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Multi-Layered Reduction System in the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma:

An Examination of the Usage of *Svabhāva*

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1 Introduction

The concept of *svabhāva* is fundamental within Indian Buddhism, often translated as "intrinsic nature" or "intrinsic essence."¹ It is generally believed that *svabhāva* stands as a cornerstone of the Sarvāstivāda school's philosophy. On one hand, it is widely accepted for its role in defining dharmas, serving as a key condition for their classification. On the other hand, its rich and multifaceted nature allows it to find extensive applications beyond the realm of dharma classification. Moreover, *svabhāva* holds significant importance in Madhyamaka philosophy, where it becomes a central point of contention. Nāgārjuna's arguments are largely centered around the refutation of the concept of *svabhāva*. Additionally, within the Yogācāra school, *svabhāva* plays a pivotal role, exemplified by the core doctrine of the "three natures" (*trisvabhāva*).

However, what exactly does *svabhāva* entail in terms of philosophical implications? As Westerhoff notes, it lacks a direct counterpart in Western philosophical history, which perhaps makes it challenging to provide an exact description (Westerhoff 2009, 19). Yet, the purpose of this article is precisely to endeavor to elucidate the philosophical implications of the Sarvāstivāda *svabhāva* system.

Currently, most scholarly research on *svabhāva* predominantly centers around Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Buddhism. While many of these studies touch upon Sarvāstivāda's *svabhāva*,² there is a notable dearth of dedicated research specifically focused on the Sarvāstivāda perspective.³ Within academia, there exists a multitude of diverse viewpoints regarding the concept of *svabhāva*. However, these varying viewpoints often remain unorganized and unassessed.

This article seeks to investigate the "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" system within the Sarvāstivāda tradition, referred to as the *svabhāva* system, and argues that it is a multi-layered reduction system. In the second section of this article, I delve into the correspondence between *svabhāva* and the translated terms in the Chinese translations made by Xuanzang to determine how to accurately identify "*svabhāva*" in Chinese translated texts, providing a methodological foundation for the case studies in the third section of the article. The third section constitutes the core of this work, focusing on the substantiation of the primary thesis. Through the presentation of three groups of "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" cases, I argue that the Sarvāstivāda's *svabhāva* system is indeed structured as a multi-layered reduction system. This analysis also leads to a discussion of whether this multi-layered reduction system is ontological or epistemological. In the fourth section, I propose two points for further consideration based on this multi-layered reduction system.

2 *Svabhāva* and Its Translated Terms by Xuanzang

In many instances, our knowledge of specific Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma texts heavily relies on the Chinese translations made by Xuanzang, as many Abhidharma texts of the Sarvāstivāda

tradition only exist in the Chinese translations by Xuanzang.⁴ In such circumstances, what did Xuanzang translate *svabhāva* as?

In common Buddhist dictionaries, the direct match between *svabhāva* and the Chinese translation term 自性 (zì xìng) seems to have become a consensus.⁵ However, if we systematically examine the translation of *svabhāva* by Xuanzang, it becomes apparent that such a correspondence is not precise.⁶ In fact, in Xuanzang's translation of *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh[X]), *svabhāva* is translated into eight different terms: 體 (tǐ), 性 (xìng), 自性 (zì xìng), 自體 (zì tǐ), 自相 (zì xiàng), 體性 (tǐ xìng), 體相 (tǐ xiàng), and 相 (xiàng). Among these, 體 is used 48 times, 自性 47 times, 性 42 times, 自體 9 times, 自相 5 times, 體性 3 times, and 體相 and 相 once each.⁷ From these results, it is evident that *svabhāva* is more often translated as 體 rather than 自性.

On the other hand, in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh),⁸ although Xuanzang translated Sanskrit words like *prakṛti*,⁹ *svatas*,¹⁰ and *ātman*¹¹ as 自性,¹² the majority of his translation using the term 自性 is often associated with *svabhāva*.

Moreover, we should also take into account that Xuanzang's translation of *svabhāva* displays a certain level of flexibility. While we have noted his use of different terms for translating it, one might expect that the usage of *svabhāva* rendered as 自性 would exhibit distinct characteristics compared to instances where it is translated with other terms. However, upon closer examination, this expectation does not hold true. For instance, in discussions regarding the Four Great Elements (*cātur-mahābhūta*) in AKBh, we find three instances where "*svabhāva*" is used in an identical manner, yet Xuanzang employs three different translation terms: 自性, 性, and 體.

kiṃ svabhāvās ca | [008|15-008|16]

AKBh[X]: 自性云何? [T29, p. 3b7]

svabhāvas tu yathākramaṃ kharasnehoṣṇateranāḥ | [008|19-20]

AKBh[X]: 如其次第, 即用堅濕煖動為性。 [T29, p. 3b7-8]

ato ya īraṇāsvabhāvo dharmāḥ sa vāyur iti karmaṇā' sya svabhāvo 'bhivyaktaḥ |

[008|24-008|25]

AKBh[X]: 故應風界動為自性。舉業顯體故亦言輕。 [T29, p. 3b12-13]

In summary, in the AKBh[X], 1) Xuanzang not only translated *svabhāva* as 自性 but also uses terms such as 體, 性, 自體 and so on for its translation. 2) The majority of Xuanzang's translation instances using the term 自性 are closely associated with *svabhāva*. 3) It is important to note that in the same context, *svabhāva* with identical usage can be translated by Xuanzang into different terms.

