



CHAPTER 1

VEDIC TRADITION AND THE BUDDHA

HOW TO SAY THE UNSAYABLE

In this chapter I will describe how Buddhism is nourished by the ancient Vedic religious traditions from which it also stands separate. To express its distinctive position, Buddhism emphasizes a use of language that I will describe (following Thomas M. Greene) as “disjunctive,” in contrast to a richly “conjunctive” discourse of the Vedas, expressing how the world is suffused with a divine significance that can be directed and manipulated by sacrifice and other rituals.

Despite the Buddha’s departure from tradition, the Pali Canon (the foundational texts of Theravada Buddhism, with which I am mostly concerned) remains infused by its Vedic antecedents. This is so not least because disjunctive and conjunctive uses of language are not in fact separable, even though they are theoretically distinct. This point remains central to my larger argument because it enables us to see how Buddhist discourse is engaged from the start in a complex dialogue. As the Buddha knew—and as I will show in some detail in chapter 2—teaching through dialogue enables nuanced judgments about how people’s religious aspirations relate to their historical circumstances, personal aptitudes, prejudices, and passionate loyalties. In turn, such judgments do much to prevent the misappropriation of the Buddha’s teaching by special interests driven by prejudice, lack of understanding, or wrongheaded enthusiasm. To explore these claims in more detail, let us begin by considering some key Buddhist ideas about language.

DIALOGUE AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

Buddhism sets us on the way to liberation, yet Buddhism requires also a radical distrust of every attempt to describe what liberation is. This distrust is based on

the fact that reality is more complex than language. To be liberated is to extinguish every trace of individual separateness and self-centered desire; these are delusions, transient determinations of a wholly unconditioned reality. But language is itself transient and fragmented and is encompassed by the unconditioned, which it cannot therefore be expected to describe.

Even in everyday usage, language bears an uncertain relationship to its objects. Suppose I change the head of my axe; would I say I have the same axe, or a different one? (What if I then change the handle?) And if I take my bicycle to pieces, at what point does it cease to be a bicycle? The Buddhist monk Nagasena imagined a chariot when he used a version of this argument to show King Milinda¹ how readily words can induce in us a false sense of permanence and certainty.

The idea that ultimate reality is mysterious beyond description is itself not uncommon among the world's spiritual writers. Thus, the Christian philosopher-theologian Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) declares of God that if anyone should say, "Thou wert called by this name or that, by the very fact that he named it, I should know that it was not Thy name."² In spirit, this is not far removed from Lao-Tsu's opening verse in the *Tao Te Ching*, compiled perhaps in the fourth century B.C.E.: "The way that can be spoken of / Is not the constant way."³ That is, as soon as we name the Tao, it is not the Tao that we name.

Although it is not difficult to find examples of this kind, it is the case also that Buddhism is the first major philosophical or religious movement⁴ to thematize the discontinuity between language and reality, and to establish a critical approach to semiotics as a principal teaching. Typically, Buddhism stresses how an uncritical dependency on language keeps us agitated and dissatisfied; consequently, liberating ourselves from the nets of our own anxieties and desires will require (at least) a scrupulously discerning attitude to words and how we use them.

When the Sakyan Prince, Siddhattha Gotama,⁵ became enlightened as a Buddha, he decided at first not to impart his newfound knowledge to others. After all, how could he explain enlightenment without giving people the wrong idea? Language being what it is, wouldn't any idea be the wrong idea? The God Brahma is said to have convinced the enlightened Gotama to change his mind, and the Buddha's teachings subsequently found expression in a body of writing of immense variety and complexity. Nonetheless, throughout the Discourses of the Pali Canon, the Buddha resolutely pulls away every conceptual support to which his interlocutors might cling for solace in a world where—as the Buddha insists—all things are impermanent and marked by suffering. Dogma, rituals, imaginings, hopes, fears, traditions, friendships, families, social institutions—these offer only a false security, temporarily shoring up our fragile ego against the ceaseless change that is basic to existence itself.

