifts toward a theme of aversion will become clear after a brief note on the theme of the pure and impure. This will also allow us to outline the Buddhist conception of the body and how it relates to ascetic discipline.

In general, it must be said that the body is not highly regarded. While some ascetic ideas propose a rejection of corporeality, seeing it as the prison of the soul, and these forms of asceticism focus on proposing the detachment or liberation of the true soul from the body, Buddhism presents a more complex view. The body is certainly the place of limitation, and as such, it is neither the ultimate reduction of the human being, nor can its limiting nature be considered insurmountable, meaning it should not be accepted as all there is or as beyond questioning. However, the mortification of the body—critically labeled by the Buddha as the excessively rigorous discipline practiced by other ascetic schools—is equally rejected as useless, as it causes suffering for its own sake and leads to new problems rather than solving the issue of the body.

Mortifying practices, characterized by extreme asceticism that aims to subvert the inhibitory processes of cognitive habituation by "overturning" the sensory channels of the body, ultimately result in a paroxysm where such subversion becomes the final goal of asceticism. This approach leads to death but not liberation from the cycle of rebirths. The paradox of these practices is that they attempt to liberate the ascetic from suffering but cause additional suffering, as we will see more clearly in a dedicated section (see §3.6).

That said, the rejection of mortifying practices does not mean that the Buddha held a positive view of the body. In Buddhism, as in all major ascetic philosophical traditions, the body is a burden, a cage, an uncomfortable obstacle to liberation. Ancient Indian ascetic traditions would say: *aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*—the soul is one thing, the body another. When referring to the soul, they do not use just any term but *jīva*, whose Indo-European root connects to the sense of "life" in its purest and most uncontaminated form. From the same Indo-European root, we have the Latin *vīvus* and the Greek βίος.[26]

26. Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part*

To indicate the body, however, they do not use *kāya*, a term linked more to *lived* corporeality, but rather a term with a pejorative connotation: *sarīra*, comparable to the Sanskrit *śarīra*,[27] meaning something that decomposes, destined to deteriorate and break down (√*śṛ*- root). Buddhism, however, overturns this paradigm, and the reason for its dissent from other ascetic philosophies has often been misunderstood. What Buddhism rejects in this definition is the idea that being can somehow be expressed in words. To define the soul as "something" distinct from something else is to semantize it. The great Buddhist idea is staggering in its radicality: being is neither an idea nor a non-idea, as it is both prior to and beyond all ideas.

Thus, invoking *jīva* by calling it *jīva* only demands the appearance of something substantialized, a living idea, but not the truth. For this reason, it is sometimes mistakenly thought that Buddhism affirms: *taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*—that the soul and the body are one and the same. Actually, the Buddha denied (*atha ca panāhaṃ na vadāmi*) that the body and soul were the same (cf. DN 6, DN 7, MN 79, MN 80), just as he denied that they were different entities. Only by understanding the subtle semantic philosophy of the Buddha can we grasp the reasoning behind this.

This also highlights a fascinating fact: despite a profound anatomical knowledge supported by refined medical understanding among early Buddhists, the body is still perceived as a vehicle of impurity. However, meditation focusing on the body as essentially a sack of flesh containing various disgusting fluids and other impure substances is not meant to induce disgust and repulsion toward the body. Instead, it aims to deconstruct the dichotomy of pure and impure.

Furthermore, consider that, in its organic whole, the body is perceived as a unit and thus as a "form" in itself. The term *rūpa* is frequently employed as a synonym for "body." As with any cognitive

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IV, 117; Michiel De Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages* (Leiden: BRILL, 2008), 685; Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 215.

27. Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part VIII*, 157.

delineation, which follows the same principle as physical delimitation, the body is perceived as "body" if it *fits* within certain limits, and here the metaphor of space and spatial organization proves useful:

> *seyyathāpi, āvuso, kaṭṭhañca paṭicca valliñca paṭicca tiṇañca paṭicca mattikañca paṭicca ākāso parivārito agārantveva saṅkhaṃ gacchati; evameva kho, āvuso, aṭṭhiñca paṭicca nhāruñca paṭicca maṃsañca paṭicca cammañca paṭicca ākāso parivārito rūpantveva saṅkhaṃ gacchati.*
>
> O mendicants, in the condition where a certain space is enclosed by sticks, creepers, grass, and mud, it is known as a "building."
> In the same way, when a space is enclosed by bones, sinews, flesh, and skin, it becomes known as "form."
> (MN 28)

To understand how the body is perceived, it may be helpful to examine AN 4.157, which addresses the Buddhist conception of illness (*roga*). The body, as we know, is susceptible to illness, yet the concept of somatic illness already offers insight into how the body is viewed within Buddhist thought.

It may come as a surprise, then, to learn that, after establishing an apparent distinction between somatic perception (*kāyika*) and cognition (*cetasika*), the Buddha chooses to delve deeply into only one of these aspects—specifically, the latter. The notion that consciousness (*citta*) itself can be "ill" (*ātura*) is a recurring theme in Buddhist literature. Concerning bodily illnesses, however, the Buddha merely remarks that some sentient beings can claim to be free from this condition (*ārogya*) for many years, even up to hundreds of years. Having made this observation, the Buddha continues as follows:

> *te, bhikkhave, sattā sudullabhā lokasmiṃ ye cetasikena rogena muhuttampi ārogyaṃ paṭijānanti, aññatra khīṇāsavehi.*
>
> Yet, O mendicants, it is truly challenging to find any sentient being in the world who can claim to be free from cognitive illness even for a moment, apart from those who have eradicated all defilements.

At this juncture, it is essential to clarify what is meant by the great sages who recognize (*paṭijānanti*) the state of non-illness. This state is associated with those who are "free from defilements" (*khiṇa* + *āsava*). The concept of *āsavā* is equally complex. This term can sometimes refer to general cognitive and behavioral impurities or habits, while in other cases, it refers specifically to passions. The term may also denote influences or inclinations.

In the Pāli Canon, these defilements are described as sustaining the karmic flow, with three primary types identified: libidinal influences (*kāmāsava*), existential or dynamic influences (*bhavāsava*), and influences stemming from incorrect vision (*avijjāsava*). Occasionally, a fourth category is added, addressing influences over one's views (*diṭṭhāsava*).

At this point, the Buddha addresses those who have chosen the path of renunciation (*pabbajita*), as they risk encountering four types of cognitive illnesses.

idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu mahiccho hoti vighātavā asantuṭṭho itarītaracīvarapiṇḍapātasenāsanagilānappaccayabhesajjaparikkhārena.

To begin with, a mendicant may be filled with many desires, frustrated and dissatisfied with the types of clothing, begged food, lodging, and medicine available for illness.

so mahiccho samāno vighātavā asantuṭṭho itarītaracīvarapiṇḍapātasenāsanagilānappaccayabhesajjaparikkhārena pāpikaṃ icchaṃ paṇidahati anavaññappaṭilābhāya lābha-sakkārasilokappaṭilābhāya.

As a result, [these dissatisfied mendicants] fixate on corrupted desires, seeking approval, material possessions, honor, and popularity.

so uṭṭhahati ghaṭati vāyamati anavaññappaṭilābhāya lābhasakkārasilokappaṭilābhāya.

They strive, struggle, and exert themselves to attain these things.

In these passages, there seems to be a deliberate attempt at orthopraxy on the Buddha's part, as he admonishes future mendicants regarding the dangers they face if they are not fully conscious of the nature of their ascetic path. Here, we can observe the Buddha's keen socio-psychological insight, as he considers human passions and individuals' relationships with the social community when he explains how the pursuit of approval can lead one away from the original path—the pursuit of freedom from cognitive distortions.

For the Buddha, mendicants' motivations deteriorate further when they visit families (*kulāni upasaṃkamati*), when they sit (*nisīdati*), when they discuss the doctrine (*dhammaṃ bhāsati*), or when they fail to attend to their bodily functions (*uccāra-passāvaṃ sandhāreti*). It is at this point that the prescription for therapy is introduced.

tasmātiha, bhikkhave, evaṃ sikkhitabbaṃ:

Thus, you should practice as follows:

'na mahicchā bhavissāma vighātavanto asantuṭṭhā itarītaracīvarapiṇḍapātasenāsanagilānappaccayabhesajjaparikkhārena, na pāpikaṃ icchaṃ paṇidahissāma anavaññappaṭilābhāya lābhasakkārasilokappaṭilābhāya,
na uṭṭhahissāma na ghaṭessāma na vāyamissāma anavaññappaṭilābhāya lābhasakkārasilokappaṭilābhāya, khamā bhavissāma sītassa uṇhassa jighacchāya pipāsāya ḍaṃsamakasavātātapasarīsapasamphassānaṃ duruttānaṃ durāgatānaṃ vacanapathānaṃ, uppannānaṃ sārīrikānaṃ vedanānaṃ dukkhānaṃ tibbānaṃ kharānaṃ kaṭukānaṃ asātānaṃ amanāpānaṃ pāṇaharānaṃ adhivāsakajātikā bhavissāmā'ti.

We will not harbor many desires nor be frustrated. We will be content with any form of clothing, begged food, lodging, or medicine and remedy for illness. We will not focus on our corrupted desires [that would lead us] to seek admiration, material possessions, honor, and popularity. We will not strive, struggle, or exert ourselves to attain these things. We will endure the cold, heat, hunger, and thirst. We will endure the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and reptiles. We will tolerate harsh and unpleasant criticisms. We will endure physical pain, whether mild, severe, sharp, unpleasant, distressing, or life-threatening.

evañhi vo, bhikkhave, sikkhitabban'ti.

This is how you should train yourselves.

Most of these behaviors can be easily recognized as ascetic-inspired prescriptions, for example the renunciation of "corrupted desires," the seeking for admiration and material possessions, honor and popularity, that is, mundane and ephemeral things. Although the Buddha's approach does not align with medicine in the sense most familiar to us (i.e., interventionist medicine involving surgery or pharmacology), it is nonetheless a practice of care and, in a sense, bears a much closer resemblance to psychotherapy. How does this conception relate to the idea of impurity?

The original division between pure (*śauca*) and impure (*aśauca*) is something heavily present in the South Asian world (sometimes expressed as *śuddhi* and *aśuddhi*), and it has evidently been a strong principle of social organization. Consider the caste system (*varṇa*), where the "impurity" associated with the lowest castes—such as the so-called "untouchables" or *dalit*—is in stark contrast to the supreme respectability and purity of those who are knowledgeable in the texts from which the Law is derived, namely the *brāhmaṇa*s.[28]

The sense of the identity of the Self had already been recognized by Indian thinkers and referred to as *ahaṃkāra* ("sense of Self"). At the same time, it was distinguished from the *ātman*, a transcendental self, which, in the reflections of later philosophers, would come to be identified with *brahman*, the universal principle.

The Indo-European tradition brought by Indians into their society included a strong conception of Law. The word *dharma* derives from the Indo-European root **d^{h}er-* ("to uphold"), which also underlies the Latin term *firmus* ("stable," "firm").[29] The Old Persian *dārayatiy* ("to uphold," "to have") retains the meaning of this original root.

28. Patrick Olivelle, *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Olivelle, "Village vs. Wilderness: Ascetic Ideals and the Hindu World"; Oliver Freiberger et al., *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Oliver Freiberger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

29. De Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages*, 223.

We know that the Pāli term *dhamma* refers to any phenomenon understood in a general sense (§1.5), and indeed the chain of conditioned production refers to the *paṭiccasamuppanne dhamme*, that is, any phenomenological process of arising related to any possible object.[30] The reason why a *dhamma* indicates any generic phenomenon is that it conveys the concept of "support," something stable, firm, secure—at least apparently. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the same Indo-European root also gives us the Greek term θρόνος (throne, seat).

Dharma is an omnipresent concept in Indian culture, beginning with the Vedas—a collection of texts containing hymns and knowledge orally transmitted for centuries and regarded as revealed by visionary sages (*ṛṣi*).

Initially, the Vedas (or the Veda, depending on whether one refers to the text as a whole or as a collection of books) included sections focused on rituals. Ritual practice is central, and a correctly performed ritual guarantees the favor of the deity (*deva*). The Vedic texts centered on ritual practice are the *Brāhmaṇa*s (or *brahmins*). Even before being structured in textual form, Vedic knowledge was known and transmitted orally, continuing to evolve and expand over centuries. What is certain is that one caste in particular claimed to possess this knowledge and thus occupied the pinnacle of Hindu society: the *brāhmaṇa*s, commonly called "priests."

Conversely, ascetic movements were inspired by the style and organization of the emerging brāhmaṇical orthodoxy, while maintaining a key distinction: the rejection of Vedic authority. The discourse on Law (*dharma*) and on what was unnatural (*adharma*), unfavorable, or contrary to the Law characterized all these movements, whether orthodox or heterodox. None could avoid engaging with the concept of *dharma*.

This also includes the idea of an intrinsic nature (*svadharma*) that follows the dictates of a given Law, which identifies that each individual has their own nature, their own place, and their own social role in the world. This is one of the great themes in the discourse on Law.

30. Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*, 95.

Society is built on dualisms. Beginning with the primary dichotomy between the self and the other, between the known of language and the unknown of the non-linguistic, all other cognitive representations descend: the dimension of the worldly in society, opposed to the sacred, which is the realm of the unregulated; and similarly, the dichotomy between purity and impurity—a central distinction in cultural and religious anthropology that explains key mechanisms in social policies, religious rituals, and popular traditions.

In a more organized societal structure, the idea of purity gives rise to the convention of norms: normality is what is socially acceptable and opposes *anomie*, the impure. The abnormal, in this framework, represents a danger to society. In clinical terms, this dualism underpins the distinction between "healthy" (normal) and "sick" (abnormal). Orthodoxy, entrenched in protecting normality, becomes the force that holds the principles of truth-making (*veridiction*), extending habituation mechanisms to shared ontological truths. These include societal laws, submission of bodies to norms, and conformity to the expectations of the established order. Everything else is processed as *anomie* or, more pointedly, as anomaly.

In India, the issue of defining what was abnormal (*adharma*) compared to behaviors conforming to the universal Law (*dharma*) was particularly acute for a certain caste interested in using the determination of "natural" behavior (*svakarman*) as a means of controlling the masses. The great debate between Buddhists and heterodox philosophies revolved almost entirely around the substantiality of nature. By denying the absoluteness of *dharma*, Buddhists refused all social laws and the birth division (*jāti*), which were based on the presumption of the absoluteness of these laws. This was because Buddhism aligned itself with ascetic traditions (*śramaṇa*s), which advocated withdrawing from social groups and rejecting their norms, inevitably being seen as abnormal (*adharma*).

> The recognition of the unity and oneness of humankind is the foundation for the practice of all spiritual life. Those who are "bound by racial prejudices" (*jāti-vāda-vinibbaddhā*) as well as those who are "bound by caste

> prejudices" (*gotta-vāda-vinibbaddhā*), says the Buddha, "have strayed far from the way of salvation" (*ārakā anuttarāya vijjā-caraṇa-sampadāya*).[31]

In Indian anthropological thought, purity operates on at least two dimensions: an intrinsic one, tied to *jāti* (birth), and a modifiable one, negotiable through behavior usually conforming to social expectations. Social identity is marked by hierarchical belonging, which corresponds to an unchangeable degree of purity. This is because the three fundamental characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*, a term that also means "symptom") of Indian social structure are endogamy, custom, and the inheritance of one's social position. These three rules are aspects of a single condition: custom, understood as the etiquette to be maintained in social interactions, even in eating, greeting others, and language usage, pertains to one's social status and thus prohibits marriage outside certain boundaries. Social status is immutable, and a Hindu is expected even today to maintain it, rather than strive to improve it.

Proper behavior (*svakarman*) is understood as something intrinsic to one's self (*sva-*), making any attempt to alter it a deviation. Just as illness causes anomalies in the body, someone who does not act according to their social duty is an ailment for the collective body. It is even preferable to perform one's own duty poorly rather than someone else's duty well, since the law is "proper" to each individual (*svadharma*).

The mixing of castes is thus seen as a form of contamination, which brings us to the theme of the body and health, areas where these norms are extended.

Asceticism often functions as a dialectical tool. As Olivelle reminds us, it has served as a theoretical instrument in numerous disciplines, from anthropology to psychoanalysis, and even biology, which posits a kind of natural predisposition toward the renunciant's behavior.[32] For Buddhist *śramaṇa*s in particular, there is no asceticism without

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31. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings. The Middle Position on Theory and Practice*, 178.

32. Patrick Olivelle, "The Ascetic and the Domestic in Brahmanical Religiosity," in *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. O. Freiberger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27.

domesticity, and no ascetic practice without conflict with domestic life. The simple explanation is that the ascetic opposes normative thought, crafting a way of life that is entirely antithetical, often even self-punitive.

Society establishes norms primarily to control bodies. The "care" of society becomes a metaphor for safeguarding the interests of the dominant classes, from which normative willpower descends. Consequently, beyond prescriptive models for controlling bodies, society inevitably exerts domination over medical discourses, whose codification aligns with the interests of lawmakers. In this sense, we might interpret the contrast between *brāhmaṇical* medicine and the "ascetic" medicine discussed by Zysk.[33] However, the Buddhist concern with bodily care appears partially at odds with the neglect characteristic of more radical asceticism.[34]

The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (book 2a, the *Brahmavidyā* expounded) presents a notion of the body as stratified into multiple spheres (*kośa*), one of the earliest multi-layered anatomical conceptions likely inherited from ascetic medicine. Proceeding from the outermost layer, we have: "food" (*annamaya*, TUp 2a.11), encompassing the grossest physiological aspects most susceptible to contamination; "breath" (*prāṇamaya*, TUp 2a.12), including both physiological and energetic flows; "mind" (*manomaya*, TUp 2a.13), which belongs to a domain of critical importance in Buddhist medical theory; pure gnosis or wisdom (*prajñā/vijñānamaya*, TUp 2a.14), linked to the intellect (*buddhi*) and connecting physiological purity to cognition; and finally, a core essence (*ānandamaya*), perfectly pure yet 'buried' beneath layers of mediation that separate it from the world and are subject to contamination.

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33. Kenneth G. Zysk, "The Evolution of Anatomical Knowledge in Ancient India, with Special Reference to Cross-Cultural Influences," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 4 (1986): 687–705, DOI: 10.2307/603532; Kenneth G. Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publications, 1998); Kenneth G. Zysk, *Religious Medicine* (New York: Routledge, 2017), DOI: 10.4324/9781315128429.

34. Antonio Rigopoulos, "Transcending the Body, Exhibiting the Body: Notes on the Ideology and Practice of Hindu Asceticism," *Quaderni Di Civiltà e Religioni* 5 (2018): 92.

A peculiar mythological concept, aligned with pan-Indian tradition, posits that the body forms from the aggregation of the five great elements. It also claims that yoga is the practice that can liberate the ascetic's body from disease. Buddhism similarly conceives of the body as an aggregate of fundamental elements, though its system recognizes only four: fire, earth, water, and air (MN 28). This view of the body as a crucible where the elements coexist and interact is reiterated in multiple texts (e.g., SN 12.62, AN 5.162, DN 22). Here, the body is explicitly identified as composed of five great elements (*mahābhūta*): earth, fire, water, air, and, in some traditions, "space" as the fifth element. Despite later developments of this idea, Buddhism partially aligns with the traditional view that sees the body as a locus of potential impurities (*aparisuddhakāya*). Yet, it does not condemn bodily fluids and secretions, as *brāhmaṇism* does, but rather considers the five elements themselves as impure. Nonetheless, this condition does not represent a condemnation.

Far from endorsing a rigid, punitive asceticism, Buddhism has always promoted a view of the body more aligned with health: "health and a good digestion are among qualities which enable a person to make speedy progress towards enlightenment."[35] This perspective must be understood in a context where ascetic practices are generally associated with austerity, if not outright neglect of bodily care. What must be remembered is that dualism is rejected in all its extremes. The concept of impurity is not abandoned but instead wielded against the dualistic conception of pure/impure, shifting from a device for controlling the body to a method of escaping normativity. Only in this context can we understand statements like the one in SN 4.1, where the practice of mortification, quintessentially ascetic, is denigrated as "impure," even as the dualistic idea of pure/impure promoted by ascetics is criticized: "You [addressing the Buddha] have turned away from the practice of mortification by which humans purify themselves; you are impure but think of yourself as pure, you have lost the path

35. Peter Harvey, "The Mind-body Relationship in Pāli Buddhism: A Philosophical Investigation," *Asian Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (1993): 29, DOI: 10.1080/09552369308575369.

of purity" (*tapokammā apakkamma, ye na sujjhanti māṇavā; asuddho maññasi suddho, suddhimaggā aparaddho*).

With these words, Māra, lord of death, tries to mislead the Buddha, who remains steadfast: "I have understood its futility; all mortification in pursuit of immortality is useless, like oars and a rudder on dry land" (*anatthasaṃhitaṃ ñatvā, yaṃ kiñci amaraṃ tapaṃ; sabbaṃ natthāvahaṃ hoti, phiyārittaṃva dhammani*).

Yet, the idea of purity is neither discarded nor abandoned; it is reclaimed and turned against the interlocutor: "Morality, concentration, and wisdom: developing this path to awakening, I have attained ultimate purity, and you are the defeated terminator" (*sīlaṃ samādhi paññañca, maggaṃ bodhāya bhāvayaṃ; pattosmi paramaṃ suddhiṃ, nihato tvamasi antakā*).[36]

While excessive ascetic rigor is opposed, one principle remains firm: *"it is possible to go beyond this entire realm of perceptions"* (*atthi imassa saññāgatassa uttariṃ nissaraṇaṃ*, MN 7), thus preserving the idea that illness arises from erroneous perceptions and that there is a connection between error and impurity.

This does not mean that Buddhism completely dispenses with certain views central to asceticism. As I have previously said, one of the most commonly used terms for the body is *sarīra*, whose etymology clearly links it to an ancient term for corpse (the root √*śṛ*- points to

36. The term *suddha* for purity, which we encountered earlier, appears several times in the Pāli canon. In Snp 4.4, we find an entire discourse in verse dedicated to purity. Here, purity is linked to the condition of being *aroga*, "free from illness": "I see a pure being free from illness; it is [right] vision that is the purification of a man*"* (*passāmi suddhaṃ paramaṃ arogaṃ, diṭṭhena saṃsuddhi narassa hoti*). And again, "Thus practicing the knowledge of the absolute, they understand the one who contemplates purity" (*evābhijānaṃ paramanti ñatvā, suddhānupassīti pacceti ñāṇaṃ*). This reiterates the central theme of early Buddhism: the direct connection between gnosis and purity. The equivalence is clear: through [right] vision, a man achieves purity, just as through gnosis, suffering is abandoned (*diṭṭhena ce suddhi narassa hoti, ñāṇena vā so pajahāti dukkhaṃ*). The text critiques the Brahmanical view, stuck in the dualism of "good and evil" (*puññe ca pāpe ca anūpalitto*) and, by extension, in a similar notion of purity and impurity. The issue of purity and its relationship to health is omnipresent in the *Suttanipāta*. Without room for a full analysis, I'll note the most interesting occurrences: Snp 3.6, 3.10, 4.4, 4.8, 4.9, 4.13, 5.8.

something that "breaks" or deteriorates, see also §3.3). This should not surprise us. The care of the body is fundamental for Buddhists, but it does not negate the fact that the body is essentially seen as a prison, preventing the true nature of human beings from freely expressing itself. The body is a prison insofar as it imposes limitations on human faculties. It is "heavy," burdened by its limits—old age, illness, subjection to physical laws.

When Buddhists want to refer to the body in a phenomenological sense, they instead use the term *kāya*, which is closer to the cognitive-perceptive, and thus sensory, dimension than to that of a container or vehicle for subjectivity.

The body can also be defined as the epicenter where two archetypal forces act: name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*). The former refers to the identity aspects involving acts of designation by which consciousness determines the elements of the world. Form has a dual function: it acts as the ideal meaning designated by the nominal signifier, of which it is an indispensable counterpart, but it is also the raw, moldable materiality, defined as derived (*upādāya*) from the four great elements: water, fire, earth, air. Each element is characterized by a specific property: cohesion, heat, solidity, mobility. These basic notions are found in later Abhidhamma theories of reality as well as in Buddhist medicine and alchemy.[37]

> *puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu imameva kāyaṃ yathāṭhitaṃ yathāpaṇihitaṃ dhātuso paccavekkhati: 'atthi imasmiṃ kāye pathavīdhātu āpodhātu tejodhātu vāyodhātū'ti.*
>
> Furthermore, let us consider a mendicant examining their own body, whatever its placement or posture is, according to the constitutive elements: "in this body there is the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element."
> (DN 22)

37. Divino, "Humours and Their Legacy in Early Buddhist Medicine."

There are two possible explanations for the word *kāya*. I personally find fascinating the reconstruction of the proto-Indo-Iranian root as **kaHi-*, thus from a proto-Indo-European **k*^{w}*eh*$_{1}$*(i)-* "to perceive, respect."[38] With this interpretation, the Indian word *kaya* would be comparable with **kaHy-a*, see proto-Iranian **-kāya-* "perception, perceiving" > Avestan *-kaiia-*. According to another interpretation, the reconstructed root would be **k*^{w}*ei̯-* "to collect, gather." Thus, the body is seen as something "put together," a collection of organs and other constituents, see Greek ποιέω (< ποιϝέω) from the same Indo-European root.[39] This would make the word *kāya* comparable also with other Sanskrit terms, such as *cinoti*, "to arrange, pile up." This second interpretation is closer to the idea of the body expressed in DN 22.

Buddhism promotes a much more refined idea of the body than the extremism of other ascetic practices. The canon recounts how the Buddha practiced such methods, exercising rigid control over his body through breath retention (*appānaka*) or fasting (*sabbaso āhārupaccheda*), practices that led only to extreme suffering, with no real benefit. It was the fundamental idea of a medical asceticism—intended as a cure for all suffering—that led the Buddha, during his austere abstinence, to realize that "there is no worse asceticism than this."[40]

In observing Buddhist practices, breath control is still present, as are strict prescriptions aimed at enhancing mental and physical faculties. However, these are not punitive practices but rather therapeutic forms of liberation. To so-called practices of "mortification," the Buddha opposed a middle path, "which consists of contemplating body, thoughts, feelings, and *dhamma*s."[41]

Meditation should lead to a state of imperturbability (*upekhaka*) in relation to the phenomenal world, to the point of clearly discerning each factor without being influenced by them. Imperturbability involves the

38. Martin Joachim Kümmel, "Voiceless High Vowels and Syncope in Older Indo-European," *Italian Journal of Linguistics* 32, no. 1 (2020): 183, DOI: 10.26346/1120-2726-153.

39. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 1216.

40. Freiberger et al., *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, 236.

41. Ibid., 239.

ability to see (*īkṣ* in Sanskrit) from above (*upa*), acquiring "an impartial tolerance in regard to all mental states,"[42] which refers not so much to total indifference, but rather to an indifference to worldliness (as understood in the *lokasutta*). Thus, the imperturbable is also the otherworldly, the transcendent, "a transcendence of the thing seen."[43] Visions are biases we passively endure, as we remain unaware of their workings, and impulses similarly fall into these forms of retroactive influence because, like the social factors of education, they are uncontrollable. This is where the more 'psychological' (in Western eyes) aspect of meditation comes into play, namely the therapy of mindfulness.

This brings us to the *Kāyānupassanāpaṭikūlamanasikārapabba*, where the body becomes the epicenter of a series of impurities that are listed: hair, nostrils, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, and then a series of organs including the kidneys, heart, spleen, intestines, and various others—all considered impure. Beyond this, in line with other Indian traditions, all bodily secretions and fluids are considered impure: from feces to blood, sweat, fat, tears, saliva, urine, and so on. The generalized conception of impurity in Buddhism cannot be coincidental in relation to the hierarchical and rigidly classificatory ideas of the *brāhmaṇa*s. Buddhism seems to attack the body as a receptacle of impurities, but not to propose a path of purification that relies solely on ritual ablutions. Certainly, since the medical component is central to their thought, it must be noted that the hygienic conception is not entirely absent. However, the idea of purity in Buddhism extends to a more holistic medical notion. Impurity and ignorance are de facto equated, and thus an incorrect vision necessarily implies a condition of impurity.

Among the elements on which the meditator must focus their attention is *byāpada*, "malevolence," or more precisely, the "sick" will (*byādhi*). The use of a medical term to indicate an undesirable will confirms the idea that cognitive deception is understood as a genuine illness. It is no coincidence that the progressive stages of *sati* meditation

42. Donald K. Swearer, "Control and Freedom: The Structure of Buddhist Meditation in the Pāli Suttas," *Philosophy East and West* 23, no. 4 (1973): 452, DOI: 10.2307/1397716.
43. Ibid., 454.

focus on purifying the six sensory organs (*chasu ajjhātika-bāhiresu āyatanesu*), considering that Buddhism posits a perfect equivalence between perception and the corresponding sensory organ: sight is the eye, hearing is the ear, taste is the tongue, smell is the nose, and touch is in the skin. The sixth organ, "thought" (*manas*), is still conceived as corporeal. The renewed awareness achieved (*pajānāti*) through the purification of these organs is equally seen as a form of embodiment of right notions: "internalized the meaning of these same truths."[44]

The *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditation seems to emphasize the most repugnant aspects of the body, aligning perfectly with those meditations on impurity that encourage the meditator to imagine the body disassembled into its organs, dissected with a surprisingly anatomical eye, while also evoking the idea of limbs and viscera as disgusting components, of the body as something destined for decay, to become nothing more than a heap of bones. The purpose of these meditations is to dismantle the powerful perception of the notion of impurity itself, directing it toward the meditator's own body. Recognizing their body as a bearer of ultimate impurities, the meditator will drastically reassess the value of such notions as well as their physical vehicle.

Moreover, another interesting aspect of this meditation, which focuses on the meticulous dissection of the body into its anatomical constituents, is its effect on the meditator's perspective. The meditator alternates between observing the body as *Leib* (the lived body) and as *Körper* (the physical body), analytically viewing it as a 'dead' organism composed of 'parts,' which they proceed to dissect with the cold detachment of an anatomy examiner, listing the 'pieces' of the mechanism.

> *puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu seyyathāpi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya chaḍḍitaṃ ekāhamataṃ vā dvīhamataṃ vā tīhamataṃ vā uddhumātakaṃ vinīlakaṃ vipubbakajātaṃ.* […]
> *puna caparaṃ, bhikkhave, bhikkhu seyyathāpi passeyya sarīraṃ sivathikāya chaḍḍitaṃ kākehi vā khajjamānaṃ kulalehi vā khajjamānaṃ gijjhehi vā khajjamānaṃ kaṅkehi vā khajjamānaṃ sunakhehi vā*

44. Shulman, "Mindful Wisdom: The Sati-Paṭṭhāna-Sutta on Mindfulness, Memory, and Liberation," 408.

khajjamānaṃ byagghehi vā khajjamānaṃ dīpīhi vā khajjamānaṃ siṅgālehi vā khajjamānaṃ vividhehi vā pāṇakajātehi khajjamānaṃ. so imameva kāyaṃ upasaṃharati: 'ayampi kho kāyo evaṃdhammo evaṃbhāvī evaṃanatīto'ti.

Furthermore, let us suppose that a mendicant were to see a corpse discarded in a charnel ground. That corpse had been dead for one, or two, or three days, swollen, livid, and festering. […]
Let us suppose that the mendicant saw a corpse abandoned in a cemetery, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, herons, dogs, tigers, leopards, jackals, and many other small creatures. He would then compare it to his own body, observing: "This body is also of the same nature, of the same kind, and no different."
(DN 22)

The body, thus disassembled, is now reduced to a skeleton without flesh, smeared with blood and held together by tendons (*aṭṭhikasaṅkhalikaṃ nimaṃsalohitamakkhitaṃ nhārusambandhaṃ*), then to bones without tendons, scattered in all directions (*aṭṭhikāni apagatasambandhāni disā vidisā vikkhittāni*). Here is a hand skeleton, a foot skeleton, an ankle skeleton, a shin-bone skeleton, a thigh-bone skeleton, a hip skeleton, a rib skeleton, an arm skeleton, a neck skeleton, a jaw skeleton, a tooth skeleton, and a skull skeleton (*aññena hatthaṭṭhikaṃ aññena pādaṭṭhikaṃ aññena gopphakaṭṭhikaṃ aññena jaṅghaṭṭhikaṃ aññena ūruṭṭhikaṃ aññena kaṭiṭṭhikaṃ aññena phāsukaṭṭhikaṃ aññena piṭṭhiṭṭhikaṃ aññena khandhaṭṭhikaṃ aññena gīvaṭṭhikaṃ aññena hanukaṭṭhikaṃ aññena dantaṭṭhikaṃ aññena sīsakaṭāhaṃ*). The disassembly proceeds further as decomposition: the bones rot, they are reduced to dust (*aṭṭhikāni pūtīni cuṇṇakajātāni*). And all this is also the nature of the body—the same as the meditator's own body, who observes the body within the body, now internally (as *Leib*), now externally (as *Körper*), now internally and externally together, as a complex unity, as a nexus of multiple aggregated phenomena, and as a phenomenon itself in interaction.

Compared to sections dedicated to meditation on the body, those on sensation, cognition, and phenomena are much shorter and reiterate the

same fundamental pattern of mindful attention. Aware that all Buddhist systems are systems of concentric complexity, where phenomenon C depends on causes and conditions that can be summarized in one or more Bs (like B_1, B_2, B_3, in relation to each other), and where B itself may result from the aggregation of A, it becomes clear that this model, much like that of the five aggregates, speaks of overall stratification.

The five aggregates model, moreover, is explicitly layered: around the nucleus of perceptual form (*rūpa*), a series of sensations (*vedanā*) of various kinds (perceived through the senses) aggregate. Around this nucleus surrounded by sensory elements lies another layer encompassing them all, brought by semantic perception (*saññā*). To this is added multiple constructs (*saṅkhāra*), particularly those eidetic constructs concerning possibilities inherent in a concept: all the ideas attached to that 'thing' that is now perceivable. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) finally encompasses everything, but the structure is also cyclical since it is always consciousness that divides forms, associating them with certain concepts derived from the continuous formal whole. For instance, if we have form X corresponding to sensory experiences *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *e*, *f* (simplifying the six senses, though each sensory gateway can experience multiple complex data), it is not because form X exists in itself but because consciousness has rendered the formality of X 'thinkable,' segmenting forms X, Y, Z, and so forth from the indescribable formal continuum. Semantic perception must necessarily come as a unifying cover that binds all (plural) sensory experiences around the (singular) formal datum. Meanwhile, eidetic constructs and mental associations are again plural but attach to the ultimate layer, perception. Consciousness integrates it all.

Could a similar structure be observed in DN 22? Partially yes, as the somatic sphere (*kāya*) plays a precise process-triggering role. The body experiences sensations (*vedanā*), which are generally directed by cognition (*citta*). In many ways, this seems an alternative model to the five aggregates. However, it is also possible that cyclicity is important but not central. Cognition can be seen as that which 'conceives' phenomena (*dhammā*), but phenomena are also the fundamental givens connecting back to *kāya*, experienced fundamentally by *kāya* first as sensation, and so on cyclically.

Nevertheless, the aspect of duality is what should interest us primarily: there are two somaticities, two sensitivities, two cognitions, two phenomenological aspects. On one side is the internal; on the other, the external. These are misleading aspects, mind you, but the problem exists and must be addressed. This is similar to what was done in SN 22.94, where it is said: "There is a phenomenon of the world within the world that the Realized One understands and comprehends" (*atthi... loke lokadhammo, taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti*). This sutta is an important comparative example with DN 22: it discusses another doubling, but this time one of the terms is specifically qualified—not just a simple "world in the world" (*loke/loka*), but a *loke loka-dhammo*, a "phenomenon of the world in the world."

We have explained the reason for this peculiarity in previous chapters, but recalling it now helps us better understand mindfulness, the true mindfulness mentioned in the suttas. In the case of SN 22.94, the characteristic "phenomenon of the world in the world" was the five aggregates. By contrast, the situation in DN 22 is similar but more complex than being in conflict with the world as in SN 22.94. Mindfulness meditation addresses sensation in sensation, instructing the meditator to focus as much as possible on the sensations they receive, bringing them to their present awareness. Whether the sensation is pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, and so on, it must be recognized in its fundamental experiential value: "this sensation is pleasant to me, unpleasant, neutral," and so on. The resemblance to the effort of phenomenological suspension is truly remarkable, and indeed, I believe it is not accidental.

Cognition, similarly, must be observed in the same way, which in its case means referring to more complex constructs, such as the reasons for experiencing emotions like hatred or illusion, as well as experiences like the contraction (*saṅkhittaṃ*) or expansion (*mahaggataṃ*) of cognition, and most importantly, the state of *samādhi*, which is mentioned as something to be recognized and distinguished from its absence. The mention of liberated cognition (*vimuttaṃ*) is also highly revealing about their vision of achieving a form of liberation from these states that does not imply the dissolution of *citta*, a term difficult to translate as mere cognition but fraught with complexity.

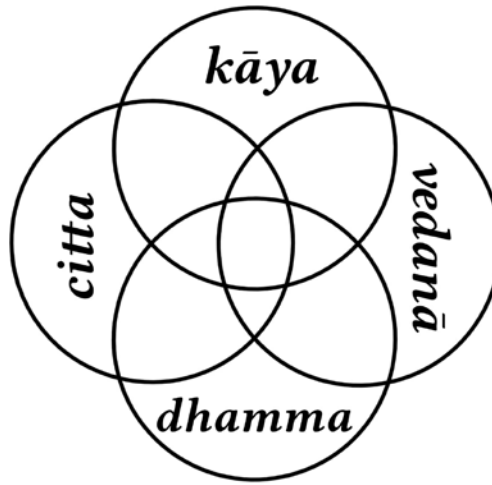

Fig. 16 — Model of propagation of the *sati* meditation. Each sphere constitutes a different focus of a meditative phase.

This issue brings us to topics such as the difference between identity as a psychosocial construct and the subject as the experiencer of phenomena, independent of this constructed idea of identity. This theme will be addressed later, as it is tightly connected to the body.

The *Dhammānupassanā* section expands again compared to the previous two, and its most interesting aspect is undoubtedly its connection with the five aggregates. Specifically, from a phenomenological perspective, meditation is also a form of analysis that not only recognizes the aggregate but also its dependencies in the phenomenological chain: "Such is form, such is the arising of form, such is the disappearance of form" (*iti rūpaṃ, iti rūpassa samudayo, iti rūpassa atthaṅgamo*). In this same section, there is meditation on the six sensory spheres, awakening factors, and the four truths. On this specific theme, much has been written by Shulman, whose work on the topic is highly comprehensive. To briefly touch on key aspects of his work without diverging from the topic, I highlight that this

fundamental teaching of Buddhist doctrine is also primarily experiential and experienced through the body.[45]

Regarding the Four Noble Truths, it is said that the Buddha *realized* (*abbhaññāsiṃ*) them, not merely that he *knew* (*pajānati*) them—a verb common in the Buddhist context. According to Shulman, this terminological choice stems from the specific experiential aspect that leads to liberation as a concrete fact.[46] The centrality of experiential dynamics should not be confused with disinterest in theoretical considerations. However, it would be more accurate to recognize that dividing theory and practice is a distinctly European way of thinking, and seeing Buddhist meditation as a practical compartment and philosophical considerations as theoretical misleads us about the nature of their reasoning. Moreover, the centrality of contemplative practice in the earliest texts is significantly less than one might expect—at least if we understand meditation as a codified, well-specified exercise. The oscillation between the analytical and the experiential is also witnessed in the use of certain terms.

> We should also note the difference between the occurrence of knowledge (*ñāṇana*) in the fourth *jhāna* and that of wisdom (*paññā*) in cessation. It seems reasonable that knowledge is more analytical and lends itself more easily to conceptualization while wisdom may be more intuitive.[47]

Instead, it appears that an analytical discipline directed at understanding the nature of phenomena animates both 'philosophical' and 'practical-contemplative' considerations, which are not so distinct from each other. The understanding of the nature of certain mental states by the Buddha is a concrete and experiential realization, which is indeed lived.[48]

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45. Shulman, "Embodied Transcendence: The Buddha's Body in the Pāli Nikāyas."
46. Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*, 27.
47. Ibid., 36.
48. Ibid., 28.

3.2 The Ascetic's Body and the Subversion of the Habituation

In this section, we will focus on the conception of the body in the Buddhist ascetic view, which will provide us with some basic notions necessary to proceed later to a deeper exploration of how the theme of the body is treated in relation to its being the 'experiencer' of the world and the 'witness' of phenomena. This perspective is essential in this discourse and allows us to reconnect with everything discussed so far.

Understanding what the ascetic conception of the body was—specifically that of Buddhist asceticism—is also fundamental for better framing their 'phenomenology' of the body. Although it is undoubtedly a philosophical conception, it is deeply rooted in the premises that led to a reflection strongly contextualized in a practice—not an end in itself, but aimed at overcoming *habituations*, a term we have already used and will now define more precisely.

Habituation is any cognitive-perceptive process of an inhibitory nature that progressively suppresses the body's response to the recurrence of a more or less frequent stimuli. The stimulus, in this case, can also refer to the way a certain perceptive marker is processed. Indeed, the stimulus should not be understood exclusively in a sensory sense. Certainly, if I am frequently exposed to bright lights, I will tend to get used to them, and when I enter darker spaces, I will have difficulty navigating compared to someone more accustomed to them. Similarly, someone who eats spicy food regularly develops a greater tolerance than someone who does not. However, the stimulus can also be a complex experience that becomes incorporated. For example, as illustrated in the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, a carpenter learns a series of codified actions requiring the utmost attention and mindfulness to execute. Yet, as the carpenter progresses in his work, certain actions become increasingly internalized by his body, enabling him to perform them in a more 'automatic' and unconscious manner while still maintaining the ability to execute them carefully.

This does not mean that a surgeon is inattentive when operating or that a driver—hopefully—is inattentive when driving, but since the action is habitual and frequent, they will begin to perform it with

increasingly less tension as they do so. Likewise, when we breathe, we are not constantly thinking "*I am breathing*," nor are we always present to the act of walking while walking.

Beyond this, a series of other *inhibitions* act upon our mundane experience, particularly those of a perceptive order. The body assimilates certain notions and conforms to them through processes of progressive habituation. For example, when we walk in a park, we are not surprised to see trees, flowers, or dogs playing. We easily recognize "that is a dog" or "that is a flower," because our perceptual system has habituated us to expect to see certain names-things catalogable by consciousness, recognizable in their nominal identities. Even when we encounter a plant we have never seen before, we are not surprised; it will certainly be "something," will undoubtedly have a "name," and will assuredly be traceable to an identity.

None of this surprises us, but this habituation and these inhibitions are seen by Buddhists as forms of addiction, and like any addiction, they prevent us from recognizing the underlying processes we take for granted. By failing to recognize these processes, we are prone to a particular weakness: the risk of being *acted upon* by those processes, being driven by something external, subjected to them—or worse, to those who understand how these processes work and have built an authority that grants them normative power. This power allows them to determine what is collectively perceived as true or valid. In other words, those who hold the normative device of veridiction also have a certain capacity to formulate truths, to shape the names-things that act as semantic markers upon bodies. This is a factual, real power capable of actively shaping corporeality.[49]

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49. Squarcini, *Forme della Norma: Contro l'eccentricità del Discorso Normativo Sudasiatico*; Squarcini, "Le Colombe e gli Avvoltoi: sull'economia Politica delle 'Ecologie Religiose' del Passato, in India e non solo"; Squarcini, *Tradition, Veda and Law: Studies on South Asian Classical Intellectual Traditions*; Squarcini, "Pāṣaṇḍin, Vaitaṇḍika, Vedanindaka and Nāstika. On Criticism, Dissenters and Polemics and the South Asian Struggle for the Semiotic Primacy of Veridiction"; Squarcini, "Tradens, Traditum, Recipiens: Introductory Remarks on the Semiotics, Pragmatics and Politics of Tradition."

Before a sovereign, even my body conforms. The "king," with his very body, acts as an effector, an emitter of perceptive markers that act upon me. These markers are effective and stimulate a response to conform if they hold *value* for me. Just as the flower has a particular value for the bee because the perceptive markers of its pollen *communicate* utility to the bee (and conversely, the bee is useful to the flower), so too does the subject unconsciously conform their body to the perceptive markers of royalty in response to what they perceive as their *moral duty*. The body bends, bows, subjugates itself to the body of the sovereign, making itself small, humble, reverent, while the body of the king is imposing, emanating its regal markers—commanding, authoritarian.

It becomes clear that this system, when recognized in all its problematics, is naturally opposed by those who situate themselves outside the normative system, beyond the city, and outside the boundaries of the mundane sphere. For them, the search for transcendence beyond sensory limits—breaking those perceptive-sensory boundaries—coincides with breaking the boundaries of sociocultural order, hierarchies, norms, laws, and the subjugation of bodies to the order.

This is the theme where all the issues addressed so far converge: language, the experience of perception, the world and the construction of a society based on recognized and shared *values* as an organization of *things and names* (for de Martino, names-things for us), and finally, the body as the vehicle through which the subject orients themselves in this world and assimilates these norms.

A discourse that offers a valid overview in this sense is MN 40. In this discourse, we observe one thing in particular among all the descriptions of Buddhist asceticism: their distance from the most radical forms of said practice. As already mentioned, there is not only the issue of undertaking the ascetic life as an alternative to the normative order and as a protest against it, but also the risk that asceticism could, in turn, establish itself as a normative order. The step is indeed a short one, as can be seen, for example, in the adoption of a radical opposition to any conventional norm.

If, for instance, the society of India at the Buddha's time promoted the formation of a specific family unit, the ascetics chose celibacy.

Regarding the necessity of maintaining an economy and ownership of goods, the ascetics opted for a life as beggars, sometimes going naked, indifferent to their hair and nails. Concerning authority over political and religious figures, the ascetics chose not to recognize these institutions, proposing their search for truth and rejecting established authorities. When all this spills over into a paroxysmal and uncritical opposition to norms, there is a risk of simply codifying an alternative system, where an anti-norm itself becomes a norm, a religious precept to follow slavishly, thereby becoming no different from other normative prescriptions that one sought to flee from.

The Buddha realizes this paradox, and many discourses in the Pāli Canon reveal a very lucid awareness of this issue. Early Buddhism, in fact, holds a very critical stance not only toward the normative order but also toward other ascetic movements, which it defines as mortifiers. The mortification practices to which it objects are essentially those deemed useless in overcoming suffering. Some examples from MN 40 play precisely on non-identification and the rejection of certain labels (*samaññā*). This exercise of dis-identification is presented even as a practice:

samaṇā samaṇāti vo, bhikkhave, jano sañjānāti.

tumhe ca pana 'ke tumhe'ti puṭṭhā samānā 'samaṇāmhā'ti paṭijānātha.

tesaṃ vo, bhikkhave, evaṃsamaññānaṃ sataṃ evaṃpaṭiññānaṃ sataṃ:

'yā samaṇasāmīcippaṭipadā taṃ paṭipajjissāma;

evaṃ no ayaṃ amhākaṃ samaññā ca saccā bhavissati paṭiññā ca bhūtā.

O mendicants, people identify you as "ascetics." And when you are asked what you are, you say you are ascetics. Given this designation and such recognition, you should train yourselves in this way:

"We will practice in a manner proper to ascetics, such that this designation and recognition is correct."

That said, there are, however, a series of behaviors characteristic of other ascetics that the Buddha does not consider suitable for their asceticism:

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, saṅghāṭikassa saṅghāṭidhāraṇamattena sāmaññaṃ vadāmi.

I say, O mendicants, that the designation of those who "wear a patchwork robe" is not proper to you merely because you wear an outer robe.

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, acelakassa acelakamattena sāmaññaṃ vadāmi.

I say, O mendicants, that the designation of "naked ascetic" is not proper to you merely because you go naked.

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, rajojallikassa rajojallikamattena sāmaññaṃ vadāmi.

I say, O mendicants, that the designation of "dust and dirt wearer" is not proper to you merely because you are covered in dust and dirt.

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, udakorohakassa udakorohaṇamattena sāmaññaṃ vadāmi.

I say, O mendicants, that the designation of "water immerser" is not proper to you merely because you immerse yourselves in water.

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, rukkhamūlikassa rukkhamūlikamattena sāmaññaṃ vadāmi.

I say, O mendicants, that the designation of those who "dwell at the roots of trees" is not proper to you merely because you dwell at the roots of a tree.

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, abbhokāsikassa abbhokāsikamattena sāmaññaṃ vadāmi.

I say, O mendicants, that the designation of those who "dwell in the open air" is not proper to you merely because you stay in the open air.

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, ubbhaṭṭhakassa ubbhaṭṭhakamattena sāmaññaṃ vadāmi.

I say, O mendicants, that the designation of "standers" is not proper to you merely because you stand continuously.

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, pariyāyabhattikassa pariyāyabhattikamattena sāmaññaṃ vadāmi.

I say, O mendicants, that the designation of those who "eat at intervals" is not proper to you merely because you eat food at certain intervals.

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, mantajjhāyakassa mantajjhāyakamattena sāmaññaṃ vadāmi.

I say, O mendicants, that the designation of "reciters" is not proper to you merely because you engage in the recitation of hymns.

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, jaṭilakassa jaṭādhāraṇamattena sāmaññaṃ vadāmi.

I say, O mendicants, that the designation of "matted-hair ascetic" is not proper to you merely because you have matted hair.

Naturally, all these behaviors can be found codified in one or more ascetic traditions, and there are indeed numerous fascinating works on the topic of asceticism in India that delve deeply into these themes.[50] Immersing oneself in water, typically freezing cold at the coldest time of the season, is one of many practices used to 'subvert' or disrupt the perceptual system. It involves engaging in a rigorous discipline designed to overturn habits, just as growing one's hair instead of cutting it does, or standing for hours without sitting to rest, instead developing meditative focus while remaining upright. These are just a few examples of the many forms of practice.

The Pāli Canon is abundant with descriptions of the practices of ascetic mortifiers (*tapopakkamakathā*), and it must be noted that Buddhists also strive to distance themselves from them terminologically. While a certain type of asceticism, which they generally oppose, is associated with *tapas*, "heat" (perhaps as a result of ascetic "effort"), they define themselves as *samaṇā*, a term that also relates to effort and discipline but has been popularized by Buddhists in a particular sense.[51] The ascetic mortifiers are described as wandering naked (*acelako*), disregarding conventions (*muttācāro*), licking their hands (*hatthāpalekhano*), not responding when called (*naehibhaddantiko, natiṭṭhabhaddantiko*), refusing to allow food to be brought to them or prepared for them, and not accepting invitations to eat together (*nābhihaṭaṃ, na uddissakataṃ, na nimantanaṃ sādiyati*).

These are just a few of the "strange" behaviors of ascetics mentioned in the Canon, such as in DN 8. Other absurd behaviors include deliberately unconventional eating habits, involving "unnatural foods"

50. Olson, *Indian Asceticism: Power, Violence, and Play*; Bronkhorst, "Historical Context of Early Asceticism"; Olivelle, "Village vs. Wilderness: Ascetic Ideals and the Hindu World"; Bronkhorst, *The two Sources of Indian Asceticism*; Freiberger et al., *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*; Divino, "Reaching the End of the World: An Anthropological Reading of Early Buddhist Medicine and Ascetic Practices"; Johannes Bronkhorst, "Asceticism, Religion, and Biological Evolution'," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 13, no. 1–4 (2001): 374–418, DOI: 10.1163/157006801X00309; Wiltshire, *Ascetic Figures before and in Early Buddhism*.

51. Divino, "Humours and Their Legacy in Early Buddhist Medicine," 2.

(*vekaṭikopi hoti vikaṭabhojanānuyogamanuyutto*), wearing only dust and mud (*rajojalladharo*), living outdoors and rejecting shelter (*abbhokāsikopi hoti*), or making a bed on a mat of thorns (*kaṇṭakāpassayikopi hoti kaṇṭakāpassaye seyyaṃ kappeti*), or sleeping directly on a hard board or the ground (*phalakaseyyampi kappeti, thaṇḍilaseyyampi kappeti*). Some remain perpetually standing, refusing to sit, or meditate in uncomfortable positions such as squatting (*ubbhaṭṭhakopi hoti āsanapaṭikkhitto, ukkuṭikopi hoti ukkuṭikappadhānamanuyutto*).

Most of these practices are rejected by Buddhism as mortifying and, above all, useless (*niratthakathā*). This argument is reiterated many times in different forms, such as in MN 36, MN 76, and AN 3.156–162, which also discuss other unconventional eating habits and strange behaviors, like pulling out one's hair and beard (*kesamassulocakopi hoti kesamassulocanānuyogamanuyutto*). In AN 4.198, it is noted that there are not only those who mortify themselves but also those who advocate for such practices, promoting self-mortification and the mortification of others (*ekacco puggalo attantapo ca hoti attaparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto, parantapo ca paraparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto*).

In SN 4.1, it is stated that Buddhists should distance themselves from such mortifying practices (*tapokammā apakkamma*) as they are deemed useless and futile (*anatthasaṃhitaṃ ñatvā, yaṃ kiñci amaraṃ tapaṃ; sabbaṃ natthāvahaṃ hoti*). This is the case where the paradox of seeking immortality through mortifying practices is likened to rowing with oars and a rudder on dry land is evoked (*phiyārittaṃva dhammani*). Other important references can be found in AN 4.196, AN 3.74 (which seems to make an explicit reference to the Jainists), and MN 101, where they are identified as those who believe they can rid themselves of karmic burdens through mortification.

This is not, however, a wholesale rejection of ascetic practice or these practices in general. As specified in suttas such as AN 8.12 and AN 10.94, and partly in Snp 4.13, the true focus is rather on distancing oneself from categories of pure and impure (*suddhiṃ asuddhinti apatthayāno*), which could be understood as fundamental organizing notions, the basis of dualism.

3.3 Body's World

To fully comprehend the perspective of Buddhist ascetic philosophy, it is essential to partially detach ourselves from the conceptions that shape our understanding of the body and the soul. I therefore intend to provide a brief introduction to clarify any potential terminological ambiguities.

From Plato onwards, Western thought assumes a peculiar perspective: the body is indeed a limiting factor, but this limit cannot be transcended by human means. Instead, it is necessary to postulate an ideal realm beyond the Mundane and the accessible, upon which all that is mundane is based but is not reachable except by grasping its 'signs' in the world.

γιγνώσκουσι γάρ, ἦ δ' ὅς, οἱ φιλομαθεῖς ὅτι παραλαβοῦσα αὐτῶν τὴν ψυχὴν ἡ φιλοσοφία ἀτεχνῶς διαδεδεμένην ἐν τῷ σώματι καὶ προσκεκολλημένην, ἀναγκαζομένην δὲ ὥσπερ διὰ εἱργμοῦ διὰ τούτου σκοπεῖσθαι τὰ ὄντα ἀλλὰ μὴ αὐτὴν δι' αὑτῆς, καὶ ἐν πάσῃ ἀμαθίᾳ κυλινδουμένην, καὶ τοῦ εἱργμοῦ τὴν δεινότητα κατιδοῦσα ὅτι δι' ἐπιθυμίας ἐστίν, ὡς ἂν μάλιστα αὐτὸς ὁ δεδεμένος συλλήπτωρ εἴη τοῦ δεδέσθαι

"The lovers of knowledge," said he, "perceive that when philosophy first takes possession of their soul it is entirely fastened and welded to the body and is compelled to regard realities through the body as through prison bars, not with its own unhindered vision, and is wallowing in utter ignorance. And philosophy sees that the most dreadful thing about the imprisonment is the fact that it is caused by the lusts of the flesh, so that the prisoner is the chief assistant in his own imprisonment.

(Plat. *Phaedo* 82d-83a)

In both archaic Greek and Indian thought, we find attestations of this position. The body is perceived as a sort of 'prison,' a limiting factor. The true individual, whatever their ultimate nature—which in itself already poses a problem, but we shall set it aside for now—is not reducible to the body. The latter is a vehicle, an interface with the world, or even the world itself according to other interpretations. What is certain, however, is that this interface or "worldliness" are forms of reduction. Primarily,

they are reductions of truth, which, having to encompass all possible, and perhaps infinite, manifestations of reality, can only be full, saturated, totalizing. In the world, however, we see that certain things appear while others disappear, phenomena follow one another, and perception is modular, partial. We cannot see behind us, we cannot see through a wall, yet even what is behind us or covered by a wall 'happens,' and in its happening, it is prejudiced against our witnessing, because it is our body that, due to these limitations, cannot perceive it.

Saying that only what is shown to the witness of our presence 'happens' or 'is real' does not resolve the issue, because at that point, a single individual's experience is enough to recognize their own limitations insofar as what they testify is sometimes mysterious, sometimes hazy, not fully mastered. We cannot rewind the tape of time to witness it again, but must rely on memory, which is at best a reconstruction of what has been attested, and in this, recalling an event to memory does nothing but make us witness another event, similar but not identical to the one lived, thus entirely another thing, another aspect, another sector, another section of the possible. We can scrutinize these corners, these sections and these sectors without being able to see them all together in a single instant, as a *whole*. And if the body is a limit, can it be transcended, or are we condemned to this prison? And on the idea of the body as a prison, various thinkers will voice their opinions.

The Pāli canon bears witness to these two positions from the beginning, and it presents them with two very precise formulas. On the one hand, the lineage of those who say "such is the soul, such is the body" (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*), that is, body and soul are two names for the same thing (as we know, *jīva* would indicate "life" or "movement," and derives from an Indo-European root from which the Greek βίος, ζωός, and the Latin *vīvus* also descend).[52] On the other hand, those who say "the body is one thing, the soul another" (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*), meaning these two names indicate aspects of reality that are different from each other.

Another interesting etymological note is the choice to indicate the body as *sarīra*. This is interesting because the first term likely derives from the

52. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 216–17.

root *$\acute{k}erh_2$- meaning "to break" (see the Greek κεραΐζω and its opposite ακέραιος), and indeed *sarīra* retains predominantly negative connotations of the body, such as that of the "corpse"[53] or the body-prison.

Plato, revisiting an even older dichotomy between body (σῶμα) and sign/tomb (σῆμα), whose central element, the ψυχή, was a third factor that he would later use to construct his dualism.

πολλαχῇ μοι δοκεῖ τοῦτό γε: ἂν μὲν καὶ σμικρόν τις παρακλίνῃ, καὶ πάνυ. καὶ γὰρ σῆμά τινές φασιν αὐτὸ εἶναι τῆς ψυχῆς, ὡς τεθαμμένης ἐν τῷ νῦν παρόντι: καὶ διότι αὖ τούτῳ σημαίνει ἃ ἂν σημαίνῃ ἡ ψυχή, καὶ ταύτῃ 'σῆμα' ὀρθῶς καλεῖσθαι.

δοκοῦσι μέντοι μοι μάλιστα θέσθαι οἱ ἀμφὶ Ὀρφέα τοῦτο τὸ ὄνομα, ὡς δίκην διδούσης τῆς ψυχῆς ὧν δὴ ἕνεκα δίδωσιν, τοῦτον δὲ περίβολον ἔχειν, ἵνα σῴζηται, δεσμωτηρίου εἰκόνα: εἶναι οὖν τῆς ψυχῆς τοῦτο, ὥσπερ αὐτὸ ὀνομάζεται, ἕως ἂν ἐκτείσῃ τὰ ὀφειλόμενα, τὸ 'σῶμα', καὶ οὐδὲν δεῖν παράγειν οὐδ' ἓν γράμμα.

I think this admits of many explanations, if a little, even very little, change is made; for some say it is the tomb (σῆμα) of the soul, their notion being that the soul is buried in the present life; and again, because by its means the soul gives any signs which it gives, it is for this reason also properly called "sign."

But I think it most likely that the Orphic poets gave this name, with the idea that the soul is undergoing punishment for something; they think it has the body as an enclosure to keep it safe, like a prison, and this is, as the name itself denotes, the safe (σῶμα) for the soul, until the penalty is paid, and not even a letter needs to be changed.

(Plat. *Crat*. 400b-c)

In the context of Buddhist psychological analysis, while the psychic identity is recognized as perfectly coinciding with the bio-physical dimension of the subject (the body and its worldly experience), this does not imply that the real being of the subject can in any way be

53. The term *sarīra* is used with the specific meaning of "corpse" in suttas like AN 5.50. The exact meaning is quite ubiquitous since it can be used for both living and dead body. Nonetheless, *kāya* can only represent living body or as a collection of organs (from the root √*ci*- "to arrange," "collecting together"), whereas *sarīra* conveys potentially the sense of a dead body possibly because of its semantic root (√*śṛ*-) meaning "to crush," "to break," "to shatter." When the Dhp must convey the sense of "the breakup of the body" uses the expression *sarīrassa va bhedana*.

reduced to its corporeality. Within Buddhism, as in all major ascetic philosophical traditions, the body is perceived as a burden, a cage, an uncomfortable obstacle to liberation.

To define the soul as "something" that is distinct from something else is to semantically encode it. The profound Buddhist notion is both lethal and radically striking: being is neither idea nor non-idea, as it precedes and transcends all ideas. Thus, invoking *jīva* by naming it *jīva* merely necessitates the appearance of something substantialized, a living idea, but not the ineffable truth.

