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- CARMEN DRAGONETTI
Marginal Note on the Idealistic Conception
of *citta-mātra* 165
- JOHN KIESCHNICK
Blood Writing in Chinese Buddhism 177
- KLAUS-DIETER MATHES
Tāranātha's Presentation of *trīsvabhāva*
in the *gĪan stoṅ sñiṅ po* 195
- SARA McCLINTOCK
Knowing All through Knowing One:
Mystical Communion or Logical Trick
in the *Tattvasaṃgraha* and *Tattvasaṃgrahapañjikā* 225
- LINDA PENKOWER
In the Beginning ... Guanding 灌頂 (561-632)
and the Creation of Early Tiantai 245
- PETER SKILLING
Vasubandhu and the *Vyākhyāyukti* Literature 297
- The XIIIth Conference of the International
Association of Buddhist Studies,
Bangkok 8-13 December 2002
First circular 351

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Marginal Note on the Idealistic Conception of *citta-mātra*

The Yogācāra system is composed of a great number of theories. In order to establish the way it was formed, it would be necessary to study when, where and how each one of these theories originated, and also to study when, where and how these diverse theories were assembled giving rise to a new structure of philosophical thought. (The same thing would have to be done *mutatis mutandis* in regard to the origin of the Mahāyāna). The creation of the Yogācāra theories (as of those of the Mahāyāna) has been a dynamic process, covering a long period of time, and in which many factors have participated. To these circumstances, that make difficult a study of the origin of the Buddhist idealistic philosophy, are to be added other facts that render that study more difficult still: the texts that must be used for this study are in most cases anonymous; their relative chronology is difficult or impossible to establish; great part of Buddhist literature is lost; many important texts are known to us only in their Chinese and Tibetan translations, which often present problems of interpretation.

We shall limit ourselves to point out some factors of a doctrinary nature, that seem to have contributed in a great extent to the formation of the fundamental Yogācāra doctrine, *cittamātra*. Similar, factors, that participated in the formation of the other theories of the Yogācāra school, could also be traced.

The importance of citta (mind)

Since its beginnings Buddhism has given to mind (*citta*, *cetas*, *manas*, *viññāṇa* or *viññāna*) a great importance, attributing to it fundamental functions. Mind is the determining condition for the arising of the individual existence (*nāmarūpa*) in the twelve members of the Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda* or *pratītyasamutpāda*). Human conduct depends on mind. Mind is the cause of purity or impurity. Man is directed by mind. *Karman* gets its moral qualification according to the mental state or disposition with which it has been carried out. Individual destiny and world destiny depend on *karman* and therefore indirectly on

mind. Many of the moral qualities propounded by Buddhist ethics belong to the realm of mind (*sati* or *smṛti*, *appamāda* or *apramāda*, etc.). The two pillars of the Buddhist Path are knowledge (*ñāna* or *jñāna*, *paññā* or *prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), and knowledge is gained through the activity and development of mind. In the way to Liberation meditation (*jhāna* or *dhyāna*) and concentration of mind (*samādhi*) play an important role. Through a well-trained and purified mind the Supreme Enlightenment (*bodhi*), the ultimate goal of Buddhist effort, is reached.

In many texts this special importance of mind is extolled as for instance: *Samyuttanikāya* I, p. 39 PTS edition; *Ānguttaranikāya* II, p. 177 PTS edition; *Dhammapāda* I, 1- 2; *Āryaratnamegha* quoted in Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, pp. 121-122 ed. Bendall. See É. LAMOTTE's translation of *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* III, par. 34, and his Introduction, pp. 51-53, and J. MAY: "La philosophie bouddhique idéaliste", pp. 268-270, for other references.

The preeminent position that *citta* has in the Yogācāra is thus coherent with the importance it always has had in Buddhism. The idealistic system of Buddhist philosophy carried one fundamental trend of Buddhist thought to its extreme point, making mind the only existing entity and deriving everything from it.

"Nominalism"

Buddhist philosophy distinguished between things existing *dravyasat* and things existing *prajñaptisat*. *Dravyasat* points to something that exists as a substance, as a real entity; *prajñaptisat* on the contrary points to something that has only a nominal existence, the existence of a mere concept, that is conventionally assumed to exist but has no objective reality. *Dravyasat* exists *in re*, *prajñaptisat* exists *in mente*.