Given the situation in the AKBh[X], we can infer that the same is likely true for his translations in other texts. Therefore, when reading Xuanzang's translations of Abhidharma texts without Sanskrit references, how can one obtain information about *svabhāva*? First, when searching for Xuanzang's Chinese translations utilizing a database retrieval approach, it is essential to search not only for 自性 but also for terms like 體, 性, 自體 and so on. Secondly, since these terms are not exclusive to *svabhāva*, one must rely on context and the usage of the translation terms to determine if it refers to the specific concept of *svabhāva*. It is worth noting that because Xuanzang's translation term 自性 is highly correlated with *svabhāva*, it can be said that when encountering 自性 in his translations, most of the time, it corresponds to the Sanskrit term *svabhāva*.

By applying these principles, one can reasonably identify instances of *svabhāva* in Xuanzang's translations, even when the original Sanskrit is not available. The instances of *svabhāva* in the **Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra* (MVŚ) provided in the following part were found using these principles.

3 The Sarvāstivāda *Svabhāva* System is a Multi-layered Reduction System

As previously mentioned, the usage of *svabhāva* in the Sarvāstivāda tradition is not uniform. In the context of the AKBh, it can generally be categorized into three usages: categorical usage, denoting "itself," and representing real entities (*dravya*) (Zhang 2023). While *svabhāva* has multiple usages, its categorical usage is the most complex and philosophically significant, which is why scholars tend to focus their discussions on this aspect.

Categorical usage, as the name suggests, involves categorizing an entity under a specific category or distinguishing it from other entities based on its *svabhāva*. It is worth noting that in this categorical usage, *svabhāva* can be applied to both different levels of primary existents (dharmas) and non-dharmas. Cox points out that this application to different levels of dharmas can lead to the consequence that a single dharma may be defined by multiple *svabhāvas*, and as *svabhāva* is seen as a marker of primary existence, a single dharma described by multiple *svabhāvas* should be regarded as the existence of multiple dharmas (Cox 2004, 565). This suggests the need for further classification in the usage of *svabhāva* for defining dharmas. Concerning the application of *svabhāva*, Westerhoff introduces three dimensions of *svabhāva*, known as epistemological, ontological, and semantic dimensions (Westerhoff 2009, 20). The semantic usage is primarily associated with Nāgārjuna's *svabhāva*, which is not discussed here.

When the Sarvāstivāda *svabhāva* is used to define dharmas, it is an ontological concept. When used to describe non-dharmas, its main purpose is to distinguish an entity from other entities based on its quality, thus making it an epistemological concept. This interpretation appears convincing but faces challenges in many Sarvāstivāda texts. Take for example, the case of "the Homogeneous Cause (*sabhāgahetu*) takes all conditioned dharmas as *svabhāva*."¹³ Since the Homogeneous Cause is not recognized as an ontological category by the Sarvāstivāda tradition, according to Westerhoff's framework, the *svabhāva* in this context appears to have an epistemological dimension. Consequently, this statement implies that dharmas are a quality of the Homogeneous Cause, distinguishing them from other things. However, there are questions. Firstly, do the Sarvāstivāda indeed acknowledge dharmas as a quality of the Homogeneous Cause, and how should this be interpreted? Secondly, we also find that the Sarvāstivādins assert "The three courses of time (*adhvan*) take all conditioned dharmas *svabhāva*,"¹⁴ suggesting that both the Homogeneous Cause and the three courses of time have dharmas as their *svabhāva*. In this context, *svabhāva* serves as the criterion for distinguishing them from other entities. Consequently, it seems that the Homogeneous Cause and the three courses of time are identical entities, but such a conclusion may seem puzzling. Hence, it appears that a new approach is required to interpret the philosophical implications of Sarvāstivāda *svabhāva*.

Building upon the previous discussion of the categorization of *svabhāva*, I would like to further propose that the *svabhāva* system employed by the Sarvāstivādins is not a haphazard, aimless system merely used to distinguish one entity from another. Instead, it is a multi-layered reduction system with a specific purpose of reduction.

When discussing Buddhist reductionism, most people might think of the reductionist

interpretations of the Pudgala. In this regard, there has indeed been substantial research, such as Duerlinger (1993, 2013), Collins (1997), Siderits (1997, 2016). However, these studies on the reductionist interpretations of Buddhist theory concentrates on the reduction from conceptual existent (*prajñapti-sat*) to substantially existent (*dravya-sat*), rather than the connection between the Sarvāstivāda *svabhāva* system and reductionism. The later is precisely what this article aims to address.

Reductionists maintain a perspective that one theory or phenomenon can be reducible to some other theory or phenomenon. In contemporary reductionism, there are various theories and models continually emerging, differing in their frameworks and details, which results in a diverse array of classifications. For instance, it can be categorized as theory reductionism, explanatory reductionism, and constitutive reductionism (Sarkar 1992, 170). Some suggest constituent reductionism, conceptual reductionism, and causal reductionism (Polkinghorne 2002). Others propose that reductionism can be divided into ontological reductionism, methodological reductionism, and theory reductionism (Ruse 2005, 793). Despite the multitude of reductionist versions, most reductionist proponents tend to acknowledge that reductionism is a philosophical idea concerning the relationships between phenomena, which can be explained in terms of other simpler or more fundamental phenomena (Doniger 1999, 911). This article adheres to this viewpoint when discussing reductionism.

The following section delves into the core arguments of this article.

3.1 Three Groups of *Svabhāva* Cases

Next, this article will present three groups of cases of *svabhāva* from the MVŚ and the AKBh.

