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DYNAMIC LIBERATION IN YOGĀCĀRA BUDDHISM

by Alan Sponberg

I. Introduction

Why did Śākyamuni Buddha, having realized liberation from the world, choose to give up the seclusion of his enlightenment and go forth again into that same world? Why did he take on the task of preaching the content of his realization to all the beings still ensnared in the net of death and re-birth? The early Buddhists seem to have had some difficulty accounting for the apparent paradox in this decision. In the *Ariyapa-riyesana-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, one of the earliest accounts of the Buddha's enlightenment, we find the following reflections attributed to Śākyamuni:

Then I thought, now I have gained the doctrine, profound, hard to perceive, hard to know, tranquil, transcendent, beyond the sphere of reasoning, subtle, to be known by the wise. . . .

But if I were to teach the Doctrine, and others did not understand it, it would be a weariness to me, a vexation. Then also there naturally occurred to me these verses unheard before:

Through painful striving have I gained it,
Away with now proclaiming it;
By those beset with lust and hate
Not easily is this Doctrine learnt.
This Doctrine, fine, against the stream,
Subtle, profound, and hard to see,
They will not see it, lust-inflamed,
Beneath the mass of darkness veiled.

Thus, monks, as I reflected, my mind turned to inaction, not to teaching the Doctrine. Then Brahmā Sahampati

knowing the deliberation of my mind thought, “verily the world is being destroyed, verily the world is going to destruction, in that the mind of the Tathāgata, the arahat, the fully enlightened, turns to inaction and not to teaching the Doctrine.” Then Brahmā Sahampati, just as a strong man might stretch out his bent arm, or bend his stretched-out arm, so did he disappear from the Brahma-world and appear before me. And arranging his upper robe on one shoulder he bent down his clasped hands to me and said, “may the reverend Lord teach the Doctrine, may the Sugata teach the Doctrine. . . .”¹

What was it then that finally overcame Śākyamuni’s initial hesitation? In this and other versions of the incident we are told that the fateful decision was made only at the behest of the god Brahmā, who, in the interest of the beings, descended from his Brahma Heaven to intercede in a *deus ex machina* manner.

This explanation was apparently not adequate for some however. With the Mahāyāna innovation that made explicit the integral link between compassion and wisdom, an additional means of resolving this puzzling question was provided. The enlightenment realized by Śākyamuni was seen to comprise both Great Wisdom (*mahāprajñā*) and Great Compassion (*mahākaruṇā*); whereupon his preaching career became perfectly consistent with the very nature of his enlightenment. It would thus have been inconceivable—with or without the intercession of Brahmā—for Śākyamuni *not* to have sought the liberation of other beings as well. This solution was one part of a broader universalistic tendency in Mahāyāna Buddhism, a development which raised additional problems that were to become the focus of further soteriological innovations in the later Mādhyamika and Yogācāra schools. Once the ideal of universal salvation through the agency of enlightened Buddhas and bodhisattvas was asserted, the problem remained of accounting—both theoretically and practically—for the relationship between the supramundane and the mundane, between the Absolute and the individual. How can the transcendental interact with the worldly? How is the bodhisattva to function at the same time in two mutually exclusive realms? In what way does the bodhisattva after realizing the transpersonal Absolute still retain some individual personality active in the relative world for the salvation of other beings?

The two principle schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism each sought to work out answers to these basic questions, answers that are probably best seen as complementary rather than contradictory. Both schools shared a good deal of common ground and certainly a common basic problematic. It is in this context that the doctrinal differences between the two schools must be examined. The thesis upon which the present article hopes to shed some light can be stated simply as the view that Mādhyamika and Yogācāra represent two different, yet parallel, approaches to the same set of problems: Mādhyamika focusing its attention primarily on the logical and philosophical issues involved and Yogācāra concerning itself more with the practical and psychological issues.

The significance of this common problematic and of the subsequent differences between the two schools can most clearly be seen in the contrast in the formulations of the nirvāṇa doctrine in the two schools. Unfortunately, this has not as yet been fully appreciated. While a great deal has been written in the West on the Mādhyamika conception of nirvāṇa, very little has been said about the corresponding Yogācāra doctrines of unfixed nirvāṇa (*apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*) and non-discriminating cognition (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*), a rather striking reflection of the current state of Yogācāra studies.² We are still a long way from a comprehensive account of the place of Yogācāra in Buddhist thought; certainly one necessary step is a preliminary examination of these two key doctrines.

II. Soteriological Innovation in Yogācāra Buddhism

It is these two doctrines that represent the major soteriological innovation of Classical Yogācāra Buddhism:³⁻⁶ a dynamic conception of liberation formulated to bridge, in practice, the apparent gap between the individual and the Absolute. The Yogācārins felt the need for a formulation of nirvāṇa that would shed light on the practical aspects of the psychological transition in the individual to the Absolute. The doctrine of unfixed nirvāṇa (*apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*) expressed the Yogācāra understanding of liberation as a state of enlightenment in which the practitioner is not permanently established in either the Absolute or the mundane human realm, and the concomitant doctrine of intuitive or non-discriminating cognition (*nir-*

vikalpaka-jñāna) elucidates the special cognitive process involved in that dynamic state of liberation.

The *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* as a Source

The best primary source for a preliminary study of these two doctrines is the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* of Asaṅga,⁴ best because it provides an introduction to the most important features of the two that is both detailed and systematic. Reference to the two terms can be found, at least implicitly, in a number of other Yogācāra works: in some—e.g., the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the *Sandhinirmocana-sūtra* and the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*—that most likely predate the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*, and also in others—e.g., the *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*, the *Madhyānta-vibhāga*, the *Triṃśikā* and the *Ch'eng-wei-shih-lun*—that are more closely contemporaneous with, or of later composition than, the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*.⁵ For the most part however, these other references are either very cursory or already presuppose a basic familiarity with the doctrines. Thus, as is generally the case with Yogācāra studies, one is well advised to begin with the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*.

