

Some Mahāsāṃghika Arguments for the Cognition of Nonexistent Objects

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INTRODUCTION

Do all the knowables exist? Can we know things that do not exist? It seems that everything that we know must be something, that is, a being. Now can we know a nonbeing? This issue has been discussed and debated over throughout the history of Indian and Buddhist philosophy. In particular, we find rich sources on the concept of the cognition of nonexistent objects (*asad-ālabhana-jñāna*) in Buddhist Abhidharma texts. All the contemporary studies on this concept, such as those of Sakamoto (1981), Cox (1988), Dhammajoti (2007a), and Kwan (2007), have focused on these sources, and examined the important role of this concept in the debate between the Vaibhāṣikas and the Dārṣṭāntika-Sautrāntikas.

The present article will instead explore some pre-Vaibhāṣika sources that are extant in Pāli and Chinese, including the *Kathāvatthu*, *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, *Śāriputrābhidharma*, and *Vijñānakāya*. These sources suggest an early origin of the concept of the cognition of nonexistent objects among the Mahāsāṃghikas and some Vibhāṣyavādins under their influence, and a possible connection of this concept to the concept of non-cognition (*anupalabdhi*) developed later by the Buddhist epistemological tradition. These scattered sources also indicate some different aspects of this theory from that held by the Dārṣṭāntika-Sautrāntikas. In particular, some Mahāsāṃghika arguments reveal how a soteriologically-oriented concept of cognition without objects gradually develops into the sophisticated philosophical concept of the cognition of nonexistent objects. This again, to echo my conclusion on the study of self-

cognition (*svasaṃvedana*) (Yao 2005), shows that the concept of the cognition of nonexistent objects has an origin in the soteriological discourse, and that many Mahāsāṃghika theories have great impact on the later development of Buddhist doctrinal systems.

LATENT DEFILEMENTS WITHOUT OBJECTS

The first argument has to do with *anuśaya*, a genetic term for defilements. But in the Mahāsāṃghika usage, it is more appropriate to translate it into “latent defilements.” It is well-documented that the Mahāsāṃghikas disagreed with the Sarvāstivādins (and possibly other Sthaviravāda schools) on the relationship between *anuśaya* and *pariyavasthāna* (the manifested defilements). In his *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, Vasumitra lists the following statement as one of the main doctrines shared by the Mahāsāṃghikas and its sub-schools including Ekavyavahārika, Lokottaravāda, and Kaukuṭika: “*Anuśaya* is not a mind or mental activity, and it has no objects. *Anuśaya* is distinguished from *pariyavasthāna*, and *pariyavasthāna* is distinguished from *anuśaya*. It should be said that *anuśaya* is not associated with the mind, while *pariyavasthāna* is associated with the mind.”¹

The same statement is found among the shared doctrines of the Mahīśāsakas and its sub-school Dharmaguptaka.² These schools are the major components of the so-called Vibhajyavādins.³ It is possible that the Vibhajyavādins were influenced by the Mahāsāṃghikas on this point, and this agreement between the two parties is the basis for their contributions to the development of the theory of cognition of nonexistent objects.

In contrast to the Mahāsāṃghika and Vibhajyavāda view on *anuśaya* and *pariyavasthāna*, the Sarvāstivādins held the exactly opposite view: “All *anuśayas* are mental activities, associated with the mind, and have objects. All *anuśayas* are included in *pariyavasthāna*, but not all *pariyavasthānas* are included in *anuśaya*.”⁴ Similar views are found in more elaborated form in Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma works such as *Mahāvibhāṣā*, *Nyāyanusāra* and *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*.⁵

This debate involves some issues with great soteriological implications. Liberation, the goal of Buddhist practice, is meant to be liberated from defilements (*anuśaya*). Therefore, *anuśaya*

undoubtedly occupies a central position in the Buddhist soteriology, and the understanding and analysis of defilements constitute the essential part of Buddhist doctrinal system. Schools such as Mahāsāṃghika and Mahīśāsaka held that a finer analysis should be made to distinguish between *anuśaya* and *pariyavasthāna*, the latent and manifested defilements. This distinction is applicable to many soteriological issues including the possibility of retrogression, an issue hotly debated among sectarian Buddhists.⁶ As I am not mainly concerned with soteriological issues in the current study, I am not going to further discuss how this distinction between latent and manifested defilements is applied to solve or evoke various soteriological problems. Instead, I am interested in how this distinction is made. It is suggested that the Mahāsāṃghikas and Mahīśāsakas made this distinction on the following ground: *Anuśaya* is not associated with the mind, while *pariyavasthāna* is. In other words, *anuśaya* or the latent defilement that is disjoined from the mind is not a mental activity. In contrast, *pariyavasthāna* or the manifested defilement that is conjoined with the mind is a mental activity. So the line is clear: *anuśaya* is not a mental activity, but *pariyavasthāna* is.