Before that, two points need to be clarified. First, MVŚ was chosen because the Sarvāstivāda

tradition was doctrinally and textually defined through the *vibhāṣa* compendia, and it significantly influenced the subsequent development of Sarvāstivāda doctrine (Willemen, Dessin, and Cox 1998, 229-230). Among the three *vibhāṣa* compendia,¹⁵ MVŚ is the most complete and extensive, making it a substantial source for finding a sufficient number of *svabhāva* cases. Second, AKBh was chosen because it provides a relatively systematic introduction to the Sarvāstivāda doctrine by Vasubandhu, making it an indispensable source for studying Sarvāstivāda doctrine. Moreover, AKBh has a Sanskrit original, allowing us to directly identify *svabhāva* cases without the need to speculate whether a given instance is a case of *svabhāva* in the Chinese translation. Below are three groups of *svabhāva* cases.

Group 1:

[1] Question: What does the Pervasive Cause (*sarvatraga-hetu*) take as *svabhāva*?

Answer: The Pervasive Proclivities (*anuśaya*) throughout past and present. [T27, p. 96a18-19]

[2] Great Compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) takes non-delusional (*a-moha*) wholesome roots as *svabhāva*. [T27, p. 428a16]

Group 2:

[3] Question: What is the *svabhāva* of *Abhidharma*?

Answer: The *svabhāva* is Uncontaminated Understanding (*prajñā*). [T27, p. 2c23-24]

[4] Having a cognitive object takes the Mental Factors (*caitasika*) as *svabhāva*. [AKBh, 023|05]

[5] The benevolence (*maitrī*) takes the Non-hatred (*a-dveṣa*) as *svabhāva*. [AKBh, 452|13]

[6] Question: What is the *svabhāva* of this severing of wholesome roots (*kuśala-mūla*)?...[Answer:] The severing of wholesome roots takes Non-possession (*aprāpti*) as *svabhāva*. [T27, p. 182b26-c5]

[7] Question: What does the Pervasive Proclivities (*anuśaya*) take as *svabhāva*?

Answer: There are eleven categories [of *dharmas*] in the Desire Realm (*kāma-dhātu*). It is said to be five Afflicted Views (*dṛṣṭi*), Doubt (*vicikitsā*), Ignorance (*avidyā*) that are abandoned by seeing suffering (*duḥkhadarśanaheya*), and the False View (*mithyā-dṛṣṭi*), Esteeming Of (such things as bad) Views (*dṛṣṭi-parāmarśa*), Doubt (*vicikitsā*), Ignorance (*avidyā*) that are abandoned by seeing the origin [of suffering] (*samudayadarśanaheya*). It should be known that in the Matter realm (*rūpya-dhātu*) and in the Formless Realm (*ārūpya-dhātu*), there are, likewise, eleven types. [T27, p. 91b23-25]

[8] All Defilements (*kleśa*) takes the Afflicted Views (*dṛṣṭi*) as *svabhāva*. [T27, p. 269a21]

Group 3:

[9] The Space (*ākāśa*) takes non-obstruction (*anāvāraṇa*) as *svabhāva*. [AKBh, 003|23]

[10] The Sound (*śabda*) takes voice (*vāc*) as *svabhāva*. [AKBh, 196|04]

One can easily notice that the above cases all follow a formula: "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*."

Upon careful observation of the distinctions between these three groups of cases, those familiar with the Abhidharma dharma classification system might discern a pattern. In the first group, neither *X* nor *Y* is not a category of dharmas in the Sarvāstivāda's Classification System of Dharmas (CSD). In the second group, *X* does not belong to the Sarvāstivāda's CSD, while *Y*

does. In the third group, X evidently belongs to the Sarvāstivāda's CSD.

Since we have mentioned the Sarvāstivāda CSD, it is necessary to provide a brief explanation here. The version most widely known is provided by the AKBh, which consists of five major groups with a total of 75 types of dharmas. The five groups are categories of "Matter (*rūpa*)," "Mind (*citta*)," "Mental Factors (*caitasika*)," "Conditionings Disjoined from Mind (*citta-viprayukta saṃskāra*)," and "Unconditioned Dharmas (*asaṃskṛta*)." Among these categories, each contains 11, 46, 14, 1, and 3 types of dharmas respectively, adding up to 75 types of dharmas. However, this version of the CSD differs slightly from the one provided by MVŚ. In the latter version, the five categories remain the same, but the number and types of dharmas contained within each category differ from AKBh's enumeration. In MVŚ, the five categories contain 11, 47, 14, 1, and 3 types of dharmas respectively, totaling 76 types of dharmas. The main difference between AKBh's CSD and MVŚ's lies primarily in the category of "Mental Factors." In fact, it is challenging to find two canonical texts from the Sarvāstivāda tradition that have identical classifications for Mental Factors. In summary, the CSD of the Sarvāstivāda is primarily characterized by five major categories, with each major category containing various subcategories. When determining whether X or Y in a given case belongs to the Sarvāstivāda CSD, we rely on the specific CSD provided in the relevant Sarvāstivāda canonical text.

It is worth mentioning that within the Sarvāstivāda CSD, there are further subdivisions into smaller categories. For example, depending on the different functions of the Understanding (*prajñā*), it can be further classified into three types: the Afflicted Views (*dṛṣṭi*), Patience (*adhivāsā*), and Cognition (*jñāna*). If a certain X or Y falls into any of these subcategories like

the category of "Afflicted Views," it is also considered to belong to the Sarvāstivāda CSD. However, certain classifications cannot be aligned with any of the categories within the Sarvāstivāda CSD. For example, the Five Aggregates category spans across the major categories of Matter, Mind, Mental Factors, and Conditionings Disjoined from Mind in CSD, especially since it includes the aggregate of volition (*saṃskāra-skandha*), which encompasses Conditionings Disjoined from Mind and some Mental Factors.¹⁶ Therefore, it is not classified as one of the Sarvāstivāda CSD categories. Similarly, "all Conditioned Dharmas" encompasses a wide range of dharmas that transcend the major four categories, and hence it is not considered belonging to the Sarvāstivāda CSD. Similar examples can be found with Defilements (*kleśa*), Pervasive Proclivities (*anuśaya*), and others.