As previously mentioned, the Buddha denied that the body and the soul were the same, just as he denied that they were different entities. Only by comprehending the subtle semantic philosophy of the Buddha can we understand the rationale behind this reasoning.

atha ca panāhaṃ na vadāmi: 'taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīran'ti vā 'aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīran'ti vā'ti.	I do not say: "the soul and the body are the same thing", nor do I say "the soul and the body are two different things."

(DN 7)

This form of double negation is a formula used in multiple contexts, as Buddhism's main goal is to transcend any conceptual dualism, whether between eternalism and nihilism or between soul and body. This does not mean that Buddhism lacks its own view of the body; it simply rejects any extreme conception of it, whether extreme reductionism that reduces everything to the body, claiming that only the body exists, or radical animism that sees the body as a mere container for an independent reality.

For Plato, philosophy is the only discipline capable of knowing reality, yet he repudiates the bodily organs as means of inquiry. Eyes and ears are unreliable, as is the human being whose body is driven by passions. If there exists an organ independent of bodily passions, for Plato, it is the ψυχή. This, for Plato, is "evidence." He frequently responds to his philosophical interlocutor's questions by invoking something as "evident" (φαίνεται).

τί δὲ δὴ περὶ αὐτὴν τὴν τῆς φρονήσεως κτῆσιν; πότερον ἐμπόδιον τὸ σῶμα ἢ οὔ, ἐάν τις αὐτὸ ἐν τῇ ζητήσει κοινωνὸν συμπαραλαμβάνῃ; οἷον τὸ τοιόνδε λέγω: ἆρα ἔχει ἀλήθειάν τινα ὄψις τε καὶ ἀκοὴ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἢ τά γε τοιαῦτα καὶ οἱ ποιηταὶ ἡμῖν ἀεὶ θρυλοῦσιν, ὅτι οὔτ᾽ ἀκούομεν ἀκριβὲς οὐδὲν οὔτε ὁρῶμεν; καίτοι εἰ αὗται τῶν περὶ τὸ σῶμα αἰσθήσεων μὴ ἀκριβεῖς εἰσιν μηδὲ σαφεῖς, σχολῇ αἵ γε ἄλλαι: πᾶσαι γάρ που τούτων φαυλότεραί εἰσιν.

ἢ σοὶ οὐ δοκοῦσιν; πάνυ μὲν οὖν, ἔφη.

πότε οὖν, ἦ δ᾽ ὅς, ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς ἀληθείας ἅπτεται; ὅταν μὲν γὰρ μετὰ τοῦ σώματος ἐπιχειρῇ τι σκοπεῖν, δῆλον ὅτι τότε ἐξαπατᾶται ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῦ.

ἀληθῆ λέγεις.

ἆρ᾽ οὖν οὐκ ἐν τῷ λογίζεσθαι εἴπερ που ἄλλοθι κατάδηλον αὐτῇ γίγνεταί τι τῶν ὄντων;

ναί.

λογίζεται δέ γέ που τότε κάλλιστα, ὅταν αὐτὴν τούτων μηδὲν παραλυπῇ, μήτε ἀκοὴ μήτε ὄψις μήτε ἀλγηδὼν μηδέ τις ἡδονή, ἀλλ᾽ ὅτι μάλιστα αὐτὴ καθ᾽ αὑτὴν γίγνηται ἐῶσα χαίρειν τὸ σῶμα, καὶ καθ᾽ ὅσον δύναται μὴ κοινωνοῦσα αὐτῷ μηδ᾽ ἁπτομένη ὀρέγηται τοῦ ὄντος.

ἔστι ταῦτα.

οὐκοῦν καὶ ἐνταῦθα ἡ τοῦ φιλοσόφου ψυχὴ μάλιστα ἀτιμάζει τὸ σῶμα καὶ φεύγει ἀπ᾽ αὐτοῦ, ζητεῖ δὲ αὐτὴ καθ᾽ αὑτὴν γίγνεσθαι;

φαίνεται.

"Now, how about the acquirement of pure knowledge? Is the body a hindrance or not, if it is made to share in the search for wisdom?

What I mean is this: Have the sight and hearing of men any truth in them, or is it true, as the poets are always telling us, that we neither hear nor see any thing accurately? And yet if these two physical senses are not accurate or exact, the rest are not likely to be, for they are inferior to these. Do you not think so?"

"Certainly I do," he replied.

"Then," said he, "when does the soul attain to truth? For when it tries to consider anything in company with the body, it is evidently deceived by it."

"True."

"In thought, then, if at all, something of the realities becomes clear to it?"

"Yes."

"But it thinks best when none of these things troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor any pleasure, but it is, so far as possible, alone by itself, and takes leave of the body, and avoiding, so far as it can, all association or contact with the body, reaches out toward the reality."

"That is true."

"In this matter also, then, the soul of the philosopher greatly despises the body and avoids it and strives to be alone by itself?"

"Evidently."

(Plat. *Phaedo* 65a-d)

This issue ultimately boils down to a singular aspect: the body, which, by its nature, imposes limitations and consequently becomes

a source of suffering. The body perceives the world through sensory data—touch, hearing, smell, and taste—over which we have no voluntary control. Similarly, thoughts habitually inhabit our minds. Certainly, one can deliberately choose to savor a particular taste or to look at a certain object, just as one can choose to avert their gaze from something unpleasant. It is also true that thought possesses a volitional component; otherwise, rational deliberation would be impossible. Nonetheless, what seems absolutely beyond our capacity is to entirely relinquish thought, perception, or sensation at will.

For instance, if I were restrained and thus prevented from covering my ears or nose, I would be compelled to experience any sound presented to me and any odor emanating from my surroundings unless I chose to faint by holding my breath. Similarly, if someone were to touch me, I could do nothing to prevent the sensation of that touch from reaching me, nor could I avoid experiencing the ambient temperature and subsequently finding it either pleasurable or distressing depending on the circumstances. Although I cannot objectively state the exact temperature of a room, I can subjectively perceive its warmth or lack thereof, along with the accompanying sensations. The same applies to sight; while I can attempt to inhibit it by closing my eyes, I cannot blind myself at will and regain sight at my convenience. Anyone who has tried to shut their eyes in a brightly lit environment knows that it is impossible to entirely escape the light stimulus.

All these perceptions can be somewhat coordinated by thought, which is indeed the aspect of human existence over which we believe we have the most control. Entire civilizations have been built on the premise that part of our thinking can be disciplined and bent to produce useful reasoning. However, the moments during the day when we are genuinely focused and our minds productive constitute a mere fraction of our conscious time.

Excluding the time spent sleeping, during which we are entirely at the mercy of mental or cerebral processes beyond our control, even when we are awake, we are mostly *driven by automatisms*, in the sense that Pierre Janet conveyed with this term.[54] Consider repetitive or rou-

54. Pierre Janet, Giuseppe Craparo, and Onno van der Hart, *Catalepsy, Memory,*

tine actions; our minds cannot be constantly active and aware of what we are doing (see §3.2).

The issue with this uncontrolled dominance of automatism, as both Plato and the Buddha recognized, is that as long as we lack control over these automatisms, any organization of sensations and perceptions into a system under our apparent control is illusory. It is merely one of many possible worlds, an attempt to harness these automatisms to our will. However, we continue to be subjected to them, suffering as a result.

Nietzsche insightfully noted that the Greek response to this problem was *metaphysics*,[55] except during an initial period of constructing a more immediate ontology. In contrast, the Buddhist response falls within the traditions of asceticism, which are significant for modern thought. We can no longer ignore the grandeur of these traditions or the profound problems they pose, which we must address. While thinkers like Plato might seek to entirely dismiss the body due to its insurmountable limitations, others focus on the body itself, attempting to educate it through rigorous discipline to push beyond these limits.

All extreme austerities practiced by ascetics can ultimately be explained as attempts to overturn the spontaneous and automatic responses of their senses and perceptions.[56] By radically altering what the body automatically experiences and perceives, ascetics aim to demonstrate that even sensations and perceptions, which inevitably condition us simply by being felt and perceived, can be corrected through a total transformation of the perceptual apparatus.

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and Suggestion in Psychological Automatism (London: Routledge, 2021), DOI: 10.4324/9780429287671; Alexandra Bacopoulos-Viau, "Automatism, Surrealism and the Making of French Psychopathology: The Case of Pierre Janet," *History of Psychiatry* 23, no. 3 (2012): 259–76, DOI: 10.1177/0957154X11428417; L. Fedi, "Automatisme et Volonté Dans La Thèse de Pierre Janet," *PSN* 5, no. 1 (2007): 36–47, DOI: 10.1007/s11836-006-0002-y.

55. Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

56. Shalini Shah, "Engendering the Material Body: A Study of Sanskrit Literature," *Social Scientist* 47, no. 7/8 (2019): 31–52; Bronkhorst, "Asceticism, Religion, and Biological Evolution'."

3.4 Perception, Body, Relation

We face a fundamental problem that requires unraveling. On the one hand, we must free ourselves from the conception of the body that has permeated Western thought since the inception of thinking about 'body' and 'mind' (or any other concept that opposed or related to it) as two distinct issues. On the other hand, we must also address the equally Western idea of a fundamental unity between body and mind, spirit, soul, or whatever it may be.[57]

It is imperative to trace the same archaeological foundation of body and mind and to entirely reconsider the problem of consciousness without retracing the paths that led to certain conceptions. I will not entirely dismiss 'Western' thinkers, but I will certainly have privileged interlocutors. These have been chosen based on their proximity to the Buddhist ideas that I will analyze. This is not a matter of total convergence; rather, it starts from entirely different premises, and it is precisely due to this difference that I am interested in examining them. For instance, I will not continue dwell too much on Husserl from now on, but rather on Merleau-Ponty, who, despite beginning with Husserl, surpasses the intrinsic Cartesian dualism that Husserl seemingly cannot discard, notwithstanding his criticism of it.

> It is no accident that Husserl fails to appreciate the full scope of the body's role in perception, relegating its intentional constitution instead to the realm of localized tactile sensation. For equating the perceptual subject with the lived body, as Merleau-Ponty does, would mean relinquishing the conceptual dualism upon which Husserl's project rests. […]

57. Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, vol. 2 (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021); McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, 2021; Michael Spezio, "McGilchrist and Hemisphere Lateralization: A Neuroscientific and Metaanalytic Assessment," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 9, no. 4 (2019): 387–99, DOI: 10.1080/2153599X.2019.1604416; Dan Arnold, "Where in the Brain Does Buddhism Come from? Critical Thoughts Regarding Iain McGilchrist's Reflections on Religion," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 9, no. 4 (2019): 345–62, DOI: 10.1080/2153599X.2019.1604414.

> Notwithstanding Husserl's professed ontological neutrality, then, there is an undeniable spirit of dualism animating his phenomenology; indeed, his theory of intentionality is predicated on what he regards as a strict categorical distinction between consciousness and reality.[58]

My aim, indeed, is to construct a comparative philosophy, but the emphasis of this dialogue is placed on the archaeology of Indian ascetic thought, with specific reference to Buddhism and its 'evolutionary' context within the panorama of Indian philosophical-religious traditions. From there, I intend to resume the dialogue on the problem of body and consciousness, recognizing that today's debate on these themes is challenged not only by technological advancements, which in themselves constitute a significant problem, but also by a lack of means within Western traditions of thought.

The phenomenon of asceticism undeniably presents a compelling problem, particularly due to its inherent paradox. Bronkhorst examines the evolutionary biological reasons behind asceticism.[59] How can such an apparently anti-biological phenomenon arise? There are various forms of asceticism, but all are undoubtedly characterized by some form of renunciation: abstention from certain types of food (or from food altogether in more extreme cases), celibacy, renunciation of opulence, and the relinquishment of material possessions, among others.

Austere practices are also a common feature: seeking extreme cold in winter or infernal heat in summer may appear counterintuitive to a biologist, yet it is precisely for this reason that they are logically ascetic. These practices pertain to the forces of biological automatism, representing the primary and most formidable barrier of bodily experience that the ascetic seeks to transcend. This strenuous effort imparts the ability to perceive beyond the conventional modes through which the body experiences the self and the world, precisely at the limits of these automatisms.

The dichotomy between *kāya* and *sarīra* is particularly noteworthy. In concrete terms, the two words are synonyms. There are numerous

58. Taylor Carman, "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty," *Philosophical Topics* 27, no. 2 (1999): 208, DOI: 10.5840/philtopics199927210.
59. Bronkhorst, "Asceticism, Religion, and Biological Evolution'."

Pāli terms to unequivocally refer to a corpse (*kaḷebara, kaḷevara, kuṇapa, chava, matasarīra*), and it is the context or nuance that leads us to interpret *sarīra* as referring to the body in a negative sense.

As previously mentioned, the ascetic conception of the body is that it serves as an interface with a world entirely managed and directed by the body itself. The body is not in a dualistic and oppositional relationship with the world, despite what we might be led to believe; rather, it is the world itself as a resultant deviation or partial experience of truth. This truth is not 'external' to the body/world, but rather the totality from which the body/world is localized.

This process of localization, the tracing of a circle of the world from which the body radiates its experience and beyond which it normally cannot go, constitutes a limit, or rather a series of limitations, entirely describable by the perceptual/cognitive process. I will use these terms slightly differently than contemporary psychology does, and I will soon explain what I mean.

Buddhist thought conceives the mechanism of world processing as orchestrated by six particular elements, that is, the six cognitive means of the body, namely the six sense organs. For the Buddhists there is also a perfect coincidence between the sense organ and its function: sight is the eye and the eye is sight, just as the tongue is taste and taste is the tongue, and so forth.[60] These six senses, or sensory "doors" (*dvāra*s) as they would later be called in the Abhidhamma, are referred to by a single name, that of the sensory organ itself. It is important to emphasize that the organs do not have the capacity to act independently.

The body is not conceived as a mechanism, but as a unified concert. Of these six organs, five correspond to what we learn in elementary school as the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste), while the sixth and

60. Gomila Gunalankara Thero, "Sensory Perception: A Comparative Study of Western Psychology and Buddhist Psychology," *Kalyani: Journal of the University of Kelaniya* 33, no. 1–2 (2019): 35, DOI: 10.4038/kalyani.v33i1-2.31; Peter G. Friedlander, "The Body And The World In Buddhism," in *Medicine, Religion, and the Body*, ed. Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Kevin White (BRILL, 2010), 51–67, DOI: 10.1163/ej.9789004179707.i-300.22; Johansson, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*; Ralph Metzner, "The Buddhist Six-Worlds Model of Consciousness and Reality," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 28, no. 2 (1996): 155–66.

most important is the coordinator of all the others, the one where everything converges and is processed. This organ is the mind (*manas*, *mana*). We might think of it as the brain or mind (the term *manas* derives from the same root as the Greek μένος, but in Sanskrit, it specifically indicates "thinking," as do all the verbs derived from the root *man*-), but we must be careful not to fall into easy parallels. Indeed, it is quite debatable that Buddhism supports either neurological reductionism (everything we call "thought" is neurologically explainable) or the opposite reductionism (the 'mind' is not an organ localized in the brain but something non-physical). This is a significant issue that will require further examination when we discuss cognition and thought. Nonetheless, the idea that thought is the organ coordinating the entire perceptual process and initiating the subsequent cognitive process is explicitly affirmed in the Abhidhamma, with its precursors well described in the Pāli texts.[61]

As we have seen in the first two chapters, perception pertains to the processing of data received by sensors from effectors. The "sensation" (*vedanā*) is this initial 'felt experience,' something quite immediate but not classifiable.[62] It could be the roughness of a stone, the pleasantness of a sound, the roundness of a shape, the bitterness of a vegetable, the repulsion of an odor, and so on. All these data are not classifiable in themselves but are mere forms (*rūpa*) communicated by their appearance (*rūpagata*) or recognized by similarity (*rūpaka*).

At this very initial stage, a significant problem already arises: we will see that the idea that distinct and distinguishable forms exist presupposes consciousness, capable of discerning one cognitive form from another. The cognitive-perceptual cycle in Buddhism is truly a circle with no discernible beginning. When the form is felt, it passes to the mental coordination operated by thought, which translates it into perception (*saññā*); here, we are already at a higher level of processing, attributing a specific conception to the perceived (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, or unclassifiable).[63]

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61. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality*; Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings. The Middle Position on Theory and Practice*.

62. Attwood, "Defining Vedanā: Through the Looking Glass."

63. This formula is often found in Pāli as as *sukhā vedanā*, *dukkhā vedanā*,

Subsequently, the perceived, having assumed a primordial qualitative connotation, is processed into a network of relationships with previously experienced things, where it can contribute to the formation of mental constructs (*saṅkhāra*) that will then motivate volitions, functions, activities, or more complex mental processes 'conditioned' by these constituents. Thus, this entire mechanism converges into the nourishment of discernment (*viññāṇa*), i.e., consciousness, among many possible meanings of this term.[64]

The question of what consciousness is for a Buddhist will be addressed in more detail later, but for now, it suffices to say that consciousness' task is to discern, that is, to segment and thus distinguish (*vijānāti*) the things of the world. Indeed, only through division can organization occur, distinguishing between this and that, and attributing to each 'divided' thing by consciousness a nominal identity. The most important thing of this mechanism is its circularity: consciousness is recognized as the sole producer of forms, which therefore are not given in the world as objective data but as distinctions made by the divisive act of consciousness. The form is the 'primary datum' that triggers the sensory, then perceptual, eidetic, and finally cognitive process, but it is consciousness itself that produces the forms.

What, then, is the beginning of this circle? For Buddhists, it is impossible to identify, suggesting that the problem of the world's reality cannot be solved by seeking a presumed objectivity 'outside' oneself. There is no verifiable reality independent of the witness. The positive side, however, is that this vicious circle of the cognitive process, while having no determinable beginning, can have an end. This accumulation proceeds like a flame, continuing to burn as long as there is something to consume. Contemplative practice aims to deprive this flame of oxygen.

Understanding this problem, the ascetic must also focus his initial efforts on studying the six sense organs and the sixfold process

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adukkhamasukhā vedanā, "pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling."

64. Oliver Hector De Alwis Wijesekera, "The Concept of Vinñāṇa in Theravāda Buddhism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 84, no. 3 (1964): 254–59, DOI: 10.2307/596558.

concerning them. An exemplary text in this regard is MN 148, where the description of the sixfold mechanism can be found.

dhammaṃ vo, bhikkhave, desessāmi ādikalyāṇaṃ majjhekalyāṇaṃ pariyosānakalyāṇaṃ sātthaṃ sabyañjanaṃ, kevalaparipuṇṇaṃ parisuddhaṃ brahmacariyaṃ pakāsessāmi, yadidaṃ— cha chakkāni …

cha ajjhattikāni āyatanāni veditabbāni, cha bāhirāni āyatanāni veditabbāni, cha viññāṇakāyā veditabbā, cha phassakāyā veditabbā, cha vedanākāyā veditabbā, cha taṇhākāyā veditabbā. ‘cha ajjhattikāni āyatanāni veditabbānī’ti
—iti kho panetaṃ vuttaṃ. kiñcetaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? cakkhāyatanaṃ, sotāyatanaṃ, ghānāyatanaṃ, jivhāyatanaṃ, kāyāyatanaṃ, manāyatanaṃ. ‘cha ajjhattikāni āyatanāni veditabbānī’ti
—iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ, idametaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ. idaṃ paṭhamaṃ chakkaṃ.
‘cha bāhirāni āyatanāni veditabbānī’ti
—iti kho panetaṃ vuttaṃ. kiñcetaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? rūpāyatanaṃ, saddāyatanaṃ, gandhāyatanaṃ, rasāyatanaṃ, phoṭṭhabbāyatanaṃ, dhammāyatanaṃ
‘cha bāhirāni āyatanāni veditabbānī’ti
—iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ, idametaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ.

O mendicants, I shall teach to you the Dhamma, which is beneficial at the beginning, beneficial in the middle, and beneficial at the end. It is profound and well-articulated, and I shall disclose what constitutes the complete and perfectly pure spiritual practice: the sixfold six. [...]
The six internal senses must be understood. The six external senses must be understood. There are six categories of discernment that can be comprehended. There are six categories of contact that can be comprehended. There are six categories of sensation that can be comprehended. There are six categories of craving that can be comprehended.
‘The six internal senses must be understood,’ and this is what I tell you. But why do I say this? There are the sensory fields of the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind. ‘These six internal sensory fields must be understood,’ this is what I say, and this is why I say it, for this is the first group of six.
‘The six external senses must be understood,’ and this is what I tell you. But why do I say this? There are the sensory fields of form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and concepts. ‘These six external sensory fields must be understood,’ this is what I say, and this is why I say it, for this is the second sextet.

As we can observe, the sole distinction between interior and exterior lies in what we might now identify as the organ and its function: the eye represents the interior and form represents the exterior, the nose represents the interior and smell represents the exterior, and so on. This reflection originates from a dualistic conception that will be deconstructed in more advanced contemplations.

For now, the Buddha encourages reflection on what appears immediately in experience, and it should also be noted the use of the concept of field or perceptual sphere (*āyatana*) in both categories. Subsequently, the Buddha describes six classes of consciousness (*cha viññāṇakāyā*), which correspond to the six senses. Each sensory organ is thus recognized as participating in its own specific conscious function: "eye consciousness arises dependent on form and sight" (*cakkhuñca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ*), or "tongue consciousness arises dependent on taste and the tongue" (*jivhañca paṭicca rase ca uppajjati jivhāviññāṇaṃ*). The consciousness that arises dependent on touch is a somatic type of consciousness (*kāyaviññāṇaṃ*), and there also exists a mental consciousness that arises dependent on thought and ideas (*manañca paṭicca dhamme ca uppajjati manoviññāṇaṃ*).

What is crucial for the first five sensory spheres is the concept of contact (*phassa*). This is the moment when the sensor encounters the effector, and it is also considered the triggering moment of consciousness. Consciousness cannot arise without this event of 'contact' between the organ and the perceived. At this stage, contemplation invites reflection on this apparent duality, yet even at this juncture, we realize the paradox: if consciousness arises only in the event of contact between the effector and the sensor, which we shall call A and B, then consciousness itself cannot be anything other than a relation. A and B are not separated by nothingness, but are in relation by virtue of the very consciousness that 'arises,' that is, manifests, dependent on their entering into relation (*phassa*).

In other words (see Fig. 17), there are as many *viññāṇa*s as there are sensory spheres (*cakkhuviññāṇa* is the visual consciousness of the *cakkhu* organ, and so forth), and also taking into account that a specific *viññāṇa* is always consciousness-of something and therefore arises

from the contact (*saṃ-phassa*) specific to each sensory sphere with a reference object, one obtains a dodecahedral schema, where the hexagonal base formed by the six sensory spheres (placed in relation to each other, since sensation is always fascicular and never separate) extends into six specific conscious discernments.

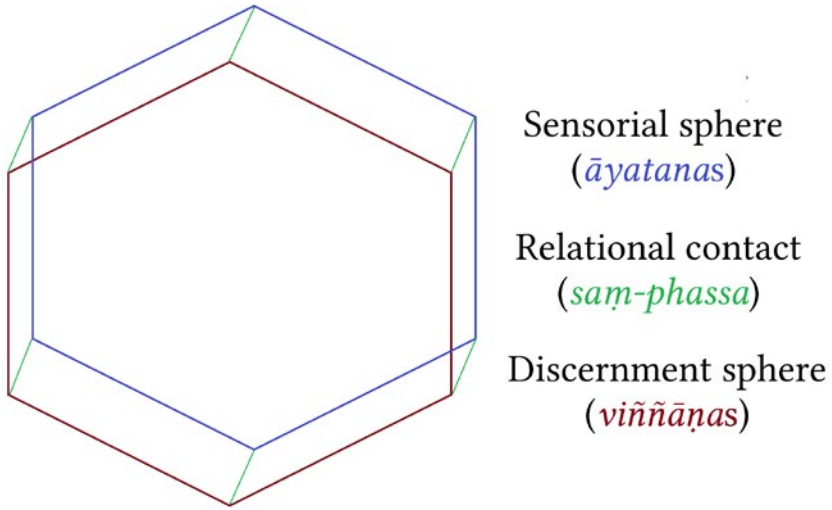

Fig. 17— The sixfold scheme visualized. The six sense bases correspond to the blue hexagon. The six senses are coordinated (they elaborate the sensorial data at the same time) *cakkhu, sota, ghāna, jivhā,* and *kāya*, coordinated by manas. The contact (*samphassa, saṃ-phassa*) with the effector causes the arising of a specific consciousness, one for each sensorial sphere. Therefore, the six *viññāṇa*s too are connected with each other, and to the senses from which they arise.

Thus, if the third sextet comprises the six sensory consciousnesses, the fourth sextet comprises the six contacts (*cha phassakāyā*). Contact always involves three elements. For example, the relationship between visual consciousness, sight, and form is what they call "contact" (*cakkhuñca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso*). This holds true for all other organs. Contact is the condition for sensation, and hence the fifth sextet, the six conditions for the sensation of each sensory organ, is enumerated (*cha vedanākāyā*). The

sixth and final sextet pertains to attachment, also in sixfold manner (*cha taṇhākāyā*). The aspect of attachment relates, of course, to the ephemeral nature of this entire concert of forms and experiences witnessed. The witness of the world sees, hears, tastes, in short, experiences and testifies to all this, believing it to be the ultimate reality. In truth, this entire concert is but a partial vision, it is a "world," but the "world" is precisely the partiality, the reduction, the inaccuracy. Thus, believing these things to be real, the fool becomes attached to forms, tastes, smells, to what is generally testified, only to suffer when it disappears from experience, when the circle of the world shifts to describe another part of being, leaving behind what was once experienceable and now is no longer so. This is the cause of great disorientation and suffering for the inhabitants of the "world." What is the solution?

The first step consists in recognizing that the identity of things (*attā*) cannot be fixed to these partial reductions. By attempting to fix an identity, we lose the whole, the entirety, the true nature of things. Thus, the Buddha reiterates for each organ, each sensory function, and each contact the following: "if someone asserts 'the eye is the self,' they are asserting something untenable. The arising and passing away of the eye is evident, and therefore it should follow that the self of someone also arises and passes away. Hence, it is not tenable to assert that the eye is the self, thus the eye is non-self" ('*cakkhu attā'ti yo vadeyya taṃ na upapajjati; cakkhussa uppādopi vayopi paññāyati; yassa kho pana uppādopi vayopi paññāyati, 'attā me uppajjati ca veti cā'ti iccassa evamāgataṃ hoti; tasmā taṃ na upapajjati: 'cakkhu attā'ti yo vadeyya; iti cakkhu anattā*).

Having thus dismantled any possibility that a sense organ and its respective contact or sensory event could contribute to the formation of a stable self, the Buddha warns his disciples: "this is what leads you to identification with a psychophysical identity: to perceive of the eye 'this is mine, this am I, this is my identity'" (*ayaṃ kho pana, bhikkhave, sakkāyasamudayagāminī paṭipadā— cakkhuṃ 'etaṃ mama, esohamasmi, eso me attā'ti samanupassati*).

Regarding the use of the term *sakkāya*, an important clarification must be made. This term is primarily connected to the bodily

dimension. The Pāli dictionary provides us with two main meanings for the term. One, linked to opinions (*diṭṭhi*, and thus *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), refers mainly to an ideology that we could define as "substantialist."[65] The Buddha refers to it sometimes simply as *sakkāya*, and his primary intent is to dismantle it. We might define it as one of the two extremes in the description of reality: physicalism, as opposed to the other extreme, immaterialism. The way the Buddha dismantles this view is by reducing it, of course, to his composite phenomenology. What appears to us as a physical body, an apparently autonomous *sakkāya*, is in reality an aggregate of simpler phenomenal factors. It has its origin as a phenomenon, its cessation as a phenomenon, and a practice that leads to the cessation of the phenomenon in question (*sakkāyasamudayañca sakkāyanirodhañca sakkāyanirodhagāminiñca paṭipadaṃ*, SN 22.105).

This, in itself, would not conflict with the physicalist ideology, as physicalism already claims that all phenomena are the result of strictly materialistic dynamics and can only be explained through matter. Nonetheless, the Buddha traces the origin of the physical phenomenon to the five aggregates of clinging (*pañcupādānakkhandhātissa vacanīyaṃ*), and not to the four great elements and their combinatory dynamics. Thus, the Buddha excludes the idea that the perception of physicality is anything more than a simple perceptual illusion. This is also in line with the definition of the associated ideology, *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, as responsible for suffering.[66]

The more frequent meaning of *sakkāya* is also the one tied to its etymology. The term comes from *sat-kāya*. The Sanskrit dictionary mentions only a *satkāyadṛṣṭi*, the doctrine that believes in the existence of an "individuality."[67] The term indeed refers to the *being-there* (*sat-*) of the body (*kāya*) as such, but this translates into a perceived individuality of the body and sensory experience on the part of the subject. However, the Buddhist view rejects both the idea of the subject as

65. Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part IV*, 156.
66. Ibid., 161.
67. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Dictionary English and Sanskrit*, 1134.

a passive receptacle of phenomena and the idea that the subject is transcendental and thus contains within itself the conditions of experience. This term thus indicates the direct transposition of the experience of the body onto the plane of an autonomous subject.

The Pāli dictionary tells us that *sakkāya* is primarily a psychological term, "almost equal to *individuality*."[68] This also explains why SN 22.105 explicitly connects it to the five aggregates. As noted, this conception can be extended to a broader physicalism, one that holds that psychological identity is physically grounded and therefore real. We can clearly see how this physicalism is very different from the psychological 'Western' one that we tend to associate with materialist reductionism. However, even this substantialist physicalism is rejected (SN 22.155, 35.166, 38.15). Buddhism also links the belief in a substantial reality with a form of weakening of cognition (*citta*), which, if it relies on the conviction of substantiality, becomes indecisive, unsettled, unsteady, and unliberated (*na pakkhandati nappasīdati na santiṭṭhati na vimuccati*, AN 5.200). The solution is therefore the complete abandonment of this ideology.

People identify with their own body, and more specifically, the collection of experiences and testimonies that their body makes in the world and of the world contribute to the construction of psychophysical identity (*sakkāya*). Since the body is the vantage point of the world and the vehicle of experiencing the world, with which we interact and acquire experience, people identify in the body and the organs it possesses for experiencing the world the core of what they are: "my" eye or "my" hand are "mine" not in a possessive sense, but in a general sense of identification. In many other suttas this 'view' (i.e., conception) of a psychophysical identity (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*) is criticized.

The first step is disidentification from these organs and processes, not because what we experience through them is untrue, but because reducing oneself to the sole experience of the body-world confines the human being to a static and limited identity, thus condemned to having only a partial vision of the world and suffering from it. The

68. Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part VIII*, 119.

abandonment of this stativity is the most difficult leap to make, for it not only implies disidentifying from one's own experience but also transcending it: "reflect on this 'this is not mine, this am not I, this is not my self'" (*'netaṃ mama, nesohamasmi, na meso attā'ti samanupassati*). This process is viewed as an unbinding, a detachment (*nibbindati*) from all attachments and cognitive habituations, and being detached, the meditator is also liberated from illusions and desire (*nibbindaṃ virajjati, virāgā vimuccati*).

Many suttas address the problem of *sakkāya* in a similar fashion.

- AN 6.91: a rightful person fully accomplished in view (*dhamme abhabbo diṭṭhisampanno puggalo*) can't give rise to six things, viz., the view of personal identity (*sakkāyadiṭṭhiṃ*), hesitation (*vicikicchaṃ*), clinging to precepts and practices (*sīlabbataparāmāsaṃ*), and anything that leads to (*apāyagamanīyaṃ*) any form of greed (*rāgaṃ*), hate (*dosaṃ*), and delusion (*mohaṃ*). The same formula is found in a shorter form in AN 6.90, speaking of just a person fully accomplished in view (*diṭṭhisampannassa puggalassa pahīnā*). The same six things to be abandoned are listed.
- AN 6.89: the very same six things are to be abandoned in order to become *diṭṭhisampadaṃ*.
- AN 7.85: these six things, to which a seventh is added (*māno*, "thought," "conceit") are to be broken (*bhinnattā*) in order to become a mendicant (*bhikkhu*).
- AN 7.92: one must be distanced (*ārakattā*) from these seven things in order to become perfected (*arahā*).
- AN 3.94: three things are described as obstruent and malevolent habits, like clouds that obscure the sky. These things to be given up are personal identity, hesitation, clinging to precepts (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, *vicikicchā*, *sīlabbataparāmāso*). Their abandonment leads to a situation similar to "a void shining sky, when the sun rises dispelling all the darkness glowing and radiating" (*viddhe vigatavalāhake deve ādicco nabhaṃ abbhussakkamāno*

sabbaṃ ākāsagataṃ tamagataṃ abhivihacca bhāsate ca tapate ca virocati ca). The triad *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, *vicikicchā*, and *sīlabbataparāmāso* is also what a Buddha must abandon in order to become awakened, but only after having abandoned also greed, hate, and delusion (AN 10.76).

- SN 22.155: the *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* is identified as something dependent on form, feeling, perception, mental constructs, and consciousness. Because of 'grasping' on these things the *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* arises. Recognizing their impermanence (*aniccaṃ*), the *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* falls.
- AN 9.67: the *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* appears among other four 'chains' (*saṃyojanā*) deemed as 'inferior' (*orambhāgiyā*). Hesitation and clinging to precepts appear as well, but this time also sexual desire (*kāmacchando*) and ill will (*byāpādo*) are part of the group. See also AN 10.13.
- In SN 1.21 and 2.16 we found a poetry recited by a deity in the Buddha's presence:

  As when they are pierced by a spear,
  as if their head were set ablaze,
  to liberate themselves from sensual desire,
  a mendicant, with awareness, must forsake worldliness.
  As when they are pierced by a spear,
  as if their head were set ablaze,
  to liberate themselves from the perception of self-identity,
  a mendicant, with awareness, must forsake worldliness.[69]

- MN 44: the problem of *sakkāya* is traced back to the five aggregates (*pañca upādānakkhandhā*), these are five factors of grasping that act like a "fuel" for the identification process. They should be a well-known mechanism by now: form,

69. Original: *sattiyā viya omaṭṭho, ḍayhamānova matthake; kāmarāgappahānāya, sato bhikkhu paribbaje ti. sattiyā viya omaṭṭho, ḍayhamānova matthake; sakkāyadiṭṭhippahānāya, sato bhikkhu paribbaje ti.*

feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness (*rūpupādānakkhandho, vedanupādānakkhandho, saññupādānakkhandho, saṅkhārupādānakkhandho, viññāṇupādānakkhandho*). In this sutta the term *sakkāya* can be understood also as "perceived reality" or the general idea one has of 'reality,' the 'identity of reality' and so on. The Buddha proposes "a path that leads to the cessation of *sakkāya*," that is "right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration" (*sammādiṭṭhi sammāsaṅkappo sammāvācā sammākammanto sammāājīvo sammāvāyāmo sammāsati sammāsamādhi*). Also, once the cessation of perception and feeling is attained (*saññāvedayitanirodhasamāpattiyā*), one experiences a kind of contact that is "empty," "signless" and "immediate" or "unguided" (*suññato… animitto… appaṇihito phasso*).

– SN 22.44 is quite similar to MN 44, but this time the five aggregates are also connected to the idea of self. An ignorant or unlearned person "regard a form as a 'self,' a self as having form, form in self, or self in form" (*rūpaṃ attato samanupassati, rūpavantaṃ vā attānaṃ; attani vā rūpaṃ, rūpasmiṃ vā attānaṃ*). This is the beginning of what leads to a process of identity construction (*sakkāyasamudayagāminī*). The same is repeated for the remaining four aggregates. Similar discourses are found elsewhere, such as in SN 41.3

These are but a few examples. The problem of body and *sakkāya* are deeply intertwined. However, we still shall see other aspects of the sixfold dimension of the body. The sense-spheres are now our basis. A mendicant should recognize that the sixfold dimension is merely the body's standpoint, and not the absolute reality. What's the next step?

Although Buddhism espouses a more tolerant perspective toward the body and generally does not advocate for self-mortifying asceticism, as other contemporary traditions do, this does not imply that its view of the body is entirely positive. The body remains a limitation and cannot be the sole determinant of a subject's existence; rather,

it represents a partial and epiphenomenal reduction. Identifying with the body constitutes an attachment to mundane conditions that do not fully encompass reality, rendering the body a crucible of various impediments. In AN 10.49, ten such impediments are enumerated: cold, heat, hunger, thirst, feces, urine (*sītaṃ, uṇhaṃ, jighacchā, pipāsā, uccāro, passāvo*). These first five are genuine worldly hindrances that a person must endure "due to the body," here referred to with the negative connotation of *sarīra*: the corpse, the carcass, the dead weight to be dragged along, "ten things exist because of the body" (*dasayime... dhammā sarīraṭṭhā*), or "are inherent in the body." This notion of burden, of travail to be borne, is elucidated not only through the use of the term *sarīra* but also through this enumeration.

Among the other five impediments four are described using the suffix *-saṃvaro* in three instances. This term generally denotes control, but in this context, it implies a form of restriction or confinement, and indeed, the compound *saṃ* + √*var* can also be interpreted as something controlling and oppressive. When control is exercised by the yogin's will, it is positive because the yogin is master rather than servant (*cakkhunā saṃvaro sādhu*, "good is the control of the eye," as in Dhp 360), but in AN 10.149, we encounter *kāyasaṃvaro* "restriction of the body," *vacīsaṃvaro* "restriction of speech," and *ājīvasaṃvaro* "restriction of livelihood."

These three terms are highly significant. Speech, in particular, may refer to the imprisoning nature of language, a major theme in Buddhism. Language is seen as probably the most partial and deceptive of human experiences (see Chapter 1).[70] Ostensibly describing reality, such description is merely an amalgamation of arbitrary designations and partial views of the world.

The term *ājīva* denotes the mode of living ("livelihood"). This term is far from insignificant in Buddhist thought. "Life" is a concept we take for granted, but defining "life" entails considerable

70. Bronkhorst, *Language and Reality: On an Episode in Indian Thought*; Lysenko, "The Buddhist Philosophy of Language in India: An Overview"; Blomberg and Żywiczyński, "Language and Its Limits: Meaning, Reference and the Ineffable in Buddhist Philosophy."

political implications. Understanding and determining what "life" is and consequently how one should live is an exercise necessary for organized power to maintain social order, but this definition carries an inherent violence that must not be underestimated, inevitably manifesting in the need to educate the social bodies that constitute that order. Immediately after defining what "life" is, power appropriates the right to determine which lives are valuable and which are not, and consequently, what the correct rules for "living" are, i.e., for being part of a social order where one's "life" is considered valuable. This mechanism is now well-studied in the social sciences and is known as "biopower," where the term bio- refers to the idea of life and the fact that educating subjects necessarily involves educating bodies.[71] The proper way to behave in a society is determined by a set of rules that are internalized and performed by bodies.

Ultimately, it is the body that is educated and shaped by biopower; thus, the idea of *ājīva* as a "mode of living" is far from trivial and is perhaps comparable to the concept of biopower, especially considering the subversive nature that Buddhism has always had concerning organized society. The life of the *pabbajita*, "one who has gone forth," is the life of someone who abandons the village or city, where social bodies must adhere to certain rules, to embrace an ascetic life, characterized by renunciations but also by a critical analysis of these same rules.[72] It should never be forgotten that the Indian term *jīva* and the Greek βίος derive from the same Proto-Indo-European archetype. The mode of living (*ājīva*) and the control or restriction on the mode of living (*ājīvasaṃvara*) are concepts that therefore pertain to the body understood as endowed or not with the vital quality by a system of thought contextualized in normative cultural forms that impose certain restrictions to enjoy or not political rights. In Buddhism, there is indeed mention of *sammājīva* "correct mode of living" as opposed to *ājīvasaṃvara*.

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71. Divino, "From Meditation to Techno-Mindfulness: On the Medicalization of Contemplative Practices and Future Prospects."

72. Wiltshire, *Ascetic Figures before and in Early Buddhism*; Bronkhorst, "Historical Context of Early Asceticism"; Bronkhorst, *The two Sources of Indian Asceticism*; Olivelle, "Village vs. Wilderness: Ascetic Ideals and the Hindu World."

Lastly, AN 10.49 attributes to the body the tendency to desire future lives, other incarnations in new bodies. The attachment to worldly bliss, believing that the materiality and earthly goods the body can enjoy are something to be desired rather than rejected, leads this same body to wish to prolong its mundane existence ad infinitum (*ponobhaviko bhavasaṅkhāro*).

To revisit the initial debate on the nature of the body and the 'soul' from a Buddhist perspective, it is essential to consider the specific terminology employed. In Indian philosophical discourse, two terms are predominantly used: the aforementioned *śarīra* and its variants, and *jīva*. However, *jīva* does not necessarily denote 'soul' in the Platonic sense, nor as it is later interpreted within Christian thought. *Jīva* simply refers to "life," suggesting a more general concept of vitality. The complexity arises particularly in texts such as BhG 2.16-18, 2.20, which appear to explicitly critique Buddhism by offering a more reassuring perspective:

nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ |
ubhayorapi dṛṣṭo 'nta stvanayos tattvadarśibhiḥ || 16
avināśi tu tadviddhi yena sarvam idaṃ tatam |
vināśam avyayasyāsya na kaścit kartum arhati || 17
antavanta ime dehā nityasyoktāḥ śarīriṇaḥ |
anāśino 'prameyasya tasmād yudhyasva bhārata || 18 […]
na jāyate mriyate vā kadāchin nāyaṃ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ |
ajo nityaḥ śāśvato 'yaṃ purāṇo na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre || 20 ||

Of that which is transient, there is no endurance, and of the eternal, there is no cessation. This has been discerned by the seers of that-which-is. That which pervades the entire body is known as indestructible; no one can bring about the destruction of the imperishable Soul. Only the material body is destructible. The Soul embedded within it is indestructible, immeasurable, and eternal.

Therefore, fight, O descendant of Bharata! The Soul is neither born nor does it ever die. It has never existed in time, nor will it cease to exist. The Soul is innate, eternal, immortal, ageless. It does not perish with the disintegration of the body.

In several respects, it becomes apparent that this text, which seems a convenient insertion into a much older epic poem (the Mahābhārata), was constructed specifically to respond to certain ascetic movements. Yet, what is the actual Buddhist position? It is easy to misconstrue it as

nihilism, but the intended idea appears to be different. Life is something that cannot be fully identified with the body nor considered entirely independent of it. As we know, the first position is rejected in SN 24.13, which denies that the body and life are one and the same (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*). Likewise, SN 24.14 refutes the opposite view that the body and life are distinct from one another (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*).

The notion that the body is not the entirety of what one is can be inferred from the Buddha's apparent belief that the body possesses partial autonomy or acts automatically and needs to be restrained or controlled. In SN 46.2, the metaphor of fuel is employed: the body sustains itself because something nourishes it, but as long as it is sustained, it essentially inclines towards desires, attachment, and thus suffering: "This body is sustained by food, depends on food to continue, and without food, it cannot continue" (*ayaṃ kāyo āhāraṭṭhitiko, āhāraṃ paṭicca tiṭṭhati, anāhāro no tiṭṭhati*). Nevertheless, this perspective does not imply a desire to deprive the body of such sustenance, thereby leading it to death. This ascetic ideal is more characteristic of Jainism, which advocates for immobility and the cessation of every action (*sallekhanā*).[73] Buddhism, however, does not find inaction to be a resolution to the body's problems, even if the 'body' is considered already dead to some extent.[74] Nonetheless, it is also true that Buddhism does not view the body's limitations as insurmountable.

This brings us to the issue of the Buddhist approach to the body. While other ascetic disciplines focus on the aspect of action (*kamma*), Buddhism concentrates on the problem of knowledge (*abhiññā*). This does not mean that the importance of actions is overlooked, but their primary interest lies in understanding how the body experiences and constructs a world, and from this comprehension, attempting to

73. Debashis Ghosh, "Suicide: Ancient Indian Perspective," in *Making Sense of Suicide?*, ed. Kathy McKay and Jann Schlimme (BRILL, 2011), 35–43, DOI: 10.1163/9781848880689_006; Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha* (Leiden: BRILL, 2007), 18, DOI: 10.1163/ej.9789004157194.i-416.

74. Martin Wiltshire, "The 'Suicide' Problem in the Pāli Canon," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1983): 124–40.

transcend the limits of those experiential circles that define a constrictive boundary of the body/world.

Reality is experienced as "world" (*loka*), but the "world" is not reality. Allow me to employ a metaphor to convey this concept. Imagine the reader living in a world where all inhabitants see in a blurred, black-and-white manner. The 'world' constructed by these 'bodies' would be one tailored to the blurriness and lack of color. All experience would be based on this seemingly incontrovertible fact, and social structures, cultural traditions, and religions would be founded on this assumption without questioning it. It would be perfectly feasible to sustain a society on these bases, as techniques to inhabit a blurred, colorless 'world' would be perfected. If one day someone were born capable of seeing contours and colors, however, they would have an enormous advantage over the other inhabitants of the 'world.' Arguably, they would not inhabit the same 'world' as everyone else, and it would be quite difficult to claim that they could even remotely communicate their experience to others. Nonetheless, their position would be that of someone who has transcended what is normative for others.

> La région qui entoure le champ visuel n'est pas facile à décrire, mais il est bien sûr qu'elle n'est ni noire ni grise. Il y a là une *vision indéterminée*, une *vision de je ne sais quoi*, et, si l'on passe à la limite, ce qui est derrière mon dos n'est pas sans présence visuelle.[75]

Maurice Merleau-Ponty stands as the philosopher who most closely approaches an understanding of these aspects. What we have termed "circles of the world," referring to the boundaries, the reductions of being that constitute the limits of the experiential, can be similarly defined by Merleau-Ponty as a frame or field. He speaks of the "*champ visuel*" and, more importantly, the "*champ phénoménal*." The body is the epicenter of this field, as if it radiates out to a certain point: to the limit of my visible in the case of the visual field, or to the limits of my experiential, my attestable as a witness of the world, and thus

75. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Gallimard, 2004, 28.

my perceptible, in the case of the phenomenal field: "Un champ visuel n'est pas fait de visions locales. Mais l'objet vu est fait de fragments de matière et les points de l'espace sont extérieurs les uns aux autres."[76]

A fundamentally important and simultaneously problematic aspect concerning the witness is its self-referential nature. The testimony of the witness can turn onto itself, attesting to its own capacity to bear witness. Simply put, the body perceives itself, but in a very particular manner. It possesses both the ability to testify to its own sensors, for instance, by touching its ears or eyes, and to recognize its own role as *witness*. Therefore, it cannot, at least under normal conditions, estrange itself from itself and view itself from an external perspective while witnessing a rough or smooth object.

Despite the recurrence of this issue in the Pāli texts and our own considerable distance from a definitive solution, the approach involving the cultivation of awareness must be addressed forthwith. Awareness is not a mere logical inference nor a philosophical speculation. For instance, in AN 4.254, it is stated that four phenomena pertain to a higher form of knowledge, termed *abhiññā* (literally "superior knowledge," *abhi* + *ñā*), which can be understood as immediate knowledge transcending corporeal limitations. These four phenomena are: complete understanding through superior knowledge (*abhiññā pariññeyyā*), what must be abandoned through superior knowledge (*abhiññā pahātabbā*), what must be cultivated through superior knowledge (*abhiññā bhāvetabbā*), and finally, what must be realized or personally experienced through superior knowledge (*abhiññā sacchikātabbā*).

What must be thoroughly comprehended is the mechanism of the five aggregates, which, as we have observed, has the body as its phenomenal epicenter. What must be relinquished, on the other hand, is ignorance and craving for worldly life (*bhavataṇhā*). What must be developed is serenity and insight (*samatho ca vipassanā ca*).[77]

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76. Ibid., 26.

77. These two terms later became popular as the names of two meditative techniques. However, the Pāli canon does not explicitly reference contemplative practices specifically named Samatha or Vipassanā, and the meditative exercises found in the texts do not seem to perfectly align with the contemporary understanding of

> Liberation is obtained when this driving force is eliminated. This requires a psychological process, not just immobilization of body and mind, or knowledge of the true nature of the self. The Buddhist texts describe this psychological process, but in doing so they follow a course which is essentially different from the other ones available in their time.[78]

Lastly, what must be realized is knowledge and freedom or liberation (*vimutti*, literally: "complete release"). As can be seen from this text, there is more than a mere allusion to the theme of wisdom. It is invoked in various forms repeatedly: firstly, it is a form of superior wisdom that must guide the meditator (*abhiññā*), and among the goals it must achieve are the abandonment of ignorance (*avijjā… pahātabbā*) and the acquisition of its opposite, namely knowledge (*vijjā... sacchikātabbā*).

Regarding the five aggregates, there is mention of "complete understanding through superior knowledge" (*pañcupādānakkhandhā... abhiññā pariññeyyā*). These translations, however, do not fully convey the significance of these terms, whose semantic scope remains obscure.

All terms containing the root √*ñā* must indeed be understood as forms of wisdom or gnosis (not in the Gnostic doctrinal sense) since they derive from the same root as the Greek γνῶσις (see §1.3). This applies to both *abhi-ñña*, "superior gnosis," and *pari-ñña*, "complete gnosis." The prefix *pari-* in Indian languages is akin to the Greek περί, indicating something widespread "all around."

Finally, we have *vijjā* and *avijjā*, knowledge and ignorance. The term *vijjā* (< *vidyā*) stems from the root √*vid*, "to know," "to understand." The archaic sense, however, is "to see." The underlying reasoning is the same as that for Greek terms deriving from the same Indo-European archetype: εἴδομαι "to see," εἶδος "appearance," but also ἰδέα (which likely needs no translation), and especially οἶδα, the perfect indicative form conveying the sense of "to know," "to be acquainted with," or "to know how." The collection of archaic texts believed to be revealed to seers and orally transmitted by Indo-Aryan

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Samatha and Vipassanā, confirming them as more recent techniques derived from the canon and other Theravāda traditions.

78. Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, 52.

people for centuries, later forming the sacred canon of the Indian tradition, is precisely called the *Veda*, "the knowledge."

Let us return to the problem of the body and its limitations. In suttas like SN 18.2 forms (*rūpā*) are specifically targeted.[79] The Buddha inquires of his disciple Rāhula (or the mendicants in general): "What do you think? Are forms permanent or impermanent?" (*taṃ kiṃ maññasi, rūpā niccā vā aniccā vā*). Form is not only the core of the five aggregates but also a pivotal component of the chain of dependent origination; however, in this second, more extensive sequence, it is ignorance (*avijjā*) that stands at the apex of the process. Nonetheless, Rāhula learns that not only forms but also sounds, smells, tastes, tactile data, and even concepts are impermanent (*saddā, gandhā, rasā, phoṭṭhabbā, dhammā aniccā*).

In the system of the chain of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the six senses are collectively included in a single link (*saḷāyatana*). Hence, while the five aggregates represent a more primordial system specifically pertaining to the manner in which the body constructs a world through a progressive processing system (primordial form, indeterminate sensation, semantic perception,[80] eidetic construction, and finally cognitive discernment),[81] the *paṭiccasamuppāda* (SN 12.2) emphasizes ignorance as the cause of a mechanism that operates a priori. The relationship between the two systems is therefore both historical (with the likelihood that the system of the five aggregates was part of the most archaic core of Buddhism, while the other is a subsequent evolution) and perspectival: the five aggregates form a posteriori system (forms present themselves and consciousness organizes them), whereas the chain of dependent origination operates a priori (ignorance conditions volitions, which lead consciousness to organize the world into names and forms). It is not necessarily incorrect to view this latter

79. Variants are found in SN 25.2, 26.2 and 27.2. An extended version is found in SN 18.12–20.

80. Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy," 19.

81. In order: primordial form (*rūpa*), indeterminate sensation (*vedanā*), semantic perception (*saññā*), eidetic construction (*saṅkhāra*), and finally cognitive discernment (*viññāṇa*).

system as a later elaboration. There is ample reason to believe that it was already implicit in the earliest core of Buddhism.

Ignorance (*avijjā*) conditions mental constructs (*saṅkhāra*), the ideas or volitional forms that drive the process of discernment (*viññāṇa*), i.e., the knowledge system (*ñāṇa*) based on divisions (*vi-*) and which recognizes things only by conceiving them as divided and opposed to each other. For discernment to function in this manner, it must necessarily operate its division-organization of the world on a dualistic principle. This principle is represented by the fourth link of the chain, the *nāmarūpa* binomial. While the five aggregates focus solely on the formal aspect of the binomial (*rūpa* is the first of the five aggregates), in this system, the nominal significator is conceived as associated with a specific formal signified: the *nāmarūpa* represents this associative binomial between a certain nominal identity linked to a recognizable form. It is essential that the reader avoids the facile deception of believing that certain pure forms exist a priori in the world, given independently of human volition to recognize a specific identity; thus, it is well understood that in this associative binomial *nāma*/*rūpa*, both the *nāma* and the *rūpa* are products of a designation process, arbitrary and constructed by what precedes them in the chain: the consciousness that has divided them, the ideation that has conceived them, and the ignorance that believes them to be real.

Following *nāmarūpa* as the fifth element is the sphere of the six senses (*saḷāyatana*). Although it may seem peculiar to find them here, we must understand that in Buddhist conception, there is no process of introjection of external forms, pure and given a priori, subsequently elaborated by consciousness; rather, it is a vicious circle in which consciousness 'produces' the forms it extrudes in an illusory mechanism of constructing an external reality, only to perceive them again with the senses. The name/form precedes the sensory sphere because this element of strong imposition on the world is something that indeed precedes sensory perception itself, and it is crucial to comprehend this.

When we approach any object, be it a cup, a stone, a pen, glasses, or a flower, we do not perceive in a pure and uncontaminated manner the 'true form' of the "cup," the "flower," and so on, but our consciousness

is already primed, preemptively and thus anticipating visual, tactile, and other perceptions, to expect to find certain 'forms' in the world and knows already that certain names will correspond to them. Only at that point, when the eye sees the long, small and cylindrical-like form of the pen, does consciousness recognize it as a "pen," because the visual datum that the sensory sphere of the eye has sent to consciousness is filtered through *nāmarūpa* and thus the cognitive bias that associates the seen to the most similar ideal forms it knows, assigning it the corresponding nominal identity: "pen." This is a mechanism of preconceived ideas and complex systems of internal references within consciousness.

Following the sensory sphere (*saḷāyatana*) in the chain are elements we are already familiar with: contact (*phassa*) that must occur between the object and the sensory organ intended to perceive it, and the resultant sensation (*vedanā*) from this initial contact: "*Vedanā* is not simply what you know about an object, but what you are made to know about it because of contact with it."[82] Subsequently, this system includes another element: greed (*taṇhā*, literally "thirst"), as it aims to emphasize how this perceptual mechanism makes the witness of the world dependent on the world it has constructed. The "beautiful," "enticing," and "seductive" forms keep the individual imprisoned in that world, quenching their thirst with those empty and impermanent forms, yet which they desire so much. This leads to the next element of the chain: attachment (*upādāna*). What follows is a form of will to possess the things of the world by taking ownership of them, akin to trying to grasp smoke.

> La signification du perçu n'est rien qu'une constellation d'images qui commencent de reparaître sans raison. Les images ou les sensations les plus simples sont en dernière analyse tout ce qu'il y a à comprendre dans les désigner, et comme elles sont elles-mêmes des impressions indicibles, comprendre est une imposture ou une illusion, la connaissance n'a jamais prise sur ses objets qui s'entraînent l'un l'autre et l'esprit fonctionne comme une machine à calculer, qui ne sait pas pourquoi ses résultats sont vrais.[83]

82. Attwood, "Defining Vedanā: Through the Looking Glass," 6.
83. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 38.

The human being chases these sinuous forms obsessively, attempting to hold onto them to prevent their departure, but is only destined to suffer from their mutability. Those who feed on attachment and continue to desire cannot help but perpetuate the mechanism of becoming (*bhava*), the constant flow that cannot cease because one does not have full control over oneself. Becoming is something endured by humans because they are ignorant of the premises of this continuous reiteration of forms. It is no coincidence that Buddhism opposes *bhava* with the idea of *nirodha* ("cessation"). Ordinary human cognition can only move within the circles of the world it traces, but these circles are a minute section of the truth, and they can only see what fits within the circle at any given time. By moving frenetically, we see things constantly transform, enter and exit our circle, followed by others, and so forth. When we stop agitating and break down this circle by looking at the totality of Being, things appear static: not becoming, not transforming.

Let us take another example: imagine standing in an immense, vast, and boundless place. It could be a forest. The characteristic is that it is pitch dark, blacker than pitch, and we only have a torch with us. This torch can only illuminate small sections, small circles, making them visible. However, we need to understand where we are, and we continue frantically moving, casting the light here and there, covering miles and miles and illuminating different things each time, sometimes similar, but never identical. Everything constantly follows and piles up, without ever giving us a clear and unequivocal overall view. We cannot see the way out because we have no means to see the entire forest as a fully illuminated totality in a single instant.

The last two elements of the chain are birth (*jāti*) and death and aging (*jarāmaraṇa*), decay. Those who strive to chase seductive forms clinging to becoming are destined to continue being reborn in mortal and decaying bodies. Only by overcoming ignorance, and with it all that follows, "this entire mass of suffering ceases" (*evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa nirodho*).

3.5 'My' Body

Before examining the solutions proposed by the ascetic philosophy of the Buddha to the problem of the body, it is necessary to further focus on other aspects of this problem. Setting aside the semantic aspect of the problem of perceptions, which due to its gravity and importance will require a separate discussion, the body is undoubtedly responsible for the confinement to a particular identity. Identification with the body alone is something sticky and difficult to shake off, because in fact human experience is reduced to the body alone. Religious authorities propose rather a metaphysically conceived "other world" as a promise of retribution for having endured earthly sufferings, rather than an "end of the world" which is much harder to conceive and accept.

> C'est tantôt l'adhérence du perçu à son contexte et comme sa viscosité, tantôt la présence en lui d'un indéterminé positif qui empêchent les ensembles spatiaux, temporels et numériques de s'articuler en termes maniables, distincts et identifiables. Et c'est ce domaine pré-objectif que nous avons à explorer en nous-mêmes si nous voulons comprendre le sentir.[84]

However, let us consider the problem from another perspective. We inhabit only three dimensions because we perceive only three under normal conditions. A being capable of inhabiting only two dimensions could not even comprehend our 'world.' This is obviously a mere theoretical exercise, which found a remarkable narrative application in works such as Edwin Abbott Abbott's novel,[85] but it helps us to understand the magnitude of the problem.

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84. Ibid., 35.

85. Philip J. Bossert, "'Plato's Cave', Flatland and Phenomenology," in *Phenomenology in Practice and Theory*, ed. William Hamrick, 1985, 53–66, DOI: 10.1007/978-94-010-9612-6_4; K. G. Valente, "Transgression and Transcendence: Flatland as a Response to 'A New Philosophy,'" *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 26, no. 1 (2004): 61–77, DOI: 10.1080/08905490410001683309; Rhonda Roland Shearer, "From Flatland to Fractaland: New Geometries in Relationship to Artistic and Scientific Revolutions," *Fractals* 3, no. 3 (1995): 617–25, DOI: 10.1142/S0218348X95000540; B. Walsh, "Escape from Flatland," *Journal of Evolutionary*

This dimensionality, this experience of 'world,' remains stuck to us due to an objective inability to transcend it. There seems to be nothing else but this world and this way of experiencing it, and consequently, the vehicle of all these experiences is what 'we' are reduced to. This problem of dimensionality is not expressed spatially in early Buddhism but temporally. Specifically, the problem of the theory of tri-temporality (past, present, and future) will be a significant issue in the debate leading to dissensions and schisms among the early Buddhist schools.

> This is why the Pāli commentaries describe all conditioned dhammas as "belonging to three times" (*tekālika*) and the unconditioned nibbāna as "time free" (*kāla-mutta*).
> What we have cited above does not in any way suggest that either early Buddhism or the Theravāda Abhidhamma recognized the reality of the past and the future in an ontological sense. It is purely in a psychological sense that they are real.[86]

Let us see, however, what the suttas tell us. In MN 109, we find an interesting explanation of the origins of the five aggregates. The Buddha asserts that the five aggregates have "root in desire" (*chandamūlakā*), but he is asked whether the five aggregates are the fuel of desire, or whether they are rather distinct from it (*upādānaṃ te pañcupādānakkhandhā, udāhu aññatra pañcahupādānakkhandhehi upādānaṃ*). Neither option is correct.

Desire is within the five aggregates; it is indeed craving (*pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu chandarāgo taṃ tattha upādānaṃ*). However, there can be different modes of desiring the five aggregates, and they conform temporally:

Biology 20, no. 1 (2007): 36–38, DOI: 10.1111/j.1420-9101.2006.01218.x.

86. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality*, 33.

idha, bhikkhu, ekaccassa evaṃ hoti: 'evaṃrūpo siyaṃ anāgatamaddhānaṃ, evaṃvedano siyaṃ anāgatamaddhānaṃ, evaṃsaññho siyaṃ anāgatamaddhānaṃ, evaṃsaṅkhāro siyaṃ anāgatamaddhānaṃ, evaṃviññāṇo siyaṃ anāgatamaddhānan'ti. evaṃ kho, bhikkhu, siyā pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu chandarāgavemattatā ...