In his commentary on the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, Kuiji explains the reason for the Mahāsāṃghika view that *anuśaya* is not a mental activity. First of all, *anuśaya* consists of ten types of defilements and they are desire (*rāga*), enmity (*pratigha*), ignorance (*avidyā*), conceit (*māna*), doubt (*vicikitsā*), self view (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*), extreme view (*antagrāhadr̥ṣṭi*), false view (*mithyādr̥ṣṭi*), adherence to one's own views (*dr̥ṣṭi-parāmarśa*), adherence to abstentions and vows (*śīlavrata-parāmarśa*).⁷ It accompanies the ordinary person (*pr̥thagjana*) all the time, even in her state of mindless meditation (*asaṃjñi-samāpatti*) or in her mental state that is morally good.⁸ The state of mindless meditation is especially important for the Mahāsāṃghikas to develop their view on *anuśaya*. It is believed to be a state in which all the mind and mental activities cease to function. The fact that the mind and mental activities can resume after the state of mindless meditation contributed greatly to the development of the concept of store consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) later among the Yogācārin. The Mahāsāṃghikas, however, are more concerned with what happens

in the state of mindless meditation. As it is a state accessible to an ordinary person through proper training, there must be defilements in this state. Otherwise, those who are in the mindless meditation would be the liberated ones (*arhat*) rather than ordinary persons. As we know, according to the Buddhist soteriology, the key difference between the liberated ones and the ordinary person is whether they are accompanied by defilements. So the Mahāsāṃghikas admit that the defilements that pertain through mindless meditation must not be mental activities. As a result, we have to distinguish between *pariyavasthāna*, the manifested defilements that are associated with the mind, and *anuśaya*, the latent defilements that are not mental activities.

Believing in a non-mental latent defilement is a view shared by the Mahāsāṃghikas and its sub-schools including Ekavyavahārika, Lokottaravāda, and Kaukkuṭika, the Mahīśāsakas and its sub-school Dharmaguptaka, and the Saṃmatīyas.⁹ For some, especially the Sarvāstivādins, this view is unacceptable. How can desire etc., which are usually considered to be typical mental activities, be non-mental? They hold firmly that “all the latent defilements (*anuśaya*) are mental activities and associated with the mind.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, they do not make a sharp distinction between *anuśaya* and *pariyavasthāna*, and consider both to be the epithets of *kleśa* (defilements).

Anuśaya, either mental or non-mental, is understood to be a human disposition with the characteristic of increasing or decreasing along with its objects. For instance, one’s desire may increase when encountering a favorable object and may decrease when meeting with an unfavorable object. Understanding the interaction between defilements and their objects is a very important aspect of Buddhist practice that aims to eliminate these defilements. And the practice consists of internally calming down the defilements and externally avoiding objects that help the growth of defilements. Now the Mahāsāṃghikas have to face a serious challenge: If *anuśaya* is non-mental, how can it have an object? If it has no objects, how can it maintain its growth? Again, it is well-documented that the Mahāsāṃghikas and its sub-schools including Ekavyavahārika, Lokottaravāda, and Kaukkuṭika exclaimed that “[*anuśaya*] has no objects either.”¹¹ The Mahīśāsakas and its sub-school Dharmaguptaka

adopted the same view, and the Sarvāstivādins, accordingly, went against such a view by insisting that “[*anuśaya*] has objects.”¹²

It is evident that the Theravādins also argued against this view. As a matter of fact, their debate with the Andhakas and some Uttarāpathakas on the subject as found in *Kathāvatthu* IX.4 constitutes the most substantial material for the current discussion.¹³ First of all, this text indicates that seven types of *anuśaya* (Pāli *anusaya*) are under discussion, and they are sensual desire (*kāmarāga*), enmity (*paṭigha*), conceit (*māna*), erroneous opinion (*diṭṭha*), doubt (*vicikicchā*), desire of life (*bhavarāga*), and ignorance (*avijjā*). On the view of the Andhakas, the *anuśaya* of desire (latent desire) is distinguished from the manifested desire, the desire as flood (*kāmarāgapariyutthāna*), bond (*kāmarāgasaññojana*), outburst (*kāmogha*), fetter (*kāmayoga*), or obstacle (*kāmacchandanivaraṇa*), all of which are the manifestations of desire in different degrees. The latent desire has no objects, while the rest has. The reason for this is not that *anuśaya* belongs to material form, sense organs, or sense objects, all of which are part of the material realm and certainly possess no objects. Nor is it because *anuśaya* belongs to *nirvāṇa*, the unconditioned state that goes beyond material and mental factors, and beyond the division between subject and object. Instead, *anuśaya* is associated with conditioning force (*saṅkhāra*, *saṃskāra*).

