

The Self-immolation of Kalanos and other Luminous Encounters Among Greeks and Indian Buddhists in the Hellenistic World

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This work is a revisionist reading on the impact of the historical meeting of Alexandrian philosophers with Indian ascetics in Gandhāra during the far eastern campaigns of Alexandros of Macedonia (356–323 BCE). A comparative re-examination of Greek and Indian sources yields new evidence that situates the religious identity of the Indian *gymnosophist* Kalanos in early ascetic traditions of Buddhism in NW India that upheld the practice of ritual suicide by immolation on specific occasions during the later part of the fourth century BCE. It supports previous research on the Hellenistic period that philosophically links Pyrrhon of Elis (c.360–c.270 BCE) with Indian Buddhism through his encounters with Kalanos and on the basis of shared soteriological conceptions and practices.

I. Introduction: Indian ascetics and Hellenistic traditions of philosophy

Ancient authors long debated whether there had been oriental influence on Hellenic philosophy, without ever doubting the readiness and capacity of the Greeks to engage in genuine dialogue with foreigners.¹ In fact, informative interactions and exchanges between Greek and non-Greek sages is a documented constant in the long history of Hellenic civilization. To this history we can assign deliberate meetings between Greek philosophers and Indian ascetics in Gandhāra re-

¹Diogenes Laertios (hereafter Diog. Laert.), who flourished in the 3rd century CE, is reluctant to admit foreign influence on Greek philosophy from the “barbarians” (βαρβάρους), but nevertheless provides several compelling accounts to the contrary by Greek writers in his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*.

ported by the companions of Alexandros of Macedonia (356-323 BCE).² Drawing critical evidence from Greek and Indian scriptures, this study argues for the Buddhist identity of a well-known Indian *gymnosophist* or “naked master”³ (Grk. *γυμνοσοφιστής*) known as Kalanos (Καλανός) from Takṣaśilā (Taxila), a prosperous and vibrant centre of learning, education and commerce by the time of the historical Buddha.⁴ Kalanos left a lasting impression on the Greeks by spending the remaining few years of his life as a teacher to Hellenes in the private entourage of Alexandros, and by ending his life with the utmost nobility on a blazing pyre.⁵ His identification as a Buddhist teacher offers new perspectives on the formation of some early ascetic Buddhist traditions in NW India that appear to have practised self-immolation during the later part of the 4th century BCE. Furthermore,

²Several meetings recorded by Alexandros’ historians preserved in the so called “Alexandros Romance” were embellished by later Hellenistic and Roman accounts; see Stoneman (1994). Kingsley (1995b:195) is duly critical of frequent claims by classicists that the “Greeks cannot have been taught anything meaningful by foreign cultures” because “they were so insular, so self-contained, that they had no real knowledge of foreign languages and no wish at all to learn them.” He maintains that though the Greeks didn’t have translation schools they learned foreign languages on a need-to-know basis and there are numerous examples in the sources of Greeks picking up foreign languages. A case in point is the statement by Halbfass (1988:18) that the Greeks would not give up their reluctance to learn foreign languages, and one made by Bett (2003:176-77), who writes that they were “notorious for their dismissiveness of all languages other than Greek.” The implications of such distortions are notable in Bett’s seminal study on Pyrrho (2003:177-78) where he overstates the difficulties of communication between Hellenes and Indians and discounts genuine religious contact between them.

³The term *sophist* (*σοφιστής*) refers to someone who has mastery over something, e.g., divination, art, poetry, oration, philosophy, and so forth – in short, a master of a certain craft or type of knowledge.

⁴Dani (1986:42). In *Jātaka* narratives Taxila is praised as a centre for the study of the three *vedas* and the eighteen branches of knowledge (Raychaudhuri, 1953:24-26). In addition to its Brahmanical heritage, Taxila featured as a major centre of Buddhist monasticism and scholarship, not least because it was strategically situated on the trading routes that connected Bactria, Kāpiśī, Puṣkalāvātī and the capital of Magadha Pāṭaliputra through the “royal highway” as reported by Megasthenes. It is said that the king of Gandhāra Pukkusāti maintained friendly relations with the powerful sovereign of Magadha Bimbisāra, who was a patron and student of the Buddha and supporter of the Buddhist community (Hazra, 2009:14).

⁵Before his self-immolation, Kalanos distributed his ascetic belongings of “cups and rugs” to his Greek pupils. One of his students ‘to be cured by wisdom’ (*τῶν τινι θεραπευόντων αὐτὸν ἐπὶ σοφίᾳ*) was the Macedonian general Lysimachos (c.360-281) who received as a parting gift his horse, a Nisaeen breed (Arr. *Anab.* 7.3.4). Tarn (1979:110) commented that the general did not seem to have profited from Kalanos’ teachings on mastering oneself and not others, considering later historical events.

it supports previous studies demonstrating striking parallels between Buddhism and the teachings of Pyrrhon of Elis (c. 360–c. 270 BCE) on the basis of their use of antinomian methods of contemplation in the service of soteriological ends.⁶ Pyrrhon had ample opportunities to learn from Kalanos and other *gymnosophists* in his journey to the far eastern borderlands of the defeated Persian Empire and in Alexandros' own mobile court.⁷

II. Buddhist *gymnosophists* in Gandhāra and the Greeks

Despite claims by classicists to the contrary, as early as the 1900s, scholars have argued that Pyrrhon's encounter with the *gymnosophists* of Taxila had a transfor-

⁶ Arguably, Pyrrhon and the Buddha alike would agree that the quest for liberation has its roots in human ignorance. Our being ignorant of the real nature of phenomena causes us to relate to the world in compulsive and deceptive ways that eventually cause *ταραχή*, 'unease, or suffering' (*dukkha*). But the meaning of reality can't be found in conditioned phenomena (including our thoughts and sense-impressions), rejected by the Buddha as sources of true knowledge (wisdom). This rejection mirrors Pyrrhon's own stance against all forms of mental proliferation and reification: "no single thing is this or that much of anything" (*οὐ γὰρ μᾶλλον τὸδε ἢ τὸδε εἶναι ἕκαστον*) (Diog. Laert. 9.11). Furthermore, both Pyrrhon and the Buddhists did not employ negative disputation for the sole reason of beating their opponents in philosophical argument. Rather they did so as means for arriving at wisdom and as "philosophical therapy" to gain release from internal disturbances caused by erroneous views. Indian influences on Pyrrhon's thought have been examined by Conze (1963), Flintoff (1980:105, n. 5) and Bett (2003:169-177). For a number of recent studies see Kuzminski (2007) & (2008); Bruseker (2012); Halkias (2014); and Beckwith (2015).

