

THE JOURNAL  
OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
BUDDHIST STUDIES

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*Volume 5*

*1982*

*Number 2*

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# A New Approach to the Intra-Mādhyamika Confrontation over the Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika Methods of Refutation

by Shohei Ichimura

## I

There is good reason to believe that the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (*Vigraha*, hereafter), one of the definitive works of Nāgārjuna, was not only the starting point of controversy between Naiyāyika logicians and Mādhyamika dialecticians, but also the fountain-head of the intra-Buddhist controversy which divided the Mādhyamika into two camps: the Svātantrika and the Prāsaṅgika schools. While the intensity of Hindu-Buddhist confrontation exhibited in classical and medieval India is understandable in view of their doctrinal differences, the intensity of the intra-Mādhyamika confrontation is somewhat surprising, as the two camps held the same doctrine, i.e., universal emptiness (*śūnyatā*), differing only in their methods of demonstrating it. The Svātantrika and the Prāsaṅgika, respectively, relied on the syllogistic and dialectic<sup>1</sup> forms of argument, both of which, in fact, were given by Nāgārjuna in the *Vigraha*. The intra-Mādhyamika dispute, though no doubt contributing to the cause of methodological refinement, seems at times to have lost sight of the middle course. In this respect, I am inclined to think that the two methods should be given equal analysis, for the sake of a clearer understanding of their common doctrinal insight and method of demonstration. The purpose of this paper is to open the way to a more balanced analysis of the contesting methods in terms of the logical principle of *anvaya-vyatireka*.<sup>2</sup>

Mādhyamika studies made a remarkable comeback in postwar academic circles, with rekindled interest in philosophical and religious studies of both Mādhyamika doctrine and methodology. In particular, Prof. Murti's interpretation<sup>3</sup> had a powerful impact on Western minds, as he treated Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika philosophy and dialectic as parallel to the Kantian critique of Reason. As a result, the Mādhyamika dialectic and the concept of *śūnyatā* have been surrounded by an aura of myth, which has, in turn, made demythologization necessary. In this respect, I believe the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika controversy can be instructive; since both methods are supposed to have been equally designed to reveal the concept of *śūnyatā*, there must be present in their forms some common structural criterion or basis upon which the methods can be equally analyzed, examined, or justified. I think that this criterion and basis can be determined to be the *anvaya* and *vyatireka* operations, or positive and negative instantiations.

It is generally accepted that Bhāvaviveka, the forefather of the Svātantrika school, divided the higher truth (*paramārtha-satya*) into two: (a) that which totally transcends discursive thought (*anabhisamskāra-pravṛtti*), which is frequently identified with the *lokottara*, *anāsvāra*, or *niṣprapañca*; and (b) that which is called semi-transcendent (*sābhisamskāra-pravṛtti*), the *śuddha-laukika-jñāna*. In this scheme, the syllogistic method is localized in the second, intermediary dimension, which connects the lower, conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya* or *vyavahāra*) to the higher truth. Candrakīrti, the foremost Prāsaṅgika, on the other hand, divided the *lower* truth into two: (a) that which is conventionally true (*lokata eva satya*) and (b) that which is conventionally fallacious (*lokata eva mithyā*). He did not set forth any intermediary dimension such as in Bhāvaviveka's scheme, leaving the higher truth exclusively to the silent inner experience of the enlightened. These divisions can, however, be forsaken for the time being as inessential to examining and correlating the two methods in terms of *anvaya* and *vyatireka*, since (1) Nāgārjuna applied both methods in *Vigraha*, and at times translated the dialectic of the main verses into syllogistic formulas in the commentary;

and (2) theoretically, the object of repudiation is exactly the same for the dialectic and the syllogistic method.

