

### 3 The Use of Vedic Texts for the Study of Buddhism with a Particular Reference to the Upaniṣads

**Index** 3.1 Buddhists, brāhmaṇas and Vedic Texts: Some Historical Remarks. – 3.2 The Difficulty in Defining Buddhism and the Upaniṣads' Relationship. – 3.3 Conclusive Remarks.

In the diachronic study of Buddhism, the use of Vedic texts is a way to further scrutinise some topics. Most Vedic texts arguably predate the arising of Buddhism and therefore may represent, to a certain extent, the pre-history of Buddhism. This means that if we find some ideas or concepts in the Vedic texts that also occur in Buddhist texts, we can try to use the former to understand the latter, especially since some of the Vedic texts are closer to the Buddhist canon than some exegetical texts, such as the Pāli commentaries. The most striking example in the present book concerns the study of the *manomayakāya* given that the term '*manomaya*' is quite widespread in the Vedic texts (especially Upaniṣads), whereas the *manomayakāya* is neglected by the official Theravāda Abhidhamma, which is the first exegetical systematic elaboration of the Buddhist teachings. The first exegesis is the treatment of the *manomayakāya* in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, a quasi-Abhidhammic text that postdates the closure of the Abhidhammapiṭaka and thus was included in the *Khuddakanikāya*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See von Hinüber 1996, 59-60. For more details concerning the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*'s dating, see below § 6.4.1.



In the history of Buddhist studies, the relationship between Buddhism and Vedic texts – especially the later ones, namely the Upaniṣads – has never been plain and, therefore, this chapter will provide some background presuppositions for the use of these sources in the present work. After some historical discussion, I will proceed to analyse the relationship between Buddhism and the Upaniṣads and, in particular, I will consider the theories of Johannes Bronkhorst as expressed in his *Greater Magadha* (= Bronkhorst 2007) since they may affect my basic assumptions. Bronkhorst's ideas would overturn, or at least undermine, the standard relative chronology that would see at least some of the early Upaniṣads predating the arising of Buddhism.

### 3.1 Buddhists, brāhmaṇas and Vedic Texts: Some Historical Remarks

Buddhism, just as any historical phenomenon, is the product of a specific cultural environment. In the case of early Buddhism, this environment is represented by the northern area of ancient India. This area did not only see the proliferation of ascetic movements – of which Buddhism played a part of together with Jainism and Ājīvikism – but also hosted another religious group, that of the Brāhmaṇas. Although the geographical focus of the oldest Vedic text, the *Ṛgveda*, is to the west (esp. Punjab and Afghanistan) and that of Buddhist texts is further to the east (Ganges valley), late compositions such as the Brāhmaṇas<sup>2</sup> and early Upaniṣads covered a wider northern area, sometimes even close to some Buddhist sites.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is not unusual to find within the Pāli Buddhist texts the compound *samaṇa-brāhmaṇa*, which provides us, from a Buddhist perspective, a panoramic view of the ancient Indian religious environment, which is thus composed of wandering ascetics (*samaṇa*) and the brāhmaṇas. The oldest Brahmanical cultures can be found expressed through texts produced in the so-called Vedic period: the earliest period of Indian history for which we have textual records. This period is conventionally around 1500-500 BC (see Jamison and Witzel 2003, 65). Here, I refer to 'Vedic texts' as the texts written in this period (which can oscillate for a few centuries), thus using the term 'Vedic' and other derivatives in a broad sense. It goes without saying that this use of the term 'Veda' is conventional, because what is called 'Veda' was composed of different texts across different periods. This topic falls within the problem concerning the definition of what the Vedic canon is (as far as the term 'canon' can be applied to the Vedic *corpus* of texts).<sup>4</sup> In some old texts, such as the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, there is reference to the three Vedas (e.g. *trayeṇa vedena*; ŚB 5.5.5.10 or also *trayī vidyā*; ŚB 1.1.4.3) which indicates that only the *mantras* were considered 'Vedas' at that time. These *mantras* are the verses (*ṛc*), sacrificial formulae (*yajus*), and melodies (*sāman*), and were collated within collections (Samhitā) called,

<sup>2</sup> In this book, I will use 'brāhmaṇa' to designate the religious group and 'Brāhmaṇa' to refer to the literary genre of ritual exegesis in prose, which is part of the Vedic *corpus* of texts.

<sup>3</sup> The location of the Vedic texts is treated by Witzel (1987). Some Vedic texts were composed quite close to Kosala (= Sanskrit: Kośāla), the birthplace of the Buddha. In this regard, see e.g. Staal 2008, 311 and Bausch 2018.

