Amalā Prajñā: Aspects of Buddhist Studies

Professor P.V. Bapat Felicitation Volume

Editor
N.H. Samtani

Associate Editor
H.S. Prasad

1989

Sri Satguru Publications
A Division of
Indian Books Centre
Delhi
Brahman in the Pali Canon and in the Pali Commentaries

Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, France

In a paper entitled 'On the Brahman in Buddhist Literature', published in Sri Venkateswara University Oriental Journal (Tirupati), 1975, I promised a study of the different interpretations of the term brahman - given in the Pali commentaries. I have not yet been able to fulfil that promise. Nor has this question been studied by anybody else, so far as I am aware. In this paper I propose to take up again the question of brahman - in Buddhist literature, particularly in the Pali Canon, - an important but highly controversial question which I studied in the article mentioned above as well as in other publications, especially in my book L'Atman-Brahman dans le Bouddhisme ancien (1973) - and I wish to concentrate on the different interpretations given in the Pali commentaries.

The study of the traditional commentaries, however interesting it may be in itself, in Buddhism as elsewhere, does not at all imply a total commitment to the interpretations they give. Distortion of ancient thoughts by later interpreters is a fairly common phenomenon. But we, coming even later, run the risk of distorting even more; and experience has proved, in the field of the study of the Pali Canon, as in other branches of Buddhist studies, and of Indian studies in general, that an intimate knowledge of the traditional interpretations would have saved scholars, and not the least ones, from some pitfalls. On the other hand, a blind reliance on the traditional commentaries procures, indeed, a sense of security, but often at the cost of truth. In these circumstances, one should know the commentaries, but make it a principle not to follow them blindly.

In the present instance, the very existence of divergent interpretations of a single point, within the same traditions, makes them suspect. Furthermore, one of these interpretations, as we shall see later, poses a serious problem of harmonization with the Canon itself. But it is important to know these very facts: they show, at least, that the original meaning was lost or obliterated by the Tradition. And it is the duty of the scholars to retrieve it.

After a discussion of the traditional interpretations, I shall in this paper consider the major interpretations of brahman - given by modern scholars and, finally, present my own interpretation. This interpretation is not really new, as I had already presented it in my earlier publications. But it will be presented here in a new light, after a more detailed study of the commentaries than I had been able to do before, - a study which, unfortunately, is not yet complete, however, but beyond which the circumstances in which I had to work did not permit me to go.

The traditional view about brahman - is summarized, in identical terms, in Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Mahājīma-Nīkāya, the Pañcāśīsūkṣaṇī, as well as in Buddhada's commentary on the Buddhavamsa, the Madhuravibhāsī. It is also given, in the same words, in the twelfth-century Pali grammar by Aggavamsa, the Saddānti 4. Following the traditional etymology, current in the Brahmanical tradition, the Pali commentators derive the word from the root bhā (Sanskrit bhā), -to grow, increase-. Brahman - let us say Brahms, for our authors speak only of the masculine Brahman - means, according to these authorities, someone who has been caused to grow (bhūhita) by such and such specific qualities (tehi tehi gavasiveshe), or someone who grows (bhūhiti) through such and such qualities (tehi tehi gavasiveshe). Different occurrences of the word in the Pali Canon are enumerated and its meanings in different instances defined. Brahma, it is said, is used in the following meanings: - 'Great Brahman' (Mahābhrahma), -'Tathāgata', -brahmin' (brahmana), -'the parents' (mātipīrā), the highest (śeṣṭha). In such instances as sassaho Brahmas, divuvaseso Brahmas, Brahmas means 'Great Brahmas'. In such instances as Bhāma ti, bhikkhave, tathāgata-s 'etam adhivacanam', Brahmas means 'Tathāgata'. In such instances as Sasubhaga 1133, Brahmā means 'brahmin' (brahmana). When it is said: Brahma ti mātipīrā pubbācariyā ti vacare 14, the word means 'the parents' (mātipīrā). Finally, when it is said: brahmacakkāma pavattai 15, Brahmas means 'the highest' (śeṣṭha). The Saddānti I in this connection has the following verse which gives in a nutshell all the meanings of Brahman-

