

# 1. *Abhidharmāvatāra* as a Sarvāstivāda manual

Through the pioneering efforts of the Japanese and western scholars like C. Akanuma, T. Kimura, Th. Stcherbatsky and Louis de la Vallée Poussin, the importance of the study of Northern Buddhism has been acknowledged by most scholars. Today, no serious researcher wishing to have an adequate understanding of “early”<sup>1</sup> Buddhism can afford to ignore the valuable data embodied in the Northern Buddhist literature, which are parallel to those in the Pāli Canon.

Among these Northern Schools, the Sarvāstivāda was certainly the most powerful one in north-west India at the beginning of the Christian era. A study of Sarvāstivāda doctrines will throw light not only on the common tenets of early Buddhism, but also on the origins of the Mahāyāna. In the history of Buddhism, the two major Mahāyāna schools, Mādhyamika and Yogācāra, had to confront with the Sarvāstivāda: the Mādhyamika may be regarded partly as a radical criticism of the so-called Hīnayāna, particularly the Sarvāstivāda; and the Yogācāra, partly as a Mahāyānist modification of the Sarvāstivāda.

But advance in such studies has remained very slow, not least because of the fact that very little of the original material is preserved in Sanskrit. Fortunately, we possess Chinese translations of all the seven *abhidharma*<sup>2</sup> texts of the Sarvāstivāda and many other works of the Northern Schools. One canonical *abhidharma* text — *Prajñāpti-śāstra* — and several important Indian commentaries are also preserved in Tibetan<sup>3</sup>. But these must remain barred to those not versed in the two classical languages. To date, only a very small number of these Chinese and Tibetan texts have been translated into modern European languages. L.V. Poussin’s monumental French translation of *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* in six volumes, “*Documents d’Abhidharma*”,<sup>4</sup> and the beginning portions of the *Vijñānakāya-śāstra*, and E. Lamotte’s *Le Traité de l’Acte de Vasubandhu*,<sup>5</sup> etc., are, in this regard, highly appreciated. In English, the great scholar Th. Stcherbatsky has given his *Soul Theory of the Buddhists* which is a translation of the ninth chapter of the AKB, and a partial translation of the argument on Sarvāstivāda in *Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the Word “Dharma”*. It is only quite recently that we have the following handful of welcome translations from the primary sources preserved in Chinese: (1) Charles Willemen’s *The Essence of Metaphysics: Abhidharmahrdaya* (1975);<sup>6</sup> (2) Van Den Broeck’s *La Saveur de L’Immortel (\*Amṛtarasa-śāstra)* (1977); (3) Van’s *Le Traité de la Descente dans la Profonde Loi De L’Arhat Skandhila* (1977);

(4) I. Armelin's *Le Coeur de la Loi Supreme* (1978); (5) Collet Cox's partial translation (1983) of chapter two of Saṃghabhadra's \**Nyāyānusāra*, and (6) Leo Pruden's English translation of the AKB(F) (1990) and (7) Baert Dessin's translation of the *Samyuktābhidharmahr̥daya* (1999).<sup>7</sup>

Vasubandhu's AKB, valuable as it is as a masterly manual of *abhidharma* doctrines, is encyclopaedic in scope and contains many obscure polemics the understanding of which presupposes a fairly good background knowledge of early Buddhist sectarian views. As such, it is difficult to understand even with its admirably lucid translation into French and English. As Skandhila puts it, "the terms and meanings in the *abhidharma*, [are bewildering as] a dense forest (*gahana*)", and beginners are apt to get frustrated with them. What we desperately need, then, is an English translation of an *abhidharma* manual which adequately summarizes the whole of the Sarvāstivāda doctrines in reasonably simple but accurate terms. *Abhidharmāvatāra* appears to have such merits. Besides, its presentation parallels that of the AKB to which therefore it can serve also as an excellent introduction. It is perhaps for this reason that L. V. Poussin has wrongly included this work as a commentary on the AKB.<sup>8</sup>

This work, extant now in Chinese<sup>9</sup> and Tibetan<sup>10</sup> translations (and a fragmentary one in Tokharian)<sup>11</sup> is an excellent *compendium* of the Sarvāstivāda *Abhidharma*. In a scheme of eight *padārtha*-s — five *skandha*-s and the three *asaṃskṛta*-s [p.15] — it succinctly<sup>12</sup> summarizes practically all the important *abhidharma* categories of the school. In the concluding remarks, the author declares his own attitude in the work:

