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**WORDS INVOLVING THE STEM BRAHMAN-  
DENOTING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SUPER-HUMAN  
STATUS IN VEDIC AND SUTTA PĪṬAKA SOURCES<sup>1</sup>**

**1. Introduction: The Apotheosis of the Hero**

- Venerable Nāgasena, was the Buddha a *brahmacārin*?
- Yes, Great King, the Blessed One was a *brahmacārin*.
- But then, Venerable Nāgasena, was the Buddha a disciple of Brahmā?
- Great King, do you have a chief elephant?
- Yes, I have.
- Great King, does the chief elephant happen to trumpet (*koñcanāda*)?
- Yes, it happens.
- Perhaps, for this reason then, this elephant is a disciple of the heron (*koñca*)?"
- No, Venerable.
- Great King, but is Brahmā one who has discernment (*buddhi*) or is he without discernment?
- He is one with discernment, Venerable.
  - Well, for this reason, then, Brahmā is a disciple of the Buddha.
- You are skilful, Nāgasenā.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a joint work discussed and shared in its entirety by both authors. Chiara Neri, however, is directly responsible for §§ 1; 3; 6; 7; 10; 11 and Tiziana Pontillo for §§ 2; 4; 5; 8; 9. We wish to thank Francesco Sferra who read a draft version of this paper and generously gave us several insightful suggestions. We are also sincerely grateful to Giuliano Giustarini and to our three anonymous assessors for their precious corrections and comments. Of course, we ourselves remain solely responsible for all mistakes.

This amusing and thought-provoking *Milindapañha* pun, turning precisely on the equivocal nature of the term *brahmacārin*, shows why we decided on this paper as an attempt to shed light on specific usages of Vedic and Pāli words, such as Pāli *brahma*, *brahmā*, *brahmacariya*, *brahmaloka*, etc. which may match the almost identical Vedic word-forms, or have developed other different meanings. We have taken a largely linguistic and philological approach in analysing and comparing texts that utilise these word-forms when conveying the concept of apotheosis, in order to improve our understanding of links between them.

Before starting on our chosen topic, it might be useful to explain the definition of ‘hero’ on which our work is based, since some well-known works definitely appear to propose different comparative frameworks. Thus, the ancient Indian heroes analysed are mainly from the Epics, interpreted as “a poetic phenomenon derived from various templates or moulds of Indo-European precedent” (McGrath 2004: 6).<sup>3</sup> We resort however to Campbell’s (1991: 79) definition that the hero’s distinctive feature is that of giving “his or her life to something bigger than oneself”. Consequently, although there are many aspects of heroism to be analysed in Indian literature, we have decided to focus on the so-called ‘apotheosis of the hero’, i.e. on a human being who, by virtue of his merits, is able to accomplish feats great enough to obtain a permanently divine status.

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<sup>2</sup> Mil 75-76: *Rājā āha: Bhante Nāgasena, Buddho brahmacārī ti? – Āma, mahārāja, Bhagavā brahmacārī ti. – Tena hi, bhante Nāgasena, Buddho Brahmuno sisso ti. – Atthi pana te, mahārāja, hatthipāmokkho ti. – Āma bhante, atthīti. – Kin nu kho, mahārāja, so hatthīti kadāci karahaci koñcanādaṃ nadatīti. – Āma, bhante, nadatīti. – Tena hi, mahārāja, so hatthī koñcanāṃ sisso”ti – na hi, bhante ti. Kim pana, mahārāja, Brahmā sabuddhiko abuddhiko ti. Sabuddhiko bhante ti. Tena hi, mahārāja, Brahmā Bhagavato sisso ti. Kallo si, bhante Nāgasenā ti.*

<sup>3</sup> They are presented as semi-divine beings, born after the gods but before our authentic human ancestors, and partially fathered (*aṃśāvatarāṇa*) by a god or identified with a god as his mythical embodiment, such as Viṣṇu’s *avatāras* (Vielle 1996: 75-79; 89-93). As individuals, they combat fabulous or monstrous creatures and partake of a wild and somehow marginalised existence (Vielle 1996: 94-99), or live at the end of an era, participating in a great, final and decisive battle that provides them with immortal fame (Vielle 1996: 115-23).

We know that this work, with the stem *brahman-* as its main subject, could address many other issues, but our aim here is merely to offer reflections that have emerged from our shared comparison of selected Vedic and Pāli texts. We aimed at singling out some common beliefs which might have been the presupposition that allowed the respective traditions to dialogue with each other.<sup>4</sup>

*We are convinced that a methodological study based on a scrupulous intertextual comparison, even between different and not always contemporary traditions, could give important results. It could lead both to an improvement of our understanding of well-known elements and to the discovery of some new details within the individual traditions studied, as well as singling out features that may have common roots but have had different outcomes in time. Therefore we hope that this article may be considered as a small contribution to the line of text analysis oriented to a dialogue between specialists of different traditions.*

## 2. *Brahman* and the Law of Heroism

Our starting point is a famous fourfold black Yajurveda formula that was pronounced during the Rājasūya, whose most ancient version is TS 1.8.16:<sup>5</sup>

“O Brahmán! O king, you are the Brahmán, you are Savitṛ, of true impulse. O Brahmán! O king, you are the Brahmán, you are Indra, of true strength. O Brahmán! O king, you are the Brahmán, you are Mitra, the auspicious one. O Brahmán! O king, you are the Brahmán, you are Varuṇa, of true Dharma.”

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<sup>4</sup> Our comparative methodology has been tentatively tuned to the line of reasoning explained by Sferra (2003). Thus, within the limits of the so-called “substratum model” highlighted by Sanderson (1994: 93-93), we are persuaded that “the notion of a common ‘religious substratum’ does not automatically exclude all possibility of borrowing between Hinduism/ Brahmanism and Buddhism in case where the assumption is clearly appropriate. Quite to the contrary, it can be argued that cultural borrowing would regularly take place precisely against a background of shared categories and concepts.” (Ruegg 2001: 738) and that the protagonists of these shared beliefs were aware that they belonged to the same cultural milieu (Sferra 2003: 59-61).

<sup>5</sup> [...] *bráhmāṣṇ tvám rājan brahmāsi savitāsi satyāsavo. bráhmāṣṇ tvám rājan brahmāśīndro 'si satyáujāḥ. bráhmāṣṇ tvám rājan brahmāsi mitrò 'si suśévo. bráhmāṣṇ tvám rājan brahmāsi varuṇo 'si satyádharma* [...].

We cannot be sure whether the first *brahman* in this formula is the m. oxytone *brahmán* or the n. paroxytone *bráhman*, because the vocative form as a rule is barytone and the prolated final pitched long vowel (*antodātta pluta*) is independent. Nevertheless, as far as the second one is concerned, even though the *sandhi* effect hides the quantity of the final vowel of the first *pada* in the phrase *brahmāsi*, the accent ensures that it deals with the m. noun. Therefore, in each repeated formula, the king is defined *brahmán* and overtly identified with an important god of the Vedic pantheon. The BSS version (12.15)<sup>6</sup> gives more information about the ritual setting and the participants in the event. Thus, we know that these formulas are pronounced when the king sits on his throne, and also that he is surrounded by four priests and three ministers, who “technically” bestow the kingship upon the king, i.e. they legitimate him (and he legitimates them in turn). However, in the *Rgveda* School version<sup>7</sup> (AB 7.19-24), all that happens in the ritual setting is quite different. The gained Brahmanhood merely corresponds to a temporary consecration of the sacrificer (the king), which is strictly functional to the performance of the sacrifice,<sup>8</sup> at the end of which he attains the Kṣatriyahood once again.<sup>9</sup>

It is tempting to interpret the mentioned TS formulas as an authentication of the gained status of being *brahmán*.<sup>10</sup> Firstly

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<sup>6</sup> *brahmāṣṇ iti. tvaṃ rājan brahmāṣīti āhādhvarṣuḥ savitāsi satyasava iti. brahmaṣṇ iti brahmāṣṇam. tvaṃ rājan brahmāṣīty āha brahmendro 'si satyaujā iti. brahmāṣṇ iti hotāram. tvaṃ rājan brahmāṣīty āha hotā mitro 'si suśeva iti. brahmāṣṇ ity udgātāram. tvaṃ rājan brahmāsi brahmāṣīty āhodgātā varuṇo 'si satyadharmeti [...].*

<sup>7</sup> In the White Yajurveda School version (SBM 5.4.4), the Brahmanhood of the king even consists in a sort of complimentary definition on the ritual stage.

<sup>8</sup> AB 7.19.23: [...] *saha dīkṣamāṇa eva brāhmaṇatām abhyupaiti yat kṣṇājīnam adhyūhati yaddīkṣatavratam carati yad enaṃ brāhmaṇā abhi samgacchante [...]* *brahma vā ayaṃ bhavati [...]*, “[...] As he is consecrated, he attains Brahmanhood since he lays on the skin of black antelope and he performs the observances of the consecration, when Brāhmaṇas surround him [... they witness this transformation]: ‘he is becoming Brahman’ [...].”

<sup>9</sup> AB 7.19.24: [...] *sa hodavasyann eva kṣatriyatām abhyupaiti [...]* *kṣatram vā ayaṃ bhavati [...]*, “[...] While he performs the concluding ceremony, he attains the Kṣatrahood once again. [Agni and Brāhmaṇas comment on this new transformation]: ‘he is becoming Kṣatra’. [...].”

<sup>10</sup> This hypothesis – also based on the analysis of the variants of this detail of the Rājasūya – is the subject of another joint contribution of ours, which was presented during

because the m. noun *brahmán*, later used to denote one of the four officiating priests, is also used as a theonym or a divine epithet in Vedic sources (see below §§ 8-9),<sup>11</sup> and also because human identification with the *bráhman* (n.) is the pivotal target of the Upaniṣadic soteriological doctrines. Nonetheless, it is preliminarily important to try to understand whether *brahman* was merely the highest human achievement within a community or, rather, the recognized access of a human being to a divine condition. Thus, the concept of *brahman*, as illustrated by Malinar (2007: 196), i.e. as conveyed by the phrase *tamasah parastāt jyotiṣām jyotis* “the light of lights, beyond darkness”, for instance, in BhG 13.17 and in MuṇḍUp 2.2.6; 9,<sup>12</sup> has played a heuristic role in the background to the present research.

“Beyond darkness” is esoterically the location of the immense divine *puruṣa*. He who knows him gains immortality both according to BhG 8.9-10 and ŚvUp 3.8. Albeit irrelevant to Malinar’s research target, but crucial for ours, is that this last-quoted ŚvUp phrase exactly matches ṚvKh 4.11.9a (*vedāham etaṃ puruṣaṃ mahantam ādityavarṇaṃ tamasaḥ parastāt*, “I know that great person coloured like the sun [and] beyond darkness”), i.e. it dates back several centuries earlier than the other sources quoted above.<sup>13</sup> It may even have been considered as a not entirely orthodox piece of religious literature, i.e. a part of what is termed “generic Indo-Āryan cultural tradition”<sup>14</sup> by Samuel (2008: 99), which was marginal or excluded in the

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the Veda Panel of the 16th World Sanskrit Conference, Bangkok, June 28th-July 2nd 2015 (Neri-Pontillo, “What was the meaning of the phrase ‘to become Brahman- in Vedic and Pāli texts?’”).

