

## Module 3: Historical Survey of Buddhist Thought

Lecture No. 4 (27, October, 2004)

### Sarvastivada

#### 1. Canonical texts and period of influence

##### Seven Canonical Treatises

Body : *Jnanaprasthana* circa mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C

Limbs : *Dharmaskandha-sastra* (pre-JPS)

*Sangiti-paryaya-sastra* (pre-JPS)

*Prajnapiti-sastra* (completed form: post-JPS, circa beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D)

*Prakarana-sastra* (1<sup>st</sup> century A.D)

*Vijnanakaya-sastra* (beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D)

*Dhatukaya-sastra* (slightly earlier than MVS cos not quoted by MVS)

Note: all the above dates are tentative; based on the research and understanding of Ven. Yinshun in his *A study of treatises and Abhidharma masters based on Sarvastivada*. For English introduction, refer to Ven. Dhammajoti's *Sarvastivada Abhidharma*, Chapter 4.

Other important works: *Mahavibhassa* (commentary of JPS; mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D)

*Abhidharmkosabhasya* of Vasubandhu (5<sup>th</sup> century A.D)

*Nyayanusara* of Sanghabhadra (contemporary of AKB)

#### 2. Doctrines:

##### 2.1 *Svabhava* (ontological doctrine)

In the process of organizing material from the scriptures, the pioneers of Abhidharma came to realize that there are similar groups of names always mentioned together (e.g. the group of five mental states: *vitarka*, *vicara*, *piti*, *sukha*, *ekagrata*), others seemed to be mentioned in a specific context having specific functions (e.g. *vijnana*, *raga*, *drsti*). Some terms can be broken down into components e.g. *pudgala*, *vedana*, or classified further e.g. male, female (under '*samjna*'), colors, shapes (under '*rupa*') etc.

Gradually, Abhidharmikas came to develop the notion of 'dharma' – the building blocks of the universe. Sarvastivadin Abhidharmikas came to define a dharma as a real entity (*dravyantara*) that has its own specific nature (*svabhava*) or a specific characteristic (*svalaksana*) perceived as its unique function not shared by other dharmas. Hence, matter as a dharma has the specific characteristics of being resistant and subject to deterioration due to obstructive contact (e.g. touched by hand); ideation (*samjna*) has the unique characteristic and function of labeling sense data as 'big', 'small', 'man', 'woman', 'blue', 'hot', 'cold' etc; the faculty of understanding (*prajna*) has the unique characteristic and function of discerning and discriminating.

In Sarvastivada ideology, even though a dharma may go through temporal changes and enters into the present, past or future modes, its *svabhava* never changes. This is the famous theory of *sarvastitva*. This is to say, for example, whether in the past, present or future, a boat – any thing made from wood and could float in water – has the function of ferrying people from one bank to another. Only that in this very crude example, a boat is not a dharma because it can be broken down to smaller components and its function can be fulfilled by some other sea-faring vessels of different material and form – therefore not unique.

Note that in Sarvastivada, a dharma can only arise once – as long as it enters into the past mode, it can never arise again. That is to say, the dharma ‘*prajna*’ is only a generic term for all dharmas having the same function/characteristic = *svabhava*. But once that particular dharma comes to the present from the future, exercised its function, it will go to the past from the present and will never arise again even when conditions obtain. But another *prajna*-dharma will arise in its place when the right conditions assemble, generated as it were by the activities of this previous dharma and forming a series.

This is the rudiment of ‘dharma-theory’ that held sway among, at least, the Abhidharmikas in all schools in the Nikaya-period before the flourish of Mahayana. Then, based on the five-aggregate concept and *nibbana* as the Unconditioned, the Sarvastivada developed their unique taxonomy (a system of classification) for all the ‘dharmas’ they had found from their search in the scriptures:

*Rupa*

*Samskara* – *citta-samprayukta* (*vedana* and *samjna* subsumed under this group)

*Citta-viprayukta*

*Citta*

*Asamskrta* – *pratisamkhya-nirodha*

*apratismkhya-nirodha*

*akasa*

For the contents of each category, refer to attached handout. From this taxonomy, the Sarvastivada began to formulate their understanding of the Buddha’s teachings into unique doctrines of their own, offering to the world their worldview – the ‘world’ is but a dynamic interaction among interdependent forces (dharmas). The so-called Sarvastivadin doctrines are really ways to explain how the various dharmas are related and how they interact with one another.

