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THE THEORETICAL BASIS FOR MAHĀYĀNA PLURALISM IN ASAṄGA'S MAHĀYĀNASAMĠGRAHA

At the heart of a pluralistic society or tradition are the theories which relate each of the various religious orientations to a common goal or ideal. These are as necessary for integrating different religious orientations within one catholic tradition, as for different religions within one pluralistic society. In this article I will show how the early Buddhist Vijñānavādin masters devised theories to harmonize a contradictory mass of early beliefs.

During its first 800 years the Buddhist *saṅgha* had split and resplit to form a wide variety of sects each with a different understanding of the master's message. Early attempts to organize these ideas resulted in *abhidharma* systems based upon the concept of an irreducible unit called the "dharma". These showed how man could escape misery by breaking the casual sequences which brought inevitable dissatisfaction with any experience. However, a new religious vision appeared in the Mahāyāna sutras—that of an unsubstantial illusion-like universe binding only those who misinterpret it. The *Abhidharma*, which could not explain this vision, was supplanted by the Madhyamika which accounted for its "illusion-like" nature through the concept of "openness" (*śūnyatā*).

In approximately the fourth century A.D. these two trends were united in the Vijñānavāda (Yogācāra) whose principal theories appeared in a group of early Mahāyāna sutras, especially the *Samdhinirmocana*, *Laṅkāvatāra* and the *Śrīmāladēvi*. On their authority Maitreya, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu produced a group of *śāstras* and commentaries which became the basis for the *Vijñānavāda*, which is not so much an additional theory as it is a systematic arrangement of previous Buddhist knowledge.

While a different aspect of the new system was developed in each early *śāstra*, only Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasamgraha* is a clear summary of the entire system. The following analysis will be based upon that text including the commentaries by Vasubandhu and Asvabhāva. All citations follow the numbering system used in E. Lamotte's *La somme du grand véhicule d'Asanga*.¹

The religious pluralism question is, how did these early Vijñānavādin masters go about integrating the various Buddhist ideas into a system which not only was able to respect the most diverse notions, but also encouraged new developments and fresh interpretations which have continued to appear up to the present day? To answer this we must first identify Asaṅga's basic concerns in writing the *Mahāyānasamgraha*.

While he is obviously engaged in the metaphysical task of formulating a system according to his particular viewpoint, this viewpoint is less fundamental than is the reason for the systematization, i.e. the desire to facilitate the believer's attainment of enlightenment. His soteriological concern is shown in the foreword (*prastāvana*) of the text in which the superiority of the system is stated to derive from the inclusion of ten topics (constituting the ten chapters of the text) which are arranged as a graded path to enlightenment.

Throughout the text Asaṅga frequently returns to this soteriological concern as the ultimate justification for any theory. In his search for a metaphysical stance or principle for ordering teachings within this path, Asaṅga was limited by those used by previous thinkers to form the theories which became his raw material, i.e. the *Abhidharma* and *Mādhyamika*.

The ordering principle of both is epistemological rather than ontological. That is, the question asked in virtually any situation was "What mechanism accounts for my present perception, and how can it be modified to yield a more acceptable one?" rather than, "What in this situation is real?" Hence, the Vijñānavāda was formed as an aid to salvation based upon a systematization of earlier epistemological doctrines. Its core is neither the individual ideas nor the general

1. Étienne Lamotte. (*La somme du grand véhicule d'Asaṅga: Mahāyānasamgraha.*) Louvain-La-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, Université de Louvain, 1973.

epistemological stance but the handful of new epistemological theories used to organize the old theories within a soteriological perspective.

The first such new theory is that of a storehouse-consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) underlying the sensory and concept-forming mechanisms. While most Buddhist thinkers had agreed that personal continuity was only apparent, they had been unclear about how it was maintained. When the new Mahāyāna notion that the ego is to be continued in a reoriented form, rather than terminated, was added, a good explanation for the continuity of the personality became imperative. The *ālayavijñāna* provided such an explanation. As it is the best known aspect of Vijñānavādin thought, only a brief summary is necessary.