<sup>11</sup> And almost exclusively as a theonym in the *Sutta Piṭakas* – see below §§ 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> For the conception of *brahman* as light similar to the sun (*sūryasamaṃ jyotis*), see also Renou-Silburn 1949: 99.

<sup>13</sup> They may date back to the age of the *Yajurveda Samhitā* and cannot however be later than the *Brāhmaṇas* (9<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century BCE) – see Scheftelowitz 1906: 11-16; Sontakke-Kashikar 1983 (= ṚV): 903; Bhise 1995: 8. As we well know, the Khilāni are still stated to be a genuine part of the *ṚgVeda* in the *Anukramaṇī* (5<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE). The phrase *pāre tamasaḥ śukraṃ jyotir* in AVP 5.27.8 (cf. Lubotsky 2002: 94) may be linguistically comparable, even though its meaning is definitely more oriented to a warlike rather than a soteriological scope.

<sup>14</sup> It is assumed to have spread broadly throughout northern India.

RV,<sup>15</sup> i.e. in the “early Vedic-Brahmanic religion”, which developed later.<sup>16</sup> The passage might belong to the ancient pattern that Samuel (2008: 221) indicates, “to a dying warrior transferring himself at death to the sphere of the sun [...] to the world of Brahman”, or to the so-called law of heroism (Malinar 2007: 38). It is difficult to over-estimate the emphasis on the overwhelming light of the Sun which only the self-controlled wise man, i.e. he who is endowed with supranormal insight, is capable of staring at, nor can it be registered as a universal trait of the visionary experience, due to the quoted linguistic coincidences.<sup>17</sup> In another contribution (Pontillo forthcoming: § 10) some *Mahābhārata* episodes strictly linked to this theme, whose protagonists are Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa and Bhūrīśravas, are tentatively classified as a specific feature of the *vrātya*-culture. Here we are forced to set aside the solar subject, in order to focus on the presumably relevant ancient original hero, whose ascetic qualities constitute the source of his divinity. We shall postulate that the hero’s goal of achieving a *brahman*-like condition, as identified in the selected Vedic and Pāli sources, is a shared facet of the assumed pre-Śrauta Indo-Āryan ascetic tradition, and that this may later have been marginalised in orthodox literature, or vice-versa exalted and slowly refined in the Theravāda tradition.

We shall to a certain extent endorse Bronkhorst’s (2007: 111) conviction that “most of the essential ideas concerning how to escape from this world [...] Brahmanism came to borrow from the spiritual culture of Greater Magadha”. Within the limits of our linguistic analysis, however, we shall show that an overarching Indo-Āryan cultural archetype concerning the achievement of super-human status can be tentatively

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Fussman (2010: 8) who, on the other hand, reflects on the categories of Vedic, Āryan and non-Āryan ideas.

<sup>16</sup> It cannot be denied that the ancient sources contain records of two distinct Indo-Āryan cultures. As underlined by Attwood (2012: 55), albeit with different perspectives, Witzel (1987; 1989; 1997), Bronkhorst (2007), and Samuel (2008) have all singled out a second cultural complex, comprising several small states in the Central Ganges Valley, where the second Urbanisation of India, Buddhism, Jainism and other Śramaṇa religions emerged.

<sup>17</sup> As far as the self-controlled *bhaktas* are concerned, see Malinar (2007: 166).

reconstructed.<sup>18</sup> In other words, we assume that the specific cultural feature constituting the subject of our present research was shared both by Greater Magadha asceticism and by warrior-ascetic heroism, which the Brahmanic Reform marginalized and labelled as *vrātya* in the Vedic sources.

### **3. *Brahmacariya* and the highest human achievement in the Pāli Canon**

Theravāda Buddhism is known for its non-theistic tradition, even though in the Pāli Canon we meet a dense array of gods (*devas*), who have gained this status by virtue of their good deeds. Indeed, it is as a rule difficult to apply theological categories to Buddhist thought and, as Gethin (1998: 28-29) explains very fully, the nature of the Buddha himself is not that of a god; rather he was born a man and went beyond both human and divine categories. The Buddha could thus be considered the prototypical protagonist of some kind of apotheosis, since the condition of Awakening can also be achieved by those who follow his path, the *arahants*, etc., albeit with some differences.<sup>19</sup>

We start our work from the Pāli Canon, by analysing a very famous compound present in the Vedic and Pāli texts: *brahmacarya* (sk) *brahmacariya* (pā). Since *brahmacariya* is a word often employed to celebrate the highest spiritual achievements, we shall explore this etymologically ambivalent compound.

According to Norman (1993: 274) this compound in the brahmanical sense means “the practice of a *brāhmaṇa*”. It is generally used to indicate the first of the four stages of life of a high-caste male. Since this phase is characterized by study of the Veda and chastity, often synecdochically, *brahmacariya* is used to indicate a chaste life. Furthermore, *brahmacariya* is

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<sup>18</sup> It should match the so-called first Indo-Āryan wave in the framework of the theory of different waves of Indo-Āryan immigrants (Grierson 1927: 116; Parpola 1983; 2012; 2015 Part I).

<sup>19</sup> For this distinction see Gethin (1998: 33).

associated with him who practices an ascetic and itinerant lifestyle, understood in contrast to the sedentary family life typical of the following stage, the *gārhasthya*, or head of the family, the most important *āśrama* in Brahmanic culture from the Dharmasūtra-age onward.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the term has been recuperated in the Pāli canon, insofar as an earlier and more notable accepted meaning of this word is used there, i.e. “chaste life”,<sup>21</sup> namely, the lifestyle characteristic of a Buddhist monk,<sup>22</sup> devoted to an itinerant life.<sup>23</sup>

In the Pāli canon however, the term *brahmacariya*, especially in a compound, is also linked by the Buddha to other meanings. Indeed, the aim of *brahmacariya* is access to another status, i.e. the condition of the *arahant*. This function of access to divine status is present also in the Vedic texts (see § 4).

By way of example, many *suttas* recount that someone abandons the life of householder for a homeless life and is said to conclude *brahmacariya* (*brahmacariyapariyosāna*) and becomes an *arahant*.<sup>24</sup> This famous formula is frequently used when someone achieves the *arahant* condition:

“Birth is destroyed; *brahmacariya* has been fulfilled (*vusita brahmacariya*); that which needed to be done has been done and there is no longer any other state of being coming.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See Olivelle (2000: 4-9). According to Bronkhorst (2011: 213-14), the traditions of *śaṃnyāsīn* (also called *parivrājaka*) belonged to Greater Magadha and were subsequently integrated into the Brahmanic system.

<sup>21</sup> Norman (1993: 274) claims that in the Buddha’s use this compound generally means “to live an holy, celibate (or in the case of married couples a chaste and moral) life”.

<sup>22</sup> For example, in the *Cūlahatthipadopama-sutta*, the Buddha explains that he who decides to leave home to follow his teaching should no longer kill living beings, should not take other than what he is offered, should observe celibacy, etc. The standard formula found in other passages is: *abrahmacariyaṃ pahāya brahmacārī hoti ārā-cārī virato methunā gāma-dhammā*. “He abandons non-celibacy, he observes celibacy, living apart, abstaining from the common practice of sexual intercourse.” E.g. cf. M I 179 = D I 63 = M I 345 = M II 226 = A V 205.

<sup>23</sup> For other considerations, see Pochi (2001: 9, Chapter 5).

<sup>24</sup> E.g. cf. A I 282-3 or D I 303.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. cf. A I 167 = M I 39, 40 = D I 84, D I 203 = M I 23: *khīṇā jāti vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ nāparaṃ ithattāyāti*.



Analyzing this sentence the term *vusita* is a variant of *vosita* and means “fulfilled, come to an end, or to perfection.” Therefore, the expression *vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ* means “having fulfilled *brahmacariya*”. The expression could also be understood as a chaste life, but in its context this celebrated formula indicates the achievement of an objective. “Fulfilling *brahmacariya*” could mean, in such cases, to end “a way of life” up to achieving arahant hood, which may be deduced from the context of the *suttas*, while the commentaries also offer the same explanation.<sup>26</sup>

Gombrich (2009: 203) goes further, claiming that *brahmacariya* on some occasions is a synonym for *nibbāna*. He focuses on another particular compound: *brahmacariyogadha*, which he translates as “supreme state of immersion (*ogadha*) in *brahman* conduct”. This compound is present in some *suttas* (cf. S V 343-4; A I 168) and one commentary glosses it as follows: “The happiness which has a firm footing in *brahmacariya*’ means the happiness connected with the triad of the higher path (*uparimaggā*) that has found a firm footing in the *brahmacariya*”.<sup>27</sup> Here too, therefore, the reference to the *uparimaggā* leads us to the idea that the compound *brahmacariyogadha* is linked to the obtainment of another dimension.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the three *uparimaggas* are the higher path leading to the *arahant* condition.<sup>29</sup>

To sum up, we believe that the ‘fulfilling of *brahmacariya*’ means the achievement of *arahant* status. The meaning of the compound *brahmacariya* should probably be discussed more

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<sup>26</sup> For example, cf. Mp II 263 which explains *vusita* as a period of time spent [to practice] (*vusitaṃ ti vutthaṃ parivutthaṃ*) and *brahmacariya* as the path of *brahmacariya* (*brahmacariyaṃ ti maggabrahmacariyaṃ*); that it is a period in which training is needed (*sekkha*) with a view to *khīṇāsava*, the destruction of all mental obsession; this word is frequently used as an epithet of the Arahants.

<sup>27</sup> Spk III 277: *brahmacariyogadhaṃ sukhaṃ ti brahmacariyaṃ ogāhitvā ṭhitam uparimaggattayasampayuttaṃ sukhaṃ*.

<sup>28</sup> Another interesting example is presented by the compound *brahmacariyogandha* in A I 168-9 and its commentary Mp II 267.

<sup>29</sup> Also Norman (1990: 3), after translating a sentence of Buddhaghosa (Sv 313,4), notices: “‘*uparimaggā-tayasāṅkhātā sambhodi*’ *sambhodi*’ is synonymous with the three higher paths (leading to the *arahant*-ship).”

fully and other interpretations are possible. What is important to our research however is that its meaning cannot be limited to a life of chastity, but includes a ‘path of life’ and has other important links with the highest achievements of the Buddha’s path. Furthermore, even in the Vedic text this compound has important connexions with divine status.

