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Seers and Ascetics: Analyzing the Vedic Theory of Cognition and Contemplative Practice in the Development of Early Buddhist Meditation and Imaginary

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Abstract: This paper represents an attempt to investigate some aspects of Vedic religiosity, as represented in the R̥gveda (R̥V), in comparison with the Pāli Canon on the themes of cognition, contemplative practice, and the theory of knowledge. It aims to argue that the metaphors in R̥V, for instance, fire, the chariot, the yoke, light, and the ocean, bear proto-Buddhist ideas that have influenced Buddhist meditative practices. These metaphors reflect a theory of knowledge and cognition that shares certain features with the Pāli Canon. The Vedic seer, the figure around whom this discussion revolves, is a forerunner of the Buddhist practitioner, and the themes of surmounting ignorance and gaining knowledge are common to both of them. The article identifies two major metaphorical fields: one related to knowledge and cognition and the other related to contemplative practice and liberation. The analysis investigates how Vedic metaphors represent an early conceptualization of "technics", both bodily and contemplative. It underlines similarities between Vedic contemplative exercises, usually understood as a form of prayer, and Buddhist meditation. While the Vedic tradition is focused on divine association, the Buddhist framework reinterprets these ideas within a human-centered perspective. The transformation of Vedic metaphors into Buddhist concepts shows an intricate dialogue rather than an absolute rejection of Vedic traditions.

Keywords: Vedic religiosity; early Buddhism; comparative philosophy; meditation; contemplative practice; theory of cognition; theory of knowledge; consciousness

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1. Introduction

This article analyzes certain aspects of Vedic religiosity, particularly those present in the R̥gveda (R̥V), and compares them with elements of the Pāli canon in relation to themes such as cognition, contemplative practice or meditation, and the theory of knowledge. The thesis I aim to propose is that the metaphors found in the R̥V contain elements that later inspired Buddhist authors and that it is possible to trace within the R̥V the seed of what would eventually become Buddhist meditative practice. Through the use of metaphors such as fire, the chariot, and the yoke, the aspiration toward the divine, light, and the ocean, the authors of the R̥V expressed symbolic content that already described a meticulous theory of knowledge and cognition. The foundation of their contemplative exercise reveals tangible similarities to the meditations found in the Pāli canon. Furthermore, numerous figures from the R̥gvedic imagination were subsequently employed in Buddhist lexicon, sometimes with altered or inverted meanings. Nonetheless, I argue that only through comparison with this same R̥gvedic imagination can we fully understand the nuances of these concepts as redefined in the distinct historical, cultural, and intellectual context of Buddhist thought as represented in the Pāli canon.

The metaphors employed as subjects of analysis can be grouped into two main categories, which will be analyzed in the following sections.

Part 1 (§2.1-3)—Metaphors for Knowledge and Cognition

These metaphors reference an embryonic theory of knowledge and are employed in the R̥V to express concepts related to ways of knowing the world, its nature, and the role of human beings. Included in this category is the specific idea of an individual capable of transcending the conventional limitations of the mundane order, which concerns the figure of the seer (*r̥ṣi*), who holds a unique connotation in the Vedas but is also utilized in the Pāli canon in a highly distinctive manner, as well as the ascetic, who represents the prototype of the Buddhist practitioner but simultaneously echoes certain concepts present in the R̥V. Lastly, this group of metaphors includes those tied to the idea of science or "true knowledge" as opposed to ignorance, drawing on a series of significant images that were later reinterpreted by Buddhists in their own framework.

Part 2 (§3.1-3)—Metaphors for Contemplative Practice and Liberation

This set of metaphors constitutes the shared prototype of what I will refer to as "contemplative practice", for lack of a better term encompassing both the foundation of Buddhist ascetic discipline and its contemplative exercises, as well as the basis of more archaic Vedic contemplation, or what some might call "prayer". Many scholars have posited that these two disciplines are interrelated and that Vedic contemplation specifically served as the genesis of Buddhist meditation (Olivelle 1993, 2006a, 2006b; Freiberger et al. 2006). This theory contrasts with another, popularized by Bronkhorst (Bronkhorst 1998, 2007, 2020), which suggests that Buddhist asceticism originated predominantly outside the Indo-Āryan world, possibly from pre-Indo-Āryan cults in the Indian subcontinent that were later assimilated. Without delving into the specifics of either position, I aim to contribute to the debate by presenting reflections suggesting that at least part of the Buddhist innovations—despite their critical stance toward orthodoxy and the introduction of novel ideas—are nonetheless inspired by the Vedic world, with which a deeper dialog and more complex relations than mere dialectical opposition must be acknowledged. Metaphors for contemplative practice include a series of images denoting effort, discipline, contemplative exercises, and various other concepts that Buddhism seems to have adopted from the Vedic world. A specific subcategory tied to the idea of "technics" must also be introduced—understood both as a bodily technique, in Marcel Mauss' sense (Mauss 2021), and as akin to meditative-contemplative exercise, as well as mere power or the ability to dominate aspects of the world. The seer is one who at some point harnessed this technical power for their advantage, making it both the foundation of their knowledge (a magical-religious technique involving correct contemplative exercise, proper formulation of sacred utterances, and knowledge of their transmission) and their power (magic and the transmission of knowledge being primordial ways of conceptualizing human dominion over the world and the nascent cognitive division between "nature" and "society"). For this reason, I consider it more appropriate to refer to "technics", borrowing this term from Emanuele Severino's philosophical lexicon (Severino 2024, pp. 19–21), rather than merely "technique" or "technology". I will elaborate on this distinction later.

The Vedic world does not specifically speak of "liberation" (*mokṣa*, *vimukti*), as this is a more distinctly ascetic concept. However, I will argue that the idea of liberation within ascetic disciplines, particularly in Buddhism, is a transformation of a specific image—namely, that of the seer attaining a divine or semi-divine nature. In the Vedic world, it is not uncommon for seers to be likened to deities, owing to the specific capabilities they acquire through the transmission of their knowledge and their contemplative practice, which can be understood as an exercise in approaching the divine and acquiring divine nature.

The verses of contemplation we find in the Vedas are considered to be of divine nature (*devattam brahma gāyata*, R̥V 1.37.4), but *brahma* is a divine power over which Indra is sovereign and which he has partially shared with the seers (*. . .indraṃ śloko mahi daivyaḥ siṣaktu yo brahmaṇo devakr̥tasya rājā*, R̥V 7.97.3). It is evident that, in this historical phase, song, praise, prayer, invocation, poetry, and contemplation are more or less synonymous and serve as potential precursors to Buddhist meditation. That some, later on, began to claim their own 'way' of approaching the divine nature, passing through a different form of *brahma*, as well as through a different conception of the divine nature—no longer viewed as something external to be reached but rather as something internal to be 'liberated'—is a possible interpretation of the emergence of the *nāstika* movements. These movements should therefore be reinterpreted in a manner different from the traditional view, which sees them as radically opposing Vedic authority. Rather, they sought to claim a part of this authority for themselves, freeing it from interpretations they considered incorrect. Indeed, if the very seers were able to compose prayers (contemplations) on their own behalf, why should others not have been able to do the same, asserting their own way of ascending to the *brahma*? That singers claimed for themselves the exclusive authority to compose hymns and *brahma*s is confirmed multiple times in the Vedas, for example, R̥V 7.22.9 (*. . .brahmāṇi janayanta viprāḥ*) and 7.31.11 (*uruvyacase mahine suvr̥ktim indrāya brahma janayanta viprāḥ. . .*).

If indeed the metaphors related to contemplative practice are to be understood as a form of yoking to a divine power in the form of technics, the subsequent acquisition of such power represents a form of 'impulse' by the seer toward that divine nature, the true light or true knowledge, which renders the seer a kind of divinity. This entails a range of attributes, as well as the ability to perceive truth. In the Vedas, there already exists the conception that the world is dual in its manifestation: human cognitions are imperfect and partial, contrasting with divine cognitions, those of individuals who 'have the sun as their eye', referring to their ability to perceive everything perfectly illuminated. What is illuminated is removed from the darkness that entirely or partially obscured its nature, and the seers possess this divine ability to perceive the true light.

Although Buddhism largely abandons the significance of deities and instead focuses solely on human capacities, it is easy to recognize that the dialectic between false opinions and truth, between mundane reality and the reality of 'things as they are', is a rearticulation of the Vedic antinomy that we shall analyze. This is particularly evident considering that the epithets and 'supernatural' abilities acquired by the Buddha bear a striking resemblance to those of the Vedic seer. Moreover, the numerous instances in which the canon references the 'correct way' of being a Brahmin (*brāhmaṇa*), thereby distinguishing between the 'true Brahmin' and the 'false' or 'inauthentic' Brahmin, do not suggest a radical opposition between the role they proposed (identified in the canon as *samaṇa*, "ascetic", *śramaṇa* in Sanskrit) and that of the brahmins (McGovern 2018, pp. 51–58). How, then, can we untangle this dilemma?

From the perspective of tradition, those aligned with Vedic orthodoxy and those identified as heterodox were in an antagonistic relationship, often depicted as radical. The famous imagery in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*, where the same antagonistic relationship of "snake and mongoose" is juxtaposed with that of "*śramaṇa* and *brāhmaṇa*", exemplifies this. However, as McGovern insightfully notes in his laudable work, mistaking this antagonistic relationship for a total rejection of the Vedic tradition would be erroneous. Furthermore, the specific figure of the Brahmin as a priest or custodian of tradition may have emerged much later than previously thought. The pivotal figure in the Vedic tradition is the seer (*r̥ṣi*) or the poet (*kavi*). It is believed that the figure of the *brāhmaṇa* existed implicitly in the early Vedic remnants and that it represents, in some sense, a continuation of the *r̥ṣi*. While this is true from the perspective of brāhmaṇical claims, it is equally true that the fully

realized *brāhmaṇa* as we know it today diverges significantly from the *ṛṣi* and is more akin to a guardian of an orthodoxy that, during the time of the *ṛṣi*s, was still in the process of being defined.

Furthermore, the deification of the *brahma* practice, in the form of the god Brahmā, could also be a subsequent development. Indeed, there is evidence to assume that Brahmā "at least in the exalted form in which he came to be known by the time of the composition of the early Buddhist sūtras—was not present in the early Vedic period" (McGovern 2012, p. 4). Brahmā as a deity and *brahma* as a practice appear frequently in the Pāli Canon: it appears in the form of a particular deity (Brahmā) but also as a divine dimension (*brahmaloka*) and in relation to a mysterious contemplative practice (*brahmavihāra*, "brahma's abode"). It can also appear in the form of *brahmaparisā*, indicating a particular divine assembly (Neri and Pontillo 2014, p. 169).

Brahmā is sometimes associated with tradition. In AN 3.31 and AN 4.63, it is stated that children who honor their parents in their home live with Brahmā (*sabrahmakāni*. . . *tāni kulāni yesaṃ puttānaṃ mātāpitaro ajjhāgāre pūjitā honti*). The *brāhmaṇas* are mentioned repeatedly in the canon, often in contrast to the *samaṇas*, the Buddhist ascetics, although the true dialectic is between the genuine *brāhmaṇa* (*brāhmaṇasammatā*) and the false *brāhmaṇa*.[1] It can be concluded that *samaṇa* was simply a peculiar term the Buddhists used to refer to themselves,[2] with the intended meaning being "true *brāhmaṇa*" (see AN 3.106, AN 4.185). Buddhist spiritual practice is defined as *brahmacariya*, though it is clarified that this term has nothing to do with orthodoxy: "The Buddha taught the *brahmacariya* not to reiterate tradition, but for the sake of restraint and abandonment, as its culmination [in practice] is *nibbāna*" (*saṃvaratthaṃ pahānatthaṃ, brahmacariyaṃ anītihaṃ; adesayi so bhagavā, nibbānogadhagāminaṃ*, AN 4.25). The text further informs us of the peculiar conception regarding seers (*isi*): "This is the path followed by great persons and great seers" (*esa maggo mahantehi, anuyāto mahesibhi*).

In MN 49, where the Buddha wins a symbolic challenge with Brahmā himself, managing to make himself invisible even to him, even to the deity who can conceal himself from the sight of all, the great metaphor of the ghost here is not only implied to diminish but to bring into the realm of discourse that which is not normally on the plane of the visible or the perceptible. The Buddha has become a ghost to Brahmā himself, and in that sutta invisibility was a synonym for power.

Finally, the Buddhist tradition preserves a series of contemplative practices called "abodes of Brahmā" (*brahmavihārā*s) as meditative exercises aimed to transcend the world to a realm of infiniteness (B. S. Miller 1979). Wiltshire asserts (Wiltshire 1990, pp. 248–49) that these techniques are an archaic reminiscence of a Brahmā cult practiced by ascetics.[3] According to his interpretation, "the particular formulation given to the brahmavihāras 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" (Wiltshire 1990, p. 169). In Snp 1.8, we read,

> *mettañca sabbalokasmi, mānasaṃ bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ; uddhaṃ adho ca tiriyañca, asambādhaṃ averamasapattaṃ. tiṭṭhaṃ caraṃ nisinno va, sayāno yāvatāssa vitamiddho; etaṃ satiṃ adhiṭṭheyya, brahmametaṃ vihāramidhamāhu.*
>
> With love for the whole world,
> With the intention of cultivating the infinite,
> Above, below, transversely,
> Unbounded, freed from any enemy or rival,
> When standing, walking or sitting,
> Lying down or being awake,
> This awareness should be firmly fixed,
> For this they say is abiding in Brahmā.

Undoubtedly, Brahmā covers a fundamental role in early Buddhism, being the protector of the doctrine. The Brahmaloka as the dimension reachable by the practitioner who abides meditating in his four infinite states of mind (*mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*) is found frequently also in the Nikāyas. This presence is interpreted "as a form of ascetico-religious practice that existed before the advent of the Buddha" (Wiltshire 1990, p. 252).

The origin of these conceptions can undoubtedly be attributed to the contemplative practices characteristic of the Ṛgveda, which involve the term *brahma* to potentially indicate specific forms of meditation aimed primarily at the "growth" (*bhṛ-*) of the self through proximity to divinity. Buddhist contemplative practice is also described using analogous terms, specifically as "development" (*bhāvana*), as we read, for instance, in AN 7.71, which also associates this development with the foundation of psychic powers: "the four bases of psychic powers, the five faculties, the five powers, and the seven factors of awakening" (*catunnaṃ iddhipādānaṃ, pañcannaṃ indriyānaṃ, pañcannaṃ balānaṃ, sattannaṃ bojjhaṅgānaṃ*).

Regarding the development of these specific foundations, we can hypothesize the emergence of figures defined as *brāhmaṇa*s, characterized as experts in brahma, and the subsequent absolutization of this concept into brahman. Nevertheless, as McGovern also partially theorizes, significant debates arose concerning the role of the *brāhmaṇa*: their competencies and objectives, what defined them in terms of behavior and societal role, and the specific techniques of *brahma*. It is specifically along this axis—"what defines a good brahmaṇa" and "what is the purpose and method of practicing *brahma*"—that I hypothesize the true conflict between orthodoxy and heterodoxy unfolded.

The orthodoxy that eventually established itself promoted a specific idea of the *brāhmaṇa*'s role, anchored in the authority of Vedic texts as repositories of particular knowledge and, above all, as custodians of a social order supposedly established and sanctioned by the deities and authenticated by the authority of these texts. Furthermore, the practice of *brahma* was a form of ἐπιστροφή (conversion or turning towards), a striving towards the divine, which the virtuous *brāhmaṇa* sought to approach. Contemplative practice sanctioned the communion of the priest with the divine.

The so-called *nāstika* philosophies, labeled thus by the emerging orthodoxy in opposition, did not necessarily reject everything derived from the Vedas outright. In the specific case of Buddhism, which is the focus of this discussion, it should be noted that figures such as the *ṛṣi*s were not opposed. In fact, there is no evidence in the Pāli canon to suggest a negative view of them. Moreover, the seers' abilities were at least admired: concepts such as the development of supernatural abilities—*ṛddhi* or *iddhi* in Pāli—are present in the Buddhist tradition but have clear Vedic roots (De Notariis 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Similarly to the development of supernatural abilities, contemplation also allows for the attainment of superior gnosis (*abhijñā* or *abhiññā*). All these concepts, which are elaborated in detail in the Pāli canon, have a clear Vedic origin, indicating that the Buddhists did not wholly reject that culture.

Additionally, a series of epithets, symbols, and figures in the Buddhist imagination or related to the Buddha are equally of clear Vedic origin. Finally, the Buddhist textual tradition is conspicuously an imitation of the Vedic tradition, demonstrating at least a degree of deference. The poetic composition of verses (Gonda 1963; Watkins 1995; West 2007; Shulman 2012; Jamison and Brereton 2014; Divino 2023a), their memorization, recitation, and oral transmission seem far from rejecting the Vedic tradition.

So, on what points did the two movements disagree? In the case of Buddhism, it can be said with some probability that its emergence occurred at the intersection of various historical and cultural changes. The composition of the earliest Upaniṣads was likely underway during the Buddha's time (Cohen 2018, p. 13; Stoneman 2019, pp. 32–34), and these texts bear witness to an innovative force reinterpreting and commenting on the older

Vedas. Concepts such as that of the *ātman*, its philosophical centrality (in the Ṛgveda, the *ātman* is a marginal and entirely undeveloped concept compared to the Upaniṣads, where we found it declined in Vedic themes like in the metaphor of the *ātman* as a chariot) (Cohen 2018, p. 76), and its identification with the absolute principle (*brahman*) exemplify this reinterpretation. Similarly, the role of texts as guarantors not so much of a sapiential tradition but of a particular social order—based on rigid hierarchies and defined social groups—was rejected by Buddhism (Krishan 1986; Karunadasa 2018, p. 178), whereas the emerging orthodoxy, supported by hymns such as ṚV 10.90,[4] justified a strongly classist social division (Squarcini 2008b, 2011b).

Ultimately, the very purpose of contemplative practice was a subject of equally intense debates. As previously mentioned, and as we shall see later, while emerging orthodoxy viewed contemplation as a means of striving towards the divine, heterodox traditions such as Buddhism rejected the authority of an external deity and regarded *brahma* practices more as a 'liberation' from the human condition. In other words, contemplation was directed inward, but not towards the self understood as *ātman*; rather, it was oriented towards a form of 'truth' to be attained by transcending cognitive constructs and conceptions (*cetasika*). Questioning concepts is likely a consequence of challenging hierarchies and the established order (Wiltshire 1990; Chakravarti 1996; Bailey and Mabbett 2003; Olson 2015; Divino and Di Lenardo 2023): that is, it constitutes a rejection of the 'norm' as such, of the principle by which an order is considered valid due to its establishment by a violent and coercive power capable of enforcing it (Squarcini 2011a, 2018). Thus, questioning the value of social hierarchies goes hand in hand with the rejection of any other concept.

2. Metaphors for Knowledge and Cognition

Power (performativity) has always seemed to be intertwined with discernment, understood here in the etymological sense of the Latin *discernēre*, which implies knowledge attained through division (*dis-*). This form of knowledge is organized by means of distinctions, separating A from B and determining the identity of both A and B. Naturally, this mode of knowledge also operates through language, seen as a force capable of conferring stable identities to things. A is called "A" to distinguish it from what is called "B". Thus, consciousness, discernment, and language go hand in hand. A term used in this sense, long after the Vedic period, is *viveka*, which inherently carries the idea of division, discrimination, as a cognitive act. The Buddhists employ *vijñāna*, another term rooted in the notion of division (*vi-*) as a cognitive act (*jñāna*).

Indra is powerful because he possesses *discernment*: ṚV 8.15.7 associates the term *kratu*, denoting both intelligence and power or skill, with *śuṣma*, signifying vigor or strength. This association between discernment and language is a central theme in the Vedic conception of knowledge: according to Brown, "The close relation between ritual and magic leads to what is essentially an ascription of creative action to the power of words or sound. That is, the potency of words is considered to be the effective creative force" (Brown 1965, p. 27).

2.1. Conceptions of Cognition, the Genesis of Discernment, and Language

The significance of language in the Vedic world is largely due to the centrality of poetic technique. Encoding knowledge in metrically precise verses to facilitate memorization and transmission is a complex art that is a common heritage among many Indo-European peoples (Gonda 1963; Watkins 1995; West 2007). For all these groups, the ability to encode knowledge in verse has always been associated with a highly refined art accessible only to a select few. This association is intuitive: the art of meter demands not only extensive linguistic proficiency and lexical knowledge but also significant imaginative capacity to encode knowledge through appropriate poetic imagery and metaphors while preserving

not only the content but also the experiential dimension accompanying these revelations. Furthermore, this knowledge comprised genuine sciences intended to be transmitted to a select audience capable of understanding its implications.

In the Vedic world, the "fathers" (*pitaraḥ*), the ancestors who first began to codify these revelations,[5] were elevated to the status of deities, regarded as having attained divine powers and venerated as such. These could refer both to the mythical and cosmic progenitors of humanity and to specific family ancestors mentioned in the Vedas as founders and original codifiers of certain texts. They served as intermediaries between humans and the gods. Specifically, those responsible for composing the hymns (*r̥c*), encompassing cosmic knowledge and ritual instructions, were a distinct class of humans who received these insights through inspiration. The "seers" (*r̥ṣi*) directly perceived this knowledge and codified it in Vedic hymns. Naturally, some *r̥ṣi* who first received and codified the Vedic revelation are part of the ancestral lineage (*pitaraḥ*), but the transmission of knowledge is an established feature of the Vedas. The texts reveal an awareness of internal stratification over time, shaped by successive seers.

Nonetheless, a *r̥ṣi* possessing such refined knowledge could also develop powers consequent to its acquisition. Indeed, the relationship between these capabilities and what might be termed "magical" abilities is already well established in the Vedas. A poetic image frequently recurring in this analysis is that of the ocean (*samudra*). Perhaps symbolizing incomprehensible vastness or the depths of its abysses as a metaphor for the depths of knowledge—or perhaps alluding to the myth of primordial waters to which the seer can return—the ocean in the Vedas represents the ultimate state the seer attains. This, I argue, is the prototype of "liberation" in subsequent ascetic philosophies. Specific examples will be examined later.

Buddhism appears to align itself with this tradition, differing primarily in its interpretation of the contemplative path leading to final liberation. In SN 11.10, we read of an ancient time (*bhūtapubbaṃ*) and virtuous, ethical seers (*sambahulā isayo sīlavanto kalyāṇadhammā*). Buddhism does not seem to disdain seers outright but proposes a distinction between righteous and corrupt ones.[6] It retains an imagination concerning their powers, acknowledging their extraordinary abilities, often situated in the past, and respects their role. SN 11.10 places these virtuous seers of ancient times on the ocean shores, settled in leaf huts (*samuddatīre paṇṇakuṭīsu sammanti*). Again, the imagery refers to an undefined archaic era, but the seers' actions stand out. At that time, there was a war between Devas and Asuras[7] (*tena kho pana samayena devāsurasaṅgāmo samupabyūḷho ahosi*), and the seers recognized the justice of the Devas' cause, aligning with them while fearing Asura retaliation (*tesaṃ isīnaṃ sīlavantānaṃ kalyāṇadhammānaṃ etadahosi: 'dhammikā kho devā, adhammikā asurā; siyāpi no asurato bhayaṃ'*).

To eliminate risk, they presented themselves directly before Sambara, king of the Asuras. Notably, the sutta highlights the seers' power, stating that they could vanish from their leaf huts and reappear before Sambara, as easily as a strong man extends or retracts his arm (*seyyathāpi nāma balavā puriso samiñjitaṃ vā bāhaṃ pasāreyya, pasāritaṃ vā bāhaṃ samiñjeyya; evameva—samuddatīre paṇṇakuṭīsu antarahitā sambarassa asurindassa sammukhe pāturahesuṃ*). The seers not only materialized before the Asura king but also banished him, a power effectuated through recitation. The sutta explicitly associates the seers' "magical" ability to banish Sambara with the recitation of specific verses (*gāthā*),[8] akin to Vedic practice: *te isayo sīlavanto kalyāṇadhammā sambaraṃ asurindaṃ gāthāya ajjhabhāsiṃsu*. The verses, a poetic lamentation directed at Sambara, also include a curse (*akkhayaṃ hotu te bhayaṃ*, "may you have eternal peril") and conclude with the end of the enchantment against Sambara (*sambaraṃ asurindaṃ abhisapitvā*). Afterward, the seers disappear again and reappear on the ocean shores.

This account, preserved in the Buddhist canon, attests not only to the seers' power—capable of cursing even an Asura—but also to its connection with language. The Pāli canon is unlikely to present a parody of these figures, as it does in other contexts related to Brahmanical mythology (e.g., in the myth of creation, DN 2). This is especially true since the Pāli canon frequently emulates Vedic style by encoding its most ancient texts in verse (to be precise, the Pāli verses are actually stylistically closer in structure to that of the Brāhmaṇas and early Upaniṣads) (Warder 1967, p. 16) and presenting a conception of language and speech quite similar to that of the Vedas. On the other hand, the choice to adopt a language other than Sanskrit also demonstrates the desire to distinguish oneself from the previous tradition, and this is an aspect to take into consideration.

In R̥V 6.24.6, it is again through speech, via prayer, that Indra is moved to release waters trapped atop the mountain.[9] Speech, together with the sacrificial act, serves as the "technical" means capable of achieving a purpose (*vi tvad āpo na parvatasya pr̥ṣṭhād ukthebhir indrānayanta yajñaiḥ*). Thus, this particular conception should be borne in mind: *technics* is primarily a means, a power unlocked by a specific code (a mantric formula or the correct execution of a sacrifice).

2.2. First Light, Organized Space, and World

The concepts of 'world' and 'light' are intimately interconnected in both Vedic and Buddhist imaginaries. The world and light also serve as metaphors signifying the space available to human beings. Such space is 'made available' through specific operative modalities and can be 'conquered' by human beings. However, while the Vedic tradition tends to view the world as a space to be rendered 'habitable' and conquered, populated with concepts, norms, and conventions that constitute social order, Buddhism rejects this idea of the world and conceives it primarily as a place of human imprisonment (Divino 2023b). The ascetic is encouraged to go 'to the end of the world' (*lokanta*, "end of the world", and *lokantagū*, "one who goes to the end of the world"), symbolizing the intention of transcendence that ascetic discipline directs 'against' the world and against established norms (Divino 2023c).

