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An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry

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Abstract: By examining the Sutta Nipāta, considered one of the collections containing the oldest texts of the Pāli canon, this study aims to reconstruct social, historical, and anthropological aspects of archaic Buddhist doctrine at the time of its definition in dialectic with the forces of orthodoxy and constituted power in 6th century BCE India. This study also provides important insights into the development and definition of contemplative practices devoted to the search for the ‘absolute’ (*paramattha* and *brahmavihāra*), which has often received little attention in meditation studies.

Keywords: Buddhist asceticism; contemplative practice; *Sutta Nipāta*; meditation in the pāli canon; early Buddhism



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1. Introduction

The current article is within the scope of anthropological research concerning contemplative practices which I am undertaking. Specifically, the aim is to analyze the earliest evidence of Buddhist thought through philological investigation. The forms and uses of modern meditation can be better understood through the history of this practice. However, textual research poses many issues in this regard, and many questions arise for the anthropologist attempting to uncover complex webs of thought that intertwine history, culture, and religiosity, with all the difficulties they imply. The purpose of this essay is to define the anthropological concepts underlying the origin of early Buddhist thought, using the written accounts of the Sutta Nipāta as reference data. The anthropologist delving into the evidence of ancient texts can also ‘do ethnography’ of a cultural world; refer to the ideas expressed in the work of Bettini. In his work (Bettini 2009), he demonstrates how a true textual ethnography is possible, an ethnography that follows the traces of culture through the analysis of documents compared to the historical record. Bettini develops his investigation to outline an anthropology of the Romans, but his method is also applicable to the Buddhist world, as I will attempt to show.¹

The aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which it is possible to reconstruct the thought of ancient Buddhism through textual evidence and to determine whether the picture provided by these texts accurately reflects a religion that achieves transcendence through contemplative practice. This is a complex question that is difficult to resolve. For this study, I have chosen to focus on the Pāli Canon for two main reasons: first, because I possess translational expertise in this area, and second, because the Theravāda school accepts these texts as its canonical source, with the name ‘Theravāda’ being adopted recently under the suggestion of Allan Bennett, ordained as monk Ānanda Metteyya in 1902.

The present study aims to examine a specific section of the Buddhist canon, namely, the Sutta Nipāta (abbreviated as Snp). This collection of texts is considered by many scholars to be of a certain age, which is supported by the language used, distinct from that of the Nikāyas predominantly written in prose. The Sutta Nipāta is composed in verse, utilizing a language that is archaic and can be considered poetic. Some scholars believe that the

Nikāyas may have originated from the expansion of these ancient poems or songs. While it is certainly true that the poetic expression was favored by ancient authors, whether they were philosophers or singers of mythological tales (Floyd 1992; Gonda 1963; Sachs 1943), the case of the Sutta Nipāta is peculiar for several reasons. However, the idea of considering the Buddhist path as a kind of poetic practice is not entirely new, and we could also link it to the idea of Buddhism as an experiential path, a definition that has already been proposed to describe the Sutta Nipāta (Habito 1988). Certainly, we cannot understand it without some comparative work with other texts in the canon, which will also be crucial in looking for traces of meditative practice.²

2. On the Conception of the Sutta Nipāta

As mentioned above, the Sutta Nipāta boasts a reputation of antiquity. Many philologists believe that it contains “some of the earliest Pali verse known to us” (Cousins 1985, p. 219). This partitive is not accidental. The general antiquity of the Sutta Nipāta is never defined in specific terms, except regarding the last two books: Snp 4 (*Aṭṭhakavagga*) and Snp 5 (*Pārāyanavagga*), which have indeed been the subject of greater definition. According to Vetter, “the Aṭṭhaka probably contains texts of a group that existed before or alongside the first Buddhist teaching and community” (Vetter 1988, pp. 101–6). Gómez believes that the Aṭṭhakavagga may also be seen as a form of Proto-Madhyamaka (Gómez 1976). He also argues that Snp 4 and Snp 5 are part of the same group of very ancient texts, while other scholars, such as Burford, affirm that Snp 5, while still being very archaic, testifies for a more recent organization of the Buddhist community if compared to Snp 4 (Burford 1996). Other scholars also tend to think that only Snp 4 can be considered remarkably archaic on the face of the evidence (Hoernle 1916). It is generally accepted that Snp 4 is an ancient text, and the publication of “The Buddha before Buddhism” (Fronsdal 2016) seems to support this view. Fronsdal aims to reconstruct a form of proto-Buddhism that he asserts is evidenced by Snp 4. However, this book has not been reviewed in any major academic journals to date.

Therefore, providing an unambiguous definition seems a more than arduous task. Certainly Snp 4 and, with some limitations, Snp 5 can boast the fragments of greater antiquity, while regarding the sections of Snp 1–3 the question is controversial. The main source of the controversy is that the entire Snp is part of a collection, the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, whose final composition is actually very recent. Also part of this collection are the Dhp, Iti, and Ud, which are also considered very ancient in some parts, although, even in this case, there are many difficulties in establishing the boundaries of this archaicity.

If it can be presumed that *Khuddaka Nikāya* contains some pieces of the oldest Buddhist poetry, the same can be said with a greater degree of certainty for *Sutta Nipāta*. The text of the *Sutta Nipāta* is a very old one and suitably deserves scholarly attention. [...] The style of composition of the *Sutta Nipāta* is distinguished by beautiful poetry conveying the austerity and astringency of early Buddhism. (Chaturvedi 2009, p. 73)

A recent translation of the Snp by Bhikkhu Bodhi is notably thorough, as noted in the preface where the translator discusses the ancient origins of the collection: “[I]n linguistic and doctrinal evidence suggests that the Suttanipāta took shape through a gradual process of accretion spread out over three or four centuries” (Bodhi 2017, p. 13). He also confirms the now consolidated view on the antiquity of Snp 4 and 5: “[t]hese two chapters are, moreover, the subjects of a two-part expository text, the Niddesa, so old that it was included in the Khuddaka Nikāya. The Suttanipāta also contains discourses that have been absorbed into the common Theravāda monastic liturgy” (Bodhi 2017, p. 13). Additionally, it is important not to be erroneously swayed by the unconscious tendency towards integralism regarding the evolution of texts over time. The reworking of the Snp should not be conflated with an increased novelty of its content. Not only are Snp 4 and 5 mentioned in SN 22.3 and AN (3.32–3, 3.61, 4.41, 7.53), corroborating their ancient nature, but the stratification of the text itself serves as evidence of its archaic origin: “as a collection it underwent a process of

gradual growth and evolution as newer material was added to a more primitive core” but this “does not necessarily mean that all the suttas inserted into the anthology at a later time were composed subsequent to those included earlier” (Bodhi 2017, pp. 27–28). Specifically, the inclusion of Snp 4 and 5 in the Niddesa can explain not only the antiquity of these texts, but also “their importance for the Buddhist community” (p. 30). The commentaries, however, sometimes can be a problem, being “a rather mixed bag of preservation and innovation” (Norman 2004, p. 71). By considering the philological data, historical context, and archaeology of Buddhist thought from an anthropological perspective, it is possible to discern the differences between these various sources. However, it is important to recognize that these reconstructions are susceptible to potential errors. Another interesting aspect is the inclusion of these two chapters in a collection that also contains Snp 1–3. Even if the other chapters of Snp are not that old, or at least one cannot prove a similar age, it is still interesting to investigate their connection to Snp 4 and 5. However, even in this case, we cannot expect the written sources to spy out everything. It is evident that the composition of Snp 1–3 differs from that of 4 and 5, primarily due to the inclusion of prose sections in the first three chapters in addition to poetry. While it is possible that the prose sections represent a departure from the poetic expression traditionally associated with ancient Buddhism (similar to the transmission of the oldest layers of Vedic texts), they could also be interpreted just as later additions. After all, some parts that “can be reasonably identified with texts now existing” in the Snp are found in the Bhabra Inscription of Aśoka (Bodhi 2017, pp. 30–31).

We have previously established that the poetic style of the Snp suggests its presumed archaicity. With this in mind, the focus of our analysis of the Snp will be to determine whether the elements of archaicity we have identified can provide insight into the society during the time of the Buddha and the origins of the doctrine in question. Rather than repeating research that has already been conducted on the reconstruction of archaic elements of Buddhist thought using the Snp as a source, this study will focus on two fundamental anthropological aspects that have not yet been thoroughly examined: the role of rulers and other authority figures in society, and the duties and experiences of ascetics, including the cultural conflicts and the concept of ‘humanity’ involved. Specifically, we will consider whether and how it is possible to convey the concept of transcendence through poetic verse, and if this form of meditation is present in the Snp. We will also examine how this potentially contrasts with the social reality of the Buddha’s time. Our hypothesis is that ascetic practice likely sought to achieve a form of ecstatic transcendence through a ‘body technique’, but this was promoted and disseminated as a means of resistance against the normative order of society, including the caste system and the institution of kingship.

3. How to Be a Good Ascetic: First Steps

In DN 27, we find a parodistic version of the Vedic cycle of Creation. Here, the Buddha describes the entire foundation of the universe and organization of society by kingship and caste division substantially ridiculing Brahmanical cosmology (Gombrich 1996, pp. 81–82). This long passage, like many others in the canon, would seem to be a reworking of the statements made in poetic form in the Snp, where the origin of the ‘world’ (*loka*) is described as the foundation of the ordered society, and the figure of the ascetic (*samaṇa*) is presented as the one who liberates himself transcending any limit from the previous condition of imprisonment in this ‘world’.

When the anger rises, they [the *samaṇas*] drive it out,
As with medicine, a snake spreads venom.
Such a mendicant abandons this world and the next,
Like a snake does with its old skin.³

Thus, a mendicant is described as someone who renounces to greed, craving, or conceit (*raga-*, *taṇha-*, *māna-*, ...-*mudacchidā*...). These elements are all connected to the mundane life. In a long analysis published in several articles by Jayawickrama, many parts of the

Snp are examined.⁴ Especially Snp 4 and 5 are believed to be amongst the oldest parts of the canon. I have been particularly interested by “the poems extolling the *muni* ideal” (Bodhi 2017, p. 31), which are considered very old by Jayawickrama. Indeed, it is commonly believed that the ascetic ideal was the very basis of the Early Buddhist thought. Thus, those suttas that seem to describe the nuclear aspects of that practice are identified as old. In the case of the Snp, Jayawickrama presumes that most of the poems have been composed between 400 and 300 B.C.E. starting from an older nucleus of teachings and principles orally transmitted. This material was “available for the creation of an anthology” (p. 32) and then, when the necessity to define a basic collection arose, the contents elaborated for this purpose mainly focused on the explanation of ascetic ideals, as is the case for Snp 4 and 5, but also Snp 1.3 (for this reason included by Jayawickrama amongst the most archaic texts). Then, a transitional phase has led to the composition of other suttas considered representative of Buddhist teaching. Finally, Snp 2 and Snp 3 were delineated as separate chapters, “thus yielding the five chapters we have now” (p. 32).

Let us focus now on the anthropology of asceticism. In fact, a somewhat different form of Buddhism emerges in the Snp, more focused on the ascetic than on the idea of the Buddha. Terms such as *muni* and *pabbajita* referring to the ‘liberated sage’ ascetic and the renunciant are very frequent. Paradoxically, the uses of the very word *buddha* “are relatively infrequent” (p. 53). This does not mean, obviously, that the *buddha* is unimportant. However, “the arahant—conceived as the *muni* or as the true brahmin—represents the spiritual ideal of the Suttanipāṭa” (p. 53).

The question we will consider is whether the Snp specifically addresses the underlying anthropological concepts of ancient Buddhism. By ‘anthropological aspects’, we refer to the ideas about the nature of the world and the role of humans within it. The ascetic ideal, in this context, represents a conscious decision to renounce certain aspects deemed ‘worldly’ (which Buddhism views as detrimental) in favor of others that are ‘ultra-worldly’. It is not just sensory pleasure and attachment to habits and beliefs connected to the world that are renounced. These are only symptoms of an unhealthy connection to the world. Ancient Buddhism uses them to illustrate what we should distance ourselves from, but it also addresses aspects related to society itself, which the ascetic does not remain silent on. These aspects can be summarized in the following three points: (a) the city and the role of urban society in contrast to the indeterminate nature of the forest, reflecting on two distinct ways of living in the world; (b) the role of power and the conceptual order represented by the religious authority held by priests, which is seen as limiting an ‘absolute sense’ that cannot be confined to categories; and (c) royal power as an alternative to the sacred, which wields violence and oppression in the name of maintaining order without providing actual benefit to humans.