#### 4. Vedic Brahmacharya

Over the past twenty years, *brahmacharya* has been considered a momentous subject, inasmuch as at least two Indological Harvard PhD Dissertations have been devoted to it (i.e. Pochi 2001 and Kajihara 2002). Consequently, we shall refer to them with gratitude and focus on details that are strictly connected with our topic. Although the *brahmacārín* is such an important figure that it is adopted as the central motif of AVŚ 11.5,<sup>30</sup> in the RV there is but a single occurrence (RV 10.109.5 = AVŚ 5.17.5 = AVP 9.15.5):

“He who is engaged in the *bráhman* moves about, serving as a servant. He becomes one limb of the gods. With him, Bṛhaspati found his wife, who had been led by Soma, since [you found] the sacrificial ladle [= tongue (= Agni)], O gods.”<sup>31</sup>

It is undeniable that the ceaseless service mentioned may somehow suggest the relationship of a student and his master, but it could even deal with devotion to the god Bṛhaspati, or to the gods in general, even though several interpreters in the past identified Bṛhaspati with the *brahmacārín*.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the help given to Bṛhaspati could hint at the idea of a “formula” for *bráhman*, provided that the identity of the mentioned woman, found by Bṛhaspati and by the *brahmacārín*, is the goddess of

<sup>30</sup> See Kajihara (2002: 142); cf. also Kajihara (1995: 1049).

<sup>31</sup> *brahmacāri carati véviṣad víṣaḥ sá devānām bhavaty ékam ángam / téna jāyām ánv avindad bṛhaspátiḥ sómena nūtām juhvām ná devāḥ.*

<sup>32</sup> See Geldner (1951: 331); Renou (1956: 98-99).

language, as Oldenberg (1912: 333) and Geldner (1951: 331 n. 5d) already claimed.<sup>33</sup> However, access to divine status suggests something else.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, we are persuaded that, as recently emphasised by Dore (2015: 63 f.), great cosmogonic power is attributed to the *brahmacārīn*, who even creates the *brāhman* as well as the world, the waters, Prajāpati, etc. in AVŚ 11.5.7. As Heesterman (1964: 25) has already stated, it is evident that he is not merely “a young man learning the Vedas”: this *brahmacārīn* and the *vrātya* of Book 15 of the AVŚ may rather have been “originally variants of the same basic type”.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the *brahmacārīns* in AVŚ 6.108.1-3 are consistently equated with the most important categories of possessors of *medhā* “wisdom/intellectual power”:

“O wisdom, come first to us, with cows, with horses, you with the sun’s rays; you deserve our worship. I call upon the aid of the gods, the first wisdom which has the *brāhman*, which was praised by seers, and which the *brahmacārīns* began to drink. The wisdom that the Ṛbhus know, the wisdom that the Asuras know, the excellent wisdom that the seers know: that shall we cause to enter into me.”<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, we still have to understand the possible relationship between the *brahmacārīn* and Bṛhaspati. In this regard, the following (probably late) verse (AVŚ 19.19.8) is intriguing:

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<sup>33</sup> *vāc* “speech”, or *ṛc* “verse” according to Kajihara (2002: 35). By contrast, this hymn is considered to be “related to the much-debated issue in the late *Rgveda* about the introduction of the Sacrificer’s Wife into ritual performance” and our verse is classified as enigmatic, albeit possibly suggesting “that a single ritual performer (reciter of formulations) is necessary but not sufficient” (Jamison-Brereton 2014: 1274 f.).

<sup>34</sup> This *brahmacārīn* should be considered as part of “the élite in the Vedic society”, according to Kajihara (2002: 142).

<sup>35</sup> For this connexion, see also Dore forthcoming, n. 3 and bibliography quoted therein.

<sup>36</sup> *tvám no medhe prathamā góbhīr áśvebhīr ā gahi / tvám sūryasya raśmībhis tvám no asi yajñīyā // medhām ahām prathamām brāhmaṇvatīm brāhmajūtām ṣṣiṣṭutām / prāpūtām brahmacārībhīr devānām ávase huve // yām medhām ṛbhávo vidúr yām medhām ásurā vidúh / ṣṣayo bhadrām medhām yām vidús tām máyī ā veśayāmasi* (tr. Kajihara 2002: 63 f. slightly modified).

“The *bráhman* ascended with the *brahmacāríns*: ‘To that stronghold I lead you (pl.) forward. Enter into this! Enter this! May this grant you both refuge and defence!’”<sup>37</sup>

We are deviating slightly from Kajihara’s (2002: 57) translation (“*bráhman* stepped up by means of the *brahmacāríns*”), simply to submit a less marked, and purely sociative function of the instrumental,<sup>38</sup> in order to retain the simultaneous idea that here the leader is the *bráhman*. The direct speech seems to suggest that the *bráhman* is inviting the *brahmacāríns* to enter into the fortress – which might be the location of the *bráhman* – as their supreme goal. Nevertheless, the “indispensable and inseparable partnership” of *bráhman* and *brahmacārín*, and the latter’s function of supporting the *bráhman*, are indisputable.<sup>39</sup> The almost ambivalent relationship between the *bráhman-brahmacārín* pair could well be explained by Kajihara’s (2002: 56) words: “The *bráhman* is the chief among the two, and the *brahmacāríns* are supporting it presumably by being engaged in or devoted to it”. We may suggest that it deals with a specific kind of devotion, as we shall see below, e.g. in some AVŚ passages, where the noun *brahmán* seem to be a mere synonym for *brahmacārín*.

Before shifting our attention to the Vedic m. noun *brahmán* and its relation with the n. *bráhman*, it is worth considering usage of the nouns *brahmacārín* and *brahmacarya* in the early Vedic *Upaniṣads*. Indeed, the relevant occurrences are not so many. Some of them – ChUp 4.4.1; 3; 4.10.1-4: 6.1.1 (7X) –

<sup>37</sup> *bráhma brahmacārībhir úd akrāmat tám púram prá ṇayāmi vaḥ / tám á viśata tám prá viśata sá vaḥ sárma ca vārma ca yacchatu.*

<sup>38</sup> This choice is indirectly suggested by Jamison’s translation of RV 10.109.5 (“With him [=the *brahmacārín*], Bṛhaspati discovered...”). Is the *brahmacārín* a sort of comrade of Bṛhaspati?

<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, out of the 11 pairs listed in the hymn, their partnership emphasized by repeating precisely the same sentence each time, only 6 actually use the pl. number for the instrumental case (*candrāmā nákṣatrair, sóma óśadhībhir, yajñó dáksīṇābhir, samudró nadībhir, prajāpatiḥ prajābhir*), so that asterisms, plants, etc. may be the interlocutors of the imperative sentences. The instrumental member of the other pairs (*mitráḥ pṛthivyá, vāyúr antárikṣeṇa, sūryo divā, índro víryè,ṇa, devā amṛtena*) may rather denote a means or even a place through which the other entity moves.

unequivocally involve Vedic students as their characters;<sup>40</sup> others – ChUp 4.3.5; 7; TaittUp 1.4.2 (4X); MuṇḍUp 2.1.7; 3.1.5 – are too generic to understand whether they refer to Vedic students or initiates in the *brahman* (n.), but in some occurrences the first option seems to be excluded. For instance, in the following two cases, *brahmacarya* is not depicted as a period devoted to the study of *Vedas* keeping chastity nor as a temporary occupation before a different stage of life. The general character of the asceticism which is meant by the term *brahmacarya*<sup>41</sup> is also implied by the fact that it is mentioned alongside with *tapas* “austerities” and *satya* “truth”. The scope is the access to a divine status in the *brahmaloka* (cf. below § 5):

(ChUp 8.4.3-5.3) “Thus, this *brahmaloka* only belongs to those who find the *brahmaloka* by being engaged in the *brahman*. To them belongs complete freedom of movement in all worlds. Now, what is normally called a sacrifice is actually engagement in the *brahman*.”<sup>42</sup>

(PrašnaUp 1.15-16) “[...] The *brahmaloka* belongs to those who are engaged in austerities and in the *brahman*, in whom truth is well established. To them belongs that stainless *brahmaloka* in whom there is no crookedness, no falsehood or deceit.”<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting that in ChUp 6.1.1, Āruṇi invites his son Śvetaketu to start *brahmacarya*, since no one in their family “has not studied (*ananūcya*) and is a brahmin only because of birth (*brahmabandhu*)”.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. also Kajihara (2002: 30 n. 6 and 145), who underlines that the meaning of asceticism associated with chastity “becomes more obvious and common in the Gṛhyasūtras”.

<sup>42</sup> *tad ya evaitaṃ brahmalokaṃ brahmacaryeṇānuvindanti teṣāṃ evaiṣa brahmalokaḥ; teṣāṃ sarveṣu lokeṣu kāmacāro bhavati. atha yad yajña ity ācakṣate brahmacaryam eva tat [...].* This passage ends with a series of identifications between *brahmacarya* and an offering (*iṣṭa*), a sacrificial session (*sattrāyana*), a vow of silence (*mauna*), a fast (*anāśakāyana*), a stay in the wilderness (*araṇyāyana*).

<sup>43</sup> [...] *teṣāṃ evaiṣa brahmalokaḥ. yeṣāṃ tapo brahmacaryam. yeṣu satyam pratiṣṭhitam. teṣāṃ asau virājo brahmaloko na yeṣu jihmam anṛtaṃ na māyā ceti.* In PraśnaUp 1.10, the goal of those who seek the self by means of austerity, engagement in the *brahman*, faith and knowledge (*tapasā brahmacaryeṇa śraddhayā vidyayā*), is immortality (*amṛtam*), precisely as the condition free from fear (*abhayam*) and free from rebirth (*etasman na punar āvartanta ity eṣa nirodhaḥ*).

Denotation of an almost divine condition for the terms *brahmacārin* and *brahmacarya* does not therefore seem to be restricted to AVŚ 11.5, but is significantly represented in Vedic sources.

## 5. The Vedic *brahmaloka*

We have just seen that the *brahmaloka* is strictly connected to *brahmacarya* as its specific goal, and consequently, in the *Upaniṣads*,<sup>44</sup> it is consistently presented as the world from which one does not return:

ChUp 8.4.1-2: “[...] All evil things turn back from it, for this *brahmaloka* is free from evil things [...] indeed this *brahmaloka* shines forth once and for all.”<sup>45</sup>

The *brahmaloka* is also depicted as a place, as a real world, which includes paths, lakes, rivers, celestial nymphs, a throne, etc., as in KauṣUp 1.3-5, occupying the highest layer in a complex cosmology,<sup>46</sup> as explained in BĀU 3.6.1; 4.3.32-33 and KaṭhaUp 1.2.17; 6.5. Moreover, it is the most auspicious world one can reach by means of good actions (MuṇḍUp 1.2.6). The supreme degree is clearly confirmed in the Upaniṣadic passages in which the *devayāna-pathin-* is the access to a permanent life in heaven, with *brahmaloka* as the last stage, after several others.

BĀU 6.2.15: “The people who know this, and the people there in the wilderness who venerate truth as faith – they pass into the flame, from the flame into the day, from the day into the fortnight of the waxing moon, from the fortnight of the waxing moon into the six months when

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<sup>44</sup> This term does not occur in the four Vedic *Samhitās* – except the generic blessing verse AVŚ 19.71.1 (see Bandhu 1960; 1963, s.v.).

<sup>45</sup> [...] *apahatapāpmā hy eṣa brahmalokaḥ [...] sakṛd vibhāto hy evaiṣa brahmalokaḥ*.