The world is also a space that, once conquered, is organized. This organization occurs predominantly through the division of that space.[10]

> *r̥tenādriṃ vy asan bhidantaḥ sam aṅghiraso navanta ghob-hiḥ;*
> *śunaṃ naraḥ pari ṣadann uṣāsam āviḥ svar abhavaj jāte aghnau.*
>
> By the natural order, the Aṅgirases cleaved the rock in twain while chanting their hymns in unison with the cattle. Bestowing profound bliss upon humankind, they embraced the Dawn as they witnessed the emergence of light upon the birth of Agni.
>
> (R̥V 4.3.11)

The event referenced in these verses pertains to a primordial mythical act, a foundational moment that transcends temporal boundaries—an imagery crafted to establish the cultural cornerstone of a civilization itself. This imagery embodies a primordial dawn.

Understood in this light, the power of fire both fascinates and astonishes. Although the Vedas retain a memory of a water principle, an aquatic archetype, perhaps predating fire, it is to fire that hymns, veneration, and prayers are directed. The very beginning of the R̥gveda opens with a prayer to Agni: "I pray to Agni, the priest of the family, the one who is the god of sacrifice, the one for whom our chants and invocations guarantee the best riches" (*aghnimīḷe purohitaṃ yajñasya devaṃ r̥tvījam; hotāraṃ ratnadhātamam*, R̥V 1.1.1). Fire is linked with the first light, dawn, and the birth of the sun; yet, in the Vedic tradition,

dawn assumes its own autonomy as Uṣás, the goddess embodying it. Nonetheless, Agni retains his role as the primary bearer of fire's creative power.

In R̥V 5.2, there is a disquieting recollection of a dark past—perhaps again a time beyond time—in which a terrible event is remembered: the household fire was obscured, and darkness descended. The cause of this calamity was the abduction of Agni by one of his two mothers (R̥V 5.2.1). The first, the official queen, is also seemingly his birth mother. The second, the abductor, is a stepmother or a despised queen (Doniger 1981, pp. 103–4). The seer, a formidable and authoritative figure, accuses the abductor of stealing the fire and offers praises to Agni. The poets, who authored the R̥gveda, are almost deified figures from antiquity, and in this hymn, their awe-inspiring nature is evident: the seer directly addresses the abductor—presumably a goddess—stating that he has witnessed Agni's birth and growth (R̥V 5.2.2–4) and that past offerings made to Agni protect him from her malevolent intentions (R̥V 5.2.6). Nonetheless, the seer laments the perils posed by the dark forces that have taken refuge among mortals. Ultimately, the danger is averted. Through devotion, Agni is liberated, and light is restored,

> *hr̥ṇīyamāno apa hi mad aiyeḥ pra me devānāṃ vratapā uvāca; indro vidvāṃ anu hi tvā cacakṣa tenāham aghne anuśiṣṭa āghām; vi jyotiṣā br̥hatā bhāty aghnir āvir viśvāni kr̥ṇute mahitvā; prādevīr māyāḥ sahate durevāḥ śiśīte śr̥ṅghe rakṣase vinikṣe.*
>
> For when you grow in your anger, you move away from me; the guardian of the law has revealed it to me. Indra has discovered you, for he knows; he has has made it known to me, and thus I have come, O Agni! Agni shines with powerful light; from his powers, he makes things manifest. He supersedes the godless forces of dark magic; he sharpens his two horns to pierce the demons. (R̥V 5.2.8–9)

Let us focus on this passage: "Agni shines with powerful light; from his powers, he makes things manifest". In this context, we observe another instance of Agni's power: his light "renders things manifest" (*vi jyotiṣā br̥hatā bhāty aghnir āvir viśvāni*). This signifies a unique form of creative power. It does not involve creation ex nihilo but rather the manifestation of the image: the self-disclosure of things in the light of truth, the unveiling.

The Aurora is the daughter of the Sky (*Dyáuṣ*), often referred to as "Sky Father" (*Dyáuṣpitr̥*), who forms a divine pair with Mother Earth (*Pr̥thvī Mātā*). As the Daughter of Heaven (*duhitār-diváḥ*), Aurora shares many distinctive features with her Indo-European counterparts, such as Ἠώς. Regarding the birth of Aurora, two fundamental aspects are noteworthy: firstly, the reference to aquatic imagery, which we shall retain for further consideration, and secondly, its birth's connection to the imaginal event—the act of making visible that which was previously unseen, in essence, appearing.

> *udu śriya uṣaso rocamānā asthurapāṃ normayo ruśantaḥ;*
> *kr̥ṇoti viśvā supathā sughānyabhūdu vasvī dakṣiṇāmaghonī;*
> *bhadrā dadr̥kṣa urviyā vi bhāsyut te śocirbhānavo dyāmapaptan;*
> *āvirvakṣaḥ kr̥ṇuṣe śumbhamānoṣo devi rocamānāmahobhiḥ.*
>
> The resplendent Dawn has arisen for the sake of brilliance, shimmering like the undulating waves of waters. She renders all paths, all passages easy to traverse. She has manifested: the auspicious bestowal, the generous one. In good omen, you have become manifest; you radiate expansively. Your brilliance, your radiant beams have ascended to the heavens. You reveal your bosoms as you advance in beauty, goddess Dawn, shining with all your might.
>
> (R̥V 6.64.1–2)

The imagery of the dawn may be interpreted as an embodiment of the Vedic creator fire. Uṣás is portrayed as the bringer of light to Earth, riding the emblematic Indo-European chariot (*uvāsoṣā uchācca nu devī jīrā rathānām*, R̥V 1.48), under the directive of the Sun god (R̥V 3.61). Furthermore, she is depicted as the conqueror of darkness, banishing it with her illumination: "she has generated the Sun, sacrifice, and Agni, and the de-tested darkness has fled afar" (. . . *ajījanan sūryaṃ yaj-ñamaghnimapācīnaṃ tamo aghādajuṣṭam*, R̥V 7.78). Since she is also characterized as a vanquisher of demons (R̥V 8.47), logical connections can be established between these demons and the darkness. Periodically, as darkness envelops the world, chaos gradually reclaims the Earth. The cyclical emergence of the Dawn is crucial for the periodic reestablishment of order (R̥V 1.113). The cosmic order, as articulated in the Vedic tradition, is identified as R̥ta, a concept that will be thoroughly examined in subsequent sections. It must be acknowledged that its efficacy is intrinsically tied to the primordial flame, posited as the origin of all other luminous entities.[11]

It is crucial to recognize that these poetic visions encapsulate not only a reverence for the esthetic grandeur of the solar dawn but also a profound ascetic epiphany—seeds of which may later be discerned germinating within meditative traditions.[12] Is this very auroral light, which moved ancient poet-seers to acknowledge it as the force of revelation and inspired the composition of these Vedic hymns, perhaps the same light that Parmenides perceived? (Verdenius 1949; Tarrant 1960).

There exists a direct correlation between fire and the world. These two conceptions are united by a shared common archetype: that of the idea of 'light'.[13] In the Vedic conception, the symbolic conquest of primordial space that Agni accomplishes through his ignition, extending his light to what was previously shrouded in darkness, is a reconquest mirrored by the warrior who establishes the 'world'. In this symbolic framework, the idea of 'space' becomes fundamentally important. This space is traditionally perceived as divided into the 'four quarters', which must be 'conquered' by the Warrior-Conqueror.

In the Buddhist conception, the idea of *loka* involves primarily an experiential thing (Waldron 2014, p. 294; Divino 2023b, pp. 105–6, 126–27). Nonetheless, the origin of this experiential conception of *loka* has its motivation. Harvey 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' (Harvey 2013, p. 79). This fundamental connection between the visible (something upon which the 'light' is cast) and the perceived is the fundamental sense preserved also in the Buddhist phenomenology of the 'world'. This is one of the main reasons why the Buddhist conception of the *loka* "refers not so much to the external, objective world, but first and foremost to the world of human experience" (Shulman 2014, p. 71).

The conception of the world-light in the Buddhist tradition likely has Vedic origins. Wiltshire argues that in the Vedas, 'the world' begins to be delineated as a spatial dimension defined by the inherent mobility of Being. The directions (*diśā*) that define this spatial realm emerge from areas conquered and ordered by humans for societal development, distinguished from chaos, which is symbolically represented by the forest (Wiltshire 1990, pp. 228–29). Directions as symbolic representations of the world are also referenced in Snp 5.13: "Dispel all your covetous craving . . . above, below, all around, and between, for Māra pursues humans using whatever they hold in the world" (*ādānataṇhaṃ vinayetha sabbaṃ . . . uddhaṃ adho tiriyañcāpi majjhe, yaṃ yañhi lokasmimupādiyanti, teneva māro anveti jantuṃ*).

In Vedic thought, the world (*loka*) separates itself from the chaotic indeterminacy of the wilderness (*araṇya*). This concept is significant as it encompasses security (*abhaya*). The world-village emerges as a domain protected "from the hazards of natural existence"

(Wiltshire 1990, p. 229). The acquisition of *loka*s occurs through conquest (*jayati*), emphasizing the centrality of the warrior in Vedic ideology. Conquerors (*kṣatriya*) reclaim land for human habitation and societal development.[14] Notably, tradition holds that the Buddha himself was of this warrior caste (*khattiya* in Pāli). The Vedic worldview divides the world into four parts, with a zenith representing the encompassing whole.

In the Vedic *śrauta* rites, particularly the Rājasūya ceremony (see R̥V 10.173), the *yajamāna* is described as the conqueror of the world (*diśo vai svargo lokaḥ*), symbolically appropriating the entire world through sacrifice (Wiltshire 1990, p. 230). These rituals reiterate the assertion of order over an idealized primordial chaos represented by the forest. The rite dramatizes the imposition of spatial order (*diśām aveṣṭayaḥ*), culminating in the conquest of space (*digvyāsthāpanam*). In this context, the *rājasūya* is an ancient consecration ritual symbolizing the conquest of various worlds, culminating in the divine dimension of *svargaloka*. This process is represented through the construction of three ritual platforms, symbolizing earth, atmosphere, and heaven. The *yajamāna* ascends these worlds using a ladder to reach a wheel atop a sacrificial post, symbolizing the *vajra*, and "by turning it to the right, he wins the 'quarters of the universe' before descending" (Wiltshire 1990, p. 230).

In the post-Vedic era, the concept of *loka* became simplified, with its salvific implications increasingly emphasized. Ritual efficacy transitioned from the *yajña* itself to the requisite knowledge for its proper performance (Wiltshire 1990, p. 230). The *brāhmaṇas* assumed exclusive authority over the rites, monopolizing their interpretation. The *yajamāna* was required to provide offerings (*dakṣiṇā*) to the *brāhmaṇa*, further centralizing ritual power in the hands of the knowledgeable.

Wiltshire suggests that the Buddhist renunciation of mundane life reflects a form of *digvyāsthāpanam* (reconfiguration of space) by the *muni* (sage). Buddhism explicitly rejects the salvific role of sacrifice (*yañña*) as a means of overcoming birth and aging. Instead, Buddhism delineates a stark contrast between worldly and transcendent practices. While the *yajamāna* is said to "gain a 'foothold' in *loka*", the Buddhist disciple entering the *ariya-magga* is described as "established in the *dhamma*" (Wiltshire 1990, p. 233). Additionally, whereas the world is regarded as insubstantial and unstable (*samantaṃ asaro loko . . . samerita*), the *muni* is portrayed as fully grounded (*thale tiṭṭhati*, cf. Snp 4.15).[15]

The figure of Brahmā becomes pivotal in this context. Wiltshire contends that the cult of Brahmā belongs to an ancient tradition partially shared by ascetics. Brahmā is frequently mentioned in the Pāli canon, suggesting his significant, if not central, role. The *Br̥hadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* describes Brahmā as sharing a unique bond with the *kṣatriya* class, created as a superior form (*paramatā*). Conversely, *brāhmaṇa*-hood is posited as the source (*yoni*) of *kṣatra*-hood (Wiltshire 1990, pp. 236–37). This division of power between royal and religious authority is normalized according to Wiltshire through peaceful coexistence (*ahiṃsā*). However, Buddhist doctrine reconfigures *ahiṃsā* not as a political compromise but as a profound repudiation of violence, particularly ritualized violence (Wiltshire 1990, p. 239). Nonetheless, it must be noted the concept of *ahiṃsā* is not mentioned quite often in the Pāli canon, where it is mostly understood as "harmlessness" (cf. SN 7.5). In Wilthire's interpretation, the rite is transformed into a metaphor for devotional efficacy (DN 5), contrasting with its role in Vedic and ancient Hindu traditions, where ritual power underscores social stratification and history.

The force that divides space, akin to the warrior in the *rājasūya* who conquers the "quarters of space" and ultimately the entire world, is the same force that institutes the rules and norms necessary for organizing the world. These laws (*dharma*s) are, in part, cognitive constructs: "the world about which the Buddha speaks is the experienced, objectified, psychological world" (Katz 1980, p. 55). Consequently, Katz argues that meditation, as a means to transcend the world, resembles a form of psychoanalysis more than a metaphysical

endeavor: "the Buddha often demonstrated that all claims about the world are, upon examination, found to be existential-psychological statements; that psychoanalysis is a more profitable spiritual undertaking than metaphysical analysis" (Katz 1980, p. 55).

Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that Buddhist traditions parody the Vedic ideal of kingship (*rājanya*). Consider the term 'noble disciple' (*ariya-sāvaka*), which explicitly references nobility, or the Buddha himself, designated as *cakkavatti* (see DN 17),[16] an apparent allusion to the Vedic notion of kingship. This concept is vividly articulated in the *rājasūya* (Heesterman 1957; Kulke 1992), where the warrior (*kṣatriya*, also the *yajamāna* in this instance) reaches the summit of the altar symbolizing the conquered world and sets the wheel in motion, signifying ascension to kingship (Wiltshire 1990, p. 230).

The Buddhist expression 'setting in motion the wheel of dharma' (*dhammacakkappavattana*) marking the advent of Buddhist teachings, thus holds dual references to royalty. Beyond the association with the *rājasūya*'s ritual of wheel-setting, it also invokes the term *dharma* (/*dhamma*), a term of royal connotation. Olivelle suggested "the central term *dharma* was co-opted by the Buddhists from the royal vocabulary as part of the employment of royal symbols and vocabulary by early ascetic leaders and institutions to lay claim to a new and different type of royal authority" (Olivelle 2006a, p. 26). This observation could extend to appellations such as *jina* or *jīna* ("conqueror", "victor"), which may reflect the martial origins of Indian kingship, and to solar imagery, such as the epithet "kinsman of the sun". Expressions like "kinsman of the sun" (*ādiccabandhunā*) appear in Snp 5.18, while the Sākas are described as "of solar clan" (*ādiccā nāma gottena sākiyā nāma jātiyā*) in Snp 3.1. Further, in Snp 3.7, it is said to the Buddha: "you shine like the sun" (*ādiccova virocasi*) and "O Gotama, you should reign as a king for kings, lord of men" (*rājābhirājā manujindo, rajjaṃ kārehi gotama*). The Buddha's response underscores his ascetic triumph: "I [actually] am a king, O Sela, the supreme king of dharma. By my teaching, I set the wheel in motion—a wheel that cannot be turned back" (*rājāhamasmi selāti, dhammarājā anuttaro; dhammena cakkaṃ vattemi, cakkaṃ appaṭivattiyaṃ*).

The notion of world conquest central to the warrior caste's *rājasūya* ritual is significantly transformed by the Buddha. The Vedic concept of the *loka* as a prize acquired through conquest is replaced by the renouncer's pursuit of moral and spiritual realization. All that is worldly (*lokiya*) is transient, void (*suñña*), and deceptive. By renouncing societal space, the Buddha sought truth in the forest (*arañña*), which serves as a refuge from the dominion established in human-made spaces through systems of concepts (*paññatti*), names and forms (*nāmarūpa*), and social structures—all rejected by the *samaṇa*. Buddhism thus opposes this paradigm of power, proposing the "end of the world" (*lokanta*) as a result of gnosis (*ñāna*). The origin of the world (*lokassa aṭṭhaṅgama*) is framed as a chain of cognitive interactions (SN 12.44 and 35.107), with its cessation coinciding with the deconstruction of conceptual proliferation.

The primordial village, opposing the forest, marks a significant dialectical space within Buddhist thought, underscoring existential problems rooted in the establishment of normative imagery. The interplay between *loka* and *āloka* serves to critique the Vedic rhetoric of fiery power, offering an alternative rooted in the deconstruction of perceptual illusions.

The city pertains to the human realm and is, in fact, referred to by Indian thinkers as *puriśaya* (see, for example, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.5.18). The symbolic act of founding a city through a furrow, a division, or the establishment of a boundary that marks a separation between the city and the unorganized world is a clear memory of the Indo-European tradition, which Indians also preserve through their philosophical reflections on the role of the field (*kṣetra*). However, the possibility of delimiting a "field" is contingent upon the prior condition of open space. Who opens this space? According to the Indo-European myth, the openness preceding spatial organization—whose prototype is agricultural fields—is

precisely the untilled earth (*tellus inarata*). This points to the possibility of a *mythologem* that has been insufficiently studied.

In India, the untilled earth represented the space of the golden age, dominated by the serpentiform god Vr̥tra. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is said that in the archaic era, the ancient god Vr̥tra, of the *daitya* lineage, was venerated. His body was gigantic (perhaps indicating a connection to the myth of R̥V 10.90), and the earth produced fruits without the need for cultivation. Here, the expression "untilled earth" (*akr̥ṣṭapacyā pr̥thivī*) appears. Since this expression has parallels in other Indo-European cultures, I recommend consulting the excellent comparative analysis by Rosa Ronzitti, which is undoubtedly relevant to our discussions on the "field" and the origins of organized space (Ronzitti 2016).

In R̥V 1.32.14, it is stated that Indra killed Vr̥tra and then fled, fearing vengeance—perhaps because this act conceals nothing less than a parricide (Ronzitti 2016, p. 206). Through this parricide, however, Indra "opens" the space, which had previously been enclosed by the colossal bulk of Vr̥tra, whose name may indeed suggest an uranic, celestial nature (Ronzitti 2016, p. 213).

The demon who restrained the waters at the mountain's summit, mentioned in R̥V 6.24.6, is presumed to be Vr̥tra. Much can be said about this figure, with interpretations ranging from a cosmic serpent and primordial representation of ice to the father of Indra himself. In the conflict between Indra and Vr̥tra, the latter is defeated partly because Indra benefits from the support of the seers, who offer prayers and sacrifices on his behalf (R̥V 4.18.4–8). One way to view this battle is as the triumph of Indra's superior technical power over the outdated capabilities of his father, Vr̥tra. Another valuable interpretation is provided in R̥V 1.36.8, where Vr̥tra's defeat is again mentioned. The responsible agent in this instance is unclear—it may be the seers themselves aided by the deities (*kaṇvo ghauraḥ*)—but what concerns us about this hymn is the consequence: the defeat of Vr̥tra creates "space", an idea central not only to the entire R̥V but also to Buddhist texts. By defeating Vr̥tra, "they made earth, heaven, and the firmament a spacious region habitable by multitudes" (*. . .ataran rodasī apa uru kṣayāya cakrire*).

The myth of Vr̥tra's slaying precisely reenacts the primordial conquest of space through light (Kuiper 1975). The warrior-conqueror who makes the first space habitable is, of course, Indra, but the Aṅgirasas, the sons of heaven who constitute one of the most significant ancestral lines ("fathers") credited with authorship of parts of the Vedas, are also central figures. While it is true that Vr̥tra's slaying initially serves to release the waters trapped at the summit of a mountain (perhaps symbolizing a glacier?), allowing them to flow downward (*pra nūnaṃ dhāvatā pr̥thak*), it is equally true that through this act, Indra liberates "space".[17]

The ancestors "slew Vr̥tra; they made earth, heaven, and the firmament a spacious region habitable by multitudes" (*ghnanto vr̥tram ataran rodasī apa uru kṣayāya cakrire*, R̥V 1.36.8). This verse is of considerable importance as it confirms the association between the conquest–liberation of space and habitability. The term *kṣaya* is employed to denote habitable space, a term closely linked to a highly productive root in Indian languages. Words such as *kṣetra* ("field") or *kṣatriya* ("warrior")—who, after all, is one who exercises armed control over a particular *kṣetra*—derive from the same root. The concept of dwelling (*kṣi*) is, naturally, also connected to dominion over a specific space (indeed, the term *kṣi* can signify both dwelling and control). Even without invoking Sāṃkhya philosophy, where the term *kṣetra* would come to denote a specific "field" of knowledge, an area over which knowledge is exercised (*kṣetrajña*), it is easy to understand that the idea of a "field" as "organized space" must have fascinated these early thinkers, who employed it as a theoretical device in various ways. Language itself creates *kṣetrajña*, and words behave like plots that organize through what Squarcini has described as the "semiosis of division"

(Squarcini 2018, p. 211). The principle is naturally analogous, and indeed, the relationship between language and power in Vedic thought and beyond has already been established. The member of the warrior caste, the *kṣatriya*, is originally one who holds control over a specific *kṣetra*, presumably by conquering it through force.[18] From this, it is easy to discern the connection between the early conquering warrior *kṣatriya* and the first sovereigns, who merely needed to officially sanction their power to determine the truth over the space they had conquered and now controlled.[19]

The association of light and its liberation with the conquest of a particular space is further confirmed by the linkage between light and the middle region (*antarikṣa*). Vedic cosmogony entails the progressive division and organization of an originally undivided primordial space. The sky is conceived as a watery region, initially united with the terrestrial waters in a single primordial ocean. The intermediate region serves to separate the waters above from those below, though various obstacles often hinder this process. Vr̥tra exemplifies this, as he imprisons the celestial waters, preventing their flow downward (for, in Vedic cosmology, the waters above and below remain part of a communicating system).

In R̥V 10.124.6 it is sung: "O Soma, this is the celestial light, this is beauty, here is the clarity of the vast middle region, hence why we two must slay Vr̥tra" (*idaṃ svar idam id āsa vāmam ayam prakāśa urv antarikṣam; hanāva vr̥traṃ nirehi soma haviṣ ṭvā santaṃ haviṣā yajāma*). Here, the speaker is probably Agni. In R̥V 1.51.4 we find praises to Indra: "You opened the receptacle of the waters, you released from the mountain the fluid beneficent gift when you slew Vr̥tra the serpent, O Indra, making the sun visible in the sky" (*tvam apām apidhānāvr̥ṇor apādhārayaḥ parvate dānumad vasu; vr̥traṃ yad indra śavasāvadhīr ahim ād it sūryaṃ divy ārohayo dr̥śe*).

Similarly, in Plato's *Protagoras* (322a), the foundation of cities through fire, stolen by Prometheus, parallels these themes. This fire symbolizes order over chaos, connected to the forest (ὕλη) and its transformation into habitable space (χώρα). The dialectic between ὕλη and *arañña*, and between *loka* and χώρα, echoes Agamben's interpretation of openness as a space receiving form from the invisible void (Agamben 2022, p. 115).

The Brahmins, whose status is inherited and bound to caste, are critiqued extensively in texts like the *Aggaññasutta* (DN 27). Here, their claims to purity and superiority are deconstructed, revealing arrogance and corruption. The Buddha, while critical of Brahmins, suggests their alignment with the *samaṇa*s could restore a purer spiritual path. This critique underscores a key distinction: the *samaṇa*'s life of renunciation contrasts with the Brahmin's adherence to societal structures, despite overlaps in ascetic practices later absorbed into Brahmanical orthodoxy.

The status of the Brahmins is transmitted through birth and thus falls within the logic of social classes. A sharp and well-known critique is found in the *Aggaññasutta* (DN 27), in which the Brahmins are described, perhaps in the harshest terms, as individuals who elevate themselves above others and claim to be the highest and noblest caste (*brāhmaṇova seṭṭho vaṇṇo, hīnā aññe vaṇṇā*), as well as the purest (*sujjhanti*) and brightest (*sukko*). These self-elevations and other claims made by the Brahmins at the expense of others are regarded by Buddhists as arrogant and insulting (*brāhmaṇā akkosanti paribhāsanti attarūpāya paribhāsāya paripuṇṇāya, no aparipuṇṇāya*). The Buddha assures his disciples that caste is irrelevant, for "any mendicant from any caste who is perfected [follows the Buddhist teachings]. . . is foremost in virtue and principles, not contrary to principles" (*catunnaṃ vaṇṇānaṃ yo hoti bhikkhu arahaṃ khīṇāsavo vusitavā katakaraṇīyo ohitabhāro anuppattasadattho parikkhīṇabhavasaṃyojano sammadaññāvimutto, so nesaṃ aggamakkhāyati dhammeneva, no adhammena*).

Although the Buddha often critiques the Brāhmins and their doctrines, he does so from the perspective that the Brahmins have corrupted the original spiritual path and that if they were righteous in pursuing it, they would resemble the *samaṇa*s. From one viewpoint,

therefore, the Buddha does not entirely separate the two categories and often seems to merge them. The distinction, however, lies in the Brahmins, who, in various episodes of the canon, frequently interact with the Buddha (Bailey and Mabbett 2003, p. 112). The Brahmanism witnessed by the Buddha is seen as corrupt, set irrecoverably on misguided tracks. However, a significant difference exists in life habits: while the ascetic (*śramaṇa*/*samaṇa*) leads a stateless life, the Brahmin resides in the *āśrama*s, takes a wife, and only occasionally adopts the life of a forest dweller (*saṃnyāsa*), which closely resembles that of the ascetic. It is reasonable to assume that this last option, later formally integrated into Brahmanical orthodoxy, reflects the influence of Buddhists and other ascetics, whose lifestyle was initially deprecated.