4. The Forest, the Field, and the Wanderer

According to a theory of Agamben expressed several times in his writings, we can trace in ancient cultures a fundamental idea related to the origin of cognition. This idea is expressed by the forest (*hýlē*) as a place of the indeterminate that precedes the human organization of the world through concepts. Indistinct matter (*prótē hýlē*) appears as a philosophical concept in Plato’s work, but it is in the translation of Chalcis that it is rendered with the Latin *silva*, indicating a forest (Agamben 2022, p. 91). The importance of the *silva* from an anthropological perspective is inherent in the idea that its image conveys. The forest is a place where human dominance cannot act: vegetation there grows indistinctly, wild animals and dangers abound. With human intervention, the forest is subjected to an order: if plants can grow by human concession, they must necessarily do so in a controlled space, that of cultivated fields, and are consequently selected according to human needs. Wild animals are banished; the city is constituted into a controlled perimeter within which laws apply, allowing certain behaviors at the expense of others. It is an extremely powerful idea in many ancient thoughts. Equally worthy of consideration, in my opinion, is the Platonic idea of *khôra*. It would be defined, according to some interpretations, as an interlude that

allows the world to raise, a kind of “pre-origin” for Derrida (p. 111). Curiously, in modern Greek, this term indicates a “village”, whereas in ancient times it meant “place”, “space”, or a “spot”. For Plato, probably, this idea served to render the act of determination. For only in the human conception does the ‘place’ exist, since it is a determinate point in space. Without the management of space, one does not set the human boundaries within which to make society with its norms stand. The *khóra* “gives a place” to something. This place is a *locus*. Agamben uses the Latin word *locus* very often in relation to *khóra*, likewise he connects these two concepts to the idea of “open space” (p. 115).

At this point, we come to the Indian world. In Vedic thought, this same dichotomy between forest/indistinct and village/space is frequently demarcated (Olivelle 2006b). Buddhism inherits this conception but decides to overturn it. The question of the village in the conception of ancient Buddhism will be of our interest later. For now, we will focus on the forest and idea of space. These concepts in the Vedic world are expressed by the following words: *grāma* for “village” or “settlement”; *araṇya* or *vana* for “forest”; and *loka* or *kṣetra* for, respectively, “world” and “field”. Interestingly, the word *loka* is etymologically derived from the root **leuk-* “to shine”, and in the Vedic use, it means a “free or open space”, similar to the Old English word *lēah* (derived from the same proto-Indo-European root of *loka*) which means “open field”.⁵

The *araṇya* is the place of alterity and the unknown in the Vedic world, but it is also the place of *saṃnyāsin*, that is, of the ascetic: a figure that we could suppose to be an attempt to institutionalize initially anti-Vedic religious practices, such as Jainism and Buddhism, to manage dissent that was expressly against the order of the city, by accepting the forest as a conceivable space (Thapar 2001). In addition to the historical conflict between the Vedic world and the ascetic movements from which Jainism and Buddhism arose, it is essential to recognize the significance of the forest in this ideology. Buddhism clearly expresses the equivalence between the ascetic and the forest dweller in the Snp, although with some notable differences. An ascetic should do like an elephant, who “stays where it wants in the forest” (*yathābhirantaṃ viharaṃ araṇṇe*, Snp 1.3). The animal metaphor does not end here: “a clever person seeking freedom should live alone, like a rhino’s horn” (*viññū naro seritaṃ pekkhamāno eko care khaggavisāṇakappo*). I am uncertain whether the phrase “*eko care*” should be translated as “living alone”, and I propose that it could also be interpreted as “living as one”, which would convey a slightly different meaning and suggest a monistic view: “living as a unit” would imply “living in unity”. This interpretation is supported by expressions such as “unity perceived in the forest” (*araṇṇasaññaṃ paṭicca ekattaṃ*) found in MN 121.

The delimitation of a field is a metaphor that is found very frequently in Indian traditions. Each delimitation of a field (*kṣetra*) is the construction of a specific area of knowledge (*kṣetrajñā*). Conversely, an area of knowledge cannot operate without a field of reference. This fact, which links knowledge (*jñā*) to delimitation, probably has very ancient origins and is based on accurate observations of the mechanisms underlying a structured society.

This is another reason why the act of delimiting a field is equally important in the symbolic thought of ancient civilizations, and persists in its later developments. We can assume that this was also the original meaning of the term *yoga*. In the context of the *R̥gveda* in fact, where we find the earliest occurrences of this word, the term *yoga* is used distinctly to denote the harnessing of wild animals, whose primordial power is subjugated, enslaved to human needs; these are primarily the horse (*aśva*) and the bull or wild ox (*gavas*), while the object of the work is obviously the chariot (*ratha*). In *R̥gveda* 10.106.2 we read: “like a driving bull among the planters, you two [Aśvin] take command, with force proper to the masters of the yoke”.⁶ About demarcation of controlled spaces and areas, we find the term *yojana* from the same root as *yoga*, used as a unit of measurement for distances in *R̥gveda* 7.67.8, again, the idea of delimiting, marking a *locus*, a defined area with specific boundaries. The analysis of the *R̥gveda* also reconfirms the archaic conception that linked ‘yoking’ to the subjugation of the wild animal’s strength to human interests through its domestication

(see also *R̥gveda* 1.151.4 and 5.46.1). Already in the *R̥gveda*, however, we find a semantic evolution of this term: subjugation as redirection and sublimation of indistinct energies toward a given aim is not only what man does with the bull, but also what man can do with himself, as is the case with the self-yoking or self-barding “of the thought and poetic vein of the Vedic seers is then mentioned as far back as *R̥gveda*, 5.81.1; 7.27.1, in which it assumes a kind of ambition for order, discipline, and methodical proceeding” (Squarcini 2015, p. xiii, my translation). This conception should have given the name of *yogin* to those who apply the discipline to themselves, and the artistic representations of the Indus Valley civilization would seem to prove it (cfr. Dhyan sky 1987, p. 94; McEvilley 1981, pp. 45, 48; Shinde and Willis 2014, pp. 2, 7 and Parpola 2015, pp. 194, 273). In fact, in these ancient artifacts, the *yogi* is always represented as a theriomorphic creature, halfway between man and bull (cfr. Dhyan sky 1987, p. 94; Parpola 2015, p. 181; Shinde and Willis 2014, p. 6, plate #1). To be considered in these artifacts is not only the importance that the bull has in ancient cultures, but also the connection that the Indus Valley civilization had with the Mesopotamian peoples, where the bull holds considerable symbolic importance (cfr. Parpola 2015, p. 227; Kenoyer 1998, p. 114; Parpola 2020, p. 186; Parpola 2018, p. 437; Parpola 2015, p. 238). See in this regard the surprising depiction of a man with bull horns and sitting perfectly cross-legged like a *yogi* in Proto-Elamite statuettes and seals (Desset et al. 2022, p. 61); and (Parpola 2015, p. 212). These similarities can be explained by the well-documented cultural exchange relationship that existed between Mesopotamian peoples and populations of the Indus Valley (Kenoyer 1826).

5. The Absolute-Sense, or Brahman

The Buddha is at the highest level of the ascetics. In Snp 1.5, five kinds of ascetics are described. Right below the highest, which is the “victor of the path” (*maggajīna*), there is the “path-teacher” (*maggadesiṃ*): one who knows “the absolute as the absolute” (*paramaṃ paramanti yodha jānāti* [original: *ñatvā*]). This is the condition of the sage (*muni*) that allows him to be freed of doubt (*kaṅkhachidaṃ*). Other inferior levels are called “path-liver” and “path-wrecker” which are described, respectively, as one who lives restrained and mindful on the path of the Buddhist teachings, and one who, otherwise, is deceitful (*māyāvī*), un-conscious (*asañña*, unrestrained), facile (*palāpo*).

Leaving aside the Buddha’s aversion to superficiality, let us focus on the conception of the absolute. Bhikkhu Bodhi chooses to translate the title of the *Paramatthajotikā* (commentary of the Snp) as “Elucidator of the Supreme Meaning” (Bodhi 2017, p. 349). Hence, we must understand why the term *paramattha* refers to an ‘absolute-sense’, and why it is so important for the Snp.⁷ In Snp 4, we can find at least two distinct notions concerning the absolute (*paramattha*). The first is found in Snp 4.4 and regards the attainment of the end of the world (“not longing for anything in the world”, *āsaṃ na kubbanti kuhiñci loke*). Another use of the term concerns instead idealized absolutisms, seen as misleading and worthless. In Snp 4.5, it is said that those who are attached to their theories, conceiving themselves as absolute and the best in the world (*paramanti diṭṭhīsu paribbasāno, aduttari kurute jantu loke...*), are also people who see others as inferior (*hīnāti aññe...*). For this reason, they are not free from conflicts (*vivādāni avitvatto*). The ‘world’ is described as the set of designations. Once you form a “view on the world” (*diṭṭhimpi lokasmiṃ*), your knowledge and vows are subsequently molded (*ñāṇena vā sīlavatena vāpi*). A person cannot be freed if too involved in the dualistic vision, representing oneself as “inferior” (*hīno*) or “sublime” (*visesi*), instead of “equal” (*sama*).

The Snp is clearly highly critical of Brahmanism (Bodhi 2017, p. 41). Given Buddhism’s distinctive understanding of truth, it is plausible to posit that they viewed Brahmanism as a form of deception. The establishment of inflexible dogmas grounded in metaphysics, such as those found in Brahmanism, reflects a desire for intellectual hegemony that allows the lower castes to wield unchecked power, as well as a desire to control truth itself, which Buddhism inherently sees as a form of violence. The unity of things and their ‘being as they are’ (*yathābhūta*) cannot be controlled by the human intellect, but Brahmanism attempts to

intellectualize the absolute for personal gain or, at least, this is the impression conveyed in the Snp. As we will see, ancient Buddhism shares with Brahmanism the concept of an absolute principle, Brahman (whose personified form Brahṃā is a later development), which is used conceptually to represent reality in its ultimate sense. The idea of the world (*loka*) leads to plurality and division: “dualisms” (*dvayadhammamāhu*, see Snp 4.12). Just as there is a world, there are also various worlds, but these are merely conventional and arbitrary ways of organizing a single reality. They are not distinct realities from the one reality, but rather different ways of representing it. In this context, Brahmanism is seen by the Buddha as a means of power that deceives by using the concept of the absolute, but presenting it in a deceptive form that ties humans to worldly existence rather than promoting their liberation. For this reason, *lokuttara* (“over-world”) is used in the Abhidhamma as a synonym for liberation, and it is likely a derivation from the concept of “world’s end” (*lokanta*) we find in suttas such as SN 12.44 and that I hypothesize to be a further development of the contents of Snp 4.3. The end of the world “has been accomplished by the realized one” (cfr. AN 4.23 and Iti 112).

In the context of Buddhist ascetic traditions, some importance should be given to the practice of *brahmavihāra*. By this name are called certain meditative techniques found in the Pāli canon. This term, evidently related to the figure of Brahṃā, is part of a very archaic rituality according to Wiltshire, which speaks to us not only of the presence of the universal principle of *Brahman* as accepted by archaic Buddhism, but also of complex ritual symbolologies concerning sacrifice and the figure of the ruler as the guardian of the four directions.⁸ Buddhism reverses the symbolic value of ritual and the figure of the king and contrasts with Brahmanism in the same absolutist principle (*brahman*): “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). This passage refers specifically to the Vedic ritual consecration ceremony of kingship (*rājasūya*). The parallelism Buddhism builds with this ritual relates to the idea of world conquest by a warrior-king symbolized by quarters of space (*cāttudisā*) in which he will establish his sovereignty and exercise power. The ascetic who meditates in *brahmavihāra* is also a conqueror of the fourfold space (*cāttudisā loka*). The difference between the warrior and the ascetic is that the latter conquers himself, rather the former wants to conquer the world. Moreover, Wiltshire believes (p. 169) we can find implied references to this *brahmavihāra* practice also in Snp 1.3. In the Snp, we also find symbolic reversals of the figure of the king. Therefore, if this is true, it should not surprise us to find references to meditations aimed at the absolute-Brahman also in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.14.1, as it is possible that both traditions make part of the same internal reform of Indian thought.