⁷ We should recall that Pyrrhon was an innovative Alexandrian philosopher who developed scepticism as a "way of life" (*ἀγωγή*) and as a soteriological discipline. During his travels to Gandhāra he was greatly inspired by the teachings of Indian masters and decided to "renounce the world" (*ἐρημάζειν*) (Diog. Laert. 9.66). He had joined Alexandros' inner circle of companions because of his teacher, the philosopher Anaxarchos from Abdera, who is mentioned in Timon's *Silloi*, our earliest source of information on Anaxarchos. Mentor and pupil spent a total of three years in Bactria (330-327 BCE) and nearly two in NW India, the prosperous region of Gandhāra, a sufficiently long time to "fraternise" (*συμμιξαι*) with Iranian Zoroastrian adepts (*Μάγοι*) and Indian recluses called by the Greeks *gymnosophists* (*γυμνοσοφισταί*) (ibid: 9.11). The impact of his encounters with Indian ascetics is seen in his transformation from a mediocre painter and unknown disciple of philosophy, to an enlightened master likened to a luminous emanation, the "orb of a burning sphere" (*σφαῖρας πυρκαῖτορα κύκλον*) by his followers back in Greece (Bett 2003:63-94). For ancient testimonies on the travels of Anaxarchos in Central Asia and India and his close connection with Pyrrhon, see Clayman (2009: 25, n.69). For the chronology of Alexandros' far eastern campaigns see Bosworth (1988).

mative impact on his philosophical views and attitudes.⁸ Their interpretations however diverge as to the religious identity of these influential ascetic communities flourishing at the borderlands of the Achaemenid Empire and fringes of orthodox Brahmanical India. It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss all the different arguments and their shortcomings, but a few clarifications are in order. To start with, we have no evidence for speculating on the prevalence of ascetic traditions at that time in Gandhāra other than what we can broadly characterize as Buddhism and Brahmanism (Dani 1986). Buddhists were active in the region for some time before winning popular support and securing patronage to construct *vihāras* in the 3rd century BCE.⁹

There is no reason to entertain the hypothesis that the *gymnosophists* were Jains (Craven, 1976:33). Their presence in Gandhāra and surrounding areas is not corroborated by any archaeological evidence (Dani, 1986:93).¹⁰ The Jain tradition holds non-violence as its highest precept and forbids ascetics to handle fire so that they may not cause harm to flying insects (Dundas, 1992:50). It follows

⁸Parallels between Pyrrhon's scepticism and Indian philosophy have long been posited by Burnet (1908-1927:229), who wrote that he was some sort of a Buddhist *arhat* – “and that is doubtless how we should regard him. He is not so much a sceptic as an ascetic and quietist.” There is no denying that Pyrrhon was educated in Greek philosophy and communicated his insights in Greek philosophical terms and for a Hellenic audience. Nevertheless, Flintoff (1980:91) is right to argue that Pyrrhon's “salvific scepticism” cannot be read exclusively within a Greek intellectual milieu by forcing on it a series of separate positions taken from equally detached positions in early Greek philosophy. Bett (2003:169-77), who is otherwise unduly sceptical of Indo-Greek exchanges transpiring at a doctrinal level, notes that the “most distinctive” part of Pyrrhon's philosophy is the way in which “tranquillity” (*ἀταραξία*) is combined with the indeterminacy thesis. He writes: “[N]either Plato and the Eleatics nor Anaxarchus furnish a parallel here, and nor, with the possible exception of the Indian sages, does anyone else.”

⁹Archaeological excavations in Taxila and Swāt confirm Buddhist material cultures from as early as the third century BCE (Behrendt & Brancaccio, 2011:11). The encounter of the Hellenes with Buddhists in Taxila is historically tenable since their arrival in India dates nearly a century after the death of Buddha Śākyamuni. The chronology of the Buddha has been the subject of controversy. For a review of positions see Gombrich (1992) and Bechert (1995).

¹⁰Jaina monks in Mathurā, which was commercially linked with Gandhāra, date from the times of the Kuṣāṇa Empire onwards (Jaini 1995). We should not presume that the *gymnosophists* (lit. “naked masters”) referred to “sky-clad” Jains of the *Digambara* tradition, for their presence is not attested until several centuries later. After all, nudity or near nudity was not exclusive to Jains (Arora, 2005:76). Three figurative representations of ambassadors from Gandhāra in Persepolis dating to the Achaemenid rule are telling in this respect. The Indians are depicted almost naked save for some sort of a turban on their heads, a loin cloth, and a long sword hanging by a strap from their shoulders (Dani, 1986:45).

that at least the *gymnosophist* Kalanos, who chose to immolate himself because of his illness, could not have been a Jain. Jains may under strict rules perform a slow non-violent “suicide by fasting” (*sallekhanā*), should they be struck by an incurable illness or infirmity that prevents them performing the “obligatory actions” or *āvaśyakas* (Dundas, 1992:180).¹¹ However, such cases of *samādhi*-death are attested as late as the 7th century CE, and in any case they do not involve self-immolation (Settar, 1989:133-134), which is condemned by Jains as an impure form of self-killing (Laidlaw, 2005:190).

There is also the hypothesis, put forth by Barua in 1921 (1988 reprint), that the naked contemplatives encountered by the Greeks were followers of Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, a contemporary of Buddha Śākyamuni.¹² From the Indian side, the relevant extract comes from the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* in which the Indian King Ajātaśatru asks Sañjaya to describe the goal of religious life. In a Buddhist caricature of the encounter of the king with the “eel-wiggler” (Pāli. *amarāvikkhepika*) Sañjaya, the latter resorts to the safety of the *tetralemma* and fails to provide an answer in any direct terms – and we are left pondering how he ever managed to attract disciples and form a school if all that he taught was conceptual ineffability.¹³ The characterization of Sañjaya as someone who defends a position of

¹¹Wiltshire (1983:126) explains: “to kill oneself by a direct, singular act – sudden suicide – interrupts the natural sequence of bodily processes... is therefore construed as a deed of *hiṃsā* [violence] against one’s own person; this is outlawed by Jainism, which seeks to interfere as little possible in the natural processes. On the other hand, to allow oneself to die slowly, by fasting over a period of years in accordance with carefully laid-out ordinances [*sallekhanā*], is to create the opportunity to watch and monitor one’s own death and thereby master and transcend it” [brackets mine].

¹²Scholars rely on Buddhist texts to historically date the Jains and Sañjaya to the times of Śākyamuni. The claim that he was a contemporary of the Buddha is substantiated by several Buddhist sources, such as the *Kosala Saṃyutta*, *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra*, and the *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta*. According to the *Mahāvagga* (1.23-24), two distinguished disciples of the Buddha, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, were previously followers of Sañjaya. In fact there were many ascetic groups and traditions in India; some of them did not survive and we don’t hear of them again, and others changed over time or were subsumed by more dominant groups. Our two earliest sources for a variety of Indian ascetics are the Pāli sermons of the Buddha collected in the *Dīgha Nikāya*: a) the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* that lists six non-Buddhist teachers, said to have been contemporaries of the Buddha; and b) the *Brahmajāla-sutta* that catalogues 62 views prevalent among ascetic groups.

¹³Sañjaya reportedly said: “If you ask me if there exists another world [after death], if I thought that there exists another world, would I declare that to you? I don’t think so. I don’t think in that way. I don’t think otherwise. I don’t think not. I don’t think not not. If you asked me if there isn’t another world... both is and isn’t... neither is nor isn’t... if there are beings who transmigrate... if there aren’t... both are and aren’t... neither are nor aren’t... if the Tathāgata exists after death... doesn’t... both... neither exists nor doesn’t exist after death, would I declare that to you? I don’t

radical scepticism but has nothing relevant to say about the benefits of this contemplative training is contrasted with Pyrrhon and the Buddha who promoted a state of embodied mental tranquillity and peace.¹⁴

Flintoff (1980) overstated the similarities between Sañjaya's use of fourfold negation (*catuṣkoṭi*) and Pyrrhon's *tetralemma* (τετράλημμα).¹⁵ Jayatilke (1998: 130) has since noted that the four logical alternatives attributed to the school of Sañjaya were also widely employed by the Buddhists,¹⁶ and possibly by other Indian religious schools. It is quite plausible that the *catuṣkoṭi* was a commonly-shared Indian method of philosophical argumentation (Kuzminski, 2008), while

think so. I don't think in that way. I don't think otherwise. I don't think not. I don't think not not." *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* (DN 2), translated from Pāli by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (1997). Online access: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.02.o.than.html>.

