

BUDDHIST NOTION OF 'I' BY VASUBANDHU IN *VIJÑAPTIMĀTRATĀSIDDHI*

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ABSTRACT: The undertaking of the Buddhism is not only to attain right understanding of the truths of suffering, origin, cessation, and the path leading to its cessation, but to fully get rid of the afflicting passions such as ignorance, lust, and hatred. So, at the deeper, more deep-rooted level of unconscious dispositions we need to get rid of concept of permanent self which leads to false belief of self -identity and love for "I" i.e., ego. Which further leads to contemplation of I, me and my family, my community, my country etc. or a tendency to alienate oneself from others.¹

Therefore, attempt made in this paper is to visualize the Vasubandhu's notion of "I" created by 'momentary elements' which are component of "self" in reference to his theory of *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* or 'Representation-only' reflected in his work *Viṃśatikā-kārikā* and *Triṃśikā-kārikā*. Further to explain the fundamental notion of 'Representation-only' (*vijñaptimātra*) that is 'non-existence of entities', Vasubandhu introduced the notion of three natures or *Trisvabhāvatā*.²

I. INTRODUCTION

Vasubandhu, the 4th century Buddhist philosopher contends that Buddhism is a method of cleansing the stream of consciousness from 'contaminations' and 'defilements',³ and for him grasping of the 'self' generates the mental afflictions (*kleśa*) and bondage that leads to suffering. Grasping of the self is due to a false belief in a self and the view that the self has independent reality. Liberation from suffering is impossible without understanding the nature of self. According to Vasubandhu, a view that there is a self that has independent reality which is over and above the physical body and consciousness is not justified. So, Vasubandhu's throughout his work showed that these doctrines of a separately existing self are unjustifiable.⁴

However, some Buddhists contends that there is existence of a person or individual (*pudgala*) although the exact relationship of physical body and consciousness cannot be expressed (*avaktavya*). According to Vasubandhu the notion of an indescribable or ineffable personal identity is impossible to differentiate from non-Buddhist doctrines of a self and must therefore be discarded. So, for him proponents of the notion of an ineffable personal identity cannot be truly Buddhist⁵.

Vasubandhu's work *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* can be seen as formalization, and expansion, of the Buddhist doctrine that all conditioned things are impermanent, or as a re-establishment of 'theory of momentariness'. As for, Vasubandhu, everything that is real or substantial (*dravya*) has specific cause-and-effect relations with

¹ Jonathan C. Gold, "Vasubandhu", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/vasubandhu/>, Accessed: 24/2/15.

² Ibid.

³ "Vasubandhu", *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/vasubandhu/, Accessed:21/2/15.

⁴ Richard P. Hayes, "Buddhist Controversies on the Nature of Self", *H-Buddhism*, 2008, [URL:http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14210](http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14210), Accessed: 23/2/15. [Review of James Duerlinger's work *Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons: Vasubandhu's 'Refutation of the Theory of a Self'*, (London: Routledge Curzon,2003)].

⁵ Ibid.

other entities. So, everything that does not have cause and effect relation is unreal. And if there is anything, it is merely a conceptual construct a mere convention (*prajñapti*). Thus, here Vasubandhu is reiterating the Buddhist ‘theory of dependent origination’ and affirms the view that constantly-changing elements, is the possessions of, or the components of, the so-called ‘self,’ are real, while the self itself is unreal.⁶

II. WHAT IS “I”?

According to Vasubandhu, there is often a subconscious tendency of human being to identify ourselves with our bodies, our feelings, our thoughts. In innate sense we believe that “we actually are one or more of the five aggregates.”⁷ 5- aggregates are 12 sense bases: physical (eye, visual form, ear, sound, nose, smell, tongue, taste, skin/body, touchable), Consciousness (Mind), Feelings, Thoughts, Dispositions (Mental object).⁸