Buddhism criticizes the idea of Indo-Aryan kingship, but it uses the image of the king to describe the ideal renouncer, the perfect ascetic (pp. 170–72). The question of spatiality is then taken up 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 Brahṃā” (*mettañca sabbalokasmi ... uddhaṃ adho ca tiriyañca ... tiṭṭhaṃ caraṃ nisinno va, sayāno yāvatāssa vitamiddho, etaṃ satim adhiṭṭheyya, brahmanmetaṃ vihāramidhamāhu*, Snp 1.8). Personally, I think a connection is possible between the meditations of *brahmavihāra* in which the meditator takes possession of the totality of the world (*sabba loka*) through a symbolic process of permeating (*pharati*) one’s consciousness (Wiltshire 1990, p. 242), with the very idea of ‘absolute’ which, on the more ‘theoretical’ philosophical level (assuming Buddhism conceived of a division between theory and praxis, which is quite unlikely) is expounded in the idea of absolute (*paramattha, uttama*) in the Snp. A sage is one who has understood the world ‘absolutely’ (*aññāya lokaṃ paramatthadassim*, Snp 1.12).

Truth itself is the immortal word: this is the eternal truth.

It is said that the laws [*dhamme*] and the meanings of truth [*sacce atthe*] are firmly existing.

The words spoken by the Buddha,
 For the attainment of nirvāṇa, of peace,
 Leading to the end of suffering
 This really is the best word.⁹
 (Snp 3.3)

The idea of truth is crucial for many philosophies. If we look at the term ‘truth’, *satya* in Sanskrit, we recognize the root of the verb ‘to be’ (*as-*). Specifically, *satya* is a derivative of ‘being’ with the addition of a denominal adjective suffix (*-ya*), therefore, what is ‘true’ is simply ‘what-is’.

Early philosophers, seeking truth, understood that human perceptions produce multiple ideas and conceptions, but this cannot ultimately be the comprehensive description of reality. The Greeks also thought so, and defined knowledge as *epistēmē*, viz., “what stays (*hístēmi*) above (*epí*)”. Truth is described by Parmenides as *alēthēs*, *alētheia*, namely, what “does not (negative prefix *a-*) hide (*lēthō*)”.¹⁰ For Parmenides, the truth is what is unveiled, plainly evident. Philosophy intervenes because truth, although evident, is misunderstood by human perception. Insofar as truth is “what-is” (*sat-ya*), Indian philosophy finds surprising consonance with the Greek world from the beginning of its philosophizing, particularly with Parmenides, who seems to place the Being (*ón*) in a controversial dualism with nothingness (*mēdēn*).¹¹

The organization of ‘what-is’ is conveyed through a series of nominal attributions associated with idealized and recognizable formal conceptions. This mechanism is at the basis not only of Buddhist thought, but it can be considered a heritage common to all of India, as it is already found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.7: “at that time, in fact, the world was not divided. The name and the form divided it, so that it is said: this thing has this name and this form” (*tad dhedham tarhy avyākṛtam āsit; tan nāmarūpābhyām eva vyākriyatāsaunāmāyam idaṃ rūpa iti; tad idam apy etarhi nāmarūpābhyām eva vyākriyate saunāmāyam idaṃ rūpa iti*).

The importance of this combination of name-and-form is well known in Buddhism. The first to connect it to the process of linguistic semiosis was Edward Small in an important article in which he offered a comparison between the ‘name’ and the nominal signifier of the Saussurian tradition (Small 1987). If this is correct, it would also explain why we find numerous linguistic metaphors within Buddhist thought. Buddhist reflections on the unspeakability of the absolute, just as the centrality of language is fundamental to understanding the processes of designation as explained. in SN 22.62, as well as the main problem of dualistic thinking, explicitly stated in SN 12.15. In addition, in the Snp, we find an indication to “meditate on the signless, renounce to thinking of conceit, thus you will live in peace” (*animittaṇca bhāvehi, mānānusayamujjaha; tato mānābhisamayā, upasanto carissati*, Snp 2.11). The signless state is also part of a long tradition that sees in the intentions of Buddhist meditation to practice a cancelation of figural signs (*nimitta*) as they are detrimental and anticipatory ‘nominal’ entities of perception (Squarcini 2020).

It is intriguing to consider that Buddhism’s aversion to conceptual categories is simply an essentialization of their primal social critique and rejection of the caste system. In the same way that society divides people into castes, dominant thought divides the world into concepts. The end of one coincides with the end of the other. Indeed, it seems quite bizarre to find a divinity such as *Brahmā* in a ‘religious’ thought, such as Buddhism, radically opposed to any form of authority, including divinities. Yet, this frequently happens in the form of *brahmavihāra* meditations. However, if we hypothesize that the figure of *Brahmā*, beyond its apparent personification, is nothing more than the absolute principle, such meditations would be aimed at no other purpose than the transcendence of categories, and in fact, if we observe how the *brahmavihāra* is described, we observe that it focuses mainly on developing a sense of love (*mettā*) and equanimity (Miller 1979).

Another description for the ‘ultimate-absolute’ is found in Snp 4.5. This sutta opens criticizing those who elevate themselves as “the highest in the world, declining anybody

else to be lesser” (*yaduttari kurute jantu loka; hīnāti aññe tato sabbamāha*). Any judgment is described to be intrinsically violent leading to disputes. A true Buddhist does not make use of judgements, nor tries to take advantage of oneself, seeing all others as ‘inferior’ (... *nihīnato passati sabbamaññam*). The absolute is beyond judgment, which means that one must not “form a view about the world” (*ditthimpi lokasmim na kappayeyya*), therefore “they [the rightful bhikkhus] would never represent themselves as ‘equal’, nor conceive themselves as ‘worse’ or ‘better’ [than others]” (*samoti attānamanūpaneyya, hīno na maññietha vīsesi vāpi*), not establishing “any dependence on any kind of knowledge” (*ñāṇepi so nissayaṃ no karoti*). This last statement, while seemingly contradictory, is consistent with the Buddhist’s ascetic conception of truth, which is essentially anti-dualistic. Thus, if absolute truth is beyond definitions, it cannot be delimited by a form of knowledge that obviously cannot help but argue with dual and oppositional linguistic forms. Knowledge, then, falls into ‘demarcation’, into the creation of ‘fields’ of knowledge. The Absolute, as ‘true’ knowledge, transcends the boundaries of these fields. True knowledge, then, is not simple ‘knowledge’ (*ñāṇa*), and yet it must be expressed in some way. This way is found both in the idea of ‘ultimate’ (*uttama*) and of ‘superior’ (*paññā*).

Moreover, an “ultimate person” (*uttamaṃ naraṃ*) is mentioned (Sn 4.10). Such person does not crave the past nor is thoughtful towards the future, is free of deceit and sensual pleasure, and never conceives oneself in the world (*na loka maññate samaṃ*). In other words, the ultimate people have no kind of dependence (*yassa nissayanā natthi*). Conversely, an unconscious person is someone who lives in the deception of this dualism, believes in designations and opinions.

There are not manifold different truths that are lasting in the world, apart from perception.

Having formed a personal way of reasoning on different opinions, they say ‘there are two things: true and false’. [...] Remaining in the discrimination [between true and false], measuring [things] by their own way, they keep arguing in the world. Nevertheless, a person who has renounced to all judgments, creates no conflict in the world.¹²

(Sn 4.12)

The space in which opinions flourish is defined by Buddhists as *loka*, ‘world’. The *loka* is the place of semiosis, in its dual representation as the cognitive space in which language operates divisions, and the place of actual exercise of power. The ascetic flees the world because he rejects the dominance of both the language and the king.

It is important not to confuse this Buddhist monism with conceptual dogmatism. While the absolute refers to a single truth, it appears to be essentially unspeakable. Early Buddhism regards any attempt to connect truth to language, rather than deconstructing language itself, as a normative desire that should be avoided. Multiple views, the proliferation of theories and manifold ‘truths’ are criticized in Sn 4.12. Those who affirm a single truth (*idameva saccanti vivādayanti*) are also critiqued in 4.13. These people “sustain their teaching is perfect, while other’s teaching is inferior: they argue, they quarrel each other, sustaining the truth of their own convictions” (*sakañhi dhammaṃ paripuṇṇamāhu, aññassa dhammaṃ pana hīnamāhu; evampi viggayha vivādayanti, sakaṃ sakaṃ sammutimāhu saccam*). The issue with the debates that Buddhism criticizes is the arrogance of the normativists, which is a classic divide-and-conquer tactic. By dogmatically arguing about reality, we lose the immediate perception of ‘things-as-they-are’ and become ensnared in discussions that reflect the desires for power and domination over others, rather than a pursuit of truth. This is a mistake according to early Buddhism, as it asserts that dogmatic truth does exist, but it cannot be discovered through dispute.

After having analyzed the teachings, a [wise] brahmin adopts one that does not need any interpretation by another. Thus, he rises above disputes, for the others do not see a doctrine better than this. [...] It is not an easy task to educate a dogmatic person, who promotes [only] a view he has formulated. [...]

The brahmin does not get involved in formulations or computations, for he is not a worshipper of views nor tied to intellectualisms. Having understood the manifold different convictions he remains indifferent while the others grasp [to worldly things]. Having untied all the knots in the world, the sage takes no sides among factions. He stays peaceful and equanimous among the peaceless. [...] Having given up all former defilements, not making new ones, not persuaded by preferences, not promoting dogmas, that wise one is released from opinions, not clinging to the world nor blames himself.¹³

(Snp 4.13)

I decided to translate this long passage because in it we find a perfect synthesis of what we have reconstructed so far in our archaeo-anthropology of ascetic practices. Additionally, the Buddha's critique of self-blame may reveal his opposition to the excessively austere and mortifying practices of the asceticism of his time, from which he distances himself (Freiberger 2006, pp. 236–43). Moreover, the insistence on the renunciation of any opinion in such an ancient text as Snp 4 shows us that Gómez is probably right in seeing in this the root of the Nāgārjunian method of fourfold negation 'neither *A*, nor *not-A*, nor *A-and-not-A*, nor *A-nor-not-A*' which is often erroneously considered an innovation of the Madhyamaka and which instead would find its place already in the canon texts (Gómez 1976).

Squarcini's notable article demonstrates how the Buddhist idea that concepts shape the cognitive world is actually a shared belief in many systems of thought. In Greece and India, the proliferation of figurative signs is recognized as "a semiotic act of distinction and domination of and over the world" (Squarcini 2018, p. 219). In Vedic reality, divinity prescribes these norms and imposes orders on the world as 'just', therefore inevitable (pp. 224–25). The purpose is thus eco-logical, "for the development of the worlds (*lokānāṃ tu viṛddhyartham*)" (p. 230). Thus, any law of nature is just like a social law. According to the authors of the *Manusmṛti*, inclusion in a particular social class is fully justified and beyond question based on these same assumptions. In Buddhism, we see the opposite deconstructive discourse: the reality of the world is called into question, and once its interdependence on these arbitrary values is recognized, it is rejected.

The sociological issue that the Buddha faced at that time was recognizing Brahmanism as a theoretical tool used to institutionalize these deceptive instances. Through Brahmanic authority and power, these designations were justified and became institutions based on divine power. This reveals the anthropological conflict between Buddhists and Brahmins.

Both Brahmanic religion and the practice of the forms of meditation known as the four brahma-vihāras are older than Buddhism. They belong to different sides of the 'renunciation' controversy, the former con, the latter pro. [...] Firstly, we shall show how Buddhism draws upon many of the Brahmanical cultic concepts in order to communicate its own doctrines.