Before considering the two doctrines individually it will be useful to review the organization of the Yogācāra system presented in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*. This will give us some idea of the place and the significance of these two doctrines in the broader context of Yogācāra soteriology. The arrangement of the ten chapters of this work provides us with a concise outline of classic Yogācāra thought. Extrapolating from the list of topics in the introduction and from the content of each chapter we can devise the following summary:

- I. The Base of the Knowable" (*jñeyāśraya*), i.e., the store-cognition (*ālaya-vijñāna*), eighth of the eight modes of mental activity and the basis for that which can be known.
- II. The Characteristics of the Knowable (*jñeyalakṣaṇa*), i.e., the three natures—the Imaginary, the Dependent, and the Absolute—that characterize that which can be known.
- III. The Entrance to the Characteristics of the Knowable (*jñeyalakṣaṇa-praveśa*), i.e., conceptualization-only-ness (*vijñapti-mātratā*), the philosophic principle asserting that the world, as we experience it, is nothing but conceptualization.

- IV. The Cause and the Fruit of the Entrance (*tat-praveśahetuphala*), i.e., the six virtues or perfections (*pāramitā*) of the bodhisattva.
- V. The Various Degrees of Cultivation of the Cause and Fruit of that Entrance (*taddhetuphala-bhāvanāprabheda*), i.e., the ten lands or stages (*daśabhūmi*) of the bodhisattva.
- VI. The Training of Superior Morality (*adhiśīlam śikṣā*), i.e., the bodhisattva discipline (*samādhi*) involved in the above cultivation.
- VII. The Training of Superior Thought (*adhicittam śikṣā*), i.e., the various meditative trances or concentrations (*samādhi*) involved in the cultivation.
- VIII. The Training of Superior Wisdom (*adhiprajñam śikṣā*), i.e., the intuitive or non-discriminating cognition (*nirvikalpakajñāna*) involved in the cultivation.
- IX. The Severing which constitutes the Fruit (*phalaprahāṇa*), i.e., the unfixed (*apratīṣṭhita*) nirvāṇa of the bodhisattva characterized by a basic revolution (*āśrayaparāvṛtti*) in which he rejects all defilements (*saṃkleśa*) and yet does not abandon the mundane realm subject to death and re-birth (*samsāra*).
- X. Cognition of the Fruit (*phalajñāna*), i.e., the triple body (*trikāya*) of the Buddha.

Thus, Chapters I and II discuss what is to be known and how we are to know it; Chapters III, IV and V treat the entrance to and the progression of the practice; Chapters VI, VII, VIII discuss the types of training involved in the practice; while Chapter IX treats the decisive turning-point that is the fruit of the above activity, and Chapter X discusses the various modes in which the fruit is experienced or known. The important chapters for the present study are the IXth, which is completely devoted to the Yogācāra notion of liberation, i.e., unfixed nirvāṇa, and the VIIIth, which presents the special form of cognition that leads to and constitutes that liberation.

The pivotal position of these two doctrines in the system is apparent from the place of their respective chapters in the above outline. It is also important to note the concomitant relationship between the two. Asvabhāva indicates this in his *Upanibandhana*; commenting on the transition in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* from Chapter VIII, on non-discriminating cognition, to Chapter IX, on the severing brought about in unfixed

nirvāṇa, he says, "The non-discriminating cognition [topic of Chapter VIII] is able to counter everything that is to be countered [i.e., it is the antidote (*pratipakṣa*) for every instance of opposition (*vipakṣa*)]. It necessarily implies the severing [that constitutes nirvāṇa], and so the author [Asaṅga] immediately continues [in Chapter IX] to discuss the distinctions of this severance."⁷

Asaṅga's presentation in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* is thus sequential. The present analysis will employ a more heuristic approach, beginning with a discussion of the features of unfixed nirvāṇa and then proceeding to consider the particular, if not to say peculiar, type of cognition that leads up to and constitutes it. It will remain necessary to bear in mind, throughout, the connection between the two, the state of liberation and the type of cognition that makes it possible.

Apratiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa

What then is meant by *apratīṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*,⁸ the unfixed liberation of the Yogācārins, and what is the dynamic element of this doctrine? *Apratiṣṭhita* is best understood as referring to a nirvāṇa that is not permanently established in, or bound to, any one realm or sphere of activity.⁹ The implicit contrast is to the nirvāṇa of the śrāvakas and pratyeka-buddhas who are criticized in several early Mahāyāna works¹⁰ for remaining permanently established or fixed (*pratiṣṭhita*) in the transcendent state of nirvāṇa-without-remainder (*nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*), a notion of liberation that was the ideal of the earlier Ābhidhārmikas, who saw in it the final extinction of both mental and physical afflictions. The dynamic notion of *apratīṣṭhita-nirvāṇa* gradually developed as the later Yogācārin Ābhidhārmikas came to reject the earlier view as inconsistent with the Mahāyāna ideal of the salvation of all beings.¹¹

While this doctrine of unfixed nirvāṇa is mentioned in the *Mahāyānasutrālaṅkāra*, its soteriological implications are developed much more fully in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*. In Chapter IX of the latter work, Asaṅga introduces the doctrine in the context of his discussion of the severing of all obstacles (*āvaraṇa*)¹² that comes as the fruit of the three types of training discussed in Chapters VI, VII and VIII. He then goes on to

present the following concise definition:

This severing is the unfixed nirvāṇa of the bodhisattva. It has as its characteristic (*lakṣaṇa*) the revolution of the dual base in which one relinquishes all defilements, but does not abandon the world of death and rebirth (*saṃsāra*).¹³

Thus the essential features of this Yogācāra notion of liberation are that it is a radical reorientation of the base of all cognition, and that it allows the bodhisattva to enjoy emancipation from all defilements (*saṃkleśa*) without losing any salvific efficacy in the realm of beings who have not yet achieved liberation. This is the dynamic aspect, the aspect that resolves, at least at the level of practice, the apparent duality of Absolute and individual, of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra.