Belief of self-identity are embedded at the deepest levels of consciousness, and Vasubandhu took the task of dismantling this belief. This false belief of self-identity recurs at the centre of the *Ālaya-vijñāna* model of mind which he expounded in his work of *Triṃśikā-kārikā*. The sense of permanent “I” is closely connected with the reflexivity of mental cognitive awareness, which is not directly based upon sense faculties but upon the faculty of mind or mentation (*mano*). Mental cognitive awareness arises in combination with 2- kinds of event: the occurrence of sensory cognitive awareness, which gives rise to a reflexive mental awareness “that such and such a cognitive awareness has occurred,” as well as its “own” objects which are associated with reflection or thinking (*vitakka-vicara*).⁹ Thus, reflexivity of mental cognitive awareness is based on such mentation (*mano*).¹⁰

So, according to Vasubandhu “I” is imagined entity created by separate, ‘momentary elements’ which are real. Separate momentary elements are elements that “self” is made up of and these elements are constantly changing sensory organs, sensory impressions, ideas and mental events in other words self is conceptually constructed by these elements which are real but “self” itself is not real. Therefore, permanent “I” is a false projection on this context Jonathan C. Gold, writes that Vasubandhu cites an evidence of conceptual construction as:

When we see, smell, and taste milk, we have distinct sensory impressions, which are combined in our awareness. The “milk,” then, is a mental construct—a concept built out of discrete sensory impressions. The sensory impressions are real, but the milk is not.¹¹

Further, according to Vasubandhu as Jonathan C. Gold writes:

The term “I” simply refers to the continuum of aggregates. The conceptual construction “I” is then understood to be only a manner of speaking, a useful shorthand. When I say “I am pale,” I know that it is only my body, not my eternal self, that is pale. Why not apply such figurative use to the term overall? Then, when I say that

⁶ Jonathan C. Gold, “Vasubandhu”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/vasubandhu/>, Accessed: 24/2/15.

⁷ William S. Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious: the Ālaya-Vijñāna in the Context of Indian Buddhist Thought* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p.36.

⁸ Jonathan C. Gold, “Vasubandhu”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/vasubandhu/>, Accessed: 24/2/15.

⁹ William S. Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious: the Ālaya-Vijñāna in the Context of Indian Buddhist Thought* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p.36 and 37.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.38.

¹¹ Jonathan C. Gold, “Vasubandhu”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/vasubandhu/>, Accessed: 24/2/15.

“I” experience the result of “my” actions, it can be seen to be both clear and accurate. Granted, it seems like there is a real “self.” But it only looks that way, just as a line of ants looks like a brown stripe on the ground.¹²

III. EXPOUNDATION OF “I” IN VASUBANDHU’S VIṂŚATIKA-KĀRIKĀ, TRIMŚIKA-KĀRIKĀ AND TRISVABHĀVANIRDEŚĀ

3.1 Viṁśatika-Kārikā

It is the philosophical speculation of Vasubandhu where he holds that everything is emerged out of consciousness and goes back to consciousness. According to him to say that we can know objects ‘as it is’ is an ‘over-claim’. This ‘over-claim’ is a ‘non-existent object,’¹³ and this ‘non-existent object’ is *viññapti-mātram* i.e. it does not have any independent reality. The aim of *viṁśatikā* is not to deny the objectivity itself, but rather to questions the dogmas with respect to the object of experience. Vasubandhu with an example of double-moon experience due to eye-disease elucidates that we see double moon, due to our illusory experience. And all concepts are not empty of empirical content, nevertheless most concepts, whether empty or with content, can produce consequence of some sort, so all this is mere concept (*viññapti-matram*).¹⁴ So, even self is an illusory experience due to defiling tendencies.