The *dictum*, that logico-linguistic convention (*vyavahāra*) is reliable for repudiating its own practicality, but is not reliable for directly expressing the higher truth (*paramārtha-satya*), can equally apply to the Svātantrika and the Prāsaṅgika positions, because Nāgārjuna uses both methods to demonstrate the ultimate impracticality of convention in the *Vigraha*. Taking cues from this text, Prof. Murti amplified the Prāsaṅgika methodology,<sup>4</sup> claiming that the Mādhyamika dialectic is intended to resolve the conflict inherent in every view (or thesis, *dṛṣṭi*) and its opposite, by dealing with the ultimate source of their conflict, embedded in Reason. Murti held that this task is to be accomplished by repudiating both views, respectively or in combination, which are mutually in conflict, and that their repudiation, however, must be accomplished exclusively on the basis of the self-contradiction disclosed in each view. In his interpretation, thus, the Mādhyamika dialectic deals with the ultimate seat of inner conflict, functionally indicated in parallel to the Kantian principle of Reason, which manifests itself in the conflicting views. In his analysis, however, Murti failed to take fully into account the Svātantrika methodology, such as the syllogistic form of argument, which Nāgārjuna also used in his own commentary to the *Vigraha*. I am inclined to think that Bhāvaviveka must have developed his Svātantrika method on the basis of this precedent.

### III

The Indian syllogistic form of argument is in part inductive, because any universal statement which is crucial to logical reasoning is required by its rules to be substantiated by some appropriate instance (*dṛṣṭānta*). When Nāgārjuna argues against the reality of *śabda* (vocal word) in terms of the Abhidharmist causal concept of *hetu-pratyaya-tā*, he never fails to abide by such rules. Take for instance *kārikā* 1 of the *Vigraha*,<sup>5</sup> in which, as uttered by the *pūrvapakṣin*, Nāgārjuna presents a deductive statement:

If *all existent entities have no svabhāva to be found anywhere (then) your statement (which is one of them) has no svabhāva.* (But, in this case,) such (an empty) word may not establish any repudiation.

Commenting on this *kārikā*, Nāgārjuna introduces as a *dr̥ṣṭānta* a sprout, and demonstrates that no *svabhāva* is found either in its causes (*hetu*), e.g., a seed; or in its conditions (*pratyaya*), e.g. soil; or in both or neither.<sup>6</sup> Next, he provides a similar analysis of the origin of a vocal word, to the effect that no *svabhāva* is found either in material elements (*mahābhūta*), such as air, or in anatomical factors, such as the vocal chords (throat), tongue, teeth, etc.<sup>7</sup> Thus, he successfully demonstrates that *śabda-pramāṇa* (i.e., speech as a means of knowledge) has no *svabhāva* either.<sup>8</sup> The entire argument can neatly be formulated in the traditional five-membered syllogism:

- (1) *pratijñā*: “Vocal word has no *svabhāva*, hence is empty.”
- (2) *hetu*: “Because it arises from (multiple) causes and conditions.”
- (3) *udāharāṇa*: “Like a sprout, whose own-being (*svabhāva*) is not found anywhere in those factors.”
- (4) *upanaya*: “Similarly, a vocal word has no *svabhāva* anywhere.”
- (5) *nigamana*: “Hence, it is *niḥsvabhāva* (without own-being), hence, empty.”

In a standard syllogism, the *udāharāṇa* is supposed to give universal concomitance (*vyāpti*) when accompanied by a *dr̥ṣṭānta*. Nāgārjuna omitted it, but obviously implied it in the *dr̥ṣṭānta* statement. From the inductive point of view, this is sufficient for the remaining instances, which, although not examined, are reasonably assumed to be similar in nature.

In formulating his syllogistic arguments, Bhāvaviveka conforms to Nāgārjuna’s method very closely in regard to (a) the subject matter of repudiation and (b) the nature of logical concomitance. Although he adopted Dignāga’s three-membered syllogism, he was not bound to it, and, in fact, at times formulated his arguments by the five-membered model. His commentary<sup>9</sup> on *Mādhyamakakārikās* IV, 1 (*Skandhapariḥṣā*), for instance, includes one such instance. Actually, he gives several

syllogisms in that context, of which, however, I shall quote only three, which include the five-membered formula and thereby show how Bhāvaviveka expresses syllogistically the same arguments that Nāgārjuna expresses dialectically in the *Vigraha*. The first half of the *kārikā* in question reads: “No *rūpa-skandha* is perceived when its constituent elements (*bhūtas*) are not perceived.”<sup>10</sup> Bhāvaviveka formulates a syllogism as follows:<sup>11</sup>

- (1) *pratijñā*: Transcendentally, the *rūpaskandha* is not real.
- (2) *hetu*: Because its cognition has no reality, because constituent elements are not perceived.
- (3) *udāharana*: Whenever a cognition is unreal because the constituent elements of its object are not perceived, that object (of cognition) is unreal, just as “an army” (which consists of its constituent individual soldiers).
- (4) *upanaya*: Similarly, the cognition of *rūpaskandha* is unreal because its constituent elements are not perceived.
- (5) *nigamana*: Therefore, the *rūpaskandha* is unreal.