(Wiltshire 1990, p. 226)

This usage reveals a dual and conflicting idea of the Buddha about the Brahmins. On the one hand, it is safe to assume that Brahmanism aroused a certain fascination in the Buddha because of its ideas about unity and the absolute (*ekatta* and *paramattha*). In the Snp, we can also find the expression "kinsman of Brahṃā" (*brahmabandhu*) used to address the disciples. However, the Buddha already sees the Brahmanism of his time as corrupt, betrayers of their own principles and advocates of deceptive doctrines (he often describes Brahmins as real frauds).

The attempt that the Buddha makes to amend Brahmanical thinking is evident in Snp 2.7, where he is expressly asked to expose the traditions of ancient Brahmanism (*porāṇānaṃ brāhmaṇānaṃ brāhmaṇadhamme*). The Buddha explicitly denies that his contemporary traditions have anything to do with ancient ones, which he describes as being substantially analogous to hermit asceticism (*isayo pubblicakā āsuṇi, saññatattā tapassino*). He even described them as beggars ("they begged for rice, bedding, clothes, ghee, oil", *taṇḍulaṃ sayanaṃ vatthaṃ, sappitelaṇca yāciya*), not officiating animal sacrifices, and therefore

well-liked by everyone. Begging is seen as a “legitimate” (*dhammena*) way of collecting objects. Rather, modern brahmins are described as thieves, who take and use other people’s goods without repaying them.

6. Breaking (Social) Bonds

Among the works that deal with the reconstruction of a sociology of ancient South Asian institutions we must include the work of Squarcini. In particular, I will take as a starting point his work that focuses on the social concept of norm in the ancient Indian world and that includes extensive comparisons between the contrasting Buddhist and Brahmanical thoughts on the institution of norm and authority (Squarcini 2008, pp. 134–43), but also tradition and cultural dogmas, such as ritual sacrifice (pp. 143–47), social division (pp. 148–50) and kinship in general (pp. 150–57). These comparisons, identified as sociological, also reconstruct for us important elements of the ‘human’ idea of Buddhism and are therefore more socio-anthropological.

The problem of social inequalities in Buddhism, and the fact that this social conflict was well present even in the ancient texts, is a point already assumed (Chakravarti 1986). The Buddha proposes a rupture with social duties that are enshrined in performative acts of various kinds, from language to ritual duties. However, this is done not only through the renunciation of these obligations and the disavowal of Vedic authority but also through counter-symbolic forms. The representation of the *yajamāna* himself, the one who performs the sacrifice, is reinterpreted. Trivially, while in Brahmanism, sacrifice ritualistically constitutes and reinforces a bond, in Buddhism, it is a rupture, a “crossing over” (Wiltshire 1990, pp. 232–33). In Snp 1.2, the Buddha says: “like a bull I broke the bonds” (*usabhoriva chetva bandhanāni*). We have observed that the bull may be a significant symbol of yogic practice, but this verse also highlights that the genuine yogin is someone who has renounced worldliness and severed bonds. These bonds being referred to are specifically social ties and regulatory constraints that exist in urban society. A valuable overview of the sociological and anthropological questions in the development of Buddhism was given by Chakravarti, who was able to demonstrate well the links between the evolution of political power and the growth of potential social conflicts also assimilated by Buddhism. Concerning the issue of social castes, we note that in early Buddhism, the issue is still in the very problem of membership in a particular family (*kula*), a social bond that entailed certain duties in the context of the society of the time. For this reason, what the Buddhist ascetic seems to reject more than anything else was not initially the caste (*varṇa*), which was still taking shape as a specific social category, but the very class of householders (*gahapati*), emblem of belonging to a social category in itself, with all its duties (Chakravarti 1996). In the Snp, it seems that the Buddha constantly wants to emphasize the rejection of social classes, the impossibility of defining a person based on the family in which he was born: “I don’t call someone a ‘brahmin’ only because of the mother or womb they came from” (*na cāhaṃ brāhmaṇaṃ brūmi, yonijaṃ mattisambhavaṃ*, Snp 3.9). Even though the Buddha always has strong words against the brahmins, it does not state that the social role of the brahmin should be abolished altogether, but only that the present brahmins, being subject to attachment and passions, and using ‘false speeches’, are only deceivers, and for this reason they are not true brahmins. In contrast, the Buddha seems to claim the role of the Brahman for true Buddhists: “deep in wisdom, intelligent, skilled in any sort of path, attainer of the ultimate goal: that’s what I call a ‘brahmin’” (*gambhīrapaññaṃ medhāvīṃ, maggāmaggassa kovidam; uttamattamanuppattam, tamahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇaṃ*). Analogously, because it is functional to brahmanic power, the classic vision of the householder is equally criticized and demolished (see for example Snp 1.10).

The ultimate persons “have no sons nor cattle, they don’t possess fields or lands [...] they personally possess nothing in the world” (*na tassa puttā pasavo, khettaṃ vatthuṇa ... yassa loke sakaṃ natthi*, Snp 4.10). In Snp 1.9, it is said that the world “is arisen in six” (*chasu loko samuppanno*), and because of grasping these six, the world is troubled sixfoldly (*channameva upādāya, chasu loko vihaññati*). The six elements it refers to are clearly the six

traditional senses of Buddhism (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, thought, cf. also MN 148.6). This is evident from the parallels of this sutta, which report the same content, connecting the origin of the world to sensory perception (cf. SN 1.70 and compare it with SN 12.44). The emergence of the world through sensoriality confirms its role as a locus, a space organized by perceptions and therefore ephemeral, conventional. In Snp 1.9, the solution is to “exit from the world” (*etaṃ lokassa niyyānaṃ*), which is likely comparable to the “end of the world” (*lokassa nirodha*), achievable by the same ascetic means we found in Snp 1.9, that are discussed in suttas like SN 35.107, 2.26, or AN 4.45. The theme of the *fuga mundi* is also reiterated in Snp 2.11, where we read: “one who has given up the five objects of sensual pleasures [...] and who has faithfully left the life as householder [...] does not return to this world ever again” (*pañca kāmagaṇe hitvā ... saddhāya gharā nikkhamma ... mā lokaṃ punarāgami*).

I am no brahmin, nor a prince,
Nor a merchant, nor anything else.
Fully understanding the ancestry of ordinary men,
I wander in the world, possessing nothing, being a thinker.
Clad in my cloak, I’m wandering with no home, [...]
It is improper to ask me about my clan.¹⁴
(Snp 3.4)

In Snp 1.7, we read the story of a fire worshiper (*aggika*) named Bhāradvāja who sees the Buddha approaching and tries to drive him away with the accusation of being a so-called low, fake ascetic (*samaṇaka*). As soon as he starts talking to him, Bhāradvāja is convinced that in reality, he is the one who is following a faux doctrine, and rather decides to follow the Buddha as *upāsaka*. Among the accusation of the Buddha to brāhmaṇic rituality, two are particularly relevant: the first is the intrinsic violence of the brahmins. A brāhmaṇ “harms living beings, be they born of womb or egg, he has no love for creatures” (*ekajaṃ vā dviijaṃ vāpi, yodha pāṇaṃ vihiṃsati; yassa pāṇe dayā natthi*); a brahmin is also violent towards people, since by virtue of his authority he robs them of their goods (*paraṇaṃ mamāyitaṃ*) and does not repay them. The Buddha even calls brāhmaṇs “notorious oppressors” (*niggāhako samaññāto*), “miserable tyrants of wicked desires, stingy and devious, shameless and imprudent” (*rosako kadariyo āpiccho maccharī saṭho ahiriko anottappī*). The first part of this fierce criticism of brāhmaṇs is a clear reference to their ancient habit of sacrificing animals. It is a fact that Vedic rituals even included human sacrifices in its most archaic phase (as it is testified in the *puruṣamedha*). We do not know if at the time of the Buddha these were still carried out, but animals were certainly killed. The indefatigable criticism of *nāstika* philosophies will prompt Brahmins to change their ritual modalities (Obeyesekere 1989). The rejection of violence is also presented by Buddhism in the transformation of the intrinsic sense of sacrifice, which is entirely reinterpreted in a symbolic and anthropological key (Bronkhorst 2012). The traditional idea of sacrifice is also rejected in Snp 3.4–5 and replaced with a moral form. The real sacrifice is not that performed by Brahmins, but rather that of pursuing the liberation from greed, anger, and developing limitless love, being diligent day and night: “one who accomplishes these three sacrifices, such a one would excel over those who are worthy of donations [...] to reborn in the Brahmā’s world” (*yo yajati tividhaṃ yaññasampadaṃ, ārādhaye dakkhiṇeyyebhi tādi ... upapajjati brahmalokanti brūmi*, Snp 3.5). Another famous passage in which the logic of sacrifice is completely rejected can be found in Snp 3.7 and, most relevantly, in Snp 5.4, in which aristocrats and Brahmins (*khattiyā brāhmaṇā*) are accused of persisting in making sacrifices in the world (*yaññamakappayimsu puthūdha loke*) hoping for the favor of the gods or other benefits, only to find themselves with illusions, which did not solve the problem of suffering. Power is seen as something that will inevitably lead to ruin: “a man of little wealth and great craving, born into an aristocratic family, aspires for kingship, and that leads to his downfall” (*appabhogo mahātanaṃ, khattiye jāyate kule; so ca rajjaṃ patthayati, taṃ parābhavato mukhaṃ,*

Snp 1.6). The search for power is something inherent in the model of life made up of hierarchies and social classes, and for this reason, it is said that “the householder cannot compete with the mendicant: the sage who meditates sheltered in the forest” (*evaṃ gihī nānukaroti bhikkhuno, munino vivittassa vanamhi jhāyatoti*, Snp 1.12).

The second critique I want to discuss more in depth is that related to social classes. All the while, the Buddha mocked the Brahmanical belief that the family of birth determines one’s nobility:

You are neither lowlife by birth,
Nor you are a Brāhmaṇa by birth.
You are lowlife because of your deeds,
And because of your deeds you are a Brāhmaṇa.¹⁵

We will delve further into the critique of social castes later, but it is worth noting the concept of action/deed (*kamma*) at this point. The idea of *kamma* in early Buddhism is not as we might understand it from its contemporary conception. The idea of retribution for actions emerged in India as a result of the dogmatization of normative power: adherence to the norm was rewarded, while deviation from the norm was punished (Squarcini 2011). The norm, above all, is the fulfillment of one’s social duties, which are seen as intrinsic to the individual as they are assigned at birth.

Earlier Buddhism thus seems to want to untie itself from the idea that actions are rewarded (*nisaṅkhati*) based on their adherence to social norms, as well as the idea that a sacred place is tied to a specific controlled space: “for the unperturbed, the knower, there is no accumulation of merit; abstaining from striving to make merit, he sees sanctuaries everywhere” (*anejassa vijānato, natthi kāci nisaṅkhati; virato so viyārabbhā, khemaṃ passati sabbadhi*, Snp 4.15, note that the word *khema* can actually mean also simply “peaceful”, “being at peace” rather than in a sanctuary).

However, this idea also has its origins in the institution of sacrifice, which serves to secure one’s position and obtain the favor of the gods. This favor consists mainly of the assurance that, upon completion of one’s social duties, one will be able to reunite with the *Brahman*, the universal principle of all things, after death. However, all humans, regardless of their social status, are united by this same nature (their own self or *ātman* coincides with the *Brahman*), in the world they live according to the social role that is proper to them, which is determined by their benevolent or malicious actions in the past. This justifies the social immobility that maintains the powerful in their position. Buddhism challenges this dynamic by rejecting ritual authority in this sense, as well as the role of deities. In its most ancient phase, however, it does not reject the idea of *Brahman*, which it continues to embrace in a more equitable and universalistic way. This also affects its conception of *kamma*, which is no longer seen as social or ritual retribution, but rather as a moral fact more closely linked to conscience. Furthermore, “those who are born into a brāhmaṇic family, who recite as kinsmen of the hymns, are more often discovered acting in the most wicked way” (*ajjhāyakakule jātā, brāhmaṇā mantabandhavā; te ca pāpesu kammesu, abhiṇhamupadissare*, Snp 1.7). In the Buddhist conception, *kamma* is what “makes the world go on” (*kammunā vattati loko*, Snp 3.9), but this affirmation implies a peculiar conception on *loka* that will be analyzed in the conclusion. However, we can also assume at this point that the rejection of identity (*anattā*) in Buddhism developed precisely from a criticism of the unchangeable belonging of people to a certain social category ‘in the world’ established since one’s birth. If one’s membership in the clan, with all its social obligations, is merely an illusion, it is reasonable to conclude that all attributed identities, even nominal ones, are arbitrary designations.