Basically, Asaṅga maintains that the abhidharma masters were correct about the nature of experience. The ordinary man does not experience pure perceptions but automatically evaluates perceptions through self-centred concerns in the light of prejudices gained from past experience. The "object" which he perceives is already falsified, a product of prejudice, self-interest and emotional response. The interaction with this object establishes prejudices which will poison future encounters. By adding the concept of an *ālayavijñāna* as the deepest layer of the mind, the Vijñānavādin masters provided a locus for the prejudices and hence for the continuity of the personality. An experience deposits influences or "seeds" in the *ālayavijñāna*. These establish the tone of future perceptions which in turn deposit further seeds. Man is trapped in this vicious circle. However, the delusive seeds, which generate perceptions of a selfish individual in a suffering-filled environment, may be replaced by others which generate equally self-perpetuating perceptions of an altruistic member of society in a joy-saturated environment, i.e. as a Buddha in a Buddhafield. These seeds are the Buddhist teachings. In chapter I Asaṅga develops a complex model of the perceptual apparatus, explaining how the influences are deposited in the *ālayavijñāna* and subsequently activated. In this he finds a place for a great number of earlier terms and ideas, either as synonyms for his own, or as aspects of the process.

The great unifying power of the *ālayavijñāna* concept, as well as the fact that the Vijñānavādin masters carried early epistemological ideas to their logical conclusion in noting that only perceptions could be discussed; this has often led to the assumption that the Vijñānavāda

is an "idealism". At least in the case of the *Mahâyânasamgraha*, this is incorrect. As we have seen, the most fundamental concern is the soteriological.

Within this, the metaphysics consist of three doctrines, of which the mentalistic is only one. The most important of the three is the "three-natures" or "three characteristics" (*trisvabhāva* or *trilakṣana*). This doctrine raises the basic ontological questions and relates the answers to the epistemological notions pertaining to the *ālayavijñāna* theory. The *trisvabhāva* doctrine recognizes three possible sorts of experience: "other-dependent" (*paratantra*) "totally illusory" (*parikalpita*), and "fully-perfected" (*pariniṣpanna*). The *paratantra* refers to the flow of experience based upon the *ālayavijñāna*, especially to the fact that this experience presents itself as that of a distinct individual existing in time and space (11:2). While such notions of incarnate existence, arising from tendencies established in the beginningless past, cannot be avoided, the Vijñānavādin masters recognized a further moment in the perceptual process which had not been recognized by the abhidharma—the evaluation of the perception. According to Asaṅga, two evaluations are possible. Those who fail to understand that perceptions are mere mental images (*vijñāptimātra*) will accept them as concrete existents or representation of such existents. The nature of such a misinterpreted perception is "imaginary" (*parikalpita*) since no such entity can exist. On the other hand, those who "see through" these impressions, understanding that they are merely mental images see them in a "fully-perfected" (*pariniṣpanna*) manner. Asaṅga uses a great part of Chapter II to explain that these two approaches are not just different evaluations of the "same" data. While this notion is a useful approach, Buddhist thought has no room for a noumenon which is perceived in different ways. Each type of evaluation alters the *paratantra* to generate different experiences, in fact different universes, which share only the most abstract of structures—space, time, number, etc. (11:2).

It is obvious that such a theory can account for the Mahâyāna alternatives of bondage to worldly structures or freedom within them. It is equally clear how such a theory can connect the *ālayavijñāna* with the other theories subsumed under it. What is less obvious, but more important, is its power to harmonize the Abhidharma with the Mādhyamika. Abhidharma epistemological theories are grounded on irreducible "*dharmas*". The Mādhyamika masters declared that while

these dharmas, (and the theories based upon them) have conventional reality, in the final analysis they were "empty" (*śūnya*). By Asaṅga's time these two views had developed into important and complimentary systems. The abhidharmic theories provided a model of the perceptual process and the Mādhyamika theories provided the ultimate truth. The Vijñānavādin *trīsvabhāva* provided a standpoint from which these two great branches of Buddhist metaphysics could be united. It did this by positing an ongoing process, aspects of which are described by each systems. The ongoing flux of perceptions (*paratantra*) can be described by an expanded abhidharma (developed in Asaṅga's *Abhidharmasamuccaya*). The interpretation of this flux as an accurate reflection of a concrete reality is the deluded (*parikalpita*) interpretation and as such is the basis for the various non-Buddhist theories. The accurate understanding, on the other hand, can describe the perceptions in Mādhyamika terms, i.e. as empty (*śūnya*).

An important corollary is that non-Buddhist systems are simply mistaken interpretations of the same human experience. There is no unbridgeable difference between them and Buddhism. This was to become important to later Tibetan and Japanese thinkers who devised graduated classifications of systems to show how a transition to a superior (i.e. Buddhist) system could be encouraged.

