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Author: Freiburger, Oliver  
Title: "The Ideal Sacrifice: Patterns of Reinterpreting Brahmin Sacrifice in Early Buddhism"  
Published in: Bulletin d'Études Indiennes / publ. par l'Association Française pour les Etudes Sanskrites.  
Paris: AFES (Association Française pour les Etudes Sanskrites)  
Volume: 16  
Year: 1998  
Pages: 39 – 49  
ISSN: 0761-3156

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The ideal sacrifice.

Patterns of reinterpreting brahmin sacrifice in early Buddhism<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that, according to the Buddhist tradition, the Buddha has rejected brahmin sacrifice. In the Pāli canon, we find a number of accounts expressing this disapproval. Generally, it is stated that one should not “cling to rites and customs”, since this was one of the five “fetters binding to the lower shore”, i.e., binding to this world.<sup>2</sup> In the *Suttanipāta*, the Buddha claims that “these many seers (and) men, khattiyas (and) brahmins who offered sacrifices to deities here in the world, (...) longed for sensual pleasures, dependent upon gain. I say that they, given over to sacrifice and affected by passion for existence, did not cross over birth and old age.”<sup>3</sup> This important soteriological aim in early Buddhism – crossing over birth and old age, i.e. Nibbāna – is obtained yet in a completely different way: by calming one’s mind and withdrawing from passion and desire.<sup>4</sup> Along this line, the former matted hair ascetic

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1. This article is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the XIIIth Conference of The International Association of Buddhist Studies, Lausanne (Switzerland), Aug. 23-28, 1999.

2. *Silabbataparāmāsaṃ kho ahaṃ bhante Bhagavatā orambhāgiyaṃ saṃyojanaṃ desitaṃ dhāremi* (MN I 432,19-21). Cf. SN V 59,25f.; SN V 61,8f.; AN III 438,1-5. Abbreviations in this paper follow Heinz BECHERT (ed.), *Abkürzungsverzeichnis zur buddhistischen Literatur in Indien und Südostasien*, Göttingen 1990 (Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden, Beiheft 3).

3. *Ye kec’ime isayo manujā (...) khattiyā brāhmaṇā devatānaṃ yaññaṃ akappayimsu puthu idha loke (...) kāmābhijappanti paṭicca lābhaṃ, te yājayaḃ bhavarāgaratā nātariṃsu jātijaraṃ ti brūmi* (Sn 200,9-11 + 17-19).

4. “He for whom, having considered what is far and near in the world, (...) there are no commotions anywhere in the world, he, I say, calmed, without fumes of passion, without affliction, without desire, has crossed over birth and old age” (*saṃkhāya lokasmiṃ parovarāni (...) yass’iñjitaṃ n’atthi kuhiñci loke, santo vidhūmo anigho nirāso atāri so jātijaraṃ ti brūmi ti*, Sn 201,7-11). Cf. Sn 44,17-23 [249], where it is stated that neither any form of radical asceticism nor any kind of sacrifice would purify a mortal who has not crossed beyond doubt. Cf. also MN I 82,13-21, where the Buddha claims that all kinds of sacrifices (*yañña*) and all kinds of fire rituals (*aggi*) had been carried out by himself in a former existence but did not lead to salvation.

Uruvelakassapa states in another passage that he has abandoned sacrifices, which in his view “speak of forms and sounds, also tastes and concubines”,<sup>5</sup> because he has seen the peaceful and unemotional path proclaimed by the Buddha.<sup>6</sup>

In these accounts, we find a dichotomy that is quite often met with in the suttas of the Pāli canon: on the one hand the performance of brahmin sacrifices, which is claimed not to be useful for the religious goal, on the other hand the ‘inner’ path of calming, the destruction of passion and desire. This disapproval of sacrifice can be seen in connection with the polemics against brahmans of being shallow and greedy for sacrificial food. In a passage in the *Majjhimanikāya*, for instance, the Buddha compares brahmans with dung-eating creatures that are greedy for dung.<sup>7</sup>

In the light of these exemplary, pretty impressive statements one should be surprised to find instances in the canon in which sacrifice is dealt with in a completely different way. In those passages, it is not rejected on principle but reinterpreted and then presented as the ‘ideal’ sacrifice. This can concern the *act* of sacrificing as well as the *term* ‘sacrifice’.