The reality of *rūpaskandha* is repudiated here on the ground that its cognition is unreal. The following two syllogisms respectively repudiate the reality of the object (*viṣaya*) of cognition and the object (*padārtha*) of the word-symbol (*śabda*):<sup>12</sup>

- (1) *pratijñā*: Transcendentally, the object of a cognition of *rūpaskandha* is not real.
  - (2) *hetu*: Because it is a (mere) cognition.
  - (3) *drṣṭānta*: Just as a cognition of a forest.
- (1) *pratijñā*: Transcendentally, the object-meaning of a word is unreal.
  - (2) *hetu*: Because it is a (merely heard) word (*śabda*).
  - (3) *drṣṭānta*: Just as the word “army.”

Two points are important: (1) Bhāvaviveka clearly differentiates four factors of consciousness in his repudiation of *rūpaskandha*: (a) cognition, (b) referential object, (c) linguistic symbol and (d) referential meaning. (2) The repudiation of *rūpaskandha* is based on the unreality of its cognition and corresponding object (of the cognition), and on the unreality of its linguistic symbol and the corresponding meaning (of the symbol). In the *Vigraha*., Nāgārjuna bases his dialectical negation

first upon the unreality of *śabda-pramāṇa*, implying repudiation of its efficiency in fetching its object (*prameya*), and second, on the ground that the *pramāṇa* and the *prameya* are only reciprocally existent, hence unreal.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV

Of the two methods Nāgārjuna applies in the *Vigraha.*, his syllogistic argument is invariably equipped with a singular concomitance based on Buddhist causality, i.e., *hetu-pratyaya-tā*. This method is analytical, designed to reduce every entity to its constituent elements, thereby exposing the merely nominal nature of word and universal. Simultaneously, however, as specified above, it is also designed inductively to validate logical concomitance. Bhāvaviveka conforms to this general Nāgārjunian precedent by giving a series of arguments, as shown above. The problem, however, is that the syllogistic argument which Bhāvaviveka has intimated above will not easily be accepted by non-Buddhists, precisely because of the particular concomitance inherited from Nāgārjuna. To elucidate this point, I shall quote two model formulas from Bhāvaviveka's short essay *Karaṭalaratna*,<sup>14</sup> which read as follows:

- (1) *pratijñā*: The *saṃskṛta-dharmas* are empty transcendently.
- (2) *hetu*: Because they are originated from causes and conditions.
- (3) *drṣṭānta*: Just as things created by magic.

- (1) *pratijñā*: The *asaṃskṛta-dharmas* are empty transcendently.
- (2) *hetu*: Because they have no origination.
- (3) *drṣṭānta*: Just as a sky-flower.

We notice, at once, three formal peculiarities: (1) the *pratijñā* is invariably negation, (2) it is controlled by an adverbial term, *paramārthatas*, and (3) it has a *sapakṣa*, but no *vipakṣa*, i.e., there is nothing whatsoever that is not empty. First, although *paramārthatas* is attached to the *pratijñā*, we can easily see that it is supposed to be ascribed to the concomitance (*vyāpti*). "What-