<sup>46</sup> The few references to *mokṣa* in this source have been classified as later additions (see Bodewitz 2002: 14 note 27).

the sun moves north, from these months into the world of the gods, from the world of the gods into the sun, and from the sun into the region of lightning. [...] These exalted people live in those *brahmalokas* for the longest time. They do not return.”<sup>47</sup>

ChUp 8.13.1: “From the dark I go into the multicoloured, and from the multicoloured into the dark. Shaking off evil, like a horse its mane, and freeing myself, like the moon from Rāhu’s jaws, I, the perfected self, cast off the body, the imperfect, and attain the *brahmaloka*.”<sup>48</sup>

By contrast, the *brahmaloka* is not the highest world according to BhG 8.16, as emphasised by McGovern (2012: 17), since Kṛṣṇa maintains that “people return again” from there (*ā brahmabhuvanāl lokāḥ punar āvartinaḥ*), while no rebirth is only warranted to his devotee (*mām upetya tu [...] punar janma na vidyate*).

## 6. *Brahmaloka* and *brahmās* in the *Sutta Piṭaka*

While *brahmaloka* in the Upaniṣads is mainly considered as the world of *brahman* (n.) – with the exception of some KauṣUp. passages analysed below – the compound *brahmaloka* in the Pāli Canon is unequivocally the “world of Brahmā”, showing the existential dimension in which the gods live.<sup>49</sup> The *brahmaloka* is divided into many worlds, and rebirth in one of these is the result of great meritorious action, corresponding to some stage of meditative practice, e.g. the achievement of the

<sup>47</sup> [= ŚBM 14.9.1.18] *té yá evám etád vidúr yé cāmí áraṇye śraddhāṃ satyám upāsate tē 'rcír abhisāmbhavanty arcīso 'har dhna āpūryamānapakṣám āpūryamānapakṣád yān śān māsān údaññ ādityá éti māsebhyo devalokāṃ devalokád ādityám ādityád vaidyutam [...] té tésu brahmalokésu pārāḥ parāvato vasanti. téśāṃ ná pūnar āvṛttiḥ* (tr. Olivelle 1998)

<sup>48</sup> *śyāmāc chabalam prapadye. śabalac chyāmaṃ prapadye. aśva iva romāṇi vidhūya pāpaṃ candra iva rāhor mukhāt pramucya dhūtvā śarīram akṛtaṃ kṛtāmā brahmalokam abhisāmbhavāmūti [...]* (tr. Olivelle 1998).

<sup>49</sup> This important difference has also been recently highlighted by McGovern (2012: 5).

first *jhāna* leads to Brahmā's worlds called *brahmapārisajja*, etc.<sup>50</sup>

The peculiarity of this existential condition, as compared to the Vedic tradition,<sup>51</sup> is its impermanence. In fact, according to the texts of the Pāli Canon, it is clear that the condition of the *devas*,<sup>52</sup> which inhabit the *brahmaloka*, was obtained by the virtue of meritorious action carried out in their past lives. The Buddha himself explains to Brahmā Bako, who is deceived about the permanence the world, that he is there by virtue of his good deeds performed in his past existences (e.g. cf. S I 143-144). The same is so for the other gods<sup>53</sup> and for Mahā Brahmā himself. He is believed by many beings and by himself to be the creator of the world:

(D I 18) “I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the conqueror, the unconquered, the all-seeing, the powerful, the lord, the maker and creator, the supreme, who

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<sup>50</sup> For a more interesting consideration of Buddhist cosmology, psychology and meditation practice, see Gethin (1997) and Gethin (1998: 112-126).

<sup>51</sup> See above, at the end of § 5.

<sup>52</sup> The Buddhist pantheon is studded with numerous Brahmās, or *devas*. A very long list of these divine beings is given in the *Mahāsamaya-sutta*, cf. D II 253-262. Sometimes they come in connexion with the Buddha and his more advanced disciples. These *devas*, whose presence recurs in many *suttas*, seem to have each his peculiarity. The Brahmā Sahampati, for example, is presented in the highlights of the life of the Buddha (e.g. cf. S I 137-138 and M I 168-169; D II 158 and S I 158-9) and according to Rhys Davids (1910: Vol. II: 175) he is a “Doctor in theology”. The Brahmā Sakka is considered “a god of high character, indeed, kindly and just; but not perfect and not very intelligent (See Rhys Davids 1910: Vol. II: 295; 294-298)”. Brahmā Baka is sometimes the bearer of false views regarding the permanence of the world, its eternity, etc. (cf. S I 142-144 = M I 326) and has a “wicked view”, see Gombrich (2001: 86-88). For other important considerations on Brahmā in Early Buddhism, see Analayo (2011: 12-19).

The divine dimension ascribed to the *devas* is not the achievement of the “*summum bonum*” that we can achieve, but a condition of happy rebirth, that does not possess the characteristics of Awakening. The *devas* live in a state of bliss, but becoming a Brahmā does not mean they have reached the highest spiritual goal. Therefore, one thing is the condition of the *devas*, another that of Buddha, who reaches the supreme realisation, transcending between the human and the divine dimension.

<sup>53</sup> For example, the Brahmā Sahampati was a monk who, having greatly practised the five *pañca indriyas*, or five spiritual faculties, was reborn in the Brahma-world. Cf. S V 233.



assigns to each his status, who has power, father of those that have been and shall be.”<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, again according to a passage of the *Brahmajāla-sutta* (cf. D I 17-18), a Mahā Brahmā, for his merits, is reborn in the radiant Brahmā world, but he forgets his former existence and thinks that he exists without any cause, and has no knowledge of the worlds above his own. The *brahmapurohitas*, too, the ministers of Brahmā, because they live with him as a consequence of his desire for companions, believe that Mahā Brahmā is their creator.

These roles and beliefs seem “to mimic” the orthodox Brahmanic view, but in Buddhist Theravāda eyes, all the leading deities – also very similar to the Vedic pantheon – are reduced to the status of *devas*, with a permanent condition of life.<sup>55</sup> Such a disempowerment of the gods of the Brahmanic system, to whom sacrifices and prayers are directed, is a probable critique of the Brahmanic system itself.

Many scholars have already written about the interpretation of the conflictual relationship between ancient Buddhism and the Brahmanic system, and in this paper we do not wish to enter into such a complex question. We wish merely to stress how the Brahmā image is presented in these texts and the relation between Pāli and Vedic sources. In this context, however, in the Pāli Canon the term *brahmā* is used both as a name and as a generic term for one of the higher *devas*.

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<sup>54</sup> *aham asmi Brahmā Mahābrahmā abhibhū anabhibhūto aññadattudaso vasavatī issaro kattā nimmātā seṭṭho sajitā vasī pitā bhūtabhabyānaṃ* Such ideas of permanence (*nicca*) are very similar to the ideas of Bako Brahma quoted above, and this same sentence is found in the *Brahmanimantanikasutta* cf. M I 327.

<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the root of the idea that rebirth in heaven (*deva/ pitṛyāna*) occurs on ethical grounds even in the oldest Vedic texts is a new source of debate among scholars: see Jurewicz (2008: 209).

## 7. *Brahma* and *brahmā* combined in compounds in the Sutta Piṭaka

The word *brahman*, of n. gender, seems not to appear in the Pāli Canon<sup>56</sup> and Rhys Davids (1910: Vol. II: 298) claims: “The neuter Brahman is, so far as I am aware, entirely unknown in the Nikāyas, and of course the Buddha’s idea of Brahmā, in the masculine, really differs widely from that of Upanishad”. The main objection to his opinion is given by K. Bhattacharya (1973: 77-121; 1998: 2), who criticizes this interpretation arguing that, although the term is used in the m., since it is synonymous with Dharma, it still has a n. connotation. In any case, however, such an interpretation is rare, because many scholars<sup>57</sup> consider that there are two usages of this word: the m. form *Brahmā*, referring to the pantheon of gods discussed above, and the form *brahma-*, noun or adjective, meaning “best, excellent”.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> According to PED, s.v. Brahma and Brahmā, this term is used in Sv I 244: *brahmaṃ aṇaṭi ti brāhmaṇo* (in CSCD *brahmaṃ*). But we cannot demonstrate any real utilization of it.

<sup>57</sup> E.g. According to Norman (1997: 28) “There seems to be no occurrence in Pāli of the uncompounded neuter word *brahma* in the sense of Upaniṣadic Brahman, but *brahma* is used in compounds, apparently in the sense of “excellent, perfect”. The same is said by Pérez-Remón (1980: 114) “It is a well known fact that *brahma* is used in the Nikāyas as an adjective indicative of “eminence, greatness, excellence”. Collins (1993: 356) is of the same opinion “the word *brahma* is standardly used to mean ‘best’ in compounds”. Gethin (1998: 30) gives a more complete explanation: “In the Buddhist text *brahma* is also used to denote or describe the qualities of such divine beings; thus *brahma* conveys something of the sense of the English ‘divine’, something of the sense of ‘holy’ and something of the sense of ‘perfection’”. On the other hand, Ñāṇamoli-Bodhi (1995: 57 f.), in the introduction to the translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, devote a small section to the word *brahma*. According to them, this term taken from the Vedic texts had two lines of development, one as the Brahman (n.) of the Upaniṣads, which is not present in the canon, and the other as Brahmā (m.), as god and a collective name for gods. They translate it as “divine” or its cognates and do not use the meaning “best, excellent”.

<sup>58</sup> This last interpretation is supported by the commentarial literature that frequently gloss *brahma* in a compound by “*seṭṭha*”, meaning “best, excellent supreme”: e.g. cf. Mp V 12 *brahmacakkhaṃ pavatteṭi ti ettha Brahmaṃ ti seṭṭhaṃ uttamaṃ viṣiṭṭhaṃ*; It-a II 36: *brahmabhūtaṃ brahmaṃ vā seṭṭhaṃ arahattaphalaṃ pattaṃ*; Spk I 265: *brahmapattiyā ti seṭṭhapattiyā*.

An example of this latter use are the compounds: *brahmadāṇḍa* or “higher penalty”<sup>59</sup> (cf. D II 154; Vin II 290),<sup>60</sup> *brahmadeyya* or “the most excellent gift” (e.g. cf. D I 87),<sup>61</sup> etc.

A good example of this latter use are the compounds: *brahmadāṇḍa* or “highest penalty”<sup>62</sup> (cf. D II 154; Vin II 290), *brahmadeyya* or “the most excellent gift” (e.g. cf. D I 87), etc. But is it really so clear? In our opinion, the use of this term still remains mysterious and actually seems to possess multiple meanings and present a semantically difficult interpretation. We feel that, by analysing some compounds, we may reach different conclusions, or more simply, may further clarify this framework.

In some compounds, the term *brahma* undoubtedly still designates elements belonging to the dimension of the gods: we have for example the compound *brahmaloka*; *brahma-purohitā* or minister of Brahmā (e.g. cf. D II 272); *brahmakāyikā-deva* or the beings living in the *brahmaloka* belonging to the Brahmā company (e.g. cf. D I 220); *brahmaparisā*, the assembly of the Brahmā gods (e.g. M I 330). The list may be very long but, of course, in such cases the term *brahma-*, although part of a compound, refers unequivocally to the Brahmās’ condition.

However, some compounds are still linked to the mythological dimension of the Brahmās, but assume a special meaning, such as *brahmavihāra*, “*brahma*’s abode” or “divine abode”. Indeed, this compound does not indicate a place where the gods live, but is a “technical term” for special meditation

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<sup>59</sup> This is the punishment for a monk who deviates from the receipts, and consists of being ignored by other monks.