In *Milindapañho* II, pp. 25-28 PTS edition, in the celebrated dialogue between the King Milinda and the Venerable Nāgasena, it is declared (in the context of the negation of an *ātman*) that 'Nāgasena' exists only "as a denotation (*saṅkhā*), appellation (*samaññā*), designation (*paññatti*), as a current usage (*voḥāro*), merely as a name (*nāmamattam*)" (I. HORNER's translation). And a stanza of *Samyuttanikāya* (I, p. 135 PTS edition) is quoted where it is said that "just as when the parts are rightly set the word 'chariot' is uttered, so when there are the *kandhas* (= *skandhas*), it is the convention (*sammuti*) to say that there is 'an individual' (*satto*)".

The attribution of a *prajñaptisat* existence, nominal existence, to diverse kinds of things is frequently met with in the Hīnayāna literature. We give some examples, which show how spread this opinion was.

The Vātsīputrīya (Thesis 1, Vasumitra, *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*) maintained that the “puḍgala” (person, individual) is a mere denomination (*prajñapti*) established in relation to the *skandhas*, the *āyatanas* and *dhātus*. Cf. *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* XVIII, 92: *prajñāptyastitayā vācyaḥ puḍgalo dravyato na tu* and commentary *ad locum: prajñaptito ’astīti vaktavyo dravyato nāstīti vaktavyaḥ*.

The Prajñāptivāda school (Thesis 3, Vasumitra *ibidem*) taught that all the *saṃskāras* or *saṃskṛtas* (composed or conditioned things) are *prajñaptisat*.

According to a text of Paramārtha’s commentary on Vasumitra’s treatise on the sects (*Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, quoted by Chūgan = Chōzen in Japanese, in his *San louen hiuan yi*, Taishō 2300, p. 459 b29-c2), the sect of the Ekavyāvahārikas held that all the mundane (*laukika*) and supra-mundane (*lokottara*) *dharma*s have only a nominal existence.

The Bahuśrutīyas also declared that the Four Great Elements that constitute matter are only nominally existent (*prajñaptisat*), according to the *Satyasiddhiśāstra* of Harivarman (middle of the third century C.E.) who expresses the point of view of that school (Taishō 1646, p. 261a, Section 37 and b-c, Section 38; Sanskrit “reconstruction” and English translation by N. AIYASWAMI Sastri), and that the *dharma*s are not real and consequently are only name (*nāmamātra*), conventional denomination (Taishō 1646, p. 327a, beginning of Section 141).

The Sautrāntikas or Saṅkrāntivādins or Dārṣṭāntikas fully adhered to the nominalist conception of reality. They considered *prajñaptisat* many entities that for the Sarvāstivādins, in their realistic inspiration, were really existent. According to them form (*saṃsthāna*) does not exist as a *dravya* (substance, thing) (Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa* IV 3b, p. 573), and according to the context it exists only *prajñaptitaḥ* (nominally, conventionally). In the Sarvāstivādin classification of *dharma*s, *prāpti* was an important *cittaviprayuktadharmā* (a *dharma* non-associated with mind), whose function was to connect any acquired object with the individual who possessed it, specially to connect the accomplished act with the series of consciousnesses of the individual who had accomplished it. *Prāpti* allowed the Sarvāstivādins to explain the mechanism of the causal retribution of actions. Sarvāstivādins considered *prāpti* as having a real existence (*dravyataḥ*). The Sautrāntikas attributed to *prāpti*

a nominal existence (*prajñaptitaḥ*) (Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa* II ad 36c-d at the end, pp. 217-218). Another *dharma*, to which the Sarvāstivādins attributed a real existence, was the *avijñapti*. Any volition (*cetanā*), which is of a mere mental nature, may externally manifest itself through a corporal or vocal act. The gesture or words are *vijñapti*, “information”, because they make known the will of the person. But, at the same time, the volition gives rise to an invisible act, which continues to exist and is the receptacle of the moral responsibility derived from that act. This invisible act is the *avijñapti*, “non-information”, because, as it does not appear, it does not give any information. For the Sautrāntikas *avijñapti* existed also *prajñaptitaḥ*, as a nominal entity.