Finally, a more-than-special connection unites the idea of light and the creative power of the word in its sonic form. While most of what pertains to light is expressed by the root √*ruc*-, the word, understood as a sacred verse and thus capable of specific creative performativity, is expressed by the root √*ṛc*-, from which the very term Ṛgveda derives.[20] Another term linked to *ṛc* is "voice" (*vāc*), the performative aspect of the word, which is often described as a creative power residing in the heavens (*vācaḥ paramaṃ vyoma*, ṚV 1.164.34). In later hymns, voice is also associated with thought, which thus becomes the fundamental shaper of language (*...yatra dhīrā manasā vācam akrata*, ṚV 10.71.2). According to Miller (J. Miller 1974, p. 64), it can be said that Vāc and Agni are two aspects of a single power. A clue supporting this idea seems to be their shared genesis: both deities are born of the waters. Agni is the offspring of the waters (Magoun 1900; Shende 1965; Brown 1968; Varenne 1977), just as the abode of Vāc is the waters or the ocean (*mama yonir apsv antaḥ samudre...*, ṚV 10.125.7). Both also appear to have extensive properties: we know that Agni "extends" his power by virtue of his luminous quality, and wherever his light reaches, that becomes his domain. The extent of his luminosity corresponds to his capacity to expand, and by casting light upon things, he makes the *loka* ("world") possible—the term, as we know, is connected to light and thus to perception: the "world" is that which is "illuminated", visible, and perceptible. Meanwhile, Vāc shapes the world and extends beyond both heaven and this very earth, to the point where it is said that her grandeur lies in her vastness (*aham eva vāta iva pra vāmy ārabhamāṇā bhuvanāni viśvā; paro divā para enā pṛthivyaitāvatī mahinā sam babhūva*, ṚV 10.125.8). This formative energy, which "holds together all the worlds" (*ārabhamāṇā bhuvanāni viśvā*), is even capable of generating the Father himself (*ahaṃ suve pitaram asya mūrdhan*, as stated in 10.125.7).

In the beginning, things were covered by darkness, and this darkness was the primordial waters, obscure and undifferentiated, which enveloped the totality (*tama āsīt tamasā gūḷham agre 'praketaṃ salilaṃ sarvam ā idam*). From these waters, "heat" (*tapas*, a property of Agni) generated all things (*tucchyenābhv apihitaṃ yad āsīt tapasas tan mahinājāyataikam*, see ṚV 10.129.3). It would be intriguing to hypothesize the mechanism by which heat causes things to emerge from the waters; perhaps it causes them to recede and thus evaporate. Subsequently—and this is the point of interest—Agni, having emerged from the waters and brought forth the things of the world, casts light upon them, making them visible, perceptible, and illuminated. This marks the origin of the world (*loka*, < **leu̯k*- "light").

Moreover, the power of Agni is later harnessed by the seers, who appropriate it, yoke it to themselves (*agniyojana*, to be discussed in the second part), thereby unveiling its secrets. Vāc too represents a power that must be harnessed and studied to be mastered. Indeed, we are told in ṚV 10.71.3 that through sacrifice (*yajñena vācaḥ padavīyam...*) the seers understood the secrets of Vāc (*...āyan tām anv avindann ṛṣiṣu praviṣṭām...*).

Finally, Agni and Vāc share a theophanic nature. Agni is light and manifests theophanically. When a fire is lit, the spark evokes a part of Agni in the hearth, and the manifestation of fire is itself divine and spectacular: it produces something that casts light. Vāc too is

connected to this theophanic power: the word itself is luminous, luminescent (*vācaḥ. . . jyotiragrā*, R̥V 7.101.1). Light is associated with cognition: the dawning of the first Uṣās (Dawn) of humanity bestows consciousness upon what was previously unconscious, casting wondrous radiance upon the world (*āvahantī poṣyā vāryāṇi citraṃ ketuṃ kr̥ṇute cekitānā; īyuṣīṇām upamā śaśvatīnāṃ vibhātīnām prathamoṣā vy aśvait*, R̥V 1.113.15). Of the Dawn, it is said (R̥V 3.55.1) that her appearance was due to the great imperishable light arising from the watery realms (the firmament) being harnessed by the seers who performed the rites to the gods through the recitation of the sacred syllable (*akṣara*).[21]

2.3. Luminous Perception and Awakening

I would like to draw attention to the following passage found in Snp 3.7: "having experienced himself superior knowledge, he makes known this world" (*so imaṃ lokaṃ . . . sayaṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedeti*). At this point, since it is knowledge (the *–vidū* in *lokavidū*) that enables liberation from suffering, it is possible to establish the final connection that Buddhism makes between wisdom (*vijjā*) and the attainment of light (*āloko udapādi*), described in numerous suttas as the consequence of attaining Buddhahood (e.g., SN 56.12, SN 51.9, SN 47.31, AN 4.143, SN 56.38, SN 10.8, SN 36.25, AN 3.59, SN 12.10, AN 1.170–187, SN 9.3, and the pivotal SN 56.11, among others). After all, the Buddha is referred to as the dispeller of darkness (*eko tamanudāsino*, Snp 5.19), and obtaining light is analogous to obtaining gnosis (*ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi*, SN 51.9).

The theme of light is also foundational for the attainment of *iddhi*s (psychic/supernatural powers). Furthermore, it is said that as long as the Realized One does not arise in the world, no great light or radiance appears,[22] and consequently, darkness prevails (*andhatamaṃ tadā hoti andhakāratimisā*, SN 56.38).

Light can derive from four primary sources: the moon, the sun, fire, and wisdom (*candāloko, sūriyāloko, aggāloko, paññāloko*), but it is affirmed that the most superior is the light of wisdom (*tadaggaṃ, bhikkhave, imesaṃ catunnaṃ ālokānaṃ yadidaṃ paññāloko ti*, AN 4.143), as the dispeller of darkness through light is akin to the arising of knowledge (*avijjā vihatā, vijjā uppannā; tamo vihato, āloko uppanno yathā taṃ appamattassa ātāpino pahitattassa viharatoti*, AN 3.59).

As observed, numerous metaphors in Pāli literature connect the world (*loka*) with light (*āloka*). It is reasonable to propose that these connections cannot solely be attributed to the common etymology of the terms. The light of the world signifies its *luminous* event: the manifestation of the world that reveals itself and becomes perceptible, allowing it to be witnessed by our subjectivities, is frequently depicted as a form of 'light' dispersing itself. In the "Sutta on the Lamp" (SN 1.80), the inquiry is posed: "What in the world is like a lamp?" (*kiṃsu lokasmi pajjoto*). The lamp is evidently a metaphor conveying the act of casting light, and the world is what is illuminated. However, there is also an association with awakening (*jāgaro*): "What in the world is awakening?" (*kiṃsu lokasmi jāgaro*). Here, *lokasmi* functions metaphorically as a locative to indicate, as in the prior instance, "what in the world acts as a lamp?"—i.e., "what illuminates the world?"—and the response follows: "wisdom is the lamp of the world, awareness is what is wakeful in the world" (*paññā lokasmi pajjoto, sati lokasmi jāgaro*).

Thus, it becomes necessary to distinguish between different aspects of light, perhaps detrimentally, perhaps unnecessarily, or perhaps critically. Buddhism, as evidenced from the preceding analysis, appears to dwell on light in at least two distinct ways. Light, in itself, is neither inherently good nor bad. Light is not intrinsically benevolent, particularly when it dazzles. The world appears and reveals itself because it is illuminated, but such light does not reveal the truth of the world, as the nature of things is not self-evident through it. And yet, the world appears. What, then, is the nature of this light? In Buddhist discourse,

this light appears to diverge from the Vedic theophany, where fire bestowed the world upon humanity, granting the right to dominate it. This is not the same light. The world appears to us, but this appearance is deceptive; what appears is misleading. Therefore, this light is not the 'true' light but rather the light of those criticized by Buddhism for their will to power, who have usurped the light for themselves, as in the Promethean myth,[23] using it as a technics. This possibility warrants consideration, which will be revisited later when examining the second concept of light: the non-fiery, 'pure' light—the 'clear' light—not the light of appearances that merely manifests the *phenomena* of the world as presented to our senses, but the light that would 'illuminate' the world if only we permitted it.

This is the crux of the matter: even though the world appears, it is not illuminated; it does not radiate with this clear light (*pabhassara*). While this latter concept is more explicitly articulated in later Buddhism as the luminous principle of cognition (*prabhāsvara* or *ābhāsvara citta*), precursors can be identified in references to the 'shining world'. Mahāyāna texts play with light metaphors more boldly, while in the Pāli canon, phenomena such as luminescence (*sappabhāsa*) achieved during *samādhi* and the appearance of 'luminous signs' (*āloka sañña*) are sporadically mentioned, often linked to the concept of purity. In the Mahāvagga, the Buddha elucidates the phenomenon of the arising of light (*āloko udapādi*), which he experienced upon realizing the Four Noble Truths.

However, this does not preclude the presence of a discourse on dazzlement versus clarity, the light of appearances versus true light, in ancient texts, particularly regarding the concept of the world. Because the world does not shine with clear light but rather dazzles with deceptive reflections, it must be 'destroyed'—or more precisely, extinguished. This entails understanding its nature as not coinciding with totality, i.e., with truth.

In Snp 5.2, it is stated that the world (*loka*) could shine, but it does not (*nappakāsati*) due to ignorance: "the world is shrouded by ignorance; avarice and heedlessness prevent it from shining" (*avijjāya nivuto loko, vevicchā pamādā nappakāsati*). Here, the entirety of suffering is again likened to a stream of ignorance: "[these] streams flow everywhere; how to block them? . . . The streams in the world are blocked by mindfulness" (*savanti sabbadhi sotā, sotānaṃ kiṃ nivāraṇaṃ, yāni sotāni lokasmiṃ, sati tesaṃ nivāraṇaṃ*). This parallel aids in better understanding the pairing of *loka/āloka* and how a world ensnared in darkness is, ultimately, a world of ignorance, yet also the world *tout court*. Only pure light—the world that shines (*pakāsati loka*)—overcomes suffering. Incidentally, one of the Buddha's epithets is *tamanuda*, "dispeller of darkness".

Many metaphors of light could be incorporated into this study, alongside associations developed further within the Mahāyāna tradition originating specifically from the concept of light. However, due to spatial constraints, a deeper exploration of the relationship between the world and light in ancient Buddhism is unfeasible here. It is evident, nonetheless, that Buddhist discourse on the world begins with a critical examination of Vedic society and a 'world' perceived as ephemeral (Burghart 1983, p. 642).

The theory of Vedic perception considers physical and transcendental sensoriality as unified. What unites these two types of sensoriality is the same organ, which can manifest as either a mundane perceiver or in its transcendent form. A fundamental example of this duality is the eye (*cakṣu*). The term denotes the core of two perceptual experiences, encompassing both ordinary vision and divine sight. This conception aligns with the way Vedic authors understood perception. The gods are endowed with superior sensory organs, and this superiority is associated with luminescent, radiant, luminous, solar, or fiery qualities—metaphors that reconnect them to their divine nature. For instance, in R̥V 7.66.10, it is stated that the ancient wise gods had the sun as their eye (*sūracakṣaso*) and flame as their tongue (*agnijihvā*).[24]

Ordinary perception, such as that of the eye, can be enhanced in relation to divinity. When invoked, Agni transforms the seers' eyes into the same luminescent eyes that enable purer perception (*urujrayasaṃ ghr̥tayonim āhutaṃ tveṣaṃ cakṣur dadhire codayanmati*, R̥V 5.8.6). This purer perception, *codayanmati*, is connected to *mati*, which signifies thought and intelligence. It represents a type of inspiration guided by divinity towards the contemplative. Thus, there is both a normal eye and a divine eye. Being associated with the gods, seers aspiring to attain this divine eye beseech Agni to grant it to them (*tad agne cakṣuḥ prati dhehi*. . ., R̥V 10.87.12). This eye is associated with divine light, celestial light (*jyotiṣā daivyena*), and above all with truth (*satyaṃ*), as well as the capacity to dispel falsehood (*dhūrvantam acitaṃ ny oṣa*).

If the eye can simultaneously serve as the human organ for perceiving mundanity and as the divine organ for perceiving truth and banishing falsehood, then we must distinguish between at least two types of "sight" (with sight understood as a metaphor for sensoriality in general): the mundane and the transcendent. According to Gonda (Gonda 1963, p. 33), this distinction can be recognized in the use of two terms: *cakṣu* and *cakṣas*. The latter term seems particularly linked to light, brightness, and even radiance, implying a more immediate, direct, and perfect vision. This is, of course, an interpretation, but if we consider the qualities of the divine eye described by the term *sūracakṣas* and found in numerous Vedic hymns, we can also draw a parallel with the Buddhist theory of knowledge.[25]

In Buddhism, another term closely related to vision is *dr̥ṣti* (Pāli: *diṭṭhi*), used to outline a fundamental dichotomy in Buddhist thought. Vision (the root √*dr̥ś*- from the Indo-European **derḱ*-, meaning "to see", cf. Greek δέρκομαι, ἔδρακον) is predominantly associated with opinion and convention (Fuller 2005). Many suttas explicitly oppose the very idea of *diṭṭhi*, tied to common perception rather than truth, and often specified as *micchādiṭṭhi*, erroneous or incorrect vision (*micchā*, Sanskrit *mithyā*, also has a fascinating Greek cognate: μῦθος, related to story or narrative). This is contrasted with *sammādiṭṭhi*, which aligns with Buddhist teachings (see, for instance, MN 9). This antithesis recalls another well-known dichotomy: that between *micchā* and *sacca* (the Pāli equivalent of *satya*).

Another way to understand truth is *yathābhūta*, "what is", or, less frequently, *yathābhucca* (likely connected to *sacca*, as this term also derives from the verb "to be"). However, since the senses are deceptive (the Pāli canon often uses the eye to represent sensory organs more broadly), the meditator must transcend the eye (as well as the ears, tongue, nose, mouth, body, and thought) and achieve a superior form of knowledge (*paññā*), which constitutes direct knowledge of things, or apperception (*abhiñña*). This term is also associated with the psychic powers that the contemplative develops through practice, powers that the Buddha himself had cultivated.

Another possible equivalent to the Vedic "solar eye" (see Table 1) can be found in the Buddhist term *paññācakkhunā*, the "eye of wisdom", that is described as an attribute possessed by few people (SN 56.63), typically distinguished from the normal "ignorant" ones (*appakā te sattā ye pana ariyena paññācakkhunā samannāgatā; atha kho eteva bahutarā sattā ye avijjāgatā sammuḷhā*. . .).

Table 1. Comparison between the Vedic and Buddhist metaphors of the "eye".

Vedic Theory of Knowledge	Buddhist Equivalent
cakṣu the ordinary, human, mundane eye, associated with the vision of things.	*diṭṭhi*, the sensorial sphere (*āyatana*s), the worldly perception (*loka*). This perception is 'wrong' by definition; thus, any *diṭṭhi* is just *micchādiṭṭhi*.
sūracakṣas "solar eye", "divine eye", associated with *satya*.[26]	*abhiññā*, the superior knowledge, obtained through meditation, related to *sammādiṭṭhi*, that is sacca, i.e., *paññā*.

It seems not to be a coincidence that in DN 32 the Buddha is called "the glorious Clear-eyed One" (*cakkhumantassa sirīmato*),[27] nor that he is connected with one of the most important authors of the Vedas, namely Aṅgīrasa ("hail Aṅgīrasa, the glorious of the Sakya clan", *aṅgīrasassa namatthu, sakyaputtassa sirīmato*). In the very same sutta, we find other interesting epithets such as *ādiccabandhuna*, which I have already discusses.

In fact, we could compare the Buddhist *sammādiṭṭhi* with the *svadṛṣti*, the luminous vision that characterizes the possessors of the *sūracakṣa*. Furthermore, although the term *satya* is not the preferred one in the Vedas to denote truth, its equivalent *ṛtasya* (generally associated with cosmic order, and thus connected to truth) is linked to the *sūracakṣa*. The very act of having inherited from one's ancestors the perception of the *ṛtasya* (*pituṣ pari medhām ṛtasya jagrabha*) renders the seers "equal to the sun" (*ahaṃ sūrya ivājani*, ṚV 8.6.10).

Indeed, there are numerous correspondences between the Vedic idea of illumination and the Buddhist notion of liberation. The use of luminous metaphors is exemplary in this regard. The quest for the *sūracakṣa* by the seers is a quest for 'true vision' (which for Buddhists corresponds to the 'things-as-they-are', the *sat-ya* or *yathā-bhūta*, or simply *tathatā*) and shares the same luminous characteristics. For the seers, Soma is the preferred vehicle to unlock this potentiality. Soma itself is thus endowed with the same characteristics of radiant perception that it can transmit to those who assimilate it. The venerated substance (Soma, or *induḥ*) is *vicakṣaṇa*, of "clear vision", "luminescent": "when effused, Soma flows in a way that it is visible (to all)—the exalter of the gods, the agent, the observer of all" (*pari suvānaś cakṣase devamādanaḥ kratur indur vicakṣaṇaḥ*, ṚV 9.107.3). Moreover, when consumed, Soma is still associated with clairvoyance or "clear vision" (*vicakṣāṇaḥ*) and luminescence (*virocayan*) in ṚV 9.39.3, while the sun itself (*sūrya*) is described as *vicakṣaṇa* in ṚV 1.50.8. In short, drinking Soma is associated with attaining radiant qualities akin to the sun and obtaining the solar eye (*somapītaye*. . . *sūracakṣasaḥ*, ṚV 1.16.1).

Vedic seers and Buddhist ascetics are united in their pursuit of "true vision" or "radiant perception", and although they differ in the interpretative modes of practice aimed at achieving this goal, both seem to employ similar terminologies to denote this practice (*brahma*, *brahmavihārā*, and derivatives of *dhyai* such as *dhī* and *dhyāna*). Light and luminosity, as qualities describing the particular state of the meditator who attains true perception, are also indicated in Buddhism, albeit in different ways.

3. Metaphors for Contemplative Practice and Liberation

In the context of Buddhist ascetic traditions, particular attention should be afforded to the practice of *brahmavihāra*. This term refers to specific meditative techniques described in the Pāli canon. The expression, evidently connected to the figure of Brahmā, is part of what Wiltshire identifies as an archaic ritual framework. This framework reflects not only the acknowledgment of the universal principle of Brahman as embraced by early Buddhism but also intricate ritual symbologies involving sacrifice and the ruler's role as guardian of the four directions. Buddhism subverts the symbolic significance of ritual and kingship, juxtaposing these elements against the absolutist principle of Brahman in Brahmanism. Wiltshire notes: "the particular formulation given to the *brahmavihāra*s 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" (Wiltshire 1990, p. 169). This observation specifically references the Vedic *rājasūya*, the consecration ritual of kingship.

The parallelism Buddhism establishes with this ritual pertains to the concept of world conquest by a warrior-king, symbolized by the quarters of space (*cāttudisā*), where sovereignty is established and power is exercised. Similarly, the ascetic meditating in *brahmavihāra* is envisioned as a conqueror of the fourfold space (*cāttudisā loka*). The

critical distinction lies in the nature of conquest: while the warrior seeks to dominate the external world, the ascetic triumphs over the self. Furthermore, Wiltshire suggests (Wiltshire 1990, p. 169) that implied references to this *brahmavihāra* practice can also be discerned in Snp 1.3. The Snp includes symbolic inversions of the king's figure, aligning with meditative practices. Consequently, it is unsurprising to encounter references to meditations concerning the absolute Brahman in texts like the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.1, as these traditions may represent aspects of a shared internal reform within Indian philosophical thought.

While Buddhism critiques the Indo-Āryan concept of kingship, it simultaneously appropriates the image of the king to represent the ideal renouncer and the perfect ascetic (Wiltshire 1990, pp. 170–72). The theme of spatiality recurs in various forms in the poetry of the Snp: "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 vitamiddho, etaṃ satiṃ adhiṭṭheyya, brahmametaṃ vihāramidhamāhu*, Snp 1.8). It is plausible to propose a connection between the *brahmavihāra* meditations—where the meditator symbolically permeates (*pharati*) their consciousness to encompass the world in its entirety (*sabba loka*)—and the notion of the 'absolute' (*paramattha*, *uttama*) expounded in the Snp on a more theoretical level (assuming, perhaps controversially, that Buddhism differentiates between theory and praxis). The sage is described as one who comprehends the world absolutely (*aññāya lokaṃ paramatthadassiṃ*, Snp 1.12).

Undoubtedly, Brahmā occupies a pivotal role in early Buddhism as the protector of the doctrine. The *Brahmaloka*, described as the dimension accessible to a practitioner meditating on the four infinite states of mind (*mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*), appears frequently in the Nikāyas. This presence has been interpreted as representing "a form of ascetico-religious practice that existed before the advent of the Buddha" (Wiltshire 1990, p. 252). At a certain stage, the concept of *nibbāna* supplanted that of *brahmaloka* in early Buddhism, signifying a transformation inherent in the acceptance of transcendence (from *loka* to *lokuttara*). This transformation, moving from presence to absence, has been interpreted by Wiltshire as *nibbāna* embodying "*loka* absentia", while *anattā* is seen as a concept ostensibly developed from "*kāya* absentia" (Wiltshire 1990, p. 263). The absence of the world, alongside the absence of the body, anticipates the notion that Buddhist contemplation seeks not what is traditionally perceived as the realm of phenomenal revelation—the domain illuminated by the sacrificial fire's radiance and defined by the normative power of the warrior-king. Instead, the *loka* absentia, or the cessation of the world, is the invisible. It exists as a reality but simultaneously represents the absence of an image. Upon this emptiness, conceived philosophically as emptiness itself (*suññatā*)—the non-self and the intrinsic non-identity of things—Buddhists meditate. Thus, meditation becomes not merely a quest for the invisible but a tangible human effort with social and spiritual implications.

In a similar manner, the martial metaphors utilized by the warrior caste, which typically celebrate conquest as a form of ascension, are subverted in Buddhist tradition. Instead of extolling martial prowess, Buddhism promotes the idea of the *cakravartin* (Chakravarti 1996, p. 153), a *khattiya* who genuinely assumes the role of *lokanāyaka* ("master of the world"). This transformation is not achieved through violent force or territorial expansion but rather through the acquisition and application of knowledge (*lokavidū*).

> *yasseso dullabho loke, pātubhāvo abhiṇhaso; svājja lokamhi uppanno, [. . .] sace agāraṃ āvasati, vijeyya pathaviṃ imaṃ; adaṇḍena asatthena, dhammena manusāsati. sace ca so pabbajati, agārā anagāriyaṃ; vivaṭṭacchado sambuddho, arahā bhavati anuttaro.*

> Today, in the world, has arisen one whose presence is rare. [. . .] If he remains in his household, having conquered this land without rod or sword, he shall govern by the dharma. But if he renounces the household life for homelessness, he becomes an Awakened One, perfected and unsurpassed.
>
> (Snp 5.1)

> *tasmā hi sikkhetha idheva jantu, yaṃ kiñci jaññā visamanti loke; na tassa hetū visamaṃ careyya, appañhidaṃ jīvitamāhu dhīrā. passāmi loke pariphandamānaṃ, pajaṃ imaṃ taṇhagataṃ bhavesu; hīnā narā maccumukhe lapanti, avītataṇhāse bhavābhavesu. [. . .] saññaṃ pariññā vitareyya oghaṃ, pariggahesu muni nopalitto; abbūḷhasallo caramappamatto, nāsīsatī lokamimaṃ parañcāti.*
>
> Therefore, one should train in this life: one should recognize that all things in the world are unjust, yet should not act wrongly on that account, for the wise declare this life to be brief. I observe people struggling in the world, craving future lives. Base individuals cry at the jaws of death, being bound by craving for existence after existence. [. . .] By fully comprehending perception and crossing the flood, the Muni, untainted by attachments, removes the [poisoned] dart and, living mindfully, does not long for this world or the next.
>
> (Snp 4.2)

According to Wiltshire, in the Nikāyas, Brahmā was anthropomorphized as a supreme deity (*Mahābrahmā*), signifying the Buddhist doctrine's supremacy over the *brahmavihāra* method. This rivalry is evident, for instance, in a narrative where the Buddha engages Brahmā in a contest to determine who possesses greater power (MN 49). The Buddha emerges victorious by making himself invisible and appearing in the Brahmaloka, demonstrating superior abilities by becoming imperceptible even to Brahmā (Anālayo 2017). Furthermore, in the traditional account of the Buddha's life, it is Brahmā who implores the Buddha after his enlightenment to teach and disseminate his message, thereby facilitating his role as *sammāsambuddha*.

3.1. The Yoke and the Yogin: On the Act of Harnessing as a Gain of Power

In the Rājasūya, the altar symbolizes the world, and the act of lighting the fire clearly sanctifies its appropriation. Indeed, the role of sacrifice is another inextricable aspect of Agni, who is the protector of the ritual sacrifice, which "he protects on all sides" (R̥V 1.1.4), and it is through the sacrifice that the mundane order is believed to have been established.

Should we assume that before the emergence of Agni, and thus before the sacred flames spread by him were lit, the world was dark and devoid of light, it is equally true that the merit of spreading the partitioned fire cannot be attributed to any deity, but to the seers. Furthermore, Agni shares various qualities with the seers and is even called *kavikratuḥ*, "poet", "sage" (R̥V 1.1.5). Agni is certainly a deity (*deva*) but the seer priests who handle his power appear to be of equally divine nature, because if there is one thing equally certain, it is Agni's connection with power: "whatever good you desire, for him who venerates you, O Agni, through you, O Aṅgirā, it will be realized" (*yad aṅga dāśuṣe tvam agne bhadraṃ kariṣyasi; tavet tat satyam aṅgiraḥ*, R̥V 1.1.6). Here, it is affirmed not only that Agni has the power to 'realize' things—likely a reference to his ability to illuminate what was previously shadowed—but also explicitly mentions the family of seers, divinized in the figure of Aṅgira or the clan of the Aṅgiras (*áṅgirā*), thought to be among the compilers of the most archaic strata of the R̥V.

Nonetheless, the connection between fire and power is reiterated countless times: in R̥V 5.2.9, it is once again explicitly stated that it is through the brilliance of the strong light (*jyotiṣā*, *bhāti*) that emanates or "spreads out" (*vi jyotiṣā*) that its power to "make all things manifest" proceeds (... *br̥hatā bhāty agnir viśvāni kr̥ṇute mahitvā*). From this, the performative power of the root *kr̥* "to make", embodied in the indicative form *kr̥ṇute*, indicates the manifestation of things. Furthermore, a clear connection between Agni's power and the seer's poetic creativity is frequently made explicit in the texts.