<sup>60</sup> The meaning of this compound has been object of interesting discussions, e.g. see Oldenberg (1898: 622); Freiburger (1996: 474-91 – “Bestrafung, die zum Höchsten (i.e. Nibbāna) [führt]”); von Hinüber (1998: 382 – “Strafe durch Verachtung”); Pochi (2001: chapter 5: 13 n. 12).

<sup>61</sup> Also in Sv I 246ff = Ps III 415 *brahmadeyya* is commented by *seṭṭhadeyya* “the most excellent gift”. Rhys Davids (1899: Vol. I: 108 n. 1) claims that in the compound *brahmadeyya* the word “*brahma*” means literally “a full gift”.

<sup>62</sup> This is the punishment for a monk who deviates from the precepts, and consists of being ignored by other monks.

practices,<sup>63</sup> clearly linked to the Brahmā condition. Indeed, the Buddha teaches them when asked how to achieve union with such gods (*brahmuno saḥabyūpago bhavissati*)<sup>64</sup> or to access the *brahmaloka* (cf. D I 250-252). They are also closely related to the cosmological dimension, since it is possible to be reborn in a kind of paradise with a certain mental state. *Brahmavihāra* was translated generally not as “excellent abode”, but as a generic “divine abode”,<sup>65</sup> probably to maintain the reference to the Brahmās; in any case, however, in this compound *brahma-*, it became part of a technical term. We state this, without going into the merits of translation choices, simply to reconstruct the useful semantics of the term.

The same mechanism works with other famous compounds involving *brahma*. Indeed, some of them have particular meanings, and their translation is questionable, since they make reference to Brahmā, but do not merely refer to a god. The translation “supreme, excellent” is unsatisfactory because their meaning is wider, and refers to a particular teaching of the Buddha. The word *brahma* lends its name to major elements of Dhamma practice, for example: *brahma-kāya* and *brahma-bhūta* are synonymous with *dhammakāya* and *dharma-bhūta*;<sup>66</sup> *brahmacakka* is used in the same sense as *dhammacakka*;<sup>67</sup> *brahma* and Dhamma are correlated to such an extent that in some passages the Buddha defines his own path as *brahmayāna*:

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<sup>63</sup> This concerns the four meditative techniques of: *mettā*, loving-kindness; *karuṇā*, compassion; *muditā*, sympathetic joy, and *upekkhā*, equanimity. Buddhaghosa describes this practice in detail in Vism 295f. (*Brahmavihāraniddesa*).

<sup>64</sup> The comparable concept of *brahmasahavyata* is also well-documented in the Upaniṣads – see e.g. ChUp 8.3.2; BĀU 6.2.15; KauṣUp 1.3.

<sup>65</sup> Rhys David’s use of “supreme conditions” (1899: Vol. I: 298) and “noble thoughts” (1910: Vol. II: 229). But many other scholars translate this compound as “divine abidings”, e.g. Ñāṇamoli (1965), and Ñāṇatiloka (1956) suggests “sublime or divine abodes”: see s.v. *brahma-vihāra*, and the same Ñāṇamoli-Bodhi (1995) use “divine abode”. About the origin and connexions with the brahmanical back-ground, see Norman (1993: 274-275).

<sup>66</sup> E.g. cf. D III 84: For the similarity of this passage with BĀU 2.5.11, see Pucciarini (1996: 98-99).

<sup>67</sup> E.g. Cf. M I 69-70, in this and other similar texts, the expression *brahmacakka* is used with the same meaning as *dhammacakka*, or Wheel of Dhamma.

“Ānanda, the noble eightfold path could be defined as *brahmayāna*, and also as *dhammayāna*, etc.”<sup>68</sup>

It is clear however that in this last case the word *brahma* in such occurrences cannot be identified with the figure of the god Brahmā, found under various names in Buddhist mythology, who, as stated above; neither does it mean just “supreme excellent”. The Buddha uses this word as a synonym of *Dhamma* and some *brahma*- compounds became technical terms with a specific meaning.<sup>69</sup>

## 8. God Brahmā (*brahmán*) in Vedic sources

As highlighted by McGovern (2012: 7), the sources in which Brahmā figures most prominently as the supreme deity and creator of the world are indeed the early Buddhist Sūtras, but a god Brahmā (*brahmán*) in Vedic sources is mentioned as early as in the AV and in the ŚB. In the AVŚ there are actually two passages in which *brahmán* is an autonomous theonym listed alongside the usual names of gods and divine entities, the second probably being late. It is noteworthy that Indra plays an identical role and that the n. *bráhman* is also included in both passages.

(AVŚ 12.2.6) “The Ādityas, the Rudras, the Vasus [appointed you] again; O Agni, *brahmán* who conducts the goods, [appointed you] again; the lord of the *bráhman* appointed you again [...]”<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> S V 5: *Ānanda ariyassa aṭṭhaṅgikassa maggassa adhivacanāṃ brahmayānaṃ iti pi dhammayānaṃ iti pi (...)*.

<sup>69</sup> An interesting meaning of the word *brahma* and its identification with Dharma was discussed by M. and W. Geiger (1920: 77) We also planning to focus in future on the relationship between Dharma and Brahman in the orthodox sources, in a comparative perspective.

<sup>70</sup> *púnas tvādityā rudrā vásavaḥ púnar brahmá vásunītir agne / púnas tvā bráhmanaḥ pátir ādhād [...]*. If *bráhmanaḥ patih* is not an independent theonym, the *brahmán* could here be defined as master of the *bráhman*. The equivalence between Bṛhaspati (“Herr des Preisliedes”) and the *bráhmanaḥ patih* (“Herr der Kraft”) is not unequivocally documented by the most ancient sources (cf. e.g. Kuiper 1972: 280 f.).

(AVŚ 19.9.12) “My auspicious progress is realised by them: the *bráhman*, Prajāpati, Dhātṛ, the Worlds, the *Vedas*, the seven Seers, the Fires: may Indra grant me refuge; may *brahmán* grant me refuge; may all the gods grant me refuge; may all the gods grant me refuge!”<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, a couple of late verses include the typical exclamation used in making oblations to the gods (*svāhā*), addressed precisely to *brahmán*, i.e. AVŚ 19.22.20 and 19.43.8. In the latter verse, the n. *bráhman* is once again involved: the god *brahmán* is requested to lead the *bráhman*-knower (*brahmavídaḥ*) to the *bráhman*, i.e. he can grant this achievement to his devotee.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, *brahmán* is combined twice as an epithet and a title respectively with two important theonyms, i.e. Indra (AVŚ 18.4.15)<sup>73</sup> and Bṛhaspati (AVŚ 3.20.4).

In ŚBM 10.1.3.8, *brahmán* is explicitly a god and seems to be an independent theonym:<sup>74</sup>

“They (= the gods) saw this strophe (VS 18.76): ‘The place-covering Agni, Indra, god Brahmā, Bṛhaspati and all the wise gods may speed our sacrifice unto bliss!’”<sup>75</sup>

In the early Vedic Upaniṣads, on the basis of Vishva Bandhu’s Index (1966), we have collected 15 occurrences of the m. *brahman*, but found that the god’s name is not so common. Nonetheless, it seems crucial in ChUp (3.11.4 = 8.15.1), where the same sentence occurs twice (once at the end of the whole work) – “Indeed Brahmā taught precisely this to Prajāpati,

<sup>71</sup> *bráhma prajāpatir dhātā lokā védāḥ saptarṣāyo ḡnāyaḥ / tair me kṛtām svastyāyanam indro me śárma yacchatu brahmā me śárma yacchatu / víśve me devāḥ śárma yacchantu śárve me devāḥ śárma yacchantu.*

<sup>72</sup> [...] *brahmā mā táttra nayatu brahmā bráhma dadhātu me [...]*, “May *brahmán* lead me there! May *brahmán* provide me with the *bráhman*!”

<sup>73</sup> For the role of *brahmán* played by Indra in RV 1.15.1-5 see Oberlies 2012: 247.

<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, in ŚBM 5.2.2.8 (which almost matches RV 10.141.3 and AVŚ 3.20.4), Bṛhaspati is called *brahmán*.

<sup>75</sup> [...] *etām ḡcam apaśyan dhāmachádagnir indro brahmā devo bṛhaspátih śácataso víśve devā yajñam právantu naḥ śubha iti.*

Prajāpati to Manu and Manu to his children.”<sup>76</sup> and in the late (traditionally Atharvavedic) MuṇḍUp, where the said god is endowed with the attributes that – as we saw above (D I 18: § 6) – Buddha is eager to deny.<sup>77</sup> In both cases the god is the repository of secret knowledge, i.e. Upaniṣadic knowledge: he only can hand it down.<sup>78</sup>

Another occurrence is found in AitUp 3.3, where the general context is a classical inquiry about the *ātman*. After excluding that it matches perceptions, cognitions, feelings, etc., the *ātman* is defined as a god: “He is Brahmā. He is Indra. He is Prajāpati. He is all the gods.”<sup>79</sup> It is tempting to define this god as a genuine result of the apotheosis of a human individual who distinguished himself by his knowledge. These occurrences may consequently not have been so far from the numerous other Upaniṣadic passages, in which the esoteric virtual authentication of newly-gained divine status is more probably conveyed by the n. noun (whenever the sandhi rules are of no help). The renowned *reductio ad unum* is for example explained as follows, involving the n. term:

BĀU 1.4.10: “If a man knows ‘I am Brahman’ in this way, he becomes the whole world. [...] So when a man venerates another deity, thinking, ‘He is one, and I am another’, he does not understand.”<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> *tad dhaitad brahmā prajāpataya uvāca. prajāpatir manave. manuḥ prajābhyaḥ [...]*

<sup>77</sup> (MuṇḍUp 1.1.1-2) “Brahmā arose as the first among gods (*brahmā devānām prathamah sambabhūva*), as the creator of all, as the guardian of the world (*viśvasya kartā bhuvanasya goptā*). To Atharvan, his first-born son, he announced the knowledge of the *brahman*, the foundation of all knowledge. The knowledge of the *brahman* (*brahmavidyā*), which Brahmā taught to Atharvan, Atharvan of old announced [...].”

<sup>78</sup> ŚvUp 6.18 also includes a sort of list of succession of teachers, which starts thus: “He who at first created the Brahmā, also delivered to him the Vedas (*yo brahmāṇam vidadhāti pūrvaṃ yo vai vedāṃs ca prahīnoti tasmai*). Aiming at my liberation (*mumuksuḥ*), I seek refuge in the god who manifests himself by means of his own intellect.”

<sup>79</sup> *eṣa brahmā. eṣa indrah. eṣa prajāpatiḥ. ete sarve devā [...]*. Olivelle’s (1998) translation (It is Brahman. It is Indra...) could of course be right, but the m. pronoun and the identification with other gods whose name is m. seems to favour our translation. Vishva Bandhu’s Index (1966) also registers this occurrence as m.