3.2 Trimśikā-Kārikā

It is the psychological speculation of Vasubandhu. Here, through concise verses he sums up his theory of *viññapti matra* by explaining Yogacara’s theories of eight-consciousnesses, three-natures and the five-step path to Enlightenment. The eight types of consciousness are the five sense consciousnesses, the empirical consciousness (*mano-viññāna*), a self-important mentality (*manas*), and the *ālaya-viññāna*. Vasubandhu explains how each of these can be eliminated through *ashraya-paravritti* i.e., through the overturning of the very basis of these eight types of consciousness. This over-turning gradually takes place through the five-step path in a way that consciousness (*viññāna*) is transformed into unmediated cognition (*jñāna*). Vasubandhu holds that consciousness arises independently¹⁵ by the evolution of consciousness or the *viññānaparināma*. This evolution is a process which is three-fold, or in other words there are three kinds of transformations:

1. *Ālayaviññāna* (the storehouse consciousness or resultant),
2. *Manana-viññāna* (reflected consciousness or mentation),
3. *Viśayasya viññapti* or *prvrti-viññāna* (functional consciousness or conception of the object).

1. *Ālayaviññāna* is a receptacle consciousness where external and internal experience is stored. Therefore, it is also often referred as store house consciousness, which contains all the traces or impressions of the past actions and all good and bad future potentialities. It is a seed (*bīja*) generated by previous action which when ripened becomes phenomena. Vasubandhu calls it as resultant consciousness (*vipkāka-viññāna*) rather than seed or cause. This resultant consciousness is an internal disposition which gets cognition, volition and experience.¹⁶

Ālaya is also called as ‘mooring or’ ‘source of dispositional tendencies.’ Empirical mind or consciousness has two aspects; the receptacle consciousness (*ālayaviññāna = vāsanās*) which possess the nature of cause and the functional consciousness (*Pravritti-viññāna = vāsanās*) which possess the nature of effect. Therefore,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ David J. Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology* (New Delhi: Shri Satguru Publications, 1992), p.182

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ David J. Kalupahana, “Vasubandhu and the *Viññaptimātratāsiddhi*”, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), p.189.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.194

ālayavijñāna and *prvrti-vijñāna* are reciprocal to each other. Since, *ālayavijñāna* is called *vipkāka-vijñāna* (resultant- consciousness) it is, *sarvabījaka* (depository) and *āśraya* to all the *vāsanās* (subliminal impressions), *anitya dharma* (Form of causal and condition), *bhava padhārtha* (real and positive existence) i.e., process of becoming and *nirvikalpaka jñāna* (subdued form of awareness which always remains unidentified). Nevertheless, things preserve, mature and changes by permutation and combination although it is invisible but gets activated occasionally¹⁷.

2. *Manana-vijñāna* also known as reflected consciousness or mentation is thinking about various deposited in it is called as *vāsanās* (subliminal impressions) such as all representation, ideas, and perceptions in a stream of consciousness. Kalupahana calls the *manana-vijñāna* as the ‘psychologists fallacy’ because it’s the situation where human being commits fallacy.¹⁸ Thus, when *manana* overwhelms the *ālayavijñāna*, the defiling tendencies generate. In other word the sense of ‘pure ego’ comes in this transformation. This transformation has two parts- *mano-vijñāna* and *klistamanas*. In *mano-vijñāna* there is a continuity of self, *mano-vijñāna* conceives of it as “I”. *klistamanas* is the sense of “I”, where one thinks it is static. It is so deeply defiled that no feeling of change is noticed. It slowly disappears temporarily in mediation. In meditation there is no sense of “I” but when one comes back to the normal state, sense of “I” returns and it slowly disappears permanently in the condition of *Nirupādhi* and *Sopādhi*.¹⁹

3. *Prvrti-vijñāna* is the third transformation. It is the ‘concept of the object’ or *visaya-vijñapti*. It leads to generation of grasping (*grāha*) of a real object even when it is no more than a conception. So, Vasubandhu explains “how human beings are liable to grasp the object”²⁰ where the defiled mind is responsible for assuming the existence of substantial self on the momentary flow of the foundational consciousness. Therefore, it produces a mistaken notion that *grāhya* (object) and *grāhak* (subject) are two different entities and assume of subject-object dualities.²¹