Even the Sarvāstivādins, who represented an extreme realistic position, maintained that all beings had a nominal existence grounded on the series (*santāti*) that constitute them (Thesis 33, Vasumitra, *op. cit.*).

In the treatise *Bhavasāṅkrāntiparikathā* attributed to Nāgārjuna, *kārikā* 11a expresses: 'di dag thams cad miñ tsam ste / 'du śes tsam la rab tu gnas / rjod par byed las tha dad pa'i / brjod par bya ba yod ma yin (all things are only name (*nāmamātra*), they dwell only in thought; separated from the word, what it designates does not exist).

Many other examples of the attribution of a nominal existence to diverse entities can be found in the theses maintained by the Hīnayānist sects. In fact, the nominalist conception agrees with the non-substantialist position adopted by Buddhism since its very beginning. This “nominalism”, which pervades the thought of the Abhidharmic period, does not mean the negation of the existence of beings and things; it affects the kind of existence that beings and things possess. But anyhow it undermined the consistency of existence, paving the way for the future conception of Voidness and Only-Mind, in the Mahāyāna period.

Perception without external objects

Dreams (*svapna*), magical creations (*nirmāṇa*), illusions (*māyā*), mirages (*marīci*), eye disorders (*timira*), the whirling firebrand (*alāta-cakra*), the moon reflected in water (*udakacandra*), and other similar phenomena interested Buddhist thinkers. They saw in them cases of cognitive experiences in which non existing objects appeared to the mind as if they were really existing. Thus these perceptions were used as comparisons (*upamāna*) or examples (*dṛṣṭānta*) for the unreality of the empirical world, as for instance by Nāgārjuna in *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* VII. 34: *yathā māyā yathā svapno gandharvanagaram yathā /*

tathotpādas tathā sthānaṃ tathā bhāṅga udāhṛtam. Cf. *Ta tche tou louen* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* or *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*), Taishō 1509, pp. 101c and ff., for a detailed enumeration and explanation of these *upamānas*, and LAMOTTE's translation, pp. 357 ff., for more references.

In several Sūtras magical creations are employed as *upāya*, means to obtain some beneficial effects, as for instance *Bhadramāyākāravāyā-karaṇa*, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* (See E. HAMLIN, "Magical *Upāya* in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*"), *Saddharmapundarikasūtra*, Chapter VII, pp. 187-188 and pp. 195-197, KERN-NANJIO edition.

Moreover, these peculiar cases of perception showed the possibility of the existence of acts of perceptual cognition which do not comply with the conditions required by the common notion of normal perception: a sense organ and a real external object corresponding to that sense organ. The Sautrāntikas accepted the existence of cognitions without an external object against the opinion of the Sarvāstivādins who argued that all cognition necessarily has a real entity as its object. Cf. Collect COX, "On the Possibility of a Nonexistent Object of Consciousness: Sarvāstivādin and Dārṣṭāntika Theories". In a similar way Rāmānuja affirms the thesis that any cognition has a corresponding real object (*sarvaṃ vijñānajātaṃ yathārtham*) and he studies all the cases where it seems that there is a cognition without a real object to prove that even in these cases a real object is present. Cf. *Bhāṣya of the Brahmasūtra*, pp. 143-149, paragraphs 66-67. In *Viṃśatikā, kārikās 1-4* and commentary *ad locum*, the cases of *taimirikas*, persons who have their visual sense organ afflicted by ophthalmic disorders, of dreams and mirages are mentioned as examples of representations without object, and in *Trisvabhāva*, Section K, *kārikās 27-30*, the magical creation of an elephant by the power of the *mantras* is presented as a case of representations without object.

The acceptance of representations without a real external object is the *conditio sine qua non* for the arising, development and establishment of an idealistic explanation of reality. If the possibility of cognitions without an object did not exist (as it was maintained by the Sarvāstivādins), an idealistic conception has no place.