<sup>80</sup> [= ŚBM 14.4.2.21] [...] *yā evaṃ [...]* *véda ahám bráhmāsmīti sá idám sárvaṃ bhávati [...]* *átha yò [...]* *anyò ’sāv anyò ’hám asmīti ná sá veda* (tr. Olivelle 1998).

In the famous father-son rite of transfer in BĀU 1.5.17, in which the most important fact is the transferral of Vedic wisdom, the specific identification here recorded unequivocally involves the n. *brahman*.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, a comparable exchange of this sort of mirror-sentence is depicted in the KauṣUp, when the deceased is in the presence of a judge-god whose n. name is not indisputable.

KauṣUp 1.5.7: “On that [throne] sits Brahmā. A man who knows this mounts it, first with his foot. Brahmā then asks him, “Who are you?” He should reply: I am a season [...] You are the self of every being. I am who you are. [...] This has been established by this verse: ‘Yajus is the belly, Sāman is the head, the Ṛc is the body; he is imperishable’, he should be known in this way: ‘He is Brahmā, a great seer who consists of *brahman*.’”<sup>82</sup>

Is he the god Brahmā? Or is he the *brahman*? In the Limaye-Vadekar edition there is at least one unequivocal m. *brahmā*, when it is followed by the verbal form *pr̥cchati*, but the variant reading *brahmāha* (which is e.g. chosen by Olivelle 1998) makes all three occurrences of *sandhi* uncertain. And how should the great seer be known? Does he become Brahmā- or *brahman*-like? We could answer like McGovern (2012: 5), who agrees with Gonda’s (1950: 62) position on the irrelevance of the grammatical distinction of m. vs. n. *brahman* in the *Upaniṣads*, precisely on the basis of a supposed usage of the n. word-form, even when the *brahman* is described in personal terms, as in KauṣUp. We believe however that the close relationship between the n. and the m. noun – already found often in the earliest *Samhitās* – would not eliminate the difference between them. In consequence, *brahmā* may have

<sup>81</sup> [ŚBM 14.4.3.25] [...] *putrām āha tvam̐ brāhma tvam̐ yajñās tvam̐ lokā iti* [...] “He tells his son: ‘You are the *brahman* (n.). You are the sacrifice. You are the world.’”

<sup>82</sup> *tasmīn brahmāste. tam̐ itthaṃvit pādenaivāgra ārohati. tam̐ brahmā pr̥cchati. ko ’siti; tam̐ pratibrūyāt. ṛtur asmi* [...] *bhūtasya bhūtasya tvam̐ ātmāsi. yas tvam̐ asi so ’ham asmīti* [...] *tad etad ṛkślokenābhuyuktam. yajūdarah̐ sāmāsirā asāvṛṇmūrtir̐ avyayaḥ. sa brahmeti vijñeya ṛṣir̐ brahmamayo mahān* [...].



been used the better to emphasize the human chance of becoming “the embodied *brahman*”. Thus, in our opinion, Bodewitz’s (2002: 19) translation – which selects the m. noun for all three of the *sandhi*-uncertain occurrences here questioned – is more faithful to the crucial pattern of the apotheosis of the deceased. He reaches the throne where *Brahmā* sits and interrogates him in order to allow him in turn to become forever a *brahmā* or not, according to the result. We therefore suppose that this sort of apotheosis of the deceased may have been the root of the concept of the scantily occurring Vedic god *Brahmā*.

### 9. *Bráhman/ brahmán (brahman/ brahmā) in Vedic sources*

As far as the m. noun is concerned, the distance between the late kind of learned and precise priest called *brahmán*<sup>83</sup> and the wise and creative RV *brahmán* has already been highlighted beyond doubt by Brereton (2004: 325 f.), who also asserts that “the *brahmán*, certainly for the early period, is inseparable from the *bráhman*, the principle that defined his function”. Thus, we shall attempt to understand whether a common archetype for both these diachronically different features of the *brahmán* (m.) does exist or not, and we shall do so precisely by focusing on the earliest usages of this internal derivation of *brahmán* from *bráhman* (Kiparsky 2010: 27), even if the entities denoted by the n. and the m. noun – whose close relationship and even essential identity are constantly proposed<sup>84</sup> – play different roles.

As in the probably late AVŚ 19.43.8 quoted above (§ 8), the relationship between *bráhman* and *brahmán* is also stressed in

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<sup>83</sup> Fuji (2001: 153) reconstructs the story of the *brahman* priest, whose connexion with expiations dates back to the age of the Rgvedic *Brāhmaṇas*, White Yajurveda and Jaiminīya *Sāmaveda*, while a merely supervising function and especially that of giving commands, has to be attributed to this priest in the previous Vedic phase.

<sup>84</sup> See the phrase *brahma vai brahmā* “The *brahman* is the [God] *brahmā* indeed, e.g. in KS 11.4.a; 11.8.1; JB 1.202; 2.297; 3.303 or *brahma brahmābhavat svayam* “The *brahman* became the [God] *brahmā* on his own” e.g. in TB 3.12.9.3; GB 1.2.19.1.

AVŚ 4.35.2. The *bráhman* seems to be engaged here in warranting immortality to the *brahmán*:

“May I overcome death by means of the milk-porridge by which the being-makers overcame death, which they discovered by asceticism and toil, and which the *bráhman* as the first one<sup>85</sup> cooked for the *brahmán*!”<sup>86</sup>

Analogously in AVŚ 19.22.21 (= 19.23.30 = AVP 8.9.1a), according to our following tentative translation, we might even find the trace of an almost causal nature of this relationship, where *bráhman* is an *a priori* with respect to the *brahmán*:

“Powers were brought together with the *bráhman* as chief; the *bráhman* as chief in the beginning stretched out the sky; the *brahmán* was born as first of beings; who is able to compete with such a *bráhman*?”<sup>87</sup>

Thus, we return to the question of the relationship with the *bráhman*, which we started analysing with regard to the *brahmacārín*. It may be a specific form of knowledge pointing at direct perception of the *bráhman* and of the gods, i.e. at achieving divine status, as explained in AVŚ 10.7.24:

“When the gods who are *bráhman*-knowers worship the *bráhman* which is the chief, indeed a knower, i.e. a *brahmán*, could indeed be he who is able to know them before his eyes.”<sup>88</sup>

The *brahmáns* (named as a pl. like the *brahmacārins* of AVŚ 19.19.8 – § 4) are even listed alongside the *ṛṣis* and the *devas*

<sup>85</sup> On the *pros* and *cons* of identifying *bráhman* with Prajāpati, mentioned as the god who originally cooked the milk-porridge in the previous verse, see Dore (2015: 53).

<sup>86</sup> *yénātaran bhūtakṛtō 'ti mṛtyúṃ yám anvāvandan tápasā śrámeṇa / yám papāca brahmáṇe bráhma pūrvam ténaudanēnāti tarāṇi mṛtyúṃ.*

<sup>87</sup> *bráhmajyeṣṭhā sambhṛtā viryāṇi bráhmāgre jyēṣṭham dívam ā tatāna / bhūtānām brahmá prathamótá jajñe ténārhati bráhmaṇā spárdhituṃ káḥ.*

<sup>88</sup> *yātra devā brahmavidō bráhma jyēṣṭhām upāsate / yó vai tān vidyāt pratyákṣam sá brahmā vēditā syāt.*

because they have the privilege of sharing the secret knowledge of the sacred *bráhman* in AVŚ 6.12.2, which they are able to learn, sustain and protect.<sup>89</sup> The prototype for this *bráhman/ brahmán* (sg. or pl.) relationship may have been the fellowship that linked Indra<sup>90</sup> with his human and divine supporters in the RV. These “supporters” are of course poets and devotees who help him by formulating prayers (*brahman- kṛ-*) and are generously rewarded by him:

(RV 6.29.4) [...] “the men who create the sacred formulations are praising Indra and reciting their hymns as the men most cherished by the gods.”<sup>91</sup>

As singled out by Jamison – Brereton (2014: 813), this “reciprocal relation between men, who offer Indra sacrifice and praise poetry, and Indra, who places his power in the service of men and offers them gifts” is announced in the first verse where the specific partnership called *sakhyam* (with Indra) is mentioned as the precise goal at which men aim.

Elsewhere, Indra’s supporters are comrades, whose extolled activity is here depicted by the *upapada-samāsa brahmakṛt-*:

RV 3.32.2: “Joined in pleasure with the formulation-making flock of Maruts, with the Rudras, [O Indra] drench yourself [in soma] to satiety.”<sup>92</sup>

Nonetheless, the group of Maruts as creative poets seems to be a counterintuitive representation, even though the Maruts are

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<sup>89</sup> AVŚ 6.12.2: *yád brahmábhīr yád īṣībhir yád deváir viditám purá / yád bhūtám bhávyam āsanvát ténā te vāraye viṣám*, “I ward off your poison by means of that which was known of old by *brahmáns*, by seers, by gods, and which is past, future and present.”. For the extraordinary wisdom of the *brahmán* (*brahmá sumedháh*), see AVŚ 9.1.6. The *brahmán* is even the highest heaven of the speech (*brahmáyám vácāḥ paramám vyóma*) in AVŚ 9.10.14 (RV 1.164.35).

<sup>90</sup> Less often, other gods such as Agni (RV 4.6.11) or the Aśvins (RV 1.47.2).

<sup>91</sup> [...] *īndraṃ nára stuvánto brahmakārā ukthā śámsanto devávātata māḥ* (tr. Jamison – Brereton). For comparable contexts and lexicon, see e.g. RV 7.32.3; 10.50.7. A more explicit reference to the reward is included in RV 8.66.6.

<sup>92</sup> [...] *brahmakṛtā mārutenā gaṇéna sajóṣā rudraís tṛpád ā vṛṣasva* (tr. Jamison-Brereton 2014).

*kavís* in ṚV 1.31.1 – as pointed out by Brereton (2004: 335 ff.) – and their *stoma* energizes Indra in ṚV 1.165.11 “for the sake of the single body politic consisting of the Marut clans and led by Indra” – as explained by Proferes (2007: 57). Precisely because we are thoroughly persuaded by Brereton’s reconstruction of the social and ritual role of the clan- or house-lord as a *kavi*, who knows secrets and possesses the truth, we wonder whether this specific translation of *brahmakṛt-* is actually indisputable, together with its closely connected question, i.e. whether we have to translate *bráhman* as “formula” and *brahmán* as “formulator” in all the hymns of the ṚV (Thieme 1952).<sup>93</sup> In other words, we are not completely persuaded of the linearity of<sup>94</sup> “the transformation of the term *bráhman* from poetry-related formulation in the ṚV to sacrifice-concerned sacredness” in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads and of the term *brahmán* “from poet to sacrificial priest”.<sup>95</sup> We prefer to advance the hypothesis that the earlier role of leader, sage and ritual expert, which Brereton deemed might have been assumed by the *brahmán* as a priest later than in the ṚV, can on the contrary be traced as a marginal remnant in the AV and in some ṚV verses. Consequently, the meaning of “formulator”, which is however prevalently attested in the ṚV, might secondarily have developed as a restrictive and innovative meaning of the same word,<sup>96</sup> as compared to its alleged earlier sense of “sacred power-holder”, in which the presumed power would depend on high knowledge and wisdom (cf. above § 4, the *brahmacārín*’s *medhā*).