Asaṅga continues in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* to gloss each of the key terms in the above definition:

The world of death and re-birth (*saṃsāra*) is the defiled component of the dependent nature (*paratantrasvabhāva-saṃkleśabhāga*), [i.e., the Imaginary].

Nirvāṇa is the pure component of the dependent nature (*paratantrasvabhāvavyavadānabhāga*), [i.e., the Absolute].¹⁴

The dual base (*āśraya*) is the dependent nature with both components combined.

The revolution (*parāvṛtti*) takes place when, on the arising of the dependent nature's antidote (*pratīpakṣa*) one rejects 轉捨 the defiled component and redeems 轉得 the pure component.¹⁵

In his commentary to this passage, Asvabhāva develops two important connections. First, he points out that the antidote (*pratīpakṣa*) that initiates the revolution is the non-discriminating cognition (*nirvikalpaka-jñāna*).¹⁶ He then goes on to illustrate the role of the two key Mahāyāna virtues, wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), in this process:

The bodhisattva dwells in this revolution of the base as if in an immaterial realm (*ārūpyadhātu*). On the one hand—with respect to his own personal interests (*svakārtham*)—he is fully endowed with superior wisdom (*adhiprajñā*) and is thus not subject to the afflictions (*kleśa*); while on the other hand—with respect to the interests of other beings (*parārtham*)—he is fully endowed with great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) and thus never ceases to dwell in the world of death and re-birth (*saṃsāra*).¹⁷

This dynamic interaction of *prajñā* and *karuṇā* is an important correlative feature of the unfixed *nirvāṇa*. It is clarified further in a helpful passage from the *Ch'eng-wei-shih-lun* discussing four types of *nirvāṇa*, the last of which is the *apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*:

The fourth is unfixed *nirvāṇa*: It is Thus-ness (*tathatā*) free from the obstruction blocking what is to be known (*jñeyāvaraṇa*); it is always assisted by great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) and great wisdom (*mahāprajñā*). Because of this the bodhisattva does not remain fixed in either *samsāra* or *nirvāṇa*; in working for the weal of all beings, though he actively employs [his compassion and wisdom] until the end of time, he nonetheless remains forever quiescent. Hence it is called *nirvāṇa*.¹⁸

The fact that this *nirvāṇa* is free from the *jñeyāvaraṇa* indicates that it is the prerogative of fully enlightened bodhisattvas and not of the arhats, who succeed in severing only the obstacle of the defilements, or passions (*kleśāvaraṇa*).

Having thus resolved the problems of formulating a *nirvāṇa* doctrine that bridged the gap between Absolute enlightenment and continued individual activity, and that allowed full play of both the Mahāyāna ideals of wisdom and compassion, the Yogācārins felt it necessary to say something more about the special kind of cognition in which one realizes this dynamic state of liberation. Along with the Mādhyamikas, they recognized that the cause of our defilement and affliction is the discriminating and conceptualizing cognition by which we constitute our world and participate in it. Concerned primarily with the practical psychology of liberation, they then asked what manner of awareness or cognition would allow the bodhisattva to free himself of this world-constructing involvement and yet to continue to work actively for the weal of the beings still ensnared in that world. The doctrine of *nirvikalpaka-jñāna* is the Yogācārin's attempt to answer this question.

Nirvikalpaka-jñāna

Vikalpa, for the Buddhists, is the discrimination or conceptualization by which we perceive and function in the world and, correspondingly, by which we are inextricably bound to this

world, with its inevitable frustration and woe. It is a negative activity, always with the implicit connotation of *false* discrimination or *vain* imagining, because it is what prevents us from realizing the true Thus-ness of all things, the Absolute.

Nirvakalpa-jñāna is, for the Yogācārins, the antidote to this world-constructing activity. When rendered literally as 'non-discriminating cognition or awareness,'¹⁹ the negative aspect of its meaning is readily apparent: it is a kind of cognition or awareness that is free of the discrimination that binds us to the world of death and re-birth. A good deal more than a simple lack-of-something is implied by the term, however. In this cognition there is not only the lack of discrimination; there is also a more positive aspect: the direct and intuitive cognition of the Absolute. This is an essential feature and suggests some freer translation such as 'intuitive wisdom.'²⁰

While correct in the broadest sense, this rendering does not have the disadvantage of obscuring the somewhat paradoxical aspect that becomes apparent in the Sanskrit term when we reach the fully developed form of *nirvikalpa-jñāna*, the mode which allows participation in both *nirvāna* and *saṃsāra*, in the supramundane Absolute and in the mundane realm of discrimination. In this mode of *nirvikalpa-jñāna* we shall find a non-discriminating cognition that, subsequent to enlightenment, is still able to function in the world of discrimination, the characteristic that allows the crucial dynamic aspect of unfixed *nirvāna*. This interpenetration of the apparent duality of *nirvāna* and *saṃsāra* must also be an essential feature of the non-discriminating cognition.

Thus, for the Yogācārins, *nirvikalpa-jñāna* has at once a negative, a positive, and a dynamic connotation: negative, in that it is non-discriminating cognition; positive, in that it is intuitive wisdom; and dynamic, in that it gives access to the Absolute without yielding efficacy in the relative.