<sup>4</sup> On this topic see, for instance, Carpenter 1994; Holdrege 1994; Witzel 1997; Ferrara 2012.

respectively: *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Sāmaveda*.<sup>5</sup> Another kind of *mantra* is the *atharvāṅgiras* or *atharvan*, which flowed into the Saṃhitā called *Atharvaveda*. The latter was considered in later times as the fourth Veda (e.g. *ātharvaṇaṃ caturtham*; CU 7.1.2-4; 7.2.1; 7.7.1). Interestingly, there are mentions of a tripartite collection of Vedas within the Pāli Buddhist texts through the notion of ‘three knowledges’ (*tisso vijjā*, often also in the adjectival form *tevijja* ‘having three knowledges’, which is equivalent to the Sanskrit *traividya*).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, within the *Dīghanikāya* it is said that the brāhmaṇa Ambaṭṭha was “a student [of the Vedas], one who knows the *mantras*, one who has gone to the further end of the three Vedas” (*ajjhāyako mantadharo tiṇṇaṃ vedānaṃ pāragū*; D I 88);<sup>7</sup> the Pāli commentary specifies that the three Vedas are the *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Sāmaveda*.<sup>8</sup> However, when the three knowledges are the ones of the Buddha and/or monks and nuns, the meaning is different. In this latter case, the three knowledges are what in another classification would correspond to the last three *abhiññās* of the six-*abhiññās* (*chaḷabhiññā*) classification, namely: 1) the knowledge of recollection of former existences (*pubbenivāsānussatiññā*); 2) the divine eye (*dibbacakkhu*) or the knowledge of the fall and rise of beings (*cutūpapātaññā*); and, 3) the knowledge of extinction (*khayaññā*) of the influxes (*āsava*).<sup>9</sup> This is expressed in various forms within the canon. In the *Aṅuttaranikāya*, for instance, it is stated that:

One who knows the past abode and sees heavens and states of decline, who then has attained the destruction of [future] rebirths, he is a sage who has perfected his higher knowledges; with these three knowledges he becomes a brāhmaṇa who has the three knowledges; I define him one who has the three knowledges, not the other who repeats what has been repeated.<sup>10</sup>

5 This seems supported by CU 3.1-3, see Bronkhorst 1989, 126.

6 See Sn 594, 595, in which the brāhmaṇa Vāseṭṭha proclaims himself a *tevijja* (one who has three knowledges).

7 The passage continues presenting the *itihāsas* ‘traditional stories’ as the fifth Veda (*itihāsa-pañcamānaṃ*; D I 88). According to Bronkhorst (1989, 129-32), passages like this one in Buddhist texts evidence a tradition which counts up to five Vedas. Nonetheless, prominence is clearly given to the first three Vedas in Buddhism.

8 *tiṇṇaṃ vedānaṃ ti Irubbeda-Yajubbedā-Sāmavedānaṃ* (Sv I 247 = Pj II 447; Mp II 261). There are other commentarial passages that share a similar understanding. Therefore, it is stated, for instance, that “one who has got perfection with reference to the knowledges (*vijjā*) of the brāhmaṇas, he would be one who has gone to the further end of the three Vedas” (*tattha ca brāhmaṇaṃ vijjāsu nipphattiṃ gato, tiṇṇaṃ vedānaṃ pāragū siyā*; Th-a III 169 ad Th 1171), or also that “Ambaṭṭha thought: ‘The knowledges (*vijjā*) are, for sure, the three Vedas [...]’” (*Ambaṭṭho cintesi: vijjā nāma tayo vedā [...]*; Sv I 267). For the equivalence of the Pāli *tiṇṇaṃ vedānaṃ pāragū* (e.g. D I 88) with the Sanskrit *vedapāraga*, see Norman 1992, 198 and SED s.v. “veda”.

9 A concise account concerning the definition of ‘three knowledges’ occurs within the *Abhidhamma*: *vijjā ti tisso vijjā - pubbenivāsānussati ñāṇaṃ vijjā; sattānaṃ cutūpapāte ñāṇaṃ vijjā āsavānaṃ khaye ñāṇaṃ vijjā* (Dhs 234; I replaced *pubbenivāsānussatiññāṇaṃ* with *Be pubbenivāsānussati ñāṇaṃ*). A commentarial example is: *tisso vijjā ti pubbenivāsādibbacakkhu-āsavakkhayaññā* (Ps III 343). As it is possible to note, the terms *cutūpapātaññā* and *dibbacakkhu* may be interchangeable.

10 *pubbenivāsaṃ yo vedī saggāpāyaṃ ca passati | atho jātikkhayaṃ patto abhiññāvositto muni | etāhi tīhi vijjāhi tevijjo hoti brāhmaṇo | taṃ ahaṃ vadāmi tevijjaṃ nāññaṃ lapitalāpanan ti ||* (A I 165, 167-8). The translation of *lapitalāpana* is in accordance with the commentarial explanation at Mp II 265: *na aññaṃ lapitalāpanan ti yo pan’ añño tevijjo ti aññehi lapitavacanamatam eva lapati*.