Mahābhrahma vipe ca aho mātipīra ca /

But if the context was different, then, the Saddānti 4 records another interpretation, which is the same as that given by Dhammapāla in his commentary Paramatthamaññījīta (Mahābhājana) on Buddhaghosa's Viśuddhimagga 16- a fact which, so far as I am aware, was not noticed before. According to this second- and perhaps later -interpretation, there are three kinds of Brahmas (ivāsā Bhramāni): samāvibrāhāni, "Brahms by convention", upapatitäbhāhāni, "Brahms by birth", and vissiristābhāhāni, "Brahms by purity", which is added a fourth, the supreme Brahms (uttamabhrahām), namely the "Perfectly Enlightened One" (samābhūtadhātu). The three kinds of "gods", samāvibrāhma, upapatitäbāhāna, and vissiristābhāhāna, are mentioned elsewhere in Pali literature. Here the word brahma - in the utterance brahmacakkāma pavattai is considered to be a substantivised adjective 17, referring to the "Noble Doctrine" (brahman it ariyadharmmo vuccati). And we are told that the "Noble Ones" (ariyā) who have sprung forth from this, - as personal manifestations as it were of this impersonal principle 18, -are without discrimination called "Brahms by purity", for they are "Brahms in the true sense" (paramatthabhrahājīta). In particular, however, we are told, by virtue of such utterances as Brahma ti, bhikkhave, tathāgata-s 'etam adhivacanam', the "Perfectly Enlightened One" is called 'the supreme Brahma', because, by his qualities which are the 'highest', he has attained the highest degree of excellence in the world including the gods. 19

In another connection, too, the Saddānti interprets brahmas as a substantivised adjective. While discussing the verbal root bhā, Aggavamsa takes up the question of brahmacakkāma and similar expressions, and, following the interpretations given in the Athavakāshā and in the Tīkā, propostes to explain their meanings by referring to the two verbal roots bhā- belonging to two different groups and used, respectively, in the sense of being (sati) [etc., 20], and in that of attaining (patti = Sanskrit prāpṭi]-21 Brahmacakkāma- is thus explained: "Brahmā, in the sense of the 'highest'" 22- or brahma (substatiivised adjective) means "The Way" (magga), and one is brahmabhāsā - because one has attained it 23.

Here again, it is clear that the tradition is not sure.

There is no doubt that by brahmā (whatever it may be), in the Pali Canon, Nirvāṇa is often meant. For instance, in several texts we find the formula: so anatta anto aparanta dītā vā dhamme nikkāha nibbāna sukkhaśīlamiccayā bharmabhāsā anītān viharati 24. The Suttanta-Nīkāya in one passage says of the Arahatu: loke anupalitā se bharmabhāsā anīsāvā. A Sanskrit text, Bhikku Vīryaśrīdatta's commentary on the Arthavinīcayā-Sūtra, clearly says: nirvāṇam brahmacayet, paramapradhānāvāt, kuta e? "‘ity api sa bhagavān śāntā sukkhā bharmabhāsā’ 25. The term para- and, used in this passage, recalls sethā of the Pali commentaries, and both Vīryaśrīdatta and the authors of these commentaries had perhaps the same thing in mind. Buddhaghosa, for instance, in his various comments, glosses brahmabhāsā anītān as sethābhāsā anītān. In numerous other instances, too, Buddhaghosa uses this term sethā to gloss brahmā, and the term sethā, as well as para- in the commentary on the Arthavinīcayā-Sūtra, has led some scholars to think that these commentators had in mind the neuter brahmā-, which they interpreted in the sense of the 'highest' in order to indicate that it designates the Absolute - as it does in the Upaniśadic tradition 26 (whatever may be, in the eyes of these scholars, the difference between the Upaniśadic conception of the Absolute and the Buddhist type of conception of it). But, as we have already seen, with the Pali commentators, sethā - the 'highest' - is one of the meanings of Brahman (masculine), which neither in the Upaniśads nor in Buddhism can designate the Absolute. It might be brought forth, that, in the first interpretation noted earlier, the 'highest' (sethā) is one of the conventional meanings of the word Brahman - having nothing to do with the Brahman gods (Buddhist knows several of them). But it is not so; for the commentators - as we are going to see - do refer to the Brahmas by the term sethā. The Brahmas, it is true, hold an important place in the Pali Canon. But, as I have tried to show elsewhere, it is merely a concession to the beliefs prevalent in the time when Buddhism originated. Sometimes the Buddha and the Arahants are called Brahmas. For the Brahmanical ritual practices Buddhism substituted ethical-meditational practices, the famous Brahmisvihāras, as the means to attain to the world of the Brahmas (Brahmaloka) and to live in communion with them (Brahmasāhāvyā, which is the same as the Brahmacāyāya - of the ritualists, as the Abhidharmadāpā shows beyond all doubt 27), to be equal to the Brahmas (Brahmasana), to attain to the status of the Brahmas (Brahmapatī): these practices, we are told, are typical of the Brahmas. However, the Brahmaloka is no longer "the highest" in the real sense as it used to be with the ritualists, nor have the Brahmas a calum any more to unconditionedness 28. The
Brahmavihāras, like all other meditational practices, are considered to be impermanent because they are conditioned\(^2\). Nevertheless, Buddhaghosa uses the term seṭṭha- in relation to the Brahmins and the Brahmarūpas. Evidently, he cannot mean by "the highest", in this context, what the Brahmās themselves mean when they claim to be so – the highest Reality\(^4\). What he means is purely ethical.

