

Forest of desires and desire of forests: a way to the Buddhist ethics.

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1. *Introduction: ritualism versus asceticism*

This paper aims at highlighting one of the pivotal points of the ancient Indian culture: the relationship between the ethics of Vedic ritualism and the ethics of Early Buddhism. As it is well known, the Vedic culture is considered one of the most ancient stages of the Indian civilization, being traced back to the 2nd millennium B.C. c.a. Such a culture is primarily characterized by ritualism, or more precisely, it is known mainly through a repertoire of texts – belonging to the priestly-*brāhmaṇa* tradition – that are eminently ritualistic. Such a Vedic textual *corpus* depicts the image of a society founded on a sacrificial taxonomy that defines and structures the world as “cosmos” through a meticulous recurring combination of gesture and sacred formula¹. The cosmic order is founded on the sacrificial action and maintained through it, that is through the orthopraxis *par excellence*. The Hindu orthodoxy – *dharma* – derives from such a Vedic orthopraxis.

However, beside the ritualistic culture – which informs the whole reality with its *praxis* prescriptions and constitutes the un-perishable “tradition” (*smṛti*) – other cultural streams are developed; compared to the ritualistic-dominant one, such streams can be considered

¹ Cf. Smith, Brian K., *Classifying the Universe. The Ancient Indian «Varṇa» System and the Origins of Caste*, New York-Oxford, 1994; as to the “syntax” of the ritual, cf. Staal, F., *Rules Without Meaning*, New York-Bern-Frankfurt am Main-Paris, 1990.

the “alternative” ones, because they do not accept – to different extents – the ritualistic practice and refuse more or less radically the Brahmanical authority. Such movements found their particular context at the edge of the official cultural sphere; they are located in the so-called *śramaṇa* sphere, that is the sphere of *asceticism*. The term *śramaṇa* is actually derived from the Skr. root *śram-*, meaning “to make efforts”, and denotes the condition of whoever performs ascetic practices instead of sacrificial practices: the sacrificial victim and the ritualistic implements (namely the fire and the sacred formula) are respectively replaced by one’s own body-*Self* (*ātmayajña*), and by bodily “stuff”, especially bodily heat (*tapas*) and mindful recitation (*svādhyāya*). Inaction and meditation substitute any ritual action and formal gesture; the attainment of a new kind of knowledge (*jñāna*), a speculative knowledge, is pursued. Therefore, the term *śramaṇa* implies different categories of ascetics, leading a life that is extreme to varying degrees and involves different types and scales of “efforts”.

On the one hand, there is the “moderate” case of the *vanāprastha*, “who dwells in the forest”, a Brahmin who leaves his community and the solemn ritualistic practices because he is aged. He decides to retire into the forest, followed by his wife only, where he waits for his death. However, he takes with him a bowl containing the fuels of the sacred fire, through which he can still perform his daily rituals. On the other hand, there is the *saṃnyāsin*, “renouncer”, who leaves the village and all dharmic conduct to live definitely detached from the Brahmanical society, in a *non-ritual state*².

According to the scholars, different terms, used in different typologies of texts, denote specific qualities of the *śramaṇa* sphere, implying hermitage (*āśrama*) in solitude or together with other ascetics, or “wandering” (*parivraja*) in the forest or on the border of the villages. The livelihood of the *śramaṇas* relies on roots and fruits

² As to the concept of “renunciation” in ancient Indian culture, cf. Olivelle, P., *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads. Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*, New York-Oxford, 1992, particularly pp. 58-81.

of the forest or on begging, and the *śramaṇas* may also fast until death. As to the clothes, the *śramaṇas* wear skins of animals or barks of trees, sometimes they use clothes abandoned by other people, and they may even go naked. Another important mark of the *śramaṇa status* is either the recitation of *mantras* in solitude or the complete silence, and a sort of mindful concentration. Austerity (*tapas*), control of breathing (*prāṇāyāma*) and different bodily “efforts” can be practiced, and mental training may be developed through meditative practices³. Despite this intermingled situation, it is evident that the śramanical condition is made opposite to the purely ritualistic realm by many factors: the attitude to asceticism and the internalization of the sacrifice, the speculation with focus on the individual Self, the renunciation of the world and the inactivity⁴.

The cultural dichotomy *ritualism / asceticism* or *ritual action / speculative in-action* was well traced in the 5th-4th centuries B.C.: the age when Buddhism and Jainism – the two main heterodox currents – emerged from the śramanical context, probably in relation to the process of urbanization in the Ganges valley, and to the formation of political states from powerful kingdoms⁵. However, as some categories (like the so-called *āranyakas* and *upaniṣads*) of Vedic texts show, such a cultural dichotomy had already been present in the 8th-6th centuries B.C. In these texts it corresponds to the spatial dichotomy *village / forest*, equivalent to Levis-Strauss’s structural antithesis *cultural status / natural status*. As Malamoud has claimed⁶, the opposition

³ As to the debate about the question, and the different interpretations of the textual sources, cf. Bronkhorst, J., *The Two Sources of Indian Asceticism*, Bern-Berlin-Frankfurt a.M.-New York-Paris-Wien, 1993; Shiraishi, R., *Asceticism in Buddhism and Brahmanism*, Institute of Buddhist Studies, Tring, 1996; Oguibénine, B., “Qu’est-ce que le forêt pour l’Inde ancienne?”, *Indologica Taurinensia* 33 (2007), pp. 213-225.

⁴ Cf. Bronkhorst’s interpretation, in *The Two Sources of Indian Asceticism*, 1993, namely p. 17.

⁵ Cf. Gombrich, R., *Theravāda Buddhism*, London, 1988, pp. 49-50.

⁶ Malamoud, Ch., “Village et forêt dans l’idéologie de l’Inde brâhmanique”, *Archives européennes de sociologie* XVII (1976), pp. 3-20; now also in *Cuire le monde. Rite et pensée dans l’Inde ancienne*, Paris, 1989, pp. 93-114.

between village and forest is implicit in the dual nature of the Vedic sacrifice itself. In fact, on the one hand the sacrificial action marks the human community (*grāma*) as the only *status* that is able to guarantee wellness and means of livelihood – thus satisfying the primary desire for survival – in opposition to all “other” conditions, connoted as a negative, magmatic and dangerous *status*. On the other hand, the sacrifice dominates the “otherness” by means that present the same features of “otherness” itself: the sacrifice consists of a “ritualization” (“ordered combination”) of violence and killing, of the deadly and dangerous powers. In other words: the livelihood of the village relies on the deadly condition of “otherness”, and the sacrifice is the threshold through which both the magma of the undifferentiated nature are re-founded and, at the same time, the very dichotomy between life and death / order and chaos is defined. In the Vedic ritual texts the Skr. term *araṇya* denotes the condition of otherness: it is etymologically connected to the Indo-European stem **al-*, from which the Latin *alius* also derives, and it often occurs in opposition to the Skr. term *grāma*, generally meaning “village” or “constituted community”, so that the term *araṇya* is interpreted as “forest” or “what is external to the community”, an empty and interstitial space⁷.

Therefore, the ritual action is one of the main tasks of the householder (*gṛhastha*), the member of the community that recognizes itself and its members through the ritual practices themselves, whereas the “other”, whoever denies ritualism, lives out of the community, in the space of otherness, the forest or *araṇya*. In this “other” space, the ritual formalism, which preludes to the prescriptive ethics of the *dharmacodes*, is replaced by a more naturalistic and individualistic approach to reality, promoted both by a speculative interest in nature and by a deeper awareness of Self, so that a more “dilemmatic” ethics emerges.

⁷ As to the question, cf. also Sprockhoff, J.F., “Aranyaka und Vānaprastha in der vedischen Literatur”, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* XXV (1981), pp. 19-90, especially pp. 32-43.