A survey of the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* chapter that is devoted to the *nirvikalpa-jñāna*²¹ will make these three features more clear. There we find that there are three varieties or degrees of non-discriminating cognition:

1. preliminary non-discriminating cognition (*prāyogika-nirvikalpa-jñāna*).
2. fundamental non-discriminating cognition (*mūla-*), and

3. subsequently-acquired non-discriminating cognition (*prṣṭha-labdha-*).²²

The order of the three degrees or modes is progressive, and the text discusses first the preliminary or preparatory stage of non-discriminating cognition, the stage which according to Vasubandhu's commentary is also known as conjectural wisdom 尋思慧 *vitarka/paritarka?-prajñā* or investigative wisdom (*par-yeṣaṇā-*).²³ Vasubandhu says also that this first stage arises by virtue of faith (*śraddhā*) and resolute conviction (*adhimukti*), which is to say that initially a bodhisattva in training hears from others about the principle of being free from false discrimination (*nirvikalpa-naya*); though he is as yet unable to realize it for himself, hearing of it does produce a resolute conviction on the basis of which he proceeds to investigate the principle.²⁴ By virtue of that investigation, non-discriminating cognition does eventually arise, and thus the first stage is said to be the cause (*hetu*) of the second.²⁵

It is with the second stage that we are dealing with *nirvikalpa-jñāna* proper, and hence it is known as the root or fundamental stage of non-discriminating cognition. Vasubandhu adds that it is also known as introspective wisdom (*pratyātmavedya-prajñā*) or the wisdom of realization (*sākṣātkāra-*).²⁶ It is with this cognition that one realizes the Absolute, and we are in fact told that it is identical (*sama*) with Thus-ness (*tathatā*).²⁷ With the fundamental cognition, one is thus liberated from all obstacles (*āvaraṇa*); one becomes fully accomplished and perfected.²⁸

This being the case, why did the Yogācārins add yet a third stage? In the second, fundamental stage we can see both the negative, non-discriminating aspect and the positive, intuitive-identification-with-Thus-ness aspect; the third essential feature, however, is still undeveloped.

It is in the third or subsequently-acquired (*prṣṭha-labdha*) stage of non-discriminating cognition that we again see the characteristic Yogācāra innovation of an explicitly dynamic notion of liberation. This third stage is 'subsequently-acquired' in that it is the result or fruit of the fundamental cognition. It is also known as the active or practical wisdom 起用慧 : *kriyā?-prajñā* or as the sustaining wisdom (*saṃdhāraṇa-*).²⁹ In his commentary on the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* passage discussing the advantage of the three degrees, Vasubandhu tells us:

By virtue of the power of this [subsequently acquired] cognition of the bodhisattvas, out of consideration for the well-being of all sentient beings, decide to be reborn in the world. When they are reborn, however, they are no longer subject to defilement by worldly contingencies, viz., the eight lokadharma: gain (*lābha*), loss (*alābha*), praise (*praśamsā*), censure (*nindā*), honor (*yaśas*), dishonor (*ayaśas*), frustration (*duḥkha*) and happiness (*sukha*). Because this [subsequently-acquired] cognition is born of the [fundamental] non-discriminating cognition, it is also called non-discriminating.³⁰

That last statement raises a provocative question. If the subsequently-acquired cognition allows the bodhisattva to be active in the world, is it still non-discriminating (*nirvikalpa*)? Just how does non-discriminating awareness function effectively in the world of discrimination? This is a variation of the central soteriological issue for the Yogācārins. As Vasubandhu himself puts it, “If non-discriminating cognition thus succeeds in realizing Buddha-hood, having become free of effort (*ābhoga*) and mental discrimination (*manasikāravikalpa*), how then does it accomplish the matter of bringing benefit and pleasure to the beings?”³¹ The Yogācāra masters had no doubt that this can in practice be done, that non-discriminating cognition can function actively in the world of discrimination without being discriminating; they recognized, however, that it does seem paradoxical—at least to the discriminating mind. To side-step the apparent paradox inherent in the terminology, they employed a metaphorical explanation which Asaṅga expresses in one concise verse:

Just as the precious gem³² and the divine
musical instrument³³
Perform their respective roles without
any conscious thought,³⁴
So are all the various activities of
the Buddha performed,
Also thus, quite free of any conscious
thought.³⁵

In explanation Vasubandhu says:

The metaphors of the precious gem and the divine musical instrument in this verse demonstrate that just as the wish-fulfilling gem, though devoid of discrimination, is still capable of fulfilling whatever it is that beings desire, and more-

over that just as the divine musical instrument, without anyone to play it, produces all varieties of sound in accord with the aspirations of the beings in its proximity, just so you should know that the non-discriminating cognition of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, while free of discrimination, is nonetheless able to carry out all sorts of activity.³⁶

To this Asvabhāva adds:

The wish-fulfilling gem and the divine musical instrument do not have the thought, "I shall now radiate brilliancy!" or "I shall now give forth sound!" because they are both without any conscious thought; nevertheless, by the power of the meritorious actions and aspirations of the beings in their proximity and without waiting to be played [etc.], they emit all sorts of radiance and give forth all varieties of sound. You should know the non-discriminating cognition of the buddhas and bodhisattvas to be just like this: though completely free of discrimination and without making any effort, they are nonetheless capable of producing all varieties of benefit and service in accord with the merit and aspirations of the beings converted by them.³⁷

This is a crucial passage, for it was this analogy that conveyed for the Yogācārins the inner workings of the special type of cognitive activity that made their notion of dynamic or unfixed nirvāṇa viable. It is their explanation of how non-discriminating cognition can, at the highest level, be active within discrimination.

These then are the three degrees of non-discriminating cognition as presented in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*.³⁸ To illustrate the differences between them, and the sequence within, Asaṅga summarizes the three in a series of brief verses:

1. Like a mute seeking to comprehend some object,
Like a mute who has succeeded in comprehending the object,
Like a non-mute who has comprehended the object,
The three cognitions are analogous to these.
2. Like a fool, seeking to comprehend some object,
Like a fool who has succeeded in comprehending the object,
Like a non-fool who has comprehended the object,
The three³⁹ cognitions are analogous to these.