The text then discusses more extensively how *anuśaya* is associated with conditioning force. First of all, if the latent desire belongs to *saṅkhāra*, then *saṅkhāra* should also be without objects. On the other hand, however, the manifested desire itself also belongs to *saṅkhāra*, and this desire certainly possesses objects, then *saṅkhāra* should have objects. The Andhakas are forced into a self-contradiction by admitting *saṅkhāra* to be with and without objects at the same time. Their solution to this contradiction is to admit “a portion of *saṅkhāra* being with objects and the other portion without objects.”¹⁴ Buddhaghosa explains that the *saṅkhāra* with objects refers to the aggregate of *saṅkhāra* that is associated with mind (*citta-sampayutta-saṅkhāra-kkhandha*), while the *saṅkhāra* without objects is meant to cover other factors included in *saṅkhāra* such as latent defilements (*anusaya*), vitality (*jīvitindriya*), and forms of bodily actions (*kāyakammādirūpa*).¹⁵ As we know, the latter group

of concepts developed into a separate category of the conditionings disassociated with the mind (*citta-viprayukta-saṃskāra*) among the Sarvāstivādins. Although they disagree among themselves on the number of concepts included in this category, they unanimously exclude *anuśaya* from the list because they believe, as we discussed earlier, *anuśaya* is associated with the mind and has objects.

When the Andhakas were asked whether this division between the portion associated with the mind and that disassociated with the mind is applicable to other aggregates such as feeling (*vedanā*), conception (*saññā*), and consciousness (*viññāna*), they denied. This means that only the aggregate of *saṅkhāra* enjoys the status of being both associated and disassociated with the mind. Interestingly enough, a parallel view is found in the *Śāriputrābhidharma*, an early Abhidharma work believed to be associated with the Mahīśāsakas and the Dharmaguptakas.¹⁶ The text states: “What is the one which is of two portions – either associated with or disassociated with the mind? It is the aggregate of conditioning force (*saṃskāra*).... What is [the portion of] the aggregate of conditioning force which is disassociated with the mind? It is [the portion of] the aggregate of conditioning force which is not mental activities, i.e., life (*jāti*), etc., up to the attainment of cessation (*nirodha-samāpatti*).”¹⁷ Since the list is shortened, we do not know whether it would include *anuśaya* or not, but Cox (1995: 76 n19) suggests that it may do.

Finally, the Andhakas argue for the latent defilements being without objects along the line of moral psychology. When the ordinary person, i.e., those who have not liberated from defilements, is willing something morally good (*kusala*) or neutral (*abyākata*), he is still understood to be embedded with *anuśaya*, for otherwise he will be liberated.¹⁸ In this state, his good or neutral thoughts have their corresponding objects, but the latent defilements at that moment cannot have any objects. If it does, the morally bad thought would emerge and that would eradicate any morally good or neutral thought.

This argument in terms of moral psychology makes more sense if we understand *anuśaya* as an unconscious or subconscious state. An unconscious or subconscious state can be understood to be disassociated with the conscious mind, so it is not a regular type

of mental activity. Therefore, it does not take the normal mental objects as its objects, and can be considered to have no objects. Another way to make sense this point is to resort to the Lacanian concept of pure desire that is beyond any recognizable object. For Lacan, desire is not a relation to an object but a relation to a lack (*manque*). In any case, the thesis that latent defilements have no objects constitutes the first step toward the formation of the concept of the cognition of nonexistent objects.