Now, let us revisit the three groups of cases, "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*," and examine the relationships between *X*, *Y*, and the CSD in more detail. In the first group of cases, we have two pairs of *X* and *Y*, namely "Pervasive Cause" and "Pervasive Proclivities," "Great Compassion" and "non-delusional wholesome roots." None of these pairs belong to any specific category of dharmas in the Sarvāstivāda CSD. Therefore, the formulation for the first group of cases can be summarized as follows: "*X*, which is not a category of dharmas in CSD, takes *Y*, which is not a category of dharmas in CSD, as *svabhāva*."

In the second group of cases, we have several instances [3][4][5][6][7][8] where *X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*. In case [3], *X* is "Abhidharma," which is not a category of dharmas in the Sarvāstivāda CSD. *Y*, "Understanding," belongs to the categories of "Ten Omnipresent Mental Factors (*daśa mahā-bhūmika*)" in the CSD. In case [4], *X* is "Having a cognitive object," which is not a specific category in the Sarvāstivāda CSD. *Y*, "Mental Factors," belongs to the CSD

and falls under one of the five major categories. In cases [5] and [6], where *Y* includes "Non-hatred" and "Non-possession." Both are present in the Sarvāstivāda CSD, with "the Non-hatred" falling under the Ten Omnipresent Wholesome Factors (*kuśala-mahā-bhūmika*) category and "Non-possession" belonging to the Conditionings Disjoined from Mind category. In case [7], *Y* encompasses 11 categories of dharmas within the CSD: five Afflicted Views, Doubt, Ignorance, and the False View Esteeming Of (such things as bad) Views, Doubt, Ignorance. It is important to note that in contrast to the Five Aggregates, *Y* here are explicitly listed within the Sarvāstivāda CSD. Each of these categories does not span across all five major categories and exists explicitly within the Sarvāstivāda CSD. Therefore, *Y* in case [7] does indeed belong to Sarvāstivāda CSD. In the case of [8], *Y* is "Afflicted Views," and as previously mentioned, it is one of the three subcategories under the Understanding category in the Sarvāstivāda CSD. Therefore, the formula for the second group of cases is "*X*, which is not a category of dharmas in CSD, takes *Y*, which belongs to CSD, as *svabhāva*."

In the third group of cases, *X* includes "the Space," which is a category under the Unconditioned dharmas category, and "the Sound," which is a category under the Matter category in the Sarvāstivāda CSD. Therefore, for the third group, the formula is "*X*, which is a category of dharmas in CSD, takes *Y* as *svabhāva*."

3.2 Interpretation through a Multi-layered Reductionist Lens

The usage of *svabhāva* within the Sarvāstivāda tradition is not solely confined to specific doctrinal theories; rather, "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" has become a linguistic pattern for them to expound their doctrines. In this context, all instances of "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" within the Sarvāstivāda tradition collectively form a *svabhāva* system. The characteristics of this

svabhāva system are exemplified by the three groups of cases mentioned above. In fact, the vast majority of the Sarvāstivāda's "X takes Y as *svabhāva*" cases can be located within these three groups. We can observe that this system is not haphazard but structured into different levels, with interconnections between these levels organized in a particular sequence.

From the first group to the second group, we can clearly observe a process of moving non-dharmas within the Sarvāstivāda CSD closer to the categories in the CSD. For example, in the first group, case [1] states, "the Pervasive Cause takes the Pervasive Proclivities as *svabhāva*." In the second group, case [7] states, "in the Desire Realm, the Pervasive Proclivities take eleven types of dharmas as *svabhāva*." Here, by using the Pervasive Proclivities as an intermediary, the Pervasive Cause eventually establishes a connection with the Sarvāstivāda CSD. This connection is ultimately facilitated through *svabhāva*.

We can describe cases [1] and [7] using the following pattern: "*P* takes *Q* as *svabhāva*, and at the same time, *Q* takes *R* as *svabhāva*." In this pattern, *P* is not a category of dharmas in the Sarvāstivāda CSD, *Q* is not a category of dharmas in the Sarvāstivāda CSD, and *R* belongs to the Sarvāstivāda CSD. A question arises: why can *svabhāva* be used to connect these three and ultimately link *P* to the Sarvāstivāda CSD?

If we consider the *svabhāva*-driven relationship between *P*, *Q*, and *R* as a reduction relationship, this question becomes clear. As mentioned earlier, the reduction of phenomena *A* to phenomena *B* means there is an association between them, and phenomena *A* can be described in terms of more fundamental phenomena *B*. In other words, establishing a reduction relationship requires three conditions: 1) There is some association between *A* and *B*. 2) *A* can be described in terms of *B*. 3) *B* is at a more fundamental level than *A*.

Regarding the statements "*P* takes *Q* as *svabhāva*" and "*Q* takes *R* as *svabhāva*," we can interpret them as "*P* is described by *Q* in the means of *svabhāva*" and "*Q* is described by *R* in the means of *svabhāva*," satisfying the first two conditions. Now, let us consider if they meet the third condition. First, *R* is already within the Sarvāstivāda CSD. Secondly, even though *P* and *Q* do not belong to the Sarvāstivāda CSD, since *P* requires applying the formula "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" twice to reach the Sarvāstivāda CSD, while *Q* only needs it once, *Q* is closer to the Sarvāstivāda CSD than *P*. Now we can see that the proximity of *P*, *Q*, and *R* to the Sarvāstivāda CSD increases, and thus, their fundamentality increases as well. The third condition is satisfied. Therefore, it can be said that *P* and *Q*, as well as *Q* and *R*, have reduction relationships. Consequently, "*P* takes *Q* as *svabhāva*" can be understood as "*P* is reduced to *Q*," and "*Q* takes *R* as *svabhāva*" can be understood as "*Q* is reduced to *R*."