> *etaṃ te stomaṃ tuvijāta vipro rathaṃ na dhīraḥ svapā atakṣam*
> *yadīd agne prati tvaṃ deva haryāḥ svarvatīr apa enā jayema.*
> Inspired through poetry, I have devoutly composed this hymn for you [Agni], whose true nature is power, as a skill artisan fashions a chariot. If you receive this hymn with delight, O Agni, let us obtain abundant waters and sunlight. (R̥V 5.2.11)

In this case, the connection with poetry is made with both the term *stoma*, which indicates the sacred hymn or verse, and *vipra*, which can refer to a priest as well as to a poet (again, the boundary is thin). The power here is akin to the Greek idea of τέχνη ("skill", "craft"), which is both an art and something productive, capable of generating something through manipulation and subjugation of matter. Agni's creative power is 'technical' to the extent that it is comparable to that of an artisan who fabricates a chariot (*ratha*). The artisan is termed *dhīra*, "expert", "skillful", but also "versed" and "intelligent". A *dhīra* might also be an "adept" and, as a matter of fact, the technical ability is something that requires a sort of initiation, a learning process through a particular form of transmission, from master to apprentice.

The notion that power is inextricably linked to control over the world is an aspect that we must not underestimate. The form of control exerted is twofold: on one hand, it is cognitive, and on the other, manipulative. Agni illuminates the world, revealing what was previously shrouded in darkness. This positions Agni as the bridge between knowledge and power, leading to the veneration of the fiery light as a symbol of wisdom. Conversely, Agni is the fire that produces heat (*tapas*), offering protection from predators, as well as enabling food cooking. Fire also serves to make metals malleable, thus facilitating a range of essential activities involving the manipulation of worldly objects. However, Agni cannot create *ex nihilō* but only unveil what was previously obscured by shedding light upon it or altering what was already present by 'burning' or 'heating' it.

These two technical feats, particularly the latter, epitomize the representation of power in Agni. Nevertheless, one might be misled by references to Agni as a "creator". More accurately, Agni is a "maker", thus creating to the extent that it can exert power over things by changing them, not generating them from nothing. This is exemplified in R̥V 2.35.2, which mentions Agni "creating" beings of the world, when in fact it merely "generates" (*jajāna*) them, drawing them out from the waters from which he is termed "offspring" (*napāt*), just as the earth (*bhuvana*) we tread upon is dried by his heat and reclaimed from the waters that previously enveloped it, and which continue to surround Agni (*pari tasthur āpaḥ*, R̥V 2.35.2). From this center, he remains luminous, radiant (*dīdivāṃsam*), yet all that flows eventually returns to these oceanic waters (*sam anyā yanty upa yanty anyāḥ samānam ūrvaṃ nadyaḥ pr̥ṇanti*), suggesting Agni cannot disperse them all.

The term used in hymn 2.35.2 to denote the nature of the poetry-prayer's preparation addressed to Agni is *sutaṣṭam*, literally "well-produced" (*su-taṣṭam*), a verb noun best translated as "production", "shaping", or even "inventing", aligning well with the concept of "crafting". Its etymological root, *taṣṭam*, derives from the radical *takṣ-*, which also gives us the verb *tákṣati*, primarily meaning "to cut" or "chop", but also used to indicate "to

form", "to shape", or "to fashion", perfectly comparable, with this last meaning, also to Latin *texō* (De Vaan 2008, p. 619), with which it shares the very same root. Tracing further back, the Indo-European root **tetḱ-* is indeed reconstructed with the prototypical meaning of "to cut" (Pokorny 1959b, p. 1057), as division is presumed to be the fundamental act of manipulation (**teḱ-*, the base form from which **tetḱ-* is an extension or doubling **te-t^{e}ḱ-*, is reconstructed with the meaning of "to sire, to beget"). The artisan cuts wood to reshape it into the desired form. Yet, this very Indo-European root is the same one reconstructed as the origin of the Greek τέχνη (Beekes 2010, p. 1484).

For now, we are still at the origins of the imagery, when technics was first harnessed by the will of the seers who understood its mechanisms. Agni is indeed the great technician but can only create if something is given in exchange to be burnt.[28] Thus, the other face of his power, the corrosive and incinerating one, is exactly that of Agni, the lord of death. On one hand, we have the gnostic fire, which, if harnessed, grants power and capability, but on the other, we have the fire of the funeral pyre, lit to consume the deceased's corpse, officially marking death and passage. Agni is defined as "flesh-consumer", i.e., "carnivore" (*kravyādam agnim*, R̥V 10.16.9). This aspect of Agni is associated with the elders, the (dead) fathers: "I send the flesh-eating fire away; let him reach those whose king is Yama [god of the dead], carrying all that is impure away" (*kravyādam agnim pra hiṇomi dūraṃ yamarājño gacchatu ripravāhaḥ*). It almost seems that the two aspects of Agni are so distinct that they correspond to two completely different manifestations of fire. The *kravyādam agnim* who enters the house of the livings (*praviveśa vo gr̥ham*) must be cast away and turned out for the fathers, to be the Jātaveda, the sacrificial fire (*imam paśyann' itaraṃ jātavedasam*, R̥V 10.16.10). Once *this* Agni, who "carries the corpses away" (*kravyavāhanaḥ*), proclaims the truthful oblation to the gods and to the fathers (*pitr̥n yakṣad r̥tāvr̥dhaḥ pred u havyāni vocati devebhyaś ca pitr̥bhya ā*, R̥V 10.16.11), the hymns apparently introduce a new Agni, or a new form of him, which cools down and heals (*rohatu*) those who had burnt, letting plants grow in their places (R̥V 10.16.13). Creation and destruction in the archaic imagination are a duo purely inscribed in the sign of technics.

It must be said, however, that the creative and destructive powers are in turn embedded in a dualistic logic. The Vedas present multiple visions of the creation myth, and although presumably some are more archaic and others more recent, they all respect the logics of fire as a fundamental element, albeit in different forms. Besides being revealing light that allows the world to appear, fire is also the "heat" (*tapas*) that animates lives. In this second logic, living bodies are those endowed with the vital flame that warms them, but *tapas* is also understood as a fire of potency that, if correctly disciplined, leads to asceticism. Obviously, *tapas* is a power of Agni, but specifically, the one who is able to dominate their own *tapas*, the *tapasvin*, is the ascetic, and thus *tapas* also becomes synonymous with ascetic rigor (Kaelber 1976, 1979). It is a form of asceticism that is opposed by Buddhists, who disparagingly refer to this type of asceticism as a form of mortification (for example, see AN 4.198). Indeed, *tapas*, as a power of Agni, retains its dual nature of creation and destruction, and the ascetic form of the *tapasvin* is a type of hermetic rigorism that imposes a very stringent form of discipline and brings it very close to death.

Fire, as an archetypal τέχνη, reveals its principal power: to illuminate what was previously hidden and to surrender the unveiled earth to the control (power) of those who ignite and carry fire. This element is the core of its essence, revered by seer-poets who are themselves the earliest technicians in history (*kavikratuḥ*). Indeed, poetry is not merely a source of 'divine' inspiration but is also an art, a τέχνη, whose metrical composition and capacity for transmission through refined techniques of memorization and repetition (Watkins 1995; West 2007) render it a perfect vehicle for knowledge, gnosis, symbolized once more by the ignited fire.

My thesis posits that seers are, in this sense, Promethean figures within the Vedic world, akin to Prometheus in the Theogony (*Th.*) and the works of Hesiod and Aeschylus (PB).

> The term "Beneficial" (ὠφέλημα) is also used (v. 613) to refer to the fire that Prometheus bestows upon mortals. By this act, he saves them from annihilation, as he prevents them from perceiving that they are destined for nothingness and provides them with fire, "father of every *téchnē*" (παντέχνος, v. 7), "master of every *téchnē*" (διδάσκαλος τέχνης πάσης, vv. 110–11), that is, the means enabling mortals to live, albeit for the brief time allotted to them. [. . .] The blind hopes and the fire together constitute the ensemble of *téchnai*. The *téchnē* is the remedy Prometheus has given to mortals against the anguish of death. [. . .]
>
> As he prepares to bind Prometheus, Kratos (Force) absolves Zeus's *téchnē* of any blame (οὐδὲν αἰτία τέχνη, v. 47); and after binding and nailing him, he departs with Hephaestus, telling the Titan that to free himself from Zeus's *téchnē*, he would need a foresight far superior to that which his name claims to suggest he possesses. Conversely, Prometheus acknowledges that having bestowed the *téchnai* upon mortals was a "mistake" (ἀμπλάκημα, v. 112): "Of my own will, I will not deny it, of my own will I erred" (ἑκὼν ἑκὼν ἥμαρτον, οὐκ ἀρνήσομαι, v. 266). "I pay the penalty for this mistake" (v. 112). The mistake lies precisely in believing that *téchnē* is the remedy against the anguish of annihilation; it lies in failing to understand that *téchnē* is far weaker than necessity.
>
> (Severino 1989, pp. 183–84)

This should not surprise us considering that seers, especially the more archaic ones credited with composing the Vedas, are seen as figures so formidable and powerful they could even rival titans (Asura) and deities (Deva). The seers' fearsome nature, granting them powers beyond the human, does not have a clear origin. It is uncertain whether these powers stem from their intrinsic gifts, their consumption of the divine *soma*, which endows them with incredible abilities including the vision of the underlying connections (*bándhu*) of the world's elements, or from their mastery over the power of Agni. I would propose a synthesis of these elements. In myths about the primordial world, seers appear to precede even the ignition of the sun, performed by them in a world formerly engulfed in night and darkness. Their power allows them to even curse titans (an episode mentioned in Buddhist literature, cf. SN 11.10) and to kindle the fire of the greater luminary (R̥V 4.3.11). Hence, while part of their power undoubtedly derives from Agni, it is equally true that having harnessed it, they must have already been powerful entities, pointing to aspects of discipline and control, their partial asceticism, and thus their ability to derive the utmost from the vital heat (*tapas*) animating them, as well as from their ability to perceive the world's connections, a quality possibly bestowed by consuming *soma*. Indeed, the importance of this beverage cannot be overlooked, especially given its particular relationship with Agni, but we must proceed step by step.

In the aforementioned R̥gvedic hymn (4.3.11), it is explicitly stated that the family of the seers, the Aṅgirasas, through a sacrificial act, perform deeds that attest to the power of these figures, capable even of splitting a mountain (*r̥tenādriṃ vy asan bhidantaḥ*) and, by singing their hymns, summoning the dawn, as the sun (*svar*) manifests as a generation of Agni (*jāte agnau*). It is unclear whether this mythological dawn (*uṣāsam*) is the first in history, nor whether the seers are indeed responsible for igniting the sun, but all suggests it: the sun ignites following the invocation of Agni, an action that accompanies the prayers of the Aṅgirasas seers.

r̥tenādriṃ vy asan bhidantaḥ sam aṅgiraso navanta gobhiḥ
śunaṃ naraḥ pari ṣadann uṣāsam āviḥ svar abhavaj jāte agnau.

Through sacrifice, the Aṅgirasas, tearing apart the mountain, laid it open and sang their hymns with the sacred cattle: thus, they embraced the dawn joyfully, for the sun was revealed as born from Agni.

Here, it is not necessary to further emphasize the significance of cattle as the quintessential sacred animal in Vedic culture, to the extent that in the preceding verse (4.3.10), Agni was invoked as "Agni the Bull" (*vr̥ṣabhaḥ*) or the "virile" (*pumāṃ*). These bovine epithets, as synonyms for strength and nobility, would resonate through to Buddhist poetics. Indeed, the image of the bull is, together with that of the lion, one of the most important epithets of the Buddha, and it has a clear Vedic origin. (Divino 2023d) What interests us in this article is the fact that the bull can be 'yoked', harnessed to a chariot or a plow. Therefore, the image of the bull also serves as an important metaphor concerning the power obtained through the act of yoking—even oneself—through the contemplative-yogic exercise. The power of Agni is acquired in the same manner as one tames an animal, with the metaphor of the yoke being utilized (*agni-yojana*). It is said that Agni is "yoked" by the gods, just as an ox is harnessed to the plow: "the peculiar detail of Agni's yoking is synchronically motivated by the well-known Vedic poetic image of fire as a horse" (Ginevra 2023, p. 222).

Using Emanuele Severino's philosophical interpretation of the Promethean myth, we can revitalize our understanding of the analogous Vedic myth by recognizing its Indo-European origins. In this interpretation, we must consider the role of the 'yoke' (as Severino titles his book "*The Yoke*", in original Italian "*Il Giogo*") since, for the Italian philosopher, it is the yoking of fire by Prometheus, who gifts it to humans, that establishes the foundation of the first technics (Severino 1989). According to Severino, this myth lies "at the origins of reason", understood as the mode of Western philosophy that utilizes technics, symbolized by Promethean fire, as the will to power exercised over the world's entities. The yoking of fire serves as a philosophical device for Severino to describe the history of Western philosophy from the Parmenidean parricide onwards. However, in the Vedic world, this same myth assumes similar connotations related to power and the will to control.

The yoking of fire (*agni-yojana*) also opens the doors to the grand theme of the 'yoke' (*yuj-*), which serves as a theoretical device for traditions of thought, predominantly heterodox but eventually reintegrated into orthodoxy within Indian history, that conceive the yoke, or *yoga*, not as subjugation to power but as a self-discipline aimed at elevating the human being above the mundane.[29]

It should not be surprising that this notion of effort is also integral to the semantic sphere distinguishing the Sanskrit term *yóga*, even though the etymology of the latter is linked to training, particularly in the context of taming animals (Squarcini 2015, p. XIII). However, the metaphorical union of the ox with its plow and the effort facilitating agricultural production might have engendered the semantic nuance evoking discipline and self-control (Divino 2023c, 2023d). This represents the secondary meaning of *yóga*, which is more recent compared to its ancient occurrences associated with agricultural function found in R̥V 1.151.4 and 5.46.1. Nonetheless, in R̥V 5.81.1 and 7.27.1, we observe a gradual semantic shift where the idea of *yoga* is no longer merely connected to the subjugation of a wild animal's power to human interests through its domestication—hence associated with terms like *aśva*, *gavas*, or *ratha*—but is instead a metaphorical, almost poetic, maneuver involving the discipline of the individual, a self-taming, whose purpose is self-discipline and self-improvement.

This concept of *yoga* as discipline closely parallels another term familiar to scholars of Buddhism: *śramaṇa*, which can be defined within the Buddhist context as the ascetic. The root *śram* is also closely associated with the idea of effort or exercise (Shults 2016). It is noteworthy that this term, including its variant in the Pāli canon *samaṇa*, appears to have been the subject of debate regarding its antiquity in usage, particularly the contention that Buddhists were the first to employ it and that other similar traditions followed suit (Stoneman 2019, p. 327). For the moment, it is not essential to delve into this debate, but rather to highlight the homology between *śramaṇa*/*yoga* and ἄσκησις.

When addressing the emergence of ascetic movements in India, particularly the *nāstika* and *avaidika* philosophies, situated outside the legitimacy of the Vedic tradition, numerous hypotheses have been proposed (Squarcini 2011a). On one hand, there are those who argue that these movements drew upon pre-existing, non-Indo-European traditions (Bronkhorst 2007), from which some form of pre-yoga or ecstatic practice likely provided a concrete foundation for conceptualizing beyond the hegemonic framework brought by the Indo-Āryans (McEvilley 1981; Burley 2007; Parpola 2015). On the other hand, attention is drawn to the figure of the *r̥ṣi*, the seers already anticipated in Vedic tradition and considered inspired authors of sacred verses (Olivelle 1993, 2006b). While not in agreement with establishing a direct continuity between the *r̥ṣi*s and the *śramaṇa*s or *yogin*s, it must be acknowledged that there are many commonalities between the ecstatic experience and expressive mode of these two figures. Particularly noteworthy are the parallels between the earliest forms of Buddhism and certain sections of the Vedas, shedding new light on the nature of the intellectual debate—or more accurately, the conflict—that was taking place between orthodoxy and emerging 'heterodox' ascetic practices during the time of ancient Buddhism. However, this does not necessarily justify direct filiation, and the hypothesis that *yoga* is a product of preceding forms of non-Indo-European asceticism remains valid. Yet, it is also true that ancient Buddhism exhibits numerous affinities with Vedic traditions: from the expressive style, sometimes deliberately subverted in symbolism but fundamentally emulated, of poetry as a means of expressing transcendence to the figures of the ascetic and seer, who share much symbolically as well, including especially those related to fire and (self-)sacrifice. Perhaps the battle between the Vedic and Buddhist worlds does not speak to us of a total irreconcilability but of a philosophical disagreement that, however, uses a common language or that has mutually influenced each other (McGovern 2018). The point I maintain is that Buddhism, and its radical way of understanding the yoke or *yoga* (see, for example, AN 4.10, AN 7.51, SN 45.172, and Iti 96, where they describe their conception of *yoga* and, most importantly, *visaṃyoga*, "dis-junction", "liberation"), always speaks to us of this tradition and descends from the considerations made so far.

Nevertheless, it remains evident that Buddhism adopts a radically anti-Vedic stance, rejecting both the authority of texts and the legitimacy of social roles and normative order (today, we would say socio-cultural order) justified by the sanctity of those verses (Squarcini 2008b, 2011a, 2011b). However, the manner in which this opposition is propagated is a highly interesting phenomenon, and in this chapter, I suggest that there is a relatively understudied aspect indicative of this mechanism, namely, the symbolism of fire.

What I suggest in this chapter is that part of the dialectical clash between Buddhism and Vedicism has persisted through symbolic conflicts, where fire was the central element contested for its sanctity: if indeed the Vedic world sacralized fire to the extent of deriving from it the world and the most important institutions of power (Kulke 1992), Buddhism positions itself as a philosophy of *nirvāṇa*, a term not adopted randomly, as it etymologically indicates the extinguishing of a flame (Johansson 1969). The use of the idea of *nirvāṇa* as analogous to that of liberation, coupled with a significant number of passages in the Pāli canon where fire is employed as a negative metaphor, or emphasis is placed on the

necessity to cease the very flames burning in the world, aiming towards an apocalypse (*lokanta*) that coincides with the cessation (*nirodha*) of the flames fueling suffering in the psychophysical aggregates constituting human identities, suggests that Buddhism intended to oppose the Vedic institution also through a symbolic warfare, where the idea of fire was evoked to represent a form of malevolence, corrosive, which consumed in order to perpetuate its power, in explicit opposition to the Vedic. Thus, it is also possible that the rejection of the 'self' (*anattā*) derives from an interpretation of the internalized *ātmayajña* in late Vedic tradition that the Buddhists developed in their own way, in contrast with the idea of the subject's subjugation to the power of 'fire'.

The brahma is also yoked (*brahmayujā*) because it serves as a means to reach the divine. At the same time, however, the *brahma* practice possesses the power to yoke something (*brahmaṇā*. . . *yunajmi*). The yoke is understood as a metaphor signifying an association, a contemplative discipline, a connection to something that entails a certain power or capacity. The power of the seers is quintessentially the ability to produce the yoke: with the yoke, they seize even the steeds of Indra himself, managing to draw from them even the divinity. Such is the power, or "heroic courage", embodied in the metaphor (*tad brahma*, R̥V 8.3.9). The same metaphor of the yoke of divine power is echoed in Genesis 3:5 (וִהְיִיתֶם כֵּאלֹהִים), where the serpent declares, "and you will be like God". This act of striving towards divinity is interpreted by Severino as the acquisition of primordial technics (Severino 2016, p. 161).

Thus, states R̥V 10.71.1, "O lord of language [*br̥haspate*] who has conferred the name upon things [*nāmadheya*], you have sent forth the first and earliest utterances of the Voice [*vāc*]: what of things was brighter, devoid of impurity or deceit, laid in deep secret, for their love became evident". The most important parts of this hymn to which we must pay attention are the aspect of naming (*nāmadheyaṃ*) as a primordial act that, through language/voice (*vāc*), leads things to their unfolding, their revealing, to appear (. . . *nihitaṃ guhāviḥ*). In other words,[30] language is the primordial epiphany, and for this reason, the first utterance, when for the first time names were given to things, is seen as a conferral of the best of identities (words) possible: pure (*aripram*) and immaculate, beautiful (*śreṣṭhaṃ*). In these verses, Br̥haspati is probably a sage or a seer, a mystical figure that appears several times in the Vedic hymns. According to Squarcini's (2008a) interpretation, "This hymn provides an extraordinary example of the profound implications existing between the use of the 'sacrificial word' and the competitive dynamics related to forms of poetic competence and the measures of recompense that their practice entails" (Squarcini 2008a, p. 93).

Severino unequivocally acknowledges the connection between language and technics. Language is considered as technics to the extent that it possesses the power to shape the world. Similarly to the Vedic tradition, the potency of language is linked to its veridical power, that is, its ability to forge knowledge or a science that aligns with a particular worldview; it is connected as well to fire and the power of sacrifice (Brown 1968).

The word is one of the possible means to implement the yoke. Mantric meditation, the technical repetition of certain words or formulas that must be recited correctly in pronunciation and executed to perfection—in short, the sacred 'verses' (*śloka*)—is what enables the wise to yoke (*yuje*) the ancient brahma (*brahma pūrvyaṃ*) of the children of immortality (*yuje vāṃ brahma pūrvyaṃ namobhir vi śloka etu pathyeva sūreḥ*. . ., R̥V 10.13.1). It is the knowledge of the 'true' name of a thing that constitutes a technical power in itself; for this reason, invocation is directed to the true name, and the name itself is synonymous with invocation (*tam īmahe namasā*, e.g., referring to Agni in R̥V 3.2.14). The relationship between word and technics (that is, power, as Agni itself might be) is affirmed by the connection between word and fire in the most archaic Vedic imagination. The wise archaic gods had the sun as their eye (*sūracakṣaso*) and flame as their tongue (*agnijihvā*), as stated in R̥V 7.66.10.

The first metaphor signifies their peculiar clairvoyance: the eye-sun indicates that their vision is perfectly clear and illuminated; nothing is obscured, for they see everything in full illumination. The tongue-fire is a reference to the technical power of Agni, fire as technics par excellence, and thus as power in its primordial form. Associated with the tongue, it reinforces the potency of language, which these deities evidently knew how to exploit to the fullest. In R̥V 1.89.7, the *agnijihvā* is also associated with radiant or illuminated vision, or with the solar eye (*sūracakṣaso*). The sun itself is, of course, "all-seeing"; its eye "shines" and "radiates" (*sūrāya viśvacakṣase*, R̥V 1.50.2). Other epithets related to radiance, breadth of vision, and omniscience are mentioned in 7.35.8 (*urucakṣā*) and 7.63.4 (*divo rukma urucakṣā*). An important mention of the all-seeing nature of the sun is also found in Aeschylus: the expression πανόπτην κύκλον ἡλίου καλῶ, "I call upon the all-seeing solar circle" (PB, v. 91), is a clear reference to the solar disk (κύκλος ἥλιος) considered as an all-seeing eye (πανόπτην, composed of ὀπτην, from ὁράω, "to see", and παν, "all, entire"), which makes us think that the Vedic conception itself is nothing more than part of a common Indo-European heritage. In fact, we also find this same Greek conception in the Odyssey (12.323), in which the sun is the god of light and knowledge as well as a universal supervisor since he "sees everything" (πάντ'ἐφορᾶ).

In Greek mythology, this technical prowess of the λόγος corresponds to its capacity to establish an ἐπιστήμη, an absolute truth that is articulated by language and which molds the world as perceived by those who exist within the language (Pitari 2022; Severino 2024). In the Vedas, this power is a privilege of the seers, or the (orthodox) priests in general (Squarcini 2011b). However, maintaining such a privilege has resulted in a series of conflicts and debates, especially in the Indian context, concerning the monopoly of the (technical) apparatus of truth-telling (*veridiction*).

This struggle can be contextualized, according to Squarcini (2008a), within a genuine dynamic aspiring to the primacy of truthfulness (*veridiction*), where various institutions attempting to establish themselves as bearers of 'truth' clash over who possesses the most effective epistemological apparatus: "since the Vedic period, certain agencies have endeavored to fix, establish, canonize, and regulate the practices, cults, beliefs, visions, institutions, and values of the inhabitants of northern India" (Squarcini 2008a, p. 88). From the earliest Vedic collections (*saṃhitās*) onwards, the monopolistic claims of the authors are evident, and it is here that the figure of the seer (*r̥ṣi*) and the poet (*kaví*) stands out, likely initially overlapping roles with blurred boundaries.

> Indeed, from the oldest contexts for which we have textual evidence, such figures are acknowledged to possess a significant veridical power: it is the 'seer', in fact, who has the ability to understand the causal relationships governing phenomena. Consequently, they are also endowed with the power to predict outcomes and, therefore, to prescribe actions.
>
> (Squarcini 2008a, pp. 89–90)

The prerogative and ability of the seer and poet in the ancient world is the possibility to discern the relational nexuses (*bándhu*), the "bonds", underlying the phenomena of the world (p. 92). This represents an aspect of extreme significance to us, as well as something in which interest has waned, except to the extent that relationships and connections are functional to power dynamics: to understand mechanisms in order to exert a controlling force, a *Wille zur Macht* over the things of the world. The "strategic" importance—as Squarcini defines it (p. 91)—of such figures may partly be attributed to this very capability. However, the interest in discerning the relational links between phenomena is something that, as we will see, characterizes the great minds at the foundation of archaic thought and has since been lost, only to reappear sporadically in some brilliant insights of philosophers, poets, chemists, and mathematicians, and then fallen into oblivion.