ever arises from causes and conditions,” of which every empirical entity, such as *rūpaskandha*, *buddhi*, *śabda*, *viśaya*, etc., can become a variable as its subject term, must be, from the transcendental point of view, predicated with a negation such as “*asvabhāva*,” “*śūnya*,” or “*asat*.” Second, the problem of the *dṛṣ-  
tānta* comes to the forefront. According to the logical rules of *anvaya* and *vyatireka*, any valid concomitance must separate two mutually contrapositive classes of things, whereby one class member (*sapakṣa*) can enter the subject term of the concomitance and simultaneously can be predicated by the predicables specified as concomitant (e.g., a hill predicated as “having smoke” also be predicated as “having fire”). This constitutes the rule of *anvaya*, or positive instantiation. Simultaneously, however, the other class member (*vipakṣa*) (e.g., an iceberg) can never enter the subject term of the concomitance, nor can they be predicated by the same predicables. This, then, constitutes the rule of *vyatireka*, or negative instantiation. The Svātantrika concomitance is, however, designed to establish universal emptiness, so as to establish as empty not only every empirical entity (that arises from causes and conditions) for the class of *sapakṣa* but also every member of the class of *vipakṣa* (that does not empirically arise). Bhāvaviveka places in the latter class (*vipakṣa*) the transcendental dharmas of the Abhidharmist and imaginary entities, such as *svabhāva*. It is to this latter class of things (*vipakṣa*) that he applies the second syllogism quoted above in order to introduce transcendental negation on the basis of “empirical non-arising,” and thereby applies one and the same predication: “empty” or “unreal,” as applied to the class members of *sapakṣa*. This is a flagrant violation of the logical rules.

It is well known that Nāgārjuna resorts to metaphors, such as magical entities (*māyāvat*), dreams, etc., and that in the *Vigraha*,<sup>15</sup> he applies such instances to demonstrate the fact that logico-linguistic affirmation and negation as well as the phenomenal interaction of the *pramāṇa* and *prameya* are equally comparable to such entities. As we have already seen, Bhāvaviveka follows him in this (i.e., “like a sky-flower,” which is non-existent). The problem, however, is that such instances can hardly convince the opponent engaged in doctrinal controversy. Following Dignāga, Bhāvaviveka must have known that the most effective reason (*hetu*) is the one (a) that the opponent

cannot reject and (b) that embodies one's own establishment of the basis upon which the opponent's thesis is to be refuted.<sup>16</sup> It is on this point that Candrakīrti focuses his criticism of the Svātantrika, pointing out that their syllogistic argument is ineffectual. Be that as it may, I have somewhat a different evaluation of the Svātantrika syllogistic form of argument, taking into consideration the singular condition which Nāgārjuna presupposes for his successful dialectic. I have elsewhere<sup>17</sup> called that condition the "Dialectical Context" in which the dual operations of *anvaya* and *vyatireka* are necessarily juxtaposed, so as to bring about a total contradiction. It is in this context that I believe the Svātantrika method can be redeemed.

## V

Both Mādhyamika syllogistic and dialectical methods are intended to review our ordinary experience in terms of the insight of śūnyatā, and ultimately, I believe, to dissolve the sentential construction of the subject (predicated) and the predicate (predicable), which constitutes the basis of convention (*vyavahāra*). Take Nāgārjuna's dialectic in the *Vigraha.*, for instance, where the Naiyāyika thesis that a cognitive agent (*pramāṇa*), such as *śabda*, imparts its object (*prameya*) as a cognition, is repudiated on the basis that a cognitive faculty cannot meet or interact with its object insofar as *svabhāva* is ascribed to them. Nāgārjuna demonstrates this by citing the example of a lamp and darkness, which conventionally are co-present in a given spatio-temporal domain, yet *cannot* be co-present: *light* and *darkness* cannot be at one and the same place and time. Bhāvaviveka's syllogism expresses this same state of affairs when he says (my rephrasing):

- (1) *pratijñā*: Cognition does not fetch its real object.
- (2) *hetu*: Because cognition itself is illusory, as it does not fetch any constituent elements.
- (3) *dṛṣṭānta*: Just as a cognition of an army (an imaginary entity) unable to cognize its multiple constituent elements, such as individual soldiers, cannot fetch its real object.

In substantiating this syllogism further, Bhāvaviveka successively repudiates the object of cognition (*prameya*) and the object of a word (*śabda-padārtha*) as unreal, on account of the unreality respectively, of cognition and of vocal word. The question is: Why is Bhāvaviveka obliged invariably to attach the adverbial term *paramārthatas* to each syllogism? I believe an answer can be drawn from the pre-classical Abhidharmist usage, as recorded in the *Kathāvatthu*.