In this paper, I would like to propose a division of three patterns of reinterpreting sacrifice within the Pāli canon: (1) reinterpretation by substituting certain elements within the conventional frame of sacrifice; (2) reinterpretation by ethization; and (3) reinterpretation by spiritualization. While doing so, I will not consider the question whether the Buddhist understanding of brahmin sacrifice as reflected in the

5. “The sacrifices speak of forms and sounds, also tastes and concubines. Knowing that ‘This is dross’, among affections — therefore I did not find delight in sacrifice, in offering” (*rūpe ca sadde ca atho rase ca kāmīthiyo cābhivadanti yaññā. Etaṃ maṇa ti upadhisu ṇatvā, tasmā na yiṭṭhe na hute araṇiṇ ti*, Vin I 36,18-21).

6. Vin I 36,26-29. Cf. the verses by Uruvelakassapa in Th 42,2-19 [375-380]; also by Nadikassapa in Th 38,32-39,9 [340-344] and by Adhimutta in Th 71,2ff. [705ff.]. Along the same lines A.K. Warder argues in his *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi 1991 [1970]): “As to the religion of ritual and the sacrifice, which was such an important aspect of Brahmanism, we shall see that it was categorically opposed by the Buddha as detrimental to the well-being of society” (p. 155f.).

7. “There are, bhikkhus, animals, breathing creatures, that are dung-eaters. Having smelt the smell of dung from afar they run up, thinking: ‘We will eat here, we will eat here.’ Bhikkhus, it is like brahmans who run up at the smell of a sacrifice, thinking: ‘We will eat here, we will eat here.’ (...) Monks, that fool who formerly enjoyed tastes here, having done evil deeds here, at the breaking up of the body after dying arises companionship with those beings that are dung-eaters” (*santi, bhikkhave, tiracchānagatā pāṇā gūṭhabhakkhā; te dūrato va gūṭhagandhaṃ ghāyivā dhāvanti: ettha bhujjissāma, ettha bhujjissāmāti. Seyyathāpi nāma brāhmaṇā āhutigandhena dhāvanti: ettha bhujjissāma, ettha bhujjissāmāti. (...) Sa kho so, bhikkhave, bālo idha pubbe rasādo idha pāpāni kammāni karitvā kāyassa bhedaṃ paraṃ maraṇā tesam sattaṇaṃ saḥayataṃ uppajjati ye te sattaṃ gūṭhabhakkhā*, MN III 167,29-268,7). In AN III 221,12-222,31 it is polemically claimed that even dogs were superior to brahmans since they possessed five *brāhmaṇa-dhammā* (among these: modesty) contemporary brahmans lacked.

canonical texts is correct or what sorts of sacrifices were known to early Buddhists at all. This was analysed by Harry Falk and others.<sup>8</sup>

### 1. THE SUBSTITUTION OF ELEMENTS WITHIN THE 'CONVENTIONAL' FRAME OF SACRIFICE

The first pattern of reinterpretation contains the substitution of certain elements that are claimed to be responsible for the inefficacy of 'conventional' sacrifices. Among these elements, the most controversial one is the killing of animals. Leaving aside other elements, e.g., the offering of plants or the demand that all labour (by slaves etc.) has to be voluntary,<sup>9</sup> I will focus only upon the reinterpretation of the 'bloody' sacrifice.

According to the Buddha's statement in *Samyuttanikāya* I 76, certain brahmin sacrifices with all their paraphernalia "do not bring rich results". In sacrificing, "divers goats and sheep and cows are slain" – "great seers, who walk the perfect way, do not visit" such sacrifices.<sup>10</sup> But instead of condemning sacrifices at all, the Buddha carries on by describing the *right* performance:

"These sacrifices, where there is no bustle nor no fuss, are always favourably made. Here, divers goats and sheep and cows are not slain. Great seers, who walk the perfect way, do visit this sacrifice. One who sacrifices that way is wise. Such a sacrifice brings rich results, and for the sacrificer it is better, not worse: the sacrifice is great, and the gods are pleased."<sup>11</sup>

In this statement, it is particularly the killing of animals that has to be rejected and replaced. What the substitution could consist of becomes clear in a detailed account of the alleged 'original' brahmin habits in ancient times the Buddha gives in *Suttanipāta* 295: "Having asked for rice, a bed, clothes, and butter and oil, having collected them properly, from that they performed the sacrifice. When the sacrifice occurred, *they* did