What then are we to learn from the voluminous Buddhist scriptures? On the face of it, they are full of prescriptions, rules, classifications, itemized codes

of behavior, and complex analyses. Clearly, much energy is invested here in language, even as the deceptiveness of language is everywhere held to be a main impediment to spiritual progress.

One way to approach this question is to notice that the Buddha's teaching is in large part dialogical. That is, he deals with his interlocutors in the manner made famous at a later date in Western philosophy by Socrates, though one main difference is that Socrates (according to Plato) uses dialogue to awaken his interlocutors to the metaphysical reality of ideas, whereas the Buddha wants to do the opposite. That is, the Buddha wants people to know that ideas are another form of attachment, a deflection from the reality in which every distinction—including even consciousness—is relinquished, burnt-out entirely, and consumed without trace. This reality beyond distinction is liberation, *nibbana*, about which, of course, nothing substantive can be said.

Meditation is the central practice by which Buddhists learn to put aside distractions, opening themselves to the unconditioned. But in the realm of discourse, with which I am mainly concerned and which aims to impart knowledge to others, dialogue becomes an effective way to lead people toward an intuition of the unrepresentable truth about *nibbana*. This is so because insight can occur in the interstices of the dialogical exchange—on the undecided ground, as it were, between conflicting points of view. Insight is therefore provoked by dialogue rather than produced by it through direct instruction or demonstration. Encouraging someone by such means to let go of an unhelpful, ingrained opinion or attachment requires a skillful deployment of argument and counter-argument aimed at bringing the interlocutor to a point where the penny drops and some fresh insight springs up to disclose the limitations and folly of an ingrained prejudice or habit of mind. It is as if the interlocutor discovers this new perspective for him or her self, and to enable such a result, the Buddha recommends the deployment of “skillful action” (*kusala-kamma*), taking into account character, circumstance, the complexity of the opinion to be debated, and so on. The aim is for some degree of awakening to occur, though the dialogue in itself cannot guarantee to produce it. And if awakening does occur, the dialogue all at once can seem redundant, somehow beside the point, as words once again are consumed by the truth to which they refer but do not encompass.

As an assessor of the Buddha's rhetorical strategies and psychological insights, a reader of the Discourses is also engaged in the dialogical process. Sometimes, indeed, the reader might prove a better understander of the Buddha's message than the person to whom the Buddha is speaking within the text, and complexities attendant upon characterization and manipulation of viewpoint throughout the Discourses call for a nuanced and tactful reader-response. Certainly, compassionate discernment remains as significant for Buddhism as are the doctrinal formulations frequently described as Buddhism's “core” teachings. Although doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path

certainly are important, they are also abstract and prescriptive. By contrast, people's actual experience is typically complex, made up of passionate commitments, deeply felt loyalties, assorted ideals and aspirations, unconscious prejudices, occasional altruism, and the usual supply of good intentions. The means by which enlightenment might be discovered through the inconsistencies and contradictions of this kind of ordinary experience are exemplified especially by what we might call the literary dimension of the Discourses—that is, the skilled and often ironic indirection through which the Buddha engages people (including the reader).

For instance, the Buddha remains always mindful that people are nurtured by the group into which they are born and to which they remain attached by deeply felt personal ties. This kind of participatory experience is humanizing and should be seen as a preparatory ground for the Buddha's higher teachings rather than an impediment to them. Not surprisingly, these higher teachings remain closely tied to the deconstructionist (or, as Thomas M. Greene says, "disjunctive") view of language that I began by noticing, aimed at freeing us from attachments and illusions. Yet, as we see, people's actual experience as participants in complex social and personal relationships needs to be addressed also by means of a more warmly engaging (let us say, again with Greene, "conjunctive")⁶ and less austere skeptical language.

And so, as historical creatures who aspire to a freedom we do not yet have and cannot adequately describe, we need to conduct our conversations vigilantly in the space between these two broad views (conjunctive and disjunctive) of how language operates. My main claim in part I is that throughout the Discourses of the Pali Canon the Buddha understands and pursues this middle way with great skill, and the dialogical example he provides in doing so remains basic to the meaning and practice of compassion, the heart of his message. In part II, I will examine how political Buddhism in Sri Lanka interprets (or fails to interpret) this aspect of the Buddha's teaching. For now, I want to turn to the main religious culture with which the Buddha engages in order to state his message, which, paradoxically, as we see, also requires a disengagement or liberation from the traditional constraints which that same culture entails. In this embeddedness of the Buddha's discourse within the Vedas, we see the dialogical process already at work and how it is inseparable from Buddhism's self-understanding expressed either orally or in writing.