AWARENESS WITHOUT OBJECTS

The second argument for the cognition of nonexistent objects that is associated with the Mahāsāṃghikas and its sub-schools has to do with awareness (*ñāṇa*). So far the most extensive source for such an argument is found in the *Kathāvatthu* IX.5, where a debate between the Theravādins and the Andhakas is reported. This section has a similar structure as the section we discussed earlier. First, the Andhakas distinguish awareness from wisdom (*paññā*), wisdom faculty (*paññindriya*), wisdom power (*paññābala*), right view (*sammāditṭhi*), discernment as a limb of enlightenment (*dharmavicaya-sambojjh-aṅga*), all of which are believed to have objects. Awareness, however, is assumed to have no objects. The reason for this is not that awareness is associated with material form, sense organs, or sense objects, all of which have no objects. Nor is it because awareness is associated with *nirvāṇa*, the unconditioned state that is beyond material and mental factors and certainly has no objects. Awareness is rather associated with the aggregate of *saṅkhāra*.

If awareness is assumed to have no objects and to be associated with the aggregate of *saṅkhāra*, then the *saṅkhāra* itself as a whole should have no objects. But the Andhakas admit that the wisdom that possesses objects is also associated with the aggregate of *saṅkhāra*, therefore *saṅkhāra* is considered to have objects. To resolve the contradiction that *saṅkhāra* is with and without objects at the same time, the Andhakas admit that a portion of *saṅkhāra* has objects, while the other portion does not. This division, again, is only applicable to the aggregate of *saṅkhāra*, but not to other

aggregates such as feeling, conception, and consciousness, all of which are believed to have objects all the time.

In the *Kathāvatthu* XI.3, a similar pattern of argument is employed to argue that awareness is not associated with the mind (*citta*). Buddhaghosa attributed this view to the Pubbaseliyas, a sub-school of the Andhakas. These two sets of arguments with regard to awareness, though attributed to different branches of the Mahāsāṃghikas, are related to each other. If awareness is associated with the mind, then it certainly should have objects. If, however, awareness is not associated with the mind, then it is understandably without objects. But a difficult point is how to understand the awareness disassociated with the mind, for this concept contradicts our usual understanding of awareness (*ñāṇa*), which can be anything but other than a mental activity. In the various lists of conditionings disassociated with the mind (*citta-viprayukta-saṃskāra*) developed among the later Sarvāstivādins, they do not include awareness there.

To fully understand this we have to look into the rest part of argument that involves the relationship between awareness and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Being a pair of concepts that are widely circulated in Buddhist doctrinal system, awareness and consciousness have a complicated relationship. In the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma system, extensive sources indicate that they are used in many cases interchangeably. When distinguished, they are believed to be associated with different realms: awareness being undefiled and a mental activity (*caitta*), while consciousness being defiled and synonymous to the mind (*citta*).¹⁹ In the earlier debates among various Buddhist schools as recorded in the *Kathāvatthu*, we see some other aspects of the relationship between awareness and consciousness. In the *Kathāvatthu* IX.5 and XI.3, both the Andhakas and the Pubbaseliyas argue that an arhat, after the attainment of the knowledge of path (*magga*), she is believed to “possess awareness” (*ñāṇīti*) at all time from then on. This is also the case when she is engaged in a sense consciousness. For instance, when she perceives something, fully engaged in the visual experience, her awareness is also active.²⁰ In this process, the visual consciousness has visual objects as its objects, but the awareness, the Andhakas and the Pubbaseliyas conclude, should have no objects. The reason for this

is probably that there cannot be two objects of cognition at the same instant of time.

As the account in the *Kathāvatthu* is too brief, we do not know for sure the context of this argument. One possibility is to understand it in the context of the Andhaka arguments for reflexive awareness. As I discussed elsewhere, the Andhakas and some other schools of the Mahāsāṃghika origin hold that the mind is aware of itself while acting on external objects.²¹ In this process, the sense consciousness that acts on sensory objects is working at the same time when a certain awareness is active. I call it a reflexive model of self-awareness in contrast to the reflective model of self-awareness propounded among the Sarvāstivādins. The latter model is thus named because the Sarvāstivādins hold that self-awareness is only possible in the later moment when the mind reflects the sensory experience. In the Mahāsāṃghika model, however, the awareness is active at the same time as the sensory experience. While the sensory consciousness takes sensory objects as its objects, the awareness ends up with no objects, because it is believed that no two objects can be presented at the same time, although for the Mahāsāṃghikas two mental processes can take place at the same time.