## 2.2 six causes, four conditions, five fruits – *hetuvada* (worldview)

The Sarvastivadins sometimes called themselves the *hetuvadins* – people who investigate and teach about causes (*hetu*). As mentioned above, the Sarvastivadins view dharmas as causal forces. We have to realize that causal efficacy is the central criterion for establishing the reality/existence (*astitva*) of a dharma – an abstract/impersonal way of understanding the Buddha’s teaching of *pratityasamutpada*.

In Sarvastivada the doctrine of 4 types of conditions is thought to have preceded that of the 6 types of causes (direct causes as compared with conditions (*pratyaya*) – supporting causes). These and their corresponding fruits (*phala*) are indicated as follows:

<u>Condition</u>	<u>Cause</u>	<u>Fruit</u>
1. <i>samanantara-pratyaya</i>		
2. <i>alambana-pratyaya</i>		
3. <i>adhipati-pratyaya</i>	<i>karana-hetu</i>	<i>adhipati-phala</i> <i>visamyoga-phala</i>
4. <i>hetu-pratyaya</i>	<i>sahabhu-hetu</i> <i>samprayuktaka-hetu</i>	<i>purusakara-phala</i>
	<i>sabhaga-hetu</i>	<i>nisyanda-phala</i>

*sarvatraga-hetu*

*vipāka-hetu*

*vipāka-phala*

1. (Equal-immediate condition) – the relationship between mind and mental concomitants
2. (The object as condition) – the object as the condition for the arising of consciousness
3. (Condition of dominance) – a most comprehensive or generic condition: a dharma is a condition of dominance either if it directly contributes to the arising of another dharma or indirectly contributes through not hindering the arising of that dharma.
4. (The cause as condition) – e.g. the seed as the *hetu-pratyaya* of a tree

### 2.3 *citta-caitta-samprayoga* theory (psychological doctrine)

Due to their belief in the theory of momentariness (*ksanikavada*) and the theory of *svabhava*, the Sarvastivadins believe that the mind and mental conditioning forces/mental concomitants (*caittasikas*) necessarily arise together at the same time, responding to the same object, through the same sense organ, in the same mode, each having the same number of members in the particular mental moment. These five points are called the Five Matters of Equality – a principle governing the relationship between the mind and its mental concomitants.

On top of this, they also believe that in any mental moment, the mind must arise with at least ten mental concomitants with other mental concomitants arising together depending on the conditions. These mental concomitants are grouped under the concept of *mahabhumika-dharmas* – there are 5 categories of *mahabhumika-dharmas*: the universals (simply called the *mahabhumikas*), the wholesome *mahabhumikas*, the unwholesome *mahabhumikas*, the defiled *mahabhumikas*, the lesser-defiled *mahabhumikas* and the rest under the Indeterminates.

Remember that to the Sarvastivadins, all dharmas are conditioning, causal forces. So in their *citta-caitta* model, which can be called the ‘constellation model’ (compared to the ‘linear model’ of the Sautrantikas), the mind and the mental concomitants mutually condition one another. The mind is the only ‘personal’ dharma, as it were, that marks one individual from another while all the other dharmas, even the *caittas* connected to *citta*, are objective forces activated by the *citta*, either directly (in the case of *caittas*) or indirectly (in the case of *citta-viprayukta-dharmas* and even *rupa* – as *vipaka-phala*). Why is a person characterized by anger when another by greed? Why is one more patient than another? In this model, these can be explained by understanding the *citta* as the ground, the field, for the activities of these mental concomitants. By mutual conditioning, a particular *citta* becomes more ‘fertile’ for the arising of certain groups of *caittas*. With the increasing frequency of the arising of such a constellation of *caittas* every time similar conditions arise, the mind’s characteristic becomes more and more fixed and in turn conditions the arising of a more and more fixed constellation of *caittas*. These are called habitual tendencies (*samskara*).