THE VEDAS: FOUNDATIONAL TEXTS AND KEY IDEAS

There are many schools of Buddhist thought and practice, but by and large they share four basic ideas deriving from Hinduism (that is, the Vedic religious traditions from which Buddhism developed). The Sanskrit terms for these basic ideas

are *anadi*, *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksa*. The first, *anadi*, means that the world has no beginning or end, but moves through cycles of creation and destruction occurring over vast stretches of time. The second, *karma*, is based on the idea that our actions are meritorious or culpable, and also that they set down memory traces predisposing us to similar kinds of behavior in the future. The third, *samsara*, is the endless round of birth, death, and rebirth in which we are caught up until we achieve the liberation indicated by the fourth term, *moksa*. In Buddhism, *moksa* is further modified by the doctrine of no-soul (*anatta*), to produce the key Buddhist concept, *nibbana*. Short of *nibbana*, people experience a wide range of attachments, desires, and responsibilities, and, within Hinduism, the doctrines of *karma* and *samsara* especially confirm the importance of our basic attachments and responsibilities to one another, and our sense of belonging in a world suffused with divine significance. The means by which ritual observance, prayer, and devout practice can assist us on our way to *moksa* are built upon the assumption, basic to Hinduism in general, that we are participants in a vast cosmic play of forces, including gods and demons, which we can to some degree influence to our advantage. Yet Buddhism would have us reject ritual and cult practice as efficacious means for adjusting the interplay between our personal *karma* (the Pali word is *kamma*) and the *samsara* we are attempting to escape. For a Buddhist, ritual in itself bears no necessary relationship to whether or not we are free from the illusions that inhibit liberation.

As we see, the Buddhist insistence on radical nonattachment pertains not only to skepticism about religious ritual, but also to skepticism about concepts and explanations. Consequently, Buddhism can make itself understood only in a provisional way, and does so especially by re-deploying the above key ideas from the Vedic tradition, its own nurturing matrix. To show what a complex negotiation this is, acknowledging a recommended (disjunctive) nonattachment on the one hand, while recognizing our many actual (conjunctive) attachments on the other, let us briefly consider some aspects of the Hindu scriptures, which themselves are complexly layered documents.

Textbook accounts of the early Vedic hymns usually connect them to an invasion of India from the north by Aryans, a people who imposed their religion, language, and culture on an already settled civilization in the Indus valley. The invasion is usually held to have occurred c. 1500 B.C.E., but whether it happened is now questioned by a broad range of scholars in various fields (philology, archaeology, history, archaeo-geography, satellite photography, among others).⁷ Based on the contention that there was no invasion, a new chronology of early Indian civilization has emerged, offering drastically revised timelines—for instance, dating the *Rg Veda* at 4000 B.C.E. in contrast to the usually accepted 1400–1000 B.C.E.

Although the new theory is based on objective arguments, there are also powerful emotional and political dimensions to the repudiation of what is held to

be a misguided “colonial-missionary” account that assumes that civilization must have come to India from outside—in this case, from the north and west, from where the Aryans brought their culture, language, and caste system to an indigenous population. The new theorists argue that there is no convincing evidence to support the invasion theory, and they point to changes in climate and geography to explain the major shifts in civilization for which there is good evidence.

The implications of the new theory are far-reaching, and the main points remain hotly contested, though a consensus still favors the traditional explanation. Fortunately, the controversy does not substantially affect my central concern—namely, the story of how, over time, the key insights of the early Vedic hymns developed toward a highly self-conscious, metaphysical body of writing from which, in turn, Buddhism emerged. Also, I am interested in how the path of this development is marked by a gradual relinquishment of a dominant, conjunctive view of language (and its attendant religious practices) under pressure from an analytical, disjunctive view designed to promote nonattachment. In short, participatory experience precedes critical reflection; thus, the early hymns of the *Rg Veda* express our deep interconnectedness with the universe and with one another, and remain as a prior condition for later metaphysical reflection, culminating in the *Upanishads*.