This discussion with reference to self-awareness may only indicate one way of making sense of the Andhaka argument that awareness has no objects. To seek alternative ways of understanding, we have to take into account the Pubbaseliya view that awareness is disassociated with the mind. This view, to a great extent, contradicts our usual understanding of awareness, but it is not entirely unimaginable. In the later Buddhist epistemological tradition, the concepts of mere non-perception (*adarśanamātra*) and non-cognition (*anupalabdhi*) were developed to account for the cognition of negative facts. One of the salient features of this means of knowledge is indicated by the inactiveness of other means of knowledge such as perception and inference.²² If following this line of thought, the awareness disassociated with the mind can be understood as a state in which all mental activities are ceased. This non-mental awareness is not an entirely blank-out, rather it could be, similar to the case of non-perception or non-cognition, responsible for the cognition of negative facts. When it is said that awareness is without objects, it

really means that it does not take the normal existent objects as its objects, but rather it has *nonexistent* objects as its objects.

The connection between the awareness without objects and the awareness of nonexistent objects seems to be supported by a pre-Vaibhāṣika source from the *Śāriputrābhidharma*. This work is believed to be the earliest Abhidharma work in the Northern tradition of Indian Buddhism, but its received version in Chinese reflects more of the Mahīśāsaka and Dharmaguptaka views. While enumerating various types of awareness (*jñāna*), this text lists “the awareness of nonexistent objects” (, **asadālambanajñāna*) as one of more than two hundred types of awareness.²³ The first thing to be noted is that it is called an “awareness” (*jñāna*) of nonexistent objects, which echoes the Andhaka arguments with respect to awareness, though we are not sure whether the “awareness” here is associated with the mind or not. Later in the text, two definitions of this concept are given. The first definition reads: “What is the awareness of nonexistent objects? The awareness that has no objects (**anālamhana*) is the awareness of nonexistent objects.”²⁴ Contemporary scholars including Sakamoto (1981: 135) and Cox (1988: 44) took the first definition as a denial of this concept: “There is *no* the awareness of nonexistent objects.”²⁵ But this denial contradicts to the fact that it is listed earlier in the text as one type of awareness. My interpretation, in contrast, makes it clear that the awareness of nonexistent objects is defined as “the awareness that has *no objects*.”

CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

The third argument for the cognition of nonexistent objects is related to the consciousness of the past and the future. Unlike the first two arguments that were to a great extent neglected by the later scholars, this argument became one of the focal points in the Sautrāntika-Sarvāstivāda debates. It is interesting to note that the Dārṣṭāntikas did not explore the argument with this respect when they argued for the cognition of nonexistent objects. It can be explained by the fact that the Dārṣṭāntikas still, along the line of the Sarvāstivādins, believe the existence of past and future factors.

This also helps us to draw a line between the Dārṣṭāntikas and the Sautrāntikas, at least on this point.

Buddhaghosa attributed the argument for the consciousness of the past and the future to the Uttarāpathakas.²⁶ In this argument, a key term to be noted is “consciousness” (*citta*). As compared to the latent defilements (*anuśaya*) and the awareness (*ñāṇa*) that we discussed earlier, consciousness is unambiguously mental and conscious. So the consciousness recalling a past object (*atītārammaṇaṃ cittaṃ*) is the cognition of the object on a conscious level.²⁷ The central thesis that the Uttarāpathakas argue for can be stated as follows: “The consciousness that [recalls] a past object or [anticipates] a future object is [a consciousness] without objects.”²⁸ In the eyes of their opponents, i.e., the Theravādins, however, this is a self-contradictory statement. They have already talked about the consciousness being involved with a past object (*atītārammaṇa*) or a future object (*anāgatārammaṇa*), how can they say that the consciousness is “without objects” (*anārammaṇa*)? Moreover, there is still adverting of consciousness (*āvattānā*), ideation, coordinated application, attention, volition, anticipation, or aiming at (*paṇidhi*) concerning that which is past or future, how is it possible that the consciousness in these states is without objects? If the Uttarāpathakas want to be consistent, the Theravādins urge, they should also admit that the consciousness perceiving a present object is the consciousness without objects. But they would not go so far to deny the existence of the present object. Instead, they insist that the basic reason for the consciousness that involves with a past or future object being the consciousness without objects is that “the past and the future do not exist.”²⁹ Therefore, when the consciousness is attending or aiming at a present object, it is a consciousness with objects; when the consciousness is attending or aiming at a past or future object, it is a consciousness without objects.