When, monks, there is such a formulation:

"May I be such a form, such a sensation, such a perception, such volitions, and such consciousness in the future!"

Thus, there is a different kind of desire and greed for the five aggregates. [...]

yaṃ kiñci, bhikkhu, rūpaṃ—atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ ajjhattaṃ vā bahiddhā vā, oḷārikaṃ vā sukhumaṃ vā, hīnaṃ vā paṇītaṃ vā, yaṃ dūre santike vā—ayaṃ rūpakkhandho.

Any kind of form whatsoever: past, future, present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, distant or near, is said to be the form aggregate.

The same applies to the other five aggregates. Ultimately, concerning the last aggregate, it is specified that it is the name/form dyad that allows consciousness to arise (*nāmarūpaṃ kho… hetu, nāmarūpaṃ paccayo viññāṇakkhandhassa paññāpanāyā*). Then follows the problem of the conception of an identity (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*). This is for the time being the result of ignorance that leads to seeing each aggregate as possessing autonomous subsistence, that is, a self. Recognizing a self in each aggregate leads to recognizing a permanent self in everything, and this is the substantialist view that the Buddha opposes: "they regard the form as self, as having a form, as self in form, or form in self" (*rūpaṃ attato samanupassati rūpavantaṃ vā attānaṃ attani vā rūpaṃ rūpasmiṃ vā attānaṃ*).

For those versed in Greek philosophy, this problem will undoubtedly recall the idea of being-in-itself (αὐτὸ τὸ ὄν). If we do not speak in Parmenidean terms, where Being is a unique totality implicit in everything, but rather believe that we are dealing with 'things' separated and believed to be such by virtue of their formal distinction (we always return to form), then the problem arises of defining their identity.

The tree is distinct from the house by virtue of its 'form,' to which certain thinkers have tended to attribute ontological autonomy, that is, essence in itself. The form of the tree that distinguishes it from the house

allows it to be ontologically 'other' than what it is distinct from, thus one must find a 'treeness' of the tree that makes the tree "tree" in itself, i.e., autonomous and self-sufficient.

Usually, the aporia intrinsic to this reasoning is forgotten. The tree can be perceived as such because it is assigned a nominal identity, but even wanting to consider only the formal distinction, its 'being tree' is nonetheless dependent on its opposition to other forms. The tree is not "house" but is "tree" precisely thanks to being *not* a "house," otherwise what would make the tree a "tree"?

'kathaṃ pana, bhante, jānato kathaṃ passato imasmiñca saviññāṇake kāye bahiddhā ca sabbanimittesu ahaṅkāramamaṅkāramānānusayā na hontī'ti?

'yaṃ kiñci, bhikkhu, rūpaṃ—atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ ajjhattaṃ vā bahiddhā vā oḷārikaṃ vā sukhumaṃ vā hīnaṃ vā paṇītaṃ vā yaṃ dūre santike vā—sabbaṃ rūpaṃ 'netaṃ mama, nesohamasmi, na meso attā'ti—evametaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passati.

Sir, how can one know and see that there is no formation of 'I,' no underlying tendency that substantiates this perceiving body and all the external stimuli? [lit. 'external signs']

Therefore, monks, the form—past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, distant or near—all form is to be seen and rightly understood as it truly is: "this is not mine, this is not me, this is not my self."

The process of ego formation (*ahaṅkāra*), as we observe, follows mechanisms analogous to the attribution of identity to objects in the world. This issue is inherently linked to that of becoming. Remember the metaphor of a man lost in a dark forest with only a torch.

Worldly experience is akin to traversing this forest. The things we see are the small portion illuminated by the torch on our path, yet they change frenetically, never being identical in every way, and as we proceed, we become aware of this inevitability.

Becoming seems an insurmountable problem from the perspective of someone who has access to only a small portion of the forest. If one could see it all at once, it would appear as a unity. This is, of course, a metaphor, but I hope it conveys the concept. The problem of temporality should be understood similarly. If the desire to attribute identity to things also entails the desire for them to be 'fixed' in an absolute, static manner (*thetato*) like a slide, then a reel must seem like a nightmare, as

the dynamism transmitted results from a rapid succession of images, never identical to one another. Given that this is our experience, where then is the 'self' of a person? The Buddha defines questions regarding temporality as "improper" (*ayonisa*). Indeed, in MN 2, he states:

so evaṃ ayoniso manasi karoti: 'ahosiṃ nu kho ahaṃ atītamaddhānaṃ? na nu kho ahosiṃ atītamaddhānaṃ? kiṃ nu kho ahosiṃ atītamaddhānaṃ? kathaṃ nu kho ahosiṃ atītamaddhānaṃ? kiṃ hutvā kiṃ ahosiṃ nu kho ahaṃ atītamaddhānaṃ? bhavissāmi nu kho ahaṃ anāgatamaddhānaṃ? na nu kho bhavissāmi anāgatamaddhānaṃ? kiṃ nu kho bhavissāmi anāgatamaddhānaṃ? kathaṃ nu kho bhavissāmi anāgatamaddhānaṃ? kiṃ hutvā kiṃ bhavissāmi nu kho ahaṃ anāgatamaddhānan'ti?

etarahi vā paccuppannamaddhānaṃ ajjhattaṃ kathaṅkathī hoti: 'ahaṃ nu khosmi? no nu khosmi? kiṃ nu khosmi? kathaṃ nu khosmi? ayaṃ nu kho satto kuto āgato? so kuhiṃ gāmī bhavissatī'ti?

tassa evaṃ ayoniso manasikaroto channaṃ diṭṭhīnaṃ aññatarā diṭṭhi uppajjati.

'atthi me attā'ti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; 'natthi me attā'ti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; 'attanāva attānaṃ sañjānāmī'ti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; 'attanāva anattānaṃ sañjānāmī'ti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; 'anattanāva attānaṃ sañjānāmī'ti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; atha vā panassa evaṃ diṭṭhi hoti: 'yo me ayaṃ attā vado vedeyyo tatra tatra kalyāṇapāpakānaṃ kammānaṃ vipākaṃ paṭisaṃvedeti so kho pana me ayaṃ attā nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo sassatisamaṃ tatheva ṭhassatī'ti. idaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, diṭṭhigataṃ diṭṭhigahanaṃ diṭṭhikantāraṃ diṭṭhivisūkaṃ diṭṭhivipphanditaṃ diṭṭhisaṃyojanaṃ.

diṭṭhisaṃyojanasaṃyutto, bhikkhave, assutavā puthujjano na parimuccati jātiyā jarāya maraṇena sokehi paridevehi dukkhehi domanassehi upāyāsehi; 'na parimuccati dukkhasmā'ti vadāmi.

Here is how some apply their thinking in a discombobulated manner: "Did I exist in the past? Or did I not exist in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, was I in the past? Will I exist in the future? Or will I not exist in the future? What will I become in the future? Having been what, will I become in the future?" Or they are internally doubtful about the present: "Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? And where will it go?" When they apply their mind in such a discombobulated manner, certainty arises regarding six ideologies [views: *diṭṭhi*, literally "certainty of vision arises regarding six views"]: the notion "my self exists" arises as true and stable; the notion "my self does not exist" arises as true and stable; the notion "through the self, I perceive the self" arises as true and stable; the notion "through the self, I perceive the non-self" arises as true and stable. Alternatively, they hold this other ideology: "this self of mine that speaks, that knows, that experiences the results of its actions, good or bad, this self is immutable, eternal, of its own nature and unmodifiable, and will eternally remain." This, O monks, is the dogmatic view, the obscured view, the desolate view, the contorted view, the chained view. O monks, a person yoked to this chaining view, unlearned, a common person, does not free themselves from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. I tell you: "they are not free from torment."

Past (*atītamaddhānaṃ*), present (*paccuppannamaddhānaṃ*), and future (*anāgatamaddhānaṃ*) are fundamentally irrational ideas. They serve to describe three different moments of worldly experience: the present is what the witness, the consciousness, attests. The past is what is no longer attested but was previously, while the future pertains to what is yet to be attested.

From the Buddhist perspective, it is easy to understand why these concepts appear useless. If we imagine a textbook, we should consider "present" as what our consciousness is focusing on at the moment of reading. The pages already read are no longer attested, but consciousness comes from that attestation, while it has yet to attest the future pages. However, the book is already complete independently of our consciousness and its processual nature in attesting it. In other contexts, one might speak of an 'eternal present,' but I suppose the Buddha did not employ a similar idea because he saw in the present only the capacity to attest to a certain fragment.

If "present" were the totality of the attestable as a unit, it would not be clear why the present is subordinate to the past and the future. Precisely because we cannot attest to the entirety of the infinite possible in a single moment, we speak of "present" as what is attested by consciousness. The limit of consciousness is also that it cannot retrogress at will, nor leap to any given moment in the future, but is subordinate to a specific sequentiality. However, this does not suffice in the eyes of the Buddha to justify temporality as an objective datum.

In MN 2, we also find other significant insights. Firstly, the Buddha insists on the problem of "vision" (*diṭṭhi*). It is quite evident that in the texts, this term assumes a meaning analogous to δόξα, "opinion." *Diṭṭhi* is any conviction or idea about the world that potentially becomes dogmatic. The ignorant hold "firm," "stable," "fixed" (*thetato*) beliefs considered "true" (*saccato*), but "truth" itself (*sacca*) is a completely different issue, as we shall see.

Another matter concerns perceptions. Again, the ignorant perceive their self, clearly a somatic and self-referential issue: "I perceive the self through the self" (*attanāva attānaṃ sañjānāmi*). The other dogmas regarding the self interest us because they constitute a stark contrast to

the doctrine of BhG 2.20, to the point that we can almost draw a direct parallel, with the only difference being that in one case it is about the self, while BhG 2 refers to the soul or something analogous:

na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin nāyaṃ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ.	The soul is unborn and immortal, at any time it, having existed, will be or will return to be.
ajo nityaḥ$_{(1)}$ śāśvato$_{(2)}$ 'yaṃ purāṇo na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre.	Unborn, eternal$_{(1)}$, perpetual$_{(2)}$, this ancient, indestructible entity persists despite the destruction of the body.

(BhG 2.20)

The terms marked with 1 and 2 in both texts are etymologically equivalent. I have presented a somewhat different translation of BhG 2.20 that is more faithful to the individual Sanskrit terms used. Let us now consider the 'dogmatic' vision of the common ignorant person according to the Buddha:

me ayaṃ attā nicco$_{(1)}$ dhuvo sassato$_{(2)}$ avipariṇāmadhammo sassatisamaṃ$_{(1)}$ tatheva ṭhassati	This self of mine is eternal$_{(1)}$, enduring, perpetual$_{(2)}$, of stable nature, and will eternally$_{(1)}$ persist.

(DN 1)

The final aspect, perhaps the most significant, pertains to the theme of yoking. The Buddha enumerates a series of pejorative terms connected to *diṭṭhi*. The first term is false conception, "conducted view" (*diṭṭhigataṃ*); the second is the jungle of views (*diṭṭhigahanaṃ*), highlighting their confusion and disorder; the third is the desert or wasteland (*diṭṭhikantāraṃ*), possibly alluding to their ultimate inconclusiveness. Following this is the notion that such a view is the product of contortion or convoluted thinking (*diṭṭhivipphanditaṃ*), and finally, the yoking view (*diṭṭhisaṃyojanaṃ*).

Regarding this term, the latter part, referring to the yoke (*saṃyojana*), is a compound frequently encountered in the canon.[87] The first part, *saṃ-*, means "to bring together," while the second part derives from the root *yuj-*, which is the same root as in *yoga*. This term is also found in the form *saṃyoga*, signifying "connection," "yoking," or "association." Historically, the word *yoga* was used primarily in its etymological sense, akin to the English term yoke, conveying the idea of yoking, especially in the context of harnessing oxen for agricultural purposes. Over time, however, it has come to denote various other concepts.

In this context, it is evident that *saṃyoga* metaphorically represents a bondage, fetters. Humans are yoked to bodily limitations, anchored to these deviant views, while the ascetic's practice is more accurately described as an 'unbinding' of these fetters, a *vi-saṃ-yoga*, where *vi-* denotes separation, dissolution, disjunction, or disyoking. The term *visaṃyoga* is recurrently employed in the canon as a synonym for liberation. Then, the sense of *yoga* further evolved to indicate the discipline and rigor of the ascetic, now termed *yogin*, one who practices *yoga*, which has ceased to mean yoking and instead signifies devotion.

Nevertheless, within the canon, this term is employed preferably in combination with the verb *kātuṃ* or similar, like in the expression *yogo karaṇīyo* "you should practice *yoga*" in relation to something. However, the term *yogo* here still means something like "discipline," "effort," thus something related to the contemplative practice, though the term *yogī* is not employed in the Snp, Ud, Iti or the Nikāyas; rather, the term *jhāyi*, "contemplator," is used, referring to one who practices *jhāna*, a meditative exercise (AN 9.36). In several sutta of the canon, the expression *yogo karaṇīyo* ("to practice yoga") appears, understood as "to engage in contemplation" related to certain fundamental themes. An example of this is the system of the four truths, each presented with a common refrain. For example, *'idaṃ dukkhan'ti yogo karaṇīyo*, "practice contemplation on the [truth] 'this is suffering,'" and the same applies to the others (SN 56.1).

87. For instance, in AN 9.67 and 10.13 ten types of *saṃyojana*s are listed: five lower (*orambhāgiya*) and five higher (*uddhambhāgiya*). The first of the lower fetters is, again, *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*. I have commented the others in a previous section.

Returning to the concept of yoking, it must also be said that it represents an issue of such magnitude that it can be reiterated within the same word: *diṭṭhi*-saṃyojana-saṃyutto, "those who are yoked to the yoking view." Consequently, the effort to disjoin (*vi-saṃ-yuj*-, "un-yoking") pertains to these views, which are also bodily habituations. We begin to understand how the ascetic philosophy of the Buddha engages with the problem of the body and discipline.

Already in the ṚV we find a similar utilization of this term: though the term *yoga*/*yojana* literally indicates harnessing—"yoking" the animal to some kind of instrument for human purposes, like the bull with the plow—this idea of subjugation as redirection and sublimation of indistinct energies toward a given aim is not only what man does with the bull, but also what man can do with himself, as is the case with the self-yoking or self-barding "of the thought and poetic vein of the Vedic seers is then mentioned as far back as ṚV, 5.81.1; 7.27.1, in which it assumes a kind of ambition for order, discipline, and methodical proceeding."[88]

Indeed, the fundamental sense of *yoga* in the Pāli texts is precisely that of contemplative practice. However, the original etymological meaning of "binding" (see also *āyoga*)[89] of the term is preserved, connected to the root √*yuj*-, "to bind," "to join," which links to the Indo-European root **i̯eu̯g*- "to join." This root underpins the English word *yoke*,[90] and the meaning in Vedic is nearly identical. Originally, the root *yuj*- was used to form a range of terms related to harnessing, yoking, and thus primarily agricultural in nature.[91] The Latin *iungō* ("to join"),[92] found in compounds like *coniugō* ("to unite"), also had the sense of yoking in addition to pairing, conjugating, and joining. The analysis of the ṚV also reconfirms the archaic conception that linked

88. Squarcini, "Introduzione," xiii.
89. Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary - Part II*, 107.
90. Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*, 272.
91. K. S. Joshi, "On the Meaning of Yoga," *Philosophy East and West* 15, no. 1 (1965): 53–64, DOI: 10.2307/1397408; Squarcini, "Introduzione."
92. de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and Other Italic Languages*, 314.

"yoking" to the subjugation of the wild animal's strength to human interests through its domestication (see also ṚV 1.151.4 and 5.46.1).[93]

Nevertheless, while we might be led to think that given the notion of union, the term *yoga* and related words (like *yugma*, "pair") are comparable to the idea of *samādhi*—the reunification of subject and object through contemplation—we would be mistaken. The concept of *yoga* takes on at most two meanings in the ascetic context and thus outside the agricultural sphere: the first is that of a forced conjunction, a yoking understood as subjugation (cf. also Greek ζυγόν meaning both "yoke" for joining animals and "burden").[94] The ox is yoked to the plow by an act of force, and this form of subjugation symbolically indicates the condition of being dominated by figurative signs (*nimitta*) and perceptual spheres that we do not control.[95] Consequently, the state of

93. In the ṚV the term *yoga* is used markedly to denote the harnessing of wild animals, whose primordial power is subjugated, enslaved to human needs; these are primarily the horse (*aśva*) and the bull or wild ox (*gavas*), while the object of the work is obviously the chariot (*ratha*). In ṚV 10.106.2 we read: "like a driving bull among the planters, you two [Aśvin] take command, with force proper to the masters of the yoke." Concerning the demarcation of controlled spaces and areas, we find the term *yojana* from the same root as *yoga*, used as a unit of measurement for distances in ṚV 7.67.8, again, the idea of delimiting, marking a *locus*, a defined area with specific boundaries.

94. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 497–98, 502.

95. We saw in MN 121 that the meditation for the annulment of figurative signs (*animitta*) proceeds through progressive stages of disengagement from the yoke of semantic operations, that is, from everyday habituations. To achieve this, one undergoes a process of progressively purifying perception (*saññā*), and it is no coincidence that all contemplative stages involve a certain distancing from specific forms of *saññaṃ*. The first stage is very important because it involves an effort to distance oneself from what are defined as *darathā*, "distractions" or "disturbances," which are identified as primarily present in the urban dimension and human collectivity—namely, "the perception of the city" and "the perception of people" (*gāmasaññaṃ*, *manussasaññaṃ*). To do this, the meditator retreats to the forest, where perception is unified (*araññasaññaṃ paṭicca ekattaṃ*) and less disturbed. The subsequent stages can be summarized as follows: *ākāsānañcāyatanasaññaṃ → pathavīsaññaṃ paṭicca ekattaṃ → viññāṇañcāyatanasaññaṃ → ākiñcaññāyatanasaññaṃ → nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*. In sequence, these involve the perception of infinite space. Once this perception is also transcended, it is followed by the perception of unity dependent on the earth, the perception of infinite consciousness, then the perception

liberation, the meditation that dissolves the bond with figurative signs (*animitta*), is a form of *disjunction*, a release, unbinding, unraveling (sometimes called *visajja*, other times *visaṃyoga*, *visaṃyutta*).

The second meaning is precisely that of *yoga* as a knot, the *intertwining of phenomena*, often referred to the compound *saṃyoga* that we have already examined. This compound term is etymologically identical to the Latin *coniugō*, as *-iugō* and *-yoga* both descend from the root **i̯eu̯g-*, while the prefix *saṃ-* ("together, joined") derives from the prefix **ḱóm-/ḱm̥-* which in Latin yields the preposition *cum* ("with") and the prefix *con-* with the same meaning.

Since we are thus "conjugated," in the sense of being forcibly joined to something, it is clear that the metaphor of *saṃyoga* as negative subjugation, and certainly not as a reunification of surreptitiously separated parts but rather a genuine dominion of one part over another, draws heavily from the imagery of yoga understood precisely as a yoking to something.

3.6 Bindings, the yoke of the Body and the dis-junction

In §1.1 we saw how there exists a discourse, MN 139, that explicitly connects language to conflicts. People are convinced that concepts describe ontological realities, and armed with their terminologies, they assert absolute truths. Nonetheless, the Buddha ridicules this belief by simply evoking the dialectal variations of the time.

I believe that MN 139 has a respectable precursor in the *Suttanipāta*. In general, in this collection and especially in Snp 4 and 5, we find most of the foundational teachings of early Buddhism, and this is also the case in Snp 4.13. The context of this text is once again conflict, war, and it is directed precisely at those who are attached to their opinions (*diṭṭhiparibbasānā*) and think, "This is the *only* truth" (*idameva saccanti vivādayanti*).

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through sensory spheres deprived of their referential objectivity—the absence of "thingness," and thus the absence of the subject-object dynamic that results from it, and the perception of neither-perception-nor-non-perception that finally leads to a meditative absorption completely signless (*animittaṃ cetosamādhiṃ*).

Buddhism does not reject the idea that truth is one, but it doubts the possibility of describing it through language. On the contrary, proclaiming a singular truth inevitably leads to dogmatism. As long as we remain anchored to language, we must proceed with caution and accept a form of light *dialetheism*, since Buddhism equally avoids absolute relativism, considering it another source of conflict.

The idea of light *dialetheism* refers to the fact that in our experience of reality, things may paradoxically appear as contradictory, possessing two truths (δι-ἀλήθεια).[96] This is part of the complexity of real phenomena, which seem to appear simultaneously concave and convex. The solution is not to proclaim one or the other truth unilaterally but to navigate this complexity. It indicates two aspects of reality that must be reconciled, not excluded from one another.

Dogmatic adherence to thesis A or non-A inevitably leads to conflicts, to religious adherence to an idea of "purity" based on disgust for vision A or B, and to rigid practices aimed at maintaining the purity of the vision (*tamūpanissāya jigucchitaṃ vā, atha vāpi diṭṭhaṃ va sutaṃ mutaṃ vā*). Furthermore, some proclaim a certain teaching as absolute (*yamāhu dhammaṃ paramanti eke*), while others dismiss it as inferior (*tameva hīnanti panāhu aññe*), and the Buddha rhetorically asks, "Which will be the true doctrine for all those who proclaim themselves experts?" (*sacco nu vādo katamo imesaṃ, sabbeva hīme kusalāvadānā*).

This leads to arguments and disputes (*viggayha vivādayanti*) because each proclaims their own conviction as the only truth (*sakaṃ sakaṃ sammutimāhu saccaṃ*). Yet again, the Buddha ridicules this view: "If someone's mere disdain made you inferior, no one would stand out in any teaching" (*parassa ce vambhayitena hīno, na koci dhammesu visesi assa*).

In this text, the Buddha engages in the debate about what makes a 'true' Brahmin and indeed asserts that the true Brahmin should avoid

96. Richard Jones, "Dialetheism, Paradox, and Nāgārjuna's Way of Thinking," *Comparative Philosophy: An International Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches toward World Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2018): 41–68, DOI: 10.31979/2151-6014(2018).090205.

clinging to either view after wisely evaluating them (*na brāhmaṇassa paraneyyamatthi*).

Here we reach what I believe is the most important point of the entire text. To dismantle the implicit dogmatism in adopting different ideologies, the Buddha states: "when a person sees, they see nothing but name and form, and having seen this, they will know only these things" (*passaṃ naro dakkhati nāmarūpaṃ, disvāna vā ñassati tānimeva*). This is the decisive moment of Snp 4.13, and the single phrase that ties together everything said in this monograph so far.

We know that things are names and names are things in the archaic Buddhist view, and now we not only have confirmation of this in one of the texts likely to be among the most archaic in the entire canon, but also a clear affirmation of the correspondence between the pair name-form, which constitutes a psychophysical and semantic dimension of organizing reality. This functions as an obstacle to perceiving the suchness of reality, the things-as-they-are. In fact, when a person "sees," they do not see reality, but "name-and-form." We see a world populated by "signs," perceptual markers within semantic networks, but we do not grasp the connections holding the entire structure together, trapped as we are in their nodes.

Here, another important metaphor arises: the *untangling* of these knots. Just as the meditator must meditate in the absence of figurative signs (*animitta*), we can similarly understand this "untangling" of the sign as the dissolution of the illusion that ties the *sema* together in Saussure's idea. The two *kenomes* are loosened in their links ⊃↔⊂, revealing that they are empty in themselves. This does not mean they are truly separable—no phenomenon is isolatable. What the meditator does is *reveal the intrinsic emptiness* of phenomena deprived of their causal connections: the untying of the knots or the disjunction from that which binds us to them, which makes us *acted upon* by the signs.

The metaphor of the "knots" (*ganthanaṃ*, see also *gānthaṇa*) describes the web of the world. Thus, the sage, having avoided taking sides among factions, has also untied (*visajja*) all the knots of the world (*vissajja ganthāni munīdha loke, vivādajātesu na vaggasārī*).

Since this binding is sometimes interpreted also as a yoke, we can understand *visajja* and *visaṃyoga* as synonyms, where the prefix *vi-* precisely serves a divisive, disjunctive function, in both terms. The Latin term *disiungō* ("to unyoke") presents the same prefix *dis-*, which traces back to the Indo-European root **dṷi-*, from which we also have the Sanskrit *dvi* ("two") and the prefix *vi-*, found again in *vi-saṃ-yoga*, meaning "I disjoin the yoking."

That this concrete idea underpins the Buddhist understanding of *yoga* is evident also from the suttas. In Iti 112, we read about the world and its origin as a phenomenon, and about the cessation of its appearing—all topics discussed in Chapter 2. What I wish to emphasize is that the one who directly knows the totality of the world as well as its suchness (*sabbalokaṃ abhiññāya, sabbaloke yathātathaṃ*) is, in this context, also described as the one who has "*disjoined* from the entire world" (*sabbalokavisaṃyutto*). A perfect correlation is thus drawn between the complete understanding of the world (which also implies being a *lokantagū*, a "knower of the end of the world") and the disjunction from the totality of the world: *sabba-loka-visaṃyutto*.

In the *Yogasutta* (AN 4.10), the existence of four distinct *yoga*s is revealed: the *yoga* of sensuality (*kāmāyogo*), the *yoga* of existence (*bhavayogo*), the *yoga* of vision-opinion (*diṭṭhiyogo*), and that of ignorance (*avijjāyogo*). As presented in this sutta, it indeed seems that these *yogas* are not understood as anything other than yokes: forces that bind us and from which we must disjoin ourselves. Just as there are beneficial practices, there can also be habits that lead to harmful consequences. For instance, *avijjāyogo* is the yoke of those who fail to discern the correct nature (*yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti*), the origin (*samudayañca*), the cessation (*atthaṅgamañca*), the gratification (*assādañca*), the drawbacks (*ādīnavañca*), and the escape (*nissaraṇañca*) from the six sensory cognitions (*phassāyatana*), or spheres of contact.

Similarly, *kāmāyogo* is described as the yoke of those who do not discern the true nature (*yathābhūtaṃ*) of things, the origin (*samudaya*) of phenomena, the pleasures (*assāda*) to which they submit themselves, and the harmful consequences (*ādīnava*) that follow, as they do not know the path of escape (*nissaraṇa*) from the trap of sensuality

(*kāma*). *Bhavayogo* pertains to those who do not discern the true nature (*yathābhūtaṃ*) of things, the origin (*samudaya*) of phenomena, the pleasures (*assāda*) to which they submit themselves, and the harmful consequences (*ādīnava*), as they do not know the path of escape (*nissaraṇa*) from the trap of becoming (*bhava*). Finally, *diṭṭhiyogo* refers to those who do not discern the true nature (*yathābhūtaṃ*) of things, the origin (*samudaya*) of phenomena, the pleasures (*assāda*) to which they submit themselves, and the harmful consequences (*ādīnava*), as they do not know the path of escape (*nissaraṇa*) from the illusion of what their eyes perceive (*diṭṭhi*) and take to be real.

Those who are victims of vision are obsessed (*sānuseti*) by the passions arising from vision (*diṭṭhirāgo*), the pleasure arising from vision (*diṭṭhinandī*), the attraction arising from vision (*diṭṭhisneho*), the infatuation arising from vision (*diṭṭhimucchā*), the craving arising from vision (*diṭṭhipipāsā*), the frenzy arising from vision (*diṭṭhipariḷāho*), the fascination arising from vision (*diṭṭhijjhosānaṃ*), and the thirst arising from vision (*diṭṭhitaṇhā*).

What is particularly curious about this sutta is that the *yoga*s, or bindings, are presented as malevolent, while the solutions to these incorrect habits are provided by anti-*yoga*s, or "disjunctions" (*visaṃyogā*). The four anti-yogas (*kāmayogavisaṃyogo, bhavayogavisaṃyogo, diṭṭhiyogavisaṃyogo, avijjāyogavisaṃyogo*) are, of course, the capacity to discern the true essence, the origin, the cessation, the gratification, the drawbacks, and the escape from sensuality, existence, vision, and ignorance (*kāmānaṃ / bhavānaṃ / diṭṭhīnaṃ / channaṃ phassāyatanānaṃ samudayañca atthaṅgamañca assādañca ādīnavañca nissaraṇañca yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti*), leading to disjunction or liberation from the incorrect practices that cause such negative outcomes.

I suggest understanding these disjunctions within the full scope of the Buddhist analytical tradition, and not as separations in a severing sense, as language tends to isolate supposedly autonomous entities—the names-things that cause us so much trouble. Analysis (*vibhaṅga*) is omnipresent in the canon and will also be employed by the Abhidhamma in the form of *bheda* (√*bhid*-), a term effectively used as equivalent to *vibhaṅga* (*vi* + √*bhañj*-), as it also implies an analytical focusing on

phenomena to reach their composition as far as possible into a state not further susceptible to decomposition (√*bhid-* or √*bhañj-*).[97] This process is always juxtaposed with its opposite: the search for indissoluble associations, synthesis (*saṅgaha*). Neither is considered superior to the other in their capacity to comprehend reality, confirming it as a process of mutually implicating causal nexuses.

For instance, in the analysis of sensory spheres (*Saḷāyatanavibhaṅga*, MN 137), no autonomous and self-sufficient senses are found: there

97. The concept of "phenomenon (*dhamma*) subject to splitting (*bhedana*)" appears in the Pāli texts primarily in relation to death. Although the Abhidhamma employs the idea of splitting (*bhedana*) as a synonym for analysis, in the Pāli canon, it is rather the term *vibhaṅga* that fulfills the same function. In SN 51.20, the exercise of dissection (*vibhaṅga*) is applied to the analysis of internal and external phenomena, the perception of *before and behind* (*pacchāpuresaññī ca viharati*), and the understanding that what is behind and what is ahead share the same essence (*yathā pure tathā pacchā, yathā pacchā tathā pure*). These are very interesting meditations because, upon analysis in contemplative practice, it is revealed that internal and external are neither isolated nor truly separate. The foundation of the same 'psychic powers' (*vīriyasamādhi*) and the radiant cognition (*sappabhāsaṃ cittaṃ*) lies in this exercise. Thus, a meditator perceives before and after, and as before, so after; as after, so before (*yathā pure tathā pacchā, yathā pacchā tathā pure*). Additionally, as below, so above; as above, so below (*yathā adho tathā uddhaṃ, yathā uddhaṃ tathā adho*). As day, so night; as night, so day (*yathā divā tathā rattiṃ, yathā rattiṃ tathā divā*). These meditations involve a certain degree of analysis. For example, the meditation on above and below is an analytical exercise on one's body, beginning from the soles of the feet to the tips of the hair, analyzing its components with anatomical precision. In SN 12.2, the concept of *vibhaṅga* is applied to the phenomenological analysis of the chain of conditioned arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). In SN 45.8, the analysis is applied to the constituents of the Noble Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhaṅgikaṃ maggaṃ desessāmi vibhajissāmi*). In SN 47.40, the analysis is applied to the stages of satipaṭṭhāna meditation. In short, the idea of analysis as the enumeration of phases, constituents, elements of interaction, and so forth was already well present in the canon with the Abhidhammic connotation. However, in the specific example of *bhedanadhamma*, it is particularly applied to death. The concept is often paired with another 'phenomenon,' namely that susceptible to 'breaking' (*nikkhepanadhamma*), again synonymous with the disintegration of the body (SN 3.3). The body is often compared to a vessel. The breaking of the vessel represents the disintegration (decomposition) of the body. As phenomena subject to such disintegration, both the vessel and the body are prone to eventual breaking (*yāni kānici kumbhakārabhājanāni āmakāni ceva pakkāni ca sabbāni tāni bhedanadhammāni bhedanapariyosānāni bhedanaṃ anatītāni*, SN 3.22).

is no ear alone, self-existing, just as there is no sound or auditory consciousness that is autonomous and independent. What the analysis of sensory processes reveals is a processual continuity that is indivisible on an ontological plane, applying equally to both "internal" and "external" senses. This underscores the paradox of continuing to believe in an internal or external dimension as closed systems.

In SN 12.58 it is said that people are usually "yoked" (*saṃyojaniya*) by the force of *nāmarūpa*. That is why they must concentrate on the drawbacks of these things, to produce the cessation of their appearing (*avakkanti na hoti*). The same formula is repeated for *viññāṇa* in the subsequent sutta (SN 12.59). While in SN 12.58 the *nāmarūpa* binomial was deemed responsible for the arising of the six sensory spheres (*nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanaṃ*), in SN 12.59 on the other hand, *viññāṇa* is recognized as the condition for name-form (*viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ*). This relationship is mutual, as we know from what we are told in DN 15 which sees name-form as capable of conditioning consciousness as well.

What is interesting about SN 12.58 and 12.59 however, is the utilization of the term *saṃyojaniya*, "yoke" to describe the power of name-form and consciousness: "O mendicants, there are things prone to be yoked, as when you concentrate on the gratification provided by these things, name-form/consciousness is conceived" (*saṃyojaniyesu, bhikkhave, dhammesu assādānupassino viharato nāmarūpassa/viññāṇassa avakkanti hoti*). Thus, part of their training is the 'un-yoking' from these fetters, literallt 'un-conceiving' them, an act made possible also meditating on the drawbacks of these dangerous things (*saṃyojaniyesu dhammesu ādīnavānupassino viharato viññāṇassa avakkanti na hoti*). Consciousness is non 'conceived' anymore when one meditates on the drawbacks of its "fetters," that is, the yoking power of these mechanisms.

3.7 The Ascetic 'Solution' to the Body Problem

In light of the various issues previously discussed, the ascetic approach to life and the body advocates for a principal effort towards the deconstruction

of automatism (the yoking mechanism par excellence). Both the five aggregates and the chain of dependent origination are not artificial constructs but *automatisms*; they operate autonomously, as if by their own volition, and an individual under normal conditions scarcely recognizes this fact. The strength of automatism lies precisely in its discreteness.

When I perceive a smooth, transparent object such as a glass, feel its cold surface, and so on, my experience will typically involve an unawareness of this perceptual process. The smooth, transparent coldness of the glass reaches me without my conscious recognition. Even to estrange oneself from this flow and to recognize, "this is the coldness reaching my skin," or "this is the transparency I see in the glass," is no simple task.

> Si la parole présupposait la pensée, si parler c'était d'abord se joindre à l'objet par une intention de connaissance ou par une représentation, on ne comprendrait pas pourquoi la pensée tend vers l'expression comme vers son achèvement, pourquoi l'objet le plus familier nous paraît indéterminé tant que nous n'en avons pas retrouvé le nom, pourquoi le sujet pensant lui-même est dans une sorte d'ignorance de ses pensées tant qu'il ne les a pas formulées pour soi ou même dites et écrites, comme le montre l'exemple de tant d'écrivains qui commencent un livre sans savoir au juste ce qu'ils y mettront. […] La dénomination des objets ne vient pas après la reconnaissance, elle est la reconnaissance même. Quand je fixe un objet dans la pénombre et que je dis: « C'est une brosse », il n'y a pas dans mon esprit un concept de la brosse, sous lequel je subsumerais l'objet et qui d'autre part se trouverait lié par une association fréquente avec le mot de « brosse », mais le mot porte le sens, et, en l'imposant à l'objet, j'ai conscience d'atteindre l'objet. Comme on l'a souvent dit, pour l'enfant l'objet n'est connu que lorsqu'il est nommé, le nom est l'essence de l'objet et réside en lui au même titre que sa couleur et que sa forme.[98]

Even more challenging is the recognition that these 'data' being processed do not reference the glass as an autonomous, self-sufficient object. There is no 'glass' out there serving as the witness to my perceptions, but rather a glass-in-relation-with me. This further realization requires an immense effort. Given that these automatisms are almost uncontrollable, and the common individual is ensnared by them without

98. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 216–17.

recourse, the philosophical problem for the ascetic, who recognizes this condition, transforms into a praxis aimed at dismantling this servitude to perceptions. Three potential paths exist.

Two extremes and a middle path. The first extreme is what Buddhists term "mortification" (*atta-kilamatha*, *ātāpanaparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto*), in reference to other extreme ascetic traditions. This path imposes a rigor almost to the point of self-destruction: perceptions must be driven to madness, such that the ascetic's body is so subverted that it no longer poses an obstacle to the practice aimed at transcending the limits constituted by these perceptions. This path was partially pursued by the Buddha[99] before being abandoned due to its excessive rigor.[100]

Fig. 18 – Depiction of a fasting Buddha, Cave 76, The Visit of Maya, detail of a panel in the Kèzī'ěr Caves (克孜尔千佛洞 Kèzī'ěr qiān fú dòng). In this image we can see a visual representation of the account concerning the Buddha's phase of rigid ascetic practice. Public domain.

99. Cf. MN 12: "Truly, I used to be an ascetic, the most austere of ascetics. Truly, I used to live miserably, the roughest way. Truly, I used to live in scrupulous morality, the most rigorous moral way possible. Truly, I used to be secluded, the most secluded way possible" (*tapassī sudaṃ homi paramatapassī, lūkho sudaṃ homi paramalūkho, jegucchī sudaṃ homi paramajegucchī, pavivitto sudaṃ homi paramapavivitto*).
100. Freiberger et al., *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, 236–43.

Indian art history recounts these episodes, preserved in the canon, where the Buddha meditated without attending to bodily care, not washing, shaving, or eating,[101] to the extent that he became so emaciated that he could touch his spine (*piṭṭhikaṇṭakaṃ*) through his abdomen.[102]

101. Cf. MN 12: "Thus, such was my ascetic austerity, O Sāriputta. I used to be naked, rejecting social conventions, licking my hands. I didn't respond when called, I didn't stop when asked to. I didn't to food brought to me, or prepared specially for me, neither did I consent to be invited for a meal. I didn't accept anything from a pot, I didn't accept anything from a bowl […] I ate herbs, millet, wild rice, poor rice, water lettuce, rice bran, scum from boiling rice, sesame flour, grass, or cow dung. I survived on forest roots and fruits, or eating fallen fruit. […] I plucked out my hair and beard for I was such convicted to this practice. I constantly stood up, refusing to seat; rather I sat on haunches committed to the endeavor of squatting; I laid on a mat of thorns, making those thorns my bed; I was committed to the practice of immersion in water three times a day, evenings included. I lived thusly, committed to various ways of mortifying and tormenting my body, such was my practice as a burner-ascetic" (*tatrāssu me idaṃ, sāriputta, tapassitāya hoti—acelako homi muttācāro hatthāpalekhano, naehibhaddantiko natiṭṭhabhaddantiko; nābhihaṭaṃ na uddissakataṃ na nimantanaṃ sādiyāmi. so na kumbhimukhā paṭiggaṇhāmi, na kaḷopimukhā paṭiggaṇhāmi… so sākabhakkho vā homi, sāmākabhakkho vā homi, nīvārabhakkho vā homi, daddulabhakkho vā homi, haṭabhakkho vā homi, kaṇabhakkho vā homi, ācāmabhakkho vā homi, piññākabhakkho vā homi, tiṇabhakkho vā homi, gomayabhakkho vā homi, vanamūlaphalāhāro yāpemi pavattaphalabhojī… kesamassulocakopi homi kesamassulocanānuyogamanuyutto; ubbhaṭṭhakopi homi āsanapaṭikkhitto; ukkuṭikopi homi ukkuṭikappadhānamanuyutto; kaṇṭakāpassayikopi homi kaṇṭakāpassaye seyyaṃ kappemi; sāyatatiyakampi udakorohanānuyogamanuyutto viharāmi— iti evarūpaṃ anekavihitaṃ kāyassa ātāpanaparitāpanānuyogamanuyutto viharāmi. idaṃsu me, sāriputta, tapassitāya hoti*).

102. Cf. MN 12, MN 36, MN 85, & MN 100: "I used to eat so little that the gleam of my eyes sank so deep in their orbits, like the gleam of water sunk deep down a well. Having eaten so little, my scalp shriveled withered like a green bitter-gourd dried in the sun and blown away by the wind. Having eaten so little, the skin of my belly stuck to my backbone, so that when I tried to rub my belly I could grab my backbone" (*seyyathāpi nāma gambhīre udapāne udakatārakā gambhīragatā okkhāyikā dissanti; evamevassu me akkhikūpesu akkhitārakā gambhīragatā okkhāyikā dissanti tāyevappāhāratāya; seyyathāpi nāma tittakālābu āmakacchinno vātātapena samphuṭito hoti sammilāto; evamevassu me sīsacchavi samphuṭitā hoti sammilātā tāyevappāhāratāya; so kho ahaṃ, sāriputta, 'udaracchaviṃ parimasissāmī'ti piṭṭhikaṇṭakaṃyeva pariggaṇhāmi, 'piṭṭhikaṇṭakaṃ parimasissāmī'ti udaracchaviṃyeva pariggaṇhāmi, yāvassu me, sāriputta, udaracchavi piṭṭhikaṇṭakaṃ allīnā hoti tāyevappāhāratāya*).

This extreme asceticism, called *tapassī* in the canon,[103] represents a radical approach to the problem of the body, a drastic blow to perceptions, opposed with a paroxysmal discipline. The ascetic must "invert day with night," seeking a frozen lake in winter for immersion at the dead of night, and the hottest sunbaked spot in summer for meditation surrounded by four fires.[104] This approach, aiming to completely overturn perceptual automatisms, can certainly yield benefits but demands such great rigor and discipline that it is an undertaking for the few.[105] The Buddha abandoned this 'traditional' form of asceticism as too extreme.

The other extreme is the exclusively intellectual approach. While yogic discipline is excessively focused on the practical problem of the body, retreating solely into intellectualism and theories presents an

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103. The term *tapassī* (literally "burners") is consistently used to describe an ancient form of asceticism, which is often rejected. The *tapasvin* is an individual who engages with 'heat' (*tapas*). The origin of the relationship between heat and ascetic practice can be elucidated in various ways. In the Indo-Aryan tradition, tapas is associated with Agni, the god of fire, who is undoubtedly the most significant figure in the Ṛgveda. Among the many hymns dedicated to him, see ṚV 3.5.7 for a comprehensive understanding of his role in the creation myth. Furthermore, the quality of heat is associated with cosmogonical creation, in opposition to the primordial cold and undifferentiated (immobile) water, as noted in ṚV 10.154.5. The translation "burners" is, undoubtedly, a deliberate poetic license on my part, connected to the etymological meaning of tapas as warmth/asceticism. Naturally, these "burners," who are so frequently criticized (see, for instance, the passages in DN 8, SN 42.12, and 44.4, among many others), stand in stark contrast to Buddhist asceticism, whose practitioners adopt a different designation for themselves: that of *samaṇa*, a term rich in fascination, likely linked to the notion of "effort." However, it is premature to delve into these topics. The term is clearly analogous to the Latin *tepor*, *tepōris* and, as the common Indo-European root (**tép*-) suggests, pertains to heat or processes related to warming. It is also probable that the ancients who appropriated this concept for philosophical purposes saw in heat an easy association with bodily temperature.

104. Cf. MN 12: "Thus I, O Sāriputta, during the nights of long winters, during the coldest winter season, during such a night, I stood in the open space, while in the day I stayed in the forest; while in the last month of the hot season I stayed in the hot open space, and in the forest by night" (*so kho ahaṃ, sāriputta, yā tā rattiyo sītā hemantikā antaraṭṭhakā himapātasamayā tathārūpāsu rattīsu rattiṃ abbhokāse viharāmi, divā vanasaṇḍe; gimhānaṃ pacchime māse divā abbhokāse viharāmi, rattiṃ vanasaṇḍe*).

105. Olson, *Indian Asceticism: Power, Violence, and Play*; Freiberger et al., *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, 28.

opposite issue, leading to a neglect of the concrete objective of transcending bodily limits. Solely intellectual pursuits result in constructing a metaphysical system that is impractical to apply to reality. One may elevate the mind to great heights, but all those absolutes aspired to remain mere conjectures because the body remains mortal and decaying, driven by perceptions over which there is no current control. One can recognize the problem theoretically, but in practice, one cannot estrange oneself from it. Pure theory is insufficient; it does not liberate from bodily constraints but leads instead to a life secluded in one's chambers, constructing a system without practical applicability.

To be more precise, a practical aspect exists but consists of a set of negative consequences on life, paradoxically the very outcomes the philosopher seeks to avoid. An example of this unintended extreme is the problem of language. For Buddhism, as will be seen, language is not an artificial construct but something inherent in cognitive automatisms. Human nature inevitably develops language, and it is the natural outcome of the automatisms of the five aggregates. The organization of the world into names and forms comes 'spontaneously' to humans, yet this naturalness does not make it beneficial. The linguistic world we inhabit daily is a world of shadows, certainties founded on emptiness, of 'things' apparently concrete and 'graspable,' usable or 'real,' but lacking any foundation beyond designation. This applies not only to so-called abstract concepts. Both 'law' and 'clothing' are merely abstract concepts, even though the latter seems tangible. Words ground the idea that they are 'real' things, thus acting upon us and conditioning us accordingly.

vokārañca manussesu,	Distinctions among humans,
samaññāya pavuccati	Are merely spoken of by designation.

(Snp 3.9)

This is an aspect Buddhism opposes from the outset: that there are "kings," "merchants," "priests," or "proletarians" only because the concept of "king," "merchant," "priest," or "proletarian" is applied as

a 'force' acting on these social classes. In virtue of this idea, people conform to what the concept prescribes, driven also by the collective belief in this supposed truth.

The king believes himself to be one because his subjects recognize him as "king," and consequently, their bodies behave before the king as subordinates interacting with the highest authority. The king, in turn, reinforces this identity, recognizing the "subordinates" as such, feeling *ontologically different* from them. The real nature of class division is probably the single argument against which the Buddha expresses the most fervor,[106] instructing his disciples that if they intend to join his community, they must not even permit themselves to believe in such real distinctions, thus the noble sheds his nobility as much as the merchant or the pauper, leveling all distinctions. The notion that there is no "right of birth" is opposed from the earliest strata of the canon.

samaññā hesā lokasmiṃ,	Merely by designation in the world,
nāmagottaṃ pakappitaṃ;	is the name-and-family conceived;
sammuccā samudāgataṃ,	Arise by virtue of common consensus,
tattha tattha pakappitaṃ.	Thus conceived for everyone.
dīgharattānusayitaṃ,	For too much time,
diṭṭhigatamajānataṃ;	This false dogma ruled
ajānantā no pabrunti,	These ignorant declare
jātiyā hoti brāhmaṇo	that one is Brahmin by birth

(MN 98)

The discussion thus far should remind us of the theory of social bodies that I previously mentioned. This emphasis on the notion that one's social class is not inherently determined by the body. As illustrated in Snp 3.9, the Buddha even enumerates numerous somatic

106. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings. The Middle Position on Theory and Practice*, 178; Gabriel Ellis, "Early Buddhism and Caste," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny/ Yearbook of Oriental Studies*, 2019, 55–71, DOI: 10.24425/ro.2019.129438; Pradeep P. Gokhale, *Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste*, ed. Pradeep P. Gokhale (Routledge India, 2020), DOI: 10.4324/9781003045090; Y. Krishan, "Buddhism and the Caste System," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9, no. 1 (1986): 7183.

differences among animals only to assert that there is no detectable difference among humans significant enough to justify social division. This conception can only be understood if we recognize the biopolitical counter-tendency of Buddhism in relation to the established order. Although the idea of 'leaving behind' and 'rejecting social norms' is fully part of the extreme asceticism that the Buddha criticized, this aspect appears to be fully retained.

It is reiterated that anyone wishing to be part of the Buddhist community must completely abandon the notion that birthright determines social distinctions. In Snp 3.9 we find also the following affirmation: "I don't call someone a 'brahmin' only because of the mother or womb they came from" (*na cāhaṃ brāhmaṇaṃ brūmi, yonijaṃ mattisambhavaṃ*, Snp 3.9).

In the end, this is also a conflict concerning the right to define a 'true brahmin,' regardless of their origin: "deep in wisdom, intelligent, skilled in any sort of path, attainer of the ultimate goal: that's what I call a 'brahmin'" (*gambhīrapaññaṃ medhāviṃ, maggāmaggassa kovidaṃ; uttamatthamanuppattaṃ, tamahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇaṃ*, this formula present in Snp 3.9 is found verbatim also in Dhp 403). This problem seems to be of such importance that we can find it stated similarly in many different parts of the canon.

na brāhmaṇo nomhi na rājaputto,	I am no brahmin, nor a prince,
na vessāyano uda koci nomhi;	Nor a merchant, nor anything else.
gottaṃ *pariññāya puthujjanānaṃ,*	Fully understanding the [true nature of] ancestry of ordinary people,
akiñcano manta carāmi loke;	I wander in the world, possessing nothing, being a thinker.
saṅghāṭivāsī agaho carāmi, [...]	Clad in my cloak, I'm wandering with no home, [...]
akallaṃ maṃ brāhmaṇa pucchasi gottapañhaṃ	It is improper to ask me about my family.

(Snp 3.4)

This same formula is found similarly articulated in many other suttas. For instance, "not a lowlife nor a brahmin by birth; it is only

because of your deeds if you are a lowlife, because of your deeds you are a brahmin" (*na jaccā vasalo hoti, na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo; kammunā vasalo hoti, kammunā hoti brāhmaṇo*, cf. Snp 1.7 and variants found in Snp 3.9 and MN 98). Finally, as we have seen for MN 98 above, belonging to a given family or clan is a fact of designation that depends on the nominal. For this reason, a parallelism is established between the name-and-form semiosis and the desire for possession, for property, similarly to that of belonging to a given lineage or clan: "one free from a sense of ownership in the whole name-and-form does not grieve for that which is not, he does not suffer for any loss in the world" (*sabbaso nāmarūpasmiṃ, yassa natthi mamāyitaṃ; asatā ca na socati, sa ve loke na jīyati*, Snp 4.15) and also, "if you don't think of anything in terms of your own or someone else's possession, not finding anything to be 'mine,' you won't grieve thinking 'I don't have it'" (*yassa natthi idaṃ meti, paresaṃ vāpi kiñcanaṃ; mamattaṃ so asaṃvindaṃ, natthi meti na socati*).

This insistence also indicates that it is a conviction apparently difficult to dismantle. Mere 'belief' is insufficient to justify such a strong conviction, to the extent of considering it a 'natural' right. Only the educational formation of bodies, which thus internalize certain norms and 'conform' to them, can explain such obstinacy in a society. The body, after all, is not inert but indeed responds to habits and beliefs.

Previously, this issue was dismissed by referring to psychosomatics, but this concept does not address the enormous problem posed by the plasticity of the body—the adoption of attitudes, non-verbal language, self-convictions, and ways of behaving and presenting oneself to the world, which reflect what is intimately believed to be "natural."

For this reason, the philosophy underpinning the ascetic model proposed by the Buddha is not one of "self-mortification" (*attaparitāpanānuyogamanuyutta*) but rather that of "right livelihood" (correct *ājīva*). The Buddha recognizes the enormous problem constituted by culturally normative habituations, and calling this phenomenon *ājīva* (an intensified form of *jīva*, meaning "life") is a choice really

telling. In fact, (*ā*)*jīva* is akin to the Greek duo βίος/ζωός, terms that are etymologically traceable to the same Indo-European root, as is the Latin *vīvus*. How is "life" distinguished from "non-life"? Are there any differences *internal* to "life" (animal life, vegetal life, human life, sub-human life, and so on)? From many points of view, human life can me dissected into multiple forms-of-life, organized in specific social hierarchies.

τὸ δὲ ζῆν ὁρίζονται τοῖς ζῴοις δυνάμει αἰσθήσεως, ἀνθρώποις δ' αἰσθήσεως ἢ νοήσεως: ἡ δὲ δύναμις εἰς τὴν ἐνέργειαν ἀνάγεται, τὸ δὲ κύριον ἐν τῇ ἐνεργείᾳ: ἔοικε δὴ τὸ ζῆν εἶναι κυρίως τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι ἢ νοεῖν. […] οὐ δεῖ δὲ λαμβάνειν μοχθηρὰν ζωὴν καὶ διεφθαρμένην, οὐδ' ἐν λύπαις: ἀόριστος γὰρ ἡ τοιαύτη, καθάπερ τὰ ὑπάρχοντα αὐτῇ.

Life is defined for animals through their capacity for sensation, whereas it is defined for man by virtue of sensation and thought. But a capacity refers to its activity, and this is what it all consists of. Thus, it seems that life in the full sense is sensation or thought. […] One should not choose a life that is wicked and corrupt, even if it is fraught with suffering: for such a life is indefinite, akin to the things that befit it.

(Aristot. *Nic. Eth*. 1170a, 7-8)

The Buddha specifically contrasts *sammā-ājīva* ("right livelihood") with *micchā-ājīva* ("wrong livelihood"), with the precise intent of asserting that this way is incorrect because it is founded on falsehood (*micchā* being the diametric opposite of *sacca*, "truth"). This concept is so significant that it is included in the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*).

Buddhist thought upholds asceticism as still fundamental. This form of asceticism is not "mortifying" or denigrating towards the body, but it nevertheless seeks transcendence while recognizing bodily limitations. The crux of this thought lies in positioning itself midway between two extremes: acknowledging the body as a limiting factor, the extreme responses could be a disdain for this vehicle, an attempt to forcibly destroy its perceptual mechanisms through paroxysmal discipline, as described by the Buddha's "mortifiers," or the opposite extreme, which I personally consider to be the Stoic-like path.

Many have questioned whether Buddhism is a form of Indian Stoicism. In reality, Stoicism in some aspects transitions from an uncritical passivism, a total acceptance of one's limitations and an impotence in acting upon these bodily limits, and instead seems to push the Stoic to learn to coexist with these limitations, to be happy despite them, indeed precisely by recognizing and embracing them. I do not believe Buddhism is Stoic, and we shall explore why.

Thus, if both the mortifying and the Stoic paths are rejected, a third way remains. The body is limiting, it is possible to transcend these limits but not in the manner of the mortifiers, and hence it makes no sense to subject oneself to unnecessary suffering, nor should these limits be uncritically loved and accepted as a Stoic would (see §3.7). They are transcendent, through an ascetic path that is different from those we are accustomed to knowing.

The type of transcendence they propose is expressed through the metaphor of crossing a body of water. Sometimes it is a river, sometimes an ocean, but the meaning remains the same.[107] The ascetic is like a person who must learn to swim to traverse perilous and treacherous waters. One is not born with this ability innately, but it must be learned and refined. However, if one learns to cross the treacherous waters correctly, one passes from the "near shore" to the "far shore." Precisely the other shore, the farthest shore, is the metaphor for the acquisition of *abhiññā*, the superior, transcendent condition, the path of the ascetic, "beyond" (*pāraṃ*).

107. Dhivan Thomas Jones, "'That Bhikkhu Lets Go Both the near and Far Shores': Meaning and Metaphor in the Refrain from the Uraga Verses," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 11 (2016): 71–107.

seyyathāpi, ānanda, gaṅgā nadī pūrā udakassa samatittikā kākapeyyā. atha dubbalako puriso āgaccheyya: 'ahaṃ imissā gaṅgāya nadiyā tiriyaṃ bāhāya sotaṃ chetvā sotthinā pāraṃ gacchissāmī'ti;

so na sakkuṇeyya gaṅgāya nadiyā tiriyaṃ bāhāya sotaṃ chetvā sotthinā pāraṃ gantuṃ. evameva kho, ānanda, yesaṃ kesañci sakkāyanirodhāya dhamme desiyamāne cittaṃ na pakkhandati nappasīdati na santiṭṭhati na vimuccati; seyyathāpi so dubbalako puriso evamete daṭṭhabbā. seyyathāpi, ānanda, gaṅgā nadī pūrā udakassa samatittikā kākapeyyā. atha balavā puriso āgaccheyya: 'ahaṃ imissā gaṅgāya nadiyā tiriyaṃ bāhāya sotaṃ chetvā sotthinā pāraṃ gacchissāmī'ti;

so sakkuṇeyya gaṅgāya nadiyā tiriyaṃ bāhāya sotaṃ chetvā sotthinā pāraṃ gantuṃ.

O Ānanda, imagine if the Ganges river is full to overflowing, Here comes a weak person who thinks: "by swimming with these arms I will safely reach the far shore of the Ganges."

But he would not be able to swim with his arms to reach the farthest shore of the Ganges river. Similarly, when the Dhamma is taught to end the identity conception, someone whose mind would waver uncertain, not firm and undecided, you should see him as that weak person. O Ānanda, imagine if the Ganges river is full to overflowing, Here comes a strong person who thinks: "by swimming with these arms I will safely reach the far shore of the Ganges."

He would be able to swim with his arms to reach the farthest shore of the Ganges river.

Similarly, when the Dhamma is taught to end the identity conception, someone whose mind would be confident, firm, and decided, you should see him as that strong person.

(MN 64)

There exists an extensive corpus of texts that can be employed as exemplary for this metaphor, yet undoubtedly the most thorough analysis is that of Dhivan Thomas Jones.[108] Certainly, it is plausible that this aquatic metaphor also harbors additional symbolic meanings, but it is beyond our scope to examine it in detail here. What concerns us is its connection to philosophy and ascetic practice. The significance of this metaphor is also highlighted by the progressive stratification of the

108. Dhivan Thomas Jones, "Like the Rhinoceros, or Like Its Horn? The Problem of Khaggavisana Revisited," *Buddhist Studies Review* 31, no. 2 (2015): 165–78, DOI: 10.1558/bsrv.v31i2.165; Jones, "'That Bhikkhu Lets Go Both the near and Far Shores': Meaning and Metaphor in the Refrain from the Uraga Verses."

canonical texts. Given that the Pāli canon is not a monolithic tradition, it can be recognized as stratified, originating from a core, likely composed of sayings attributed to the Buddha and transmitted orally, around which subsequent commentaries and constructions have accumulated.

The most archaic core, identified as poetic in nature and linguistically distinct from classical Pāli, has frequently been pinpointed in the poems preserved in Snp 4 and Snp 5.[109] From this starting point, other texts can be identified, such as those codified in Snp, especially in verse, or certain sections in Ud and Iti, and certainly some portions of the Nikāya as well. The presence of verse is not always a guarantee, but it must be noted that in various suttas, certain texts are clearly poems, followed or preceded by prose parts that serve to contextualize or introduce those verses. There is also a series of internal citations. Many sections of the suttas are self-citations from other suttas, suggesting that certain fragments were memorized and repeated. Sometimes, suttas are even cited by title. Notably, some suttas mention the Greeks (*yona*, *yavana*),[110] whom the Buddha could not have known, thus confirming that these were reworked or composed after 300 BCE.

Returning to the internal citations, a sutta found in AN 6.61 exemplifies this reworking. It presents what is very likely a very archaic core of the Buddha's teachings, specifically the "middle" path (*majjhe*), but in doing so, it cites two texts, probably Snp 5.18-9 and 5.3, in that order. The latter is a very brief text that refers precisely to the middle way. The sage is one who has known the two extremes, but this does not render him stuck in the middle (*majjhe mantā na lippati*); rather, by fleeing both extremes, the sage is beyond the tangle. Snp 5.18 and 5.19 discuss reaching the far shore: "From the near shore to the far shore, cultivating the ultimate path, this is the road that goes to the far

109. Shulman, "Early Buddhist Imagination: The Aṭṭhakavagga as Buddhist Poetry"; Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry"; Jayawickrama, "Critical Analysis of the Sutta Nipata"; B. Sujato and B. Brahmali, *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts* (Sangharaja Mawatha: Buddhist Publication Society, 2014); McGovern, *The Snake and the Mongoose*, 59.

110. For instance, see MN 93 that mentions *yonakambojesu* "among the Greeks and Persians."

shore, therefore it is called 'The Way to the Far Shore'" (*apārā pāraṃ gaccheyya, bhāvento maggamuttamaṃ; maggo so pāraṃ gamanāya, tasmā pārāyanaṃ iti*), and 5.19 explains this path, not before reminding us of the many luminous epithets surrounding the Buddha: "dispeller of darkness, radiant beacon" (*eko tamanudāsino, jutimā so pabhaṅkaro*), but also "one who has crossed the flood" (*oghatiṇṇa*).

Therefore, AN 6.61 cites some poetic verses from Snp 5.3 concerning the one who has fled the tangle, but at that point, it says that the disciples ask for an explanation of what this tangle is, what the two extremes are, and what the end of it all is. The explanation attributed to the Buddha (it is highly unlikely that the Buddha cited the titles of his own poems, so we assume that this narrative is a later explanation of more archaic content) is that contact (*phasso*) is one extreme, and the origin (-*samudayo*) of contact is the other. The cessation (-*nirodho*) of contact would be the middle way. The tangle to be escaped is the tangle of craving.