A proper view of any theory within this text must take into account its soteriological function. For the *trīsvabhāva*, this may be seen in the instructions for "entering" the characteristics of the knowable (III), i.e. for understanding experience via this theory. Here the three are portrayed as levels of understanding. Under the influence of Buddhist doctrine the aspirant first comes to understand his experience as concrete existents (*parikalpita*), then understands them as simple mental impressions (*paratantra*) but finally goes beyond this to lose all notions of subject and object and so passes to the perfected (*pariṇiṣpanna*) non-conceptual awareness (*nirvikalpitajñāna*). However, this does not mean that he perceives reality more accurately. It simply means that he is more open to return to the *paratantra* which now reveals a positive joyful universe rather than a congeries of objects disparaged as "mere ideas". This return corresponds to the process called "reorientation" (*parāvṛtti*) which involves the taking up of Mahāyāna vows, discipline and meditation.

In the central portion of the text, Asaṅga unites the various moral, intellectual and meditative technique spractised in the Buddhist communities within one spiritual path. Although the various theories used to do this, (the ten stages, the four paths, the six perfections) came in to prominence as aspects of vijñānavādin thought, none is a radical departure from previous ideas. The departure, and key to their integration with the new system, lies in the notion that they all constitute an entry to the *trīsvabhāva*.

The third and final theory uniting the Vijñānavāda describes the Buddha who is the goal or result of the practice. The Buddhological theories exhibit the disagreements between the various types of Buddhism most graphically. Depending upon the sect consulted, the number of Buddhas may be anything between one and infinity; the Buddha may be mortal or immortal, and the very definition of Buddhahood may be anything from total quiescence to an infinite and endless activity.

To begin bringing some order in to these theories, Asaṅga sorts them out into three groups: those Mādhyamika theories which discuss Buddhahood as a state of nonconceptual awareness are easily treated as a continuation of the discussion of the *trīsvabhāva* (VIII). The remainder are either from those traditions which regard it as a state of separation from worldly affairs or from those which regard it as a state of involved compassionate action. Asaṅga groups the former into negative (IX) and the latter into positive (X) descriptions of Buddhahood (XI).

The former is basically a very short treatment of the concept of *nirvāṇa*. This had often been regarded as a state permanently beyond the round of worldly suffering (*saṃsāra*). Asaṅga brings it within his system via the three-natures (*trīsvabhāva*) theory. He identifies *saṃsāra* as the soiled aspect of an individual's ongoing experience (*paratantra*) and *nirvāṇa* as its pure aspect. The aspirant's goal is not simply to reject the soiled and obtain the pure, i.e. *nirvāṇa*, but to undergo reorientation which enables him to view his experience in a perfected (*pariniṣpanna*) manner. Both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* will still remain open possibilities for him but they will converge to form the "non-abiding *nirvāṇa*" [*apratiṣṭhitavirvāṇa*]. The individual "stays" in *saṃsāra* while also being beyond emotion drives, i.e. in

nirvāna. To Asaṅga, the “*nirvāna*” of earlier texts really means his non-abiding *nirvāna*.

The positive description of the final chapter embodies several basic visions of Buddhahood. First is the classic mythical image of a Buddha, such as Dipankara, Sakyamuni, or Maitreya, who takes birth as a man having the 32 major and 80 minor marks and who lives out a set pattern of actions. Asaṅga labels this figure the “transformation-Buddha” (*nirmāṇakāya*).

A second image is taken from the *Mahāyānasāstras* which portray a splendidly attired luminous Buddha presiding over a joyful bejewelled Buddha-land. Asaṅga labels this figure the “enjoyment-Buddha” (*sambhogakāya*). A third strand portrays the Buddha as a transcendent figure beyond the ordinary world of suffering. This is called the “essential-Buddha” (*svabhāvikakāya*).

Finally a large number of *sūtra* passages contain descriptions which do not fit any one of the above. These are usually lists of characteristics of the Buddha which describe, in an unsystematic manner, a unitary but complex “Buddhahood”. Asaṅga labels these “*Dharmakāya*”. While each of the above concepts contains many specific beliefs about the Buddha, Asaṅga discusses the arrangement of these general concepts to form a comprehensive Buddhology rather than details of each. He achieves this by the “three-*kāya*” (*trikāya*) theory which shows that the *Svabhāvikakāya*, *Nirmāṇakāya* and *Sambhogakāya* are different aspects of the Buddha, and that all ideas contained in the *Dharmakāya* passages may be distributed over the other three.²

Christian and Vedantic writers on Buddhism, misled by plausible parallels from their own faiths, have often regarded the *Svabhāvika-kāya* as the “real” Buddha which manifests the *Nirmāṇakāya* as an incarnation or [*avatāra*] and the *Sambhogakāya* as a less important theophany. Asaṅga’s text will not bear such an interpretation—not at least because there is no room in his metaphysics for any “real” or “essential” Buddha.