3. Like the five modes of sensory perception, seeking to apprehend an object,
 Like the five when they have succeeded in apprehending the object,
 Like *manas*⁴⁰ when it has comprehended the object,
 The three cognitions are analogous to these.
4. Like one who has not yet understood a treatise
 But seeks to understand it, eventually comprehending [now the letter of] the doctrine and [finally] the meaning,
 This sequence is a metaphor for the three cognitions:
 Thus should you know the preliminary, etc.⁴¹

According to Asvabhāva's commentary, the preliminary stage of non-discriminating cognition is like a mute or a fool seeking to comprehend some object, because they can neither comprehend it nor talk about it—the mute lacking the verbal ability and the fool lacking the conceptual ability. Fundamental cognition is like the case of a mute or fool who has managed to comprehend the object but is still unable to communicate his comprehension. Finally, the subsequently-acquired cognition is like one with full verbal and conceptual powers who has comprehended the object and can also communicate his understanding.⁴²

Regarding the third verse, he explains that even when one has apprehended an object by means of the five modes of sensory perception one nonetheless lacks the conceptualization or discrimination (*vikalpa*) which is added by the sixth or coordinating mode of perception called *mano-vijñāna*.⁴³

In Vasubandhu's explanation of the fourth verse he comments that first one seeks to understand the treatise, then one comes to understand the words; and finally one understands the words and the meaning. In the same way one progresses through the three cognitions.⁴⁴

The analogies employed in these four verses reiterate and summarize the most basic theme involved in the doctrine of the three degrees of non-discriminating cognition: that understanding must be coupled with activity, that wisdom must include compassion. The subsequently acquired cognition is not to be seen as a relapse from the fundamental cognition—or even as a voluntary retreat. Rather, it is the fruition, the *fulfillment*, of that realization. The verses make clear that both of

the latter two degrees are necessary. According to this doctrine, the enlightenment of the buddhas and bodhisattvas is in full flower only when the subsequently-acquired cognition has developed *in addition to* the fundamental cognition.⁴⁵

III. Some Broader Implications

The preceding analysis of the doctrines of unfixed nirvāṇa and non-discriminating cognition in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* suggests several observations on the place of these Yogācāra innovations in the broader context of Buddhist soteriology and also, more particularly, on the relationship between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. In order to bring these into focus it is necessary first to review the common ground shared by the two schools.

Two main themes characterize the revitalization movement initiated in the early Mahāyāna scriptures:

- 1) a marked tendency towards philosophic absolutism; and
- 2) a concern for the salvation of all sentient beings in contrast to the earlier focus on individual liberation.

These two developments are, of course, not unrelated. Both may be seen as instances of a broader theme of universalization. Just as the Buddha was universalized from an historical individual to an abstract principle, so also was the concept of liberation universalized, in both content and extension.

The basic difference that the Mahāyāna converts saw between their notion of liberation and that of their Hīnayāna antagonists is eloquently expressed in the *Prajñāpāramitā Scriptures* and in the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁴⁶ The nirvāṇa sought by the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas was criticized as the attainment of a transcendent (*lokottara* or *aparyāpanna*) state, irrevocably separated from the mundane sphere of human existence. Nirvāṇa and saṃsāra were thus seen as totally distinct, an assertion antithetical to the emerging notion of Mahāyāna absolutism. A primary objective of the early Mahāyāna scriptures was to counter that view with a universalized notion of liberation that recognized no ultimate distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, and that encompassed the salvation of all beings as its ultimate goal. This was the common ground shared by adherents to the Mahāyāna.

The task of working out the implications of these new ideas, both in theory and in practice, was subsequently taken up by the later Mahāyāna masters. What was initially a division of labor and inclination among these Mahāyānists eventually resulted in the division into the two main Mahāyāna schools. Following the epistemological criticism implicit in the *Prajñāpāramitā Scriptures*, the Mādhyamikas focused their interest on the abstract and logical issues of the basic Mahāyāna themes; one may say their approach was primarily philosophical. The Yogācārins had no quarrel with the critical philosophy of the Mādhyamikas; indeed, they assumed it, while going on to take a rather different approach. Following the systematic soteriology of the early Ābhīdhārmikas, the Yogācārins focused their interest on the practical and technical issues of the common Mahāyāna themes; thus, their approach may be seen as basically psychological. The two schools shared a common problematic; their difference was one of method and point of view.

This difference in approach between the two schools resulted in two parallel formulations of nirvāṇa.⁴⁷ Concerned with the logical refutation of duality, the Mādhyamika discussions of nirvāṇa are characteristically negative in expression. In one of the best known summaries of the Mādhyamika conception of nirvāṇa, Nāgārjuna states:

What is not abandoned and not attained,
 Not cut off and not eternal,
 What is not suppressed and not produced,
 That is called nirvāṇa.

To which Candrakīrti comments:

That which cannot be abandoned like greed and the other [afflictions] and also cannot be attained like the fruits of renunciation, that which cannot be cut off like the aggregates, etc. and also is not permanent like non-empty [principles], that which by its nature is not suppressed and not produced, that which has as its characteristic the cessation of all vain discourse, that is what is called nirvāṇa.⁴⁸

The intention of the Mādhyamika notion of nirvāṇa is to break down, by means of the *via negativa*, the duality implicit in all conceptual formulation. The Absolute is inexpressible; ultimately, one must realize that there can be no duality, that

there can be *neither samsāra nor nirvāṇa*.

