THE BUDDHIST ABSOLUTE AND THE NECESSITY OF THE INFINITE: A PHILOSOPHICAL COMPARISON BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND SKEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT

This article examines, from a skeptical perspective, the theme of foundation and its relationship with the founded, highlighting significant correspondences between the metaphysical conception, which emerges already in ancient Greek philosophy, and Buddhist philosophy. The finite proves insufficient unto itself, and such insufficiency cannot be overcome through relation with another finite, but only by virtue of the vertical emergence of the absolute foundation. However, the latter does not enter into relation with the founded, as it unilaterally conditions them, such that the unconditioned and absolute condition cannot be determined nor, consequently, reduced to a sum of determinates, i.e., to a "totality."

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1. *Introduction*

The present study is part of a series of works undertaken by the two authors concerning the comparative philosophical analysis between Buddhism and Western thought.[3] In a previous study, the metaphysical question was examined by comparing Anaximander with early Buddhism,[4] while a second study focused on the ontology of early Buddhism in a comparative dialogue with Parmenides.[5] The current study builds upon these foundations to establish a dialogue with the skeptical tradition. We will explore the extent to which the Buddha's thought can be regarded as a form of Indian skepticism and what common implications these two philosophies share. The aim is not merely comparative but also involves active philosophical construction, drawing on reconsiderations of Hegel's skepticism to reflect on the theme of the infinite or indeterminate.[6]

The Buddha characterized certain questions, such as the finite or infinite nature of the world,[7] as "imponderable" (*acinteyya*), thus falling into the category of apparently unanswerable questions. However, does this lack of an answer truly indicate an absence of a stance, or is it itself a form of response? Our thesis posits that the finite and the infinite, though denied as concepts, pertain to the realm of the relative experience of the

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[3] The sections of the article pertaining to studies on Skepticism are authored by Aldo Stella, whereas the research in the field of Buddhology is authored by Federico Divino. The introduction, comparative reflections, and conclusions are jointly authored by both.

[4] Stella and Divino, "The Metaphysical Turn in the History of Thought: Anaximander and Buddhist Philosophy."

[5] Divino, "What Dawned First: Early Buddhist Philosophy on the Problem of Phenomenon and Origin in a Comparative Perspective."

[6] The article is structured into two distinct sections. Paragraphs 1-3 focus on the problem of skepticism and infinity, introducing the issue from a philosophical perspective, while paragraphs 4-7 develop new philosophical hypotheses based on the foundations previously established and on the Buddhist conception of 'transcendence'.

[7] *'antavā loko'tipi, 'anantavā loko'tipi*…, MN 63.

world, from which Buddhist contemplative practice seeks transcendence. This transcendence, articulated as a higher understanding (*paññā*) of reality attained through direct perception (*abhiññā*) of what otherwise falls within the relativity of cognitive constructions and limitations, implies an attainment of the imponderable or the infinite. This infinite is not reduced to the concept of 'infinity', as every conceptualization (*paññatti*) belongs to the realm of the mundane, conventional, and relative, which, while real, is not absolute and cannot describe incontrovertible reality. This is because it attempts to isolate manifestations of the real into a series of separate entities, considered autonomous and self-sufficient. However, being finite entities, they negate themselves and rather point toward another direction: that of the absolute as the incontrovertible.

The demonstration of the inconsistency of the finite makes its first appearance in the history of Western philosophical thought with the skeptical philosophy, particularly with Pyrrho,[8] Aenesidemus, whose eighth mode is expounded notably by Sextus Empiricus, Diogenes Laërtius, and Philo of Alexandria. The perspective delineated through the analysis carried out by the skeptics will be juxtaposed with the perspective arising from the analysis of Buddhist philosophical traditions. We will also engage with Hegel's interpretation of skepticism[9] as a possible overcoming of the limits of the principles of ἐποχή and ἀταραξία which, although comparable to some extent to similar Buddhist conceptions, Buddhist contemplative practice aims to a transcendence of the limitations of our perceptions.

More specifically, we chose to engage in a dialogue with the Pāli canon, Nāgārjuna and some aspects of the Mahāyāna traditions that tell us about the experience of the infinite and transcendence from the limits of the experienced world. Indeed, the compatibility of these two perspectives has long been debated not only from a comparative standpoint but also in terms of potential historical contacts.[10]

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[8] Sinnott-Armstrong, Pyrrhonian Skepticism.

[9] Heidemann, "Hegel on the Nature of Scepticism."

[10] McEvilley, "Pyrrhonism and Madhyamika"; Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's*

In this work, we confine ourselves to a purely theoretical and conceptual comparison between the two perspectives, refraining from any investigation of a historical or historiographical nature. The value of the absolute foundation and its indeterminacy are discussed, demonstrating how the risk of interpreting the absolute reality as a totality, that is, as a whole, is primarily undertaken by Western philosophy, as opposed to Buddhist philosophy, which speaks of "emptiness" and understands it as devoid of determinations, hence effectively emerging beyond them. The dialectic of "emptiness" and "fullness," characteristic of Buddhist philosophy, succinctly translates the necessity of the absolute demanded by the relative reality, without reducing the absolute to a term of a relationship that binds it to the relative.

Western philosophy originates in Greece, with the earliest philosophers belonging to the Ionian School. As is well-known, this school gave rise to two fundamental orientations: a naturalistic orientation, according to which the "principle" (ἀρχή) of all things is to be sought in an element of nature, and a metaphysical orientation, which could also be termed transcendental, conceiving the principle as a foundation emerging beyond the universe of founded things. For the latter orientation, the aim is not to find the beginning of all things but to identify the condition of their possibility, which coincides with the condition of their intelligibility. In other words, the metaphysical orientation is directed towards the search for a foundation capable of legitimizing (justifying) experience, given that according to Anaximander, initially, and Parmenides, later, the universe of finite determinations is incapable of justifying itself.[11] It must be emphasized, however, that both Anaximander and Parmenides do not provide an authentic demonstration of the insufficiency of the finite; rather, the necessity of the infinite is only intuited (foreseen).

The alleged neutral attitude of the Buddhists (the "neither A nor

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Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia; Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*.

[11] Stella and Divino, "The Metaphysical Turn in the History of Thought: Anaximander and Buddhist Philosophy."

not-A" position) has often been compared to a form of skepticism.[12] The idea that the Buddha was a sort of proto-skeptic has been argued by many scholars, some more persuasively than others.[13] Notably, Beckwith's work,[14] despite numerous historical criticisms, convincingly suggests that the founder of the Skeptical school, Pyrrho, likely derived the foundations of his philosophy from his encounter with proto-Buddhist schools during Alexander the Great's conquest of Iran, which brought him to the gates of India.

It is a fact that such an encounter occurred, and it is undeniable that Pyrrho was part of that expedition, which came into contact with the mysterious Indian philosophers, among whom the σαρμᾶνες were probably the closest to the Buddhists.[15] Whether, as Beckwith asserts, these were proto-Buddhists or other similar ascetic schools is uncertain. In the absence of more detailed testimonies, we can only rely on what Pyrrho derived from these encounters, and indeed, the foundations of his philosophy seem to converge on numerous points with Buddhism.

However, what we will argue in this work is that Buddhism is not simply similar or identical to skepticism. Beyond the points of convergence, whether due to contact or direct derivation of Pyrrhonism from Indian ascetic philosophies, which is of little importance, Buddhism also argues beyond skeptical assumptions. To clarify, these assumptions hold that the culmination of Buddhism is, identically to the skeptical idea, the attainment of a state of absolute tranquility and total absence of disturbance (ἀταραξία). This starts from an implicit assumption, never acknowledged as asserted without proof, that Buddhism believes the limits of the body to be insurmountable. If we take this assumption as true, then it is easy to interpret Buddhism as no more than skepticism. Unlike

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[12] Vieweg, "The East and Buddhism from Hegel's Perspective."

[13] Mills, "Skepticism and Religious Practice in Sextus and Nāgārjuna"; Garfield, "Epoche and Sunyata: Skepticism East and West"; Dreyfus and Garfield, "The Madhyamaka Contribution to Skepticism."

[14] Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*.

[15] Stoneman, *The Greek Experience of India*.

skepticism, however, Buddhism seems to assert that although the body is a constraining limit and the cause of human suffering, the solution is not in the uncritical acceptance of these limits and the simple suspension of judgment. The connotation that skepticism attributes to the idea of ἐποχή ("cessation") is not identical to that of *nibbāna* (literally "extinguishment") in Buddhism. ἐποχή is the suspension of judgment necessary because the human body cannot perceive objective reality, thus the judgments we derive lead only to misunderstandings and suffering. In Buddhism, it is intended to deconstruct the mechanisms of cognitive habituations because they are the basis of misunderstanding: *nirodha* ("cessation") is the key word accompanying the meditations aimed at reaching a state of *animitta* ("absence of signs"). However, there is more to this, as we will see throughout this discussion.

> While it is possible that similar ideas can arise independently in separate cultures without a direct line of transmission, I am not convinced that this was the case with the soteriological methods advanced by Pyrrho and the Buddha. The intricacy and subtlety of their views and arguments, aimed at challenging our most basic belief structures and assumptions about reality, could hardly have been self-evident to anyone back then any more than they are obvious to us nowadays. In fact, they are counterintuitive and go against common convictions of certitude about the nature of our experiences that seem to describe a world that is independent of our sense faculties and reasoning.[16]

Beckwith's thesis is grounded not only in philosophical similarities but also in surprising lexical parallels. For instance, the structure of the *trilakṣaṇa*s (Pāli: *tilakkhaṇa*) is objectively very similar. In early Buddhism, it is reiterated multiple times that the central core of the teaching can be summarized in these three propositions: "all conditioned things are impermanent" (*sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*), "all conditioned things

[16] Halkias, "Yavanayāna: Buddhist Soteriology in the Aristocles Passage," 85.

are unstable" (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*), and "all things are devoid of self" (*sabbe dhammā anattā*). Let us carefully analyze these terms.