The word “Veda” (Sanskrit for “knowledge”) is sometimes used in a narrow sense to describe a body of hymns and their ritual accompaniments, constituting the earliest written documents in the religious culture of ancient India.⁸ But the word is also used in a broader sense to describe certain further extrapolations and reflections upon the early hymns, conducted from an increasingly philosophical point of view. As we see, *anadi* means that the world is beginningless; just so, the Vedas also are held to be without beginning or end, and are revealed in exactly the same form at each new cycle of creation. The *rsis*, or seers to whom direct vision is imparted, deploy language (*vak*) to make the eternal truth accessible in an imperfect but real way.⁹ That is, words provide knowledge of the true meaning of things, and, consequently, have inherent power, leading us toward the originating mystery (*brahman*) by stages, until language itself is transcended and consumed by direct experience.

In the broad sense, the Vedas divide into four groups: *Sambhita*, *Brahmana*, *Aranyaka*, and *Upanishad*. These are *sruti* (“that which has been heard”), as distinct from *smṛti* (“that which has been remembered”). *Sruti* imparts revealed truth, at once primordial and eternal, whereas *smṛti* depends on the status and reputation of a particular author, whose reflections upon *sruti* are judged to be cogent and illuminating.

All four collections constituting the Vedas in the broad sense are *sruti*—divine truth revealed (“heard”) by the *rsis* and subsequently written down. The first collection, the *Sambhita*, divides in turn into four subcollections, which constitute the Vedas in the narrow sense. These are the *Rg Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur*

Veda, and *Atharva Veda*. The *Rg Veda* is made up of hymns; the *Sama Veda* of chants or melodies; the *Yajur Veda* of ritual and sacrificial formulas; and the *Atharva Veda*, which is sometimes treated as a different kind of collection,¹⁰ of spells and incantations. These four subcollections have in common an insistence on the foundational importance of sacrifice (*yajna*), described in the *Rg Veda* as “the world’s center.”¹¹

The *Brahmanas* (the second division of the Vedas in the broad sense) are prose treatises describing and explaining ritual practices and their mythic antecedents and corollaries. The third collection, the *Aranyakas*, is also concerned with the sacrifice ritual, but contains further passages of philosophical and mystical reflection. The word “*Aranyakas*” means “forest books” and suggests that the compilers were exploring nontraditional teachings that might best be imparted in the safety and seclusion of a forest. If so, we have the beginnings here of an opposition between forest and village (or urban center), which will later be of considerable importance to Buddhism.

The *Upanishads* universalize the idea of liberation by thinking about it philosophically, and in so doing they challenge traditional attitudes to sacrifice. That is, by developing a set of transcendental concepts and vocabularies, the *Upanishads* call in question the efficacy of ritual for producing merit, whether to enable a propitious rebirth or to effect a final unification—as the *Upanishads* recommend—between the individual soul (*atman*) and the universal divine ground (*brahman*).

Because of the challenge they present to traditional cult practice, the *Upanishads* were at first a secret or elite teaching, and, not surprisingly, they overlap with the *Aranyakas*. Thus, the early *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* is, as its name implies, partly an *Aranyaka*, or forest book. Yet it also retains the language of ancient sacrificial ritual, as is evident, for instance, in the remarkable opening section dealing with a horse sacrifice. In short, the philosophical self-reflexiveness of the *Upanishads* continues to evoke the language and symbolism of earlier phases of the tradition.

Although, as we see, the dates are disputed, the traditional view is that the *Rg Veda* was composed between c. 1400 and 1000 B.C.E.; the *Brahmanas* and early prose *Upanishads* (which overlap with the *Aranyakas*) between 800 and 500 B.C.E., and a later group of verse *Upanishads* between 500 and 200 B.C.E. Again, the timeline is less important for my present purposes than are developments that occur when the mythological world of the *Rg Veda* is modified and transformed by later philosophical speculation.