Meditation

The *Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra* or *Bhadrapālasūtra* mentions as instances of cognitions without really existing external object, dreams (3H, HARRISON's edition), *aśubhabhāvanā* or

meditation on the repulsive practised by the Bhikṣu (3J, *ibidem*), images reflected in a mirror (3K, *ibidem*), and compares to them the visualizations of Tathāgatas that occur in the meditative concentration of the Bodhisattvas. The *Samḍhinirmocanasūtra* VIII, paragraph 7 (LAMOTTE's edition and translation = pp. 152-155 POWERS' edition and translation) expresses the same idea in relation to images seen in meditation: *gzugs brñam de rnam par rig pa tsam du zad pa'i phyir te*. In *Trisvabhāvakārikā*, Section M, *kārikās* 35-36, reference is made to the "three knowledges" thanks to which Bodhisattvas, *dhyāyins* and wise people have also the experience of cognitions without external object.

An important difference between the cases of cognitions without object given in the previous section (dreams, etc.) and those occurring in meditation is that these latter take place as a result of the practitioner's voluntary resolve and the application of a yogic technique.

The experience of meditation could contribute in another way to the constitution of the *cittamātra* theory. Meditation, as a yogic process, has as its effect to allow the meditator to get diverse attainments and also to void his mind, to liberate it from its psychological and intellectual contents, passing through the diverse stages of the meditative process, in which the experience becomes gradually deeper. At the end of the process the external world and the internal world (sensations, notions) have disappeared for the meditator, who "enters in a state of calm and cessation similar to *nirvāṇa*" (*Ta tche tou louen*, Taishō 1509, p. 216a, lines 2-3).

A complete description of the meditative process is found in the just quoted *Ta tche tou louen*, pp. 206a-217a = LAMOTTE's translation III, pp. 1216-1309. LAMOTTE gives in the notes to his translation a detailed account of references concerning meditation. In *Mahāvīyutpatti* Nos. 1477-1540 there is a complete enumeration of *dhyānas*, *samāpattis*, *apramāṇas*, *vimokṣas*, *abhībhvāyatanas* and *kṛtsnāyatanas*, which constitute the elements of the meditation path, in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese.

The meditative process shows that the mind, *citta*, can remain alone and isolated in itself, that it can subsist without the presence of an object, freeing itself from the subject-object duality, getting rid of the empirical reality, and manifesting itself as the transcendent supreme reality.

The instantaneity of the dharmas

Buddhism has a dynamic conception of reality. This manifests itself in the peculiar doctrine of the *dharmas*. The *dharmas* are the elements, the constituent factors of all that exists. All that is 'material', as human body, is constituted by material *dharmas*. The mental phenomena as perceptions, sensations, volitions, acts of consciousness are nothing but *dharmas*. And man is only a psycho-physical aggregate of material *dharmas* and of mental *dharmas*. Reality, in its integrity, is likewise nothing else than *dharmas*, isolated or accumulated. *Dharmas* are unsubstantial (*anātman*), because (using the Western terminology) they do not exist *in se et per se* or (using the Buddhist terminology) they do not exist *svabhāvena*, i.e. they do not possess an own being; they are dependent, produced by causes and conditions. And, besides that, since the first period of Buddhist thought, *dharmas* were conceived as impermanent (*anitya*). For Early Buddhism and for the Hīnayānist schools *dharmas*, although unsubstantial and impermanent, were real. But in the Hīnayāna several sects added to the transitory *dharmas* the attribute of instantaneity: *dharmas* not only are impermanent, but also they disappear as soon as they arise, and are replaced by other *dharmas* of the same species as long as the causes that provoked the appearance of the replaced *dharma* continue to exist. Thus reality is an accumulation of series of *dharmas*, in a process of vertiginous constant replacement. The result is that, as D.N. SHASTRI, *The Philosophy of Nyāya*, p. 189, says: "the reality, according to the Buddhist, is not static; it is dynamic. It is not being; it is becoming."

Among the Hīnayānist sects that maintained the instantaneity of the *dharmas* were the Sarvāstivādins, the Vātsīputrīyas, the Mahīśāsakas, and the Kāśyapīyas, and the sects derived from them, according to Vasumitra's *I pu tsung lun lun*, Taishō 2031, pp. 16c, line 2; 16c, lines 15-16; 17a, lines 13-14; and 17b, line 1 (= A. BAREAU: "Trois Traités sur les Sectes Bouddhiques attribués à Vasumitra, Bhāvya et Vinītadeva": 255, 257, 262 and 265, and J. MASUDA: "Origin and Doctrines of Early Indian Buddhist Schools": 50, 54, 62 and 65). The Pubbaseliyas and the Aparaseliyas, both derived from the Mahāsaṃghikas, affirmed also the instantaneity of the *dharmas*, according to Buddhaghosa's commentary to the *Kathāvatthu* included in *Pañcappakaraṇa-Aṭṭhakathā* (XXII, 8, p. 198 PTS edition). Vasubandhu in *Abhidharmakośa* IV, 2d, pp. 568-569, emphatically declares that "what is conditioned (– and all is –) is momentary" (*saṃskṛtaṃ kṣaṇikam*), and *bhāṣya ad locum: ko yaṃ kṣaṇo*