This passage is followed by another passage that highlights once more how ‘having three knowledges’ (*tevijja*) is a concept understood in a different way by Buddhists and brāhmaṇas. Indeed, a brāhmaṇa himself admits that the Buddhist three knowledges are far better than the Brahmanic ones:

“O brāhmaṇa, it is in this way that one has the three knowledges according to the discipline of the Noble”. “O dear Gotama, one has the three knowledges of the brāhmaṇas in one way, but in another way one who has the three knowledges according to the discipline of the Noble. O dear Gotama, and the one who has the three knowledges of the brāhmaṇas is not worth a sixteenth part of the one who has the three knowledges according to the discipline of the Noble”.<sup>11</sup>

Turning again to the topic of the Vedic texts, it is worth noting that the closest texts to the Buddhist canon – not only in terms of chronology but also in terms of speculative arguments considered – are the Upaniṣads.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, particular attention will be paid to these texts. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest or establish a distinct separation between the Upaniṣads and other Vedic texts. Some of the earlier Upaniṣads are, indeed, sections of other late Vedic texts and so their existence as independent texts is the result of a modern periodisation.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, although the oldest Upaniṣads will be taken into account more systematically, the other older Vedic texts will be consulted if needed in order to avoid a sharp and artificial separation from the Upaniṣads, allowing the continuity existing within the Vedic tradition to emerge, if present. The use of Upaniṣadic material in the study of Buddhism would raise the issue concerning the relationship between Buddhism and the Upaniṣads, a topic that is worthy of further analysis.

### 3.2 The Difficulty in Defining Buddhism and the Upaniṣads’ Relationship

As Jan W. de Jong rightly wrote “[s]ince 1881 much has been written on the relations between the *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism, but without clear results” (1997, 33). In some ways, de Jong’s statement is still valid and, therefore, if this was a contentious issue during the period between the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century, we should admit that it still remains a very popular and relevant topic of discussion today. In the ‘Middle Period (1877-1942)’ of Buddhist studies,<sup>14</sup> some scholars – such as Sir Monier Monier-Williams and Thomas W. Rhys Davids – recognised some influences of the

**11** *evam eva kho brāhmaṇa ariyassa vinaye tevijjo hotī ti. aññathā bho Gotama brāhmaṇānaṃ tevijjo aññathā ca pana ariyassa vinaye tevijjo hoti. imassa ca bho Gotama ariyassa vinaye tevijjassa brāhmaṇānaṃ tevijjo kalam nāgghati solasiṃ* (A I 168).

**12** Although the historical founder of Jainism, Mahāvīra, was a contemporary of the Buddha and predeceased him (Dundas [1992] 2002, 24), the Jaina scriptures that came down to us belong mostly to one sect, the Śvetāmbara, and seem to be redacted in a later period than the Buddhist sources. Moreover, another Jaina sect, the Digambara, even claims that the original textual tradition has most definitely been lost (Dundas [1992] 2002, 60-85).

**13** In this regard, see Cohen 2008, 5-9; Ferrara 2012, 30; Cohen 2018a, 27-8; Killingley 2018, 69, 71.

**14** According to the arbitrary periodisation made by de Jong (1997, 27).

Upaniṣads on Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> Other scholars were more cautious when they approached the topic. Hermann Oldenberg recognised the influence of the Brahmanic culture on Buddhism, though he is more reluctant in recognising that Buddhists might have been aware of the Upaniṣadic texts.<sup>16</sup> Louis de La Vallée Poussin, for instance, wrote that “[s]ur les rapports des Upaniṣads et du vieux Bouddhisme, on s’en tient à des opinions arbitraires” ([1909] 1925, VII),<sup>17</sup> whereas he later affirmed that the Upaniṣads were not known by Buddhists.<sup>18</sup> An intermediate position might be represented by Przyłuski and Lamotte who wrote that “[l]e Bouddhisme et l’Upaniṣad se sont développés parallèlement pendant une longue suite de siècles [...] le Bouddhisme et l’Upaniṣad n’ont pas manqué de réagir l’un sur l’autre” (1932, 141).<sup>19</sup> Signe Cohen (2018b) recently discussed the relationship between the Upaniṣads and early Buddhism, suggesting that scholars are mainly divided in two factions: 1) scholars who think that there are no reasons to believe that the early Buddhists were acquainted with the Upaniṣads; and 2) scholars who assume that early Buddhism was influenced by the Upaniṣads. Among the first group, it is possible to find authors such as Horsch (1968) and Chandra (1971) who preferred to believe that similarities between Buddhism and the Upaniṣads are better explained as the result of sharing the same cultural *milieu*. This kind of approach, nonetheless, never discouraged comparison between Buddhism and the Upaniṣads. This is exemplified by Reat, who suggests, on the basis of the fact that both traditions share similar goals and that the doctrine of karma and rebirth seems to be absent in the oldest

**15** Monier-Williams, for instance, wrote: “[t]he Buddha, like all Indians, was by nature a metaphysician. He had great sympathy with the philosophy of the Upaniṣads” (1889, 104-5). Influences of the Upaniṣads on Buddhism were also hypothesised by Rhys Davids: “it is certain from the details given in our Suttanta that there were then current in Northern India many other philosophic and theosophic speculations besides those the priests found it expedient to adopt, and have preserved for us in the Upaniṣads. And who can doubt but that some, if not all of them, may also have had their influence on the new doctrine?” (1899, XXVI).