This explanation, of course, renders in prose the complex issue of the body and perception, and prompts us to reflect on the nature of the Buddha's 'philosophical' communication, which likely occurred in a manner very different from that of Plato and Aristotle and more akin to Parmenides and Heraclitus. It involves teachings transmitted with extensive use of metaphors (such as the ascetic path depicted as the crossing of perilous waters), poetic evocations, and transmission through easily 'memorizable' and 'singable' verses. This is also the nature of the oldest strata of the canon: Snp 4 and 5 are essentially all poetry, exceedingly dense and difficult to decipher precisely because of the enormous scope of the metaphors employed, images of great emotional impact, but also capable of extreme pragmatism in other cases. The teaching remains essentially unchanged, especially concerning the issue of what is 'true' and what is 'believed' to be true due to 'visions' and convictions about what is absolute (a theme of Snp 4.5, for instance). Essentially identical metaphors are employed in all the poetic sections. For example, Snp 4.2 compares the attainment of knowledge and total perception to the crossing of perilous waters (*saññaṃ pariññā vitareyya oghaṃ*).

In the context of ascetic discipline and their philosophical conception, the discourses on the ocean are particularly compelling. These discourses are scattered throughout the canon. One example is found in SN 56.57 and similarly in SN 56.58. The central theme of this discourse pertains to the vastness of the ocean:

'seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, puriso mahāsamuddato dve vā tīṇi vā udakaphusitāni uddharitāni.

taṃ kiṃ maññatha, bhikkhave, katamaṃ nu kho bahutaraṃ—yāni dve vā tīṇi vā udakaphusitāni ubbhatāni, yaṃ vā mahāsamudde udakan'ti?

'etadeva, bhante, bahutaraṃ, yadidaṃ—mahāsamudde udakaṃ; appamattakāni dve vā tīṇi vā udakaphusitāni ubbhatāni. saṅkhampi na upenti, upanidhampi na upenti, kalabhāgampi na upenti mahāsamudde udakaṃ upanidhāya dve vā tīṇi vā udakaphusitāni ubbhatānī'ti.

O monks, suppose there is a man who removes two or three drops of water from the ocean. What do you think, O monks?

Which is greater: the two or three drops taken out, or the water in the ocean?

— "Lord, the water in the ocean is certainly greater. The two or three drops taken out are negligible."

The intriguing aspect of this sutta is not solely the discussion of proportions (in SN 56.58, the evaporation of the water mass is discussed, but the general meaning remains unchanged), but how these proportions relate to ascetic practice. The ocean remains vast and immense, and two or three drops cannot alter its nature, just as a person endowed with correct vision, allowing for superior understanding (*diṭṭhisampannassa puggalassa abhisametāvino*), realizes that once suffering is transcended, what remains is negligible.

Compared to the mass of worldly sufferings, there is no match. Hence, it is necessary to understand suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation (in other words, the Four Noble Truths). This is also why the mendicant must... *yogo karaṇīyo*, literally "practice yoga." Here we see an extraordinary use of the expression *yogo* together with *karaṇīyo* ("ought to do") we have seen in §3.5. Evidently, this refers to ascetic practice, but in the sense of discipline

or exercise. What practice? The one just mentioned: *'idaṃ dukkhan'ti yogo karaṇīyo* "practice discipline on the fact that 'this is suffering'" and similarly for all the Four Noble Truths.

It is noteworthy that this discussion of proportions is not applied solely to the ocean but is repeated with various other symbols serving the purpose of this metaphor. For example, it is used with the earth, compared to clods of clay the size of jujube seeds (SN 56.55-6). Nevertheless, the metaphor of water, especially its flowing nature, is particularly favored. In SN 56.53, the location where the waters of the great rivers (Gaṅgā, Yamuna, Aciravatī, Sarabhū, and Mahī) converge is discussed. Similarly, the Buddha invites one to imagine what would happen if two or three drops of water were removed. The immeasurability of those rivers' flow would not change due to such a small influence. The same applies to SN 56.54: if all the water of that immense flow evaporated, leaving only two or three drops, these could not replace the previous flow.[111]

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111. This aqueous metaphor appears to bear a remarkable resemblance to ChUp 6.13, where, however, it is employed for quite different purposes. As we shall see in the section dedicated to the problem of self and identity, Upaniṣadic philosophy is characterized by the identification it establishes between the self (*ātman*) and the absolute (*brahman*). This represents a problem from various perspectives, and even today, there is debate over whether the self referred to by the Buddhists (*attā*) is the same as that of the Upaniṣads not only etymologically but also conceptually. Nonetheless, this absoluteness of the self is expressed in various ways, and precisely in ChUp 6.13, a master has his son taste water in which salt had been dissolved. After each taste, he always asks the same question about its flavor, and the answer is invariably "it is salty." At this point, the father points out how the water is salty on the surface, in the middle, and at the bottom of the glass, "then the father said to him: 'in truth, my dear, you cannot perceive Being, yet it surely is here, it is indeed right here'" (*taddha tathā cakāra tacchaśvatsaṃvartate taṃ hovācātra vāva kila tatsomya na nibhālayase'traiva kileti*). The intended message is clear. The self seems to disappear when dissolved in the body, but it can be made to reemerge; it is noted by 'tasting' the water because the signs of its presence affect the nature of the water-body even if they are invisible. Most importantly, the self is compared to Being itself, which is necessarily eternal and true. Being is sometimes called *sat*, a term already in use in the Vedas and etymologically the verbal root of the copula, similar to the Greek εἰμι (in Pāli it appears as *satta*), but in the Upaniṣads, the locution "That" or "This" (*tad*) in Sanskrit is also preferred. However, the Vedic myth

Today, we know that quantity can change the quality of a phenomenon. The two are directly related. Quantitative variations also alter the effects a particular phenomenon can produce. Paracelsus said that everything is potentially poison, but it is the dose that determines whether a substance is poisonous or harmless (*omnia venenum sunt: nec sine veneno quicquam existit, dosis sola facit, ut venenum non fit*).[112]

The concepts of conformation (*conformātiō*) and information (*īnformātiō*), both based on the term "form" (*fōrma*), highlight differences between phenomena. Organization, sometimes called "natural laws," other times "automatism," is a morphological aspect, an ordered arrangement of matter. The presence of this order indicates an ordering agent. Information makes all the difference in the world, acting through order and quantity (which impacts quality). This discussion should be kept in mind as it will recur in our analysis.

However, the automatism from which ascetic discipline seeks to escape must be understood in this same perspective. The unconscious processes that guide the body without the present consciousness's awareness do not oppose it as an absolute and irreconcilable antithesis but as a nuance of a complex process. Even the conscious presence, which recognizes actions while performing them, is a quantitative variation of the

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of primordial time in which Being (*sat*) emerges from Non-being (*asat*) found in ṚV 10.129 is repeated in ChUp 6.1 in slightly different tones, denying that Being can arise from Non-being (*kutastu khalu somyaivaṃsyāditi hovāca kathamasataḥ sajjāyeteti; sattveva... āsīdekamevādvitīyam*), although the idea that in the beginning there was "only Being, without a second" (*sadeva... āsīdekamevādvitīyam*) leads to the notion that it was "Non-being, and from that Non-being, Being arose" (*taddhaika āhurasadevedamagra āsīdekamevādvitīyaṃ tasmādasataḥ sajjāyata*). In a somewhat different manner, ṚV 10.129.1 states that "Non-being was not, therefore Being was not" (*nāsad āsīn no sad āsīt tadānīṃ nāsīd*) implying a dependency between these two concepts. And then, still adhering to the aquatic metaphors, it speaks of the deep and unfathomable waters (*gahanaṃ gabhīram*), rhetorically questioning how they could exist if Being-Non-being was not. Yet this water, dark and invisible, enveloping all before time, was there; it was the only thing present before the heat set everything in motion (*tama āsīt tamasā gūḷham agre 'praketaṃ salilaṃ sarvam ā idam, tucchyenābhv apihitaṃ yad āsīt tapasas tan mahinājāyataikam*, ṚV 10.129.3).

112. Giorgio Pifferi and Patrizia Restani, "The Safety of Pharmaceutical Excipients," *Il Farmaco* 58, no. 8 (2003): 541–50, DOI: 10.1016/S0014-827X(03)00079-X.

same force that, when left to act unconsciously, produces automatism. In other words, the qualitative distinction depends on a quantitative variation, in this case, brought about by the philosophical-practical exercise of contemplation, leading to awareness of those same automatisms and, ideally, to transcendence through acquiring control over these processes. It is not, I emphasize, a radical opposition. Automatism is an organizing force manifesting as order, it is information and conformation, and can never be considered a chaotic or lifeless process.

The theme of effort and discipline in ascetic Buddhist thought is a critically important subject that must be situated within its proper philosophical framework. Asceticism, not exclusively within Buddhism, should not be perceived as a form of religious ritualism devoid of tangible meaning. This holds true for all forms of rituality in general, which some interpretations tend to explain as purely symbolic and metaphorical. However, another plausible explanation is the pursuit of efficacy that such behaviors are intended to achieve. In the specific case of Buddhist asceticism, the underlying thought is evidently connected to conceptions of the body and the world, which should not be forgotten.

Asceticism represents the practical aspect of this philosophy and is, therefore, an *orthopraxy* that addresses the consequences of the problem as observed through philosophical reflection on worldly experience and the limiting conditions evidenced by phenomenology. In testifying to such limitations, phenomenology also indicates residually what it conceals, much like a shadow implies the presence of a more complex object. We are akin to the characters in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, trapped in a condition that allows us to see only shadows (Plat. *Rep*. 7.514a-520a).[113]

The 'world' is this shadowy reflection of truth, and the path to *nibbāna* is obviously the escape from the cave. Beyond the issue of this comparison (it is not certain that Plato would necessarily agree with the Buddha or vice versa, thus we permit ourselves the luxury of juxtaposing the two philosophies in this regard), the implications these

113. ἀνθρώπους οἷον ἐν καταγείῳ οἰκήσει σπηλαιώδει, ἀναπεπταμένην πρὸς τὸ φῶς τὴν εἴσοδον ἐχούσῃ μακρὰν παρὰ πᾶν τὸ σπήλαιον, ἐν ταύτῃ ἐκ παίδων ὄντας ἐν δεσμοῖς καὶ τὰ σκέλη καὶ τοὺς αὐχένας…

have on the conception of the body and consequently on the correct practice' or 'correct use' of the body by Buddhist ascetics is what interests us most.

Discipline (*yoga*) and effort (Buddhist ascetics are called *samaṇa*, whose semantic root *śram-* indicates "effort,"[114] "commitment") are the indispensable orthopraxy derived from their phenomenological philosophy. Merleau-Ponty can accompany us up to a certain point, after which we must proceed alone because his philosophy, despite recognizing this fundamental conception, does not derive the two aspects that distinguish it from Buddhism (the possibility of transcending bodily limits and the orthopraxy necessary for this purpose).

Indeed, there is a fundamental discrepancy regarding the vitalistic conception he attributes to the perceptual-sensory apparatus. Vitality, in the last analysis, is derived precisely from this active engagement with the world. Perceptual experience is not only part of our irreducible subjectivity but also an inalienable testimony of our 'being alive': "Le sentir est cette communication vitale avec le monde qui nous le rende présent comme lieu familier de notre vie. C'est à lui que l'objet perçu et le sujet percevant doivent leur épaisseur."[115]

This is an aspect that Pāli Buddhism would likely dismiss as uninteresting. The dichotomy of life/death is part of the dualistic theater inhabited by those still under the yoke of somatic-worldly limitations. While it is true that from their perspective there is no effective distinguishability between the body and the lived world, it is also true that, considered from the viewpoint of an ascetic, the body is essentially a corpse: "the body is prospectively dead anyway."[116]

"Life" is not valorized in the Demartinian sense,[117] that is, it is not recognized as something inherently possessing "value." It holds value within the historical-cultural context that employs the concept of "life"

114. Brett Shults, "A Note on Śramaṇa in Vedic Texts," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 5 (2016): 113–27.
115. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 79.
116. Wiltshire, "The 'Suicide' Problem in the Pāli Canon," 137.
117. de Martino, *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence*, 40.

as a positive value opposed to the negative value of death, deriving various benefits for the establishment and maintenance of social order.

> In this perspective and in this dynamic, death as a terminal condition of the biological individual transforms itself into a death that is being born in the intersubjectivity of values: in other words, the biological dying of an individual, which in a certain sense begins at birth, is remodeled into a "making someone die in value, operating in the concreteness of a historical society", which the divine Plato already knew in his own way when he declared the life of every instant to be the discipline of death: "Die and become". […] The family, the economic and social order, the system of prohibitions and obligations, the norms of interpersonal relations, the variety of cultural institutions, mythical-ritual symbols, the arts and more or less advanced mental and technological instruments for controlling nature: all these constitute the adult world's choices, initiatives that had their origin in adults' decisions and that have acquired the strength of traditions to be transmitted to children and youths. There are civilizations that differ greatly with regard to the "position" of males and females, fathers and mothers, or other "relatives" of this or that social group, but there has never been and there can never be a civilization in which children and the very young have a culturally hegemonic function.[118]

However, since in the normal condition we believe to be "life" we are actually slaves to the normative order of that same historical-cultural society, as well as to our perceptual-sensory automatisms organized by the automatism par excellence that is the cognitive-discriminative system, Buddhists find no advantage in defining the value of life and provoke those who believe in it by asserting that the body is rather a corpse. Essentially, *we are already dead*. This is a provocation, of course, but it conceals both their philosophical intent and the sense of the orthopraxy of their meditation.

It is natural to inquire to what extent this orthopraxis constitutes an uncritical acceptance of one's own conditions or, conversely, if it represents an active form of change and transcendence of these conditions. To some extent, I have already addressed this through my

118. Ibid., 58, 286–87.

previous considerations, but it must be noted that Buddhist philosophy appears, at times, to be quite similar to Stoicism.

Let us first examine one aspect. The discipline proposed by Buddhists involves dismantling those identity mechanisms (*sati iminā itthasmīti hoti*, "I am this because of that") which, when one is not aware of their functioning, lead to being "burned" (*pajjalati*). This is another significant metaphor in the Pāli canon: the cognitive processes which, in their relentless progression, "consume" the subject possessed by them until they burn.

Let us proceed step by step. In AN 4.200, four principles are presented which will soon become clear to us:

1. From love arises love (*pemā pemaṃ jāyati*);
2. From love, hatred can also arise (*pemā doso jāyati*);
3. From hatred arises love (*dosā pemaṃ jāyati*);
4. Finally, from hatred arises hatred (*dosā doso jāyati*).

This first part seems to assert that love and hatred are two entities that can reciprocally produce one another, in addition to being the cause of further love and hatred. In truth, these verses appear to contradict a famous maxim found in Dhp 3-5. However, I wish to also cite these verses within the context of the Stoic parenthesis I am opening here:

> 'They insulted me, they struck me!'
> 'They robbed me, they attacked me!'
> For those who harbor such burdens,
> Hatred is never appeased.
> 'They insulted me, they struck me!'
> 'They robbed me, they attacked me!'
> For those who do not harbor such burdens,
> Hatred is always appeased.
> For hatred cannot be appeased by hatred.
> Eventually, only love can appease it.
> This is the eternal Dhamma.[119]

119. Original: *akkocchi maṃ avadhi maṃ, ajini maṃ ahāsi me; ye ca taṃ upanayhanti,*

At first glance, these verses seem to contradict the idea that hatred can originate from love. However, attention to terminology is warranted. In Dhp, love is technically cited as *avera*, meaning the opposite of *vera* ("animosity, hostility"). Logically, therefore, Dhp speaks of a state of total absence of animosity and hatred, while AN 4.200 uses *pema* for love and dosa for hatred. The former term indicates affection more than love. Its root, √*pī*, conveys this sense of fondness, affection, attraction.

The other term, *dosa*, is one of the three poisons and can be translated as aversion, ill will, hatred (√*dus*). It should be noted that *pema* appears in the same Dhp (212-3): "from fondness arises grief, and from fondness arises fear; for one who is free from fondness, there is no grief, and what will he fear?" (*pemato jāyatī soko, pemato jāyatī bhayaṃ, pemato vippamuttassa natthi soko, kuto bhayaṃ*). Since this distinction between *pema* and *averena* is already present in Dhp, it cannot be considered in contradiction with AN 4.200.

The issue is thus somewhat different: *pema* is a form of attachment and affection for something, but such a condition is not the total absence of hatred; rather, it is a desire, which can also be understood as a desire for possession, control, dominance, explaining the possibility that from this form of 'love' hatred can arise. The solution here is also a detachment from all this. Identity mechanisms, based on dominance and possession, lead to these dynamics of love and hatred.

Desire (*iṭṭha*), pleasure (*kanta*), and attraction (*manāpa*) are implicated in this case: "when a person feels desire, pleasure, and attraction towards another person" (*puggalo puggalassa iṭṭho hoti kanto manāpo*) or else, when this person is hated. The combinations involve being engaged in multiple forms of relationships. When the person we love is also loved by others, and we derive joy from this, love arises from love. When both feel the opposite towards the same person, there is a paradoxical agreement ("these people hate the person I also hate, and

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veraṃ tesaṃ na sammati. akkocchi maṃ avadhi maṃ, ajini maṃ ahāsi me; ye ca taṃ nupanayhanti, veraṃ tesūpasammati. na hi verena verāni, sammantīdha kudācanaṃ; averena ca sammanti, esa dhammo sanantano. Here the term sanantana conveys the meaning of "eternal," "perpetual." However, his term can also be used to indicate something ancient or very archaic.

thus love arises for them"), showing how love can arise from hatred. Another paradoxical case: others hate the person I also hate. Love arises for them from common hatred. Then there is the case where other people love someone I hate, leading to hatred for them, a *dosā doso jāyati*. People subject to these dynamics of love and hatred are also "smoldering" (*dhūpāyati*) because they are "burning" (*pajjalati*, *sampajjhāyati*). The purpose of meditation is to extinguish this fire.[120] One should not disturb, argue, or abuse one's companions, nor respond to any provocations (*bhikkhu akkosantaṃ na paccakkosati, rosantaṃ na paṭirosati, bhaṇḍantaṃ na paṭibhaṇḍati*).

Additionally, there are certain things that are the triggering cause of a possible fire, and these things are obviously a series of thoughts, here called concepts, listed as follows: "when there is 'I am,' there is also 'I am such,' 'I am so,' 'I am otherwise,' 'I am everlasting,' …" (*asmīti, sati itthasmīti hoti, evaṃsmīti hoti, aññathāsmīti hoti, asasmīti hoti, satasmīti hoti…*), and so on, desiring "may things be such," "may such ways be," "may such other different ways be," thus arising "may I be so," "may I be such things," "may I be in such a way," "may I be in such another different way," "may I be in the future," "may I become such a thing," "may I become in such a way," "may I become in such another different way" (*itthaṃ santi hoti, evaṃ santi hoti, aññathā santi hoti, apihaṃ santi hoti, apihaṃ itthaṃ santi hoti, apihaṃ evaṃ santi hoti, apihaṃ aññathā santi hoti, bhavissanti hoti, itthaṃ bhavissanti hoti, evaṃ bhavissanti hoti, aññathā bhavissanti hoti*). This stage of desire is still seen as "smoking," but the fire ignites when causality is introduced (*iminā*). The extinguishing of the fire occurs when none of these concepts are produced: "when there is no 'I will be such for such reason'... thus a mendicant is not ignited" (*iminā evaṃ bhavissanti na hoti… evaṃ kho, bhikkhu na pajjalati*).

Given this peaceful and generally tolerant perspective towards misfortune, it is possible to hypothesize, as some have done, that the Buddha could be considered a kind of a proto-Stoic. Indeed, when discussing Stoicism, particular caution is required due to its being a highly variegated philosophical movement that has undergone significant

120. Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvana*, 58.

transformations over time.[121] The usual focal point of such comparisons lies in a general principle: the Buddhist concept of detachment, or more broadly, the view of attachment as pathological, which is indeed a part of ascetic discipline.

A common exercise, reiterated in various formulations, can be summarized thus: "I perceive this form that provokes attraction or attachment; I see it as impermanent; now I experience detachment from this form." This specific aspect appears comparable to many Stoic tenets,[122] but for practical reasons, we refer to Zeno of Citium and Epictetus, providing a sufficiently broad temporal scope. Zeno is said to have been the first head of the Stoic school. His writings are lost, and since this text does not aim to compare Buddhism and Stoicism comprehensively, we will briefly refer to what has been reported of his doctrine.

When drawing comparisons between Buddhism and Stoicism, the focus often centers on the theme of detachment. However, it must be noted that both philosophies share certain foundational premises. Zeno centered his doctrine on the problem of λόγος, and understanding correct discourse is also foundational to the practical aspects of Stoicism. Stoics believed that sensation was something passively experienced by humans, processed through a series of active procedures like assent, which constructed the cataleptic (κατάληψις) representation. Concepts were not given objectively but were forms of mental anticipation derived from sensations, constituting a predictive understanding of reality. The sign and its analysis thus become fundamental.

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121. Brad Inwood, "Stoicism," in Routledge History of Philosophy, ed. David Furley, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1999), 243–73, DOI: 10.4324/9780203028452; Steven Strange and Jack Zupko, eds., Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

122. John M. Rist, "The Stoic Concept of Detachment," in *The Stoics* (University of California Press, 1978), 259–72, DOI: 10.1525/9780520339255-014; David B. Wong, "The Meaning of Detachment in Daoism, Buddhism, and Stoicism," *Dao* 5, no. 2 (2006): 207–19, DOI: 10.1007/BF02868031.

Ἀρέσκει τοῖς Στωικοῖς τὸν περὶ φαντασίας καὶ αἰσθήσεως προτάττειν λόγον, καθότι τὸ κριτήριον, ᾧ ἡ ἀλήθεια τῶν πραγμάτων γινώσκεται, κατὰ γένος φαντασία ἐστί, καὶ καθότι ὁ περὶ συγκαταθέσεως καὶ ὁ περὶ καταλήψεως καὶ νοήσεως λόγος, προάγων τῶν ἄλλων, οὐκ ἄνευ φαντασίας συνίσταται. προηγεῖται γὰρ ἡ φαντασία, εἶθ᾽ ἡ διάνοια ἐκλαλητικὴ ὑπάρχουσα, ὃ πάσχει ὑπὸ τῆς φαντασίας, τοῦτο ἐκφέρει λόγῳ.

Stoics agree on the primary importance of the doctrine of representation and sensation to the extent that the standard by which the truth of things is experienced is generally representation. The theory of assent and that of apprehension and thought, from which everything else proceeds, cannot be stated without representation, as representation comes first, followed by thought capable of expressing in propositional form what the subject receives from representation.

(DL *Lives* 7.49)

However, in this dualism between active and passive principles, a parallel with Sāṃkhya rather than Buddhism might be seen. In Sāṃkhya doctrine, matter is the primary element (*pradhāna*) which is inert and inactive without the intervention of a vivifying agent. Matter is eternal, unified, and continuous, but its transformation into the various configurations of becoming depends on embodying the universal witness, manifested in multiple forms and capable of vivifying matter.[123] This entity, called *puruṣa*, is described as a manifold phenomenon (SK 18) that penetrate matter and vivify it (SK 37), becoming the witness of the world through this process: manifestation is the fruit of this interaction (…*saṃyogaḥ tat-kṛtaḥ sargaḥ*, SK 21). Sāṃkhya doctrine promotes "liberation" from this material bondage, reasoning similarly to Buddhism but positing that *puruṣa* is fundamentally independent of matter,[124] which it uses only to understand its potential, after which it must proceed to 'detach' from matter.

123. Edward Hamilton Johnston, *Early Samkhya: An Essay on Its Historical Development According to the Texts* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1937).

124. Douglas Osto, "No-Self in Sāṃkhya: A Comparative Look at Classical Sāṃkhya and Theravāda Buddhism," *Philosophy East and West* 68, no. 1 (2018): 201–22, DOI: 10.1353/pew.2018.0010.

Δοκεῖ δ᾽ αὐτοῖς ἀρχὰς εἶναι τῶν ὅλων δύο, τὸ ποιοῦν καὶ τὸ πάσχον. τὸ μὲν οὖν πάσχον εἶναι τὴν ἄποιον οὐσίαν τὴν ὕλην, τὸ δὲ ποιοῦν τὸν ἐν αὐτῇ λόγον τὸν θεόν: τοῦτον γὰρ ἀΐδιον ὄντα διὰ πάσης αὐτῆς δημιουργεῖν ἕκαστα. τίθησι δὲ τὸ δόγμα τοῦτο Ζήνων μὲν ὁ Κιτιεὺς ἐν τῷ Περὶ οὐσίας [...]. Οὐσίαν δέ φασι τῶν ὄντων ἁπάντων τὴν πρώτην ὕλην, ὡς καὶ Χρύσιππος ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ τῶν Φυσικῶν καὶ Ζήνων. ὕλη δέ ἐστιν ἐξ ἧς ὁτιδηποτοῦν γίνεται.

They assert that there are two principles in the universe: the active and the passive. The passive principle, thus, is substance devoid of quality, that is, matter, whereas the active is reason inherent in that substance, that is, divinity. For it is eternal and is the artificer of many things through the extended matter. This is the doctrine that Zeno of Citium has expounded in On Existence [...]. The primary matter is considered by them to be the substrate of all things: thus asserts Chrysippus in the first book of his Physics, and Zeno. By matter is meant everything whatsoever is produced.

(DL *Lives* 7.134, 150)

Hypotheses regarding the derivation of Buddhism from Sāṃkhya have been advanced in the past. It is uncertain whether this is true, as Sāṃkhya, often considered the earliest philosophy to appear on the Indian intellectual scene, is also poorly documented indirectly by other philosophies, and its cardinal text is lost. We possess a Sāṃkhya text that is many centuries post-Buddhism, so any hypothesis of a pre-Buddhist Sāṃkhya must be taken with a grain of salt. However, it is possible to recognize common traits, and my own studies have led me to conclude that this hypothesis is not entirely unfounded, though things are not so simple.[125]

Nevertheless, while attested Sāṃkhya speaks explicitly of a duality between the subject of the world, the universal witness (*puruṣa*), and the passive material witness (*prakṛti*), Buddhism addresses this dualism without identifying the subject with a specific term. Both philosophies exhibit remarkable similarities regarding the impermanence of psychophysical identity, recognizing it as a construct. The illusory

125. Federico Divino, *Il Sāṃkhya Perduto: Archeologia dell'evento Ascetico* (Padua: Diodati, 2023).

nature of the world and the misleading nature of psychophysical perceptions are similarly addressed.

Liberation assumes different tones, as Buddhism, as we shall see, aims at an 'extinction' of these perceptual mechanisms rather than detachment from matter. Furthermore, not knowing the primordial Sāṃkhya or the one that supposedly interacted with the Buddha (perhaps through the figure of Āḷāra Kālāma), we cannot ascertain if this dualism of witness/witnessed was resolved in terms of distancing from the witnessed, as seen in the extant Sāṃkhya.

In Buddhism, the terms are undoubtedly different. The gap between the witness and the witnessed is collapsed, recognizing a fundamental unity between the two. Therefore, it is the mechanisms producing the illusion of this separation that cease, allowing the witness to extend its consciousness even to what was previously witnessed, perceived as different and separate from itself.

Turning to the theme of emotions, the Stoics undoubtedly showed interest from antiquity, classifying them meticulously (DL *Lives* 7.110-12) and referring to desire or craving as an irrational appetite (ἡ δ'ἐπιθυμία ἐστὶν ἄλογος ὄρεξις, 7.113). Moreover, and this is the most significant point of convergence, the wise man is also free from passions (φασὶ δὲ καὶ ἀπαθῆ εἶναι τὸν σοφόν, διὰ τὸ ἀνέμπτωτον εἶναι, 7.117). This is undoubtedly a notable point of convergence, but we must ask how it is so. While it is true that the Buddha is often described as "pacified," "desireless," and entirely "free from attachment," it is equally true that the methods by which the two philosophies aim to achieve this goal are radically different. They are not always recognized as such, but some divergence is taken into account. Speaking of Buddhist contemplative practice for example, Goerger writes that there is no "evidence" that "shows that the Stoics developed anything as robust as *mettā* meditation"[126] even if their 'detachment exercises' are quite similar.

126. Michael Goerger, "Moral Practice in Late Stoicism and Buddhist Meditation," *Comparative Philosophy: An International Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches toward World Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2017): 55, DOI: 10.31979/2151-6014(2017).080107.

Specifically, the concept of freedom from passions, or any form of perturbing experience, marks a convergence not only between Buddhism and Stoicism but also, as noted by several scholars,[127] between Buddhism and Skepticism. The Greek term in both cases is ἀπάθεια or a derivative thereof. From its formation, ἀπάθεια signifies the state of absence (ἀ-) of πάθος, which in Greek denotes sensations in general, but particularly unpleasant ones, or implies strong or disturbing emotions (πάσχω "I suffer").

If we examine the philosophical arguments leading Skeptics to aspire to ἀπάθεια we could surely recognize some similarities between the Greek and Buddhist or proto-Buddhist worlds, particularly in the case of comparable concepts suchlike δόξα-*diṭṭhi*, ἀταραξία-*asāraddha*, ἐποχή-*animitta*. Nonetheless, these similarities, albeit remarkable, are not perfect equivalences. Furthermore, the final goal of the Buddhist contemplative practice, that is the complete transcendence from the worldly and bodily limitations does not coincide with the Skeptic pursuit for an unperturbed life, which is for the Buddhist nothing but the premise for their practice.

Epictetus is a Stoic author who transforms these assumptions into the consequences that constitute the general contemporary understanding of Stoicism, namely that some things are within our power to change, while others are not. Concerning the latter, it is futile to strive to alter them, as they are beyond our control, and we should instead accept or learn to live with them without allowing them to cause us suffering or disturbance.[128]

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127. Jay L. Garfield, "Epoche and Sunyata: Skepticism East and West," *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 3 (1990): 285–307, DOI: 10.2307/1399425; Ethan Mills, "Skepticism and Religious Practice in Sextus and Nāgārjuna," in *Ethics without Self, Dharma without Atman: Western and Buddhist Philosophical Traditions in Dialogue*, ed. Gordon Davis (Cham: Springer, 2018), 91–106, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-67407-0_4; Thomas McEvilley, "Pyrrhonism and Madhyamika," *Philosophy East and West* 32, no. 1 (1982): 3, DOI: 10.2307/1398749; A. Plymouth Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008); Georgios Halkias, "Yavanayāna: Buddhist Soteriology in the Aristocles Passage," in *Buddhism and Scepticism: Historical, Philosophical, and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Oren Hanner (Hamburg: Numata Center for Buddhist Studies, 2020), 83–108.

128. Cf. *Enkh*. 1.1: τῶν ὄντων τὰ μέν ἐστιν ἐφ᾽ ἡμῖν, τὰ δὲ οὐκ ἐφ᾽ ἡμῖν.

This is the apotheosis of ἀπάθεια as understood by the Stoics. It is, however, quite debatable whether Buddhism adopts a similar view.

Epictetus extensively reflects on the nature of what we can and cannot change. This type of analysis seems to be of no interest to the Buddha, whose apparent obsession is the illusory nature of reality. The Buddha posits that nothing is truly within our control, not because we passively suffer its power and are destined to be unable to change things, but because the world we believe we inhabit actually inhabits us. The mechanisms of designation and reduction of reality, fragmented and organized into a recognizable and manipulable world, are akin to a stone cast onto a sloped surface. Once its descent begins, it proceeds autonomously, like an avalanche, unstoppable. These processes are unstoppable until their workings are recognized; the problem lies in halting these mechanisms, not in their uncritical acceptance. This is because the reality of the external world, a crucial issue in Buddhism from its origins, is far from a given.

Epictetus holds a very different opinion, although he acknowledges the deceptions we inhabit daily: "therefore, immediately practice saying to every harsh impression, 'You are just an impression and not at all the thing you appear to be'" (εὐθὺς οὖν πάσῃ φαντασίᾳ τραχείᾳ μελέτα ἐπιλέγειν ὅτι 'φαντασία εἶ καὶ οὐ πάντως τὸ φαινόμενον', *Enkh*. 1.5). Both in Buddhism and Stoicism the focus of the problem appears shifted to the perception of what constitutes suffering rather than on the uncritical acceptance of the idea that there is a 'force' or 'will' in nature that disturbs the quiet life of man: "men are not disturbed by things, but by the opinions they have about those things" (ταράσσει τοὺς ἀνθρώπους οὐ τὰ πράγματα, ἀλλὰ τὰ περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων δόγματα, *Enkh.* 5).

Epictetus's 'meditations,' if one may allow this poetic license, are typically Stoic contemplative exercises, where one imagines the loss of a beloved object or person. Imagining the loss of what one is attached to should produce, in practice, the apathetic effect. In this sense, I do not deny the similarity, for instance, with the Buddhist meditation exercises on the dismembered body or one's decaying corpse, which are a significant theme in the suttas. However, aside from the sight of one's corpse, the Buddha seems less interested in having meditators

practice on the loss of other things, focusing instead on the ontology of desired objects and their impermanent nature. Furthermore, meditations on death can also be understood differently, namely as a deconstruction of the life/death binary and a consequent devaluation of the culturally instituted concept of "life." Indeed, something like the radical non-dualism of Buddhism is challenging to find in Stoicism, and therefore this aspect of bodily discipline must be understood somewhat differently. In light of this we should reconsider entirely the "rejection of death" (θανάτου καταφρονεῖν) that Diogenes reports about the gymnosophists, and even the Pyrrhonian idea that life and death have no distinction whatsoever (μηδὲν διαφὲρειν).[129]

Death is not terrible in itself, says Epictetus (οἷον ὁ θάνατος οὐδὲν δεινόν), but "the notion of what we call death is terrible" (ἀλλὰ τὸ δόγμα τὸ περὶ τοῦ θανάτου, διότι δεινόν, ἐκεῖνο τὸ δεινόν ἐστιν). In a spirit very much akin to Buddhism, where the root of all human misfortune is ignorance (*avijjā*) and wrong view (*micchādiṭṭhī*), Epictetus asserts that the catastrophes that disturb, hinder, or grieve us are never attributable to others but to ourselves, and our dogmas (μηδέποτε ἄλλον αἰτιώμεθα, ἀλλ᾽ ἑαυτούς, τοῦτ᾽ ἔστι τὰ ἑαυτῶν δόγματα), by which he means our conception and interpretation of them: "it is the action of the uneducated person to blame others for his misfortunes" (ἀπαιδεύτου ἔργον τὸ ἄλλοις ἐγκαλεῖν, ἐφ᾽ οἷς αὐτὸς πράσσει κακῶς). But one might think this leads to a sort of anti-causalism, yet because the problem is the conception of evil, not the existence of evil per se, Epictetus dismantles the δόγματα by stating that "one who is perfectly educated neither blames others nor himself" (ἠργμένου παιδεύεσθαι τὸ ἑαυτῷ: πεπαιδευμένου τὸ μήτε ἄλλῳ μήτε ἑαυτῷ).

Epictetus reintroduces us to the problem of appearance and phenomenon (φαντασία, φαινόμενον). What constitutes mere appearance is φαντασία, "fantasy," "mere impression," and what constitutes the real phenomenon? How can we untangle this complex problem, with the body at its epicenter as both a witness to these φαινόμενοι and a potential processor of disparate φαντασίαι? In other words, given the illusory

129. Halkias, "Yavanayāna: Buddhist Soteriology in the Aristocles Passage," 87–88.

nature of the world we witness, how can we address the problem of what appears to us in this testimony? What is φαίνεσθαι? How do we disentangle this web of φαινόμενοι that crowd our testimony, misleading, deviated, reduced, constructed, controllable, or uncontrollable? The quest for the 'thing-in-itself' and the 'thing-as-it-is' might seem like two similar objectives, but they stem from fundamentally different premises. This also explains why Buddhist ascetic practice differs from Stoic exercises.[130]

130. See *Enkh.* 8: "Do not seek for the things which happen to happen as you desire; but wish them to happen *as they are*, thus you will experience tranquil flow of life" (μὴ ζήτει τὰ γινόμενα γίνεσθαι ὡς θέλεις, ἀλλὰ θέλε τὰ γινόμενα ὡς γίνεται καὶ εὐροήσεις); *Enkh.* 11: "Never say of anything 'I have lost it'; but rather say 'I have restored it.' Has your child died? He is restored. Has your wife died? She is restored" (μηδέποτε ἐπὶ μηδενὸς εἴπῃς ὅτι 'ἀπώλεσα αὐτό', ἀλλ' ὅτι 'ἀπέδωκα'. τὸ παιδίον ἀπέθανεν; ἀπεδόθη. ἡ γυνὴ ἀπέθανεν; ἀπεδόθη). For a comparison, consider SN 16.9: "O mendicants, whenever I so desire, I possess manifold varieties of powers: I can multiply myself and become one again, appear and disappear, pass through walls unimpeded, similarly through fences and mountains, as if moving through open space. I can submerge into and emerge from the earth as if it were water, walk on water as if it were solid ground, soar through the sky cross-legged like a bird, and touch and stroke with my hand the sun and the moon, possessing such extraordinary power. I control the body even up to the realm of Brahmā" (*ahaṃ, bhikkhave, yāvade ākaṅkhāmi anekavihitaṃ iddhividhaṃ paccanubhomi—ekopi hutvā bahudhā homi, bahudhāpi hutvā eko homi; āvibhāvaṃ, tirobhāvaṃ, tirokuṭṭaṃ, tiropākāraṃ, tiropabbataṃ, asajjamāno gacchāmi, seyyathāpi ākāse; pathaviyāpi ummujjanimujjaṃ karomi, seyyathāpi udake; udakepi abhijjamāne gacchāmi, seyyathāpi pathaviyaṃ; ākāsepi pallaṅkena kamāmi, seyyathāpi pakkhī sakuṇo; imepi candimasūriye evaṃmahiddhike evaṃmahānubhāve pāṇinā parimasāmi parimajjāmi; yāva brahmalokāpi kāyena vasaṃ vattemi*). As is evident from this and numerous other suttas, Buddhism indeed envisages the potential to attain a 'state beyond human limitations' (*atikkantamānusaka*) or 'beyond human capabilities,' thus distinguishing itself fundamentally from the stoic passivism previously discussed. Further: "O mendicants, whenever I wish, with a divine and purified vision that transcends human limitations, I can observe sentient beings coming and going, being reborn… thus I understand how they proceed according to their virtuous or malevolent actions… I have realized liberation from the defilements, attained the state of total liberation of cognition from these defilements through higher gnosis, and dwell in this very life with the perfect realization that I have personally experienced and fully comprehended" (*ahaṃ, bhikkhave, yāvade ākaṅkhāmi dibbena cakkhunā visuddhena atikkantamānusakena satte passāmi cavamāne upapajjamāne... sugate duggate yathākammūpage satte pajānāmi... ahaṃ... āsavānaṃ khayā anāsavaṃ cetovimuttiṃ paññāvimuttiṃ diṭṭheva dhamme sayaṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharāmi*).

Chapter 4
World, Body, and Transcendence (*lokuttara*)

ubhosu antesu vineyya chandaṃ,
phassaṃ pariññāya anānugiddho;
yadattagarahī tadakubbamāno,
na lippatī diṭṭhasutesu dhīro.
saññaṃ pariññā vitareyya oghaṃ,
pariggahesu muni nopalitto;
abbūḷhasallo caramappamatto,
nāsīsatī lokamimaṃ parañcāti.

"Devoid of desire for either end,
Having fully comprehended contact, free from greed,
Without committing actions to regret,
The wise one does not crave the seen or the heard.
Having fully understood perception and crossed the flood,
The sage longs for no possession,
With the arrow extracted, living diligently,
Aspires neither to this world nor to another."
(Snp 4.2)

Certain aspects of the Buddhist philosophy are undoubtedly original, "revolutionary for their time,"[1] and not found in the Vedic world, yet many others are constructed from within the Vedic world itself, without drawing from any other cultural tradition.[2] Indeed, it is the interpretation and transformation that the Buddha applies to certain concepts that constitutes the 'heretical' aspect of his doctrine. However, it is neither true nor sustainable to claim that the Buddha sought to constitute himself as a complete alterity to the Vedic world, which he appears rather to want to amend. Some institutions even seem to be respected, and Buddhism is indebted to Vedicism for some of its fundamental concepts.

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1. Sujato and Brahmali, *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*, 97.
2. Divino, "Seers and Ascetics: Analyzing the Vedic Theory of Cognition and Contemplative Practice in the Development of Early Buddhist Meditation and Imaginary."

Nevertheless, from a certain point onwards, the identity of Buddhist schools was constructed precisely as an alterity to Vedic and Brahmanical authority in India. This narrative, viewing Buddhism as entirely foreign to that world, gained traction and found acceptance even among many Western scholars, who consequently sought the innovative and subversive nature of ascetic philosophies exclusively in non-Indo-Aryan traditions, which were thought to have 'contaminated' the hegemonic culture, thus forming *nāstika*s, "negationists" (of Vedic authority), i.e., heterodox, and heretical movements.

Exogenous influence explains many things but not everything. To understand the position of ascetics, we must also comprehend these historical-cultural dynamics. The figure of the ascetic itself is not entirely foreign to the Indo-European world. We must demystify it from this image of being exclusively foreign to Indo-European, and particularly Indo-Iranian, traditions. Nietzsche's idea of Zaraϑuštra wandering in the desert and receiving revelations (*daēnā mazdaiiasni*-) from the supreme deity Ahura Mazdā should already indicate something about the presumed endogenous nature of ascetic-like practices, although specifically identifying the modalities of the revelation of the historical Zaraϑuštra is a difficult problem to solve.[3]

However, it is true that in Buddhism, the forest/village dichotomy (*arañña*/*gāma*) forms the basis of asceticism.[4] The forest is the place where the "city's laws" do not apply, where the ascetic can retreat to meditate and deconstruct the habituations accumulated within the normative domain of organized society. Numerous praises of the forest suggest that a part of Buddhism is undoubtedly indebted to different traditions, where forest dwellers, bearers of unspecified cults but remembered in the Vedas as strange, grotesque, howling wanderers,

3. Emanuele Enrico Mariani, "Il Così Parlò Zarathustra Di Nietzsche e Lo Zoroastro Storico Una Lettura Dell'Avestā," *Rivista Di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica: Vita e Pensiero* 4 (2021): 1–15, DOI: 10.26350/001050_000234; C.F. Whitley, "The Date and Teaching of Zarathustra," *Numen* 4, no. 1 (1957): 215–27, DOI: 10.1163/156852757X00130; A. Mani Irannejad, "The Old Avesta and Birth of Iranian Identity," *Iran*, 2022, 1–23, DOI: 10.1080/05786967.2022.2082313.

4. Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry."

engaged in practices that eluded the Indo-Aryans themselves. These may represent two different models of asceticism. Wandering in the desert until overcome by divine inspiration is different from retreating to a forest to practice a specific exercise. Contemplative practice in this regard is undoubtedly an innovative and peculiar aspect of Buddhism or *nāstika* philosophies in general.

The figure we seek to unravel is that of the ascetic-contemplator. The act of sitting, ceasing all other activities, and directing one's attention to the cognitive process in a specifically codified exercise to regain control over one's body is something not evident in the Indo-Iranian world before Buddhism. Equally different is the mythological, solemn, and formidable figure of the seer (*ṛṣi*) in the Vedic world. These figures, with almost divine power and revered abilities, are considered the authors of Vedic texts and custodians of ancient, magic-related knowledge, very similar, not coincidentally, to the high priests (*maguš*) of the related Avestan tradition.

The manner in which the Buddha positions himself in relation to the *ṛṣi*, as well as the Brāhmaṇas who apparently (supposedly) inherited part of their religious role,[5] indicates that these figures are not despised per se but rather considered corrupt, deviating from their original task. This suggests that his thought is, in some way, indebted to them, precisely because it proposes a correction. Although these figures were not involved in contemplative practice or the specific exercises of archaic meditation that we will examine, other aspects related to them, such as inspiration, poetry, and supernatural powers, are also found in Buddhism, demonstrating that not all aspects of these figures are rejected.

Every concept has its own history, and even beginning to reflect on a particular philosophical problem is not necessarily something done in isolation or through inspiration detached from everything else; rather, it arises from specific reasons rooted in intellectual history and the

5. D. D. Kosambi, "Brahmin Clans," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 73, no. 4 (1953): 202, DOI: 10.2307/594855; Michael Witzel, "Toward a History of the Brahmins," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 2 (1993): 264, DOI: 10.2307/603031.

events that have led a given tradition to grapple with certain problems over others. This chapter will be somewhat atypical, as it aims to examine these historical reasons. This historical contextualization offers an opportunity to better understand the rationale behind the structuring of the problems discussed thus far.

Before moving on to the concluding and more advanced section, which engages with and further develops these issues on a deeply analytical level—namely, biosemiotics—it is essential to close the loop on the preceding tradition. What better way to do so than by interrogating the very reasons underlying its philosophical inquiry? Why did the Buddhists begin to reflect on the nature of the world, phenomena, and origins? What prompted them to adopt a philosophy grounded in impermanence and the emptiness of all nominal identities? What led them to the conclusion that no self is autonomous?

While these questions showcase remarkable analytical depth, they also have historical foundations. The adoption of certain concepts—most notably that of *loka* (a term with specific connotations in the Buddha's thought, which also carries earlier meanings that the Buddha appears to expand and modify in certain respects)—was not an arbitrary choice.

Moreover, it is crucial to remember that these authors were not only philosophers and phenomenologists but also ascetics. Asceticism entails a series of consequences in lifestyle, in the relationship with society and the inner world, that is distinctive. It seeks to transcend certain boundaries we often take for granted, to overturn, disrupt, and challenge specific conditions. In essence, it aims to propose something inherently tied to praxis—a mode of living that was never separate from practice.

My methodological proposal so far has been focused on engaging first and foremost with the problem of the world from the perspective of biosemiotics. In the conception of those raised within Western modes of thought, the "world" can be understood as that set of "external" factors distinct from my subjectivity and corporeality, which constitutes a dimensionality populated by a series of objects whose "behavior" is described by the laws of "nature." This latter term, nature, introduces

yet another issue to be addressed. Forms of life populate the world and are themselves organized systems that follow natural laws, in the sense that they respond to stimuli and adopt behaviors according to their own "nature." There are also inanimate, non-living entities that populate this external reality, which we call the world.

At this point, the question assumes the following form: given that the body inhabits a world of which it experiences a reality that does not faithfully reflect it but limits, distorts, reduces, or deviates it in some manner, what must we do to attain a reliable picture of reality? In other words, is the body an insurmountable limit that will always pose a problem for humans, or can this limiting nature of the body be transcended in some way?

The reader will understand that the answer to this question fundamentally alters the approach to philosophical inquiry. If the body represents an insurmountable limit, then it must be entirely set aside. At this point, there are two possible ways of inquiry: those who pursue the search for reality 'by other means' outside the body, completely distrusting what comes from the body and attempting to 'decode' reality through the establishment of objective and stable means, not as fickle as the body's subjectivity; and those who further radicalize this position, believing instead that any means devised by the body to study reality would merely reproduce the body's perceptual mechanisms. The wisest course, therefore, would be to accept reality as it is, exercising perhaps a cold detachment from it. This latter school of thought trusts in the possibility of 'training' the body not to be overly influenced by reality but remains skeptical of the investigative tools, which reside nonetheless within the body, whatever theoretical or technical construction one attempts to circumvent them.

Another hypothesis posits that while the body is indeed a limit and poses a significant problem because it views reality in a distorted manner, it shows things as they are not, becomes attached to them, suffers, is frail and imperfect. Moreover, the experience of a distorted form of reality also poses a problem for the subject, who inevitably suffers from it. However, even recognizing all this, these thinkers assert, often with certainty, that this limiting nature of the body is not

an insurmountable confinement. This school, though adhering to the "body as prison" metaphor, does not see this prison as an inescapable life sentence. On the contrary, an escape is possible once the true nature of the bars and walls—i.e., the elements constituting the body's limiting and imprisoning factors—is recognized. This, incidentally, is the stance of Buddhism, which meticulously describes both the imprisoning nature of the body, identified in perceptual mechanisms, and asserts with certainty the possibility of transcending them: "one can go beyond this entire realm of perceptions" (*atthi imassa saññāgatassa uttariṃ nissaraṇaṃ*, MN 7). And "going beyond" is precisely the central theme of this propositional stance.

In this context, the *fuga mundī*, those seeking liberation from the world, are precisely the ascetics, and asceticism is the practical foundation of Buddhist thought. We now understand both why the ascetic undertakes this escape by disciplining the body to deconstruct habituations and isolating cognitions, and why society, culture, the political-normative order, in short, the οἰκονομία in the Demartinian sense, is what the ascetic flees from not only theoretically, rejecting the normative order imposed by these social forms, but also practically, seeking refuge outside the boundary (the field, *kṣetra*, see §2.7) within which they are in force and have power: "the economic order is anything but the risk of losing presence; on the contrary, it is the initial value with which the *ethos* of transcendence overcomes that risk."[6]

The necessity to abandon the world and become an ascetic in the ancient Buddhist tradition is described as early as the poetry of the Aṭṭhakavagga (Snp 4), where abandonment coincides with the full attainment of mindfulness (*sato samativattati*, Snp 4.1). The world is described as a place full of sensual pleasures (Snp 4.2), where the cycle of death and rebirth is perpetuated; but the world is also an identity construct (Snp 4.3), thus identifiable with the mechanism of thought (*māyañca mānañca pahāya*), which generates visions and opinions, leading to suffering. Theories and opinions are a worldly thing (Snp 4.5) and to attach oneself to them is to bind oneself to conflict.

6. de Martino, *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence*, 282.

No matter which ones, the problem is worldviews (*diṭṭhimpi lokasmiṃ*) shaping a form of knowledge of it (*ñāṇena vā sīlavatena vāpi*). The solution is to consider oneself neither as inferior (*hīno*) nor as superior (*visesi*), but as equal (*sama*). The world is a place of suffering (Snp 4.9), in which a self, an identity, is thought (Snp 4.10). To think a world (*loke maññate*) is to bind oneself to judgments, desires, pleasures and pains (Snp 4.11). Perception is a mundane fact that involves believing in multiple truths (*saccāni*), but they do not exist except in the worldly frame (*aññatra saññāya niccāni loke*, 4.12). Such is also the origin of dualistic thinking: in the law of duality, there is true and false (*saccaṃ musāti dvayadhammamāhu*). These are also basically opinions. Opinions create conflicts, and only those who abandon all opinions also abandon all conflicts. Such a person is called *upekkhako* (Snp 4.13), capable of resolving all discrepancies in the world (*vissajja ganthāni munīdha loke*).

In the Dhp the world appears as it is because it is 'perpetuated,' and therefore it should not be maintained (*na siyā lokavaḍḍhano*, Dhp 167): it spreads false opinions (*micchādiṭṭhiṃ*). The world is as transient as a bubble, as deceptive as a mirage; only by understanding it does one transcend death (Dhp 170). Few see clearly through this fundamental deception (Dhp 174). Here the importance of the renouncer is strongly affirmed, as one who abandons the world (*nīyanti dhīrā lokamhā*), and for that reason victorious over death itself (Dhp 175). Another important term we will reflect on is that of 'lord of the whole world' (*sabbalokādhipaccena*), a condition that in Dhp 178 is said to be inferior to that of one who has freed himself from the world.

The metaphor of the Buddha as world leader (*lokanāyaka*) is also repeated in the *Pārāyanavagga* (Snp 5.1), where, however, this condition also coincides with the world-ender (*lokantagū*). The world is shrouded by ignorance (Snp 5.2). The world has innumerable possible forms (Snp 5.5), just as innumerable are the forms of attachment (*lokasmimanekarūpā*). Such multiplicity of possible worlds is also understood in the formula "this world" (*ayaṃ loko*) and "another world" (*paro loko*) mentioned in Snp 5.16. But the only "right" view of the world is the one that reveals its inherent vacuity (*suññato lokaṃ*

avekkhassu), which does not mean that the world does not exist, but that it is full of illusions and interdependent mental constructs, not standing in isolation as self-existent. The Buddha, again, is the world-ender (Snp 5.19), the one who has reached the very end of the world, and for this admired by all.

4.1 What 'phenomenon' is 'outside'

As we have discovered in our phenomenological analysis thus far is that we engage with 'things' through various sensory channels. What unites all these sensory channels is not merely the capacity to establish a relationship between the perceiver and the perceived, but also the fact that such a relationship is established through a form of 'contact.'

Vision processes the effectors that reach us as the 'visual image' of the thing through contact with photons, processed by the ocular channel and the brain to extract data on color and shape. The same can be said for the other senses. Aside from touch, where the nature of contact between effector and sensor is quite clear, hearing also involves contact between the data transmitted by sound vibrations to the auditory channel (comprising the auricle, the external auditory canal up to the tympanic membrane), where the cochlea, fluids, and hair cells perceive these vibrations and then transmit them via the vestibulocochlear nerve to the brain (to the cochlear nucleus and then to the auditory cortex). Smell and taste proceed similarly through dedicated sensory effectors such as the neurons present in the olfactory mucosa or the gustatory cells on the tongue. For each sensory channel, the mode of activation is always the same: the contact between sensor and effector.

However, following the perception of things, there is a mental elaboration. It should be remembered that, according to Buddhism, the senses are six, not five. The sense of thought (*manas*) is not merely the coordinator of the other five, a coordination that allows for a unified and not fragmented perception of various data,[7] but it is also an

7. One should not take for granted the ability to associate a certain object being seen and held in hand with the unity of perception, that is, to recognize that the tactile and visual sensations being processed derive from the same object.

organizing principle that 'thinks' the thing. This already presents a problem: what does it mean to know how to 'think' a thing?

Furthermore, here the philosophical pathway diverges in the analysis of perceptions, as we must necessarily recognize that the thinking will assumes a dual nature: on one hand, there is the path of the grasper, the perceiver, the thinker oneself, the self-referential path of the mind that coordinates the mental image of the self and constructs its being 'someone' in relation to its own experience. On the other hand, there is the path of the grasped, which must consider the nature of the thing in itself, justifying it to the logic of separateness that endows it with its autonomous and self-sufficient identity. This gap is at the origin of the divergence and philosophical specialization as it is inherent in the very rationality with which we experience. In certain cases, the divorce becomes so irreconcilable that the two philosophies lose mutual intelligibility. There are also internal divergences, for example, when one seeks the necessity to investigate 'things' or invisible 'forces' that have an influence on the experienced, without being able to grasp them as one would with another object.

We have thus introduced the perennial issue of the internal/external axis in Pāli Buddhism. Clearly, resolving the problem of *ajjhatta-bahiddhā* is no trivial matter, and we must await further excerpts from the canon to form a comprehensive understanding. Returning to Merleau-Ponty, from the standpoint of his phenomenology of perception, addressing the problem of the apparent externality of perceived objects is crucial. However, he also asserts that such a distinction is a postulate that is difficult to substantiate.

> Le perçu n'est pas nécessairement un objet présent devant moi comme terme à connaître, il peut être une « unité de valeur » qui ne m'est présente que pratiquement. Si l'on a enlevé un tableau dans une pièce que nous habitons, nous pouvons percevoir un changement sans savoir lequel.[8]

Careful reflection on human experience does not compel us to believe in the objective existence of 'external things.' Rather, they appear

8. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 377.

as variations relative to the primordial field of presence, the perceptual domain over which the body has jurisdiction, or what we have termed the "circle of the world." This does not imply a reduction of everything to interiority but highlights the problem of defining exteriority. Once this is acknowledged, what remains of interiority?

Certainly, we might deceive ourselves into thinking that technical instruments and measurement tools provide a valid and objective representation of the external world. However, this assumption rests on the indemonstrable premise that the external world, independent of our experience, is an incontrovertible reality. This notion also overlooks the problem of defining a means capable of genuinely informing us about the 'external world' without being a grotesque parody, if not a hyperbolic exaggeration, of the analytical investigative methods we already possess, merely imitated, emulated, simulated, or accentuated to the point of absurdity by a mechanism of self-aggrandizement.

Nevertheless, even if we abolish this pernicious distinction between internal and external, we do not end up empty-handed. On the contrary, we realize that our experience of the so-called "world" is defined through a series of relationships. We must redefine philosophy as the science that studies these relationships and seeks in them the reasons for the relation that allows A and B to be A and B, not because they are inherently and independently existent, but precisely in the act of entering into reciprocal relation.

Therefore, not only Merleau-Ponty but also many others, including Rousseau, come to our aid. Fundamentally, we recognize that the human being is primarily "être « capable d'attachement »" (a being capable of attachment), and from this, we can develop our reasoning.

> À l'homme capable d'attachement correspond une définition de la philosophie comme étude des rapports dans lesquels il est engagé : « L'étude convenable à l'homme est celle de ses rapports ». Elle est l'étude de ses rapports avec les choses, ou rapports physiques, puis de « ses rapports avec les autres hommes », ou rapports moraux ; enfin, de ses rapports civils, qui sont « l'emploi de la vie entière ».[9]

9. Géraldine Lepan, "« Nœud Social » et « Rapport Civil » Chez Rousseau,"

As we approach from the problem of the body to that of the world, I wish to emphasize the issue of *perspective*. This topic has been partially addressed in various ways, but it is necessary to complete these reflections because the problem of the body will continue to be addressed. However, it will serve merely as the backdrop from which reflections on the issues of identity and the world will also develop.

Perspective is the world we present to ourselves. It appears 'given' by perspective, but in reality, it is a construction that is neither active nor passive. On one hand, the limitation constituted by our world-circle is a fact over which we have no jurisdiction unless we actively strive to transcend it, which is the fundamental premise of yogic-meditative practice. On the other hand, it is true that what enters within the limits of our world-circle is chosen, selected, and shaped in the image and likeness of our assumptions, anticipatory cognitions, and isolating thoughts that construct such a world.

Buddhist philosophy conceives of a body that is no longer the perimeter of limitations of worldly circles but is an all-pervasiveness. This characteristic of the Buddha's body is also the basis for subsequent, extremely elaborate philosophical speculations such as those of the Abhidhamma, but also the Mahāyāna movements, which I will not discuss, as my primary focus is on Pāli Buddhism.

This transcendence of the body brings other philosophical implications, within what we might define as Buddhist ontology, although some definitions of "ontology" may not fit well with the Buddhist thought on being. Ontology is often seen as a *discourse on being* (ὤν, ὄντος is "being," and the λόγος περὶ τοῦ ὄντος constitutes ἡ ὀντολογία) that aims to control and constrain it,[10] which is not the case here. In any case, I will discuss the relationship and transcendence of limits (what the Buddha 'sees' beyond the circles of the world) to then return to reflect on the problem of the limiting circles of the world from the perspective of the 'thing' observed.

Astérion, no. 22 (2020): §36, DOI: 10.4000/asterion.5021.

10. Emanuele Severino, *Il Giogo - Alle Origini della Ragione: Eschilo* (Milan: Adelphi, 1989), 83–89.

What ultimately reveals itself to the Buddha as the truth of being, once he has attained his non-corporeal body, not delimiting the boundaries of worldly circles, is the undivided: something that previously was integral part of the logic of the identical and the different, the semiosis of division,[11] the organizing force of entities into 'things' and 'names' manipulable through the discerning power of consciousness. This semiosis, understood as the fundamental *linguistic* act of determination of identities, is the one issue where the early Buddhist thought seems to converge with Parmenides, as we have seen in §1.6. For Parmenides,

> τἀντία δ' ἐκρίναντο δέμας καὶ σήματ' ἔθεντο
> χωρὶς ἀπ' ἀλλήλων, τῇ μὲν φλογὸς αἰθέριον πῦρ,
> ἤπιον ὄν, μέγ' ἐλαφρόν, ἑωυτῷ πάντοσε τωὐτόν,
> τῷ δ' ἑτέρῳ μὴ τωὐτόν· ἀτὰρ κἀκεῖνο κατ' αὐτό
> τἀντία νύκτ' ἀδαῆ, πυκινὸν δέμας ἐμβριθές τε.
>
> They assigned an opposing substance to each, and distinctive marks to one and to the other. To one they assigned heavenly fire, luminous, gentle, very light, identical to itself in every direction, but not to another. The other is its opposite: obscure night, compact, with a heavy and dense body.
> (Par. *Nat.*, *fr*. 8 v. 55)

Parmenides' (apparent) dualism, also speaks to us of the birth of designations, of how the dance between light and darkness is the first act of conceptualization, from which names and forms, signifiers and meanings, the ideas that appear in the chain of the unveiling of Being are derived, but which deceive us in their apparent internal division, in their dangerous concealment.

> *passaṃ naro dakkhati nāmarūpaṃ,*
> *disvāna vā ñassati tānimeva.*

11. Squarcini, "Le Colombe e gli Avvoltoi: sull'economia Politica delle 'Ecologie Religiose' del Passato, in India e non solo," 211–32.

> When a person sees, they only see name-form,
> and having seen, they will know only those things [as names and forms].
> (Snp 4.13)

Here, then, is the deception the ascetic seeks to escape. That is why the Buddha himself cared about the clear distinction between truth (*sacca*, *satya*) and hearsay, rumor, myth (*micchā*, *mithyā*). An identical distinction is that between ἀλήθεια and δόξα. Parmenides warns the unwary not to linger over "opinions," and the Buddha also, speaking of *micchā* (whose Indo-European root is identical to that from which derives the Greek μῦθος, "myth," "legend"), observes that opinions may know part of the truth, but then they seduce those who speculate on them to the point of convincing them that truth is reduced to opinion, whereas it is *sat-ya*, what "is," simply, though not so simple to discern when obscured by ideas about the world.