¹⁴Sextos Empirikos (fl. c.200 CE), our major source for ancient scepticism and a "Pyrrhonist", cherishes a striking recollection of the ascetic philosopher Pyrrhon who substantiated scepticism in more "corporeal" (σωματικώτερον) and "physically manifest" (ἐπιφανέστερον) ways than those so called "Pyrrhonians" who followed after him (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.7). His serenity and calming presence must have been striking for the spirited Hellenes who passed on endearing anecdotes and lampoons that draw the picture of a benevolent, absent-minded yogi who "led a life faithful to his doctrines" (ἀκόλουθος δ' ἦν καὶ τῷ βίῳ). Pyrrhon taught from the perspective of getting release from experiences governed by "beliefs" (δόξαι) and "sense experiences" (αἰσθήσεις) and arriving at an "inexpressible state" (ἀφασία) followed by "cessation of suffering" (ἀταράξια) and "physical bliss" (ἡδονή) (*Praep.evan.* 14.18.3-4). This pragmatic, uncompromising orientation is in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha, for whom, as aptly described by Conze (1963:9, 11): "[T]he conditioned world as it appears to us is fundamentally and irreparably undesirable... and all its philosophical statements are subordinate to its soteriological purpose; [hence] salvation can be found only through escape to the Unconditioned, also called 'Nirvāṇa'. Everything else is elaboration."

¹⁵Pyrrhon's fourfold negation states: no single phenomenon is other than A, or A, or A and A, or not A and not A (Eusebios *Praep.evan.* 14.18.3-4). The *tetralemma* is identified with an Indian method of negation known in Sanskrit as the *catuṣkoṭi*. Kuzminski (2008:45) is right to criticize Flintoff (1980:93) for erroneously stating that the use of the *tetralemma* by Greek Sceptics has no precedent in "Greek philosophical or indeed any other thinking" and was derived from India. This combined way of argumentation, though rarely used in its full tetradic formulation before the Sceptics, was certainly not foreign to Platon's *Parmenides* (165d) and Aristoteles' *Metaphysics* (1028a).

¹⁶The ubiquitous use of the *tetralemma* and other fourfold ways of inquiry and negative argumentation (in various forms) in early and later Buddhist discourses, such as the *Book of the Fours* in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (18.8), suggests that it originated with the Buddhists and was used retrospectively to describe Sañjaya's views. Since no works from Sañjaya and his followers survive, it is not possible to resolve this issue in any definitive way, any more than we can meaningfully maintain the proposition that the *gymnosophists* belonged to their school.

parts of its formulation were known to pre-Hellenistic philosophers (McEvelley, 1982).¹⁷ After all, for Pyrrhon the *tetralemma* was just one contemplative stemma in a larger fourfold arrangement deconstructing the certainty of dogmas.¹⁸

The diverse and often conflicting character of interpretations in contemporary scholarship reflects not only a variety of seeming contradictions in the extant sources, but also the liability of some key texts to have competing readings. Though there are several factors to take into account in any historical reconstruction,¹⁹ some notable contradictions in the Greek texts may be less compelling if we recognize that the designation *gymnosophists* initially comprised two main groups: *brachmanes* (βραχυᾶνες) and *sarmanes* (σαρμᾶνες) or *sarmanai* (σαρμᾶναι). The *brachmanes* often served in hereditary succession the interests of the ruling class and the *sarmanai* comprised wandering renunciants who shared in the social and economic resources of Taxila. While this fine distinction between *brachmanes* and *sarmanes* is often missed by some Greek authors, for all practical purposes we can surmise that several meetings took place between Indian and Hellenic philosophers in nearly 2 years and were only later conflated in

¹⁷McEvelley (1982) has argued persuasively that the *tetralemma* could have been conceived in Hellenic philosophical circles prior to Pyrrhon's encounter with the Buddhists. What is quite distinct in the case of Pyrrhon is his employment of this contemplative method of negation to arrive at an experiential state of "inexpressibility" (ἀφασία) followed by "cessation of disturbance" (ἀταραξία).

¹⁸The crux of the matter lies in a debated passage quoted by Eusebios (*Praep. evan.* 14.18.2-5) in which Aristoboulos outlines Pyrrhon's teachings in a condensed and philosophically structured form. He presents three interrelated topics presented in a series of negations. These concern: a) the nature of "things" or "phenomena" (πράγματα); b) the dispositions we ought to cultivate in our dealings with them; and c) the benefits gained through this practice. Pyrrhon's pithy instructions to his disciples are framed in four *via negationis* contemplations: 1) ascertain the nature of phenomena "without differentiation" (ἀδιάφορα), "without measurement" (ἀστάθμητα), and "without judgment" (ἀνεπίκριτα); 2) challenge the truth value of sense perceptions and views/opinions we may hold about them (μήτε τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἡμῶν μήτε τὰς δόξας ἀληθεύειν ἢ ψεύδεσθαι); 3) cultivate an impartial (ἀδόξαστους), non-judgmental (ἀκλινεῖς) and unwavering (ἀκραδάντους) disposition towards all phenomena (pleasant and unpleasant); and 4) recognize that no single phenomenon is other than A, A, A and A, or not A and not A (οὐ μᾶλλον ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν ἢ καὶ ἔστι καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἢ οὔτε ἔστιν οὔτε οὐκ ἔστιν).

¹⁹A clear demarcation between Indian ascetic schools construed in terms of exclusive doctrines and specific practices dates to a later, so called "normative" phase, characterized by institutional differentiation and doctrinal systematization prompted by the proliferation of organized monastic hierarchies and the canonization and production of religious scriptures. It is plausible that during the time in question ascetics from different traditions shared aspirations for liberation attained by a variety of ascetic regimes and contemplative practices.

single reports that appear muddled.²⁰

Megasthenes, the Hellenistic ambassador to the Indian Emperor Candragupta Maurya, is our oldest non-Indian source for the distinction between *brachmanes* (Skt. *brāhmaṇa*) and *garmanes* (γαρμᾶνες), which is either a scribal error for *sarmanes* (Skt. *śramaṇa*), or more likely how *śramaṇa* sounded to the ears of a Hellene at that time (Halbfass, 1995:256). Among the *garmanes* (i.e., σαρμᾶνες), Megasthenes mentions the *pramnās* (πράμνας), an ascetic group that openly criticised the doctrines of the *brachmanes*.²¹ This reactionary movement was further divided into several groups including the *gymnetas* (γυμνήτας) held in high esteem. As their name suggests, they were naked or nearly so, living mainly out in the open air, and women could practise with them without intimate cohabitation (Strab. 15.1.70).²² Among the *garmanes* we also find the “physicians” (ιατρικούς) who had knowledge of medicine and could effect cures by regulating diet and applying ointments and plasters. They were hosted in Alexandros’ camp for being the “wisest” (σοφώτατοι) Indian physicians (Arr. *Ind.* 15.11). Like others among the *pramnās*, they practised fortitude in enduring physical pain and could stand in the same posture a whole day without moving (Strab. 15.1.60). It is very likely