**16** Oldenberg, though recognises a geographical distance between the homeland of Brahmanical thinkers (North-West India) and the places in which the Buddha wandered according to the Buddhist literature (East India), wrote that: “[o]f course, influences of Brahmanic speculation touched naturally the east also quite early [...] [a]s a matter of fact, the eastern lands appear in the entire Buddhist literature to be full of Brahmanas” ([1915] 1997, 186). Oldenberg also assumed a time frame between the Upaniṣads and Buddhism: “[c]ompared with the older layers of the Upaniṣads, it is absolutely sure that even the first beginnings of the Buddhist literature are of later origin, in fact, of much later origin” ([1915] 1997, 186). It appears, however, that Oldenberg was more sceptical regarding a textual influence: “[o]f all the texts in which the Brahmanical speculations as to the delivering power of knowledge are contained, perhaps not even one was known except by hearsay to the founder of the Buddhist community of believers” ([1881] 1882, 52-3). Jan W. de Jong summarised Oldenberg’s position in this way: “Oldenberg believed that the Buddhists had probably not known the brahmanical texts; still, he did not hesitate to state that Buddhist had inherited from Brahmanism not only many of its important dogmas but also the general tone of religious thought and sentiments” (1997, 33). The ideas of Oldenberg were accepted by Thomas ([1933] 1953, 90-1), who was contested, however, by Jayatilleke (1963, 65).

**17** Quoted also by de Jong (1997, 33). Louis de La Vallée Poussin provided a bibliography of his time in Louis de La Vallée Poussin 1930, 165-7.

**18** See de La Vallée Poussin 1927, 12, who was also cited by Gombrich (1990, 13; 1992, 162; [1996] 2006, 14).

**19** It is doubtful whether this position was also really maintained by Lamotte since his contribution within the article seems to concern only the arrangement and translation of some passages. Przyłuski, indeed, wrote that “[l]es textes ont été établis et traduits par M. Lamotte. Je suis seul responsable des développements qui les accompagnent” (Przyłuski and Lamotte 1932, 142).

Vedic texts, that “the *Upaniṣadic* Buddhist doctrines may be diverging interpretations of a non-*Vedic* rebirth tradition” (1977, 163).<sup>20</sup> The strongest argument for this position is that it is difficult to find direct evidence of the Upaniṣads within Buddhist texts.<sup>21</sup> However, from the end of the XX century onwards, a specific attitude seems to have established among scholars concerning the relationship between Buddhism and the Upaniṣads. The discovery of some connections and allusions to the Vedic texts in the Buddhist literature led scholars to consider the Vedic context in a more systematic way. In the nineteen-eighties, for instance, Kenneth R. Norman argues in a seminal article (1981) that the exposition of the concept of non-self (*anatta*) in the *Alagaddūpamasutta* (M 22) is nothing more than a reply to the theory of *ātman/brahman* unity (theory of the equivalence between macrocosm and microcosm), as explained in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* and *Chāndogyopaniṣad*. Hence, it is possible to observe in the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties a proliferation of works that highlight connections between Buddhism and Vedic texts, including the Upaniṣads.<sup>22</sup> This new confidence in the relationship between Buddhism and the Upaniṣads can be described through the words of Richard F. Gombrich, who has always taken into account the historical context in which Buddhism was born and developed:

Only a generation ago, scholars were still unaware of evidence that the Buddhist Canon contained allusions to non-Buddhist texts. The Buddhist commentarial tradition does not mention any such allusions, so scholars could continue to maintain that although the Buddha had some knowledge of Vedic doctrine and practices, he did not seem to know any Vedic texts. Recent research, however, has found several clear allusions: a couple to Vedic hymns, and several to the oldest Upanishads, especially the *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka*. This intertextuality, as it is nowadays known, both helps us better to understand the Buddha’s meaning, since we can see what he was arguing against, and more generally vindicates the antiquity of the texts, since the later generations who commented on them had lost sight of this historical context. (Gombrich [1988] 2006, 20)

**20** This statement makes clear that at the base of the controversy concerning the relationship between Buddhism and the Upaniṣads there are also other unresolved issues of Indology, such as the origin of the karma and rebirth theory, a theory shared by both Buddhism and the Upaniṣads. In this regard see, for instance, Flood 1996, 85-6.