> 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.
> (Par. *Nat.*, *fr*. 9)

The importance of Parmenides' philosophy is also implicit in how the Greek author describes the process of 'division' as the distinctive mark of language (i.e., "names"). As Conche writes,

> Si, à l'opposé de la non-division et de la non-divisibilité de l'être, on songe à la divisibilité des étants, il ne faut pas songer seulement aux corps, divisibles comme l'espace qu'ils occupent, ou aux organismes et aux organes qui le composent (l'être n'est pas « articulable » […]), mais à tout ce qu'il y a — la langue, per exemple. […] La division se traduit par la séparation des mots, des syllabes, des phonèmes, ou des signes de

> l'écriture, des lettres — des γράμματα. Les étants sont divisibles et divisés par le fait d'être assujettis à exister dans l'espace et le temps.[12]

What initially appeared as a set of designated identities perceived as autonomous and self-sufficient, populating the world as 'pieces' of a mechanism always dismantled and reassembled at will, is then, in the Buddha's experience, 're-unified' through the act of *samādhi*. We will deeply reflect on the nature of these identities and their mutual relationship.

To arrive at this point, we must answer the ultimate question: what is the 'external' phenomenon (external *to the body*) that in non-Buddhist conditions common people experience? The body, as a vantage point on the world, overlooks a set of phenomena, witnessing a succession of phanies that relate to it, and indeed, precisely by virtue of their relation to the body, they become witnessable; *otherwise, they would not appear*. Their entering into the circles of the world makes them 'accessible' to the body through contact (*phassa*) with the sensory organs, but is this appearing the truth? Or is it falsehood? Neither, at least not completely. The body experiences a series of 'trues,' that is, partializations of the truth. This partialization, this limitation which is also a delimitation, can be understood as the testimony of that 'truth' which appears to the perspective of the witness. And it is precisely on the problem of perspective that we must focus.

The term that best indicates this problem is indeed *diṭṭhi*.[13] A particular *diṭṭhi*, as the name itself suggests, is nothing but the perception dependent on a specific "point of view," a "sight." The *diṭṭhi*/sight cannot claim truth, and for this reason, Buddhists understand *diṭṭhi* similarly to the Greek δόξα (see also δοκεῖν "to appear, to seem"), if not even more radically as "false opinion," "erroneous belief," since starting from this appearance, some construct dogmas on which they base assumptions of truth, and at that point, these assumptions can only be distortions, theorems based on the partial, the limited.

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12. Marcel Conche, *Parménide — Le Poème : Fragments* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011).

13. Paul Fuller, *The Notion of Diṭṭhi in Theravāda Buddhism: The Point of View* (New York: Routledge, 2005), DOI: 10.4324/9780203010433.

The "true" is thus a singular aspect of possible infinites. When a dogma of truth is constituted from these appearances, opinions, visions, points of view (*diṭṭhi*, δόξα) lead to a total distortion of our relationship with what is real. One "true" is certainly a part of the truth, but the latter is necessarily singular and reachable only by globally including all its possible aspects, which are its manifestative potentials, its phanies, each of which is "true," but not *the truth*. How many "trues" are there? How many need to be put together to have the truth?

It is not a matter of summation. If we think about it, the possible trues are potentially infinite, and since the body can process in its circles of the world only a finite number of trues at a time, which are then those that enter its circles of the world, the Buddha concludes that with the body, the truth cannot be reached. This is also a great Greek theme, at the basis of the Platonic postulate of the ψυχή, of a non-corporeal organ presumably capable of processing the objective data of reality. We will also discuss about this.

Buddhism seems to opt for another solution: extending one's circles of the world. The sage (*muni*), the ascetic (*samaṇa*), the practitioner in general (*arahant*) is one who undertakes a path to extend their consciousness, that is, extend the delimitations of their circles of the world. However, the endpoint is not metaphorically a diameter that can include all possible being, but the collapsing of that same diameter, reaching an extension beyond which this limit breaks, fails, and only at that point does the coincidence between the Buddha and the truth return, that is, being (the term *sacca* that the Buddha uses to indicate "truth" simply means "being," deriving from *sat-ya*, where *sat* indicates "being," to which a nominal derivational suffix *-yá* is added).[14]

One cannot begin this path of extension and then transcendence of consciousness without being aware of how it acts in the delimitation of sensible experience. This initial problem constitutes, as the first obstacle, an almost insurmountable impediment, since our daily experience seems to suggest otherwise, seems to tell us that the world is what is unveiled in our perceptual circles. This, as already mentioned, is 'true,'

14. Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy."

it is incontrovertibly 'true.' Our perceptions are not 'false' (if anything, the beliefs constructed from them as an assumption are), but they are not the 'truth' (*sacca*). This constitutes no small dilemma. How to consider those 'true' things that appear to us? How to relate to them?

According to Husserl, the objects of the world—be they things, entities, or any other worldly beings—reach our perception and must be considered transcendent. This is because they arrive at our consciousness only in a perspectival, partial, and shaded form (*Abschattungen*). We cannot perceive an object in its absolute entirety.

We cannot perceptually assimilate all aspects of a worldly thing as a whole, sensing it 'entirely' in a single instant. The objects of the world are like a die viewed from a single observation point: as said in Chapter 2 (see Fig. 11), we can see only three faces at once, and when we change our perspective or move the object to view the hidden faces, we lose sight of those that were previously visible. This limitation and partiality also apply to the body. This issue is problematic in Husserl's analysis, not necessarily in his formulations, which are undoubtedly correct, but in the conclusions he draws from them.

Consider, for instance, what is not transcendent, namely immanent objects. Husserl posits their existence because he requires entities that are given to consciousness in a single discerning act, in their entirety. In theory, immanent objects should be contents of consciousness that are given immediately and totally. Note: this distinction is not between abstract and concrete things. For Husserl, even abstract objects such as mathematical entities are considered transcendent.[15]

This perspective implies an irremediable dualism and, consequently, an aporia. The immanent object depends solely on consciousness, not on the so-called 'external' world, creating a fracture between consciousness and the world. Theoretically, Husserl considers thoughts and experiences immanent because our access to them is immediate. I must fundamentally disagree with this notion. Husserl's conception of immanent objects, beyond their dependence on consciousness, is essentially that of separate and in-themselves-existing things. Certainly, they depend on consciousness, but apparently on nothing else. What, then, of a mental

15. Carman, "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty," 209.

image, a memory, a sensation evoked in consciousness? Can we truly say it is immediate? It is as immediate as the perception of the roughness of a part of a stone we are holding. From the standpoint of immediacy, there is no difference, unless one argues—which presents numerous problems, as we saw—that the perception of the stone's roughness is 'mediated' in some way by the filter of consciousness.

Why, then, would the evocation of a mental image by consciousness not be equally mediated, selected from among millions of other possible mental images (first mediation) and 'extracted' (second mediation) from a flow of continuous and intricate relationships? Indeed, I urge never to forget that nothing within conscious content exists in itself or depends solely on consciousness, as if consciousness 'were' as such.

The experience we have of mental objects, when deeply meditated upon, is rather one of a dense and intricate interrelation. Each image evokes another image in an infinite chain of references, with no possibility of absolute independence. The presentation of a conscious content is nothing but the focus of consciousness on that aspect, which would not be possible, nor even imaginable, without the network of relations with all other related images that make that image '*that* image' now appearing to our consciousness. The notion of the immanent object is a grand illusion, forgetful of the absolute impossibility of radically abstracting anything from its context.

> Mon corps visuel est bien objet dans les parties éloignées de ma tête, mais à mesure qu'on approche des yeux, il se sépare des objets, il ménage au milieu d'eux un quasi-espace où ils n'ont pas accès, et quand je veux combler ce vide en recourant à l'image du miroir, elle me renvoie encore à un original du corps qui n'est pas là-bas, parmi les choses, mais de mon côté, en deçà de toute vision. […] La présence et l'absence des objets extérieurs ne sont que des variations à l'intérieur d'un champ de présence primordial, d'un domaine perceptif sur lesquels mon corps a puissance.[16]

There is no 'immediate' or 'transparent' access, just as there is no 'mediated' or 'opaque' access in an absolute sense. Mental contents

16. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 121.

are like a plant's ramification into thousands of intricate branches, twigs, leaves, and fruits, and we choose to focus on 'that' fruit, 'that' leaf, 'that' branch as if that fruit, leaf, or branch could be that fruit, leaf, or branch independently of all other fruits, leaves, and branches that 'compose' the plant. Or rather, that *are* the plant.

The plant could not be "the plant" without all that we believe composes it; each individual leaf, branch, or fruit is the plant in itself as, to appear as a leaf, branch, or fruit, it must necessarily implicate all the rest, even if we do not see it: it must *implicate* the plant in its entirety, and thus implicating it cannot separate from it, not even when we detach the leaf and place it under a microscope. And we could go further: can the plant exist without the soil and the water that nourishes it? Can the soil exist without the world, and the world without the cosmos? Can anything exist without any other thing?

The reason we cannot use Husserl to comparatively understand the philosophical thought underlying contemplative practice lies precisely in his conviction that the natural world is "detachable" (*Ablösbarkeit*) from the conscious sphere.

In essence, I share Carman's critique. Although Husserl strives to distinguish between the living body (*Leib*) and the body as an organism or mere material object of investigation (*Körper*), the way he approaches consciousness and perception leads us to assume that even this clarification regarding the living body "is not enough, then, to overcome the conceptual dualism underwriting his project."[17]

Where we can partially agree is on the nature of the body. Indeed, the body poses itself as a limitation. This represents an ascetic view, so to speak. The body is a 'limit,' whether it is understood as a prison and thus a 'constraint,' or even in the gentler view of it as the only possible 'vehicle' *in* the world (or even *of* the world). Nevertheless, in this 'conveying' or 'conveyance,' it indeed configures certain deceptions, as it neither inhabits nor constructs a world ultimately 'true,' but rather as a partial distortion of the truth.

We can conceive of the body as a "field." In Buddhism, this is clearer than in other ascetic contexts, but the field is effectively the *loka*, the

17. Carman, "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty," 210.

world, and ultimately the body *is* the world, and the world is 'originated' from the body (see §1.5).

We have seen how in Sāṃkhya philosophy the profound reflection on the dichotomy between the witnessed and the witness, between attestable phenomena and the spectator of such phenomena, is sometimes rendered by two very precise technical terms: *kṣetra* and *kṣetrajña*, meaning literally "the field" and "the knower of the field." This terminology is remarkable because it skillfully employs the dual symbolic value of *kṣetra* and applies it to a context of deep reflection. Just as there is a 'field' within which phenomena unfold to our observation, there is the observer, the witness of that field, who beholds (*kṣetrajña*).[18]

There are hypotheses suggesting that the philosophical development of the concept of *kṣetra* has very ancient origins, likely dating back to the cultivated field of a hypothetical prehistoric man who first realized the power of this 'frame' that imprints upon the world.

Firstly, there is the Vedic myth, remaining within the historical-religious domain, where the world prior to the cosmological order willed by the deities is depicted as an *akṛṣṭapacyā pṛthivī*, an untilled earth, akin to the Roman myth of Ovid's *tellus inarata* and the *ósánir akrar* of the Norse Vǫluspá. This represents a common Indo-European heritage, where "during the golden age the earth produced by itself the fruits and crops that man would later have to procure through immense labor."[19]

Another development of this concept is found in the ritual of enthroning the Indo-Aryan sovereign, traces of which are preserved in the description of the Rājasūya.[20] In this ritual, numerous figures participate, remnants of social classes that perhaps pre-existed the formation of an organized state. The king, initially a warrior, receives recognition of his role from these figures, among whom the *govyacchá*

18. Angelika Malinar, "Narrating Sāṃkhya Philosophy: Bhīṣma, Janaka and Pañcaśikha at Mahābhārata 12.211–12," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 45, no. 4 (2017): 609–49, DOI: 10.1007/s10781-017-9315-5.

19. Rosa Ronzitti, "L'età Dell'oro Sotto Vṛtra e La Formula Indoeuropea 'Terra Inarata,'" *Atti del Sodalizio Glottologico Milanese* 8–9 (2016): 212, DOI: 10.13130/1972-9901/8165.

20. H. Kulke, "The Rājasūya: A Paradigm of Early State Formation?," in *Ritual, State and History in South Asia* (BRILL, 1992), 188–98, DOI: 10.1163/9789004643994_014.

(herdsman) and *akṣāvāpa* (farmers) stand out in importance.[21] These figures are closely related to the division of land into organized "frames." The theme of space organized and subjected to human power, the boundaries of a *kṣetra*, is of colossal importance. Besides the farmer and the herdsman, a significant organizer of space is one who conquers it through the mightiest means, war. The *kṣetra* can thus be the property of a *kṣatriya*, a warrior, conqueror, or military leader.[22] The term *kṣatra* indeed signifies "rule, authority." The *kṣatriya* are also traditionally the caste of monarchs, and it is indeed a *kṣatriya* who is enthroned, becoming king (*rāja*) at the end of the Rājasūya ritual, a ritual that symbolically enacts a progressive conquest of 'spaces,' represented by the concentric platforms of a sacrificial altar.

The king-to-be symbolically conquers more and more of these spaces,[23] approaching the central, higher platform. Here, he consecrates his conquest, officially rendering the conquered space not chaotic and uncontrolled but under human dominion, by turning a wheel, which represents both the solar wheel, as the king is a descendant of the sun, and the wheel of law. The king thus becomes a *cakravartin*, a "wheel-turner," a royal epithet later adopted by Buddhists to denote the Buddha.[24] Moreover, the conquered space is organized into "quarters" (*cāturdiśa*), and this notion of the world organized into "quarters of space" (*cāttudisā loka*) frequently recurs in Buddhism. The expression *cāttudisā loka* or simply *cāttudisā* will be used to indicate "the totality of the world," and many meditations employ this metaphor: "with love for the whole world […] above, below, and all around […] whether you are standing, walking or sitting, lying down but still unflagging, always keep this in mind, for this is dwelling in Brahmā" (*mettañca sabbalokasmi… uddhaṃ adho ca tiriyañca… tiṭṭhaṃ caraṃ nisinno va, sayāno yāvatāssa*

21. David Nelson, "Vedic Govyacchá 'Herdsman,'" *Tōkyō Daigaku Gengogaku Ronshū Denshiban (eTULIP)* 42, no. 9 (2020): 254–68, DOI: 10.15083/00080053.

22. J C Heesterman, "King and Warrior," *History and Anthropology* 4, no. 1 (1989): 97–122, DOI: 10.1080/02757206.1989.9960795.

23. This very idea persists in the description the Buddha gives for the warrior caste: "the term 'lord of the field' is the meaning of 'aristocrat'" (khettānaṃ *adhipatīti kho, vāseṭṭha, 'khattiyo, khattiyo' tveva dutiyaṃ akkharaṃ upanibbattaṃ*, DN 27).

24. Divino and Di Lenardo, "The World and the Desert: A Comparative Perspective on the 'Apocalypse' between Buddhism and Christianity," 151.

vitamiddho, etaṃ satiṃ adhiṭṭheyya, brahmametaṃ vihāramidhamāhu, Snp 1.8). This kind of contemplative exercise, called *brahmavihāra* meditation "is closely analogous to the formulation of certain sacrificial rituals performed by the king: both employ the spatial concepts of the 'regions' and both are methods of surmounting dangers."[25]

This is crucial because without this premise, it is impossible to understand what Buddhists mean by "end of the world" (*lokassa antaṃ*) and why this is neither an apocalyptic catastrophe nor the destruction of the body, but the cessation (*nirodha*) of those mechanisms, perfectly corporeal, that allow the world to substantiate itself as we then experience it.

The body is thus the epicenter of this field,[26] of this mundane circle. Every 'body' is its own mundane circle, but this field-world, and it is important to emphasize this as well, does not erect itself on a 'broader' world. At least in the Buddhist vision, the world is always a boundary, and thus the transcendence of that field does not lead to an 'other' world nor to a 'true' world. Rather, the world is the limitation of the truth, and what Buddhist asceticism aspires to is "beyond-world"

25. Wiltshire, *Ascetic Figures before and in Early Buddhism*, 169.

26. We can also appreciate how the Pāli canon substantially preserves both connotations of the term 'field' (*khetta*). For instance, in AN 3.83, it is mentioned how a farmer prioritizes plowing and properly tending to his field (*kassako gahapati paṭikacceva khettaṃ sukaṭṭhaṃ karoti sumatikataṃ*), and this serves as a metaphor for practitioners, who must diligently attend to their practice (*sikkhitabba*). Similarly, in SN 56.91, while in AN 8.34, the metaphor is made explicit: "When a *field* is excellent, and the seeds planted therein are excellent, and the rain is excellent, then the harvest of grain will be excellent… therefore, if a person seeks excellence, let them excel in this: associate with those who excel in wisdom, so that your own excellence may flourish… knowing the world as it truly is, and having attained excellence in vision, relying on the excellent path, proceeds the one whose mind excels" (*yathāpi khette sampanne, pavuttā bījasampadā; deve sampādayantamhi, hoti dhaññassa sampadā... tasmā sampadamākaṅkhī, sampannatthūdha puggalo; sampannapaññe sevetha, evaṃ ijjhanti sampadā... lokaṃ ñatvā yathābhūtaṃ, pappuyya diṭṭhisampadaṃ; maggasampadamāgamma, yāti sampannamānaso*). Let us examine another usage: in AN 10.16, the expression *puññakkhettaṃ lokassa*, the "field of merit" (*puñña-kkhettaṃ*) of the world, is employed. Merit here obviously refers to the sum of benevolent and well-intentioned actions pursued by a good Buddhist ascetic. Similarly, this expression is found in AN 10.30: *anuttaraṃ puññakkhettaṃ lokassa*, "supreme field of merit for the world." The same applies to numerous other texts such as AN 3.70, 3.75, 3.96, 3.97, 3.98, 3.133, 10.92, 10.97, 11.11, to mention only a few.

(*lokuttara*), not "another world" (*aññaṃ lokaṃ*) understood as a world different from the one we are accustomed to, nor "the other world" (*paraṃ lokaṃ*) understood as a world different from, or opposite to, ours, such as, for example, the world of another person.

From this perspective, therefore, we can share one idea with Husserl: human consciousness is integrally part of the hyletic substrate of the body, where hyletic refers to ὕλη, the matter. This is not because Husserl was a materialist, but because he saw the body as primarily the "bearer of sensations."[27]

In the Buddhist case, the situation is more complex. The body is not matter capable of interacting with and perceiving other matter that 'exists' in the 'world,' in something somewhere 'out there' outside the body. For our reasoning system, which has significantly prejudiced our ability to understand what Buddhists truly meant, two seemingly contradictory things are asserted:

1. The external world does not exist in the sense that it is not possible to support it in any way as something autonomously existent.
2. The 'world' is co-dependent with the body which conveys itself into a reality it cannot grasp in its absoluteness or totality, and this self-conveyance 'generates' the world, just as the cessation of the mechanisms that lead to the field-world is de facto the "end of the world" (*lokanta*).

For those who read these texts with a Western theoretical framework, the contradiction lies in noting that the same assertion applies to the concept of truth. If indeed it is assumed that the world is only external, one can fall into the reductionism that foresees the existence of something 'real,' 'external' to the body and in its 'internal' reduction; but then the Buddhists reiterate that the 'truth,' that is, what should unfold when the boundaries of the mundane field are broken, is neither 'internal' nor 'external,' and we must therefore presume that it is already implied within us, even if initially we cannot grasp it.

On the other hand, if there were no such implication, even "liberation" would be impossible. The internal and the external are two

27. Carman, "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty," 212.

concepts used conventionally, and then discarded when no longer needed, to explain the contemplative practice. As they are progressively expounded, and this occurs in multiple discourses, it becomes increasingly evident that they serve as useless distinctions.

Let us thus consider this problem of the world and its relation to consciousness. In AN 9.38, two Brahmins, referred to as "cosmologists" (*lokāyatika*), pose several questions to the Buddha. They first mention Pūraṇa Kassapa and his doctrine. Kassapa is likely taken as a representative of the non-causal doctrine (*ahetuvāda*), which denies the impact of actions and proposes a theory whereby the body and the self are distinct and independent, with their actions being similarly disconnected (*akiriyāvāda*), thus carrying different moral weights. The Brahmins, in the presence of the Buddha, also report that Kassapa claims to be omniscient and all-seeing (*sabbaññū sabbadassāvī*), asserting that complete knowledge never leaves him, whether he is walking, standing, sleeping, or awake (*carato ca me tiṭṭhato ca suttassa ca jāgarassa ca satataṃ samitaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ paccupaṭṭhitaṃ*). The infinite knowledge residing in him enables him to comprehend and see the world as infinite (*anantena ñāṇena anantaṃ lokaṃ jānaṃ passaṃ*). Similarly, the Jain ascetic Ñātika declares an identical experience of knowledge but reaches a conclusion opposite to that of Kassapa (*vipaccanīkavādānaṃ*). When asked by the Brahmins which view is correct, the Buddha responds:

seyyathāpi, brāhmaṇā, cattāro purisā catuddisā ṭhitā paramena javena ca samannāgatā paramena ca padavītihārena.

te evarūpena javena samannāgatā assu, seyyathāpi nāma daḷhadhammā dhanuggaho sikkhito katahattho katūpāsano lahukena asanena appakasirena tiriyaṃ tālacchāyaṃ atipāteyya; evarūpena ca padavītihārena, seyyathāpi nāma puratthimā samuddā pacchimo samuddo.

O Brahmins, suppose there are four individuals standing at the four quarters. Each of them is extraordinarily swift, capable of maintaining a formidable pace. They are as swift as a light arrow that shoots between the shadows of palm trees, launched by a skilled and adept archer with a firm bow and great experience. Such is the extent of their pace that it can span the distance between the eastern and western oceans.

At this point, each of them boasts of being able to reach the end of the world (*ahaṃ gamanena lokassa antaṃ pāpuṇissāmi*) by traveling at a rapid pace. Despite their conviction, they must bitterly realize that the true end of the world cannot be reached, even running at such a speed. This is, of course, a metaphor, but here the Buddha introduces us to his conception of the end of the world. This concept is crucial to understand from the outset, as the Buddha reveals that the world is not a geographical expanse, nor what we experience as the presumed external reality. Therefore, its end cannot be reached by traveling; its boundaries cannot be traversed even by the swiftest human step.

At this point, the Buddha enumerates the five senses (excluding thought) and the seductive sensory experiences that accompany them, which are pleasant, agreeable, and lead to attachment. Why does he enumerate these senses? Because they constitute the world, and a mendicant who "has reached the end of the world, meditates at the end of the world" is a mendicant who "secluded from sensual pleasures" (*bhikkhu vivicceva kāmehi... lokassa antamāgamma, lokassa ante viharati*). This alone is not sufficient to transcend the world, but detachment from sensual pleasures is merely the first contemplative stage. One progresses through four stages of contemplative absorption,[28] followed by the contemplative abode in the dimension of infinite consciousness, that of nothingness, that of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, and finally, the total cessation of perceptions (*sabbaso nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṃ samatikkamma saññāvedayitanirodhaṃ*). At this point, it is said of him: "He is a mendicant who has reached the end of the world and meditates at the end of the world" (*bhikkhu lokassa antamāgamma lokassa ante viharati*).

We will delve further into this topic, but it is already clear that the "end of the world" is nothing other than the end of the perceptions with which the 'world' coincides. The circles of the world we have discussed so far are nothing but the limits of perceptions, the extent to which the body extends in its worldliness. Body and world are a unity, not two things in an oppositional relationship with each other.

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28. Tilmann Vetter, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism* (Leiden: BRILL, 1988), DOI: 10.1163/9789004644380; Keren Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation* (Routledge, 2017), DOI: 10.4324/9781315676043.

At this juncture, we must understand the supra-bodily conception that Buddhist philosophy attributes to the ascetic who has accomplished this end of the world. This will be an important precursor to the major themes of truth and language, for the one who has transcended the limits of the body must inevitably confront the structure of such limitation, which is the sign, the boundary, the framework, the field of the circle of the world, whose internal governing rule is the organizing force of language.

4.2 From Interdependence to Interpenetration

One of the concepts that best describe the transcendence reached through contemplative practice are *iddhi* and *abhiññā*, sometimes described as "psychic" or "supernatural" powers. The term *iddhi* can be used actually for many forms of power, including a capacity that seems rather 'normal.' For instance, the ability to fly of geese (Dhp 175). Thus, an *iddhi* can indicate any kind of 'ability,' including the supernatural ones. Furthermore, "What seems to differentiate *iddhi*s from the other *abhiññā*s is that the *iddhi*s result in a physical performance, whereas the *abhiññā*s result in a new knowledge (*ñāṇa*)."[29]

A different example of these extraordinary powers is found in Ud 7.9, which narrates an episode where some rival ascetics of the Buddha pollute a water well by throwing in grass and chaff to prevent the Buddha from drinking from it. However, the Buddha sends Ānanda to fetch the water, and at that moment, he causes the grass and chaff to erupt from the mouth of the well, leaving the water clear. In other contexts, we might refer to this as a miracle, but here Ānanda refers to the Buddha as *mahiddhikatā*—one possessing great powers or abilities.

At this point, we are not interested in listing the *pañca dhamme* associated with superhuman powers,[30] but rather in the description of these pow-

29. Bryan De Notariis, "The Vedic Background of the Buddhist Notions of Iddhi and Abhiññā: Three Case Studies with Particular Reference to the Pāli Literature," *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie Orientale* 55 (2019): 238, DOI: 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2019/01/008.

30. Sanu Mahatthanadull, "Marvel as Superhuman Power Performance

ers themselves. An example of these powers is given in the subsequent sutta (AN 5.68), where evidence is provided that these powers are indeed linked to the overcoming of the corporeal limits described thus far.

dhammānaṃ bhāvitattā bahulīkatattā yassa yassa abhiññāsacchikaraṇīyassa dhammassa cittaṃ abhininnāmesiṃ abhiññāsacchikiriyāya, tatra tatreva sakkhibhabbataṃ pāpuṇiṃ sati sati āyatane; so sace ākaṅkhiṃ: 'anekavihitaṃ iddhividhaṃ paccanubhaveyyaṃ… pe… yāva brahmalokāpi kāyena vasaṃ vatteyyan'ti, tatra tatreva sakkhibhabbataṃ pāpuṇiṃ sati sati āyatane.

I have experienced superior gnosis directed towards cognition through the power of direct gnosis of the Dhamma, so that wherever personal capacities achieved the present consciousness of the sensory spheres, becoming capable of realizing things through insight.

If I wished, "may I multiply […] control this body up to the realm of Brahmā," I had the capacity to achieve it as a personal ability in any case, to the awareness of the sensory spheres.

In SN 51.5, the bases for the development of powers are four, not five, as is also the case in SN 52.12, while in SN 43.7 there is an important connection between the four bases of psychic powers and the path that leads to the unconditioned (*asaṅkhatagāmimaggo, cattāro iddhipādā*). Let us keep in mind this relationship between the unconditioned and superhuman powers, as the theme of the unconditioned will soon become of utmost importance.

There exist some potential anticipations of this conception, or, if not anticipations (the dating of the Upaniṣads is quite controversial), one might speak of almost contemporaneous thoughts belonging to a culturally affiliated milieu. In BṛUp 4.3.7, for example, *ātman* is described as "made of consciousness" (*vijñānamaya*). De Notariis notes that, in this sense, the abilities of this conscious *ātman* are quite similar to those of a Buddha, though in BṛUp this condition is more specifically connected to mastery of the oneiric state.

> In this dreamlike state, this person made of consciousness displays the creative power of the mind and so is able to manipulate matter to

(Iddhi-Pāṭihāriya) in Dhammapada Scriptures," *Journal of International Buddhist Studies* 15, no. 2 (2024): 1–14.

> create objects and parts of the landscape [...]. In this dreamlike state, this person made of consciousness displays the creative power of the mind and so is able to manipulate matter to create objects and parts of the landscape. [...] Therefore, for instance in the Pāli canon only the term *manas* is used to indicate that a body (*kāya*) is made of mind: *manomaya*. Alternative options such as **cittamaya* and **viññāṇamaya* are not attested within both canon and commentaries. This could also be the case in the Upaniṣadic passages examined above, wherein the mention of a person made of consciousness (*vijñānamaya*) might reveal a specific way to indicate the personification or embodiment that acts in the oneiric state.[31]

Conversely, in BṛUp 4.4.5, the suffix *-maya* ("made of") is applied in various contexts: consciousness, thought, and breath (*vijñānamaya*, *manomaya*, *prāṇamaya*). Furthermore, the latter term might be compared by some to the σῶμα πνευματικόν in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, although it would be more accurate to speak of σῶμα ψυχικόν since Paul himself draws this distinction (σπείρεται σῶμα ψυχικόν, ἐγείρεται σῶμα πνευματικόν).[32] There is some doubt that they refer to the exact same thing, but in a comparative context, it is interesting to note the metaphorical use of "body made of breath" (*prāṇamaya kāya*, σῶμα ψυχικόν) to convey a subtler, more ethereal, spiritual nature, distinct in some way from the coarser material body. Moreover, speaking of *prāṇamaya ātman* appears somewhat redundant, if not an intentional reinforcement, since *ātman* literally means "breath" and is used in this literal sense in the ṚV, before extending to signify the self, the identity of the one who breathes.[33]

There is indeed much to say on this topic, even restricting ourselves to Buddhism and the issue of *manomaya-kāya*, the only term

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31. De Notariis, "The Vedic Background of the Buddhist Notions of Iddhi and Abhiññā: Three Case Studies with Particular Reference to the Pāli Literature," 242, 243–44.

32. 1 Corinthians 15:44.

33. Signe Cohen, *The Upaniṣads: A Complete Guide*, Routledge (Abingdon, 2018), DOI: 10.4324/9781315758701; Greg Bailey, "Ātman and Its Transition to Worldly Existence," in *Universe and Inner Self in Early Indian and Early Greek Thought*, ed. Richard Seaford (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 55–70.

that appears in the Pāli texts referring to a body made of something other than common gross matter. Studies tracing possible origins of this conception back to the earlier Vedic tradition have been conducted by De Notariis.[34]

What interests us, however, is the specific use Buddhists make of this conception: what purpose does it serve to think of a *mano-maya-kāya*, and more importantly, what does the Buddha see in the non-world he accesses? In MN 18, the process of arising of mental consciousness is explained in other terms.

manañcāvuso, paṭicca dhamme ca uppajjati manoviññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā,

yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi,

yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tatonidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññāsaṅkhā samudācaranti atītānāgatapaccuppannesu manoviññeyyesu dhammesu.

Mental consciousness arises because of the mind and thoughts. The encounter of the three is sensation. This is the condition that leads to the notion. What you feel, you perceive. What you perceive, you think. What you think proliferates in you. What proliferates is the source of identity concepts, emerging from the proliferation of perceptions, which assault the person. This happens by virtue of the thoughts produced by the mind in the past, future, and present.

In the text on the origin of the world (SN 35.107), it is said: "visual consciousness arises in dependence on the eye and the sight, and the union of the three generates contact" (*akkhuñca paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ. tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso*). And thus the series of senses and their phenomena is recited. What emerges from the dualism of the eye and its vision is contact (*phasso*), that is, a sensation of connection between dual elements: the cognitive process appears to

34. Bryan De Notariis, "The Concept of Manomaya in Early Buddhism and Upaniṣads: A Study with Particular Reference to the Pāli Sīlakkhandhavagga," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 42 (2019): 47–81, DOI: 10.2143/JIABS.42.0.3287477; Bryan De Notariis, "Osservazioni sull'esposizione della Creazione del Corpo Fatto di Mente (Manomaya-Kāya) all'interno del Sāmaññaphala-Sutta," *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie Orientale* 54 (2018): 117–204, DOI: 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2018/01/009.

arise from the splitting of reality into subject and object and the relational tension of these two poles.

Therefore, the use of this mental body conception allows considering the problem of phenomenology in somewhat different terms: if *manomaya-kāya* is made up of the mind-thought, what does it mean to say that the mind perceives itself as a body? It means that its phenomenological continuity is such that there is no self in the physical body but in the mental one, that is, there is no phany (phenomenal manifestation) of the physical body, only the mental one.

Thus, the chain of conditioned coproduction proceeds as follows: "contact generates sensation, sensation generates craving, craving generates attachment, attachment generates becoming, and the continuous condition of becoming leads to rebirth, rebirth gives rise to old age and death, desolation, suffering, pain, sadness, and distress" (*phassapaccayā vedanā, vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ, upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā jāti, jātippaccayā jarāmaraṇaṃ sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā sambhavanti*). This, therefore, is the origin of the world (*ayam kho, bhikkhave, lokassa samudayo*). The same reasoning is repeated for mental consciousness (*manoviññāṇaṃ*), which arises in dependence on the mind and phenomena (*manañca paṭicca dhamme*).

Remarkably, the text also provides an explanation for the end of the world (*lokassa atthaṅgamo*). When there is the cessation of attachment (*upādānanirodhā bhavanirodho*), existence also ceases (*bhavanirodhā jātinirodho*), and with it, the entire accumulation of suffering (*vamtassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa nirodho hoti*).

The term *bhava* refers more to a condition of being than to the being itself, and it is thus translatable as becoming or "state of being" like Shulman does.[35] The end of the world, conversely, is to end this chain of cognitive production. This is also confirmed by the parallel in SN 35.107. But an even clearer confirmation is given to us by MN 148.6 in which the six cognitive organs are explicitly listed and identified as the origin of identity (through mechanisms of identification and appropriation) and the world itself. By disidentifying (*netaṃ mama,*

35. Shulman, "Early Buddhist Imagination: The Aṭṭhakavagga as Buddhist Poetry," 366.

nesohamasmi, na meso attā), one ends not only identity (*akkāyan-irodhagāminī*) but also the world. Another pertinent occasion when *loka* is mentioned in MN is certainly MN 63 in an explanation of the fourteen unanswered questions. Here the world is described as neither finite nor infinite (*antavā* and *anantavā*), neither everlasting nor transient (*sassato* and *asassato*). This formulation stands in the classic Buddhist dialectic of the double negation: neither *a* nor non-*a*, which they use precisely to assert their radical anti-conceptualist position.

The same discourse, presented differently, can be found in numerous suttas, including DN 15, where the focus of the same mechanism of concatenation is, however, shifted to the theme of causality. One cannot speak of something like sensation that it is devoid of causes and conditions. The condition for sensation is obviously contact. And so on, proceeding with the same chain mechanism: *atthi idappaccayā nāmarūpan ti*? Is there a condition for name and form? Name and form are already conditions for contact (*nāmarūpapaccayā phasso ti iccassa vacanīyaṃ*), and in turn, name and form are conditioned by discernment, consciousness (*viññāṇapaccayā*). This mechanism of concatenation and interdependence also implies mutual co-implication.

To clarify what this co-implication means, I employed the term "pansematism" in an article on Buddhist psychosemantics,[36] intending to signify the condition whereby in experienced reality "everything is a sign" (πάντα σημεῖόν ἐστιν). However, a clarification is needed: the being-sign of the thing that appears does not mean that it is a semantic reality, that is, referring to a designated signifier and signified, but it is "sign" in the sense that it is a determined and recognizable aspect of being.

This aspect, interdependent with all other aspects, is not a 'determined thing' in the linguistic-cognitive sense, i.e., designated by a conventional attribution of meaning, but is pure undivided meaning. The determination in precise semantic boundaries occurs through language, whereas before this determination the 'signs' that appear to us

36. Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy"; Rune Johansson, "Citta, Mano, Vinnana – A Psychosemantic Investigation," *University of Ceylon Review* 23, no. 1/2 (1965): 165–215.

are not recognizable as 'themselves' but as an aspect that co-implicates all other possible aspects. Every aspect of the whole implies in itself the whole of which it is an indissoluble part. Even when the arbitrariness of language intervenes to section forms and assign names (selecting meanings to associate with signifiers), this fundamental condition cannot be altered and is preserved as a residue.

Moreover, if there were not this mutual interpenetration, if each aspect of being were not already the implication of the totality of being, the linguistic exercise of attributing formal-nominal signs would be impossible: where would the semantic substance from which we draw the attributive force come from? If things were not already all 'significant' in themselves, how could we attribute entirely arbitrary meanings to them? Why can I say of the same thing, based on cultural relativity, that it is "bad" or "good" if not because the sense of both these aspects is potentially implied in everything? Thus, the tree is indeed a tree because it appears to us as "tree," but it is also everything else, because it necessarily implies it. It is only our worldly circle, limited to the momentariness of experience and its perceptual fallacies, that sees 'only' a tree and not the 'All' that is implied in that aspect of the All that is the tree.

yehi, ānanda, ākārehi yehi liṅgehi yehi nimittehi yehi uddesehi nāmakāyassa paññatti hoti, tesu ākāresu tesu liṅgesu tesu nimittesu tesu uddesesu asati api nu kho rūpakāye adhivacanasamphasso paññāyethā"ti?

no hetaṃ, bhante. ...

tassa sukhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyamānassa 'eso me attā'ti hoti. tassāyeva sukhāya vedanāya nirodhā 'byagā me attā'ti hoti. ... tatrānanda, yo so evamāha: 'na heva kho me vedanā attā, appaṭisaṃvedano me attā'ti, so evamassa vacanīyo: 'yattha panāvuso, sabbaso vedayitaṃ natthi api nu kho, tattha 'ayamahamasmī'ti siyā'ti?

no hetaṃ, bhante.

tasmātihānanda, etena petaṃ nakkhamati: 'na heva kho me vedanā attā, appaṭisaṃvedano me attā'ti samanupassituṃ. ...

yāvatā, ānanda, adhivacanaṃ yāvatā adhivacanapatho, yāvatā nirutti yāvatā niruttipatho, yāvatā paññatti yāvatā paññattipatho, yāvatā paññā yāvatā paññāvacaraṃ, yāvatā vaṭṭaṃ, yāvatā vaṭṭati...

O Ānanda, suppose there were none such features, aspects, signs and details by which the set of designated nominal phenomena are found. Would contact still be found in the set of formal phenomena?

No, sir. […]

When you feel a pleasant feeling you think 'this is my self'.

When such pleasant feeling ceases you think: 'my self disappeared'. […] Now, Ānanda, as to those who say that 'feeling is definitely not my self since my self does not experience feeling,' you should reply to them 'o friend, where there is really anything to feel at all would the thought 'I am' rise?

No, sir.

That's why the self as that which does not experience feeling is not tenable. […]

Therefore, O Ānanda, a mendicant is freed by directly knowing this: to what extent linguistic expression works, to what extent the scope of expression works, to what extent the sign works, to what extent the scope of the sign works, to what extent designation works, to what extent the scope of designation works, to what extent wisdom works, to what extent the spere of wisdom works, to what extent the cycle of rebirths works, to what extent the continuation of the cycle works.

(DN 15)

To conclude this section, I wish to emphasize the critical importance of considering all this in relation to the problem of the body. The body, indeed, is the epicenter of these mechanisms: language, designation, discernment, perception of 'signs.' Consequently, we cannot proceed with the analysis of the problem of identity unless we understand

how it originates from the body, which is the quintessential element of relation and the witness to the networks of relations it constructs, recognizes, organizes, and so forth. The body is a nexus of relationships, embedded within the same network of relationships as a node that interacts with other relational nodes, engaging with them within its capacities, and successively incorporating them into its worldly circles.

Thus, discourses on conditionality (such as SN 12.20) should not be interpreted in an ontological sense but rather phenomenologically. When the Buddha outlines a discourse modeled as "*x* is the condition for *y* and *y* is the condition for *z*," where *x* may be one or a combination of multiple factors, and so forth, we must understand that the conditionality of the relationship $x \rightarrow y$ is not ontological-existential (i.e., *x* 'generates' or 'creates' *y*) but phenomenological-relational (the relationship between *x* and *y* is such that *x* precedes the appearance of *y* as a phenomenon, hence *y* depends on *x* for its manifestation).[37] Once this is understood, addressing the discourse on identity becomes the next step. Nonetheless,

> The doctrine of the twelve links does have important ontological implications. It is based on a metaphysics that seems to believe that objects — real objects! — are conditioned by consciousness. Such an understanding is implied by the statement that form (*rūpa*) and the objects of the senses, the "external" side of links four and five, are conditioned by mental dispositions and consciousness (links two and three). [...] The point is that one is reborn in direct relation to acts of attachment conducted during his or her previous life/lives. Thus, the main formative influences on the conditioning process are subjective efforts and tendencies, such as mental formations (*saṅkhārā*), consciousness, thirst (or desire, *taṇhā*), and grasping (*upādāna*). The results of this process are not only mental but also include material or physical aspects of human life.[38]

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37. Phenomena do not emerge from nothingness; rather, they are progressively unveiled within a chain of relationships. The fire that we observe emerging from burning wood does not imply, and it would be a grave logical fallacy to believe so, that the emergence of the entity "fire" annihilates the entity 'wood' which it consumes. The "wood" cannot vanish into nothingness merely because its condition is requisite for the "production" (which is nothing other than the manifestation) of the phenomenon of fire.
38. Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*, 92.

> This statement mainly concerns the possibility of conditioning the phenomenal chain, considering the interacting object as a phenomenon that can take part in the chain of events, and is therefore an active contributor to the processes of reality.[39]

4.3 Fleeing from the World-Environment

The origin of the Buddhist conception of the world and the ascetic are the two aspects I will examine in this section. The latter figure, obviously in relation to the act of the end of the world, has various aspects that merit our attention and is expressed through numerous terminologies that reveal its prominent roles.

The origins are to be found both in the dialectic of the ideological clash between orthodoxy and heterodoxy and in the innovation brought by ascetic thought to concepts that are exquisitely Vedic and Indo-Aryan. There are indeed two interpretative lines concerning the nature of heterodox movements, such as Buddhism, Jainism, Ājīvikism, Ajñānism, Cārvākism or Lokāyatism, and possibly even primordial Sāṃkhya, and the heterodoxy constituted by the Vedic tradition brought by the Indo-Aryans.[40]

There is an undoubtedly conflictual nature in the relationship between these clearly heterodox movements and Vedicism, if only because they denied the authority of the Vedic text. Nonetheless, explaining their origin has always been a problem. Bronkhorst pointed to Magadha,[41] a region of great cultural ferment where, in all likelihood, pockets of non-Indo-Aryan traditions existed prior to the Indo-European colonization of the Indian subcontinent, which would have 'resisted' the Vedic tradition with their own strong religious traditions

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39. Ibid., 99.
40. Squarcini, *Forme della Norma: Contro l'eccentricità del Discorso Normativo Sudasiatico*; Squarcini, *Tradition, Veda and Law: Studies on South Asian Classical Intellectual Traditions*; Squarcini, "Pāṣaṇḍin, Vaitaṇḍika, Vedanindaka and Nāstika. On Criticism, Dissenters and Polemics and the South Asian Struggle for the Semiotic Primacy of Veridiction"; Squarcini, "Tradens, Traditum, Recipiens: Introductory Remarks on the Semiotics, Pragmatics and Politics of Tradition."
41. Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*.

that, over the course of this dialectical clash, transformed and assumed the organic forms we know today. This thesis is not entirely dismissible, but it has generally implied a total alienation from the Vedic tradition, rejected because its premises were refused and opposed because it was not recognized as an interlocutor. The assumption of this hypothesis is that Buddhism, like the other heterodox movements, would have rejected any Vedic concept or idea, proposing only their own.

Now, Buddhism is undoubtedly innovative.[42] Some ideas appear for the first time in Indian thought only in the Buddhist context, and therefore can only be their innovations. Moreover, the contemplative practice, closely connected with what is today yoga, cannot have originated exclusively from the Vedic world but must have some precursor in anthropotechnics or ritual practices of Hindus valley religiosity, of which we have material traces in visual representations of figures not easily identifiable as priests, ascetics, or deities, shown in clear yogic positions, often theriomorphic and/or surrounded by animals.[43] This affinity with the non-urbanized world of the animal and wild dimension can also be easily connected to the Indian ascetics' love for wilderness and rejection of the urban and worldly dimension.[44] The Buddhist ascetic is also often described as *āraññika* "forest-dweller."[45]

The so-called discourse on the rhinoceros, as transmitted in Snp 1.12, serves as a clear example of how the figure of the sage-ascetic was understood in early Buddhism. The discovery of the Gāndhārī variant of this text, known as the Khargaviṣaṇa-sutra or Khargaviṣaṇagasa, confirms that its content is likely very archaic.[46]

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42. Sujato and Brahmali, *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*.

43. Thomas McEvilley, "An Archaeology of Yoga," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 1 (March 1981): 44–77, DOI: 10.1086/RESv1n1ms20166655.

44. Olivelle, "Village vs. Wilderness: Ascetic Ideals and the Hindu World."

45. Cf. AN 5.181: there are five kinds of forest dwellers, and only one, that is the Buddhist ascetic, is the "highest and finest" (*uttamo ca pavaro ca*). Other forest dwellers may choose this path "because of stupidity and folly" (*mandattā momūhattā āraññiko*) or because of corrupt desires (*pāpiccho icchāpakato*), or because of madness and mental derangement (*ummādā cittakkhepā*).

46. Richard Salomon, *The Buddhist Literature of Ancient Gandhāra: An Introduction with Selected Translations* (Wisdom Publications, 2018).

The fundamental aspects of this text align with those traditionally attributed to the philosophy of early Buddhist asceticism. The first point addressed in the text is pacifism: "When you have laid down your arms against all creatures, harming none of them, desiring neither a child nor a companion: live alone like a rhinoceros" (*sabbesu bhūtesu nidhāya daṇḍaṃ, aviheṭhayaṃ aññatarampi tesaṃ; na puttamiccheyya kuto sahāyaṃ, eko care khaggavisāṇakappo*).[47] These initial verses provide a good overview of the issue and encapsulate the core of the dialectical conflict with the emerging orthodoxy during the Buddha's time. The rejection of any form of violence is closely tied to the recognition of the suffering condition of all creatures. The refusal to have children might also be seen as a way to avoid bringing beings into a world where they are destined to suffer.

However, this voluntary abstention from contributing to the proliferation of the world and society stands in contrast to the model identified as Brahmanism, which, during the Buddha's time, began to emphasize the moral duty to contribute to the sustenance and enrichment of society. The ascetic, in contrast, shuns organized space and finds dwelling in the forest: "As a wild deer roams free through the forest, grazing wherever it pleases, the wise man who looks towards freedom lives alone like a rhinoceros" (*migo araññamhi yathā abaddho, yenicchakaṃ gacchati gocarāya; viññū naro seritaṃ pekkhamāno, eko care khaggavisāṇakappo*).[48] Much debate has ensued regarding the meaning of this solitary life. Since the term *khaggavisāṇakappo* refers to the Indian horned rhinoceros, some have interpreted "living as one" (*eko care*) not as the solitary life of the rhinoceros but rather as that of its horn.[49]

This text emphasizes the renunciant life, stressing the need to avoid the seductive deceptions of worldly pleasures, which are transient and impermanent. Just as they come, they go, not revealing the truth but rather

47. In Gāndhārī: *sarveṣo bhuteṣo ṇiṣae daṃḍo avihesao aṃñataraṃ pi teṣo metreṇa citiṇa hitaṁukaṃpi eko care khargaviṣaṇagapo*.
48. In Gāndhārī: *mrigo abadho vi yaṣa araṃñe yeṇichati gachati goyarae* ...[missing part]… *eko care hargaviṣaṇagapo*.
49. Jones, "Like the Rhinoceros, or Like Its Horn? The Problem of Khaggavisana Revisited."

inducing a dependency, a 'thirst' driven by attachment that compels one to seek more. These pleasures are ephemeral and illusory, and we suffer from their disappearance: "The seductive pleasures are beautiful, sweet, and attractive, but they appear in changing forms that disturb cognition" (*kāmā hi citrā madhurā manoramā, virūparūpena mathenti cittaṃ*), "this is a calamity, an abscess, a disaster, a disease, a poisoned dart, a danger to me" (*ītī ca gaṇḍo ca upaddavo ca, rogo ca sallañca bhayañca metaṃ*).

Notably, everything characterizing the deceit of seductive forms and fleeting pleasures is identified as 'worldly,' as what is 'in the world' (*loke*), and it is said: "When one understands that love for these entertainments and worldly pleasures is unstable, one loses interest, becomes unadorned, and speaks the truth" (*khiḍḍaṃ ratiṃ kāmasukhañca loke, analaṅkaritvā anapekkhamāno; vibhūsanaṭṭhānā virato saccavādī*). What prevents us from pursuing this path is identified as an obstacle of cognitions, five cognitive obstructions (*pañcāvaraṇāni cetaso*). The sage must not reject withdrawal from the world and contemplative absorption (*paṭisallānaṃ jhānamariñcamāno*), which allow one to live undisturbed (*asantasanto*), like a mighty lion, king of creatures, who roams as a conqueror and victor (*sīho yathā dāṭhabalī pasayha, rājā migānaṃ abhibhuyya cārī*). The ascetic is the conqueror of truth, surpassing the worldly-corporeal limits that constrain normal human existence. The impetus towards this transcendence and the recognition of the nature of such limits will be the first theme addressed: "having understood the world, the seer of the ultimate, the serene one who crossed the flood has cut the ties, unattached and undefiled" (*aññāya lokaṃ* paramatthadassiṃ *oghaṃ samuddaṃ atitariya tādiṃ*, *taṃ chinnaganthaṃ asitaṃ anāsavaṃ*). The concept of an ultimate truth (*paramatthatā*) will be examined in the section on the empirical and absolute (§4.5).

Recognizing the innovations present in some Buddhist concepts and the possible influences of non-Indo-Aryan traditions, it must be said that many other concepts and practices seem clearly attributable to a re-elaboration of concepts and principles well present in the Vedas, with which the Pāli canon seems dialogue extensively,[50] not rejecting it entirely.

50. Divino, "Seers and Ascetics: Analyzing the Vedic Theory of Cognition and

If all Vedic concepts were indeed rejected altogether, the seers would not even be recognized as worthy interlocutors of Buddhist philosophical speculation. Instead, Vedic concepts recur periodically either in negated form (the theme of *anattā* is the most striking case) or reinterpreted form,[51] and here we come again to the "world." The idea of the world (*loka*) is not a Buddhist concept, but it is a semantic core around which numerous other Vedic ideas are taken by Buddhism and reinterpreted critically.[52] What is Buddhist is the conception of the end of the world (*lokanta*) as the goal of ascetic practice. However, while denying the Vedic world, the Buddhist ascetic refers to an alleged original purity of contemplative practice, of which the greatest exponents are precisely the ancient Vedic sages (*isi*s).

There is a fundamental point of convergence between the *muni*, the Buddhist sage, and the *isi*, the Vedic seer. The latter seem to be at least respected figures in the Pāli canon, and those who are fiercely criticized are the 'contemporary' Brāhmaṇas, those known to the Buddha (numerous references are made to ancient Brāhmaṇas in a neutral or positive manner, not making it clear whether these are assimilable to the *isi*s, but it is clear that the Buddha constructs a dynamic between contemporary Brāhmaṇas and ancient Brāhmaṇas, often labeled as 'true' who progressively corrupted. Moreover, the description of the Buddhist *samaṇa* is often constructed based on what a 'true' Brāhmaṇa should do if they were not corrupted). If what McGovern argues is correct, "Brahmanical orthodoxy grew slowly over a period of many centuries and was still in a state of flux at the time that Buddhism arose."[53]

As it is natural and evident at this point, we understand that the problem of the world and that of perception cannot be separated. Archaic Buddhism seems to attribute the same importance to this issue, proposing an idea of "world" (*loka*) that pertains essentially to the five

Contemplative Practice in the Development of Early Buddhist Meditation and Imaginary."

51. Olivelle, *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution*; Freiberger et al., *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*.

52. McGovern, *The Snake and the Mongoose*.

53. Ibid., 52.

aggregates, that is, to the constitution of perception itself. However, Buddhism adopts this term (*loka*) from the preceding Vedic conception, mainly to critique the notion of "world" that was taking shape in rival traditions. Therefore, we cannot disregard the Vedic conception of *loka* as a starting point for constructing the Buddhist idea of *loka*, which is not in contradiction with this historical development.

We must resume our discussion on the concept of interdependence and interpenetration. One of the innovative aspects of Buddhist thought is undoubtedly the idea of the reciprocal interconnection of all aspects of the world. Individual phenomena, which appear to us as having form and participating in some process, pertain to partial aspects of truth, not autonomous and self-sufficient facts. For this reason, asserting that they have a self (*attā*) is improper. Many trace the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) proposed by Buddhism as a critique of the concept of *ātman* present in the Upaniṣads or even in the Vedas. However, although this explanation may have some basis in truth, as we will see more concretely in a dedicated section, it is insufficient to explain why the specific conception of *anattā* is not merely "non-Brahmanical self," where in Upaniṣadic thought the *ātman* is important because it ultimately coincides with *Brahman*, the absolute being. There is no specific rejection of this notion in archaic Buddhism.[54]

On the contrary, since Brahmā (the deity) is indeed present in the Pāli texts, which in itself poses several problems that will also be addressed separately, one would expect, if the Buddha was aware of Upaniṣadic positions and intended to oppose them, that he would at least strive to explicitly deny them. After all, frankness and direct negation of what is considered incorrect is certainly not absent in the canon. Yet, nowhere do we read "such a master proposes the doctrine that the self coincides with Brahmā," nor is there any negation of such a doctrine mentioned in these terms. The equation *attā* = Brahmā, or even the juxtaposition of the two terms, is absent.

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54. Alexander Wynne, "The Ātman and Its Negation: A Conceptual and Chronological Analysis of Early Buddhist Thought," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33, no. 1/2 (2010): 103–71, DOI: 10.2143/JIABS.33.1.3144319.

A very precise interpretation of the doctrine of *attā* has been given by Hamilton in a decidedly brilliant work. According to his interpretation, the final goal of contemplative practice, namely *anattatā*, has to be interpreted as "non-separate-self-hood." Thus, the effort towards transcendence would be actually an effort against the "separating forces" of our cognitive mechanisms: "In separating the factors of our experience in this way, we are conferring on each of those factors, including ourselves, the notion of having an independent identity, of being what we call a 'self.' In this respect the notion of self-hood is applicable not just personally but also generically. If all things are in fact dependent and impermanent, what we are doing is erroneous."[55]

This is also the base for the Buddhist idea of the world-origin: "as long as one is operating from a standpoint of any degree of ignorance," which brings also to both suffering and the origin of the world, "one also superimposes 'manifoldness' (i.e. separateness, or independent self-hood) onto experiential data."[56]

In MN 79, the possibility of creating a perfect world (*ekantasukho loko*) is explored. However, based on the premises we have reached so far, it is clear that such a goal would not make sense to the Buddha, who sees the world itself as problematic: "No... the mendicant does not pursue the Brahmanical conduct that I profess for the purpose of realizing such a 'happy world,' because there are other things that are superior and more sublime for which the mendicant pursues the Brahmanical conduct that I profess" (*na kho... ekantasukhassa lokassa sacchikiriyāhetu bhikkhū mayi brahmacariyaṃ caranti, atthi kho... aññeva dhammā uttaritarā ca paṇītatarā ca, yesaṃ sacchikiriyāhetu bhikkhū mayi brahmacariyaṃ caranti*). This discourse already preludes to why Buddhism does not so much profess a way to live well in the world or to improve it, but rather its end.

Furthermore, it is precisely because of this conflict (whether to improve and sustain the world or to abandon it) that the struggle between ascetic philosophies and other forms of Brahmanism unfolds,

55. Sue Hamilton, "The 'External World': Its Status and Relevance in the Pali Nikāyas," *Religion* 29, no. 1 (1999): 79, DOI: 10.1006/reli.1999.0166.
56. Ibid., 80.

where only those that later took on the name of Brāhmaṇa or Brahman are today known as the orthodoxy continuing the Vedic tradition.[57] However, as we can see in MN 79, the Buddha conceives the spiritual life as *brahmacariya*, "conduct of Brahmā," proving that the point of contention was a conception regarding the very idea of Brahman and *loka* by the challenging traditions.

As McGovern points out, "the opposition between the categories *śramaṇa* and *Brahman* has been overblown, and in any case must be understood as the *product* of a period of contestation between different groups rather than the metahistorical cause of that contestation. […] Does being a Brahman consist of leaving the world, through the lifestyle of renunciation and celibacy and the soteriological goal of liberation? Or does being a Brahman consist of embracing, supporting, and even participating in the construction of the world, through householdship, marriage, the production of children, and the performance of ritual?"[58]

The text specifically addresses this spiritual conduct as achievable by becoming a *lokavidū*, a knower of the world, and pursuing progressive stages of contemplative absorption (*samādhi*) leading to an awakening of wisdom (*paññāya dubbalīkaraṇe*) and various other qualities such as the recollection of all past lives and the acquisition of superhuman abilities (*atikkantamānusaka*) as well as the transcendence of all dualistic conceptions: inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, good and evil (*hīne paṇīte suvaṇṇe dubbaṇṇe sugate duggate...*), thus fully understanding the path and nature of sentient beings.

Another important text is SN 22.94, where the Buddha refers to each of the five aggregates in the same manner, as *loke lokadhammo taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti*. The second part of this expression pertains to the full understanding of the enlightened one: each of the five aggregates has a temporary (conventional) nature that the Buddha understands and comprehends. However, the first part, *loke*

57. Squarcini, "Pāṣaṇḍin, Vaitaṇḍika, Vedanindaka and Nāstika. On Criticism, Dissenters and Polemics and the South Asian Struggle for the Semiotic Primacy of Veridiction," 108.

58. McGovern, *The Snake and the Mongoose*, 86.

lokadhammo, is difficult to translate and has been the subject of a dedicated study on cognitive duplications (see the discussion in §2.5 and §3.1). I proposed to translate *loke lokadhammo* as "phenomenon of the world in the world." Personally, I share also Hamilton's interpretation on this matter: "the five *khanda*s together comprise a 'phenomenon which is a world in the world.'"[59]

In a similar fashion, Katz proposes an analysis of the Buddhist idea of *loka* which remarkably points towards the same direction: *loka* is essentially *lokasaññī*, that is, "the world is our experience of the world,"[60] and that is because "the world about which the Buddha speaks is the experienced, objectified, psychological world."[61] Also, and perhaps most importantly, "for Buddhism, the self and the world are co-terminous and co-extensive."[62]

4.4 Vedic world and Buddhist world

Wiltshire's commendable work on the figure of the pre-Buddhist and early Buddhist ascetic provides a valuable historical context for addressing the problem of *loka*. He acknowledges that in Buddhism, the figure of the *muni*, the sage, partially overlaps with that of the ascetic (*samaṇa*) and is closely related to issues of transcendence from worldliness. The term *muni* refers to one who fully understands the world and, by virtue of this, attains comprehension of the ultimate (*aññāya lokaṃ paramattha-dassiṃ*). It is also said that the *muni* "has entirely transcended the realm of this world (*loka-dhātu*)."[63]

However, it is important to emphasize, as Hamilton notes, that this transcendence does not involve a transition to another world, but rather an expanded plane where worldliness is merely a small part. I add, it

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59. Hamilton, "The 'External World': Its Status and Relevance in the Pali Nikāyas," 81.
60. Nathan Katz, "Does the 'Cessation of the World' Entail the Cessation of Emotions?," *Buddhist Studies Review* 4, no. 3 (1980): 54, DOI: 10.1558/bsrv.v4i3.13928.
61. Ibid., 55.
62. Ibid., 56.
63. Wiltshire, *Ascetic Figures before and in Early Buddhism*, 22.

is not about leaping from one world to another, but about the concrete "end of the world." Worldliness is defined as a particular existential plane, a dimensionality, the delineation of one boundary over another, but every boundary is traced from the same being, merely creating administration in one space rather than another, indeed, rendering 'space' as a specific portion.

In this context, there is also a clear conflict regarding the definition of what is Brahman and what is not. During this period, Buddhism was contending with various traditions that were beginning to define the idea of an absolute principle (*Brahman*) and the practical consequences of such a cult. For the Buddha, the "abode in Brahmā" (*brahma-vihāra*) indicates a specific contemplative exercise.[64] Meditative practice is defined as *bhāvanā*, meaning "development" or "cultivation," and assumes various possible forms, the two most notable of which are *jhāna*, "contemplation" (√*jhā*, "thought," "reflection"), and *samādhi*, "absorption."

It is likely that a general *jhāna* practice was foundational to pre-sectarian Buddhism.[65] However, the *brahma-vihāra* is much less discussed, as it implies the search for a dimension of Brahmā (*brahmaloka*), which poses several problems.

What is Brahmā's status in early Buddhism? If the Buddha rejects the authority of Vedic deities, why does he mention Brahmā? In some respects, this figure is not exactly a deity but a kind of demiurge, yet his origins are shrouded in mystery. Brahmā as a deity does not appear in the Vedas (but rather as a term to indicate contemplation),[66] but is a fundamental figure in the Upaniṣads, where, in addition to the demiurge Brahmā, the concept he presumably represents also appears—the

64. Barbara Stoler Miller, "On Cultivating the Immeasurable Change of Heart: The Buddhist Brahma-Vihāra Formula," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1979): 209–21, DOI: 10.1007/BF00164546.