In order to encourage the beginners (*ādi-karmika*) to take a keen interest in their studies, this treatise has been composed succinctly, without the [usual] questions and answers [which characterize doctrinal disputations]. Those who have not mastered (*parijñāta*) the profound characteristics of the *abhidharma*, have indulged in compiling various conceptual proliferations (*prapañca*). These they put forward, fabricating objections, with the evil intention of slandering one another. [In doing so], they are in fact slandering the Buddha's teachings (*āptāgama*).<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, throughout this short treatise, there is no evidence of any hostility on the part of the author towards others holding views different from his. Nevertheless, we do find an instance of mild criticism apparently directed at the Sautrāntika-Dārṣṭāntika. Here he calls those denying the reality, partially or completely, of the *caitta*-s, "persons of lesser intelligence" and "deluded".<sup>14</sup>

## 2. The schematic organization of *Avatāra*

*Avatāra* expounds the totality of the Sarvāstivāda doctrines under the following scheme of eight *padārtha*-s or fundamental Categories: I. *rūpa-skandha*, II. *vedanā-skandha*, III. *saṃjñā-skandha*, IV. *saṃskāra-skandha* — subdivided into *saṃprayukta-* and *viprayukta-saṃskāra*, V. *viññāna-skandha*, VI. *ākāśa*, VII. *pratisaṃkhyā-nirodha*, VIII. *aprasaṃkhyā-nirodha*. These eight — the five *skandha*-s and the three *asaṃskṛta*-s — Skandhila declares, “subsume all things (*artha*)” in the Buddhist system.

One might wonder why Skandhila does not adopt the well-established five-fold classification of *rūpa*, *citta*, *caitta*, *viprayukta-saṃskāra* and *asaṃskṛta*, with which he can equally or perhaps even more conveniently subsume the Sarvāstivāda categories. This is all the more to be expected since he seems to be influenced by the *Prakarāṇa-pāda-śāstra* with which this five-fold classification originated. The reason could be that this eight-fold scheme spells out the three *asaṃskṛta*-s and underlines their real existence, one by one, more explicitly in contrast to the *saṃskṛta dharma*-s grouped as the five *skandha*-s. Vīryaśrīdatta, author of another post-AKB work, the *Arthavinīścaya-sūtra-nibandhana*, also eulogizes the teachers as “well-versed in the *padārtha* of the Sugata’s *sūtra*-s” (*sugatasūtrapadārtha-vijñāh*).<sup>15</sup> Noteworthy, he also subsumes all *saṃskṛta dharma*-s under the five *upādāna-skandha*-s, of which the *saṃskāra-skandha* similarly comprises both the *saṃprayukta-saṃskāra* and *viprayukta-saṃskāra*. Moreover, like *Avatāra*, the *saṃprayukta-saṃskāra* comprises all the other *caitta*-s except *vedanā* and *saṃjñā* (*vedanā-saṃjñe varjayitvā ye’nye caittāh*).<sup>16</sup> The question of Vīryaśrīdatta’s affiliation<sup>17</sup> aside, his representation of these Vaibhāṣika doctrinal features and terminologies very probably reflects certain emphasis and concern on the part of the Vaibhāṣika in this period. Yet another post-AKB Vaibhāṣika polemic, the *Abhidharmadīpa-prabhāvṛtti*, contains the following statement in the first chapter: *vyākhyātāh aṣṭau padārthāh — saṃskṛtāh pañca trayaś cāsaṃskṛtāh / etāccaitatsarvam yaduta saṃskṛtaṃ cāsaṃskṛtaṃ ceti* /.<sup>18</sup> This work thus also uses this eight-*padārtha* scheme to outline the totality of their recognised *dharma*-s. In the Sanskrit statement quoted, the above-mentioned contrast is conspicuous: The “all” (*sarvam*) recognized by the Sarvāstivādins to exist truly comprises the *saṃskṛta dharma*-s and the three (*traya*) *asaṃskṛta*-s.

It may further be noted that in the AKB, Vasubandhu denies the reality of the *skandha* as a whole,<sup>19</sup> as well as that of the *asaṃskṛta*. Saṃghabhadra

refutes his denial of the *asaṃskṛta* at great length<sup>20</sup>. For the Sarvāstivādin, not only must the three — *ākāśa*, *pratisaṃkhyā-nirodha* and *apratisaṃkhyā-nirodha* — be real; the pluralistic reality of the latter two must also be accepted. The need for this emphasis seems to have been precipitated in the course of a long drawn out debate on their reality; starting from the period of the *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā*, among some Sarvāstivādin themselves — particularly the Dārṣṭāntikas (see *infra*), and culminating around the time of the AKB, during which the Vaibhāṣika had been hard-pressed to prove their reality. This intentional emphasis is also evident in the modification of the definition of “Sarvāstivādin / Sarvāstivāda”. First, we see it given in the AKB as follows:<sup>21</sup>

Those who hold that “all exists” — the past, the present and the future — belong to the Sarvāstivāda. Those, on the other hand, making a distinction [among the tritemporal *dharma*-s], hold that some exist — viz. the present and the past *karma* which has not given fruit — and none of those which have given fruit or the future exists, are followers of the Vibhajyavāda.