He says, indeed, in the Visuddhimagga\(^4\), while explaining the expression Brahmarūpa -

Setthathena āva niddosabbhāvena c’ etha brahmavihārāteti vedisabā, satassa sammapatipatibbhāvena hi seṭṭha ete vihārā, yathā ca Brahāmā niddosacittī vihāranti evam ete samapayātī yogino Brahmasamāl harīvi vihāranti setthathena niddosabhāvena ca Brahmarūpā tī vuccanti.

"It should be understood that the Brahmavihāras are so called in the sense of ‘the highest’ and because of their faultless nature. For these practices, in being the right mode of conduct toward beings, are the highest. And, as the Brahmins live with faultless thoughts, so do the yogins, who, being associated with these practices, become equal to the Brahmas. Thus these practices are called Brahmavihāras in the sense of ‘the highest’ and because of their faultless nature."

To the idea of “the highest” (seṭṭha-) Buddhaghosa adds here that of “faultlessness (niddosabhāva).” This occurs elsewhere too. Thus Buddhaghosa explains the expression Brahmarūpa- in the Aṅguttara-Nīkāya (II, p. 184): Brahmarūpa tī niddosathanāna Brahmābhavasiddhamk Brahmarūpaṃ...\(^2\). In the Sārathapakkāsiṇī, he explains setthā- “the highest” itself by “faultlessness”, when he interprets the expression Brahmavihāra\(^3\).

As we saw earlier, regarding the conventions established by the commentators, one of the meanings of Brahmī, in the Canon, is “the parents” (mātāpiṭā). This, of course, does not throw any light on the utterance that is cited to illustrate this “meaning”: Brahmī tī mātāpiṭāre .... In actual practice, however, the commentator says that the word Brahmī is used, here also, in the sense of “the highest” (seṭṭha-) and they compare the attitudes of the parents toward their children in different periods of their (the children’s) life to the four Brahmavihāras which characterize the Brahmas. Thus Buddhaghosa writes in the Manorathapāraṇī, while commenting upon Aṅguttara-Nīkāya, I, p. 132: Brahmarūpa tī mātāpiṭāre seṭṭha ivacīvaṇanam. yathā Mahābrahmano ca ca bhavān avijjāheha hoti, metta karaṃ madita upekkhe, eva eva mātāpiṭānam puttes ca ca bhavān avijjāheha hoti...\(^2\). (We need not go into the details here.) Dhammadāla, Buddhaghosa’s continuator, writes similarly when he comments on Itivuttaka, p. 110.\(^6\)

All this seems irreproachable. But how can Nirvāṇa be called Brahma, even in this specific sense of “the highest”? As we are going to see, the commentators themselves do not seem to be quite at ease on this point. However, the instance cited earlier is not the only one where brahmā, in relation to the highest Truth, is interpreted in this sense. There are many passages in the Canon where the Buddha is called brahmabhūta- , and the expression is often used along with dhammadhūta-\(^4\). Undoubtedly brahmā and dhammadhūta are considered to be synonyms. Thus in the Aṅguttara-Nīkāya\(^2\) we read: sathagattassa k’ etam adhivacanam; dhammadhūta iī eti pi brahmabhūta iī eti, dhammadhūta eti eti pi brahmabhūta eti eti; The Tathāgata is so called: Dhammadhūta- ‘One who is (or : has become) the Dhamma, or brahmabhūta ‘One who is (or : has become) brahmā’\(^\text{19}^\). Here also, Buddhaghosa has nothing else to say than: Dhammo ki setṭhatthena Brahmā tī vuccati \(^2\); “The Dhamma is called Brahman, in the sense of ‘the highest’\(^1\). But, whatever the meaning of the term dhammadhūta- in this and similar context, – the Doctrine, or the ‘ninefold supramundane Dhamma’ (navavākhokutaradhamma), or ‘the true nature’ (aviparītasaṁsambhava), or the commentators say \(^4\), - in no way, it seems, is it possible to equate Dhamma with Brahman – unless we have recourse to a figurative explanation similar to the one Dhammadāla seems to suggest when he elucidates the designation Brahman given to the Buddha in Theragāthā 182: the Buddha is so called because he is “the highest” in the world including the gods (just as the Brahmās claim to be)\(^4\).