In this more speculative context a sort of “physiology” is elaborated: it relies on the observation of natural phenomena, and focuses on the cosmic correspondences of nature, especially between microcosm and macrocosm (e.g. breath / *ātman* considered as analogous to wind). A sort of “metaphysics” is also shaped: the “true” essence (*satya*) of reality is pursued, both by transcending the phenomenal world and by deeply penetrating the mystery of the phenomenal world, through the abyss of the undifferentiated and impermanent. So, the doctrine of the Absolute (*brahman*) and the notion of Self (*ātman*) are elaborated: they result from discerning speculation and dialectical teaching, that is from a cognitive process. In such cognitive context the doctrine of the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*) is also formulated: every action (*karman*) provokes consequent re-actions or fruits (*phala*), the fruition of which determines an unbroken chain of deaths and births. Such a chain can be interpreted not only as the never-ending life, but also as the never-ending suffering that mark human existence, being studded with ills, old age and death. According to the latter negative vision, release (*mokṣa*) from the bondage of suffering is the supreme goal, which has to be attained⁸. Therefore, action assumes a “moral” value, in a sort of “naturalistic” ethics: thus, the “individual agent” substitutes a violent sacrificial action with a non-violent and pacified attitude (*ahiṃsā*), and food gained from an “injurious” action with vegetarianism. Likewise, the desire (*kāma*) for wellness and prosperity, which promotes the sacrifice itself, is commuted in non-desire – mainly chastity –, and action itself (*karman*) turns into inaction. The eschatological conceptions also change: the ancient Fathers’ realm (which was maintained

⁸ As to the origins of the early doctrine of transmigration connected with the doctrine of correspondences, and with the development of the notion of *ātman* from “breath” to “soul” and “Self”, cf. Butzenberger, K., “Ancient Indian Conceptions on Man’s Destiny After Death: the Beginnings and the Early Development of the Doctrine of Transmigration. I”, *Berliner Indologische Studien* 9 (1996), pp. 55-118, and “Ancient Indian Conceptions on Man’s Destiny After Death: the Beginnings and the Early Development of the Doctrine of Transmigration. II”, *Berliner Indologische Studien* 11/12 (1998), pp. 1-84.

through sacrificial offerings) and the heaven (*svarga*) with its material pleasures (abundance of nourishment, troops of musicians and nymphs delighting the deceased), attainable through ritual formalism and dharmic conduct⁹, do not provide anymore an unperishable happiness, because they can only represent a step of the cycle of rebirth. Therefore, the ultimate goal becomes a transcendent, unconditioned, and even unutterable reality – or not-reality – corresponding to the breaking and dissolution of the samsaric chain.

However, the Hindu texts, especially the so-called *śāstra* or “normative texts”, include the definition of forest-dweller and renouncer in the four stages of life, as if this *status* was established according to the orthodox *dharma*¹⁰. Moreover, some of the above mentioned concepts are considered fundamental for the Hindu ideology: the relationship between *brahman-ātman*, the release from *saṃsāra*, the discovery of the ultimate reality. Some ascetic and meditative practices also seem to be integrated in the Hindu orthodoxy and, in turn, some ascetics of the forest long for the gods’ realm, as if it could guarantee a never-ending happiness. Furthermore, some textual categories, included in the Vedic corpus, testify to a close connection between the Vedic and the *śramaṇa* sphere. Such textual categories are the *āraṇyakas*, or “texts of the forest”, and the *upaniṣads*, or “texts of esoteric teaching”, and both of them are devoted to speculations on the secret correspondences between ritual and cosmos, ritual and bodily-Self, cosmos and Self. In particular, the *upaniṣads* deal with the doctrine of *karman* and the cycle of rebirth, as well as with the notion of Absolute-*brahman*: they are meta-ritualistic texts. Thus, the śramanical knowledge, or the “forest-knowledge”, is implied in the Vedic reflection on ritualism

⁹ As to the eschatological conception in Vedic and dharmic India, cf. Bodewitz, H.W., “Life after death in the Ṛgvedasamhitā”, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens*, XXXVIII (1994), pp. 23-41; and “The dark and deep underworld in the Veda”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 122/2 (2002), pp. 213-223; Rossi, P.M., “Una stele eroica ritrovata a Lisbona. II. Il destino ultraterreno del guerriero”, in Zanetto, G.-Ornaghi, M. (eds.), *Argumenta Antiquitatis. Seminari 2008, Quaderni di Acme* 109 (2009), forthcoming, pp. 117-134.

¹⁰ For instance in *Mānavadharmasāstra* VI 1-65.

itself, as the sacrifice is the threshold between village-community and forest-otherness, so that the aged Brahmin-householder can become a forest-dweller, going to die into the forest¹¹; Levis-Strauss's structural relationship *culture / nature* is applied once again: the poles of the dichotomy interact through the sacrificial realm. However, in the Indian context such a dichotomy can also be interpreted as community *versus* individuality, and normative ethics *versus* naturalistic and cognitive ethics.

Taking into account the points here synthetically outlined, the scholars wonder whether the emergence of asceticism, mainly in the case of radical renunciation, is due to a sort of "protest" against the Brahmanical ritualism, promoted by external cultural currents, or to "an internal development" of the Vedic culture, based on the natural maturation of antithetical tendencies inside sacrifice itself¹². However, in the first hypothesis the original dichotomy is considered to be absorbed in the orthodox Hindu system during the first centuries A.D.; in the second one, the antithesis is seen as especially stressed within the Buddhist and Jain traditions, in order to mark their own distinction from the Brahmanical system¹³. Nevertheless, a third hypothesis is formulated: the Indian asceticism derives from two different sources: both the ritualistic and the anti-ritualistic one. The Vedic ascetic tendency develops a form of "active" asceticism, characterized by austerity, aiming at reaching a heavenly *post-mortem* condition; on

¹¹ As to the analogies between ritualism and asceticism, cf. Kaelber, W.O., *Asceticism and Initiation in Vedic India*, Albany-New York, 1989.

¹² The "heterogenetic" theory is argued by Dumont, L., in his famous essay "World Renunciation in Indian Religion", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* IV (1960), pp. 33-62; the "orthogenetic" theory is claimed by Heesterman, J.C., "Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens und Archiv für indische Philosophie* VIII (1964), pp. 1-31, now also in Heesterman, J.C., *The Inner Conflict of Tradition. Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, Chicago-London, 1985, pp. 26-44.

¹³ As to the question and the historical perspective, cf. Thapar, R., "The householder and the renouncer in the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions", in Madan, T.N. (ed.), *Way of Life. King, Householder, Renouncer. Essays in Honour of Louis Dumont*, Delhi, 1982, 273-298.

the contrary, the non-Vedic line aims at the final extinction (*mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*) through inaction and meditation¹⁴.

In the light of these considerations, Oguibénine¹⁵ argues that one may distinguish between the *forest* nearby the village, where the Brahmanical ascetics dwell, and the *wild forest*, far from the village, that is the abode of the renouncers; the first one is defined by the Skr. term *vana*, the second one is denoted by the Skr. term *araṇya*. However, the complexity of the question and the hybrid picture emerging from the Vedic texts themselves do not allow such a strict distinction: *vana* is primarily the more or less wild space with vegetation – plants, trees, etc. – that is a natural environment with no definite cultural connotations, whereas *araṇya* is the space of “otherness”, the cultural connotation of which is wilderness¹⁶.

2. The Buddhist vana: forest and desire¹⁷

As it has well known, Buddhism is one of the heterodox movements derived from the śramanical context: against every dogmatism, Buddha denies any essence of reality, arguing that the phenomenal existence is impermanent (*anicca*), that it lack of any hidden ontological correspondences, like the *brahman-ātman* one, and that no individual Self can be identified and defined (*anattā*). In this perspective, the ultimate goal is the extinction (*nibbāna*) of every conditioned existence, corresponding to the cessation of suffering (*dukkha*). This goal cannot be attained through extreme austerity, but rather through lonely calming

¹⁴ Cf. Bronkhorst, J., *op. cit.*, 1993; he also claims that the term *śramaṇa* itself can especially denote the non-Vedic asceticism, namely pp. 76-86, as it has already been suggested by R. Thapar, above quoted, namely p. 276.

¹⁵ Oguibénine, B., “Qu’est-ce que le forêt pour l’Inde ancienne?”, *Indologica Taurinensia* 33 (2007), particularly p. 224.

¹⁶ Cf. Sprockhoff, J.F., *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* XXV (1981), pp. 19-90, especially pp. 32-43.

¹⁷ The Buddhist terminology is quoted in *Pāli* language; the *Pāli* texts are quoted after the Pāli Text Society editions.

meditation (*samatha*), mindful insight (*jhāna*), and awareness of the “essence-less” of the reality, that is through a discriminating insight or wisdom (*paññā*)¹⁸. According to the scholars, it is evident that the Buddhist teaching presupposes the Brahmanical doctrinal background, as it aims to twist the Brahmanical taxonomy, and to demonstrate its groundlessness or “essence-less”¹⁹. Therefore, the Buddha plays with the Brahmanical terminology, introducing in his words metaphors or puns that allude to the orthodox context, but turn the Vedic meaning upside down²⁰.

Taking into account such premise, an interesting pun, occurring in the Buddhist *Pāli* literature, points out the Buddhist attitude to the dichotomy *village / forest*, as above delineated, especially in Early Buddhism.

The pun is based upon the double meaning of the *Pāli* term *vana*: *vana*, “forest, wood”, is homophone with *vana*, “desire”. Thus, the *Pāli* term *nibbana*, compound with *vana*, means both “out of forest” and “out of desire”, that is the condition of non-desire, synonym of the *pāli* term *nikkāma*, “out of passion; out of desire”. It is evident that in the didactic Buddhist verse the pun can also imply the term *nibbāna*, which denotes the “supreme goal”, attained through the extinction of desire or the condition of non-desire (*nibbana*)²¹. Such a pun occurs in the *Dhammapada*, one of the most famous canonical Buddhist texts²²:

¹⁸ According to Tilmann Vetter it is possible to distinguish two means to achieve the *nibbāna*, the *jhānic* way and the *paññic* way, focused the former on meditative conduct and the latter on ignorance and rational awareness. He suggests that probably these two different śramanical tendencies flowed together into the Early Buddhism. Cf. Vetter, T., *The Ideias and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, Leiden-New York-Kobenhavn-Koln, 1899, pp. XXI-XXV; 47.