FROM POETRY TO PHILOSOPHY

The hymns of the *Rg Veda* emerge from a mythological background of gods, heroes, and demons not fully explained by the hymns themselves, but assumed

by them. These divinities are often closely implicated, sometimes in richly inconsistent ways, with the forces of nature, and, as with the gods of ancient Greece, they pervade nature and the human observers of nature alike.

Today, educated Hindus are likely to regard the gods of the *Rg Veda* as manifestations of *brahman*, but it is difficult to ignore the polytheistic dynamism of these wonderfully various and complex divine figures, powerfully immanent in the world around us and also within ourselves. Thus, Agni, god of fire, is manifest in the natural world but is also an active principle within each human person: "Agni is head and height of heaven, the Master of earth is he," and, likewise, Agni is "shared by all men living." Similarly, Vayu is the wind but also our life-giving breath:

Thou art our Father, Vata [Wind], yea, thou art a Brother and a
friend,
So give us strength that we may live.¹²

Likewise, Indra, the main hero of the *Rg Veda*, is a divine warrior who fights with demons, chaos monsters from the deep representing both nature's destructive forces and also the archaic fears and terrors experienced at some time or other by every human person.

In short, the gods remind us that we are infused by energies that cross the boundaries between subject and object, pervading both nature and ourselves. This being the case, the sacrifice ritual is not only a means of propitiation, but also a communicative act putting us in touch with the primal energies that constitute the world and ourselves together, enabling us thereby to remake or re-fashion both. That is, by performing the sacrifice, we (like Indra) might be better able to ward off terror and chaos, thereby ensuring ourselves a better, longer life.

Although the word *karma* recurs some forty times in the *Rg Veda*, it is never used in connection with the idea of rebirth; rather, it indicates a sacred action or deed that may or may not be meritorious, and it is, again, connected especially to sacrifice. Basically, the Vedic sacrifice involves fire, which presumably is linked to the sun setting and rising daily from waters beneath the earth, the realm of chaos and darkness. This process of rising and setting is evident also in myriad ways throughout nature, where everything is part of an intricate web of births, deaths, and rebirths—the cosmic order (*ṛta*) into which the human being is woven. Indeed, everything that comes into being is, in a sense, a sacrifice because it is already given over to death—its own dissolution—as a result of which further rebirth can take place. And just as each component of nature incurs a debt by becoming individualized or separate in the first place, so this debt is paid by the eventual dissolution of every individual existence. This is as true of a rain-drop as of a human being, except that the human being can grasp the process in

its splendor and poignancy, and can also represent it symbolically, as in the hymns of the *Rg Veda* and the sacrificial practices informing them.

It is not difficult to see how, by further reflection, the idea of *karma* could develop in a direction emphasizing our individual human responsibility for behaving in ways that harmonize with the cosmic order, thereby reassuring us that our actions have consequences for which we are accountable and which might cause us to be reborn within the realm of *samsara*. Yet this linking of *karma* to rebirth maintains the close interweave between ourselves and the cosmos depicted already in the Vedic hymns and expressed in the prephilosophical meaning of *karma* that we find there.

Throughout the *Rg Veda*, the connection between human beings and the cosmos is further developed by a remarkable mirror imaging whereby the human not only mirrors the cosmos, but the cosmos also mirrors the human to the point, even, where the cosmos is itself depicted as a man who is sacrificed, out of whose parts the world is formed. This “primal man” (*Purusa*) is identified with the universe itself (“This Purusa is all that yet hath been and all that is to be”), and when the gods “prepared the sacrifice” they did so “with Purusa as their offering,” thereby giving form to the main social strata of society:

When they divided Purusa how many portions did they make?
 What do they call his mouth, his arms?
 What do they call his thighs and feet?

The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made.
 His thighs became Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced.

The moon was gendered from his mind, and from his eye the Sun had
 birth;
 Indra and Agni from his mouth were born, and Vayu from his breath.