8. Harry FALK, "Vedische Opfer im Pāli-Kanon", *BEI* 6 (1988), p. 225-254 (see notes for further references).

9. Cf. DN I 141,28-34; MN I 344,9-12; AN II 207,32-208,3.

10. *Assamedhaṃ purisamedhaṃ, sammāpāsaṃ vājapeyyaṃ, niraggalaṃ mahārambhā, na te honti mahapphalā. Ajeḷakā gāvo ca, vividhā yatha haññare, na taṃ sammaggatā yaññaṃ, upayanti mahesino* (SN I 76,20-23).

11. *Ye ca yaññaṃ nirārambhā, yajanti anukūlaṃ sadā, ajeḷakā ca gāvo ca, vividhā n-etha haññare. Etaṃ sammaggatā yaññaṃ, upayanti mahesino, etaṃ yajetha medhāvī, eso yañño mahapphalo. Etaṃ hi yajamānassa, seyyo hoti na pāpiyo, yañño ca vipulo hoti, pasidanti ca devatā ti* (SN I 76,24-29). A very similar statement is to be found in AN II 42,8-43,9. Cf. also DN II 352,26-354,13, where the 'unbloody' (and therefore meritorious) sacrifice is compared with a planting of an unbroken seed in favourable soil on ideal weather conditions.

not kill cows.”<sup>12</sup> And in his description of a successful sacrifice in *Dighanikāya* I 141, the Buddha stresses: “And (...) at that sacrifice neither were any cows slain, neither goats, nor cocks, nor pigs, nor were any kinds of living creatures put to death. (...) With ghee, and oil, and butter, and milk, and honey, and sugar only was that sacrifice accomplished.”<sup>13</sup>

These exemplary instances might illustrate the first pattern of reinterpretation: By substituting one element (the killing of animals), the sacrifice would bring rich results and the gods would be pleased. We can conclude that with this view, sacrifice is tolerated to a certain extent. Provided one shuns the killing of animals, it is possible to earn religious merit by sacrificing. Of course, it seems that the reinterpretation also illustrates an ethical feature of Buddhist doctrine which is claimed to be soteriologically superior to brahmin practices.<sup>14</sup> It hints to the idea of *ahiṃsā* (“non-violence”) – ethics that could naturally be realized without any kind of sacrifice. In the accounts given, however, sacrifice is not dismissed but linked to that ethical feature and, thus reshaped, integrated into Buddhist soteriology.<sup>15</sup> The first pattern of reinterpretation thus concerns the sacrificial *act*, for which – although reshaped – the ritual framework is maintained.

## 2. THE ETHIZATION OF SACRIFICE

In the second pattern of reinterpretation, the ‘ethization’ of sacrifice, all ritual practices are dropped by reducing sacrifice to one act (i.e. gift-giving). In addition to that, the *term* ‘sacrifice’ is reinterpreted.

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12. *Tañḍulaṃ sayanaṃ vatthaṃ sappitelaṃ ca yāciya dhammena samudānetvā tato yaññaṃ akappayum, upaṭṭhitasmim yaññasim nāssu gāvo hañṇiṃsu te* (Sn 52,7-10 [295]).

13. *Tasmim kho brāhmaṇa yaññe n’eva gāvo hañṇiṃsu na ajeḷakā hañṇiṃsu na kukkuṣa-sūkarā hañṇiṃsu, na viddhā pāṇā samghātaṃ āpajjiṃsu. (...) Sappi-tela-navanīta-dadhi-madhu-phāṇitena c’eva so yañño niṭṭhānam agamāsi* (DN I 141,26-36).

14. This comparison is expressed in MN I 343-344, where a king or brahman who is performing a big sacrifice, including the killing of several kinds of animals, is called a “self-tormentor, intent on the practice of self-torment, and a tormentor of others, intent on the practice of tormenting others” (... *puggalo attantapo ca attaparitāpanānuyogam anuyutto parantapo ca paraparitāpanānuyogam anuyutto*, MN I 343,27-29). In direct contrast, someone who follows the Buddhist path (without sacrificing at all) is called “a person who is neither a self-tormentor, not intent on the practice of self-torment, nor a tormentor of others, not intent on the practice of tormenting others” (... *puggalo n’ev’attantapo nāttaparitāpanānuyogam anuyutto na parantapo na paraparitāpanānuyogam anuyutto*, MN I 344,15-17). On this path he attains arahantship. The same in MN II 162,8f.; AN II 207,12-14 and 208,6-8.