¹⁹ Cf. Gombrich, R., *How Buddhism Began*, London, 1996, particularly pp. 27-64.

²⁰ Cf. examples in *idem*, particularly pp. 65-95.

²¹ Cf. Collins, S., *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 195-196.

²² *Dhp* 283: *vanam chindatha mā rukkham vanato jāyañi bhayaṃ / chetvā vanam ca vanathañ ca nibbanā hotha bhikkhavo // 283 // Dhp* 344: *yo nibbanatho vanādhimutto vanamutto vanam eva dhāvati / tam puggalam eva passatha mutto bandhanam eva dhāvati // 344 //*; my translation.

“Cut the (whole) *forest*, not a (single) tree: from the *forest* the scare arises after cutting the *forest* and *forest*-wood, you, monks, will be out of *desire*” (283).

“He who is out of *desire*, but devoted to the *forest*, he who is free from *desire* and runs to the *forest* look at him: released, he runs towards the fetters” (344).

In these verses the terms *desire* / *forest* are interchangeable, conveying two possible and opposite meanings. The same pun is found also in the *Theraḡāthā*, the collection of *Pāli* strophes ascribed to the “Elder monks” of the Buddhist Order that is considered an early evidence of the *kāvya* poetry. It is worth noticing that the commentary reads *nibbāna* instead of *nibbāna*, meaning that «one goes from desire to non-desire, which is *nibbāna*»²³.

“Having passed beyond all fetters, come from the wood of desire to the non-wood, delighting in renunciation of sensual pleasures, released, like gold from stone” (691)

Likewise, in the *Arīguttara Nikāya*, *nibbana* is changed into *nibbāna* in the verses closing the Buddha’s words about the wilderness dwelling²⁴:

“Having passed beyond all fetters, come from the wood of desire to the *nibbāna*, delighting in renunciation of sensual pleasures, released, like gold from stone” (20).

²³ *Th* 691: *sabbasaṃyojanāñīdaṃ vanā nibbanaṃ āgataṃ / kāmehi nikkhammarataṃ muttaseḷā va kañcanaṃ // 691 //*; translation after Norman, K.R., *The Elders’ Verses. I. Theraḡāthā*, translated with an introduction and notes, Pali Text Society, London, 1969.

²⁴ *AN* III 346: *sabbasaṃ yojanāñīdaṃvanā nibbānaṃ āgataṃ / kāmehi nikkhammarataṃ muttaṃ seḷā va kañcanaṃ // 20 //*.

Finally, in the *Samyutta Nikāya* the following verses rely on the double meaning of *vana* and *nibbana*²⁵:

“In the forests, for me, there is nothing to do; *desire*, (which is) restless motion, without roots becomes *forest* for me.
In the *forest*, out of *desire*, free from pain, I find delight alone, discontent disappears.”

This playing with words produces an immediate didactic effect, inasmuch the multiform expressive power of the linguistic arbitrariness is realized: the same phonetic chain can convey different meanings, thus revealing the intrinsic contradiction of existence and the meaninglessness of reality that are pivotal aspects of the Buddhist perspective. Thus, in the pun *vana-nibbana-nibbāna* the whole doctrine of the Buddha is condensed.

In fact, in order to attain the supreme goal the Buddha himself recommends the wilderness dwelling and disapproves the village dwelling, thus apparently opposing the Brahmanical dominant prescriptions. For example, the passage of the *Samyutta Nikāya* from which the above verses are quoted states that, while he was going to collect the wood in the forest for the sacrificial fire, the brahmin Bhāradvāja saw the Buddha in meditation, and addressed these words to him²⁶:

“In a deep and terrible forest, immersed in the empty and desolate wilderness, oh monk, you meditate unwaveringly,

²⁵ SN I 180: *Na me vanasmim̐ karaṇīyam atthi ucchinnamūlam̐ me vanam̐ visūkam̐ / so 'ham̐ vane nibbanatho visallo eko rame arati vippahāyāti //*; my translation.

²⁶ SN I 180-181: *Gambhīrarūpe bahubherave vane suññam̐ araññam̐ vijanam̐ vigāhiya / aniñjamānena thitena vaggunā sucārurūpaṃ vata bhikkhu jhāyasi //* *Na yattha gītā na pi yattha vāditaṃ eko araññe vanam̐ assito muni, / accherarūpaṃ paṭibhāti maṃ idaṃ yad ekako pītmano vane vase //* *Maññam̐ aham̐ lokādhipaṇi sahayatam̐ ākari khamāno tidivaṃ anuttaram̐ / kasmā bhavam̐ vijanam̐ araññam̐ assito tapo idha kubbasi brahmapattiyā ti //*; my translation.

steadfastly, pleasantly: (this is) a very delightful thing indeed.

Where there are no songs, where there are no sounds, alone in wilderness, you rely on the forest, oh silent ascetic; this wonderful thing, the fact that he lives alone and joyful in the forest, surprises me.

I think you are longing for the three highest Heavens, the Lords of the worlds as companions: why, Sir, do you practice austerity here, relying on the desolate wilderness, but for the attainment of the *brahman*'s realm?"

The brahmin's words reveal the Brahmanical ideology: wilderness dwelling is conceived of as a means to achieve the heaven, or the *brahman*'s realm, which here seems to be equivalent to the gods' realm, the paradise; this should be the supreme goal that, according to the brahmin, has to be attained and desired. Moreover, the image of the forest is absolutely negative in the brahmin's eyes: it is empty (*suñña*) and terrible, like the austerity (*tapas*) practiced by the ascetic, which should be very extreme. On the contrary, the Buddha seems to be glad minded, and enjoys the place as if it was pleasant and delightful. In fact, he replies²⁷:

"All kind of delighting or longing – often attached to many and manifold elements yearned for because of deep-rooted ignorance – all these, with their roots, were removed by me.

I am not longing, I am independent, with no attachment, with purified sight of all worldly phenomena; having achieved the highest and happy enlightenment, I meditate lonely, oh brahmin, and self-confident."

²⁷ SN I 181: *Yā kāci kaṅkhā abhinandanā vā anekadhātusu puthū sadāsītā / aññāṇamūlapabhavā pajappitā sabbā mayā byantikatā samūlikā // svāhaṃ akarikho asito anūpayo sabbesu dhammesu visuddhadassano, / pappuyya sambodhim anuttaraṃ sivaṃ jhāyāṃ ahaṃ brāhmaṇa raho vīsārado ti //*; my translation.

The Buddha, or the Enlightened, is not practicing austerity, but he is meditating lonely, deeply concentrated into mindful insight (*jhāyati*): he is totally detached from the phenomenal world, and has realised the “non-essence” of reality, thus reaching the *status* of non-desire, which preludes to *nibbāna*. Here, the term *vana* does not occur, but the compound *aññānamūlappabhava* seems to allude to the pun, already explicit in the verses quoted above, where it is used as an adjective denoting the objects of desire. The cause of such a condition of desire, that is its *root* (*mūla*), is *ignorance* or *aññāna*. The term *root* is connected with the same semantic sphere of *forest* and vegetation in general, while the term *aññāna* is almost homophone with the term *arañña*, the *Pāli* equivalent of the Skr. *arannya*, wilderness: the false knowledge (*aññāna*) determines the attachment to the worldly phenomena and the consequent *desire-status*, that is the *arañña-status* or the wilderness. This *desire-wilderness* must be eradicated. It is worth noticing that the Buddhist ideology is characterized by a naturalistic and a cognitive approach: the wilderness lonely dwelling preludes to the attainment of knowledge, which is – according to the Buddha’s conception – the awareness of the emptiness or “non-essence” of reality. This is the same awareness indirectly suggested through the term *suñña-empty*, used to define the wilderness dwelling, in the brahmin’s words. Here, the gnoseological way and the meditative way seem to be complementary in the path leading to attain the supreme goal.

Likewise, in the *Nāgitasutta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha claims that the wilderness dwelling is preferable to the village dwelling, because the concentration and the meditation process are favoured²⁸:

²⁸ ANIII 343: *Idha pañāhaṃ nāgita, bhikkhuṃ passāmi āraññaṃ araññe pacalāyamānaṃ nisinnaṃ. Tassa mayhaṃ nāgita, evaṃ hoti idāni ayam āyasmā imaṃ niddākilamathaṃ paṭivinodetvā araññasaññaṃ yeva manasi karissati ekattan ti. Tenāhaṃ nāgita, tassa bhikkhuno attamano homi araññavihārena.[...] Idha pañāhaṃ nāgita, bhikkhuṃ passāmi āraññaṃ araññe samāhitaṃ nisinnaṃ. Tassa mayhaṃ*

“On the contrary, Nāgita, here I see a monk living in the wilderness, sitting and winking in the wilderness. Nāgita, I think about him: “Now this venerable one will fix the mind in the singleness, (based on) the perception of the wilderness, dispelling tiredness and sleep”. And so I am pleased with that monk’s wilderness-dwelling. [...] On the contrary, Nāgita, here I see a monk living in the wilderness, composed in mind and sitting in the wilderness. Nāgita, I think about him: “Now this venerable one will release the unreleased mind, and will protect his released mind. And so I am pleased with that monk’s wilderness-dwelling.”