As the Theravādins agreed with the Uttarāpathakas and many other Buddhist schools in propounding the view that past and future factors do not exist, they did not get into further debate on this point. But the Theravādins’ accusation of their opponents being self-contradictory still makes sense. If past and future factors do not exist, it is impossible to talk about “a past object” (*atītārammaṇa*) or

“a future object” (*anāgatārammaṇa*) in the first place, and it evokes a self-contradiction to say that “the consciousness recalling a past object is a consciousness without objects.” This desperate situation is similar to what Western philosophers called the Meinongian paradox, a paradox involving with virtually all types of negative existential statements. This instance shows that Buddhist philosophers were aware of the difficulty involved with such an issue.

Besides the *Kathāvatthu*, we have a few more pre-Vaibhāṣika sources that argue for the cognition of nonexistent objects along the line of the consciousness of the past and the future. In the *Śāriputrābhidharma*, the second definition of the awareness of nonexistent objects reads: “What is the awareness of nonexistent objects? Or, the arising of the awareness that contends to past or future factors is called the awareness of nonexistent objects.”³⁰ This definition is evidently related to the Uttarāpathaka argument from the consciousness of the past and the future. As we know the received version of *Śāriputrābhidharma* is associated with the Mahīśāsakas and the Dharmaguptakas, then, most probably, this concept originated in the Mahāsāṃghika subgroup Uttarāpathaka and was accepted and further developed among the Vibhāvādins including the Mahīśāsakas and the Dharmaguptakas.

Later in the *Śāriputrābhidharma*, while enumerating various types of meditation, a meditation of nonexistent objects (, **asadālambanasamādhi*) is listed as one of more than two hundred types of meditation.³¹ Later in the text, two definitions of this concept are given: 1) the meditation that has no objects; 2) the meditation that contemplates on past or future factors.³² This is a concept that we have not encountered in earlier discussions. It may indicate another possible origin for the Buddhist theory of the cognition of nonexistent objects. Besides the soteriological and epistemological approaches that we have discussed earlier, the meditative practice undoubtedly occupies a central position in the Buddhist tradition, and it is understandable that the Buddhist practitioners would develop their theory of the cognition of nonexistent objects on the basis of their relevant meditative experience. If we had more sources, this could be a promising direction for tracing the origin of this concept.

The other early source is the *Vijñānakāya*, one of the “six limbs” of Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma works. Being attributed to Devaśarman, this work begins with the refutation of the views of a certain Maudgalyāyana. It is repeatedly stated that Maudgalyāyana holds that things of the past and the future do not exist, but the present and the unconditioned exist.³³ In his *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, Vasumitra reports that this view was shared by the Mahīśāsakas and its subgroup Dharmaguptaka.³⁴ According to the same text, the Dharmaguptakas claim themselves to be the followers of Maudgalyāyana.³⁵ So we can assume that Maudgalyāyana mentioned in the *Vijñānakāya* is this Dharmaguptaka Maudgalyāyana.

Among the various views of Maudgalyāyana refuted by Devaśarman, one view is reported as follows: “There is the consciousness (*xin*, **citta*) of nonexistent objects.”³⁶ It is worth noting that the key term “consciousness” is used, which indicates that the faculty for the cognition of nonexistent objects is the consciousness itself. It is also coherent to the Uttarāpathaka usage of “the *consciousness* without objects” (*cittaṃ anārammaṇan*) that was discussed earlier in this section. More importantly, Maudgalyāyana further explains the reason for admitting this consciousness of nonexistent objects as follows: “There must be the consciousness of nonexistent objects. Why? Because the consciousness cognizes the past or the future.”³⁷ This view is in turn built upon their shared assumption that “the past and the future do not exist”, which is refuted extensively by Devaśarman in the *Vijñānakāya*.

In any case, the Sarvāstivādins supplied us some scattered sources that reveal the connection between the Uttarāpathakas and the Dharmaguptakas on the understanding of the cognition of nonexistent objects as the cognition of the past and the future. This view was probably also shared by some other Mahāsāṃghika and Vibhajyavāda subgroups. Without further evidence, we cannot explore further. But it is evident that the later Sautrāntikas (but not the Dāṛṣṭāntikas) further developed this view by heavily engaging debates with the Vaibhāṣikas on the cognition of the past and the future.