**21** This was not a problem for all scholars as demonstrated by Nakamura, who states: “we find in the earliest Buddhist sources no reference to the name Upaniṣad nor to branches of study immediately concerning the Upaniṣads. We conclude, therefore, that the Upaniṣads were known to these early Buddhists merely as part of the Veda, without special value being attached to them” (1955, 75).

**22** Remarkable articles in the nineteen-eighties are, for instance, Bhattacharya (1980) who discussed similarities in Buddhist phrasing, such as the Pāli phrasing *diṭṭhaṃ sutam mutaṃ viññātaṃ* (M I 135), which resembles Upaniṣadic passages, such as *ātmani khalv are dṛṣṭe śrute mate vijñāte idaṃ sarvaṃ viditaṃ* (BU 4.5.6). Parallelisms between the Vedic ritual and Buddhist practice were detected by Oguibene (1983), while Falk (1988) analysed how the Vedic ritual is reflected within the Pāli texts. An influential work that contextualises Buddhism starting from its historical context is Gombrich [1988] 2006. Gombrich ([1988] 1990) also noted similarities between the composition of the Buddhist canon and the Vedic texts, suggesting that the Pāli *sutta* derived from the Vedic *sūta* (this view is, however, rejected by von Hinüber 1994: 132, who also provides earlier examples of this claim in his footnote 28) and that the Pāli *suttānta* deliberately resembles *vedānta*. Gombrich also wrote important contributions in the nineteen-nineties, such as in Gombrich 1990; 1992; [1996] 2006.

This new state of affairs encouraged scholars to search for parallelisms and connections between Buddhism and the Upaniṣads,<sup>23</sup> analysing how Buddhism adopted a Brahmanical terminology;<sup>24</sup> how Upaniṣadic ideas influenced the Buddhist speculation;<sup>25</sup> parallelisms in particular phrasings or wordings;<sup>26</sup> and, later on, how the literary and narrative shape of the Upaniṣads may have affected the narrative frame of some Buddhist texts.<sup>27</sup> The most obvious direction of influence, in the case of these similarities, was from the Upaniṣads to Buddhism, since the oldest Upaniṣads (esp. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* and *Chāndogyopaniṣad*) are regarded as predating Buddhism.<sup>28</sup> As a matter of fact, if an earlier date for the older Upaniṣads is maintained, all these similarities are better explained as Buddhist references to the Upaniṣadic texts than as loans from a common shared substratum. Therefore, it is worth noting in this regard what Alexis Sanderson wrote about a similar problem encountered when comparing Buddhist Tantric texts with Śaiva scriptures:

The problem with this concept of a “religious substratum” or “common cultic stock” is that they are by their very nature entities inferred but never perceived. [...] Derivation from this hidden source cannot therefore be the preferred explanation for similarities between these specific traditions unless those similarities cannot be explained in any other way. (Sanderson 1994, 92-3)

However, this idyllic state of affairs was soon interrupted in 2007 by Johannes Bronkhorst with the publication of his *Greater Magadha: Studies in the Culture of Early India* (Leiden, Boston: Brill), a work that aimed to turn the tide. Bronkhorst, indeed, argued that “some portions of the early Upaniṣads [...] were composed more or less at the time of the Buddha, or later” (Bronkhorst 2007, 258). This, of course, may affect the way in which similarities between Buddhism and the Upaniṣads are interpreted. As a matter of fact, without certainty of at least a relative chronology, it would be more difficult to establish a direction of influence and, therefore, a Buddhist

**23** “The work of identifying traces of other brahmanical terminology in Buddhism continues, and scholars are currently devoting time to considering the echoes of the Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads which can be heard in some of the Buddha’s teachings, e.g. in the Aggaññasutta of the Dīgha nikāya. There are certainly more features common to Buddhism and Jainism which await detection” (Norman 1997, 168).

**24** A brief overview is provided by Norman (1992). Collins (1993, 311) described the exploration of how far Brahmanism and heterodox traditions (which include Buddhism) share the same language and vocabulary as one of the most pressing tasks of Indology.

**25** First among all is the Buddhist concept of *anattan*, as sustained by some scholars, e.g. Collins (1982, 97); Gombrich ([1996] 2006, 14-17); Gethin (1998, 133-9).

**26** Some parallelisms were traced, for instance by Gombrich (1990, 15) who directly relates back to the theory explained by Norman (1981).

**27** One of the most striking cases is provided by Black (2011). However, it appears that it is not only the Upaniṣads that may have affected Buddhist literature, but that some Buddhist narratives were seemingly modelled on the basis of Vedic prose of the Brāhmaṇas (see von Hinüber [2006] 2008, 196). Parallelisms between RV 10.129 and the *Aggaññasutta* have also been discussed by Lindtner (1997-98, 217-24). For similarities between the *Sagāthavagga* of the *Samyuttanikāya* and the Vedas in form and content, see von Hinüber 2020.