The early commentators themselves, it seems, are not always at ease when they resort to this equation. Thus, while commenting upon Theragāthā 689, – a verse attributed to Udāyi-Thera, which occurs also in the Aṅguttara-Nīkāya (III, p. 346), and where by brahmī Nirvāṇa is clearly meant, since one of the manuscripts of the Aṅguttara adds to brahmāpate the gloss amatapate\(^1\); Dhammadāla first states that by brahmapatha- the four Brahmavihāras are meant; but he then gives an alternative interpretation according to which the first member of the compound is brahma-, an adjective (= Sanskrit bhāma-), meaning “the highest” (setṭha-\(^4\). In various other contexts, too, brahmā is interpreted as an adjective. As we saw earlier, in the enumeration of the different “meanings” of Brahman the sentence brahmacākrama āvatteti – which often occurs in place of dhammadacca āvatteti, being one more illustration of the equivalence brahmā = dhammadhūta- is cited to illustrate the meaning “the highest” (setṭha-). But, in actual practice, we find the first member of the compound brahmacākrama- interpreted as the adjective brahma- “the highest”: etha brahamī tī setṭhām uññamā viṣṭhāham\(^4\); brahma tī setṭhām viṣṭhāham \(^2\); etha brahman tī setṭhām uññamā viṣṭuddhassa dhammadhūta etam adhivacanam... In brahmacārya-(= Sanskrit brahmacārya-) , – an expression in which the Chāṇḍogya-Upaniṣad designates the discipline that leads to the brahman, and which, according to the Buddhist tradition, designates the discipline – the “Noble Eightfold Path” (ariya atthathāgo maggo) – that leads to Nirvāṇa, called Brahma\(^4\), brahmā is sometimes interpreted in the same manner\(^1\). In the Canon itself, brahma- (as a simple word) is sometimes found used as an adjective, and the commentators gloss it by setṭha- “the highest” – thus in Suttonpāsa\(^2\) 151 and 285, in connection with the Brahmarūpas; in the Samaṇyutā-Nīkāya in connection with yāna-\(^5\). On the other hand, there are in the old commentaries instances of interpretation where brahma- can be understood as a substantivized adjective. Thus, in one passage of the Sumakkalavilāsinī, Buddhaghosa interprets brahmacāri (n-) as follows: setṭhatthena brahman ariyamagga cāranti brahmacāri\(^1\). It may be thought that, for Buddhaghosa, brahma- here is a substantivized adjective, meaning “the highest” (setṭha-) and designating the “Noble Path” (ariyamagga) – an interpretation that we found recorded in the Saddhanī\(^2\). A doubt is cast upon this way of understanding by what Dhammadāla says in the Itivuttaka-Aṭṭhakathā\(^4\). He first interprets brahmacārin-as brahman setṭhām cāranti brahmanācārin...
an interpretation where, again, brahma- can be understood as a substantivized adjective. But, immediately after, he gives an alternative interpretation which brings us back to Brahmā “the highest”: 

Brahmā vai seṭṭho aticon etasa aitithī brahmācāri. According to this interpretation, therefore, Brahmā, in this context, means “the highest conduct” (seṭṭho aticon); and, if this interpretation is to be taken seriously, in the Samanagaḷavāsīṣā passage also we have to understand brahmam, not as the Accusative singular of brahma-, substantivized adjective, but as the Accusative singular of Brahma (n)- (masculine), designating the “Noble Path”. In Dhammapala’s first interpretation, of course, we have to understand brahma- similarly, and the word is explained there as meaning “the highest” (seṭṭha).