In the Pāli context, "conditioned things" (*saṅkhārā*) are all those phenomena that cannot be said to be independent by their nature but are rather dependent on other phenomena. For example, fire is a phenomenon dependent on others, such as the interaction of combustible material with friction, a spark, and so on. When the topic of *saṅkhāra*s, or conditioned things, is further explored, one concludes that only the absolute can be said to be truly unconditioned (*asaṅkhāra*), and by absolute, we mean *nibbāna*, as explicitly reiterated. The theme of conditioned things will recur throughout our discussion, so it is important to keep it in mind. The other term that is worth analyzing is dukkha, often translated as "suffering." Although this is accurate considering how Buddhists use it to describe the human condition, it should also be noted that this condition of suffering is understood at an existential level due to the 'precarious' and 'unstable' nature that characterizes such experience. The term *dukkha* (Sanskrit: *duḥkha*) has an uncertain origin but certainly refers to a condition of precarious balance, for example, due to a poorly made axle-hole. Thus, because of the 'poor hole' (*du-kha*), the pole is in a precarious, unstable, unsteady condition, from which the existential meaning of the human condition is derived by extension. Finally, the term *anattā* will be another challenging concept to address. It will receive a more systematic treatment as we progress, but for now, it suffices to know that Buddhists specifically understand it as 'lacking autonomous and self-sufficient identity'. We will explain and document later why the precise meaning of Buddhist *anattā* is indeed 'non-autonomous' or 'non-independent,' in other words, very similar to the idea of *saṅkhāra*.

According to Beckwith, these three basic teachings are also found in the tenets of Pyrrhonism. Beckwith's comparison is between the following ideas: For Pyrrho, all phenomena are undifferentiated (ἀδιάφορα), that is, in their ultimate nature, they are devoid of intrinsic distinction or differentiation (διαφορά), which would instead be the result of conventions. Conventions then solidify into opinions (δόξα) that are

certainly based on appearances (δοκεῖν) but not on objective truth. This teaching mirrors what is said by the *tilakkhaṇa*s, to which Beckwith adds the idea that Buddhist *nibbāna* aims at achieving a state analogous to ἀταραξία. However, *nibbāna* is a much more complex condition than Beckwith describes, even considering only the oldest texts. What most closely resembles ἀταραξία is undoubtedly the central goal of contemplative practices, but it can find many other equivalents such as *asāraddha*, *passaddho*, *aneja*, and various others that can be translated as "unperturbed," "undisturbed," etc. According to Diogenes' account,

> Pyrrho's encounters with the Indian ascetics led him to philosophize in a most radical way promoting the notion of "ineffability" (*ἀκαταληψία*) and the "suspension of assertions" (*ἐποχῆς εἶδος εἰσαγαγών*) concerning what is honourable or dishonourable, just or unjust, "for the same holds for all things nothing is in truth" (*ὁμοίως ἐπὶ πάντων μηδὲν εἶναι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ*), "but laws and conventions" (*νόμῳ δὲ καὶ ἔθει*) that motivate human actions.[17]

A similar discussion can be made for the idea of ἀπάθεια, "absence of emotions", which certainly concerns the basic tenets of contemplative practice. That said, it is therefore possible that something analogous to the suspension of judgment (ἐποχή) proposed by Pyrrho is also found in the intents of contemplative practice, especially in the idea of *nirodha*, but that this is the ultimate and exclusive goal is something we should be doubtful about.

> Pyrrho's explicit enjoinment that we should have "no views" corresponds exactly to the Buddhist attitude attested in some of the earliest texts in the Pali Canon. In the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, several texts say unambiguously that we should have "no views". The teaching of "right views" and "the highest knowledge" are rejected as "the false science

[17] Ibid., 87.

> of those who are still attached to views. Moreover their attachment is not deemed to be merely the attachment to wrong views, but to views in general.[18]

The similarities are undoubtedly striking, yet the primary aim of this preliminary analysis—using the comparison with Pyrrhonism as a pretext to introduce the fundamentals of Buddhist thought—is to underscore that all these issues, when addressed by a thinker, ascetic,[19] or any reflective individual, have the body as their sole reasonable starting point. This convergence upon a common starting point will characterize this first chapter. If we want to inquiry upon the nature of the 'bare thing' (the *dhamma* or, according to Beckwith, the πρᾶγμα) we have to seek it beyond our body's veils of perception.

Nonetheless, the crucial issue at the heart of this discussion pertains to what lies beyond these veils of perception. We have sufficiently argued that Buddhism, at least as evidenced in the Pāli Canon, indeed considers the body to be a limiting factor that does not convey the truth (*sacca*), or what is later referred to in Abhidhamma literature as *paramattha*, the absolute. However, the question remains whether this absolute can be determined. If what we experience corporeally is merely conventional matter (*sammuti* in the Abhidhamma), then the limitations inherent in this convention might hinder its own transcendence. Another term used even before the Abhidhamma is *paññatti*, which refers to convention, designation, or conceptualization. The reality we experience is a designative construct, derived from a reduction of reality.[20] Nevertheless, upon the cessation (*nirodha*) of such designative mechanisms, is it possible to reach the absolute?

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[18] Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*, 37.

[19] In DL *Lives* 9.11.63 we read that Pyrrho had an Indian master who convinced him to "withdraw from the world" (ἐκπατεῖν τ᾽ αὐτὸν καὶ ἐρημάζειν). It goes beyond saying that this attitude is patently ascetic. Even more convincing (9.11.66) is the renunciation of what is human (ἐκδῦναι τόν ἄνθρωπον).

[20] Genjun, *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*.

Here, Buddhism and early skepticism seem to diverge, as Pyrrhonian ἐποχή does not appear to imply the transcendence of the self, which is, on the other hand, central to the state of *nibbāna*. The latter condition, indeed, is not merely a passive acceptance of the state of things but involves a series of acquisitions of qualities that inherently suggest a transcendence of limits, such as the *iddhi*s (sometimes described as psychic powers) or the state of superior knowledge (*abhiññā*), which are explicitly defined as supernatural abilities associated with the attainment of a state of transcendence.[21] While there is also a moral discourse regarding the non-necessity of utilizing such abilities, the belief evident in early Buddhism in the very possibility of acquiring them clearly indicates their position on the transcendence of limits: the infinite, though difficult to conceptualize due to the limiting nature of conventional language—which belongs to the realm of the finite—is nonetheless something attainable through contemplative practice.

2. *On the insufficiency of the finite in itself in Western philosophy*

The demonstration of the insufficiency of the finite, as Hegel himself indicates, is also present in skeptical philosophy. As Hegel reaffirms in the annotation to paragraph 81 of the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1830), "skepticism contains simple negation as the result of the dialectical moment".[22] In essence, he conceives philosophy as "reason", and reason, in its negative (dialectical) aspect, involves the transcendence of the finite determinations characteristic of the "understanding" and their transition into their opposite determinations: the finite is annulled in the infinite, though

[21] De Notariis, "The Vedic Background of the Buddhist Notions of Iddhi and Abhiññā Three Case Studies with Particular Reference to the Pāli Literature"; De Notariis, "Osservazioni Sull'esposizione Della Creazione Del Corpo Fatto Di Mente (Manomaya-Kāya) All'interno Del Sāmaññaphala-Sutta"; De Notariis, "The Concept of Manomaya in Early Buddhism and Upaniṣads: A Study with Particular Reference to the Pāli Sīlakkhandhavagga"; Mahatthanadull, "Marvel as Superhuman Power Performance (Iddhi-Pāṭihāriya) in Dhammapada Scriptures."

[22] Hegel, "Enzyklopädie Der Philosophischen Wissenschaften Im Grundrisse."

within an infinite that is contrasted with the finite. However, philosophy also encompasses a "speculative or positively rational element", which consists in the overcoming of opposed determinations, such that the finite and the infinite, still limited by the finite, are annulled and resolved into the unity that constitutes the true infinite, that is, the absolute.

Hegel writes that to linger in individuality is precisely the will of the individual; no one can distract oneself from it, for one cannot certainly drive anyone out of nothing. But things go differently with skepticism, which consists in showing that every determinate and finite thing vacillates. More precisely, according to Hegel, between skepticism and philosophy there is this relationship: the former is the dialectic of every determinate thing. The finiteness of every representation of the truth can be demonstrated, since it contains within itself a negation, hence a contradiction. What is commonly called universal, infinite, does not escape this fate; indeed, the universal, which opposes the particular, the indeterminate, which opposes the determinate, and the infinite, which opposes the finite, are nothing but a side, hence only a determinate something. Skepticism thus turns against intellectualistic thought, which makes determinate differences ultimate, an essence.[23]

According to Hegel, skepticism thus performs a fundamental function: the critique of the finite and the demonstration of the necessity of its removal. With a further clarification, which is of primary importance: one cannot understand as true infinity that which is placed in opposition to the finite, because, thus posited, as a term of a relation, even the infinite is rendered finite. It is therefore a matter, on the one hand, of understanding the reason for the removal of the finite; on the other hand, of grasping the infinite as emerging beyond relation. Precisely because it emerges beyond relation, the infinite is absolute: *absolūtus*, freed from every bond, from every tie (relation).

Skepticism, as has been begun to be said, thus has a fundamental role: it demonstrates for the first time in the history of Western thought the inconsistency of the finite. To adequately understand this demonstration,

[23] Ibid.

we believe it is essential to bear in mind the eighth mode of Aenesidemus, the one in which he speaks precisely of relation. As is known, the eight books of Pyrrhonian Discourses written by Aenesidemus have been lost, so to know his thought one must refer to those who have summarized it. The first is Sextus Empiricus, who writes as follows: "The eighth mode [which corresponds to the 'tropos'] is that of relation, and by it we infer that, everything being relative, we must suspend judgment on what things are in an absolute sense and on their real nature" (P.H. 1.135)[24].