Forth from his navel came mid-air; they sky was fashioned from his
 head;
 Earth from his feet, and from his ear the regions. Thus they formed
 the worlds.¹³

This remarkable hymn imagines the birth of the world as the sacrifice of a human being whose parts are distributed through the cosmos (moon and sun) and into human society (the four main social divisions). Later, especially in the *Brahmanas*, the primal man is identified with Prajapati, who is mentioned hardly at all in the *Rg Veda*¹⁴ but is clearly identified in the *Brahmanas* as the primordial being. Now, however, the gods do not sacrifice Prajapati: he sacrifices himself so

that the cosmos and everything in it can become manifest.¹⁵ The sacrifice performed by humans can therefore be imagined as not only repeating the act of creation, but also as being instrumental in sustaining it.

Accounts of the sustaining aspects of sacrifice are provided especially in the *Atharva Veda* and *Brahmanas*. For instance, *Satapatha Brahmana* tells us that if the fire sacrifice is not performed properly in the morning, the sun will not rise.¹⁶ Consequently, the fear that inspires propitiation is now accompanied by a heavy burden of responsibility: “the *agnihotra* [fire sacrifice] is unlimited and, hence, from its unlimitedness, creatures also are born unlimited.”¹⁷ In short, the sacrifice is universal, and knowing this gives us power and imposes obligations. Great prestige therefore attaches to the priestly caste, the Brahmins, whose skill and knowledge as ritual experts could shape even the “unlimited.”

Not surprisingly, the idea that sacrificial ritual maintains and shapes the world developed in conjunction with the idea that the self is also shaped by the same means. That is, the correct performance of sacrifice confers merit by means of which the sacrificer attains further life, bringing to birth another body fit to dwell among the gods.¹⁸ Thus, a person is said to be born three times: first, from parents; second, from sacrifice; third, from the funeral pyre.¹⁹

By suggesting in this way that we can attain to a higher life with the gods, the *Brahmanas* deemphasize the shadowy realm of the afterlife hinted at in the Vedic hymns, stressing instead an eschatological reward for well-conducted ritual observance: “so the man who performs sacrifice rids himself of his mortal body, that is to say, of sin, and by dint of verses, formulas, Vedic melodies, and offerings takes possession of the heavenly realm.”²⁰ Yet, even those who dwell with the gods after death must eventually return to this world by rebirth,²¹ and the further possibility of escaping altogether from the round of birth, death, and rebirth was not explored coherently until the topic was taken up by a group of intellectually adventurous thinkers whose conclusions are expressed in the *Upanishads*.

Again, sacrifice ritual is the key to understanding how the great metaphysical breakthrough of the *Upanishads* occurred. If, as the *Satapatha Brahmana* says, “the entire universe takes part in sacrifice,”²² then the acquisition of knowledge is also part of the sacrificial process: “the sacrifice to Brahman” we are assured, “consists of sacred study.”²³ But if sacrifice is a way of fashioning our higher selves through knowledge, then the self-sacrifice involved in gaining knowledge might turn out to be more important in the quest for liberation than the merit acquired by a ritual killing of animals. Thus, when the *Satapatha Brahmana* says that self-offerings are better than God-offerings,²⁴ the meaning is that sacrifices made with a view to realizing a higher self are better than material sacrifices offered to the gods. The convergence evident here between universalizing the sacrifice and interiorizing its meaning is highly significant both for the development of the *Upanishads* and for the basic ideas of Buddhism.

One way to clarify how this is so is to consider the word *brahman*. In the early Vedas it can mean a prayer or incantation with power to bring about a particular result,²⁵ and eventually it came also to suggest the power sustaining both the world and ourselves within it. Through proper attention to the interior sacrifice—the relinquishment, that is, of the material and egotistic self—our true, divine self, or *atman*, could realize its identity with the underlying ground, or *brahman*. The abstract formulation of this idea lies at the heart of the *Upanishads*, and is accompanied by the claim that realizing the identity of *atman* and *brahman*, with every residue of egotistic desire burnt away, frees us from *samsara*. As the *Maitri Upanishad* says, when the mind seeks after truth it comes to realize that “sense objects, / In the power of desire, are false,” and “consciousness is *samsara*.” Consequently:

By the calming of consciousness
 One kills action, both pure and impure:
 With self calmed, resting in the self
 One wins unfailing bliss.