The above analysis of the doctrines of unfixed nirvāṇa and non-discriminating cognition has shown the Yogācāra conception of liberation to be characteristically more positive in expression. The delusion of duality is still to be resolved, but in their framework the emphasis is different: the Absolute must be shown to encompass or interpenetrate *both nirvāṇa and saṃsāra* at one and the same time.⁴⁹

The Mādhyamikas were primarily concerned with critically examining the philosophic nature of bondage. By examining the logical inadequacies of language and discursive thought, they sought to explain why we are trapped by the duality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. The Yogācārins, accepting that critique, turned away from the purely philosophic issues to address the more immediate question of how one is to realize that non-duality in practice. By analyzing the psychological structures by which beings become trapped in the dualities of discursive thought, they sought to chart the path by which one may, in practice, escape bondage.

Both schools recognized that we are bound to the world of our experience and that this inevitably leads to frustration and suffering. Madhyamaka sought to explain logically how this experience was ultimately a delusion; it generated thereby a critical and soteriologic philosophy of language. On the basis of that critical analysis of delusion combined with their own interest in meditative practice, the Yogācārins sought to examine the mental process by which we perpetuate the world-constructing delusion, and to explain in practical terms how one is to escape from that process. They, in turn, generated a speculative and soteriologic psychology.

In this sense, we may see Yogācāra as the old Abhidharmic enterprise carried on in the new light of Mādhyamika critical epistemology, an enterprise that required—now in its Yogācāra guise—an innovative and dynamic reformulation of the notion of liberation, one that would go beyond the static duality of the Hīnayāna *nirupadhiśeṣa-nirvāṇa* and one that would also complement the practical austerity of the rigorously negative Mādhyamika nirvāṇa. And, indeed, this is precisely what we see in the doctrines of *nirvikalpaka-jñāna* and *apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa*.

NOTES

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All translations are those of the author unless otherwise noted. In the case of passages from the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* and its commentaries (see n. 4 below), translations are from the Chinese version of Hsüan-tsang (T:1594, XXXI.132c-152a) unless otherwise noted. References to the *Ch'eng-wei-shih-lun* are cited from the edition of SAEKI Jōin 佐伯定胤 *Shindō Jo-yuishiki-ron* 新導成唯識論 (Nara: Shōsōgaku Seiten, 1940). This allows easy reference to the French translation of Louis de la Vallée-Poussin, *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi: La Siddhi de Hiuan-tsang* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1928-1948).

1. This is the translation of E. J. Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1927), p. 81. In his reference to the *Majjhima-nikāya* source of the passage, Thomas indicates that it is from the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta*; in fact, it is from the *Ariyapariyesana*, corresponding to pp. 167-168 of V. Trenckner's edition of the Pali original, *Majjhima-nikāya*, I (London: Pali Text Society, 1888).

Very similar versions of this story are also found in the *Dīghanikāya* (Pali Text Society ed. Vol. II, p. 36) and in the *Vinaya* (H. Oldenberg's ed. Vol. I, p. 4). There are other accounts (also in the *Majjhima-nikāya*) that tell of Māra tempting the newly enlightened Buddha with the thought that he should not bother going forth to teach his message, another early tradition that also warrants consideration in any broader study of the development of the nirvāṇa concept.

2. There is no mention of the *apratisthita-nirvāṇa* doctrine in the most commonly used surveys of Buddhism, e.g., E. Thomas' *History of Buddhist Thought*, E. Conze's *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* and *Buddhist Thought in India*, A. K. Warder's *Indian Buddhism*, David Kalupahana's *Buddhist Philosophy*, etc. More surprising is the omission of the doctrine in A. K. Chatterjee's *The Yogācāra Idealism* and also the very summary and inadequate treatment in Th. Stcherbatsky's *Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa* (pp. 185n & 204n) where it is mentioned only parenthetically as an instance of Yogācāra having "deviated from strict Mahāyānism."

Some discussion of *apratisthita-nirvāṇa* in western-language sources is found in the annotation to the appropriate sections (see below) of L. de la Vallée-Poussin's translation of the *Ch'eng-wei-shih-lun* (*Vijñaptimātratā-siddhi*) and É. Lamotte's translation of the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*, also in D. T. Suzuki's *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: Luzac and Co., 1907), pp. 345-346; A. B. Keith's *Buddhist Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), pp. 257-259; J. Masuda's *Der individualistisch Idealismus* (Heidelberg, 1926), pp. 49ff., J. Kitayama's *Metaphysik des Buddhismus* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1934), pp. 164-165; H. von Glasenapp's *Unsteyblichkeit und Erlösung in den indischen Religionen* (Halle, 1938), p. 62; N. Dutt's *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, new ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), p. 250, n. 3. These latter secondary works for the most part simply paraphrase the one short passage from the *Ch'eng-wei-shih-lun* translated below in this article.

3. The historical development of Yogācāra doctrine is still a very controversial subject. Provisionally, I would suggest a division of the Yogācāra literature into (at least) three main historical periods: Early Yogācāra (pre-Asaṅga), Classical Yogācāra (Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, esp. the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*), and Late or Scholastic Yogācāra (post-Vasubandhu); more refinement must await further textual studies—the *Yogācārabhūmi* and the *Abhidharma-samuccaya*, for example, should go in the first period in spite of their association with Asaṅga. Contrast Jacques May's proposal for a Vijñānavāda periodization in "La philosophie bouddhique idéaliste," *Asiatische Studien (Études asiatique)*, 25 (1971): 265-323; and see also Lambert Schmithausen, "Zur Literaturgeschichte der älteren Yogācāra-schule," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Supplementum 1, Vol. 2 (1968), pp. 811-823. I agree with Schmithausen (p. 811n) that, as a generic term, Yogācāra is preferable to Vijñānavāda.