**28** Olivelle (1998, 12-13) dates *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* and *Chāndogyopaniṣad* around the VII-VI centuries BC, and *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, *Aitareyopaniṣad*, and *Kauṣītakyopaniṣad* around the VI-V centuries BC.

influence on the Upaniṣads cannot be ruled out. However, the arguments of Bronkhorst did not completely convince the critics,<sup>29</sup> and some reactions against his ideas soon arrived, especially concerning the new dating of the older Upaniṣads and their partial overlap with the early Buddhist texts.<sup>30</sup> The new periodisation suggested by Bronkhorst is counterintuitive for many reasons, and it does not provide justification for some striking features. For instance, if the texts partially overlap each other, why would we find in the Buddhist texts that there is often mention of brāhmaṇas and Brahmanical ideas, whereas within the older Upaniṣads there is no mention of Buddhism? Should we not expect an Upaniṣadic reaction to Buddhism? Of course, we should expect it, and this does seem to occur within a later text, such as the *Maitrāyaṇīyopaniṣad*. Therefore, in *Maitrāyaṇīyopaniṣad* 2.4 the word *nirātman* ‘without a self’ (variant reading: *nisātman*) can be found, an odd occurrence which might be inspired by the Buddhist *anattan* ‘no-self’ given that in the same verse the word *śūnya* ‘empty’ also occurs, another term widely used within Buddhist texts.<sup>31</sup> A strategy used to justify Brahmanical references within Buddhist texts is based on diminishing the value of the oral transmission of these texts. The reasoning behind this assumption is that if the oral transmission of texts is not reliable, we can assume that there were interpolations and so this may justify the presence of Brahmanical references, which could be later additions. Hence, Bronkhorst wrote:

It is frequently pointed out that according to the Ceylonese tradition canonical texts were not written down until the first century BCE, which leaves several centuries between the first composition of at least some of these texts and their fixation in writing. During this long period they were preserved orally; the reliability of this oral tradition cannot be verified. (2007, 208)<sup>32</sup>

There are many misconceptions in a statement like this one. The basic bias is that of an unreliable transmission in the case where an oral transmission is assumed. This has been done without citing any work

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, the reviews of Cort (2007); Neelis (2008); Sarao (2008); Fynes (2011); Wynne (2011); Lubin (2015). Even Lubin, who seems the most enthusiastic, wrote: “I have not been convinced on every point” (2015, 99).

<sup>30</sup> Witzel (2009) discussed the idea that the late Vedic texts may overlap to some extent with Buddhist texts – as Bronkhorst’s work (2007) would imply – and highlighted how, on the basis of historical, archaeological, and textual evidence, there should be a time gap between the late Vedic and early Buddhist texts. Wynne (2010) discussed the attempt made by Bronkhorst to date the *Yājñavalkyakāṇḍa* (chapters 3-4 of *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*) later than the Buddha (cf. Bronkhorst 2007, 237-8). Wynne (2010, 207-9) showed that Bronkhorst’s argument demonstrates only that the *Yājñavalkyakāṇḍa* was not included in the Vedic corpus before or during the Buddha’s life, whereas its creation and circulation as an independent text could safely have taken place in a period which is previous to – or at least contemporary with – the Buddha’s life. Notably, according to Wynne (2011, 1-2), this was Bronkhorst’s main argument in trying to establish a later date of the Upaniṣads.

<sup>31</sup> See Pande 1957, 575-6; Cohen 2018b, 78. For other Buddhist reference in the *Maitrāyaṇīyopaniṣad*, see Jayatilleke 1963, 66-8.

<sup>32</sup> A similar assumption was also made by Schlieter (2012), a scholar who seems to take seriously the new periodisation outlined by Bronkhorst. In fact, Schlieter writes: “[a]s Buddhist texts were transmitted orally for at least 150 years, and the canonical scriptures were finalized even later, a significant amount of the Buddhist depictions of Brahmins and the ‘ideological system of Brahmanism’ might have been conceptualized and inserted at a much later date” (2012, 138).

related to the oral transmission of the Buddhist texts.<sup>33</sup> Another fallacy is the so called *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, namely since the reliability of the oral transmission cannot be proved (this is, of course, questionable), the oral transmission itself is used to corroborate the main argument, almost assuming that it was not a reliable transmission. Bronkhorst tried to support his statement, but with a wrong example. He wrote that:

[T]he Assalāyana Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya (M[ajjhima]N[ikāya] II p. 149) refers to the Greeks (*yona*), which suggests that the passage which contains this reference was composed after – perhaps long after – the conquests of Alexander the Great, and therefore perhaps a century or more after the death of the Buddha. (Bronkhorst 2007, 209; square brackets mine)<sup>34</sup>