Furthermore, the reduction relationships between *P* and *Q* and between *Q* and *R* are achieved in the means of *svabhāva*. *P* is reduced to *Q* in the means of *svabhāva*, *Q* is reduced to *R* in the means of *svabhāva*, and *P* is ultimately reduced to *R* in the means of *svabhāva*, having undergone two stages of reduction. In this context, it is reasonable to consider *svabhāva* as a means of reduction.

The issue lies in whether, firstly, this reductionist interpretation can be extended to other cases in the first and second groups. Secondly, whether the cases in the third group of "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" can also be explained in a similar manner. Let us start by addressing the first question. In the second group of cases, all *X* are not categories of dharmas in CSD, while all *Y* belong to CSD. Therefore, *Y* is more fundamental than *X*, and *X* is described by *Y* through *svabhāva*. So, it can be interpreted as "*X* is reduced to *Y*." Next, we move on to the first group.

In fact, there are not many cases that can be classified into the first group of "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" in the Sarvāstivāda. Besides the examples [1] and [2], there are other instances that can be categorized similarly, such as:

The three courses of time (*adhvan*) take all conditioned *dharma*s as *svabhāva*.¹⁷ (MVŚ)

The Simultaneous Cause (*sahabhūhetu*) takes all conditioned *dharma*s as *svabhāva*.¹⁸
(MVŚ)

The aeon (*kalpa*) takes the Five Aggregates as *svabhāva*.¹⁹ (AKBh)

In the examples above, *X* includes three courses of time, the Simultaneous Cause, and the aeon. Regardless of the perspective, they cannot be directly related to the Sarvāstivāda CSD. As for *Y*, which includes all conditioned *dharma*s and the Five Aggregates, both of which comprises the four major categories within CSD: Matter, Consciousness, Conditionings Disjoined from Mind, and Mental Factors. Thus, based on the Sarvāstivāda's CSD as the criterion, it is indeed reasonable to interpret it from a reductionist standpoint, as *Y* is more fundamental than *X*.

It is worth noting that in the case [2]:

Great Compassion takes the non-delusional wholesome roots as *svabhāva*.

It appears that both Great Compassion as *X* and the non-delusional wholesome roots as *Y* cannot be directly associated with the Sarvāstivāda CSD. However, it still seems that *Y* is closer to CSD than *X*. Great Compassion, quite literally, may be challenging to relate to any specific categories within the Sarvāstivāda's CSD. In contrast, the non-delusional wholesome roots seem to align more closely with the category of "Ten Omnipresent Wholesome Factors" in CSD. Therefore, interpreting case [2] as "Great Compassion is reduced to the non-delusional

wholesome roots" is reasonable when considering the Sarvāstivāda CSD as the criterion.

Next is the second question. We know that all X in the third group belong to the Sarvāstivāda CSD. Therefore, more precisely, the formula for the cases in the third group is actually "a category of dharmas takes Y as *svabhāva*." This aligns with a significant function of *svabhāva* as I understand it – the definition of dharmas. Since *svabhāva* here defines a certain category of dharmas, it satisfies the first two conditions for the establishment of a reductionist relationship. Additionally, Y , as a defining element, is undoubtedly more fundamental than the defined element. Therefore, cases in the third group can also be explained as " X is reduced to Y ."

Now it has been demonstrated that the " X takes Y as *svabhāva*" in the three groups can all be understood as " X is reduced to Y ." Additionally, the majority of the " X takes Y as *svabhāva*" cases in the Sarvāstivāda tradition can be categorized into these three groups, which can also be interpreted as " X is reduced to Y ." As mentioned earlier, the Sarvāstivāda's use of " X takes Y as *svabhāva*" forms a *svabhāva* system. Therefore, it can be said that the Sarvāstivāda's *svabhāva* system is a reductionist system.

Furthermore, unlike typical reduction models, this reductionist system is hierarchical. The Sarvāstivāda reductionist system can be broadly divided into three layers, which align with the three-group division of *svabhāva* cases as discussed earlier. In the top layer (the first layer), both X and Y do not belong to the Sarvāstivāda CSD. In the middle layer (the second layer), X does not belong to the Sarvāstivāda CSD, but Y does. In the bottom layer (the third layer), X belongs to the Sarvāstivāda CSD, and Y is the defining element for X . I refer to this kind of reductionist system as a "multi-layered reduction system."

3.3 Is it Ontological or Epistemological?

In the previous section, we have demonstrated that in Sarvāstivāda, the expression "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" can be understood as "*X* is reduced to *Y*." Now, the details of the reduction relationships between *X* and *Y* in different situations will be discussed.

First, let us examine the specifics of the reduction relationships in the second layer. Examples [3] to [8], as well as some other cases not mentioned earlier, illustrate reductions as follows:

<i>X</i>		<i>Y</i>
<i>Abhidharma</i>		The Uncontaminated
		Understanding
Having a cognitive object		The Mind-concomitants
The benevolence		The Non-hatred
The severing of wholesome roots	is/are reduced to	Non-possession
The Pervasive Proclivities		The eleven categories of <i>dharmas</i>
All Defilements		Afflicted Views
Dreams		The Mind and the Mind-concomitants ²⁰
The four unobstructed		The Understanding ²¹

Table 1

In the second layer, as discussed earlier, the basis for reduction is that *Y* is closer to the Sarvāstivāda CSD than *X*. The CSD is precisely the classification system used by Sarvāstivāda

to categorize fundamental existents, making it an ontological classification system. Furthermore, since the CSD is a classification system, its fundamental units are types, not tokens. In other words, the concepts recognized by this system, such as "Mental Factors," correspond to a general sort of thing, rather than its particular concrete instances. The importance of this distinction lies in providing a better understanding of the Sarvāstivāda thought, which is often overlooked in Sarvāstivāda studies, either intentionally or unintentionally.