The essence of Sextus' discourse can be summarized as follows: given that everything is interrelated with something other than itself, no thing can be apprehended in its real essence, that is, in its intrinsic reality, precisely because no thing, no determination, is truly autonomous and self-sufficient, meaning it stands on its own. This is also the position of structuralism, and in the specific case of structural linguistics, remarkable parallels have been identified between Saussurean linguistics and early Buddhist philosophy of language.[25]

From a skeptical point of view, each thing depends necessarily on all others, such that it does not possess a truly distinct reality of its own: it is not absolutely itself. On the other hand, Diogenes Laërtius writes: "The eighth trope pertains to the quantity and quality of things, to the multiplicity of their conditions determined by heat or cold, by speed or slowness, by the absence or variety of colors" (DL *Lives* 9.11),[26] to reiterate that the existence of the determined is "relative" to given conditions and not "absolute". And, as regards "relative terms", Diogenes comments that these relative terms or concepts, considered in and of themselves, are unknowable.

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[24] ὄγδός ἐστι τρόπος ὁ ἀπὸ… φύσειν ἐφέξομεν.

[25] Divino, "What Dawned First: Early Buddhist Philosophy on the Problem of Phenomenon and Origin in a Comparative Perspective," 12–13, 16; Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy."

[26] Κεφ. ια'. ΠΥΡΡΩΝ [86]: ὄγδοος ὁ παρὰ τὰς ποσότητας αὐτῶν ἢ θερμότητας ἢ ψυχρότητας ἢ ταχύτητας ἢ βραδύτητας ἢ ὠχρότητας ἢ ἑτεροχροιότητας. ὁ γοῦν οἶνος μέτριος μὲν ληφθεὶς ῥώννυσι, πλείων δὲ παρίησιν: ὁμοίως καὶ ἡ τροφὴ καὶ τὰ ὅμοια.

However, the individual who elucidates the crux of the matter is Philo of Alexandria, also known as Philo the Jew. In his work entitled "De Ebrietate" (*Eb.*), Philo writes: "But surely there is no one who is unaware of this truth: that certainly almost none of the realities are known in themselves and by themselves; rather, each entity is judged through its relation with its opposite [...]. And if one were to cast their gaze upon all the realities that exist in the universe, they would discover that these receive determination in the same manner: each one, in fact, is in itself incomprehensible and appears to be knowable only in relation to something else" (*Eb.* 44).

In conclusion of his discourse, Philo arrives at this fundamental argument regarding the finite: "That which is unable to guarantee itself, needing the support of another, is an uncertain foundation for belief. For this reason and from this perspective, it is possible to refute those who easily affirm and negate on every argument. And what is strange about that? Whoever has delved deeper into realities and shed more light on them will have discovered that not even one reality reveals itself to us in its pure and simple nature, but that each possesses an exceedingly complex, composite, and mixed constitution".

As seen, what emerges from the discourses of both Sextus and Diogenes as well as Philo is that no determinate thing is knowable in its reality, and this is because no determinate thing constitutes a truly autonomous and self-sufficient reality. The unknowability, which pertains to the gnoseological aspect, is based on the lack of autonomy, which pertains to the ontological aspect.

Precisely because no relative term can be considered "in itself and by itself", says Diogenes, or, according to the words of Sextus, precisely because it is not given to grasp how things are "in an absolute sense", that is, in "their real nature", the consequence is that no determination can be known. Philo strongly reaffirms the concept and adds a consideration of utmost importance: "Whoever has delved deeper into realities and shed more light on them [the determinations] with more clarity will have discovered that not even one reality reveals itself to us in its pure and

simple nature, but that each possesses an exceedingly complex, composite, and mixed constitution".

Now, it seems to us that, in extreme synthesis, it is argued, firstly, that no thing, that is, no "finite", can be assumed as if it were autonomous and self-sufficient; secondly, as a direct consequence, that no thing presents an actual identity, that is, it is not actually "itself", being itself only in relation to another, so that it never reveals itself in its nature, that is, in its being, precisely because it does not have its own being: "A" is never "A" because it is intrinsically bound ("mixed") to "non-A", so that in itself it configures a complex nature, that is, it is "itself and not-itself", that is, it is a contradiction.

Precisely for the reason that the finite is inherently contradictory, every finite determination cannot help but remove itself, that is, it cannot help but transcend itself, aspiring to true self-sufficiency, which belongs only to the Parmenidean being, which is absolute.

However, the attainment of the absolute does not belong to skeptical philosophy. The latter primarily engages in a *pars dēstruēns* rather than a *pars cōnstruēns*. Hegel himself underscores this in his work dedicated specifically to skepticism and its relationship with philosophy: *Verhältnis des Skeptizismus zur Philosophie, Darstellung seiner Verschiedenen Modifikationen und Vergleichung des neuesten mit dem alten*. This work was published in Jena in 1802, in the second issue of the first volume of the *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie*, a journal founded by Hegel and Schelling in 1801 (although the first issue was released the following year by Cotta of Tübingen) and ceased publication in 1803.

In this work, Hegel essentially argues for the necessity of a "skepticism of skepticism",[27] given that its absolutization is a mere contradiction. Furthermore, the absolute itself is undeniable and serves as the authentic foundation of critique, including that of skeptical critique. The absolute constitutes the very idea of philosophy, for it is only through the absolute that one can apprehend the limits of the relative (the finite), and thereby critique it and recognize the necessity of its sublation into

[27] Walsh, "Hegel and Self-Completing Skepticism."

the absolute foundation that constitutes its true reality.

3. *The value of the absolute and the topic of the relationship*

Only by virtue of the absolute, however, is it possible to recognize the limit of the relative, not because one is opposed to the other, but because, as Hegel say, something is known as limitation, as defect, [...] only insofar as, at the same time, one is already beyond it. Therefore, it should be considered only as a lack of awareness not to understand that precisely the definition of something as finite or limited contains the demonstration of the actually real presence of the infinite, of the unlimited".[28]

Grasping finiteness (the relative), therefore, is possible only by virtue of the infinite (the absolute), so that the infinite (the absolute) is the transcendental condition of the finite (relative), that unconditional condition which emerges vertically beyond the finite and does not let itself be conditioned by it precisely because it does not enter into relation with it.

However, the question becomes how to understand the infinite. It could be said that two approaches are possible. In the first, the infinite is determined; in the second, it is excluded that it can be determined, precisely because it would cease to emerge and would fall back into the universe of the finite.

For what reason, one might ask, do some believe, instead, that the infinite can be determined? Because they fear that not determining it will ultimately lead philosophy towards mysticism. Not for nothing, Hegel himself opposes Schelling's absolute precisely because it is undetermined ('undifferentiated', sometimes translated also as 'indifferent') and, in his opinion, is comparable to the night in which all cows are black (*die Nacht wäre, in der »alle Kühe schwarz sind«*).[29] If the absolute is indeterminable, in short, it is equivalent to removing all determination, like that unity in which every multiplicity disappears. In this context, Hegel is certainly

[28] Hegel, "Enzyklopädie Der Philosophischen Wissenschaften Im Grundrisse."

[29] Browning, "The Night in Which All Cows Are Black: Ethical Absolutism in Plato and Hegel."

not entirely comparable to Buddhist positions on the concept of the absolute, and more generally, he has demonstrated a certain disdain for Indian philosophical traditions, which he sometimes regarded as inferior to their European counterparts.[30] However, our aim is to reinterpret Hegel in terms of what he can contribute to the discourse on skepticism, and from this foundation, to construct a new philosophical dialogue with Buddhist thought, one that emphasizes the significance of relationality and the concept of the infinite as a transcendence of limiting or finite perceptions.

From a Buddhist perspective, the term 'infinite' (*ananta*), as part of the 'eternalist' view (*sassatavāda*) is not appropriate for describing the non-limited indeterminate. Early Buddhism rejects both extreme: eternalism and nihilism (*ucchedavāda*).[31] Instead, they favor the concept of non-self (*anattā*), where the self is understood as the potential for determination (limitation within cognitive boundaries) of a portion of truth into a specific identity. Therefore, in our discourse, the notion of the infinite is better understood as the non-determined, an indeterminate that, however, underlies all determinations that are inscribed upon it.

Let us return to Hegel and introduce a new point of departure. As previously mentioned, Hegel opposes Schelling's conception of the Absolute precisely because it is indeterminate. If the Absolute is indeterminable, it essentially signifies the removal of all determinations, resembling that unity in which all multiplicity ceases to exist. In this way, the being of Parmenides and the negation of the world are reinstated—a negation that Plato sought to counter through the concept of "parricide". But how does one arrive at the position that the Absolute is determinable?

The argument can be termed the "argument of relation". One will recall that the skeptics, and particularly Aenesidemus, in the eighth mode had used relation to demonstrate the relativity of every determination. Those who intend to determine the absolute start from this point and

[30] Mehta, "Heidegger and the Comparison of Indian and Western Philosophy"; Bernasconi, "With What Must the History of Philosophy Begin? Hegel's Role in the Debate on the Place of India within the History of Philosophy"; Bilimoria, "Hegel's Reading of the Logic of Indian Philosophy."

[31] Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings. The Middle Position on Theory and Practice*, 14.

interpret the words of Philo, attributed to Aenesidemus, as the necessity to "connect" the determinations.

Philo had said: if one were to turn his gaze to all the realities that are in the universe, he would discover that these receive determination 'always' in the same way: each one, in fact, is incomprehensible in itself and seems able to be known 'only' in relation to another.[32] From these words, it is believed possible to conclude that things, when isolated, are unintelligible; when in relation, however, they attain intelligibility.