65. Vetter, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*; Bronkhorst, *The two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*; Rupert Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001).

66. Divino, "Seers and Ascetics: Analyzing the Vedic Theory of Cognition and Contemplative Practice in the Development of Early Buddhist Meditation and Imaginary."

Brahman, the absolute principle of "development" and "proliferation," a sort of prime mover, which is seen in the Ṛgveda, for example, in ṚV 10.141.3, where the epithet *brahmāṇaṃ* is attributed to a priest performing a ritual involving *soma*.

Given the archaic connection of this concept with the priestly function, it can be thought to be linked with the figure of the Roman *flāmen*, an analogy proposed by Dumézil,[67] although the two terms *flāmen*/*brahman* are probably not etymologically connected.[68] Nonetheless, the connection between the *flāmen*, associated with the sacred flame, and archaic Vedic rituality, which also prominently features fire, may be a possible link to the idea of *brahman*. However, the latter is perhaps more etymologically tied to the idea of development and proliferation (√*bṛh*). Historically speaking, the Indian priest (*brāhmaṇa*) is de facto the one who, among other things, holds the knowledge of the sacred flame (*agni*) and knows how to correctly perform the rituals that involve its use.

The connection between the fiery-solar power and the birth of the Brahman is confirmed by the interpretation found in ŚBr 14.1.3.3, which affirms that this absolute principle and contemplative potency, which the seers must harness, is none other than the sun itself, which is reborn day after day from the distant east. Furthermore, the *Pravargya* (the preliminary ceremony of the *Somayajña*) is that very sun, the one who gratifies in this manner, and thus it is said that Brahman is the firstborn from the beginning (*brahma jajñānam prathamam purastāditi asau vā ādityo brahmāharahaḥ purastājjāyata eṣa u pravargyastadetamevaitatprīṇāti tasmādāha brahma jajñānam prathamam purastādityatha prokṣatyasāveva bandhuḥ*).

What we know for certain is that at some point in Indian intellectual history, this concept—perhaps associated with the sacred flame, more likely with the benefit (√*bṛh*) tied to proper ritual performance—was

67. Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 21–46; Georges Dumézil, *Flamen- Brahman*, vol. 52 (Paris: Annales du Musée Guimet - Bibliothèque de vulgarisation, 1935).

68. de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and Other Italic Languages*, 225.

absolutized into a cosmic principle. In the archaic world described by the Vedas, it is the wise seers who perform rituals involving the yoking of fire (*agniyojana*),[69] and this control over fire endows them with considerable powers, making them akin to deities.[70] This creative capacity of the primordial fire is attributed to Agni from the earliest Vedic hymns,[71] and thus it is unsurprising that this primordial flame, similar to the thoughts of Heraclitus,[72] later nourishes the idea of an absolute creative principle.[73]

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69. Riccardo Ginevra, "Loki's Chains, Agni's Yoke, Prometheus Bound, and the Old English Boethius," *Indogermanische Forschungen* 128, no. 1 (September 4, 2023): 203–52, DOI: 10.1515/if-2023-0010.

70. Cf. ṚV 8.48.3: "we drink the Soma, may thus we become immortal! We attained the light, we have known the gods! What could ever do the enemy to us now? What hostility could ever the perishable man commit, O immortal!" (*apāma somam amṛtā abhūmāganma jyotir avidāma devān; kiṃ nūnam asmān kṛṇavad arātiḥ kim u dhūrtir amṛta martyasya*).

71. Jean Varenne, "Agni's Role in the Ṛgvedic Cosmogonic Myth," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 58/59 (1977): 375–86; Dominik Wujastyk, "Agni and Soma: A Universal Classification," *Studia Asiatica* 4–5 (2004): 347–69, DOI: 10.1901/jaba.2004.4-5-347; N. J. Shende, "Agni in the Brāhmaṇas of the Ṛgveda," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 46, no. 1 (1965): 1–28; J. Gonda, "Agni in Ṛgveda-Saṃhitā 9, 66 and 67," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 111, no. 2 (April 15, 1979): 137–52, DOI: 10.1017/S0035869X00135567.

72. Eleni Chronopoulou, "Heraclitus and the Rig Veda: A Cross-Tradition Engaging Examination," *Comparative Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2024): 19–34, DOI: 10.31979/2151-6014(2024).150105; Constance I. Smith, "Heraclitus and Fire," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 1 (1966): 125–27, DOI: 10.2307/2708312.

73. The association between light, knowledge, and power is explicitly articulated in the metaphorical imagery of the ṚV. The image of the sun god Sūrya, who, when rising, spreads his rays and in doing so bestows life and perceives what he illuminates, appears in multiple forms. The ṚV praises the sun as the diffuser of light with golden hair (*deva sūrya, śociṣkeśaṃ vicakṣaṇa*). In 1.50.9, the sun is described as the one who has yoked the seven mares that pull his celestial chariot (*ayukta sapta śundhyuvaḥ sūro rathasya naptyaḥ, tābhir yāti svayuktibhiḥ*). Notably, here as well, the metaphor of yoking (*ayukta*) fundamentally serves as a technical term to denote the acquisition and possession of a particular power. The radiant force of Uṣas is also a light associated with a specific potency. In ṚV 7.75.1, this luminous power is a source of cosmic order, as well as the capacity to illuminate human pathways and guide them (*vy uṣā āvo divijā ṛtenāviṣkṛṇvānā mahimānam āgāt, apa druhas tama āvar ajuṣṭam*

In this context, the Upaniṣads begin to reflect on the figure of the one who embodies this principle, and on the followers of this doctrine. The concept of Brahman as presented in the Upaniṣads is clearly an innovation built upon archaic Vedic concepts, yet it proposes a transformation of the figure of the seer (*ṛṣi*) into a priest of the Brahman cult, the Brāhmaṇa. This term, *Brāhmaṇa*, is also the title of a collection of texts likely composed between the eleventh and ninth centuries BCE, aiming to standardize and describe the performance of sacrificial formulas (*mantra*s). In other words, the Brāhmaṇas construct a philosophical speculation based on the most ancient Vedic rituals. They are, in fact, a prelude to the Upaniṣads, where this philosophical speculation reaches its culmination: the absolute principle (*Brahman*) is coincident with the self (*ātman*) of the devotee, and the ritual leads to the revelation of this coincidence.

brahma taṃ parādādyo'nyatrātmano brahma veda, kṣatraṃ taṃ parādādyo 'nyatrātmanaḥ kṣatraṃ veda, lokāstaṃ parāduryo'nyatrātmano lokānveda, devāstaṃ parāduryo'nyatrātmano devānveda, bhūtāni taṃ parāduryo'nyatrātmano bhūtāni veda, sarvaṃ taṃ parādādyo'nyatrātmanaḥ sarvaṃ veda; idaṃ brahma, idaṃ kṣatram, ime lokāḥ, ime devāḥ, imāmi bhūtāni, idaṃ sarvaṃ yadayamātmā

The Brāhmaṇa rejects those who consider the *Brahman* different from the Self. The Warrior rejects those who consider the Warrior different from the Self. The worlds reject those who consider the worlds different from the Self. Gods reject those who consider the Gods different from the Self. Being rejects those who consider the Beings different from the self. Everything rejects those who consider the Whole different from the Self. This *Brahma*, this Warrior, these Worlds, these Gods, these Beings: everything is nothing more than the Self.

(BṛUp 4.5.7)

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aṅgirastamā pathyā ajīgaḥ). The light of Uṣas is the very essence of immortality, which the god Savtṛ has elevated into the heavens (*ud u jyotir amṛtaṃ viśvajanyaṃ viśvānaraḥ savitā devo aśret*, 7.76.1). In this context as well, light—here Uṣas—is defined as the "eye of the gods," which has been made manifest for the celebration of rituals (*kratvā devānām ajaniṣta cakṣur āvir akar bhuvanaṃ viśvam uṣāḥ*). Uṣas is similarly described as the eye of the gods in 7.77.3 (*devānāṃ cakṣuḥ...*).

brahmavidāpnoti param
tadeṣā'bhyuktā
satyaṃ jñānamanantaṃ brahma ...

The one who knows Brahman attains the Supreme. Regarding this, it is stated: "Brahman is truth, knowledge, infinity…"
(TUp 2.1.3)

yato vāco nivartante
aprāpya manasā saha
ānandaṃ brahmaṇo vidvān

The one who has realized the bliss of Brahman, from which words and thoughts retreat, incapable of grasping it, no longer has any fear.
(TUp 2.4.1)

vijñānaṃ yajñaṃ tanute
karmāṇi tanute'pi ca
vijñānaṃ devāḥ sarve
brahma jyeṣṭhamupāsate

Knowledge performs the sacrifice and also conducts the rites. All the gods meditate on Brahman, the most ancient of all, as well as on knowledge.
(TUp 2.5.1)

asanneva sa bhavati
asad brahmeti veda cet
asti brahmeti cedveda
santamenaṃ tato viduriti

He himself becomes non-being who considers Brahman to be non-being. But he who recognizes Brahman as being is thus regarded by the wise as being.
(TUp 2.6.1)

Nonetheless, the Upaniṣads are quite a heterogeneous collection of texts, and we can also find positions defending the ascetic path and even legitimizing it as the way of the ancient seers.

sa vā eṣa mahānaja ātmā yo'yaṃ vijñānamayaḥ prāṇeṣu ya eṣo'ntarhṛdaya ākāśastasmiñchete, sarvasya vaśī sarvasyeśānaḥ sarvasyādhipatiḥ;

sa na sādhunā karmaṇā bhūyān, no evāsādhunā kanīyān; eṣa sarveśvaraḥ;

eṣa bhūtādhipatiḥ, eṣa bhūtapālaḥ, eṣa seturvidharaṇa eṣāṃ lokānāmasaṃbhedāya;

tametaṃ vedānuvacanena brāhmaṇā vividiṣanti yajñena dānena tapasā'nāśakena;

etameva viditvā munirbhavati;

etameva pravrājino lokamicchantaḥ pravrajanti;

etaddha sma vai tat pūrve vidvāṃsaḥ prajāṃ na kāmayante, kiṃ prajayā kariṣyāmo yeṣāṃ no'yamātmāyaṃ loka iti;

te ha sma putraiṣaṇāyāśca vittaiṣaṇāyāśca lokaiṣaṇāyāśca vyutthāyātha bhikśācaryaṃ caranti;

yā hyeva putraiṣaṇā sā vittaiṣaṇā, yā vittaiṣaṇā sā lokaiṣaṇā, ubhe hyete eṣaṇe eva bhavataḥ

He who is consubstantial with knowledge and resides among the vital functions is indeed the great, imperishable Self. This Self is *That* who dwells in the space within the heart. *That* is the Regent of all, the Lord of all, the Sovereign of all. *That* neither improves through righteous actions nor deteriorates through unrighteous actions. *That* is the Lord of all, the one who governs beings and enables their existence. *That* itself stands as a barrier separating these worlds, so they do not intermingle. The Brāhmaṇas seek to know *That* through the study of the Vedas, through ritual sacrifice, offerings, ascetic discipline, and fasting. Only by realizing *That* does one become wise. Those who wander, aspiring solely to that state, err as mere itinerants. Indeed, this is why the primordial wandering sages did not long for progeny: 'What can we gain from progeny, we who have realized the Self and possess this world?' Thus, they renounced the desire for progeny and worldly matters, and took up the life of mendicants.

(BṛUp 4.4.22)

sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma tajjalāniti śānta upāsīta

atha khalu kratumayaḥ puruṣo yathākraturasmiṃ'lloke puruṣo bhavati tathetaḥ pretya bhavati sa kratuṃ kurvīta

All this is Brahman. Everything originates from Brahman and everything returns to Brahman; thus, everything is sustained by Brahman. Therefore, one should meditate calmly on Brahman. Each individual possesses their own mind. What a person desires in their current life is realized when they depart from this world. This should be kept in mind and meditation should be conducted accordingly.

(ChUp 3.14.1)

The philosophy of the Upaniṣads is primarily distinguished by the idea that the world (*loka*) is sustained by principles that the diligent priest must protect and perpetuate. Among these principles are ancient Vedic notions, such as the creation of the world through the 'military' conquest of a ritually consecrated space, established by the union of the warrior caste's military power and the sacral authority of the seers. Ambitious priests recreate this ideal situation of a world governed by the proper ritual performance, thereby making the priest responsible for the world's equilibrium and destined for a prominent role.

Furthermore, these texts elaborate on the concept of the self (*ātman*), making it consubstantial with that of ritual sacrifice (*yajña*). The self is something that is sacrificed (*ātmayajña*), akin to the primordial great-human (*mahāpuruṣa*), who was dismembered in the primeval sacrifice that created the world. Each part of his giant body became a part of the cosmos through a series of sacrifices performed by the deities at the beginning of time (ṚV 10.90). This creation myth, although included in the Vedas, is likely very recent and indicates this initial transformation of the concept of sacrifice towards an ideal and foundational principle.[74]

We are, however, in a phase of transition. While some reflect on sacrifice and the self in these terms, seeing the foundation of a 'world' as the *summum bonum* of human existence, others reflect on these same terms in an opposite direction. For them, the world is not a good thing but a constrictive enclosure filled with illusions that perpetuate a tragic existential condition intrinsically imbued with suffering. For these practitioners of *fuga mundī*, the sacrifice of the self is not for the benefit of the world but *contra mundum*. The self must be abandoned (sacrificed) as it is merely an impermanent convention, an arbitrary and transitory identity serving the idea of a world made up of parts

74. W. Norman Brown, "The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62, no. 2 (June 1942): 85, DOI: 10.2307/594460; W. Norman Brown, "Theories of Creation in the Rig Veda," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 85, no. 1 (1965): 23–34, DOI: 10.2307/597699; Per-Johan Norelius, "Mahān Puruṣaḥ: The Macranthropic Soul in Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 45, no. 3 (2017): 403–72, DOI: 10.1007/s10781-017-9316-4.

(various selves) believed to be autonomous and self-sufficient.[75] By fleeing the world and abandoning the self, these ascetics recognized the interdependent nature of all things and brought it back to a universal principle that does not imply autonomy.

This would explain the apparent contradiction of early Buddhists maintaining the concept of a world of Brahmā (*brahmaloka*) and a contemplative practice of dwelling in Brahman, while in other sections the figure of Brahmā is clearly rejected or even mocked.[76]

These contemplative dwellings seek the absolute principle present in all things, discernible only by abandoning the world and striving to understand the intrinsic relationship among all entities. This search points towards *a fundamental unity of all differences* rather than *a fundamental difference of all unities*. The latter view underlies the Upaniṣads, as well as the Vedic hymn on the dismemberment of the primordial man. The ideology behind these reflections on the self and the absolute, however, serves to justify the foundation of a world where social caste distinctions exist.

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75. The institute of sacrifice is reinterpreted in a moral and non-violent form: "O master Gotama, I like to sacrifice, I wish to perform a sacrifice, please advise me for I do not know what needs an oblation to be profitable, please tell me" (*yaññe ratohaṃ bho gotama, yaññaṃ yiṭṭhukāmo nāhaṃ pajānāmi, anusāsatu maṃ bhavaṃ, yattha hutaṃ ijjhate brūhi me taṃ*) — "don't ask about rebirth, ask about conduct instead, for any stick can be used for a sacrificial flame to arise: a resolute sage, even those from a low class, is a thoroughbred judged only by his morality" (*mā jātiṃ pucchī caraṇañca puccha, kaṭṭhā have jāyati jātavedo; nīcākulīnopi munī dhitīmā, ājāniyo hoti hirīnisedho*). On the other hand, the traditional Vedic sacrifice is judged ineffective and corrupt: "one who accomplishes these three sacrifices, such a one would excel over those who are worthy of donations […] to reborn in the Brahmā's world" (*yo yajati tividhaṃ yaññasampadaṃ, ārādhaye dakkhiṇeyyebhi tādi ... upapajjati brahmalokanti brūmi*, Snp 3.5). The old Vedic sacrifice is associated to a negative idea of power. In Snp 5.4 the classes *khattiyā-brāhmaṇā* are accused to perform sacrifices only to obtain power and other favors from the gods (devatānaṃ *yaññamakappayiṃsu puthūdha loke*) or hoping for some state of existence to be reached (*jaraṃ sitā yaññamakappayiṃsu*). This behavior is patently criticized by the Buddha who rejects both the authority of the gods and the power of sacrifice.

76. McGovern, "Brahmā: An Early and Ultimately Doomed Attempt at a Brahmanical Synthesis."

The real difference between ascetic philosophies and Upaniṣadic philosophies lies in their social implications. The Buddha concretely rejected any caste division and the right of birth determining one's social position, asserting that there are no social classes and one cannot become a Brahmin by birthright.[77]

This fierce insistence of Buddhism on the non-existence of social classes and the rejection of birthright as a determinant of being a Brahmin should be the focus of our analysis. This fundamental difference delineates ascetic philosophies from Upaniṣadic thought.

77. For instance, see Snp 1.7: "You are neither lowlife by birth, Nor you are a Brāhmaṇa by birth. You are lowlife because of your deeds, And because of your deeds you are a Brāhmaṇa" (*na jaccā vasalo hoti, na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo; kammunā vasalo hoti, kammunā hoti brāhmaṇo*). Also, a clear hierarchy that opposes the figure of the householder (supported by the orthodoxy) and the Buddhist ascetic is outlined: "the householder cannot compete with the mendicant: the sage who meditates sheltered in the forest" (*evaṃ gihī nānukaroti bhikkhuno, munino vivittassa vanamhi jhāyatoti*, Snp 1.12). See also the two Vāseṭṭhasuttas at Snp 3.9 and MN 98: "you are a Brahmin because of your morality and actions" (*yato kho, bho, sīlavā ca hoti vatasampanno ca, ettāvatā kho, bho, brāhmaṇo hoti*). In this context the conflict is crystal clear. Two Brahmins went to the Buddha presenting the diverging views: "we are both recognized masters of the three Vedas […] we are fully qualified in the three Vedas, as philologists and as grammarians […] we are disputing about genealogy, O Gotama, for Bhāradvāja asserts that one is Brahmin by birthright, but for me one is such because of one's deeds" (*anuññātapaṭiññātā, tevijjā mayamasmubho… tevijjānaṃ yadakkhātaṃ, tatra kevalinosmase; padakasma veyyākaraṇā… tesaṃ no jātivādasmiṃ, vivādo atthi gorama; jātiyā brāhmaṇo hoti, bhāradvājo iti bhāsati; ahañca kammunā brūmi*). To this the Buddha replies listing a series of animal characteristics, and then the human ones. Since cannot be found any distinctive human characteristic that lead us to unequivocally say that they are differentiated by their birth, such a hierarchical social division is not tenable as well: "the difference between humans are not defined by birth, not by their hair, nor by their head, not by ear nor by eye, not by mouth nor by nose, not by lips nor by eyebrow" (*evaṃ natthi manussesu, liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ puthu; na kesehi na sīsena, na kaṇṇehi na akkhibhi; na mukhena na nāsāya, na oṭṭhehi bhamūhi vā*), and the list goes on and on until this conclusion: "in individual human bodies, you can't find such distinctions, for the distinctions among humans are spoken of by convention" (*paccattañca sarīresu, manussesvetaṃ na vijjati; vokārañca manussesu, samaññāya pavuccati*). Finally, the Buddha describes the ideal Brahmin a one who does not harm living creatures and lives morally, without committing bad actions, nor hoping for this world or a different world to be reborn into. Thus, a real Brahmin is defined by moral conduct, not birthright.

The latter, while maintaining that everyone's self inevitably coincides with the absolute principle, acknowledges that beyond this fundamental truth—purely speculative—each person lives in the world and has the duty to protect and maintain it.

This world is constituted by a social order where individuals, although their selves coincide with the nature of the absolute principle, are divided into castes or social classes pre-determined by birthright. These social structures, contributing to the preservation of worldly order, are not debatable but are absolute facts to which individuals must conform.[78] There exists a moral order that dictates proper behavior within society, coinciding with an intrinsic nature attributed to the caste one is born into. Failing to adhere to this nature contravenes what is essentially a moral order.

yat puruṣaṃ vy adadhuḥ katidhā vy akalpayan
mukhaṃ kim asya kau bāhū kā ūrū pādā ucyete

brāhmaṇo 'sya mukham āsīd bāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtaḥ
ūrū tad asya yad vaiśyaḥ padbhyāṃ śūdro ajāyata

When the Puruṣa was sacrificed, into how many parts did they divide him? What was his mouth, his arms, his thighs, and his feet called upon?

His mouth became the Brāhmaṇa, his arms became the Rājanya,[79] his thighs became the Vaiśya,[80] and from his feet the Śūdra[81] was born.

(ṚV 10.90.11-)

na brāhmaṇo nomhi na rājaputto,
na vessāyano uda koci nomhi;
gottaṃ pariññāya puthujjanānaṃ,
akiñcano manta carāmi loke

I am neither a Brahmin nor a prince,
nor a peasant nor anything else.
Having understood the family division among ordinary people
I wander in the world, owning nothing, reflecting.

(Snp 3.4)

78. Squarcini, "Le Colombe e gli Avvoltoi: sull'economia Politica delle 'Ecologie Religiose' del Passato, in India e non solo," 230.
79. Kingship. Most likely the class of the *kṣatriya*s.
80. The third class, mainly landlords and herdsmen. They are mainly devoted to agriculture and cattle-rearing.
81. Working class. They are mainly under the dependences of the upper classes.

Thus, we clearly understand the worldview Buddhists opposed and the idea of a structured society they rejected. The Buddhists opposed the notion that followers of the search and cultivation of the absolute principle, (*Brahman*?), should be defined by birthright. Instead, they argued that true philosophical pursuit and the nature of a genuine Brahmin should be determined not by birth but by one's actions.

Reflecting on the connection between the figure of the warrior (*kṣatriya*/*khattiya*) and that of the renunciant in the Pāli texts, Wiltshire identifies some surprising similarities. I will not delve into all his findings but will begin with the well-known role of the *kṣatriya* in antiquity. The warrior class is likely the foundation of the noble caste, and the *kṣatriya*s are also the class that underpins the figure of the *rājan*, the ancient king.

The historical Buddha was most probably the son of a *kṣatriya* who headed a small kingdom, and the figure of the warrior reappears symbolically multiple times in the canon. There are many hypotheses regarding the Buddha's rejection of violence. It is repudiated in all its forms, whether in warfare or ritual sacrifice, and this may be partially attributable to the Buddha's personal experiences.

Beyond mythological accounts, he would have certainly witnessed the brutalities of wars or local conflicts, which were commonplace. This, combined with his decision to pursue an ascetic life, helps explain his aversion to war: "catastrophes arise from those who take up arms; look at the people engaged in conflicts! [...] I have seen these people flounder, like fish in a drying pond, fighting one against the other, and fear overwhelmed me: a world entirely without substance, all directions were in turmoil. [...] Even in their own homes they were hostile, seeing this I grew disheartened, then I saw here a dart, so hard to see, lodged in the heart" (*attadaṇḍā bhayaṃ jātaṃ, janaṃ passatha medhagaṃ… phandamānaṃ pajaṃ disvā, macche appodake yathā; aññamaññehi byāruddhe, disvā maṃ bhayamāvisi; samantamasāro loko, disā sabbā sameritā… osāne tveva byāruddhe, disvā me aratī ahu; athettha sallamaddakkhiṃ, duddasaṃ hadayanissitaṃ*, Snp 4.15).

These powerful poetic images evoke the theme of conflict, a war possibly witnessed by the Buddha or perhaps merely figurative, but

they serve as a pretext to impart a teaching: "here I tell you, yearning is the great flood, and longing, here I tell you, are the currents [...] the wise never deviate from the truth, the brahman stands firmly on the ground, having nothing to renounce, they live in peace" (*gedhaṃ brūmi mahoghoti, ājavaṃ brūmi jappanaṃ… saccā avokkamma muni, thale tiṭṭhati brāhmaṇo; sabbaṃ so paṭinissajja, sa ve santoti vuccati*).

Despite these, and various other, denunciations of war that a good sage or brahmin should pursue, other suttas mention the theme of the four quarters (*cāttudisā*). This concept is well-known in the Vedas, as this spatial division into quarters is one way of indicating the world, and more specifically the space over which the warrior-conqueror establishes his rule. Buddhism frequently employs this metaphor, but while in Vedic rituals it is closely tied to enthronement, Buddhism uses it to propose a metaphorical sovereign, with the figure of the Buddha becoming analogous to that of an ideal king (*dhammiko dhammarājā*, for example in AN 5.133). However, the concept of the *cāttudisā* also appears symbolically to denote the totality of the world, and according to Wiltshire, "can be read as an epithet either for a 'king' or for one who cultivates the brahmavihāra meditations."[82] According to Shulman, this peculiar way "to meeting Brahma" described in these meditations points towards a "philosophical intuition" that was possibly "borrowed from non-Buddhist traditions, but it need not necessarily be interpreted as a non-organic part of the Buddhist view."[83]

This particular form of meditation would be "closely analogous to the formulation of certain sacrificial rituals performed by the king: both employ the spatial concepts of the 'regions' and both are methods of surmounting dangers."[84] At this point, Wiltshire also mentions the *Rājasūya*.

> For example, in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa it says of the Punarābhiṣeka Ceremony performed at the rājasūya sacrifice that the king is 'free from harm and injury, unoppressed, protected on every side; by the form of the

82. Wiltshire, *Ascetic Figures before and in Early Buddhism*, 168.
83. Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*, 39.
84. Wiltshire, *Ascetic Figures before and in Early Buddhism*, 168–69.

> threefold knowledge he wanders (samcarati) through all the quarters (diśā), finding support (pratiṣṭhā) in the world of Indra. This description might apply as much to a muni and adept of the brahmavihāras as to a monarch. […] As the king—literally or by ritual—conquers the cāttudisā, and so establishes his sovereignty and secures his own protection, the one who cultivates the brahmavihāras conquers by the power of meditation the cāttudisā, etc.[85]

According to Wiltshire, an implicit reference to this meditative form is found in Snp 1.3, of which I also report the Gāndhārī version available to us today, but with the translation he proposes of these verses.[86]

Snp 1.3 (Pāli)	Fragment 5B (Gāndhārī)	Wiltshire's Translation
mettaṃ upekkhaṃ karuṇaṃ vimuttiṃ,	*metra uvekha karuṇa ya bhavae,*	"Constantly cultivating loving-kindness,
āsevamāno muditañca kāle;	*asevamaṇa mutita e kalo;*	equanimity, compassion release and sympathy;
sabbena lokena avirujjhamāno,	*sarveṇa logeṇa a̍viruī̍amā̍ṇa,*	Unobstructed by the whole world,
eko care khaggavisāṇakappo	*eko care khargavi̍saṇagapo*	One should wander alone like a rhinoceros."

In this context, the expression *sabbena lokena* (*sarveṇa logeṇa* in Gāndhārī) is merely a reference to the "four corners" corresponding to the organized space, the "entire world." However, this raises a question about the status of the *brahmavihāra*s. It has been stated that Buddhism was in conflict with emerging orthodoxy concerning the role of the world and the ascetic/priest within it. The figure of Brahmā is preserved in the metaphysical-cosmological conception of Buddhism, but it does not hold the status or importance assigned to it in the Upaniṣads.

Therefore, a meditation aiming to reach a *brahma-loka* would seem rather unusual. Wiltshire's work remains relevant despite the decades that have passed, as it provides excellent points for reflection. However, when he hypothesizes that Buddhism retains some form of

85. Ibid., 169.
86. Ibid.

orthopraxy aimed at rebirth in a *brahmaloka*, it might seem that this practice sought to achieve nothing different from a form of paradise. Even so, *brahmaloka* is not the ultimate destination and is not a separate and distinct world from ours but rather a condition in which one's abilities reach a potency equal to that of Brahmā.

This is not the ultimate destination, as the Buddha possesses a condition superior to that of Brahmā, as evidenced by the famous challenge in MN 49 between the Buddha and a mysterious Baka Brahmā (Heron Brahmā, perhaps an epithet meant to mock him). In this challenge the Buddha manages to penetrate Brahmā's world and render himself invisible even to Brahmā himself. This episode, executed through an "exercise of superhuman powers" (*iddhābhisaṅkhāraṃ*), demonstrates that the Buddha can penetrate the existential plane of this Brahmā's dimension and even mock him by becoming invisible in his own world, showcasing the superiority of his powers: "Therefore, Brahmā, I will disappear from your sight!" (*handa carahi te brahme antaradhāyāmi*), to which Baka Brahmā replies: "Well then, venerable one, disappear indeed if you are truly capable of it" (*handa carahi me tvaṃ, mārisa, antaradhāyassu sace visahasi*). This exchange of words has the air of a challenge, which is the tone the sutta intends to convey, demonstrating that the Buddha's supernatural powers far surpass those of Baka Brahmā.

Now, let's reconnect to Wiltshire's discussion. In his hypothesis, the *brahmavihāra*s might have been spiritual exercises already present in the cultural milieu before the advent of the Buddha.[87] Since Buddhism entered into dialogue with these philosophical-spiritual movements, it is likely that it initially integrated the *brahmavihāra*s, significantly altering their meaning. Furthermore, the presence of other contemplative exercises focused instead on the "extinguishing" (*nibbuta*) of metaphorical fires of perceptions and cognitive mechanisms, along with the peculiar conception of *nibbāna*—which, for the use they make of this term, is most likely an original innovation of Buddhism or movements that merged into it—suggests that the Buddha opposed his meditative exercises to these practices.

87. Ibid., 261.

Therefore, although I do not fully agree with Wiltshire's historical reconstruction, I share many of his assumptions, particularly his theorizing regarding the problem of *loka*.

> However, Early Buddhism affirmed its critique of prevailing soteriologies (including the brahma-vihāra meditations), by situating its supreme attainment beyond the notion of a loka; in other words it achieved the conceptual distinction of citing transcendence in the principle of loka absentia (nibbāna) and kāya absentia (anattā) rather than in loka maximus (brahma loka). The conception of loka maximus is perfectly exemplified by the meditational technique of the brahma-vihāras since it is said that the adept's mind (citta) expands outwards, pervading (pharati) all directions (sabba loka; sabba disā). Prior to the development of the brahma-vihāras the citta is said to be paritta (small, confined), but through their development it grows or expands (bhāvitā) until it becomes subhāvitā (well developed) and appamāṇa (unbounded). Given such a cosmological framework of loka maximus, it seems to us that the conception of cittaṁ appamāṇaṁ (unbounded mind) implies transcendence, that is, implies vimutti (release). If instead the conceptual framework is loka and kāya absentia as Buddhism traditionally affirms, then the brahma-vihāras would not alone be sufficient for the attainment of transcendence. […] If we are to posit the idea of an alteration in the conception of a summum bonum, then there is considerable evidence to suggest that the dhamma of the Buddha is the new conception which replaces Brahmā/brahman as the primary object of knowledge or gnosis […].[88]

These experiences cannot be explained simply by cosmogonic reasons or by adopting a transformed Vedic cosmology. These ideas of the expansion and extension of consciousness have also been scientifically documented by modern meditation practitioners,[89] compelling

88. Ibid., 263–64.

89. Zoran Josipovic, "Neural Correlates of Nondual Awareness in Meditation," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1307, no. 1 (2014): 9–18, DOI: 10.1111/nyas.12261; Emil Jovanov, "On Physiological Bases of States of Expanded Consciousness," in *States of Consciousness:Cvetkovic Experimental Insights into Meditation, Waking, Sleep and Dreams*, ed. Dean Cvetkovic and Irena Cosic (Heidelberg: Springer Berlin, 2011), 203–21, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-642-18047-7_9; Ruben E. Laukkonen et al., "Cessations of Consciousness in Meditation: Advancing a

us to consider that beyond the symbolic and cultural pretext that led to the adoption of certain metaphors for symbolic purposes only and in response to a dominant and pre-existing narrative, these metaphors describe real ideas and concrete experiences.

The episode in MN 49, among others, proves to Wiltshire "that the Buddhist conception of transcendence is higher than the conception of brahman; one of loka and kāya absentia rather than of loka maximus."[90] The problem of the world is thus inextricably linked to that of the body and identity. Wiltshire had a brilliant intuition in hypothesizing the concept of "absence" (*absentia*) as an intellectual (philosophical) and practical (contemplative, meditative) concept in Early Buddhism that can explain both their interplay with Vedic and orthodox ideas of the time concerning these issues, and how the Buddha conceived his peculiar way of transcending the worldly-bodily constraints through contemplative practice.

The commendable work of Johansson, remarkably relevant even today, provides an exhaustive overview of the problem of the world in early Buddhism. Firstly, from the analysis of the suttas, it is evident that Buddhism does not propose transcendence into *another* world, nor that the "end of the world" is something catastrophic or apocalyptic. Among the *micchādiṭṭhi*s, the erroneous views, both the idea that "the world does not exist" and the one that "there is no world beyond" (*n'atthi ayaṃ loko, n'atthi paro loko*) are present.[91] Nonetheless, the "beyond" world is not another world but is what remains (or does not remain) of our idea of "world" when the boundaries of what we call "world" have been transcended, extending to the point of being no longer determinate.

Scientific Understanding of Nirodha Samāpatti," in *Progress in Brain Research*, vol. 280 (Elsevier, 2023), 61–87, DOI: 10.1016/bs.pbr.2022.12.007; Julian M. Davidson, "The Physiology of Meditation and Mystical States of Consciousness," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 19, no. 3 (1976): 345–80, DOI: 10.1353/pbm.1976.0042; Raphaël Millière et al., "Psychedelics, Meditation, and Self-Consciousness," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, no. 1475 (2018): 1–29, DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01475.

90. Wiltshire, *Ascetic Figures before and in Early Buddhism*, 266.

91. Johansson, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, 27.

The conception of the world in early Buddhism is a theme I have addressed in different occasions,[92] and I will not reiterate it here. Moreover, Johansson provides a comprehensive view of the nature of what we call the world, which is "arisen through the six (senses, or sense-modalities)."[93] The suttas (like Snp 1.9) are explicit in this regard: the world "is born in six," referring to the six sensory spheres (*chassu loko samuppanno*), and just as it is born in six, it is also destroyed in six (*kubbati santhava*). In the section on the body, we have seen the complex dynamic between the sensory spheres, the six 'gates' of mediation through which the body constructs and experiences the world. In relation to the body, we have also seen that contemplative practice seeks a form of transcendence that liberates experience from the stringent confines of these six gates. But once this sensory limit is dismantled, what remains of the world?

The only possible solution is that the world, which is what appears within the mundane circles, is transcended along with the same limits that previously defined those circles. This also leads to another consequence. In other words, "There is no independently existing world."[94]

The problem, Johansson explains, lies precisely in the distinction between subjective and objective, which is a dichotomy, and like any binomial relationship, it is a distortion of the truth. I would add at this point that the same body/world dichotomy is part of this dualism, and thus the world constructed from this dualism is not 'false,' but neither is it 'the truth,' as it is part of those illusions and reductions of truth that construct antinomic relationships. If we bring the discussion back to the problem of the conditioned and the unconditioned, then we notice that the issue of the world is but a declination of this problem. The perception of separation from the world is an illusion, but both "I" and the "world" are two conditioned aspects of the unconditioned, and therefore cannot be said

92. Divino, "In This World or the Next: Investigation Over the 'End of the World' in Contemplative Practice Through the Pāli Canon"; Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry."
93. Johansson, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, 28.
94. Ibid., 28–29.

to be separate or independent from each other. To approach the unconditioned, one can only put an 'end' to the world, simultaneously ending the 'conditioning mechanisms' of the six sensory spheres.

Quoting SN 1.62, Johansson brings us this remarkable phrase, which I will retranslate for reasons related to the term *citta*, which can be rendered as mind but is more appropriately linked to cognition: "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*). Then quoting the famous Rohitassasutta (AN 4.45), he reminds us that "there is no liberation from suffering without the end of the world" (*na ca appatvā lokantaṃ, dukkhā atthi pamocanaṃ*).

However, in this sutta, it is also stated, to make it unequivocal, that "the end of the world" is not something that "can be reached by traveling" (*gamanena na pattabbo, lokassanto kudācanaṃ*), demonstrating that Buddhists do not intend the state of *lokanta* as a physical destination, a kind of "other world," a paradise or an afterlife of some kind accessed through retribution, but as a transcendental goal, typically ascetic: "thus a sage, having understood the world, reaches the end of the world by completing his spiritual journey, and being at peace having known the end of the world, desires neither this world nor the next" (*tasmā have lokavidū sumedho, lokantagū vusitabrahmacariyo; lokassa antaṃ samitāvi ñatvā, nāsīsatī lokamimaṃ parañca*). These verses in particular must be older than the prose that precedes and introduces them, as they are repeated multiple times in the canon, also in the subsequent AN 4.46, or SN 2.26. This refrain on the end of the world must have been a fairly common idea in early ascetic thought. In Snp 4.2, we find them in a slightly different form: in this case, the act of crossing the flood is invoked, and it is said: "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 we can see here, the common denominator is the abandonment of desire for this world or any other world whatsoever. But we can also

draw a parallel with the preceding part. If Johansson is correct, and the world is something generated by cognitions through the six sensory spheres, this parallel with Snp 4.2, which I remind, is probably one of the oldest discourses in the entire canon being in the Aṭṭhakavagga, would confirm the parallelism between world and perceptions.

The conceptions of a "world" or multiple "worlds" in general fall within the domain of cosmology, an area that the Buddha regards as particularly problematic. Any form of engagement with power is quite controversial, and the emerging orthodoxy of the time—those who would later adopt the name "Brāhmaṇa," but were still in contention with other doctrines, including Buddhism, over what it meant to be a 'true Brāhmaṇa'—was keen on defining not only what the truth was, but also which system was most optimal for managing the world. In order to manage a world, one must also define what constitutes a world. This represents an apparently insurmountable gap between ascetic philosophies: the *samaṇa*s, as often emphasized, reject the world because its institution is nothing but a form of power and control over the social bodies adhering to the reference world-system.

Conversely, the emerging orthodoxy perceived the world as a necessity, and therefore, rather than deconstructing or fleeing from it, one should actively contribute to its proliferation, which led to a stricter adherence to cultural norms, social classes, and 'moral' duties imposed "for the good of the world." These themes are of fundamental importance as they represent the crux of the dispute between the two schools of thought. In a famous sutta in SN 12.48, some Brāhmaṇas approach the Buddha to inquire about the correct cosmology. They present four options, all of which the Buddha rejects:

1. Everything exists (*sabbamatthi*);
2. Nothing exists (*sabbamatthi*);
3. Everything is one (*sabbamekattaṃ*);
4. Everything is multiple (*sabbaṃ puthuttaṃ*).

The rejection of these four options is likely conceptual in nature. As Johansson has also explained, the Buddha does not adhere to nihilism, nor does he assert that the world does not exist simply because what we perceive as "world" is a partial illusion. However, to cling to those illusions or to revel in the idea of an objective truth based solely on what is witnessed is probably the existentialist option that the Buddha rejected: "everything exists," that is, "everything is truth."

Similarly, the extreme opposite that denies the existence of things merely because they are not the truth is another extreme: "nothing exists" denies the evidence of facts, because if nothing truly existed, we ourselves would not be able to witness any reality. Extreme monism, "everything is one," is a position that does not account for the plurality of manifestations of the real. The fact that everything is essentially interdependent and interpenetrating does not permit us to say that everything is the same thing, just as extremizing this difference and asserting "everything is multiple" risks leading us into a segmenting pluralism, where each diversity is understood as a thing in itself, inherently existent and independent. But this, too, as we have seen, is an unacceptable extreme.

In SN 35.68, when the Buddha is asked to define "what is that thing we call 'world'" (*kittāvatā nu kho, loko vā assa lokapaññatti vā*), he responds in a clear and unequivocal manner by enumerating the six sensory spheres and, for each of them, "that which is known through consciousness." For example, "when there is the eye, visual objects, visual consciousness, and the things knowable by visual consciousness, there is a world or that which is known as a world" (*yattha kho, atthi cakkhu, atthi rūpā, atthi cakkhuviññāṇaṃ, atthi cakkhuviññāṇaviññātabbā dhammā, atthi tattha loko vā lokapaññatti vāti*). Conversely, when each of these six sensory consciousnesses ceases to function, "there is no longer the world or that which we know as the world" (... *natthi tattha loko vā lokapaññatti vā*). This does not imply that the world vanishes into nothingness or ceases to exist. Nihilism is not an option contemplated or considered even remotely possible. The meaning conveyed by the verb *atthi* "there is" and its negative *natthi* ("there is not," sometimes rendered as *n'atthi*)

is precisely that of "appearing" or "not appearing." A thing "presents itself" or "does not present itself" because certain conditions make it possible to appear in the way it does, otherwise it no longer appears as such. This does not mean it has become nonexistent.

4.5 Empirical and absolute

Over time and with the evolution of the debate, this fundamental conception regarding the *end* of the world has gradually been lost. The rejection of the four cosmologies was not intended to promote nihilism or establish an ontological hierarchy where some things are 'truer' than others. My critique is particularly focused on certain passages in the Abhidhamma, which seem to imply these ontological nuances that fail to account for the theme of interpenetration. Notably, in the Abhidhamma, the idea of transcendence (*lokuttara*) emerges as an evolution of the concept of *lokanta* but is gradually transformed into an access to a different, superior ontology.[95]

The fundamental distinction between truth and opinion is not maintained; instead, it is replaced by a conception of apparent entities and the search for an underlying ontological substance. In the suttas we find that the concept of *lokuttara* is employed mainly in one formula: "speeches pronounced by the Realized One, profound, transcending the world, concerning emptiness" (*suttantā tathāgatabhāsitā gambhīrā gambhīratthā lokuttarā suññatāppaṭisaṃyuttā*, AN 5.79, SN 20.7 & 55.53). Nonetheless, not every innovation posed by the Abhidhamma is too distant from those of the Pāli canon, although a certain amount of reworking can be detected.

> The Abhidhamma recognises the fact that, while conventionally language about persons (*puggala*) etc., may be understood and acted upon by the ordinary person, the psycho-physical continuum is in reality nothing but a mirage caused by the constant interplay of countless impermanent, insubstantial, and unsatisfactory elements (*dharma*).[96]

95. Bhikkhu, "Jhāna and Lokuttara-Jjhāna."
96. Ian Charles Harris, *The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in Indian*

However, Nāgārjuna intervenes by formulating a philosophy that appears to be a radical return to more ancient concepts.[97] What is really commendable about his philosophy is precisely the refocusing on this fundamental level of truth analysis, which he articulates as the understanding of "two truths"—one concerning the "conventional world" and the other being "absolute" (*dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā; lokasaṃvṛtisatyaṃ ca satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ*, MK 24.8). This emphasis on the fact that conventionality itself is the mundane (*lokasaṃvṛti*) likely represents the pinnacle of his thought, and it aligns closely with the Pāli texts.

As Hamilton writes, "focusing on subjectivity, the Buddha is pointing the way not to discovering the non-existence of the experiential world but to understanding its nature," but this does not implicate that nothing exist whatsoever: "from saying that the 'world' (as we mean that particular term) is in fact a world of experience, it does not follow that therefore 'in Reality' (capital 'R') nothing exists."[98]

In saying this, Hamilton correctly infers that Nāgārjuna's doctrine of the "conventional truth" can easily be referring to this experiential plane of relativity. Consequently, the "absolute truth" is referred to the possibility of recognizing the *whole possible Being*. Nāgārjuna's philosophy is in this sense much closer to the core of the early Pāli canon, and a profound inquiry on the nature of Reality.

> In my view much more important, however, the Buddha's teachings themselves have a further implication about the nature of Reality in this respect. It is because the empirical world of experience is dependently originated, and therefore dependent, that there *must* be something else. If there were not, the conventional world, the world of experience would have to be autonomous, which the Buddha's teachings both implicitly and explicitly state is not the case. It is indeed the common human experience of such Reality (whatever 'it' is—and I use the term 'it' only because

Mahāyāna Buddhism (Leiden: BRILL, 1991), 86.

97. Vélez de Cea, "Emptiness in the Pāli Suttas and the Question of Nāgārjuna's Orthodoxy."

98. Hamilton, "The 'External World': Its Status and Relevance in the Pali Nikāyas," 84.

> constraints of language preclude any less singularising alternative—in itself, whatever its nature, it is clearly not, and *cannot* be, part of experience) that constitutes the empirical world.[99]

Nāgārjuna reiterates the condition of the appearing and disappearing of Being. These are two aspects that we perceive due to a cognitive misunderstanding, which Nāgārjuna calls obscuration (*mohād*). This is why the example of eyeglasses is so pertinent. The illusion that beings, as reflections of truth, appear and disappear, manifest and then vanish from sight, stems precisely from this obscuration, caused by the limited perceptual condition that humans possess. The Being can perceive itself only by prefiguring a condition in which it can appear and disappear. If it were evident in its entirety, it could not be described as it is. Therefore, appearing and disappearing exist only in the obscured relative reality, whereas in the true reality, these two conditions would not exist because they are contradictory.

saṃbhavo vibhavaś caiva naika ity upapadyate *saṃbhavo vibhavaś caiva na nānety upapadyate* *dṛśyate saṃbhavaścaiva vibhavaś caiva te bhavet* *dṛśyate saṃbhavaścaiva mohād vibhava eva ca*	To say that appearing and disappearing are the same thing is not congruent, just as it is not to say that appearing and disappearing are separate realities. Are appearing and disappearing perceived, thus existing? It is due to obscuration that we perceive entities as appearing and disappearing.

(MK 21.10-11)

When it is said that Nāgārjuna is not concerned with the absolute, it is often forgotten that he himself admits to adhering to the original teachings of the Buddha, which state that there are "two realities" (*dve satye*): a worldly and conventional one (*lokasaṃvṛtisatyaṃ*) and an absolute and permanent one (*paramārthataḥ*). The clarity at this point is such that it is surprising to see the misunderstandings that have followed these declarations: "*dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ*

99. Ibid.

dharmadeśanā; lokasaṃvṛtisatyaṃ ca satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ" (MK 24.18). It is also clear how the message aligns with that of early Buddhism: it is ignorance (*avidyā*) that maintains the perceptions that structure our reality of conventions. When someone develops correct wisdom (*samyagjñāna*), reality, i.e., "such-ness" (*tattva*) appears clearly, and ignorance (*avidyā*) is destroyed.

Harris hypothesizes that the two truths in Buddhism are mutually dependent in a manner analogous to the relationship between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* in Sāṃkhya philosophy.[100] The absolute reality is, to a certain extent, the only "real" reality, as the etymology of the term itself indicates (*paramārtha* means "ultimate," from *parama* meaning "principal," "predominant," and *artha*, "meaning"). The conventional reality is a "reality," but not "real" in the sense of stable and permanent. The term *saṃvṛti* means "conventional," indicating that it does not refer to another reality distinct from the only reality, but rather to a way of seeing and interpreting reality, as if creating another reality.

The quality of *saṃvṛti* is *prajñapti*—"concepts," "mental constructions"—so while the conventional reality depends on the absolute (as it is a reduction and mystification of it, creating the idea of becoming and division from the stable and permanent eternal), it cannot be said in any way that the absolute depends on the relative. The fact that Nāgārjuna compares the two realities to the dimensions of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, stating that there is no difference (MK 25.19-20), does not represent a contradiction.

It is true that there is only one reality, and thus no difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. What changes are the various conventional, provisional (*neyārtha*), and not rigidly defined (*nītārtha*) ways of seeing the appearance of reality, making it relative to our experience. This is why texts like the Dharmasaṃgraha (section 41) speak of the absolute truth of emptiness (*paramārthaśūnyatā*), because Nāgārjuna had already stated that *śūnyatā*, "emptiness," inevitably leads to the absolute.

In Asaṅga's Yogācārabhūmi, four stages of reality are described: the first is the stage given by the vision of the world (*lokaparisiddhatattvārtha*)

100. Harris, *The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 112.

when one is still unaware of cognitive deceptions. The second stage is a higher awareness arising from reasoning (*yuktiparisiddhatattvārtha*) that questions the cognitive mechanisms previously taken for granted. The third stage follows a purification of the mind from the obstacles of contaminations (*kleśāvaraṇaviśuddhijñānagocaratattvārtha*), which is achieved when one understands that there is no identity self (*pudgala-nairātmya*). Finally, the stage where thought is purified from cognitive preconceptions (*jñeyāvaraṇaviśuddhijñānagocaratattvārtha*) is reached when one understands that there are no substantial entities (*dharma-nairātmya*). For Candrakīrti, there is no difference between names (*abhidhāna*) and conventional reality (*prajñaptisat*), in the sense that they are essentially the same: the name is conventionality.[101]

Being nothing means saying "being a non-being," and this contradictory affirmation leads to nihilistic anguish, which *samādhi*, as the supreme manifestation of being, combats. In this sense, Nāgārjuna's philosophy, which is already evidently opposed to the idea of nothingness and the duality oscillating between being and non-being, shows today its true nature as the ultimate defense of truth in an absolute sense.

This is supremely represented by being in its evident form, the "that-which-is" of things (*tattva*). Being in this sense:

> is free of any discrete parts that we normally cut the world up into by our thoughts (*vikalpa*s) that necessarily make distinctions—it does not have the artificial borders within it that our conceptual differentiations suggest. [...] *Tattva* thus is simply the phenomenal realm free of our conceptual division of it into self-contained objects (*bhāva*s and *dharma*s) and is open to direct experience. It is not some hidden or transcendent reality. Nāgārjuna does not reject sense-experience of the phenomenal world as cognitive—he wants to correct our experience of the world and to see what is really there rather than our conceptual projections. Seeing *tattva* (which is called *yathātathaṃ* in Pāli) is not seeing something behind the phenomenal realm but seeing the phenomenal realm as it is without our conceptual overlay.[102]

101. Ibid., 95.

102. Richard H. Jones, "On What Is Real in Nāgārjuna's 'Middle Way,'" *Comparative Philosophy: An International Journal of Constructive Engagement*

If the world is nothing but the language that describes it (words are things), then the origin of the world is the foundation of language. But at this point, one must ask, what is the origin of language? Can we assert that it comes from nothing?

Being-such (*tattva*), which is not the idea of being nor the being that can be expressed through the word "being" (for which, when speaking of it, it is necessary to transcend the word), is not simply the Gestaltian sum of all the elements that compose the totality. Being is not the totality of its manifestations, nor is it the sum of every possible manifestation: "*tattva* is free of conceptualizations—the distinct objects that our concepts produce are merely our creations,"[103] and among these "objects," which are mental objects, is included the idea of being as well as the idea of non-being. But, it must be reiterated, "*tattva* is not an entity or collection of entities."[104]

This interpretation is far from being a subsequent interpolation, as it finds resonance in concepts explicitly expressed already in the Pāli canon:

dhammatā esā, bhikkhave, *yaṃ samāhito yathābhūtaṃ jānāti passati*	It is in the nature of things, O monks, that a person with awareness sees things-as-they-are.

(AN 11.2)

Under normal conditions, a person is established as a "stream of consciousness consisting of both sides, established as such in this world and in the next" (*purisassa ca viññāṇasotaṃ pajānāti, ubhayato abbocchinnaṃ idha loke patiṭṭhitañca paraloke patiṭṭhitañca*, DN 28). This conception of consciousness as a stream extending between the extremes of worlds (this world and the 'other' one) allows us to clearly understand the Buddha's position on consciousness and its distinction, for example, from awareness. Awareness, as a form of presence, does

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103. Ibid., 13.

104. Ibid.

not flow across one or more worlds but constitutes a complete understanding of the world, thus residing at the 'end' of the world.

Buddhism focuses and invests most of its reflections solely on the destruction of the Ego. The "suchness" is mentioned sometimes in the form of *dhammatā* or *yathābhūta* as the truth (*sacca*) that is unveiled beyond the worldly constraints. Nonetheless, this concept remains less relevant at least until the great Mahāyāna revolution, which, from Nāgārjuna's work onward, began to structure itself in increasingly complex ways.

Here, finally, the Truth re-emerges, in the form of a Buddha nucleus (*tathāgatagarbha*), a quotient of Buddhahood (*buddhatā*), or a True Self (*satyātman*). When these reflections reach the sublime apex of the esoteric Vajrayāna turn, the True Nature returns to the center of philosophical interest. Thus, true liberation (*mokṣa*) in Buddhism is liberation from the anguish of nothingness, from the deception of death. Nirvāṇa, in this sense, is "liberation from the tyranny of the conventional (*saṃvṛti*). *Parāmārthasatya* is incapable of being taught or proved, though it may be hinted at through the spoken word."[105]

What can be said about the imperishable Truth (*paramārtha*), which at this point is superfluous to state. Things neither become nothing nor eternally become something other than themselves, which would mean entering nothingness and emerging from it as something else. Are things perhaps nothing? Are things perhaps eternally something else? The sign (*nimitta*), which is not the reality of things, is ephemeral (*śūnya*) in its substance. Things as they are, beyond the emptiness of signs, rigid and conventional (*saṃvṛti*), just as conventional is the world they describe when confronted with Truth, are instead eternal, but also inconceivable to relative language, made up of self-identity (*ātman*) and otherness (*anyatva*).

This fundamental teaching on the deceptive nature of dual perceptions appears to underpin Nāgārjuna's philosophy, yet it is also true that he claims to have derived it from the Buddha's teachings. There is indeed a single sutta that Nāgārjuna explicitly mentions: "in the teaching to Kātyāyana, the Buddha extinguishes the notions of

105. Harris, *The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 115.

being-and-non-being, giving us instructions on how to transcend such notions" (*kātyāyanāvavāde cāstīti nāstīti cobhayam, pratiṣiddhaṃ bhagavatā bhāvābhāvavibhāvinā*, MK 15.7).

In all likelihood, Nāgārjuna is praising a well-known discourse codified in SN 12.15, which is indeed the discourse to Kātyāyana (in Pāli: Kaccāna). This discourse is very brief yet highly precise. The theme is *sammādiṭṭhi*, and the Buddha explains how to attain it. The problem, what torments the human condition, is dwelling in a world: "O Kaccāna, this world is mostly supported by duality, the notions of 'there is' and 'there is not'" (*dvayanissito khvāyaṃ, kaccāna, loko yebhuyyena—atthitañceva natthitañca*). The solution is to go beyond the dualistic notions of existence and non-existence of the world, as both are extremes, defined respectively as "the first extreme" (*ayameko anto*) and "the second extreme" (*dutiyo anto*). Perhaps it is also for this reason that Nāgārjuna titled his work and school the "Middle Way" (*madhyamaka*), aiming to position itself equidistant from all extremes. In this one brief discourse, we have a clear picture of how the problem of the world is linked to that of dualism and conceptual notions.

4.6 Identity, Consciousness, Liberation

Identity operates as a primary mechanism by which consciousness functions. Various levels of consciousness can be delineated, and within the context of Pāli Buddhism, there seems to be an implicit acknowledgment that consciousness is not monolithic but rather a complex mechanism. In its most unaware state, it produces (*discerns*) names and forms (*nāmā vijānati, rūpāni vijānati*). Furthermore, it is crucial to distinguish it from semantic perception, an active process (*sañjānati*) that functions as a form of recognition based on the correct association of designations, essentially "labeling."

If *viññāṇa* is a form of consciousness specifically understood as discernment—the creation of a knowledge system (*ñā*) through divisions (*vi*)—it is equally true that it must be comprehended as a spectrum. Its lower forms are divisive and classificatory, while its higher forms approach the understanding of infinite discerning possibilities (*viññāṇañcāyatana*).

Nevertheless, even this latter stage is insufficient for achieving enlightenment. Once we grasp that consciousness is a spectrum and that identity follows a dual process—divisive consciousness (*vi-jānati*) and associative perception (*saṃ-jānati*)—we understand that identity oscillates between division and association. These are two phases of the arbitrary process of designation and, in the case of psychosocial identities, the appropriation of those 'pieces' segmented from experiential memories, subsequently forming the aggregate of accumulations that constitute the self, the individual's conception of "who I am."

> Identity is nostalgia for the identical, returning to the indistinctness of origins, resisting the proliferation of historical becoming, the death drive, disappearing in a situation in place of transcending it, the annihilation of being-in-the-world. It is the original sin that offends and at the same time gives sense to the primordial ethos of making oneself present. Or, when nostalgia for the identical becomes aware of the approaching void, identity takes on the form of being that repeats, of nostalgia for cyclical becoming, imitating astronomical order, the succession of seasons, and natural law. The symbolic order takes on this risk and indirectly discloses being-there's commitment to transcending situations according to cultural values that humanity generates and that are addressed to humankind. The symbolic order includes, in an intuitive and highly emotional context, origin and perspective: the symbolic mythical-ritual order periodically recollects an absolute origin of history and its absolute fulfillment; the political-symbolic order recalls the origin and perspective of the epoch to which it belongs.[106]

Identity functions as a bridge between the witness and the witnessed, and it is constantly at the center of the consciousness-semantic mechanism of division (*vi-*) and association (*saṃ-*). Division is the artifice imposed on the unitary, indivisible continuum of being (hence division is merely an artificial representation), which we have learned to recognize as a multifaceted and unitary meaning. Only by extracting substance from meaning can it be reorganized into the signified. The signified is

106. de Martino, *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence*, 43–44.

associated with another piece of meaning, which is attributed as the signifier of a given signified. In other words, the *nāmā* (nominal signifier) is associated with a specific formal signified, a *rūpa* that has been arbitrarily 'sectioned' from that unitary meaning of being.

If, as Merleau-Ponty asserts, the body is our general means of having a world,[107] then this process of split/splice constructing the appearance of the world is not something given independently of our consciousness. The world is created by and of consciousness, making it challenging to argue that the world exists independently of consciousness. Consciousness 'creates' the world it witnesses, becoming the witness of a witnessed that reduces entirely to the 'theatrical' occurrence within its own worldly circle. It remains unaware that beyond these worldly circles, perceived as divisive boundaries between things, spaces, and times, nothing is divided or separate from itself, not even the totality of being. This totality must be implicated in consciousness itself, which blissfully remains unaware of its part in an infinitely greater whole.

From the outset, our exploration of the problem of identity diverges into two parallel yet distinct paths, which must be kept in mind throughout this discussion. On the one hand, there is the 'ontological' aspect of the problem. The 'world' and the 'body' witness the theater of conditioned phenomena, yet each conditioned phenomenon is but a phanic aspect of the totality, a single unconditioned entity. The search for this unconditioned poses an ontological problem: it is implicit in all things, an indispensable substance of all things, yet we do not clearly see it within things, which appear to us as divided 'things,' singular phanic aspects (conditioned) of the unconditioned. This also explains why Buddhism did not define an ontology in the Greek mode, i.e., as a quest for 'being,' but instead focused on the cessation of the theatrical procession of conditioned phenomena, partial and non-total aspects of being. However, even archaic Buddhism intuited this as a problem of "being" (*sat*), defining

107. Yone de Almeida Nascimento et al., "The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty in Investigations about Medication Use: Constructing a Methodological Cascade," *Revista Da Escola de Enfermagem Da USP* 51 (2018): 1–7, DOI: 10.1590/s1980-220x2017017603296.

"truth" as simply "what-is" (*sat-ya*, *sacca* in Pāli).[108] Beyond the significant use of this term, the problem is treated differently than in Greek ontology. This does not preclude the possibility of comparison, which remains feasible if we bear in mind these expressive differences: "seeing this truth is not an easy task" (*na hi saccaṃ sudassanaṃ*, Ud 8.2).

The path of conventions investigates the ephemeral and elusive nature of names. This 'nominalistic' investigation (again, the term is indicative) focuses on the influence that names and designatory forces exert on our daily lives, their impact and distortion when we remain unaware of these mechanisms, allowing ourselves to be deceived by names, definitions, and forms—seductive yet ephemeral and empty.

There are many traceable parallels between linguistics and Buddhist thought.[109] The parallel I have emphasized the most is the surprising similarity between the binomial *nāmarūpa* and the signifier-signified,[110] a similarity also noted by Edward Small.[111] Other parallels I have examined in the first two chapters concern the ideas of designation (*paññatti*), meaning (*attha*), sign (*nimitta*), expression (*adhivacana*), language (*nirutti*), and speech (*bhāsā*).

There is much to discuss, but let us start with our binomial name/form. In AN 9.14, the disciple Samiddhi is asked, "On what basis do thoughts arise in a person?" (*kimārammaṇā purisassa saṅkappavitakkā uppajjanti*). The answer is *nāmarūpārammaṇā*, "through name-form." Thus, we note that the bifacial nature of the linguistic sign is responsible for the *saṅkappavitakkā*, the thoughts. This term implies volitional thought, a mental elaboration with a nuance of will.

However, the name-form sign itself is not sufficient; it needs to be 'organized' within the semantic context, within the linguistic-cognitive

108. J. Gonda, "The Historical Background of the Name Satya Assigned to the Highest Being," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 48/49 (1968): 83–93; Matthew Kapstein, "Buddhist Perspectives on Ontological Truth," in *A Companion to World Philosophies* (Wiley, 2017), 420–33, DOI: 10.1002/9781405164566.ch31.

109. Lysenko, "The Buddhist Philosophy of Language in India: An Overview"; Genjun, *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*.

110. Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy."