And the same would be the case with brahma- in other interpretations of brahmācārī (n)- and sabrahmacārī (n)-, as well as in the interpretation that Dhammapāla gives of brahmabhāsī- in the Itivuttaka-Aṭṭhakāṭhā: 

( brahmabhāsī ) brahmāν vai seṭṭham ārahathagationaṃ patītam, – an interpretation according to which this expression means “one who has attained the highest Fruit consisting in Arahatship”. However, in the Sinhalese edition of the Netipakarana-Aṭṭhakāṭhā, we find the following interpretation of sabrahmacārī:- 

brahmam vaccatt seṭṭhathena sakkalā samāsāvanam. samāna sava vai brahmam carati paṭipajjūtī sabrahmacāri. “The entire teaching of the Buddha is called brahma- in the sense of ‘the highest’. ... Here there can be no question of Brahmā. And Buddhaghosa does use brahma- as a substantivized adjective, designating Omniscience (sabbapariññāha).”, “in the sense of the ‘highest’”, when he explains the expression brahmajāta- in the Brahmajāta-Sutta: 

yamaṃ ca ettha seṭṭhathena brahmaṃ sabbhakāruṇāṃ vibhāsitaṃ tasmā brahmajātāni ti paṃ dhārehi. “Beautifully, Mahānāma, in the Saddhammapakāsīṇī (Pajjādisāhamadāna-Aṭṭhakāṭhā), explains brahmacarya- as designating that conduct which leads to Nirvāṇa, called brahma- ‘in the sense of the ‘highest’’. (uttamaṅkha) uttamaṅkhaṃ nibbānaṃ brahmam nāma. sikkhāthāya nibbhāsāthāya pavattanato brahmabhojanaṃ tīcira brahmacariyam i vuccati. And again: ariyamaggo nibbhānaṃ samathandana brahmabhāsī ca riyāt tīcira brahmacariyam i vuccati. The Saṅkhīrt Arthavīdāca-Saṅkha, to which reference has already been made, uses the compound brāhmaṃsaka- as well as the uncompound expression brahmaṃvakaraṃ, – where, evidently, brāhmaṃ is an adjective. But it also uses the compound brāhmaṇīvāhara, where the commentator, Bhikku Vīravīrādita, interprets brāhmaṇa as a substantivized adjective, “the great” (byrah), – in accordance with the etymology that was noted earlier, an etymology by virtue of which brah- is often used as a synonym of brahma- in the Brahmanical tradition, –: byrah brahmam. maitrāyādhīvādāyā brahpatthavātā. aṭo brahmavāhara aṭi. According to this interpretation, the brahmavāhāra are so called because they “procure great results”.

A question may now be asked: Why not take brahmam, in the Pali commentaries just cited and in the passages of the Paramatthamānusāda and the Sādākkūthī quoted earlier, as the Nominative-Accusative singular of the neutral noun brahma- (n), rather than – as I have been doing – as the Nominative-Accusative singular of brahma-, substantivized adjective, which is also neuter? Although I do not exclude this possibility, in the present state of my documentation I do not think it is so. Further light on this question may be thrown by the Titakā in the Aṭṭhakāṭhā; but these, with the exception of the Dīghākāyakassakathā Ṛ̊ṣi: Linathavannaṇa, which has been published by the Pali Text Society

and the Burmese edition of the Vajrābuddhācāra on the Samantabādīṣā, which I was able to consult at the Library of Congress before writing this article, have not been available to me because they are available neither in Paris nor in Washington; and neither in these two Titakā nor in the other works which I have consulted in the Siamese and Sinhalese editions, have I found any information on this point. Relying on my own light, therefore, I hold, for the present, that brahmam in these commentaries does not represent the Upaniṣadic brahma-. The interpretation of brahmā in the sense of the masculine Brahmā, in those compounds which refer to what is of the highest truth, is very odd indeed, as we have seen. I have the impression that it was to remove this oddness and to give the word a neutral character that brahmā was later interpreted, first as an adjective and then as a substantivized adjective designating various concepts: the Noble Doctrine, the Noble Path, Nirvāṇa. The neuter brahma- of the Upaniṣads was in the background, it seems; but, in their eagerness to isolate Buddhism from the Brahmanic tradition, the Pali commentators refused to recognize it in those canonical passages where it could be easily recognized. In the Aṭṭhakāṭhā I know of no clear instance of use of the neuter word brahma- (n)- in the context with which we are concerned here. Buddhaghosa does use it, but in the sense of “Vedic text” and in that of “brahmiment”, in his fanciful etymologies.