CONCLUSION

Based on scattered sources in Pāli and Chinese, we have reconstructed three arguments for the cognition of nonexistent objects that are associated with the Mahāsāṃghikas and some of its sub-schools. In the first argument, the thesis reads: “Latent defilements (*anuśaya*) have no objects.”³⁸ The Mahāsāṃghikas and its sub-schools including Ekavyavahārika, Lokottaravāda, and Kaukuṭika, the Mahīśāsakas and its sub-school Dharmaguptaka, and the Saṃmatīyas were arguing for this view, while the Sarvāstivādins (and possibly other Sthaviravāda schools) were arguing against it. The proponents formulate four main reasons to support their thesis: 1) Latent defilements (*anuśaya*) is distinguished from manifested defilements (*pariyavasthāna*); 2) Latent defilements are not associated with the mind (*citta*), nor are they a mental activity (*caitta*), but rather they are associated with conditioning force (*saṅkhāra*), and possibly components of conditionings disassociated with the mind (*citta-viṭṭayukta-saṃskāra*); 3) Latent defilements accompany an ordinary person (*prthagjana*) at all the time, even in her state of mindless meditation; 4) When an ordinary person is willing something morally good or neutral, her good or neutral thoughts have their corresponding objects, but the latent defilements at that moment cannot have any object. To make sense of this argument from a contemporary perspective, we have to resort to the Freudian concept of unconscious or subconscious and the Lacanian concept of pure desire without objects.

In the second argument, the thesis is expressed in two different ways: 1) “Awareness (*ñāṇa*) has no objects”,³⁹ or 1’) “The awareness that has no objects (**anālamhana*) is the awareness of nonexistent objects.”⁴⁰ The Andhakas, Pubbaseliyas and Dharmaguptakas were proponents, while the Theravādins were their opponents. The proponents provide three reasons to support their thesis: 1) Awareness is distinguished from wisdom (*paññā*); 2) Awareness is not associated with the mind (*citta*), nor is it a mental activity (*caitta*), but rather it is associated with conditioning force (*saṅkhāra*), and might also be a component of conditionings disassociated with the mind (*citta-viṭṭayukta-saṃskāra*); 3) When an arhat perceives something, fully engaged in the visual experience, her awareness is

also active. In this process, the visual consciousness has visual objects as its objects, but the awareness should have no objects. To make sense of this argument, we have discussed the Mahāsāṃghika theory of reflexive awareness, according to which, awareness is active while the subject engages visual or other sensory experience. Moreover, their concept of “awareness disassociated with the mind” anticipates the concept of non-cognition in Buddhist epistemology, which is a state of mind that other means of knowledge such as perception and inference are inactive.

In the third argument, the thesis is expressed in various different ways: 1) “The consciousness (*citta*) that [recalls] a past object or [anticipates] a future object is [the consciousness] without objects”;⁴¹ or 1’) “The arising of the awareness (*jñāna*) that contends to past or future factors is called the awareness of nonexistent objects”;⁴² or 1”) “There must be the consciousness (*citta*) of nonexistent objects. Why? Because the consciousness cognizes past or future [factors].”⁴³ The reason given by the proponents, i.e., the Uttarāpathakas and the Dharmaguptakas, is simple, that is, “because the past and the future do not exist.” Although agreeing with this reason, their opponents—the Theravādins—point out a paradox involving with virtually all negative existential statements: If past and future factors do not exist, it is impossible to talk about “a past object” (*atītārammaṇa*) or “a future object” (*anāgatārammaṇa*) in the first place. So it is self-contradictory to say: “The consciousness recalling a past object is the consciousness without objects.”

As compared to other arguments for the cognition of nonexistent objects developed later by the Dāṛṣṭāntika-Sautrāntikas and the Yogācārin, these three arguments of Mahāsāṃghika origin are more primitive. But they reveal some features of this theory in its early development. In particular, the *x* of nonexistent objects is evolved from *x* without objects. In the case of latent defilements, it is the latent defilements without objects. But when it comes to awareness, it can be the awareness without objects or the awareness of nonexistent objects. And finally the consciousness of the past and the future is more explicitly the cognition of nonexistent objects in the past and the future. In the further debates between the Vaibhāṣikas and the Dāṛṣṭāntika-Sautrāntikas, varieties of