Finally, in the *Cūlasuññatasutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the detachment from the village and the permanence in the wilderness are considered as the first steps to the meditative process, which is the main means to attain the awareness of emptiness, and, therefore, the supreme goal²⁹:

“Even so, Ānanda, a monk not fixing the mind upon the perception of the village, not fixing the mind upon the perception of the human being, fixes the mind upon the singleness based on the perception of wilderness. His mind rejoices, it is calm and settled, it lingers in the perception of wilderness. So he

nāgita, evaṃ hoti idāni ayaṃ āyasmā avimuttaṃ vā cittaṃ vimocessati, vimuttaṃ vā cittaṃ anurakkhissatī. Tenāhaṃ nāgita, tassa bhikkhuno attamano homi araññavihārena //; my translation.

As to the wilderness dwelling in the Buddha’s teaching, cf. also *It* II 8; *AN* II 252; *MN* I 104-108.

²⁹ *MN* III 104: *Evam eva kho ānanda, bhikkhu amanasikarivā gāmasaññaṃ, amanasikarivā manussasaññaṃ, araññasaññaṃ paṭicca manasikaroti ekattaṃ. Tassa araññasaññāya cittaṃ pakkhandati paṣidati santiṭṭhati adhimuccati. So evaṃ pajānāti ye assu darathā gāmasaññaṃ paṭicca, tedha na santi. Ye assu darathā manussasaññaṃ paṭicca tedha na santi. Atthi cevāyaṃ darathamattā yad idaṃ araññasaññaṃ paṭicca ekattan ti. So suññaṃ idaṃ saññāgataṃ gāmasaññāyā ti pajānāti. Suññaṃ idaṃ saññāgataṃ manussasaññāyā ti pajānāti. Atthi cevidaṃ asuññataṃ yad idaṃ araññasaññaṃ paṭicca ekattan ti. My translation.*

recognizes: “The cares, which depended on the perception of the village, do not exist anymore. The cares, which depended on the perception of the human being, do not exist anymore. This is, indeed, the only one consisting of care: depending on the singleness based on the perception of wilderness”. So he recognizes that the emptiness of the perception of the village is perceivable; he recognizes that the emptiness of the perception of the human being is perceivable. This is the only non-perceivable emptiness: depending on the singleness based on the perception of wilderness.”

As to the notion of *desire*, the position of the Buddha appears evident in the formulation of the famous Four Noble Truths, the core of the Buddha’s doctrine³⁰: the second of the Four Noble Truths, articulated in the Buddha’s first sermon, asserts that desire is exactly the main source of suffering, involving the whole process of becoming, because «it is that craving that leads to births». With regard to the ceasing of suffering (*dukkhanirodha*), the third Noble Truth claims that «it is the utter passionless cessation of, the giving up, the forsaking, the release from, the absence of longing for this craving». In these texts the *Pāli* term denoting *desire* is *taṇhā*, literally meaning *thirst*, and generally translated with *craving*: it leads to the attachment to, or the “grasping” of the conditioned existence, that is of the assertion of the Self, and of the consequent samsaric cycle. Moreover, in the circular chain of the “dependent origination” (*paṭiccasamuppāda*)³¹, another principle of the Buddhist teaching, craving results directly from the sensory experience (*vedanā*). So, on the one hand, it conditions the grasping (*upādāna*), which, in turn, determines the process of becoming

³⁰ For instance in *Vin* I 10, 31-36; *SN* V 421, 25-31: *yāyaṃ taṇhā ponobbhavikā [...] yo tassāyeva taṇhāya asesavirāganirodho cāgo paṇinissaggo mutti anālayo*.

³¹ For instance in *MN* I 261.

(*bhava*), and the following birth; while on the other hand, it depends on the physical and the mental hindrances, that is consciousness and volitions, which are conditioned by ignorance (*avijjā*), the first-last ring of such a chain of existence. Suffering, becoming, desire, mental hindrances and ignorance are interdependent: their extinction is the supreme goal.

It is worth noticing that in this conditioned system desire is located in the central position, between the physical and the mental level, as a *pivot* able to condition both of the levels of reality, the physiological and the cognitive one. Since the role of desire is so important in the Buddha's teaching, it is no wonder if in the Buddhist canonical *corpus* a varied terminology occurs. Vallée Poussin³² had already elaborated a sort of "desire scale", analysing the different terms denoting *desire*: *lobha*-greed, *rāga*-attachment, *kāma*-sensual pleasure, *chanda*-will are the most common ones. More recently, starting from the analysis of the terminology, Webster highlights the complexity of the Buddhist canonical conception of desire, and proposes a "system of desire" that traces a map of the varieties of desire³³.

Such an insistence upon the notion of desire in Buddhism, especially upon its negative connotation, is specular to the importance that the Brahmanical and orthodox ideology attributes to desire itself. One of the most important codes of the Hindu *dharma*, the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, claims³⁴:

³² De la Vallée Poussin, L., *La Morale Bouddhique*, Paris 1927, pp. 151-153.

³³ Webster, D., *The Philosophy of Desire in the Buddhist Pali Canon*, London-New York, 2005, pp. 90-142.

³⁴ *MDŚ* II 2-5: *kāmātmatā na prasastā na caivehasty akāmatā / kāmīyo hi vedādhiḡamaḡ karmayogaś ca vaidikah // 2 // saṡkalpamūlah kāmō vai yajñāḡ saṡkalpasamḡbhavāḡ / [...]* // 3 // *akāmasya kriyā kācid drśyate neha karhicit / yad yad dhi kurute kiṡcit tat tat kāmasya ceṡṡitam // 4 // teṡu samyag vartamāno gacchaty amaralokatām / yathā saṡkalpitāmś ceḡa sarvān kāmān samāśnute // 5 //*; text and translation after Olivelle, P. (ed.), *Manu's Code of Law. A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-dharmaśāstra*, Oxford, 2005.

“To be motivated by desire is not commended, but it is impossible here to be free from desire; for it is desire that prompts Vedic study and the performance of Vedic rites (2). Intention is the root of desire; intention is the wellspring of sacrifices [...] (3). Nowhere in this world do we see any activity done by a man free from desire; for whatever at all that a man may do, it is the work of someone who desired it (4). By engaging in them properly, a man attains the world of the immortals and, in this world, obtains all his desires just as he intended (5).”

Although this section, according to some scholars³⁵, could be spurious, desire is celebrated as the indispensable and unavoidable condition of existence “here”, that is “in this world”: it is the primary principle of every action, especially of the sacrificial action, which satisfies all desires, and it is recommended to whoever longs for attaining heaven. The Skr. term adopted for *desire* is *kāma*, *sensual desire*. Despite its negative colouring at the beginning of the passage, the text re-echoes the phrase «whoever desires heaven, must perform sacrifices»³⁶; such line is the *dictat* of the *Pūrvāmīmāṃsāsūtra*, a text traced back to the 3rd-2nd century B.C. and ascribed to Jaimini, the founder of the most orthodox Hindu philosophical current, dealing with the Vedic sacrificial hermeneutics. According to the interpretation proposed by Heesterman, «the desire (*kāma*) for the fruit (*phala*), which is the aim or purpose (*artha*) of the act of sacrifice», is the principle criterion to define the right to sacrifice: «the difference with profane every-day activity is that sacrifice aims at an *unseen*, transcendental result, notably *heaven (svarga)*»³⁷. Thus, the sacrificial agent is the desirous *par excellence*, and the sacrifice relies on desire itself. In other

³⁵ Cf. Olivelle, P. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2005, particularly p. 54 and p. 243.

³⁶ *svargakāmo yajeta* is the first *sūtra* of the *Jaiminipūrvāmīmāṃsāsūtra*.

³⁷ Heesterman, J.C., “The Sacrificer in Ancient Indian Ritual. The View of the Mīmāṃsā”, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* XLIV (2000), pp. 135-155, particularly p. 146.

words, desire is the *pivot* of the Brahmanical prescriptive ethics, which informs all the system of livelihood of the *village*³⁸.

Furthermore, in the Vedic texts, desire (*kāma*) as a ritualistic principle is depicted also as a cosmogonical principle: desire results in being the propelling power of every action, particularly of the ritual one, since the sacred performance is “activated” by desire.

In fact, according to the analogical process, which already characterizes the poetic formulation of the early Vedic texts, desire (*kāma*) is considered as a synonym of chariot (*ratha*), or of mind (*manas*). The mind is the vehicle of desire, that is a wish-car through which desire can “ride” to the goal, or desire itself is imaged as a chariot, because the chariot is a very important implement of some Vedic ceremonies; the chariot is actually able to fulfil any desire, thus achieving the ritualistic goal³⁹. To sum up: in the poetic-ritualistic imagery, the ritual is able to guarantee wellness and happiness to the *village*, likewise, desire, the motor-chariot of the ritual, can found the *cosmos* in its riding, turning into the source of the constant process of becoming.