If a person's consciousness
 Were as firmly attached to *brahman*
 As it is to the sense realm,
 Would not all be freed from bonds?²⁶

The early *Brhadaranyaka* and *Chandogya Upanishads* are especially interesting in this context because their philosophical vision bears traces of earlier ideas and practices that sit uneasily with the metaphysical propositions central to the *Upanishads* as a whole. For instance, the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* begins with an account of the ancient Vedic horse sacrifice (I, 1), and elsewhere invokes Agni to “lead us by a good road to prosperity” (V, 15, 4). Offerings are also made for “Increasing in my own house” by way of “offspring” and “animals” (VI, 4, 24). This sounds much like the early Vedic expectation that ritual sacrifice will bring material blessings. But the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* also assures us that renouncers who truly know the self (*atman*) do not care for such things: “leaving behind desires for sons, for wealth, and desires for worlds, Brahmanas live in alms” (III, 5, 1); likewise, “the ancients did not desire offspring, for they thought, ‘What is offspring to us, when the self (*atman*) is our world?’” (IV, 4, 22). These passages invite us to turn away from material rewards, and in so doing they focus on the self, *atman*, and its identity with *brahman*. Thus, when Yajnavalkya is asked to reveal “the *brahman* that is manifest, not hidden, that is the self within everything,” he replies, “It is *your* self that is within everything” (III, 4, 2). This is the key insight, asserting a radical nondualism, explained conceptually rather than in terms of traditional ritual practices. Here is a characteristic passage:

As a lump of rock-salt thrown into water would dissolve in the water, and there would be none, as it were, to take out again, yet wherever one took water it would be salty, so this great being, endless, boundless, consists entirely of knowledge. Having arisen from these elements, it [individuality] vanishes along with them, for after it has departed there is no consciousness. (II, 4, 12)

The main contrast in these lines is between an individual identity based on separateness (“the elements”), and the realization that our real, deepest self (*atman*) is identical with *brahman*, just as the dissolved salt becomes identical with the water. This realization comes by putting away ignorance, together with the desires, attachments, and impulses that bind us to our material existence. In turn, such a process entails a renunciation that brings us beyond duality (“the self is ‘not this, not this’” [IV, 2, 4]). Here, disjunctive language (“not this, not this”) helps us to understand that the path to realizing the identity of *atman* and *brahman* is based on knowledge, not ritual, and on the successful elimination of the desires and attachments that bind us to *samsara*.

The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* is clear about all this, insisting on the identity of *atman* and *brahman*, and also developing a new, broadly metaphysical interpretation of *karma* and rebirth. In a key passage, the Brahmin Yajnavalkya explains what happens at death, as the senses withdraw and life ebbs from the physical body. Throughout this process, the dying man “follows consciousness. His knowledge and action take hold of him, as does his former experience. As a caterpillar, reaching the end of a blade of grass and taking the next step, draws itself together, so the self, dropping the body, letting go of ignorance and taking the next step, draws itself together” (IV, 4, 2–3). The self being reborn is like a caterpillar moving from one blade of grass to another, because “as one acts, as one behaves, so does one become” (IV, 4, 5). Consequently, “When he reaches the end / Of the action he did here, / He comes back from that world / To this one, to act again” (IV, 4, 6). By contrast, “the one who does not desire, who is without desire, free from desire, whose desires are fulfilled, with the self as his desire, the breaths do not leave him. Being *brahman* he goes to *brahman*” (IV, 4, 6). To be “free from desire” requires renunciation or self-sacrifice, and by the Buddha’s time, wandering ascetics were common. As we learn from the Pali Canon, they often engaged in extreme self-mortification, and Siddhatta Gotama himself became an ascetic during the early phase of his quest for enlightenment. Later, he rejected extreme self-mortification as harmful, even though he continued to advocate a moderate self-discipline in keeping with his doctrine of the middle way.