nonexistent objects were discussed. To fully understand these discussions, we may have to employ a phenomenological distinction between the cognition of *non*-existent objects and that of *in*-existent objects. The former applies to objects of the past and the future, negations and expressions referring to nonexistent objects, while the latter applies to internal objects such as meditative objects, dream images, reflected images, echoes, sensory error, illusions, and magical creations. Therefore, the single Sanskrit phrase *asad-ālabhana-jñāna* can be interpreted in three different ways, i.e., cognition without objects, cognition of nonexistent objects, and cognition of inexistent objects.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- 1 *Samyabhedoparacanacakra:* T2031, 15c28-16a1.
- 2 See *Samyabhedoparacanacakra*, T2031, 16c28-17a1.
- 3 See Yao 2005: 90 n10.
- 4 *Samyabhedoparacanacakra:* T2031, 16b16-18.
- 5 For a discussion of the Sarvāstivāda theory of defilements based on these sources, see Dhammajoti 2007b: 418-479.
- 6 See Dhammajoti 2007b: 442-443.
- 7 See *Yibu zonglun lun shuji*, X844, 582b18-21. In his commentary on the *Kathāvatthu*, Buddhaghosa named seven types, see below for details.
- 8 For the latter, more sources from the *Kathāvatthu* will be discussed below.
- 9 For the Saṃmatīya view, see Buddhaghosa's commentary on *Kathāvatthu* XI.1.
- 10 *Samyabhedoparacanacakra:* T2031, 16b16.
- 11 *Samyabhedoparacanacakra:* T2031, 15c28. The Tibetan translation reads: *dmigs med par brjod par bya'o*. Peking 5639: 172a.
- 12 *Samyabhedoparacanacakra:* T2031, 16b16.
- 13 For the affiliation of the Andhakas and their sub-schools to the Mahāsāṃghikas, see Yao 2005: 23-25.
- 14 *Kathāvatthu* IX.4: *Saṅkhārakkhandho ekadeso sārammaṇo, ekadeso anārammaṇo ti.*

- 15 See *Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā* IX. 4: *Anusayaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ kāyakammādirūpaṅ ca saṅkhārakkhandhapariyāpannaṃ, taṃ sandhāya paṭijānāti.*
- 16 See Lü 1991: 1964-1965.
- 17 *Śāriputrābhidharma:*
T1548, 547b12-17 See also Dhammajoti 2007b: 373.
- 18 See *Kathāvatthu* IX.4, XI.1, and XIV. 5.
- 19 See Yao 2005: 68-70.
- 20 In *Kathāvatthu* XI. 2, however, the Mahāsāṃghikas seem to argue that awareness should be inactive during this process.
- 21 See Yao 2005: 15-33.
- 22 See Yao (forthcoming).
- 23 See *Śāriputrābhidharma*, T1548, 590a7-8.
- 24 *Śāriputrābhidharma:* T1548, 593c16-17.
- 25 Some editions of the text delete the second *jing* (“object”) to make this reading possible.
- 26 The Pāli Text Society edition of the *Kathāvatthu* and its English and Japanese translations separate the argument on the cognition of the future an independent section IX.7. If examining the text more carefully, one would find it unnecessary to do so. This might be the reason that Buddhaghosa comments on the two sections together.
- 27 The English translator of the *Kathāvatthu* is therefore justified in rendering “*citta*” as “consciousness.” See Shwe 1969 [c1915]: 237.
- 28 *Kathāvatthu* IX.6: *Aṭṭārammaṇaṃ cittaṃ anārammaṇaṃ ti; IX. 7: Anāgatārammaṇaṃ cittaṃ anārammaṇaṃ ti.*
- 29 *Kathāvatthu* IX.7: *aṭṭānāgataṃ natthīti.* Here I follow the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana CD (v. 3.0) edition. The Pāli Text Society edition reads: “*aṭṭārammaṇaṃ n’atthīti*” (“the past objects do not exist”).
- 30 *Śāriputrābhidharma:* T1548, 593c16-18.
- 31 See *Śāriputrābhidharma*, T1548, 701c10-11.
- 32 See *Śāriputrābhidharma*, T1548, 717a29-b2. I have to interpolate the character *jing* (“object”) to make this reading of the first definition possible.
- 33 See *Vijñānakāya*, T1539, 531a27-537a12.
- 34 See *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, T2031, 16c26-27.
- 35 See *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, T2031, 15b16-17.
- 36 *Vijñānakāya:* T1539, 535a8.
- 37 *Vijñānakāya:* T1539, 535a19-20.

- 38 *Kathāvatthu* IX.4: *anusayā anārammaṇā; Samayabhedoparacanacakra:*
... T2031, 15c28-29.
- 39 *Kathāvatthu* IX.5: *nāṇaṃ anārammaṇan.*
- 40 *Śāriputrābhidharma:* T1548, 593c17.
- 41 *Kathāvatthu* IX.6: *atītānāgatārammaṇaṃ cittaṃ anārammaṇan.*
- 42 *Śāriputrābhidharma:* , T1548, 593c17-18.
- 43 *Vijñānakāya:* , ? T1539, 535a19-20.

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