This case represents an example of that taxonomic process through which the sacrifice informs and involves the whole reality: it founds the “cosmos”, and, reversely, the “cosmos” supports the sacrifice itself. Thus, in the Brahmanical *Weltanschauung* *kāma* is conceived of as “creative force”⁴⁰, through which the cosmos itself is emitted, and/or as a primordial germ, from which all the creatures derive, the same creatures through which the sacrifice can be performed.

In the *Brāhmaṇa* texts, this relationship sacrifice-cosmos is well represented by the god Prajāpati, literally “Lord of Creatures”, depicted

³⁸ As to the term *kāma* in the Vedic texts and its implications in the ritualism, cf. Pellegrini Sannino, A., “Sulla connessione del desiderio con la rinascita nel pensiero indiano. Presupposti e sviluppi”, *Pan* 18-19 (2001), pp. 421-434.

³⁹ Cf. Bloomfield, M., “The Mind as Wish-Car in the Veda”, *Journal of the Oriental American Society*, 39 (1919), pp. 280-282.

⁴⁰ Cf. Muir, J., *Original Sanskrit Texts*, Amsterdam, 1967³, vol. V, pp. 462-407; Webster, D., *op. cit.*, pp. 52-57.

as the lord of sacrifice: he is the agent, the victim and the fruit of sacrifice itself, being disintegrated into cosmic elements and reintegrated into the primordial divine unity. The following formulaic phrases denote the starting point of the cosmogonic event: «Prajāpati desired so (*akāmayata*): ‘May I generate...’», and, after intense austerity (*tapas*), he emitted – depending on the mythological version referred to⁴¹ – waters, word, gods, food, etc.. Here *kāma-desire* is evidently the generating power of Prajāpati himself.

Likewise, in the famous and enigmatic cosmogonic hymn X 129 of the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*, *kāma-desire* is the primordial impersonal principle; the central verses are quoted⁴²:

“Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind.

Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.”

A similar strophe is quoted in the *Atharvavedasamhitā* XIX 52⁴³:

“Desire here came into being in the beginning, which was the first seed of mind.

O desire, being of one origin with great desire, do you impart abundance of wealth to the sacrificer.”

⁴¹ *prajāpatir akāmayata...prajāyeya iti*; it is for instance in *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* VI 1.1. 8; VI 1. 3.1; VII 5. 2. 6; XI 5. 8. 1.

⁴² *ṚV X 129. 4: kāmāḥ tād āgre sām avartatādhi mānaso rétaḥ prathamām yád āsīt sató bāndhum ásati nír avindan hr̥dī prañṣyā kavāyo mañṣā // 4 //*; text after Max Müller, F., *Rig-Veda-Samhita*, London 1849-1874; translation after Doniger O’Flaherty, W., *The Rig Veda*, London 1981, p. 25.

⁴³ *AV. XIX 52. 1: kāmāḥ tād āgre sām avartata mānaso rétaḥ prathamām yád āsīt / sá kāma kāmēna bṛhaṭṭá sáyoniḥ rāyās póṣam yájamānāya dhehi // 1 //*; text after Roth, R.-Whitney, W.D. (eds.), *Atharva-Veda-Samhitā*, Berlin 1855; translation after Whitney, W.D., *Atharva Veda Samhitā*, Cambridge Mass. 1905, vol. II, p. 985.

Here, desire is considered as a cosmogonic principle, as a promoter of the sacrifice itself, and, in other passages of the Vedic ritualistic literature⁴⁴, it is also identified with Agni, the fire god and the core of the sacrifice. Finally, in the *Atharvavedasamhitā* IX 2 *kāma-desire* is celebrated as a personified power or a supreme and absolute principle⁴⁵:

“Kāma was first born; neither the gods, the Fathers, nor mortal reached him; to them you are superior, always great; to you as the superior one, O Kāma, do I pay homage.”

Thus, even in the śramanical context probably more related to Brahmanism, desire involves the attainment of the supreme goal: the absolute-*brahman* or the supreme Self (*ātman*) can be conceived of as fulfilment of all desires; for instance, in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* these verses are quoted⁴⁶:

“Truth and knowledge, the infinite and *brahman*: a man who knows them as hidden in the deepest cavity, hidden in the highest heaven, attains all his desires, together with the wise *brahman*.”

Likewise in the *Chandogya Upaniṣad* it is stated⁴⁷:

⁴⁴ Cf. Muir, J., *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 403, n. 587.

⁴⁵ AV IX 2. 19: *kāmo jajñe prathamó náinaṃ devā āpuḥ pitáro ná mártvyaḥ / tátas tvám asi jyáyan viváhā mahāns tásmāi te kāma náma ít krnōmi // 19 //*; text after Roth, R.-Whitney, W.D. (eds.), *Atharva-Veda-Samhitā*, Berlin 1855; translation after Whitney, W.D., *Atharva Veda Samhitā*, Cambridge Mass. 1905, vol. I, p. 525.

⁴⁶ TU II 1 .1: *satyaṃ jñānam anantaṃ brahmā yo veda nihitaṃ guhāyāṃ parame vyoman / so 'śnute sarvān kāmān saha brahmaṇā vipāściteti II*; text and translation after Olivelle, P. (ed.), *The Early Upaniṣads*, Oxford, 1998.

⁴⁷ ChU VIII 12 . 6: *taṃ vā devā ātmānam upāsate / tasmāt teṣāṃ sarve ca lokā āttāḥ sarve ca kāmāḥ / sa sarvāṃś ca lokān āpnoti sarvāṃś ca kāmān yas tam ātmānam anuvidya vijānāti //*; text and translation after Olivelle, P. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1998.

It is this Self that the gods venerate, as the result of which they have obtained all the worlds and have had all their desires fulfilled. Likewise, when someone discovers this self and comes to perceive it, he will obtain all the worlds and have all his desires fulfilled.

In this sense, desire, being the core of sacrifice, is both the *pivot* of the ritualistic ideology and a major dialectic point in asceticism: desire represents a sort of line transversal to different cultural formations. Among these, the Buddhist tradition seems to maintain a notion of desire antithetical to the Brahmanical one, stressing the negative value of desire. However, how can the *Pāli* term *vana*, “forest” or “desire”, be connected to such a ritualistic context, so that it could suggest the paradoxical pun that reverses the Brahmanical principles?

3. Etymological notes

The Skr. term *vana* is a neuter substantive, with stem in *-a*, resulted from the Old-Indo-Aryan root-stem *ván-*, attested in the Rigvedic hymns with the meaning of “tree, wood (material)”⁴⁸; the Old-Indo-Aryan *vána-* also means “tree, wood (material)” and, extensively, “forest”. However, Elizarenkova⁴⁹ argues that out of the 103 occurrences found in the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*, the term *vána* doubtlessly means “forest” only in 5-6 cases; otherwise, the prevalent meaning is “tree” or “wood (material)”, especially indicating the wood of ritual vessels or the pieces of wood for kindling the ritual fire. Therefore, the term *vána* has a significant value in the ritualistic context: it is the nourishment of the fire – often *devoured*

⁴⁸ Cf. Mahyfer, M., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindiarischen*, Heidelberg, 1992-1996, 3 vols., particularly vol. II, p. 500.

⁴⁹ Elizarenkova, T.Y., “Forests in the *Ṛgveda*”, in Elizarenkova, T.Y., «*Words and Things*» in the *Ṛgveda*, Pune, 1995, pp. 32-43.

by the fire⁵⁰ – without which the sacrifice cannot even be performed. It is worth noticing that in the *Ṛgvedasamhitā* the activity of the fire is often denoted through the forms of the root *tṛṣ*, “to thirst”, from which the noun *tṛṣṇā*, “thirst” – the Sanskrit equivalent of the *Pāli* term *taṇhā* – is derived⁵¹: Agni, the fire god, is thirsty or endowed with *burning* thirst; therefore, it *longs for* food and beverage, that is wood and the sacrificial offering (melted butter, *soma* juice, waters, etc.). For instance, in *ṚV* IV 7. 11ab. Agni is so depicted⁵²:

“Agni, the restless, makes what has greedily increased the food (his) thirsty messenger, through thirsty.”

Also in *ṚV* II 4. 5a Agni is defined the “devourer of trees / wood” - *van-ād*⁵³, like in II 4. 6 ab⁵⁴ he is *thirsty*:

“He who lights the woods, like a thirsty being, in his path resounds like water, like wheel of chariot.”

Here the image of the *thirsty* fire, lighting the forest, is combined with the image of the waters and the chariot: this is an example of the extraordinary metaphorical power of the Rigvedic poetic language. The analogical process of the poetic comparisons is a sort of surprising whirl of images, the associations of which are often suggested by phonetic equivalences, formulaic phrases, and syntactic parallelisms: all these poetic means turn the non-sacred words into magical words,

⁵⁰ In *ṚV* I 65. 7b; X 79. 2b.