²⁰The Greeks were often mistaken in grouping all *brachmanes* / *brachmanai* (βραχμᾶνες / βραχμᾶναι) as ascetics and all ascetics as *brachmanes*; see Strab. (15.1.66) and for a discussion of such incidents see Tola & Dragonetti (1991:121). For example, Onesikritos and Aristoboulos seem to contradict each other on whether Alexandros met the Indian ascetics. This observation has led scholars to prematurely dismiss the event of their meeting altogether as fiction (Arora, 2005:67). It is plausible that we are dealing with two different occasions. In on one of them Alexandros did invite the Indian masters to his dinner table and they partook of their meal standing. After all, Strabon does not report on any contradictions in the sources he consulted. Elsewhere he has been keen to discuss a disagreement among historians as to the manner and cause of Kalanos death (Strab. 15.68). Bosman (2010) also identifies two separate incidents and two separate sets of Indian sages.

²¹It is tempting to read *πράμνας* as a Greek rendition of *paṃāṇa*, referring to an important Buddhist philosophical term for the criterion, or “measure”, of truth.

²²Halbfass (1995:201) reiterates an old debate among scholars concerning Megasthenes’ *γαρμᾶνες* referring either to renouncers in general or Buddhists in particular. While he provides evidence that *σαρμᾶνες* is a term for Buddhists, he maintains (without convincing reasons, in my opinion) the interpretation that Megasthenes is referring to “renouncers in general”. For Saint Jerome (c.342-420) the confusion as to who were the *gymnosophists* was adequately resolved in favour of the *σαρμᾶνες*. He explicitly writes, making reference to the Buddha’s legendary birth, that they were in fact Buddhists: “To come to the Gymnosophists of India, the opinion is authoritatively handed down that Budda (sic), the founder of their religion, had his birth through the side of a virgin” (*adv. Jovin* 1. 43). Curiously, John of Damascus appropriates elements of this Buddhist narrative into the life of the Christian saint Josephat (Ἰωάσαφ) (deriving from the Sanskrit bodhisattva) canonized in the Martyrology of Pope Gregory XIII (Banerjee, 2009: 27).

that the *garmanes* of Megasthenes correspond to the non-*brāhmaṇas* mentioned by Nearchos, who “studied the nature of things” (σκοπεῖν τὰ περὶ τὴν φύσιν) and allowed “women to debate philosophy with them” (συμφιλοσοφεῖν δ’ αὐτοῖς καὶ γυναικάς) (Strab. 15.1.60). For unlike the Buddhists, who admitted women in their order from the time of the Buddha, the *brachmanes* did not communicate knowledge of philosophy to their wives (Strab. 15.1.59).

There are references in the Pāli scriptures to “an ill-defined category of ascetics (*yogin*-s, *yogāvacara*-s, later *yogācāra*-s)” that included “saints and irregulars, schismatics or heretics” alongside “monks of strict observance.” They were “men of the forests (*āraṇyaka*) or of cemeteries (*śmāsānikas*)” who declined “novitiate and communal living” and were “stringent in their practice of the rigorous rules of asceticism.”²³ In the *Visuddhimagga*, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghōṣa describes Buddhist renunciant groups whose eccentric behaviour correlates with descriptions furnished in the Greek sources. There are intriguing similarities between the *gymnetas* and early Buddhist groups known as the “refuse-rag wearers” (*paṃsukūlika*), who refused robes given by householders and clothed themselves with rags procured in a variety of ways,²⁴ and also with those ascetics known as “open-air dwellers” (*abbhokāsika*).²⁵ Though writing centuries after Megasthenes, the Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215 CE) may very well be reflecting current views in his identification of the *sarmanai* as Mahāyāna

²³La Vallée Poussin quoted in Silk (2000:276). The development of meditative traditions of the Yogācāra School in NW India and Kashmir alludes to a long presence of Buddhist traditions in the region. Arguably, at an early stage the doctrines of the Yogācāra were not yet idealistic in the later Mahāyāna sense that refutes the independent existence of an external reality. Rather we find the assertion of the existence of an external reality that is perceptible to us, dependent on the mind and not apart from it. Their position is that of an epistemological realism focusing on the process of cognition, in that we can only know the “external world” through mental content or representations of our mind, without explicitly denying that external things exist or asserting that our mind is the only reality.

²⁴These are explained as follows: “One...should get a robe of one of the following kinds: one from a charnel ground, one from a shop, a cloth from a street, a cloth from a maiden, one from a childbed, an ablution cloth, a cloth from a washing place, one worn going to and returning from [the charnel ground], one scorched by fire, one gnawed by cattle, one gnawed by ants, one gnawed by rats, one cut at the end, one cut at the edge, one carried as a flag, a robe from a shrine, an ascetic’s robe, one from a consecration, one produced by supernormal power, one from a highway, one borne by the wind, one presented by deities, one from the sea. Taking one of these robe cloths, he should tear off and throw away the weak parts, and then wash the sound parts and make up a robe. He can use it after getting rid of his old robe given by householders” (*Visud.* 2.15).

²⁵*Visud.* (2.69; 2.63; 2.87; 2.91).

followers of the Buddha (Βοῦττα) who out of excessive piety worship him as a god (θεόν). And there is no reason to doubt the reliability of Clement's sources, for he also mentioned (*Strom.* 1.15) Buddhists (*sarmanai*) in Bactria (Σαμαναῖοι Βάκτρων), a fact well attested at the time of his writing.²⁶

III. An incandescent liberation

κἄν παραδῶ τὸ σῶμά μου, ἵνα καυθήσωμαι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐδὲν ὠφελοῦμαι
 - and even if I surrender my body to the pyre, if I don't have love I gain no profit -
 (Corinthians, 13.3)

Nearchos, a reliable historian and Alexandros' admiral, was the first to introduce a division between *brāhmaṇas* and non-*brāhmaṇas*. He explicitly states that the Indian ascetic Kalanos belonged to the second group and was not one of the *brāhmaṇas* who engaged in politics and served as counsellors to kings (Strab. 15.1.66).²⁷ Following Megasthenes' division, Kalanos belonged to the *śramaṇa* order that contemplated the nature of reality and allowed women to do the same. It is reported that Alexandros admired the power of endurance of the *śramaṇas* and requested that one of them come to live with him. It seems unreasonable that Kalanos would forsake his ascetic lifestyle at an advanced age and follow Alexandros on an arduous journey from Taxila to Persia which he would have known to

²⁶The presence of Buddhists in Bactria, however minimal during the times of Alexandros' campaigns, cannot be ruled out given explicit references that assign Bactrians among the Buddha's earliest disciples; Halkias (2014:79, n.39).