15. Cf. Konrad MEISIG, *Klang der Stille. Der Buddhismus*, Freiburg 1995, p. 40-46.

The term regularly used for “sacrifice” in the Pāli canon is *yañña*, the Vedic *yajña*. Mostly, when brahmin sacrifices are discussed and criticized, this term is made use of. The second meaning of *yañña* appearing in the texts, however, is “almsgiving” or “gift to ascetics”. In a relatively late passage (in the *Cullaniddesa*), *yañña* is even defined as *deyyadhamma*, as “that which has the quality of being given”.<sup>16</sup> Thus, *yañña* can be understood as synonymous with *dāna*, the usual term for “gift”.

What is the correlation between *yañña* as “sacrifice” and *yañña* as “gift”? The examination of this question can be inspired by the long and vivid discussion concerning the theory of gift-giving and exchange in India.<sup>17</sup> In a recent article in *Numen*, Torkel Brekke took up that discussion again and applied the considerations that were focused mainly on the Hindu tradition, to Buddhist and Jain concepts as well. He stresses in particular the essential qualities of giver and recipient and shows that Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism share what he calls a “fundamental contradiction” concerning gift-giving: the notion of giving as ‘sacrifice’, which contains certain qualities of the recipient, and the notion of giving as a charitable act, which implies the right intention of the donor.<sup>18</sup>

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16. Nidd II 233,11f. [523].

17. Already Vedic sacrifice contained a comparable act of giving, i.e., when the sacrificer handed over sacrificial gifts (*dakṣiṇā*) to the ‘priests’, that were renunciators in the ideal case. As Jan Heesterman has shown, this act of giving establishes a close bond between the giver and the recipient, a bond that is considered to be extremely dangerous. To give *dakṣiṇās* to a wrong person ruins the giver, and to receive a gift might press down and crush the recipient (J.C. HEESTERMAN, “Reflections on the Significance of the *dakṣiṇā*”, in: *III* 3 [1959], p. 241-258, here: p. 242f.). Cf. also J.C. HEESTERMAN, “Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer”, in: *WZKSO* 8 (1964), p. 1-31, focused on the renouncer as the “ideal brahmin”. That special bond between giver and recipient was described already by Marcel Mauss in his work *The Gift* in 1924 and has been examined later, especially for the Indian context, also by scholars like Thomas Trautmann, C.J. Fuller, Jonathan Parry, Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Axel Michaels: Marcel MAUSS, “Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques”, *L’année sociologique* 1923-24 (engl. *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London 1970, p. 53-59); Thomas R. TRAUTMANN, *Dravidian Kinship*, Cambridge 1981, esp. p. 278-288; C.J. FULLER, *Servants of the Goddess. The Priests of a South Indian Temple*, Cambridge 1984, esp. p. 65-67; Jonathan PARRY, “The Gift, the Indian Gift and the ‘Indian Gift’”, in: *Man* (N.S.) 21 (1986), p. 453-473; Gloria Goodwin RAHEJA, *The Poison in the Gift. Ritual, Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village*, Chicago/London 1988; Axel MICHAELS, “Gift and Return Gift, Greeting and Return Greeting in India. On a Consequential Footnote by Marcel Mauss”, in: *Numen* 44 (1997), p. 242-269. One important aspect in these considerations is the discovery of the notion that impurity or inauspiciousness is transferred with the gift but can be ‘digested’ by the recipient – provided he has the capacity to do so. This capacity is rooted in his way of life which has its ideal in the perfect renouncer, an ideal that is common also in the canonical Pāli texts.

18. Torkel BREKKE, “Contradiction and the Merit of Giving in Indian Religions”, in: *Numen* 45 (1998), p. 287-320, here: p. 312: “The first contradiction concerns the imagery of gift-giving. On the one hand, the gift is seen as sacrifice. On the other hand, it is seen as an act of charity. The second contradiction concerned the motivation for giving. On the one hand, the qualities of the recipient determine the merit achieved by the gift. On the other hand, it is the intention behind the giving which is important.” Brekke concludes that for the merit-seeking giver, this ambivalence is rather convenient than confusing since it means a chance to

It is illuminating to put these issues side by side. For our purpose, I would like to raise two questions: Are these two notions of gift-giving reflected in the distinction of *yañña* as “sacrifice” and *yañña* as “gift”? And in what respect can we speak of a ‘contradiction’ concerning both notions?