⁵¹ Cf. Jurewicz, J., “Playing with Fire: The *praṇīyasamutpāda* from the perspective of Vedic Thought”, *Journal of the Pali Text Society* XXVI (2000), pp. 77-103, particularly p. 96, n. 54.

⁵² *ṚV* IV 7. 11ab: *tṛṣú yád ánnā tṛṣúṇā vavákṣa tṛṣúṃ dūtám kṛṇute yāhvó agníḥ* /; text after Max Müller, F., *Rig-Veda-Sanhita*, London 1849-1874; my translation, cf. Geldner, K.F., *Der Rig-Veda*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1951-1957, I-IV, particularly I, p. 429, n. 11: he comments “Wortspiel mit *tṛṣú*”.

⁵³ Cf. Scarlata, S., *Die Wurzelcomposita im Ṛg-Veda*, Wiesbaden, 1999, p. 38.

⁵⁴ *ṚV* II 4. 6ab: *á yó vánā tātṛṣṇó ná bhāti vār ná pathā ráthiyeva svānūt* /; text after Max Müller, F., *Rig-Veda-Sanhita*, London, 1849-1874; my translation.

able to act effectively on the cosmos, and promote semantic shifts and double meanings, although they are not grammatically justified. Thus, in the later Rigvedic commentaries *vána* “tree, wood” is interpreted as “water”⁵⁵; this can be considered another “ritualistic” meaning, which is combined with a cosmic myth, as the fire is born from the waters⁵⁶.

Furthermore, in the Vedic texts the compound *vánas-pati* occurs: it is literally the “lord of the tree, lord of wood”, being *ván-as* interpreted as the genitive case of the stem *ván-*; it is the sacred word which denotes the deified tree or the deified wood, that is the suitable wood for the ritual fire.

Another interesting point is that, according to some linguistic hypotheses, the Old-Indo-Aryan root-stem *ván-* could be connected to the IE root **wen / *wen-H*, which in the historical variety of the Indo-European languages conveys two different meanings: “to win” and “to desire”⁵⁷. As to the historical linguistic issues of such an Indo-European root, the situation is so complex that the scholars wonder whether these two different meanings could be referred to two distinct etymological origins – that is the root **wen* meaning “to win”, and the root **wen-H* meaning “to desire”–, or they could be derived from the same semantic sphere, to which the root would be originally related. Both of the root forms are so well attested in the Vedic language, especially in the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*, that some scholars suggest a possible original common semantic sphere: Migron⁵⁸ considers the root as denoting the semantic sphere of hunting, Mucciarelli⁵⁹ maintains

⁵⁵ Cf. Renou, L., “Les éléments védiques dans le vocabulaire du sanskrite classique”, *Journal Asiatique* 231 (1939), pp. 321-404, particularly p. 351.

⁵⁶ As to this famous mythical image, cf. Banks Findly, E., “The «Child of the Waters»: a Revaluation of Vedic *Apām Napāt*”, *Numen* XXVI. 2 (1979), pp. 164-184.

⁵⁷ Cf. Mahyfer, M., *op. cit.*, 3 vols., particularly vol. II, pp. 498 and 501; as to the IE. roots, cf. Rix, H. (ed.), *LIV. Lexicon der indogermanischen Verben*, Wiesbaden 1998, pp. 680-683.

⁵⁸ Migron, S., “R̥gvedic *van-*: an Old Hunting Term?”, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 22/4 (1980), pp. 269-282.

⁵⁹ Mucciarelli, E., “*wen / *wen-H: una radice indoeuropea del «desiderio» nella *Ṛgvedasamhitā*», *Istituto Lombardo (Rend. Lett.)* 141 (2007), pp. 283-336.

that the common semantic sphere is related to the ritual context, especially to the delimited sacrificial space. Taking into account both of the hypotheses, once more the term *vána* can be referred either to the naturalistic context of the *forest*, the ideal place for hunting, or to the cultural context of the *village*, the ritualistic place *par excellence*.

Though the etymology of the term *vána* is hypothetical, and its meaning can be influenced by its ritualistic functions, it is evident that in the Rigevedic hymns the homophony between *vána* “tree, wood (material)” and the occurrences of the two roots, derived either from *van* “to win” or *van* “to desire”, is very relevant for the poetic effects: these connotative means confer magical powers on the word, marking it as a sacred and ritual word, distinguished from the common one. For instance, the following Rigvedic strophe presents the image of the god fire that destroys the wood (*vána*), burning or *longing for* it⁶⁰:

“Your shining flames, impelled by the wind, oh shining Agni, wander to all directions; they, the destroyers, like the divine Navagva, get woods, breaking strongly.”

Such a poetic power is even more evident in the problematic case of *vánas*: this term is interpreted as a noun-stem with suffix *-as*, that is a *nomen actionis*⁶¹, derived from the root *van* “to desire”; it is etymologically connected with the Latin *venus*, and the *hapax* of *ṚV* X 172. 1 alludes to an erotic context, so that it can mean “attraction, allurement”⁶²:

⁶⁰ *ṚV* VI 6. 3: *ví te víṣvag vātajūtāso agne bhāmāsaḥ śuce śúcayās caranti / tuvimrakṣāso diviyā nāvagvā vānā vananti dhṛṣatā rujántaḥ // 3 //*; text after Max Müller, F., *Rig-Veda-Sanhita*, London, 1849-1874; my translation.

⁶¹ Wackernagel, J., *Altindische Grammatik*, Göttingen, 1896-1957, II. 2 §127 b.α.

⁶² Cf. Mahyoffer, M., *op. cit.*, 3 vols., particularly vol. II, p. 500; Migron, S., *Indo-Iranian Journal* 22/4 (1980), pp. 273 and 279. *ṚV* X 172. 1ab: *á yāhi vānasā sahá gāvaḥ sacanta vartanīm yád údhabhiḥ /*; text after Max Müller, F., *Rig-Veda-Sanhita*, London, 1849-1874; my translation.

“Come here, together with the attraction! The cows follow the chariot-path, when are endowed with prosperous breast.”

This request is addressed to Agni, which must be kindled early in the morning, during the daily ritual of the *Agnihotra*: kindling the fire is implicitly compared with a sort of seductive ritual through which the fire is “attracted” or begins *to burn*. Moreover, in the mythopoetic language, the fire is equivalent to the sun, and its sparks are equivalent to the cows-rays of the morning sun, which are “appealed” or “attracted” by the fire itself, and, therefore, follow its path. This complex web of hidden correspondences may be explained in greater detail as follows: the sunshine comes from attraction (*vānas*) for the charming cows-Dawn, the cows-Dawn are attracted by the fire, the fire comes from the attrition of the wood fuels (*vāna*)⁶³. Given the premise that the fire is equivalent to the Sun, it becomes clear that the Sun and the fire are mutually implied.

Here, the *wood-desire* binomial seems to prelude to the Buddhist *forest-desire* one, expressed through the *Pāli* term *vana*: in fact, on the one hand, the Vedic *vāna-tree*, *wood (material)* is present in Sanskrit and in *Pāli* as a collective noun with the main meaning of *forest*; on the other hand, the Vedic *vānas* does not occur in Sanskrit but, in the Middle-Indo-Aryan languages, it becomes *vana*, *desire*⁶⁴, as attested in *Pāli*.

However, the Vedic pun aims at connoting the word with ritualistic values and cosmic meanings, whereas the Buddhist pun aims at the demystification of sacredness or cosmic essence. Nonetheless, the semantic shift between *vana-forest* and *vana-desire* is influenced by the same word play; thus, the grammatical data can be influenced by

⁶³ In *ṚV* III 1. 13 the feminine stem *vānā* denotes the fuel-stick for kindling the fire.

⁶⁴ Cf. Turner, R.L., *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages*, London, 1966, p. 657; Oberlies, Th., *Pāli. A Grammar of the Language of the Theravāda Tipitaka*, Berlin-New York, 2001, p. 12; and also Edgerton, F.E., *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, 2 vols., New Haven, 1952.

the cultural data⁶⁵. In this connection, the *Nirukta* – a work traced back to the 5th century B.C., ascribed to Yāska, and forming part of the so called “auxiliaries sciences of the Veda” (*vedāṅga*) – offers a good example. In the text, a Rigvedic phrase referred to the sacrificial fire, *kāyamāno vānā*, probably meaning “avoiding the woods”⁶⁶, is interpreted as *kāmayamāna- vānā*, that is “desiring the forests”: the ritualistic connotation fashions the semantic values, shapes the cosmos, founds its essence.