²⁷Ploutarchos (*Alex.* 65) writes that Kalanos' real name was Sfines (Σφίνης) "but because he greeted those whom he met with *kale* (καλέ), the Indian word of salutation, the Greeks called him Καλανός." The word *kale* (καλέ) may derive from the Sanskrit form *kalyāṇa*, which is often used in Buddhist scriptures along with the term *mitta* (friend) to mean an "agreeable companion" or a "virtuous friend". This term was commonly used by the Buddha to indicate the sort of companion or spiritual friend who enables and encourages one to engage in steady contemplation on the nature of phenomena. In the same passage Ploutarchos relates how Kalanos "performed" for Alexandros a lesson on "middle-way" governance. He flung on the ground a dry, shrunken hide, and then trod upon the edges, and as he trod it down in one place, it rose up in all the others. He walked all round the edge of it, illustrating that this kept taking place until at length he stepped into the middle making all sides lie flat. Although Ploutarchos interprets this incident as a warning that Alexandros should concentrate on the middle of his empire and not venture on distant journeys, a Buddhist lesson on the middle-way approach (between extremes in actions and thoughts) is also plausible in lieu of our discussion.

be his last. He was over 70 years of age when he joined the Greeks and we must seriously question the naive interpretations of some ancient historians that he followed Alexandros to “rehearse praises for him”, having “no control over himself” and being “a slave to his table” (Strab. 15.68). Aristoboulos, who confused Dandamis with Kalanos and wrongly characterized them both as *brāhmaṇas*, saw in Taxila one master with long hair and one with a shaven head surrounded by their Indian disciples. The shaved renunciant “accompanied the king to the last” and “during his stay he changed his dress, and altered his mode of life.” When reproached for his conduct, he answered that he had completed the forty years of discipline which he had promised to observe, and an appreciative Alexandros made “presents to his children” (Strab. 15.1.61).

It would appear that Kalanos became a teacher of Alexandros to seek benefits in his court for himself and his family, hardly the aspirations we would expect of a professional renunciant who had completed no less than 40 years of asceticism and who, as we have seen, had no money or gold among his sparse belongings but cups and rags that he shared with his Greek disciples. We are in a better position to understand Kalanos’ decision if we turn to a description of *śramaṇa* customs recorded by Porphyry (*de Abst.* 4.17).

Having likewise the superfluities of his body cut off, he receives a garment, and departs to the Samanaeans, but does not return either to his wife or children, if he happens to have any, nor does he pay any attention to them, or think that they at all pertain to him. And, with respect to his children indeed, the king provides what is necessary for them, and the relatives provide for the wife. And such is the life of the Samanaeans.

Given that Kalanos decided to be under the patronage of another king, Alexandros ought to make provision for the welfare of his children according to prevailing customs, which would explain why he presented them with “gifts” before departing from Taxila. After all, we must bear in mind that the portrayal of Kalanos as an opportunist is hardly compatible with the daring and fearless manner that so impressed Alexandros and the Hellenes – namely of a man who stood motionless with utmost dignity as the fire engulfed him. Our sources relate stories of an Indian sage who had allegedly attained the *siddhi* (power/ability) of foreknowledge as a result of practising austerities. Having made his prayers and casting some of his hair on the pyre, he bade farewell to his attending students but not to Alexan-

dros, saying that he would be seeing him in a year's time in Babylon, a prophetic vision of the Macedonian leader passing away a year later.²⁸

Onesikritos explains that the *gymnosophists* regard disease of the body “as most disgraceful, and he who apprehends it, after preparing a pyre, destroys himself by fire; he (previously) anoints himself, and sitting down upon it orders it to be lighted, remaining motionless while he is burning” (Strab. 15.1.65). This description placed in the mouth of Dandamis describes the way Kalanos decided to end his life on a pyre in 323 BCE in Susa,²⁹ staging in public his self-immolation after falling seriously ill. According to Strabon (15.1.68) and Diodorus Siculus, Kalanos was 73 years of age when “his health became delicate, though he had never before been subject to illness” (Diod. *Lib.* 17.107). Aware that his illness could not be remedied by conventional *śramaṇa* treatments such as diet, incantations and medicine, he told Alexandros that he was not willing to lead the life of a man in infirm health. “In such circumstances he thought it best for him to put an end to his existence, before he came to experience any disease which might compel him to change his former mode of living” (Arr. *Anab.* 7.3.1). Since his former mode of living did not entail a lifestyle of physical comforts, we can understand that his illness would prevent him from engaging in his usual contemplative practices.³⁰

Arrianos (*Anab.* 7.3) and Ploutarchos (*Alex.* 69) report that at the moment of his death Kalanos displayed no signs of fear, remorse or pain, but sat firm to

²⁸For narratives on Kalanos' prophetic powers; see (Arr. *Anab.* 18); (Cic. *de Divin.* 1.47); (Plout. *Alex.* 69.3-4); and Valerius Maximus (*Facta et dicta memorabilia* 1.8 ext. 10).

²⁹Strabon (15.1) is mistaken when he writes that Kalanos' immolation took place at Pasargadae, for according to Diodoros (17.107) it happened at Susa, a statement confirmed by Nearchos, who was present at the funeral pyre. For Greek and Roman references to Kalanos' self-immolation see Cicero, *Tusculanae* (2.52); *De divinatione* (1.23.47); Diodoros, *Biblioteca Historica* (17.107); Strabon (15.1; 15.4; 15.68); Ploutarchos, *Life of Alexandros* (69.3-4); Arrianos, *Anabasis*, (7.3; 7.18; 7.16); Aelian, *Varia Historia* (2.41); Loukianos, *The Death of Peregrinos* (25); and Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta memorabilia* (1.8 ext. 10).

³⁰We should perhaps suspect a religious mission behind Kalanos' decision to forsake Taxila, which was by all means a prosperous and religious city and “the largest of those situated between the rivers Indus and Hydaspes” (Arr. *Anab.* 7.2). The Buddhists were known for their missionary activities aimed at the powerful classes of society now occupied by Greek rulers and for their acceptance of anyone into their order regardless of their social and ethnic background. It is possible that the Greeks forged a certain level of trust with the Buddhists, who openly repudiated the doctrines of the powerful and defiant Brahmins and challenged the Brahmanical socio-political system of the four castes that relegated Greeks and other foreigners to the status of outcasts.

be consumed by flames.³¹ According to Cicero (*Divin.* 1.47), as he was about to die he proclaimed this to be a glorious death, like that of Herakles, for when “this mortal frame is burned the soul will find the light.”³² The spectacle of an unmoving human torch provoked different reactions among Greek spectators: for some he was mad; for others he was vain in seeking glory for his ability to withstand pain; and many simply marvelled at his fortitude and contempt for death (Diod. *Lib.* 17.107). Ploutarchos (*Alex.* 69) was keen to notice a comparable suicide of another *śramaṇa* who joined a mission sent by the Indian King Poros (Πῶρος) to Augustus Caesar (63 BCE-14 CE) with a Greek letter written on a parchment (Strab. 15.1.73). The sources are sparse, and for reasons unknown to us the Indian ascetic Zarmanos (Dion Cassius, *Liv.* 4.), a likely variant of *śramaṇa* with the alias Zarmanochegas (Ζαρμανοχηγᾶς), leaped naked and anointed with a smile onto a pyre in Athens wearing a “girdle round his waist” (*mekhalā*).³³

IV. Ablaze in honour of the Buddha

There are compelling similarities between the reasons behind Kalanos’ suicide and canonical descriptions of Buddhist ascetics who didn’t wish to fall into disturbing psycho-physical states because of their deteriorating health that would prevent them from engaging in and/or sustaining contemplative ways of living.