The question is: how can the synthesis of two insufficient (unintelligible) elements produce sufficiency (intelligibility)? It cannot go unnoticed, moreover, that the same nexus, before joining the terms, is itself relative, i.e., it too is insufficient, so that there would be three abstract or insufficient forms which, however, unified, would produce sufficiency. What power, therefore, should the relation deploy to realize the concrete? To reflect on this theme, let us begin by noting that those who conceive the concrete (the infinite, the original, the absolute) as the synthesis of two abstract moments have not adequately posed the question of how this can occur.

What would transform the abstract into the concrete? The answer, as we have just seen, seems to be only one: relation. By virtue of relation, it is opined that the separated become distinct, which, since they are bound to each other, would cease to be insufficient. This is the answer that Hegel himself seems to provide repeatedly, although in some passages he transcends synthesis, that is, unification, and indicates the need to arrive at true unity.[33]

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[32] Cf. *Eb*. 186-7: κατὰ τὸ παραπλήσιον μέντοι καὶ ὅσα ἐπ' ἀρετὴν ἢ κακίαν ἀναφέρεται, τὰ ὠφέλιμα διὰ τῶν βλαβερῶν γνωρίζεται, τὰ καλὰ τῇ τῶν αἰσχρῶν ἀντιθέσει, τὰ δίκαια καὶ κοινῶς ἀγαθὰ τῇ τῶν ἀδίκων καὶ κακῶν παραθέσει, καὶ πάντα μέντοι τὰ ἄλλα ὅσα ἐν κόσμῳ σκοπῶν ἄν τις εὕροι κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν τύπον λαμβάνοντα τὴν ἐπίκρισιν· ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ μὲν γὰρ ἕκαστον ἀκατάληπτον, ἐκ δὲ τῆς πρὸς ἕτερον συγκρίσεως γνωρίζεσθαι δοκεῖ.

[33] Stella, *Il Concetto Di «relazione» Nella «Scienza Della Logica» Di Hegel*; Stella, *La Prefazione Alla Fenomenologia Dello Spirito Di Hegel. Interpretazioni Critiche e Approfondimenti Teoretici*. Stella, *Riflessioni Teoretiche*.

The question we have asked concerns the alleged power of relation, which would be able to transform two abstracts into one concrete just because it binds them. What we object is that the bond maintains two different identities, since it is based on their duality, in such a way that these identities have not undergone any intrinsic transformation and, therefore, cannot but remain what they were before their connection: still abstract.

To become truly concrete, determined identities would have to undergo a transformation so radical as to cease to be two determined identities, since every determined identity is insufficient in itself for the reason that it requires the other to be, so that only by surpassing the finite can one arrive at the infinite.

However, what we point out is as follows: the finite would not truly be surpassed if the infinite consisted of a set of finite identities, nor would the absolute truly be absolute if it were structured by the relation that unifies such identities, since the absolute is such precisely because it is free from relations, both external and internal.

Without terms, therefore, the relation appears abstract; with terms, on the other hand, it becomes determined (objectified). In either case, it cannot stand as an unconditional condition, thus as the original foundation. More precisely, the relation cannot in any case be considered as the original, since it unavoidably presupposes the related terms, which themselves presuppose the connection, without either the terms or the connection being able to serve as genuinely founding conditions, hence original. If one were to attempt to resolve the issue by asserting that the relational construct is original in its 'entirety'. that is, as a construct, then it would be inevitable to reiterate that within the construct, both the dyad and the connection that constitutes it are abstract moments, and considering their entirety as concrete would amount to presupposing a 'concretizing power' of the relation, which, however, constitutes precisely what should instead be demonstrated. The foundation, namely the original, cannot fail to coincide with the unlimitedness of Anaximander or with the being of Parmenides, that is, with the absolute itself, inherently indeterminable.

4. *The absolute and its indeterminability in Buddhist philosophy*

The point that seems extremely significant to us, and for this reason, we intend to bring it to the reader's attention, is as follows: the awareness of the value of the absolute and its indeterminacy, which emerges laboriously in Western philosophy, finds explicit expression in early Buddhist philosophy. Nonetheless, also further developments of Buddhist thought, from the Abhidhamma to Nāgārjuna and finally the Mahāyāna movements, particularly the Avataṃsakasūtra, are particularly relevant in this case.

The first aspect that demands emphasis is that, within the context of Buddhist philosophy, the concept of the "absolute" (*paramārtha*) is often associated with the concepts of "emptiness" and "voidness" (*śūnyatā*). This makes it difficult to understand precisely what is meant by the absolute, especially due to a longstanding tradition that tends to interpret the concept of "emptiness" as a synonym for "nothingness".

In reality, consistent with the older tradition, which was based on absolute truth (*satya*) as that which cannot rely on any determined self (*ātman*), ancient Buddhism conceives of emptiness as a consequence of its fundamental doctrine, which is precisely that of non-identity (*anātman*).

In this latter case, specific reference is made to attributed identities: the world (*loka*) is conceived as that which appears by virtue of cognitive mechanisms of designation and formulation of identities. Things of the world are thus designated, attributed, and impermanent identities because none of them is authentic truth, but rather a product of arbitrary opinion (*mithyādṛṣṭi*), that is, a partition (section) of the world carried out by the subject.

The finite determinations and the world that contains them all, therefore, do not constitute true reality, i.e., objective reality, but only the reality correlated to the subject, the reality that the subject contributes to bring into being and determine. Precisely for this reason, true reality is only the reality of the absolute, which emerges infinitely beyond the reality of determinations and, therefore, cannot consist of determinations.

For Buddhist philosophy, therefore, the absolute cannot be taken as a summation of every possible 'finite', for this summation would not be the overcoming of determinations but their maintenance, so that it reproduces the self-insufficiency that characterizes each of them. Therefore, it is precisely for this reason that we speak of "emptiness": the absolute is emptiness, that is, the absence of finite determinations.

Nonetheless, the cessation of the universe of determinations, that is, the cessation of the world, does not constitute its annihilation. If it were annihilation, it would result in an empirical overcoming of the universe of experience, in such a way that experience would return. How then to interpret the transcendental overcoming of empirical data without assuming such overcoming as the nullification of the universe of determinates?

In one way only: by understanding such overcoming in a transcendental sense. The cessation of the finite does not entail its factual disappearance because what disappears is only the claim that it is the authentic truth. When speaking of transcendental overcoming, therefore, we mean the realization that the finite (the universe of ordinary experience) seems to be the truth, but it is only an apparent truth.

Here arises an important dilemma for Buddhist thought, but fundamentally for thought that grasps the non-truth of the finite: if all identities are mere conventional attributions that do not in themselves resolve truth but only constitute a partial and imperfect reduction—to which a specific function is designated in an organizational system of things—how can one arrive at the truth of the absolute?

The issue can also be expressed in the following terms: if only the absolute is true, and if it is indeterminable precisely because it is absolute, how can the demonstration of its truth be given without ending up hypostatizing it?

It is worth recalling in this regard that even the earliest Buddhism envisaged a doctrine of truth as absolute and therefore any nihilistic interpretation that would instead see behind the things of the world

"nothingness" should be excluded.[35]

There is a truth, therefore, but precisely it is "emptiness" because it cannot be reduced to determination. This cannot but leave perplexed both those who affirm the truth of the manifold, as they affirm the truth of the world, and those who indeed intend truth as an absolute foundation but reduce the absolute to "totality", as the outcome of summing all things, understood as manifestations of the whole.

What we intend to argue, therefore, is as follows: emptiness indeed transcends the infinite, but only insofar as the latter is understood as a summation of all the possibilities of the world. Since the possible conventional designations of the "things of the world" are hypothetically infinite, the world is understood as "quantitatively" infinite, even though it would rather be reinterpreted as "potentially indefinite".

In any case, understanding this aspect, it is clear to us why Buddhist meditation, in its ultimate and most complex stage, aspires to transcend every finite determination as well as their set.

Emptiness is in this sense indescribable: from a certain point of view, it is valued as absence, as what does not appear, yet it is implicit in every presence; it is, therefore, both absent and present or neither absent nor present.

What is certain is that the quantitative-manipulative dimension, which is functional to the preservation of the things of the world, is here rejected in favor of a search for emptiness understood as the transcendence of the world and its things. This seems to us the authentic meaning of the "speeches pronounced by the Realized One, profound, transcending the world, concerning emptiness" (*suttantā tathāgatabhāsitā gambhīrā gambhīratthā lokuttarā suññatāppaṭisaṃyuttā*, AN 5.79, SN 20.7 & 55.53).

The point we intend to emphasize strongly is that Buddhism not only denies the truth of the world but also systematically denies that the absolute can in any way be reducible to a sum of all possible aspects of the world. The whole, in fact, cannot be understood as a composite (a

[35] Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings. The Middle Position on Theory and Practice*.

set) nor can it manifest itself. If it were to count as a composite, it would reduce to a set of parts and could no longer be considered "whole," that is, integrum, which means undivided because inviolable. If it were to manifest, on the other hand, it would again divide because it would distinguish itself into an "in itself" and an "for another".

Firstly, the conventional aspects of the world are potentially infinite, so that a sum of infinite elements produces only a quantitative infinity, that is, what properly counts as "indefinite"; the latter is not the true infinity, which cannot but be qualitative and coincide with the absolute itself.

Secondly, it emerges clearly that Buddhist philosophy also considers every determination, that is, any '*x*' of the world, as "finite" which, as such, cannot but be imperfect. The sum of imperfect elements, therefore, cannot lead to the absolute.