nāma? ātmalābho 'nantaravināśī, so 'syāstīti kṣanikaḥ. Yaśomitra's commentary ad *Abhidharmakośa* II, 46b, p.262, line 26, refers to the Vaibhāṣikas with the term *kṣanikavādin*. On the contrary the Theravādins, according to the quoted text of the *Kathāvatthu*, XXII, 8, did not accept the momentariness of the *dharmas*, and this explains why they remained attached to the realistic conception of the world.

The new attribute of instantaneity produced an enormous effect in the Buddhist theory of knowledge: if *dharmas* are not only impermanent but also instantaneous – and *dharmas* constitute the whole reality – and we do not perceive that momentariness of the *dharmas* but only compact things that seem to be there as the objects of cognition, then we do not see reality as it truly is.

Nāgārjuna's conception of reality

One of the principal tasks of Nāgārjuna is to establish the logical impossibility of the existence of elements, manifestations, categories of the empirical reality, as for instance: birth and destruction, causality, movement, time, sensorial activity, the elements that constitute man, passion and its subject, action and its agent, suffering, *karman*, *saṃsāra*, etc. This impossibility derives from the fact that all is conditioned, related, dependent, contingent, and as such lacks an own being, a *svabhāva*, an existence *in se et per se*. Everything is *śūnya*, "void", *svabhāvaśūnya*, "void of an own being". The abolishing analysis, to which Nāgārjuna submits the whole reality, leaves a great void, *Śūnyatā*, Voidness, in which nothing belonging to the empirical reality which appears before us remains. But normal knowledge does not reach the true reality of *Śūnyatā*, which is covered, concealed by an apparitional reality, the empirical reality, beyond which normal knowledge cannot go. We do not perceive what really exists (*paramārthasatya* = Supreme Truth or Reality); we only perceive something that is inexistent, false, illusory (*saṃvṛtisatya*, concealing truth or reality = Relative Truth or Reality), as the dreams, mirages, magical creations etc. to which Nāgārjuna's school so frequently compares the world in which we live. The situation in the case of Nāgārjuna is similar to that of the theory of the *dharmas* as maintained in the Hīnayāna: we perceive something different from what really exists, things are not as they appear.

It could be said that the theory of the instantaneity of the *dharmas* and Nāgārjuna's conception of reality, which stress the separation between what is outside our mind and our mental representations, are the two

more important factors for the forthcoming of the idealistic theory that there is nothing apart from the creations of our mind.

The philosophical inference

Given the preceding historical, philosophical conceptions – the importance of the mind conceived as the determining principle of human conduct and of man's and world's destiny; nominalism which transforms the reality in which we exist in a collection of names and labels and undermines the consistency of beings and things; the awareness of the existence of many cognitions which are cases of representations without a real external object; the experience of meditation which has both powers: to visualize objects at will and to suppress the surrounding reality and the contents of the mind, leaving the mind empty and isolated; the instantaneity of the *dharmas* (the constituent factors of what exists, the sole existing true reality that remains concealed to our normal knowledge which is limited to perceive something that is not there and unable to perceive what is really there); and Nāgārjuna's conception of reality which dissolves all that exists into a Void, depriving beings and things of real existence, making cognition an instrument condemned to grasp only illusions and falseties, and positing the impossibility for normal knowledge to reach reality – given these conceptions, it was not difficult for philosophically very well trained minds, as were Buddhist thinkers, to ask themselves: if what we perceive is not outside (the realm of the object), wherefrom does it come? and to answer: from the mind (the realm of the subject). Thus they rounded an inference whose premises originated in the beginnings of Buddhism. *Only Mind* was the logically valid conclusion for a reasoning that had lasted for centuries.

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