‘All Buddhist schools traditionally used ‘*samskāra/saṃkhāra*’ (habitual tendency) to denote karmic influence on a person’s mental make-up and personality. In addition, the Sautrāntikas have their perfuming theory to explain the mechanism involved in this doctrine. The Sarvāstivādins had a much more direct and traditional explanation – it is *citta*, the ground for the activities of the *caittas* (also known as the *citta-saṃprayukta-samskāras*) that determines the intensity or otherwise of the strength of each *caitta*. Activities of the *caittas* can be intense or lax: why is a particular *caitta* stronger in one series than another? Why is one person more perceptive than the other or more hateful

than the other in disposition? It would hardly be wrong to say *citta* is the deciding factor for what kind of *caittas* with what strength would remain in the 'field'. Each moment of mental activity strengthens the configuration unless conditions change the pattern. It is as if *citta* is tacitly understood or taken for granted as the receptacle for such a configuration. Indeed it is termed the sphere of activities where *caittas* interact with karmic conditions or other circumstantial conditions to strengthen their roles or be cancelled off by other *caittas*.

*Citta* is a 'personal' force, whereas *caittas* are *external*, universal dharmas though inextricably linked to *cittas* only, personalized by the individual *citta*. Each *citta* is a customized configuration, like each computer, though having the same programs available to all computers, uses different programs in different ways and with different frequency. *Citta* is the mark of personality or individuality: all of us are connected (to use the Sarvāstivādin terminology) to external dharmas like *rūpa* and even *caittas*. However what marks us from each other individualistically is *citta* – the field for the configuration of *caittas*. Vasubandhu has been so articulate on this that he said, "hence, it is only with regard to the mind that 'I' is designated"

#### **2.4 *prapti* and *aprapti* of the *citta-viprayukta* category (liberation theory)**

This *citta-viprayukta-samskaras* category is uniquely Sarvastivadin and much controversy and debate hang over its establishment. There are 14 generic dharmas in this category. These dharmas are not conjoined with the mind i.e. they do not belong to the mental domain. Neither do they belong to the material domain. Here we will briefly learn about 2 related ones – *prapti* and its opposite – *aprapti*.

*Prapti* is a dharma that links other dharmas to a particular psycho-physical series (*santati/samtana*). Hence, when we say a person has 'greed', the Sarvastivadin will understand this as: the mental concomitant 'greed' is connected to this *santati* by *prapti*. *Prapti* can be imagined as a hook or a chain that binds external dharmas to the *santati*. This *prapti* is also produced by conditions and forms a series of its own type, until its opposite, the *aprapti* is produced by necessary conditions. If *prapti* can be imagined as a hook or a chain, *aprapti* can be imagined as a cutter that cuts this hook or chain. An ordinary person is defined as one who has the *apraptis* to pure dharmas like *nirvana* whereas a saint is defined as one who has *praptis* to pure dharmas (and *apraptis* to defilements).

Even when we are in wholesome states of mind, greed is still linked to us because of *prapti*. It merely has no chance to predominate the mind due to the strength of other wholesome *caittas*. The 'arising of greed' in Sarvastivada does not mean that only at the particular mental moment greed is produced in the mind. Rather it means that greed is given the condition to predominate. The 'cessation of greed' similarly does not mean greed ceases to exist in the mind but rather that its strength has abated in that particular mental moment. The only time when greed really ceases to exist in the mind is when the *prapti* linking it to the mind is disrupted and cancelled out by the arising of *aprapti*.

How can *aprapti* arise, that is to say, what are the causes and conditions for the arising of *aprapti*? Through spiritual practice, when the strength of *prajna* is enhanced, when the *praptis* to pure dharmas are conditioned to arise, by *dharmata*, the *aprapti* of greed etc will also arise. This process of liberation actually takes two moments: in the first moment, the *prapti* to greed is prevented from arising due to the strength of pure dharmas acquired through spiritual practice

that culminates to this moment. Conventionally speaking, at this moment one is finally freed and free from greed; the second moment the *aprapti* to greed arises to put a final end to this particular *prapti* series so that *prapti* to greed can never arise again (that is to say, there is no retrogression from this state of liberation). At the same time, the *prapti* to the fruit of disconnection arises i.e. one realizes that one IS free from greed. These two moments are likened to the definite removal of a thief from the house – the throwing out of the thief followed immediately by the shutting of the door.