In a sutta from the *Āṅguttaranikāya*, the Buddha describes an ideal “offering” (the term used here is *dakkhiṇā*, Skt. *dakṣiṇā*). That offering is endowed with six constituent elements: the threefold part of the ideal giver (who is glad at heart before, during and after the giving) and the threefold part of the ideal recipient (who is free from passion, hatred and delusion). This is claimed to be the accomplishment of *yañña* (*yaññassa sampadā*). It brings great fruit (*yañño hoti mahapphalo*) and leads to rebirth in a happy world (*sukhaṃ lokam*).<sup>19</sup>

How do we render *yañña* in this passage? Since we are told in the beginning that somebody “establishes an offering” (*dakkhiṇaṃ paṭiṭṭhāpeti*, AN III 336,5f.), it can be assumed that the Buddha is talking about “sacrifice” in the brahmanic sense. In the end, however, the whole procedure is limited to the act of “giving”, to the right conditions concerning giver and recipient.

Here, we do not meet a contradiction between sacrifice and gift but rather the opposite. *Yañña* as “sacrifice” is reinterpreted and thus defined as “gift”. “Sacrifice” becomes “gift”. This identification is closely connected with the claim that for the ideal offering, the giver’s intention *as well as* the recipient’s qualities have to be perfect.

A similar example is found in the *Suttanipāta*, where the Buddha describes a ‘pure’ sacrifice.<sup>20</sup> Again, the sacrificer (*yajamāna*) is an “open-handed householder, a lordly giver, seeking for merit, looking for merit, who sacrifices (*yajati*), giving food and drink to others here.”<sup>21</sup> The recipient is described as the ideal ascetic in the Buddhist sense: fully calmed and free from passion, hatred and delusion. Once more, the description of ‘sacrifice’ is ambiguous: the terms used are familiar to brahmin sacrificial practice (*yajati*, *yajamāna* etc.), but the Buddha’s application of the terms refers only to the act of giving. And as before, the giver is perfectly charitable and generous just as the recipient is the ideal ascetic and thus worthy of offerings.

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choose: if there are no “worthy recipients” around, he can earn merit by considering his gift not as a sacrifice but as an act endowed with a charitable intention. Therefore, giving “becomes meritorious *a priori*” (p. 313).

19. AN III 336,1-337,19. Cf. MN III 256,34-257,2; AN II 81,18f.

20. Sn 88,2 [487].

21. *Yo yācayogo dānapatī gahaṭṭho puññatthiko yajati puññapekko dadamā pasesam idha annapānam* (Sn 87,22-88,1 [487]).

Analysing these instances – which are only exemplary<sup>22</sup> – it becomes clear that the Buddhist authors of the passages used the sacrificial terms consciously to give them a new meaning. Brahmin sacrifice – as it is understood – is reinterpreted: the *ideal* sacrifice is consisting of one all-embracing act, i.e. giving. This reinterpretation comes off any ritualistic concept of sacrifice. Only the act of giving remains: the meanings of *yañña*, *dāna* and also *dakkhinā* become identical.<sup>23</sup>

This concept, which is found in a number of passages, must not be generalized as *the* concept of gift-giving in canonical Pāli texts. It is restricted to accounts in which sacrificial terms are used<sup>24</sup> and can be considered as one concept besides others in the texts – a concept in which the two “contradictory” notions Torkel Brekke referred to are harmonized.<sup>25</sup>

We can conclude that with this concept, the authors dropped all ritualistic practices connected with sacrifice and maintained only the act of giving gifts to the renouncer. Thus, in this pattern of reinterpretation the meaning of ‘sacrifice’ is shifted into an ethical dimension – it is ‘ethicized’. And with this ethicization sacrifice is integrated into Buddhist soteriology: to give in this ideal way is to earn merit.<sup>26</sup> The

22. Other passages are AN I 166,9-168,9 (recipients of a gift [*yañña*, *dāna*] have to possess the “threefold lore” [*tevijja*], which is reinterpreted as the knowledge and realization of an arahant); AN II 62,25-63,24 (one who gives [*deti*] well-prepared food to those who are well practised in the Way, earns great merit and reaches a heavenly place for this offering [*yañña*]); AN IV 61,16-20 (a gift is “great in fruit”, if one offers it, thinking: “I will give the gift [*dāna*] as those sages of old had those great offerings [*mahāyaññāni*]”). Cf. also MN II 154,3-23; SN I 19,15-28; SN I 167,18-170,6; Pv 26,32-27,6 [II.9.48-51]; Thī 151,9-11 [287].

