

Module 3: Historical Survey of Buddhist Thought

Lecture No. 6 (10 November, 2004)

Brief Outline of Other Schools

The last two schools we will study in the Abhidharma-period will be the Vātsīputrīyas and the Sautrāntikas, both related to the Sarvāstivāda.

1. Vātsīputrīyas 犢子部 (aka Pudgalavādins)

Traditional accounts differ with regard to the relationship between the Vātsīputrīyas and the Sarvāstivāda. The Pāli records deem that Sarvāstivāda was established later than the Vātsīputrīyas, the *Samayabhedopacaraṇacakra* (a Sarvāstivādin text) reports that the Vātsīputrīyas originated from the Sarvāstivāda. Though we cannot be sure now the actual relationship that existed, we know for sure that the doctrinal differences between the two sects were very limited as MVŚ reports: ‘There may be six or seven (tenets) [of the Vātsīputrīyas] that are different from [the Sarvāstivāda], all other teachings are similar.’

1.1 The doctrine of the ineffable ‘*pudgala*’ (Pāli: *puggala*) (不可说補特伽罗/勝義補特伽罗)

The Vātsīputrīyas taught that there is a dharma called ‘*pudgala*’ which is neither different from nor similar to the five aggregates. This is just like the relationship between fire and fuel. Without fuel, there cannot be fire, yet the fire is not the fuel itself. Similarly, there cannot be ‘*pudgala*’ without the five aggregates, yet the five aggregates combined do not equal to ‘*pudgala*’. This is because to the Vātsīputrīyas, the ‘*pudgala*’ is the basis upon which we can talk about karma and its results from one life to another, it is that which allows recollection to take place (in view of *kṣaṇikavāda*: the six sensual consciousnesses arise and cease moment by moment, how is it possible or what is it that makes recollection possible?). Without the *pudgala*, the six sense bases do not have a support for their function and development. When interrogated by their opponents whether *pudgala* is real or just a designation, the Vātsīputrīyas answered that it is established in relation to the **present internal aggregates**. That means it is neither *dravya* (a real entity) or *prajñāpti* (a mere concept or designation). We can understand the Vātsīputrīya concept of *pudgala* as a reaction/response to the debates involving the dharma theory – between saying something is real because it has *svabhāva* and something is a mere convention because it is a composite of other things/concepts, they sort of show ‘the middle way’ between the two: something can be neither-*dravya*-nor-*prajñāpti*.

1.2 The Saṃmitīyas (三弥底部, 正量部)

This was the most influential sub-sect of the Vātsīputrīyas. Its popularity among the masses was due to its ability to connect with the masses through preaching in worldly terms using stories, similes and such other conventional methods. This is similar to the Dārṣṭāntikas of the Sarvāstivāda in their style of preaching.

One new tenet promulgated by the Saṃmitīyas is the concept of *avipranāśa* dharma, pertaining to karma doctrine. One may think that with the ‘*pudgala*’ theory, the Vātsīputrīyas would have explained karma-continuum quite satisfactorily. However it seems that the Saṃmitīyas felt the need to explain the working of karma in more details especially when the idea of ‘*vāsanā*’ (perfuming, 习气) was in vogue (quoted even in Ny). So the ‘*pudgala*’ concept explains why karma can continue from one life to another. People would now want to know ‘how’ karma

continues. The Saṃmitīyas accredit the continuation and therefore, the preservation, of karma from one life to another to the dharma called *avipraṇāśa* (不失法), which Ny puts together with *vāsanā* as a synonym. The *vāsanā* concept was circulated in other schools and can be explained in a simple way: let's say we have a white handkerchief. We drip some perfume on it. The drop of perfume would spread its scent throughout the whole handkerchief. The scent remains in the whole handkerchief even after the perfume itself has evaporated. This is the idea of *vāsanā*: even when the action is past, it leaves behind traces like the perfume traces that will remain long after it disappears. This concept talks about how karma can be preserved in the light of the theory of momentariness (*kṣaṇikavāda*). The Saṃmitīyas improved on the idea combining the *prāpti* idea of the Sarvāstivāda with the ideas of *pudgala* and *vāsanā*.