3.2. Promethean Metaphors of the Yoke

The symbolism of fire and light also has a significant presence in the Pāli canon. The Buddha is often compared to a 'bearer of light', a beacon' for men: *pabhaṅkara*. A variant of this epithet is *pajjotakaro* ("illuminator", used, for example, in SN 8.8). Another epithet of a similar nature is that of 'dispeller of darkness', which is always connected to the idea of luminosity that the Buddha should emanate.[31]

> *tamonudo buddho* ***samantacakkhu****,*
> *lokantagū sabbabhavātivatto;*
> *anāsavo sabbadukkhappahīno* . . .
> *eko tamanudāsino,*
> *jutimā so pabhaṅkaro;*
> *gotamo bhūripaññāṇo,*
> *gotamo bhūrimedhaso.*
>
> "The Buddha, **all-seer**, dispeller of darkness,
> Has gone to world's end, beyond all becoming;
> He is free of all defilements, has abandoned all pain. [. . .]
> He alone, the dispeller of darkness,
> Splendid beacon: Gotama, vast in wisdom, vast in knowledge"
>
> (Snp 5.19)

In Greek mythology, Prometheus is a surviving Titan from the Titanomachy who sided with the gods, foreseeing the demise of his kin. He is distinguished as humanity's benefactor, who consistently opposes the sternest king of the gods, from whom he steals and bestows goods upon humanity. Among these, fire undoubtedly stands out for its significance, but it should also be noted that the power of this gift, as a primitive technics, was significant.[32] Hesiod states that Zeus did not wish for humans to know the power of fire (πυρὸς μένος ἀκαμάτοιο, *Th.*, v. 563), yet Prometheus stole it, transporting it on a fennel stalk (κλέψας ἀκαμάτοιο πυρὸς τηλέσκοπον, *Th.*, v. 566). This act, the manner in which Prometheus steals the fire, reflects the grand theme of its partitioning (cf. R̥V 1.59.1). Clearly, Prometheus cannot transport fire as if it were a static object, but he can carry its power, allowing it to spark on a fennel stalk and conveying this fractionation to humans. Hesiod, reflecting on what Prometheus did to Zeus, uses a term usually translated as "trick" or "deception", but in Greek is, once again, τέχνη: "the cunning Prometheus replied (to Zeus), smiling subtly, without forgetting his sly **technics**" (τὸν δ᾽ αὖτε προσέειπε Προμηθεὺς ἀγκυλομήτης ἦκ᾽ ἐπιμειδήσας, δολίης δ᾽ οὐ λήθετο **τέχνης**, *Th.*, vv. 546–547). Thus, Prometheus addresses the king of gods when presenting the first deceit, in which he attempted to pass off ox bones covered in fat, so that humans would be left with the meat. Realizing the τέχνη with which Prometheus sought to deceive him, Zeus recalls the theft of fire: "I see that you have not forgotten your cunning **techniques**" (οὐκ ἄρα πω δολίης ἐπιλήθεο **τέχνης**).

In the R̥gveda, the name Mātariśvan is counted among those attributed to Agni. A common interpretation renders this epithet as "grown (*śvi*) in the mother (*mātari*)", yet Parpola proposes that Mātariśvan is instead a distinct mythological figure, later assimilated to Agni. Incidentally, Mātariśvan is considered to be the entity who brought Agni to humans. This Promethean figure, possibly a seer or a deity, should therefore be interpreted differently, as Parpola, drawing on Insler, suggests, namely as **ātaríśvan-*, "master of fire" (Parpola 2015, p. 114). This interpretation also supports our reading of the poetic imagery of fire as a primordial technics. The first mythological donor of τέχνη among all τέχναι must be identified with an *íśvan*, a master, a knower, one who controls (*iś*), and the master of fire, a kind of Vedic Prometheus, might have been a member of the seer clan

Bhr̥gus, which Parpola (Parpola 2015, p. 115) points out as an ancient clan of seers, perhaps contemporaneous with the Aṅgirasas, to whom it is attributed the discovery of fire for mankind.[33] Might Mātariśvan be the mythologization of the one who first, by rubbing two sticks together, learned the necessary technique to ignite fire and harness its powers?

It is curious that the Vedic word *pramathyu*, meaning "thief", resonates so well with the name Prometheus in Greek. This may be coincidental, as the exact etymology of Prometheus's name in Greek has not been conclusively determined, and some believe it to be of non-Greek origin. According to Parpola, Prometheus' name,

> . . . is likely to have originally meant "robber", etymologically related to the root *math-*, "to steal, rob", which is often used in connection with Mātaríśvan (cf. also Sanskrit *pramātha-*, "robbery"). I have no doubt that the myth is also connected with the homophonous root *math-/manth-*, "to whirl round, to rotate" (so as to produce cream by rotating a churning-stick in milk, or fire by rapidly rotating a dry wooden stick in a hole of a dry wooden plank, that is, a "fire-drill"). Mātariśvan also kindled the hidden fire for the Bhr̥gus, who are spoken of as ancient sacrificers along with the Atharvans and Āṅgirasas.
>
> (Parpola 2015, p. 115)

Similarly, it is the power of Agni that captivates those who wish to harness it, reflecting upon its sacred attributes: light, warmth, and sacrifice. Agni himself expresses grief over this predicament through the discourse of priests (*hotar*, *hotā*), the "sacrificer" (*hótr̥*), and the sacrificial condition (*hotrá*) that necessitates the subjugation of Agni: "O Varuṇa, I have arrived here fearing the sacrifice, lest the gods *yoke* me to it again" (*hotrād ahaṃ varuṇa bibhyad āyaṃ ned eva mā yunajann atra devāḥ*, R̥V 10.51.4). Here, Agni appears to flee, and this escape signifies a "return" (*niviṣṭā*), suggesting a retreat into the primordial waters (Izawa 2017).

It should be noted that Severino examines the myth of Prometheus as narrated by Aeschylus, and not in Hesiod's Theogony, where, as we have seen, the references to the technical nature of fire's power are evident. It should also be remembered that here we understand technics not as mere technology or technical ability inherent in certain tools. These are indeed aspects of technics, but do not represent its fundamental archetype, which is precisely power and manipulative capacity over the world. Finally, it is noted that in the Severinian interpretation of the myth of Prometheus, the ultimate purpose of technics is primarily to liberate humans from the burden of death (Severino 1989, pp. 187–99), a theme that resonates deeply with Indo-European conceptions around the power of Agni and the destiny of immortality of the seers who have harnessed it. R̥V 10.154.2 even mentions "those who became invincible through heat" (*tapasā ye anādhr̥ṣyās*). The yoke of Agni (*agni-yojana*) is not, as we have seen, a prerogative of the seers, but also of the gods, which constitutes a parallel with the Greek version of the myth: "at least in Aeschylus' version, Zeus orders that Prometheus be put in chains by the divine smith Hephaestus, who consistently stresses the fact that Prometheus is his *syngenḗs* 'kinsman'" (Ginevra 2023, p. 236).

The subservience of the sun to Agni (R̥V 4.3.11), which suggests that the former is merely a partition of the latter, represents the final 'Luciferian' aspect (as a bearer of light) of Agni that we will explore before delving into matters more deeply rooted in the ecstatic and transcendent experience of the poet-seers (Thompson 2003). However, the sun is predominantly a symbol of regal rather than sacred power.[34] Indeed, there exists an ancient alliance between priests and warriors, the precursors of Indo-European kings, which is commemorated in the rite of enthronement (*rājasūya*), but this also seems to signal a belief in a distinction between the natures of these two offices. Nonetheless, the sun, as a metaphor for the sovereign power wielded by the king, shares certain characteristics with Agni, such as luminosity, and is thus employed in various ways, especially in the

form of the solar wheel, or wheel of the law (*dharmacakra*), which the sovereign holds. Yet, the epithet "kinsman of the sun" even comes to be adopted by the Buddha (*ādiccabandhu*, *buddhenādiccabandhunā*), who, as we shall see, sought to represent something far removed from regal power.[35]

On the one hand, the subservience of the Sun to Agni is well understood from the myth that distinguishes its birth as a partition of the primordial fire,[36] while on the other hand, there are testimonies that distance the two deities. Agni is superior to the Sun as the possessor of its brilliance (*svar-bhānu*), but he is also the one who wounded the Sun in a well-known myth wherein he used a sort of arrow (*didyúm*). This myth is known as that of the "Wounded Sun" (Ginevra 2023, p. 219). Consequently, the Sun exhibits a certain conflict with Agni, but its role is also well defined and much more limited, though not less important. The Sun "observes all" (R̥V 1.50.2) and, being situated high (the issue of the spatial organization of the world is equally decisive in this poetics), acts as a propagator of Agni's force. The Sun's rays are its banners, and what they make visible (*adr̥śram*) to the world is beholding men like blazing fires (R̥V 1.50.3). Here, the comparison is clear: the rays that unravel (*vi raśmayo*) are said to act "alike" (*yathā*) to Agni (*agnayo*). This pertains to their radiant power (*bhrājantaḥ*) but also, implicitly, to what ensues: what is illuminated is given to the world; it is given to humanity for its dominion. Sūrya (the Sun, like Agni, is also a proper name of a deity) is also a source of light or, more precisely, a "creator of light" (*jyotiṣkr̥t*, again emphasizing the centrality of "making": *kr̥-*), but in its case, its role is to shine, thus extending its light, across the entirety of the firmament (*viśvam ā bhāsi rocanam*, R̥V 1.50.4).

Symbolically, the harnessing of Agni is reenacted each time fire is summoned for any ritualistic purpose. The very altar on which it is ignited, as well as the wood it consumes, is regarded as part of Agni's body. This perhaps offers a deeper understanding of the elsewhere mentioned brothers of Agni who preceded him (*agnéḥ pū̆rve bhrā̆taro*, R̥V 10.51.6). This particular dynamic is also reflected in subsequent texts, where it is further discussed, suggesting that not only does the sacrificial altar of Agni in some way represent his body, but also that the harnessing, symbolically recalled through its lighting, is followed by an 'un-yoking', an extinguishing—possibly through water—which effectively constitutes Agni's release (Ginevra 2023, pp. 223–24). However, Agni's 'unconditioned' freedom, utterly devoid of harnessing, is also linked to a destructive and dangerous force (pp. 225, 231). A poetic reference to this freely roaming flame is found in R̥V 4.4.2, where wandering flames (*bhramāsa*), with their blaze (*śośucānaḥ*) and heat (*tapūṃṣi*), are something mighty and formidable: it is the tongue of fire (*juhvā*) that spreads and devastates what it consumes.

As is widely acknowledged, Aeschylus also presents an interpretation of the Promethean myth. Perhaps the most renowned of these interpretations is found in *Prometheus Bound* (Προμηθεὺς Δεσμώτης, PB). This work constitutes the focal point of Severino's analysis, which I reference regarding the other significant issue surrounding the theme of fire, namely, the will to power.

Fire, as previously mentioned, is the progenitor of all techniques and, as a technique, enables humanity to subjugate, control, and manipulate, just as the Vedic warrior-king subjugates 'space' by delineating its boundaries, the Indo-European priest governs normativity through sacred laws, and the blacksmith manipulates metals to forge weapons.

In Aeschylus' work, we observe the unveiling of the problematic aspect of fire. Prometheus is bound and punished for stealing fire from the gods and gifting it to humans. While this act is often perceived as a heroic gesture that imparts the gift of technique to humanity, Severino argues that Aeschylus actually critiques Prometheus's action. Simultaneously, in this defeat of Prometheus, a conflict between two techniques becomes apparent:

that of the gods and that of humans. Indeed, although Prometheus is the god of fire, he is not the sole deity performing this function in the Greek world, where Hephaestus, already a blacksmith and thus a master 'technician', also fulfills this role. In the *Iliad*, an ancient repository of orally transmitted myths and legends analogous to the Vedas, Hephaestus is depicted as an extraordinary figure capable of crafting the most astonishing marvels in his mythical forge, including automata in the form of golden maidens, imbued with intelligence, speech, and strength. This pinnacle of technique places the blacksmith Hephaestus in a markedly superior position to Prometheus. Both are gods of fire and technique, but whereas Hephaestus optimizes these potentialities in service to the gods, of whom he is a progeny, Prometheus serves humanity. For this reason, Aeschylus describes him as φιλάνθρωπος (philanthropic)[37] (Severino 1989, p. 182). According to some versions of the myth, it is from Hephaestus's forge that Prometheus steals fire. However, regardless of alternative versions, Aeschylus specifies that Zeus dispatches Hephaestus, along with Kratos, to chain Prometheus. Severino interprets this as a clash between two techniques, wherein the stronger and more efficient technique—that of the gods, embodied by Hephaestus—inevitably prevails. Nevertheless, according to the Severinian interpretation, Aeschylus reproaches Prometheus not merely because he is punished by Zeus—an act already suggesting the conflictual nature of techniques (τέχναι) and the clashes they provoke in their quest for supremacy in technics as a whole—but because technics is inherently destined to fail against necessity.

In these renowned verses,[38] a comprehensive elucidation unfolds. Although the Oceanids implore Prometheus to liberate himself, even asserting his superiority over Zeus, he resolutely refuses, acknowledging his guilt and the dire fate to which he has consigned humanity by bestowing upon them the gift of technics—an endeavor that can never transcend the inexorable demands of existence. With these considerations in mind, we can now examine the Vedic myth of the stolen fire (Agni) through entirely new perspectives.[39]

As is evident from the Vedic myth, the theme of fire theft is not unique to Greek culture and indeed recurs across numerous cultures, including those beyond the Indo-European sphere. The Indian myth reveals elements shared with the Promethean myth, particularly the relationship between fire and bare power, as explained at the outset of this work. Fire is overtly linked to manifest reality; it serves as the medium for unveiling images, a source of revelation, and simultaneously a source of power. While the Vedic flame is associated with revelation, fire also functions as an instrument of power. The subjugation of images to an order effectively establishes a norm, exemplified by the demarcation of boundaries within which appearing phenomena are regulated by cognitive expectations. This aspect is particularly evident in the segment of the myth where fire is stolen by Mātariśvan and bestowed upon the "mortals" (*martā*), a term identical to the Greek designation for humans (βροτοὺς).[40] The ritual sacrifice is sanctified through fire (*aghr̥bhṇata devebhyo havyavāhana*), mirroring the Greek myth. Similarly, as in the Greek tradition, the one who steals fire is regarded as a benefactor of humanity; in Aeschylus, Prometheus is described as φιλάνθρωπος, while in the Vedas, Agni is celebrated as the most genuine friend of humans (*viśvān yadyajñānabhipāsi mānuṣa*).

3.3. Building a Vehicle Through Imagination (dhī)

If the yoke is the ultimate metaphor for the harnessing of power, the chariot is the metaphor for the application of that power.[41] The chariot is, first and foremost, a vehicle, and we must pay close attention to this notion of a vehicle. A vehicle moves from a starting point to an endpoint, and in the case of the metaphor of Vedic contemplative practice, the endpoint is clearly the communion with the deity or the application of the particular

powers of the seer. Those familiar with the Buddhist world will similarly have no difficulty understanding the analogous meanings of the term "vehicle".[42] Yet, there is more than a simple similarity.

In the Vedic world, the chariot is what leads to the desired "goal", but it is not enough to mount it and depart; the chariot must be constructed. The construction of the chariot is, more specifically, the metaphor for contemplative "practice" itself. It goes without saying that, even in this case, it involves a particular form of technique. Building a functional chariot requires a series of skills. The carpenter is the wood specialist, who knows its secrets and methods of shaping it, and the contemplative must be like a carpenter. The analogy becomes clear when we understand that the technical act of chariot construction performed by the carpenter is understood as the brahma of the seer. I propose leaving the term brahma untranslated for now to avoid translational choices such as "prayer" or "devotion", which could mislead the understanding of this term that likely lacks a true English equivalent.

Naturally, the manner in which the chariot is constructed or *brahma* is practiced must also be appropriate. The R̥V consistently employs imagery related to the chariot to signify the appropriateness or inadequacy of the practice. For example, the term *sukha* is often used concerning correct practice (like in R̥V 1.20.3), but etymologically, it literally means having a good (*su-*) axle hole (*kha*). The image it evokes is precisely the bored hole in the wheel where the axle is inserted to serve as its pivot. If the wheel's hole (*cakra*) and the pivot are correctly crafted, the wheel will turn smoothly and without hindrance—this is the meaning of having a "good pivot" (*su-kha*). Conversely, a poorly made pivot results in *duḥkha*, creating a condition of discomfort and instability for the axle. It is now evident that the well-known dialectic expressed in Pāli between *sukha* and *dukkha* (equivalent to *sukha* and *duḥkha*) evokes nothing but this image.[43]

In R̥V 1.20.3, it is said that the R̥bhu fashioned a "suitable" (*sukhaṃ*) chariot. As Jurewicz documents: "In the R̥V, the word *sukhá* is mostly used in reference to chariots. It is a *bahuvrīhi* compound, which means 'with a good axle, well-naved'" (Jurewicz 2018, p. 17). Naturally, this is spoken of in a poetic sense, but we now have the tools to interpret this metaphor. In any case, the verse itself specifies the meaning: it is a chariot that can move everywhere, not an ordinary vehicle (*parijmānaṃ*). Special attention should also be paid to the term used to denote the making of the chariot, namely *takṣan*. Everything connected to *takṣa* indeed pertains to fabrication and invokes the imagery of the carpenter[44] (the verb *takṣati* also means "to divide" and "to shape"). I wish to emphasize that this term is etymologically equivalent to the Greek τέχνη. This similarity is far from coincidental. The idea of technics (τέχνη) reconstructed by Severino in Greek thought is precisely the foundation of the will to power: technique is a form of power, a skill that can be codified and transmitted but is primarily aimed at "dominating" something. Given the common Indo-European heritage of the Vedic and Greek worlds, we might expect surprising convergences between the figure of the τέκτων (craftsman) and that of the Vedic seer. Certainly, this is not about technology in the modern sense but something that connects the supernatural power of the seers—something vaguely akin to magic—with the necessity of a strict codification of knowledge through language and a "correct way" of performing the rite to unlock the power in question.

The chariot evoked in the Vedas is a symbolic instrument for this creative act: it is not, indeed, a horse-drawn chariot nor one with reins, and yet it crosses the firmament without horses (*anaśvo jāto anabhīśur ukthyo rathas tricakraḥ pari vartate rajaḥ*, R̥V 4.36.1). Those who forged it, as stated in the following verse (4.36.2), did so *manasas pari dhyayā*. The term *manasas* indicates it was made by "thought" (*manas*), while *dhyayā* refers to *dhyai*, "to contemplate", an action well-known in Buddhism as *dhyāna* (Pāli: *jhyāna*), but already present in Vedic texts as *dhī*, a term primarily linked to "vision", "seeing", and "perceiving".

However, this form of perception differs from the usual one, as it is tied to contemplation, prayer, or perhaps the effort made to bring about a will. Naturally, this realization involves technical skill, as R̥V 1.94.1 reminds us: the seers create a chariot for Agni to deliver their veneration, and these invocations are "constructed" with thought, just as a carpenter fabricates a chariot (*jātavedase ratham iva sam mahemā manīṣayā*).

The image of the carpenter seems to persist in relation to contemplative practice within the Pāli canon. For example, regarding *sati* meditation (DN 22), the exercise of focusing on the breath must be conducted with precise, methodical attention, the same employed by a carpenter at work,

> *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 his apprentice. When making a deep cut, he knows 'I am making a deep cut', and when making a shallow cut, he knows 'I am making a shallow cut'. Similarly, O monks, when a monk breathes deeply, he knows 'I am breathing deeply'; when he breathes shallowly, he knows 'I am breathing shallowly'.

The image of the carpenter is evoked on multiple occasions in the canon. Specifically, it calls upon his attention and is explicitly linked to forms of *satipaṭṭhānāna*. Another example is AN 7.71, where the strenuousness of their work, capable of leaving hand marks on the axe handle they use daily, is highlighted. A further mention of carpenters appears in a fascinating verse of Dhp 145, where it is said: "While water is guided by the irrigators, fletchers shape the arrows, and carpenters carve the wood, the virtuous tame themselves" (*udakañhi nayanti nettikā, usukārā namayanti tejanaṃ; dāruṃ namayanti tacchakā, attānaṃ damayanti subbatā*). This image is equally of interest: the self (*attā*) is something that is "tamed" (*damayati*) by the virtuous.[45] We have already discussed this image of taming extensively in the section on yoga. However, it is not a Buddhist novelty. In R̥V 3.38.1, *dhī* is invoked toward Indra.

We know that *dhī* is perhaps the prototype of *dhyāna*, but in the Vedic context, it is not the same meditative exercise as in Buddhism; it is something that directs the contemplative's attention to the deity (*dīdhayā manīṣām*), and it is specified that this is achieved "like a carpenter" (*taṣṭeva*), again in reference to attentiveness, and as swift as a horse (*atyo*) carrying its burden. Although these are two different contemplative exercises, we can discern some prototypes leading from *dhī* to *dhyāna*. Firstly, the focus on attention is necessary, just as it is for a carpenter performing his craft. In the Vedic world, this attention is understood as the concentration required to direct one's devotion to the invoked deity, and therefore, focus is indispensable. Yet, the same type of focus, defined as "single-pointed", is exactly what the Buddhist world employs to concentrate on specific mental objects, tracing back to the phenomenological processes underlying them. By focusing on a single point—whether it be the direction of devotion toward the deity, a mental object, or a phenomenological process requiring complete attention—the exercise appears to be fundamentally the same.

The effect of contemplative immersion is described as the attainment of unity of cognition (*cittassekaggataṃ*, AN 1.345), and in AN 7.45, *cittassekaggatā* is described as attainable following the achievement of seven prerequisites, all linked to contemplative exercises: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and

right mindfulness (*sammādiṭṭhi, sammāsaṅkappo, sammāvācā, sammākammanto, sammāājīvo, sammāvāyāmo, sammāsati*; see also DN 18).

As Miller rightly points out, the chariot is nothing other than the "vehicle" for realizing a specific will, namely, what is called *brahman*. In R̥V 5.73.10, the chariot is fashioned (*yā takṣāma rathāṃ*) to accomplish *imā brahmāṇi* ("these prayers", "these invocations"). The term *brahma* also frequently appears in the sense of "growth" or "expansion". Indeed, it is said that invocations or praises (literally the "names" addressed, *namaḥ*) are made to grow (*br̥han*); that is, the fervent adoration is proclaimed aloud (*ivāvocāma br̥han namaḥ*). The equivalence between *ratha* and *brahman* appears to be confirmed in other passages as well. In R̥V 10.80.7, the R̥bhus "fashion" (*tatakṣuḥ*) a *brahma* for Agni (*agnaye brahma r̥bhavas tatakṣur agnim mahām avocāmā suvr̥ktim*). We know that the chariot is fashioned with thought, sustained by thought (*dhītiṃ kr̥ṇavad dhāraya*, R̥V 7.64.4). The 'chariot' itself is frequently described in Vedic literature as 'luminous', and adjectives pertaining to light are among the most commonly used to qualify it: "a pure, radiant luminous chariot... destroyer of darkness" (*śuciṃ jyotīrathaṃ... tamohanam*, R̥V 1.140.1); "transported on chariots of light" (*jyotīrathā*, R̥V 10.63.4); or "golden chariot" (*hiraṇyarathaṃ*, R̥V 1.30.16).

Fashioning, crafting, or constructing a chariot thus becomes a metaphor for the Vedic contemplative practice. The act of construction, as noted, is purely "technical", not in the sense of technology nor exclusively in the sense of anthropological technique (bodily or contemplative technique), but in a more primordial sense of power that underlies both culturally codified technical knowledge and other forms of codified knowledge. The term used in these contexts is precisely *takṣāma*, or other derivatives of *takṣ*, which we know to be etymologically related to the Greek τέχνη (*technics*). For example, in the hymn R̥V 5.73.10 (*imā brahmāṇi vardhanāśvibhyāṃ santu śaṃtamā yā* ***takṣāma*** *rathāṃ ivāvocāma br̥han namaḥ*), the connection between *takṣ* and *brahma* is clearly established. Similarly, in R̥V 10.80.7, reference is made to a "contemplation" (*brahma*) "fashioned" for Agni using the same term (*agnaye brahma... tatakṣur*).[46] A similar conception seems to be preserved, as meditative imagery, also in Buddhist contemplative practice,

> *atha khvāhaṃ, bhaggava, taṃ parisaṃ dhammiyā kathāya sandassesiṃ samādapesiṃ samuttejesiṃ sampahaṃsesiṃ, taṃ parisaṃ dhammiyā kathāya sandassetvā samādapetvā samuttejetvā sampahaṃsetvā mahābandhanā mokkhaṃ karitvā caturāsītipāṇasahassāni mahāviduggā uddharitvā tejodhātuṃ samāpajjitvā sattatālaṃ vehāsaṃ abbhuggantvā aññaṃ sattatālampi acciṃ abhinimminitvā pajjalitvā dhūmāyitvā mahāvane kūṭāgārasālāyaṃ paccuṭṭhāsiṃ.*
>
> And when I, Bhaggava, having thus achieved, fired up and inspired that assembly with a talk about Dhamma, unshackled them from profound servitude, released eighty-four thou-sand beings from the vast abyss, I embarked on a contemplative trance through the technique of fire. Ascending to the skies, where seven palm trees kissed the heavens, I cast forth a towering flame, another seven palms in in height, it blazed and shimmered; and then, I reemerged within the Grand Forest, at the Hall with the peaked roof.
>
> (DN 24)

The technical skill in utilizing thoughts-visions (*dhībhiḥ*) is compared to the ability to manage or tame a steed (*sa dhībhir astu sanitā medhasātā so arvatā*, R̥V 4.37.6). If the chariot is the metaphor for the contemplative exercise that must 'construct' it, the horse that pulls it serves as a metaphor for the journey into transcendental realms. Thus, it represents a mental faculty, just as the cow symbolizes light (which can be reached in the journey to the higher realms). In later literature, the chariot is identified with the *ātman* (J. Miller 1974, p. 101), and this invites reflection on the specific Buddhist conception. In post-Vedic literature, the

ātman is identified as the means capable of reuniting with divinity. Hence, it inherently possesses a divine nature, leading to the identification of *ātman* with *brahman*. The latter, however, must not be confused with brahma as understood as a contemplative exercise, as we have seen so far. Instead, it represents the absolutization of that principle, thus symbolizing perfection.

With the identification between the self (*ātman*) and the absolute (*brahman*), the philosophers of the Upaniṣads sought to elevate human nature to the divine. However, in doing so, they identified an aspect of the human being—the self—as the vehicle (chariot) capable of reaching the absolute and, indeed, as potentially the absolute itself. This perspective, however, was rejected by ascetic philosophies and Buddhists, in my view, primarily for one reason: the further identification between the self and sacrifice (*yajña*). Sacrifice, specifically, was the contentious element over which debates regarding the true *brahmaṇa*—who qualifies as an authentic contemplative—and the proper execution of contemplation were conducted. It also concerned *what* contemplative practice entails, why it is performed, and what real benefits it should bring.[47]

The act of sacrifice (*yajña*) holds significant symbolic value in the Vedic world and greatly influences Buddhist allegories and metaphors, frequently appearing in the Pāli canon. In the Vedic context, sacrifice primarily represents a technical act through which something is produced or a bond is established (Coomaraswamy 1942; Gonda 1983; Cavallin 2003). Priests perform sacrifices as a means of approaching the gods: it is a gift offered to them followed by a request, thereby establishing a connection between the two parties. However, sacrifice soon becomes elevated to the status of a foundational act of the cosmic order itself. The renowned Puruṣasūkta is a relatively late hymn within the Vedic corpus but represents a trend already present in earlier hymns. In this hymn, sacrifice is explained as a genuine creative act, wherein a primordial entity in the form of a giant human (*puruṣa*) is sacrificed and "dismembered" by the gods to create the known world. Various parts of the *puruṣa*'s body become different aspects of the cosmos, including social categories, which thus derive their foundational order from this primordial sacrificial act.