In this layer, *Y* itself is a concept from the Sarvāstivāda CSD, and therefore it is a type. When we examine the *X* in this group, we find that it also appears in the form of type. Consequently, the reduction in this layer is from one type or types to another type or types. (It is worth noting that reduction can only occur between types and types or between tokens and tokens. Reduction between types and tokens is not possible because one is abstract, and the other is particulars.) Furthermore, since *Y* is a concept from the CSD, which is an ontological system, the reduction in this layer is ontological.

The reduction cases of the second layer are much more extensive than the examples presented. The second layer contains a wide variety of reduction relationships, and the number of cases in this layer far surpasses those in the other two layers. Some cases exhibit a "sufficient but not necessary" form of reduction. In other words, all instances of *X* are instances of *Y*, but the reverse does not hold. There are also cases of "necessary and sufficient condition" reduction. For example, "the Pervasive Proclivities are reduced to the eleven categories of dharmas." In this case, the Pervasive Proclivities are actually those specific eleven dharmas, and these eleven dharmas are also referred to as the Pervasive Proclivities. In this case, *X* and *Y* are essentially

interchangeable, which is known as identity reduction (Kim 2008, 100). It is important to note that this interchangeability applies to referents rather than senses. They can be substituted for each other in propositions, but they are not equivalent as cognitive contents. Furthermore, in this layer, there are cases where it is challenging to determine the specific type of ontological reduction. For example, "the benevolence is reduced to the Non-hatred." Due to a lack of relevant information, it is difficult to discern the exact details of the reduction relationship between *X* and *Y* in these cases.

To sum up, in the second layer, all reduction relationships aim to reduce types that are absent in the Sarvāstivāda CSD to types present in the CSD.

Next is the first layer. Examples [1], [2], and other cases mentioned earlier in the text illustrate the following reductions:

<i>X</i>		<i>Y</i>
The Pervasive Cause		The Proclivities
Great Compassion		The non-delusional wholesome roots
	is/are reduced to	
The three courses of time		All conditioned <i>dharmas</i>
The Simultaneous Cause		
The aeon		The Five Aggregates

Table 2

The conclusion drawn in the earlier part of the text, "*Y* is closer to the Sarvāstivāda's CSD than *X*," and the inference of the reduction from *X* to *Y* as ontological types, also hold in this first layer. However, compared to the diversity of reduction relationships in the second layer,

most of the cases in this layer are of the "sufficient but not necessary" type. For example, what is called the Pervasive Cause is actually the Proclivities, but the latter can only be called Pervasive Cause under specific conditions. Similarly, the Simultaneous Cause is actually All conditioned dharmas, but the latter can also only become the Simultaneous Cause under specific conditions.

Next, let us look at the reduction cases in the third layer:

<i>X</i>		<i>Y</i>
The Space	is/are reduced to	The non-obstruction
The Sound		Voice

Table 3

In fact, there are not many cases in this layer. As mentioned earlier, the cases in this layer involve *Y* being the definition of *X*, creating explanatory relations. *Y*, being more foundational than *X*, holds in the sense of meaning between the defined elements and the defining elements. Therefore, the reduction in this layer is epistemological. Unlike the cases in the previous two layers, which are established based on the proximity to the CSD, the types of reduction relationships in this layer are not constrained by the ontological nature of the CSD.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that the reductions in the Sarvāstivāda multi-layer reduction system are all weak reductions. They assert reduction while not excluding the reduced items. This aligns with the ontology of the Sarvāstivāda, which divides existents into primary existents (dharmas) and non-dharmas within the CSD. Both dharmas and non-dharmas are considered to be necessary (Williams 1981, 240).

3.4 Some Special Cases

It appears that when we map these cases based on the Sarvāstivāda's usage of "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" onto a coordinate system, we obtain a graph with numerous points. It is easy to imagine that the points on this graph are not evenly distributed. Instead, there is a concentration of points in some areas, while in other areas there are scattered individual points. The multi-layered system of *svabhāva* presented earlier, is built upon the clustering of numerous points at specific coordinates. Now, let us shift our focus to the scattered points located in other areas.

The first thing that catches the eye is the use of "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" by the Sarvāstivāda in their discourse on the Four Great Elements.

And by succession, the *svabhāvas* are solidity (*khara*), humidity (*sneha*), heat (*uṣṇatā*), and mobility (*īraṇā*). The Earth (*pr̥thivī*) is the solidity. The Water (*āpas*) is the humidity.

The Fire (*tejas*) is the heat. The Wind (*vāyu*) is the mobility. [AKBh, 008|19-22]

According to AKBh [007|09-007|10], the Four Great Elements belong to the category of "Tangible Object (*spraṣṭavya*)." This seems to imply that the Four Great Elements are merely subcategories under the Matter category, on an equal footing with other subcategories for Matter. However, the text also acknowledges the existence of the Derived Matter depending on Great Elements (*upādāya-rūpa*), suggesting that the Four Great Elements might be considered more foundational than other subcategories for Matter. In fact, according to Dhammjoti (2015, 219-220), there is no consensus among Sarvāstivādins regarding the relationship between the Four Great Elements and Matter dharmas, contributing to the perplexity surrounding the connection between the two.