The problem of personal Identity is also found in Snp 4. We must understand that, from a Buddhist perspective, there is no fundamental difference between a nominal identity and a personal, psychological identity. Both are the result of designation, and both are attempts to isolate a part of the whole in order to make it knowable and useful. Society organizes the world into discrete objects and gives them names to categorize them, but it

also does this with people. Therefore, from a Buddhist point of view, there is no difference between the name ‘flower’ given to a particular plant to identify it, and the name given to a child by a family to enable them to live (be ‘livable’) in society (that is, to be ‘usable’ by society). A mendicant “does not take pride in attributing a ‘this-is’ to things” (Sn̐ 4.3, lit. “he does not make a habit of the ‘thus-I-am’”: *itihanti sīlesu akatthamāno*, since *sīla* can be intended both as “ethical conduct” and as “behavior” or “habit”). Attributing identities is a *habit*, a *custom*, more than a natural thing for human beings, and for this reason it is difficult to abandon: “visions-opinions are not something to be easily overcome” (*diṭṭhīnivesā na hi svātivattā*), for they lead to judgment and dogmas. This is repeated also in Sn̐ 4.9 in various ways: “a master of knowledge does not follow any conceit due to views or thoughts, for he does not identify with these things” (*na vedagū diṭṭhiyāyako na mutiyā, sa mānameti na hi tammayo so*). In Sn̐ 4.14, it is said that a good mendicant would eliminate “the idea ‘I am a thinker’, which is the root of every concept of identity due to proliferation” (*mūlaṃ papañcasaṅkhāya, mantā asmīti sabbamuparundhe*).

Disputes, described as problems developed from theories and forms-of-knowledge, are particularly relevant in Sn̐ 4.11. Again, conflict is addressed as derived from “conceit and arrogance” (*mānātimānā*) and must be abandoned. Any factor that causes us suffering is derived from the desire of the world and in the world (*chandaṇidānāni piyāni loke...*). In Sn̐ 4.11, it is explained how views and desires in the world arise from a cognitive chain of dependent origination: pleasure, as pain, emerges from contact, which generates possession. However, contact is itself derived from name-and-form (*nāmaṇca rūpaṇca paṭicca phasso*), and possession is related to desire (*icchānidānāni pariggahāni*). Therefore, if one renounces names and forms (attributed identities associated with conceptual cognitive forms) and understands that desire is only an empty desire for power, suffering also disappears.

7. End of the World and *fuga mundi*

Since an ascetic is an anthropological subject who chooses to leave society to pursue a practice of the body that takes place in forests, mountains, or generally in places far from the ordered world,¹⁶ we should anticipate that, even among Buddhists, society is experienced with a certain level of intolerance, and that is indeed what occurs:

I see the people of the world struggling, craving for future lives. The base man cries in the jaws of death, being not rid of his craving for a life after life. [...] Having fully understood perception and thus crossed the flood, the *muni*, not clinging to possess anything, having removed the [poisoned] dart, living appropriately, does not long for this world or the next.¹⁷

(Sn̐ 4.2)

The importance of the idea of the world (*loka*) in ancient Buddhism is simply the most relevant testimony of its ascetic ideal. However, the complexity of thinking around what is *loka* for Buddhists should not be underestimated. I believe that this concept is extremely ancient, and perhaps it can also help us reconstructing the formulation of the four noble truths (see Table 1). The figure of the ascetic seems to be entirely built around the idea of *loka*. The world is what human beings are born into, but it is presented by Buddhists as the greatest of deceptions: “that is why a person should learn in this life, in order to know that anything in the world is uneven” (*tasmā hi sikkhetha idheva jantu, yaṃ kiñci jaññā visamanti loke*, Sn̐ 4.2). In fact, suffering is hidden in the world, and therefore, the truth of suffering coincides with the discovery of the origin of the world: “the wise does not grieve, for he has understood the way of the world” (*tasmā dhīrā na socanti, viditvā lokapariyāyaṃ*, Sn̐ 3.8). Here, the figure of the ascetic emerges as a connoisseur of the world (*lokavidū*), since only through knowledge of the world can he free himself from it, as he frees himself from a noose or from the ropes that bind anyone: “hard is to escape the snare in the world” (*saṅgaṃ loke duraccayaṃ*, Sn̐ 4.15). Contemplative practice is associated to the knowledge of the world also in Ud 3.10 as well as in many other texts.

Table 1. The development of the model of the four noble truths: 1. Be aware of the existence of the world/suffering; 2. be aware of the origin of the world/suffering; 3. be aware of the end/cessation of the world/suffering; 4. be the world-ender/Follow the path to the end of suffering.

Model of <i>loka</i> Transcendence	Four Noble Truths
<i>lokavidū</i>	<i>dukkha</i>
<i>lokassa samudaya</i>	<i>dukkha samudaya</i>
<i>lokassa atthaṅgama</i>	<i>dukkha nirodha</i>
<i>lokantagū</i>	<i>maggā</i>

This formulation is echoed not only in the Snp but in numerous points of the Pāli canon, helping to create a complex imaginary about the end of the world (*lokanta*), that is nothing more than the crossing of the world as the boundary in which these cognitive mechanisms occur. This is inevitably linked to perceptions of categories and identities: “one free from a sense of ownership in the whole name-and-form does not grieve for that which is not, he does not suffer for any loss in the world” (*sabbaso nāmarūpasmiṃ, yassa natthi mamāyitaṃ; asatā ca na socati, sa ve loke na jīyati*, Snp 4.15), and thus reiterated: “if you don’t think of anything in terms of your own or someone else’s possession, not finding anything to be ‘mine’, you won’t grieve thinking ‘I don’t have it’” (*yassa natthi idaṃ meti, paresaṃ vāpi kiñcanaṃ; mamattaṃ so asaṇṇvindaṃ, natthi meti na socati*). If we were to reconstruct a prototype of Buddhism’s ascetic model, we would use exactly these three basic elements: rejection of all categorizations, rejection of all mortifying (overly austere) practices, and rejection of all attachment: “not formulating, not abstaining, not longing” (*na kappiyo nūparato na patthiyo*, Snp 4.13).

The world does not shine (*nappakāsati*), and it is shrouded (*nivuto loko*) because of ignorance (*avijjāya nivuto loko*). These statements we find in Snp 5.2 introduce the idea that the world functions as a set of flows (*sotā*) that can be blocked by the practice of mindfulness (*sati tesāṃ nivāraṇaṃ*). This is in fact one of the oldest mentions of mindfulness (*sati*). It seems to be related not so much to stillness and inner peace, but rather to the cessation of the mechanisms of nominal designation and formal association (*yattha nāmañca rūpañca asesāṃ uparujjhati*) and those of discernment (*viññāṇassa nirodhena*). This does not mean that experiences of peacefulness do not exist. In Snp 5.3, it is specified that escape from this flow leads precisely to imperturbability (*santi iñjitā*). In Snp 5.5, the world is addressed as a place of suffering that only the ascetic, through the renunciation of attachment, can overcome, as one crosses a flood.

Summarizing the main conceptions of the world in ancient Buddhism: in Snp 4.3, the world is substantially identifiable with the pride of identity (the “thus-I-am” conceit”) which a mendicant should reject (... *yassussadā natthi kuhiñci loke*). Renouncing to illusion and thoughts (*māyañca mānañca pahāya*), the purified one understands that everything in the world concerning multiple realities is false, just an ‘opinion’ (*dhonassa hi natthi kuhiñci loke, akappitā diṭṭhi bhavābhavesu*). Moreover, having understood the Dhamma thanks to pure knowledge (*vidvā ca vedehi samecca dhammaṃ*), the one who meditates cannot be judged by anyone ‘in the world’ (*kenīdha lokasmi vikappayeyya*), also because he does not long for anything in the world (*āsaṃ na kubbanti kuhiñci loke*). The world is presented in Snp 4.9 as a place of suffering, and in Snp 4.10 as a place where you *conceive* ‘your-self’ (*loke maññate...*), therefore it must be shunned (*loke sakaṃ natthi*). In Snp 4.11, the world is seen as that from which cognition and desire rise, including judgments, place of pleasure and pain (*sātaṃ asātanti yamāhu loke*), and where the ‘contact’—the beginning of the cognitive chain of attachments and pain (cf. also SN 12.44)—spreads from (*phasso nu lokasmi kutonidāno*). In Snp 4.12, the belief in different truths (*saccāni*) is rejected since they are not found, apart from perception, in the world (*aññatra saññāya niccāni loke*). The belief in different truths is seen as the root of dualism: ‘true and false’ (*saccaṃ musāti dvayadhammamāhu*). Only the one who has given up all judgments (*vinicchayāni*) produces no conflict in the world (*na medhagaṃ kubbati jantu loke*). This is supported also in Snp 4.13, where the wise person is described as the most equanimous (*upekkhako*) who “takes no side among factions”,

having solved all the “knots” (discrepancies) in the world (*vissajja ganthāni munīdha loke*). In Snp 4.14, it is said that the one who attains the state of *samādhi*, no longer feels the need to possess anything in the world (*na ca mamāyetha kiñci lokasmim*). With comparable implications, the term is also found in Snp 4.15 and 4.16.

The world also appears in the thirteen chapter of the Dhammapada (Dhp 167–178), which seems to confirm what we have seen so far. The world is something *not* to be “perpetuated” (*na siyā lokavaḍḍhano*), because of wrong views (*micchādiṭṭhiṃ*) inherent in it. One who acts benevolently (*sucaritaṃ*) sleeps joyfully (*sukhaṃ seti*) “in this world as well as in the next” (*asmim loke paramhi ca*). This last formula repeats almost verbatim the verse of Snp 4.2 (... *lokamimaṃ parañcāti*). The world is ephemeral like a bubble, deceptive as a mirage, and if you understand it, death won’t see you (Dhp 170). Because of its deceptiveness, the world is blind (*andhabhūto ayaṃ loko*). Only a small number are those who see clearly (Dhp 174). The wise one abandons the world (*nīyanti dhīrā lokamhā*) because he has defeated Death (Dhp 175). Therefore, the one who has freed oneself, experiences a condition better than lordship over the world (Dhp 178). Transcendence from the world is often presented as ‘beyond the domain of death’ (*maccudheyayassa pāraṃ* cfr. Snp 5.19).

In the Abhidhamma, the dialectic between the mundane (*lokiya*) and the ultramundane (*lokuttara*) becomes fundamental, and that seems very much like an evolution of the ascetic idea of transcendence. In fact, the ultramundane is echoed both in the suttas on the end of the world (*lokanta*) that we find everywhere in the canon, and by a more generic idea of transcending, of going beyond (*pārāyana*, *pāraṃ gamanāya*), which is often used in Snp 5 to describe the ascetic’s goal. In Snp 5.6, the overcoming of the world is also described by making use of the spatial and directional metaphor: “I rejoice, great hermit, in that supreme peace, having understood which, one who lives mindfully can cross over clinging in the world [...] once you have understood anything, you are aware of the world above, below, all around, between; [the world] is a snare, you don’t crave for live after life” (*tañcāhaṃ abhinandāmi, mahesi santimuttamaṃ; yaṃ viditvā sato caraṃ, tare loke visattikaṃ ... yaṃ kiñci sampajānāsi ... uddhaṃ adho tiriyañcāpi majjhe; etaṃ viditvā saṅgoti loke, bhavābhavāya mākāsi taṇhan*). It is also pointed out that the end intended by these texts, is not an end in the nihilistic sense. That which ends does not cease to exist, and we are not speaking here in ontological terms, but in eschatological terms, so to speak: “one who has come to the end cannot be measured, for he has nothing by which can be described. Once all things have been eradicated, so are all ways of speech” (*atthaṅgatassa na pamāṇamatthi, yena naṃ vajjuṃ taṃ tassa natthi; sabbesu dhammesu samohatesu, samūhatā vādapathāpi sabbe*, Snp 5.7).