Whatever may be the verdict of the Titakā, which, I hope, I shall have an opportunity to see some day or other, one thing is clear: there were, within the Theravāda tradition, divergent interpretations of the prior member of various compounds, all relating to the highest Truth. In the midst of this confusion, a historical investigation into the problem seems priorities. The modern scholars are extremely divided on this issue. The divergence of their opinions runs parallel, as it were, to that of the opinions expressed by the Pali commentators. Some of these scholars – and they seem to represent the majority – hold that “the neuter Brahmā is entirely unknown in the Nikāyas”. This is how T.W. Rhys Davids expressed his opinion long ago, and he seems to have many followers even nowadays. Others – not to take into account those who are not able to distinguish between the neuter brahma- and the masculine Brahma- – admit that the Pali commentary does use the Upaniṣadic term brahma- (neuter) in such compounds as brahmabhāsī, hold that it is given there in a new signification. This was, explicitly, the opinion of Wilhelm Geiger, the scholar who made the most substantial contribution to the elucidation of this problem. Geiger clearly perceived that the Buddha was using the Upaniṣadic terminology. Brahma-, we have seen, is not seldom identified in the Pali Canon with Dhamma- and Geiger showed that this fact has its antecedents in the Upaniṣadic tradition itself. Nevertheless, under the influence of the ideas generally received about the Buddha’s philosophical position, he believed that with the Buddha, the term dhamma-(=Saṅkhīrt dhamma) was but a “venerable receptacle that he filled up with new content” ( ... das ehrwürdige Gefäß, das er mit neuem Inhalts füllte). The Buddha’s intention was, thought Geiger, to replace the idea of brahma- with that of dhamma-, i.e. to replace the idea of eternity with that of change, the idea of atman- with that of non-atman- (anatta). So the term brahmā, in Geiger’s view, acquired with the Buddha “a peculiar coloration, a new illumination” ( eine besondere Färbung, eine neue Beleuchtung).

There is nothing in the Canon to substantiate these ideas.
The Buddha, bearing the two extreme standpoints, eternalism (sassatavāda) on the one hand and nihilism (ucchedavāda) on the other, did condemn eternalism. But what is meant by "eternity" in this context? As several canonical texts show, it is nothing but time extended, either in this world or in a higher world. The Buddha did admit an Absolute that is eternal, in the sense that it is timeless, an Absolute that is not born and which, consequently, neither decays nor dies. It is enough, for being convinced of this, to have a glance at the Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary, p. 364, giving the various epithets of Nibbāna: accattam padam, avalokitāthānam, anantam, bhavam, niccam, sassatam. Buddhaghosa, in the Viśuddhimagga, clearly explains: appabhavita ajāntamajātanam; pahavavatijānajñanam abbhavato niccam. He also refers to the epithets of Nibbāna: sussata-, etc. Similarly in the Upāṇiṣads, the brahman - eternal is only in this sense; they also reject the idea of a temporal eternity.

Thus it seems that Buddhism is both "eternalist" and "non-eternalist", just as the Upāṇiṣads are, depending on how "eternity" is conceived of.

Similar is the case with anatītā. If by ātman- (Pali attan-) is meant the psychophysical individual or any of the elements - however privileged it may be, particularly consciousness (vijñāna: Pali viññāna) - of which this individual is composed, then the Upāṇiṣads deny ātman- as much the Buddha does. But, if the equation ātman- = brahman- means - as it really does - that the individual in its immost essence is not an individual but the Being itself - an identity which it realizes in Liberation, through negation of its individuality - then the Buddha admits the ātman- as much as the Upāṇiṣads do. The pudgalanā puggala- of Buddhism has nothing to do with the ātman-brahman- of the Upāṇiṣads. There is a great deal of difference between the Upāṇiṣadic conception of ātman- and the conceptions of ātman- as found in other Brahmanical systems, e.g. Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, with whose ātman- the pudgala- of the Pudgalavādins has much in common.

Considering all these facts, I do not see any insuperable difficulty in adopting a straightforward solution to the problem under discussion, namely that the concept of brahman- in the Pali Canon is the same as that with which the Upāṇiṣads have made us familiar. The cases where the Absolute is clearly meant should be carefully distinguished from others where Brahmacāra is referred to, e.g., the case of the Bhavavāhāra and that of the utterance Brahma ti māsāpitaro .... As for the fact that the Buddha is sometimes called Brahma in the Canon, we should not see there - as Geiger saw - a confusion between the neuter brahman- and the masculine brahman - a confusion which is sometimes noticed in the early Upāṇiṣads themselves. As I have tried to show elsewhere, in these cases, which, again, should be carefully distinguished from those where the Buddha and the Arahat are compared to Brahma, as a concession to the belief prevalent in the time - Brahma means brahmana-, as it also does in the Brahmanical tradition. And the Buddha and the Arahat are often called brahmanā - in the Buddhist tradition; whether we should understand by this term brahmanā - "knower of the brahman-"; i.e., "one who has become the brahman-" (brahmacāra), as in the Upāṇiṣadic tradition, also echoed by a Buddhist text in Sanskrit: sīrṣa brahmacārana brahmabrahmānārahamānā śāstraśirvāna śāstraśirvāna, or "one who has expelled evil" (bhikṣupāla), following the fanciful but pregnant etymology of the Buddhists, is a different matter.