However, *contra* Bronkhorst, there are reasons to believe that people from North-West India had already come into contact with the Greeks of Asia Minor at the time of Darius I (522-486 BC) and, indeed, the Persian word *yauna* (Pāli: *yona*; Sanskrit: *yavana*), which indicates the Ionian Greeks, actually occurs in an inscription of Darius I. The Sanskrit form *yavana* is also found within the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇini (ca. the IV century BC). Moreover, in the year 480 BC when the Persian King Xerxes attempted an invasion of Greece, an Indian contingent of archers was present within his army. These Indians may have brought with them information about Greeks when they returned to their homeland.<sup>35</sup> These examples demonstrate that there is no need to await the invasion of Alexander to expect references to the Greeks. Finally, the degree of openness for the Pāli texts assumed by Bronkhorst cannot provide justification to some of their peculiarities. It was noted as early as the time of Rhys Davids ([1903] 1911, 174) that the Pāli discourses do not mention Aśoka, though the texts notably do not fail to mention other kings. Furthermore, the Pāli texts do not appear to have traces of Sinhalese dialects (Norman [1978] 1991, 34-7; 1997, 90). If the texts remained open to so many interpolations – as Bronkhorst’s hypothesis would assume – until the I century BC it would be odd to not find any reference to one of the greatest rulers of India, who was also most likely the greatest supporter of Buddhism. It would also be strange, if so many modifications (as assumed by Bronkhorst) had occurred in Sri Lanka from the III century BC onwards (the date in which Buddhism arrived in Sri Lanka), that the Sinhalese language did not affect the texts in any way.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to investigating chronological issues, we should also wonder how we can understand a possible direction of influence on the basis

**33** Among the works not even mentioned in the final bibliography, there are Gombrich [1988] 1990; Allon 1997a; Allon 1997b; Wynne 2004. Furthermore, perhaps an even improvisatory oral transmission does not necessarily allow the degree of changes assumed by Bronkhorst: “[t]o be clear, orality does not necessarily imply fluidity and a performative expression of texts that is different from their fixed versions. But it does recommend that performances did not reduce only to fixed recitation, and that ‘transmission’ is a complicated idea” (Shulman 2025, 165).

**34** There is also mention of this view in Bronkhorst 2011, 35-6.

**35** For a more detailed account, see Sircar [1951] 1960, 101-2; Halbfass 1991, 199-202; Anālayo 2009a; 2011, 552, n. 116; 2012, 245-6.

**36** The lack of references to Aśoka and to Sinhalese dialects in Pāli texts is highlighted also by Wynne (2007, 4).

of appropriateness of a similar passage in each tradition. If we assume that a particular tradition is the original source of a particular passage (e.g. metaphor, story, etc.), we would expect that in this particular tradition the passage would have full sense and perfectly fit the context. On the other hand, in the instance where the passage is borrowed, we might expect to find some inconsistencies, or at least we would not be able to fully understand why it is formulated in a particular way. Good examples are some Upaniṣadic echoes within the *Brahmajālasutta* (D 1) detected by Richard Gombrich (1990, 13) in a section concerning the reason why some people believe that the world and the soul are partly eternal and partly not (D I 17-18). Gombrich shows that it reiterated, in a satirical form, the creation myth of *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 1.4.1-3. However, this idea of Gombrich is rejected by Bronkhorst (2007, 217-18). He stated that:

The *Brahmajāla Sutta* certainly knows the idea of *Brahmā* as creator god, who creates because he is lonely, but one cannot seriously maintain that this belief was the exclusive property of one passage in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. (2007, 218)

Bronkhorst also warns not “to exaggerate the importance of superficial similarities” (2007, 218). I think that this similarity is not so superficial and meaningless. There is a peculiarity in this story, which is present within both Buddhist and Upaniṣadic accounts, namely that the first being felt fear. It is worth noting that this feature fits very well with a certain Vedic and Upaniṣadic *modus operandi*. In this regard, the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* (1.4.2) stated: “this one [i.e. the first being] became afraid, for this reason one who is alone becomes afraid”.<sup>37</sup> In addressing this passage, Carlo Della Casa (1973, 37) highlights that there is an inversion of the logical process, because the cause is seen as a consequence since the observation of the particular case (the fear of the lonely person) should precede the general statement about the fear of the first being.<sup>38</sup> Similar cases, in which there is an inversion of the logical process, appear elsewhere in the account (see *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 1.4.1-3) and also appear in *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 9.5.1.16-17 and *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 1.2.3 (Della Casa 1973, 37, n. 10). However, this overturning of the logical process cannot be found within the *Brahmajālasutta*'s account (D I 17-18) in which the fear due to the loneliness of the first primordial being is not compared with the same situation experienced by the common person. Thus, the ‘fear’ is a common feature of both accounts,<sup>39</sup> but within the Upaniṣadic account it is also a mythological device to explain fear due to loneliness; it is an etiological tool. The presence of fear is fully understandable in the Upaniṣadic text because

<sup>37</sup> *so 'bibhet tasmād ekākī bibheti* (BU 1.4.2).