## 2.5 The three *asamskrta*s

Traditionally, there is only one *asamskrta* or the Unconditioned – *nirvana*. But through doctrinal innovations, different schools expanded the number of *asamskrta*. The Sarvastivadins added only two more to the group whereas the Mahasamghikas and Vibhajyavadins have 9 *asamskrta* in their lists.

The three unconditioned dharmas in Sarvastivada are: *pratisamkhyā-nirodha* (= the traditional *nirvana* but in plural), *apratisamkhyā-nirodha* and *akāśa* (space). Here we will learn about *apratisamkhyā-nirodha*.

*Pratisamkhyā-nirodha* is translated as ‘cessation through discrimination’ – that is, cessation of defilements through discriminative efforts (i.e. cultivation of *prajñā*). On the contrary, *apratisamkhyā-nirodha* or ‘cessation independent of discrimination’ is the cessation of dharmas not by discriminative efforts but due to a lack of conditions for their further arising. In other words, while *pratisamkhyā-nirodha* is acquired by personal efforts that are the conditions for its arising, *apratisamkhyā-nirodha* of dharmas arises due to objective circumstance, viz. the lack of conditions for their arising.

In MVS an example of *apratisamkhyā-nirodha* is given as when a person directs his attention to say, a visual object, then all other dharmas in all other directions would have *apratisamkhyā-nirodha*, that is to say, they come to cease. Remember that Sarvastivadins believe in momentariness. Therefore, if in this particular moment, a person directs his attention to a visual object, all his mind and mental concomitants would respond to the same visual object. The result is that the mind (= consciousness) and mental concomitants that would have taken these other dharmas in other directions cease to arise absolutely, resulting in the arising of *apratisamkhyā-nirodha* of these other dharmas. This is, in modern lay-man term, to say that we are oblivious to all the other objects apart from the one we are directing attention at, all these other dharmas will never get to be connected to us because once this moment is past, these very dharmas would go to the past mode, never to arise again. But their counterparts would still be generated so that a table, though not having our attention this moment, still stands in front of us the next moment whether we are aware of it or not. This aspect of *apratisamkhyā-nirodha* pertains to epistemology.

Another aspect of *apratisamkhyā-nirodha* pertains to the spiritual domain. In the case of a saint, even a saint of the first stage (*srota-apanna*), he will never take rebirth in the lower realms (hell, animal and hungry ghosts). In Sarvastivadin understanding, the arising of such lower realms is not possible due to the arising of *apratisamkhyā-nirodha* conditioned by the deficiency in conditions (in this case, the saint’s lack of defilements and bad karma). ( $\approx -a = b, c, d$  etc; these (b, c, d etc) can condition the arising of *apratisamkhyā-nirodha*)

There are as many *pratisamkhyā-nirodhas* as there are defilements. Similarly, there are as many *apratīsamkhyā-nirodhas* as there are conditioned dharmas. The world of a Sarvastivādin is a dizzying web of conditioning forces or dharmas. If these dharmas were visible and countable, they would have filled the entire universe (and probably spilled over).

### 3. Contributions

‘The Sarvastivāda is one of the most important Buddhist schools during the period of Abhidharma development. An understanding of its doctrinal development is indispensable for gaining a proper perspective of the development in Buddhist thoughts in India as a whole. Its doctrine of *sarvastīva* – the tri-temporal existence of dharmas – had had tremendous impact on the doctrines of not only the so-called Abhidharma schools, but also those of the Mahāyāna, either directly or indirectly, positively or negatively. Accordingly, even those aspiring to acquire insight into the sources of Mahāyāna thoughts ought to be sufficiently acquainted with the fundamental doctrines of (this) school.’

- Ven. Prof. Dhammajoti in  
*Sarvastivāda*  
*Abhidharma*

Mādhyamika’s *śūnyatā* doctrine a reaction against Sarvastivāda’s dharma-theory  
Yogācāra inherited the taxonomy of Sarvastivāda though disagreeing with its dharma-theory  
Proto-Mahāyāna elements in Sarvastivāda buddhology  
Tibetan Buddhism – Sarvastivādin vinaya