The specific expressions that are employed in the Pali Canon seem to suggest, however, a stage of development later than the earliest Upāṇiṣads, although the ideas expressed can be traced there. Thus the expression brahmapiśā is found, e.g., in the Bhagavadgīta, which also uses the expression brahmanirvāna-. But the idea is as clear as the Brhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad (IV, 4, 6): brahmaśānaḥ sam brahmañyeyi. Attaining the brahman-, i.e., Liberation, is, indeed, nothing short of being it. The expression brahmapattā, in the sense of "one who has attained the brahman-" (and not "the status of Brahma-", as it is the case sometimes), occurs once in the Majjhima-Nikāya, and its Sanskrit equivalent, brahmāpāra, is found in the Katha-Upaniṣad. The expression brahmaśānaḥ pathi (glossed by Saṅkara as brahmāpāramārga, which in its turn recalls the Pali expression maggo bhagmapārabhiyā), it also signifies that the simile of the extinction of fire, which is explained the concept of Nirvāna in the Buddhist texts, appears in such texts as the Śvetāṣṭaravā- Upaniṣad and the Maitreyi- and Maitri-Upaniṣads.

The descriptions of Nirvāna in the Pali Canon recall, in many respects, those of the brahman- in the Upāṇiṣads. Particularly illuminating is the fact that in two passages at least, it is conceived as the infinite, universal Consciousness (viññānam anidassanam anantam sabbañcālam), which is distinct from the empirical consciousness, better, which is attained only when this empirical consciousness has ceased (viññānam na ādhyātma) - an idea brilliantly exposed by Yājñavalkya in the Brhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad.

However, it is equally instructive that Buddhaghosa, while he perceives that viññāna-, in these passages, is a "name for Nibbāna" (nibbānassā nānam), refuses to admit that Consciousness is being spoken of, and gives a fanciful etymology of the word viññāna-: viññābhiḥ bhū viññānam; viññānā ti viññātabham. Viññāna- (as an epithet of Nibbāna) means "something to be known".

The existence of similarities between two traditions does not, of course, imply a total identity. But the difference between the teachings of the Pali Canon and those of the Upāṇiṣads has too often been exaggerated. The Buddha's Absolute is the same as that of Upāṇiṣads; the gulf was created later, by the scholastic interpretations.

Notes and References

1. See pp. 20-21 below.
3. P. 11.
Brahman in the Pali Canon and in the Pali Commentaries

19. Cf. n. 8 above.

“brahmacakram pavateti” ti udivacanato brahman ti ariyadhama uvacani. tato nibbatu avisesena sabbe pi ariy visuddhiddhamaha nama, paramathabrahmana. visesato pana“Brahma ti kho (particle omitted in the Paramathamaipucika: cf. n. 15 above), bhikkhavo, tahtagatas’ etam adhivacanato’’ (ti (the Paramathamaipucika adda addi) vacanto sammaddhado utamadhamaha nama, sadevake loke brahmahathi guehi ukkakasampāramippatito: Saddaṭṭha, pp. 459-460. (In brahmahathi guehi, brahm in brahmahatha can be understood either as brahman or as brahma, adjective. cf. pp. 19-20 below), in the sense of the ‘highest’."


22. “bhī satāyam; bhā pattiyaṃ” ti vīgāsikāmah dvinnam dhītāyam vasaṇa asthathakāṭikā nayanāsitum ahāma pakāsasayissam. Saddaṭṭha, II, p. 555. — In connection with bhā “to attain”, reference is made (cf. also, e.g. Kṣīraṭaraṇgini, p. 190) to the term used in Grammar: isticammahā (cf. Panini, I, 4, 90; II, 3, 21; VI, 2, 149). isticammahā is thus explained: imam pakāram bhāto patto (Saddaṭṭha, II, p. 555; cf. III, p. 719 § 598; p. 805: 27; imam pakāram bhāto patto āpanno ti isticammahā) — an interpretation that goes back to the Kāliyavī. Thus Kāliyavī on Panini I, 3, 21: kacitt pakāram pūpana isticammahā, and on Panini VI, 2, 149: imam pakāram āpanna isticammahā. - In the exegetical literature, both Sanskrit and Pali, this meaning of bhā is often explored for resuming bhāta. The Saddaṭṭha (p. 555) cites Dhammapāla’s explanation of manussabhātha in the Patavathā-Asthakathā (p. 71). Cf. also Theragāthā-Asthakathā, III, p. 9 (on Theragāthō 689); ibid., II, p. 205 (explanation of dhammabhātha in Theragāthā 491); and the explanation of brahmabhātha in the Itivuttaka-Asthakathā, quoted below, p. 20.