5. *The dialectical demonstration of the necessity of the absolute*

At this juncture, it is now possible to address the question posed earlier: if the absolute is indeterminable, how can its necessity be demonstrated? The necessity of the absolute does not arise from an analytic demonstration, but from a dialectical demonstration, which begins with the factual presence of the finite and perceives that this presence is insufficient in itself. If the finite were self-sufficient, it would not need to refer to anything else, that is, to transcend itself. This reference, in turn, cannot be understood as a relation, because in this case, the other from the finite would still be finite, and the insufficiency would not be overcome at all, as we have sought to highlight previously. The finite cannot but refer to the infinite to overcome its own finitude, but since the infinite is not determinable – it would be reduced to the finite – the reference of the finite does not conclude in a relational construct, in which the infinite degenerates into one of the two terms of the construct, but in an act: the act of the finite transcending itself. The infinite, in turn, is not only the destination towards which the finite turns, but also constitutes the reason for the finite transcending itself: the finite transcends itself because the

infinite imposes on it to be only if authentically self-sufficient. The infinite, that is, the absolute, must not be intended in its determinate manifestation (the concept of the "absolute"), that would inevitably lead back to the series of determinations. Contrariwise, it is the demonstration of the insufficiency of the finite that brings forth the necessity of the infinite.

Even for Buddhist philosophy, relation does not produce a radical ontological change in the terms related, that is, in the determined identities, not even by summing them. This is clearly evident from the fact that the focal point of meditation is not represented by the indefinite, which is constituted by the infinite sum of all things, but by zero, that is, by emptiness, which expresses the absolute as the transcendence of every finite determination.

In a hypothetical system comprised of three elements, *x*, *y*, and *z*, *x* cannot exist without *y* and *z*, just as *y* cannot exist without *x* and *z*, nor can *z* exist without *x* and *y*. In other words, the definition of any element within the system is not intrinsic, but only conceivable in opposition to all other elements: the being of *x* depends on its non-being *y* and *z*.

Understanding this fact is crucial for the subsequent step, which must necessarily reflect on the nature of things that appear. If indeed every existent is not self-existent but derives its 'being-there' from its relation with other existents, what must we conclude about the reality of the world? Does it not exist, because nothing that composes it is per se existent, or does it exist, because the relation itself attests to the possibility of existence? The first hypothesis is nihilistic: nothing exists in an ultimate and definitive sense, and what exists is merely an illusion. The second hypothesis, in turn, envisages two interpretative possibilities: existentialism tout court, whereby everything exists because it possesses a substance of meaning that nonetheless allows what undeniably appears to manifest, or that which appears is still an illusion, but, unable to deny the evidence of its appearing, this illusion truly testifies to a form of deception of our perceptions about the reality of the world, shifting the focus from the relation to the thing itself. In other words, we will seek being in things and not in their being in relation, that is, in the relation itself. If, however, we

assume that things that appear are precisely appearances, epiphenomena at the conjunction of relational nodes, but such conjunctions are merely what make things appear, while what really is lies in the relation, then we will seek being in the relation, and things would become apparent phenomena, aspects, multiple, infinite manifestative possibilities, of being, but not being tout court.

Contrarily, the foundation is precisely what is autonomous and self-sufficient, that is, it needs nothing else to be, and for this reason, it serves as the foundation also for every existent, for every aspect of it that appears, as a prerequisite, required *a parte ante* from the series of conditioned ones. A problematic aspect, however, is that of postulating the separation between existents, appearances, or more concretely the phenomena of the world, from their foundation. Because it is autonomous and self-sufficient, it must be considered absolute, that is, as positing itself independently of any relation, without constraints, indeed as a condition for any relation, but not dependent on them because it is autonomous and without constraints: fully present in every relational node, but not coincidental with any of the relational nodes in which it is fully present. It must be what constitutes the exterior and the interior of anything, and beyond which it is not possible to go. Thus omnipervasive by necessity.

If it is posited that the existents are in some measure different from the foundation, they would be rendered ontologically separate from it, or as if they were a fractionation of the foundation, which would still pose an irreconcilable difference. The fracture or separation is only perceived in the partial manifestativity of the entity, that is, that peculiar aspect of the foundation that emerges manifestatively in certain conjunctions, but which necessarily maintains its indissoluble unity of the foundation, not as a 'part' of a mechanism where the pieces are inseparable, but as something systemic, which, therefore, cannot do without the system. This radically changes the perspective on the nature of entities: inherently empty, void, ephemeral, if we pretend with our cognition to isolate them, see them independently from their context, but instead as a holographic section of a whole, where 'holographic' is intended in a principle similar

to systemic internal homothety, but here revised for ontology.

The homothetic principle occurs in the geometric transformation of the plane or space, which dilates or contracts the segments, and therefore the objects, from a point called the center of homothety. Lengths vary in proportion, while angles remain unchanged and thus the shape of objects is maintained, as in similarities. Geometrically this occurs in self-similar objects. A self-similar object is exactly or approximately similar to a part of itself, which reproduces the entirety of the object even on smaller scales. What we wish to argue in this ontological approach is rather that every phenomenal manifestation of being, every existent, is at the same time a testimony of the peculiar aspect of the being that manifests, thus different from every other aspect, but is necessarily also the totality of the being in which it is, and which must include in itself as a possibility, otherwise it could not appear as such. Revisiting our system *x*, *y*, *z*, we would have a particular situation whereby *x* is different from *y* and *z*, but also includes *y* and *z*. In turn, *y* is different from *x* and *z* but must include them within itself. Without this inclusion, even the appearance of difference would not be possible: the mutual inclusivity of the existents is a condition for their difference. We must not be deceived by their locality, but must focus on their potential: *x* and *y* may appear different, distinct, and 'separated' spatially, but without the inclusion of *y* in *x* and of *x* in *y*, *x* would not appear as *x*, and *y* would not appear as *y*. The foundation will ultimately be what includes all the infinite possibilities of its manifestation (*x*, *y*, *z*) but at the same time does not reduce itself to any of them: it includes all, thus it is in all, but the single manifestation, the single *x*, is not also the foundation that grounds the conditions of manifestation, but only an apparent aspect of it, inseparable and indivisible from the totality in which it is.

In this last system, the phenomenological variability of all the existents, but also their intrinsic emptiness, their ephemeral nature, can be ontologically explained. In any other interpretation, we would inevitably fall into nihilism: if on one hand, we admit the pure ontological difference (*x* is different from *y*, and this difference makes them irreconcilable, "*x* is

absolutely non-*y*"), the result is still that of isolating the entity and falling into an evident aporia: *x* will necessarily depend on *y*, that is, on non-*x*, to be *x*, resulting in the paradox where a thing is itself in dependence on the non-itself, a thing depends on its opposite to be itself. The result is that nothing separates *x* and *y* in their being "different" irreconcilably and dependently. This aporia leaves open a nihilistic abyss, and is not a solution different from the extreme opposite, which yields directly to *nihil absolutum*: things are not in themselves anything, they are just appearances behind which there is nothing.[36] This second reading leads to another aporia, which, however, the nihilist does not worry about: that of identifying a thing with nothing. In the final analysis, *x*, *y*, *z*, are nothing, and even if this opens up the problem of defining what "nothing" is, which is not easily solved, the nihilist reading simply removes every sense and every substance from the networks of the world: everything appears by an accident, a fortuitous case, and being ultimately nothing, because it came from nothing, it will return to nothing.

The ontological difference between the foundation and the founded ends up creating an internal duality within the foundation itself: a split between itself and its 'creations'; and this internal split can only be filled by nothingness. How then to find a solution between these two extremes that are the absolute difference and the absolute nothing? The only solution that seems possible to approach here is the Buddhist one, which has proposed a concept of an all-pervasive absolute, while maintaining both the ephemeral nature of the things of the world and their reality. What appears is impermanent and interdependent, but this does not mean nonexistence: the emptiness of all things does not coincide with their nonexistence, just as their interdependence does not imply that they can cease to exist.

[36] Oosterling, "Avoiding Nihilism by Affirming Nothing: Hegel on Buddhism."

6. *The dialectic of full/empty: the emergence of the absolute expressed by Buddhist philosophy*

This fundamental conception reflects, at least in part, a long tradition of thought originating even in India, which initiated the reflection on the concepts of "emptiness" and "fullness", converging into the Buddhist notion of "emptiness". This notion is understood as the absolute that surpasses, incorporating within itself, and transcending all forms.

Among the terms historically employed to denote zero, we find *ākāśa*, also signifying sky, atmosphere, or ether, and *pūrṇa* which paradoxically denotes what one would expect to be the opposite of zero, that is, "full" (etymologically akin to the Latin *plēnus*, the Greek πλήρης, and even the English full). It is surprising, therefore, to encounter terms indicating hollowness, void, open space, and fullness being equally employed to signify zero. Coomaraswamy supports the notion that zero is not a nullity but rather an infinity, given the association of this peculiar "number" with other terms such as *ananta*, meaning "endless," thereby implying an identification of zero with infinity.[37] The mathematical zero, *kha* (a lemma he connects with χάος), can be traced back to an "a priori undimensioned space".[38]

To adequately comprehend the concept of "plenitude", reference must be made to its genesis, which is functional to the configuration of the Indian world. Within such a universe, a *ratiō entis*, possessing demiurgic significance, quantitatively distributes essences to the various entities of the world in hierarchical proportion, as elucidated in the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad (1.4.7) and the Ṛgveda (10.90), where the division of primordial being occurs to generate a humanity hierarchically divided into castes.

Only in a hypothetical primordial god do essence and being coincide, as each entity participates quantitatively *in esse* in proportion to its essence: this primordial god was, within the Vedic culture against

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[37] Coomaraswamy, "Kha and Other Words Denoting 'Zero' in Connection with the Metaphysics of Space," 488.