<sup>38</sup> “La convinzione dell'esistenza d'una realtà stabilita è alla base del travestimento mitologico per cui la causa è vista come conseguenza, ché logicamente l'osservazione del fatto particolare (la paura di chi è solo) dovette precedere l'affermazione generale della paura dell'Uno” (Della Casa 1973, 37).

<sup>39</sup> I should strictly acknowledge that *Brahmajālasutta*'s account (D I 17-18) uses different vocabulary (viz. *paritassanā*; the PED [s.v. “paritassati”] suggests that, phonetically, it is from the Sanskrit *paritrṣyati* [= *pari-vṛṣ*], but probably in meaning it is from the Sanskrit *pari-vṛas*) from the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 1.4.2 (viz. *abibhet, bibheti, bhaya*, from *vbhī*). However, the close parallel is reinforced by the use of *anabhirati* (D I 17) and *na ramate* (BU 1.4.3), both of which mean ‘not delighting’.

it is significant, whereas in the Buddhist account it could be facultative and so its presence only makes complete sense in light of the Upaniṣadic passage.

### 3.3 Conclusive Remarks

Given that I see no reason to accept Bronkhorst's new periodisation, I will proceed assuming the classical periodisation as my working hypothesis, namely, I will assume that the oldest Upaniṣads (esp. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* and *Chāndogyopaniṣad*) predate Buddhism. The recent findings concerning the similarities of narratives and some literary tropes will also be taken into account. It seems, indeed, that not only ideas, but also the mode of expression of some Upaniṣads influenced the Buddhist discourses.<sup>40</sup> This is particularly evident in Buddhist discourses such as the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (D 2)<sup>41</sup> and the *Ambaṭṭhasutta* (D 3),<sup>42</sup> both of which, perhaps unsurprisingly, belong to the *Sīlakkhandhavagga*, which seems to include the earliest stratum of the *Dīghanikāya*.<sup>43</sup>

With more secure presuppositions in adopting Vedic texts and the Upaniṣads in particular to investigate early Buddhism,<sup>44</sup> we shall move towards the exegetical sources. In this regard, the Abhidhamma is the first methodical attempt to systematise the canonical material. Although the exegetical sources in the present book will be mostly Pāli commentaries, some ideas in them originate from within the Abhidhamma or are, at least, presented by using an Abhidhammic way of exposition. Indeed, I will argue later (see Chapter 5) that I regard the exegesis as an ongoing process. For this reason, the next chapter deals with some doctrines which originated during the development of the Abhidhamma that will be assumed and considered by the commentarial exegeses. These doctrines are the doctrine of momentariness (*khaṇavāda*) and the doctrine of the consciousness process (*cittavīthi*).

**40** "Many scholars note that the Upaniṣads have influenced early Buddhism. Yet similar to how Upaniṣadic philosophy is characterized in general, the influence of the Upaniṣads on early Buddhism is described as taking place in the hermetically sealed realm of ideas. The early Buddhist texts, however, like the Upaniṣads, use both narrative and dialogue to present the message of the Buddha's teachings. Furthermore, there are a number of specific literary tropes and narrative situations that are quite similar [...] These similarities suggest that one of the major influences of the Upaniṣads on the early Buddhist texts is the mode of presentation" (Black 2007, 174).

**41** In this regard, see Deussen [1897] 1980, 475; Gotō 2005, 71, n. 4; Black 2007, 70-4; 2011, 158, n. 31.

**42** See the study of Black (2011), who spotted similarities between the narratives involving the Buddhist character of Ambaṭṭha and the Upaniṣadic character of Śvetaketu.

**43** See Norman 1983, 32. As noted in Chapter 2, all thirteen *suttas* within the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* have a parallel within the Sanskrit Mūlasarvāstivāda *Dīrghāgama* in the corresponding section called *Sīlaskandhanipāta* (Bucknell 2014, 64-5). It is also worth noting that the Sanskrit Mūlasarvāstivāda *Dīrghāgama* is also divided into three sections (see Table 2.2, Chapter 2), but the first two of them are fundamentally different from those of the *Dīghanikāya*, whereas, as stated by Hartmann, "the third, named *Sīlaskandha* in Sanskrit and *Sīlakkhandha* in Pāli, shares not only the name, but also the basic arrangement" (2004, 121). Assuming an increasing differentiation and diversification of texts over time due to the split of Buddhism into different schools, these details make the supposed antiquity of the *Sīlakkhandhavagga* even more probable.

**44** Concerning the use of the concept of 'early Buddhism' in the present book, see below § 6.4.