The problem of the ‘end of the world’ in the Pāli canon has received very little attention from scholars, although its importance is abundantly recognized: “[i]t is well known that the Buddha taught a method which led to the cessation of the world (*tiṇṇ’ loke visattikan ti*), but what is not so well known is what the Buddha meant by ‘world’” (Katz 1980, p. 53). In his analysis, Katz has no doubt: the world for the early Buddhist thought, is not a space geographically intended,¹⁸ but rather a cognitive space: *loka* and *lokasaññā* are in fact equated by Ānanda: “the world is our experience of the world. ‘World’ means a lived world; it is our experience, and therefore the relational, objectified world” (p. 54). I ask the reader to remember what we said at the beginning, about how setting a boundary in organized space was the means to structure society. The village is the prototype of the world. This approach, already present in the Vedic system, is perfectly accepted by Buddhists, who simply change its moral interpretation, rejecting the world as necessary for the human good, relegating it rather to a tool of power.

The power that divides the space, like the warrior in the *rājasūya* who conquers the “quarters of space” and finally the whole world, is the same power that creates rules and norms for the world to be organized. Those laws (*dharma*s) are, to some extent, cognitive habits: “the world about which the Buddha speaks is the experienced, objectified, psychological world” (p. 55). For this reason, Katz finds that meditation, as a way to lead someone to the end of the world, is much more like a psychoanalysis than a metaphysical intent: “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” (p. 55). Metaphysics, here intended as a set of theories and ‘visions’ (*ditṭhi*) about the world’s laws, is one of the three floods (*ogha*) that must be crossed over in order to reach the end of the world, along with sensual pleasures (*kāma*), the idea of becoming (*bhava*), and ignorance (*avijjā*). We can also recognize a clear connection between the process of identity and the world: “for Buddhism, the self and the world are co-terminous and co-extensive” (p. 56). Another way to describe the end of the world is the cessation of *taṇhā*, since “the world is the product of our desiring that there be a world” (p. 57). Johansson also dedicated part of his study to the idea of the world, and he has concluded that “the world is the perceived world” (Johansson 1979, p. 28).

As well as the elements of the forest and proto-village being similarly present in Greek thought, it is possible that the idea of a constituted city (*pólis*) is comparable with that of a *loka* in Buddhism (see Table 2). However, in Buddhism, the concept of ‘world’ is not limited to the physical realm or the urban environment, but rather refers to a set of cognitive habits that shape our perception of reality. In other words, the “world” is a product of our own subjective interpretation and understanding. For this reason, it is rather possible to trace *loka* back to the Greek idea of *kósmos*, as it has always been connected to the perceptual dimension in formulations that reverberate the Buddhist ones in a surprising way (see for example the description of *kósmos* in the Greek thought made by Hartley 1918).

Table 2. The world and the forest in early Buddhism compared with possible analogous Greek conceptions.

Forest, Undefined Space, Original Unity	Village, Settlement, Imposition of the Division of Space	World, Defined Locus within Which the Sovereign Exercises Power
<i>āraṇya</i> <i>hýlē</i>	<i>grāma</i> <i>khóra</i>	<i>loka</i> <i>kósmos—pólis</i>

Plato, as Severino wisely notes, with his own philosophizing and reasoning about the world “founds a world” by placing it as a *metaxý* between being and nothingness (Severino 1982, p. 171). Moreover, even Parmenides dedicated the lines of his poem to understand how the simple “semiosis of dividing” could make a world appear (Squarcini 2018, p. 211).

Buddhist intent to escape from the world must therefore be actualized. Here too, the common idea of the ascetic as escaping from every worldly institution is only partly true. Even in its aims of transcendence, Buddhism maintains a political idea of the city as a place that must be made suited for ascetic practice, and not destroyed by it. In Snp 2.13 is described “the right way to wander the world” (*sammā so loke paribbajeyya*), and it obviously includes what we can imagine: renouncing material attachment as well as hatred, concepts, underlying tendencies, dichotomies and contrasts, and so on. This is also found in Snp 4.15, which we might identify as possibly the earliest formulation, as “a proper way of acting in the world” (*sammā so loke iriyāno*). The question is raised again in Snp 2.14, which focuses particularly on the criticism of the householder’s life.

I shall praise going forth, following the example of the seer, this is the investigation that led to his choice to go forth: ‘this life at home is cramped, a dimension of dirt; the life of one who has gone forth is like an open space’; understanding this, he went forth.¹⁹

(Snp 3.1)

The Buddha is “a guide of the world with its gods” (*lokassa sadevakassa netā*, Snp 1.5). Discourses of this kind related to the question of awareness and transcendence of the world are repeated also from Snp 5.9 to 5.17 and can be consulted for further study.

8. Anthropological Outline of Early Buddhism

In considering the early forms of expression within the context of early Buddhism, it is necessary to understand that the complex poetic forms of the Snp likely reflect underlying social dynamics that influenced their formulation and the conception of ascetic practice they depict. The use of metaphors related to kingship in Buddhism is particularly significant, as it reveals a strong sociological concept outlined in the Snp. Recent socio-historical research has demonstrated the importance of understanding the anthropological context of Buddha's time in India in order to gain insight into the development and spread of Buddhism. Particular emphasis has been placed on the role of the city and the urban revolution that affected India in the VI century B.C. (Gokhale 1982). This relates back to the issue of kingship in that the urban revolution is thought to have exacerbated the social conflicts inherent in the classical caste model of Indo-European societies, and thus royal power, like religious authority, was felt as an element of pressure by the emerging lower classes, particularly the merchants, who looked favorably on a philosophy that explicitly argued against class division (see DN 27 or also Snp 1.6, among others). It is also possible to argue that "the merchants were a sort of counterweight to the brahmins" (Bailey and Mabbett 2003, p. 25), who we know to be treated as true antagonists of the Buddha. To be fair, the Buddha is often referred to as a Brahmin himself, or at least as a genuine Brahmin should be, and for this reason Brahmins are often severely rebuked for totally straying from the right path. It should also be remembered that the Buddha is presented as belonging to the caste of *khattiyas* which held the kingship in the various Indian kingdoms of the time. While in the study by Bailey et al. the authors focus more on the spread and development of Buddhism from the social context in which it arose, another study by Chakravarti also analyzes the 'doctrinal' aspects, so to speak, and those related to ascetic practice. A key part of his analysis is precisely associated with the idea of kingship.

The political ideas of the Buddhists themselves reflect various themes, such as general ideas on kingship; contemporary kingship, which included both the legitimate and despotic exercise of power; and ideal kingship, as articulated through the concept of the *cakkavatti dhammiko dhammarāja*, or the righteous universal ruler.

(Chakravarti 1996, p. 150)

Yet, that Vedic traditional kingship (*rājanya*) is literally parodied by Buddhists seems to be a fact. Just think about the appellation 'noble disciple' (*āriya-sāvaka*), an explicit reference to nobility, and even that of the Buddha himself, defined as *cakkavatti*, would seem to be a reference to the Vedic idea of kingship. We find such an idea perfectly outlined in the *rājasūya* (see Heesterman 1957; Kulke 1992), where the warrior (the *kṣatriya* is also the *yajamāna* in this case), having reached the pinnacle of the altar representing the conquered world, sets the wheel in motion, symbolically marking his ascension to kingship (Wiltshire 1990, p. 230).

The expression 'setting in motion of the wheel of dharma' (*dhammacakkappavattana*) used to indicate the advent of Buddhist teaching is thus a double reference to royalty: in addition to the setting in motion of the wheel referring to the *śrauta* ritual of *rājasūya*, there is the association with the term *dharma* (/ *dhamma*) which is also of royal usage, like Olivelle points out: "I have suggested that 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 could easily be said also for appellatives such as *jina* "conqueror", which may refer to the warrior origin of the Indian kingship, and "solar kinsman" which possibly is an epithet for the solar metaphors related to Indo-European kingship. We find such expressions, such as "kinsman of the sun" (*buddhenādiccabandhunā*) in Snp 5.18. The Sākas are said to be "of solar clan" (*ādiccā nāma gottena sākiyā nāma jātiyā*) in Snp 3.1, and in Snp 3.7 it is said to the Buddha "you shine like the sun" (*ādiccova virocasi*), and also "o Gotama, you should reign as a king for kings, lord of men" (*rājābhirājā*

manujindo, rajjaṃ kārehi gotama). To this, the Buddha replies: “I [actually] am a king, o Sela, the supreme king of *dharma*, by the teaching I put in motion the wheel which cannot be rolled back” (*drajjaṃ kārehi gotama, dhammena cakkam vattemi, cakkam appaṭivattiyam*).

In order to properly analyze the symbols and their meanings in the description of the path to perfection for the Buddhist ascetic in the Snp, it is necessary to first understand the anthropological role of kingship in early Buddhism. According to Chakravarti, the Buddhist texts contain an explanation of a theory on power and society that intertwines the figure of the ruler with the process of urbanization (Chakravarti 1996, p. 151). The city is a central concept in Early Buddhist thought, and it borrows from the Vedic world the dialectic of the village as a place of civilization in contrast to the forest, reversing the roles. In the Vedas, the forest is a place of indeterminate chaos that the warrior conquers in order to establish the city as a place of civilization. In contrast, early Buddhism sees the city as a place of illusion and suffering, and the forest as a place of liberation and enlightenment (Wiltshire 1990, pp. 228–29). In Buddhist texts, the city is often criticized as the center of diffusion of false normative orders (MN 121), since they are based on the designation and separation of truth into a multiplicity; and the ascetic is invited rather to go to the forest, where the perception of the unity of things (*araññasasāññaṃ paṭicca ekattaṃ*) prevails: “in this way, a mendicant, ignoring the perception of the village and of the people, focuses on the oneness dependent on the perception of the forest” (*evameva kho, ānanda, bhikkhu amanasikaritvā gāmasasāññaṃ, amanasikaritvā manussasasāññaṃ, araññasasāññaṃ paṭicca manasi karoti ekattaṃ*). The city-village therefore is understood by Buddhists as the place where organized society, the normative orders of perception and the masking of things-as-they-are first emerged. In the Snp, it is well preserved the conception of *gāma* as “primordial village” (Gokhale 1982, p. 17). The king is the one who allows this order to persevere; he is the guarantor who subsumes within himself the very idea of power. Similarly, the ruler stands as the guarantor of an order based on social classes, another reality strongly criticized by Buddhism, which opposes the idea of the determination of an individual on the basis of the family into which he or she is born (Karunadasa 2018, p. 178) as well as the very idea of the division of society into groups: DN 27, for example, has been described as “an open challenge to the Vedic dogma of the divine creation of the social order” (Chakravarti 1996, p. 152). Early Buddhism enacts, according to some scholars, a distinctive protest against the centralized or autocratic power (Bailey and Mabbett 2003, pp. 21–22). In the Pāli canon, it is evident that “the control over domination was intrinsic to kingship” (Chakravarti 1996, p. 154), and it is usually described as *vijita*, referring to a “subjugated territory” by force, which is another possible reference to the Vedic conception of kingship and the conquest of the world divided into quarters of space (*digvyāsthāpanam* and *disām aveṣṭayah*) by the warrior/king-to-be in the ancient *rājasūya* ritual consecration (Wiltshire 1990, p. 230).

Despite this, the Buddhists frequently employ metaphors of kingship. This could be due to an attempt to mock the figure of the ruler in contrast to the role of the ascetic. The king claims to rule the world through violence and submission, the ascetic is the true master of the world through peace, morality and contemplation (Snp 2.3–4, 2.9–10). What is certain is that symbols of kingship in Buddhism are abundant. Even the *stūpa* could be traced back to the burial mounds reserved for kings (Wiltshire 1990, p. 202). However, the most interesting symbolism of kingship is undoubtedly that of the solar disk.