4. The *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* does not survive in Sanskrit, but we do have four translations into Chinese and two into Tibetan. Étienne Lamotte's *La Somme du Grand Vehicule d'Asaṅga* (Louvain: Bureaux du Muséon, 1938; rpt Louvain: Université de Louvain, Institute Orientaliste, 1973) includes an edition of the Tibetan text and an excellent French translation from the Tibetan with annotations from the two principle commentaries. Vasubandhu's *Mahāyānasamgraha-bhāṣya* and Asvabhāva(?)'s *Mahāyānasamgraha-upanibandhana*. For details of the different versions of the original work and its commentaries, see Lamotte, Vol. 1, pp. v-viii. In this article references will be given to the *Taishō* edition of the Chinese translations; this allows easy reference to Lamotte's translation of the Tibetan which gives the corresponding *Taishō* page numbers after each section.

5. For details on these references and others see Lamotte, *La Somme*, pp. *45-46 and *47-48.

6. In Sanskrit *jñeya*, the passive future or optative participle of $\sqrt{jñā}$: "to know," means both "that which is knowable" as well as "that which is to be known." Hsüan-tsang expresses both aspects in his rendering of Vasubandhu's gloss 所應可知故名所知 (F:XXXI.322b29-c1).

7. T:XXXI.434c16-17.

8. The germ at least of this idea is to be found already in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-pāramitā*; cf. *apratīṣṭhitamānaso hi tathāgato 'rhan samyak-sambuddhaḥ sa naiva saṃskṛte dhātau sthito nāpy asaṃskṛte dhātau sthito na ca tato vyūthitah!* (ed. of R. Mitra, Calcutta, 1888, p. 37). The earliest occurrence in a Yogācāra context seems to be in the *Sūtrālaṅkāra* where it is mentioned several times (see Lamotte, *La Somme*, p. *48 for the references).

9. The term has been variously rendered into Western languages: "the nirvāṇa that has no abode" (Suzuki), "nirvāṇa without basis or stay" (Keith), "das absolut freie Nirvāṇa" (Kitayama), "altruistic nirvāṇa" (Stcherbatsky), "l'immortel et actif Nirvāṇa" (La Vallée-Poussin), and "le Nirvāṇa instable" (Lamotte). *Nirvāṇa*, of course, means literally "extinction" and represents in the broadest sense the Buddhist conception of liberation, deliverance, salvation, etc.

10. See for example *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* XVII.42:

āviṣṭānām kṛpayā na tiṣṭhati manah same kṛpālūnām
kuta eva lokasaukhye svajīvite vā bhavet snehaḥ

sarvasya hi lokasya laukike saukhye svajīvite ca snehaḥ/ tatrāpi ca
niḥsnehānām śrāvaka-pratyekabuddhānām sarvadulḥkhopasame nirvāṇe
pratiṣṭhitam manah/ bodhisattvānām tu karuṇā-viṣṭatvān nirvāṇe 'pi mano
na pratiṣṭhitam//

Which S. Levi (*Mahāyānasūtrāṅkāra*, Vol. II, p. 217) translates:

Les Compatissants, tout pénétrés de Compassion,
n'arrêtent pas leur esprit dans la Suppression.
Comment donc se prendraient-ils d'affection pour
le bonheur mondain ou pour leur vie?

Le monde entier, il est vrai, aime le bonheur mondain et tient à sa vie.
Les Auditeurs et les Bouddhas-pour-soi, qui ne tiennent ni à l'un ni à
l'autre, arrêtent du moins leur esprit dans le Nirvāṇa, qui est le sous-
Apaisement de toute douleur. Mais les Bodhisattvas, pénétrés qu'ils sont
de Compassion, n'arrêtent pas leur esprit même dans le Nirvāṇa.

11. Lambert Schmithausen has presented a very important document in
the development of the Yogācāra conception of liberation in *Der Nirvāṇa-
abschnitt in der Vinīścayasamgrahaṇī der Yogācārabhūmiḥ* (Wien: Hermann Boh-
laus, 1969, pub. as Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften: *Sitzungs-
berichte*, 264.2). While the term *apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa* is apparently not to be
found in the *Yogācārabhūmi*, the doctrine is foreshadowed in this section
which reflects a distinction between the static nirvāṇa of the arhats and the
dynamic nirvāṇa of the tathāgata (see esp. I. 9-11, pp. 53-59; and also note
159, p. 159-160). The distinction is explained with reference to *nirupadhiṣeṣa-
nirvāṇa*: after entering the transcendental nirvāṇa-without-remainder the
tathāgata, in contrast to the arhat, chooses to return. As Schmithausen sug-
gests (p. 7) this very likely represents an earlier and transitional stage in the
development of the *apraṭiṣṭhita-nirvāṇa* doctrine that is found in later works
like the *Mahāyānasūtrāṅkāra* and the *Mahāyānasamgraha*.

12. Vasubandhu (T:XXXI.322c20-21) identifies these as the obstacle of
the afflictions or passions (*kleśāvaraṇa*) and the obstacle blocking what is to be
known (*jñeyāvaraṇa*). For a summary account of the important Yogācāra doc-
trine of the two obstacles see *Ch'eng-wei-shih-hun* ix.5b-8b along with LaVallée-
Poussin's annotations. Note especially the different meaning of *jñeyāvaraṇa*
in a Yogācāra as opposed to a Mādhyamika context.

13. T:XXXI.148c14-15.

14. In Chap. II (T:XXXI.140c7-11) Asaṅga has already explained that
the defiled component is the Imaginary (*parikalpita*) and the pure component
is the Absolute (*pariṇiṣpanna*), while the Dependent (*paratantra*) comprises
both.

15. T:XXXI.148c15-18.

16. T:XXXI.435a6-7.

17. T:XXXI.434c21-23.

18. S:x.9b; T:XXXI.55b16-19.

19. The Sanskrit verbal-noun *jñāna* (cf. *vijñāna*) should require as an equivalent an English word expressing an act rather than a state; hence 'cognition.' In Buddhist Chinese, however, *jñāna* is consistently rendered with 智 which is generally translated into English as 'knowledge' or 'wisdom.' Also, the equation of °-*jñāna* and °-*prajñā* in this context as indicated below should be borne in mind.