³¹ Although further details are not furnished in the sources, it would seem that Kalanos sat in a meditation posture and probably in a state of *samādhi*, during which one can withdraw from the “sense-objects, the senses and their operations (the 18 *dhātu*) and so experience temporary respite by attenuating or eliminating sensation (*vedanā*)” (Wiltshire, 1983:133). In *The Death of Peregrinos* (25) Loukianos explains that the Indians do not leap into the fire as recounted by Onesikritos. When the pyre is lit, they “stand quietly roasting in front of it, and when they do get on top, there they sit, smouldering away in a dignified manner, never budging an inch.”

³² Though references to self-immolations by Greeks in the name of a cult of Herakles would not have been missed by learned Roman readers, it seems unlikely that Kalanos would compare himself to a Greek hero who immolated himself, according to certain stories. This fabricated narrative implicitly argues for a common ancestry of self-immolation practices upheld by some Greek and Indian sects.

³³ For passing reference to the *mekhalā* or “garland for the private parts,” see *Visud.* (7.64). According to Banerjee (2009:23) Ζαρμανοχηγᾶς is a phonetic rendering of *śramaṇa-ācārya*, a Buddhist teacher. The Athenians were quite impressed with Zarmanochegas from Bargose (Βαργόση) and built a tomb inscribed for him with the words: “Zarmanochegas, an Indian from Bargose who immortalized himself according to Indian custom, lies here” (Strab. 15.1.73). We may follow Puri (1963:179, n.3), who identifies Bargose as Barygaza (present day Bharoch and capital of the Gaikwar), the great commercial port on the Narbada river mentioned in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea.

The Pāli *suttas* contain several references to Buddhist renunciants ending their own lives because they were struck by a grave or incurable disease, or because they didn't wish to relapse from an acquired spiritual state (Delhey, 2006); as in the case of Godhika, who finds it impossible to sustain “mind-release through *samādhi*” (Wiltshire, 1983:133). The majority of examples of ritual suicide or self-administered euthanasia in the Pāli canon concern spiritual adepts who were seeking alleviation of pain due to physical illness and who sought death as a way of release from their mortal confines. As noted by Wiltshire (1983:137-38), “if this body has lost its essential usefulness – and Buddhism seems to recognize that such circumstances do sometimes exist – then the body can be relinquished.” This should only be done provided that “it is understood that all bodies are intrinsically impermanent and bankrupt of self.”³⁴

The practice of cremation follows Vedic/Hindu and ancient Greek mortuary rites, and it was the “normative Buddhist way of disposing of bodies, at least the bodies of monks, in ancient India” (Strong 2004:115). Strong explains that the cremation of the Buddha (and his monks) is precisely that which ritually differentiated him and members of his order “from orthodox brahmanical ascetics and renunciants, who were typically *not* cremated... [but]...buried in sand or abandoned in a river.” The tradition of self-cremation of Hindu widows (*satī*) who burn themselves on their husband's funeral pyre is reported by Megasthenes, who further explains that self-destruction is not a dogma of the Indian philosophers (Strab. 15.68). Arora (2005:71) cites a few passing references to self-immolation in Brahmanical texts, like the contested *Vasiṣṭha sūtra* and other Upaniṣads, but these seem to be descriptive of a custom that was by no means a general practice among the *brāhmaṇas*. For them, ritual suicide, if condoned at all, was more commonly prescribed by drowning in a sacred river for purification.³⁵ This is confirmed by Pliny the Elder (*Nat.Hist.* 6.22), who wrote that the Indian ascetics accustomed to self-immolation were not part of the system of the four *varnas* (i.e., *brāhmaṇas* and the rest), but belonged to a “fifth class” that was devoted to the “pursuit of wisdom”.

Bardaisan or Bardesanes (154-222 CE), a Gnostic Christian from Syria, derived his knowledge from a meeting at Edessa with a delegation of Indian *gym-*

³⁴For Buddhism suicide is not condoned, but as Keown (1996) points out, there are certain circumstances in which such action may be permissible (i.e., severe and incurable illness) provided that the agent who takes his life is not motivated by desire for death, or driven by fear or delusion.

³⁵According to the *Manusmṛti* (11.74), suicide by fire was not a common practice among the *brāhmaṇas* and their ascetic orders but was reserved for the slayer of a *brāhmaṇa*.

nosophists sent to the Roman Emperor Elagabalus (r. 218-222 CE). He describes a renunciant order of *śramaṇas* who went forth (*pabbajjā*) in search of wisdom in contrast to the Brahmins who “receive divine wisdom of this kind by succession, in the same manner as the priesthood.” The *śramaṇas* abandon all wealth and property and in order to join the order they shave their heads, wear robes and take on bowls for alms. They reside in temples and monasteries and unlike the Brahmins they allow open membership to all nations, sects and castes of Indians. This monastic order described by Bardaisan is clearly organized according to Buddhist concepts and rituals. Most importantly, they practise self-immolation and die in a way that is most admired by all *śramaṇas*.

...they unwillingly endure the whole time of the present life, as a certain servitude to nature, and therefore they hasten to liberate their souls from the bodies [with which they are connected]. Hence, frequently, when they are seen to be well, and are neither oppressed, nor driven to desperation by any evil, they depart from life. And though they previously announce to others that it is their intention to commit suicide, yet no one impedes them; but, proclaiming all those to be happy who thus quit the present life, they enjoin certain things to the domestics and kindred of the dead: so stable and true do they, and also the multitude, believe the assertion to be, that souls [in another life] associate with each other. But as soon as those, to whom they have proclaimed that this is their intention, have heard the mandates given to them, they deliver the body to fire, in order that they may separate the soul from the body in the purest manner, and thus they die celebrated by all the Samanaeans.³⁶

While suicide figures in the logic of several Indian religions (Wiltshire, 1983), the evidence suggests that the *śramaṇa* order favouring suicide by fire were in fact Buddhists, who share a long history of self-immolation not only in India, but in China, Vietnam, and more recently in Tibet.³⁷ There are explicit references

³⁶Cited in Porphyry, (*de Abst.* 4.18); translated by Thomas Taylor. References to the “soul” should not deter us, for the subtle doctrine of *anātman* may not have been widely discussed outside Buddhist circles.

³⁷For a landmark study on self-immolations performed by Chinese Buddhists from the 5th to the 10th centuries see Gernet (1960) and Benn’s (2007a) comprehensive treatment of the topic. Strong (2004:103) explains that in China self-immolations were called *shao shen* (one of the terms used for cremation) and there were all sorts of “related devotional practices, such as suicides by

to ritual suicide in general, and auto-cremation in particular, in early canonical and later Indian Buddhist scriptures and in Chinese reports by the monks Faxian (320?-420?) and Xuanzang (600-664), who travelled to India in search of the Buddha's teachings (Benn, 2007b:105-106). It seems that Buddhist contemplatives across Asia "treated suicide as something distinctly different from killing other sentient beings and that in contrast to Western notions of human life as sacred, life does not have such basic value in Buddhism" (Zimmermann, 2006:7). The Buddhist tradition makes a clear distinction between the suicide of an ordinary person (an act that is met with categorical disapproval) and the giving up of the body by one who has attained the culmination of Buddhist discipline. Those who have completed their spiritual training may "sever their last link with the world and voluntarily pass into *nirvāṇa*, thus definitely escaping from the world of rebirths" (Lamotte, 1987:106).