Next, in Saṃghabhadra’s *\*Nyāyānusāra*<sup>22</sup>, another post-ARB Vaibhāṣika polemic, an additional requirement for the definition is noticeable:

It is only those who believe in the real existence of the three periods of time, as discussed above, as well as of the three kinds of the unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*), that can be considered as belonging to the Sarvāstivāda.

This same requirement is also found in the ADV<sup>23</sup> :

Sarvāstivāda is so-called because it accepts [the reality of] the three periods of time, distinguished on account of activity, and the three permanent (*dhruva*) [— the three unconditioned] ...

A commentary on the AKB attributed to Saṃghabhadra (?), entitled *chos mngon pa mdzod kyi bstan bcos kyi tshig le’ur byas pa’i rnam par bshad pa* (Tohoku no. 4091), preserved in Tibetan, too contains a definition with the same additional requirement:

*gang dag ‘das pa dang / ma ‘ongs pa dang / da ltar byung ba dang / dus la ma gtogs pa thams cad yod do zhes smra ba de dag ni thams cad yod par smra ba yin /*

The fact that *Avatāra*, as much as the *Pañcavastuka*, attempts to deal with all *dharma*-s recognized by the Sarvāstivāda, summarily under

a definite scheme — particularly a five-fold classification — may well be an indication of the influence of the *Pañcavastuka* of the PrŚ on *Avatāra*. Skandhila tells us in his prologue that he has composed a brief treatise to enable the beginners “to enter with ease and delight into the deep whirlpool within the *dharma-lakṣaṇa* ocean of the *abhidharma*.”<sup>24</sup> In the *Vibhāṣā* to the *Pañcavastuka* (T no. 1555), Dharmatrāta, too, remarks that Vasumitra has composed the *Pañcavastuka* so that those who are afraid of extensive learning and memorization may gain understanding of the *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* by means of a brief treatise.<sup>25</sup> The *Pañcavastuka* is in fact a self-contained treatise and seems to have been popular as an independent treatise from the Han dynasty to the time of Xuan Zang.<sup>26</sup>

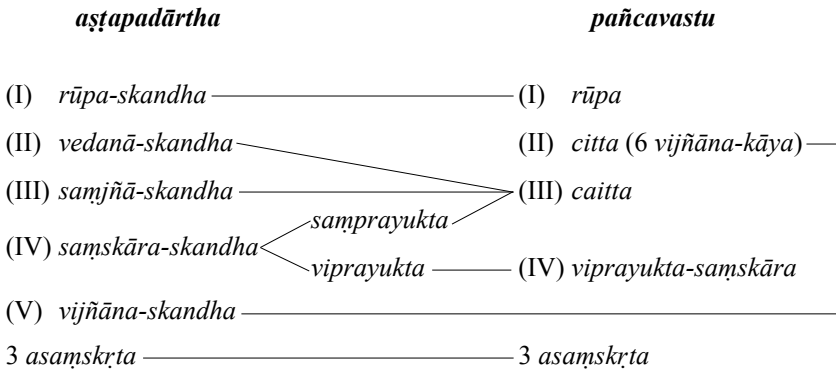
All this suggests that the eight-*padārtha* scheme cannot be considered an innovation on the part of Skandhila. As a matter of fact, the classification of all *saṃskṛta dharma*-s under the five-*skandha* scheme — exactly the same as that in *Avatāra* — is already found in the *Sapta-vastuka* (辯七事品) of the PrŚ:

... What are the five *skandha*-s? The *rūpa-skandha*, the *vedanā-skandha*, the *saṃjñā-skandha*, the *saṃskāra-skandha*, *vijñāna-skandha* .... What is the *rūpa-skandha*? The ten *rūpāyatana*-s and the *dharmāyatana-saṃgrhīta-rūpa*. What is the *vedanā-skandha*? The six *vedanā-kāya*-s ... What is the *saṃjñā-skandha*? The six *saṃjñā-kāya*-s ... What is the *saṃskāra skandha*? This is two-fold: the *citta-saṃprayukta-saṃskāra-skandha* and the *citta-viprayukta-saṃskāra-skandha*. What is the *citta-saṃprayukta-saṃskāra-skandha*? The *citta-saṃprayukta-saṃskāra-dharma*-s are, namely: *cetanā*, *sparśa*, *manaskāra*, *chanda*, *adhimokṣa*, *smṛti*, *samādhi*, *prajñā*, *śraddhā*, *vīrya*, *vitarka*, *vicāra*, *pramāda*, *apramāda*; the *kuśala-mūla*-s, the *akuśala-mūla*-s, the *avyākṛta-mūla*-s; all the *saṃyojana*-s, all the *bandhana*-s, all the *anuśaya*-s, all the *upakleśa*-s, all the *paryavasthāna*-s; all that is *jñāna*, all that is *dr̥ṣṭi*, all that is *abhisamaya*; and other such *dharma*-s which are *citta-saṃprayukta*. They are collectively named the *citta-saṃprayukta-saṃskāra-skandha*. What is the *citta-viprayukta-saṃskāra-skandha*? The *citta-viprayukta-dharma*-s are, namely: *prāpti*, *asaṃjñi-samāpatti*, *nirodha-samāpatti*, *āsaṃjñika*, *jīvitendriya*, *nikāya-sabhāgatā*, *\*upadhi-pratilambha* (? 依得), *\*vastu-pratilambha* (? 事得), *\*āyatana-pratilambha* (? 處得), *jāti*, *sthiti*, *jarā*, *anityatā*, *nāma-kāya*, *pada-kāya*, *vyañjana-kāya*; and all other such *dharma*-s which are *citta-viprayukta*. They are collectively named the *citta-viprayukta-saṃskāra-skandha*. These two kinds [of *saṃskāra*] together receive the name *saṃskāra-skandha*. What is *vijñāna-skandha*? The six *vijñāna-kāya*-s ...<sup>27</sup>

The five-*skandha* classification is obviously inspired by the five-*skandha*-s doctrine in the *sūtra*. In the Sarvāstivāda *Abhidharma* development, the *saṃskāra-skandha* came to be subdivided into the *saṃprayukta*- and *viprayukta-saṃskāra*-s, with the *saṃprayukta-saṃskāra* subsuming the *caitasika*-s. The *abhidharma* texts, however, preserve the *sūtra* inspiration, and rationalize the five-*skandha* scheme of classification of *dharma*-s by offering reasons for the separate enumeration of *vedanā* and *saṃjñā* as two separate *skandha*-s outside the *saṃskāra-skandha*: *vedanā* leads to attachment and *saṃjñā* leads to views (*dr̥ṣṭi*); they are accordingly the root causes of disputes and of *samsaric* existence.<sup>28</sup>

The same five-*skandha* classification is also found in the DSS,<sup>29</sup> and in the AmRŚ.<sup>30</sup> The latter moreover agrees with *Avatāra* in beginning the discussion on *hetu-pratyaya* immediately after that on the *viprayukta-saṃskāra*-s.

Finally, we may also note that, as will be seen from the comparative chart below, there is an exact parallel between the eight-*padārtha* and the five-group schemes, except for the case of the six *vijñānakāya*-s. In the five-group scheme, these come under “*citta*” which precedes “*caitasika*”. This order, however, is only natural in a more developed scheme which has incorporated the Abhidharmic concept of *citta-caitta*:



We must not leave out another possibility, however, for Skandhila’s choice of the five-*skandha* scheme: He could have done so simply in consideration of the fact that it is the most ancient of all schemes of classification, frequently used by the Buddha Himself in His discourses. But convenient as it may be, as a scheme of classification of *dharma*-s, it was certainly not one specifically tailored for the subsumption of all the important Sarvāstivāda

doctrines — a task that Skandhila appears to undertake. For this reason, in *Avatāra*, such doctrines as *hetu*, *pratyaya*, *phala*, the stages of purification and spiritual progress, the planes of existence, etc. have to be fitted into the scheme, often in a rather awkward manner. However, some kind of “logic” in such fitting in could also be observed in some cases. E.g., such topics as planes of existence etc. are included after the discussion of *kleśa* and *āsrava* probably in consideration of the fact that the latter keep beings in *samsaric* existence.

We may remark in passing, that there exists a Pāli *abhidhamma* manual by the same title: *Abhidhammāvatāra*<sup>31</sup> by Buddhadatta of Uragapura, written in the Coḷa country in India. It is the earliest of the non-canonical *abhidhamma* works in which an attempt has been made to systematize the Pāli *abhidhamma* in the form of a manual. It was treasured as a beginners’ manual until it was surpassed by Anuruddha’s *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* around the twelfth century. Divided into twenty-four chapters, mostly in verse, it represents the orthodox Theravāda views of the Mahāvihāra; and as such has little to compare with *Avatāra* which is a synopsis of the Sarvāstivāda doctrines.