It is not necessary, however, to refer to R̥V 10.90 to encounter these conceptions of sacrifice (Brown 1931; Sharma 1978; Norelius 2017). Already in the first book of the R̥V, largely dedicated to Agni, the latter performs a series of "creative" roles or acts of establishing the cosmic order, mediated specifically through sacrifice (Brown 1942, 1968; Shende 1965; Varenne 1977; Izawa 2017; Ginevra 2023). The primordial seers "yoke" Agni through sacrifices and, again through sacrificial acts, establish with him a series of fundamental relationships that then constitute a cosmic order.[48] From this, it is easy to understand the subsequent development of the conception of sacrifice as a mere technical act, capable of yielding power or some other result. At this stage, however, it already becomes a codified performative technique: sacrifice must be performed correctly; otherwise, the desired effect is not achieved.

In R̥V 10.101.2, thought itself is compared to ritual sacrifice to the extent that the "friends" (*sakhyāḥ*), i.e., those suitable for the ritual, are asked to make their thoughts (*dhiyaḥ*) harmonious (*mandrāḥ*) in order to *mold* them (*kr̥ṇudhvam*... *tanudhvaṃ*) into an armed boat (*nāvam*... *āyudhāraṃ*) intended to remove the obstacles that would otherwise block the offering of the sacrifice to Agni. We know that the "vehicle" conventionally called a "chariot" is but a metaphor for the contemplative path, yet the idea that the offering of the *yajña* "towards" (*pra*) its intended recipient must pass through a warship clearing the path to the deity appears to persist even in Buddhism. In the latter, the purpose of contemplative practice is not directed toward an external deity but is aimed at one's own liberation. However, the practice is also frequently compared to a path or road, which, not coincidentally, requires the use of an appropriate "vehicle" (as noted in the second

part). Moreover, the idea of obstacles to be removed is also present, although in this case, they are described as *kleśa* (in Pāli: *kilesa*), referring primarily to internal obstructions that prevent the meditator from practicing properly. These are often associated with passions and desires (SN 27) that "yoke" the meditator (*saṃyutta*), hindering the correct exercise of meditation. That is why the Buddhist contemplative exercises propose rather a disjunction (*visaṃyutta*) from the 'yokes'. The Buddha is also completely "un-yoked" from the world (*sabbaṃ lokaṃ visaṃyutto*, AN 4.23) having achieved perfect direct knowledge of it (*sabbaṃ lokaṃ abhiññāya, sabbaṃ loke yathātathaṃ*).

Thus, while in Buddhism contemplative practice is an inner act, directed toward one's own perceptions and sensations and aimed at "liberation", in the Vedic world, contemplative practice follows a "path" (*patha*) that moves from the subject toward the deity and is aimed at bringing the contemplative closer to the divine (*yānān*).[49] Sacrifice is therefore conceived as something intended to enable the devotee's ascent toward the deity (*manmāni dhībhir uta yajñam ṛndhan devatrā ca kṛṇuhy adhvaraṃ naḥ*). In Buddhism, however, it is reformulated as a self-sacrifice, a renunciation of attachment to one's impermanent self, recognized as a construct dependent on causes and conditions, and an attempt to achieve that which is unconditioned. This shift is also a consequence of the critique ascetic movements direct against earlier traditions, rejecting sacrifice as an effective performative act and, consequently, denying its authority.

In the Vedic world, the chariot (*ratha*) is a metaphor for a more generic vehicle, signifying any instrument that transports one from a point of departure to a destination. Extending this concept, it is not necessarily a physical vehicle but rather a metaphor for the striving toward divinity. This vehicle can manifest not only as a chariot but also, as circumstances demand, as a boat. It is capable of traversing the skies, swift as thought, and can also serve to "reach the far shore". Indeed, the identical metaphor of crossing the ocean toward a far shore (*pārāya*) is adapted by Buddhists from Ṛgvedic literature,

> *ā no nāvā matīnāṃ yātam pārāya gantave; yuñjāthām aśvinā ratham.*
>
> Come as a boat, to bring us to the far shore through prayers, O Aśvins, yoke your chariot.
>
> (ṚV 1.46.7)

> *appakā te manussesu, ye janā pāragāmino; athāyaṃ itarā pajā, tīramevānudhāvati [...] yesaṃ sambodhiyaṅgesu, sammā cittaṃ subhāvitaṃ; ādānapaṭinissagge, anupādāya ye ratā; khīṇāsavā jutimanto, te loke parinibbuta.*
>
> Few among humans reach the farthest shore, while the others confine themselves to remain around the nearest shore [...] And those whose cognition is rightly developed through the factors of awakening, free from attachments, they enjoy in not grasping, and with the end of the defilements, radiant, they are extinguished in this world.
>
> (AN 10.118)

It is also noteworthy to mention the use of the idea of the yoke (*yuñjāthām*), which, at this point, we understand is employed in relation to the chariot of the Aśvins. The vehicle in question can traverse earth, waters, and skies. It has three seats (*trivandhuro*), three wheels (*tricakraḥ*), moves as swiftly as thought (*manaso yo javīyān*), and is adorned with three metals (*tridhātunā*, ṚV 1.183.1). On occasion, however, it can also become a boat, vast as the sky and equipped with large oars: *aritraṃ vāṃ divas pṛthu tīrthe sindhūnāṃ rathaḥ* (ṚV 1.46.8). It is thus evident that this "chariot", though called *ratha*, is not necessarily equipped with wheels, nor is it a physical vehicle, as metaphorically it can take the form

suited to contemplation, such as a boat to navigate waters. These are the drops of Soma expressed for contemplation (*dhiyā yuyujra indavaḥ*).

As discussed in previous points, the ocean is a highly significant metaphor within the Vedic world, primarily employed to signify the attainment of an ultimate goal, which may involve divine nature. The forefathers, the ancestral progenitors of humankind and likely the founders of the dynasties that contributed to the composition of the early Vedic texts, are deified entities who inhabit their own realm (*pitr̥loka*), which is likely their ultimate destination.

In the Buddhist context, the ocean is predominantly evoked as a symbol of crossing. It is referred to as *samudda* ("ocean") or *pātāla* ("abyss"), both of which appear to be associated with a great endeavor undertaken by sages and emulated by ascetics. For instance, in SN 1.44, there is mention of an ocean with twelve whirlpools, representing the abyss traversed by the sages (*samuddaṃ dvādasāvaṭṭaṃ, pātālaṃ atarī isi*). The metaphor of crossing waters is elaborated upon in various earlier works and invariably connected to *nibbāna*. Specifically, crossing the ocean or a body of water symbolizes moving from a near shore to a far shore. Reaching the far shore (*pāragāmī*) evokes the imagery of a great accomplishment. The near shore represents the mundane world, inhabited by ordinary people, while the far shore symbolizes liberation: "Few among humans reach the far shore, while the rest merely run along the near shore" (*appakā te manussesu, ye janā pāragāmino; athāyaṃ itarā pajā, tīramevānudhāvati*, SN 45.34 and 46.17).

The crossing toward the far shore is tied to correct teaching and proper practice (*dhamme dhammānuvattino*), as well as the overcoming of the domain of death (*maccudheyyaṃ suduttaraṃ*). This connection to the state of the "deathless" must also be carefully noted. The far shore, or simply "going beyond" (*te janā pāramessanti*), is further associated with the cultivation of pure or radiant qualities (*sukkaṃ*) and the development of perfect cognition (*sammā cittaṃ subhāvitaṃ*). The luminous metaphor appears twice, referring to one who has reached beyond and is now radiant (*jutimanto*) and "extinguished in this world" (*te loke parinibbuta*). This enables us to draw another correlation: the world (*loka*) is clearly linked to the nearer shore, while *nibbāna*, as the far shore, is necessarily beyond.[50]

The image of the far shore and its crossing is repeatedly evoked in relation to themes typical of ascetic discipline (Jones 2016). The duality of *orima/parima* ("near/far") in relation to shores (or *pāra*, "beyond", as a metaphor for crossing) clearly alludes to the *saṃsāra/nibbāna* dichotomy and is explicitly expressed in AN 10.2, 10.117, 10.118, 10.170, 11.2, as well as in suttas like AN 3.32 and 3.33, which even contain internal references to these discourses, explicitly citing "what I referred to in 'The Way to the Beyond" (*idañca pana metaṃ, ānanda, sandhāya bhāsitaṃ pārāyane puṇṇakapañhe*).

The ocean itself is not understood in the Vedas as the body of water separating landmasses but as the cosmological ocean, which in Vedic belief constitutes the vast intermediate region separating heaven and earth. The tripartite division of the world into earth and sky interspersed with the atmosphere is a vision clearly present in the most ancient Vedic hymns (Cohen 2018, p. 59). In this context, this cosmological ocean is employed for its mythic value: these vast waters may recall the primordial waters from which Agni emerged (Doniger 1981, pp. 104–5), and to which the sages intend to return. For instance, R̥V 10.5.1 extols a "single ocean" (*ekaḥ samudro*),[51] to which even Agni must return: "O Agni, the single ocean capacious with treasures, who is of many births, contemplates our hearts; he resides in the cloud near the hidden one; go, Agni, to the plural entity established amid the waters" (*ekaḥ samudro dharuṇo rayīṇām asmad dhr̥do bhūrijanmā vi caṣṭe; siṣakty ūdhar niṇyor upastha utsasya madhye nihitam padaṃ veḥ*).[52]

In the Pāli canon, it is clearly stated that the ocean (*samudda*), often represented symbolically as the "great ocean" (*mahāsamudda*), is a metaphor for *nibbāna*.

One of the earliest scholars to argue that the Buddhist concept of *nibbāna* is connected to the symbolism of fire—and specifically that the idea of extinguishing a flame implicitly references the sacredness of fire in Vedic culture—was Steven Collins. In two works devoted exclusively to the theme of *nibbāna*, Collins repeatedly examines the metaphor of fire. Moreover, in a significant study focusing on Theravāda imagery, he investigates the mythical-religious symbolism of fire in the Vedic tradition to demonstrate how these elements contributed to the formation of Buddhist "responses" (Collins 1982, pp. 43, 48).

Certainly, fire serves as a metaphor primarily because of its analogy to an active process: the flame persists as long as there is material to consume—a hypothetical fuel that sustains it. Similarly, the processes leading to suffering, which fuel the cycle of rebirths, resemble a flame that burns—and corrodes from within, as seen in the parallel between the origin of the world (*lokassa samudayo*) being contingent on sensory spheres, the cognitive and sensory processes being likened to a blaze (*rūpaṃ ādittaṃ*. . .), and the world itself being "on fire" (*ādittako loko*). The analogy is straightforward: something sustains these flames, allowing them to continue burning, and therefore the root of the issue must be addressed by removing the metaphorical fuel—by "extinguishing" the flame. Collins observes that the parallel between *nibbāna* and the extinction of a flame is explicitly articulated multiple times in the canon (Collins 1998, pp. 163, 173, 205, 213, 216–33). Even without recourse to metaphors, the etymology of the term itself underscores this connection (Collins 1998, pp. 191, 194, 195–96; 2010, p. 63). However, in the second of the aforementioned works, the theme is revisited with a more explicit reference to the imagery of water and its metaphorical resonance in extinguishing fire. Building on his other significant work, *Selfless Persons*, Collins hypothesizes that "Buddhism deliberately reverses the central fire-image of Brahmanism, derived from the Vedic fire sacrifice. There, the fire of the inner self (*ātman*), manifested as the warmth of life, is identical to that of the universe (*brahman*), represented by the sun and operative in the ripening of plants" (Collins 2010, p. 82). In his texts, Collins provides a meticulous analysis of a *sutta* found in MN 72 (Collins 1998, pp. 162–63, 217–21, 231; 2010, pp. 68, 82–86, 92).

The attainment of true light by the bards also coincides with the achievement of immortality (R̥V 1.31.7; 6.60.1), another element that grants them a divine status: "We have drunk Soma, may we attain immortality, we have obtained the heavenly light, we have known the gods. What now can the enemy ever do to us? What can the malice of the immortal do against the mortal?" (*apāma somam amr̥tā abhūmāganma jyotir avidāma devān; kiṃ nūnam asmān kr̥ṇavad arātiḥ kim u dhūrtir amr̥ta martyasya*, R̥V 8.48.3). Thus, the seer, after ascending through Indra and Soma to the house of the sun, becomes himself the protector of its light (*ud yad bradhnasya viṣṭapaṃ gr̥ham indraś ca ganvahi; madhvaḥ pītvā sacevahi triḥ sapta sakhyuḥ pade*, R̥V 8.69.7). Miller compares this path of ascension to a genuine contemplative practice (J. Miller 1974, pp. 94–98) that transforms the meditator into the protector of the sun (*gopāyanti sūryam*, R̥V 10.154.5). The state of immortality, expressed in Pāli as *amata*, represents another point of convergence between these two conceptions. The Buddha is technically defined as "deathless", and this state is described in the suttas as the ultimate aspiration, distinguishing genuine practitioners from pretenders. This critique is evident in the case of sacrificial practices: those "yoked" to sacrifice are certainly not free from rebirth and death, the Buddha criticizes (*yājayogā bhavarāgarattā, nātariṃsu jātijaranti brūmi*, Snp 5.4), thus rendering the sacrificial institution futile, as it does not genuinely liberate from death. By contrast, the Buddha is truly *deathless*, a state accessible to others who adhere to the Buddhist teaching, described as a genuine path (*pada*) to deathlessness (*desentaṃ amataṃ padaṃ*, AN 4.48). This is the doctrine that "opens the doors to the freedom from death" (*apāpuretaṃ amatassa dvāraṃ*, MN 26). This state also renders the Buddha comparable to "the great seers" of the past, as claimed in Iti 84 (*satthā hi loke paṭhamo mahesi*). Therefore, a

tangible comparison exists between the Vedic and Buddhist worlds, constructed precisely on the imagery of immortality, though the Buddha is, of course, presented as "the greatest" among those seers, "beacons of light that proclaim the teaching, opening the doors of the deathless, liberating many from the yokes" (*pabhaṅkarā dhammamudīrayantā, apāpuranti amatassa dvāraṃ, yogā pamocenti bahujjanaṃ te*).[53]

The attainment of immortal light (*jyotir amr̥tam*) is a form of communion with the sun (*saha te sūryeṇa*, R̥V 10.107.2) that perhaps refers to archaic contemplative exercises aiming to reenact the cosmogonic myth of the sun's primordial foundation, discovered by Indra in the darkness and liberated through contemplation (*brahmaṇāvindad*). This act of liberation is recounted in the R̥gveda: "The sun hidden in darkness, Indra found through the fourth contemplation and liberated it from the obscurity" (*gūḻhaṃ sūryaṃ tamasāpavratena turīyeṇa brahmaṇāvindad atriḥ*, R̥V 5.40.6). Similarly, sages and seers practice to "yoke" the celestial light (*svarvaj jyotir*), just as Indra is implored to lead the contemplative into a "vast world" (*uruṃ no lokam*) associated with that light (R̥V 6.47.8). This *uruṃ lokam* is perhaps a precursor to the concept of transcendence as a divine state, which the seer sought to achieve through contemplation. The same transcendent light, a "higher light" (*jyotir uttamam*) associated with the sun in its purest form, is sought by the seer who reenacts Indra's mythical journey into the depths of darkness to find the sun concealed within and free its light (*ud vayaṃ tamasas pari jyotiṣ paśyanta uttaram; devaṃ devatrā sūryam aganma jyotir uttamam*, R̥V 1.50.10). This allegory of the mythical journey possibly alludes to a contemplative exercise that the seer reenacts within himself, becoming a deity like Indra. In this sense, contemplative exercise (*brahma*) can also be understood in its original sense as a process of augmentation (*itthā hi soma in made brahmā cakāra vardhanam*, R̥V 1.80.1). Meditation (*brahma*) is an act of augmentation (*br̥h-*) because it elevates the contemplative to the same level as the gods, whose deeds he reenacts or whose nature he assimilates.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have reflected on the theme of contemplative practice and analyzed the symbols and shared imagery between the Vedic and Buddhist worlds concerning contemplation. Despite having fundamentally different objectives, the common principle is identical: contemplative practice is a technique capable of enabling a "path". In the Vedic world, this path is meant to lead the "heart" of the contemplative towards divinity;[54] it is an ascent of the contemplator towards the divine nature and also entails the acquisition of that nature: the visionary poets and the 'fathers' of the past are assimilated to deities. Hence, there exists a direct correlation between contemplative technique and power. In Buddhism, contemplation is not directed toward an external deity but toward the meditator's own experience, focusing on their perceptual processes and cognitive structures to escape the habituations that would otherwise dominate them. Although the ultimate goal differs, the consequences of contemplative exercise are the same: the one who approaches awakening attains psychic powers (*iddhi*) and capacities for superior knowledge or apperception (*abhiññā*), which in many respects mirror the "solar" eye possessed by Vedic deities and seers: the ability to see things perfectly illuminated, unveiled, without secrets, or "things-as-they-are", to use Buddhist terminology.

It is important to emphasize the relationship between contemplation and *technics*. We have noted that the Vedic world shares with the Greek one the notion that certain codified forms of knowledge and practices are *technics*, that is, means capable of achieving specific ends with extreme efficiency. Poetry, language, is a *technics* as it constitutes a form of power, and in the Vedic world, it is directly assimilated to technical capacity, which belongs to those capable of composing and codifying in verse, and consequently to the power held by those who possess *technics*, a power that is real, concrete, and 'magical'. Contemplation, too, is a

technics, and all these forms of power are in some way considered to have a divine origin. In the Vedic world, it is Agni, the primordial fire, that represents the origin of all *technics*, and as in the myth of Prometheus, fire is "split", divided, but each section is nothing other than a part of Agni. The sun's very origin is likely Agni, and the myth of fire acquisition by the seers of the past perfectly reflects the conceptions of *technics* in the Promethean myth. Fire is the primordial technical power that was "harnessed" by ancient seers, domesticated, and acquired as a power: with the harnessing of Agni, its divine powers are subordinated to human purposes, just as with Prometheus's theft of fire, *technics* is brought from the divine realm to that of mortals. According to Plato, once the Promethean power of light emanating from the fire stolen from the gods was granted to humans, they began erecting altars and venerating images in honor of the gods. Subsequently, the power of speech and **naming** (ἔπειτα φωνὴν καὶ **ὀνόματα** ταχὺ διηρθρώσατο τῇ τέχνῃ), identified as techniques, emerged. Initially, there were no cities, but through technique, they were founded both to defend against the wild world and to administer (πολιτικὴν τέχνην) the human community (*Protagoras* 322b-c).

In Severino's interpretation, which I have partially drawn upon to connect the myth of Prometheus to that of Agni, there are, however, some logical gaps to consider. Severino sees *technics* as something closely tied to the dawn of ontological thought, that is, the conception of being as a "thing" manipulable and usable by *technics*. *Technics* indeed requires "things" subordinated to its purposes, but the specific ontological conception of "thing" is, for Severino, an aspect exclusive to the Greek world, absent in the Indian one, which, according to him, would not have known ontological suffering. This latter conception is described in Aeschylus, namely, of death not as a passage to another existential stage but as the total annihilation of being, going into nothingness, with no possibility of return. While Parmenides would have forcefully refuted this possibility, viewing it as a logical impossibility (that which "is" is, by definition, and cannot "not be"),[55] over time, this wisdom, seen by Severino as the "path of day", that of being, would have been lost, and another path would have been taken, that of the "path of night" (ἔνθα πύλαι νυκτός τε καὶ ἤματός εἰσι κελεύθων, *Nat.*, *fr*. 1, v. 11), the forgetfulness of the authentic sense of being, and the beginning of the conception of the *nihil absolutum*, the conviction that that-which-is can become that which is not, that is, totally nullify or annihilate itself. This idea is also the foundation of the Greek conception of *technics* and thus of ontological thought, but Severino sees it as conceived solely by the Greeks, whereas the "East", in this generic and vaguely defined sense, would not have known it, at least not until the arrival of Alexander the Great at the gates of India.

Unfortunately for Severino, contemplative practice is still a form of "exercise", and exercising to "let happen", Severino observes, "is a square circle: exercising so that all exercise dissolves. [. . .] In this inability to escape 'exercise' lies the profound solidarity between the West and the East" (Severino 2008, p. 232). Therefore, for Severino, Indian philosophies are not a critique of power and action but rather a different way in which the sense of technics has developed. To the bare technics cultivated in the West and aimed at dominating nature, there stands in contrast the elaboration of different 'techniques' (*tecniche*) aimed at controlling the soul, cultivated in the East: "But is it more decisive that the East and the West turned to different fields (nature, the soul), or that at the foundation of this turning to things lies the same technical attitude?" (Severino 2008, pp. 241–42).

From what has been stated so far, it is evident that this is an incorrect interpretation, likely motivated by a decidedly partial understanding of Indian thought, particularly Buddhist philosophy. This is further confirmed by a certain lack of philological rigor in Severino's work. For instance, Severino (Severino 1989, p. 100) attributes to the root of the Pāli term *dukkha* the meaning of 'sigh' (*dheuk*-), which is known to be inaccurate.

However, this reinforces his philosophical interpretation of the concept of suffering; for Buddhists, the conception of suffering is radically different from that of the Greeks, as India remained "pre-ontological". "The suffering to which Buddha refers is radically, utterly different from the suffering that lies before the eyes of Aeschylus; yet, between these two forms of suffering, there is something in common; they share a certain identity. It is precisely this identity that makes it possible to render pre-ontological and ontological forms of suffering commensurable" (Severino 1989, p. 99). Nevertheless, "in Buddha and the *Upaniṣad*s, becoming does not yet have an ontological character"—Severino here refers to the idea that the change of an appearance from form A to form B is not conceived as a formal transformation but as a radical annihilation of the being of A, which vanishes into nothingness, and the coming-into-being of B from nothingness—"and thus, for him, it must be said that the becoming to which this wisdom aspires does not yet have an ontological meaning, even though a Buddhist commentator of the fifth century CE, such as Vasubandhu, could already think ontologically about the categories of immortality and annihilation as a consequence of the spread of Greek culture in the East" (Severino 1989, p. 100).

There are multiple reasons why Severino misunderstands the philosophy of the Buddha, which have been argued in various comparative studies contrasting, for example, Pāli Buddhism with Parmenides and with Aeschylus (Divino 2024), or with Anaximander (Stella and Divino 2023). I have highlighted how Severino's interpretation of Greek authors tends to lack the philological attention necessary to properly situate them, for example, within the Indo-European context, thereby preventing an accurate comparison with Indian thinkers. Furthermore, Severino misinterprets some aspects of the philosophy of the *Upaniṣads*, wherein the 'solution' to suffering is the affirmation of the eternity of the *ātman* and the 'escape' from 'becoming' (*saṃsāra*) sought by Buddhist ascetics. Since he considers them incapable of generating a "*practice*" and a "*technics*", he regards their escape from suffering as a reliance on reason, as evidenced by the Buddhist attribution of *avidyā* as the cause of suffering (Severino 1989, p. 101).

Here, too, it is evident that Severino does not consider contemplative practice as a bodily technique, being unaware of the strong associations between technics and power already present in Vedic culture. This would have supported his interpretation, given that the Vedic world presents a true Promethean myth analogous to that described in *Theogony* or Aeschylus, albeit lacking the final connotations given to it by the latter, namely Prometheus' 'repentance', which attributes false hopes (τύφλας ἐλπίδας, "τυφλὰς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐλπίδας κατῴκισα", v. 252) to technics for its inability to surpass necessity (τέχνη δ᾽ ἀνάγκης ἀσθενεστέρα μακρῷ, PB, v. 514). However, this is most likely a reinterpretation by Aeschylus, as Severino himself admits, and has nothing to do with the common Indo-European heritage of this myth.

The notion that Aeschylus and the generic "pre-ontological Orient" offer liberation from the "suffering of becoming" by affirming its "illusoriness" leads Severino to assert that Parmenides "offered the possibility, not embraced by the West, of a liberation from suffering and anguish analogous to that practiced by Eastern wisdom" (Severino 1989, p. 105). However, Severino criticizes Parmenides for not providing this "knowledge of the illusoriness of becoming and multiplicity" with a practical dimension rooted in the "*ineffable experience* of the immutable", seemingly overlooking the fact that Parmenides describes his philosophy as a genuine mystical revelation (Cornford 1933; Boodin 1943; Vlastos 1946; Verdenius 1949; Phillips 1955; Woodbury 1958; Kahn 1969; Floyd 1992; Crystal 2002).

> The great Oriental civilizations developed outside of European nihilism not because the Orient is the dominion of truth, but because it did not reach the fork where the "path of Night" (*nuktos keleuthos*, as Parmenides called it), travelled by European civilization, branches off from the "path of Day" (*ematos keleuthos*), where history grows in the light of truth and which has not yet been travelled by men. The Orient was not saved: it had not yet reached the place where salvation or perdition is decided. The Orient is not health; it is the state that precedes sickness.
>
> (Severino 2016, p. 21)

Similarly, Severino's accusation that the 'Orientals' conceive of death as mere illusion is justified by his assertion that "in all pre-ontological thought—in thought, that is, where faith in the evidence of the annihilation of the entity is absent (the faith that underpins knowledge)—the principle dominates that, in its essence, humanity has lived, lives, or can live a divine life free from death" (Severino 1989, p. 107). This can be considered partially true by virtue of the Vedic conception of contemplation as a reunion with the divine and the attainment of qualities such as *amṛta*. Nonetheless, it is certainly not due to a lack of technical conception that such aspirations are formulated: on the contrary, the idea of technics is already present in the Vedic world and constitutes precisely the type of epistemic wisdom with which humans believe they can control being; it is 'ontological' in this sense.