4. From the sacrifice wood to the ascetic forest

The etymological data attest that the semantic shift from *wood* to *forest* definitively occurs in the Sanskrit literature, that is in texts that are not eminently ritualistic. In the development of the profane language other contexts are implied, like the epic one, the erotic one, the juridical one, and the sapiential one. Outside ritualism, the language assumes other forms (phonetic, morphological, syntactic) and is able to convey other realities. Thus, in the *village* context the term *vana* simply denotes “tree, wood”, while in the *ritual* context, it is connoted with sacred and cosmic values as “water”, “attraction, attracting power”, or “divinity”. Outside the cultural and the sacred space, *vana* denotes the natural environment, especially the *forest*. This is the śramanical space where, in relation to the so called Brahmanical asceticism, a simple analogy is applied during the process of the internalization of the sacrifice: on the one hand, the sacrificial wood turns into the forest, while on the other hand the sacrificial fire turns into inner fire, into the ascetic warm emitted through austerity (*tapas*). Therefore, besides the term *araṇya*, already culturally connoted as “wilderness”, the Skr. compound *tapovana*, meaning “forest of austerity” or simply “ascetic

⁶⁵ As to the Vedic double meaning and its expressive potentiality, cf. also Renou, L. *Grammaire de la langue védique*, Paris 1952, § 466.

⁶⁶ *RV* III 9. 2a: *kāyamāna-* is *hapax*; strophe quoted in *Nirukta* IV 14; text and translation after Lakshman Sarup, M. A. (ed.), *The Nighaṇṭu and the Nirukta*, Lahore, 1927.

forest”, frequently occurs in the Sanskrit literary texts. Likewise, in the ascetic context, kindling the fire and kindling the wood-sticks - with the implied metaphorical erotic allusions - are interpreted as the equivalent of desire, the physical and mental “motor” of the individual action⁶⁷. This process of internalization of sacrifice promotes the speculative re-elaboration of the notion of desire, so that desire as the *motor-chariot* of sacrifice - the ritual and cosmic desire - becomes the threshold where different cultural traditions are in “translation” and mutually interact. With the śramanical context the dialectics of desire is originated and articulated in manifold perspectives.

As we have already seen above, among these perspectives, the Brahmanical asceticism conceptualizes desire as the attainment of the supreme reality, the absolute *brahman*. In fact, in the Vedic ritualistic literature, the term *bráhman* is a neuter noun, connected with the Old-Indo-Aryan root *bṛh* “to be strong, to increase”⁶⁸, so *bráhman* can be translated as “increasing strength”. In the Rigvedic hymns a very significant phrase occurs: *brahmāni vardhāna*⁶⁹, translatable as “the increasing strengths that make prosperous”. Such a phrase is referred both to the sacrificial offerings as nourishment, which make the cosmos and the divinity more vigorous and powerful, and to the sacrificial words, as ritual-poetic words, which turn the village-ritual into a cosmic ritual involving the whole reality. Thus, *bráhman* is the sacred word, or the holy formulation *par excellence*⁷⁰, which evokes secret connections between the different levels of reality and reveals the analogical correspondences between beings. Therefore, *bráhman*

⁶⁷ For instance, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakoṇiṣad* III 2. 7 *manas* is said to be the means through which “one desires desires” (*kāmān kāmāyate*). Here, the ritual image of *manas* as wish-car is translated in individual *manas*, one of the components of the human body.

⁶⁸ Cf. Mahyfer, M., *op. cit.*, 3 vols., particularly vol. II, pp. 236-238; and Gonda, J., *Notes on Brahman*, Utrecht, 1950.

⁶⁹ *ṚV* VII 22. 7; VI 23. 6; I 10. 4.

⁷⁰ Cf. Renou, L., “Sur le notion de *bráhman*”, in Renou, L., *L'Inde fondamentale*, Paris, 1978, pp. 83-116; and Thieme, P., “Bráhman”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 102 (1952), 91-129.

represents the *pivot* of the Brahmanical ideology. No wonder if in the ascetic context, outside ritualism, in the natural environment of the forest (*vana*), the same term denotes the absolute, that is the reality of the reality, which implies both the phenomenal and the transcendental realm, the seen and the unseen, the said and the unsaid, the inside and the outside. In the play of the antithetical correspondences, *brahman* and the individual Self-*ātman* become equivalent: the essence of the sacrifice and of the cosmos is completely interiorized. This is the esoteric knowledge, the knowledge of the forest, which the *āraṇyakas* texts attest, through which the Heaven can be attained.

Thus, in the *Kenopaniṣad*, the last section reveals the coincidence of the *bráhman* of the ritualism with the *brahman* of the asceticism: such an equivalence is translated through *vana*, the kindling-wood of the sacrificial fire, through *vanaspati*, the deified tree of the cosmos supported by the sacrifice, and through *vánas*, the “attraction”, or the hidden connection itself between village, sacrifice, cosmos. The text runs as follows⁷¹:

“Now its name is *tadvana*, and it should be venerated as *tadvana*.
When someone knows it as such, all beings long for him.”

According to some scholars, *tadvana* is an esoteric term, with no specific semantic meaning, used here to express the mysterious power of *brahman*: Geldner defines it as *Geheimwort*, *secret word*⁷² for *brahman*.

⁷¹ *KeU*. IV 6: *tad dha tadvanam nāma / tadvanam ity upāsitavyam / sa ya etad evaṃ veda / abhi hainam sarvāṇi bhūtāni samvañchanti // 6 //*; text and translation after Olivelle, P., *The Early Upaniṣads*, Oxford, 1998. For an interpretation of this *upaniṣad*, cf. Rossi, P.M., “O aparecimento do *brahman*: a *Kenopaniṣad* III-IV *khaṇḍa*”, in Correia, C.J. (ed.), *A Mente, a Religião e a Ciência*, Lisboa, 2003, pp. 63-79. As to the interpretations of *tadvana*, cf. also Sprockhoff, J.F., “*Āraṇyaka* und *Vanāprastha* in der vedischen *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens*, XXV (1981), pp. 19-90, especially p. 44, n. 51.

⁷² Geldner, K.F., “Die Lehre der Upaniṣaden”, in Geldner, K.F., *Vedismus und Brahmanismus*, Tübingen 1911, pp. 109-169, particularly p. 149, n. 838; also Olivelle, in his commentary, prefers this interpretation: Olivelle, P., *The Early Upaniṣads*, Oxford, 1998, p. 599.

However, Max Müller⁷³ considers it as a determinative compound with *tad*, neuter pronoun meaning *that*, and *vana* – interpreted as a noun derived from the Vedic *vānas* – meaning *desire*. Thus, the meaning of *advana* could be *desire of that*. Likewise, Deussen⁷⁴ translates *tadvana* as *Nach-ihm-das-Sehnen*.

On the contrary, Thieme⁷⁵ reads *vana* as *wood-tree*, considering the term as equivalent to the Greek *hyle*, the “material” of the Plotinian tradition: in this perspective, *tadvana* can be interpreted as *material of that*, implying the phenomenal component of *brahman*. Otherwise, as van Buitenen⁷⁶ suggests, it can be interpreted as a descriptive compound translatable as *that is material*, or more literally as *that (brahman) is wood / the wood is that (brahman)*. In this sense *tadvana* can be the answer to the enigmatic questions by which the *upaniṣad* itself begins – in fact *kena* is an interrogative pronoun in instrumental case. However, this picture may well be the solution of an unanswered riddle occurring quite often in the ritualistic texts⁷⁷:

“What was the wood (*vāna*) and what was the tree (*vr̥kṣá*) from which they carved the sky and the earth?”

This kind of riddles is usual in those Vedic texts where the sacred word-*bráhman* has assumed its cosmogonical power, that is when the sacrifice involves the whole cosmos⁷⁸. Furthermore, the unsolved enigma alludes to the infinite and mysterious potentiality of *bráhman*

⁷³ Max Müller, F., *The Upanishads*, in *The Sacred Book of East*, Oxford, 1879, p. 152, n. 2.

⁷⁴ Deussen, P., *Sechzig Upanishad's des Veda*, Leipzig, 1921, p. 208.

⁷⁵ Thieme, P., «*ādeśa*», in *Mélanges d'Indianisme a la mémoire de Louis Renou*, Paris, 1968, pp. 715-723, particularly p. 721, n. 3.

⁷⁶ Van Buitenen, J.A.B., “*vācārambhaṇam* reconsidered”, *Indo-Iranian Journal* II (1958), pp. 295-305, especially p. 299.

⁷⁷ ṚV X 81. 4ab: *kīm svid vānaṃ ká u sá vr̥kṣá āsa yáto dyāvāpṛthivī niṣtataksúh!*; translation after Doniger O'Flaherty, W., *The Rig Veda*, London, 1981, p. 35; the same verse is in ṚV X 31. 7; TS IV 6. 2. 5; MS II. 10. 12: 133. 3; KS XVIII. 2; VS XVII. 20; TB II. 8. 9. 6-7.

⁷⁸ Cf. i.e. ṚV X. I 185; X. 121; X 129; AV X 2.

itself, because of which the hymns are often open ended. Such an open-endedness is found i.e. in the quoted Rigvedic hymn X 129⁷⁹. Nonetheless, in *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* II. 8. 9. 3-7, where the description of an animal sacrifice for the attainment of heaven is presented, the seven strophes of the hymn X. 129 are quoted, and two additional strophes close the Rigvedic citation, providing the solution of the enigma of the hymn. The first strophe is the above quoted riddle about wood and tree, and the second one is the surprising answer to the double enigma, that is both the solution of hymn X. 129 and the answer to «What was the wood (*vána*) and what was the tree (*vṛkṣá*)...»⁸⁰:

“The sacred word (*bráhma*n) was the wood, the sacred word was the tree, from which they carved out heaven and earth. O you of inspired mind, through my mind I will explain to you: on the sacred word he stood as he supported the worlds.”