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<sup>93</sup> In Jamison-Brereton’s translation of the *Rgveda*, we found 7 occurrences of *brahmán* interpreted as officiant priests.

<sup>94</sup> The meaning of *brahmán* as “possessor of the holy power” has been recently re-proposed by McGovern (2011: 3). His thesis is based on Gonda’s work dating back to 1950, according to which the word *bráhman* denotes a power and etymologically means “that which swells” vs. *brahmán* “he who is swollen”. For a broad survey of hypotheses on the meaning and the etymology of the Vedic word *bráhman*, see Shende (1985: 209-10), who for the AV usage attempted to reconstruct the original meaning of “miraculous power” i.e. “the magical power that arises from the magical acts” (1985: 201 f.; 210).

<sup>95</sup> We quote here a couple of expressions of Pochi’s (2001: 41, Chapter 2) as a clear example of this commonly shared perspective.

<sup>96</sup> This hints at the ṚV “practice of re-packaging and reprising older material”, highlighted by Proferes (2007: 9; cf. also Proferes 2003: 2-11; 18).

The following AVŚ and RV occurrences of the noun *brahmán* – referred to somebody apparently extolled as a divine being and seemingly depicted as a leader who provides his group of companions with goods – might favour this interpretation. Apart from AVŚ 12.2.6 quoted above, including the epithet *vásunīti* “conductor of goods” attributed to the *brahmán*, the following two RV passages present Agni as “collector” and “distributor” of wealth:

(RV 2.1.2-3) “[...] You are both the *brahmán* and the *grhápati* in our home. You, Agni, as bull of beings, are Indra; you, wide-striding, worthy of homage, are Viṣṇu; you, finder of wealth, are the *brahmán*; O Lord of *bráhman*, you, O Apportioner, are accompanied by plenitude.”<sup>97</sup>

(RV 7.7.5) “Having come here, the chosen conveyor has been seated in the assembly of men – Agni, *brahmán* and apportioner, whom Heaven and Earth have made strong [...]”<sup>98</sup>

The *brahmán* is surrounded by his group, which is almost identified with him.<sup>99</sup> he is prototypically Indra surrounded by the Maruts, the divine priest-king who is considered the model of the earthly king (Kuiper 1972: 284 f.):

(RV 10.77.1) “I have praised the flock of them as if praising the *brahmán* [probably = Indra], who is well provided with Maruts – have praised them for their deserving [soma], as also for their splendour.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> [...] *brahmá cāsi grhápatiś ca no dáme // tvám agna índro vṛṣabháḥ satām asi tvám viṣṇur urugāyó namasyāḥ / tvám brahmá rayivíd brahmaṇas pate tvám vidhartāḥ sacase púramdhyā.*

<sup>98</sup> *ásādi vṛtó váhnir ājaganván agnír brahmá nṛśádane vidhartá / dyaús ca yám pṛthiví vāvṛdháte [...].*

<sup>99</sup> For the increasing phenomenon according to which the king “embodied the aspirations of others” because of the power and freedom he enjoyed, see Profères (2007: 3 ff. and Chapter IV).

<sup>100</sup> [...] / *sumárutaṃ ná brahmāṇam arháse gaṇám astoṣy eṣāṃ ná śobháse.*

(RV 8.16.7) “Indra is the *brahmán*, Indra the seer, Indra who is much invoked many times, mighty in his great powers.”<sup>101</sup>

Reciprocal support and legitimation of Indra and the Maruts seem to constitute the mythological background of these passages. It is plausible to suppose that the social and ritual context that inspired this scenario was the presumed alliance for *sattras* and partly for *vrātyastoma*-performances, where the most authoritative member of the group who originally took part in shared military expeditions<sup>102</sup> was legitimated to represent all the others and extolled as a god.

What is most noteworthy is that the best candidate for the role of leader – *primus inter pares* – is selected on the basis of three qualities, two of which are knowledge and poetic skills. He should be the *ānūcānatama* “the most learned” and the *nṛśamsatama* “the best bard”. His specific task makes him more like an ascetic than a warrior:

(BŚS 18.24) “[...] They appoint one whom they agree on as their leader. He observes vows for them. He becomes one who lies down (on the ground), who does not eat meat, who does not approach his wife. This is what the consecrated man observes. [...]”<sup>103</sup>

(KŚS 22.4.7) “The elders [...] should undertake their consecration [for the performance of the Vrātyastoma]

<sup>101</sup> *īndro brahméndra ṛṣir indrah purú puruhūtáḥ / mahán mahībhiḥ śácībhiḥ.*

<sup>102</sup> Their target may have been to ensure the necessary goods for their clan, so that, at the end of the expedition, they were all simultaneously officiants and sacrificers in the same ritual performance of distributing the booty, etc. See Candotti – Pontillo (2015: 181 ff.) and, for some affinities with the ancient *saṅgha/ gaṇa* institution of the Licchavis, see Neri (2015: 405) and the bibliography quoted there.

<sup>103</sup> [...] *te yam abhisamjānate taṃ sthapatim kurvanti. sa eṣāṃ vratāni carati. so 'dhaḥ samveśy amāmsāśy astryupāyī bhavati. tad dhi dīkṣitavratam [...].* For the context of the assembly (*sabhā*) within which the leader was elected, see Falk (1986: 92-9) and, for the mutual commitments (*vrata*) between the band of warriors and their leader, see Proferes (2007: 17; 39). On the *vrata* as reciprocal vow of faithful friendship between the king and his subjects and its connexion to the *ādityas*, Varuṇa ‘oath’, Mitra ‘contract’ and Aryaman ‘hospitality’, see Schmidt 1958: 143 f.

led by the *grhapati* who is the best bard or the richest one or the most learned.”<sup>104</sup>

The precise title is *brahmán* in the following passage, in which a definitely orthodox superintendent priest seems to be selected, while the same quality of being *anūcānatama* “learned to the maximum degree” is sought:

ŚBM 4.6.6.5: “He who is the most learned of *brahmans*, is the strongest of them: this is the reason why anyone<sup>105</sup> is now able to become a *brahmán*.”<sup>106</sup>

The title of *brahmán* is consistently earned by the King of the Videhas too (*táto brahmájanaká āsa*) by winning a verbal contest against Yājñavalkya and other challengers in ŚBM 11.6.2.10, where the scope is to explain the esoteric meaning of the *agnihotra*-libations.

Finally, in BĀU 3.1.2, a more competitively oriented pattern of achieving this pre-eminent role of *brahmán* involves the superlative *brāhmiṣṭha*, when (once again) King Janaka addresses all the Brahmins and invites them to a competition, in order to award the prize to the most learned man (*brāhmiṣṭha*).<sup>107</sup> We deem that this superlative is a later linguistically marked reproduction of *brahmán* employed as a crucial term in the most ancient Rājasūya-performance in the earliest sources i.e. TS 1.8.16; BŚS 12.14-15; AB 7.19-24; ŚBM 5.4.4.15.<sup>108</sup> The original sense might have been “sacred power-holder/ intellectual power-embodied.”

<sup>104</sup> [...] *sthavirās* [...] *yo nṛśamsatamaḥ syād dravyavattamo vānūcānatamo vā tasya gārhapate dīkṣeran*.

<sup>105</sup> And not exclusively a member of the Vasiṣṭha family. Cf. ŚBM 12.6.1.40.

<sup>106</sup> *yo vai brāhmaṇām anūcānatamaḥ sā eṣāṃ vīryātamó 'tha yád idaṃ yá eva kás ca brahmā bhāvati*. Cf. Fuji (2001: 156).

<sup>107</sup> [= ŚBM 14.6.1.2] *brāhmaṇā bhagavanto yó vo brāhmiṣṭhaḥ sā etā gā údajatām íti*, “Distinguished Brahmin! May the most learned man drive away these cows!”

<sup>108</sup> This is the specific subject of another joint paper of ours – see above n. 7.

## 10. The prototypical apotheosis: Buddha

In the Sutta Piṭaka, the Buddha is not called god because his condition is different from that of the *devas* surveyed above (§ 5).<sup>109</sup> As well as in other Buddhist traditions, in some passages of the Pāli Canon he is defined as omniscient (*sabbaññu*),<sup>110</sup> although he denies this title saying that he only possesses the triple knowledge (*tevijja*).<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, he has many epithets that suggest his super-human, or semi-divine condition, for example Tathāgata, which means that “he has come ‘thus’ (*tathā*) and gone thus”,<sup>112</sup> cf. Gethin (1998: 28); perfect conduct of body, speech, mind and actions, e.g. cf. A IV 82-3; supreme (*anuttara*), e.g. cf. Sn 41 v. 234; and teacher of *devas* and humans (*sathā devamanussānaṃ*), e.g. cf. D I 87.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, in

<sup>109</sup> For a general, but very complete and clear framework of the Buddha’s nature, see Gethin (1998: 27-34).

<sup>110</sup> In the Milindapañha, Nāgasena argues on several occasions that the Buddha was omniscient (e.g. Mil 107-113). But the Buddha is said to have omniscience as his knowledge (*sabbaññūtāñña*). Cf. Ud-a 144, Paṭi I, 131 and Ud-a 145: *sabbaṃ saṅkhatam asaṅkhatam anavasesaṃ jānātīti*, he knows everything conditioned and unconditioned without cease.

<sup>111</sup> The Buddha denies being omniscient and possessing uninterrupted knowledge and says, cf. M I 482: *tevijjo samaṇo gotamo ti kho Vaccha byākaramāno vuttavādī c’eva me assa*. “The ascetic Gotama has the threefold true knowledge (*tevijjā*), so, Vaccha, you will be saying what has been said by me”. The threefold knowledge consists of remembrance of former rebirths (*pubbe nīvāsānussati-ñāna*), the divine eye (*dibba-cakkhu*), extinction of all (defiling) influxes (*āsavakkhaya-ñāna*). Nāṇamoli-Bodhi (1995: 1273 note n. 714), following the Ps, said the Buddha in the Theravāda tradition “is omniscient in the sense that all knowable things are potentially accessible to him. He cannot, however, know everything simultaneously and must advert to whatever he wishes to know”. On this subject Endo (1997: 23-30) makes interesting observations by historical and textual point of view.

<sup>112</sup> Iti 122: *yathāvādī bhikkhave tathāgato tathākārī yathākārī tathāvādī, iti yathāvādī tathākārī yathākārī tathāvādī, tasmā tathāgato ti vuccati. Sadevake bhikkhave loke samārake sabrahmake sassamaṇabrāhmaṇiṇyā pajāya sadevamanussāya tathāgato abhibhū anabhibhūto aññadathudaso vasavattī, tasmā tathāgato ti vuccatīti*. “Monks, as the Tathāgata speaks so he acts, and so acts as he speaks, i.e. he speaks as he acts and acts as he speaks, for which he is called the Tathāgata. In this world with its *devas*, Māra, Brahmā, with the generations of ascetics and brahmins, of divine beings and men, the Tathāgata is the conqueror, the unconquered, the all-seeing, the powerful, therefore he is called the Tathāgata”. Cf. also A II 24. In this passage it is interesting to note that to describe the power of the Tathāgata, the Iti uses partly the same words used by Mahā-Brahmā, cf. § 6. Very interesting are also the considerations about the etymology and the interpretation of the word Tathāgata made by Buddhaghosa in Sv I 58-69.