In the case of Buddhism, even the Buddha assumes a 'Promethean' role in a manner entirely comparable to the Greek tradition. Just as Prometheus is a "bringer of light" (βόσπορος < φωσφόρος) to humanity (PB, vv. 732–74) by giving them fire (a principle of technics as a metaphor for power but also for knowledge, as light holds the same connotation in the Vedic world: as a revealer of the 'truth' of things, and thus capable of making its possessor—who possesses the technics of fire and hence of light—also the possessor of 'power'), so too is the 'power' obtained by the Buddha through contemplative technique analogously qualified: he is *tamonuda* ("dispeller of darkness"), *obhāsaka* ("the radiant one", related to *obhāsa*, "shining"), the aforementioned *pabhaṅkara* ("emanator of light", also used to denote the sun), and *pajjotakara* (literally "beacon"). Other truly fascinating terms include *ālokakaraṇā* ("light-giver") and *ukkādhāra* (literally "torch-bearer", like Prometheus, sic), and the Buddha is also called "kinsman of the sun" (*buddhenādiccabandhunā,* Snp 5.18) and described as *ādiccova virocasi* ("you shine like the sun", Snp 3.1 and 3.7). His family, the Sākiya clan, is described as being of solar descent (*ādiccā nāma gottena sākiyā nāma jātiyā*).

Contemplative practice is linked to the acquisition of light, as described by the phenomenon of "light acquisition" (*āloko udapādi*), which we find described, for example, in SN 56.11, explicitly connecting the acquisition of light—through contemplative technique—to the attainment of 'vision' (the *cakṣa* of Vedic seers?) and **gnosis** (*cakkhuṃ udapādi,* ***ñāṇaṃ udapādi***, ***paññā udapādi***, ***vijjā udapādi***, and *āloko udapādi*). In this, the sutta is a clear heir to Vedic conceptions, as the light acquired is, in every respect, a power that surpasses even that of the gods: "an immeasurable and magnificent light appeared in the world, surpassing the glory of the gods" (*appamāṇo ca uḷāro obhāso loke pāturahosi atikkamma devānaṃ devānubhāvanti*, see also SN 12.4, 12.10, 12.65, 36.25, 47.31, 51.9, and 56.12). Similar expressions are also found in DN 14 (*appamāṇo uḷāro obhāso pātubhavati*. . . *tenobhāsena aññamaññaṃ sañjānanti*. . . always referring to "an immeasurable magnificent light appears, surpassing the glory of the gods", and *andhakāre vā telapajjotaṃ dhāreyya: 'cakkhumanto rūpāni dakkhantī'ti; evamevaṃ bhagavatā anekapariyāyena dhammo pakāsito,* meaning "lighting a lamp in the darkness so that those with clear vision can see what is there, the Buddha has made the teaching clear in many ways"). In this sense, see also DN 21, SN 12.4, 12.10, 12.65, 36.5, 47.31, 51.9, and 56.12. Many other similarities concerning the imagery of light in Buddhism have been compared to the Vedic world by Gonda (Gonda 1963, pp. 268–70).

In conclusion, through the comparison of a series of symbolic images found in R̥gvedic literature, we have reconstructed the formation of some fundamental concepts of early Buddhist thought as preserved in the Pāli Canon. Similarly, figures and rituals present in both the Vedic and Buddhist worlds, though differing in their manifestations and functions, provide significant insights into the evolution of the philosophical conceptions they express.

It is not difficult to understand why light becomes such a significant metaphor for truth in the Vedic world. Indra himself discovered the sun, which was previously dwelling in darkness, and thus the world was initially shrouded in shadows (*gūḻhaṃ sūryaṃ tamasāpavratena turīyeṇa brahmaṇāvindad atriḥ*, R̥V 5.40.6). By liberating the sun, Indra is also the one who "made truth manifest", as he cast it under the rays of his light, which had previously been enveloped in darkness (*satyaṃ tad indro daśabhir daśagvaiḥ sūryaṃ viveda tamasi kṣiyantam*, R̥V 3.39.5). Buddhism notably emphasizes the connection between the notions of light and the world. Within the poetic discourse of Buddhism, there are recurring allusions to this concept, such as the individual who illuminates the world with their radiance (*lokaṃ pabhāseti*), referring to those engaged in the pursuit of Buddhahood.[56]

The significance of the metaphor of light as the highest point of liberation or the attainment of divine nature is reiterated throughout the Vedic hymns. In the earlier section, we observed how light is primarily associated with Agni and how it possesses the power to reveal things that were previously obscured. In this interpretation, light plays a fundamental role in unveiling truth and enabling the generation of the 'world', as it makes things manifest, thereby rendering them knowable and manipulable by those who wield the power of that light. Those who have harnessed fire, capturing the power of Agni, have thus acquired the ability to understand the nature of things and organize the world. This, however, represents only the manipulative aspect tied to fire as the primordial technics and therefore to the harnessing of fire as the attainment of the most crucial power for humanity. Light, on the other hand, is also the highest peak to which a human being can aspire; it is the ultimate representation of power and thus implies divine nature, which is luminous by definition. It represents a superior cognitive capacity, as it can illuminate everything, thereby allowing it to be fully known. The seers aspire to this luminous nature, which is the ultimate acquisition of the characteristic of radiance and pervasive luminosity, represented by celestial light (*svar*), evoked repeatedly in various forms in the Vedic hymns. For example, if not in the form of pure light or Agni, the sun plays a fundamental role in invocations that aim to make it manifest (*evā pāhi pratnathā mandatu tvā śrudhi brahma vāvr̥dhasvota gīrbhiḥ; āviḥ sūryaṃ kr̥ṇuhi pīpihīṣo jahi śatrūṃr abhi gā indra tr̥ndhi*, R̥V 6.17.3). Could this perhaps be a reference to the original act of creation in which the seers harnessed Agni and 'lit' the sun? Let us not forget that the luminous power harnessed by Agni through the *agniyojana* is also the origin of Vedic 'technics', the Indian version of the Promethean myth of stealing the primordial, imperishable flame gifted to humankind. The *kavayaḥ* of antiquity are those who brought the invincible (Agni himself) to his seat (presumably the altar dedicated to him, though perhaps the altar par excellence, i.e., his primary seat, is the sky itself), so that he could be worshiped in manifold ways and manifest to humans as the sun (*dhīrāsaḥ padaṃ kavayo nayanti nānā hr̥dā rakṣamāṇā ajuryam; siṣāsantaḥ pary apaśyanta sindhum āvir ebhyo abhavat sūryo nr̥̄n*, R̥V 1.146.4).

The sun was made 'manifest' for humankind in the same way. From this, it is inferred that there was perhaps a prior state of perpetual night. The numerous solar epithets associated not only with the seers and deities but also with the sovereign must thus be situated in this context, whereby the sun (light) becomes a metaphor for power (technics), including the power over others that the sovereign exercises as the guarantor of social order.

The Buddha, in turn, boasts numerous solar metaphors, indicative of how such imagery could not be easily abandoned.

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Abbreviations

R̥V	*R̥gveda*, Rajwade, V. K., Abhyankar, V. S., Sontakke, N. S. et al. (1965) (eds.), *R̥gveda-Samhitā* with the Commentary of Sāyaṇācārya, vol. 1, Mandal 1 (Poona: N. S. Sontakke for the Vaidic SamshodhanMandal).
Snp	*Suttanipāta*, Andersen, Dines, and Smith, Helmer (1913) (eds.), *Sutta-Nipāta* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Dhp	*Dhammapada*, Ānandajoti Bhikkhu (2020), *A Comparatve Edition of the Dhammapada with Parallels from Sanskritised Prakrit Edited Together with a Study of the Dhammapada Collection* (4th edn., Colombo: University of Peredeniya).
Iti	*Itivuttaka*, Kashyap, Bhikkhu (1959) (ed.), *The Khuddakapāṭha-Dhammapada-Udāna-Itivuttaka-Suttanipāta* (Bihar: Pāli Publication Board). Other reference edition: Mahāsaṅgīti Tipiṭaka Buddhavasse 2500.
DN	*Dīghanikāya*, Davids, T. W. Rhys, and Carpenter, J. Estlin (1890–1911) (eds.), *The Dīgha Nikāya* (London: Henry Frowde for the Pali Text Society).
MN	*Majjhimanikāya*, Trenckner, Vilhelm, and Chalmers, Robert (1888–1925), *TheMajjhima-nikāya* (Pali Text Society Text Series, 60; London: Published for the Pali Text Society, by H. Frowde).
SN	*Saṃyuttanikāya*, Feer, Léon (1884–1904) (ed.), *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, 6 vols (London:Henry Frowde for the Pali Text Society).
AN	*Aṅguttaranikāya*, Morris, Richard, Hardy, E., Hunt, Mabel, and Davids, C. A. F. Rhys (1885–1910) (eds.), *The Aṅguttara-Nikâya*, v, 6 vols (London: Pali Text Society).
Th.	Hesiod, *Theogony* (Θεογονία). Reference edition: Evelyn-White, Hugh G. (1914) (ed.) *Hesiod. The Homeric Hymns and Homerica with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. Theogony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd.).
Nat.	Parmenides, *On Nature*, fragments (Περὶ Φύσεως). Reference edition: Conche, M. (2011) (ed.) *Parménide: Le Poème: Fragments* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France) (Conche 2011).
PB	Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (Προμηθεὺς Δεσμώτης). Reference edition: *Prometheus*. London: William Heinemann, Ltd. 1926. Part of two volumes: *Aeschylus*, with an English translation by Herbert Weir Smyth.

Notes

1 See, for example, the expression "O mendicants, I don't deem them neither as ascetics among ascetics nor as brahmins among brahmins" (*na me te, bhikkhave, samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā samaṇesu vā samaṇasammatā brāhmaṇesu vā brāhmaṇasammatā*), SN 17.25 and 48.34.

2 A controversial debate concerns the use of the term *samaṇa* by Buddhists, since its equivalent in other Indian languages is actually adopted by other ascetic movements in India, including the Jains. That this is a term initially used by Buddhists is, according to Stoneman (Stoneman 2019, p. 329), beyond doubt, and it is more likely that it was the latter who popularized it later.

3 In the Upaniṣads, Brahmā's world is the *parama-loka*, the "summum bonum" that a seer can reach by the *śrauta* rite. Here, meditation (*dhyāna*) becomes a means to permanent safety, permitting the seer to freely move in all the existing *loka*s.

4 An example of caste division preceding R̥V 10.90 can also be found in R̥V 4.50.8, where the inferiority of the herder-farmer caste is asserted in favor of those who possess knowledge of contemplation: "Indeed, he prospers in his dwelling; for him, the earth bears fruit in every season; to him, (his) subjects willingly render homage, the prince to whom the Brāhmaṇa (duly revered) first addresses himself" (*sa it kṣeti sudhita okasi sve tasmā iḻā pinvate viśvadānīm; tasmai viśaḥ svayam evā namante yasmin brahmā rājani pūrva eti*). If we then examine the *rājasūya*, it becomes evident why two distinct figures emerge: a herder (*govyacchá*) and a farmer (*akṣāvāpa*), and also why, in a later stage of the ritual, only the farmer remains to secure the power of the aspiring sovereign. This ritual also reveals the centrality of spatial organization within ancient Indo-Āryan thought. The sovereign, as

a warrior, "conquers" the space originally governed by the chaos of the forest and "humanizes" it into an "organized space". To formalize this conquest, a series of sacrifices are performed on multiple platforms stacked one above the other, symbolizing various spatial levels—distinct "worlds" (*loka*) that are conquered sequentially by the warrior-king. At the apex of the ritual platform, the warrior-king "sets the wheel in motion" (*cakra*), an ancient symbol associated with the sun. For this reason, the Indian king is also referred to as *cakravartin*. This ritual encompasses several elements: the significance of spatial organization in the area "conquered" through human will, solar symbolism, and the relationship between the sovereign and the herder-farmer. Moreover, it retains ancient vestiges of human sacrifice (*puruṣamedha*), offering much for reflection.

5 Cf. R̥V 1.87.5 (***pituḥ*** *pratnasya janmanā vadāmasi somasya jihvā pra jigāti* ***cakṣasā***); 3.39.2 (*bhadrā vastrāṇy arjunā vasānā seyam asme sanajā* ***pitryā dhīḥ***); 4.4.11 (*maho rujāmi bandhutā vacobhis tan mā* ***pitur*** *gotamād anv iyāya*); 8.6.10 (*aham id dhi* ***pituṣ pari*** *medhām r̥tasya jagrabha*).

6 Furthermore, early Buddhism seems to establish a connection between *asura*s and the element of water or the metaphor of the ocean. See, for example, AN 8.19, where it is said that the *asura*s "love the ocean" (*asurā mahāsamudde abhiramanti*) for several reasons: it slants and slopes gradually, with no abrupt precipice; it is "stable" (*ṭhitadhammo*); and it does not overflow its boundaries (*nātivattati*). It is evident that these and other images found in AN 8.19 are metaphors. The *mahāsamudda* serves the purpose of this great, immense, and indistinct whole, where all the other waters (such as those of the rivers) should eventually flow into. This final convergence is also what the Buddhist ascetic wants to realize, and once this status is reached, the ascetic becomes like the world's stream that never empties or fills up (*puna caparaṃ, bhante, yā ca loke savantiyo mahāsamuddaṃ appenti yā ca antalikkhā dhārā papatanti, na tena mahāsamuddassa ūnattaṃ vā pūrattaṃ vā paññāyati*). The fact that the ascetic must "flow into the ocean" like a river is stated, for example, in SN 45.109, 45.110–114, 45.121, 45.122–126, 45.133, 45.134–138, 45.97, and 45.98–102.

7 This battle is also referenced in other suttas, such as SN 56.41.

8 In this context, SN 1.60 is also worth mentioning, as it presents the figure of the *kavi* (the Vedic 'poet'). This sutta proves not only the importance that some ancient figures still had in the Buddhist world (such as the *kavi* or the *isi*), but also the importance of traditions related to their role, thus the conceptions of language, verses, and metrics, "metrics is the basis of verses" (*chando nidānaṃ gāthānaṃ*), and we also read that "syllables are their distinctive mark; verses depend on names, a *kavi* is what underlies them" (*akkharā tāsaṃ viyañjanaṃ; nāmasannissitā gāthā, kavi gāthānamāsayo*).

9 The word, always in the form of prayer (*asmā ukthāya*), enables the primordial event that split the mountain (*vi parvato jihīta*) and caused the waters of life to flow forth from it: the weight of the cloud descends, the cloud separates (with its weight), and the sky fulfills (its office); see R̥V 5.45.3.

10 The world, thus understood as a metaphorical apparatus, encompasses not only sociological implications but also profound philosophical enigmas. The fundamental hypothesis I propose is that, in the specialized language of Buddhism, the world predominantly represents what is to be transcended through disciplined meditative practice. The world, in essence, is a constrained interpretation of objective reality, manifesting as a systematic assemblage of illusory and deceptive perceptions. Consequently, and indeed as a direct result of this, the world also functions as a universal intellectual key, seamlessly integrated into the dialectical interplay between the *gāma*, or village, symbolizing the socially and culturally organized dimension, and the *arañña*, or forest, indicative of the "unitary perception" (*araññasaññaṃ paṭicca ekattaṃ*) considered retrievable in the forest (MN 121). This implies that the world evidently also falls within a dimension involving the social context, closely connected to the normative framework. Since Buddhism stands in marked contrast to the Vedic normative context, one can expect a use of the term *loka* that accounts for the conception of the same term in the Brahmanical tradition. In Vedic usage, *loka* can denote the dimension of the *deva* (gods) as distinct from the human realm.

11 "Even from the heavens, your radiant beams shone forth to this realm: you continued to shine through countless sunny mornings, and the gods extolled the joyous labor of their zealous herald, who ardently kindled Agni in the forests" (*divaścidā te rucayante rokā uṣo vibhātīranu bhāsi pūrvīḥ; apo yadaghna uśadhagh vaneṣu hoturmandrasya panayanta devāḥ*, R̥V 3.6.7).

12 The Vedic Aurora "drives away her Sister's darkness, and, through her excellence, makes her retrace her path" (*uṣā apa svasustamaḥ saṃ vartayati vartaniṃ sujātatā*, R̥V 10.172.4), highlighting the inherent connection between Aurora's symbolic representation of light and the overarching ideals of truth and justice. Additionally, the concept of light, its manifestation, and the associated processes of revelation and discernibility are profoundly interwoven with the notion of authenticity.

13 The term 'world' (*loka*) is etymologically linked to the concept of *'light'*. Its core derives from the Indo-European root **leu̯k-*, which is approximately reconstructed to mean "to shine" or "to radiate" (Mayrhofer 1996b, p. 481). This root underpins the Vedic word *loka*, signifying "world", and its variant *roká*, meaning "light" (Monier-Williams 1899, pp. 881–82, 906). The transition from the liquid sound /l/ to the vibrant /r/ is a frequent phenomenon in linguistic evolution. While these variants have specialized into distinct terms—*roká* even existing in a verbal form (*rócate*, "to shine", see, for example, the usage of the term *rocamānā* in R̥V 6.64.1)—it should be emphasized that *loka*, as "world", preserves a semantic trace of its ancient association with "light". Moreover, numerous other Indo-European terms for light, brightness, luminosity, whiteness, or radiance are derived from the same root, including Hittite *lukk-tta* and *lukkanu-zi* and Greek λἐυκος and λὑκοφως, among others (Kloekhorst 2008, pp. 530–33;

Beekes 2010, p. 851). Lithuanian *laũkas*, from the same root and meaning "field" or "open space", hints at the semantic shift from the notion of radiating light, revealing the image of a world, to the conception of a spatial field, the framework for phenomenal occurrences. The world, when conceptualized as a metaphoric construct, encompasses not only sociological dimensions but also profound philosophical complexities. The principal hypothesis proposed here is that, in the specialized discourse of Buddhism, the world is predominantly understood as that which is designated for transcendence through disciplined meditative practice. Cf. also the origin for the Latin term *lūx* and English *light* (<**leuhsa*) (Rix 2001, pp. 418–19; De Vaan 2008, p. 355; Kroonen 2013, p. 334).

14 According to Jurewicz, "the Ṛgvedic poets presented the movement, especially movement while traveling, as the process during which they could realize their essence and their identity. Moreover, during a journey, space (*loka*) was gained which enabled them to move again. In the ṚV, there is no term for 'freedom', this concept, however, is evoked by the poets. Moreover, we can also reconstruct its source domain, i.e., space which enables movement. *Loka* is opposed to *áṃhas*, the lack of freedom, conceived in terms of bondage which makes movement impossible" (Jurewicz 2018, p. 27).

15 In the version available on SuttaCentral (based on Mahāsaṅgīti Tipiṭaka Buddhavasse 2500) the text is published as *amantamasāro loko, disā sabbā sameritā*. . .

16 *chakkhattuṃ kho panāhaṃ, ānanda, abhijānāmi imasmiṃ padese sarīraṃ nikkhipitaṃ, tañca kho rājāva* ***samāno cakkavattī*** *dhammiko dhammarājā cāturanto vijitāvī janapadatthāvariyappatto sattaratanasamannāgato, ayaṃ sattamo sarīranikkhepo.* Here, it is explicitly mentioned that the Buddha was born as a *cakkavatti* in one of his previous lives. Other mentions of the role of the *cakkavatti* can be found in AN 3.14, 4.130, DN 26, SN 46.42, and 55.1.

17 A variant of this myth is the slaying of another analogous demon, Vala. In ṚV 1.52, it is said that Indra is both *vṛtrahatye* ("slayer of Vṛtra", 1.52.4) and the one who "broke the enclosure of Vala" (*bhinad valasya paridhīṃr*, 1.52.5). Vala, like Vṛtra, is a constrainer and is associated with an "enclosure". While Vṛtra imprisons the waters, Vala confines sacred cows, associated with light (*svaḥ*), which may represent the sun's rays. In ṚV 2.24.3, Bṛhaspati uses the instrument of prayer (*brahma*) to pierce Vala and release the imprisoned cows (*ud gā ājad abhinad brahmaṇā valam agūhat tamo vy acakṣayat svaḥ*). This inevitably results in the dispersion of darkness (*valam agūhat tamo vy acakṣayat svaḥ*).

18 Particular attention should be paid to the use of the term *kṣaya* to denote "habitable space". The root of this term is *kṣi*, which relates not only to habitation but primarily to possession and dominion (cf. Greek κτάομαι) (Monier Monier-Williams 1899, p. 325; Beekes 2010, pp. 788–89). From the same Indo-European root, we derive the Old Persian *xšāyaθiya*, "king", "emperor" (Mayrhofer 1996a, p. 421). The term is thus associated with power and the acquisition of power, yet power is exercised over a defined space, which must be brought under human control. Space is thereby removed from its prior indeterminacy and framed within precise boundaries, within which humans exercise control and assert power. This concept underlies the notion of *kṣetra*, the "field". While it signifies the plowed and cultivated field, this metaphor holds substantial importance, as the cultivated field is evidently a space subjected to a certain level of human control. Even from above, the areas of a *kṣetra* are easily distinguishable: they are well squared, divided into plots, and follow a clear and precise 'order', readily discernible from spaces beyond human control.

19 Analogous terms in languages related to Sanskrit contribute to further elucidating this concept; the Avestan *xšaθra* "realm" as well as *xšaθriia* and the equivalent in ancient Persian *xšāyaθiya* are clear variations in the same root from which *kṣatriya* derives. Even the English word "home", perhaps unexpectedly, may be etymologically connected to a related root: *kṣema* "basis, foundation" (cf. also German *Heimat* "homeland", Greek κώμη "village" and ἐϋκτίμενος, a place good to dwell in, both terms related to Mycenaean *kitimena* "field") (Monier-Williams 1899, p. 322; Mayrhofer 1996a, p. 437; Beekes 2010, pp. 791–92; Kroonen 2013, p. 201). Therefore, the frame within which our image is set is a frame that plays on the *kṣatra/kṣetra* dichotomy and the figure of the *kṣatriya*, who employs both to affirm their dominion. The word *kṣema* appears used also in a compound with *yoga*, "It is worth noting that the composer of the Bhagavadgītā (9.22), when he uses the compound *yogakṣema* in reference to the final bliss realized thanks to unity with Kṛṣṇa, also evokes the scenario of a journey (*teṣāṃ nityābhiyuktānāṃ yogakṣemaṃ vahāmy aham*)" (Jurewicz 2018, p. 28).

20 Furthermore, the reconstructed Indo-European root **h_1erk^w-*, which signifies "to praise", has also within its possible meanings "to shine" (see, for example, Old Irish *erc*, "sky, heaven") (Pokorny 1959a, p. 340; Rix 2001, p. 240). In Hittite, the root *ārku-^{zi}*, *arku-* means "to chant, to intone" and is comparable with Sanskrit *arc-* "to sing, to praise", and Tocharian A *yark* "worship" (Tocharian B *yarke*, "worship") (Kloekhorst 2008, p. 205).

21 *uṣasaḥ pūrvā adha yad vyūṣur mahad vi jajñe akṣaram pade goḥ; vratā devānām upa nu prabhūṣan mahad devānām asuratvam ekam*. Likewise, we can affirm that there exists a fundamental relationship between the word, understood as prayer or verses directed towards invocation, and the techniques of fire, a relationship established through the metaphor of light: the word is luminous and is also a technical power, just as fire is. However, as previously mentioned, not all words possess this power, but only those pronounced correctly and thus executed in a technically perfect manner. This knowledge, especially in the form of the proper intonation of the word (*svāra*, *svarita*), is what sacralizes the syllables (*akṣara*), the fundamental units for the construction of lexemes in Vedic, and creates a genuine cult of language. It goes without saying that the significance of language in the form of the *ṛc* is also tied to the sapiential transmission of the Vedas, insofar as they constitute a kind of science of the "true word", which

remains unknown to those who instead use common speech and therefore do not have access to the sacred power of the verses or the knowledge codified within them, "All the gods have taken their seat in this supreme heaven (which is) the imperishable verses [*ṛco akṣare*]; what use will it be to one who does not know this (truth) of the verses? But those who know it, they are the perfect ones" (*ṛco akṣare parame vyoman yasmin devā adhi viśve niṣeduḥ; yas tan na veda kim ṛcā kariṣyati ya it tad vidus ta ime sam āsate*, ṚV 1.164.39). It is interesting to note that the Indo-European root of φαίνω not only denotes the condition of luminous appearance (φαεινός, φάος, or Sanskrit *bhāti*) but, in its triliteral archetype, may perhaps be homophonic with the root of verbal action (φήμη, φωνή, and in Sanskrit *bhánati* and *bhāṣā*) (Pokorny 1959a, pp. 104–5; Rix 2001, pp. 68–69; Beekes 2010, pp. 1545–46). If this were true, a striking coincidence would emerge between vocal action, phonation, and luminous epiphany. Both phenomena evoke the primordial appearance of an image. Language, in fact, functions as the custodian of acoustic images and their association with conceptual prototypes—cognitive images that form the foundation of our semantics.

22 *evameva kho, bhikkhave, yāvakīvañca tathāgato loke nuppajjati arahaṃ sammāsambuddho, neva tāva mahato ālokassa pātubhāvo hoti mahato obhāsassa.*

23 The myth of Prometheus likely preserves an archaic memory of Indo-European fire rituals and the veneration of fire, the origins of which are described in this narrative. Upon discovering Prometheus's deception, Zeus becomes enraged. Initially, Prometheus offers Zeus the choice of any portion he desired, but this was part of the deception Zeus failed to understand, so great was his desire to harm humans (. . . θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποισι, τὰ καὶ τελέεσθαι ἔμελλεν). Zeus then seized the white fat but quickly realized he had been tricked, "anger poisoned his spirit when he saw the white bones of the ox cleverly disguised, and for this reason, the tribes of men on earth burn white bones to the immortal gods on fragrant altars" (χώσατο δὲ φρένας ἀμφί, χόλος δέ μιν ἵκετο θυμόν, ὡς ἴδεν ὀστέα λευκὰ βοὸς δολίῃ ἐπὶ τέχνῃ. ἐκ τοῦ δ᾽ ἀθανάτοισιν ἐπὶ χθονὶ φῦλ᾽ ἀνθρώπων καίουσ᾽ ὀστέα λευκὰ θυηέντων ἐπὶ βωμῶν, *Th.*, vv. 554–7). Here, we recognize a familiar scene: the altar of fire and the ritual sacrifice performed upon it, echoing the memory of the Indo-European ritual flame. Due to this trick, humans retained the meat for themselves while the bones wrapped in fat were used as sacrificial offerings to the gods through the sacred fire. Offended by this injustice, Zeus decided to hide fire from humans as a punishment (πυρὸς μένος ἀκαμάτοιο). Prometheus intervened a second time for humanity's benefit, stealing the distant glow of the imperishable fire through a hollow fennel stalk (κλέψας ἀκαμάτοιο πυρὸς τηλέσκοπον, *Th.*, v. 566). The flame, thus transmitted through the fennel stalk, was returned to humans. In this second part of the myth, numerous elements merit attention: foremost is the theme of an imperishable flame, a fire that burns eternally, which clearly references the sacredness of the flame. This theme is reproduced in other Indo-European cultures, notably in Iranian tradition, where the temple of the eternal fire holds central importance.