111. Small, "Semiotic Referentiality: Saussure's Sign and the Sanskrit Nama-Rupa."

network. This process is defined as "diversification" (*nānattaṃ*) and is attributed to states, properties, or characteristics (*dhātūsu*). Thus, the mind moves its volition by virtue of the linguistic sign, which is organized based on specific qualities or characteristics. Where do these characteristics come from? Obviously, from contact (*phassasamudayā*), which brings us back to the problem of the body.

We already know where this reasoning will proceed: sensation is the encounter between the characteristic and the contact (*vedanāsamosaraṇā*). I chose this discourse because it does not revolve exclusively around corporeality. Certainly, contact (*phassa*) is the fundamental junction of these semiological processes (I will use this term to indicate the dual semantic and semiotic aspect), but this discourse in AN 9.14 delves deeply into the problem of the relationship between consciousness, awareness, and reality. While today we might be persuaded that external reality is a given independent of our relationship, or rather our relating to it, and that it thus conditions us unilaterally, for Buddhists, it seems not to be so. To the question "who directs the sensations?" the answer is *samādhippamukhā* "union directs them." The word *samādhi* is a term indicating concentration or a contemplative phase of deep absorption, often linked to the overcoming of the dichotomous division between self and the observed object. My idea is that this term should be translated considering its etymology, revolving around the prefix *saṃ-* "put together" and the root *dhā* "to place." In this sense, *samādhi* is eerily similar to the Greek σύμβολον, a term also composed of σύν- "together" and βάλλω "to throw, to place." *Samādhi*, therefore, is a 'symbolic union' in the etymological sense, a form of concentration or contemplative absorption culminating in the 'putting together' of subject and object.

Proceeding further, we have *satādhipateyyā* "awareness governs it" (*sati* + *adhipateyya*). The state of awareness surpasses automatism, and the subject is no longer guided by these automatic behaviors, where they are not mentally present, or by actions they do not understand. What guides mindfulness (*sati*)? The *paññuttarā*, that is, the overarching or supervising gnosis (*paññā* + *uttara*). What is the driving force of this gnosis? Freedom (*vimuttisārā*, "whose essence is liberation,"

vimutti + *sāra*). Finally, the culmination, the final achievement of this essence of liberation, is *amatogadhā* "the state of deathlessness."

This discourse provides an overview of the multiple levels Buddhism conceives in the path to liberation. We can also understand it as a spectrum gradually shading towards one or the other polarity. The state of deathlessness is a fundamental theme but cannot be elaborated on further here beyond what has already been said regarding the theme of biopower and the conception of the mode of living. We must remember that the life/death binomial, like every dualism, is part of worldly conceptions, and outside the circles of the world, it does not exist as a fact or a real threat. In the totality of being, there can be no death, just as there can be no form-of-life, but only the absence of death.

The spectrum oscillates between the absolute, which transcends the relativity of the worldly circles, and the mundane sphere where the designation of the relative, the name-form binomial, prevails.

Mundane dimension (*loka*, *lokiya*)	*saṅkappavitakkā* (thoughts-volitions) *nāmarūpā* (names-and-forms, psychosemiotic principle) *nānatta* (diversification, multiplicity) *dhātū* (characteristics, epiphenomena)
Construction of mundane dimension (*lokassa samudaya*, process of *pañcakkhandha*)	*phassa* (contact) *vedanā* (sensations)
Ultramundane dimension (*lokanta, lokuttara*), disappearance of the world (*lokassa atthaṅgama)*, cessation (*nibbāna*)	*samādhi* (absorption, symbol) *sati* (mental presence) *paññā* (wisdom) *vimutti* (liberation) *amatogadhā* (deathlessness)

Table 9. The two fundamental dimensions of early Buddhist philosophy and their related concepts.

This scale oscillates between mundanity (*loka*, *lokiya*) and end-of-the-world (*lokanta*), or as defined by the Abhidhamma, supramundane

(*lokuttara*). It also oscillates between the most unaware psychological automatism and its opposite, that is, full present awareness. We must not forget that body and world are a unity, so there are no 'laws of nature,' that is, principles of organization of the presumed natural things that act automatically and are different from the same forces of automation in biological beings.

Similarly, if these organizing forces, in their 'automatic' action, remain fundamentally a 'sense,' simply unaware of their action, of a proceeding that is somnambulistic, unconscious, their awakening or liberation from this state of unaware action does not change their fundamental nature, but only the degree of awareness of it. The Buddha is awakened (√*budh* + *-ta* is literally the nominalized past participle of "to wake up") precisely in this sense: he has transitioned from a state of total automatic unawareness to a state of full awareness. This transition is enabled by contemplative practice, which is nothing but an exercise in investigating the nature of things and our perception of them, whose fruits are truly 'supernatural' (*iddhi*) because they are capable of profoundly understanding these automatisms and, consequently, no longer being subject to them.

The worldly stage and the ultra-worldly one are not two opposite, distinct, and separate dimensions, but two ways of being within the one possible reality. Existing in reality through worldliness means reducing reality to a section or a series of possible 'worlds.' This reduction is the focus within the worldly circle of the body, which brings into existence a 'world.' causing it to appear to its limiting perceptions and isolating cognitions because it cannot conceive all possible being and cannot help but 'found a world' within these circles. The extreme opposite, however, is an impetus, an infinite extension of this worldly circle, a break from the frame that reduced being to a possible 'world.' This impetus is not exactly a Plotinian ἐπιστροφή, although it resembles it in many aspects. For example, one remains in the one possible reality, but while the state of automatism, that of isolating cognitions, of *saṅkappavitakkā* or *nāmarūpā*, the ability to conceive the world as a series of 'multiple aspects' and not as an infinitely complex unity, is a form of distancing from the truth, though it would be more correct to speak of reduction.

Thus, while for Plotinus, liberation is an ἐπιστροφή, an impetus towards the most central part of being (ἕν), reducing the distance from its peripheries, where materiality (ὕλη) prevails, which has "descended" from the One through ὑπόστασις, in Buddhism there is no talk of a process of degeneration or descent, but of a reduction of the truth. Essentially, there is no ontological change of any kind. Being, or the "nature of the Buddha," as mentioned in the section on interpenetration, is present in its entirety even in each of its 'partial' manifestations, which is not a piece of being but an epiphenomenon indivisible from this unity. Liberation, therefore, consists of a different kind of 'impetus,' something that breaks the frames of the worldly circles, infinitely extending the doors of perception, rendering them effectively beyond-human (the human condition is intrinsically limited), and to achieve this, the processes that keep these boundaries active must cease (*nirodha*).

In the specific context of our cognitive experience, the concatenation of factors leading to the arising and ceasing of worldly phenomena can be described as a mechanism of co-implication: "when this is present, that comes to be; due to the arising of this, that arises" (*iti imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti, imassuppādā idaṃ uppajjati*). As described and well summarized in Ud 1.1, this psychophysical concatenation follows this order of co-implication (*paccayā*).[112] This is considered "the origin of the entire mass of suffering" (*dukkhakkhandhassa samudayo*).

Rather than speaking of a "world" (which is merely an aspect of truth, not something separate from it), Buddhism speaks of "spheres" or "dimensions" (*āyatana*). Hence, there exists a dimension where nothing mundane can be found: neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind, nor the dimension of infinite space, nor the dimension of infinite consciousness, nor the dimension of nothingness, nor the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, neither this world nor another world, neither the sun nor the moon (*yattha neva pathavī, na āpo,*

112. *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā, saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇaṃ, viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ, nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanaṃ, saḷāyatanapaccayā phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ, upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā jāti, jātipaccayā jarāmaraṇaṃ sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā sambhavanti.*

na tejo, na vāyo, na ākāsānañcāyatanaṃ, na viññāṇañcāyatanaṃ, na ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ, na nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṃ, nāyaṃ loko, na paraloko, na ubho candimasūriyā, Ud 8.1).

The text speaks of phenomena as dynamics of "coming and going, staying or disappearing and reappearing" (*eva āgatiṃ vadāmi, na gatiṃ, na ṭhitiṃ, na cutiṃ, na upapattiṃ*). However, when we transcend the conditions for these dynamics, which make us perceive things as coming or going, static or apparent, the 'support' for such illusions collapses (*anārammaṇamevetaṃ*), and this is also the end of suffering (*esevanto dukkhassa*). This can also be understood as the conception of non-conditionality (*asaṅkhataṃ*). Indeed, what is unconditioned is beyond the mundane (Ud 8.3), not falling within the limits of a single circle of the world, where what is within appears as present, and when it goes out, it disappears.

The specific form of knowledge that this contemplative, philosophical-practical inquiry aims to achieve can be referred to by various names.

However, I found the definition provided in SN 12.70, namely *dhammaṭṭhitiñāṇaṃ*, meaning "knowledge of the relationship of ideas or states" or "knowledge of the structure of ideas or states," particularly interesting. This term is used in relation to conditioned production, but it reminds us of what was discussed in the previous section: everything is relational, and it is impossible to comprehend the reality of the world without considering the sole factor that manifests worldly things, which is relationship.

Relationship is the mode in which information presents itself. Without information, nothing would appear. I cannot investigate the nature of a thing in and of itself, as if it were self-evident. The only way I can understand the nature of something is by placing it in relation to another thing. Let us recall the example of the iron and the magnet explained in §2.6: iron will react to its relationship with the magnet by being attracted to it. It will not do the same when placed in relation to a piece of wood. Thus, the relationship between iron and magnet tells us something about both the iron and the magnet, and the relationship between iron and wood tells us something about both the iron and the wood.

This relationship is *phassa*, contact, and indeed the "sensory doors" of the worldly circles are nothing other than "modes-of-relation." The

pursuit of some "being in itself" (αὐτὸ τὸ ὄν) makes no sense as long as we continue to conceive the aspects of being as separate entities. If the entity is rightly placed in its only possible manifestative state, that is, in-relation to all other entities, then αὐτὸ τὸ ὄν is no longer the pretense of discerning the "tableness" of a table simply in its "being-table," but it is the totality of being that appears to us as "table," and it can do so because the being of the table is part of a whole that includes other aspects, such as the being of the chair in relation to the table, and also in relation to the observer who sees "chair" and "table."

The Buddhist equivalent of αὐτὸ τὸ ὄν is *sabhāva* (Sanskrit *svabhāva*), which literally means "self-being" (*sva-bhāva*). Such a condition is inherently problematic to postulate, and the Abhidhamma indeed acknowledges that the problem of *sabhāva* is a problem of defining the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*). A self-being would be autonomous and self-sufficient, something we do not observe anywhere. At the same time, if all things mutually depend on one another, as we understand from the chain of conditioned production, then there must be a condition of unity of all mutually dependent things that serves as the stable base (*ṭhiti*) allowing each configuration to manifest.

4.7 Nibbāna as non-Phenomenal Horizon

Archaic Indian thought appears to concur with the earliest Greek thinkers on a fundamental point, namely that what appears to us (φαίνεσθαι, *uppajja*) is necessarily part of a process reflecting relations of mutual conditionality. The manifestation of a phenomenon does not occur in an empty void but is determined by causes and conditions—that is, by other phenomena. This implies the hypothesis of a complex network in which each phenomenon is both the cause of others and caused by others, forming a web of reciprocal references. At a certain point, it becomes necessary to ask whether there exists a primordial principle, an unconditioned absolute that nonetheless serves as the condition for all conditioned phenomena.[113]

113. It is necessary to make an important clarification regarding the issue of conditioned entities. Although it seems necessary, for the reasons we have discussed,

The philosophical characterization of this unconditioned principle has been undertaken in various ways, reflecting precisely on the phenomenology of worldly processes and their perception, while also questioning the reliability of our perceptual faculties, which are incapable of fully apprehending all causal connections and, consequently, the infinite network of relations underlying them. On the contrary, our perceptual faculties tend to be *isolating cognitions*, perceiving the phenomenon *x* as if in a void, detached from its relations and reified as an autonomous and self-sufficient entity—a "thing-in-itself" that exists per se.

In striking intellectual convergences, the earliest Greek thinkers problematized the issues related to the phenomenology of appearing and the limitations of our cognitive faculties in a manner remarkably similar to what was occurring, during the same period, in the Indian world.

The theme of isolation, of the reification of a 'thing' by human cognition, is central throughout the work of Saussure. It appears both in the *Cours* and in his unpublished writings.

> Nous nourrissons depuis bien des années cette conviction que la linguistique est une science *double*, et si profondément, irrémédiablement double qu'on peut à vrai dire se demander s'il y a une raison suffisante pour maintenir sous ce nom de *linguistique* une unité factice, génératrice précisément de toutes les erreurs, de tous les inextricables pièges contre lesquels nous nous débattons chaque jour, avec le sentiment [ ]
> *Avant* que cette dualité fondamentale ait été reconnue, au moins discutée, nous admettons qu'il peut y avoir d'une part des opinions simplement

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to affirm the existence of conditioned entities as *distinct* from the absolutely unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), it is equally important to clarify this nature of conditioning. From this perspective, there is no real ontological difference between so-called conditioned entities and the unconditioned, insofar as conditioned phenomena are partial manifestations of a singular unity, which thus implicates them in its totality, as they cannot be severed or isolated from it. Consequently, conditioned phenomena are not 'creations' of the unconditioned, nor are they in any way separate from it. Rather, they describe the unconditioned as the absolute that encompasses all infinite phenomenological possibilities, and within individual phenomena, it is implicit as a totality through the relational link that connects all phenomena. Therefore, we cannot assert the autonomy or independence of phenomena; they are not 'creatures' created by the unconditioned but simply manifestations (its aspects) that implicate it.

> chimériques, et d'autres qui ont le mérite de ne pas contredire la réalité des faits ; de ramener à leur observation ; mais il nous est impossible de concéder que les unes soient plus instructives que les autres, fondées sur la base naturelle et capables de nous éclairer positivement.[114]

Saussure seems obsessed with the divisive process of semiosis, whereby the human 'mind' (for lack of a better term) becomes capable of isolating, from a phenomenal continuum that is evidently unified, a series of specific elements that are segmented for purely linguistic purposes.[115] In fact, without introducing a discontinuity that isolates a fragment of that continuum in an ideal void, the effect cannot be produced whereby the isolated part can be perceived as a semiotic prototype and thus considered as a thing-in-itself, a fundamental ideal of reference. Such semiosis operates on multiple levels, as is evident: isolating cognition segments something it may call "tree," but "tree" in turn is segmentable into other entities isolable by thought—branches, leaves, roots, trunk, and so forth—according to what is most convenient for the epistemological system in question.

> La langue est encore comparable à une feuille de papier : la pensée est le recto et le son le verso ; on ne peut découper le recto sans découper en même temps le verso ; de même dans la langue, on ne saurait isoler ni le son de la pensée, ni la pensée du son ; on n'y arriverait que par une abstraction dont le résultat serait de faire de la psychologie pure ou de la phonologie pure.[116]

> *Forme* implique : DIFFÉRENCE : PLURALITÉ. (SYSTÈME ?). SIMULTANÉITÉ. VALEUR SIGNIFICATIVE.
>
> En résumé :
>
> FORME = Non pas une certaine entité *positive* d'un ordre quelconque, et d'un ordre simple ; mais l'entité à la fois *négative* et *complexe* : résultant (sans aucune espèce de base matérielle) de la *différence* avec d'autres

114. de Saussure, *Écrits de Linguistique Générale*, 210.
115. Divino, "Language and Consciousness in Early Buddhist Thought: On the Early Reflections on the Theme of Language and the Perception of Reality in the Pāli Canon."
116. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 1995, 157; de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 2016, 217.

> formes COMBINÉE avec la *différence* de signification d'autres formes […] Une forme est une figure vocale qui est pour la conscience des sujets parlants *déterminée*, c'est-à-dire à la fois existante et délimitée. Elle n'est rien de plus ; comme elle n'est rien de moins. Elle n'a pas nécessairement « un sens » précis ; mais elle est ressentie comme quelque chose qui *est* ; qui de plus ne serait plus, ou ne serait plus la même chose, si on changeait quoi que ce soit à son exacte configuration.[117]

As Urbain aptly emphasizes in his foreword, Saussure's thought is essentially "nourrie par une épistémologie dualiste : de la relation, du lien, du rapport, de la partie, du couple."[118]

While this insight is undoubtedly the genius of Saussure, it is equally true that he was heavily influenced by Greek authors and, now it must be stated without any further doubt, Indian thinkers who reflected on these themes in a similar manner.

As we have seen in this monograph, Buddhist discourse is articulated on two levels, of which divisive semiosis is only one part. Division alone, however, is insufficient to determine a cognitive identity, as it must be situated within a network of relations necessary for characterizing its nature: a tree is a tree but is also *not*-a-stone, *not*-a-river, and so forth. This identity, based on differences, is possible if, alongside an isolating force, a synthetic, associative force is also at work. This, as we have seen, is the role of semantic perception (*saññā*).

To be able to engage with this entire complex structure, other elements are also necessary. It may seem self-evident, but in fact, it is not: first and foremost, one must recognize the very possibility of the phenomenon itself.

Things appear to us, but in this appearing, they manifest themselves with particular characteristics that make them distinct 'things.' These are differences that, within the undivided phenomenal continuum, can be understood in various ways: characteristics, qualities, aspects, determinations. We have dedicated many words in this monograph to their inseparability from this complex network of relationships and mutual

117. de Saussure, *Écrits de Linguistique Générale*, 36–37.
118. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, 2016, 37.

implications, yet very little has been said about their most self-evident yet most determinant feature of their being phenomena—namely, the very power of φαίνω ("to cause to appear") that underlies them.

An interesting correlation between this primordial 'understanding' of the phenomenon in itself and the emergence of language also seems to be presented in the Vedic texts, with striking similarities to analogous reflections made by the earliest Greek thinkers. These similarities are not coincidental, nor can we refrain from considering them in light of recent research that highlights how, at least in the case of the Indian world, these ideas rooted in the Vedic texts constitute the precursors to Buddhist considerations on language and phenomenology.

In the Vedic world, the emergence of the first phenomena is attributed to Agni. The god of fire is arguably the most important deity in the entire ṚV, and for good reason. Agni, in fact, establishes a "world," given that the primordial universe was essentially enveloped in darkness and submerged in cosmic waters. In this dark and obscure world, Agni emerges—literally, as he is defined as *apām napāt*, "offspring of the waters,"[119] thus implying that he was born from the waters themselves—and his most significant act is precisely to enable phenomenal appearing.

A phenomenon, indeed, is that upon which light is cast: without light, a phenomenon does not appear—literally—since it is not visible. Light and phenomenon are closely correlated from the very first hymns of the ṚV, just as they are in Greek terminology (φῶς, φαίνω). But there is more. Agni represents a formidable techno-magical power which, if harnessed by the wise, grants them a fundamental advantage in the knowledge of phenomena. The first humans who harnessed this power, not coincidentally, are venerated as deities and called *ṛṣi*, the "seers," those who see. The power of Agni is thus both a manifestative power (light) and a magical power, as it is directly linked to performative potency: one who yokes Agni, who controls the power of fire, knows not only the "truth" of phenomena but also wields a certain control over the world.[120]

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119. Wendy Doniger, *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 104–7.

120. Divino, "Seers and Ascetics: Analyzing the Vedic Theory of Cognition and

As we have seen in the myth of the conquest of primordial space (see §4.4), the "field" whose boundaries are delineated at the beginning of time establishes a "world" in the sense of an "ordered society," a space within which a set of norms is enforced. However, the first conqueror of all spaces—the primordial hero and the mythical figure who first enacts this 'conquest'—is precisely Agni, as the space he conquers is the land wrested from the waters (perhaps through evaporation) and, above all, the land upon which light is cast. The illuminated land is knowable, controllable, and governable—this is the essence of Agni's conquest of primordial space. Each time a priest kindles a fire, he re-enacts this primordial myth, placing the altar of the sacred fire as an *axis mundī*: wherever the divine light of fire-Agni reaches and illuminates, there lie the boundaries of the 'conquered' land.

Within this circle, things are visible; they appear to us as phenomena. This manifestative power of reality is a principle that pertains both to truth and to cosmic order.

A key term in this regard, central throughout Vedic literature, is precisely *ṛta*, *ṛtasya*—"cosmic order," but also "truth," "principle." This term can be traced back to the reconstructed Indo-European root **h*$_2$*er*-, which signifies something "fixed," "stable" (a concept closely related to the root **dʰer*-, from which the term *dharma* derives). However, it is not merely about stability. The root **h*$_2$*er*- is also associated with "bonds" (cf. Greek ἀρθμός) and with the idea of "fixing," "to fix," "to fit" (cf. ἀρτύω), "to put together" (cf. ἀρτύς). In Sanskrit, among its possible outcomes, we also find *ṛti*, meaning "prosperity." Nevertheless, the notion of truth/universal principle (*ṛta*) is the most significant in the Vedic world, and in this sense, the Latin cognate *ōrdō* is one of the closest terms to its Vedic counterpart. However, it should also be noted that the Greek term ἄρχω ("to begin; to lead, to rule") is connected to this root. In fact, it is an inchoative formation of **h*$_2$*er*- (in the form **h*$_2$*r̥-ské-ti*), which results in this term.[121] If this theory were correct, there would also be an etymological link between

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121. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 145–46.

the concept of ἀρχή, upon which the earliest Greek thinkers reflected, and the Vedic concept of *ṛta*.

The first to speak of ἀρχή in the sense of "first principle," and thus implicitly of a "primordial phenomenon," was Anaximander. A disciple of Thales, who instead maintained that water was the principle of all things (in this case, too, I would not exclude a common Indo-European heritage, also due to the myth of the primordial waters),[122] he inherited from his master the search for a universal first principle, precisely an ἀρχή, which was to function as the unconditioned par excellence.

Indeed, if all phenomena can be traced backward in their phenomenal chain, describing a complex network of mutual dependence and conditionality, it was necessary to admit that there must have been a primordial phenomenon—unconditioned but itself the condition of all conditioned appearings. This unconditioned condition was a necessity to avoid falling into an infinite regress without resolution, in which every phenomenon was both cause and condition for others while itself being caused and conditioned by others, without there being a unifying principle.

However, determining with precision the nature of this primordial phenomenon has proven to be an exceedingly arduous task, one that too often culminates in forms of theism that are, at least in part, almost inevitable. Indeed, if one seeks an 'order' in the cosmos, an intelligent 'orderer' is also required.

Thales employs the concept of ἀρχή primarily as the "first substance" and as the "foundation" or "nourishment" (ontological basis) of all moist things (τὸ δ᾽ ὕδωρ ἀρχὴν τῆς φύσεως εἶναι τοῖς ὑγροῖς…), but it is Anaximander who uses this term in a technical sense and, above all, who no longer posits an elemental substance as an ontological basis, but rather a principle—something that aligns with the idea of the absolute or the unconditioned condition. According to Conche, the technicalization of the concept of ἀρχή can also be recognized in a semantic shift.

> Dès lors, étant donné que la philosophie entend répondre (comme le mythe, mais autrement — par une explication rationnelle, et non par un

122. Divino, "Humours and Their Legacy in Early Buddhist Medicine," 18, 28 (note 63), 29.

> récit à prendre ou à laisser) à la question du commencement — et de la fin — de toutes choses, et que le mot ἀρχή avait, au temps de la naissance grecque de la philosophie, le sens de « commencement », l'étonnant serait que les premiers philosophes ioniens n'en aient pas fait usage.[123]

Thus, without invoking elements such as Thales' water or, as Heraclitus would later do, fire, Anaximander focuses on ἀρχή understood as a principle, and this principle must possess specific characteristics, as well as serve, if anything, as the cause of the physical 'elements.' In ancient philosophies, the predominance of a physical element as the first cause of phenomena is not attributable to factional preferences, but has reasons that are far from tribal or primitive.

However, one must be careful to recognize the symbolic nature of this choice: why water for those who choose water, why fire for those who choose fire, and so on. These are not fantasy-like choices, but rather precise reasonings. That being said, Anaximander's decision to distance himself from such terminologies may also have its own valid motivations. The absolute principle cannot be an element (στοιχεῖον) but must be the cause of all these: ἀρχήν τι καὶ στοιχεῖον εἴρηκε τῶν ὄντων τὸ ἄπειρον, πρῶτος τοῦτο τοὔνομα κομίσας τῆς ἀρχῆς (*fr.* A. 9).[124]

The choice of the infinite must be further contextualized. Anaximander, in fact, speaks of ἀρχή as ἄπειρον, a term usually translated as "infinite," but which should rather be understood as "indeterminate." The infinitude of the ἄπειρον is not, in fact, something quantitative or numerical, but rather something devoid of limitations in terms that now, in light of our analysis of language, appear clearer to us. The unlimited is thus without limitations, devoid of delimitations in terms of the establishment of a 'circle' within which norms and constructs operate.

> λέγει δ' αὐτὴν μήτε ὕδωρ μήτε ἄλλο τι τῶν καλουμένων εἶναι στοιχείων, ἀλλ' ἑτέραν τινὰ φύσιν ἄπειρον ἐξ ἧς ἅπαντας γίνεσθαι τοὺς οὐρανοὺς καὶ τοὺς ἐν αὐτοῖς κόσμους.

123. Marcel Conche, *Anaximandre: Fragments et Témoignages* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 44.
124. Ibid., 56.

> He declares that it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but a substance different from these, which is infinite, and from which all the heavens and the worlds they contain proceed.

In other words, Anaximander implies that having a delimitation, a determination, and therefore being "limited," entails having an origin.[125] The two things are, in fact, the same: if it has an origin, it is limited. Everything that is unlimited derives from the unlimited not in an ontological sense but in a foundational sense: it is part of the unlimited and thus constitutes an internal, non-autonomous determination (because it is conditioned), and is not self-sufficient.[126]

The confirmation that the discussion does not concern the unlimited in quantitative-numerical terms is also provided by Anaximander's conception of that which is conditioned by this unlimited and is not placed 'outside' of it, like a protrusion detaching from it and existing independently, but always and exclusively in terms of a determination. It is, therefore, in the limit that number arises, serving to quantify the boundaries of such a determination. Nevertheless, once the boundaries that are always traced within the unlimited are erased, any logic of quantitatively determining 'something' collapses (πέρας primarily means "limit" in the sense of "boundary," and thus its negation, ἄπειρον, must be understood as "without boundaries").

> L'argumentation est valable seulement si l'on admet que toutes les déterminations sont d'ordre sensible (puisque la diversité des éléments commande la diversité des seules qualités sensibles), et donc si l'on admet qu'il n'y a pas de monde(s) autre(s) que sensible(s). L'*apeiron*, étant *sensiblement* indéterminé, est alors, purement et simplement, indéterminé.[127]

Although it is commonly believed that Buddhism ostensibly rejects a universal principle akin to the Vedic model, the suttas narrate an entirely different story. What diverges from the Vedic worldview is the

125. Ibid., 60.

126. Stella and Divino, "The Metaphysical Turn in the History of Thought: Anaximander and Buddhist Philosophy."

127. Conche, *Anaximandre: Fragments et Témoignages*, 67.

essentially non-theological nature of this principle. The order, if it can indeed be called an order, is not maintained or preserved by deities. What concerns Buddhists is truth in its absolute sense, which is identified with a foundational type of order. It is also true that this principle, in the singular sense of *dhamma*, is significant to the Buddhist practitioner as a totality that transcends individual determinations—namely, the divisive elements of language, conventions, and mundane order.

The opposition between the dimension of names, which is the locus of *dukkha*, and the end of the world (*lokanta*) is, of course, not an opposition between two different dimensions, but between a limited order and the unlimited upon which it is founded. In other words, the concept of the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), referenced multiple times in the Pāli canon, is something concrete: the ultimate truth concealed behind all representations, conventions, languages, limitations, that is, lower types of orders. Yet, the unconditioned is also the ultimate goal of ascetic practice. It is said that the Buddha has realized and reached the unconditioned (*desitaṃ vo mayā asaṅkhataṃ, desito asaṅkhatagāmimaggo*, SN 43.12), allowing us to hypothesize *nibbāna* as a non-phenomenal horizon.

If phenomena are the individual manifestations of the totality's aspects, which our isolating cognitions take to be separate "things" and "names," then the realization or attainment of the unconditioned (the unconditioned state upon which all conditioned phenomena are founded) is not merely a philosophical epiphany—a recognition that "there is a principle" or "there is a foundation of all things." Instead, it is a concrete fact: the attainment of specific 'superhuman' capacities. These include, for example, the ability to perceive all phenomenal determinations not as distinct, isolated, and separate identities but within their complex network of interconnections with the whole. Recognizing all conditioned phenomena as determinations of the one unconditioned means directly perceiving the unconditioned and reaching a non-phenomenal horizon, for phenomena entail the progressive, gradual, and partial appearing of infinite complexity, whereas the Buddha's gaze presumably sees all interconnections, all causes, all conditions, perceives the totality, and thus does not see phenomena but a non-phenomenal horizon.

In this aspect, it is undeniable that Buddhism draws much, at least in terms of the poetic and metaphorical representation of this condition, from the Vedic world. It is an established fact that the role of the seers greatly inspired the role of Buddhist ascetics, and one might argue that, to some extent, they consider themselves the continuators and worthy heirs of these traditions.[128] Meanwhile, the unconditioned, in addition to being explicitly recognized as synonymous with *nibbāna*, is also connected to *dhamma*, mentioned in the singular, and thus not to any specific phenomenon but to a "foundation," intending the term in its etymological sense. Those who have fully understood the unconditioned, Iti 44 tells us (*ye etadaññāya padaṃ asaṅkhataṃ*), have also realized what is called the "essence of the Dhamma" (*te dhammasārādhigamā khaye ratā*). In other words, they have fully grasped the foundation of all conditioned phenomena.

It is further stated that such knowledge is acquired by one who is Clear-Eyed (*cakkhumatā pakāsitā*, an epithet found elsewhere, such as in DN 32). This is one of the possible epithets of the Buddha, but here I wish to emphasize that referring to the Clear-Eyed is merely another way of describing the clairvoyant, the seer, the one who sees clearly. Such epithets were already present in Indian culture long before Buddhism, and they obviously referred to seers. In their case, the eye was clear because it was brilliant, luminous, and thus compared to the sun (*sūrāya viśvacakṣase*), a characteristic shared with the deities. The gods (and seers who attain divine status) are described as having the sun for an eye (*sūracakṣas*, see ṚV 1.16.1, 1.50.2, 1.89.7 for notable examples), and beyond the evocative figure of this poetic metaphor, the reason for this symbolism is clear: the sun is light, and having a solar eye means perfectly illuminating all that would otherwise not appear perfectly clear and unveiled.[129] The seer perceives things as they are, in their perfect suchness.

128. Divino, "Seers and Ascetics: Analyzing the Vedic Theory of Cognition and Contemplative Practice in the Development of Early Buddhist Meditation and Imaginary."

129. The metaphor of the divine eye as a solar eye is attributed to multiple deities. For example, ṚV 1.50.6 states that the sun is the eye of Varuṇa, through which he perceives the devotee in the world. The solar eye is connected to a specific visual power: in the vast and immense world, the god is able to locate precisely the one who offers him

ṚV 10.130.6 associates this divine eye with truth (*satya*), while in MN 98, the Buddha is called "the eye arisen in the world" (*cakkhuṃ loke samuppannaṃ*). ṚV 8.6.10 states that the seers have attained the perfect perception of the foundation, of truth (*ṛtasya*), thanks to the knowledge inherited from their fathers (*pituṣ pari medhām ṛtasya jagrabha*), and thus they have become equal to the sun (*ahaṃ sūrya ivājani*). At times, this power is connected to a gift from Agni (ṚV 5.8.6), and with the attainment of luminous eyes comes a purer perception (*codayanmati*). The evident analogies between these Vedic concepts and Buddhist ones likely require no further elaboration.

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oblations because he possesses a perfect, infallible eye. ṚV 1.115.1 attributes this eye to Mitra and Varuṇa, as well as to Agni (*cakṣur mitrasya varuṇasyāgneḥ*). Mitra watches over the peoples without ever closing his eyes (*mitraḥ kṛṣṭīr animiṣābhi caṣṭe mitrāya havyaṃ ghṛtavaj juhota*, ṚV 3.59.1). With this eye, Mitra and Varuṇa see everything: both the finite and the infinite *(cakṣāthe aditiṃ ditiṃ ca*, 5.62.8), a power that likens the two deities to the sun, which ascends into the sky at the break of dawn (*hiraṇyarūpam uṣaso vyuṣṭāv ayaḥsthūṇam uditā sūryasya*). Moreover, the sun is described as the beautiful eye that rises in Mitra and Varuṇa, and through them, its light radiates in every direction (*ud vāṃ cakṣur varuṇa supratīkaṃ devayor eti sūryas tatanvān...*, 7.61.1). This eye is all-seeing (*viśvacakṣāḥ*), and with it, Mitra and Varuṇa perceive beyond darkness and through the sky (*cakṣur mitrasya varuṇasya devaś carmeva yaḥ samavivyak tamāṃsi*, 7.63.1). Indra, too, observes the world with this same power: "Yours are all the animals of the world surrounding you, which you illuminate with the light of your sun, O Indra, lord of cattle; may we be enriched by the well-being you bestow" (*tavedaṃ viśvam abhitaḥ paśavyaṃ yat paśyasi cakṣasā sūryasya, gavām asi gopatir eka indra bhakṣīmahi te prayatasya vasvaḥ*, 7.98.6). Even the Dawn (Uṣas), also called the "daughter of heaven," is all-seeing, and with her light, she leads men away from her sister, Night (ṚV 4.52.1). Her rays are likened to white cows that fill the world with broad light (*prati bhadrā adṛkṣata gavāṃ sargā na raśmayaḥ, oṣā aprā uru jrayaḥ*, 4.52.5). The parallelism between light and cattle (sacred cows being in fact a metaphor for luminous rays) also invites reflection on the significance of yogic metaphors related to the yoking of the male of the same animal. Similarly to Sūrya, Uṣas also "yokes to her chariot" something, but rather than horses, it is red cows; with her light, she illuminates the paths of men (*eṣā gobhir aruṇebhir yujānāsredhantī rayim aprāyu cakre*), radiating her light everywhere, towards desirable things (*patho radantī suvitāya devī puruṣṭutā viśvavārā vi bhāti*). In 7.76.1 Uṣas is defined as the "eye of the gods," which has been made manifest for the celebration of rituals (*kratvā devānām ajaniṣṭa cakṣur āvir akar bhuvanaṃ viśvam uṣāḥ*). Uṣas is called the eye of the gods also in 7.77.3 (*devānāṃ cakṣuḥ*).

Where the Vedic world speaks of *ṛtasya*, Buddhists speak of *dhamma*, or more precisely of *dhammatā*. Both are the goals of contemplative practice, undertaken by seers in the case of the Vedas and ascetics in the case of Buddhism. This principle is inherent in the totality of all phenomena, but only those with perfected (*codayanmati*) or superior (*abhiññā*) perception can grasp it, for it is truth (*satya*, *sacca*) in its most complete sense.[130] Phenomena usually appear to us as partializations of this truth, reductions that we perceive with our imperfect means. However, one with clear vision (*cakkhumant*), likened to a solar eye (*sūracakṣas*), sees all things illuminated, perfectly clear, with a light that reveals their implicit causal connections and inter-relationality.

bahavaḥ sūracakṣaso agnijihvā ṛtāvṛdhaḥ
trīṇi ye yemur vidathāni dhītibhir viśvāni paribhūtibhiḥ

Many (are those who) have the sun for an eye and flame for a tongue,
the sustainers of ṛta, those who, with their perfect knowledge,
have mastered the three sciences and all things through their sovereign power.
(ṚV 7.66.10)

dhammatā esā, bhikkhave, yaṃ samāhito yathābhūtaṃ jānāti passati.

It is the state of things, O mendicants, that a mindful person sees things in their suchness.
(AN 11.2)

130. In the Greek world Aristotle discusses the idea of a primary philosophy (Aristot. *Met.* 4.1003a, 21), or the science that *studies being qua being* and the properties that pertain to it by virtue of its inherent nature (ἔστιν ἐπιστήμη τις ἣ θεωρεῖ τὸ ὂν ᾗ ὂν καὶ τὰ τούτῳ ὑπάρχοντα καθ'αὑτό). The particularity of this ἐπιστήμη, which distinguishes it from all other sciences, lies precisely in its contemplation of being qua being (... ἐπισκοπεῖ καθόλου περὶ τοῦ ὄντος ᾗ ὄν). In contrast, other sciences "divide" Being into various parts, concentrating on the attributes found within them (ἀλλὰ μέρος αὐτοῦ τι ἀποτεμόμεναι περὶ τούτου θεωροῦσι τὸ συμβεβηκός). An example Aristotle provides is that of the mathematical sciences (μαθηματικαὶ τῶν ἐπιστημῶν). Nonetheless, it is always to being that these contingent characteristics belong, and therefore the philosopher is also concerned with being qua being.

As we learn from various suttas, the distinction drawn between conditioned phenomena and the unconditioned phenomenon (*saṅkhatādhātu*, *asaṅkhatādhātu*, MN 115) is fundamentally phenomenological.

Conditioned phenomena are those whose dependence on other phenomena can be recognized. For Buddhism, all sensory phenomena are essentially a chain of conditioned phenomena, whereas the unconditioned phenomenon is the foundation of all phenomena. However, the path leading to the unconditioned (*asaṅkhatagāmimaggo*, SN 43.11) is not a route to heaven or any celestial realm of bliss but is instead the cessation of the phenomenal chain—not because it ceases to exist factually but because *our* limiting conditions, which position us as observers of a progressive and procedural unveiling of totality, cease. These conditions give us the illusion of temporal becoming, the mutability of phenomena, and so forth. Hence, it is said that the unconditioned lacks what typically characterizes a phenomenon: it neither appears nor disappears nor changes, yet it remains persistent: *na uppādo paññāyati, na vayo paññāyati, na ṭhitassa aññathattaṃ paññāyati* (AN 3.47).

The practice of Buddhists, which encompasses a synthesis of theoretical aspects reflected in their way of life and contemplative exercises, is detailed in various suttas. Among these, DN 1 and 2 serve as a sort of programmatic declaration in which Buddhists essentially delineate their doctrine and intentions. These texts present a comprehensive summary of their teachings, though they are likely subsequent elaborations composed of collages, extensions, and collections of episodes from the life of the Buddha strategically used to highlight doctrinal aspects.

The issue of *diṭṭhi*s is also addressed here, underscoring the colossal importance of this theme. It is probable that the original core reflecting on the theme of the truth (*sacca*) and *diṭṭhi*s has remained largely unchanged, as evidenced by the presence of these topics in Snp 4.

In the third section of DN 1, the problem is revisited, this time in the context of temporality. We return to a major theme of Buddhist philosophy, necessitating a consideration of the earlier discussion on the illusion of time. It is likely that the Buddha's foundational view is that temporality, as the chronological progression of events, faces two primary problems, both of which pertain to opinion (*diṭṭhi*, or δόξα

in Parmenides' terms). The first problem is perceptual. As previously stated, the body serves as a point of observation, inherently limited, and thus can only process experiences modularly, giving rise to the illusion of past, present, and future. If it is acknowledged that the body is a witness to time, but this witnessing is a result of the limitation of what is witnessed, then all chronological notions lose their meaning. The same applies to the distinction between witness and witnessed.

The second problem is social in nature. Culturally dominant classes appropriate temporal structures, standardizing them for everyone. Constructs like the calendar and holidays are means of controlling time and social subjects through temporal order. This type of organization is commonly referred to as rationality, but the Buddha in this sutta is described as *atakkāvacarā*, "beyond reason," "beyond logic." This is significant. Logic is a restrictive form, and the term *avacara* also means "custom," "habit," not coincidentally. Certain ascetics and Brahmins (*samaṇabrāhmaṇā*) theorize and hypothesize about the past and future, producing a myriad of theories. The Buddha enumerates these theories in detail, but I will summarize them here.

All these doctrines are equally rejected by the Buddha, who instead proposes a hybrid system. The cornerstone of his rejection lies in the denial of nihilism for its evident inconsistency, and of eternalism, as the Buddha fundamentally refuses to identify the *attā* with a higher and eternal self, reducing it instead to the psychophysical self. This reduction implies that the self, being a witness to a world constructed and conditioned by contact (*phassapaccayā*), cannot be eternal (autonomous, independent).

The theory of *phassapaccayā* posits a dualized world that must be transcended into non-duality. Those who support all the preceding theories cannot escape the evidence that all worldly experience is constructed by contact, by the relationship between the witness and the witnessed, by the *x*/*y* axis that gives life to the phenomenon, the cognitive act. Without contact, these experiences would not occur. What does this relational world of contact tell us? It is a fundamentally illusory world, rendering debates on its eternity or temporality pointless. Time itself is experienced starting from "contact," from witnessing

that "present," which is the limited testifiable moment, followed by another fraction, another "present," replacing the now-past present. Therefore, the goal is the cessation of contact.

The suttas describe this complex system of reductions and constructions as entrapment in a net (*antojālīkatā*). This metaphor once again indicates the reductive, entrapping nature of the body, but the entire theater of experiences witnessed through these contacts is a grand illusion. The basis of the witness that enters into contact with the witnessed is unique, but the 'net' they are part of places them in-relation as distinct entities. Hence, the metaphor of a fisherman casting a net in a small pond: "similarly, all these ascetics and brahmins who theorize about the past or the future are trapped in the net" (... *ettha pariyāpannā antojālīkatāva ummujjamānā ummujjanti*).

What, then, is the Buddhist theory of temporality, and how is time related to the phenomena we observe? What substance lies behind the conventional identity of things? For a long time, scholars have wondered whether it is possible to speak of a sort of πρώτη ὕλη (prime matter) in Buddhism, or whether there is some other kind of "substance" that forms the ontological basis of the phenomena to which we assign nominal identities. This problem is of such magnitude that even the Buddhists, after the Buddha's death, have not been able to resolve it unequivocally. The speculations of the Abhidhamma are almost entirely dedicated to these two problems: time and entities.

Identity is the crucial issue underlying both the concept of time and that of entities, the "things" that populate the "world." Our very conception of temporality derives from the organization of lived experience into temporal states, which are endowed with their own identity and have a distinctive function: the "past" is not the "present" nor the "future," and so forth. The very existence of time in this configuration is already a problem, but the same must be said for entities, and especially for entities in relation to time.

Consider the example of wood and ash and imagine it distributed over a temporal scale. If we denote past, present, and future as three states x, y, and z, then the apparent transformation of wood into ash can be seen as an ontological variation in relation to the unfolding of

time: wood (x) → burning wood (y) → ash (z), with our point of observation, the present, being the burning wood.

However, the "duration" of an event is a perception that pertains to psychic, or more precisely psychosomatic, arbitrariness (we must not forget this fundamental unity). There is no moment (*khaṇa*) that inherently exists as a temporal quantity; rather, this quantity is something attributed to sensible experience by the experiencer. There is also another problem, which is the sequentiality of moments. In the process of temporal perception, the various "moments" are perceived as succeeding one another, and moreover, from our position, our perceptual limit, we can only be present to the present, and when this is replaced by 'another' present, because the previous one has exited our worldly circle, the past present no longer appears to us, giving us the illusion that it has perished. This mechanism is predictive and leads us to infer that it will happen again, causing us to theorize the existence of "future moments" that will repeat the phenomenon. The problem is: what ontological status should we confer to these moments? I believe that the best answer to this day remains that of Brown.

> The problem of arising (from nothing) and perishing (to nothing) has occupied many of the best minds in Buddhist thought, especially with regard to the causal process that binds one entity to the next. In my view, 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. The entity is no longer the same entity and in that sense no longer exists (as that entity), but one ought not to confuse nonexistence with unreality or nonbeing. The nonexistence of an occurrent entity at an antecedent or subsequent moment is its existence in another state, not its absolute nonexistence. The misconstrual of nonexistence with nonbeing results from a confusion of the momentariness of an entity with the persistence of that entity over the moments of its occurrence. […] 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. Otherwise, process would be chaotic. The antecedent state constrains the occurrent state, which then constrains the subsequent state. Within each moment of arising and perishing, there

> is no nesting of nascent/cessant pairs. Nor can a static phase of abiding be tolerated. The moment is a dynamic cycle that constitutes existence.[131]

The Pāli canon repeatedly states, "all entities are without self" (*sabbe dhammā anattā*). This is asserted in SN 22.90, 44.10, AN 3.136, and MN 35. This assertion is always accompanied by another: "all conditioned things are impermanent" (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*). This dual association is perhaps the most important aspect of early Buddhist doctrine and deserves greater attention.

We have mentioned that for the Buddha, *dhamma*s are simply "things," "entities," "events," but not necessarily "fundamental constituent elements of reality." The analysis of phenomena is not absent in early Buddhism, but it essentially reduces to the five aggregates, which lead to the belief in a self of things, the attribution of an identity that depends on the interaction of those five factors, or to the doctrine of conditioned arising, which explains the interaction between these identity and phenomenal processes with our linguistic-cognitive apparatus. In all other contexts, *dhamma* is used to denote an unspecified "thing," but in most contexts, it is evident that *dhamma* indicates an idea or a concept. Since the Buddha himself oscillates between the material thing and the conceptual idea, we cannot say with certainty if he truly believed in a distinction between objective reality and mental constructs.

What is certain is that both cognitive processes and supposed worldly phenomena can be analyzed in the exact same way, and it is therefore beyond doubt that, at least in this respect, the Buddha does not draw a distinction. Let us return to the initial problem. The Buddha appears to establish an equivalence between *anattā*, "non-self," "devoid of an autonomous and self-sufficient identity," and *aniccā*, "impermanent," "transitory," "ephemeral." In the earliest texts, the term *suññā*, "empty," "void," does not possess the same significance that it will acquire from the Abhidhamma onwards; rather, it is the terms *anattā* and *aniccā* that serve this role. As Karunadasa points out, in the Abhidhamma, as in early Buddhist scriptures, *suññā* has to be

131. Jason W. Brown, "Microgenesis and Buddhism: The Concept of Momentariness," *Philosophy East and West* 49, no. 3 (1999): 264, DOI: 10.2307/1399895.

considered a synonym for *anattā*.[132] We must take this aspect into account, as it compels us to reassess the concept of emptiness in the interpretation of later Buddhism.

In the assertion *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*, "all conditioned things are impermanent," the term *saṅkhārā* refers to anything, entity, mental construct, or phenomenon in general which, upon thorough analysis, reveals itself to be neither autonomous nor self-sufficient, but rather dependent on other factors that congregate, aggregate (*saṃ-skāra*), allowing phenomenon *x* to 'appear.' This position seems to be hold also by the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma (*sarve saṃskārā anityāḥ*).

Conditioned things are necessarily ephemeral and impermanent because they depend on these phenomena that, by aggregating, permit their manifestation. But what is the point of this assertion? If we thoroughly investigate the canon to identify which phenomena are definable as *saṅkhārā* or *saṅkhata*, we observe that all phenomena, except for *nibbāna*, are conditioned. There is no mention anywhere of "fundamental constituents" that are not themselves *saṅkhata*. Thus, even if a given phenomenon *x* is *saṅkhata* because it depends on other phenomena (*a*, *b*, *c*, and so on), upon deeper analysis, it is discovered that phenomena *a*, *b*, *c*, etc., are themselves *saṅkhata*, dependent on others, and so forth.

All phenomena are *saṅkhata*, mutually dependent, and therefore interdependent. The only thing defined as *asaṅkhata*, "unconditioned," is precisely *nibbāna*, to which everything presumably tends and on which everything depends. *Nibbāna* is therefore the only thing that is ultimately and absolutely real, because it is not dependent on anything else. One can presume that this distinction served to reiterate the theme of the illusory nature of worldly reality. This stable base is the unconditioned, which can only be *nibbāna*. In this sense, we can understand *nibbāna* fundamentally as a "non-phenomenal horizon" that can be fully understood only by the one who has reached enlightenment.

If we compare the assertion *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā* with the one that always accompanies it, *sabbe dhammā anattā*, we find that the

132. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality*, 29.

term *dhamma* can be understood as a way to indicate, through designation, a given phenomenon that is *saṅkhata* (all phenomena are). However, the conceptualization that is the instrument of linguistic designation, and that therefore provides an identity to the *saṅkhata* phenomenon by designating it with its specific concept-*dhamma*, is itself a phenomenon. However, in this case, the emphasis is not on the ephemeral nature, already implicit in the equation *saṅkhata* = *anicca*, but rather on the identity nature of *dhamma*, of the name-thing, of the designated-concept. The attribution of a given identity (*attā*) is functional to the perception of the concept as something stable and 'real,' whereas it is based on the belief that the thing is isolable, independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient, which it is not.

Everything is conditioned, thus part of a chain of reciprocal relationships. Without the relationship it would lose its meaning; it cannot even be separated from the relationship. Thus, conceptualization proceeds by convictions, indemonstrable assumptions, it does not truly isolate the thing into a *dhamma* per se, but convinces itself that it does so while attributing a conventional designation, a self, which must convey the illusion of this autonomy of the concept. But the Buddha admonishes his disciples: *sabbe dhammā anattā*, "all concepts are non-self," which can also be read as "no concept is an independent self."

This is most likely the basis of the subsequent Abhidhamma speculation. In addition to the idea of *dhamma*, which becomes foundational for later speculations, these authors adopted the concepts of *saṅkhata* and *asaṅkhata*, masking them with other terms, the most important of which are *sammuti*, meaning "conventional", "designated," or "arbitrary," and *paramattha*, meaning "absolute" or "incontrovertible." These two concepts are intended to serve the functions of *saṅkhata* and *asaṅkhata*, respectively, but the Abhidhamma raises the stakes further by discussing *sabhāva*, meaning "self-subsistent." This term theoretically indicates something that exists in itself (*sva*-) and has being (*bhāva*), yet the Abhidhamma simultaneously maintains that there are dhammas which are *sabhāva* but not *asaṅkhata*. This discrepancy can only be explained if the notion of *sabhāva* did not denote ontological autonomy but perhaps a presumed conceptual autonomy. If this were

not the case, then Nāgārjuna's objection, which vehemently opposes the very idea of *svabhāva*, would be more than justified, as this concept conveys the illusion of ontological autonomy, an intrinsic essence, and can be easily misunderstood as *asaṅkhata* (in Sanskrit *asaṃskāra*).

However, Nāgārjuna's critique should be understood as primarily directed at the Sarvāstivādins, who were accused of leaving the door open for some form of substantialism regarding the dharmas, thus rendering them autonomous and self-sufficient—an idea Nāgārjuna, in alignment with earlier doctrine, denied. How, then, can one resolve the misunderstanding that may arise when discussing *sabhāva*, *paramattha*, and *asaṅkhata* in Theravāda Abhidhamma? A potentially valid answer is provided by Karunadasa.

To begin with: "the Abhidhamma introduces two levels of reality, one consensual (*sammuti*) and the other ultimate (*paramattha*)—a distinction that we do not read in the early Buddhist scriptures (Pāli suttas), despite their containing identifiable antecedent trends."[133] The nature of an ultimate reality, however, is not a matter of ontological autonomy. The idea of the Abhidhamma is that something is endowed of ultimate reality if during the analysis of a phenomenon it emerges as not further analyzable: "if the dhammas are ascribed as real and ultimate, this means not that they partake of the nature of absolute entities but that they are not further reducible to any other reality, to some kind of substance that underlies them."[134] To this extent, it seems that a *paramattha-dhamma* is not *asaṅkhata*, for the "ultimate existence" (*paramatthato vijjamānatā*) does not imply the *asaṅkhata* condition, quite the contrary, it is explicitly said that an absolute entity, no further reducible, is also necessarily "arisen due to conditions" (*paccaya-sambhūtā*). Karunadasa acknowledges the potential contradiction, and further clarifies that for the authors of the Abhidhamma, the concept of *paramatthata* does not convey the idea of inherent substance or quality. Only the independent existence of a discrete entity that does not rely on any other entity can be defined as unconditioned.

133. Ibid., 27.
134. Ibid., 29.

A composite thing that necessitates the attribution of a designated identity comes under the definition of *sammuti* ("conventional" or "consensual"). A *sammuti* is something analyzable into several parts and components, that in turn can or cannot be found as further analyzable into other constituents, to the level of an absolute *dhamma*, an entity nor further reducible. Nonetheless, these *dhamma*s are not independent, as they depend on a mutual network of subsistence. We can understand the difference between *paramattha* and *sammuti* as a variation in the degree of complexity: *paramattha* is the simplest degree of complexity, a founding existent, whether a *sammuti* is composed of a complex interaction of simpler existents.

Anther matter of confusion is that in the few occurrences that mentions the term *paramattha* in the suttas, it is used as a synonym for *nibbāna*, the ultimate purity (*paramatthavisuddhiṃ paññāpenti*, AN 10.29) or the condition of awakening: "having understood the world, the seer of the ultimate, the serene one who crossed the flood has cut the ties, unattached and undefiled" (*aññāya lokaṃ paramatthadassiṃ oghaṃ samuddaṃ atitariya tādiṃ*, *taṃ chinnaganthaṃ asitaṃ anāsavaṃ*, Snp 1.12), "with strenuous intent to reach the ultimate goal" (*āraddhaviriyo paramatthapattiyā*, Snp 1.3).

The characteristic of temporality in Early Buddhism is that past, present, and future are conventions dictated by our perception; time does not truly flow but is perceived as such due to our limited, worldly viewpoint.

What enters our worldly circle is "present," but it becomes "past" when it exits. This perspective does not imply that what is past ceases to exist or that what is yet to appear does not exist until it is brought into being by necessary causes. The resolution of this dilemma is to posit an eternal present, and Karunadasa himself notes that in early Buddhism, "past and future are as real as the present."[135]

We can read evidence of the timeless nature of the experience of one who has reached the state of Buddhahood even before the Abhidhamma, in the stories concerning the experience of the Buddha who, once he had reached awakening, "is able to see his former lives: where and how and why he was reborn as he was." He is also "able

135. Ibid., 31.

to see other beings being born and reborn in different conditions and *why* they are so reborn." Ultimately, "he is able to see how to uproot the deepest of the tendencies which bind one to continued rebirth."[136]

Upon thorough analysis, every nuance is nothing more than the close succession of a series of distinct moments, of adjacent pixels held together by something elusive. If indeed the single pixel is "the substance," and their innumerable succession, viewed from afar, can give the impression of a gradient, up close it is incontrovertible that each moment, each single appearance, firmly linked to the next, is nevertheless distinct from one another. A set, even if infinite, of distinct moments must be held together by something that firmly chains these moments to each other.

> Wholes and parts are relations. The relation of whole to part resembles the shifting contrasts and hierarchies of categories and members. This relation is fundamental to the experience of all mental and perceptual content. The shift from whole to part is the vehicle of change. The recrudescence of antecedent wholes that distribute into parts recaptures the context (concepts) from which the parts (objects) individuate. The view of mental process as the fractioning of wholes into parts—the final partlike wholes being the entities that process achieves, with every part emerging from an antecedent whole—corresponds with a basic theme in Indian philosophy, that unity underlies diversity, for example in the concept of causation as an emergence of event-particulars out of a causal whole, or in the concept of a universal self or absolute nature that underlies the transient self and the phenomenal world.[137]

We have said that cognition apparently isolates each thing from the others although this is factually impossible. What is determined (by cognition, for example) appears bound to the condition that determines it: *x* is bound to non-*x*, be it *y* or *z*. Without this relationship of inclusion of difference, not even identity is constituted. Every determined entity posits itself insofar as it relates to every other determined entity.

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136. Hamilton, "The 'External World': Its Status and Relevance in the Pali Nikāyas," 77–78.

137. Brown, "Microgenesis and Buddhism: The Concept of Momentariness," 275.

nāhaṃ, bhikkhave, aññaṃ ekadhammampi samanupassāmi yaṃ evaṃ dantaṃ guttaṃ rakkhitaṃ saṃvutaṃ mahato atthāya saṃvattati yathayidaṃ, bhikkhave, cittaṃ.

cittaṃ, bhikkhave, dantaṃ guttaṃ rakkhitaṃ saṃvutaṃ mahato atthāya saṃvattatī ti.

Mendicants, there's no single thing like cognition that, when it is tamed, guarded, protected, and restrained, is such beneficial.

A cognition which is tamed, guarded, protected and restrained, is incredibly beneficial.

(AN 1.40)

The classical metaphysical conception understands the original or primal as a prerequisite, that which exists *a parte ante*, as an unconditioned condition acting as the foundation of the manifest reality. In other terms, the original serves as reality's foundation. Unlike human experience, which apprehends reality through a series of determinations perceived as components of reality, the foundation must be self-sufficient. These determinations must refer to one another, as none can exist in isolation, independently. None is auto-existent, but derives its meaning from its relationship, within the context that is the aggregate of possible determinations, from all other determinations against which it is contrasted.

The point here is not existence but appearance: the things of the world appear, but as they appear they disappear, giving the illusion of being born and dying, when in reality they are so tightly inter-related among themselves, co-implicating in a causal chain, that more than their nonexistence we must take note of their relation. Certainly, they cannot exist per se, cannot be per se existents, but Buddhism does not posit an existence of relations, that is, a relation among existents, but a relation that is existence itself. What appears in this chain is at the convergence of relations, ripples of the sea that appear as waves, but remain always, fundamentally, the vast sea.

We observed how, in the formation of early Buddhist thought, not only the concept of the world (*loka*) plays a fundamental role, but also that of phenomenal space is of importance. These concepts likely have cultural origins, and although they refer to ritual functions related to

the emergence of heterodox elements in Buddhist thought, the issues they address are closely analogous to those in biosemiotics.

For the Buddha, the body is the epicenter of the experiential field, the starting point from which the perception of the world is constructed. However, as the sources demonstrate, the body is not an independent reality but exists only in relation to the world. Consciousness, which resides in the body, segments the world into "things," assigning them names and forms. This process of naming and categorization, however, is illusory, as it creates a false separation between the observer and the observed.

The *cāttudisā loka* represents the world conceived as a space organized into "quarters." This conception originates from ancient Indo-Aryan ritual traditions, particularly the coronation ritual of the king (*Rājasūya*), in which the sovereign symbolically conquers the four quarters of space, establishing his dominion over the world. In Buddhism, the *cāttudisā loka* becomes a metaphor for the totality of the phenomenal world, a field of experience that the ascetic seeks to transcend through meditative practice.

The term *khetta* (Sanskrit: *kṣetra*), often translated as "field," assumes a dual significance: on the one hand, it refers to cultivated land; on the other, it extends to represent an organized space, a "frame" within which a certain volition is exercised. In the Buddhist context, the field represents the *loka*, the experiential world, which is not independent of the body but rather a projection of it.

Buddhist ascetic practice aims to alter the biosemiotic enslavement to normative signs—those conditioning factors that shape our perception of the world. Through meditation and the cultivation of mindfulness (*sati*), the ascetic endeavors to deconstruct mental habits and liberate themselves from the chains of desire and attachment.

The ultimate goal is to attain *nibbāna*, the cessation of the cycle of birth and death, which coincides with the dissolution of the *loka*, the limited experiential field. *Nibbāna* is not a physical place or a paradise but rather a state of liberation from suffering, achieved through the understanding of the true nature of reality. Additionally, the Buddha describes life (*jīvita*) as encompassing all aspects of the mundane realm, from which *nibbāna* seeks to liberate.

The "world" described in these texts is both an "environmental" world and a space defined by cultural habituations. The body is the epicenter of this experience, but it is impossible to demonstrate the existence of anything independent of our relationship with it. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is what "segments" the world into "things" with which we interact, but at the same time, it determines itself as a "thing." Through ascetic practice, Buddhism aims to transcend the limits of the *Funktionskreis*, expanding consciousness beyond the boundaries of the body and the perceptual world.

In conclusion, I hope this work has provided an insightful perspective on the Buddhist conception of the world and its transcendence. Through comparison with biosemiotics, I have highlighted how Buddhism views the world as an *Umwelt*, an experiential environment constrained by our perception. Ascetic practice, therefore, is framed as a path to expand consciousness beyond these limitations, ultimately achieving a more comprehensive and liberatory understanding of reality.

Chapter 5
Concluding Remarks: the Early Buddhist Biosemiotics of Relation

> *Wir leben naiv im Wahrnehmen und Erfahren, in diesen thetischen Akten, in denen uns Dingeinheiten erscheinen, und nicht nur erscheinen, sondern im Charakter des „vorhanden", des „wirklich" gegeben sind.*
>
> "We live naïvely in perception and experience, in these thetic acts in which units of things appear to us—not only appear, but are given with the character of being 'present' and 'real.'"[1]

At this point it is appropriate to sum up everything we have said so far. According to the Uexküllian framework, living organisms function as both interpreters and emitters of signs, with their responses to stimuli not merely dictated by mechanistic principles but by the interpretation of meaning through semiotic processes. Life itself, in this view, is a network of semiotic interpretations, with relationships at the core of such interpretations. The environment, another key factor, serves as the setting in which these relational networks acquire meaning. Each living organism inhabits its own *Umwelt*, an inner world unique to each organism, where specific signs gain distinct significance. In intraspecific interactions, every living being is perceived by others according to the significance it holds within its own *Umwelt*, and the behavior of organisms is shaped by their perception of this *Umwelt.*[2]

Numerous affinities can also be recognized between biosemiotics and semiosis—initially described by Peirce as the principle underlying language—as governing both cultural and biological phenomena.[3] In

1. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Erstes Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band III/1)*, 107.