[38] Ibid., 491.

which the Buddhists opposed, a generic and indefinite "that" (*tad*).[39]

Due to this reason, the transcendence from the world (*loka-anta*), which Buddhist practice aims to achieve through meditation, does not aspire to the indefinite, but to emptiness, which not only transcends the world but also the finite consciousness of the infinite (*vijñānānantyāyatana*), which is the ultimate meditative stage of the formless (*arūpāvacara*).

In a previous study, a comparison was made between early Buddhist thought, with a focus on the Pāli Canon, and Parmenidean philosophy.[40] Central to both philosophies are the themes of the infinite and the finite. In the Buddhism of the Pāli Canon, the problem of name-and-form as an organizing factor of perceived reality is clearly understood as a limitation. The world (*loka*), which arises from these conventional constructs and designations (*paññatti*), is thus seen as the result of a series of limitations imposed on the absolute (*yathābhūtaṃ*), which is indivisible. This absolute is perceived as a series of separate entities due to the limitations of our perceptual faculties.

However, there also emerges the possibility of transcending these limitations, which for Buddhists is conceptualized as the 'end of the world' (*lokanta*), resulting from the cessation (*nirodha*) of those limiting mechanisms that assign names to the 'forms' previously isolated by our cognition. On the one hand, limitation is largely represented by the problem of language, but on the other hand, it is not an insurmountable

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[39] The Chāndogyopaniṣad (6.2.3) elucidates that the genesis of the world initiates when the indefinite, referred to as "that" (*tad*), and which we may presume to be the most fitting appellation for the archetypal being, resolves to manifest as manifold: "May I become manifold, may I manifest in existence." It is at this juncture that "that" engendered fire, from whose heat emerged the remainder of the world. The Upaniṣads employ two of these ambiguous terms, at times used interchangeably, namely the interrogative pronoun ka ("who?") and the demonstrative tad ("that"). Almost as if one were the question and the other the answer, the two pronouns ka and tad appear variably in Upaniṣadic literature, yet their prototype perhaps lies in Ṛgveda 10.121 (*kasmai devāyahaviṣā vidhema ya*…), wherein the demiurge Prajāpati is precisely identified with these pronouns.

[40] Divino, "What Dawned First: Early Buddhist Philosophy on the Problem of Phenomenon and Origin in a Comparative Perspective."

obstacle, as contemplative practice aims precisely at the indeterminable and infinite. It is from this perspective that, as Vélez de Cea aptly observed,[41] the most archaic concept of non-self (*anattā*) and the later developed Abhidhamma concept of 'emptiness' (*suñña*) are essentially synonymous. In authors who later wrote in Sanskrit, the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) assumes the critical importance of an absolute truth. It should be noted, as demonstrated by Brown, that in no case is emptiness understood as 'nothingness', but rather as the inconsistency of designated and conventional concepts,[42] those initially referred to in Buddhism as *saṅkhārā*. Since the only unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) state is *nibbāna*,[43] we deduce that this idea essentially refers to the impossibility of any entity being isolated, independent, autonomous, or self-sufficient (the Abhidhamma uses the term *sabhāva*, 'intrinsically existent'). Everything is mutually dependent, pointing not only to the chain of conditioned production but also to a mutual implication of all things as part of an inseparable unity—essentially, a co-implication. This theme, which prompts us to interpret the concept of *suñña*/*śūnya* as the condition of non-self-sufficiency of entities, has been thoroughly examined not only by Brown but also by Vélez de Cea, Johansson,[44] and especially Hamilton.[45] His thesis is that the concept of *anattatā* should be expressly translated as "non-separate-self-hood". The core of the problem is precisely the isolating cognitions. In this context, perfectly recognized by the author, the problem of identity also arises.

> In separating the factors of our experience in this way, we are conferring on each of those factors, including ourselves, the notion of having an independent identity, of being what

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

[42] Brown, "Microgenesis and Buddhism: The Concept of Momentariness."

[43] Gokhale, "Buddhist Approaches to Impermanence: Phenomenal and Naumenal."

[44] Johansson, *The Psychology of Nirvana*.

[45] Hamilton, "The 'External World': Its Status and Relevance in the Pali Nikāyas."

> we call a 'self'. In this respect the notion of self-hood is applicable not just personally but also generically. If all things are in fact dependent and impermanent, what we are doing is erroneous. Impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-separate-self-hood (each characteristic following from its predecessor) are taught together in the *tilakkhaṇa* formula, giving us the so-called 'three characteristics' (which is what *tilakkhaṇa* means) of experience.[46]

From this starting point, the Buddhist theory on the origin of the world is also developed: "as long as one is operating from a standpoint of any degree of ignorance," which is the main cause of both suffering and the origin of the world as we will see, "one also superimposes 'manifoldness' (i.e. separateness, or independent self-hood) onto experiential data."[47] Hamilton and Johansson particularly recognize the archaic significance of the concept of the world (*loka*) as a conventional construct that is not independent, autonomous, or self-sufficient.

> There is no independently existing world. The world is a dynamic process, constantly being produced and deliberately constructed by our senses, our thoughts, and our desires. We build the world and we can also destroy it, simply by not needing it. This does not mean that we and the world are unreal or a mere illusion. The objects are there but our perceptions of them are constituent and essential pars of them. The world must be taken seriously; all our ideations (*saññā*, i.e. perceptions and images) are true processes, and it is extremely difficult to control them or become independent of them. The achievement of independence, "destruction of the world", is the same as the achievement of nibbāna and is possible through meditation and understanding (*paññā*).[48]

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[46] bid., 79.

[47] Ibid., 80.

[48] Johansson, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*, 28–29.

This interpretation also allows us to establish a stronger connection with the subsequent developments of Buddhist schools such as Yogācāra, which would not ultimately be the originators of the idea that an objective reality independent of consciousness cannot exist.[49] This notion is already present in the Pāli Canon. Later schools would further elaborate on this theme of the end of the world (*lokanta*), and through the idea of world-transcendence (*lokuttara*), they would further develop the idea of the absolute (*paramattha*). The Abhidhamma, in particular, would build the foundation of its doctrine on the dichotomy of *sammuti*/*paramattha*, providing the basis for the rigorous philosophy of Nāgārjuna, in which the dimension of the conventional-mundane (*lokasaṃrvṛti*) is part of a two-truth system (*dve-satye*) that does not constitute a real dualism. The conventional or relative truth is merely a series of designations or conventional aspects of the absolute truth. Certainly, even the concept of 'absolute truth' (*paramārtha satya*) is, like any concept, a conventional designation. Yet it is precisely in this that the genius of Nāgārjuna lies, as he proclaims the emptiness of emptiness (the inconsistency of the concept of emptiness). As he writes in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (vv. 24.8-11): "The teaching of the Buddha's law is presented through two truths: the relative truth of worldly reality and the truth of the absolute. Those who do not understand the difference between these two truths do not understand the profound teaching of the Buddha. Without using worldly language, the truth of the absolute cannot be taught, and without realizing the absolute truth, *nirvāṇa* is not attained. Misunderstanding emptiness ruins the weak-minded, as [happens] with mishandling a snake or improperly reciting an incantation".[50]

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[49] Harris, *The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*; Karunadasa, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: Inquiry into the Nature of Conditioned Reality*.

[50] *dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā, lokasaṃvṛtisatyaṃ ca satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ; ye 'nayor na vijānanti vibhāgaṃ satyayor dvayoḥ, te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīraṃ buddhaśāsane; vyavahāram anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate, paramārtham anāgamya nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate; vināśayati durdṛṣṭā śūnyatā mandamedhasam, sarpo yathā durgṛhīto vidyā vā duṣprasādhitā.*

To further clarify the discourse, taking it precisely from the Buddhist perspective, we will say that even from this perspective, the "Whole" is not the absolute. The Whole, as a hypothetical summation of the totality of possible perceptions decodable by the senses and organizable by the mind-thought, is nothing more than part of that worldly illusion from which the Buddha desires to escape, putting an end to it (*lokassa atthaṅgama*). In the description of the end of the world, it is not by chance that the Buddha speaks precisely of the cessation of those cognitive mechanisms that, through the senses and ideas, organize the *dhammā* and give us the illusion that "out there" (*bahiddhā*) there exists a "world" that is true in itself and not only as correlative to the subject. There is therefore no need to refer to subsequent schools, which strongly affirm the emptiness of all *dhammā*, but already in ancient Buddhism, there is the expression of awareness, the result of logical discourse, that the ultimate truth, which transcends the world, is emptiness (*anattā*, *suñña*) and not totality.

The foregoing, it must be reiterated, does not imply that Totality is unimportant; worldly things, albeit void, are nonetheless "essentials that appear" by virtue of their reliance on something that serves as their foundation. In other words, worldly things exist, but only as conditioned (*saṅkhata*): "any view [worldview] is conditioned, chosen, manifestly dependent" (*panesā diṭṭhi bhūtā saṅkhatā cetayitā paṭiccasamuppannā*, AN 10.93). Thus, if conditionality exists, then there must be the unconditional (*asaṅkhata*), which inevitably is *nibbāna*, indicating the transcendence of the worldly (*lokuttara*).

Furthermore, when the Buddha enumerates the practices that can lead us towards the unconditional, he specifically highlights absorption into emptiness (*suññato samādhi*) as the supreme form, namely absorption in the absence of any sign (*animitto samādhi*) and absorption in the absence of directionality (*appaṇihito samādhi*). After transcending (and recognizing as "empty") the dimensions of infinite space (*ākāsānañcāyatana*), infinite consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatana*), infinite nothingness (*ākiñcaññāyatana*), and neither perception nor non-perception

(*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*), the meditator finally extinguishes the field of sensation and perception (*saññā-vedayita-nirodha*): "thus they regard it as void of whatever is not there, but as present whatever remains" (*iti yañhi kho tattha na hoti tena taṃ suññaṃ samanupassati, yaṃ pana tattha avasiṭṭhaṃ hoti taṃ 'santamidaṃ atthī'ti pajānāti*, MN 121).