It is my belief that the origin of the Nāgārjunian dialectic can be traced to the Abhidharmist controversy between the Theravādin and the Pudgalavādin on the metaphysical status of the *pudgala*. The problem with their controversy was logical indeterminacy, in that the *anvaya-vyatireka* operations cannot determine the validity or invalidity of the parties' theses, namely the Theravādin "*pudgala* is unreal" and the Pudgalavādin "*pudgala* is real." The heart of the problem is to be found in adverbial qualification similar to that of the Svātantrika, namely, "*saccikaṭṭhaparamatṭhena*," which is applied to *both* theses in the controversy.<sup>18</sup> The Theravādin uses this qualification in order to classify dharmas as "transcendentally real," while excluding those empirical *pudgalas* as "transcendentally unreal." The problem is that the reality of one thing and the unreality of another thing are asserted in one and the same transcendental context. It was due to the doctrinal ambiguity created by the adverbial term, such as "in a transcendental context," that the two mutually contrapositive classes of entities cannot be clearly separated. Candrakīrti's criticism of the Svātantrika use of *paramārthatas*<sup>19</sup> seems to have been directed at this same context. He says that the adverbial term, which is designed to indicate concomitance based on transcendental insight, cannot be accepted by non-Buddhists, since they do not understand the "transcendental context" specified by the term. Nor is it correct from the logical point of view, because it involves a categorial mistake, or violation of the boundary between empirical and non-empirical dimensions. In the concomitance in question, an object of cognition, being taken for granted as existent in the sphere of empirical perception, is also predicated by a transcendental negation as "non-existent," "empty," etc. This can be condemned even conventionally.

Nāgārjuna, I believe, overcame the Abhidharmist pitfalls by way of repudiating the reality of both classes, dharmas and *puḍgalas*. The way in which Theravādins and Puḍgalavādins claimed, respectively, that “*puḍgala* is unreal” and that “*puḍgala* is real” parallels the way in which opposing assertions are contrived in the *Vigraha*., where one party claims that a *light* illuminates darkness, while the other, that *darkness* shades off light. Nāgārjuna repudiates both positions on the basis of the dialectical context that is the necessary condition of the repudiation. The dialectic succeeds by pressing the convention that requires the illumining agent, *light*, and the recipient object of illumination, *darkness*, to be co-present, or in actual interaction, at the moment of illumination. Similarly, Nāgārjuna juxtaposes the *pramāṇa* and the *prameya* (i.e., cognitive faculty and its object, which respectively constitute *sapakṣa* and *vipakṣa*) in the *same spatio-temporal sphere*, as required by convention for cognition. I think *Bhāvaviveka* deliberately reversed the direction here in order to translate this dialectical context into his syllogistic concomitance, not toward the Abhidharmist indeterminacy, but to the universal repudiation of the reality of logico-linguistic conventions. The term “*paramārthatas*” here means to safeguard anything not to be placed beyond the domain of conventional truth or, more in his own terms, not to be placed beyond the intermediary dimension designated as the *śuddha-laukika-jñāna*.

## VI

Although Nāgārjuna’s method of refutation has been traditionally identified as *prasaṅgavākya*, strictly speaking, his dialectic consisted of two types—syllogistic and *reductio-ad-absurdum* arguments. The former applies the Buddhist’s own concomitance to the opponent’s view on the basis of a transcendental context, whereas the latter is designed to juxtapose one view with its correlative in a dialectical context. My discussion has been directed at showing that the Svātantrika transcendental context and the Prāsaṅgika dialectical context are identical, and further to indicate that these two essentially identical con-

texts are also identical with that of the pre-classical Abhidharmists. It is interesting to note that, of two different passages treating the concept of *svabhāva*, one, the Abhidharmist, leads to an insoluble antithesis (impracticality of convention), while the other, the Mādhyamika, undertakes a simultaneous repudiation (transcendence from convention). The foregoing analysis has necessarily been limited in scope and source material, and has the disadvantage of being incapable of dealing with the transcendental consciousness itself, lofty and rich in content, in which the Mādhamika, as well as Buddhist doctrine as a whole, is deeply rooted. If my analysis is accepted, however, it may at least be accepted that there is a definite continuity between the Hīnayāna *Abhidharma* and the Mahāyāna, and that Mahāyāna doctrine was *not* a deviation from the orthodoxy.

## NOTES

1. "Syllogism" and "Dialectic" are, respectively, equivalent to the Sanskrit *anumāna* and *prasaṅga*, of which the former is more properly expressed as inferential method, while the latter may also be expressed as the *reductio-ad-absurdum* method.