2. While there can be no doubt of this in the present text, later Vijñānavāda authors frequently reverse the sense of *Dharmakāya* and *Svabhāvika-kāya*, so the general term for “Buddhahood” becomes *Svabhāvika-kāya*.

The *trikāya* is based on the concept of relationship, especially the liberating relationship between the Buddha and aspirant. In this model the Buddha by-himself untouched by worldly involvement, and the pure aspirant, untouched by the Buddhaword, are both logical abstractions. *Asaṅga* implies that there is no sentient being not already involved in the long struggle toward enlightenment (*agotrika* or *iccantika*) and no Buddha who is not aiding aspirants in this struggle. The model is based on a continuum of spiritual progress in which the distance between aspirant and the Buddha decreases as the struggle progresses and the aspirant's non-conceptual awareness increases.

Asaṅga provides sufficient information to visualize three situations along this continuum. The first is that of the man in the ordinary world. Seeds planted in the deepest layer of his consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) by hearing the Dharma begin to develop, thus turning the individual toward Buddhism. Not the least of these seeds is the knowledge of exactly how a Buddha should appear and act. Therefore, in the next situation, the aspirant, (now called a *Śrāvaka*) encounters the Buddha as a *Nirmāṇakāya* having the 32 and 80 marks who performs the traditional Buddha activities. *Asaṅga* suggests that this encounter occurs when the aspirant is prepared to recognize the Buddha rather than when the *Nirmāṇakāya* is "sent" into the world even though the *Śrāvaka* is approached by the *Nirmāṇakāya*. The encounter furthers the *Śrāvaka's* spiritual progress in two ways: The sight of a Buddha engenders confidence (*Śraddhā*) and aspiration (*adhimukti*) to persevere in his practice. The activities of the *Nirmāṇakāya*, especially his death (*parinirvāṇa*), stimulate a desire for religious practice. The tone of this encounter is very negative and the *Śrāvaka* is principally motivated by feelings of pain and loss.

The aspirant then undergoes a process called "reorientation" (*parāvṛtti*) which involves a complete change in attitude attendant upon taking up Mahāyāna vows and discipline. This change is so complete that the final situation is one in which the aspirant, who is now a *bodhisattva* himself, approaches the Buddha seen as a Great Bodhisattva in a Buddhafield of joyful experiences. The joy experienced there is instrumental in maturing the aspirant.

There is no further situation beyond the Buddha field. The aspirant and the Buddha never achieve an ontological unity. Further action lies in the opposite direction as the former aspirant, who is now Buddha,

awaits to be approached at the centre of a Buddhafield, reaches out to the *Śrāvaka*, and formulates the Dharma which involves another neophyte.

Thus, by the use of three new interlinked theories, the Vijñānavādin masters were able to formulate a unified Mahāyāna religion. The new system proved so flexible that today it still provides the basis for integrating new ideas and practices.

While these integrative theories are interesting to the Buddhist scholar, in order to draw conclusions relevant to the broader study of religion, a more general or abstract formulation of the attitude underlying Asaṅga's system is desirable. A rough statement is certainly possible. In negative terms, and contrary to what might be expected, integration is not achieved by designating the various doctrines and practices as different approaches to the same ultimate reality. To Asaṅga, as to most Buddhists, no such reality can exist. Even in the *trikāya* Buddhology, the two manifest forms of the Buddha are not simply different appearances leading to the same transcendent state, but are the foci of stages of awareness on the path leading to a more meaningful involvement in the world.

The locus of value is the concrete individual in his personal situation, rather than a transcendent reality. The *ālayavijñāna* doctrine provides a detailed account of the genesis of his experiences. The *trīsvabhāva* stresses the fact that he cannot escape to or from anything, but can only cease falsifying his situation through hope and fear. The *trikāya* Buddhology adds that he can do so only in encounter with "Buddha", an encounter which alerts him to his own potential and arouses him to live up to it. This potential involves the ability to live in a compassionate and satisfactory relation to others.

We might also say that the central concept of the system is "freedom". It is not a restrictive system in which, for example, each style of religion is prescribed for a different type of aspirant. In this system the individual becomes increasingly free to make his own choices. The different doctrines and practices describe different aspects of his path : some deal with the forces from which he becomes free, others with those options to which he may turn, while still others with the operation of the process.