setthahdvacanaan etam (cf. also Upasena, Saddhammapajjotpiti, III, p. 29). See L'Ajman-Brahman,...p. 149 and n. 3, Dhammapala also, in his comment on Theragathá 182, where by Brahма the Buddha is meant, interprets the term in the sense of "the highest". See n. 46 below.


41. See references in L'Ajman-Brahman,..., p. 83, n. 1 ; "On the Brahman in Buddhist Literature", loc. cit., p. 4, n. 22.


45. Cf. p. 18 and n. 33 above.

46. sadevakassa lokassa saggahbhūtā setṭhathanā Brahmano, Buddhassa bhagavato ... Paramathadāpi : Theragathā-Aṭṭhakathā, II, p. 54. (Cf. n. 38 above ; p. 22 below.)


49. Papacāsani, II, p. 27.

50. Manorathapuraṇi, V, p. 12.


55. Samyutta-Nīkāya, V, pp. 4-6, with Sārathapakāsādī, III, pp. 120-121, 122 (cf. p. 18 above). L’Aïman-Brahman..., p. 91 and n. 4.

56. Saṅgālalavāli, III, p. 737.

57. P. 17 above.


"in the true sense" (paramatthato, paramatthena), — he possesses "the highest brahmahood" (anuttaram brāhmaṇahāvām), — because, on the one hand, he has "expelled evil" (bāhūtipātām), and, on the other, he "expounds the brahma (n)" (brahmassā ca anatato kathato) — "the supreme brahma (n)-, named the Noble Path" (anuttarassā ariyamaggamākkhaṇṇā brāhmaṇassā). Here Dhammapāla uses the neuter word brahma (n)- in the sense of the "Noble Path" — as "Buddhist antithesis to the authority of the Veda" (for similar ideas, cf. L‘Aimān-Brāhmaṇ-. p. 87 [n. 3 to p. 86].

In Paññākāśikā, III, p. 443 (cf. Paramatthajoti, II, 2, p. 472, on Suttapāsā 655), Buddhaghosa explains the variant reading brahmāna- in the sense of "(doed) that brings brahmahood": brāhmaṇa- ti pūrto, ayyaṃ paṇi ethā vacananitho: brāhmaṇam ñettilī brāhmaṇam, brāhmaṇabhāvam āvahatī vuttaṃ koti.

It may be noted in this connection that Moggalāna’s Abhidhānappadīpa (812 in W. Subhūti’s edition, Colombo, 1865) records the meanings of brahman- we saw earlier, namely "Brahmā”, “Buddha”, “the highest”, "brahmin”, “the parents”, and for neuter brahma (n)- (Nominative singular : brahman), the meanings of “Veda” and "religious austerity" : Piḷāmahe jine seṭhī brāhmaṇe ca piḷāv ap a i !

Brāhmā vutto taḥā brāhmaṇa- veḍe tapasī vaccaṭe !

(Só far as I am aware, in the sense of “religious austerity”, brahman- is not actually used in Pali ; but Moggalāna’s source here may have been, as elsewhere, the Amarakūṭa. Thus Amarakūṭa, III, 3, 114 in the Nīrāyana-Sāgara Press edition with the commentary Yākhyāyuddhā, Bombay, 1944); vediṣa taṭvaṃ tāpo brāhma Brāhmaṇ vipraḥ Prajāpatī.


76. M. & W. Geiger, Pāli Dhamma, p. 7; W. Geiger, Dhamma und Brāhmaṇ, p. 4. (Cf. n. 27 above).


79. Ibid., VII, 75.


81. P. 18 above.


83. Ibid., pp. 149-151.

84. Ibid., p. 88 and n. 7 ; p. 150 and n. 1. See also J.Gonda, op. cit., p. 52 and p. 83, n. 13.

85. Cf. n. 74 above.

86. For details concerning the following, cf. L‘Aimān-Brāhmaṇ-. chapter II, and “On the Brahman in Buddhist Literature”, loc. cit.

87. Cf. p.18 above.


89. It should be clearly borne in mind that these expressions are not to be taken literally. There is no one who becomes the brahman- (brāhmaṇabhūtā); or, whose self becomes the brahman-.