<sup>113</sup> A famous list of these epithets (*bhagavā, arahaṃ, sammāsambuddho, vijjācaraṇasampanno, sugato, lokavidū, anuttaro, purisadammasārathī, sathā,*



most episodes the Buddha knows things that the Brahmās ignore and sometimes they are themselves aware of their lack of knowledge and invite the petitioner to ask the Buddha.<sup>114</sup> In other words, the canonical view, the true apotheosis could be the achievement of Buddhahood.<sup>115</sup>

In fact the Buddha, as we know, can be identified with the Dhamma: “Enough, Vakkali, why do you want to see this dirty body? Whoever sees the Dhamma sees me; whoever sees me sees the Dhamma, because, Vakkali, seeing the Dhamma you see me, and seeing me you see the Dhamma.”<sup>116</sup> Indeed, in the *Aggañña-sutta* the Buddha says to Vāsetṭha that these names are equivalent to Tathāgata: *dharmakāya* and *brahmakāya* respectively denote him who becomes Dhamma, and becomes Brahmā, i.e. the embodied Dhamma or Brahmā.<sup>117</sup>

This suggests that although we cannot speak of apotheosis in the literal sense, since the Buddha in the Theravāda view is not a deity and is beyond human and divine categories, the achievement of his condition and that of those who reach this awakening, like the *arahant*, etc., is the only permanent state, not subject to “decay”.

## 11. Conclusions

In our opinion, the word *brahma* in the Pāli Canon has three sets of meanings: in some cases it indicates the gods and all the compounds attached to such figures; in others, it is a compound:

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*devamanussānaṃ*) is present in e.g. S I 219; D I 49; M II 133 etc. and also in Vism cap VII 2/198. Griffiths (1994: 60 f.) has listed and studied this famous epithets of the Buddha. See Endo (1997: 11-15).

<sup>114</sup> In the *Kevaddha-sutta*, for example, the Buddha recounts an episode in which he knew an answer that Mahā-Brahmā himself ignored and the god told the petitioner to go to the Buddha, cf. D I 220-223.

<sup>115</sup> Endo (1997: 11-15) traces a little history of the origins of the concept of Buddha’s apotheosis in the Theravāda tradition.

<sup>116</sup> S III 120: *alaṃ Vakkali kiṃ te iminā pūtikāyena diṭṭhena // Yo kho Vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati // yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati // // Dhammaṃ hi Vakkali passanto maṃ passati maṃ passanto dhammaṃ passati //*

<sup>117</sup> Cf. D III 84: *Tathāgatassa h’etaṃ Vāsetṭha adbhivacanaṃ - “dhamma-kāyo iti pi brahma-kāyo iti pi, dhamma-bhūto iti pi brahmabhūto iti pi ti”.*

on some occasions it means “best, excellent”; in other particular circumstances, however, it is used as a technical term to indicate the super-human dimension connected to the Dharma.

In this last case, we can deduce that the Buddha adopted important aspects of the pre-Buddhist concept and took them further. If *brahma* is a synonym for Dhamma in certain contexts, we can surmise that the Buddha used the pre-Buddhist *brahma*- and gave it a new dimension linking it to important Buddhist concepts (§ 7). In other words, in our opinion we are dealing with a phenomenon of reinterpretation and incorporation of this word and have attempted to discover its “old” meaning.

We are indeed persuaded that the widespread presence of Brahmanical figures, terms and concepts in the Pāli Canon cannot be convincingly explained if we assume that Buddhism emerged in a cultural and speculative *vacuum*. Thus, a slight change is needed in the historical model to assume that a common set of terms and ideas was in circulation, developed secondarily in various specific social and religious contexts, up to the well-known late rigid competition between their representatives. Such competition and relevant polemical intent – which cannot be underrated – were mainly determined in the late background of so-called “new Brahmanism” (to use Bronkhorst’s terminology – 2011: 27 ff.) in areas where Brahmins were increasingly present.

On the other hand, based on the single elements of comparison collected in the two different traditions taken into account above, it also seems reasonable to postulate the existence of a common archetype for the analysed human chance of access to apotheosis, probably accounting for a shared field of discussion, without which perhaps the ancient Buddhist-Brahmanic debate would never have opened at all. In our opinion, the concept of *brahman* we have tried to reconstruct here is better suited to explain the different outcomes we read in the two respective traditions.

The starting point might be inscribed in a pervasive and relatively simple pre-Śrauta Indo-Āryan pattern of heroism, whose protagonists were consecrated warriors capable of

assuming an ascetic life-style for long periods, bound together by reciprocal commitments, which was slowly transfigured century after century.

As a matter of fact, in Vedic sources, an almost neat and fairly ancient image emerges of a human being who gains divine status (e.g. in KauṣUp – see § 8) and here we discover a frequent association between Indra and the title of *brahmā* (m. *brahmán*), both in contexts highlighting warrior-ascetic fellowships and in wisdom-centred ones (§§ 8-9). The most ancient concept of liberation from impermanent individuality and, as a consequence, from rebirth, may have been inspired by the renunciation of individuality in order to adhere to the collectivity of comrades (*sákhi*), as explained by Proferes (2007: 56-61). On the one hand, the scope of warranting prosperity to all members of the consecrated group (§ 9) may have become a promise of shared esoteric knowledge (§§ 5; 8) capable of granting liberation from an impermanent earthly life to all the ascetics “engaged in the *bráhman*”. On the other hand, the vows of the group’s allegiance and obedience to the divine authority of their leader (§ 9) may have been transformed into divine attributes to be imitated (§ 5)<sup>118</sup> and in precise ascetic and learned practices targeting a systematic achievement of a permanent state of bliss.

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<sup>118</sup> We rely on the concept of *vrata* in the sense used by Lubin 2001. Cf. also Malinar (1996: 268). We resort to RV 8.48.8 which is the only RV occurrence of *vratyá-*, where some grateful devotees of King Soma define themselves as his *vrātyás*.

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- AB *Śrī Aitareya Brāhmaṇam*. 2 Vols. Ed. by M. Haug, [Re-edited by S. Jain]. Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation 2003.
- AitUp [Aitareyopaniṣad] – see BĀU.
- AVP *Atharvaveda-Paiṅgalāda Kāṇḍa Five. Text, translation, commentary* by A. Lubotsky (Harvard Oriental Series Opera Minora Vol. 4. Ed. by M. Witzel). Cambridge: Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies Harvard University 2002.  
<https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/14206/AVP5.pdf?>
- AVŚ *Atharvaveda (Śaunaka) with the Padapāṭha and Sāyaṇācārya's Commentary*. Ed. by V. Bandhu. Hoshiarpur: VVRI 1960-62.
- BĀU [Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad] *Eighteen Principal Upaniṣad* Vol. 1. Ed. by V.P. Limaye & R.K. Vadekar. Poona: Vaidika Saṃśodhana Maṇḍala, 1958 – see ŚBM.
- BhG *The Bhagavadgītā*. Being reprint of relevant parts of Bhīṣmaparvan from Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute's edition of the Mahābhārata, for the first time critically edited by Shripad Krishna Belvalkar. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute 1945.
- BŚS *The Baudhāyana-Śrautasūtra*, 4 vols. (Kalāmūlāsāstra Series 37). Crit. ed. and tr. by C.G. Kashikar. New Delhi: IGNC and Motilal Banarsidass 2003.
- ChUp [Chāndogyaopaniṣad] – see BĀU.
- CSCD [Chāṭṭha Saṅgāyana] CD-ROM (version 3). Vipassanā Research Institute
- D *Dīghanikāya*. Ed. by T.W. Rhys Davids – J.E. Carpenter. London: PTS 1890-1911.
- GB [Gopathabrāhmaṇa]  
<http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/ind/a/ind/ved/av/gb/gb.htm>
- Iti *Itivuttaka*. Ed. by E. Windisch. London: PTS 1889.

- JB *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa of the Sāmaveda*. Ed. by R. Vira and L. Chandra. Delhi [Varanasi 1955]: Motilal Banarsidass 1986.
- KaṭhaUp [*Kaṭhopaniṣad*] – see BĀU.
- KauṣUp [*Kauṣṭakyupaniṣad*] – see BĀU.
- KS *Kāthakam. Die Samhitā der Kaṭha-Śākha*. Ed. by L. von Schroeder, Leipzig: Brockhaus 1900 .
- KŚS *Kātyāyana-Śrautasūtra: Text with English translation and notes*. Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corp. 2006.
- M *Majjhimanikāya*. Ed. by V. Trenckner – R. Chalmers. London: PTS 1887-1902.
- Mil *Milindapañho*. Ed. by V. Trenckner. London: PTS 1880.
- Mp *Manorathapūraṇī (Aṅguttaranikāya-aṭṭhakathā)* CSCD.
- MuṇḍUp [*Muṇḍakopaniṣad*] – see BĀU.
- Paṭis *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, CSCD.
- PED [Pāli-English Dictionary] *The Pali text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*. Ed. by T. W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede. London: Luzac 1959.
- PraśnaUp [*Praśnopaniṣad*] – see BĀU.
- PTS [Pali Text society]
- RV *Ṛgveda-Samhitā with a Commentary of Sāyaṇācārya*. Ed. by N. S. Sontakke – C.G. Kashikar, Poona 1983<sup>2</sup> [1933-1951], 4 vols.
- RvKh *Die Apokryphen des Ṛgveda: Khilāni*, crit. ed. by J. Scheftelowitz, “Indische Forschungen” 1 (1906), 1-191.
- S *Samyuttanikāya*. Ed. by L. Feer. London: PTS 1884-98.
- Spk *Sāratthappakāsinī (Samyuttanikāya-aṭṭhakathā)*, CSCD.
- Sv *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī (Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā)*, CSCD.
- ŚBM *The Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa in the Mādhyandina-śākhā with Extracts from the Commentaries of Sāyaṇa, Harisvāmin and Dvivedagaṅga*. Ed. by A. Weber. Varanasi: ChSSO 1964 [1885].
- ŚvUp [*Śvetaśvataropaniṣad*] – see BĀU.
- TaittUp [*Taittirīyopaniṣad*] – see BĀU.
- TB *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇam with Sāyaṇa's Commentary*. 3 vols. Ed. by N. Śāstri Goḍabole. Poona: Ānandāśrama 1934-38.
- TS [*Taittirīyasamhitā*] *Kṛṣṇayajurvedīyataittirīyasamhitā. Vedārtha-Prakāśa by Sāyaṇa*. 8 vols. (Ānandāśrama

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- Vin *Vinayapiṭaka*. Ed. by H. Oldenberg. London: PTS 1879-83.
- Vism *Visuddhimagga*. Ed. by C.A.F. Rhys Davids. London: PTS 1920-21.
- Vol. [volume/ volumes]
- VS *The Vājasaneyi Samhitā in the Mādhyandina and the Kānva-śākhā with the Commentary of Mahidhara*. Ed. by A. Weber. Varanasi: ChSSO 1972 [1849].

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