BUDDHIST NOTION OF ‘I’ BY VASUBANDHU IN 
VIJÑAPTIMĀTRATĀSIDDHĪ

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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. 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 Viṃsatikā-kārikā and Trimsikā-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.

I. INTRODUCTION
Vasubandhu, the 4th century Buddhist philosopher contends that Buddhism is a method of cleansing the stream of consciousness from ‘contaminations' and ‘defilements’, 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 Vasubandh, 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. 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 Buddhist.

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

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2 Ibid.


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 (prajñāpti). 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.” 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 Trimiṅkā-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).

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

10 Ibid. p.38.
“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

IPLEXPONATION OF “I” IN VASUBANDHU’S VIṆŚATIKA-KĀRIKĀ, TRIṆŚIKA-KĀRIKĀ AND TRISVABHĀVANIRDEśA

3.1 Viṇśatika-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 vijnapti-mātram i.e. it does not have any independent reality. The aim of viṇśatikā 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 (vīṇāpti-mātram).”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 vīṇāpti mātra 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- vijñāna), a self-important mentality (manas), and the ālaya- vijñāna. Vasubandhu explains how each of these can be eliminated through ashraya-paravritti i.e., through the over-turning 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 (vijñana) is transformed into unmediated cognition (iñāna). Vasubandhu holds that consciousness arises independently15 by the evolution of consciousness or the vīṇānaparīṇāma. This evolution is a process which is three-fold, or in other words there are three kinds of transformations:
1. Ālayavijñāna (the storehouse consciousness or resultant),
2. Manana-vijñāna (reflected consciousness or mentation),
3. Visayasya vijñapti or prvrīti-vijñāna (functional consciousness or conception of the object).

1. Ālayavijñāna 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 (bija) generated by previous action which when ripened becomes phenomena. Vasubandhu calls it as resultant consciousness (vīpāka-vijñāna) 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 (ālayavijñāna =vāsanās) which possess the nature of cause and the functional consciousness (Pravṛtti-vijñāna =vāsanās) which possess the nature of effect. Therefore,

12 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid. p.194
ālayavijnāna and prṛti-vijñāna are reciprocal to each other. Since, ālayavijnāna is called vipkāka-vijñāna (resultant-consciousness) it is, sarvabījak (depository) and aśraya 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 occasionally.

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 manan-vijñāna as the ‘psychologists fallacy’ because it’s the situation where human being commits fallacy. Thus, when manana overwhelms the ālayavijnāna, 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.

3. Prṛti-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” 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.

3.3 Trisvabhāvanirdeśa
Vasubandhu expounded his theory of trisvabhāva in the Trīṣṇika-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.”

In the notion of Trisvabhāvas or three natures, Vasubandhu expounds the three transformations of consciousness 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

19 Ibid. p. 140 and 141
20 Ibid. p.141.
realm which is intrinsically ‘empty’ or ‘the ideal conception.’ 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 (Parinispanna 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.

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. 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. Parinispannā 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.”

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 vijñaptimātrata 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”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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24 Ibid. p.130.
27 Ibid.