Here the identity *bráhma*n-wood is declared, and the following identity – *bráhma*n-tree – alludes to the cosmic image of *vána*spati, the deified tree, and, for extension, the cosmic tree⁸¹. Therefore, the enigmatic *tadvana* is equivalent to *tadbrahma*n⁸², but it is mainly referred to the first value of *bráhma*n, that is the sacrificial one: wood is

⁷⁹ The enigma is expressed in the first strophe of the hymn: “There was neither non-existence nor existence then: there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which beyond. What stirred? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?” (*ṚV* X 129. 1: *násad āsīn nó sád āsīt tadānīm náśid rájo nó víomā paró yát / kím āvaṛīvaḥ kúha kásya śármann ámbhaḥ kím āśid gáhanam gabhírám*; text after Max Müller, F., *Rig-Veda-Sanhita*, London 1849-1874; translation after W. Doniger O’Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, London, 1981, p. 25). As to the interpretation of the hymn and its enigma, cf. Brereton, J.P., “Edifying Puzzlement: *Ṛgveda* 10. 129 and the uses of the enigma”, *Journal of American Oriental Society* 119/2 (1999), pp. 248-260.

⁸⁰ *TB* II. 8. 9. 7: *bráhma vánam bráhma sá vṛkṣá āsīt yáto dyāvāpṛthiví nīṣatakṣúḥ / mánīṣīno mánasā víbraṇīmi vaḥ bráhmādhyaítīṣṭhad bhúvanāni dhārāyan //*; citation from Brereton, J.P., *Journal of American Oriental Society* 119/2 (1999), pp. 248-260, particularly p. 259.

⁸¹ As to this cosmic image, cf. Coomaraswamy, A.K., “The Inverted Tree”, in Lipsey, R. (ed.) *Selected Papers. 1. Traditional Art and Symbolism*, Princeton, 1977.

⁸² Already according to Śankara, the famous Vedantic commentator, *tadvana* is *tadbrahma*n.

the essential material to perform the sacrifice itself. As to the Rigvedic hymn X. 129, the cosmic meaning of *bráhma*n must be applied, that is the sacred word, which informs and shapes the cosmos, thanks to mind (*manas*) and desire (*kāma*), as the above quoted fourth strophe suggests. However, also in the *Kenopaniṣad* the metaphorical meaning of *desire* is evoked, because the upanisadic citation closes with the expression “all beings long for him”, (*sarvāṇi bhūtāni sa mvañchantī*), in which the same root *van* “to desire” is used. Thus, the double meaning *wood-desire* is revealed. Furthermore, in this chain of correspondences the *wood-desire* binomial is equivalent to the supreme *brahman*, the absolute. Thus, in the Brahmanical asceticism the *vana-brahman* binomial is formulated.

5. Ethics as desire of desirelessness

In the light of these considerations, the Buddhist pun results even more significant: in fact, the *Pāli* term *vana* is used not only to denote paradoxically the ritualistic concept of desire, but also to stigmatize the desire as a cosmic principle and, consequently, to confute the derived notion of desire, conceptualized in the Brahmanical asceticism.

Curiously, the canonical Buddhist *corpus* ascribes to the Buddha the so-called “Book of Genesis”, that is a sermon about the origin of the world, the *Agañña Sutta* (*DN sutta XXVII*). This cosmological text is considered by Gombrich⁸³ as a parody of the Brahmanical cosmogonical texts, like the Rigvedic hymns X 90 or X 129. In this story of the origin of the cosmos, Vedic images and expressions are echoed: with the “development” of the world (*saṃvaṭṭamāne loke*), some beings (*sattā*) “mind-made, fed on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious”⁸⁴ were present. For these beings “a flavoured earth spread

⁸³ Gombrich, R., “The Buddha’s Book of Genesis?”, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 35 (1992), pp. 159-178.

⁸⁴ *DN III 84: te 'dha honti manomayā pūtibhakkhā sayampabhā antalikkhavarā subhaṭṭhāyino.*

itself over the waters; it looked just like the skin that forms itself over hot milk as it cools [...]; it was endowed with colour, smell and taste”⁸⁵ (we can see here here the reference to the sacrificial clarified butter). Having tasted the flavour-juice with their fingers, craving (*taṇhā*) arose in them: here, according to Gombrich, there would be the satirical reference to the *kāma* of the Rigvedic strophe X. 129. 4. In other words, the same cosmogonical principle, which should guarantee wellness and prosperity, turns into a principle of suffering that is the source of bad conduct. In fact, in the last section of the *sutta*, some beings decide to find refuge in the wilderness, to keep away bad and unwholesome states (*pāpaka akusale dhamma*) – suffering, dishonesty and violence. They become meditating (*jhāyanti*) *śamaṇa*⁸⁶, as they practice the meditative conduct or the naturalistic ethics, based on the non-egoistic attitude. The awareness of the chain of the conditioned existences, achieved in solitude, can either lead directly to the release, or be divulged for the welfare of all beings, in the path of compassion (*karuṇā*)⁸⁷. Thus, the cosmological *sutta* closes with ethical teachings for the constitution of a new Buddhist society, based on non-violence and consistency of Right speech-Right action-Right livelihood.

Therefore, the Buddhist pun can be the dialectical device used by the Buddha on the occasion of debates with exponents of other contemporary ascetic currents, who practice other ethics starting from different notions of desire and reality. Thus, the famous Buddhist formula with the tripartition of craving (*taṇhā*) – “craving for sensual pleasure, craving for being, craving for non-being”⁸⁸ –, which can be found in addition to the formulation of the Four Noble Truths, can be referred to different conceptions of reality, maintained by different

⁸⁵ DN III 85: *rasā paṭhavī udakasmim samatāni seyyathāpi nāma payaso tattassa nibbāyamānassa upari santānakaṃ hoti.[...] Sā ahosi vaṇṇasampannā gandhasampannā rasantampannā.*

⁸⁶ DN III 93-94.

⁸⁷ Cf. i.e. AN I 211.

⁸⁸ *kāmatāṇhā bhavataṇhā vibhavataṇhā.* For instance in DN II 308.

speculative currents contemporary to the rise of Buddhism. Lamotte comments: «[...] it is pernicious to delight in sense-objects, and even more pernicious to entertain in oneself as impossible ideal of eternal survival or utter annihilation. Buddhism constitutes the outright condemnation of the personalism and materialism»⁸⁹.

However, the use of puns is not only an effective method to confute other ideologies, but also a means to avoid all dogmatic assertion; despite the formulation of the Four Noble Truths, it is not possible to conceive of a sort of “ontology of desire”, because desire is not a unique “essence”, but a fluid core, experienced in “translations”. Thus, Webster⁹⁰ claims that desire consists of the dynamical process of becoming, based on the conditioning factors. That is to say that the famous Buddhist “middle way” passes through desire. In the fluctuation and the impermanence of existence, *vana* can arbitrarily mean desire and non-desire, forest and non-forest. In the middle of the antithesis the way to *nibbāna* is opened: this way can be the desire for desirelessness or, ethically, the attitude to the non-egoistic attitude, the aspiration to the lonely wilderness dwelling and to the sharing of awareness through teaching. This paradoxical way can be suggested by the following *Pāli* verses of the section *vanasamṃyutta* of the *Samṃyutta Nikāya*; they can be interpreted either as a remark, addressed to an unconvinced monk, or as an advice to live in community, practicing the ethics of the non-egoistic attitude, «without egoistic passions» (*vītarāga*)⁹¹:

You entered the forest with the desire for loneliness, then
your mind wanders outside; man among men, remove desire
(*chanda*), then be happy, without egoistic passions.

⁸⁹ Lamotte, E., *History of Indian Buddhism from the Origins to the Sāka Era*, Louvain-La-Neuve, 1988, p. 35, English version after *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien, des origines à l'ère Sāka*, Louvain, 1958, p. 38.

⁹⁰ Webster, D., *op. cit.*, pp. 184-186; 191-192.

⁹¹ *SN I 197: vivekakāmo 'si vanaṃ pavīṭṭho atha te mano niccharaṅ bahiddhā / jano janasmīṃ vinayassu chandaṃ tato sukḥi hohisi vītarāgo //*; my translation.

However, in another canonical text, when a brahmin asks the Buddhist monk: “Is there any path, any way to give up this desire (*chanda*)?”⁹², he paradoxically answers that the way consists of a concentration through desire (*chandasmādhī*), as desire is removed through desire. Once again punning is an expression of the paradox of the inconsistent existence.

⁹² *SN V 272: Atthi [...] maggo atthi paṭipadā etassa chandassa pahānāyāti*. As to the term *chanda* and its double meaning of “desire” and “desire to act” for spiritual progress, cf. Webster, D., *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 114.