For these reasons precisely, emptiness proves to be indescribable: it is indicated as absence, i.e., as what does not appear, yet it is implicit in (implied by) every presence. Its absence from the empirical universe thus consists in its abyssal transcendental presence.

As we were saying, the idea of "emptiness" in Buddhism absolutely does not imply a nihilistic conception; on the contrary, "*śūnya* doesn't mean nihilism but that this emptiness directs one to a non-dual reality".[51]

This term has been so successful in mathematical thought that it entered Arabic as *ṣifr*, then passed into European languages in the form of both "zero" and "cipher" as outcomes. The term *śūnya* "emptiness" derives from an Indo-European root that originally meant "hollow" (cf. Latin *cavus* and Greek κύαρ), which, although it had philosophical implications, was also used in the mathematical context at a rather late time.

The "cavity" of emptiness, as Coomaraswamy argues,[52] would also be attested by another Greek cognate: χάος. However, the etymological connection of the latter is uncertain. If it were correct, then it would also be with the term χώρα, the "open space"[53] of the original undetermined from which normative power organizes the world into the first city, from the predetermined to the proto-determined of the village and the πόλις (cf. Sanskrit *pura*, "fortress"). What surprises us, however, about Coomaraswamy's suggestions is the set of words denoting zero in Indian thought: one of these, synonyms, *antrikṣa*, also indicates open space, outer space, or space in general.

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[51] Tewari, "Zero, Śūnya and Pūrṇa: A Comparative Analysis," 163.

[52] Coomaraswamy, "Kha and Other Words Denoting 'Zero' in Connection with the Metaphysics of Space."

[53] Agamben, *L'irrealizzabile. Per Una Politica Dell'ontologia*, 115.

Incidentally, Seyfort-Ruegg tends to exclude that Nāgārjuna's philosophy,[54] which extensively employs the concept of emptiness, had connotations also linked to mathematical zero, although connections cannot be entirely ruled out. Certainly, this term already appears in the Pāli canon in the form of *suñña*, *suññatā*, where it is invariably used as a synonym of *anattā*, "non-identity", or more precisely, "lack of intrinsic essence", "non-autonomy", "non-self-essence". In the canon, there are also precursors of the connection between emptiness and the absolute: in MN 121, the meditator is invited to contemplate emptiness in order to attain "the pure, ultimate, and supreme emptiness" (*parisuddhaṃ paramānuttaraṃ suññataṃ*).

In the Discourse on the All (SN 35.23), the Buddha asserts that "the All is simply the eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds, the nose and odors, the tongue and flavors, the body and tactile objects, the mind and mental phenomena: this is what we call the All" (*cakkhuñceva rūpā ca, sotañca saddā ca, ghānañca gandhā ca, jivhā ca rasā ca, kāyo ca phoṭṭhabbā ca, mano ca dhammā ca, idaṃ vuccati... sabbaṃ*). Such a definition is in line with the idea that the world is what appears from the combination of perceptions and designations (operated by the mind-thought) which, by coordinating those sensations, gives "origin" to the world (*lokassa samudayo*, cf. SN 12.44), and thus also the Totality (*sabba*, from a root related to the Sanskrit *sarva*, cognate with the Greek ὅλος) cannot be anything other than something that is part of the world. In the description of the end of the world, not by chance, the Buddha speaks precisely of the cessation of those cognitive mechanisms that through the senses and the ideas organizing the *dhammā* give us the illusion that 'out there' (*bahiddhā*) there exists a 'world'. Therefore, there is no need to refer to subsequent schools that strongly affirm the emptiness of all *dhammā*, but already in ancient Buddhism, it is asserted, by strict logic, that the ultimate truth, the one that transcends the world, is emptiness (*anattā*, *suñña*) and not totality. As we have already said, if there are conditioned

[54] Seyfort-Ruegg, "Mathematical and Linguistic Models in Indian Thought: The Case of Zero and Śūnyatā."

phenomena, which fall into a hypothetical "whole" in the dimension of the world, there must be at least one unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) and, consistently with what we might expect, the Buddhist system postulates only one unconditioned: nibbāna, that is, the transcendence from the world (*lokuttara*). The equality between the condition of "liberation" (*nibbāna*, *vimutti*) and the transcendence from the world (*lokuttara*) has already been discussed in other works.[55]

What we are interested in demonstrating now is that the unconditioned, by virtue of its condition of independence from the world, is not in relation to it, that is, there is no reciprocity between the unconditioned and the world. The world is a set of conditioned phenomena, therefore dependent on the unconditioned, but the latter does not depend on them, and for a good reason. As the ultimate condition of conditioned phenomena, it cannot share their nature. Conditioned phenomena, on the other hand, imply the existence of an unconditioned, otherwise they could not exist: "any view [worldview] is conditioned, chosen, manifestly dependent" (*panesā diṭṭhi bhūtā saṅkhatā cetayitā paṭiccasamuppannā*, AN 10.93). As evidence of this, the unconditioned cannot be attained by the sum of all possible sensations or experiences of the world. They can only be useful to understand that they are insufficient. The truth lies in the transcendence of everything that is worldly, therefore not in the sum or in any other quantitative operation, but in the extinction from these mechanisms: "and what, mendicants, is the unconditioned? The cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion" (*katamañca, bhikkhave, asaṅkhataṃ? — yo, bhikkhave, rāgakkhayo dosakkhayo mohakkhayo*, SN 43.12). We can thus observe how every form of designation (sign) or directionality, typical factors of the quantitatively understood world, are avoided in the search for emptiness.

[55] Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry"; Divino, "In This World or the Next: Investigation Over the 'End of the World' in Contemplative Practice Through the Pāli Canon."

7. Concluding remarks

It seems possible for us to conclude by stating that both in Western philosophy and in Buddhist philosophy, some fundamental concepts are indicated regarding the theme of foundation and its relationship with the founded, which prove to be insufficient in themselves. Firstly, the finite is insufficient in itself, so that its being cannot be understood as the same being as the absolute. Secondly, the insufficiency of the finite cannot be overcome through its relation with another finite, because by this "horizontal" path, the insufficiency is maintained. Thirdly, insufficiency imposes the necessity of that which is self-sufficient and autonomous, namely the absolute or infinite, which emerges "vertically" beyond the universe of conditioned entities. Fourthly, it is precisely by virtue of the absolute (infinite) that it is possible to grasp the limit of the relative (finite), so that the infinite is the original and transcendental as well as unconditional condition. Fifthly, the infinite cannot be understood as a "totality", that is, as the synthesis (sum) of the finite, because in this way it would also be rendered finite. It should instead be understood as emerging beyond every determination, as "void", that is, as the absence of finite determinations. Sixthly, precisely for the reasons given, it is indeterminable: it is not reducible to determination because it is an unconditional and foundational condition. Seventhly, it does not enter into relation with the universe of conditioned entities, because it cannot be reduced to the term of a relation: it would be determined again. Therefore, it unilaterally conditions, that is, it conditions without being conditioned. Finally, since it conditions without reducing itself to empirical presence, the infinite is the abyssal presence of absent truth.

The Buddhist philosophical tradition has not relied solely on intellectual work. While among Buddhist thinkers there are prominent

logicians,[56] and according to some, even ontologists[57] and metaphysicians[58] with highly refined philosophical abilities, it should also be noted that a fundamental basis of Buddhist thought is rooted in practice, specifically in contemplative practice or meditation.[59] Many of the philosophical propositions described in Buddhist texts are likely supported by concrete experiences derived from contemplative practice, to which the intellectual framework was only later added. Since these experiences would provide tangible evidence of the transcendence from the perception of the finite to the infinite, it is important to conclude by presenting at least one example of such works.

One of these majestic works is known, among other titles, as the Avataṃsakasūtra. We choose to cite a particular image from this text, specifically in the fourth book, as we believe the premises of such reasoning are those of the inter-penetration of every conditioned thing, a natural consequence of the doctrine of the *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

Paul Williams reports this translation from a section of the Avataṃsakasūtra:

> In all atoms of all lands
> Buddha enters, each and every one,
> Producing miracle displays for sentient beings:
> Such is the way of Vairocana....
> The techniques of the Buddhas are inconceivable,
> All appearing in accord with beings' minds....
> In each atom the Buddhas of all times
> Appear, according to inclinations;
> While their essential nature neither comes nor goes,

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[56] Priest, "The Logic of the Catuskoti"; Priest, "None of the Above: The Catuṣkoṭi in Indian Buddhist Logic."

[57] Divino, "What Dawned First: Early Buddhist Philosophy on the Problem of Phenomenon and Origin in a Comparative Perspective."

[58] Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics*; Karunadasa, *The Buddhist Analysis of Matter*.

[59] Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception*; Shulman, "Embodied Transcendence: The Buddha's Body in the Pāli Nikāyas."

By their vow power they pervade the worlds.[60]

The context of this sūtra primarily involves the description of the truth or the true world that unfolds before the Buddha's eyes (*dharmadhātu*). Some have interpreted these descriptions as bordering on the hallucinatory, but generally, the text presents a world where boundaries between things are no longer well-defined, existing as a singular and powerful conscious flow, unified and inexorable—a world entirely different from the one we are accustomed to observing. Here, the Buddha is not merely a person but a profound nature that, when awakened, manifests in anyone who becomes a 'Buddha', yet is also intrinsically present in every single thing. Every grain, every atom of the world is, in reality, full of the Buddha nature.