23. Cf. for this reinterpretation Roy Clayton AMORE, *The Concept and Practice of Doing Merit in Early Theravāda Buddhism*, Ann Arbor 1971, p. 6-57, here: p. 18: “The Buddhists, then, have kept the ideal of the sacrificial act, but they have reinterpreted it to include the sacrificial giving by the lay Buddhist for the support of the Bhikkhus. The layman’s reward is *puñña*, which is generated through his relationship to those men who are worthy of sacrifice, the Bhikkhus.” Cf. also Uma CHAKRAVARTI, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, Delhi u.a. 1987, p. 58-62; Dennis GIRA, “Le sacrifice dans le bouddhisme”, in: M. NEUSCH (ed.), *Le sacrifice dans les religions*, Paris 1994, p. 203-221.

24. As Torkel Brekke correctly observes, there are other concepts of gift-giving, as we find, e.g., in accounts in which only the worthiness of the recipient makes the act of giving meritorious (e.g., when the saṅgha is claimed to be the unsurpassed field of merit). Cf., e.g., MN III 80,8-11; Sn 111,12-19 [568-569]; also AN IV 25,21-25; Sn 82,8-21 [463-466].

25. Since both the giver and the recipient are considered perfect in their respective roles, also the bond between them is perfect, and the danger in giving is neutralized.

26. It may be tempting to interpret some accounts of – as we may call it – ‘self-sacrifice’ in the Jātakas as ethicization of sacrifice, in particular the famous *Vessantarajātaka*, in which Prince Vessantara longs for offering even his own body (Jā VI 486,21f.) and gives away his children and wife. Another example would be the *Sasajātaka* that tells the story of a hare which is ready to jump into the fire to present his own flesh to a visiting brahman out of generosity (Jā III 51-56). In these Jātakas, however, there is no account of any sacrificial terminology. The crucial focus here is rather the notion of generosity reflected by the keyword *dāna* in both Jātakas.

second pattern thus combines a reinterpretation of the sacrificial *act* with a reinterpretation of the *term* 'sacrifice'. In the third pattern, which I call the 'spiritualization' of sacrifice, nothing but the term is reinterpreted.

### 3. THE SPIRITUALIZATION OF SACRIFICE

This pattern can be observed particularly in the *Kūṭadantasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*.<sup>27</sup> In the beginning of that sutta it is told that the brahman Kūṭadanta requested the Buddha to explain to him the modes of a successful sacrifice. In reply, the Buddha tells the story of King Mahāvijita, who wanted to perform a great sacrifice a long time ago. A brahman the king put in charge<sup>28</sup> advised him to put the country in order first and to ask his vassals for a sanction. When this had been carried out, the sacrifice was performed. In this performance, no animals were killed, all work was voluntary, and the vassals brought much wealth to the king, who returned even more wealth to them.<sup>29</sup>

After telling this story, the Buddha states that there were still other sacrifices, less difficult and less troublesome, with more fruit and more advantages than this. He puts forward the following acts as "sacrifices", indicating that any of them would be more meritorious and less difficult than the one preceding: 1. to offer gifts to virtuous recluses perpetually; 2. to put up a vihāra on behalf of the saṅgha; 3. to go for refuge to the Buddha, the dhamma, and the saṅgha (i.e., to become a lay-disciple); 4. to take upon oneself the five silas (the precepts of not-killing, not-stealing, not-lying, abandoning sexual misconduct and avoiding intoxicating drinks); and finally, to renounce the world, to follow the Buddhist path to liberation and to attain arahantship.<sup>30</sup> The Buddha winds up by saying: "There is no other accomplishment of a sacrifice that is higher or more excellent than this, O brahman."<sup>31</sup>

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27. DN I 127-149.