They explained their '*avipraṇāśa* dharma' with the simile of an I.O.U. They said karma is like a debt. The *avipraṇāśa-dharma* is like a document recording the debt owed by the *pudgala*. Note how the Saṃmitīyas made clever use of similes to teach philosophical ideas. Now *avipraṇāśa-dharma* is like *prāpti*, it forms a series and will not just disappear with the mind and mental concomitants that propelled the *pudgala* to do the karma. Its name itself suggested that it is something not lost to the passage of time (a + vi + pra + √naś + a: something that is not prone to destruction). It belongs to the category of *citta-viprayukta-saṃskāras* and is itself morally neutral i.e. neither wholesome nor unwholesome. If it can be identified morally, it will itself become karmic in nature and therefore serves no purpose as a link for past karma and its future fruit. But because it can continue and it is the trace of karma that is left behind and being linked to the *pudgala*, it will continue to 'perfume' the *pudgala*-series until the conditions arise for the past karma to bear fruit.

2. Sautrāntikas (經量部/經部)

It seems that the Sautrāntikas originated from the Dārṣṭāntikas among the Sarvāstivādins. These Dārṣṭāntikas while accepting the general doctrines of '*sarvāstitva*' had different ideas in other doctrines. Their style of preaching was also livelier though less rigorous than the Ābhidharmikas. Probably the Sarvāstivādin Ābhidharmikas (especially the Kāśmīran Vaibhāṣikas) looked upon them as mavericks in their fold and regarded their doctrines as unorthodox views within Sarvāstivāda.

However in Ny (circa 5th century A.D) the successors of the Dārṣṭāntikas, the Sautrāntikas, rose to occupy the central seat of criticism. This shows that the Sautrāntika doctrines became popular enough to be a direct threat to the orthodox Vaibhāṣikas. In fact, by the name itself, we can understand the inevitability of ideological clashes between the two factions. Sautrāntika means literally 'pertaining to the sūtras', i.e. these people took only the scriptures as authority as opposed to the Ābhidharmikas who took the Abhidharma as authority. The Vaibhāṣikas were not only Ābhidharmikas, they upheld specifically the views endorsed by the *Mahāvibhāṣa* only.

The Sautrāntikas held different opinions with regard to almost every Sarvāstivādin theory. We will discuss two most far-reaching doctrines that would be the foundation or at least, inspiration, for the Mahāyānese Yogācāra school.

2.1 *bīja* theory

Note that this doctrine makes use of the simile of 'seed' (*bīja*, 种子). Remember that it is not the seed that directly gives rise to the fruit, it goes through the process of seed being planted, then

after some other process, the shoots grow from the decomposed seed, the shoots in turn growing phase by phase into a tree, the tree flowers, the flowers fructify, and when the time comes, the fruit will ripen. In this process, by the time the fruit ripens on the tree, the original seed would have decomposed and disappeared; but what passes on from stage to stage in the whole process is the potency. From this simile, we learn the gist of the Sautrāntika *bīja* theory:

What is meant by *bīja* or potency? It is actually the complex of the five aggregates. The formal formulation of the *bīja* theory is phrased like this in AKB

*saṃtatyah sūkṣmam pariṇāmaviśeṣaṃ prāpnuvanti
yena ayatyāṃ bahutara phalābhiniṣpattaya samarthā bhavanti*

(The series obtain a very subtle distinctive point of transformation from which they become potencies for the production of much future fruition).

This means that the series (complex of five-aggregates, i.e. the individual) is transformed moment by moment due to interaction of internal and external factors. The potency of each moment is passed on to the next so that each moment is the totality of past potencies and the potency just obtained from the present moment. In terms of karma, the potency of the action done is spread throughout the series (*vāsanā* concept) and is passed on to the next moment. The series is thus transformed moment by moment due to the interaction of these potencies too. So that when the right conditions assemble, the fruit of past karma could arise. Note that the Sautrāntikas did not say the seed (potency) directly gives rise to the fruit. It is the whole progressive series, the series as a whole, evolving moment by moment, that finally gives rise to the fruit. Just like in the simile mentioned in the beginning, the seed cannot be the direct cause of the mango fruit I am eating now. This mango fruit would not be in my hands without the development of its tree, its leaves and its flowers.