24 *bahavaḥ sūracakṣaso 'gnijihvā ṛtāvṛdhaḥ; trīṇi ye yemur vidathāni dhītibhir viśvāni paribhūtibhiḥ.*

25 The Buddha is "the eye arisen in the world" (*cakkhuṃ loke samuppannaṃ*, MN 98). Cf. also the expression "all-seeing" (*samanta-cakkhu*) found also in Snp 5.7 and 5.19.

26 The seer who attains *cakṣas* gains the ability for a superior observation (*paśya*), but one always oriented towards devotion and connected to thought (*manasā*), like those in ancient times who performed sacrifices (*paśyan manye manasā cakṣasā tān ya imaṃ yajñam ayajanta pūrve*, ṚV 10.130.6).

27 See also Iti 44 (*cakkhumatā pakāsitā*). As Bhikkhu Bodhi notices, this epithet is frequently employed in the Nikāyas, and it is part of a series of other attributes related to the eye, such as the epithet "universal eye" or "one with opened eyes" (*vivaṭacakkhu*), which are all related to the concept of omniscience, "The suttas ascribe various kinds of vision to the Buddha: the divine eye, the eye of wisdom, and the buddha eye" (Bodhi 2017, p. 92).

28 The technical prowess of Agni is mirrored in his dual capability: creative and destructive. The creative aspect is invariably the reverse side of the destructive one. This is because Agni's power does not ensure creation from nothingness but rather a transformation from something else. We must consider this in the potent imagery first conveyed through poetry by the seers. In their imaginative realm, this dual nature of Agni was indeed distinctly clear, intentionally bent to their will. Later on, hermits and ascetics would propose another imagery, other visions, other poems, in which this force is synonymous with the 'mortifier' will of the fire worshippers to reduce things to nothingness, to let that heat consume until incineration. This represents a significant warning for modern mortifiers who, utilizing that same fire of technics, forget how it cannot grant anything without consuming something else. However, we will discuss the theme of incineration later on.

29 According to Jurewicz, *yoga* can also be interpreted as "journey", in a spiritual sense, "The reason why the period of journey was called *yoga* is clear: it began with harnessing of draught animals. The yoke for a journey metonymy motivates this use of the word *yoga*. This is an example of a more general metonymy—first phase of the process for the whole process. [. . .] In the later Sanskrit, the compound *yogakṣema* (literally: 'war and settling'), which appears in the ṚV only once (10.166.5), was used to express a state of spiritual fullness and happiness. This compound activates the whole experience of journey: the beginning of a journey with the yoking of an animal (*yoga*) and reaching the final destination—a safe and happy place where one can have rest (*kṣema*)" (Jurewicz 2018, pp. 27–28).

30 Interestingly, in Snp 3.3 it is spoken of an "immortal **voice**" which is "truth" (*saccaṃ ve amatā **vācā***). This corresponds to the Buddha's teaching, which is "eternal" (*esa dhammo sanantano*), for this teaching, with its **meaning**, is grounded in truth (*sacce **atthe** ca dhamme ca*).

31 "Indeed, if there were no one to dispel the corruptions, as the wind disperses the clouds, darkness would envelop the entire world, and never again would humans shine brightly. The wise are the bearers of light. Thus it is, O great hero, that I think of you" (*no ce hi jātu puriso kilese, vāto yathā abbhaghanaṃ vihāne; tamovassa nivuto sabbaloko, na jotimantopi narā tapeyyuṃ; dhīrā ca pajjotakarā bhavanti, taṃ taṃ ahaṃ vīra tatheva maññe*, Snp 2.12). See also Iti 104, "such mendicants are called 'teachers', 'leaders of the caravan', 'abandoners of conflicts', 'dispellers of darkness', 'bearers of light', 'luminaries', 'lamps', 'torch bearers', 'beacons', 'nobles', and 'clairvoyants'... they illuminate the true teaching, O radiant bearers of light, wise bearers of light, with clear vision, devoid of conflict" (*evarūpā ca te*, *bhikkhave*, *bhikkhū satthārotipi vuccanti*, *satthavāhātipi vuccanti*, *raṇañjahātipi vuccanti*, *tamonudātipi vuccanti*, *ālokakarātipi vuccanti*, *obhāsakarātipi vuccanti*, *pajjotakarātipi vuccanti*, *ukkādhārātipi vuccanti*, *pabhaṅkarātipi vuccanti*, *ariyātipi vuccanti*, *cakkhumantotipi vuccantī'ti... te jotayanti saddhammaṃ*, *bhāsayanti pabhaṅkarā; ālokakaraṇā dhīrā*, *cakkhumanto raṇañjahā*).

32 Cf. *Th.*, vv. 535–44: "...when gods and mortal men had a dispute at Mecone, even then Prometheus was ready to slice up a great ox and set portions before them, seeking to deceive the mind of Zeus. Before the others, he placed on the ox's hide the flesh and the thick layer of fat, covering them with the ox's stomach; but for Zeus, he put the white bones, skillfully adorned with gleaming fat. Then the father of gods and men said to him: 'Son of Iapetus, most glorious of all lords, good sir, how unfairly you have divided the portions!'" (καὶ γὰρ ὅτ᾽ ἐκρίνοντο θεοὶ θνητοί τ᾽ ἄνθρωποι Μηκώνῃ, τότ᾽ ἔπειτα μέγαν βοῦν πρόφρονι θυμῷ δασσάμενος προέθηκε, Διὸς νόον ἐξαπαφίσκων. τοῖς μὲν γὰρ σάρκας τε καὶ ἔγκατα πίονα δημῷ ἐν ῥινῷ κατέθηκε καλύψας γαστρὶ βοείῃ, τῷ δ᾽ αὖτ᾽ ὀστέα λευκὰ βοὸς δολίῃ ἐπὶ **τέχνῃ** εὐθετίσας κατέθηκε καλύψας ἀργέτι δημῷ. δὴ τότε μιν προσέειπε πατὴρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε: Ἰαπετιονίδη, πάντων ἀριδείκετ᾽ ἀνάκτων, ὦ πέπον, ὡς ἑτεροζήλως διεδάσσαο μοίρας).

33 The Bhṛgus are not only a priestly clan who discovered fire for mankind; they are also mentioned as chariot builders in the Rigveda. In the Brāhmaṇa texts, Bhṛgu is the son of Varuṇa. The word *bhṛgu-* is considered etymologically related to *bhárgas-*, "effulgence", which characterizes Agni when the fire is born out of "power" (i.e., the strong friction of the kindling stick); these words seem to have a cognate in Greek φλόξ (gen. φλογός) and Latin *flamma*.

34 It is evident that this social division is a Vedic legacy of the two fundamental figures: one, representing political power, substantiated the other, holding the religious and ritual power, but the priests were in turn implicated in the maintenance of the royal authority (Cohen 2018, p. 86).

35 In Snp 5.18, the Buddha is described as being a solar descent (*ādiccā nāma gottena sākiyā nāma jātiyā*). The same thing is also affirmed various hymns directed to the Buddha, such as Snp 3.1 and 3.7, where we find the phrase *ādiccova virocasi* ("you shine like the sun").

36 "In whatever other fires there may exist, these are merely ramifications of you, Agni. In you, all the immortals rejoice" (*vayā id agne agnayas te anye tve viśve amṛtā mādayante*, ṚV 1.59.1).

37 It is interesting to note that Agni too is hailed as the most authentic friend of humans (*viśvān yadyajñāṃ abhipāsi mānuṣa tava kratvā yaviṣṭhya*, ṚV 3.9.6).

38 "Chorus: 'Abstaining from bestowing undue benefits upon mortals and disregarding your own suffering; nonetheless, I hold confidence that you will be unburdened from these constraints and possess a power no less than that of Zeus'. Prometheus: 'Not so the Fate, which inexorably brings all to fruition, is destined to fulfill this course. Only when I have been subjected to endless pains and torments, can I escape from my bondage. For technics is far weaker than necessity'" ([Χορός]: μή νυν βροτοὺς μὲν ὠφέλει καιροῦ πέρα, σαυτοῦ δ᾽ ἀκήδει δυστυχοῦντος. ὡς ἐγὼ εὔελπίς εἰμι τῶνδέ σ᾽ ἐκ δεσμῶν ἔτι λυθέντα μηδὲν μεῖον ἰσχύσειν Διός. [Προμηθεύς]: οὐ ταῦτα ταύτῃ Μοῖρά πω τελεσφόρος κρᾶναι πέπρωται, μυρίαις δὲ πημοναῖς δύαις τε καμφθεὶς ὧδε δεσμὰ φυγγάνω: τέχνη δ᾽ ἀνάγκης ἀσθενεστέρα μακρῷ, PB, vv. 507–14).

39 "We, your devoted companions, have chosen you, Agni, to be our divine ally, the Water's child of radiant glory, victorious beyond compare. As you joyfully roam the forest, you return to the nurturing streams, the offspring of your mother, which we, Agni, do not scorn. Your presence, even from afar, is a welcomed one" (*sakhāyas tvā vavṛmahe devam martāsa ūtaye; apāṃ napātaṃ subhagaṃ sudīditiṃ supratūrtim anehasam; kāyamāno vanā tvaṃ yan mātṝr ajagann apaḥ; na tat te agne pramṛṣe nivartanaṃ yad dūre sann ihābhavaḥ*, ṚV 3.9.1–2), and "You have conquered the acrid fumes, displaying your benevolence. Some precede you, while others encircle you, these friends of yours in whose company you take delight. The One who has surpassed his adversaries, eluding relentless pursuits, the vigilant and unwavering beings found him, hidden like a lion in his den, amidst the waters" (*ati tṛṣṭaṃ vavakṣithāthaiva sumanā asi; pra-prānye yanti paryanya āsate yeṣāṃ sakhye asi śritaḥ; īyivāṃsamati sridhaḥ śaśvatīrati saścataḥ; anvīmavindan niciirāso adruho.apsu siṃhamiva śritam*, 3.9.3).

40 "Disguised, you roamed freely, Agni, your presence concealed from our sight. Mātariśvan, produced through friction, from the Gods, brought you to us from a distant realm. Mortals received you, Agni, as the conveyor of oblations, bestowed upon them by the Gods. As the true friend of humanity, you safeguard each ritual with your inherent power, eternally youthful" (*sasṛvāṃsam iva tmanāgnim itthā tirohitam; ainaṃ nayan mātariśvā parāvato devebhyo mathitam pari; taṃ tvā martā agṛbhṇata devebhyo havyavāhana; viśvān yad yajñām̐ abhipāsi mānuṣa tava kratvā yaviṣṭhya*, ṚV 3.9.5–6).

41 At the break of dawn (*hiraṇyarūpam uṣaso vyuṣṭāv ayaḥsthūṇam uditā sūryasya*), Mitra and Varuṇa also arrived in a golden chariot (*ā rohatho varuṇa mitra gartam atas*), capable of observing both the finite and the infinite (*cakṣāthe aditiṃ ditiṃ ca*, ṚV 5.62.8). Furthermore, ṚV 9.10.8 states, "I take the navel of the sacrifice into my navel, my eye associates with the sun, and I fill the progeny of the seer" (*nābhā nābhiṃ na ā dade cakṣuś cit sūrye sacā; kaver apatyam ā duhe*). Agni himself is compared to a steed not born of horses (*anaśvo jāto*. . ., ṚV 1.152.5).

42 To be precise, the metaphor of the vehicle (*yāna*) is more typical of the successive dynamics and internal debates of the Buddhist schools. In the Pāli canon, it is the concept of road (*magga*) or path (*patha*) that best describes the metaphor of ascetic practice. See, for example, SN 47.43, AN 10.145, and 10.149 as the 'noble path', sometimes opposed to the 'dark path', constituted by *micchāvimutti* (AN 10.146 and 10.190)

43 Cf. also Jurewicz, whose reflections are absolutely distinguished on this matter, "Since their [of the Indo-Āryans] main means of transport were carts and chariots, the metaphor implied by the ṚV is LIFE IS A JOURNEY IN A CHARIOT. A chariot must have had a good axle to make the journey comfortable. In other words, a chariot had to be *sukha*" (Jurewicz 2018, p. 20).

44 See, for example, ṚV 1.130.6, *imāṃ te vācaṃ vasūyanta āyavo* ***rathaṃ*** *na* ***dhīraḥ*** *svapā* ***atakṣiṣuḥ*** *sumnāya tvām* ***atakṣiṣuḥ***. See also ṚV 10.39.14, *etaṃ vāṃ* ***stomam*** *aśvināv* ***akarmātakṣāma*** *bhṛgavo na ratham*.

45 It is equally noteworthy, as Jurewicz aptly points out, that the metaphor of a chariot in early Buddhism is clearly assimilated from the Vedic world also in the form of "man as a chariot". According to Jurewicz, this centrality of the chariot metaphor derives from the "half-nomadic life" of the ancient Indo-Āryans, and thus the authors of the Vedas, which led to these considerations, "the Ṛgvedic poets saw movement as their most important feature. It constituted their essence and allowed them to realize their identity as the Āryans. [. . .] While the space in which movement was possible was reserved for the Āryans (ṚV 4.24.2), 18 enemies were supposed to be deprived of this possibility. In cognitive terms, we could say that the Ṛgvedic poets conceived life in terms of movement or, more specifically, in terms of a journey" (Jurewicz 2018, pp. 19, 20).

46 Although the power to fashion a chariot is human, given that the seers are those who initially codify it, the power itself would seem to be, first and foremost, a divine faculty (. . .*brahmāṇi janayanta viprāḥ*, ṚV 7.22.9), harnessed (yoked) by humans primarily to communicate with (or approach) the deities. Moreover, that this is a τέχνη in an anthropological sense—a magical-religious technique—is confirmed, for instance, in ṚV 1.62.13, where the son of the seer Gotama fashions a "new" *brahma* (*navyam atakṣad brahma hariyojanāya*), hoping it will be more effective in transmitting thoughts-visions to Indra that might please him (*sunīthāya naḥ śavasāna nodhāḥ prātar makṣū dhiyāvasur jagamyāt*). This power, therefore, is not generated *ex nihilo*, but is something that must be "fashioned" or "constructed" according to a precise art, and depending on how it is fashioned, it may or may not be effective. As ṚV 3.38.1 reminds us, evoking the metaphor of a carpenter who must pay meticulous attention, so too must the contemplative exercise be disciplined (*abhi taṣṭeva dīdhayā manīṣām atyo na vājī sudhuro jihānaḥ*. . .). This conception also leads to the idea of the man as a chariot and *yoga* as a journey. Also, "this metaphor was used by the Buddha" (Jurewicz 2018, p. 23).

47 It is well-known that the concept of sacrifice is one of the points of divergence between Buddhism and the preceding tradition. Snp 3.4 states, "On what basis have seers and men, warriors and brahmins in the world performed so many sacrifices for the gods?" (*kiṃ nissitā isayo manujā, khattiyā brāhmaṇā devatānaṃ; yaññamakappayiṃsu puthū idha loke*). The intent here is, of course, to discredit the institution of sacrifice as capable of bringing tangible benefits. The only sacrifice one becomes worthy of is symbolic in nature. This does not involve the killing of living beings, which is strongly opposed in the canon, but rather the recognition of having become a 'knower'—one who has completed their path to brahma (*vedantagū vūsitabrahmacariyo*). Such a person is defined as the true "brahmin seeking merit" and thus deserving of a timely offering as a sacrifice (*kālena tamhi habyaṃ pavecche, yo brāhmaṇo puññapekkho yajetha*). The logic of sacrifice is also mocked in Snp 5.4, "Warriors and brahmins, who have performed many diverse sacrifices to the gods in the world, being meticulous in their rites, have they perhaps transcended rebirth, old age, and death?" (*khattiyā brāhmaṇā devatānaṃ aññamakappayiṃsu puthūdha loke, kaccissu te bhagavā yaññapathe appamattā*). Indeed, it is only by evaluating the world in its heights and depths (*saṅkhāya lokasmi paroparāni*) that these negative conditions can be overcome.

48 Similarly, the thought-prayers, the *brahmas*, must be "yoked like steeds through the work of the wise (*vivān*)"—presumably by means of the poetic technique (*harayaḥ santu yuktāḥ*, ṚV 7.28.1). For this reason, it is said, for example, "Let the *brahma* come to Indra" (*brahmā ṇa indropa yāhi*), and Indra responds, having the power to protect the *brahma* of the sages. This serves as a metaphor for communication with the deity.

49 In the Vedic world, prayers reach the gods but then descend back to men in the form of wealth and nourishment (*daśāritro manuṣyaḥ svarṣāḥ*. . ., ṚV 2.18.1; . . .*dhiyaḥ karasi vājaratnāḥ*, ṚV 6.35.1) or health, keeping hunger and disease at bay (*yuyutam asmad anirām amīvāṃ divā naktam mādhvī trāsīthāṃ naḥ*, ṚV 7.71.2). And again, "When shall our *brahmas* [be with you] in your chariot? When will you return your [received] *brahmas* in the form of sustenance for thousands? When will you reward my praises with wealth? When will you render the sacred rites as producers of food?" (*kadā bhuvan rathakṣayāṇi brahma kadā stotre sahasrapoṣyaṃ dāḥ; kadā stomaṃ vāsayo 'sya rāyā kadā dhiyaḥ karasi vājaratnāḥ*, ṚV 6.35.1); "When, O mighty Indra, will you return your [received] *brahma*s to us as food that will be all-sufficient? When will you combine worship and prayers? When will you make the oblations

(to you) productive of cattle?" (*karhi svit tad indra yaj jaritre viśvapsu brahma kr̥ṇavaḥ śaviṣṭha; kadā dhiyo na niyuto yuvāse kadā gomaghā havanāni gacchāḥ*).

50 It must be noted, in this regard, that in the Buddhist conception, death is something that "yokes". This specific metaphor is employed, for example, in Iti 63 and SN 1.20 ("they fall into the yoke of death", *yogamāyanti maccuno*) and also in AN 4.49 in the form of the "yoke of Māra", the god of death ("these ones, yoked by the yoke of Māra", *te yogayuttā mārassa*). It is thus in this sense that one should understand liberation from the ultimate yoke, which is precisely death or the cycle of rebirths. The Buddha, free from the yoke, is *amata*, deathless, and we may therefore presume that the condition of absence of death is precisely freedom from the yoke. Studying the use of these metaphors is important insofar as they derive from an imaginary that is almost certainly Vedic, where, however, the metaphor of the yoke and of immortality is inverted with respect to its Buddhist meaning. In the Vedic world, it is not so much death that yokes, but rather the seer who, in order to escape it, yokes something else—namely, an immortal principle, typically inherent in Soma or, even more so, in light, in *Agni*, or in the Sun. The flame, in fact, is imperishable (*ud u jyotir amr̥taṃ*), and ritually invoking it, yoking it, means harnessing its immortality for oneself (R̥V 7.76.1). The association between light and immortality is further reinforced by the relationship between light and darkness; darkness (*tamas*), in fact, is the sister of the dawn, Uṣas, whose purpose also includes "driving away the darkness" from humanity (*prati ṣyā sūnarī janī vyucchantī pari svasuḥ, divo adarśi duhitā*, R̥V 4.52.1). The same is achieved by the light of *Agni* (*. . . sa dīdayad uśatīr ūrmyā ā dakṣāyyo yo dāsvate dama ā*, R̥V 2.4.3). Once again, given the association between light and immortality, the expulsion of darkness strengthens the idea that the latter also represents death. In R̥V 2.33.1, Rudra is prayed to not separate the devotee from the sight of the sun (*naḥ sūryasya saṃdr̥śo yuyothāḥ*), a metaphor that presumably indicates dying—losing the light. The yoke, in this context, is something that must facilitate immortality; the broad chariot of donation must be yoked so that the immortal gods may ascend it; thus, Uṣas (light-life) rises from darkness (death), bringing this life also to human beings through the diffusion of her light (*pr̥thū ratho dakṣiṇāyā ayojy ainaṃ devāso amr̥tāso asthuḥ, kr̥ṣṇād ud asthād aryā vihāyāś cikitsantī mānuṣāya kṣayāya*, R̥V 1.123.1).

51 A similar conception is found also in the Pāli canon. "At that time, there was a single mass of waters that were of profound darkness" (*ekodakībhūtaṃ kho pana. . . tena samayena hoti andhakāro andhakāratimisā*, DN 27). The metaphor of water constitutes one of the most significant images in ancient Buddhism, employed to evoke the state to which the meditator "returns" upon attaining enlightenment. Just as rivers "slant, slope, and incline towards the ocean" to which they ultimately return (*nadī samuddaninnā samuddapoṇā samuddapabbhārā*, SN 45.121), in a similar manner, a mendicant who has achieved enlightenment "slants, slopes, and is inclined towards Nibbāna" (*. . . bahulīkaronto nibbānaninno hoti nibbānapoṇo nibbānapabbhāro*, SN 45.97). This inclination toward the ocean is none other than the Noble Eightfold Path (see SN 45.109, 45.121). "The ocean is certainly vaster than two or three drops" (*etadeva, bhante, bahutaraṃ, yadidaṃ mahāsamudde udakaṃ*, SN 13.7). Thus, similarly, one who attains the pinnacle of Buddhist teachings, realizing *dhamma* (*dhamma-cakkhupaṭilābho*) is "certainly more", infinitely greater and more expansive than the water drop they were before.

52 These may be the same primordial waters recognized as the balm of immortality and the abode of medicinal herbs (*apsu antar amr̥tam apsu bheṣajam apām uta praśastaye*, R̥V 1.23.19). The idea that the primordial space was initially 'divided' into several 'regions', of which the middle one (*antarikṣa*) is of utmost importance since it effectively *separates* the other two, is an idea we found also in the Greek world. Anaximander, for example, believed that from the original ἄπειρον all the heavens and the worlds were generated by fission (Conche 1991, pp. 137–38).

53 The understanding of 'yoke' as a negative phenomenon in the early Buddhist conception (one is 'yoked' to passions, one is 'yoked' to thoughts; for this reason, some Buddhist contemplative exercises speak of 'disjunction' or *visaṃyoga*) is also found in the form of 'fetters' (*saṃyojana*), a term similarly constructed from the same root. In SN 1.64, it is stated that desire is what binds the world (*nandīsaṃyojano* loko) and spreads or 'travels' through thought (*vitakkassa vicāraṇaṃ*). A similar discourse, however, employs the concept of 'bonds' (*bandhana*), which are likewise described as yoking the world and transmitted by thought (*nandīsambandhano loko, vitakkassa vicāraṇaṃ*). It is noteworthy that in this context the metaphor of 'severing' or 'cutting' the ties (*sabbaṃ chindati bandhanaṃ*) is used—an image closely resembling the exercises of *visaṃyoga* (see AN 4.10, 5.137, 7.51, 8.35, and DN 34) when we consider the etymological value of the term and its symbolic application in contemplative practice.

54 The role of the heart in Vedic meditation symbolizes the attainment of perfect communion with the divine. Indeed, in the poet's ultimate aspiration, truth (*r̥ta*) lies in achieving this communion, which is described through the use of the heart of the deity as a symbol of the ultimate goal, "May these our excellent hymns touch your heart, be pleasing to you, and thus drink the effused libations" (*ayaṃ te stomo agriyo hr̥dispr̥g astu śaṃtamaḥ; athā somaṃ sutam piba*, R̥V 1.16.7). The image of "reaching the heart" of the deity (*hr̥dispr̥g*) thus conveys a very particular poetic imaginary. The heart is, of course, not intended as a physical organ, but it is important to dwell on this image and its connection to contemplation. In R̥V 7.33.9, we read, "Through the wisdom located in the heart, the Vasiṣṭhas [types of priests] traverse the thousands of branches of the world" (*ta in niṇyaṃ hr̥dayasya praketaiḥ sahasravalśam abhi saṃ caranti*). Furthermore, "O Agni, by comprehending the light that must be comprehended by the heart, he has purified himself (through the three) purifying forms; he has made himself the most excellent treasure (through these) self-manifestations, and from there he contemplated heaven and earth" (*tribhiḥ pavitrair apupod dhy arkaṃ hr̥dā matiṃ jyotir anu prajānan; varṣiṣṭhaṃ ratnam akr̥ta svadhābhir ād id dyāvāpr̥thivī pary apaśyat*, R̥V 3.26.8). Praises to Indra and Soma are offered

"through the heart" as well as through the recitation of hymns (*hṛdā hūyanta ukthinaḥ*, ṚV 8.76.8). One approaches Indra with the heart and thought (*icchāmi id hṛdā manasā cid indram*, ṚV 6.28.5). In the Pāli suttas, the heart (*hadaya*) is sometimes associated with *citta* and possesses a similar connotation to this Vedic conception. Nonetheless, most of the time it is *citta* and not *hadaya* to function as a 'vehicle' for contemplation. See, for example, the conception of *cetovimutti* in SN 41.7 (*yā cāyaṃ, gahapati, appamāṇā cetovimutti, yā ca ākiñcaññā cetovimutti, yā ca suññatā cetovimutti, yā ca animittā cetovimutti*. . .).

55 ἡ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι. . . ἡ δ' ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς χρεών ἐστι μὴ εἶναι, τὴν δή τοι φράζω παναπευθέα ἔμμεν ἀταρπόν· (*Nat.*, *fr.* 2, vv 3 and 5).

56 *yo pubbeva pamajjitvā, pacchā so nappamajjati; somaṃ lokaṃ pabhāseti, abbhā muttova candimā*, MN 86.

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