The substructure of teachings on which the Buddha drew is provided by the elements of the Vedic tradition that I have now briefly outlined, but it is worth noticing that the Buddha possibly drew also on the Samkhya²⁷ philosophy that

developed especially under the influence of the later *Upanishads*. According to Samkhya thinking, two basic, timeless principles interpenetrate in the world of everyday experience. These are *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*, corresponding to matter and spirit. Suffering arises from a lack of understanding that our true self is not identical with the feelings and desires associated with the ego and its bondage to the material world. As an antidote to suffering, Samkhya (the way of discrimination) calls for analysis, enabling us to become aware of the meaning of *prakṛti* and its difference from *puruṣa*. Samkhya philosophy does not posit the existence of God, though the *Samkhyapravacana Sutra* (attributed to the founder, Kapila, who lived c. the seventh century B.C.E.) does not explicitly deny God's existence and cannot properly be called atheist.²⁸ As with Buddhism, "nontheist" is a more accurate description of the position espoused.

THE BUDDHA: NON-ATTACHMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

When the Buddha decided to teach others in light of his own experience of the indescribable *nibbana*, he turned to ideas, traditions, symbols, and metaphors ready at hand, adapting them to his purpose. As we see, he interprets *karma* in a highly ethical, interior way, disconnected from the ritual efficacy of sacrifice but nonetheless determining our rebirth or liberation from *samsara*. Also, he combines the ascetic ideal of renunciation (or nonattachment) with a radical internalization of the sacrifice in a manner that stresses the individual's ethical responsibility. Finally, by developing a Samkhyan type of nontheism, the Buddha takes the metaphysical vision of the *Upanishads* a step further, especially through the doctrine of *anatta*, or no-soul.

The Buddha's insistence on individual experience can return us to the general Buddhist wariness about reliance on concepts, and, in the tradition of the forest-dwelling ascetics, the Buddha teaches the relinquishment of worldly attachments. Yet, as we see, the Buddha also engages the world and would transform it in ways that mitigate suffering. As I have noticed, the Discourses of the Pali Canon are informed throughout by a carefully considered dialogical process involving both of these poles—the first recommending disengagement and the second requiring the opposite. Although nonattachment might well be commendable in theory, people by and large continue to be motivated by desires and feeling-structures laid down through early enculturation—mediated, in this case, through the rich, participatory sense of the world entailed by *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksa*, and their complex interconnections with the mythology, ritual, and psychology of the sacrifice. In short, the rich affective and symbolic view of the world deriving from Vedic tradition remains the soil in which the rarefied Buddhist vision is planted and is able to grow. As we see, in developing

its own distinctive vision by way of an emphasis on radical nonattachment, Buddhism favors a theory of language insisting on the incommensurability of words and their referents—the disjunctive view of language I described earlier. Yet one main problem with applying such a theory in a thoroughgoing way is that it soon robs human communication of passionate life, energy, and individuality. Still, the opposite, conjunctive or participatory view of language that underpins the mythological universe of the *Rg Veda* also has drawbacks. In assuming the efficacy of language to make things happen, whether as ritual, prayer, or magic spell, this view of language soon relegates us to a world governed by priestcraft and superstition, and the breakthrough to the idea of a universal freedom that each person is responsible for seeking individually could not happen without critical detachment from conjunctive assumptions. For practical purposes, the challenge therefore lies in discovering an appropriate relationship between these two broad assessments of how language operates, neither of which alone is sufficiently sustaining.

The problem with which I am mainly concerned in the following pages arises, precisely, from a failure to discern this kind of relationship. In particular, when the aspiration to an individually realized, transcendent freedom is reinvested to promote traditional group interests and practices (as, for instance, in modern Sri Lanka), the result is a lethal contradiction through which violence is infused by a passion for the wholly unconditioned, beyond language. Tragically, such a dangerous transference can occur even despite the fact that unconditioned liberation is held to transcend group interests and practices and to entail a universal compassion. To help us to assess more clearly how this is so, I want now to turn to the Discourses of the Pali Canon, and to consider how the Buddha explores the dialogical relationship between a transcendent universalism and the cultural antecedents that, as we now see, enable its expression.