According to Goodman (2002, 156), in Vasubandhu's perspective, the emergence of the Four Great Elements reflects a kind of ontological stratification within dharmas, with the Four

Great Elements being more fundamental than regular Matter dharmas. On the other hand, I tend to consider the Matter theory in the CSD and the Four Great Elements theory as two separate systems within the Sarvāstivāda tradition. In fact, apart from the two theories, the Sarvāstivāda tradition provides another theory about Matter dharmas, known as the theory of Atom (*paramāṇu*).

Furthermore, in the reduction of the Twelffold Dependent Origination, there is "the Ignorance (*avidya*), Desire (*atrṣṇa*) and Clinging (*upādāna*) take the Defilements as *svabhāva*."²² Here, the complication arises because the Ignorance, as *X*, is a category of dharma within the CSD, whereas Desire and Clinging, also as *X*, are not. Therefore, it appears challenging to categorize it within any specific layer of the multilayered reduction system. Nevertheless, this highlights the Sarvāstivādin's attempt to reduce the Twelffold Dependent Origination into their CSD framework.

Additionally, we have also identified a small number of cases where *X* is more foundational than *Y* and cases where *X* and *Y* are on the same level within the Sarvāstivāda CSD. Examples of the former include "The Absorption of Suppression (*nirodhasamāpatti*) takes the Conditionings Disjoined from Mind (*citta-viprayukta saṃskāra*) as *svabhāva*."²³ Examples of the latter include "Arrogance (*mada*) takes Conceit (*māna*) as *svabhāva*."²⁴

While there are cases of "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" that do not fit neatly into the multilayered reduction system, as mentioned earlier we are discussing the coordinates where points cluster. Therefore, these specific cases do not challenge the conclusions of this article.

4 Extensive Consideration of the Sarvāstivāda Multi-Layered Reduction System

First, as previously mentioned, the number of cases of the second layer of the Sarvāstivāda multi-layered reduction system, which involves a greater number of cases where types not belonging to the Sarvāstivāda's CSD are reduced to dharma types within it, far outweighs the number of cases in the other two layers. This reflects the primary purpose of this reduction system, which is to reduce non-dharma types to dharma types. Since the entire layered reduction system is based on the CSD, it further underscores the Sarvāstivāda's efforts and determination to solidify their CSD and highlights the central role of the CSD in Sarvāstivāda ontology.

Second, I must mention a point that may challenge what is currently widely accepted as a "consensus" in academia. We already know that in the third layer of the multi-layered reduction system, the reduction is explanatory, specifically involving the definition of dharma types within the Sarvāstivāda CSD. This understanding aligns with one of the well-known usages of *svabhāva* that we previously discussed. We find that from Williams (1981, 243-244) to Cox (2004, 561), Westerhoff (2009, 20), Katsura (2011, 272), and others, they have all emphasized this particular usage of *svabhāva* in Sarvāstivāda thought. This interpretation can be found supported in the AKBh: "because upholding a *svalakṣaṇa*, it is a dharma [002|10]." Here, *svalakṣaṇa* corresponds to *svabhāva* (Williams 1981, 584; Cox 2004, 584).

However, the issue here is that the number of cases included in the third layer is limited. Throughout the MVŚ and AKBh, we have only found several such instances. However, the CSD comprises over 70 dharma types, even without considering sub-types. If the Sarvāstivādins truly intended to define various dharma types using *svabhāva*, one would expect them to systematically enumerate all dharma types using the "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" form with

their patience. However, they did not do so. In this context, *svabhāva* played a limited role in defining dharma types.

Some might question this, given that AKBh provides clear definitions through *svabhāva* for dharmas. Can't this be taken as evidence that *svabhāva* has a universal function in defining dharma types? However, for those familiar with the Indian exegetical tradition, it is apparent that the explanation is likely etymological interpretations, i.e., an explanation based on the root \sqrt{dhr} from which the word "dharma" is derived. The starting point for such an explanation is not to define dharma types but to guide the interpretation of the Sanskrit word "dharma" itself. There are many similar examples, for instance, the Matter being something with obstructiveness (*rūpaṇā/rūpaṇa*)²⁵ and Consciousness being recognition (*prativijñapti*).²⁶ Both demonstrate clear etymological features. If this is the case, then AKBh's explanation may not provide sufficient evidence for the claim that "dharma types are defined through *svabhāva*."

5 Conclusion

The Sarvāstivāda's usage of "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" can be seen as forming a *svabhāva* system, which operates as a multi-layered reduction system where "*X* takes *Y* as *svabhāva*" can be understood as "*X* is reduced to *Y*." Here, *svabhāva* functions as a means of reduction. The reduction system comprises three layers. In the first layer, both *X* and *Y* do not belong to the Sarvāstivāda CSD. In the second layer, *X* does not belong to CSD, while *Y* does. In the third layer, *X* belongs to CSD, and *Y* is a definition for *X*. Among these, reductions in the first and second layers are ontological, while reductions in the third layer are epistemological. All reductions in this system are weak reductions, as they do not exclude the reduced items when

asserting the reduction. Additionally, the second layer contains the most cases among the three layers, greatly outnumbering the cases in the other two layers, which demonstrates the Sarvāstivāda's strong commitment to consolidate its CSD. Furthermore, the scarcity of cases in the third layer in this multi-layered reduction system suggests that *svabhāva* may have played a limited role in defining dharma types. This conclusion challenges the currently widely accepted "consensus" in academia.

Abbreviations

MVŚ: **Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra*

AKBh: *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*

AKBh[X]: 《阿毘達磨俱舍論》 (Xuanzang's Translation of *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*)

CSD: Classification system of fundamental *dharmas*

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Notes

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¹ There is indeed some academic divergence on this issue. According to Westerhoff (2009, 19), in Madhyamaka Buddhism, this term is often translated as "inherent existence" or "own-

being."