2. Cf. S. Ichimura, "A Study of the Mādhyamika Method of Refutation, Especially of its Affinity to that of *Kathāvatthu*," *JIAS*, III, 1 (1980), p. 10ff.

3. *The Central Conception of Buddhism*, London: 1960.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 128f.

5. Ed. by E. H. Johnston and A. Kunst, *MCB* (1948–51), p. 108: *sarveṣāṃ bhāvānāṃ sarvatra na vidyate svabhāvaś cet / tvad vacanam asvabhāvaṃ na nivar-tayitum svabhāvam alam //*

6. *Ibid.* *na hi bīje hetubhūte 'nkuro 'sti, na pṛthivyaptejovāyāvādīnām ekaikasmin pratyayasamjñite, na pratyayeṣu sāmagreṣu, na hetupratyayasāmagryām, na hetupratyayavinirmuktaḥ pṛthag eva ca /*

7. *Ibid.* *yady evam, tavāpi vacanam . . . tad api hetau nāsti mahābhūteṣu sam-prayukteṣu viparyukteṣu vā, pratyayeṣu nāsty urahkantharuṣṭhajihvādantamūlatālu-nāsikāmūrdhahprabhṛtiṣu yatneṣu, ubhayasāmagryām nāsti, hetupratyayavinirmuktaṃ pṛthag eva ca nāsti /*

8. *Ibid.* *yasmād sarvatra nāsti tasmān niḥsvabhāvam / yasmān niḥsvabhāvam tasmāc chūnyam /*

9. *Prajñāpradīpa*: 般若燈論釋, *Taishō*. XXX, No. 1566, pp. 50–136.

10. La Vallée Poussin's edition, with *Prasannapadā* (p. 123): *rūpakāraṇa-nirmuktaṃ na rūpam upalabhyate!*

11. *Taishō.*, p. 68c (25–8):

- (1) 第一義中 驗色無實
- (2) 自因不受故 彼覺無體故
- (3) 若自因不受 覺無體者 彼實非有 如軍衆等
- (4) 色因不可取 色覺無自體
- (5) 亦復如是

12. *Ibid.*, p. 68c (28–9) - p. 69a (1–2):

- (1) 第一義中 色覺境界 體非實有
- (2) 何以故 以覺故
- (3) 譬如林等覺
- (1) 第一義中 色聲句義 境界無實
- (2) 何以故 以聞故
- (3) 譬如軍等聲

13. Cf. Ichimura, "A Study on the Mādhyamika Method of Refutation and its Influence on Buddhist Logic," *JIAS*, IV, 1(1981), p. 91f.

14. Sanskritized by N. Aiyaswami Shastri from the Chinese *Chang-chen-lun* (掌珍論); *Visva-Bharati Annals*, II (1949), p. 34. *tattvataḥ saṃskṛtāḥ śūnyā māyāvāt pratyaabhāvāt / asaṃskṛtās tv asadbhūtā anutpādāḥ khaṇḍapavāt //*

15. *kārikā* 23 (*loc. cit.* p. 123): *nirmitako nirmitakaṃ māyāpuruṣaḥ svamāyayā sṛṣṭam / pratiśedhayeta yadvāt pratiśedho 'yaṃ tathaiiva syāt //*

16. Cf. Stcherbatskoi, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa*, Indo-Iranian reprint, VI, 1965, p. 119; *Prasannapadā* p. 35(5–6): *ya eva ubhayavinīścitavādī sa pramāṇam . . . /*

17. Cf. Ichimura, "An Analysis of Mādhyamika Dialectic in Terms of the Logical Principle of *Anvaya-vyatireka*," (esp. sect. IV), in the forthcoming *The Professor P. V. Bapat Felicitation Volume*.

18. Of the two related statements: (1) *puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti* and (2) *yo saccikattho paramattho tato so puggalo upalabbhati saccikatthaparamatthenāti*, the Theravādin accepts (2) but not (1), whereas the Pudgalavādin accepts (1) but not (2). The source of the problem lies in the qualification phrase "*saccikatthaparamatthena*." Cf. Ichimura, *JIAS* III, 1(1980), p. 10ff.

19. Cf. *Prasannapadā*, p. 26ff. and Stcherbatskoi, *op. cit.* p. 105ff.