28. We will learn at the end of the story that this brahman was the Buddha himself in a former existence.

29. Cf. Richard GOMBRICH, *Theravāda Buddhism. A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, London/New York 1988, p. 81-85.

30. This is described here in a long stock phrase elaborated in detail in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* (DN I 62-85).

31. *Imāya ca brāhmaṇa yañña-sampadāya aññā yañña-sampadā uttaritarā vā pañitarā vā n'athiti* (DN I 147,26f.).

In these statements, another pattern of reinterpretation can be observed in addition to the two patterns already mentioned.<sup>32</sup> In this third pattern, the “ideal sacrifice” is presented on three levels. On the level of religious orientation, it consists of going for refuge to the Buddha, the dhamma and the saṅgha, i.e., of “becoming a Buddhist”. On the level of ethics, it represents the acceptance of the five moral precepts. Finally, on the soteriological level, the renunciation of the world which embraces the Buddhist path to arahantship is claimed to be the most excellent sacrifice.<sup>33</sup>

This interpretation comes off entirely any literal meaning of “sacrifice”. The term is ‘spiritualized’ and becomes symbolic. Its most striking function is transferred to Buddhist doctrine: The name of the central feature of Brahmanism (sacrifice)<sup>34</sup> is now used even for the highest soteriological concern of Buddhism – the path to liberation.

### CONCLUSION

To sum up, it can be stated that the authors of the canonical Pāli texts coped with the issue of sacrifice in different ways. We can distinguish between several strategies: the radical disapproval and rejection of sacrifice on the one hand and the possibility of reinterpretation (realized in three patterns) on the other. The observation of different strategies reveals once more the heterogeneous character of the canonical texts. Trying not to be too hasty in constructing consistencies, we can first of all recognize different methods of dealing with other religious practices. This variety of methods may reflect a plurality of interest groups within the early Buddhist community.

Using this interpretation, one could summarize as follows: One of these circles rejected brahmin sacrifice at all, perhaps even rejected any ritual whatsoever.<sup>35</sup> Another circle, on the contrary, seems to have tolerated sacrifice as a practice by which

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32. This understanding of “sacrifice” could be interpreted in several ways. Thomas William Rhys Davids, for instance, points to the “gentle irony” expressed in the sutta by turning the typical Vedic sacrifice upside down (*Dialogues of the Buddha*, transl. by T.W. RHYS DAVIDS, vol. I, Oxford 1899 [PTS], p. 160-166). Konrad Meisig stresses the rhetorical skill of the authors in rephrasing brahmin terminology to express their anti-ritualistic stance (“Zur Entritualisierung des Opfers im frühen Buddhismus”, in: *Mitteilungen für Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte* 7 [1992], p. 213-221).

33. Cf. also AN I 168,11-169,11.

34. According to J.C. Heesterman, in brahmin tradition sacrifice was even understood as “the periodical regeneration of the cosmos, the winning of life out of death” (“Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer”, p. 2). Cf. also Steven COLLINS, *Selfless Persons. Imagery and thought in Theravāda Buddhism*, Cambridge 1990 [1982], p. 42.

35. Cf. GOMBRICH, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 67.

one can earn religious merit – as long as certain elements, especially the killing of animals, are replaced. Yet other Buddhist thinkers restricted their interpretation of sacrifice to the act of giving gifts to renunciators and thus ethicized its meaning. Finally, some authors spiritualized ‘sacrifice’ by identifying the term even with the highest religious goal in Buddhism.

The three patterns of reinterpretation have one feature in common: the attempt to fit sacrifice (the act and/or the term) in the Buddhist doctrinal system and to integrate it into the concepts of Buddhist soteriology – be it the earnings of merit or even the path to liberation. We can speculate on the motivations for this effort of integration. One was perhaps the obvious attempt to express the superiority of the Buddhist path in order to make converts – in particular among brahmins. Another motivation might have been the endeavour to legitimate certain sacrificial practices Buddhist laypeople were actually carrying out. That question, however, needs further examination. For this, a comparison with similar patterns in other religions appears to be most promising, especially in closely related contexts like the Jain and the Upaniṣadic traditions.<sup>36</sup>