> One's mind can therefore penetrate all things, and the Buddha is this all-penetrating, all-transforming awareness. This penetrating awareness has many powers to help others and is, as all-penetrating, present in all beings. […]
>
> The world as seen by the Buddhas, the *dharmadhātu*, the way things really are, is one of infinite interpenetration. Inside everything is everything else. And yet no things are confused. As a description of the way things are in our unenlightened world this seems incredible. But the *dharmadhātu* is the world as seen by the Buddha wherein there is no question of *the* world (an objectively real world 'out there') as distinct from meditative vision.[61]

This implication underlies and animates every phenomenon, and once the veil of division into things and names is lifted, it reveals a realm beyond the conceivable. Human reason cannot comprehend this infinity, which is clear only to those who have returned to coincide with it, unveiling that reality, the suchness of the world, is an immense and

[60] Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 135.

[61] Ibid., 135–36.

singular being, undivided yet multiform, appearing rich in manifestations and details. It is also true that each individual thing, every smallest aspect that exhibits its individuality and characteristic, again encapsulates this totality of being, as it inherently contains the Buddha nature. This infinite interpenetration, whereby being and the Buddha nature are fundamentally unitary but manifest in infinite distinctions and characteristics, each containing the Buddha nature as a unified being, attests to the grand poetic and philosophical genius of the authors of the Avataṃsakasūtra.

> Il s'agit là d'une conception holographique des phénomènes où chaque phénomène individuel est à la fois lui-même et le reflet de tous les autres phénomènes, étant aussi lui-même du fait des autres phénomènes singuliers.[62]

It is on this particular 'holographic' conception that we wish to focus. In a previous work,[63] we endeavored to demonstrate how the philosophy of Pāli Buddhism also compels us to consider a 'holographic' reality, although it would be more accurate to describe it as pansematic (from πάν-σημεῖόν). Furthermore, the premises of this holographic conception are important for concluding our discourse on the body, which has now reached its apex: the transcendence of the body. While Mahāyāna Buddhism explicitly speaks of a Dharmakāya as the highest and most sublime body of the Buddha (setting aside the various discourses on corporeality they elaborate in a very detailed manner) that coincides with the universe in its true nature, lower corporealities, coexisting, describe reality on the mere physical or metaphysical plane.[64]

In numerous texts, reference is made to the Buddha's capacity to conspicuously transcend the traditionally ascribed limitations of the

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[62] Cornu, *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique Du Bouddhisme. Nouvelle Édition Augmentée*, 173.

[63] Divino, "Dualism and Psychosemantics: Holography and Pansematism in Early Buddhist Philosophy."

[64] Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 179–84.

corporeal condition. These capacities, sometimes translated as 'psychic powers' or 'supernatural powers,' are not so much attributable to the realm of the psyche—an aspect not identifiable within Buddhist conception—nor to the transcendence of nature, another concept difficult to pinpoint within Buddhist thought. To a certain extent, these are superhuman or trans-human powers; however, the precise term indicating them, *iddhi* (*ṛddhi* in Sanskrit), pertains to prosperity: could it refer to acquired abilities? The root *ṛdh-* signifies growth, increase, and augmentation, and in contexts beyond Buddhism, it can also denote magic.

The issue of these powers in Buddhism is a rather delicate topic. They are an undeniably fundamental part of its archaic conception, and the neglect of their importance may be attributable, as Gethin notes, to the modernist tendencies that have dominated the interpretation of Buddhism from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.[65]

Another term that indicates such superhuman abilities is certainly *abhiññā*, although this latter term explicitly implies gnosis or superior wisdom (*abhi-ñā*) or even "super knowledge".[66] There is a direct link between wisdom and ability. As previously mentioned, theory and practice are not conceived as separate, and true knowledge necessarily entails the acquisition of certain abilities. Nevertheless, *iddhi* is the term most explicitly associated with capacities for transcendence. Numerous suttas are devoted exclusively or primarily to this theme.

A notable example is found in AN 5.67, where it is made explicit that five qualities (*pañca dhamme*) are connected to the development of the foundations of superhuman capacities (*iddhipādaṃ*). It is interesting to note that the cultivation of these qualities has only two possible outcomes: either the acquisition of the vision of truth in this very life (*diṭṭheva dhamme*) or alternatively (*aññā*), if the presence of something persists (*sati vā upādisese*), entry into the state of non-return (*anāgāmitā*), which is also a rather peculiar concept. The *anāgāmin*, literally "one

[65] Gethin, "Tales Of Miraculous Teachings: Miracles In Early Indian Buddhism," 223.

[66] De Notariis, "The Vedic Background of the Buddhist Notions of Iddhi and Abhiññā Three Case Studies with Particular Reference to the Pāli Literature," 235.

who does not return", probably refers to one who, having attained the state of Buddhahood, does not remain in the mundane dimension even in the awakened form and abandons this existential plane definitively. This suggests that there might be a possibility of remaining, in some form, in this mundane plane even after attaining Buddhahood, but these interpretations are quite controversial and at times reminiscent of Mahāyāna, where the distinction between a Buddha and a Bodhisattva can indeed be described in similar terms. In the Pāli Canon, there seem to be traits referring to different progressive stages of Buddhahood, some still partially tied to mundanity and others less so, especially concerning the various stages of breaking the bonds or fetters (*saṃyojana*).

We believe there are more than valid reasons to think that this principle of interpenetration described by the Avataṃsaka is neither an invention nor an innovation but a necessary implication of the principle of interdependence. In other words, the phenomenological interdependence, the original core of Buddhist teachings, necessarily implies phenomenological interpenetration.[67] The Huáyán school that has the Avataṃsaka as its founding text refers to this condition as "perfect interpenetration" (*yuán róng*, 圓融) or "Dharma-realm's dependent origination" (*fǎjiè yuánqǐ*, 法界緣起).[68] There can only be a phenomenological continuum between them since each link is implicated in its context. This is the perspective for which everything is just "one single nexus of conditions in which everything simultaneously depends on, and is depended on by, everything else".[69] This is most likely the perspective from which the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness was developed.[70]

When we observe wood burning, cognition deceives us, giving the impression that the wood becomes ash. From a logical point of view,

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[67] Hamar, *Reflecting Mirrors: Perspectives on Huayan Buddhism*, 189.

[68] Hamar, "Chengguan's Theory of the Four Dharma-Dhātus."

[69] Cleary, *Entry Into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-Yen Buddhism*, 2.

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

since humans have assumed the identity of things with language, stating that the wood becomes ash is an intrinsic contradiction, as it asserts that the wood becomes other than itself. That is, the wood is what it is not. At the same time, the statement "the wood becomes ash" implicitly assumes the identity between wood and ash. But that wood is ash is nonsense. Furthermore, in what we believe to be becoming, the identity of wood and ash does not appear. What we see instead, according to Severino, is a succession of independent states, each of which is a being-itself of the things that appear, that is, an eternal. Severino comments:

> That the firewood turns into the ashes does not appear, and nor does the being-ashes of the firewood. Rather, in the circle of appearing, there appears first the identical (that is, the eternal) being of the firewood, then that other identical being that is the burning firewood, and, lastly, that yet other identical being that are the ashes.[71]

In other words, the example of wood burning to become ash is analogous to that of a tree growing from a seed. In every process of transformation of a thing, we implicitly accept that it ceases to be to become something else. But if we say that A has become B, we are also implicitly accepting that (A = B). What is apparent is misleading, interpretable. The wood that becomes ash is appearance; becoming is seen but is apparent. What actually appears in becoming is a sequence of being-itself, that is, eternal aspects of being, which would testify to the evidence of the absolute, but precisely, obscured by the ephemeral semantic constitution of appearance.

The existence of something as an independent entity is first of all negated by the subordination of the entity to the conditions that allow it to be defined as such. It is said that the tree is not the seed because the tree is itself and not something else, and vice versa, the seed also has its defined identity. Yet, for the tree to exist, it needs to be a seed first,

[71] Severino, *Beyond Language*, 9.

which creates a problem: should we admit the equivalence of the tree to the seed? That is, say that the tree is also other, or that the tree is what it is not, that is, a seed? Even if we admitted that the tree and the seed are independent, as different aspects of being that appear first (seed) and later (tree), we still cannot avoid recognizing that the meaning of the tree is given in relation to the meaning of the seed that precedes it. That is, the tree cannot be detached from the chain of appearances of being of which it is a part. The tree is such as a different aspect of being, but it is not independent, nor is the seed. The meaning of the tree that appears as a tree depends on the appearance of the seed, and then the sprout, and so on. Thus, there is no independent meaning of the tree from this chain of manifestations. And in this sense, what precedes the appearance of the tree lends itself to giving meaning to the appearance of the tree that will come, so the meaning of the tree depends on that of the seed: the tree depends on the archetype of the seed, it is archetypal, but it also depends on what will follow and will in turn be archetypal concerning the tree. In this chain, therefore, the tree has a meaning that is interdependent on the appearance of things.

But then in this sense, how can one assert that the tree is incontrovertibly not-seed if the seed necessarily implies the tree in itself already? The further we advance in these considerations, the more evident it becomes that affirming any type of separation between things is sheer madness, and it is not the world of the Buddha of the Avataṃsaka that is mad where there is no longer any separation between things: it is we who are mad, who section the unsectionable, who believe we live in a world of separate things, denying the implicit relation of each of them. The many phenomena (*dharma*s) we perceive are not separate, "they exist in a state of mutual dependence, interfusion and balance without any contradiction or conflict".[72]

[72] Hamar, *Reflecting Mirrors: Perspectives on Huayan Buddhism*, 189.

Abbreviations

DN Dīghanikāya

MN Majjhimanikāya

SN Saṃyuttanikāya

AN Aṅguttaranikāya

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

Eb *De ebrietate* [Φίλων]. Online Source: https://scaife.perseus.org/library/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0018.tlg011/.

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