² For example, Fukuda (1988), Cox (2004), Ronkin (2005), Siderits (2014), Westerhoff (2018).

³ Research specifically addressing the study of *svabhāva* in the Sarvāstivāda tradition is primarily concentrated in the Japanese academia. The contributions include Mitomo (1972), Miyashita (1994, 1997), Kimura (2002), Saito (2006), Abe (2011). Among them, except for Saito and Mitomo's studies, the other studies focused on literature-based research.

⁴ Taking the example of the literature related to the Sarvāstivāda's One body (*śarīra*) and six feet (*pāda*), besides the *Abhidharmaprajñaptipādaśāstra* and the *Abhidharmaparakaraṇapādaśāstra*, the other five texts, while some fragments in Sanskrit or in other languages, their complete versions only exist in the Chinese translations by Xuanzang.

⁵ For example, The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism corresponds it to the Chinese translated term "自性" (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 879).

⁶ In fact, The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism also correlates *svabhāva* with the Tibetan translated term "rang bzhin" (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 879). However, upon closer examination of the relationship between the two, it becomes apparent that they are not strictly necessary conditions for each other.

⁷ This statistical result is sourced from the appendix of Kimura (2002).

⁸ The AKBh texts cited in this article are sourced from Pradhan (1975).

⁹ For example, AKBh: *nāsati heto bhāvo bhavati na cānutpattimato nityāt prakrtipuruṣādikāt kiñcidutpadyata iti* | [139|07-139|08] AKBh[X]: 謂非無因諸行可有。亦非由常自性我等無生因故諸行得生。 [T29, p. 50c27-28]

¹⁰ For example, AKBh: *svato mūlahyar patrapāḥ* | [202|10] AKBh[X]: 自性慚愧根。 [T29,

p. 71a19]

¹¹ For example, AKBh: *kathaṃ kṛtvā | saṃsāraḥ paramārthenākuśalaḥ | sarvaduḥkhapravṛtṭyātmakatvena paramākṣematvāt* [[202|23] AKBh[X]: 云何相違。勝義不善。謂生死法。由生死中諸法皆以苦為自性極不安隱猶如痼疾。 [T29, p. 71b3-5]

¹² Additionally, it is worth noting that, according to Abe (2011), in a broader range of Chinese-translated Buddhist scriptures, 自性 also corresponds to these Sanskrit terms: *jāti, nija, svagoṭra, svabhāva-vikalpa, svabhāva-smṛty-upasthāna*.

¹³ Question: What does the Homogeneous Cause (*sabhāgahetu*) take as *svabhāva*? Answer: All conditioned *dharmas* throughout past and present. [T27, p. 90b26-27]

¹⁴ Question: What do the three courses of thime (*adhvan*) take as *svabhāva*? Answer: [They] take all conditioned *dharmas* as *svabhāva*. [T27, p. 393c4-5]

¹⁵ These three Vibhāṣa compendia are **Abhidharmavibhāṣāsāstra* (T1546, 《阿毘曇毘婆沙論》), **Vibhāṣāsāstra* (T1547, 《鞞婆沙論》), and **Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāsāstra* (T1545, 《阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論》).

¹⁶ The relationship between the Five Aggregates and the Sarvāstivāda CSD is illustrated in the following table.

Sarvāstivāda CSD		Five Aggregates
Matter (<i>rūpa</i>)	five sense faculties	Aggregate of Matter
	five external objects	
	the Unmanifest (<i>a-vijñapti</i>)	
Mental Factors (<i>caitasika</i>)	Sensation (<i>vedanā</i>)	Aggregate of Sensation
	Representation (<i>saṃjñā</i>)	Aggregate of Representation

	Conditionings Associated with Mind (<i>citta-samprayukta- saṃskāra</i>)	Aggregate of Volition (<i>saṃskāra-skandha</i>)
Conditionings Disjoined from Mind (<i>citta- viprayukta saṃskāra</i>)	Possession (<i>prāpti</i>)...	
Mind (<i>citta</i>)	Consciousness (<i>viññāna</i>) Thought (<i>manas</i>)	Aggregate of Consciousness
Unconditioned Dharmas (<i>asaṃskṛta</i>)	The Space (<i>ākāśa</i>); Suppression due to Discernment (<i>pratisaṃkhyānirodha</i>); Suppression not due to Discernment (<i>apratisaṃkhyānirodha</i>)	×

Table 4

¹⁷ Question: What do the three courses of thime (*adhvan*) take as *svabhāva*? Answer: [They] take all conditioned *dharmas* as *svabhāva*. [T27, p. 393c4-5]

¹⁸ Question: What does the Simultaneous Cause (*sahabhūhetu*) take as *svabhāva*? Answer: All conditioned *dharmas*. [T27, p. 85b22]

¹⁹ What does the aeon (*kalpa*) take as *svabhāva*? [Answer:] The Five Aggregates as *svabhāva*. [AKBh, 180|25]

²⁰ See [T27, p. 193b27-29].

²¹ See [T27, p. 904a8].

²² See AKBh [134|07].

²³ What is the *svabhāva* of The Absorption of Suppression (*nirodhasamāpatti*)? Answer: The Conditionings Disjoined from Mind (*citta-viprayukta saṃskāra*) as *svabhāva*. [T27, p. 774b8]

²⁴ Question: What does Arrogance (*mada*) take as *svabhāva*?...[Answer:] The conceit (*māna*) as *svabhāva*. [T27, p. 223a10-13]

²⁵ See AKBh [010|05-010|06].

²⁶ See AKBh [011|06].