What is karma then to the Sautrāntikas? It is the action done by the five-aggregate-series in a certain moment. Its potency is then passed on to each moment in the series, being modified all the while by potencies before and after it. The fruit of this particular action cannot be fixed in the strict sense because there is always the possibility of counter-potencies that will change the course of the development.

One important idea to be gleaned from this doctrine is the idea that both the mental aspects and the physical aspects of the same series can ‘perfume’ each other, that is to say, they store the potencies of equally so that when one aspect is deficient (e.g. in the *ārūpya-dhātu*) the other could be the cause of the arising of that deficient aspect when conditions arise (say when the individual gets reborn in the *kāma-dhātu*). This doctrine also brings about the establishment of the ‘subtle mind’ concept among the Sautrāntikas that would be a precursor to the ‘*ālaya-vijñāna*’ concept of the Yogācāras – the ‘store-house’ consciousness for all the seeds in the series.

2.2 Theory of Indirect Perception (*bāhyārthānumeya*)

The Sautrāntikas were famous for another radical theory. As Vibhajyavādins in the sense that they upheld ‘only present is real’ theory, they opposed the Sarvāstivādin perception theory in that if eye-consciousness is the result of the contact between eye and visual object, it cannot arise in the same moment as the eye and visual object. As a consequence of this concept, the question arises that what is it that the eye-consciousness perceives because arisen in the second moment after the contact of eye and visual object, the eye-consciousness cannot perceive that same visual

object. That visual object would have gone into the past and not in the present moment as the eye-consciousness arises. Therefore, the Sautrāntikas concluded, what we perceive is only a representation of the object, a mental replica of that object left behind in the first moment. That is to say, we can never perceive external reality as it is; we can only infer the reality of external objects due to this indirect perception by our consciousnesses.

Not surprisingly, the Sarvāstivāda attacked the shortcomings of this theory e.g. when and how is the mental replica made? To which the Sautrāntikas could only resort to the '*dharmatā*' (法爾如是) reply – it is the nature of dharmas.

Such shortcomings notwithstanding, this theory provided the foundation for further development of Buddhist idealism – the principle that 'everything is mind-made'. Although the Sautrāntika 'theory of indirect perception' posits that we cannot know external reality as it is, it does not deny the reality of external objects. However, full-fledged idealism in Buddhism in the form of Yogācāra would relegate 'reality of external objects' as duality between subject and object and is therefore unreal.

3. Conclusion on the period of sectarian developments

- time: from 50 years after 2nd Council to about 5th century A.D (approx. 800 years)
- development of Buddhist philosophy based on the Buddha's teachings, needs within the Buddhist community due to external competition and internal interpretation of the Buddha's teachings (esp. with the compilation of Abhidharma-piṭaka)
- contribution of all these sectarian doctrines as a whole: galvanized the rise of Mahāyāna – another new phase in Buddhist history;
- step by step development of say, *ālayavijñāna* theory of Yogācāras: *svabhāva* doctrine from Sarvāstivāda inspires the *pudgala* idea of Vātsīputrīyas which in turn inspires the idea of *avipranāśa-dharma* – all these pointing to some sort of substratum of existence which is permanent though not eternal. (Eternality implies transcending time and space; but permanence implies a relative stability operating within time and space). These ideas encouraged the promulgation of 'unorthodox' ideas like *ālayavijñāna* and since these ideas were precursors to it, they had already 'tested the ground' and 'cultivated the ground' for enough time so when *ālayavijñāna* concept came into the scene, there was little or no resistance to it among the general Buddhist population, who would have taken it for granted since similar ideas had been 'approved' before.