More pertinently, self-immolations are intimately related to Buddha Śākyamuni, who is reported by some influential recountings to have ended his own life by auto-cremation,³⁸ and in former times threw himself into "a great abyss, ablaze and on fire for the sake of the well-spoken [dharma]" (*Rāstrapālapariṣcchā-sūtra*, 36.11; Boucher, 2008:144). A Buddhist narrative from the *Mahāvastu* tells that at the moment of Śākyamuni's conception in his mother's womb five hundred *pratyekabuddhas* assembled at the Deer Park in Sarnath (where Śākyamuni would later deliver his first sermon) and liberated themselves from their bodies in a spectacular manner. Rising high up in the air to a height of seven palm trees they immolated themselves, bursting into flames (Lamotte, 1987:108). This pyrotechnic phantasmagoria anticipates the Buddha's enlightening teachings at the Deer Park and suggests some ancient form of sacrifice/offering that marks the birth of a great leader.³⁹

fire or the burning off of fingers and arms." In truth, they were so widespread in China that the famous 6th century Chinese text of memoirs, the *Gaoseng zhuan* (*Lives of Eminent Monks*) lists "self-immolators" (*wang shen*) among ten categories of Buddhist vocation (Lopez, 2008:208). Recently, there have been an alarming number of self-immolations by lay Buddhists and monastics in Tibet. They resemble similar public outcries of despair and hope performed by Vietnamese monks who faced oppression of religious freedom and persecution in the 70s.

³⁸The recounted death of the Buddha was certainly not a typical cremation, for the pyre beneath his body reportedly ignited of its own accord. Attempting to cremate the Buddha's body, the Malla chieftains found that they could not light the pyre. It was only with the arrival of Mahākāśyapa along with a company of five hundred monks that the funeral pyre began to burn (Wilson, 2003:37).

³⁹On the prevalence of sacrificial immolations and cosmogonic myths Eliade (1972:184-186) explains: "The mythical motif of a 'birth' brought about by an immolation is found in countless

When he was still a bodhisattva, the past Buddha Maṅgala is said to have wrapped his whole body in the manner of “making a torch”. As an offering to the *caitya* of another Buddha, he set his body “ablaze, along with a golden thousand-wick butter lamp” (Strong, 2004:103). But he was not the only one, for the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka-sūtra* narrates the story of the bodhisattva Sarvasattvapriyadarśana, who “ate resins and drank oil for twelve years and then wrapped his body in garments and bathed in oil before setting himself ablaze in honour of a buddha; he burned, we are told, for twelve thousand years.”⁴⁰

There are many references to the ritual significance of Buddhist cremation and the symbolic potency of fire.⁴¹ According to Strong (2004:103), in at least one tradition the emperor Aśoka is said to have “honoured the relics of the Buddha by setting himself on fire” in the manner of a “wheel-turning monarch” (*cakravartin*), having his body first “wrapped in cotton... and having himself soaked with five hundred pots of scented oil.” He argues that virtually all later auto-cremations by Buddhists were done in honour of their master’s relics and are intimately linked to the Buddha’s own funeral. These incidents in the Buddhist tradition are not simply sacrifices, but “acts of imitation and appropriation, attempts to repeat the Buddha’s own cremation and creation of relics.”⁴²

A Buddhist preoccupation with the physical and symbolic properties of fire has given rise to the most common religious metaphor for the state of attaining *nibbāna*: a fire fuelled by “desire” (*rāga*), “aversion” (*dosa*) and “ignorance” (*moha*) going out.⁴³ The truth of human suffering has the “characteristics of af-

contexts: it is not only the Cosmos that is born as the result of the immolation of a Primordial Being and from his own substance; the same is true of food plants, human races, or different social classes... On the plane of construction rites the immolated being, as we have seen, acquires a new body: the building that it has made a ‘living,’ hence enduring, thing by its violent death. In all these myths death by violence is creative.”

⁴⁰Cuevas & Stone (2007:35). *Jātaka* narratives about the bodhisattva’s past lives abound with compassionate stories of self-sacrifice, as in the case of the white rabbit king who “was able to give up his body for the cause of the religion and jumped into fire as an offering to the hungry religious man” (Jan 1981:128).

⁴¹Whenever they reveal themselves to bodhisattvas Buddhas assume the aspect of emitting flames, we are told in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* (Taddei, 1992:106), and reliefs from Amarāvati depict the Buddha as a pillar of fire (Wilson, 2003:44, n.20).

⁴²A modern adaptation on the theme of sacrificial relics is artistically portrayed in Ki-duk Kim’s film (2003), “Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring,” where the Korean Buddhist teacher sets himself ablaze on a wooden boat leaving behind relics to be discovered by his disciple.

⁴³In his English translation of the *Visuddhimagga* (*Visud.*), Bhikkhu Ñānamoli explains that the original meaning of the word *nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvāṇa*) meant ‘extinction’ of a fire by ceasing to

flicting [and] its function is to burn” (*Visud.* 16.23). The “accessories of enlightenment” are often compared to the “light of a blazing fire” which burns up obscuration and is called “the radiating” (*Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, 10.34). In the *Fire Sermon* (SN 35.28), the Buddha discourses on conventional reality constructed by the five senses that are metaphorically speaking on fire.⁴⁴ Elsewhere he resorts to apotropaic visions of self-incineration to admonish his disciples against the dangers of sexual desire, for it is better for an ascetic “to sit or lie down embracing that mass of fire burning, blazing and glowing” than “embracing a warrior-noble maiden or a brahman maiden or a maiden of householder family, with soft, delicate hands and feet” (AN 7.68).⁴⁵

Consumption by “fire” (Pāli. *tejo*) figures prominently in Buddhist eschatology, for it is the medium by which our universe will come to the end of its cycle in a massive conflagration.⁴⁶ Arguably, the entire universe will undergo a fiery process of death, rebirth and purification, for in early Buddhism fire also takes on the element of cleansing and serves as a potent metaphor of a single force that both consumes/destroys and illuminates/creates. Fire is a tangible force that corresponds to one of the four “primary elements” (*mahā-bhūta*) of the material world and our physical constitution, the element that gives rise to heat and mat-

blow and it has been extended to mean extinction of fire by any means, for example the going out of a lamp’s flame (Buddhaghosa, 2010:289, n.73). Compare with a stanza from the Tibetan *Mahāyānasamgraha* (47a-3.4), *la lar me bzhin mya ngan ’das // nam yang med pa ma yin te*, “like a fire, *nirvāṇa* is shown to some and annihilation to others.” For instances of “fire” similes and metaphors in early Buddhism see Thānissaro Bhikkhu (1993).

⁴⁴“Monks, all things are on fire. And what are all things which are on fire? The eye is on fire. Forms are on fire. Eye-consciousness is on fire. Impressions received by the eye are on fire. And whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye is also on fire. And with what are these on fire? [There are] with the fire of desire, with the fire of aversion, and with the fire of ignorance.”