3.3 *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*

Vasubandhu expounded his theory of *trisvabhāva* in the *Triṃśika-kārikā* and wrote a treatise on the three natures, known as *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*. Vasubandhu open up his treaties of the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, by following verses which states about the three natures i.e., “The imagined, the other dependent and the consummate. These are the three natures, which should be deeply understood.”²²

In the notion of *Trisvabhāvas* or three natures, Vasubandhu expounds the three transformations of consciousness²³ i.e., there are three cognitive realms at play thus the three natures explain ‘the three psychological processes,’ firstly the delusional cognitively constructed realm, which is intrinsically unreal or false conception, secondly the realm of causal dependency or right conception and Thirdly the perfectional

¹⁷ Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti, “Philosophy of Mind in the Yogacara Buddhist Idealistic School.” *History of Psychiatry*, 2011, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00570832/document>, Accessed: 1/3/2015.

¹⁸ David J. Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology* (New Delhi: Shri Satguru Publications, 1992), p.140.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 140 and 141

²⁰ Ibid. p.141.

²¹ Jan Westerhoff, “Metaphysical Issues in Indian Buddhist Thought”, *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 143.

²² Jay L. Garfield, “Vasubandhu’s Treatise on the Three Natures”, *Tibetan Buddhism in the West*, 2002, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/vasubandhu>, Accessed: 2/3/15.

²³ “Vasubandhu”, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/vasubandhu/, Accessed:21/2/15.

realm which is intrinsically ‘empty’ or ‘the ideal conception.’²⁴ These three natures explain the reality of the world in brief the three natures (*svabhāvas*) are:

- 1) The Fabricated or the Imagined nature (*Parikalpit svabhāva*).
- 2) The Dependent nature (*Partantra svabhāva*).
- 3) The Perfected or the Absolute nature (*Parinispāna svabhāva*).

To quote Tola Fernando:

To define the essence of these three natures is to define the essence of the empirical reality and to show mechanism by means of which the imagined natures comes forth from the dependent nature, is to show the process of how empirical world is created from the mind that is nothing else than the dependent nature.²⁵

Further in *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* Vasubandhu gives his famous analogy of magician and elephant where magician produce an elephant by illusion but once we are aware of the falsity of the illusion created by the magician the illusion goes away and we experience the truth which is the non-existence of the elephant.²⁶ Similarly, although self appears to be real but it is devoid of *svabhāva* therefore permanent “I” created by self is due to *Parikalpit svabhāva* where the *Partantra svabhāva* is the causal condition of this seeming self or the cycle of dependent origination. *Ālayavijñāna* can be seen as reason for postulation of permanent “I” which is actually a process of innumerable changes. *Parinispāna svabhāva* is the non-existence of the self: it is true nature and eternal non-existence “as it appears of what appears” absence of subject and object duality. Thus, this threefold reality of self is the appearance, the process and establishment of emptiness or *sunyata* of the perceptible entity called “I.”²⁷

IV. CONCLUSION

Vasubandhu in his central work *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* philosophically, logically, and critically analyses to establish that notion of enduring “I” is just an illusion and unreal produced by impermanent self, due to defiling tendencies which overwhelms *ālayavijñāna* or resultant consciousness although self itself is made up of ‘momentary elements’ which is real. Everything is only appearance *vijñaptimatratā siddhi* and non-existent object is *vijñapti-mātram* i.e. it does not have any independent reality. To conclude our action cannot affect the eternal soul, but it can change the future of aggregates weaved by a causal series. Therefore, according to Vasubandhu, to propel that there is a permanent “self” and “I” is a “false notion”.

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²⁴ Ibid. p.130.

²⁵ Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti, “Philosophy of Mind in the Yogacara Buddhist Idealistic School.” *History of Psychiatry*, 2011, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00570832/document>, Accessed: 1/3/2015.

²⁶ Jonathan C. Gold, “Vasubandhu”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/vasubandhu/>, Accessed: 24/2/15.

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