The *cakkaratana* is probably the most valued symbol of sovereignty possessed by the king. Rhys Davids interprets the wheel as a representation of the solar disc of the sun. In the *Mahāsuddasana Sutta* it is described appearing in the sky as a heavenly treasure and is quite clearly a mystical object rather than a material one, unlike the six other treasures which are enumerated among the material possessions of the great king, Mahā Sudāssana. According to Zimmer, the luminous apparition of the wheel in the firmament is a duplication of the neolithic symbol of the sun which in its daily course illuminates and *rules* the earth.

(Chakravarti 1996, p. 153)

Although the conception of royalty is therefore borrowed from Buddhism with all its symbolisms, its meaning is revisited for very different purposes, as we can see for example in Snp 3.7, perhaps the best example of this transformation.²⁰

Here we find concepts such as the “great being” (*mahāpurisalakkhaṇa*) and “universal monarch” (*cakkavatti*, lit. “wheel-turner”) compared. These two concepts “probably hark back to pre-Buddhistic times, or at least belong to early Buddhist period” (Perera 1980, p. 69). We have seen that the concept of *cakkavatti* is closely related to the idea of a universal monarch and to the Vedic symbols of the warrior-conqueror of the world we find in the *rājasūya*.

The “great man” (*mahāpuruṣa*) “occurs in the Aitareya Āraṇyaka where it means “the year” (*saṃvatsara eva*), the essence of which is said to be “the sun” (*ādityo rasah*), which in turns is identified with “the incorporeal Supreme Spirit,” (*sa yaścāyamaśarīraḥ pragñātmā yaścāsāvāditya ekametaditi vidyāt*). It is also a name for Viṣṇu.

(Perera 1980, p. 69)

An important aspect of the figure of the king in ancient Buddhism is the criticism of despotic government. Buddhist texts seem to make a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate government. While Buddhism welcomes the figure of a responsible authority preserving social order, it already sees in the monarchy of its time a corruption of this initial ideal, and an oppressive form of control on several occasions (Chakravarti 1996, pp. 158–63). For Buddhism, the concept of *danḍa* meaning “oppression” that we find, for example, in DN 2 is very significant because it appears especially connected with kings and a certain established power, and it “has become for this reason a symbol par excellence of regal power” (Wiltshire 1990, p. 167).

The concept of asceticism frequently evokes imagery of severe and extreme practices. However, it is worth noting that there exists a broad range of possibilities within the ascetic landscape, and Buddhism may adopt a more moderate and intellectual approach compared to other ascetic traditions in India. The Buddha and other Buddhist critics often critique the excessively rigid practices of their contemporaries as futile, emphasizing the practical utility of their own pursuits, even when seeking transcendence. In this context, it becomes evident that the criticism of monarchical regimes by Buddhism is not radical or drastic, but rather seeks constructive dialogue with authority. The ideal Buddhist is also often described as an ideal ruler, thus paving the way for the idea of a possible wise monarch, a *dhammiko dhammarāja* “who would wield power according to certain norms unlike the existing kings” (Chakravarti 1996, p. 164).

The Vedic king consecrated by the ritual is “the possessor of the four quarters of space” (*diśo vai svargo lokah*) and so is also the just king for the Buddhists, “lord of the four quarters” (*cāturanto vijitavi*). Though the formal definition is virtually the same, their social role is completely different (Heesterman 1957, p. 104; and Chakravarti 1996, p. 164–67). The *dhammiko dhammarāja* is described as an ideal ruler, whose rise is well seen even by his enemies, whose benevolence is immense: he gives food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, and goods to the poor. Clearly, this figure has many points of overlap with the *cakkavatti*, from whom he is often indistinguishable. The ideas expressed here are also part of the nuclear heritage of ancient Buddhism, and it must be considered that many rulers have hosted the *saṅgha* or have become protectors of Buddhism over time. Furthermore, the separation between the symbolic role of the king/warrior and that of Brahmā is gradually dissolving in the development of Buddhism, coming to join in their idea of *dhamma* (Chakravarti 1996, p. 176).

The space in which a norm stands is always a place of conflicting powers. The norm, to be such, must possess within itself the possibility of its own overcoming. In other words, the norm is founded on the possibility of anomie, and without an anomie to be sanctioned, there is no norm. This implies that the norm affirms its negation as a necessity in order to impose itself. This makes the figure of the monarch poised between two opposing realities, as Agamben has shown in his studies. The king is at the same time above the law, but

he is also its guarantor. Or rather, precisely because he is its guarantor, he must be able to place himself above it; therefore, some rules do not apply to him. This is precisely the condition that is criticized by Buddhists who would seem to see in the *samaṇa* not simply an itinerant ascetic, but a true righteous ruler, as the Buddha himself is often called. This figure is particularly interesting to me because it seems comparable to that of Plato's philosopher-king (*Politéia* 473d). The king-philosopher is traditionally seen as "a ruler who borrows the universal principles of rationality from philosophy and lets them prevail over any particular purpose" (Agamben 2022, p. 11). In fact, Agamben reminds us that Foucault, in analyzing what Plato said, detected a figure far more complex than just a king guided by philosophy. The philosopher-king is in fact someone in whom politics (*dynamis politike*) and philosophy coincide (p. 12). In this complex circumstance, in which neither the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher while practicing as a sovereign, nor can philosophy "realize" itself politically, we find numerous points in common with the *dhammiko dhammarāja* we have just described. Moreover, one might wonder if this figure of the *dhammiko dhammarāja* who exercises the sovereignty to allow others to have the conditions to aspire to enlightenment, perhaps a proto-Bodhisattva as understood by the Mahāyāna can be seen.

In Snp 4.14, the Buddha is called "kinsman of the Sun" (*ādiccabandhu*), and in Snp 5.1 we find many royal epithets attributed to the Buddha, as well as a reference to his family, the Sākas. Among the most significant, we mention the comparison to the lion, a royal symbol par excellence, which is used here to indicate the power of the Buddha's teaching, and again the solar symbolism: "he was teaching the dhamma like a lion roaring in the jungle [...] like the sun shining with hundreds of rays" (*dhammam deseti, sīhova nadatī vane ... sataṃsimva bhāṇumam*). The reference to light seems not only metaphorical. In Snp 5.19, the Buddha is called a "dispeller of darkness" (*tamanudāsino*) and a "bringer of light" (*pabhaṇkaro*), epithets we also find elsewhere.²¹ The reference to light seems to call us back to ancient ascetic experiences around the world (Verdenius 1949; Vlastos 1946, p. 73) as well as to the same meditative practices that are believed to be of ancient tradition (Cousins 2022, p. 146; Crosby 2020, p. 56).

Other relevant elements we must notice of Snp 3.7 are these epithets of the Buddha: "the blessed one, the perfected, the fully awakened, accomplished in knowledge and conduct, well-gone, knower of the world" (*so bhagavā arahaṃ sammāsambuddho vijjācaraṇasampanno sugato lokavidū*). This last epithet, in particular, "knower of the world" (*lokavidū*) is noteworthy. It is probably a consequence of the condition of "world-ender" (*lokantagū*), which is distinctively recognized to be that of the Buddha himself (Johansson 1979, p. 80). The 'end of the world' in Buddhism develops precisely from the ascetic idea of overcoming the world as a limiting and imprisoning place. This is why the 'end of the world' coincides with the victory over suffering (Nizamis 2012, p. 217).

9. Conclusions

In this study, we aimed to provide an anthropological perspective on early Buddhist thought by examining the figure of the ascetic in the Snp and their relationship to the world (*loka*). Through a diachronic analysis of historical, textual, and philological sources, we were able to situate the Buddhist conception of the world within a larger cultural and social context. From Vedic to Buddhist conception, the world is used to establish a social normative order and then rejected in order to transcend it. The figure of the ascetic is more than a simple role in a socio-cultural framework, it is rather the very model of the *ánthropos* to which the good Buddhist must aspire. Thus, the anthropological idea of the early Buddhist movement, it is a very idea of a 'perfected' human, with deep awareness of what a socio-cultural context is and how it can and should be transcended, reaching the 'end of the world'.

In conclusion, the Buddhist ascetic can be understood as one who engages in contemplation and ascetic practices in pursuit of the absolute. This pursuit reveals a dialectical relationship with the Brahmanical world and the political and cultural context of 6th century

BC India. The Brahmanism described in the Snp reflects the transformation from ancient Vedic seers to a new form of priest that incorporates the concept of Brahman, potentially inherited from Indus Valley cultures, into its orthodoxy. The Buddha challenges the understanding of Brahmā held by these priests, drawing upon philosophical debates in the Upaniṣads. The search for the absolute through contemplation and asceticism is characterized by a split between an institutionalizing force that seeks to incorporate these practices into the Vedic cultural framework, and a force that rejects this kind of power and rejects all forms of nominal categorization, opinions, and designations in favor of an absolute that transcends language. Language, in this view (Snp 5.7), creates a ‘world’ used by the established power to justify a particular social structure, which the ascetic aims to transcend.

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Abbreviations

Snp	Suttanipāṭa
Dhp	Dhammapada
Ud	Udāna
Iti	Itivuttaka
DN	Dīghanikāya
MN	Majjhimanikāya
SN	Samyuttanikāya
AN	Anguttaranikāya

Notes

- Regarding the concept of ‘anthropology’, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by this term in the present work. The goal of anthropology is the study of human behavior, including customs, beliefs, and ideas about the world and life, as well as their intricate relationship to social structures, history, and political and cultural institutions. To this day, ethnography is considered the indispensable means of documenting these elements directly from the experience of the ethnographer. It is only in further elaboration that ethnographic data are connected to potential historical and theoretical facts. This centrality of ‘in situ ethnography’, however, prevents us from discussing an anthropology of ancient peoples, whose ethnography as direct testimony appears to be impossible. To this point, I would like to highlight the importance of transforming the ‘field’ as a background for ethnographic research. This is especially true for the issue of the ethnographic field as a “bounded territory” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) in which subjects are studied in their natural environment. Despite all the criticisms and changes, it is assumed that there must be a field, otherwise there is no ethnography, and if there is no ethnography, there is no anthropology. In addition to giving more attention to innovative experiences, it is indeed necessary to point out that even a textual experience, the immersion in a ‘document’, can in every sense constitute an ethnographic experience, as Williams puts it, “embodied as fieldwork” (Williams 2007, p. 66). This also brings us back to the criticism of ethnographic method: despite the multidisciplinary origins of anthropology, the entire “anthropological theory has tended to disappear and be swallowed up by ethnographic particularism” (Brigati and Gamberi 2019, p. 226). Instead, those who are now criticized as ‘armchair anthropologists’ for doing anthropology through texts and indirect sources, according to Bettini, they were anthropologists as much as modern ethnographers. There is no need to glorify the work of Frazer or Tylor to recognize the validity of a more philological or historical-archaeological anthropology. The works of the old anthropologists were undoubtedly imperfect and full of errors, but that does not mean that anthropology based on written sources cannot prove itself valid. This tendency is crowned by Geertz’s manifesto, which would have contributed in no small way to describing the “prevailing ethnographic fanaticism” (Matera 2017, pp. 23–24) that we experience today. This was glimpsed in past times when De Martino sharply criticized the “descriptivism of positivist-era ethnologists who meticulously described the facts of primitive customs and obtained an unintentionally ridiculous image of them, like the technical gestures of swimming repeated by those outside the water” (De Martino 2019, p. 399).