⁴⁵“I say to you, bhikkhus, I declare to you, bhikkhus, that it would be better for one who is unvirtuous, who is evil-natured, of unclean and suspect habits, secretive of his acts, who is not an ascetic and claims to be one, who does not lead the life of purity and claims to do so, who is rotten within, lecherous, and full of corruption, to sit down or lie down embracing that great mass of fire burning, blazing and glowing.” Translation from Pāli by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, *The Path of Purification* (2010:50-51).

⁴⁶The Buddha prophesied that our world will be destroyed by the gradual appearance of seven consecutive suns during which “the whole world-sphere together with the hundred thousand million other world-spheres catches fire.” As long as there is anything left “the size of an atom” the fire will not go out until “all formed things have been consumed. And like the flame that burns ghee and oil, it leaves no ash.” (*Anguttara Nikaya* 7.62; *The Sermon of the Seven Suns*).

uration.⁴⁷ In its luminous form it serves as an object (*kaṣiṇa*) of meditation that can lead to the attainment of supernormal faculties. Buddhaghosa (*Visud.* 5.30) explains that the fire *kaṣiṇa* is the basis for such powers as “smoking, flaming, causing showers of sparks, countering fire with fire, ability to burn only what one wants to burn... causing light for the purpose of seeing visible objects with the divine eye, [and] burning up the body by means of the fire element at the time of attaining Nibbāna.”

Hence, a Buddhist practitioner accomplished in *samatha*, like the Elder Sañjīva, can't be burnt by fire (*Visud.* 23.37). Fire will not harm one who has gone through the “meditative absorptions” (*jhāna*) and has attained “the base consisting of boundless consciousness.” Such is the case of Mahā Nāga, who attained cessation in his mother's living-room unaffected when the establishment went up in flames (23.36), and of Saṅkicca, who was still in his mother's womb when she was pierced by stakes and placed on a pyre. He miraculously survived the pyre through “success by intervention of knowledge” and later attained Arhatship (12.28). Uttarā, a lay woman devotee of the Buddha attained loving-kindness and did not burn when hot oil was thrown at her by the jealous harlot Sirimā (12.34). An adept who has mastery over the element of fire may willingly combust into flames like the aged bhikkhu Subhadda, who did not want to die after his master had passed away, so he “seated himself before the Buddha and incinerated his body completely, passing into final *nirvāṇa* as the Buddha lay dying” (Wilson, 2003:39). Arguably, the most impressive display of self-immolation reported in the Pāli canon is that of Dabba Mallaputta, the bhikkhu who died bursting into flames while seated cross-legged in the air so that “neither ashes nor soot could be discerned” (*Udāna Sutta*, 8.9).

V. Ancient histories of a luminous silence

Several aspects examined in this study suggest a certain depth and intensity in the exchanges that transpired between Hellenes and Buddhists in Hellenistic times. The impact of the encounter between Buddhists and the Hellenistic world is not

⁴⁷Just as “earth” (*paṭhāvi*) is the material aggregate of solidity and hardness, “air” (*vāyo*) is for distension and motion, and “water” (*āpo*) for liquidity and cohesion (Buddhaghosa, 2010:845). Buddhaghosa further elaborates on the properties of fire when he conjures up image of burned flesh to illustrate the repulsiveness of human “skin” (*taca*). He writes: “The inner skin envelops the whole body...But as to colour, the skin itself is white; and its whiteness becomes evident when the outer cuticle is destroyed by contact with the flame of fire” (*Visud.* 8.93).

simply the outcome of something entirely new coming from the outside, but the inside acquiring renewed forms of articulation in its contact with the “outside-other”. For while Indian religious concepts were translated into Hellenistic and Roman cultural idiom and philosophical terminology, more subtle ways of contemplation were adopted that were not entirely foreign to the spiritual and philosophical heritage of the ancient Greeks.⁴⁸ As I have argued elsewhere (Halkias 2014), intricate processes of cultural and philosophical innovation are not simply the results of historical encounters between “East” and “West” as discreet geographical entities, nor are they the single outcome of symmetrical transfers of knowledge. In the cosmopolitan milieu of the Hellenistic period contacts between Hellenes and Buddhists in Alexandria, Gandhāra and Bactria led to a revitalization and elucidation of existing trends within each tradition, and to an eclectic appropriation of religious concepts and imagery by later Indo-Greek converts to Buddhism and Indian Buddhists.

It has been especially instructive to explain the enigmatic practice of Kalanos’ death within the Buddhist tradition – which as we have seen exhibits an ongoing preoccupation with fire and cremation and permits suicide under the circumstances recounted by Kalanos. The evidence suggests that ritual suicide by fire was upheld by some early Indian Buddhist sects. The frequency of such incidents did not pass unnoticed by Greeks and Romans and triggered cultural and intellectual responses in the Hellenistic world. For even if the incandescent spectacle of Kalanos’ auto-cremation exceeded what some Greek wisdom-seekers envisioned as an end of their contemplative life, this radical form of self-transcendence left its deep impression on Hellenistic and Roman writers who domesticated it as a literary *topos* for romanticising the triumph of Indian asceticism over that which is human, mortal and transitory (Halbfass, 1988:13). And yet the influence of India on Greco-Roman times is just one aspect of a more intriguing story that predates Alexandros and the historical Buddha. Narratives of self-immolating *śramaṇas* could and did find voice in pre-Hellenistic esoteric traditions that considered

⁴⁸A comparative study of Hellenistic and Buddhist systems of soteriology should account for the history of Greek ascetic traditions (i.e., Heraklitos, Pythagoras, Diogenes), the pre-Hellenistic use of “sceptical doctrines” and the “therapeutic aspects of philosophy” (i.e., Pythagoras, Asklepios, Plato) prior to the advent of Buddhism. A case in point is the ubiquitous use of medical analogies of “illness and therapy” in Buddhist soteriology and several schools of Hellenistic philosophy, e.g., Epikourian, Stoic and Pyrrhonian (Gowans, 2010). These parallels may very well be shown to reflect cases of individual articulations with shared roots and are not the by-product of direct borrowing. For an illuminating treatment of medical analogies in Epikouros see Nussbaum (2013:102-139).

death by fire “a standard way of attaining heroic status” – especially by lightning, which was seen as “the purest form of fire” (Kingsley 1995a:258). Heroic acts of immortalization by auto-cremation featured in Orphic mysteries and in the earliest traditions surrounding Herakles’ fiery death on Mt. Oeta and Empedokles’ plunge into the active volcanic crater of Etna. So when, centuries later, the Greek Cynic Peregrinos (c.100-165 CE) staged his self-apotheosis on a pyre at the Olympic festival, he acted in the same way as the Olympic pancratiast Timanthes of Kleonai had done six centuries before him in Peloponnesos, emulating the heroic sacrifice of Herakles (Paus. 6.8.4). Loukianos reports (*Περὶ τῆς Περεγγρίνου Τελευτηῆς*) that Peregrinos burned himself publicly on stage not far from Olympia soon after delivering his own funeral oration. His devoted disciple Theagenes saw his master going up in smoke “riding upon the fire” (*ὄχουόμενος ἐπὶ τοῦ πυρός*) to join the immortal gods.

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