20. Cf. Lamotte's "le savoir intuitif."

21. The eighth chapter on the "Training of Superior Wisdom" (T:XXXI.147b19-148c11): Erich Frauwallner's *Die Philosophie des Buddhismus* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1969) includes a translation of some brief selections from this chapter (pp. 345-347) and also a discussion in which he draws attention to the key position of *nirvikalpa-jñāna* and *prṣṭhalabha-jñāna* in Asaṅga's thought.

22. The text discusses the difference between the three modes at some length before the specific terms are actually introduced at T:XXXI.148a23-28. Later scholastic works in Chinese refer to the three also as the initial 初, the middle 中, and the subsequent 後.

23. T:XXXI.363c15-20.

24. T:XXXI.365b23-26.

25. T:XXXI.363c21.

26. T:XXXI.363c15-20.

27. T:XXXI.364b24-25.

28. *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* T:XXXI.148a1-2 and Vasubandhu's *Bhāṣya* T:XXXI.365c2-5.

29. Hsüan-tsang translates 攝持 (T:XXXI.363c19); Lamotte reconstructs *ādharma*°, but that seems less likely since *saṃdhāraṇa* ("holding together") is used specifically in the sense of "supporting life," etc. Also 攝持 for *saṃdhāraṇa* is attested in Hsüan-tsang's translation of the *Kośa*, T:XXIX.11c10.

30. T:XXXI.365c10-14.

31. T:XXXI.366a28-29.

32. This is the *cintāmani*, the wish-fulfilling gem or philosopher's stone that fulfills its possessor's every wish.

33. This is a musical instrument (*tūrya*) that produces without being played just what the possessor wishes to hear. Hsüan-tsang's 天樂 is probably elliptical for 天樂器 (or 具) Paramārtha's 天鼓.

34. In Hsüan-tsang's Chinese 無思 normally renders *acetanam*, "unconsciously," "without conscious intent," etc. Paramārtha (T:XXXI.128c3) says "without discriminating" in the second half of the verse; Buddhaśānta (T:XXXI.109a6-7) speaks of "non-discrimination" in the case of the gem and musical instrument and of the Buddha's "unfixed [nirvāṇa]" in the second half. Dharmagupta (T:XXXI.308a7-8) has "free from discrimination" in both cases.

35. T:XXXI.148a17-18. Lamotte, *La Somme*, p. 245, points out that this verse is very close to *Mahāyānasūtrāṅkāra* IX.18-19.

36. T:XXXI.366b4-7.

37. T:XXXI.431c23-28.

38. Each of these is further analyzed in the text (T:XXXI.148a23-28) into various sub-species—three, three, and five respectively. These further distinctions are explained in Vasubandhu's and Asvabhāva's commentaries (see Lamotte, *La Somme*, pp. 248-250).

39. Following the variant given in the notes T:XXXI.148.

40. Vasubandhu (T:XXXI.366a5) and Asvabhava (T:XXXI.431b27-28) both specify the "manas transcribed in the text to be *mano-vijñāna*, the sixth mode of mental activity (*vijñāna*).

41. T:XXXI.148a5-12.

42. T:XXXI.431b15-23.

43. T:XXXI.431b23-29.

44. T:XXXI.366a7-12. The commentary explains the third line of the verse, saying that "the doctrine (法 :dharma)" means "the words (文字)," i.e., what it says as opposed to what it means.

45. There is an unfortunate error in La Vallée-Poussin's discussion of the three cognitions that obscures this important point (*La Siddhi*, p. 634). In a paraphrase of the first of these same four verses from the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* he says that the preliminary cognition corresponds to "le muet qui ne sait pas"; the fundamental cognition, to "le muet qui sait"; and the subsequently-acquired cognition, to "le non-muet qui ne sait pas" (emphasis added). The whole point of the analogy, however, is that the subsequently-acquired cognition is a step beyond the fundamental: it corresponds to someone who both *knows* and can *act*, in this case, talk about or preach his realization to others.

46. Perhaps the best study contrasting the differences between the various notions of nirvāṇa in the Hinayāna as opposed to the Mahāyāna schools is found in Nalinaksha Dutt, *Mahāyāna Buddhism* (see above, n. 2), pp. 178-254.

47. It is surely no coincidence that, of the principal adversaries in the modern debate over the meaning of Buddhist nirvāṇa, Stcherbatsky, who advocated a more negative conception, worked especially with Mādhyamika works in Tibetan, while La Vallée-Poussin, who advocated a more positive understanding of the term, worked especially with Yogācāra works in Chinese. Consider also in this light Stcherbatsky's evaluation of *apratīṣṭhita-nirvāṇa* as a Yogācāra deviation from "strict Mahāyānism" (see n. 2 above).

48. This is verse XXV.3 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* along with Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* commentary.

aprahīnam asaṃprāptam anucchinnaṃ aśśvatam/

aniruddham anuṭpannam etan nirvāṇam ucyate//

Vṛtti: yad dhi naiva prahīyate rāgādivat nāpi prāpyate sramanyaphalavat nāpyucchidyate skandhādivat yac cāpi nanītyam aśśnyavat tat svabhāvato 'niruddham anuṭpannam ca sarvaprāpañcopasama-lakṣaṇam nirvāṇam uktam/

The Sanskrit text is found in the revised and enlarged edition of Stcherbatsky's *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa* (ed. by Jaideva Singh, Varanasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakasham), p. 40 of the appendix. For Stcherbatsky's somewhat different translation of the same passage, see pp. 288-289 of the Singh ed. or pp. 186-187 of the original ed.

49. The significance and prominence of this 'positive' element in Yogācāra thought is too quickly disregarded by those who would represent Indian Buddhism as negative and world-denying in contrast to Chinese Buddhism which is positive and world-affirming.