2. Giuseppe Flavio Artese and Francesca Michelini, "La Ricezione di Jakob von Uexküll nella Psicologia Ecologica e nell'enattivismo," *Discipline Filosofiche* 33, no. 1 (2023): 10.

3. Prisca Augustyn, "Uexküll, Peirce, and Other Affinities Between Biosemiotics and Biolinguistics," *Biosemiotics* 2, no. 1 (2009): 1–17, DOI: 10.1007/

this regard, the potential of this discipline is considerable, as it allows for the integration of cultural anthropology and biology within a rational, yet non-reductionist, framework. Such a framework can account for the specific complexities inherent to each system.

In Peirce's conception, the world is "conceived as existing almost entirely of signs and relations."[4] The word "relation" has been the most important word of this analysis of the Buddhist conception of the witnessed. Lettner proposes a comparative study between Peirce's world "perfused with signs" and the Buddhist Abhidhamma, finding impressive remarks.

The Buddhist analysis of reality posits that all phenomena, whether physical or psychological, are composed of minimal elements that combine and manifest as more complex data. Starting from this fundamental premise, the Abhidhamma dedicates much of its analysis to these irreducible constituent elements, meticulously listing and categorizing them.[5] These minimal constituents are known as *dhamma*s (in Sanskrit: *dharma*s). Although this specific use of the term *dhamma*, as associated with the so-called *dhamma theory*,[6] represents a distinct Abhidhammic extension of the more generic meaning of *dhamma*, it is important to note that the general principle of minimal constituent

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s12304-008-9028-y; Yannick Campion, "L'Umweltraum de Jakob von Uexküll. Le Signe, l'espace, le Temps et les Philosophes," *Cahiers François Viète* 3, no. 8 (2020): 155–81, DOI: 10.4000/cahierscfv.621; Ekaterina Velmezova, Kalevi Kull, and Stephen J. Cowley, eds., *Biosemiotic Perspectives on Language and Linguistics*, vol. 13 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-20663-9; Donald Favareau and Kalevi Kull, "On Biosemiotics and Its Possible Relevance to Linguistics," 2015, 13–28, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-20663-9_2; Joseph Alter, "Biosemiotics and Religion: Theoretical Perspectives on Language, Society and the Supernatural," *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 1 (2022): 101–21, DOI: 10.1177/02632764211029348.

4. Lettner, "Semiotic Roots and Buddhist Routes in Phenomenology and Intercultural Philosophy: A Peircean Study of Abhidharma Buddhist Theories of Consciousness and Perception," 48.

5. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality*; Yakupitiyage Karunadasa, *The Buddhist Analysis of Matter* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2020).

6. Karunadasa, *The Dhamma Theory*.

elements (or minimal phenomenal unit) being identifiable through analytical study of physical or psychological phenomena is already present in the Pāli texts.[7]

Lettner correctly argues that this analytical effort, already present in the Pāli texts, constitutes a form of phenomenological analysis. Key elements of this analysis can be identified in the categories used to describe these minimal units, such as the sign (*nimitta*) and the association of name and form (*nāmarūpa*), which appears to have a dual semantic nature. In this framework, "name" functions as the equivalent of a signifier, while "form" refers to the eidetic-conceptual structure, corresponding to its prototypical meaning.[8] Interpreted in a phenomenological way, *dharma*s are not mere 'things' but 'phenomenal' things, that is, "events."[9] Since "Buddhism focuses more strongly upon how such processes of constitution work" it results that *dharma*s are mostly conceived as "purely relational notions."[10]

In this regard, the 'external' world is not conceivable as a witnessed completely independent from the witness. Witnessed and witness are inextricably linked to each other, perhaps are not even capable of existing independently from one another. In the Abhidhammic analysis "the world of matter is considered as relevant only in so far as it becomes an object of cognition that triggers processes of perception."[11] Thus, Lettner affirms that the *dhamma*s are a comparable notion to Perice's *phaneron*, i.e., a "minimal event" present at any time to the mind in any way and that denotes a certain relation to consciousness.

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7. Lettner, "Semiotic Roots and Buddhist Routes in Phenomenology and Intercultural Philosophy: A Peircean Study of Abhidharma Buddhist Theories of Consciousness and Perception," 52.
8. Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy," 5, 18.
9. Lettner, "Semiotic Roots and Buddhist Routes in Phenomenology and Intercultural Philosophy: A Peircean Study of Abhidharma Buddhist Theories of Consciousness and Perception," 53.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 54.

An object is describable as "something that is constituted through the relation to an organism that experiences and observes,"[12] this is also why in the Abhidhammic analysis what truly matters is "dealing with (mental) entities in terms of processes, not substances."[13] However, this does not translates into a dualism between matter and consciousness, nor a reductionism to materialism or panpsychism, for "Sentient beings are part of the same matter they cognise,"[14] and while the "Western" connotations of "matter" are something "hardly appropriate" to describe the nature of the dhammic relations, the idea of *rūpa*s (forms or "appearances" of the phenomenal field) proposed in the Buddhist texts is much more a comprehensive term.

The idea that Buddhist phenomenology does not strictly distinguish between "inner" and "outer" world is,[15] however, too simplistic, and it does not take into account the numerous suttas proposing the alternance of an *ajjhatta*/*bahiddhā rūpāni* (inner/outer forms). This is indeed a problem in the interpretation of the early Buddhist suttas, though it is reasonable to assume that it is used merely for meditative purposes, and does not pretend to describe reality.[16]

Internal and external are two categories even within Husserlian phenomenology. In his case, he employs these concepts as there can be two types of real experience: one "external" (*äußere*), referring to the facts of the physical world (*physische*), and one "internal," referring to the facts of the psychic world (*seelische Erfahrung*).[17] However, it must be noted that Husserl places quotation marks around "external" as he believes phenomenology can say something about the experience of reality. Therefore, even this perception of it as external is only

12. Ibid., 55.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 56.
15. Ibid., 58.
16. Tamara Ditrich, "Interpretations of the Terms Ajjhattaṃ and Bahiddhā: From the Pāli Nikāyas to the Abhidhamma," in *Text, History, and Philosophy* (BRILL, 2016), 108–45, DOI: 10.1163/9789004318823_005.
17. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Zweites Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band IV)*, 125.

a posteriori localization. Obviously, the center of experience is where everything is received, that is, in the *Leib*.

In Buddhism, the absence of dualism between external and internal—and thus the conventional use of these two terms—is due to other motivations, particularly concerning the fact that the laws governing both dimensions are the same. The spurious division between the inner and outer worlds arises from the illusory nature of the perceptual sphere, which tends to "construct" a world within its interiority. However, what Buddhists genuinely mean by the alternation of external and internal is, initially, what pertains primarily to *nāma* (internal) versus what pertains primarily to *rūpa* (external)—while not forgetting that these spheres are in constant relation.

Secondly, and more specifically in the Abhidhamma, the two dimensions pertain, in the case of interiority, to the realm of signs populated by *paññatti* entities, i.e., conventional *dhamma*s, because they are highly composite and organized according to arbitrary principles, as opposed to the phenomenal reality where *dhamma*s not further analyzable can be reached through contemplative-phenomenological exercise. Here lies the fundamental and thus non-concrete difference between interior and exterior dimensions. In reality, no exteriority or interiority exists as such, only a distinction between *sammuti* and *paramattha*, keeping in mind that many ways of understanding the external would also fall fully within *paññatti/sammuti*, just as in the apparently internal dimension we can recognize, through contemplative exercise, the *paramattha*—and hence also *dhamma*s that are not further analyzable.

So far (especially in the chapters 2-3), I argued for the existence of a biosemiotic-like vision in the context of Pāli Buddhism, where the notion of *Umwelt* can be found in the Buddhist concept of *loka*. This term has several implications that lead us to think that in all respects the intent of ascetic practice, which aims at the cessation of the *loka*, seen as a real functional circle that calls into question the perceptive experience of the subject, in an end-of-the-world *lokanta*,[18] is actually

18. Divino, "In This World or the Next: Investigation Over the 'End of the World' in Contemplative Practice Through the Pāli Canon."

an attempt to overcome the limiting experience of that reality called in biosemiotics *Funktionskreis*.

This is because Buddhism does not seem to recognize a distinct separation between the functioning of human psychology and the general behaviors of all living beings. However, a comprehensive theory of the 'living' that considers all these nuances has not yet been thoroughly analyzed. Nevertheless, the idea that the behavioral phenomenology of living beings can be described as systems of communicative relations through 'semiotic' forms is highly intriguing. To evaluate this, it was necessary to delve deeper not only into Buddhist views on living systems but also to apply these views to semiotic dynamics, comparing them with the insights offered by (bio)semiotics and, more broadly, by Western intellectual traditions.

In biosemiotics, living organisms and the environment are understood to be in a complementary relationship.[19] The environment can be perceived in two distinct ways: the *Umwelt* refers to the experiential world that arises from the network of relationships established by the living being as a sensory and operational center, whereas the *Ungebung*, literally "the surroundings," refers to the area perceived by the living being. Biosemiotic theory views the organism as a closed unit where the interaction between the *Merkwelt* (the perceptual world) and the *Wirkwelt* (the operational world) is continuous, generating a *Funktionskreis* (functional cycle). These theories have prompted a reconsideration of psychology from an ecological perspective, where the term ecological clearly refers to the concept of οἶκος, signifying a biosemiotic environment.[20]

The reality described by biosemiotics is particularly useful for understanding the problem presented in Pāli Buddhism, which describes the "world" (*loka*) as a series of limitations that ascetic effort seeks to transcend. The scheme displayed in Fig. 19 proposed a comprehensive comparison between biosemiotic concepts with specific Buddhist terms (already seen in Fig. 1 and Fig. 13).

19. Artese and Michelini, "La Ricezione di Jakob von Uexküll nella Psicologia Ecologica e nell'enattivismo," 15.
20. Ibid., 14.

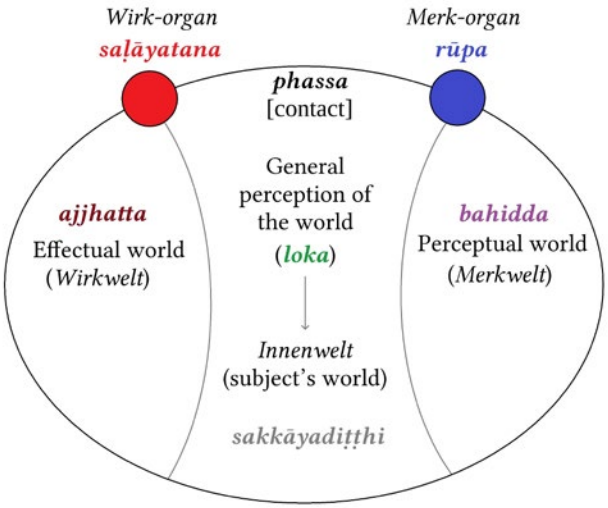

Fig. 19 — Comparison between biosemiotic concepts with specific Buddhist terms.

The "world" here is not simply the environment in the modern sense, as something with an independent state of nature that operates autonomously from human activity. Instead, the environment is a network of signs that humans internalize and continually interact with. In this sense, the "cultural world" is as much an environmental "world" as the space defined by topography, climate, and other elements often labeled as "natural," though this categorization artificially separates them from human experience and attributes to them a distinct essence. This is not the case for the Buddha, who often describes life (*jīvita*) as encompassing all aspects of the mundane realm—precisely what *nibbāna* seeks to liberate from.

> *byādhidhammā jarādhammā, atho maraṇadhammino; yathādhammā tathāsantā, jigucchanti puthujjanā. ahañce taṃ jiguccheyyaṃ, evaṃdhammesu pāṇisu; na metaṃ patirūpassa, mama evaṃ vihārino. sohaṃ evaṃ viharanto, ñatvā dhammaṃ nirūpadhiṃ; ārogye yobbanasmiñca, jīvitasmiñca ye madā; sabbe made abhibhosmi, nekkhamme daṭṭhu khemataṃ; tassa me ahu ussāho, nibbānaṃ abhipassato; nāhaṃ bhabbo etarahi, kāmāni paṭisevituṃ; anivatti bhavissāmi, brahmacariyaparāyaṇo ...*

> For some, infirmity, aging, and mortality unfold as inherent aspects of existence. While these facets align with the intrinsic order of their nature, the ordinary people find them repugnant. Should disdain be directed towards creatures embodying such inherent characteristics, it would not be fitting for me, as my existence mirrors theirs. Dwelling in such a manner, I have apprehended the veracity encapsulated in emancipation from worldly attachments. I have attained mastery over all conceits: well-being, youth, and even life itself. A fervor ignited within me as I beheld the prospect of liberation. Henceforth, the pursuit of sensual pleasures eludes me, for I am irrevocably committed to the path of spiritual life, with no possibility of retracing my steps.
> (AN 3.39)

This circle of *Umwelt-loka* thus represents the entire world of experiences. The term *jīvita*, due to its etymological link to the Greek βίος, deserves careful consideration.[21] For Uexküll, the only reality about which we can reasonably speak is the "phenomenal world," understood as "the only world that exists."[22]

Objects, in his view, are understood in a Kantian sense as merely phenomenal objects, meaning objects of consciousness/action.[23] The form of the object coincides with the subjective operation that perceives it as such. Object and perceptual/operational world are inseparably connected, and the environment of every animal organism is a series of relationships that link it, as a perceiving subject with sensory apparatus, to its experienced object, which in turn acts as a signal emitter or effector.[24] The effector is thus far from being a passive actor in this dynamic but is instead an active contributor.

In contrast, Buddhism does not posit the existence of autonomous entities that then enter into relationships. The potential for relationship is already inherent in them, meaning they are always already *in-relation* due to their interdependence. In Uexküll's framework, this relational aspect is not underestimated: what he calls *Objekt* is not a mere "thing" (*Ding*),

21. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek (2 Vols.)*, 216–17.
22. Cimatti, "Con Uexküll, oltre Uexküll. Per un'ontologia Relazionale," 51.
23. Ibid., 52.
24. Ibid., 53–54.

but a "set of properties and characteristics that determine its insertion into a network of relationships, assigning it a specific function."[25] Natural sciences, therefore, are not concerned with reality or truth but with the search for "order" in the organization of things, which we call "nature."

The *Merkwelten* are various experiential possibilities that never reveal themselves in their full potential, probably incalculable if imagined as a whole. The boundaries of these individual possibilities are like the transparent borders of a soap bubble (*Seifenblase*). It is interesting to note that a similar metaphor is used by the Buddha, though to indicate something slightly different: the speed with which the phenomena of the world appear and disappear, like bubbles that burst as quickly as they form (*thullaphusitake deve vassante udakabubbuḷaṃ khippaṃyeva paṭivigacchati, na ciraṭṭhitikaṃ hoti*, AN 7.74). In Dhp 167-178, it is even said that the world "is like a bubble or a mirage," and seeing it this way prevents the Lord of Death from reaching you (*yathā pubbuḷakaṃ passe, yathā passe marīcikaṃ; evaṃ lokaṃ avekkhantaṃ, maccurājā na passati*). Here too, the metaphorical contrast between death and life as value must not be overlooked.

This leads to another difference with Uexküll, as he does not believe it is possible to transcend the boundaries of the *Seifenblasen*. An animal (humans included, of course) is to some extent "confined" to its own environmental possibilities, and the universe, though it may be convenient to postulate an ideal unity, is always experienced in its "fundamental nuclei," which are akin to Leibnizian monads,[26] understood here as "living units of subject and environment." This view is starkly different from that of the Buddha, for whom the goal is for a "monk to master his own cognition and not be mastered by it" (*bhikkhu cittaṃ vasaṃ vatteti, no ca bhikkhu cittassa vasena vattati*, MN 32). As discussed in this monograph, this cognition is not merely a construction or a reduction of what is witnessed, though this may be one way to correctly interpret the Buddhist cognitive process—it is not, however, merely that.

25. Gentili, "La Umweltlehre tra Uexküll e Husserl," 72.
26. Ibid., 78.

In SN 22.94, each of the five aggregates is defined as *loke lokadhammo taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti*, "a phenomenon of the world in the world that the Realized One perfectly understands and comprehends." We have already analyzed the issue of doubling, in this case as a "phenomenon *of* the world-in-the-world" (*loke lokadhammo*), when we discussed the exercises of the *Satipaṭṭhāna*. The emphasis on these forms of doubling should not, in my view, be sought in the simple relative locative (which would lead us to translate as "a phenomenon of the world *as such*") but rather in the doubling tendency implicit in the perceptual system.

This fact, summarized in the internal/external dualism found repeatedly in the canon, was well understood by the authors of the Abhidhamma, who built upon it a complex conception forming the foundation of a sophisticated doctrine. The entire philosophical work of the Abhidhamma can be considered as a phenomenological discourse on the dual theme of the absolute and the relative. Conditioned phenomena, which relate within the complex framework of the attestable, as well as what we, as sociocultural subjects, construct through conventions, language, norms, and so forth, constitute the plane of the virtual, the relative—that is, what does not include the totality of the absolute but rather its epiphenomenal manifestations, subject to interpretation. Indeed, as Karunadasa and Genjun pointed out,

> The difference between *sammuti* and *saṃvṛti* is not simply that between Pāli and Sanskrit, for the two terms differ both in etymology and meaning. The term *sammuti* is derived from the root man, to think, and when prefixed with *sam* it means consent, convention, or general agreement. On the other hand, the term *saṃvṛti* is derived from the root *vṛ*, to cover, and when prefixed with *sam* it means covering, concealment. This difference is not confined to the vocabulary of the theory of double truth alone. That elsewhere, too, Sanskrit *saṃvṛti* corresponds to Pāli *sammuti* gets confirmed by other textual instances. Since *sammuti* refers to convention or general agreement, *sammuti-sacca* means truth based on convention or general agreement. On the other hand, the idea behind *saṃvṛti-satya* is that which covers up the true nature of things and makes them appear otherwise.[27]

27. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality*, 72–73.

> The Pāli term *sammuti* is used in contrast to *paramattha*, meaning thereby 'the conventional'. Further, it is derived from *samman*, meaning 'to think together' or 'to think rightly'. […] Thus, *sammuti* (the conventional) is found in such early texts as *Suttanipāta* and *Milindapañha* and the like used in contrast to *vidvā* (the wise man) and *paramattha* (the absolute).[28]

The concept of "convention" (*paññatti*) is already found in the SN 22.62, the very first sutta we analyzed in Chapter 1, where it is stated that temporal designations of the present (is), past (was), and future (will be) are the result of three phases: expression (*nirutti*), designation (*adhivacana*), and conceptualization (*paññatti*).

The plane of convention, defined as *sammuti*, pertains to language, understood in the broadest sense—not only as articulated language spoken by individuals but also as the relational system of phenomena. In this intricate network of relations, where phenomenal aggregates cause other phenomena to appear, aggregate with others, disaggregate, and recombine causing yet more phenomena to appear, and so on, there emerges a complex morphology of reality that can itself be understood as a form of language. However, this is a different kind of language, distinct from the principle of arbitrariness that governs designations commonly understood in the form of verbal language.

Nevertheless, what appears to us is graspable as provisional, impermanent, and thus empty, because it is conditioned. The philosophical concept that inherits the archaic idea of the unconditional is reinterpreted by the authors of the Abhidhamma as *paramattha*, meaning "ultimate" or "absolute." In the Snp, the theme of the ultimate principle is addressed in two distinct ways. For example, in Snp 4.4, we read of a being that is absolutely pure and entirely free from illness (*passāmi suddhaṃ paramaṃ arogaṃ*). However, Buddhism avoids dualisms, and even the notion that pursuing a concept of purity could guarantee liberation is a controversial matter.

What truly interests the Buddhist, the text states, is being "remote" from all phenomena—seen, heard, or thought (*sa sabbadhammesu*

28. Genjun, *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*, 79.

visenibhūto, yaṃ kiñci diṭṭhaṃ va sutaṃ mutaṃ vā)—free from all judgment, concept, or formation, to the extent of being beyond judgment (*kenīdha lokasmi vikappayeyya*). Speaking of absolute purity is a pious illusion that should not be promoted (*accantasuddhīti na te vadanti*), as only by doing so does one free oneself from bondage, dissolving all the knots of attachment (*ādānaganthaṃ gathitaṃ visajja*).

No "doctrine" is accepted by the 'true' Brahmin who has crossed beyond boundaries—presumably the boundaries of duality (*sīmātigo brāhmaṇo tassa natthi, ñatvā va disvā va samuggahītaṃ*). Consequently, nothing is regarded as "ultimate" or "absolute" (*tassīdha natthi paramuggahītanti*). In the following sutta, Snp 4.5, a well-known reasoning is revisited: dogma, or faith in an incontrovertible absolute, generates only conflict. The one who entrenches themselves in their positions about an ultimate truth believes they are superior in the world and declares others to be inferior. This is the root of all conflict (*paramanti diṭṭhīsu paribbasāno, yaduttari kurute jantu loke; hīnāti aññe tato sabbamāha, asmā vivādāni avītivatto*).

The text advises opposing such convictions, inviting the good disciple to avoid forming any views about the world, any notions, thoughts, precepts, or vows (*diṭṭhimpi lokasmiṃ na kappayeyya, ñāṇena vā sīlavatena vāpi*). The same applies to any classification of self: one is neither "equal," nor "better," nor "worse" (*samoti attānamanūpaneyya, hīno na maññetha visesi vāpi*). All these judgments lead to attachment and conflict. By rejecting any notions, they follow no faction, creed, or view (*sa ve viyattesu na vaggasārī, diṭṭhimpi so na pacceti kiñci*).

The essence of all this is that judgments, precepts, concepts, and notions all belong to worldliness. To avoid the continuation of worldly life (reincarnation) and the ongoing imprisonment in this same world, the ascetic seeks to abandon all of this, desiring no becoming in "this world or the next."[29] It seems, therefore, that the central themes in the most archaic texts are those of the "world" (*loka*) or its transcendence. Before speaking openly of the "end of the world," the Snp employs subtler poetic metaphors, such as crossing a river to reach the distant

29. Divino, "In This World or the Next: Investigation Over the 'End of the World' in Contemplative Practice Through the Pāli Canon."

shore. The Brahmin, who does not require guidance by precepts or vows, has reached the farther shore from which there is no return (*na brāhmaṇo sīlavatena neyyo, pāraṅgato na pacceti tādīti*). The term *pāraṅgata* also carries the sense of one who has "gone beyond," who has "surpassed" the world.

If the idea of *paramattha*/*paramaṭṭha* is understood in these early texts as a dogmatic form of belief in an incontrovertible absolute, this does not mean that Buddhists reject the idea of the absolute. What they consider impossible is expressing it conceptually, using verbal language. Therefore, the "true" brahman must refrain from taking sides with any faction and pursue their path toward the "far shore." The dialectic of the near shore vs. the far shore (*orimaṃ* vs. *pārimaṃ*) will continue to animate Buddhist philosophical debate, with remnants of it scattered throughout the canon.

In AN 10.118, the "false liberation" is even compared to the near shore, whereas true liberation is the far shore (*micchāvimutti orimaṃ tīraṃ, sammāvimutti pārimaṃ tīraṃ*). This goal is achieved by very few among humans (*appakā te manussesu*), while everyone else struggles and rushes around the nearer shore (*athāyaṃ itarā pajā, tīramevānudhāvati*). This confirms that this concept is indeed a prototype of the idea of *saṃsāra* vs. *nibbāna*, as the attainment of the far shore is a matter of ascetic practice, not devotion. When the teaching is well transmitted to those who practice it correctly, they become those who will cross the boundary of the domain of death, otherwise so difficult to overcome (*ye ca kho sammadakkhāte, dhamme dhammānuvattino; te janā pāramessanti, maccudheyyaṃ suduttaraṃ*). Thus, there is a domain of death (*maccudheyyaṃ*) that is surpassable. Death is metaphorically "located" on the near shore, and those who reach the far shore have transcended death itself, aligning with the figure of the Buddha described as *amataṃ* ("deathless") in many other texts.

AN 10.118 also reveals further insights that allow for broader connections: the one who develops these teachings (*sammā cittaṃ subhāvitaṃ*) is also described as "extinguished in this world" (*loke parinibbutā*), and we know that the metaphor of the extinction of the fire is foundational to the very idea of *nibbāna*. The world is on fire (*ādittako loko*, SN 1.41),

so *loka* is another metaphor for the near shore. The extinction of the fire (*nibbāna*) is liberation, as well as the attainment of the far shore. Thus, we observe a subsequent development of fundamental concepts based on the same principle. On one side is the world of conventions, the relative, opinions, concepts, and dualisms. In these dualisms reside conflict, strife, death, and limitation. On the other side, there is the ascetic practice seeking to transcend all of this. If the realm of dualisms is placed on the "near shore," then that of non-dualism, the far shore, represents liberation from these conditions. According to Genjun's interpretation,

> the relative represents the things which are considered as existents from the viewpoint of conventional usage (*lokanirutti*), but not in reality. These things are relative and transitory. They assume a form of limitation also. They reveal themselves as the relative. The relative is a form of manifestation or indication (*paññatti*). Both the things, absolute and relative, are thus involved in *paññatti*.[30]

Given that this likely reflects a progressive development rather than a series of synonyms introduced all at once at the beginning of the Buddha's teaching, it is also easy to hypothesize why certain concepts have shifted slightly in meaning over time. While initially, the idea of the absolute (*paramattha*) might have been seen as synonymous with "dogmatism," placing the conception of the absolute within *diṭṭhi* and thus on the "near shore," with the development of more refined technical concepts such as the "unconditioned" (*asaṅkhata*), the idea of the absolute shifted closer to the notion of the "ultimate," in the sense of "not further reducible by analysis," and thus closer to the idea of *pārima* that defines both the "far shore" and the "ultimate goal."

Furthermore, the terms *pārima* and *paramattha* share the same etymological root: *parā*, "through," "over," and especially "beyond." Sharing this fundamental idea, *pārima* and *paramattha* converge, and even the conception of "view" as inherently flawed because it is an opinion (*diṭṭhi*) is reformulated into a dual aspect: wrong view (*micchādiṭṭhi*), which includes everything pertaining to the world, and right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*), which constitutes its transcendence.

30. Genjun, *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*, 82.

This is, of course, only a hypothesis that speculates on the stratification processes of the canon and posits a certain antiquity for some concepts without claiming to offer the definitive interpretation. However, it is interesting to observe how certain suttas like AN 10.118, which present a final part in verse and an introductory part providing context, seem to result from this stratification. The verses speak only of reaching the far shore, extinguishment in the world, and overcoming the domain of death. In contrast, the introductory section, apparently inserted deliberately to interpret the verses, explains that the text indeed speaks of the near shore and the far shore but that the former should be understood as "wrong view" and the latter as "right view" (*micchādiṭṭhi orimaṃ tīraṃ, sammādiṭṭhi pārimaṃ tīraṃ*).

This (see Table 11) is the general hypothesis regarding the development of these concepts:

Worldly dimension, opinions, conventions	Liberation, transcendence, ascetic practice
maccudheyyaṃ	*amataṃ*
diṭṭhi	*sacca*
micchādiṭṭhi	*sammādiṭṭhi*
orima	*parima*
āditta *ādīpita*	*nibbuta* *nirodha*
loka	*lokanta*
lokiya	*lokuttara*
saṃsāra	*nibbāna*
saṅkhata	*asaṅkhata*
paññatti	*yathābhūta* *yathābhucca* *yathātatha* *tathātā*

Table 11. Hypothesis of the development of the *saṃsāra/nibbāna* binomial as starting from a fundamental dichotomy between conceptions of death and deathlessness, or mundane and ultramundane dimensions.

Naturally, in all these metaphors, one should include many other analogies, such as the omnipresent one of the knots. In AN 4.10 it is said that sensual pleasures (another mundane factor) are what "yoke" or "bind" people (*saṃyuttā*). Through this yoking, they desire rebirth and are yoked also to becoming (*bhavayoga*). They are yoked to views (*diṭṭhiyogena saṃyuttā*) and thus are governed by ignorance (*avijjāya purakkhatā*), which is why this "yoke" also binds beings to continuous transmigration (*sattā gacchanti saṃsāraṃ*). Conversely, the wise, the ascetic, has disentangled from all of this, has untied all the knots, all the yogas (*sabbayogavisaṃyuttā*). For this reason, they are referred to as sages who have transcended all yokes (*te ve yogātigā muni*). Therefore, we could add to our list the contrast between *yoga/saṃyutta* and *yogātigā/visaṃyutta*.

All this serves to highlight how the development of the concept of the absolute in the Abhidhamma is highly complex and must be contextualized within this succession of reinterpretations and re-readings of more archaic antecedent concepts.

The Abhidhamma builds precisely upon the last concept I emphasized in my list, regardless of whether it was the most recent or not: that of *asaṅkhata*. Given the correspondence between *asaṅkhata* and *nibbāna*, the authors of the Abhidhamma do not merely aim to demonstrate it but also strive to reconstruct a more rigorous analysis of conditioned reality that further underscores the interdependent nature of all phenomena. The theme of *nibbāna* is, in a sense, omnipresent as it underlies all analyses, but it is also placed to the side: *nibbāna* is absolutely that which transcends phenomenal reality (it is "aphenomenal"), and thus the analysis of causal connections and phenomena as such can only lead to a deeper understanding of the realm of the relative. Nevertheless, the authors of the Abhidhamma hold that there are two distinct categories of phenomena. Here lies the great innovation of the Abhidhamma's work and its greatest divergence from the assumptions of archaic Buddhism.

The idea of the absolute in the Abhidhamma should therefore not be understood as a synonym for the unconditioned in the sense of the

nibbāna of more archaic texts. Rather, the absolute is that which can be shown to arise from causes and conditions (*paccaya-sambhūtatā*).[31]

Naturally, and this must always be kept in mind, "It is only for purposes of definition and description that things are artificially dissected and presented as discrete entities. The truth of the matter is that the phenomenal world of experience exhibits a vast network of relational categories where nothing can exist in splendid isolation."[32] However, the Abhidhamma does not advocate either radical pluralism or radical monism: the totality is at once "one" but made of multiple aspects, the vast network of relational categories mentioned above. Thus, the Abhidhamma distances itself equally from both pluralism and monism.

The first option would lead to the paradox of nihilism, while the second would fail to account for the factual distinctions among all phenomena. By affirming the unity of all phenomena, their differences would be flattened into indistinguishability—something that does not appear to be the case.

> The commentary to the *Itivuttaka* says that one could mistakenly transgress the bounds of the dhamma theory (*atidhāvanti*) by ignoring the causal relationship of the dhammas and by focusing only on the principle of plurality (*nānatta-naya*), a situation that, it says, could lead to the extremist view of annihilation (*uccheda*): "This self and the world indeed get annihilated with no prospect of causal continuity." The subcommentary to the *Dīghanikāya* has a similar observation to make: "The erroneous grasping of the principle of plurality (*nānatta-nayassa micchāgahaṇa*) is due to the undue emphasis on the radical separateness (*accanta-bheda*) of the dhammas. This is the cause of the dogmatic adherence to the notion of 'annihilation' (*ucchedābhinivesassa kāraṇaṃ*)." [...] If the dhamma theory is not radically pluralist, it does not represent some kind of monism either. Any such interpretation, as the Pāli commentaries say, is due to overstressing the principle of unity (*ekattanaya*) and undue focusing on the absolute nondistinctness (*accantaṃ abhedagahaṇa*) of

31. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality*, 29.
32. Ibid., 24.

> the dhammas. This necessarily paves the way to the wrong view that the dhammas constitute an unanalyzable absolute unity.[33]

The Buddhist Abhidhamma considers that matter and its physical laws can be reduced to certain material *dhamma*s, formal constituents of all material existence. Beyond these dhammic laws, no matter or material substantiality is recognized, and substantiality itself is an imaginative effect.[34] This would thus seem to confirm a view in which *dhamma*s are theoretically distinguished only as material and immaterial, since all psychic or physical laws are always described by dhammas, and the effect of material substantiality is a cognitive misunderstanding. So, what are *dhamma*s? They are not substances but inseparable physical entities that determine the structure of a physics conceived as the sole universal reality (metaphysics is entirely absent as a concept in Buddhist speculation). Thus, by segmenting matter, one would directly reach the laws as constituents of the same:

> when the analysis of matter "ended" in atomism (theory of *rūpa-kalāpa*), this principle of positional inseparability was not abandoned. For even the so-called atom (*paramāṇu*) is, in the final analysis, a cluster of material *dhamma*s (*rūpa-kalāpa*), one physically inseparable from another, all forming a "heterogeneous" unity.[35]

What the commentators of the Abhidhamma affirmed is not that the emptiness of factors implies their being nothing (an irrational "being a non-being," which would be self-contradictory), but rather that they are not radically separate (*accanta-bheda*), and thus all leads back to a monism where the manifestations of being are plural, not being itself. Misunderstanding the principle of plurality (*nānattta-nayassa micchāgahaṇa*) instead leads to nihilism.[36] The idea of radical sepa-

33. Ibid., 24–25.
34. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings. The Middle Position on Theory and Practice*, 189.
35. Ibid.
36. Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality*, 25.

ration of things adheres, in reality, to the notion of annihilation (*ucchedābhinivesassa kāraṇam*).

Reality is singular, but the way it is perceived gives the impression of constant becoming, and this perceptual convention is *paññatti*, that is, knowledge designated by provisional nominal designation (in Sanskrit, *prajñapti*). From the perspective of linguistic cognition, both meaning (*attha*) and nominal designation (*nāma*) are relativized. While outside the Buddhist view, "sense" (*artha* in Sanskrit) is the highest ambition of humanity (to arrive at ultimate meaning), the Buddha warns philosophers against confusing the sense of the absolute with the meanings designated by linguistic convention.

The signifier is defined in the Abhidhamma as "that which makes known" (*paññāpanato paññatti*), which enables knowing and acts as the agent of designation (*abhidhāna*), while the signified is the object of designation (*abhidheya*) as well as that which is made known (*paññāpiyattā paññatti*). Both signifier and signified "have a psychological origin and, as such, both are devoid of objective reality."[37]

Signifier	*Signified*
Name-designation	Meaning-designation
nāma-paññatti	*attha-paññatti*

Table 12. The signifier-signified binomial in the Abhidhammic conception.

Language reflects the world but, at the same time, precisely because it is a testimony to essence and not essence itself, it pertains to the isolation of the world, even while being part of the world it purports to isolate, and thus essence. Severino offers formidable reflections on the role of language in isolating the world, analogous only to the Buddha's profound insights into language (understood as semantic perception) as the origin of the world (*lokassa samudayo*)—naturally meaning the "world" as we experience it, equivalent to Severino's isolated earth. Language, writes Severino, is the essence of the will to

37. Ibid., 60.

power, and "The essence of the will is to will that something should become something other than itself. That is to say, the will joins the forces that it, itself, regards as being able to make things become other than what they are."[38]

This form, in some way violent, of language is simply symptomatic of its organizational nature. Yet it is also inevitable that the germ of becoming is comprised in language, as the very organizational function of entities in themselves and others prefigures the foundation of a dimension of knowability that is isolated from a devastating external and unknown Other, gradually coinciding, for this characteristic of unknowability, with an idea of "nothingness," as that dimension from which things arise (come into being) and perish (are nullified).[39] Thus, language, grounded on the mechanism of appropriation, is a will to dominion that can never express truth, except the idea of truth it appropriates. Similarly, the intention to bear witness to the truth is a form of the alienation of truth.

We can understand the nature of these "nominal objects" described in Buddhism as akin to that of objects *tout court*. To be more precise, it is not even possible to say that outside the "nominal" discourse—that is, outside the realm of the name-form dyad—there exist "objects" at all. The perception of objects is already something conditioned by the peculiar way in which name-and-form perceives the world. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that for our convenience—as even the terminology I am proposing holds meaning only within conventionality—we simply distinguish phenomenal orders of greater or lesser subordination or superordination.

Most phenomena—for example, a given phenomenon presented as phenomenon *x*—are recognizable as phenomena appearing in their own unity (that of phenomenon *x*). However, upon analysis, they

38. Severino, *Beyond Language*, 7.

39. As said in the previous chapters, the mere idea or word "nothing" is indeed *something*, and it thus contradicts its own meaning. Nothingness is an impossibility, for what is not cannot be, but the idea of nothingness is, indeed, something: see Par. *Nat.*, *fr*. 7: οὐ γὰρ μήποτε τοῦτο δαμῇ εἶναι μὴ ἐόντα· ἀλλὰ σὺ τῆσδ' ἀφ' ὁδοῦ διζήσιος εἶργε νόημα—as we can see from this passage, Parmenides considers nothingness as an impossibility, a sheer unthinkability.

emerge as aggregates of other phenomena. These complex phenomena, aggregates of multiple phenomena, present themselves as unified in the sense that they can, in turn, interact with other phenomena. These other phenomena may themselves be more or less simple; there is no true limitation to the type or complexity of phenomena capable of interacting with one another. For instance, if we consider the phenomenon "heat," it can be recognized as more or less complex, but it is certainly simpler than the phenomenon "iron." Yet the phenomenon "iron" can interact with heat, and in this interaction, it will exhibit different properties. Similarly, phenomenon *x* can be decomposed into its constituent phenomena, *a*, *b*, or *c,* but it is not guaranteed that *a*, *b*, or *c* cannot themselves be recognized as composite phenomena.

The great purpose of the Abhidhamma is precisely to decompose phenomena to a level where the recognized constituent phenomenon is no longer divisible. Much can be said about this conception, but for now, we will suspend judgment on it. What matters for us to understand is that, for the sake of convenience, it is not practical to speak of phenomena as more or less subordinate or superordinate, but simply as subordinate or superordinate, without delving into the degree or engaging in unnecessary and convoluted classifications. Additionally, for the sake of convenience, we recognize that even if composed of other phenomena, a given phenomenon "*x*" is still, in turn, a "phenomenon," and as such, it can interact with others, regardless of their complexity. Its being perceived as relatively unitary (aggregated) is part of its phenomenology.

The only domain in which "objects" exist is that of nominal phenomena, which, even in the Abhidhamma, are considered a category almost apart, given that they indeed possess characteristics distinguishing them from others. For instance, if I observe a given phenomenon, such as a tornado, it is undeniable that this phenomenon is indeed such—that is, a superordinate phenomenon that appears to me through the interaction-aggregation of other subordinate phenomena, which I can conventionally and conveniently name as "wind," "air," "current," "temperature," "motion." However, whatever the nominal label, which is a mere designation, I can at least recognize this dynamic: the

complex interaction of a series of phenomena organically structuring the appearance of a certain phenomenon that I subsequently recognize as a "tornado."

Now, this nominal act of mine—recall the hierarchy of nominal constructs discussed in §1.5, which is critically important to bear in mind—is itself a phenomenon: the phenomenon "tornado," which is not the same phenomenon that I perceive with my senses and experience, and which I conventionally call "tornado." Follow me on this somewhat abstract point: just as the phenomenon I call "tornado" is linked to a series of other phenomena—difficult to precisely determine—that condition its manifestation, the very act of recognizing it as a "tornado" makes this nominal act, "tornado," another phenomenon, obviously linked to its presumed referent.

> Some black marks on paper become a word when they are understood as the sign of a meaning, or as the invitation to select a certain meaning. A language is an invitation to select certain meanings and to conjoin them in a certain way. Despite all other reasons for understanding something as language, the ultimate reason is the understanding itself—the *conviction*—that something *is* language and is a certain language rather than another. The given is transformed into language—and into a certain language—by the interpreting will; and, here again, the testimony to truth cannot prohibit different interpretations.[40]

Why is it essential to distinguish the two phenomena? Because only and solely in the phenomenon "tornado," in the name "tornado," is the tornado conceived as a "thing." In other words, "things" and "names" are fundamentally identical in our phenomenology. Only in the nominal sphere do "things" exist, and as such, they are amenable to being used by human will. Similarly, discourses concerning "things," "objects," exist solely within this nominal sphere. Understanding this is fundamental to delving into the intricate discourse that the Abhidhamma outlines, starting precisely from these premises.

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40. Emanuele Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism* (London: Verso, 2016), 271.

For Husserl, any "discourse concerning objects" (*alle Rede von Gegenständen*)—and thus any discourse concerning the predicates of objects (*ihren Prädikaten*), their relationships (*Beziehungen*), the states of affairs they pertain to (*den ihnen zugehörigen Sachverhalten etwa Gesetzen*)—refers back to theoretical acts in which objects are or can be given, perceived, intuited, theoretically explicated, and thought (*zurückweist auf theoretische Akte, in denen Gegestände gegeben, wahrgenommen oder sonstwie erschaut, theoretisch expliziert, gedacht usw. sind oder es sein können*).[41] It follows that we also attribute certain objectivities (*Gegenständlichkeiten*) to intentional and emotional lived experiences.

From the perspective of the Abhidhamma, however, this does not change the conventional nature of nominal beings. Or rather, it does not change their being "things," i.e., "names."

It goes without saying that there is a substantial difference between the phenomenon I call "tumbler" and the phenomenon *tumbler* both attested as phenomena by my experiencing subjectivity as a phenomenological witness. However, this subjectivity is misled by the fact that the phenomenon *tumbler* appears to me almost simultaneously and superimposed on the phenomenon I call "tumbler." This phenomenon, presenting itself as an obstacle to my perception, ensures that any experience of the glass refers to its being "glass" and not to its shape, its vitreous nature—which must itself be disentangled from the identity "glass"—its weight, its relationship with the surrounding environment, and so on. All this remains inaccessible to me unless I first understand the nature of nominal phenomena and thus make the necessary distinction between form as a phenomenon and form as correlated to the name.

Already in texts predating the Abhidhamma, there is a clear indication that Buddhists sought to distinguish between different types of form. The form that is part of the five aggregates is distinct from the form associated with specific "names" and that participates in the semiotic name-form dyad. Similarly, form understood as something pertaining to a specific phenomenality is, in turn, something else entirely.

41. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Zweites Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band IV)*, 15.

For now, there are different orders of magnitude: the form in the last category is only one of the multiple aspects of a continuous and complex form, which reveals itself to me as a given form tied to a specific phenomenal aspect. Thus, this idea of form is closely linked to phenomenal appearing—a form corresponds to a particular phenomenal configuration. However, it is not a binding identity but rather the specific aspect of a phenomenal context. The conforming of different shapes and the appearing of diverse forms correspond to different phenomenal aspects, which should lead us toward a complex phenomenological morphology.

When form is instead understood as part of the five aggregates, it is a particular aspect of the earlier formal continuum, detached from its continuity because it is part of a precise process of phenomenal configuration. It is the form around which our phenomenal lived experience of a given thing crystallizes. It is no coincidence that "form" is precisely the first of the five aggregates, around which further levels of apprehension of that detached form then stratify—through the sensation of it, its semantic perception, and so on.

When understood instead as part of the name-form dyad, we are once again talking about a form detached from its continuum. However, it is not even a form serving as a matrix for a series of associative processes that constitute the core of a phenomenal experience (which is the sense of the five aggregates). Instead, it is yet another process—that of a conventional segmentation and abstraction of a specific formal identity from that same flow, one that coincides with a semantic nominal identity. This fixation, the principle of the semiotic process, pertains to the mechanisms of designation and identification of "things"—of assigning nominal identities, as examined in the first chapter.

The form that serves as the basis for a nominal label, which is associated with a specific idea-concept, is not a form in itself. It is not necessarily an aspect of the phenomenological formal continuum. Rather, it is a *deliberate section* of that continuum, abstracted and isolated by linguistic thought to be associated, as an ideal prototype and thus a fundamental ordering value, with a specific identity.

> Offenbar werden wir *bei allen diesen Formen der Konstitution von Gegenständen zurückgeführt* auf Gegenstände, welche *nicht mehr auf vorgegebene Gegenstände der Art zurückweisen*, die ursprünglich durch irgend welche theoretischen, wertenden, praktischen Spontaneitäten entsprungen sind; mit anderen Worten: gehen wir der intentionalen Struktur irgend welcher gegebenen Gegenstände nach und den *Rückdeutungen*, die bewußtseinsmäßig in Form *sekundärer Rezeptivitäten* vorliegen, erzeugen wir die Spontaneitäten, welche die betreffenden Gegenständlichkeiten zu voll eigentlicher originärer Gegebenheit bringen, so kommen wir, ev. in einer Reihe von Schritten, *auf fundierende Gegenständlichkeiten* bzw. Noemata zurück, die nichts mehr von solchen Rückdeutungen enthalten, *die in schlichtesten Thesen* ursprünglich erfaßt oder erfaßbar sind und auf keine voranliegenden und allererst zu reaktivierenden Thesen zurückweisen, die zum konstitutiven Bestand des Gegenstands Beiträge liefern. Die phänomenologisch in dieser Eigentümlichkeit charakterisierten Gegenstande — gleichsam die *Urgegenstände*, auf welche alle möglichen Gegenstände ihrer phänomenologischen Konstitution nach zurückweisen — sind die *Sinnengegenstände*.[42]

To bring about a unification of objects constituted within different sensory spheres is, for Husserl, the aesthetic synthesis (*Synthesen hinzuweisen*).[43] However, it must be noted that his conception of an object slightly varies from that of the Buddhists or the Abhidhamma. Nonetheless, the general idea that the object is primarily given in its 'graspability' seems, in my view, very similar. Pāli Buddhism does not make significant use of the term *gaha* ("grasping") to indicate the sensory process as much as Mahāyāna does for the analogous Sanskrit term *graha*, but it should be noted that in Pāli this function is excellently carried out by the term *upādāya*, which also indicates "taking" something, "grasping," or "taking possession of." Its usage in relation to sensory apprehension mechanisms leaves no room for doubt.

For Husserl, grasping is fundamental to the givenness of a thing to consciousness, regardless of whether this givenness occurs through an intentional act. The fact is that, for example, if a consciousness hears

42. Ibid., 17.
43. Ibid., 20.

for the first time what we define as a 'note,' it does not necessarily mean that this auditory phenomenon is given to it as an object-note, that is, perceived as a 'note,' in the absence of the objective apprehension that only occurs with the original constitution of the object-note.[44] For this reason, Husserl defines mere apprehension (*Auf-fassung*) as an intentional derivative of grasping (*Er-fassung*).

The fact that 'things' are given to us as 'objects' and that they are substantially nominal phenomena does not imply that they are false or, indeed, nonexistent. The fundamental issue lies rather in correctly recognizing the nature of these phenomena in their emptiness through the phenomenological analysis accomplished by contemplative practice, thereby also reaching the most essential level, which underlies every seemingly ever-changing phenomenal process. In other words, Buddhists do not dismiss nominal beings as non-existent but rather caution that exclusive reliance on them leads only to a partial and corrupted understanding of reality.

Moreover, in understanding these partialities lies the foundation of their transcendence. Nominal identities rest on abstract forms—extracted from the shapes of reality and placed in an organized system that views them in a certain way. However, when restored to their continuity, we realize that they retain their fundamental and inalienable nature, namely, the very *form*-ness that is intrinsic to them.

> Im Wahrnehmen ist nun dieser Tisch gegeben, aber in jeweils bestimmter Weise gegeben. [...] Das Tisch-Erscheinende ist Tisch-Erscheinendes von der Vorderseite mit einer Vorderseitenfarbe, —Gestalt usw. Es liegt im Sinn dieses Vermeinten, daß das Gestaltvermeinte, Farbenvermeinte auf neue und neue Gestalterscheinungen, Farbenerscheinungen in einem bestimmten Progressus weiterweist, wodurch nicht nur das schon wirklich Erscheinende zu besserer Erscheinung kommt, sondern die nicht erscheinenden Seiten (aber doch mehr oder minder unbestimmt mitvermeinten Seiten) zu ausweisender Gegebenheit kommen.[45]

44. Ibid., 23.
45. Ibid., 35.

The fact that form is fundamentally at the basis of any phenomenological appearing stems from our ability to view every phenomenon essentially as the configuration of a particular aspect of reality. By "configuration," I mean the adoption of a specific form by an aspect of reality, which, in assuming a given form, conveys information about a particular aspect of reality. However, this particular aspect of reality must already be implicit in the form itself, which, in its different configurations, transmits different information already embedded within it. These are revealed only under specific conditions, which can themselves be understood as configurations of particular phenomenological relationships—essentially, as conformations and assumptions of form in the broadest sense.

In this specific view of form as information, we can understand, for instance, the particular nature of all phenomena we observe. For example, we can conceive of the phenomenon (φ) of water (φ—'*water*') as having various possible forms. If we consider water in relation to the phenomenon conventionally referred to as low temperature, the φ—'*water*' will configure itself, i.e., assume a specific form that accounts for a particular relational aspect with the φ—'*low temperatures*.' This form is the solid state. Conversely, in relation to other temperatures—phenomena with which it enters into reciprocal conformation—water assumes a different form, the liquid state. The solid and liquid forms are two formal aspects of two possible configurations that convey information precisely through the assumption of a specific form. Yet these aspects must be understood as already implicit in a continuous and broader form that encompasses all possible phenomenological relationships. In the case of water, this broader form manifests as liquid or solid depending on differing relational nodes. However, the solid form does not emerge from a prior nothingness; it was already implicit in water—namely, as implicit information. It simply becomes apparent to us in our limited perception when specific conditions render it visible to our perceptual means.

This concept is what came to mind while reading one particular passage of the second volume of Husserl's *Ideen*, where, for example, it is noted that phenomena such as thrust or pressure cannot be properly seen, as one can see only what manifests spatially and in form ("*Stoß und Druck*

können eigentlich *nicht gesehen* werden, sehen kann man nur, was räumlich und gestaltlich dabei vorgeht").[46] This statement by Husserl—that of these phenomena, we perceive only what manifests in form—proves what I have asserted so far: that information lies in form, and that conformation represents the assumption or, more precisely, the appearance of specific relational aspects already implicit in the phenomenon but expressed explicitly through the adoption of a particular form.

Similarly, the statement that the essence of anything, as derived from the essence of experience—and thus from an ideally possible experience—entails the ideal possibility of its modification, should now be clearer. For example, Husserl provides the example of a spring, whose property of elasticity is given by its form. While elasticity is a property of the spring's form, there may be circumstances that modify the spring's form, resulting in changes to its properties. This occurs because form, as I have repeatedly said, is information, and this information perfectly coincides with the properties of the object in question. In other words, there is no real distinction between form, information, and properties.

Thus, Husserl explains that if a metal spring is exposed to high temperatures, its properties may change, potentially leading to a formal modification of the spring such as breaking or fragmenting. Changes in properties (*Eigenschaftsänderungen*)[47] correspond to formal modifications of the object.

Even the configuration of material things, insofar as they are αἰσθητός (perceptible), involves my configuration toward them (*Beschaffenheit*) as an experiencing subject.[48] This relationship occurs through my *Leib* (living body). This observation ties back to the earlier discussion of phenomenological interconnection: the conformation of water as ice—its adoption of a solid form—depends on its relational conformation with another phenomenon, conventionally understood as temperature, which assumes the form of warmth or cold. In doing so, it interacts with other phenomena, whose conformation is simultaneously shaped by their relationship to those phenomena with which they interact.

46. Ibid., 39.
47. Ibid., 47.
48. Ibid., 56.

The experience of *Leib* and perception is not to be understood as separate from this same dynamic of phenomena. Likewise, a single form alters its aspect (it conforms) depending on its position relative to my *Leib*. This conformation means adopting different aspects (*wechselden Aspekten*) and manifesting in different phenomenological aspects.[49]

Since in language, for example, everything hinges on perception, it is more appropriate to use, rather than terms that refer to presumed objective and independent existences of phonetic facts, the concept of vocal figure or, more precisely, that of sound *cognitive form*. However, we do not use here the idea of form as Saussure does, that is, as fundamentally distinct from the idea (since ideas are, in turn, *cognitive forms*), although we share the fundamental need that a form is such only if inseparable from its meaning and, at the same time, inseparable from the network of opposition to all other possible forms: "Notre point de vue constant sera de dire que non seulement la signification mais aussi le signe est un fait de conscience pur."[50]

Form, in this sense, is a testimony of difference and plurality, existing as it is simultaneously with other finite existents as aspects (forms) of being. In every experienceable life, this fundamental truth thus appears to us. Even in language that describes unfolding, form is a testimony to this alternation, expressed as the alternation of different signs, both equivalent and, on the contrary, opposed in their meaning.

> Qui dit FORME dit *quatre choses* qu'on oublie toutes les quatre et ce point est fondamental :
> 1º Qui dit *forme* dit, primordialement, *diversité de forme* : autrement il n'y a plus même une base quelconque, juste ou fausse, suffisante ou insuffisante, pour raisonner un seul instant sur la *forme*.
> 2° Qui dit *forme* dit par conséquent *pluralité de formes* : sans quoi la différence qui se trouve être à la base de l'existence d'une forme n'est plus possible.
> 3º Qui dit *forme*, c'est-à-dire différence dans une pluralité […]
> FORME = Non pas une certaine entité *positive* d'un ordre quelconque, et d'un ordre simple ; mais l'entité à la fois *négative* et *complexe* : résultant

49. Ibid., 59.
50. de Saussure, *Écrits de Linguistique Générale*, 19.

> (sans aucune espèce de base matérielle) de la différence avec d'autres formes COMBINÉE avec la *différence* de signification d'autres formes […].
> Forme = élément d'une alternance
> Alternance = coexistence (cf. remarque sur *exister*) de signes différents, soit équivalents soit au contraire opposés dans leur signification.[51]

The examination of the relationships of dependence between experienced nature and the experiencing subject demonstrates, for Husserl, that to fully comprehend the meaning of the construction of physical nature—or what is presumed to be such—it is absolutely necessary to study subjectivity.[52] In other words, there are aspects of the phenomenal configuration of reality that cannot be clear to us if we exclude the perspective of the subject who witnesses them: the fact that perceptions are imperfect—or rather, that relying on them blindly does not lead us to the essence of phenomena—does not imply that we must alienate ourselves from our role as subjects. On the contrary, there are aspects of the world's givenness that can only be fully understood by grasping the phenomena *precisely from* our perspective as witnesses.

What we have seen with the Buddhist deconstruction of the perceptual process is not aimed at discrediting the senses but at their refinement. Starting from them, the goal is to adjust those aspects that would otherwise deceive us. If we carefully study meditative exercises, such as the *satipaṭṭhāna* (see Chapter 3), we realize that they are not motivated by an absolute discrediting of the senses but by a desire to approach them critically and analytically, aiming at improving sensory experience. This approach is better equipped to grasp what usually eludes us: it is a training of the senses, an effort towards their enhancement, an exercise intended to improve their deficient aspects.

These aspects are perfectly intuitive through a critical analysis of sensory experience itself: their importance is therefore not unrecognized by Buddhists. The same applies to the acknowledgment of the unitary nature of perceptual-sensory and experiential flows in general, which has

51. Ibid., 35, 36.
52. Husserl, *Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie - Zweites Buch (Gesammelte Werke Band IV)*, 90.

undoubtedly led to the formulation of the theory of phenomenal interdependence. This insight was undoubtedly made possible by a thorough analysis of sensory experience. For this reason, I partially share Husserl's conclusions on the experiential flow of lived experiences (*Erlebnisstrom*): "*Sie sind* vielmehr *durch ihr eigenes Wesen eins*, miteinander verbunden und verlochten, schichtenweise ineinander strömend und nur in dieser Einheit eines Stromes möglich. Nichts kann diesem entrissen, nichts gleichsam als Ding für sich abgestückt werden."[53]

In this sense, we can also consider correct the conception of a fundamental unity of the flow of consciousness understood in its totality. Certainly, for Husserl,[54] this unity is related to the pure ego—but the distinctions Husserl draws between various types of egos are of no interest to us and will not be discussed.

In the experience of forms, our perceptions constitute higher objectivities (*hörer Objektitäten*). I have spoken extensively about this before, but what interests us now is the localization of sensory experience. Husserl tells us that perception, for example, in the tactile apprehension of form, is not locally in the finger that touches, as what is truly localized in the epidermis of the finger are the tactile sensations.[55] The thought responsible for perceptions, which are already of a higher order, is not genuinely localized in a specific part of the body. Moreover, even sensation itself is not exclusively localized at the point of contact between the sensory organ and the effector, as the data received by one part of the sensory organ are processed and translated into somatic experience.

Furthermore, Husserl acknowledges that in the perception of the physical thing, it is always given to us as incomplete (*unvollkommen*), an indeterminacy inherent in the very essence of the physical thing as grasped by our perceptions.[56]

Regarding my subjectivity, it must first be understood as the mode in which a Leib exists in the Umwelt. My person is what it is, first and

53. Ibid., 92.
54. Ibid., 119.
55. Ibid., 153.
56. Ibid., 176.

foremost, as the subject of an *Umwelt*.[57] This important fact, which brings us back to the theme of *Umwelt* or *loka* for Buddhists, introduces another fundamental aspect of the problem. Namely, the things of the world that I experience are, above all, things of the *Umwelt*, that is, of a world constituted "for me" (*für mich*). Therefore, the "things" we saw earlier, which are characteristics only of the world of nominal entities, are part of a *loka*, that is, an *Umwelt*, because there they are "available" to me, usable and manipulable. This is because they are conceivable, and conceivable because they are part of an *Umwelt*.

At its core, the world manifests itself sensibly (it is sensible, it is sensory) and is characterized as *vorhanden*. This concept of being "available," "at hand," is very important in Husserlian phenomenology. I introduce it here because this aspect is also present, in its way, in Buddhist phenomenology.

Subjectivity—the *I* for Husserl but also the *I* for Buddhists—thus acts in reference to this world of experience populated by "objects" that can be experienced. The way objects are organized in the subject's experience—a theme equally important—is based on values. Value is a complex system with gradations ranging from the cultural and collective to the personal and subjective. But note well: when something is perceived as "pleasant" collectively because it is attributed a positive value by culture, or "pleasant" subjectively because it is considered "good for me" or "pleasant for me," in both cases, value perception is also somatically felt. What is ordered by social norms and collective conventions moves along an axis that is also, and especially, somatic. Thus, something socially reprehensible is genuinely felt with disgust by social actors who have internalized that norm: the anomic thing is "disgusting," provoking physical revulsion, rejection, and somatic unease. Norms are culturally learned but powerful precisely because they act on reality, not on an abstraction found nowhere: it is the body that responds to them. Similarly, the way we respond to certain "objects," perceived immediately within the context of their usability, is a practical implication of the "thing" following the same value principles. I perceive an object at different times as "useful" or "harmful," not only

57. Ibid., 185.

as "pleasant" or "unpleasant." Naturalistic thoughts, which adopt "useful" nomenclatures to engage with objects, follow the same reasoning. For example, "combustible" is a term denoting the quality of certain objects insofar as their potential practical use is concerned.[58] This makes "objects"—remember how we characterized them earlier—also "products" (*Erzeugnissen*), a consequence partly inevitable due to our perceptual system. This mediation of value "reshapes" objects into a system where they are always objects of an *Umwelt* but above all "objects for the *I*" and objects of a value-laden world usable by the *I*.

It is important to add one significant point: the subjective world, or the surrounding environment, is testified to as a world hosting a series of manifestations. Through the relationship of this world with a context of people organized collectively—what we might call society or culture—the so-called subjective world is also given. This world is thus a constitutive part of the broader cultural world. Among the plural possibilities given in cultural worlds, these are, in turn, part of the real world.[59] To every subjectivity, therefore, corresponds a specific orientation it has with respect to the world and the environment. Additionally, my body, understood as *Leib*, presents itself as my first environmental object through which I experience the surrounding world.

Each of us thus finds ourselves as a subject, the actor of a truly subjective world, a world that, by principle, cannot be the same for another subject, who in turn is the bearer of a subjective manifestation of their own world.[60]

58. Ibid., 188.
59. Ibid., 203.
60. Ibid., 209.

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This work represents the culmination of years of dedicated research on Buddhist psychology within the Pāli Canon. A meticulous analysis of the texts in this Buddhist literary tradition reveals a profound engagement with consciousness, the nature of cognitive processes, and perception—topics examined with remarkable depth and insight. These reflections are further enriched by firsthand experience derived from meditative practice, which provides Buddhist thinkers with a practical perspective that enhances their inquiries into the nature of consciousness in ways that warrant serious consideration by Western phenomenology. In this regard, the present study offers a comparative analysis of these major philosophical questions through a close reading of Pāli Canon texts that explore consciousness, cognitive and perceptual processes, and contemplative experience. What emerges from this investigation is a philosophical examination of the centrality of language as a fundamental key to understanding the phenomenology of experiencing the "world." The philosophical proposal put forward in this work calls for a reconsideration of Early Buddhism as a crucial interlocutor in advancing research on consciousness and the philosophy of mind. Scholars in this field can no longer afford to overlook its contributions, as engaging in this dialogue offers significant intellectual benefits. The philosophical journey undertaken here intersects with themes such as the phenomenology of the body, biosemiotics, and the philosophy of language; the relationship between language and cognition; studies on mind and perception; and an in-depth exploration of the historical development of these issues within the philosophical framework of early Buddhism, with particular attention to philological and historical perspectives.

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