- 2 It should be noted that the use of the Pāli canon as a historical source is far from comprehensive. The material contained within these texts that can be considered reliable testimony, with a certain margin of error, is primarily that which allows us to reconstruct the customs and ascetic beliefs of early Buddhism, while continuously comparing this information with other historical and archaeological data to address any potential issues in the reconstruction process. For instance, as we will see in the case of the Sutta Nipāta, multiple historical layers intersect and combine, as not all of the chapters comprising this collection were composed at the same time. However, these chapters likely refer, at least hypothetically, to the most archaic form of Buddhism, although this fact alone is not sufficient to consider all of the reported statements as legitimately archaic. It is more likely that we will encounter elements that evoke or refer to some level of archaism, but which are also influenced by the perspectives of those who transmitted or developed these ballads. Nonetheless, the use of the Pāli canon in the reconstruction of archaic Buddhism is generally accepted in contemporary scholarship, as exemplified by the works of (Bucknell 2022; Anālayo 2012; Turriff 2009; Kuan 2007).
- 3 *yo uppatitaṃ vineti kodhaṃ, viṣaṇaṃ sappavisaṇva osadhehi; so bhikkhu jahāti orapāraṃ, urago jiṇṇamivattacaṃ purāṇaṃ.*
- 4 Those articles are currently available in the online archive of the *Buddhist Studies Review*. The reader can find in the bibliography the references for the article I have personally reviewed for the purpose of this work. See (Jayawickrama 1977, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1980d, 1980e, 1980f).
- 5 Cf. (De Vaan 2008, pp. 355–56) and (Buck 1988, p. 15) (point 7: “Skt. loka-”). Finally, for a complete overview see “The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary” (Rhys Davis and William Stede ed., 1921–1925), voice *loka* (p. 651, digital version of 2009) defined as “space, open space”, with also a reference to the Vedic origin remarked.
- 6 Original: *uṣṭā reva phārvareṣu śrayethe prāyogēva śvā tryā śā sur éthaḥ*. For the translation, cf. (Squarcini 2015, p. xii).
- 7 The word *paramattha* is a compound of *parama* and *attha*. Both these words have a clear Vedic origin. According to the “The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary” the word *parama* comes from the Vedic *parama* “farthest” and it is used to indicate the “highest, most excellent, superior, best” (p. 468, ver. 2009). In compound with *-attha*, it means “the highest good, ideal” or “truth in the ultimate sense” (*ibidem*). This is due to the peculiar meaning of *attha*, related to the Vedic *artha* which is very important also in modern hindu conceptions. In Pāli, most of its original meaning is preserved, as *attha* indicates what results from a cause and, morally, it indicates the end, the meaning of something (p. 29). This term also has a linguistic use (cfr. Crosby (2020, p. 252) citing Kaccāyana’s Pāli grammar): “Sense (*attha*) is perceived (*saññāto*) through sounds (*akkhara*). The Sense of all (*sabba*) language (*vacanāṃ*) is perceived only (*eva*) through sounds. When there is an error (*vipatti*) in the phonic sounds, the meaning is confused (*dunnayatā*). Therefore (*tasmā*), the phonetic skill (*kosalla*) is helpful (*bahū-pakāraṃ*) in [understanding] the teachings of the Suttas (*suttantesu*)”. The Vedic *artha* derives from the Proto-Indo-Iranian root **hártham* (<Proto-Indo-European **h₁ert*), which stands for “matter”, a defined object or, interestingly, a *purpose* or “meaning”.
- 8 Concerning this particular matter of ‘directions’ and its development in Buddhist thought, I suggest to refer to Snp 5.17 where it is said “the four directions, the intermediate directions, below and above: in these directions we find in the world there is nothing at all that you have not seen or heard or thought or experienced through cognition” (*disā catasso vidisā catasso, uddhaṃ adho dasa disā imāyo, na tuyhaṃ adiṭṭhaṃ asutaṃ amutaṃ, atho aviññātaṃ kiñcanamatthi loke; ācikkha dhammaṃ yamaṃ vijaññaṃ*).
- 9 *saccaṃ ve amatā vācā, esa dhammo sanantano; sacce atthe ca dhamme ca, āhu santo paṭiṭṭhitā; yaṃ buddho bhāṣati vācaṃ, khemaṃ nibbānapaṭṭiyā; dukkhassantakiriyāya, sā ve vācānamuttama*. The expression “be firmly existing” is the translation of *santo paṭiṭṭhitā*, where *paṭiṭṭhita* can mean “firmly grounded”, “well established” or “fixed in”, “settled in”, and *santo* is a nominal form of *atthi* “to be” (cf. *santa/saṃ*).
- 10 Parmenides’ philosophy can be summarized in three ways presented in his poem. Granted that it is impossible to conceive that anything came into being out of nowhere, the Goddess Mnēmosýnē reveals to Parmenides only three possible (and thinkable) alternatives. Firstly, the contradictory way, of unthinkable and unnamable things, for which being can become non-being: it is the impassable way, according to Cornford’s definition (Cornford 1933). In addition to this path, which is impracticable, there are the path of Truth (*alētheia*) and the path of Seeming (*dóxa*), the latter being immediately led back to a false path. The stone door of Mnēmosýnē’s house is rolled away by Dikē and Parmenides is shown a double way: *alētheia* and *dóxa*. The limbs are inconstant (*hekástot’*) and therefore not valid as a means of knowledge. Light and Shadow are concurrent in constancy (*polýplanktos*) as well as the relationship between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* in the Sāṃkhya system. In the same way, the intellect (*buddhi*) is the product of this interaction between the two entities. According to Parmenides, “the elements of Light and Darkness are wandering through the cosmos, of which the human mind is an integral part. In this sphere of thought knowledge is not the result of a contact between the mind and its objects, for the concept of contact does not yet exist” (Verdenius 1949, p. 128). Traditionally, *dóxa* indicates an opinion, but also common concepts, shared thinking, expectations, and judgments: “Parmenides undoubtedly took this illumination literally as a luminous phenomenon surrounding and pervading his mind. This is not to be wondered at, if we remember that he possessed a mystical nature” (p. 122).
- 11 In Parmenides, one could speak of dualism only if the philosophical formulation of his poem made clear and unequivocal a conceptual and radical separation between the two entities, such as to make Fire as “isolated” from the Night and vice versa. However, this does not happen since both concepts are presented as equal. Each concept of a linguistic system is necessarily equal to the other and cannot be neither superior nor inferior (*pân pléon estîn homoi pháeos kai nyktòs aphántoy isôn amphotérōn*). It is also clear that Parmenides speaks of language as he mentions naming (*onómastai*) and designation. Parmenides’ philosophy has nothing to do with Light itself, nor with Darkness, but only with the concept of Light, which is logically opposite to that of Darkness. In their entirety, however, we know that Light is the presence of a phenomenon, while Dark is a non-thing, as a

simple absence of Light. It is the conceptualization of absence that makes it linguistically equal to another conceptualization: that of presence. Thus “being” and “nothing” are two names, and as such they are equal, favoring the deception that *nothing* is, impossibly, *something*, while it is, by its very definition, non-being (nothing is a no-thing), therefore it is *not*.

12 *na heva saccāni bahūni nānā, aññatra saññāya niccāni loke; takkañca dīṭṭhisu pakappayitvā, saccaṃ musāti dvayadhammāhu ... vinicchaye thatvā sayaṃ pamāya, uddhamsa lokasmiṃ vivādameti; hitvāna sabbāni vinicchayāni, na medhagaṃ kubbatī jantu loke.*

13 *na brāhmaṇassa paraneyyamatthi, dhammesu niccheyya samuggahitaṃ; tasmā vivādāni upātivatto, na hi seṭṭhato passati dhammamaññaṃ ... nivissavādī na hi subbināyo, pakappitaṃ dīṭṭhi purakkharāno ... na brāhmaṇo kappamupeti saṅkhā, na dīṭṭhisārī napi ñāṇabandhu; ñatvā ca so sammutiyo puthujjā, upekkhatī uggahaṇanti maññe; vissajja ganthāni munīdha loke, vivādajātesu na vaggasārī; santo asantesu upekkhako so ... pubbāsava hitvā nave akubbaṃ, na chandagū nopi nivissavādī; sa vip̐pamutto dīṭṭhigatehi dhīro, na lippati loke anattagarahī.*

14 *na brāhmaṇo nomhi na rājaputto, na vessāyano uda koci nomhi; gottaṃ pariññāya puthujjanānaṃ, akiñcano manta carāmi loke; saṅghāṭivāsī agaho carāmi ... akallaṃ maṃ brāhmaṇa pucchasi gottapañhaṃ.*

15 *na jaccā vasalo hoti, na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo; kammunā vasalo hoti, kammunā hoti brāhmaṇo.* Cf. Snp 1.7 and variants found in Snp 3.9 and MN 98.

16 Among the works that have dealt with the description of a ‘Buddhist anthropology’ (i.e. the anthropological idea of Buddhism) and an anthropology of Buddhism (anthropological analysis of Buddhism), numerous can be cited as useful for this research. In reconstructing the anthropological idea underlying ancient Buddhist thought, we cannot disregard all the studies on the figure of the ascetic. Fundamental are the works of (Burghart 1983; Olivelle 2006a; Olivelle 2006b). Moreover, McEvilley’s work on the archaeology of yoga, published in a journal of anthropology (McEvilley 1981), is certainly foundational to the line of study I am promoting and provides an excellent foundation for the archaeo-anthropology mentioned at the outset, as well as other works of him. In addition, there is the academic work of Squarcini, mentioned earlier, which outlines a socio-anthropology of both modern and ancient South Asian thought (for antiquity, see, e.g., Squarcini 2008, 2011). Even Weber, in his Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism (Weber 1958), makes frequent use of anthropological analyses that turn to antiquity and that are fundamental to explaining modernity. The same is true of (Bailey and Mabbett 2003; Olson 2015), to name but a few examples. See also modern works, such as that of Comolli (2009) and a research on modern meditation in the clinical settings (Divino 2021).

17 *passāmi loke pariphandamānaṃ, paṇaṃ imaṃ taṇhagataṃ bhavesu; hīnā narā maccumukhe lapanti, avīṭatanhāse bhavābhavesu. [...] saññāṃ pariññā vitareyya oghaṃ, pariggahesu muni nopalitto; abbūḥhasallo caramappamatto, nāsīsatī lokamimaṃ parañcātī.*

18 The geographical conception of the world is rather expressed by the idea of *jagat*, somewhere physically reachable. Indeed, in AN 4.45 it is explicitly stated that *loka* is not some place where someone can go (*gamamena*).

19 *pabbajjaṃ kittayissāmi, yathā pabbajī cakkhumā; yathā vīmaṃsamāno so, pabbajjaṃ samarocayi; sambādhoyaṃ gharāvāso, rajassāyatanāṃ iti; abbhokāsova pabbajjā, iti disvāna pabbajī.*

20 According to Perera, Snp 3.7 is a very interesting text since it presents both ancient and innovated elements. However, we must be very careful analyzing it. Surely, Snp 3.7 “belongs to the ballad poetry of the Sutta-Nipāta” (Perera 1980, p. 66), like others we have seen so far. Indeed, Snp 3.7 “is typical of the ballads of ancient Indian literature”. Furthermore, it has been observed that Snp 3.7 is quite uniform, like other suttas of the same Vagga, which “are probably very old”. However, Snp 3.7 presents some problems in this regard, that is to say “signs of lateness”. Perera supposes that Snp 3.7 can be a fusion of two distinct ballads which we can also find preserved separately, with some differences, in other collections: “one concerning *Sela* is that preserved in the Theragāthā”, and the other ballad, “regarding *Keniya* is from a then-floating tradition, drawn upon both by the Sutta-Nipāta and the Vinaya” (p. 68). In addition, we see the linguistic problem. In Snp 3.7, we find both prose and poetry. The prose parts are just narrative interludes that serve to introduce the parts in poetry to the two ballads of *Sela* and *Keniya*. However, those prose parts are linguistically more recent than those in verse: “[t]he language of the prose, as almost in all the *Suttas* of this collection, is quite similar to the prose of the Nikāyas in idiom, syntax and style” (*ibidem*). One of the elements that allowed us to identify Snp 4 and 5 as extremely ancient is precisely the frequent use of archaisms and ancient lexical and verbal forms. For Snp 3.7 this is only minimally true: “to the end sounds very poetic, while the earlier portion of the Sutta is rather labored and seems to be adapted from a prose version [...] Old linguistic forms (particularly Vedic, for which the Sutta-Nipāta is well-known) are not very common” (p. 69).

21 The question of light has been deeply studied in the past and has several occurrences in the Canon such as AN 4.142 where it is explicitly connected with ‘superior knowledge’, but it is also possible to find it in other suttas such as 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 also the important SN 56.11, among others.

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