It is not obvious in the texts if or in what way the different approaches to sacrifice got in contact or even struggled with each other. It is conceivable, for instance, that in practical apologetics, a radical rejection of sacrificial *practices* and the spiritualization of the *term* ‘sacrifice’ were combined.<sup>37</sup> In the texts, however, there are very few accounts in which some of these approaches are linked.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it is

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36. Generally, other traditions could be used for comparison as well, e.g. the interpretations of sacrifice in early Christianity. Such an investigation of a completely different context (equally philologically based) might open up new perspectives on those strategies. Far from suggesting that one religion should be seen in the light of another, I merely suppose that new questions might arise, and the Indian material could be questioned once again – and vice versa. Methodological tools that help to deal with those practices of reinterpretation (or ‘interreligious hermeneutics’) on a theoretical level can be found in: Ulrich BERNER, *Untersuchungen zur Verwendung des Synkretismus-Begriffes*, Wiesbaden 1982, and Andreas GRÜNSCHLOSS, *Der eigene und der fremde Glaube. Studien zur interreligiösen Fremdwahrnehmung in Islam, Hinduismus, Buddhismus und Christentum*, Tübingen 1999.

37. This apologetic strategy of taking over a term while dropping its original contents could be understood as ‘inclusivism’ (cf. Gerhard OBERHAMMER [ed.], *Inklusivismus. Eine indische Denkform*, Wien 1983). Cf. the critical discussion of this term in GRÜNSCHLOSS, *Der eigene und der fremde Glaube...*, p. 156ff.

38. Cf. AN IV 41,7-46,7, where the Buddha states that a man performing a sacrifice sets up the three evil swords of deed, word and thought concerning the killing of animals (pattern 1). The three fires of Vedic sacrifice are reinterpreted thus: three fires have to be shunned (the fires of passion, hatred and delusion), and three fires lead to happiness (honoring one’s parents, honoring one’s family, honoring worthy recluses) (pattern 2). Finally, the wood-fire (*kaṭṭhaggi*, perhaps the one not used for ritual purposes) has to be kindled from time to time. Cf. GOMBRICH, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 66f. A special case is the already mentioned *Kūṭadantasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* (DN I 127-149), in which all three patterns are combined. This might reflect a (fourth) standpoint yet different from the others, an interpretation which attempts to harmonize the strategies.

useful to distinguish the strategies. It helps us to work out the ways Buddhists pursued to cope with a central issue of a religious tradition they apparently had to compete with in early times.

## RÉSUMÉ

En dehors des passages qui désapprouvent et rejettent radicalement le sacrifice, le canon pali en contient de nombreux où le sacrifice (l'acte aussi bien que le terme) se trouve réinterprété. Cet article propose de dégager trois schémas de réinterprétation :

1) La substitution d'éléments à l'intérieur du cadre 'conventionnel' du sacrifice. Ce trait concerne surtout le sacrifice animal: en offrant de l'huile, du beurre, du miel, etc., à la place d'animaux, il est possible d'acquérir des mérites.

2) La transformation du sacrifice en concept de registre éthique. En restreignant l'acte du sacrifice à la pratique du don et en voyant dans le terme « sacrifice » un équivalent de « don », il prend une dimension éthique. D'autre part, toutes les pratiques ritualistes en rapport avec le sacrifice sont abandonnées.

3) La spiritualisation du sacrifice. Le renoncement au monde et le chemin du Bouddha vers l'état d'Arhant sont considérés comme le sacrifice suprême. Cette réinterprétation ôte absolument tout sens littéral au sacrifice. Le terme est « spiritualisé » et devient symbolique: ce qui désigne la caractéristique cardinale du brahmanisme est même désormais utilisé pour la préoccupation sotériologique la plus importante du bouddhisme: la voie vers la Délivrance.

La diversité des stratégies employées pour traiter la notion de sacrifice pourrait refléter une pluralité de groupes d'intérêt au sein de l'ancienne communauté bouddhique. Certaines de ces stratégies sont même contradictoires (ainsi le rejet radical et la première stratégie, qui semble tolérer le sacrifice dans une certaine mesure). Par le biais de la réinterprétation, les anciens bouddhistes pouvaient intégrer le sacrifice dans leur propre système sotériologique. La question de savoir quelles motivations ont pu déterminer cette intégration requiert un examen supplémentaire, lequel devrait inclure une comparaison avec d'autres traditions religieuses indiennes, upanişadique et jaïne notamment.